



HELIOTROPE

THE SPECULATIVE FICTION MAGAZINE

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Letter from the editor

Issue four is a bit of a transition for us though we have carried over a couple of the features that we debuted in our last issue. I am pleased to be able to present another of my favorite writers in general - but particularly his short fiction - Ian R. Macleod to continue the virtual anthology kicked off by Jeffrey Ford last issue. A bit of staple at Heliotrope now, Jeff VanderMeer returns from gardens of forking paths to suggest quality shelf space decisions for those of us readers who may mistakenly feel we have all the questions. Our poetry for the issue is penned by the delightful Anna Tambour, continuing our tradition of attracting wandering muses - this one from down under. Returning to our pages for the first time since our first issue is the newly crowned Tiptree Award winner, Catherynne M. Valente. Cat's been busy spinning a tale to what is oddly enough one of the great epic fantasies we have seen, though it is not so in a way we have come to perhaps falsely define. She reenters the small stage with what is hopefully the first of her columns we will be the venue for. Some will say we have less fiction this issue, I am sure the author of that piece will tell you he can stick it in a pillowcase and beat you to death with the weight of his story while he screams G-O-O-D-B-Y-E.

This editorial, compared to the last, will mirror the issue, a bit short, still sweet, but a doorway to yet another bigger door. Our next issue will be a bit of a deviation, but one you will not regret answering the bell to. Expect news of it coming soon as we retool Heliotrope and pass out new keys to our well of locks.

Enjoy.

- Jay Tomio

Author Bios

Ian R. MacLeod has been writing in and around the area of what he still likes to think of as speculative and fantastic fiction for many years. He's published five novels and three short story collections, has been widely anthologised and translated, and has won or been up for most of the major awards. His latest novel, *Song Of Time*, is due out very shortly from PS Publishing, and he has new stories due out in several markets, including a couple upcoming in Asimov's and in two new Steampunk anthologies. He lives in the riverside town of Bewdley in England, and he divides his time between writing, trying to write, and not writing at all. His website is at www.ianrmacleod.com.

Nick Mamatas is the author of two novels. The Lovecraftian Beat road novel *Move Under Ground* was nominated for both the Bram Stoker and International Horror Guild awards in 2005. The satirical novel of neighborhood nuclear supremacy, *Under My Roof* was recently nominated for Germany's Kurd Laßwitz Preis for translated science fiction. Much of his recent short fiction will be collected in *You Might Sleep...* in July 2008. Nick lives near, but not in, Boston Massachusetts.

Sandra Ruttan was born June 2, 1971 in Etobicoke, she grew up in Muskoka. As a child she devoured books, including Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*, CS Lewis's *Narnia Chronicles*, and had her first newspaper column at the age of 13.

After high school she spent time living overseas and witnessed the collapse of the Berlin Wall. Over the years she has traveled to over 25 countries on four continents.

She studied journalism at Loyalist College, took communication studies from Simon Fraser University and worked in special education. She also completed a creative writing diploma, which was when she began her first completed manuscript.

Sandra lives in western Canada.

Anna Tambour's next novel is *Crandolin*.

Catherynne M. Valente is the author of the *Orphan's Tales* series, as well as *The Labyrinth*, *Yume no Hon: The Book of Dreams*, *The Grass-Cutting Sword*, and four books of poetry, *Music of a Proto-Suicide*, *Apocrypha*, *The Descent of Inanna*, and *Oracles*. She is the winner of the Tiptree Award and the Million Writers Award and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, the Rhysling and Spectrum Awards, and the World Fantasy Award. She currently lives in Northeastern Ohio with her partner and two dogs.

Jeff VanderMeer is currently working on three stories sure to make him obscure: "Juan Mandible Sick-Eyes," "The Quickening," and "Mormeck." For other news, visit his website at www.jeffvandermeer.com

Artist Bio

Teemu Vedenoja



Teemu is 34 years old and lives in Kempele, Finland. He is a freelance graphics artist and his first major published work was last year, the album cover for King Diamond's "Give me your soul... please".

Most of his work is based on photographs, many many photographs, but since photographs rarely come out perfectly and/or have the same lighting, colours, contrast or simply do not exist, some parts are drawn over digitally.

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Succession At Quandong Creek

by Anna Tambour

Old Ron's house by Quandong Creek
with a cockatoo shriek and a pop of sinews snapping
(loud reports lost under a barrage of rain on tin)
fell down one night.

Flung down its useless arms, popped hips to flop
and in one last bony sag died cursing
bloody oath! surrenderless

But this was no surprise.
For years there, at the tendrilled valley's end
it listed, crouched in a rhomboidal sway,
gazed at its nail-stubbed often-streaming face,
in ever-nearness peered in that trick mirror of jokey waters.
Stubborn, but pushed and jerked in play -
the windswirl devils had their way with it,
their whistling joys.

. . . and those few nails as possible bought in 1938
didn't help to pin the joints.

Ron's house kept company with its own reflection,
watched vines grow over bones of wood and other.
Lived through the end of claps of axemen, crashing
death replies. Saw bullocks strain till sold, or dead.
Ron's house watched Ron sprout grey.
Watched Ron just lately hold his own
in house-like dignity, at people-devils.

Young costumed "hippies" now swirl naked,
joyful on their stage - this tangled creek
to the huffing, twisting stare of Ron
who always fills his electric kettle there
to make his tea and dinner on the fire he will make
from the cast-off limbs of eucalypts.

Ron's cows drink from the creek there, too.
Old Crooked Horn, their queen, and all the rest
who spend hot days hock-cooled in contemplation,
chewing cud, plops counterpointing
water ripple-breeze.

Ron's cat Witchy kept the house rat-free,
but as for the tree that overhangs the house
those mangoes have a siren-scent so loud
that nightly drop-plops split the scurried air -
added to indignities of age and buffeting.

Bombing mangoes dropped upon the roof
hit *bang* all night on headached windpushed tin
and the frame did more collapsing with each bash
like a face its teeth deserting.

Happily for Ron,
too many bushrats for Witchy-cat,
too many mangoes for the rats,
so Ron always gets a few.
He shares them with Ruby,
the dog who also eats his stew.

That was the second of Ron's houses to collapse,
and there's one more to go.

All built to the jangle of empty pockets -
"goat farmers" everyone called the scoop-eyed vets
who vanished rent-unpaid from dreamless rooms
whose footprints melted under other trappings
who traded their present for parcels of
Paradise!
flyblown white elephants!
Say that again, mate, and . . .
government land.

High and wild, the hills and vines.
Hack a new life - the fixed-jaw assertions.
Amateurs at farming, experts at the hard life
the hardest men of all then,
too spare to shed a tear, to whinge at fate,
to mourn the friends who'd "fallen"

men who hacked their rusty laughs at euphemisms
led their straw-haired cow-eyed families
with no sweet homilies, but a harvest-full
of heavy open-handers
to the not-much-promised land.

Never word-bakers,
their best hopes rose of pasts just burned;
they put no faith in this poppycock of Maker.

With those few nails, and his kin all hanging
like a swag of ticks on the jerking wagon's hide,
Ron's father's long tongue-lashings and rougher whip
tore strips off the new-bought bullocks, who mild as milk,
forever uncomplaining, pulled the family up and up and
through the new man-dwarfing tunnels of lantana -
that *carnivale*-coloured migrant then making rampant
pinkflowering mountains in those hills

in those hills
where lovely lawyer vine that grabs and rips
tall rappling liana rope
slow-clutching strangler fig pouring its suffocation from the treetops
and leeches clinging fat, making sores hard-put to heal
and false valentine leaves earning axes for the giant stinging tree
and fat harmless pythons curling sleepy on the river stones
where buttresses of trees and roots turning under humus
caught your feet at every step and made your ankles burn

The Jungle

as men called its alienness then
jungle smug as gravity,
old as wind
wild
as forest fire
crouched in waiting
patient
as a hibernating fern.

Jungle, stoic as the bullocks
Jungle, displaced and something to be
warred against,
sat

as Ron's own Pa had sat
in trenches,
 waiting
 to return.

