

Hub

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The Editor's Club

There's an interesting discussion over at our website, where we've been accused of nepotism due to the fact that we've published a few editors among the 43 stories we've published as an eZine (closer to 60 if you include the two print editions). Coincidentally (and coincidence is something that also seems to be causing concern), the current issue contains a story by an editor – that's three issues in a row!

What do you think? Is it unfair that we publish editors? Should we filter out submissions by writers' occupations? Are we guilty of a form of nepotism by allowing – and inviting – submissions from professional (and semi-professional) editors? It's an interesting debate, and we'd like to hear your thoughts on it...

A Change of Schedule

From this issue, Hub will reach you every Monday. There *are* reasons for the change of day, but they're far too uninteresting to list.

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About *Hub*

Every week we publish a piece of short fiction, along with at least one review and sometimes a feature or interview. If you like what you read here, please consider making a donation over at www.hub-mag.co.uk. We pay our writers, and anything you donate helps us to continue to attract high quality fiction and non-fiction.



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by Guy Haley

Kasimir Larkin was, if nothing else, a man of habit.

Every morning at 5.30am, as soon as the alarm wailed its wail, Kasimir swung his legs over the edge of his cot, eyes snapping open as he did so, feet slipping into slippers that were always in the same place. Today was no different.

“Another day, another dollar,” he said, as he said nearly every morning, and yawned expansively. He stood up, scratched his chest and stretched his institutional stretches. “Another day...”

He had a routine for waking, a routine he enjoyed. It plucked order from the chaos of sleep: first, a quick breakfast, self-heated, then a short shower. A purposeful walk to the basin followed – Two minutes brushing his teeth; two minutes – precisely. When the sonic brush chimed, he set it down, walked away, returned to the sink to straighten the toothbrush fastidiously, his frown turning to a quick nod at the rightness of its new position.

“Everything in its place and a place for everything,” he said, as he almost invariably did.

He dressed in his uniform – underpants, sock, shirt, tie, trousers, in that order. Only when he had straightened his tie and oiled his hair, only when he was sure of the neatness of his beard and moustaches, did he purposefully stride out of the low door of his small, plastic living unit. His every movement directed to the goal of fulfilling his employment, no more and no less flamboyant than they needed to be.

Kasimir Larkin was also a man of purpose.

Outside the door he smiled, for the finale of Kasimir Larkin’s waking routine was to tell himself, every day, that he loved his job; and he did.

There were, at the height of its pre-eminence, over 60 million stores in the galaxy-renowned Star Chain. Outposts of standardised commerce dotted throughout known space, wherever there was a spare corner for a shop, and often even if, a man could be sure that he could find a Star. In old barns, abandoned factories, high-price residential districts, isolated asteroids, dead colonies... And each one, for 18 hours of the standard 24 hour cycle, come rain, shine, or meteor shower, would provide its Star’s unique, incomparable service to many nations of happy shoppers.

Kasimir Larkin was the proud manager of one such store.

He whistled as he walked round from the back of the shop where his extremely modest accommodation was situated. Kasimir was of a shape unusual in his times, short, round, the figure of a jolly seller of ice creams or candies from some retro-advertisement. This was not normal in these days of genefactored perfection, but Kasimir was, altogether, an unusual man.

The street was empty, orange, dusty, and dead. Kasimir glanced up and down it as he methodically worked through his magnetic keys to find the right one for the storefront shutters. A skirl of dust jumped up in the wind, leaping like a frenzied dancer, suddenly to collapse in drunken exhaustion halfway toward the street’s end. Further up the town’s single thoroughfare, a loose door banged.

Kasimir looked up at the noise, and stopped whistling for a moment. His brow crinkled, pulling his far-receded hairline back towards its high watermark, a lethargic wave on a shrinking sea. He shook his head, his expression cleared.

“Hmm. Wind. Never stops,” the nonchalance of his shrug was exaggerated. If he were honest with himself, he did not feel entirely at ease. He began whistling again, trying to ignore the sensation that the gazes of a dozen pairs of eyes were burning into the back of his neck.

Uncharacteristically, he fumbled as he reached the mag-key out to the lock. He hit it on the second

attempt. The entrance shutter hummed up, opening a gateway in the shopfront's nightclothes of steel. He regained his composure as the noise filled the street, rubbing at the back of his neck to wipe away the feeling of being watched. The shutter slid home into its housing above the door with a 'Bump-clang!', revealing a rectangular glass door behind.

"Aha!" Kasimir rubbed his hands with satisfaction, as if he had solved a complex and novel puzzle. "Time to wake the staff," he said with a stern rhythm, and walked into the shop.

The shop was dark, the window shutters still down. Bright orange sunlight slanted through the door, claiming a rhombus of stock for its own. The rest of the store was dark striped with light, blades of brightness stabbed through the gaps between the shutter slats, illuminating thin slashes of air, the motes of dust in the light spinning giddily round as if caught unawares at play.

