

Hub

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Editors: Lee Harris, Alasdair Stuart and Trudi Topham.
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A Change of Style

We’ve had a few comments (both on the website and by email) about the new format – some prefer the new landscape layout, some prefer the old style. We’ll let it run a week or two more before we decide whether to keep, or to revert (or to do both!)

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Songs of Praise

Praise be this week to James Targett, who pointed out the *Sound and Fury* article on Richard K Morgan’s website. Let us rejoice, also in the company of Mr Morgan himself, for allowing us to reprint said article in this edition of *Hub*.

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, or buying some merchandise from our Café Press store, or even mentioning our advertising opportunities to any friends and colleagues with relevant businesses to promote. We pay our writers, and anything you contribute helps us to continue to attract high quality fiction and non-fiction.

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Pantechinon Magazine is one of the most professional quarterly eZines on the market, and is co-edited by Hub’s own Trudi Topham and Alasdair Stuart.

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Next Week

As well as some more excellent fiction, and reviews, we have an in-depth article on the Nebula awards, with some exclusive commentary from some of the biggest names in the business!

Until Pebbles Grow

by:

Daniel Good

*

As Mr. Tandem, many years an asset to his city, stepped down the three irregular steps into his back garden, he experienced a coppery taste in the back of his throat and an empty feeling between the joints in his hands. He had been told upon his dismissal from Victoria General Hospital earlier that day that these symptoms were to be expected; they had said that the stabilizers he was to swallow every six hours would carry a metallic aftertaste, and that pressures exerted during the surgery had caused a perfectly natural cerebral swelling which would subside after a day or two. He had been watching television when he first noticed the discomfort, and had decided to take a stroll in the garden to alleviate his concern.

The late spring evening had settled in on the gated Fernwood community like a sheepdog cooing into a rug. Neatly trimmed yet fuzzy, the grass was green and bright in the light of the setting sun, and late May bloomers wetted colour along its borders. The garden struck Mr. Tandem as looking rather like an abstract painting with a gaudy baroque frame. He took especial note of a small tree, strong in blossom by the fence, with fading forget-me-nots mouldering around its knuckled roots. He was sad to see their colour drain as spring advanced, but the paler shades looked appropriate beside the ghostly veronica he'd planted last season.

Absently taking up a few notes of McCartney's *Blackbird*, he ambled over to the fence, crunching grass beneath his sandals. He leaned up against the wooden divider as he hummed, trying to relax in his terrycloth bathrobe. Pausing every now and again from the song, he breathed deeply of the mildly scented air, hoping its aroma and gentleness would assuage his symptoms. Mr. Tandem's breathing, however, only seemed to increase the sense of dislocation in his hands and bring particular intensity to the copper flavour lining his mouth. Panicked, he stopped humming as his eyes searched for solutions in the swaying leaves, dizzying colours, and faint buzzing insects around him. From behind he heard a swinging door snap shut and footsteps woodenly thud along a porch. Turning, alarmed, Mr.

Tandem propped his arms over the top of the fence and scrutinized the approach of his neighbor and friend, Mr. French. The immediate sight of another person made Mr. Tandem haltingly pick up humming again. Mr. French was also wearing a terrycloth bathrobe and sandals -- and the green grass also crunched under his feet as he took the time to survey his own garden. French had left his television on, the canned laughter shaping into another natural evening sound.

From inside Mr. Tandem's house a cuckoo clock struck seven, interrupting his observations. Its cackle seemed as if it came over a great distance, yet it still cut distinctly through the chatter of his television.

Mr. French paused in the middle of his yard and made as if to turn around, then thought better of it and remained where he was. He regarded Mr. Tandem standing and gazing over the fence at him and casually looked away, as if he had just been scanning his entire field of vision. They had not spoken in recent months, as they both had been blessed with grandchildren and had become separately and greatly involved with their families.

Mr. French began to hum a different Paul McCartney song.

He then looked sidelong over at Mr. Tandem as if he had just noticed him. Mr. French ceased humming and smiled sheepishly. "Evening, neighbor," he said.

"Evening, yourself," Mr. Tandem replied, also smiling sheepishly for not having been the first to say so.

The grass continued to crunch as Mr. French walked over to the fence and propped his arms up against it. "How've you been?"

"The knee's been giving me a lot of trouble."

