

Hub

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About Hub

Every week we will be publishing a piece of short fiction, along with at least one review (book, DVD, film, audio, or TV series) and we'll also have the occasional feature, too. We can afford to do this largely due to the generosity of the people over at Orbit, who have sponsored this electronic version of the magazine, and partly by the generosity displayed by your good selves. If you like what you read here, please consider making a donation over at www.hub-mag.co.uk.

See you at *FantasyCon* next weekend!



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Requiem in D-Minor (for prions, whale and burning bush)

by Ian McHugh

Today...

The University of California,

San Francisco, USA.

Kevin switched the audio over to the projector. The lecture hall was filled with outdoor noises. Wind hummed softly over the microphone, cattle lowed nearby, a truck accelerated in the distance.

A roan steer staggered around a concreted yard, its mute distress accompanied by clattering hooves and the fleshy slap of its thigh striking the ground when it fell. A new sound was introduced - incongruous, but familiar to Kevin's audience.

Whale song.

Gradually, the cow's shaking stilled, until it could stand securely. Its muscles continued to tremble, but not enough to upset its equilibrium while it listened.

Kevin let the video play for a while, enjoying the dumbfounded expressions of his audience. He skipped to the next clip. "This is Daniel, age 21, suffering from late-stage variant-Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease." The young man sat in an armchair, trembling very slightly. He held an MP3 player in his lap, earphones in his ears. The expression on his face was rapturous. Kevin shut off the video.

He spoke over the top of the chorus of excited whispering, "After about ten minutes both Daniel and the steer began convulsing again. In both cases, their illnesses have since proceeded to their fatal conclusions. The whale song had no effect when played to either subject again."

He had the undivided attention of every person in the hall.

"Why whale song?" He let the question hang for a moment.

"Here is our vCJD prion." The image that re-appeared on the screen bore a passing resemblance to a key ring with its keys tangled together. "Or rather, this is a *visual representation* of a vCJD prion.

"My girlfriend loves post-modern art. She took me to an exhibition, a while back. The artist had taken ordinary household objects and mapped their dimensions as sounds. Weird stuff, but anyway...

"Here's what a vCJD prion *sounds* like."

A series of squeals, pops and clicks followed. Kevin could see people frowning. He grinned.

"And this is what it sounds like underwater..."



Tomorrow...

The vicinity of Copernicus Crater,

The Near Side of the Moon.

With a flick of his calf, Ling Xiu bounded up and over the crater rim. He glanced up as he sailed through the vacuum, at the blue-and-white bauble, hanging overhead. He looked ahead again as his trajectory started to curve back down. What he saw made him forget about landing.

He sprawled, slow motion, in his cumbersome excursion suit. A cloud of regolith dust settled slowly around him. For a moment he lay, winded and listening for the dreaded hiss of escaping air. It didn't come.

They were operating on open AV, so Hao and Shun had witnessed his mishap. Their alarmed queries tumbled over each other.

"Colonel Ling, are you alright?"

"Sir, do you need assistance?"

Ling Xiu struggled to collect his thoughts.

"Sir?"

He found his voice. "Major Hao, get over here. Major Shun, confirm my AV feed is recording and transmitting live to Mission Control."

Ling Xiu levered himself awkwardly upright.

The object in the centre of the crater was a flattened, lopsided dome, about six feet high at its tallest point, slightly off centre, and 30 feet across its base. A bowl shaped apparatus protruded on a tapered stem near one end. The artefact's surface was dark and dully reflective and had no visible seams or marks.

Shun, watching on the monitors in the lander, muttered an expletive.

"You're getting this then, Shun?"

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. You're recording to disc and transmission's good."

Ling Xiu turned as Hao appeared over the crater rim. The younger taikonaut repeated his superior's performance, arms windmilling in a useless reflex when he realised he'd forgotten where the ground was. Ling Xiu saved him from falling on his face.

"What is it?" Hao gasped.

"Is it American?" asked Shun.

"I doubt," said Ling Xiu, "we'll find any 'Made In The USA' stickers."