Kasimir flicked the main bank of switches, and the store's cheap lighting ticked, pinged and popped into flickering life, pale lemon illumination fighting a losing battle with the sun's orange, a clash of citrus lucense at the threshold of Kasimir's kingdom. From cheap speakers, the jingly tinkle of relaxing muzak struck up. At least, 'relaxing' is what it said on the file.

The shelves of the shop were crammed with, among many other things, unsatisfactory foam-like cake, poor reproductions of genuine coffee, soft plastic washing up brushes, scented toilet bowl blocks, immortal cheeses, chocolate and bread and milk and meat products of meatless origin. Kasimir strode past them, up the shop's wide, central aisle, his feet squeaking on cracked plastic tiles so old the edges had begun to blend into one another, his nose full of a rude bouquet of three dozen artificial scents. A host of toiletries, household cleaning products, frozen peas and obscure Dvids competed with eye-watering visual volume in a fanfare of garish, filmy wrappings. He ignored them all, inured to their coquettish packaging by long familiarity. He went on, past the racks containing dozens of tiny, dusty looking clear bags holding all manner of random, yet useful items – brandless glue, sewing machine bobbins, nail scissors and plastic button noses destined for the faces of home-made soft bears.

The Star corporation was nothing but assiduous in finding ways of filling needs you never knew you had.

It was a kind of generosity, thought Kasimir.

And perhaps it was. From Cygnus Beta to New Alpha Centauri, domestic sundries were available at whatever time you might need them, and at a reasonable price. Provided you were willing to accept a slightly inferior quality. Money had to be saved somewhere, the overheads of such a large intergalactic chain were, literally, astronomical.

Kasimir ignored all these also. He marched to a discrete portal at the back of the store, walked straight through the flickering 'Employees only' holosign that pretended to bar the way. With his left hand he swept aside the thick ribbons of plastic that served as a door. His eyes swept round the warehouse behind the shop, and then he turned on his toes, a precise swivel left, and walked down a bare concrete corridor and opened a plain door marked simply 'Staff'.

The robot within the cupboard was a primitive, monomaniac model, built solely to assist in a Star, and interested in only that. It was old, its cream shell yellowed and worn. He pressed a smooth button on his key fob, and the machine came slowly to life. It juddered and clicked as toothless plastic gears slipped in its neck.

"Hello sir," came the same tedious message it gave every single day, its voice a servile mechanical smear. "I am <grind>," the robot's voice dropped several octaves "<grind> UNDEFINED <grind>," back to normal, "A robot of the 7100 Korimitsu retail assistance series. How may I be of assistance?" The robot looked up, its unblinking glass eyes fixed unwaveringly on Kasimir's face. The second voice returned. "To initiate personalisation imprint, depress the blue button on the front of the unit. <grind>"

Kasimir left the button unpressed. Each morning the factory-voice politely invited him to do so, each day he declined. He did not care for the chirpy demeanour of imprinted units, the way they always knew what you were thinking, their over-familiarity. The impersonal nature of the robot's default settings seemed so much more proper for a professional relationship.

"Come along 7100," said Kasimir. He hadn't given it a name either. "Up and at 'em."

"Yes sir."

"Another day..."

"...another dollar, sir."

The activation of 7100 began Kasimir's other routine, that of keeping shop, and it was this that took

up most of his day. First, he directed the small mechanoid to open the remainder of the store's shutters. Old tracks span on wheels that shouted their age in a chorus of squeaks and squeals as 7100 shook his way slowly to the shop front. Kasimir watched it go. He shook his head at its mechanical senescence, and went to retrieve the float from the safe. Out here, physical currency still had a use, the banking systems at the edge of man's range being underdeveloped and unreliable. Kasimir jounced a couple of plastic bags of coins up and down in his hand, appreciating the heft and clatter of actual money. Then he filled up the till's plastic trays, the pebbly thunder of the rounded, plastic coins clattering to war punching a hole in the quiet of the shop. Next he wiped the counter down and, as the orange sun filled the rest of the store with freshly squeezed illumination, he carefully adjusted the jars behind the counter, then the last-minute buys on the counter. When he was satisfied the counter was as it should be, he pressed one of a bank of buttons hidden just out of the sight of customers to activate the holofront. Outside, the shop's decoration sputtered to life, rotating globes and bands of logos and brand names snapping to life in the hazy air, a gameshow voice shouting out bargains, only-today deals, special offers and monies off. Parts of it kept flickering in and out of existence. Kasimir frowned again. He frowned a lot. If he could have seen his frown, he would have realised that it had become theatrical, as if his brain were trying to remind his face that it was still there.

"That dust," he said, shaking his head. "It gets into everything."

Logan's Reach's Star was open for trading.

The racket of the holofront ran up and down the empty street, mischievously rattling dust-filmed windows, hammering on shuttered hab units as it passed. It had the place to itself, except the wind, and that was never going to go away.