"Mine too. This getting-old business is for the dogs."

Mr. Tandem paused briefly before responding. "I remember when I was a kid and my father helped me set up my Nintendo. I wanted him to play the games with me. He picked up the controller and started using his fingers where his thumbs should've been -- and he was squinting -- real annoyed. Or vaguely annoyed. I don't know."

"Yeah?"

"I felt sorry for him. I loved him so much for trying, but at first I was embarrassed. I promised myself I'd never end up like that, using my fingers where I should my thumbs. First, with my kids, there were those injections -- whatever they're called -- myth-amphetamine -- and I tried them right along with my boys. It was a real great time and the other kids at their school thought they were lucky to have such a cool dad. I kept with those all the way through version 3.4, but then my kids had moved on -- those artifacts brought back by the astronauts really coincided with their teen years. So then it was puzzledreams and meshpets and ansibles... I tried them all -- still use puzzledreams when I can't get to sleep. But it just keeps going. It's hard to keep up."

"Yeah, I hear ya."

"That's when I decided to get that new implant; I was sitting around with my grandchildren --"

"-- how are they, by the way?"

"Oh good. Good. Real strong and happy. And yours?"

"She's doing real good. And Janine is happier than she's been since college. She's a real mum now. It's funny... so you were sitting around with your --"

"-- right -- with my grandkids, and I remembered my father sitting there trying to play one of my favourite games with me. And just not being able to. So that's when it hit me. I've tried hard to stay away from those new implants everybody's going on about -- didn't trust them -- but then I realized that I didn't want to be the granddad whose kids and his kids' kids think is past it. Now hear me out -- I wanted to grab my dad and tell him how much I loved him when I saw that he couldn't use the console -- I would have never said he was past it, but I felt like...like he was dad...and nothing more."

"So you're thinking of getting an implant?"

"No, Frenchie. I got one." Tandem smiled. "Just got back today from Vic Gen."

"Well, how do you like that! What's it like?"

"I... I don't know yet. I don't think it's kicked in."

"I heard that you have to force its appliance by focusing on something specific, like, like that little tree with the flowers beside you."

"Alright, let's give it a try... it's a Japanese quince..."

French cut in with a grin, "Chaenomeles japonica..."

"... native to Japan with little apple-like fruit. The flowers are --"

"-- usually red, but can bloom pink or white."

They both laughed as Mr. Tandem realized that Mr. French also had an implant. Mr. Tandem placed his empty-feeling hand on top of Mr. French's and said, "Did you know, Frenchie, that the c. japonica here, is suitable for bonsai?"

"That's something. Did you know that your quince is likely to be home to leaf-miners?"

"Bonsai: *pén jǐng*: the aesthetic miniaturization of trees first produced by the Chinese around two-hundred A.D., spreading to Japan during the Heian period, where it eventually flourished as an art form for the wealthy."

"Heian: meaning peace or tranquility; in Japanese history, the period of time from --"

"-- the eighth century to the twelfth, considered a pinnacle in Japanese art, literature and --"

"-- religion, Confucianism still influencing ways of life --"

They both laughed again, staring hard, into each other's wet grey eyes. Mr. Tandem, disembodied from his grip, tightened his hold on Mr. French's hand; "seven-eighty-four, Emperor Kammu moves the capital to what is modern day Kyoto; eight-oh-six--"

"-- eight-oh-six, the Tantric school is introduced by Kōbō Daishi; eight-fifty-eight, Fujiwara clan begins reign with Emperor Seiwa -"

"-- Emperor Seiwa, fifty-sixth emperor of Japan, birth name --"

"-- ten-sixty-eight, Emperor Go-Sanjo overthrows Fujiwara clan; Go-Sanjo, seventy-first emperor of Japan --"

"-- Korehito --"

“-- birth name Takahito --”

“-- Tale of the Genji, the first novel ever, written by --”

“-- said by Luis Borges to be interesting not because of the 'exoticism --”

“-- '--- that horrible word -- but rather the human passions' --”

“Borges: 'the earth we inhabit is an error' --”

“Kimi ga yo wa!”

“Chiyo ni!”

“Yachiyo ni!”

“Sazare ishi no!”

“Iwao to narite!”

“Koke no musu made!”