Shun managed a chuckle. "If it was American, they'd be 'Made In China' stickers, anyway."

"Why didn't we see it during overflight?" asked Hao.

"It must be disguised from above somehow," said Ling Xiu.

"Confirmed," said Shun, "I can't see it or you on the orbiter's scopes. It's invisible right across the spectrum."

"What is it?" Hao asked again.

Ling Xiu looked up, at Earth, tiny and vulnerable amid the sweep of stars.

#

Eurobodalla Region, South-Eastern Australia.

"I'm coming already," the old man grumbled as the knocking resumed. "Keep your damn shirt on."

He yanked the door open and glared over his reading glasses at the pair standing on the porch. A thirtyish Caucasian woman and an older man of African ancestry. A car with government plates was parked in the shade of the wattle trees across the yard.

"Kevin Mackay?" the woman asked.

He grunted an affirmative.

She offered an open wallet. "Catherine Hird. I'm an analyst with the Defence Signals Directorate. This is my colleague, Duane Peters."

Kevin examined the ID for a moment before handing it back. "You got ID too?"

Peters shook his head. "No, sir, I don't."

Four words were enough for Kevin to pick the man's Texas drawl. He kept his face neutral. If they'd been discovered, it would be ASIO and an army of gun-toting cops on their doorstep, not a DSD analyst and her NSA liaison.

"What d'you want?"

"Mr Mackay," Peters said, "a number of years ago, as a freshman at UCSF, I attended your PhD dissertation."

"My failed dissertation. Thanks for reminding me."

"We'd like to talk to you about the topic of your dissertation," said Hird.

Kevin tried to read their expressions behind their sunglasses. They'd both clearly spent a lot of time practising their secret agent faces.

"May we come in?"

He stood his ground.

"Mr Mackay..."

He hesitated. *Oh, what's the use?*

He stepped aside and directed them into the front room, making shooing motions with his other hand at the half-dozen faces that peered from doorways further down the corridor.

"Someone get us some tea, huh?"

"This is quite a set up you've got," Hird said as they seated themselves.

Kevin felt a muscle tic in his cheek.

"How many people you got living here?" she asked, flipping her sunglasses up onto her hair. Grey eyes.

"Thirty-nine, right now."

"You running a cult?" Her mouth was quirked in a half smile, taking the edge off the question.

"Just a community of like-minded people."

Peters cleared his throat. "Mr Mackay, as I recall, you provided evidence in your dissertation linking the prions that cause Creutzfeld-Jakob Disease to the songs of whales. You further asserted that prions are not naturally occurring proteins."

"Some prions," Kevin corrected. "Why?"

Peters ignored the question. "*Alien artifacts*, you said"

Seeing he would get nothing from them unless he answered first, Kevin sighed. "I proposed that variant-CJD prions were seeded on Earth in the hope that an intelligence would evolve that could unlock and understand the message contained inside."

The conversation paused as one of the children entered bearing a tea service.

"Thankyou, Michael. Tea?" Both shook their heads. Kevin poured for himself.

"So you believe whales are singing to space aliens?" said Hird.

Kevin gave her a pained look. "Whale brains are full of protein fibril clumps that indicate the presence of prions, but they don't get 'mad whale disease'. This is one of the things the Japanese have been researching, all these years.

"I proposed that some aspect of whale intelligence had activated the prions in whale brains, stimulating evolution of the complex songs of baleen whales - humpbacks and bowheads, in particular. I don't believe whales have the capacity to communicate with aliens."

The DSD agent threw her American colleague a glance, and asked, "And you also believe 'whale song' prions cause CJD and BSE?"

"Well," said Kevin, "activated whale prions could've been introduced into terrestrial food chains on countless isolated occasions. But during the industrial whaling era, *every* part of a whale that wasn't oil was pulped, dried and used for, among other things, stock feed additive. The cooking and drying didn't affect the whale prions - you can't kill prions because prions *aren't alive* - and they were introduced into our food chain on a catastrophic scale."