Kasimir and 7100 spent the day doing the things that they always did on Tuesdays. Tuesdays were stock taking days, but that had to wait until after lunch. First of all there was general shop work, the things that need doing in the store each morning. 7100 cleaned the floor with its polishing attachment while Kasimir faced the shelves on the narrow aisles. Not that this took long, as the jars, tins, packets, rolls, bottles and boxes were in exactly the same pristine order as they were the day before. Then he put away the signs and items for yesterday's deals, and put out the signs and items for today's deals, stacking tins of beer in careful pyramids. This kind of thing went on all morning under the buzz of the cheap lights. Sometimes Kasimir whistled. When he did, 7100 would join in with four-part backing. But mostly he was silent, only the shout of the holofront and barely audible muzak disturbed the shop's synthetically scented air.

At 12.32pm, Kasimir took his lunch. Two minutes late, he noticed irritably, as he had to wait for the robot to finish washing the windows. It was getting slower and slower. He left 7100 to mind the shop, and went to eat in his hab, reading a novel he'd bought from the shop with part of his wage.

At 1.30pm exactly, Kasimir was back on the shop floor, taking stock. This had changed little since his last stock check, only the items which he had used to feed himself and maintain the robot had been consumed.

There were never any customers at Logan's Reach's Star.

He noted that there were virtually out of square tins of Fork, 'The pork substitute with a taste that's bigger than pig', or so the advertising slogan went. Kasimir hummed the jingle. He wrote down on his order form, to be sent off later that day, that he'd need four more cases. When he did send the form, he noted he had no replies to the last 36 Tuesday's forms, not even an acknowledgement reply. He felt bad, Fork was his favourite, but he'd eaten lots of it. Though there were dozens of the smaller round tins, what if someone wanted to buy one of the larger square ones? For some reason they tasted better. He frowned again.

There were never any deliveries to Logan's Reach Star either.

The rest of the day he spent patiently waiting for clientele, only occasionally taking a guilty minute to read his book. He wouldn't ordinarily do this, but it was very good.

At 10pm, he closed up. He counted the money. It was the same as it had been in the morning. He put the cash back in the safe, checked the shop with 7100, shut down the holosign, closed the shutters and finally escorted the mechanoid back to its coffin-sized home.

"Another day, another dollar, 7100," he said. It was practically all he'd say all day.

"Yes sir," said 7100.

Kasimir began to close the door.

"Sir!"

“Yes 7100?”

“Maybe they will come tomorrow, sir,” said the robot in its dispassionate voice.

“Maybe.” Kasimir smiled sadly at the little tracked robot. “Now go to sleep.” He shut the cupboard.

If anyone had been at Logan’s Reach, perhaps standing on one of the many low, orange hills that surrounded the town as rounded and predictable as bubblewrap, they would have heard the noise of the store’s voice, as clear as a bell, suddenly go silent. They would have seen the lights go out at the Star, plunging the tiny settlement into the gloom of the planetoid’s half-hearted night. They might then have caught sight of a lonely figure standing in front of the shop, stamping his feet against the chill, waiting until the high, clear hum of the shutters ceased with a ‘Bump-clang!’ Then they would have seen the figure walk round the back of the store to a tiny habpod, enter, and close the door behind him.

If someone had been there, they would have seen that there were no other signs of life, that Logan’s Reach was a dead town, laid to rest in its froth of hills. They might have seen the mine lying abandoned and rusting to the east, the derelict machinery slowly collapsing into the alien soil, and they might have thought that this was a town fast on its way to becoming an archeological site. They may have conjectured that Kasimir was in danger of dying alone there, his store and stock perhaps to be misinterpreted by future historians as the resting place of a great king, well supplied with soft beverages, tinned fruit and darning needles for the afterlife.

But there was nobody to see, and so such thoughts went unthought.

Kasimir was dreaming of the day that the mining company had left, VX-331a condemned as free of useable mineral deposits. He was dreaming that he was opening an envelope he dreaded from Galaxy Star Chain HQ when he was awoken by an insistent bonging.

As he did every day, he sat immediately upright, opening his eyes as his feet slipped into slippers that were always in the same place.

“Another day...” He faltered. It was not another day.

The habpod’s semi-opaque window was watery with the grey of night. The noise was not his alarm clock, and it came from both within his pod and from without. His mouth open with surprise, he slid his gaze to the instrument panel above his headboard. The clock read 3.24am. Next to it, a red right pulsed angrily. It took a moment for him to figure out what was going on.

“The store alarm!” he said. Fumbling with sudden urgency, he reached for the camera button. A plain panel quivered and turned into a screen, bringing the interior of the store into view. He cycled through the cameras in the shop. Canned goods – nothing. Toiletries, cleaning goods, home bake, pet food, dairy – also nothing. He moved onto snacks and biscuits. There! A flash of movement. He squinted. Again! There was someone in the store, snatching at his packets! His eyes narrowed, his hand slowly formed into a fist. He followed the shadowy figure as it violated his domain with its presence. Once he caught a fuzzy moon of face as it looked toward one of the cameras, but he could make out no features. The cameras were of the cheapest kind.

Without thinking, he reached for the panic button, then stopped. “Stupid, stupid!” he said to himself. “No police since January!”