Jungle just sat beside itself, its soul unbent
just hunkered down to watch men's follies fall upon
themselves, as nail bites into wood, and rust in nail,
Jungle waited
 watching
to earn its place again
winding its wildness on the never-settled earth.

Today, vines twist around the dreams of '38.
There's one house left, and one old man, old cows,
and a flock of parrot-people in full flightiness -
but all that's only a crack in the wood in time

house and nails and plans and flings of wailing winds
and skins of dreams all rotted by the damp.
Jungle doesn't care, indelible as fate. It crouches in no
cramp. It staked its claim long before the bullocks and
the nails, before lantana tried to be conquistador.
This jungle that was here before is sure, and knows its
primacy. It hunkers, like the last house shoved.
It doesn't need to wait and see.

One house to go.

For the playful windswirl devils,
a too-short game.
 But the jungle,
used to lying low
luxuriates

slow-breathing
in a bullock-patient
certainty of
 wait



Discuss on FanatasyBookSpot E-Zine Report Forum

G-O-O-D-B-Y-E

by Nick Mamatas

Once, there was this kid — and this wasn't all that long ago so this might tell you how really stupid kids can be, even today — who tromped into 924 Hilltop punk house in Ohio with a guitar case and a ripped T-shirt and a practiced scowl that he would have just bought from Hot Topic if only they'd sell them, and he declared that he'd sell his soul to the motherfucker who could teach him to rock a bass as well as Sid Vicious.

Of course, just to start Hilltop was the totally wrong place for such an exercise in posing. No booze, no stagediving, no major labels, no songs with the lyrics that include "girl" or "baby" because they're sexist, and the place isn't even open, really, before noon. But Moussaka was there, and he's a funny guy, so he waves the kid in and tells him to take the bass out of the case and take a seat. Moussaka had a little amp, and the kid breaks out this Fender Jazz Bass he must have gotten from his junior high school, and they plug in. Moussaka shows him how to slap a little bit, and pop the strings, and reminds him never to even pretend to strum a bass or everyone will know what's up.

And then Moussaka said, "Okay, we're done here."

"What the hell?" the kid said, "is this a joke?"

"I could ask you the same question," Moussaka said. "Sid sucked shit, sonny." Moussaka is about thirty-two years old, which is a pretty sad age for a non-pederast living in a punk house, so he was trying to sound like a cranky uncle or the kid's Dad. "His bass wasn't even plugged in to the backline at gigs so he wouldn't ruin the show, and it's not like the Sex Pistols were, you know—" he held up his hands and twitched his fingers like quotation marks "all about the music."

The kid started to open his mouth, but Moussaka continued, "He didn't play on the album. Steve Jones did all the bass parts and the guitar too. Sid asked Lemmy from Motörhead for lessons because he started getting embarrassed, even through the haze of smack and Nancy's big titties." The kid blushed at titties and then, his persona melted in a puddle around him, just said, "Thank you for your time, sir," and packed his bass.

But Moussaka wasn't done. While the kid is putting his bass back in his case and trying not to cry, Moussaka dug around for a blank piece of paper and a Sharpie. He wrote on the paper _____'s SOUL, OWNED BY MOUSSAKA O'REILEY AS OF THIS DATE _____. SIGNATURE _____, and actually made the kid fill it out. The kid did, and he had apparently given himself the name of Jack Shit — kids are stupid, remember? Anyway, the kid fills the whole thing out under his punk name, and even signs the words Jack Shit in the sort of careful cursive writing of a kid who goes to a very good junior high and always got extra points for neatness, and now Moussaka has the kid's soul just like that. He pinned the deed or contract or whatever you want to call it to the bulletin board, and it was there for a while. It either got so covered up with other flyers that it had more pushpin holes than paper, or it fell off and slipped behind the bookcase. Or maybe Lucy threw it out. Anyway. Anyway, imagine the kid. Who knows what brought him to Hilltop, or what the hell was going through his little cough syrup-addled head? A girl, maybe. Or maybe he made a friend who wanted to start a band and the kid really wanted this new friend and so he told the guy he could play bass and then decided to see if he could do a little Robert Johnson sort of thing, meeting a devil at the crossroads (where the Hilltop house happens to be).

Or maybe that self-same new friend wasn't one, and he tells the kid that if they want to be pals he should dress like a dipshit and take his junior high jazz band bass down to Hilltop for a bass lesson he'd never forget. For that matter, maybe the kid really learned something: you don't need to be a good musician to be a punk legend. (It actually works against you.) Really, it's the easiest thing in the world, being a punk legend. Two steps are involved.

First, get your name attached to a product of some sort. (It's especially good if the product is somehow anti-consumerist). Then, step two.

Die fucking young.

Spazzy cracked her knuckles and blinked hard three times. The salt in her sweat stung her eyes. She cracked her knuckles and asked, "Get all that?" The planchette was still again, the pen it was carrying tilted off to the side.

"I think so," said Kiki. He grabbed the last piece of paper and flipped through the few pages Spazzy had generated — it was all covered in the purple ink from his pen. Notes.

"How long was I under?"

"God, about three hours!" Kiki declared. Spazzy looked at him closely, so he actually glanced toward the clock radio. "Almost. Two and a half. Almost two." There wasn't much light in the room, Spazzy's, except for the clock radio, and the candles on either side of the side of the lapdesk Spazzy used to operate the planchette, and the indigo of a snowy twilight on the other side of the single window over the bed. "Man, I am tired from all this spirit medium...ism-, uh, ing," said Kiki.

Spazzy held up her arms, hands limp. "Pfft, try riding the planchette by yourself for three hours!"

"Two. Barely two. Not even."

"I must have moved that thing four thousand times. I need protein. I'm going to the kitchen to get a protein bar. Want anything?"

"I got your protein bar right here," Kiki said, smacking his lap with the pages of automatic writing. Then he flopped back on Spazzy's bed, took one of her pillows and placed it over his head. "Just turn on the lights, sweet thing." Spazzy struggled to her feet and left, limping heavily. Kiki laid there, letting his eyes adjust to the new light by slowly pulling the pillow across the top of his face, breathing in the ghost of Spazzy's raspberry shampoo and wondering whether she was a fake-ass, or if she really believed this stuff and if he should too. The writing sure didn't look like Spazzy's — it wasn't as spastic — so that had to mean something, if only some secret crazy subconscious hypnosis was in full effect.

#

Kiki, being a gigantic homo, was able to do what he pleased in shop class. None of the other kids would partner with him, and the shop teacher — a human hosepipe himself, though deeper in the closet than a roller skate that needs a key — felt bad for Kiki. So what Kiki did was what the planchette had previously instructed. He took apart his bass guitar and replaced the body with a large wooden tackle box, the cover of which was an antique ouija board he and Spazzy had found while thrifting one day. It was thee ouija board, in fact, the one that worked when Spazzy was doing it all by herself. The spirits were not only summoned, they were downright chatty. That's when Kiki had had the idea to drill a hole in the planchette and insert a pen. It was totally old school, and kept the transcribing down to a minimum.

Anyway, the spirits wanted a bass guitar ouija board for the big show, so they were getting one. Kiki even filched a couple of nice brass hinges to better attach the board to the box. It took him almost a week to get the body mods done. The YES NO GOODBYE on the top and bottom of the body made Kiki smile whenever he looked at it.

Unfortunately, the ouija bass sounded like muddy-ass shit. Spazzy frowned and rocked on her feet awkwardly. They were The But I Love Hims. Lady Miss Kiki Extravaganza (aka, Tomas Epstein) on muddy-ass shit-sounding bass. Spazzy Spaghetti Stigmata Yomama (aka Cheryl Shephard) on vocals and garbage can drums. The Tinklebot 9000, Spazzy's pre-programmed keyboard, rounded out their sound.

"Well, now what are we going to do?" asked Kiki.

"What do you mean?"

"I used to have a decent bass? Now this thing sounds like I'm playing in the bathroom stall of a men's station bathroom."

"So what?" Spazzy said, dismissive.

"So? So, thee spirits are guiding us wrong."