Breathing heavily on both sides of the fence and red-faced from Japan's national anthem, Mr. Tandem and Mr. French abruptly stopped the contest. Their televisions and the televisions of the neighborhood laughed. The two men grew quiet and the silence stretched as the sun turned the sky a coppery red. Tandem's mouth was dry and he had nothing left to say.

The quince remained as it was, the forget-me-nots dying at its roots.

About the author

The author lives in West Yorkshire.

If you enjoyed this week's tale, and the non-fiction that follows, please make a donation at www.hub-mag.co.uk.

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REVIEWS

Spook Country and *Doctor Who s4, Ep4: The Sontaran Strategem* reviewed by Alasdair Stuart

Doctor Who s4, Ep5: The Poison Sky reviewed by Scott Harrison
Spook Country and

Spook Country

Written by William Gibson
Viking, £18.99 (hardback)

Hollis Henry is a former rock star turned journalist, sent to LA to write a piece on virtual situationalist art. The only problem is that the magazine she's working for, may or may not exist. Tito is part of a Chinese-Cuban family of spies involved in transferring information on old fashioned ipods, who finds his life is about to change. Milgrim is a junkie who happens to speak Volapuk, the tradecraft language Tito and his family use and Brown may, or may not, be a secret agent. All four find themselves caught up in a web of events that incorporates businessman Hubertus Bigend, a very large helicopter and a shipping container that everyone wants and no one knows why.

William Gibson's latest novel picks up threads from *Pattern Recognition* but stands perfectly well as an individual story. It also, it should be noted, continues to prove that the world Gibson writes about is, in essence, our own. What would have been a cyberpunk novel fifteen years ago is now pretty much a contemporary thriller. Gibson's world of modern artists, nomadic spies and antique technology that's under ten years old is, to borrow an old Cyberpunk phrase 'twenty minutes into the future' at most.

Hollis Henry's unreal, faintly surreal journey is equal parts comedy and horror and the absurd nature of her work is fascinating and frustrating in equal proportion. At times it feels like Gibson is doing little more than posturing, showing off the research he's done whilst at others the novel crackles along with the grace and energy of Tito and his sytema moves. There are some great ideas on display here and some moments of casual, offhand humour that only Gibson is capable of, especially in Milgrim's elegantly wasted, casually amoral sections of the novel.

In fact, the pacing is both the film's biggest strength and biggest weakness. The strength comes from both the multiple plot lines and the brevity of the chapters, each plot rotating into place for rarely more than eight pages at a time. However, there's a sense, certainly towards the middle, of a few too many plates being spun, of at least one plot running in place whilst the others are moving ahead.

Despite these problems, this is consistently odd, consistently smart storytelling. Gibson's a rare talent and he rarely put a foot wrong. All in all, Spook Country requires a little more work than you might expect but it's absolutely, unquestionably worth it.

Doctor Who 4.04: The Sontaran Stratagem

Written by Helen Raynor

Directed by Douglas Mackinnon

Starring David Tennant, Catherine Tate, Freema Agyeman, Christopher Ryan, Rupert Holliday Evens, Ryan Sampson, Christian Cooke, Bernard Cribbins and Jacqueline King

The Doctor is called back to Earth by Martha Jones, only to discover that she is now working for UNIT, who are in the process of shutting down the largest sat-nav firm on the planet and something is very, very wrong at the Rattigan Academy, a school for geniuses.

The return of UNIT, Martha Jones, the Sontarans and Helen Raynor makes this a packed episode which, for some will cause some trepidation. The first two part story in any given *Who* season is, well... a bit poor, traditionally. From the introduction of the Slitheen in *Aliens of London/World War Three*, to the strangely dull *The Age of Steel* and *Rise of the Cybermen* and the deeply flawed *Daleks in Manhattan/Evolution of the Daleks* this is not a slot which traditionally inspires confidence.

It's a nice change then that this is monumentally good fun. Tennant and Tate continue to bounce off another with almost palpable glee and Donna is on fine form here. From coming at the case from an entirely different angle, to effortlessly charming Martha, she's a constant, grounded, pragmatic presence in the show. Plus, in her 'exit' scene, we have possibly the best gag the series has pulled so far.