Kasimir had begun to talk to himself with greater frequency of late.

“What to do, what to do? Turn the lights on?” No, he thought. Then he’d lose him. Lose the thief – lose the only person he had seen in 20 months! This brought another surge of panic, of a deeper, gut troubling variety. He leapt up and dressed without his usual care. He scabbled in a drawer he never opened for his company issue stunlight. He checked the switch, realized he had it upside down, nearly dropped it as he turned it round, his hands sweaty and shaking. He made to leave, then hurried back and pressed a button in the panel. He spoke into a small microphone of cracked plastic, whispering even though the pod was sound-proof. “7100,” he said, “wake up! There is someone in the store!”

Kasimir carefully opened the side door to the shop. There was no steel shutter here, no ‘Bump-clang!’ to alert the thief. The door hissed aside on near-silent pneumatics that tonight seemed as loud as the roar of a waterfall. Kasimir held his breath, wincing. There was no noise. Stunlight held unsteadily in front of him, Kasimir proceeded within.

It was very dark in the store. Not even the pale grey of VX-331a’s night got through the shutters.

Silently, slowly, he crept forward, his attempts to listen foiled by the thunder of his breath and the 'shush-shush' of his heart roaring like surf in his ears.

There, a clink. He whirled round, the marker dot of the stunlight describing crazy parabolas in the air.

"Who-who's there?" he said. He ground his teeth at the timidity of his own voice. Kasimir was terrified, but why shouldn't he be?

"Come out!" he said, louder and with more confidence, or so he hoped.

There was an explosion of stars, and a sharp pain in his head. He fell to the floor dazed, the stunlight clattering from his hand. The store lights pinked and whickered on. He followed the dirty boots his eyes found up, past a shapeless, filthy flightsuit, to the head of their owner; a helmet with a lightmask. He groaned as he noticed his own stunlight in the figure's hands.

"Get up!" barked the figure, its voice metallic. "Damn it!" it cursed and transferred the stunlight to one hand, fumbling at the helmet with the other. It fell away from the face, revealing a young man underneath. "Can't breathe in that thing! Get up!" The youth sort of lunged with the stunlight, as if he were unsure of it, himself, or his situation.

Kasimir got to his feet very slowly, ignoring the spinning feeling in his head. He did not want to get stung with a stunlight, especially his not own. It was not a pleasant experience, as he'd found in the health and safety training when they'd used him for the demonstration.

"Easy, easy..." he said, his voice strange in his own ears.

"My god, look at you!" the kid sneered nervously, mockingly, jabbing the stolen stun light in the direction of Kasimir's receding curly hair, at his paunch. "Not even genefactored."

"Just..."

"Shut up!" The kid danced from foot to foot and looked behind him nervously, he couldn't have been more than 19. "You here alone?"

"Yes," lied Kasimir.

The kid looked back. He was tense. "Look, I don't want any trouble. I thought this place was abandoned. I just want some supplies. I've got to get out of here. I'll be gone soon, okay? You should do the same."

"Um, why?" said Kasimir, his throat dry.

"Shit man! The Kronk are coming!"

"The who?" said Kasimir, frowning his frown. In horror, the mirror of another human face before him, he realised how ludicrous it must look. He blushed deeply. The boy appeared not to notice.

"The *who*? Jesus! How long have you been here man? The Kronk. *The* Kronk!"

"20 months," said Kasimir. It had been a very long time.

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"Shit man! They forget about you or something? Too expensive to bring you home I'll bet."

Kasimir looked at the floor and shrugged. He felt powerless, a feeling made worse that it was felt in his own store.

"Tough break. Listen. The Kronk. Nasty, they came out of the galactic south, sweeping up through the core. Really advanced tech, they're killing everyone they find. We didn't put up much of a fight. We're running, those that are left. You should run too."

"I can't leave!" said Kasimir, lowering his hands slightly. "What about my job?"

"Oi!" he shouted. "Hands up where I can see them mister. Screw the job man! It really looks like you've been forgotten, anyways. Sorry dude."

Kasimir's downcast expression must have touched the young man. "Tell you what," he said, some of the swagger gone from his voice, "come with me."

"No," said Kasimir. "I have responsibilities."

“Some responsibility! Running a store no-one visits.” The boy shrugged. “Suit yourself,” he croaked and coughed. “Shit!” He spat orange spittle onto the floor. Kasimir winced. “Damn dust! How do you live here?”

It’s all I have, thought Kasimir, and more than he’d ever had, and more than he was ever likely to get. But he didn’t feel like sharing this with the boy. He stood up a little straighter.

“I’ll get the stuff I need and then I’ll be gone. You can wait here to get eaten, that’s your lookout.”

The youth started to back up. Kasimir rallied himself. He was still the manager, after all. “These supplies. How do you intend to pay for them? We are closed right now, but I could make an exception. We don’t get much custom right now. I’d be happy to help you fetch what you need.”