"No, they're not", Spazzy said. "Remember, you don't need to be a good musician to be a punk legend. So the bass's new sound is probably just a part of that."

"The spirits also said to die young last time we spoke to them," Kiki said. He shifted the bass from one knee to another and drummed his fingers on the neck. "Should we do that too?"

"Actually, they said that we'd need a record first, or something to sell. A book, maybe? Are either of us going to write a book any time soon?"

Kiki snorted. "Guess not. And as long as my bass sounds like this—" he popped a string and a fuzzy sound, more like a thick rubber band being shot off someone's thumb and hitting a wall, filled Spazzy's mother's basement, "we're not getting a deal with anyone, not even MakeYourOwnCD dot com."

"Good!" Spazzy leaned heavily on her brace and blew Kiki a kiss with her free hand. "Now let's waste our lives practicing in this dank little room."

"Or not practicing," said Kiki, "if we really want to be punk rock legends." Spazzy played a rim-shot.

#

Hilltop really is atop a hill, so Spazzy's mother had to drive the band in the SUV all the way to the door, which was very embarrassing because SUV's are evil. One time, Spazzy had even slapped a bumper sticker on the car reading I'M KILLING THE PLANET: ASK ME HOW! but her mother made her scrape it off. A bunch of kids on the bowed wrap-around porch even booed the SUV as it pulled up and stopped only when Kiki swung open the wide side doors, dropped onto the dirt driveway and helped Spazzy take the step down from her seat. Then a few of the kids even strolled up to help unload the garbage can and cymbals.

Spazzy's mother called after them as they began climbing the steps up to the porch, "Text me when you're almost done, so I can pick you up right after!"

"How am I supposed to text you in the middle of the set!" Spazzy yelled back. She had to stop and twist around to shout, because talking and walking at once was hard.

"Not the middle, near the end!" said Spazzy's mother.

"That's even worse than the middle," Spazzy said in a normal voice to Kiki, as her mother clearly wasn't listening. The window went up and the SUV eased back down the winding driveway spine of the hill. One guy named Fred went beep beep beep! like the SUV was a fat garbage truck and then winked and zipped inside. "That wink was for me, I'll have you know," said Kiki.

The gig was in the basement, which was another trial as the steps leading down to it weren't completed as they were in Spazzy's house. The entire flight was just wooden slats, and it took a right angle about halfway down, like a poor man's spiral staircase. Kiki and Spazzy ended up walking back out the front, down those safer steps and then around the house to the backyard to enter through the cellar door. Only six steps, and firm-seeming concrete with a banister screwed into the walls on either side. The equipment went down the rickety steps, and was waiting for Kiki to set it all up.

Moussaka slid off the freezer on which he was sitting and counting receipts to buttonhole Spazzy. "Hey, I know you come here all the time—" Spazzy had only been to Hilltop twice — "but I need to go over the rules one more time." Moussaka raised a finger, "One, no stagediving." Spazzy rooted herself and lifted her left arm to wiggle her forearm crutch around. "No problem," she said.

"Even if you had a stage!"

"Two, no alcohol or drugs. If you're carrying, let me have it."

"I bet," said Spazzy.

"Third, uhm, you're the vocalist, right?" Moussaka said.

"La la la," said Spazzy.

"Well, we already got your lyrics, I think, but I want to remind you: no sexism, racism, homophobia, anti-immigrant sentiment, encouraging of violence, glorification of meat-eating — though if that is your choice, it's fine — and no pro-Nader lyrics."

"That's a new one," Spazzy said. "with Nader."

"No, we always had it. Even when we decided, we did it retroactively. Band who played here and sang pro-Nader or PIRG lyrics were sent letters explaining exactly what's wrong, politically, with him, and they were disinvited back unless they apologized for those lyrics."

"Rock and roll!" said Spazzy.

In the back of the room Kiki spoke into a mic, saying "Test, test, testing, one-two-three" and someone sitting on an old couch on his left said, as someone always must, "Testes, testes. One, two, three!" and someone else who was sitting on the rickety stairs and creating a fire hazard said, "Hike!"

"Whatever, bitches."

#

"Hey," said Spazzy into the mic. "Hi. We're The But I Love Hims. And this is a song." The room was half-full. Overwhelmingly boys, mostly all skinny, except for fat old Moussaka. A couple of girls, who looked about sixteen and dressed like they were about eight, were in the corner under the steps. Then Spazzy raised her sticks and brought them down onto the side of the well-pummeled garbage can and began to scream. Tinklebot 9000 blared Casiotone bossanova and Kiki waited, counting, for his cue. He snapped a string on his ouija guitar and it, and the world, seemed to go wwaaaOOOooooAAAoooo, pulsing in and out like a bubble in the deep black sea. The boys got up and started almost dancing.

Spazzy sang the lyrics the spirits had directed. There was "Day of the Locust", with its memorable refrain of "It's all just hocus pocus/this place is a locus/of your crimes" and then "Miss Lonelyhearts," about how boys are all worthless bitches for not wanting a girl whose legs may not necessarily spread all the way open, but who can still suck a mean dick. Kiki sang the "mean dick" parts, as he struggled manfully with the deep and fuzzy notes rumbling out of his bass. The boys really danced there, grabbing their crotches and hooting. Even Moussaka got up and stomped a bit.

Sweaty and tired from the dual exertions of caterwaul and drums, Spazzy licked her lips and introduced one more song. "Here's another song. It's about an adult that people used to think was a cool guy, but then he turned out to be a total prick." She smiled. "Don't worry Moose Ca-Ca, it's not about Ralph Nader. This one is called 'Goodbye.'" And The But I Loved Hims hit it hard. The Tinklebot 9000 squeaked and groaned, and Spazzy shrieked about Sid Vicious and fucked-up losers and thick hands around a tender white neck and how the scene ain't worth jack shit and Kiki slapped the shit out his bass, jumping and hooting and kicking out his leg like he was making fun of Van Halen, and in doing so he kicked the crutch and that knocked Spazzy off-balance and the Tinklebot 9000 got knocked off its stand and the garbage can started rolling down the length of the basement, kids running and jumping out of the way and Kiki put his hand right through the ouija board body of his bass right as he got tangled up in the cords leading to an amp and he knocked over a girl whose lemonade spilled and splattered all over Spazzy's bent metal crutch and then there was a huge bloom of sparks and the smell of flaming hair and everything went dark and silent except for a distant wwaaaOOOooooAAAoooo. "Nobody move!" said Moussaka. "Everyone stay exactly where you are so you don't trip over one another or fall onto any broken glass or start a fire. It's like freeze tag, kids. Just freeze."

"Tag!" someone called out in the dark, and then there were chuckles.

"You're it!" shouted Spazzy.

"Shut up!" Moussaka barked. "I'm going to find the circuit breaker."

The wwaaaOOOooooAAAoooo was quiet at first, more felt than heard. But in the dank silence of the Hilltop basement, it began to make itself clear. Everyone could hear it, because nobody could speak or even move. It was a low low groan, like a motor struggling.

It was a motor, Kiki realized. The freezer, on another circuit, was still running, and running hard. Kiki, not even sure what he was doing, but sure wanting to give Moussaka and his rules a little fuck you, started slowly making his way over to it. The kids were quiet and still so it was easy to pick his over their legs and torsos. The freezer, even though it was the horizontal kind, probably had a light in it that goes on, Kiki reasoned. He'd be helping everyone out, including Moussaka.

Kiki opened the freezer door as a solid click echoed in the basement and the lights flicked back on hard. He squinted, blinked, then saw the kid in the freezer all blue and dead, the ghosts of thick fingers purple on his throat.

"Jack Shit," said Kiki. Moussaka came running, swatting a girl aside to get to the freezer "Fuck, you're a

murderer!" Kiki shouted. "There's a dead body in here!" Moussaka slammed into Kiki hard, crushing the boy against the wall. Kiki wilted.

"Protect the scene!" shouted Spazzy as she picked up her crutch and swung it over her head. It flew across the room end over end and slammed hard into Moussaka's back. Then the kids swarmed and took him down.