Likewise, Tennant turns in a remarkably consistent performance here, all twitchy energy and swashbuckling science and his interaction with UNIT soldier Ross (Christian Cooke, also turning in good work) and the splendidly twitchy Rattigan (Ryan Sampson) are amongst the best scenes he's had.

For many though, the three on-screen returns are where the meat of the episode will lie. Agyeman does good work as Martha who, despite being required, momentarily, to be an idiot by the script is a much more grounded and frankly interesting character than she was at any point during season three. There's a splendid moment of awkwardness when she first sees Donna that's both touching and more than a little selfish, as is the speech she gives about how the Doctor will ruin Donna's life without ever meaning it. This is the Martha Jones that everyone but me has seen from the start and it'll be fascinating to see where the character goes.

Likewise, UNIT are on triumphant form here, all bluster and black uniforms and not a shred of competence amongst them. As Colonel Mace, the new Brigadier, Holliday Evans does a nice job of being both starstruck and arrogant, both characteristics that defined the early interaction between the Doctor and Mace's predecessor. He's a bit of a caricature certainly but you can see where the character can grow and hopefully, will be given a chance to.

But it's the Sontarans who steal the show. Christopher Ryan (Mike from *The Young Ones* no less) is nothing short of magnificent as General Staal. Somewhere between a samurai and Colonel Blimp he's a wonderfully fresh villain, someone for whom war is a way of life and the Doctor is not a nemesis but a challenge, an honoured adversary. Last week the Ood were rounded out to tremendous effect and this week, the Sontarans take their place as an iconic villain in the new series. Oddly charming, casually brutal and clearly alien, this is a triumphant revival of an unfairly overlooked villain.

There are problems, certainly, with the script. First and foremost as mentioned above is UNIT's epic lack of competence, embodied in particular in a pair of relentlessly, needlessly stupid soldiers whose sole purpose is to manipulate the plot into existence. But get past that, and you have a story with total energy, total exuberance and four stunning performances. This stratagem looks set to succeed.

Doctor Who Series 4 – Episode 5 : The Poison Sky

Written by Helen Raynor

Directed by Douglas Mackinnon

Starring David Tennant, Catherine Tate, Freema Agyeman, Christopher Ryan, Rupert Holliday Evens, Ryan Sampson, Christian Cooke, Bernard Cribbins and Jacqueline King

As the previous review has already noted, traditionally the first two-part of the series is usually the weakest of the three, liberally sprinkled with farting aliens, squealing pig-men and over-ripe villains. This is the one aimed squarely at the kiddies, keeping them entertained with big explosions, fantastic monsters and men with guns, before the series begins to hurtle inexorably towards its darker, more adult climax. Helen Raynor's wonderful double helping of *The Sontaran Stratagem* / *The Poison Sky* is, however, the exception that proves the rule! Yes, we have big explosions, fantastic monsters and men with guns (even fantastic monsters with guns!) but this one manages to mix them all into an intelligent, well paced story that appeals to those members of the audience well above the age of 10 years old, and as a result the quality feels more like the two-part story usually reserved for episodes 9 & 10.



The Poison Sky picks up where last week's cliffhanger left us, well, hanging! The Sontarans step up their plan to choke Earth's atmosphere using the four hundred million Atmos-fitted cars to flood the world with alien gas, killing every human in the process. But what exactly is the gas for? With Martha's clone running freely around the UNIT base, Donna trapped onboard the Sontaran Base Ship and the world about to go nuclear, the Doctor can see no other solution than that of self-sacrifice in order to save the human race from total annihilation.

Often is the case that the second episode of a two-part story tends not to keep those promises made by the previous episode, often feeling less pacy,

exciting and liable to wander away from the story's original purpose. Not so with *The Poison Sky* though, which deftly grasps the *Stratagem* baton from the moment the opening titles fade out and delivers 45 minutes of high-octane fun that matches its predecessor in both excitement and adventure. Watching David Tennant's Tenth Doctor in action is like watching a mini firework display, whose performance some three years later still has the power to surprise, astound and amuse! Meanwhile Catherine Tate's fantastic turn as companion Donna Noble continues to thrust a metaphorical two-fingered gesture to all the rabid Tate haters out there in audience-land, as she brings in yet another beautifully measured performance to a character that is refreshingly different to that of either Rose or Martha. The real unsung hero of the series so far,

however, is the magnificent Bernard Cribbins whose portrayal of Donna's grandfather Wilfred Mott is both honestly real and staggeringly poignant and will become, one hopes, more important to the series arc further along the line.

