



Hub

Issue 50

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50 Issues of Hub

This issue of Hub is a bit of a milestone issue (hence the balloons – no expense spared, you know!) As well as being our 50th issue, it's the One Year Anniversary Issue of our electronic incarnation, and in the past week we reach our 7,000 reader milestone! April 20th 2007 saw the first weekly electronic Hub Magazine. As lot has changed since then – read about some of it, inside.

Alt.Fiction

April 26th sees the 3rd alt.fiction event in Derby. It's a great one-day literary genre event, attended by some of the very best writers the genre has to offer! There are discussion groups, readings, panels and much merriment (there's a bar, too!). *Hub* editor, Lee Harris, is appearing on one of the panels – “Writers and The Internet” – alongside well-known online luminaries Darren Turpin (The Artist Formerly Known As Ariel) and writer extraordinaire, Simon Spurrier. The event grows in popularity every year, so be sure to get your ticket early! Other guests include: Mike Carey, Eric Brown, Mark Morris, Ramsey Campbell, and others too numerous to mention. More details at:

<http://www.derby.gov.uk/LeisureCulture/ArtsEntertainment/Alt.Fiction.htm>



Two Songs by Alasdair Stuart

Eighteen months ago, I stood in front of my bathroom mirror, convinced myself for the fifth time that I was able to do this and then turned, walked downstairs and went to the press launch for *Hub's* first print issue. It was the end of a day that had consisted of frantic preparation, an interview with local radio and a single song that I'd found myself listening to on repeat, 'Vindicated' by Dashboard Confessional.

Yes that's right, your intrepid nonfic editor has shades of the emo to him.

There was one line in there though that really stuck out, still does:

*I am flawed,
But I am cleaning up so well.*

It captured perfectly for me how we went about doing this. Producing a magazine is both a colossally difficult and frequently monumentally tedious thing to do and you will, absolutely, make some biblically stupid mistakes. We did, we're still here and we're still learning and still growing.

The reason why is simple: You.

To everyone who has ever read an issue of *Hub*, thank you. You're the reason we're still here, the reason why we're a success and the reason why we do this. Stick with us, the second year will be better than the first, trust me. And that's not in the Ed Wood 'You hated my last film? Okay, well my next one will be better!' sense either. There's some fun stuff coming down the line. So keep reading and keep talking to us. If you like something, please tell us. If you don't like something, please tell us and crucially, tell us why. Like I say, still learning, still growing.

As for the other song, well, earlier this week I found myself listening to *Heroes* by David Bowie and it got me thinking. So here, once and for all, is the *Hub* roll of honour:

Lee Harris, whose idea this was in the first place.
Troo Topham who doesn't know how to quit and who shares my relentless love of the first *Mortal Kombat* movie.
Our intrepid slush pile readers Ellen Phillips (Now Allen), Peter Crump and Derek Muir.
Ever single author we've published.
And you.
There's no doubt, you're heroes, every one of you.

Hooray, Five-Oh! – by Lee Harris

As Al so eloquently put in his piece, above, we're still learning how to do this weekly electronic magazine thing, and now (thanks to the Arts Council, and early support from Orbit) we're at issue five-oh!

And we're weekly!

When it became clear that financial restraints meant that *Hub* would not survive more than two print editions, we decided to go electronic. And weekly! How we laughed when people asked "won't that be a lot of work?". How we're laughing now, through gritted teeth. As any editor will tell you, putting together a magazine – whether print-based, electronic, or toasted through stencils on large slices of organic white bread – is a time-consuming business. And stressful. And a whole lot of hard work.

But we love it! We love short fiction. We love the genres we cover. Folk will try to tell you that no-one is interested in short stories, any more. Our growth to our current weekly readership of over **seven thousand** gives lie to that statement.

So, we're looking forward to our next fifty issues, and hope you'll come along for the ride. We'll be evolving and adapting as we go, so be sure to leave us feedback on what you like (and what we could do better). We're starting our very own weekly podcast serial in a few weeks' time, and we're extremely excited and proud of it. We hope you'll enjoy it as much as we're enjoying producing it!

Advertise with Hub

Hub Magazine currently reaches well over 6,000 readers every week (and growing), and they all enjoy genre fiction. If you have a product or service that you think might be of interest to our readers, we are now accepting advertising (banners and quarter-page advertisements). Email us at advertise@hub-mag.co.uk for further details. Prices start at a ridiculous £50 (Approximately US\$100).

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 Martin McGrath

Even battered and neglected, the gun was like a pearl amongst coal.

The silver-plated Colt forty-five semiautomatic had mother of pearl panels on the grips. Intricate patterns coiled along the five-inch barrel. On the frame, just above the trigger, the initials M.H. were inscribed with a flourish in gold. The prancing horse, Colt's insignia, was also picked out in gold on the grip. Small spots of rust bubbled up through the silver-plating and the mother of pearl was traced with a fine pattern of cracks.

The gun was old and had not been well cared for and yet it seemed to shine.

It sat under the glass counter amongst the pawnshop's small collection of handguns. Amongst the drab colours of the other weapons the Colt's sparkled, its sleek lines made the cannon-like magnums, snub-nosed thirty eights and blueish nine millimetres seem clumsy and ugly.

The label said it was chrome-plated and priced it at four hundred dollars.

Judy licked her lips and brushed a stray strand of straw-coloured hair from her eyes. She'd only really come in to escape the heat and traffic fumes on the street. But this was too good to resist. Whoever had priced the gun didn't know shit. It was worth at least ten times the marked price. Even in this condition. She was sure.

Barrington would love it. She checked her purse. She could just about afford it. She looked up and caught the eye of the chubby guy behind the counter. He wheezed over, wiping his sweaty palms on a grey tee-shirt that had a faded picture of Monica Lewinski and some dumb joke on it.

"I'll give you two hundred and fifty for it." Judy pointed towards the gun.

"The price says four hundred."

"It's a wreck! Two seventy five."

"It's a collector's item. Three fifty, not a cent less."

Judy checked her purse again – for effect.

"Okay."