Cheryl's personal email userid is still Spazzy4LifenDeth, but she doesn't rock out anymore. She left Ohio when she went to college, and now she's a vet tech in Berkeley, where it's never as cold as freezers. She likes to ride in her Lark scooter and watch the kids act out and reenact their little rituals and rites of passage on Telegraph Avenue, then she goes home to her own two boys, Johnny and Joey, and let's them listen to whatever music they like, even if it is Greenlandic trip-hop, which is the big thing.

Tomas is only Lady Miss Kiki Extravaganza twice a month, at a bar called Secrets. He's still in Cincinnati, and lives with his mother even though he has more than enough money for a place of his own. Mama keeps Tomas honest. Hold out for love, rather than bring home any scraggly boy who is all elbows and lips and eyes that flutter like little moths after every kiss. He never bought another bass, and would rather lip synch torch songs these days. Tomas is a librarian with a special interest in true crime and photography.

Moussaka O'Reiley is in prison. He has a zine called *The Punk Got Punked* — two issues have come out in nine years — and works in the shop, twisting together strands of metal to make wire mesh garbage cans for the state. He's been stabbed four times in four separate incidents. His belly looks like a railway map of stitches and scars.

Jack Shit is still dead, and has nobody to talk to anymore. Punk rock legend.



Discuss on FantasyBookSpot E-Zine Report Forum

The Shadow Cabinet:

Spotlight on Dedalus

by Jeff VanderMeer

If the Surreal-Decadent section of the Shadow Cabinet has a publisher as its champion, that champion would have to be Dedalus. (<http://www.dedalusbooks.com>) Based in England, Dedalus has produced edgy, inexpensive trade paperbacks of classic reprints, anthologies of translated fantasy from continental Europe, and even originals by the obscure writers of today. Given Dedalus' current financial problems, and need for reader support, I thought it appropriate to spotlight a few interesting titles that, if not for Dedalus, wouldn't be in print or, in some cases, never brought into print. Although Dedalus is most famous, perhaps, for its many anthologies of translated Surreal/Decadent or just plain phantasmagorical fiction, I have chosen to concentrate on novels...

The Other Side by Alfred Kubin (original publication, 1908) – Perhaps most akin in tone to parts of Mervyn Peake's *Titus Alone*, this novel by a major graphic artist of the Twentieth Century (1877-1959) tells of a mysterious city deep in the heart of Central Asia and the traveler who visits it. The city has literally been brought to

its current location by its inhabitants. Over time, strange rituals and aberrations have sprung up. The relatively modern aspects of the novel—American tourists, etc.—are perfectly integrated into a timeless, festering milieu. Unease and unseen horror form the emotional foundations of this original and disturbing novel.

Memoirs of a Gnostic Dwarf and *Confessions of a Flesh-Eater* by David Madsen (Dedalus originals, 1995 and 1997) – Madsen takes on sexual taboos and deviations in *Memoirs* and cannibalism in *Confessions*, with equally fascinating results. The titular dwarf of *Memoirs* serves in the court of Pope Leo during the Renaissance—in fact, Leo’s backside is described in horrifying detail at the beginning of the novel. What follows is a clear-eyed view of a decadent Papacy, complete with all manner of degradation. As a narrator, Peppe the dwarf is endearing, disgusting, and a sturdy guide through the flagrant excesses of the period. *Confessions*, by contrast, is a more intimate affair, narrated by Orlando Crispe, who protests in the novel’s opening paragraph, “I did not kill Trogville. No matter what they say, I did not kill him. I introduced a mild narcotic into his glass of whisky; I subsequently stripped him naked, laid him face down on the parquet floor...but I did not kill him.” True, perhaps, although as the reader soon finds out, Crispe, more of a dandy and poseur than Peppe, has plenty else to answer for. Both novels approach the extremes of the grotesque while being fast-moving and, at times, darkly humorous.

Primordial Soup by Christine Leunens (Dedalus original, 1999) – Deceptively breezy and light, but descending into a special kind of darkness, this novel is narrated by Kate Lester, a meat-hater (due to the bizarre views of her mother) who turns to sex in adolescence as a way of achieving a kind of normalcy. Unfortunately, in college, she begins to mix sex with a sudden hunger for meat: “I spent those afternoons marinating Professor Ranji in my mind, in lassi and rose petals.” Satirical, unflinching, and an antidote to the more cloying choices from the Oprah Book Club, *Primordial Soup* isn’t without its flaws, but in terms of updating Decadent themes in a modern setting, it’s well worth reading.

The Mysteries of Algiers by Robert Irwin (original publication, 1988) – A very dark comedy mixed with philosophical discourse, Irwin’s novel blew me away when I first read it. Set in 1959 in Algiers during a last stand by the French against a liberation army, *Mysteries* follows Philippe, a desert intelligence officer bent on understanding the mind of the enemy. The plot is labyrinthine, Philippe’s actions grotesque. Unflinching, contemporary, and surreal, it’s a minor masterpiece of mood and condensed writing. Extreme? Certainly. But, then, some of the best writing is extreme. (I also highly recommend Irwin’s *The Limits of Vision*, an unclassifiable minor masterpiece.)

The Book of Nights by Sylvie Germain (original publication, 1985) – Compared to *One Hundred Years of Solitude* because of its generations-spanning events, this is a melodramatic, at times hyperbolic novel that showcases the grotesque and bizarre in describing a century of Franco-Prussian conflicts. *The Book of Nights* follows the Peniel family’s adventures, triumphs, disappointments, and suffering. The elevated language and almost saga-like rhetoric can at times be tiresome, but if you allow yourself to enter this stylized world, there’s an unmistakable power to the narrative. But: in tone and approach, it’s not at all like Marquez. Readers who buy the novel expecting a similar experience will be disappointed. (Germain’s *Invitation to a Journey*, also published by Dedalus, is a more personal novel, although not as good.)

If any of these novels pique your interest, I would also recommend seeking out *The Man in Flames* by Serge Filippini, *Memoirs of a Byzantine Eunuch*, and *Alembert’s Principle* by Andrew Crumey. Of course, Dedalus has many other titles, in and out of print, and almost all of them are worth your serious consideration.



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A Virtual Anthology: *Weinachtabend*

by Ian R. MacLeod

A sleek Mercedes glides through falling snow towards the lodge gates of a sprawling country house. Inside, Diane, a beautiful woman, and Richard, the man she once loved, head towards their fate. In the Christmas weekend that follows, which is filled with tinsel and pine and fine whisky and presents and the joy of the hunt, they will fall in love again. And one will betray the other. And neither will survive.

Weihnachtabend made an immediate impression on me, and reading it again now as I have done many times over the years, that impression remains. It isn't the idea around which the story is framed — even to me as a teenager when I first encountered this story, the idea of an alternate England which the Nazis had succeeded in invading was hardly ground-breaking — but pretty much everything else about Roberts' story still feels both vivid and groundbreaking. Heartbreaking, as well.

Roberts was an artist as well as a writer, and the strong visual sense is one of his great strengths. The sense of that car moving through the snow at the start of the story, and then the country house at which it arrives, and the whole lovely idea of a firelit Christmas, the smooth luxury and easy indulgence of the privileged few in a dictatorship, is brought deliciously to life. The beautiful women, the guns, the cars, the powerful men and the fine wines, are all superbly undermined by the sort of genuine unease which action writers rarely seem capable of achieving. And the action in this story is subtly achieved, and thus made all the more compelling and, ultimately, horrific.

I used to wonder when I first read Roberts how it was that he was able to make the colours in his best work seem so vivid, the feelings of his characters so real, the sense of place so intense. Now that I've read a lot more widely, I understand that Roberts cared about aspects of writing which are often neglected in the genre. His choice of words, the way he reveals and describes things, how he lets his characters talk and react — all these things are accomplished with a verve and precision which is rare in any kind of literature, and especially in SF. Above all, though — or moving subtly below these strengths — is an almost preternatural ability to envisage things as if they were real. I'm not simply talking about the brisk solidity of his descriptions, or his fine attention to telling detail, although these are amongst Roberts' characteristic strengths. What I'm really attempting to describe is that deeper sense of real people facing real choices in a world which seems even more vivid and complex, and yet ultimately as inexplicable, as our own. There are no simple remedies, no easy answers, no magic bullets or handy escapes. Above all, in his best work, there's Roberts' almost supreme ability to write about women, and about love, and about sex.