As with the Daleks and the Cybermen in previous series Neill Gorton and his Millennium FX team have done an excellent job updating the Sontarans for the Noughties, while still managing to maintain the look and feel of the original Seventies design. Back to their diminutive stature (after the towering aliens of *Invasion of Time* and *Two Doctors*) and sporting funky new metallic-blue 'armour' there's no doubt that the Sontarans will be every bit as popular with Doctor Who's newest (and youngest) audience members as the Daleks and Cybermen have been since the series' return in 2005.

So far Series 4 has failed to deliver a bad, weak or even average episode, but instead continues to raise the bar on the quality of scripts and stories we expect from the series as a whole. It truly feels that Doctor Who has hit its stride and that all involved are performing at the top of their game – and we've not even reached the halfway point yet!

Sound and Fury, Signifying...?

By Richard K. Morgan

First published online at www.richardkmorgan.com

Richard K Morgan is the Clarke 2008 Award-winning author of *Black Man* (published in the U.S. as *Thirteen*).

A couple of months back, Pete Crowther asked me to write a guest editorial for the 2008 WorldCon edition of his Postscripts anthology. He gave me carte blanche, which is often an error with me. I wrote this for him. He declined to use it -- too negative, he felt -- but was gentlemanly enough to pay me for it anyway. Seems a shame for it not to get aired ...



Here's a quote:

"[T]hey're really a bunch of self-righteous condescending arrogant little pricks who are more than happy to ignore history and scientific facts when it suites [sic] them ... a bunch of goddamned fucking militant, humorless, and annoying asshats for whom beatings are way too good."

Here's another one:

"I'm still disgusted. I *don't* forgive all those nice, flaccid, mediocre people who diluted and rediluted something strong & worthwhile, just because, well, they had to make a living. They could have stayed with their day job as far as I'm concerned, because they *didn't* contribute."

Now, you would think, from the amount of passionate anger swilling around here, that we're dealing with something major, some stark issue of life or death. Command economy socialism versus free market deregulation, perhaps. Starvation in Africa or human rights abuse in Iran. The privatization of public space, or the failures of inner city state schooling. Chinese censorship of the Internet, or the war in Iraq. You know -- important stuff.

Actually, no.

What these two explosions of fury have most notably in common (apart from the fact that they were both -- you guessed it -- posted on the internet) is that they come from deep in the heart of the SF & Fantasy genre. There is, to be fair, an obvious qualitative difference between the two pieces of writing, which reflects a corresponding difference in source. You could say they are from opposite ends of a spectrum, so to speak. The first piece is lifted from a (fairly) randomly selected blog, whose owner was reacting to the Mundane SF manifesto (and was presumably off his anger management meds at the time). The second was posted by a respected Grand Old Man of the SF&F genre during an increasingly heated spat over the emergence of the New Weird. But beyond those differences of origin, another common factor still looms large -- in both cases, the focus of all this rage is nothing more or less than *the kind of SF & Fantasy people should* (or more precisely *shouldn't be reading and writing*.

Just that. Reading preferences.

Which leads me to ask the question -- *just what the hell is wrong with us?*

I'm asking that in all wide-eyed innocence because I'm still a relative novice in this place. I mean, I've always *read* SF and Fantasy, for the reason I guess most people read anything -- because I like it. But before the publication of my first novel, five years ago, I knew next to nothing about SF fandom, had never attended a con in my life, and was quite unaware there might be anything to warrant the wielding of such savage rhetorical weaponry. So I was a bit (actually a lot) taken aback to see these squabbles arising, and even more taken aback to learn that this kind of back-biting is nothing new in the genre. Trawl back through the short history of SF and you can see the exact same bitching and lekking oneupmanship set loose time and time again. New Wave writers lambast and laugh at their predecessors from the so-called Golden Age. Individual authors ally or square up to each other with ludicrous intensity. Lots of furious lit. crit. goes flying this way and that. Splat! Pow! Blood on the dancefloor. Oh, but the times, they are a-changing -- here comes the hard-SF revival to "take back" the genre, to barricade themselves in the genre cabin with their technophilic faith and new frontier spirit and hold off the weirdos for a while. Then cyberpunk kicks down the door all over again, proclaims itself dangerous and subversive (but over here, in this corner, some New Wave purists scoff).

