

Hub

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New UK SF

Last year television viewers in the UK were treated to two new genre shows of note – Torchwood on BBC3 and Primeval on ITV. Both shows were greeted with mixed reviews, though the general consensus was that neither show set the world alight – even when Hannah Spearitt danced around in her skimpies in Primeval.

This month both shows returned. Have they learned from their mistakes? We're going to discuss this in a few weeks time, but we'd be interested in hearing your views, first. Head on over to our main page at www.hub-mag.co.uk and leave a comment under the Issue 43 thread...

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By Ian Whates

All he wanted was a cup of coffee.

A simple enough ambition - a goal unlikely to test any man; but on this particular day fate appeared to have its own agenda.

An explosion was the very last thing Bud Walker needed to hear.

You see, Bud really liked his coffee. Not the tepid, tasteless muck churned out by vending machines, nor the scalded, chicory-bitter excuse for a drink his mom used to make. He liked his coffee just so. Not too bitter, not too mellow; no sugar, thank you very much, but a splash of milk or cream if you please - he wasn't an espresso man, but would accept that rather than have the flavour drowned in a latte. As for cappuccino, well, that was nothing short of a gimmick in Bud's opinion - all froth and no substance.

The coffee bar at the corner of 21st and 7th knew how these things should be done, and this month's fresh blend was pretty close to his idea of coffee-heaven.

So when he finally managed to sit down at his usual table near the window, cradling a steaming mug of freshly brewed nectar in front of him, when he was *finally* able to drink in the delicious aroma that curled around his face and tantalised his nostrils, the very last thing he wanted to hear was an explosion.

The plate glass beside him shuddered slightly but only just. He glanced out the window at the world beyond and then back at the mug of coffee, considering his options.

The explosion hadn't been *that* close. Granted, it had interrupted one of his favourite moments - savouring the ultimate anticipation before taking that first sip - but this did not necessarily mean that the entire experience was ruined. He could still recapture the mood, given the chance.

His attention was wrenched outside again by excited yelling almost at his shoulder. A group of people ran quickly past the window in a blur of gangly arms and legs, calling as they went. Kids; a whole gang of them, perhaps a dozen strong, running towards the explosion rather than away from it, eager to see what was going on.

Bud turned to look around the coffee bar. He took in the pensive, studious man with the goatee and the polar-neck, intently staring at his laptop, and the two young women at the table opposite, their hands gesturing for emphasis as they exchanged bursts of vapid conversation with the rapidity of machine gun fire, before his eyes came to rest on the queue, which seemed just as long as ever.

They hadn't moved.

They weren't concerned.

Waiting for a decent mug of coffee was still the priority for everyone here.

Reassured, he turned back to his own drink.

Deciding under the circumstances to dispense with the usual formalities, he lifted the mug and took a sip, closing his eyes as the first draught washed into his expectant mouth.

Then came the second explosion.

Louder this time, and closer. The window definitely flexed as opposed to merely thinking about it. Conversation in the coffee bar stuttered to a halt. Not the two young women - Bud suspected that the bomb would need to go off directly under their table in order to claim *their* attention - but everyone else. Even Mr Pensive had been drawn away from his laptop and was looking around worriedly.

Bud swallowed the mouthful of coffee, which went down almost unnoticed, delivering none of the customary pleasure he had hoped for.

People began to speak again: nervous chatter that seemed to start spontaneously throughout the bar, accompanied by anxious glances towards the street. The man in the black coat at the back of the queue detached himself. Evidently deciding that enough was enough, he headed for the door. This was a *big* man, Bud couldn't help but notice. Not that he was exactly svelte-like himself these days, but this guy moved with a sort of ponderous, exaggerated waddle, which seemed calculated to emphasise his size.

Again Bud's attention was drawn outside by the sound of running footsteps. More people ran past the window, men and women, glancing over their shoulders with fear in their eyes. At least they were heading in the opposite direction this time, away from the explosions.

Bud took another sip of coffee.