The guy started scribbling the gun's details onto a sheaf of forms. Judy felt beads of sweat trickle down her spine. Eventually he pushed the pile of paper across the counter. "Here you go. Fill these in and, in fifteen days, it's all yours."

The guy behind the counter wiped at his forehead with a paper towel. "Damn air conditioning," he said. "The thing hasn't worked properly for weeks..."

"Mmmhmm," Judy concentrated on the forms. The guy stank of stale sweat and seemed to take her barely civil response as an invitation to conversation and to try and get a good look down the front of the bikini top Judy was wearing.

"You a showgirl?"

Judy nodded but kept her gaze fixed on the forms. If she didn't look up, she couldn't see his leering face.

"Interesting story goes with that gun," the fat guy said.

"Mmm?"

"Yeah the guys who brought it in said they dug it up out in the desert. Said they were building a prison or something out near Indian Springs and dug this up."

"Really?"

"That's what they said. 'Course it could have been bullshit. We get a lot of bullshit in this business. Still, they said it was the god's honest..."

"Mmm," Judy shrugged and signed her name on the last form with a flourish. "Fifteen days?"

"Yeah."

"Okay."

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The gun was a silver-plated Colt forty-five semiautomatic with mother of pearl panels on the grip. Intricate twisting patterns coiled along the five-inch barrel. Mary's initials were inscribed on the frame. She ran her fingers along the twisting line of gold to the point where it ended in a flourish. The mother of pearl shimmered, opalescent, in the light of the early Californian sun that filtered through the long blinds.

Where the sunlight caught the silvered barrel or the gold inlay it reflected and danced around the bedroom making patterns and rainbows, bouncing off mirrors, filling the room with living light. The gun was brand new.

"Its unique," Joe said. "I had it specially made. There's an inscription."

Mary looked at the gun uncertainly. It lay snugly in the felt-lined presentation box. Mary was sitting up in bed, ivory pillows plumped up against her back. She held the box with her fingertips, but didn't dare touch the gun.

The radio announcer said the next song would be Buddy Holly's "That'll be the day". Joe walked over and switched the radio off. He didn't much like modern music.

Mary looked up at her husband, doing her best to look pleased. She failed. She couldn't disguise her confusion and disappointment.

Joe lifted the gun from its case, turning it over to show her the curly scripted message running down the back of the grip.

"Joe... its beautiful... really... but..."

"I love thee with a love I seemed to lose, With my lost saints, — I love thee with the breath, Smiles, tears, of all my life! — and, if God choose, I shall but love thee better after death." Joe read the inscription.

Mary looked at him uncertainly.

"It's a poem," Joe said.

"It's a bit — "

Joe Halworthy put a single finger to his wife's lips.

"I know. I know. You don't like guns... you told me. But my new job is going to take me away overnight, maybe for a few days at a time, and I don't like the idea of you staying alone in this big house without protection.

Mary sighed.

"But Joe, I don't even know how..."

Joe raised his hand again.

"I know, baby," he pulled a slim envelope from behind his back. "So I got this."

Mary opened the envelope. Inside was a membership card, in Mary's name, for the Beverley Hills Gun Club.

"Lot's of movie stars go there," Joe cocked his head hopefully. "If you don't like it, I'll sell the gun and never mention it again."

Mary looked into her husband's brown eyes and sagged slightly. She could never deny him anything when he looked at her like that. She smiled and nodded.

"Thank you honey," Joe said, looking genuinely relieved. "I just want you to be safe."

Joe reached under the bed and pulled out another, larger box wrapped in paper and a large pale pink bow.

"Now because I know that wasn't the most romantic of birthday gifts, I got you this."

Mary tore at the tissue paper wrapping and lifted the lid.

"Oh Joe!" She yelped, delighted. "Its just beautiful."

Mary held the cream silk and lace negligee up to admire in the light. Then she turned it around, holding it against her body for her husband to admire.

"Do I look beautiful?" She flicked dark hair and pursed her lips.

"Like Audrey Hepburn in *Funny Face*." They'd seen the film last week and Mary had loved it. She squealed. Joe leant forward for a kiss. Mary lay back in the bed, sliding under her husband's grip. Joe had to crawl over her, pursuing her lips.

Mary giggled, and pushed her presents away with one hand while pulling Joe closer with the other. The gun fell to the floor with a thud. "I don't think I'm going to need any of those for a while."

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The desert, the car and the men in it had been baked dirt-brown by the sun. Across the scrubby open plain a dust devil tore at the ground and tossed twigs and debris into the air. Joshua trees threw strange shapes against the horizon and an ocean of sagebrush bubbled irregularly to the far horizon. About fifteen minutes north of Beatty the car turned left, off Interstate Ninety Five and onto a local road.

Bobby Harlin and Chuck Ray drove slowly along the dusty roads. To a casual observer the two men might seem identical. Their faces were leather-brown and creased. Both wore baseball caps and sensible work shirts and jeans and Redwing workboots. They lounged in the car's seats in a way that suggested that, even sitting down, they were determined to conserve energy. Only in details did they differ. Chuck was slightly taller. Bobby had bright blue eyes. Chuck had a small scar on his cheek that puckered like a dimple when he smiled. Bobby, beneath his cap, still had all his fair hair.

"Bobby, man, when are you going to get a new car?" Chuck was scrunched up into as small a space as possible, trying not to make contact with the black vinyl of the car's interior. At every bump Chuck winced as some new part of his anatomy was brought into contact with the sun-scorched material.

"Chuck, you don't know shit," Bobby patted the steering wheel. He loved his car. "This is a 1968 Dodge Charger. It's a classic."

"It's a ten year old piece of junk. If it wasn't for the dirt it'd fall apart. And it stinks. What died in here?"

Bobby shrugged.

"You don't know shit."

They bumped along for twenty minutes in silence. Every now and then Chuck would take off his baseball cap and wipe the sweat from his forehead with the cap. Then, carefully, he'd pat down his thinning wisps of brown hair and precisely reposition the cap.

Eventually they turned off the hardball road onto a track marked only by shallow ruts in the ground and a stake in the road that held up a mailbox. Ten more minutes and they were at Bobby's place.