"Catastrophic?" said Peters.

"Don't pretend you don't know, NSA man," said Kevin. "At the turn of the century, there were two known variants of CJD and it affected only a certain percentage of the population who shared a particular genetic profile. Now there are nineteen variants and they kill anyone and everyone."

Hird nodded thoughtfully. "Our brains can't handle the message. We aren't what the aliens were hoping to find."

"Have you unlocked the message, Mr Mackay?" said Peters.

Kevin shook his head. "No."

The disappointment on their faces surprised him.

"Tell me why you're here," he said.

#

He stood at the window as they walked back to their car. Hird pointed back at the house, talking urgently. Peters held up a hand, silencing her.

"Pop, who was it?"

The others had sent his granddaughter as spokesperson or, as likely, Mil had elected herself.

"Government."

Her eyes and mouth became 'O's of alarm. "Do they know?"

He shook his head.

"What did they want?"

Hird and Peters were sitting in the car watching him. He looked past them, over the yellow and green of the wattles, to the blue sweep of ocean that stretched to the horizon.

"Pop?"

"The Chinese found something on the moon."

"Found something?" Mil was beside him now.

"They want me to help them communicate with it."

"God." Her lips curved slowly into a grin. "My god Pop, you were right."

"Of course I was."

Laughing, she hugged him. "Right about the whale songs didn't mean right about the aliens, you old coot."

"Hmmpf."

She sobered. "Are you going with them?"

Kevin chewed his lip and didn't answer.

"Pop, other people are no more or less guilty than us. If you can help..."

Reluctantly, he nodded. "Okay, but if it doesn't work out, we're going to have to relocate."

"Surely now they've discovered..."

"What we're doing will still be illegal tomorrow."

Now it was her turn to nod. "Okay, we'll start packing while you're gone."

#

*Tidbinbilla Tracking Station,
Canberra, Australia.*

Pandemonium reigned. Every monitor and wall screen in the control room displayed 3.5 second-delayed footage of the alien artefact from the taikonauts' helmet cameras.

"The Chinese need our tracking facilities, same as the Americans did," Hird said, referring to the Chinese military technicians scattered among the Australian civilian crew.

Kevin nodded absently, staring at the main wall screen. He extracted a memory wafer from his jacket pocket. "Have them transmit this."

#

Copernicus Crater.

"Colonel Ling," said Hao, in the lander now, "mission control are attempting contact again."

Ling Xiu's sigh turned into a yawn. "I hope they've thought of something new this time."

The three taikonauts were dead on their feet, on the surface without rest for fifteen hours now, rotating to the lander one hour in every three. In another few hours, their diminishing oxygen supplies and saturated air scrubbers would force them to return to the orbiter.

The transmission came through. Ling Xiu frowned at the unearthly noise. "Whale song?"

"Colonel, look!"

A point of light appeared above the artefact. It grew quickly in size and intensity, then flashed with a brilliance that momentarily blinded the taikonauts.

Ling Xiu blinked spots from in front of his eyes, then blinked some more when he saw the apparition now floating above the alien dome. It looked like a flame, shifting and flickering, bright yellow at its centre, fading to dull red at the edge. Within it hung a skeletal structure like a leafless tree branch.

He heard a gasp from Shun. As though in response, the alien swooped downward. Before the taikonaut could move, the flame engulfed him. Shun's scream cut off abruptly. The alien held him in its grasp for a minute, then he toppled to the ground.

Ling Xiu was uncomfortably certain it had turned its attention toward him. He hardly dared breathe.

The alien rose gracefully. Then, with a flicker of motion, it was gone. The afterimage of its departure elongated Earthwards.

#

Tidbinbilla.

A second later, with Major Shun's demise still playing on the monitor screens, the alien appeared in the Tidbinbilla control centre. It landed on the pair of technicians seated at the primary communications console and consumed them as it had Shun.

Civilian operators surged away from the intruder, as though propelled by a shockwave. The Chinese military crew stayed at their posts, staring hopefully at their commander. The man seemed petrified.