Amongst male writers, Thomas Hardy's women would be the clearest parallel to what Roberts achieved; characters such as Tess D'Urberville and Bathsheba Everdene. Roberts also loved and commemorated the same landscapes that Hardy did, and had a similarly mordant view of God and humanity, and the shocks and ironies of chance. Although both writers could sometimes fall victim to cutesy wish-fulfilment, their passion for beauty and their anger at the world's wrongness gives extraordinary power to their best work.

The key scene in *Weihnachtabend* which lingers in the mind — in part, I'll admit, because I first read it as a male adolescent — is the love-making between Richard and Diane. As always with Roberts when he's at his best, he approaches things in ways which are poetic, sensual and oblique. He fragments the moments into dis-

associated images and feelings which come back to haunt Richard as the story develops. Much, indeed in the manner of Nicholas Roeg's film *Don't Look Now*; for me, another key influence.

I often cite Keith Roberts as an inspiration for my work (and life) as a writer, and *Weihnachtabend*, as much as anything he ever wrote, is the reason why. I first encountered this superb short story back in my teens; an age when the place where I bought or borrowed each particular book, and then where I read it, often ended up almost as engraved upon my mind as the actual words on the page. So, for the record, I should say that I bought my paperback copy of *New Worlds 4* from a carousel at a newsagents on the high street of Shirley, my home town, and that I read *Weihnachtabend* on a coach trip to the Cotswolds on what I think was my fifteenth birthday. And I still have it now. Many books are disposable. Some aren't. Some stories you can lose or forget about. Others follow you into your thoughts and hopes — your fears and dreams.



Discuss on FantasyBookSpot E-Zine Report Forum

The Devil and Ms. V

by Catherynne M. Valente

I firmly believe that one of the circles of hell consists of a single endless undergraduate poetry workshop. They are harrowing by intent and design, so it should be unsurprising that your humble narrator was scarred by one or two in her time, and in times of extremis, draws out the lessons of those humiliating jungle-years with which to instruct and terrify. This is one of those times. Hearken, children! For what I have to say will chill your heart.

The devil of my early writing was man I shall henceforward refer to as Dr. S.

Dr. S was obsessed with the idea of Cliché. I capitalize it because he did—you could hear it in his speech, the awe and fear with which he regarded it. It was a word that came to haunt me, a floating neon noun ready to pounce on my carefully-typed pages and scald them with accusations. It was his main criticism of anything he did not like, lines, images, subjects. He was as vigilant against it as a savvy hunter against hidden panthers—Cliché may leap upon you at a moment's notice, burrowing into your verse without pity or hesitation, and if you are not so well-read that you say your night-prayers not to God but Ginsberg, you will never even know it is there. Dr. S outlawed an entire index of words from our available poetic vocabulary at the beginning of the semester. I will not reproduce it in full, but among them were: "ocean," "tears," "love," "gossamer," and "blood." These are necessary tumors to remove from the undergraduate body, of course.

In later years it seemed odd to me that a man so feared of cliché in poetry could embrace it so in his person. For Dr. S was particularly fond of the following activities: elbow-patches on corduroy jackets, writing poetry about his fatherless childhood in the Midwest, running the campus literary magazine like his personal Chilean junta, and sleeping with his students. It is entirely possible that there is a factory somewhere deep in the wilds of Iowa where such men are stamped out by the dozens and neatly shipped to educational institutions across the world.

Needless to say, Dr. S hated my work. Poetry should be about parental issues, edgy sex, and the Midwest, not magic or myth, after all. Eventually he threw up his hands and declared that if I wasn't going to change for him,

I wasn't going to change for anyone, and I might as well just do what I do and languish in the purgatory of the unpublished. My response was, I believe, unprintable in such an august venue as the one in which these words abide.

However, despite my personal differences with the dastardly Dr. S, his phobia of Cliché was communicable, and I inherited it full-force.

It is a valuable phobia to have. In poetry, you cannot hide. Your words are naked and unprotected: if you dare to say a woman's skin was white as snow, you will be caught out and arrested, and no judge in the world will remain steadfast at your side. It's no more than you deserved, really. And because poetry is so vulnerable, so unguarded, most poets of any quality have figured out how to avoid it, or at least to slow down when they see a critical patrol car in the distance.

But in fiction, you can hide.

A novel consists of so many words that you can get away with murder, so to speak. And if you did not bend under the whip of Dr. S, if you did not discover along the way a phobia, nay, an allergy to Cliché, you may toss about as much snow-white skin as you please, and be forgiven for it. And as I have begun to review books as well as write them, I have come to believe that Dr. S did not make a small hell of enough young writers' lives. What is a Cliché, you might ask, so that I may identify it in the wild? A Cliché is something repeated so many times in so many pieces of media that it has lost all ability to move or impact the audience, and is therefore utterly useless to the writer. "Get away with murder," for example. No one who reads such a sentence is really struck dumb with the raw unfairness of such a thing, the injustice, the violence condoned, the amoral, godless universe implied by such a phrase. Nor is it funny. Yet it is used and re-used as though it carried some kind of mantric power. This is silly, slovenly writing, and I shuddered to type it. Nevertheless, especially in genre literature, such proliferate like foul mushrooms. Not because the writers who use them are bad, or lazy, or anything of the sort. They simply are not poets, and have never been strip-searched for unoriginal phrasing. After all, in a work of a hundred thousand words, what does it matter if a thousand or so have been chewed to death by three millennia of decomposing authors?

It mattered to Dr. S. And it matters to me. The world could do with a little phobia, and if novels could be as naked an accountable as poems, we would all have to endure far less rubbish.

As a start, allow me to fire the following items from the English Author's lexicon: "vise-like grip." "His/her blood ran cold." The word "eldritch," applied to anything, unless you are Terry Pratchett and therefore making a joke, or H.P. Lovecraft, and therefore dead.

Skin may be any color, however, it may not be compared to: snow, milk/cream/any dairy product, ebony, porcelain, chocolate, coffee/café au lait/any caffeinated beverage.

Eyes, especially if they are green, may not "flash."

A heroine may have red hair. If you pay a tax, it may even be "flowing red hair." However, if she does, she may not be "fiery" a "spitfire" or any other combustible substance. She may not be spunky, sassy, or in any other way defined entirely by her hair color. If she has flowing red hair and a fiery personality, under no circumstances may she be named Molly. Or Kate. Or Annie, for god's sake.

A sword may be many things. It may slice, dice, and julienne. It may cut tin cans and tomatoes with equal ease. Try hard to resist giving it a lineage, or allowing it to be of dwarven/elvish/eldritch make. Or glow. In fact, try writing a fantasy novel without using the word "sword." It'll be good for you.

If a hero is spunky or sassy, like his redheaded friend Molly, if he is a scrappy, clever, tricky type, he may be named anything but Jack. If he is an orphan, Oliver is right out.

This one may seem too easy, but like smoking certain vegetable substances, we rarely narc on each other, even though we know it is illegal: if a certain young man is destined for great acts of heroism, he may be raised anywhere but a farm.

The phrase “genre hack” was created for addicts of this sort of thing. This is only a beginning. Search inside yourself—you know others lurk there, panther-like, ready to pounce. They lurk in me, too. Our vigilance must be tireless. It is not that any of the above are bad in and of themselves. But they have been done so many times before—why would you spend precious time that will be counted against you at the hour of your death creating more of it? Life, and the warranty on your wrists, is too short for unoriginality.

If this sort of thing continues much longer, I shall have to institute a Neighborhood Watch. And you know, Dr. S just doesn't have the vacation time.



Discuss on FanatasyBookSpot E-Zine Report Forum

What Burns Within (Excerpt)

by Sandra Ruttan

She wasn't the type of woman he was interested in. Constable Tain knew that before he even set eyes on her. Everything from her tone of voice to her abrupt manner to the way she hung up the phone before she heard what he had to say bothered him.