They climbed out of the Dodge and Chuck pulled a battered leather suitcase and a brown-paper-wrapped parcel from the trunk and followed his friend onto the sun-bleached porch of the wooden shack Bobby called home.

"Hi honey!"

Charlotte met Bobby in the hallway. She wrapped her arms around her husband and kissed him slow. Bobby pulled away, eventually, his face split by a grin. He reached out and brushed a thread of chestnut hair from his wife's forehead and placed his other hand on her swollen belly. Charlotte was drenched in sweat, her thin, flower-patterned dress had dark patches beneath the armpits.

Bobby looked around. There were boxes piled everywhere. The house was in the process of being stripped bare.

"Lotty, you said you'd take things easy." He patted his wife's belly. "You've got to rest."

Charlotte took his hand. "I'm fine. The baby is fine."

Chuck watched something gentle, unspoken, pass between his friend and his sister.

"Are you sure you aren't having triplets?" Chuck butted in. He had been teasing his sister the same way for months. "You look big enough to hold me and your good-fer-nuthin husband."

"Shut up Chucky!" Charlotte kissed her brother's cheek and then patted her stomach with pride. "Six more weeks and then Bobby will be a daddy."

Bobby grinned like a stupid kid.

"Wanna beer?" Bobby asked.

Chuck nodded enthusiastically and they walked through the narrow hallway and into the kitchen. Chuck dropped the suitcase onto the floor and put the parcel on the table. He took a cold bottle of Schlitz from Bobby, sat down at the kitchen table, sighed and relaxed.

"How was Los Angeles?" Bobby sat across the table from Chuck.

"Hell on earth," Chuck shrugged. "Miles and miles of glass and steel and places that all look the same as everywhere else."

Bobby nodded. "You seen one city..."

"...you seen 'em all." Chuck finished.

They paused.

"Cept Vegas," the two men chorused, laughing. "Nowhere's like Vegas."

"Keown give you any problems?"

"Nah! I dropped him off with the LA guys, waited 'til the paperwork was finalised and came home."

Bobby drained the last of his beer, wandered over to the rattling old fridge and pulled out two more. In the front room Charlotte was singing softly to herself as she shifted things into boxes.

"I got you this," Chuck pushed the parcel across the table. "There was going to be an auction, but the sergeant let me take this. For a fellow officer, y'know."

Bobby opened the parcel.

The gun was a silver-plated Colt forty-five semiautomatic with mother of pearl panels on the grip. Intricate twisting patterns coiled along the five-inch barrel. In the cool shadows of the kitchen the mother of pearl flickered and shifted like a living, breathing thing. In Chuck's hand the silver misted over like the cool glass of the beer bottles. The gun looked like it had never been fired.

"I've never seen one like it," Chuck said. "The guy said it had been evidence in some case back in the fifties and that they'd had it in storage ever since."

"It's a beauty. Custom made." Bobby picked up the gun, running his fingers over the inscription on the grip. "Thanks Chuck."

Chuck shrugged. "No problem. You're a gun freak, I knew you'd like it. Maybe now you'll let me play with some of your toys."

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"What do you want for your birthday?" Judy was lying on the bed next to Barrington, her fingers wandered aimlessly through the hair on his chest.

"Mmm?"

"I said," Judy sighed theatrically, "what do you want for your birthday?"

"Oh just the usual."

"The usual?" Judy rolled back so she could look at Barrington's face.

"Yeah, you know?"

"I do?"

"Yeah!"

"What do I know?"

Barrington grinned. "Just you, covered in oil, writhing on this bed and demanding my full, manly, attention."

"That's the usual?"

"A guy can hope, can't he?"

Judy laughed, then reached down pulling away the thin white sheet that was all that covered her husband, and slapped Barrington on the knees.

"You're a very bad boy," she said, laughing.

"You'll never learn," Barrington said.

"What?"

"How long have we lived together?"

"Four years."

"And you still don't remember that I can't feel a thing that low down." Barrington grabbed Judy and started to tickle her. She squealed in protest for a moment.

Then, for a long time, they were quiet.

"Help me up," Barrington said eventually.

Barrington grabbed hold of the supports by the side of his bed and pulled himself up. He didn't really need Judy's help, but she put both hands on his back and gave him the tiniest of shoves as Barrington pulled himself into a sitting position.

A livid scar, like a wild starburst, splattered across the small of Barrington's back. Judy traced the outline of the scar with her fingers.

"Oh-oh!" Barrington was looking over his shoulder at his wife.

"What?"

"I know that look."

"What look?"

"The look you get on your face when your about to ask some profoundly philosophical question."

Judy poked him in the ribs. "I was just wondering –"

"Oh oh!"

Judy poked him again.

"I was just wondering," Judy traced the outline of the scar again, "why you keep guns. Why you'd collect them, I mean."

She paused, pulling herself up to sit beside Barrington, wrapping an arm around his waist.

Barrington looked at her.

"I'm not sure," he shrugged. "Some of them are beautiful. I admire the craftsmanship. Maybe. Or maybe it's like falling off a horse. They always say you should get straight back on. Maybe it's my way of not being beaten."

Judy pulled Barrington's wheelchair closer to the bed.

"Sometimes – ugh" Barrington grunted as he lifted himself into the chair. " – sometimes I look at them and I think what that dumb kid did to me and I feel safer, you know, having them contained, close at hand."

Barrington shrugged.

"I'm hungry."

Judy pushed him out of the bedroom and towards the kitchen.

"Me too. Let's eat."

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A tongue of steel grey smoke curled from the barrel of the gun.

"Fiddlesticks!" Mary stamped her foot. Butch laughed.

Four months had passed since Mary's birthday.

Mary had loved the gun club when she finally went. She wasn't quite sure what she'd expected, but whatever it had been, it wasn't a country club with a pool and a restaurant and movie stars. The first time Mary had seen Gary Cooper she had almost swooned. She had been surprised at how many women seemed to be there every day. And how many of them didn't seem to know one end of the gun from another. They just sat around looking glamorous and faintly disappointed with everything.

Butch, her instructor, pressed the button to bring her paper target rolling across the concrete bunker that was the gun club's underground shooting range. The mechanism ground and screeched and then shuddered to a halt in front of their booth.

