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Troo's bid for world dominance

Many of you will know Ms Trudi Topham. She heads the (frankly superb) quarterly eZine, *Pantechicon* over at www.pantechicon.net. She also works behind the scenes as one of *Hub's* editors. Now we find that she is continuing her bid for world dominance (well, the world of genre fiction, at least) by becoming involved with those lovely chaps over at Humdrumming – one of the finest Small Press publishing companies in the market. More details over at [www. http://www.humdrumming.co.uk/blog/](http://www.humdrumming.co.uk/blog/)

When asked to comment, Troo simply said: “Bwahahahaaaaa! Kneel before my feet, foolish mortals!”*

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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.

*No she didn't. We made that up.

** Well, they can, but in this particular instance we don't believe they are.



Runner

by Stephen R. Smith

He made the corner into the alley at a full sprint, not quite missing a mountain of abandoned waste containers. One foot caught a lid, throwing him off balance, and momentum and gravity combined to send him skidding across greasy asphalt into the wall opposite. Rain water and urine raced each other to saturate his coat and chinos as he struggled to regain his feet, sweat and fresh blood clouding his vision where the alley brick had left its mark.

He'd killed a mech just ten minutes earlier, and he knew exactly what would happen if they caught him.

The buildings lining the alley stretched skyward, shutting out any light from above, and the streetlights could no longer penetrate the murk as he stumbled forward. A dumpster loomed out of the darkness, offering a route to a fire escape above, and he clambered upwards, leaping from the complaining metal of the bin to the hanging rungs of steel, then pulling hand over hand until he could hoist a foot up and climb higher to safety.

He hadn't meant to kill anyone. He thought he'd surprise his girlfriend at home, used his key to her apartment, and found him there, with her.

The iron staircase announced his ascent to anyone with any interest, but he was past caring now, he needed to get clear of the area, and once he was on the roof, the night city would swallow him up and he could disappear.

She'd screamed when she saw him, just standing in the doorway of her bedroom, watching this other man, watching what he was doing with her. Something snapped, and he was suddenly wielding a lamp he didn't remember picking up, swinging repeatedly at the stranger's head.

The iron rungs curled over the rooftop wall, and with his heart pounding, his chest heaving, he threw himself onto the flattop of the building. Gravel scattered beneath his boots as he raced towards an adjacent rooftop at random. He could run for miles up here, the buildings so close together, he could be halfway across the city before anyone knew to look for him.

He'd hit the stranger maybe ten, maybe twenty times when he started twitching wildly, not like a real man would convulse, but violently, mechanically, arms and legs flailing about in perfect synchronized rhythm. She was screaming as she scrambled away from the flailing stiff limbed machine in a death fit conniption on her bed.

This was somebody's mech. Someone owned him, and they'd hunt him down and exact payment for the damage he'd done to their property. He fled. She yelled after him, but her words couldn't penetrate his fear as he ran, slamming through doors and tumbling down stairs. He was horrified; these mechs cost more than he could ever hope to make in his lifetime, and he'd pulverized it, caved in its skull beyond all hope of repair. People had been killed for less.

The city blurred beneath his feet, racing by as he jumped the narrowed gaps where buildings leaned towards each other, reaching to close any available space above the streets. Time and distance passed between he and his crime, and with each step, each ragged breath he began to feel less frantic. He would be safe, had to be safe, they couldn't find him up here, they'd no idea where he'd gone. Maybe she wouldn't tell them who he was.

He leapt again, but as the next roof came up to meet him, he found himself squinting against a sudden blaze of light, and a rooftop bathed in blue.

"Freeze!" The voice a staccato snap, as though amplified into his brain.

Panic overtook him and he veered left, still running, trying desperately to make the next rooftop. He was only briefly aware of the blinding flash as his eyes flooded with light, and then consciousness was ripped violently away and gravity took complete control.

The officer lowered his weapon, and thumbed his radio. "Control, this is five niner two, two, seven, our runner's down, send a pickup to my twenty - over."

A second uniformed man turned off the tracker he'd been focused on and walked to the fallen figure, kicking it lightly in the ribs. "I never will get why they bother to run."

The shooter powered down his pistol and holstered it. "You want to be careful kicking that thing. You break it, and its owner will be taking it out of your pay for it the rest of your working life."