“Pay? Pay!” he laughed. “Look man, I got cash okay, but I don’t see...” There was a dull ‘Clonk!’ Abruptly, the kid stopped talking and slid down to the floor.

“No sale,” said 7100, letting fall a dented tin of Fork from its three-fingered hand.

Kasimir looked suspiciously into the robot’s ever-open eyes. “Did you oil your wheels?” he said.

7100 stared back with glassy insouciance.

The boy did have, as it happened, an amount of cash about his person. There were coins from several rim currencies in his pack, big chunky round-edged denomination designed to be safe for space travel, along with a battered multiphoto displaying a happy-looking family. A younger, cleaner version of the boy was in the picture, along with two smiling parents and a little girl with a cross pout. Kasimir ran his fingers over the shiny paper, smoothing out the creases. The photograph cycled through a few more pictures. All were of the boy and his family. Kasimir felt his eyes tighten. He had never met his father, and his mother had always looked tired, but at least she had always been there for him. He suspected the same could no longer be said of the boy’s parents.

He looked at the youth, his fingers playing absentmindedly over the picture. What had happened to this boy? How had he come here all by himself? Desperate, really, to come all the way out here.

Kasimir came to a decision. Together he and the robot checked the boy for serious injury, and then, while 7100 tied the boy up, Kasimir went about the store and gathered such supplies as he thought a refugee might need.

Kasimir stacked the goods neatly in a blue plastic crate on the counter, deducted such funds as were necessary from the youth’s cash, then returned both money and flickering memories to his flightsuit backpack. Leaving 7100 to watch over the kid, Kasimir went out into the rapidly orangng day to look for the boy’s ship.

Later, the boy left. He could not persuade Kasimir to go. Though the boy was grudgingly thankful for the supplies, Kasimir could have sworn he could detect a certain disappointment that there were only the round tins of Fork, not the inexplicably tastier, square tins, in his crate.

Five days after the boy had gone, a Monday.

“Another day, another dollar,” Kasimir said, as he said nearly every morning. He stood up, and stretched his institutional stretches. “Another day...” Only today, he didn’t stretch so vigorously. He didn’t have the energy for it. And his beard and moustaches, though attended to, were not so neat as they normally were as he left the habpod for the store.

The day went like any other. Facing, checking, setting out products under offer, waiting. He drummed his fingers on the countertop a lot. Not once did he whistle.

When evening came, Kasimir shut up shop more slowly than had been his want. Even 7100 seemed to notice, its head held at what could have been a concerned angle as he followed his master round the store.

It was as he began to prepare the front of the store for closing that he noticed something different about VX-331a’s orangey-grey sky.

It was full of lights. Lights clustered in meaningful patterns on large black shapes that crowded out the nascent stars.

For a few moments, Kasimir watched the lights grow larger, the shapes become more distinct as they

moved through the haze. A thought seized him. Hurriedly, he waddled back into the shop. He went behind the counter, scrabbling under the top. He moved aside a dusty, opened envelope, placing it on the counter so he could get a switch he never thought he'd use. The holofront modified, he hurried out of the store.

The first of the ships touched down, the roar of its gravlift drowning out the cheery voice booming from the shop that detailed the delights that were to be had within. The ship's ramp descended with a hiss.

If there had been anyone inside, they would have seen that a great wave of orange dust blast into the shop by the shuttle's backwash. The envelope, caught in the garish eddies of this sand-choked wind, lifted up off the counter, span once, twice in the air, and scattered its contents across the worn tiles: Kasimir's recall notice, settlement cheque and homeward ticket, dated 20 months ago.

Outside, Kasimir smiled his best greeting smile and spread his arms as he welcomed his new customers. Across the shop's holofront, blossoming bright and large, shone the words 'Final Sale'.

REVIEWS

Judge Dredd – Origins reviewed by James Bacon

Nemesis the Warlock Volume 1 reviewed by James Bacon

The Brightonomicon reviewed by Lee Harris

Judge Dredd, Origins

John Wagner and Carlos Ezquerra

Published by Rebellion, £12.99

Throughout the history of *2000AD* there have been epic Judge Dredd stories – epic in the sense that readers enjoy the story on a weekly basis over a period of months. It allows a more in depth and convoluted story and there is always an energy created, by the events. Here perhaps two of the greatest Dredd stalwarts John Wagner and Carlos Ezquerra are on hand and provide much entertainment.

The story, like many Dredd epics starts with a preamble set up. This is drawn by artist Kev Walker and is very noir in style and setting; it's raining a lot too. We see a group of mutants infiltrate Mega City on a mission to deliver a box to The Grand Hall of Justice. It's a nice little run in and the juxtaposition of artistic styles sets it apart neatly from the main story.

Carlos Ezquerra is the artist for the main story, renowned for his speed of art execution and consistency over a long period; he is the perfect choice, having been responsible for some classic stories and imagery of the character and being very popular with readers.

We return to the box, and blackmail ensues. It appears someone has found Judge Fargo, the man who forged the Judges in the 21st century and who has been presumed dead by the time the story takes place. Although most people believe he died in action, we learn that this has been a cover up for many decades, as Fargo had surrendered to his own human feelings and failed to uphold the moral stance he espoused.