"You're doing much better," Butch patted her on the shoulder.

"But I didn't hit the target once!" Mary's voice squeaked.

"But you missed it by much less than before," Butch pointed to the scatter of bullet holes around the outside of the target. "I don't think I've ever seen anyone shoot this well with both their eyes closed."

Butch had a smooth, boy's face, with a deep cleft in his chin and blue eyes under thin sandy hair. He smiled disarmingly and Mary couldn't help laughing. She patted his muscle-thickened arms. Butch fixed a fresh paper target onto the mechanism and sent it back to the far side of the range. He loaded Mary's pistol and handed it to her.

"I'll never be any good at this," Mary pulled back the slide.

"You will," Butch leaned close to her, placing her hands properly on the pistol. His hands enveloped hers. He stood behind her, his big shoulders leaning over her tiny frame. "Take a deep breath. Try and clear your thoughts."

Mary breathed. She thought about Joe and how she missed him. Then she let the thought go.

"Now," said Butch. "Squeeze gently."

Crack!

The gun recoiled hard but Butch's big hands absorbed the shock. The bullet punched a hole in the centre of the target.

"I hit it!" Mary wiggled in delight.

"Well done," Butch smiled. "Now again."

Another hit.

Butch loosened his grip on Mary's hand. She squeezed the trigger and, without his strength the gun's recoil caused her to stagger back. She pressed against Butch. The bullet slid to the left.

"Steady," Butch took his hand away from the gun, cupping Mary's wrists gently. "Breathe. Aim. Squeeze."

Crack!

The bullet punched a hole right in the centre of the target.

Crack. Crack. Crack. Crack.

Two in the target, one on the edge and one miss.

"I did it." Mary gave a little jig of delight.

"Check the chamber. Remove the magazine." Butch tried to sound strict but he was beaming from ear to ear. Mary's face became very serious for a moment, like a child concentrating hard, as she checked the gun and put it down on the table.

"I did it!" She jumped at Butch, who caught her in his thick arms.

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"So d'ya want to go outside and try it out?" Chuck asked.

"Sure." Bobby finished reassembling the Colt. Chuck drained another beer and pulled two more from the fridge. Bobby grabbed a box of ammunition from a cupboard and led Chuck outside. Across the back yard and over a dry gully was a large open area where Bobby had shot beer bottles and tin cans.

Bobby slid a full magazine into the butt of the gun and raised it to shoulder height. He cradled his right hand with his left, took aim along the top of the pistol and squeezed.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Three bottles shattered.

Chuck grinned. "Nice shooting, boss."

Bobby smiled. "Wanna have a go?"

Chuck took the gun

Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack!

Two cans flew up. A third wobbled and tumbled sideways as the pile of rocks underneath it crumbled. A fourth sat unmoved.

"Buddy you shoot like a girl."

"Screw you."

"Gimme back my gun."

Both men took long slugs from their beer. They were enjoying themselves, feeling like boys again. The sky was still blue and a heat haze rose from the desert. It was still hot even though the sun was slipping towards distant mountains and casting long shadows from rocks and shrubs. Bobby reloaded the gun.

"Happy days, boss." Chuck slapped Bobby on the shoulder.

Bobby shivered at Chuck's touch. Chuck blinked as a shadow passed across the two men. Chuck looked up, but the sky was empty.

"Boys? Dinner!" Chuck turned to see Charlotte waving from the kitchen door, bathed in evening sunlight.

Bobby mumbled something to himself. He was holding the gun awkwardly, away from his body. He turned and began marching back towards the house. Chuck watched him skip over the dry gully.

Chuck wanted to call out to his friend, to call him back. He opened his mouth but a flash of the fading sunlight reflected off the gun. Dazzled Chuck raised a hand to shield his eyes. In those moments Bobby reached the house and went in without looking back.

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Joe stood in the doorway, his arms hung loosely at his side, but his fists were clenched tight. He looked into the bedroom.

On the floor he saw a silk and lace negligee and a man's jacket, some stockings and a shirt.

Mary was on the bed. Or rather, Mary was sitting astride someone who was lying on the bed. Mary was moving slowly up and down. Her eyes were closed. On her face was a look of concentration and pleasure that Joe recognised. Mary was in charge here. Her long dark hair brushed the man's chest. She was whispering softly, as though talking to herself. Joe could only make out the word "Butch."

"Mary?" The word slipped from Joe's lips involuntarily. But it was a croaked whisper. Mary could not have heard because she kept moving, her pace quickening, her cheeks flushing. Joe watched, horrified, as his wife's head rocked back, her mouth opened slightly, she gasped. The moment passed. She opened her eyes. Joe found his voice.

"What the hell is going on?" He stepped into the room, aware even as he asked it that it was a stupid question.

Butch leapt out of the bed, tossing Mary to one side. Joe noticed that he was young, muscular and that his penis was still hard. Butch grabbed a sheet from the bed to wrap around himself which, Joe thought, was strangely modest of a man who'd been fucking someone else's wife just seconds ago.

Mary seemed entirely unfazed. She lay on the bed, making no effort to cover herself and staring coolly at Joe, with the faintest of smirks on her face.

"What is going on? Who... who is this? Why?" Joe was fumbling. He felt his determination slip away. There was something cruel in Mary's eyes.

“So you decided to come home at last?” Mary sat up and waved a hand at the hulk. “Joe this is Butch. Butch this is my husband Joe.” Butch nodded politely and seemed to be about to raise a hand to shake Joe’s, then stopped, embarrassed.

Joe knew he should be angry. He should be raging. Instead he felt lost. His future had disappeared.

“Why?” It was all he could say. It came out like a whimper.

For the first time something like regret seemed to pass across Mary’s face, but it hardened quickly into contempt.

“You were never here.”

Joe opened his mouth to speak. He wanted to say that he’d been working for her, for their future. That he was doing it so they could continue to enjoy things she loved. But she knew that. She knew and she didn’t care.

Butch reached down and picked up his pants and shirt.

“Sorry... I’ll just... Sorry. ”

“Sorry?” The word broke something in Joe. “Sorry? You bastard!”