Somebody outside screamed at the same moment as the man from the back of the queue pushed the door open. The scream was immediately followed by the staccato chatter of small arms fire. At this, the dam broke; the queue disintegrated and people started to desert their tables. One woman stood up too quickly, sending her chair clattering over backwards. A child was bowled over in the rush, the first tearful wail welling forth even as she was scooped up and consoled by parents eager to depart. Tables rocked and a mug rolled off a surface to smash to the tiled floor with a strident tinkle of shattered crockery, which was instantly swallowed by the scraping of chairs and the babble of concerned voices, as the exodus became a stampede.

Bud savoured his third swig of coffee, stubbornly refusing to be distracted. He was off duty. This had nothing to do with him.

The only way out of the coffee bar was a single small door, which quickly developed into a bottleneck, stemming the tide of people as they all tried to pile out into the street at once. Bud picked up his mug and shuffled his chair to one side as the jostling mob spread out from the gangway and began to engulf the tables closest to the door, threatening to reach him. They didn't in the end, but you could never be too careful.

The tide of escapees receded as rapidly as it had arisen, with the final stragglers pushing their way through into the outside world. A siren wailed its way rapidly to a wah-wah crescendo and back again as a police unit shot past at reckless speed, lording it over a street ominously devoid of traffic. The street door swung shut behind the final retreating customer, leaving the bar deserted apart from Bud, the two young women, and the small brigade of white-smocked staff behind the counter.

"You see anything?" one of the latter called out.

"No." Bud shook his head. "The street's pretty much deserted out there now...."

He was interrupted by a figure that came smashing through the big plate glass window at that precise moment, sending shards of glass flying everywhere, including into Bud's coffee. Bud ducked down beneath the table, not just for protection as some might have thought, but to flip open the twin catches on the large, black pilot's case he'd stowed there when he first came in. He realised that the man who had just come through the window didn't represent a threat, principally because he had arrived backwards and head first and hadn't stirred since, but whoever threw him this way still might.

Bud reached calmly into the case and grasped one of the two objects he kept there: his gun, a veritable cannon. He sat up, noting that the new arrival wore a trooper's uniform. The man lay unmoving amongst fragments of glass and scattered tables and chairs.

The gaping window remained apparently empty, but there was a peculiar distortion at the centre of the opening, like a small, localised heat haze. He groaned, recognising the effect immediately; a shimmer suit, which almost certainly meant Idalen, and if there was one race in the entire galaxy Bud couldn't stand, it was the Idalen. He looked towards the wall at the opposite side of the room, so that the window was now in the very corner of his vision, lifted his arm across his body, with the gun pointing diagonal to his line of site, and fired. The only way to even begin seeing anything through the shimmer effect was in the corner of your eye.

The alien, visible now that the shimmer suit had been deactivated by its wearer's death, collapsed forward. It's long, tapering frame, disconcertingly manlike in so many ways but oddly stretched and unnaturally slender, lay close to the fallen trooper, who hadn't moved since his dramatic entrance and probably never would again.

With a sigh, and a single wistful glance at the defiled coffee, Bud reached down to lift the second object out of his case. Cast from a semi-metallic polymer, the helmet was the only piece of kit other than the gun that was portable enough to be carried around. Which meant that he did, even when off duty as he was supposed to be now.

Protection had been very much a secondary consideration in the helmet's design. Sure, it was better than the naked human skull, but we're hardly talking body-armour here. The headpiece's chief reason for being was its built-in software.

Bud slipped the helmet on, secured it, and flipped down the visor. Then he peered out through the smashed window. To his right, two uniformed figures were crouching down by the shell of their disabled cruiser. They were looking this way and that, clearly unsure which direction any threat was likely to come from. Police, not even troopers; they were armed effectively enough but wouldn't be equipped with anything capable of dealing with the eye-foxing effect of a shimmer suit.

Bud scanned the street and thought he spotted a ripple in the air to his left. He adjusted his visor, focussing, until he had the right frequency. Two Idalen leapt into view, strutting along bold as you like, with their stooped forms and exaggerated, heron-like gait, confident that the humans couldn't see them, relying totally on the protection afforded them by their precious shimmer suits.