The story is twofold - we have a group of Judges heading out into the cursed earth with a billion creds with the intention of finding Fargo and whomever has him and meanwhile, round camp fires on their journey Dredd is quizzed about the lore and legends surrounding the creation of the Judges and the Atomic war which resulted in their assumption of power and we have an insight into his own involvement.

The judges - a mix of police, judge jury and at times executioner, were just a regular force, but it was seen as a solution to the many problems of the American Mega Cities in the mid 2000's.

The last American President, Booth is a main character in the flashbacks and his corrupt maniacal desires bring about the Atomic war and the destruction of much of the world. The Huge Mega-City 1 although not unscarred is left relatively intact and become the independent Judge governed city we know. It's interesting to see the topical subject of politics and how America brings itself to an end, with essentially bad politicians, and it's an interesting moment when Dredd says of Booth's hyperbole: *'the world was living off our backs, that was his line, truth was we'd always used our muscle to make sure America's interests came first.'*

Dredd tells how the Judges came about, their history, for the first time explained in detail and a very ugly picture of America in the early 21st century.



We find Dredd recalling in flashbacks his time in the Justice Academy as a youngster, being required to join other cadets in helping to maintain order during the war, and subsequently involved in a civil war between regular American forces, loyal to Booth and the Judges.

John Wagner - the most experienced Dredd author and co creator of the character - admitted that the history of the Judges as outlined at varying times in the pages of 2000AD was very potted and at times contradictory and that he had avoided trying to put together a definitive account of how the system actually came about. This story allowed him to bring together a definitive history, while showing how Dredd came about – a clone of Fargo and also depicting him in some serious action at a young age.

This action is brilliantly drawn by Ezquerra, one of the definitive artists on the character. He has a unique style, but he captures the action beautifully. The various flash backs all weave nicely with the contemporary story (which is the only strand that could be a bit stronger) while in the cursed earth, perhaps the strength of the flash backs and the knowledge hunger is the problem there, rather than a weakness in the story itself. Wanting more is never a bad thing, surely.

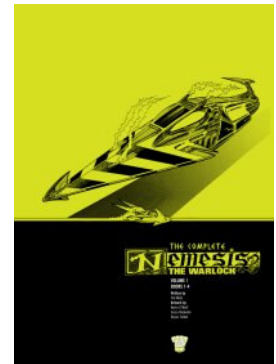
As regular readers of the comic know, there have been questions raised about the righteousness of the Judge system and there is a really nice moment of revelation in the comic about the judge system, which is poignantly allowed to sit with the main character and of course the reader.

Overall it's classic Judge Dredd. A quest that leads to more than one expects, it does not fail to provide an interesting story to a character now in its thirtieth year.

Nemesis The Warlock Volume 1
Pat Mills and Various
Published by Rebellion, £13.99

Be Pure, Be Vigilant, Behave.

In 1980 Pat Mills, a man who had helped create *2000AD*, *Battle* and publicly vilified *Action* wrote a one-off story. Loosely based on a song by *The Jam*. It appeared in the weekly comic *2000AD*, a comic allegedly aimed at children. Mills must have known, or was insightful enough to know that the capacity for children to comprehend complex situations and see thorough patronising bullshit meant that his stories had to be entertaining, not just entertaining for kids.



Nemesis the Warlock was born, as was Torquemada, soon to be his sworn enemy.

This science fiction story with a healthy helping of magic and mysticism sees the surface of Terra now known as Termight, as uninhabitable, with humanity (if that's what one could call it), living in the interior, using networks of Tubes like huge highways between cities, with the aid of Black Hole as highways between systems.

Termight is now a puritan zealoted imperialist religious bigoted fascist authority, with control over vast amount of space. Humans must fear the deviants. The deviants are of course the aliens from other worlds, which Termight has subjugated under the mighty metallic boot of The Terminators - the religious styled military. They have a large empire stretching out across the universe. Their leader is Thomas de Torquemada, quite insanely racist and determined to rid the known universe of all aliens, no matter how sweet and cuddly they might be. *'There is only one good alien, a dead one'*

The terminators wear peaked helmets depicting mask of anger and horror, a new strange take on the pillow cases of the KKK. It's not a pleasant world.

Pitted against this horrible vision of humanity's disastrous development we find Nemesis the Warlock - a creature gifted with magic and wizardry, a sword that cuts through iron and rock, a fire breathing creature, and a living space ship. He is the rebel leader, the creature that wants to free Alien and deviant human alike. He sees that humanity can actually develop into a caring and decent race, but he must fight for freedom.

This Volume collects the first four 'books' of Nemesis The Warlock in one complete 320 page collection. The important thing to remember as a reader is the stories are essentially in spurts of six pages, as originally produced for 2000AD. This means there is a succinctness and depth to the storytelling. Detail

and information must be imparted promptly. There is an equal amount of black humour as well as hidden visual messages in the book to equal the quick and impressive the dialogue.