Joe swung at Butch’s head as hard as he could.

Calmly, almost contemptuously, Butch blocked the punch, grabbed Joe’s wrist and twisted it, spinning Joe around and push him away.

Joe roared in fury and charged the boy, fists flailing. Butch simply sidestepped and, almost gently, pushed Joe so that his momentum carried him across the room. Joe crashed into his wife’s dressing table, scattering the boxes of jewellery and bottles of perfume and the potions and powders that covered its polished surface.

“Sorry,” said Butch, as he pulled on his pants and shirt.

Mary laughed.

That was too much. Joe leapt up and tugged open the top drawer of the dressing table. The silver gun shimmered on a bed of silk underwear. Next to it was a full magazine. Joe grabbed the gun, slammed the magazine in place and pulled back the slide. He turned. Butch had stepped forward, but stopped when faced with the barrel of the forty-five.

Mary was still laughing.

“What are you going to do, Joe, shoot –”

Crack!

The bullet hit Mary in the gut. She flopped back onto the bed grasping at her stomach, her blue eyes widening in surprise.

Crack!

The second hit her in the cheek. Blood and bone scattered across the room creating a black mist on the mirrors behind the bed.

Butch screamed and took three steps towards the door.

“Stop!”

Butch froze.

“Sit down!” Joe waved the gun towards the bed.

Butch looked at the bed in obvious distaste. A large pool of blood was spreading across the silk sheets. Mary was twitching and gurgling softly.

“Sit!” Joe jerked the gun at the boy, trying to look menacing but Butch was too scared to notice. The boy sat down and Joe saw tears in his eyes.

“Don’t kill me.”

“Shut up!” Joe smiled. The gun felt good in his hand. It made him strong. “Now, who the hell are you?”

“What?”

“Tell me your name. How did you meet my wife?”

“Ummm... It’s Butch, sir. Butch Parker. I... I...” Butch closed his eyes and licked his lip. “I met your wife at the gun club. I am... ah... was her instructor.”

Joe stared blankly for a moment.

“What?”

“I was your wife’s instructor at the gun club. I’m sorry... I just... I didn’t know.”

“Shut up!” Joe was staring strangely at the gun. “Ha!” He barked bitterly. “Ha!”

“Sir?”

Tears streamed down Joes face. He stared at the gun. They had both betrayed him. He took a breath.

“Butch... Can I call you Butch?” Butch nodded. “Butch, when I had this gun made for my wife I had it inscribed. Have you seen it?”

“Yes sir. Ah... many times.”

“Of course you have Butch... Ha! ...And that’s not all you’ve seen, eh?” Joe wiped at his face with one sleeve. He noticed his cuff was soaked in blood and wondered for a moment how that had happened. Then he turned back to Butch. “I meant it, you know, every word.”

The words caught in Joe’s throat. He gasped, sucking in breath, struggling to keep the world in focus.

“Did you love her, Butch?”

“Um...” Butch was trying to calculate the safest answer.

“Tell me the truth. It doesn’t matter now.”

“No, sir.” Butch looked down at Mary but turned away quickly. Her mutilated face appalled him.

“Really?”

“It was just, fun. I didn’t love her... And she didn’t love me.”

“No.” Joe moved his head slightly to one side, as though appraising the young man before him. “No, I don’t think she did.”

Joe put the barrel of the silver forty-five in his mouth. It was still warm. The tang of the powder mixed with the slight sweetness of his own tears and the spice of blood in his mouth.

Joe pulled the trigger.

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Bobby and Charlotte were dead by the time Chuck reached the house. Bobby had shot Charlotte in the gut and the face and then he’d shot himself in the head.

Across the kitchen floor a wide, viscous pool of blood spread slowly. At its heart sat the gun, reflecting the sunset, pink and fat as though engorged by the butchery. It glistened. Malevolent.

Chuck knew, without doubt, that the gun had done this. His friend could not have done this. It must be the gun.

Chuck grabbed Colt from the floor, took the keys to the Dodge and headed for the door. He threw the gun on to the passenger seat and drove towards town.

It was late by the time he reached Beatty.

Chuck pulled up outside The Exchange Club and stopped. The club’s red neon flashed and sparkled and the sign on top of its whitewashed walls proclaimed “Exchange 1906” – the year the club and the town were born. Chuck could make out the thumpa-thump of some country song on the jukebox. Through the smoked glass of the windows he could see one or two people playing the slots.

Now, on the streets of the small town that had always been his home, Chuck began to wonder about what he had seen. This was the real world, he told himself, and guns don’t kill people. He had to deal with what had happened rationally. He had to think clearly. He’d drive down to the Sheriff’s Office, record the gun as evidence and deal with this as a normal domestic killing.

As he reached for the ignition, the door of The Exchange Club opened and a shaft of light poured into the street. For a moment Chuck could hear the music clearly, it was Merle Haggard singing about a working man getting nothing.

Annie-May stepped out of the club, on her arm was some guy Chuck didn't recognise. Some tourist maybe? They kissed.

Chuck and Annie-May had been sweethearts in high school, for a little while. He remembered making out in Bobby's daddy's car.

"She betrayed me," Chuck whispered to himself. "She said she loved me and now she's with this stranger. I'm gonna teach her —"

Annie-May disentangled herself from the big guy and they moved around the corner of the club and out of sight.

Chuck looked at his hand.

He was holding the gun.

It sparkled and shimmered. It wanted to be used.

Chuck tossed the gun to the floor on the passenger side of the Dodge and drove. He drove south through the night along I95 and kept driving until the sun started to lighten the sky. He didn't look left or right. He didn't know where he was going or what he was going to do. He just drove.

He stopped when, ahead of him, he saw the lights of another town. He pulled the car off the road, picked up the gun and walked into the desert towards the rising sun.

When it was becoming warm, he stopped, knelt down and, with his bare hands, he dug a hole. He clawed at the loose dry dirt and at the roots of sagebrush. He dropped the gun into the hole and pushed the earth on top of it with his feet, tramping the dirt down hard.

Then, with the heat of the morning sun on his face, Chuck walked into the desert.