Paranoid. That's what his friends would call him, if he had any left he could talk to. It had been a while since he'd checked, but he knew what they would have said before. That he'd been thinking like a cop for too long. That if he saw a smiling toddler with a lollipop he'd assume the kid stole it.

His gut told him the woman had probably had her share of run-ins with the law, at best a negligent parent, at worst... Well, he wasn't sure yet. Despite that, he noted the store-bought blonde might have been a looker if the layers of makeup hadn't cracked under her snarl.

“I'd better not hear you've been taking things,” the woman hissed at the child, who cowered on the edge of the bench as she clip-clopped by on her three-inch heels.

Tain wondered how she could move in clothes that tight. He gestured to the open door as he identified himself. “Right this way, Mrs. Brennen.”

She tossed her head, causing her multiple dangling hoop earrings to clink together, and marched past him. Once she reached the table inside the small, bland interview room she turned on her heel.

“Well?” Her right hand landed on her hip.

“Well?” Tain echoed, staring back. With heels she was about an inch taller than he was, and that was saying something. In bare feet she must have been 5’11”.

The woman blew out a deep breath. “What’s he done?”

Tain sat down on a chair. “He was found at the park near the fair just off the Lougheed Highway. Wandering around alone.”

She blinked, and the lines around her eyes softened, but only for a split second. Everything about this woman bothered him, from the fact that her first instinct had been to assume her son was in trouble to the fact that she acted more like a suspect than a parent whose child had been found unattended at the fairgrounds, brought to the police station by a stranger.

“Mrs. Brennen, what—”

“Jesus, what do you take me for? Is that what you’re after, some sort of trumped-up neglect charge? Who are you anyway? Quota filler so the RCMP can look like an equal opportunity employer for Indians too? Oh, I mean native or aboriginal or First Nations or what ever the hell you people call yourselves.”

Tain stared at her. No look of regret even flickered across her face. Her upper lip curled, and everything from the toe-tapping to the way she blew out her breath hinted at nothing more than annoyance and impatience. No trace of concern for her son.

Or evidence she felt any responsibility for the situation.

The woman finally dropped the hand from her hip, sat down and exhaled audibly as she crossed her legs to the side of the chair, her gaze leveled at the door instead of at the police officer across from her.

“He was with Taylor. His sister. When I get my hands on her...”

She froze. After a moment the scowl slipped from her face. Tain started counting and hit five before she looked him in the eye.

“Where’s my daughter?”

“I tried to explain when I phoned—”

She sprang from the chair and was across the room and out the door before he had a chance to stop her. He ran into the hallway.

“Where is she? Where’s your sister?” Mrs. Brennen grabbed her son’s shirt and shook him, lightly at first, then forcefully. Nicky’s head snapped back dangerously close to the wall.

The boy started to cry as Tain pushed his way between them. “Let him go!”

She did just that and slapped Tain across the face, his skin burning from the blow. He grabbed her wrists.

“Take your hands off me.” She jerked her arms back as soon as he released her. Tain unclenched his jaw and nodded to the officer who’d been watching Nicky.

“Please take Mrs. Brennen to an interview room.”

“I’m not—”

Tain lowered his voice. “I can charge you with assaulting a police officer. You can cooperate, or you can cool off in a cell.” He turned back to the officer. “And please find this young man a snack once Mrs. Brennen is settled.”

Nicky had slid down under the bench, curled with his arms wrapped around his knees.

The next ten minutes were spent painfully watching the officer try to coax the boy out from under the bench. It was a curious thing to Tain. Sims was a clean-cut guy. He had an easygoing smile and looked sharp in his uniform, but the boy kept looking at Tain, wiggling back against the wall whenever Sims reached toward him, pulling his knees up to hide his chin.

Sims stood up, looked at Tain and shrugged. “Do you want me to pull him out?”

Tain wasn’t great with kids, but he wasn’t eager to have one dragged kicking and screaming down the hall either. Especially when the child was a witness he was responsible for.

He squatted down beside the bench and tried to offer a reassuring smile. “My friend will take you for cookies and find you something to play with.” Nicky remained in a ball.

“We need to talk to your mom. It’s okay. My friend will take good care of you.”

For a moment they were locked in a stare. Tain wondered what was going through the boy’s mind. If his own brief encounter with Nicky Brennen’s mother was anything to go by, the child probably didn’t have much of a reason to trust adults. Tain reached out his hand slowly.

Nicky unclasped his hands, unbending his legs one at a time. His eyes were huge.

“Are you gonna find my sister?” Nicky pulled himself out from under the bench. He looked at Tain’s hand for a moment, his mouth twisted, and then he stood.

Tain pulled back his hand, his heart sinking just a bit as he contemplated what experiences would cause a child to be afraid to trust a police officer. He took out his wallet and handed Nicky a five-dollar bill. He whispered, “Make sure he takes you to get a treat.”

Tain watched the boy glance at his mother, who had her back to them, arms folded across her chest, not moving. A hint of a smile curled the boy’s lips as he clamped the money in his fist. He didn’t take the other officer’s hand either, but followed without argument.

As they walked away, Nicky turned back to look over his shoulder, those big eyes meeting Tain’s gaze. The smile was gone.

Tain drew a deep breath. From the corner of his eye he saw someone approach him.

Sergeant Steve Daly was a little shorter than Tain, with sandy hair just starting to turn gray at the temples. Daly nodded at the boy. "What's the situation?" he asked.

Tain didn't have a great track record of getting along with his superiors, or pretty much anyone for that matter, but he respected the way Daly operated. The man was available without being intrusive. It didn't feel like Daly checked up on him, so much as checked in with him.

Most other officers would have punted Tain sideways, put him on desk duty or some marginal unit without much stress, tried to keep him out of the way. Instead, Daly had pulled him up for this case, getting him away from the routine humdrum assignments.

He'd even let him work alone. It had been the only thing Daly had hesitated over. In the end he'd agreed, as long as Tain understood that at the first sign the case was snowballing he'd have to deal with a partner.

Tain had hoped that wouldn't be necessary, although he had to admit it didn't look good now. He filled Daly in on how Nicholas Brennen got to the police station.

Daly's eyes narrowed. "Some guy drove him here?" "Apparently he didn't want people to think he was abducting the boy. He didn't come inside. Just wrote this note and gave it to the boy. Kid came in on his own. We'll have to check the tape and see if we can get an ID." "Now I've heard everything," Daly said.

"Not quite." Tain told him about the missing girl.

Something about the way Daly's cheeks sagged made him look like he'd aged ten years in that moment. "How old is she?"

"I was just about to ask when Mommy Dearest flew off the handle."

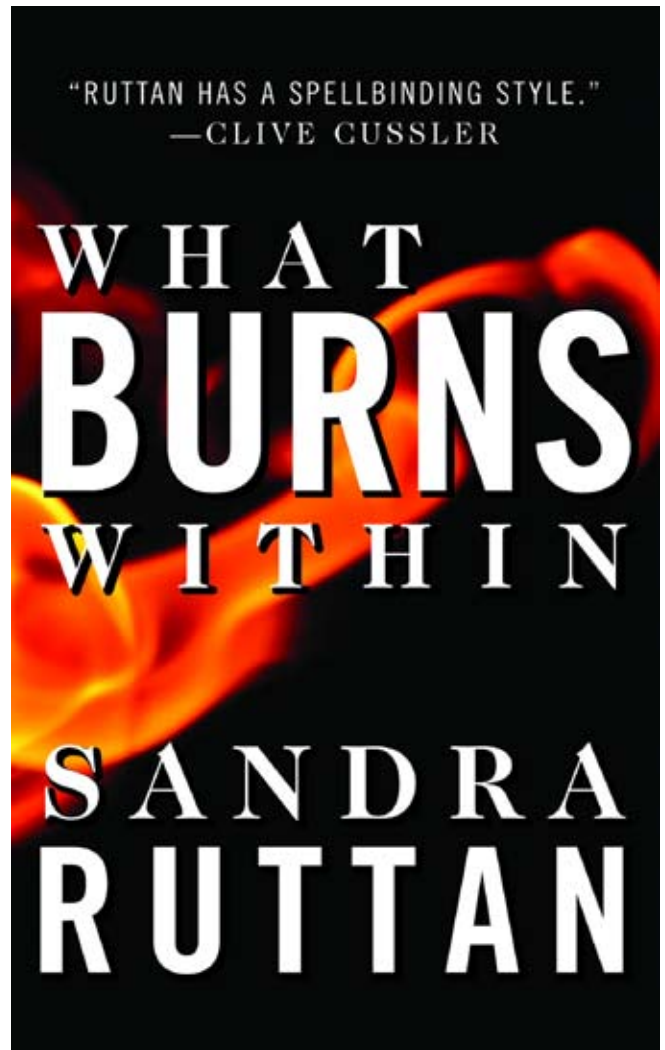
"Do we need to bring in social services?"