Neither had even thought to look in his direction. He lifted the gun and fired two quick bursts. Both the aliens went down, though the second one could only have been wounded, because a burst of fire came back at Bud as he stepped out through the shattered window. He instinctively dived to the ground, rolling and firing as he went, though the alien's aim was lousy and its bullets tore at the brickwork high above Bud's head. Neither of the Idalen offered any further threat.

Cursing, Bud got to his feet, brushing dust and glass fragments from his clothes and sucking briefly at a cut finger. The helmet's radio was reporting an Idalen raid on the arms depot at the outskirts of town. The raid had been repulsed, but remnants of the attacking force had escaped and fled into the city.

Great. Why did they have to go and mount a raid on his day off?

Bud started to walk across to the two police officers, who stood uncertainly by their disabled hover-car. The cruiser put him in mind of a beached whale - completely out of its element - sitting there with its field deflated and engines dead. Even the wisps of steam curling up from under its battery hood seemed deliberately designed to taunt him; a cruel parody of the coffee vapours he was being denied.

He had almost reached the stricken vehicle when a further group of Idalen came charging around the corner to his left.

Bud sprinted the last few steps, yelling out, "Get down," to the two bewildered officers, who, of course, couldn't see the Idalen, so probably thought him crazy. They did as they were told at least, and were scrambling around to the vehicle's far side as Bud joined them.

Bullets were pinging off the cruiser's bodywork as he gave hurried instructions. "Shimmer suits, you know about them?" In response to their terrified nods, he continued, "Good. Shoot where I shoot.

You,” he indicated the one nearest him, “lay down a pattern of fire around the area my first shot hits, and you, do the same for my second. Got it?” God, they were only kids. What help were they going to be?

More quick woodpecker-nods.

“Okay, come on!”

With that, Bud stood up, peering over the cruiser's roof and firing at the nearest target. Without waiting to see the result, he aimed again and fired towards a group of three approaching figures. The two officers were up beside him, firing blind but as he'd instructed.

Bud counted six of the aliens in all. His first shot had taken out one. His second had missed entirely but the secondary fire from the kid beside him had accounted for another one. That left four. Bud aimed carefully and let loose with a sustained burst.

Three.

Then the kid to his right took a bullet in the shoulder, which flung him back and sent him crashing to the ground.

“Concentrate your fire between those two posters on the wall to the right,” Bud yelled to his surviving comrade, as he drew a bead on an Idalen that had almost reached them and shot it point blank. The kid got lucky and nailed one of the two remaining ones. But the last alien was right up to them - they moved deceptively quickly on those spindly legs of theirs, flowing across the ground as if on jet-propelled skates.

Bud was twisting around to target this final one, but knew that he was too late, that it had him. He desperately tried to duck down, out of the way, but the Idalen fired at the same instant, and he felt a searing pain across his left temple. Then he hit the ground.

Perhaps he blacked out for a second or two, it was hard to say. He knew that he heard persistent gun fire. Then silence. He looked up when he could, to see the kid still standing, his gun held loosely at his side. Bud scrambled to his feet, aware of fractured vision where his visor had cracked. He made a quick count of Idalen bodies. Six.

“You got it!”

The kid nodded. His face betrayed the surprise he clearly felt at still being alive, the shock at all the violence that had suddenly erupted around him. “I saw where the shot that hit you came from and just emptied my gun at that point.”

“Well done,” Bud muttered distractedly. He had his helmet off and was tracing a deep crease made by the Idalen bullet as it skidded across his head.

The kid's partner sat up slowly, clutching his bleeding shoulder, only to bend forward and throw up.

Bud remembered his first fire fight and felt a sudden affinity for the lad. He'd thrown up afterwards too.

He gave the wounded man an encouraging smile and the thumbs up, before gingerly putting his helmet back on, aware of the added pressure where it had been bent out of shape by the bullet. At least the audio was still working. He listened, and hoped. His prayers were answered almost immediately, as reports came in that the last of the Idalen attackers had been rounded up and neutralised.