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It wasn't a big gun. In Barrington's huge hands it seemed tiny, like a toy. He had finished cleaning and reassembling it and he slid the magazine into the grip with a satisfying click. He gave the casing a final polish, stored away the little tool kit he'd been using and placed the cleaning cloth on the kitchen table.

Then he raised the gun.

It wasn't a heavy gun, yet Barrington seemed barely able to lift it. His arm sagged. His hands – his whole body – trembled, but the black mouth of the gun did not move for one moment from its target.

Judy sat with her back to him, staring hard at the screen of their computer. She was unaware.

He pulled the trigger.

Click!

Nothing.

Click!

The gun wasn't loaded.

Judy turned round.

"I've found it," she said. Then noticed the strange look on her boyfriend's face. "Honey? Are you okay?"

Barrington blinked. He looked at Judy and then at the gun. He dropped silver-plated pistol as if it had burnt him. It landed with a heavy clunk on the kitchen table. He pushed himself back, away.

"Honey? What is it?" Judy got up from the computer and took the five steps across their tiny apartment to where Barrington sat. She put an arm, protectively, around his shoulder, and raised the back of her other hand to his forehead. He was cold and clammy.

"I'm fine," Barrington said. His deep voice cracked slightly as he spoke. "Its nothing." His eyes never left the gun.

"I've found out about the inscription," she smiled and gave Barrington a squeeze. "It was some English poet. A girl. Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Hey! That's like the gun. 'Cept this is a Colt of course."

Barrington managed to smile, weakly.

"Anyway its from a sonnet..." she looked at the page she'd printed out. "From the Portuguese."

Barrington took the page and looked at the short poem. Judy pointed to the last four lines. The lines etched on the gun.

*I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints, — I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life! — and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.*

"Pretty depressing," said Barrington.

"I think it's beautiful," Judy snatched back the sheet of paper. "It's romantic."

Barrington shrugged. He looked at the gun in Judy's hand. He never wanted to touch it again.

"There's something strange about that gun."

Judy shifted, the blank barrel of the gun levelled itself at Barrington's chest. He flinched.

Judy noticed and gave the pistol a hard stare. She shrugged.

"It's just another gun, baby."

Barrington nodded. "Just another gun..."

Judy walked over to the display case that Barrington had prepared. "Well it can't do anything, to anyone, locked in here."

She placed the gun on the velvet of the case. It sat between a Kentucky flintlock musket that was almost two hundred and fifty years old and an ugly-handled Colt Bisley. She set the cover of the display case into position and locked it.

Barrington relaxed.

Judy turned back to her boyfriend. He looked pale. She noticed that he was absentmindedly rubbing his side.

"Are you hurting?" She walked over and knelt beside him, lifting up his shirt. His scar was sore and red. She bent and kissed it softly.

"I'm fine," he said.

"I've got one more present for you," Judy walked over and took hold of the handles of Barrington's wheelchair.

"You do?" Barrington craned his neck back to look at Judy.

"Oh yes." Her face broke into a familiar grin.

"What is it?"

"I think you know." Judy pushed the wheelchair towards the bedroom.

"Where are you going to do to me?" Barrington was trying to sound afraid, but he couldn't hold back a deep chuckle.

"Just the usual, sir," Judy laughed and they disappeared into the bedroom. "Just the usual."

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The gun was a silver-plated Colt forty-five semiautomatic with mother of pearl panels on the grip. Intricate patterns coiled along the five-inch barrel. On the frame, just above the trigger, the initials M.H. were inscribed with a flourish in gold. The prancing horse, Colt's insignia, was also picked out in gold on the grip.

It had been repaired and restored and it looked very much as it had on the day it left the factory. It looked beautiful.

The gun lay behind glass on a green velvet cushion. The room was dark but, sometimes, light from a passing car would sweep across the room and the coils of decoration on the gun's barrel would twist tighter and the gun seemed to strain to be free. Then, with a flash, the light would be gone but, for an instant, the gun would glow red and bloody in the night.

The moment passed. And the gun still sat on its velvet bed, unmoving and helpless.

About the Author

Martin McGrath is a journalist by profession. He writes short stories in his spare time and edits *Focus*, a magazine for writers, for the British Science Fiction Association.

He is originally from Northern Ireland but has lived in and around London and the South East for most of the last 20 years. He now lives in St Albans.

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REVIEWS

A Clockwork Orange and *Doctor Who s4, Ep2: The Fires of Pompeii* reviewed by Scott Harrison
Needful Things reviewed by Alasdair Stuart

A Clockwork Orange

Directed by Stanley Kubrick

Starring Malcolm McDowell, Warren Clarke, Michael Bates
Warner, £15.99

Originally rejected by movie legend Stanley Kubrick as a potential film project back in the mid-sixties while shooting *Dr Strangelove*, the director would thankfully perform a complete about-turn in early 1970 after his dreams of developing the ultimate biopic of Napoleon Bonaparte ultimately fell through. This sudden and drastic change of opinion on Kubrick's part would culminate in the creation one of the greatest, most visually disturbing, controversial and culturally shocking movies of all time, based on one of the greatest, most compelling novels ever to be published.

Set in a crumbling, violent dystopian Britain of the near future the story explores the rapidly escalating conflict between individual freewill and state control as seen through the eyes of 15 year old misfit Alex, social deviant and leader of his gang of three 'droogs'. Alex's 'confessions' are presented to the viewer as a series of voice-overs, told in 'nadsat', the patois of the street used by the various teenage gangs that roam the landscape looking to get their kicks from frequent bouts of the old in-out-in-out and ultra-violence! All those who have read the novel will undoubtedly agree that Malcolm McDowell was born to play teenage delinquent Alex Delage, a sentiment that Kubrick himself held, even going on record to say that if McDowell had been unavailable at the time *A Clockwork Orange* would never have been made.

From its haunting main title music and iconic slo-mo pull-back of Alex and his droogs in the Korova Milk Bar the film's opening 30 minutes is arguably the most visually stunning and brutally relentless in cinema history. With its stylised violence, moody lighting and rape scenes set to Gene Kelly warbling *Singing in the Rain* the film is as visually compelling and breathtakingly exciting as it is disturbing and uncomfortable to watch.