"Already called them."

Daly blew out a deep breath. "Talk to the mother. I'll have Sims handle the background check. Report to my office as soon as you're done."

Tain nodded as he went to interview Mrs. Brennen for the second time.

When Tain reached Sergeant Daly's office twenty minutes later, Inspector Hawkins was already there. "Sir."



Tain nodded.

Hawkins had a few years on Daly, but he was as fit as any man on the force. He was the poster boy for the respectable RCMP officers, the kind of man who embodied confidence and authority. Clean cut, with nothing more than a few laugh lines around his eyes and his rank to hint at his age. Few things rattled the inspector, but the fact that he was in Daly's office suggested to Tain that he was worried.

The inspector didn't acknowledge Tain's arrival. "What's the status?"

Daly answered. "Patrols are out canvassing now. We've got uniforms at every exit point from the fairgrounds, taking statements."

Hawkins frowned. "And the girl is the right age?"

Daly glanced at Tain, then nodded.

"Shit." Hawkins muttered the word under his breath, but not so far under that Tain didn't hear him. Tain looked at Daly. "There's usually a news crew on the grounds filming, right?"

Daly nodded.

"We should get their tape, double-check it. Look for any known pedophiles, any sign of these kids in the background, anything."

"I'll call the patrols."

"I think we should reassign this case," Hawkins said.

"Respectfully, sir, I don't think that's a good idea," Daly said.

Hawkins turned to look at Tain. "Last month we recovered the body of Julie Darrens from a burnt-out shack at the industrial park near the Mary Hill Bypass. Isabella Bertini is still missing. The press will have a field day with this."

"I decided to have Tain respond to every arson fire since we found Julie Darrens," Daly said. "He's been working 'round the clock on the Bertini girl. No solid leads."

"Just crackpots and dead ends," Tain said. "We'll be getting more of the same when this hits the news."

Hawkins kept his gaze on Daly. "You can have Tain assist, but I don't think it's in the best interest of this department—"

"What about the best interest of this case?" Daly's eyes pinched with uncharacteristic anger. "Tain has been working in conjunction with Burnaby. He knows all the particulars. Pulling him off—"

"I didn't say to pull him off."

"No, just have him take a backseat so that Burnaby will think we softballed them, gave them a body just to shut them up because we don't take finding dead kids on our patch seriously."

Hawkins pointed at Daly. “Julie Darrens and Isabella Bertini may have gone missing from Burnaby, but Julie was found here, in Coquitlam, and now a child’s been snatched from within our borders. I want our department handling this case.”

“Then Tain will take the lead.”

The two men stood staring at each other for a moment, until Daly’s phone rang and he grabbed it. “Yes. No, I... Thank you.”

He hung up the phone and leaned against his arms, his hands planted firmly on the desk in front of him before he looked up again. “Industrial area just south of the Trans Canada Highway, right on the Fraser River. Not far from the fairgrounds where Taylor Brennen went missing. Another suspected arson fire.”

For a moment the room was silent, Hawkins and Daly still locked in a match of visual chicken, waiting to see who would blink first.

It was Hawkins who turned, glanced at Tain, then looked back at Daly. “I sure as hell hope you know what you’re doing.”

He crossed the room, pulled the door open and slammed it behind him.

Constable Craig Nolan was familiar with the image of his partner, all business, from the straight skirt to the pressed shirt, straight brown hair clipped back in a ponytail looking like it knew better than to dare fall out of place, the touch of makeup that somehow emphasized the icy eyes.

She stopped at the steps to the house and turned to look at him. “You should let me handle this.”

Craig unclenched his jaw. “Did I miss the memo?”

Her forehead wrinkled for a second. Lori Price was as pushy as she was tall, and she met Craig’s gaze steadily. “The one about your promotion, putting you in charge,” he said.

Lori folded her arms across her chest. “It might be better for her if she deals with a woman. I didn’t know you were so touchy.”

Craig shook his head as he watched his partner turn, march up the steps, pause, then yank the door open. He counted to ten before he followed her silently, clenching his fists.

“I already told them,” the low, hollow voice murmured from just beyond the hallway where Craig stood.

“Yes, but I need you to tell me now.” Lori’s voice failed to sound sympathetic. Instead, it sounded pushy. As usual.

Her words were met with silence.

“Mrs. Parks, it really would be best—”

“No. I don’t think so.”

Craig heard movement, which told him that either Mrs. Parks was preparing to flee or that Lori was trying to corner her. He walked into the living room.

Mrs. Parks was standing, but Lori towered over her. Craig's partner looked like she was ready to tackle Mrs. Parks if the woman tried to leave.

Craig stopped just inside the room. Mrs. Parks looked at him and blinked.

"For a second I thought you were Carl. Except your hair's a bit longer."

A quick glance at the prominent wedding photo on the mantel showing Mrs. Parks and a blond, fit man was all Craig needed. "Your husband?"

She nodded. "Three years. He's at work."

"Would you like us to phone him, have him come home?"

Mrs. Parks nodded again. She sank back down on the sofa across the coffee table from where Lori Price stood, arms now crossed.

"Perhaps you could locate her husband." Craig glanced at Lori. Her eyes pinched partially shut, and her nostrils flared. He turned his back to her, approached Mrs. Parks slowly and knelt down until he was below eye level with her. When he finally heard Lori march out of the room he spoke. "Is there anything else we can get for you, Mrs. Parks?"

"Cindy."

Craig frowned, glancing back at the photos for a clue. "Cindy?"

"Call me Cindy. Please."

"Okay. Is there anything else we can do, Cindy?"

She continued sitting rigidly, her hands clasped together on her lap, her face long and cold, without a trace of a spark in her eyes. Then she lifted a trembling hand to wipe away an unbidden tear that had escaped, before tucking her blond hair back behind her ear. She looked at Craig. "You can find the man who did this to me."

Craig swallowed. He felt like he'd been punched in the gut, winded. The look in her dark eyes sent a chill down his spine.

How's she supposed to look? What do you know about how it feels to be raped?

"We're going to do everything we can to catch him and put him away, but I'm not going to lie. This won't be easy."

Her face didn't move, but her gaze shifted to the right, as though something on that side of the room had caught her attention. Then she took a deep breath and looked him in the eyes. "You need me to tell you what happened."

He nodded.

“Carl got a call just before four pm.”

“From his work?”

“From the fire department. He’s a volunteer.” Cindy Parks leaned back against the sofa, pulling her cardigan tight as she wrapped her arms around her body.

Craig eased himself onto the couch across from her, listening as she told her story.

Constable Ashlyn Hart parked her vehicle, the sting of smoke already burning her eyes. She flashed her ID and ducked under the barrier. With the spate of arson fires in the area lately the police weren’t taking any chances. They were being cautious about protecting the scenes.

Not that it had done much good. Officially no leads. Arsons were notoriously hard to bring to trial, and so far their arsonist hadn’t given them much to work with. That was the reason she was handling every scene personally. She had to find a different way to pinpoint the culprit.

“Maybe we should get you some gear, have you work out of our station.”