About the Author

Stephen Smith grew up a voracious reader; from Heinlein, Bradbury, and Asimov, to Ludlum, le Carré and Clancy. With the discovery of Philip K. Dick, Harlan Ellison and William Gibson he realized his path was going to be forever engaged in the business of the future. Computerizing the world around him, creating solutions in code, and imagining what comes next through prose, the future is never far away.

Staff Writer for the popular Flash Fiction website, 365tomorrows, and the founder of a successful consulting and web development company, Steve can almost always be found absorbing information from the nets, consuming alarming quantities of coffee, and writing in either the language of men, or that of machines.

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

Coffin County reviewed by David Tallerman

The Host reviewed by Elizabeth de Jager

Doctor Who s4, Ep10: Midnight reviewed by Scott Harrison

Coffin County

by Gary A Braunbeck

Leisure Fiction, £5.99

Cedar Hill is a troubled place, and always has been: right from the savage killings that inaugurated its first settlement, to the catastrophic fire that claimed the coffin factory, to its most recent serial killer troubles, it's attracted more than its share of violence. Local legend tells of a bleeding cedar tree, of a monster named 'Hoopsticks', and of countless nameless bodies buried beneath its grounds; and somehow, all of these horrors add up into something which might explain its current horrific problems, starting with a diner shooting perpetrated by a man invisible to camera...

If that summary makes it sound like an implausibly busy place, then good, because of *Coffin County's* many faults its random flailing between plot threads, characters, and threats is high on the list. There's no doubt that Braunbeck is an imaginative and frequently powerful writer. His prose is compulsive, his style is consistently strong, and apart from a few repetitious images--it's amazing how many things melt like candle wax--it's hard to find fault.

But his story never adds up to the sum of its many parts, and a pattern emerges in the opening chapters that's hard to ignore. Characters are introduced, only to die horribly; important information is



voiced directly to reader, in case we happen to not be paying attention. Braunbeck shows real skill for setting up his cast, but once you realise that most of them are going to be hurriedly shuffled to their deaths it's hard to stay interested. Mainly for this reason, while *Coffin County* is frequently gruesome it's never frightening, and worse, is often content to offer up torture in place of more subtle frights.

All of this might be just about okay if the plot held up better. Despite its faults it's compelling, because it's obvious that Braunbeck has a bigger picture in mind, and while this kills any hope of tension--it's apparent from fifty pages in that the menace is of a mystical nature and unlikely to be defeated--it's at least intriguing. And it does lead to an ending that seems ingenious, until you realise that it doesn't explain much of what's come before, doesn't make sense, and is a *deus ex machina* in the most literal sense.

Even with much padding, Braunbeck's novel won't take you long to get through, and with that in mind the publishers have bundled in a couple of short stories. Both are ostensibly set in the same universe as *Coffin County*, though that fact adds nothing to them and any links are of the tenuous kind. The first, *I'll Play the Blues for You*, is pretty good; the second, *Union Dues*, isn't. Both, like the novel itself, feel underdeveloped and fail to quite come together.

So, on the whole, *Coffin County* is hard to recommend. While it offers strong storytelling and the occasional stand-out scene, there's plenty of better horror out there--horror that manages to sustain a coherent tale, use the supernatural as more than a mcguffin, and offer shocks that aren't merely repulsive.

The Host **By Stephanie Meyer** **Little, Brown, £6.99**

I genuinely can't imagine a scarier scenario. Aliens invade Earth. And they stay. Not only do they stay to co-habit Earth, they take over by bonding with the humans (whom they call their host) in a parasitical way. They repress the host's personality completely and take over their day-to-day lives. In some instances, the host personality dies and is overcome by the "soul" implanted into its body. Humanity becomes changed forever by the souls who find that they bond truly well with their human hosts.



I don't like bugs – no matter how beautiful. So I had a preconception about how this was going to turn out already, and in the back of my mind, I ran through the various horror movies out there in the same sort of genre and I sort of despaired. How to do something new and fresh? The concept already had my skin crawling before I even read *Host* by Stephenie Meyer. Which is not the best way to start reading a book to review.

I know the author through her *Twilight* books she did, in the past, and was unsure how she was going to handle this futuristic, Sci-Fi styled book with its overtones of horror and romance.

The fact is: she pulls it off. The aptly named soul, Wanderer, becomes implanted in a rebel human, Mel. Mel is a fighter and she refuses to let Wanderer take her over completely. She becomes a passenger in her own mind and slowly but surely a strong relationship grows between host and soul. We follow them on a journey filled with hate and despair as they strive to find Mel's brother and her boyfriend/lover, Jared. A group of humans headed by Mel's uncle, Jeb, (who immediately in my mind turned into Sam Elliot) discover Wanderer and Mel, in the desert, close to death. And this is where the story genuinely unfolds and the author's writing skills comes to the fore.