Hird shouted in Mandarin, "Kwai! Kwai!" *Flee! Flee!*

"Kwai! Kwai!" the alien repeated.

That was good enough for most of the PLA technicians.

The alien discarded its victims. It drifted sideways, seeming uncertain who to attack next. Terror launched Kevin into action. He ran forward, arms upraised.

"Stop! Wait!" he shouted. "You're killing people!"

"Stop. Wait," the alien repeated, and stopped.

"Killing," it said.

No-one moved, the alien's flame flickered silently. Kevin's brain caught up with what he'd done. His heart hammered so fast against his ribs he half expected to have an attack.

He heard Peters whisper, "Jesus, it's the goddamn burning bush."

"This is the source of the communication?" said the alien, simultaneously in flawless English and Mandarin.

No-one else spoke, so after a moment Kevin said hoarsely, "Yes."

"Why are you using such a crude form of communication now?"

"Mr Mackay," hissed Peters, "let us handle..."

"Peters, back off," Hird said, equally quietly.

Kevin could feel his pulse throbbing in every part of his body. "The communication we sent isn't ours," he said. "It's the song of a whale."

"Whale?"

"Yes..." His mind blanked for a moment, overwhelmed by the problem of where to even *begin* an explanation. "Whales are marine creatures of..."

The alien cut him off. "The requisite knowledge has been acquired."

It drifted towards the roof.

"Wait!" Kevin cried again. The alien paused. "What will you do with the whales?"

"They will be offered the opportunity to assimilate."

"I don't understand."

"That is true." It started to rise again.

"No! Stop, please. The prions - the whale communications - they're in us. They're killing us."

"How did this come to be?"

"Whaling practices of the past..."

"Whaling?"

Kevin closed his eyes, feeling tears threaten. "The hunting and killing of whales..."

"The requisite knowledge has been acquired."

"Will you help us?" he asked.

"No. You will learn, or not."

"Please..." Kevin trailed off, at a loss for the second time in as many minutes. What could he possibly say to plead with this being?

Peters jostled past him. "That's it? That's all you have to say to us?"

"You are presently of no interest. However, it is not desirable that your species expand beyond this world. All activity beyond this planet's atmosphere will cease immediately."

"Who are you to tell us what we can and can't do?" Peters demanded, but the alien was already gone.

Kevin had a sick feeling in his belly. "Contact the lunar mission," he said.

Hird repeated the instruction in Mandarin. She translated the PLA technician's response a moment later. "We've lost contact with the taikonauts."

Another technician remembered his English and added, "We have lost *all* satellite communication."

#

Copernicus Crater.

The radio went dead. Ling Xiu, kneeling beside Shun's body, toggled the controls. "Hao? Major? Hao Qixin, respond."

No response.

As he stood, Ling Xiu glimpsed a flash of light at the very top of his field of vision.

The orbiter!

Feeling a sudden dread, he bounded up to the lip of the crater. The lander wasn't there. He turned back. Shun's body had vanished as well.

"I don't understand," he whispered, and was gone.

#

After...

King George Sound, Western Australia.

She had a name once, though she barely remembered it. It was difficult to think down to the level where she needed a label to tell her who she was.

The water of the Sound was blue and calm, the warm sand under her feet as fine and soft as talc. The round-shouldered promontories that embraced the bay were furred with grey-green scrub. The sky above was clear, the morning sun warm at her back. Across the water, she could just make out the ramshackle buildings and tall, white storage tanks where her parents' species had ensured their doom. Beyond the old whaling station, a crescent moon hung low in the sky.

She walked into the gently lapping waves. Along the beach, others followed her example. They filled their enlarged lungs and slipped under the surface. Webbed fingers splayed. Broad feet kicked together strongly, dolphin-fashion. As one, they forced air from their lungs up into the cavities in their cheekbones and foreheads, projecting the vibrations out through the fatty tissue of their skull crests. They sang.

Out in the middle of the bay, the whales - who had not gone when the Visitor asked, who had waited, believing that humankind could evolve - responded.