The film courted much controversy on its original release in 1971 with its unflinching depiction of violence both of a physical and sexual nature; a controversy which reached a fever pitch when the film apparently influenced copy-cat gangs to terrorise Britain's streets, ultimately causing Kubrick to withdraw *A Clockwork Orange* from British cinemas, and later the video and DVD market - a ban which was only lifted after Kubrick's death in 1999.

Since its original release on DVD *A Clockwork Orange* has only been available as a disappointing vanilla edition, part of the equally disappointing (and equally extras-lite) *Stanley Kubrick Collection*. It's taken nine long years for Warner to finally get around to releasing a 2-disc special edition that is befitting an honest-to-goodness, hands-down 'classic' film such as this. Without doubt the best thing on offer from this shiny new special edition is the feature length commentary by film historian Nick Redman and a wonderfully warm and charismatic Malcolm McDowell, the latter on dazzling form recalling his time on the film in great detail and imparting much behind-the-scenes info with very little prodding needed from movie buff Redman. The second disc in this collection is absolutely heaving with

behind the scenes documentaries, clocking up an impressive two hours and forty minutes collective runtime! The wonderful Channel 4 documentary *Still Tickin'* takes a look behind the intense controversy that surrounded the making of the film and its release and, eventual, withdrawal from UK cinemas, with interviews from film-makers, critics, artists and the British censorship board! While *Great Bolshy Yarbloskos!* a brand new 28 minute featurette, speaks with film Directors and Kubrick biographers and takes a look at how Kubrick went about committing author Anthony Burgess's classic novel to celluloid. The disc is rounded off by the feature length career profile of actor Malcolm McDowell, which, at 90 minutes long, is suitably exhaustive yet mostly concentrates on his extensive acting career post *Clockwork Orange!* A rather weird and surprisingly messy theatrical trailer completes an otherwise satisfactory and long awaited 2-disc release.

Moody, magnificent and sumptuously shot, yet still powerful enough to terrify, shock and sicken it's audience, *A Clockwork Orange* is film maestro Stanley Kubrick's greatest gift to the history of cinema. More breathtakingly beautiful than *2001: A Space Odyssey*, scarier than *The Shining* and a hundred times more controversial than *Lolita*, this special edition deserves, nay, demands to be in every serious movie-lovers DVD collection!

Needful Things

Directed by Fraser Clarke Heston

Starring Ed Harris, Max Von Sydow, Bonnie Bedelia, J.T. Walsh, Amanda Plummer, Ray McKinnon, Duncan Fraser, Valri Bromfeld, Shane Meier, W. Morgan Sheppard and Don S. Davis

Adapted from the Stephen King novel, this is, in many ways, the prototype for the successful King adaptations of the last few years. It's something of a surprise then to find that this is the first time the film has made it onto DVD.

Sheriff Alan Pangborn (Harris) presides over the town of Castle Rock with a combination of gentle charm and authority. A big city cop who quit in the hope of finding a quiet life, he's engaged in a slow, old fashioned courtship of Polly Chalmers, owner of the local diner and is well liked by the town's inhabitants. Castle Rock is small, peaceful and dull.

Until *Needful Things* opens.

A new store, managed by Leland Gaunt (Von Sydow), *Needful Things* sells impossible things at impossible prices. The heart's desire of whoever walks through the door is in stock and all Gaunt wants in return is a favour, a small favour, never one that causes any harm... But quietly, with every sale, Castle Rock begins to go to war with itself and Sheriff Pangborn is caught in the middle.

Whilst there are several substantial changes from the book, the film works because it embraces the dark vein of mischief that runs straight through the original. There's a sense of glee, of quiet, off kilter, jet black happiness as Castle Rock's petty rivalries get violent, as people settle the disputes they previously ignored and the town tears itself apart. One scene in particular, set to *In The Hall of the Mountain King* from Peer Gynt, is glorious, the sense of joy at doing something wrong but doing it anyway almost palpable.

What really sells the film though is the cast. Von Sydow's Gaunt is a flamboyant, charming, plausible reptile, something which is wearing the skin of a man and having tremendous fun doing it. His final scene in particular is breathtaking and his scenes with Harris crackle with intensity and intelligence, two men who are diametrically opposed matching wits and neither quite winning.

Likewise, Harris' Pangborn is yet another in a long, proud line of spectacularly good performances. He's a gentle, quiet and relentlessly good man and his gradual realisation that something terrible has come to town really sells the horror of the situation. He's ably supported too by genre greats like the late J.T. Walsh and W. Morgan Sheppard and the excellent Bonnie Bedelia as Polly, bringing intelligence and charm to a role that would normally have fallen flat.

This is wrong fun of the best kind and an adaptation that embraces the spirit if not the text of the original. All in all, if you're a horror fan then this is for you and if you're a frequent shopper then beware...

Doctor Who – Episode 2 : The Fires of Pompeii
Written by **James Moran**
Starring **David Tennant, Catherine Tate, Phil Davis**
BBC 1. First shown 12th April 2008

After last weeks obligatory cute and colourful opening episode, traditionally aimed at the little 'uns in the audience, the fourth series of *Doctor Who* moves up several gears in order to deliver a much darker and emotionally satisfying story, this time at the hands of first-time series contributor James Moran, who delivers a stunningly brilliant script that one hopes will be setting the tone and standard for the remainder of the series.

The Doctor and spanking new travelling chum Donna find themselves in Pompeii 79AD on what the Doctor succinctly terms as "Volcano Day" - when nearby Vesuvius erupts, killing everyone in the nearby city within minutes. Before long the TARDIS has vanished, sold by a street-trader as a piece of abstract art, leaving the pair stranded in an unfamiliar city with the clock steadily ticking down to total annihilation. Tracking the ship to a local marble trader The Doctor and Donna soon find themselves unwittingly embroiled in a sinister tale of soothsayers, rock monsters and the secretive sisterhood of the Cult of Vulcan, all hell-bent on changing the course of history.