Bud smiled. That hadn't taken too long, all things considered.

More uniforms arrived, tending to the two kids and towing away their wrecked unit. Bud watched as a couple removed the dead trooper from the coffee bar in a zipped-up body bag. The Idalen casualties were too tall for body bags and had to be carted off uncovered.

"We'll need you to come back to the station and make a report," said one of the uniforms, who appeared to be in charge but whose face and name Bud didn't even bother to register.

"Yeah, of course; later," he promised.

Finally they left, allowing Bud to step through the window and back into the coffee bar. Amidst the wreckage, his favourite table was still upright. He brushed shattered glass and debris from its surface and placed his damaged helmet there, then walked resolutely inward. Fractured glass ground to dust beneath his heel as he strode past scattered chairs and overturned tables, making his way through the whole length of the shop, stopping only once he had reached the counter.

He cleared his throat.

The top of a man's head came slowly into view, its crowning mop of black hair rising to reveal first a broad forehead and then a pair of wide, darting eyes, which peered at him over the edge of the counter. Bud smiled reassuringly, and the figure stood up fully; one of the staff, straightening his white-smock uniform with fastidious care. Bud knew most of the guys and girls who regularly served him at this place, but not this one - a short, undistinguished man, older than you normally saw here.

"Is it over?"

"Yup, all done and dusted. I'll have a fresh brew, to drink in; largest you've got, please, and leave room for a dash of milk."

The man stared at him as if he were speaking in an alien tongue. "Are you mad? You saw what just happened. Look at the place. We're not serving coffee. We're closed; *very* closed!"

Bud's smile vanished, his face hardening. "Look, pal, I appreciate this is all a bit upsetting, but let me explain how things are from where I'm standing. You see, I've had a really lousy week. You have no idea just how lousy. And do you know the one thing that's been keeping me going?"

The little man shook his head, the courage that inspired his outburst evidently deserting him. He looked for all the world like a rabbit transfixed by the headlights of an onrushing car.

"The thought of coming in here on my day off; of sitting down and taking my time over a cup of your excellent coffee: that's what has seen me through this God-awful week. Now so far, things may not have gone entirely to plan, but these things happen and that's all behind us now. We can move on, right?"

Bud casually placed his gun down on the counter. Quite by chance, its nozzle was pointing directly at the little man, who gulped visibly and turned as white as a sheet.

"So, how about that coffee?" Bud finished, cheerfully.

The man nodded and hurried to comply.

As Bud returned to his seat, one of the two young women emerged hesitantly from the ladies. She saw Bud and seemed to draw strength from his presence, smiling at him and walking out with renewed confidence. He nodded in response. Not bad looking, he acknowledged to himself, now that she'd actually stopped talking.

The other young woman crawled out from under a table, dusted herself down and straightened her dress. She then righted an overturned chair and sat, to be joined almost immediately by her friend.

"Now, where were we?" one said to the other, and they were off again.

Bud tuned out their voices, tuned out the world, then closed his eyes, leant forward, and smelt the coffee.

REVIEWS

Duma Key reviewed by Marie O'Regan

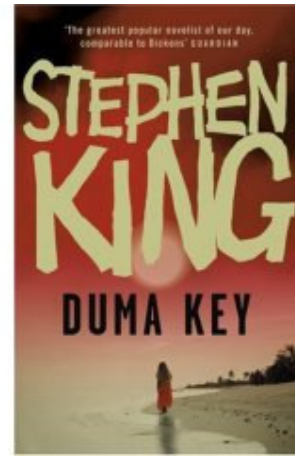
Spirit Gate reviewed by Ellen Phillips

Duma Key by Stephen King

Hodder and Stoughton

Hardback, £18.99

In *Duma Key*, King revisits the theme of loss that he explored to such effect in *Lisey's Story* and, before that, *Bag of Bones*. The protagonist, Edgar Freemantle, is a building contractor who has lost an arm in an industrial accident and sustained a significant brain injury. In the aftermath of that, he's lost his wife, his business, even his home when his marriage breaks down.