This volume is complete so we see the first few standalone stories, of Nemesis and then we continue onto the first book, establishing in detail the fight between Nemesis and his tyrannical foe. We learn of Torquemada's accidental diembodiment, all caused by Nemesis. We see a human - Purity Brown - helping Nemesis to release alien and human prisoners on Termight. The story flashes along as artist Kevin O'Neil with his very detailed fine angular style suiting the story perfectly brings Mills vision to life.

We also learn more about Nemesis' background in the second book - his family and the alien resistance Credo, which unites all the races together against Termight power. Artist Jesus Redondo takes the helm for a short while, and although his art is quite distinctive, and very European in style and composition he only works on part of book 2 before O'Neil's return.

Interestingly as the aliens try to consider whether the human race can be actually redeemed, Torquemada is dead set against such compassion and desires all-out war and the destruction of all deviants. We also get an insight into the Nemesis clan and his interesting social set up on his home planet.

Book three is a beautifully imagined and realised and we encounter a great battle on the planet Demotika. The Terminators have laid siege to the massive Ydrasill castle, a huge tree miles high, that is the main refuge of the Basillisk race. The siege engines and vast depictions of battle, something really only comics could accurately depict, are incredible. The complexity of the story, winding through the battle, with Nemesis engaging directly with the leader of the sieging terminators on Demotika and while Nemesis is at battle, a spurned lover, betrays him on his home planet and more importantly he betrays his family.

Book Four sees artist Bryan Talbot starting on his first ever regular comic, and with the story of The Gothic Empire, an alien race who listen to the early radio broadcasts of Earth, and developed their whole world and empire in the image of a Victorian British earth, giving us such planets as Lucknow and the Ion Dukes High Space fleet docked at the Scapa Flow space station.

It's a wonderfully realised steam punk vision, made all the more exciting with the development on a galactic empire scale. Talbot's visuals are perfect, with his vision of Torquemada in the dark alleys of Whitechapel complimenting his large scale space opera battles. Nemesis recruits the ABC Warriors - Atomic, Bacterial and Chemical resistant Robots, centuries old, yet very deadly - and together they defeat the terminators onslaught against the Gothic empire, which is stemmed just at the home planet. It's a fitting end as we see our two protagonists battling it out.

I had read this as a teenager, and it was a favourite, but with a more relaxed eye, one can just see how much is being crammed so artistically into these pages.

It's quite reflective of the political back ground of its time, with a very intolerant Margaret Thatcher at the helm in the UK, racism quite acute and a feeling that military solutions were best, yet it also resonates with today's state of fear, and such extreme depictions can help make one consider more mundane and accepted norms.

'Thanks to my bigotry, my hatred, I united the Human Race against the rest of the Galaxy!' Torquemada.

The Brightonomicon

BBC Audiobooks

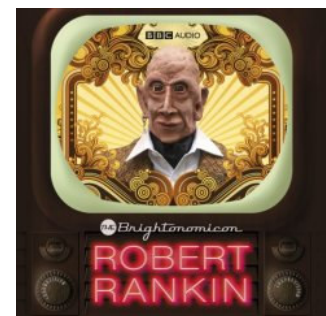
From the novel by Robert Rankin

Starring: David Warner, Rupert Degas, Mark Wing-Davey, and many more.

7 CD box-set £29.99 (though shop around - it's also available as a download, but Amazon currently have the CDs at £14.99)

I'm a huge admirer of Rankin's work, so it was with some trepidation that I began listening to this adaptation. After all, at six and a half hours long (plus extras), this was going to be difficult to get all the way through if the going proved to be tough.

I needn't have worried.



Rankin has a very distinctive style of writing, and anyone attempting an adaptation of his work – particularly on this scale – would be foolish to deviate too far from his rather skewed world view. Luckily, the majority of the dialogue in this adaptation is straight from Rankin’s pen, and the additional dialogue all fits the Rankin mould.

The Brightonomicon tells the story of the Greatest Man Who Ever Lived, the self-styled guru’s guru, Hugo Rune (played by the always excellent David Warner). He saves a young man – Rizla (Degas) – from drowning, and persuades him to repay the kindness by working alongside him as his acolyte. Their task – to find the legendary Chronovision (a mystical TV that can tune into the past) before the evil Count Otto Black (Andy Serkis) finds it and uses it to rule the world. To aid them in their quest they consult the Brightonomicon – an ancient zodiac hidden within the A to Z of Brighton.

The Brightonomicon is one of the best books Rankin has produced in recent years, and the quality spills over into this production. A stellar cast can be heard having huge amounts of fun, and even the small roles are played with gusto. Ben Miller is hilarious in his first outing as the Bog Troll, and I never expected to ever be able to write the first four words of this sentence in the order in which they appear!

There are a few very minor quibbles – some of the sound effects are less than satisfactory (though this is rare) and one of the female cast members in her performance – but on the whole this is an excellent adaptation.