And so it goes, drearily onward until we wind up squabbling all over again about how cool and cutting edge and *unlike other fantasy writers* we are in the New Weird, or more recently how hopelessly wrong and dangerously irresponsible anyone is if they're writing Faster than Light drives into their SF,

or (see above) how *goddamn fucking militant, humorless, and annoying* anyone is who says it's off base to write FTL into ...

So forth.

For the last five years, I've stood on the sidelines of this endless scrummaging, with feelings that range from mild curiosity to irritation to fascinated disbelief. I've haunted the messageboards and the blogs and the con panels, I've even occasionally dipped my toe into one pool of critical vitriol or another -- Clomping Foot of Nerdism, New Weird, "political" SF -- but mostly I've just watched, in much the same way I guess you'd watch footage of those guys in Shia Muslim nations battering themselves in the head with sharp objects until the blood clots their hair and streams down their faces from their lacerated scalps and evidently makes them all feel *really good* about themselves. O-kay, guys. Whatever gets you off, I guess.

But then, finally, at Eastercon 2006, things came to a head; one panel title in particular leapt out of the Glasgow Concussion programme at me, and I realized -- oh, for *fuck's sake!!!* -- that I'd really, *really* had it with this shit.

Won't Get Fooled Again, the item in question declaimed. *Why don't we just completely trash the whole tired SF genre and try to take the discourse somewhere genuinely new?*

What the hell is wrong with us?

Here's a funny thing. Skip across the tracks to the world of crime fiction for a while, and you don't see this shit going on. You don't get this gnawing, mutilative thread of self-hatred, this bulemic purging of whole sub-genres or readership sub-sections as somehow unworthy. A quick trawl through a couple of dozen crime writer websites and messageboards reveals no agendas or dogme-style utterances, no towering rages or griping about how the genre's going to shit these days, how there's all this generic pap being published, how *this* strain of crime writing is so much more *valid* than this other strain, how maybe we shouldn't even be reading or writing crime fiction at all, how we need to *Get Back to Basics*, or *Rip it Up and Start Again*, or any other misbegotten Year Zero bullshit.

Go on, see for yourselves -- it just ain't there.

Unsure if I was missing something, if this was just naïve grass-is-always-greenerism on my part, I did what you should always do in research -- I asked a man who knows. I got in touch with Ali Karim at the Shots Magazine website, a man who was once kind enough to provide me with the perfect definition of

"Noir" (it's the antithesis of "Disney") and who knows the crime writing world inside and out. And he concurs. You just don't see this thrashing, squabbling more-valid-than-thou posturing among crime readers or writers. You don't see the back-biting, you don't see the antagonistic comparisons, you don't see the defensive factionalism, and you don't see the rage. What you *do* see, on crime writing blogs and messageboards and author websites everywhere, is a confident and unselfconscious enthusiasm for the form *that doesn't seem to need to denigrate something else in order to flourish*. You see a broad and varied readership choosing from and enjoying what's on the menu, a large, mixed bag of writers happy to serve it up for them, and above all a generous, live-and-let-live attitude that suffuses the whole genre.

How do they do that?

Well, Ali and I batted that one back and forth for quite a while. Where does this rather less cannibalistic attitude come from? Is it maybe because there's a bigger pie to share in crime fiction, more readers, more dosh, and so a lot less anxiety about why *>not enough people are buying my stuff, goddamnit, why don't they appreciate what I'm doing with the genre?* Is it because, aside from the money, there's relatively more respectability in being a crime writer than in writing SF and Fantasy? Or is it perhaps that the line between reader and writer isn't as blurred in crime writing, that comparatively few of the crime readership are themselves aspiring to write what they read, so the genre lacks the bitchy *that should be me up there* dynamic? Is it because crime readers are older on average, or less demanding, or less transgressive, or maybe just less bloody-minded? Is it the readers, or the writers, or both (or neither)? And back on this side of the fence, is it just a few malcontent bad apples in the SF barrel, or is it something endemic to the form? Is it maybe just down to an overdeveloped literary ghetto grievance and a lack of self-esteem?