She looked up and offered the firefighter who’d spoken a smile as she accepted a helmet from him. Ashlyn recognized Adrian Vaughan, the man under the layers of soot, but he’d barely stopped to offer the remark and hat before he disappeared again. She watched him move toward the thick plume of smoke billowing from the building. Flames were already licking the exterior from windows on the upper floors.

“Not much we can do now but hope to contain it.”

She turned. Paul Quinlan, the battalion chief, was standing beside her. “Arson?” she asked.

“What color’s that smoke?”

Dense dark clouds swirled out of every opening she could see. She’d been getting an education in fire ever since she got this assignment, but Ashlyn still hadn’t learned everything. “And black smoke means what?”

“Petroleum- based accelerant. Likely gas.”

Gas. Not too helpful. Only about a thousand local places where someone could get their hands on that.

Paul passed her the object he was holding. “We found it on the door, just like before. Could this help you?”

Ashlyn pulled a bag from her pocket, wrapped the angel quickly, then put it in the trunk of her car. “Generic materials found in hundreds of stores in the province, virtually untraceable, handmade. We haven’t turned up anything so far.”

“What the hell?” Paul raced forward, toward the door. She tried to follow him. Other firefighters started running, and one grabbed her arm.

“Stay there.” He glared at her as he backed away, watching until she stopped moving before he turned around. The man disappeared amidst the sea of turnout gear each firefighter wore for protection on the job.

Ashlyn moved her head from side to side and up and down until she could see through the smoke and men to what had caught Quinlan's attention.

A firefighter was racing down the front steps carrying a child.

The paramedic repositioned the stethoscope and paused. It had been at least twenty minutes since the girl had been pulled from the building, and the paramedic's shoulders sagged. She shook her head.

"Fuck." The firefighter who'd found the girl turned and kicked a garbage can. His dirt-streaked fingers clenched into a fist beside his head as he walked away.

Ashlyn pulled plastic gloves from her pocket, stepped forward and knelt beside the body. She tossed the helmet she'd been given aside. The girl's hair was darker than hers. Careful not to touch her unnecessarily, Ashlyn surveyed the victim visually until she got to her hands. Then she reached into her jacket pocket, pulled out a pen and used it to nudge the loose shirtsleeve up, revealing black and purple skin mixed with partially healed wounds. The gashes and bruises stretched out like an overgrown tattoo, covering the girl's arm.

A voice cut into Ashlyn's thoughts from above her. "Can't you cover her up and get her out of here before the reporters start shooting photos?"

She shook her head. "This is a murder investigation now."

"For Christ's sake, she's already been moved. What difference does it make?"

Purple shirt, green pants... It kept playing through Ashlyn's head as she studied the girl's face. There was a shiny metal pendant around the girl's neck, and she reached for it.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" A different voice this time. One she'd describe as demanding, unapologetic... Familiar.

"My job." She pulled out her ID as she turned around. For a moment she crouched, jaw open, then dropped her hand and put her badge away. He was tall, athletic, dark hair, a face of stone, and he never let anyone call him by his first name. She frowned as she realized she didn't even know his first name herself. That was the kind of distance he put between himself and even the people he worked closely with, but she knew he had a warm smile when he let his guard down and was a good person. "Jesus."

"Well, I am back from the dead."

"Your penance is over?"

One curt nod. "Sorry. Didn't know you'd been called out on this."

"I wasn't. I'm working the arsons."

The skin between his brows puckered. "Wasn't that Robinson's case?"

"Not anymore. He died." Ashlyn was still crouching between him and the girl, obscuring Tain's view.

She almost couldn't believe it was him. They'd worked together once, on a tough case. One she tried hard not

to think about. At the end of the day they'd solved it, but it seemed like Tain had managed to piss off every senior officer from Vancouver to Halifax in the process. It had taken a toll on him.

It had taken a toll on all of them. Maybe that's why she'd found herself making excuses when it was over, picking up the phone and setting it down without dialing the number . . .

Willing herself to forget. Willing herself to believe they all had forgotten and that nobody wanted to hear from her because it would bring it all back.

“What have you got?”

“Likely the reason for the fire.” She stood up and stepped back so that she wasn't in his way.

“Purple shirt, green pants . . .” Tain's eyes turned down at the corners. With him, the expressions were all subtle, but she knew him well enough to see it.

“And a charm on a necklace.”

“Shit.” His fingers pushed through his short dark hair and into his skull. “It's Isabella Bertini.”



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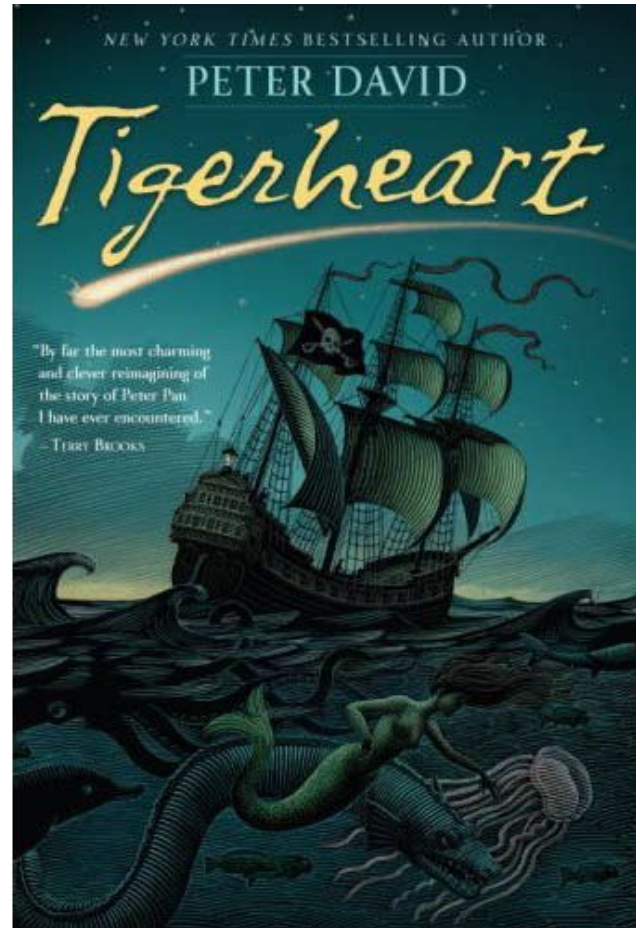
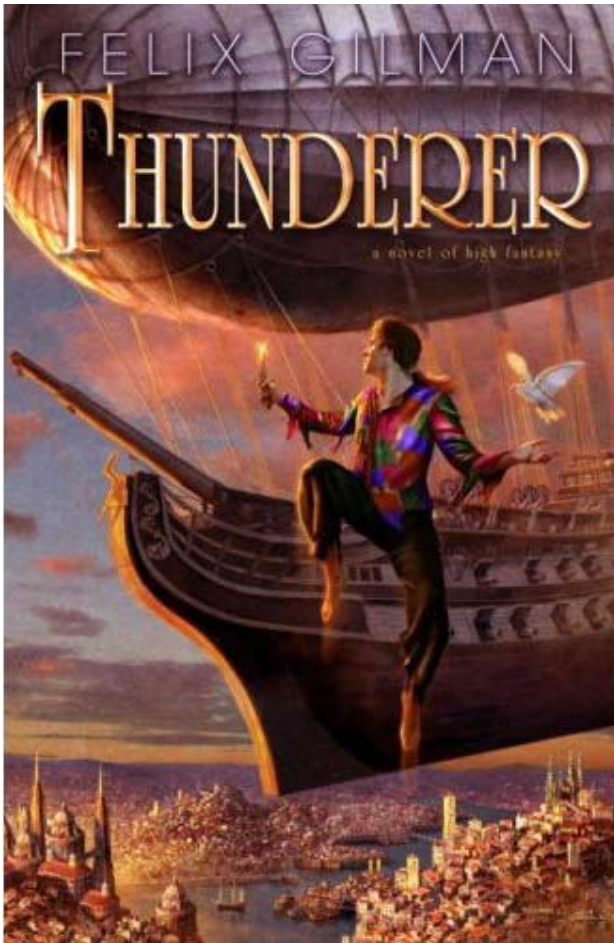
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