Cue *Duma Key*. An island in the Florida Keys, it becomes Edgar's new home as he relocates to explore his sudden passion – and talent – for painting. As the artistic side of his nature awakens, so does something else. *Duma Key* has a dark secret, and it rises once more when his art calls to it – or is it that it calls to his art?

Edgar befriends his nearest neighbours, his landlady, the elderly Miss Elizabeth Eastlake and her companion and carer, Wireman. Elizabeth warns him to keep his daughters away from the island, 'it doesn't like daughters.' Deep in the throes of Alzheimer's, she says no more at first, but gradually we find how the story began far back in her childhood – when a similar head injury triggered her own artistic talent as well as the most recent awakening of that which haunts *Duma Key*. As Edgar resolves to banish the evil haunting the island, the body count rises, as it pursues his family, his friends...anyone with any connection to him or knowledge of the truth. The book culminates in a chilling finale that must rank among the best that King has written.

A haunting tale that resonates with loss, love and a deep sense of rage, *Duma Key* is not to be missed.

Spirit Gate by Kate Elliott

Orbit

Paperback, £7.99

Spirit Gate by Kate Elliott, author of the *Crown of Stars* fantasy series of books, is a great edition to the epic fantasy genre. Hearteningly, fantasy authors are increasingly using settings other than Tolkien-esque, northern European or the US, and this is no exception. With a distinctly Asian feel to it, the novel is set primarily in the Hundred; a peaceful land of 100 cities. But law and order are breaking down: the Guardians – mystical beings provided by the Gods to act as judges – have vanished and Reeves are all that keep the land from complete lawlessness, travelling from town to village on their giant eagles. But their numbers are dwindling, and corruption is at work everywhere, even within their ranks.



Tightly plotted and well-written, the book moves between 3 main groups of characters:

Reeve Joss, who has never recovered from the mysterious loss of his lover, finds himself increasingly unpopular as he refuses to compromise his belief in the laws which are quite literally set in stone. As he travels across the Hundred, powerless to prevent villages, towns, and entire regions slipping into chaos, he attempts to find out both what happened to the Guardians and where the outlaws are coming from.

Outlander Anji and his beautiful wife Mai are seeking a new home within the Hundred for themselves and for Anji's troops, while Mai's uncle, Shai travels with them in the hope of finding out what has happened to his elder brother.

Kesh, a slave, is doing what he must to buy his freedom and the freedom of his sister, who has been dedicated to the temple of the Merciless One, the goddess of lust and death. Zubaidit has grown up to be a very different woman, one he finds he doesn't know at all, and has her own agenda, which includes travelling into the heart of the enemy's army.

Kate Elliott's writing beautifully evokes the world her characters inhabit, making the book a pleasure to read. The terrain changes from the fertile plains and valleys of the Hundred, to the mountains which border the Qin empire, and the deserts and sere regions beyond. Her characters don't simply move through the landscape: they inhabit it. Customs and traditions in Mai's homeland, a region of scrubland with little water, are very different from those of the Hundred, and the different peoples' behaviours reflect that. But the background to the world isn't shoved in awkwardly as in some less-skilfully written books.

The plot is well handled for a complex book at the start of a series. Characters have their own motives and interests, and these intersect to produce some startling results. No-one is so evil they would have been drowned at birth, or too noble ever to have lived. People have their weaknesses and strengths, and I don't recall any of them falling into the role of cardboard-cutout character. Meanwhile, there is a real sense of menace as chaos and violence marches across the Hundred. All of the characters in *Spirit Gate* have everything to lose - and it matters to the reader.

It's a measure of how good the book is that after I finished, I went straight to Amazon to see when the next one is coming out. If you want a mature epic fantasy which has fully-realised characters and a plot you can't see through by page 2, you need to read *Spirit Gate*.

If you have enjoyed this week's issue, please consider making a small donation at www.hub-mag.co.uk. We pay our writers, and your support is appreciated.