Suffice it to say that while all this made for a fascinating conversation, neither Ali nor I could nail down any conclusive explanation for the difference. See, it is true that there's more money around in crime fiction, the market is about five or six times as large. But that doesn't mean crime writers are all getting rich. A Nielsen survey in 2003 found that a massive fifty percent of all crime sales the previous year were accounted for by just *fifteen* bestselling writers. And that leaves a lot of little guys out in the cold. Quoting the survey, an article in the Independent sounded the alert that publishers were taking a pretty savage axe to their crime lists, dropping less popular writers and cutting back on their output of new talent. And as for respectability, well, in the very same article, no lesser crime luminary than Ian Rankin was quoted as saying that the literary

mainstream still seemed blind in their elitism to any idea that there might be quality writing coming out of the crime genre.

All of which will sound very familiar to anyone reading or writing in SF&F. So this difference in intra-genre tolerance isn't about the money or the respectability -- or at least, that's not *all* it's about. Maybe it does have something to do with reader profile, then -- but then again an awful lot of the SF readership aren't averse to a bit of crime fiction as well, so the readership does seem to interpenetrate, in one direction at least. And anyway, that doesn't explain the crime *writers*, who, it seems, are equally laid back, tolerant and mutually supportive.

At this point, you might be forgiven for asking the question *So What?* So there's a lot of bitching, lekking and squabbling in SF and Fantasy. So it's a cannibalistic, malcontent genre. So who cares?

I care.

Because it seems to me rather a shame that right here and now, in the form of fiction that's most fit to explore the twenty first century, at a time when our newer, sister media -- movies, TV, video games -- are replete with the genre's well-worn furniture, we still can't seem to *get our fucking act together*, find some faith in ourselves and just go do our thing. So you want to write Mundane SF. Good idea -- go away and do it; if Geoff Ryman's *Air* is anything to go by, something resembling Mundane SF might -- eventually -- win the genre its first Booker prize. But why the crushing need to denigrate the space opera end of SF before you start? What's with the superior attitude? Oh, and *you* guys -- before you start looking all smug 'n' shit behind this -- so you lot *don't* want to write (or read) mundane SF. Fine -- don't. But is it so terribly threatening when someone else *does*, that you have to vomit up this ocean of rage and abuse, as if the Mundanistas had come out suggesting re-education camps for the Star Trek fanbase. Is the Mundane manifesto really such an affront that established authors (who really should know better) and fans alike have to start hurling abuse around like they're a street gang and someone said something dirty about their mothers?

And while we're at it, all you self-professed New Weirdsters - did nailing your New Weird colours to the mast five years ago really have to mean such an avowed and out loud contempt for all that painstakingly imagined (and yes, mapped!) "consolatory" fantasy and those who like to immerse themselves in it? Was that the only way the manifesto could stand -- in fake-defiant from-the-barricades revolution-chic opposition to something else? Did there -- does there *always* -- have to be an enemy? Do we have to hate before we can get passionate

about what we're doing? Or was it just a sneaking suspicion that those "consolatory" guys were going to steal readership share?

Which, of course, they inevitably will do. "Consolatory" fantasy does well. So does "consolatory" Space Opera. People like it, and so, not unreasonably, they buy it by the ton. Of course, it's become customary in genre debates to sneer and blame this sort of thing on *marketing* -- as if without the marketing departments, Terry Brooks fans would suddenly be marching en masse into Barnes and Noble and demanding a reprint of *In Viriconium*; as if marketing is what prevents the readers of Star Wars tie-in novels from developing a passion for Stanislaw Lem. I mean, come on, guys, get real -- enough of the false consciousness rap, already. People know what they like (and, yes, sadly, they tend to like what they know). And a large number of such people within the SF&F readership like straightforward, by-the-numbers story-telling with a lot of *sensawunda*, heroes who achieve their goals, bad guys who go down hard, and a solid happy ending. In this, they are no different than the reading (or indeed TV, or cinema-going) public in general. Marketing is simply a system for shifting product to that public in as large quantities as possible. And I never met an author yet who didn't want their books to sell in large quantities.