SOFTWARE REVIEW by Steve Cooper

BPC-SCREENPLAY

By Berlin Picture Company (www.bpc-screenplay.com)

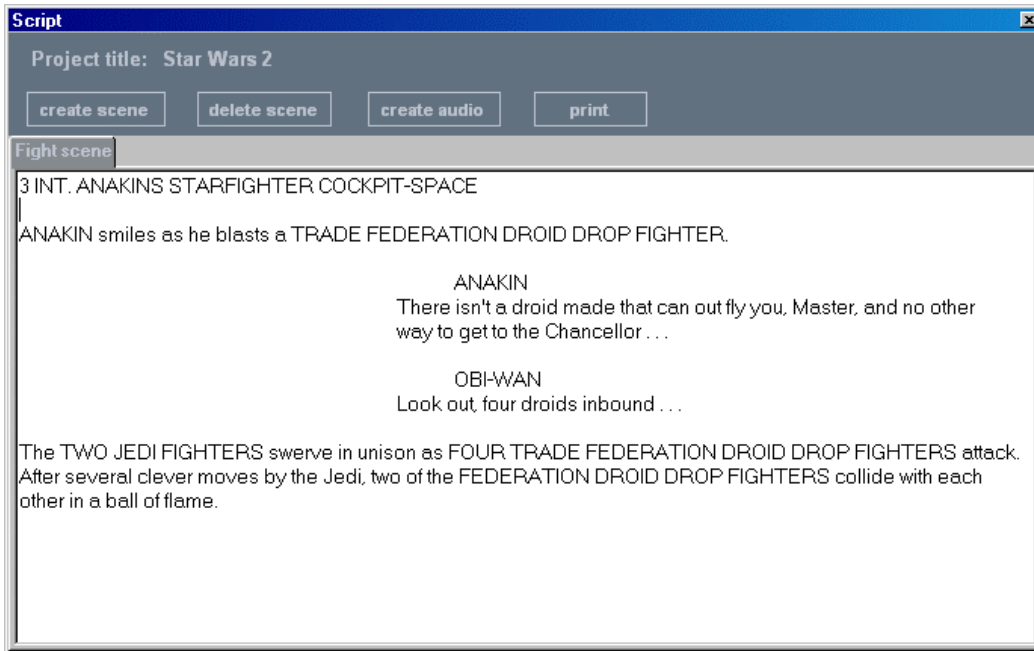
Debut Edition: €25 (About £17)

If you're a screenwriter, and you ever get lucky enough to get something produced, you might see your work rendered as an *animatic*. It's a cheap and cheerful animated 'sketch' of your film; a picture slideshow with dialogue, music, and SFX.

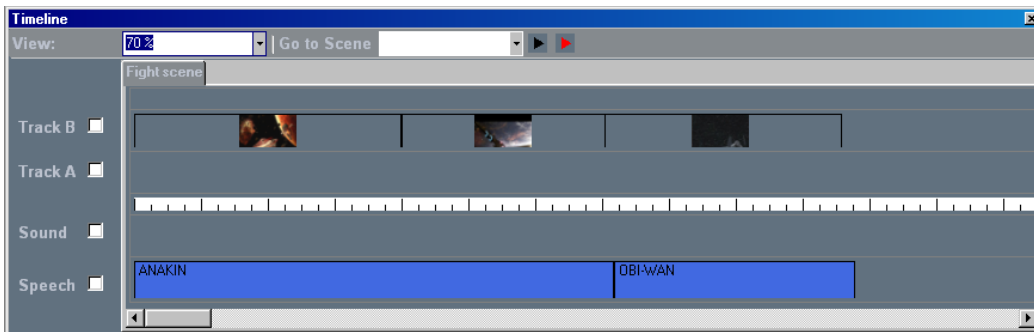
Normally, you can't really hope to produce these on your own; you need animation software and artists and voice actors. The [Berlin Picture Company](#) have created [BPC Screenplay Debut Edition](#), which tries to give screenwriters the ability to put together a basic animatic with very little effort. Did they succeed?