It is inevitable that SF audio comedies will get compared to *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* – even after all this time. How then, does *The Brightonomicon* compare? It doesn’t break any new ground, as *Hitchhiker’s* did (except for being the first professional audio adaptation of a Robert Rankin novel), but it is certainly laugh-out-loud funny – funnier than almost every SF audio comedy since Adams worried at his deadlines.

The quality of this production is evident even in the theme tune, which is quite possibly the best original theme tune, ever written for an audio production – even rivalling TV’s *Doctor Who* and children’s TV’s *Space Pirates* (god, I love that theme tune!).

This is certainly a production I will enjoy revisiting over the years, and I recommend you invest in a copy so that you can do the same.

WIN A COPY OF THE BRIGHTONOMICON AUDIO

Next week we will be giving away a copy of this excellent box set, courtesy of those kind folk over at BBC Audiobooks. It’s a tradition, or an old charter, or something.

Creating The Brightonomicon – part 1 of 4: The Birth of the Project

By Neil Gardner, Producer, Director, Co-Adaptor, Tea Lady

It is February 2008 and my 7 hour audio epic is about to go on sale around the world...excited? I am bursting with excitement! But along the route to producing the series I have been asked many times why I am doing it, what the driving force is and when did my love affair with all things Robert Rankin begin. Well, let me take you back 20 years...

Summer, 1988, Nuneaton in Warwickshire, UK...I was 14 years old and visiting my Grandmother (Nan!) for summer holidays. Over the past couple of years I had moved away from playing with toys such as Lego and Action Force and Star Wars (although Transformers still held a strong fascination for me) and had gradually blossomed into an avid reader. Earlier that year my parents had moved us from South London to the East Anglian boredom-zone that is Bedford (the only town to have the tourist board sign at its borders say “Keep Going!”) I had been feeling isolated and lonely for many months, had had some trouble fitting into my new school and was missing my friends. So a trip to Nan’s would help settle me down a bit. And indeed it did. Over the fortnight I spent in Nuneaton (99% OAPs, .9% adults, .1% kids!) I read more books than the previous two years. And it was a need for new books that led me on a trip to nearby Coventry to pop into the book section of WHSmith and look for something interesting. I already had all the Terry Pratchett books available, I had just finished the entire Foundation series by Asimov and was tiring of serious sci-fi. But I wanted something sci-fi/fantasy but funny...you know, Pratchett meets Clive Barker maybe? As I scanned the shelves I came across a lonely purple coloured book with the name Terry Pratchett on it...“Hello!” I said, “Is this a new Pratchett I have yet to read?” Nope. It was a mere quote by the PT-meister. But what a quote! Someone who makes Pratchett laugh? Sounds good. So I begged my

Nan to lend me the £5 I needed to buy this book and practically forced her to take us home so I could get down to some serious reading. What was the book? Why, it was *ARMAGEDDON THE MUSICAL*, by Robert Rankin (read it if you haven't, it'll blow you away!)

Imagine the hands of a clock whizzing past through 48 hours and we are now watching a wide eyed 14 year old boy finishing this incredible novel. I was astounded...astonished...in admiration of every word, sentence, paragraph and running gag. This author had upturned my whole mind. Everything I thought I understood about writing (and let it be said right here right now that other than wanting to work in professional radio, the only other thing I wanted to be was a writer) was bunkum. This author...this person...this genius...I have heard people talk about experiencing a 'moment of awakening' the first time they read Tolkien. Well, for me, this was my Tolkien moment...except it went by another name altogether...this was my Rankin-moment...and it changed my life forever. I am sure you all have your own such moments, but for me, books and literature and the use of language would never be the same again (much to the chagrin of my English teachers no doubt!)

Sadly I had run out of money, so I couldn't buy any more of Robert's books that summer. But for Christmas I asked for, and received *The Antipope*, *The Brentford Triangle* and *East of Ealing* – and alongside my much treasured Complete *Hitch Hiker's Guide Omnibus Edition* – I was lost within a world of literary surrealism and splendour for many months to come.

So, was this the moment that *The Brightonomicon* audio series began? I suppose it is because this moment changed my outlook on comedy and entertainment. The following year I started volunteering at Hospital Radio Bedford and then BBC Radio Bedfordshire...at both I met incredible people who would allow me to learn my craft, and experiment with formats and ideas and more importantly, learn what worked and what didn't on-air. My encounter with Robert's world opened my mind to the world's created by other geniuses, or reinvigorated my love of them...Kenny Everett, Douglas Adams, Kenneth Horne, Chris Morris, ISIRTA, Reeves & Mortimer, and many many more. And from all of these individuals and shows...and from Robert's books...I borrowed, copied and no doubt stole ideas for my own writings, shows and projects. And I soon learned that there were others out in the world who shared my love of the cleverness of words, the humour of puns, the joy of radio and the originality of imagination...and it was these relationships and friendships that through the years have allowed me to get to where I was eventually able to create something as huge as *The Brightonomicon* audio series.

20 years...it's a long time...but the wait has been worth it!

NEXT WEEK: How to make a full-cast audio adaptation

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