So. This is the landscape around us, and we all know what it looks like. What we need to do is stop qvetching about the terrain, and just decide where we're going to pitch our bloody tents. Ian McEwan argues (obliquely, through conversation and event in *The Child in Time*) that good writers write for themselves, and I think probably that's true; certainly I try never to write for anybody else. But writing for yourself does carry an opportunity cost. If you're lucky, *your self* shares tastes with enough other people that your books are going to sell well; you can hand your finished product over to the marketing guys, and they'll run with it. As Neal Asher once remarked to me, *I don't mind doing the crowd-pleasing stuff because most of the time what pleases the crowd also pleases me*. But if that particular piece of serendipity doesn't happen for you, then you're simply going to have to make a choice. Want to make a shit-load of money? Want to make the bestseller lists? Then get on and write a three brick fantasy trilogy about a good hearted farm-boy who becomes a wizard or a warrior (or a space pilot) and defeats an evil empire. Want to write grim and gloomy portraits of emotional decay in unemployed, divorced or otherwise alienated Londoners who may -- or may not! -- have come from an *ever* so faintly different parallel universe? Prepare to keep your day job for some time to come.

Or, of course, you could reduce that parallel universe angle to such homeopathic dosage that it can be safely interpreted by mainstream critics as wholly illusory, in which case you can then make your genre-break escape bid. And the best of

luck to you, if you do. Sincerely. There's gold in them thar TLS pages, and why shouldn't you have some of it? You might be the next Jonathan Lethem or David Mitchell in the making. But watch out -- don't allow even the *whisper* that you might be writing SF or Fantasy, because in the mainstream, that kind of thing still goes down about as well as lap dancers at a wedding. Sad fact, but an enduring one. The bulk of mainstreamers (and mainstream critics) are no different in this to the bulk of any other readership, including our own. They also know what they like, and like what they know. (And generally, they don't know or like SF&F very much). Yes, they are partisan and small "c" conservative and subject to prejudice, just like the rest of us. Big surprise.

In fact, you could argue that it's our constant mistake as a genre to look up from our constant in-house bickering and expect that the mainstream critical establishment will somehow be different; more open, more dispassionate and more even-handed than we are ourselves. It's almost as if we're looking to pin some kind of father-to-the-prodigal-son wisdom on these guys, and then abase ourselves to it and hope for acceptance; when what we're really up against is just another, larger and more powerful literary sibling who really isn't very keen to see us again, no matter *how* much we're promising (no more starships or aliens, *honest*) to behave ourselves this time. Perhaps that's sad and unfair, perhaps it's just bloody obvious. Point is -- you make your choice when you sit down to write; in or out, mainstream/slipstream or genre (or, if you're lucky enough to juggle it right, both!). You weigh it up. You decide. You live with your decision, and your royalty cheques (or lack of them).

I guess in the end what I'm saying is that it's about *growing up*. Not growing up in the sense of writing or reading "grown up" literature (whatever that actually is), or pretending -- on some Eastercon panel or messageboard somewhere -- to cast off a specious immaturity of prior literary taste in favour of more weighty and worthwhile prose. No, I'm talking about growing up in the sense of seeing both the genre and the wider world in the way they *are* instead of the way we'd like them to be. I'm talking about making conscious choices in what we write, and then taking responsibility for those choices, instead of railing against some crudely confected *other* that's spoiling everything for us. This is, above all, about getting a sense of perspective on what we do for a living, about accepting our genre as a whole, the way the crime guys accept theirs; accepting it has *facets* and seeing them that way, instead of constantly turning them into factions; accepting that just because *you* don't get off on a particular strain of SF&F, doesn't mean other people don't, can't or shouldn't. This is about accepting, as Iain Banks once said, that when all is said and done, we are all a part of the entertainment industry.

Is that so terrible to admit? It shouldn't be. Entertainment looks set to become *the* major industry of the twenty first century. It seeps into everything we are and do; it's as powerful a globalizing force as anything else in play right now. Not a bad place to be working, really. All we have to do is keep our perspective; shrug off that pitifully self-important delusion that we're locked in some sort of titanic struggle for the cultural soul of humanity against hostile elites or witless hordes or evil marketing empires. Let's save that kind of hyperbole for (some of) our fiction. Let's get a fucking life, people, let's *get over ourselves* and start enjoying this ride for its own sake -- rather than constantly glowering around with militant disapproval at our fellow passengers further down the car, all on account of what they're reading.

Enough bile. Gentlemen and ladies -- let's go to work.

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He is the author of six novels and two graphic novels for Marvel.

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