The Software

The program has a fairly rudimentary script editor; nothing fancy, but enough to add scenes, dialogue, and direction. It's straightforward enough to create a scene. It looks like this:



Then you hit the 'create audio' button and a voice synthesiser creates your dialogue in audio form and loads it onto the audio-visual timeline, the second part of the program. This is more of an animation tool, and has channels for pictures and sound;



You drop some images onto the timeline and you've added your visuals. Add some special effects and soundtrack, click a button, and out pops your animatic.

At least, that's what supposed to happen. There are some serious bugs. One machine I installed it on wouldn't generate the dialogue. Sometimes it fell over without warning. Once it lost my entire script. BPC are calling this the 'Debut Edition', which is a nice way of saying 'brand new and still buggy'. That said, there's a Pro version on the way, and if you buy the Debut view now, you get the Pro version free.

For all that, though, I can't bring myself to dislike this software. When it works, it's great fun. It's easy to knock out your own little movie scenes. If you've got a script already written, and a few pictures, you can knock out a scene in ten minutes. Trust me, there's something very satisfying to hear and see your script running in front of you. And it's cheap – just £25, or about £17.

It's far too buggy and rough at the moment for me to recommend it as a serious work tool. But then, that's not the way I ended up using it. It's a playground for your ideas.

The Competition

If you want to try animatics, here are some other tools;

[Dakine Wave Virtaul Stage](#): A £45 3D animation tool, a little like scripting The Sims.

[Final Draft](#): £150 of 100%-hollywood-approved script writing software, which will synthesise the dialogue of your script. No pictures, though.

[Toon Boom Storyboard](#): \$250 of serious storyboarding software. Artistic talent required.

News – *The Brightonomicon* Audio Play



Long-time readers of *Hub* (and there are plenty of you) will know that one of our occasional columnists – Neil Gardner – is producing an audio dramatisation of Robert Rankin's excellent Brentford/Hugo Rune novel, *The Brightonomicon*.

Things have moved on apace since we last reported on the play. A cast is in place, and the series is to be distributed by BBC Audiobooks early next year; but let's just back up a moment and look at some of the cast...

The Man Himself, Hugo Rune is to be played by none other than genre favourite, **David Warner!** Sometime hitchhiker, and vocal talent behind *The Chicken Song*, **Michael Fenton Stevens** is the Narrator. Gollum himself, **Andy Serkis** is playing Count Otto Black with **Mark Wing-Davey** (Zaphod from the Hitchhikers radio and TV series) plays Fangio. **Ben** "Primeval is actually quite a lot of fun" **Miller** is Bartholomew the Bog Troll and **Martin Jarvis OBE** is Inspectre Sherringford Hovis. **Neil Gardner** (the producer) plays Ahab the Space Crab, and **Robert Rankin** pops up as the Cabbies (with his delightful lady wife **Rachel** playing The Lady in the Straw Hat). Others include, Iain Lee, Brian Murphy, Rupert Degas and many, many more!

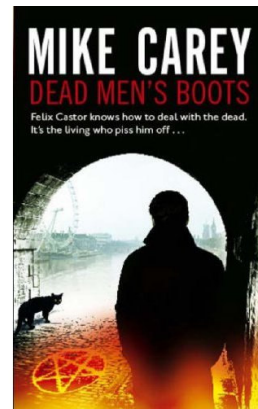
This promises to be an amazing production, so pop over to www.brightonomicon.com for more info and to listen to some podcasts of the cast and crew.

While you're there, why not enter their competition to win a small part in the production itself! You'll even share a scene with David Warner! It doesn't get much better than that...

Mike Carey – Video Interviews

Mike Carey – author of the excellent Felix Castor books (the third of which, *Dead Men's Boots*, is on current release) – called into the offices of our sponsor, Orbit, and chatted about the series. See the video interviews here:

<http://www.orbitbooks.net/2007/09/13/mike-carey-on-camera/#more-169>



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