As always David Tennant is on sparkling form as the last of Gallifrey's famous Time Lords – a role he was born to play - proving (if further proof were needed) why he has become one of Britain's most sort after actors of recent years, but it is Catherine Tate who steals the show here with a truly touching and heartfelt performance of new companion Donna experiencing her first real trip in the TARDIS. Never has so much controversy, anger and intense speculation been aimed at any one person in the show's entire forty-five year history. *Doctor Who* fansites and forums have been burning white-hot with the opinions and reactions of furious *Who* fans bemoaning Russell T. Davies' decision to bring Catherine Tate back as a full-time companion, yet here Tate gives what is arguably her finest performance to date bringing real depth and human emotion to what began life in 2006's Christmas special as a rather two-dimensional character. Whether displaying her comic timing with lines such as "You fought her off with a water pistol?! I bloody love you!" or begging the Doctor to help the doomed inhabitants of Pompeii with a tearful "Just one person. Not the whole city. Please, just one person!" Tate more than justifies her position aboard the TARDIS, proving to be the perfect emotional and human foil to Tennant's coldly logical, battle-scarred alien!

In a break from *Doctor Who* tradition both cast and crew travelled from wind-swept Cardiff to the Cinecitta studios in Rome to film the scenes set in Pompeii's sun-drenched streets, giving the entire production a truly authentic, glossy feel, topping last year's location shoot at London's Globe Theatre. Closer to home the Mill deliver effects that go above and beyond anything they've created over the previous three series as Vesuvius erupts with the force of twenty-four nuclear bombs, laying waste to Pompeii in truly cinematic proportions. We've marvelled at thousands of Daleks swarming in formation in space and flying cars gridlocked beneath the city of New New York but the sight of an all-enveloping dust cloud rumbling across the city of old Pompeii was a breathtaking sight that topped them all!

Doctor Who is a series that has gone from strength to strength over the past three years and with *The Fires of Pompeii* shows no sign whatsoever of slowing down. If this episode is an indication of Series Four as a whole then this could be the best series yet!

OPINION – The Tate Debate Revisited

Words: Lee Harris

WAYYYYYYYY back in issue 14 (6th July 2007) we ran the following piece, defending the *Doctor Who* production team's decision to cast Catherine Tate as the regular companion for season four. Since then, fan forums have been red-hot with calls for her (and the casting team's) heads on a plate. At the time of writing this update paragraph, two issues of series four have aired, and Tate has been excellent.

We'd just like to poke out our tongues and say to the detractors:
Naaaaa-naaaaa-na-naaaaa-naaaaa!



The original feature:

Season Three of the new incarnation of *Doctor Who* ended its initial UK run on Saturday 30th June. *Doctor Who* fans are generally in agreement that this was the finest season of New *Who* so far (though the hardcore among them would probably argue that season x, y or z of "Classic" *Who* was far better. You can't please everyone).

[End of Season 3 Spoiler Warning]

It only took a few days for the BBC to upset the applegart, however, with their announcement that Catherine Tate's character Donna (from last year's *Runaway Bride* Christmas Special) would be replacing Martha Jones as The Doctor's companion.

Fan forums have been full of debate on whether the casting is good. Actually, that's not quite true – fan forums have been full of debate concerning the best way to disembowel the producers and other personnel responsible for the casting.

Detractors cite Tate's performance in *The Runaway Bride* as reason enough to burn her at the stake for the witch she most evidently is. It is true that Donna appeared to be Shouty McShout's more vocal sister in that episode, but in her defence, she was running late for the most important event of her adult life, as well as having been kidnapped by an alien robot assassin. Her high frustration levels were perhaps at least a *little* justified. Also, of course, her performance was created by three people – herself as actress, Russell T Davies (who put the words in her mouth) and Euros Lyn, who directed the episode, and was therefore intimately involved in crafting the performance in relation to the rest of the characters and situations. If Tate hadn't given exactly what the production team had required, there is little doubt that she would not have been invited back for a full season.

That leads us onto Tate's acting credentials. A far more prolific and experienced actress than either Billie Piper or Freema Agyeman, Tate is classically trained. She served a year with the prestigious Royal Shakespeare Company, and has been nominated for numerous awards. She has appeared on numerous one-off productions and serials over the past decade, always successfully.

Unfortunately, she seems to be judged almost purely on her award-winning sketch show – *The Catherine Tate Show* – in which she plays a variety of characters, many of them (not all) unlikeable and annoying, as well as the first half of her *Who* Christmas Special.

Her performance in *Runaway Bride* was almost pantomimic for the first half of the show (well, it *was* Christmas), but layers were gradually uncovered as the programme aired, and a more sympathetic Donna emerged at the end. Sympathetic, and more worldly-wise.

It will be refreshing to have a companion who doesn't go all doe-eyed every time The Doctor makes an entrance. Tate could be just the person to do this.

When Billie Piper was initially announced as companion, the angry mob called for Davies' head on a plate, and Piper proved them wrong. Now they're calling for the same entrée without knowing what Davies and his team have planned for Donna. A tad premature, and a shame they didn't learn from their previous error.

Perhaps they'll be proven right. Perhaps they'll be proven wrong. What's certain, of course, is that idle speculation achieves nothing. Hopefully Tate will ignore the grumbles of those who still choose to call themselves "fans" while publicly bashing the show, and get on with her job. I, for one, am rooting for her.

The Third International Screenwriters' Festival

This event takes place in Cheltenham on July 1-3, 2008.

Some of the confirmed speakers this year so far are: Terry Pratchett, Jane Tranter (Controller of BBC Fiction), Deborah Moggach (Pride and Prejudice), Christopher Hampton (Atonement) and Julian Fellowes (Young Victoria). Other guests will include writers, producers, directors, agents, development executives and commissioners.

Tickets are apparently selling fast. A large proportion of delegates have been to the two previous festivals. The festival is promises to be an excellent opportunity to network in the screenwriting genre.

The workshops provide first hand information for both novice screenwriters and experts alike and in addition to the workshops, the chance to mingle is available during lunch or in the evening giving everyone a chance to unwind and reflect on the days' events.

The festival is a 3-day event, and you can find out more at www.screenwritersfestival.com.

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