A tremendous amount of internal dialogue and keen observations on human behaviour is dotted through the book. It is beautifully written and the style is consistent all the way through. But having said that, I couldn't quite suspend my disbelief that the souls were all such gentle folk, even the Seekers, the ones who hunt humans and bring them in for implantation. Wanderer is rendered as incredibly saintly, yet all through the book I felt that I wanted to throttle her, to make her be more proactive and less reticent. Which, naturally, from a writer's point of view is exactly what you want to do: stir up emotion in the reader. Mel remains as an interesting counter-point to the very selfless Wanderer (or Wanda) and I found it interesting to follow the storyline to see how the author played it out right to the very end.

It is a good book, no doubt about it. It is skilfully written with a lot of thought having gone into the society the souls press upon humanity. Stephenie Meyer will no doubt spearhead a new romance-Sci-Fi genre, doing what she did for vampires in *Twilight* and make sci-fi even cooler than before.

Doctor Who Series 4 – Episode 10 : Midnight

Written by Russell T. Davies

Starring David Tennant, Catherine Tate, Lesley Sharp, David Troughton

BBC 1. First shown 14th June 2008

While holidaying on the planet Midnight, a seemingly dead planet circling an extonic sun, the Doctor leaves Donna to join a group of fellow holidaymakers on a four-hour coach tour across the planet's surface to see a rare sapphire waterfall. When the bus appears to breakdown partway into the journey and the passengers begin to grow uneasy the Doctor steps in to calm the situation...but then the knocking from outside begins and the Doctor finds himself in his most dangerous situation yet, facing terrified humans!

New Doctor Who reached its 50th episode this week and what an episode it was to celebrate with! This is without doubt showrunner Russell T. Davies's greatest and most powerfully effective script to date - which is no mean feat when you consider that this is the writer who has given us Parting of the Ways, Christmas Invasion, Gridlock and Utopia. RTD has come under a lot of flak over the past few years; some of it deservedly so with the cringingly embarrassing episodes Love & Monsters and Aliens of London/ World War III, while most has been nothing more than grossly unfair nitpicking from the more, shall we say, "enthusiastic" members of the Whovian community. In a recent interview for issue 396 of Doctor Who Magazine, Davies admitted that it was a very experimental script and had the potential to be a love-it-or-loathe-it episode adding "It's brave, it's different to anything we've done before...", seemingly as an effort to soften the impact and forewarn that rabid faction out there that usually end up spoiling it for the rest of us Doctor Who fans!

With Catherine Tate sadly absent from most of the episode (she was filming the Doctor-lite episode Turn Left at the time) Midnight showcases some of the greatest acting talent the show has ever seen, not least David Tennant's wonderful Tenth Doctor, here arguably giving not only his best, most frenetic performance since series two's The Girl in the Fireplace but also of the entire episode. Making his third Doctor Who appearance in thirty-nine years is the magnificent David Troughton who began his Who career way back in 1969 starring alongside his father Patrick Troughton in the Second Doctor's epic swansong The War Games, while RTD stalwart Lesley Sharp gives an hypnotically creepy performance as the alien-inhabited Sky Silvestry. Special mention must go to the (until now) little known actress Ayesha Antoine who gives a wonderfully magnetic performance as the ebullient Dee Dee, Troughton's long suffering travelling companion and would-be protégé!

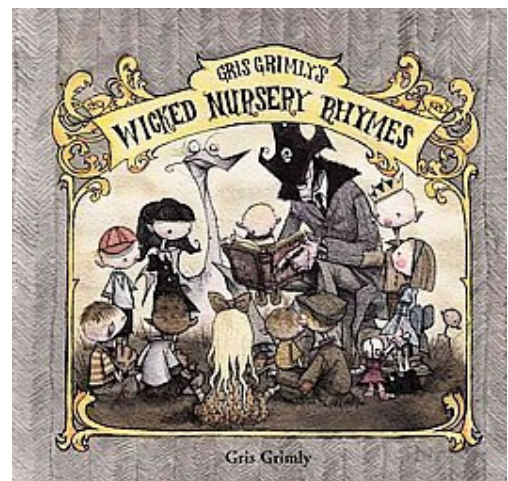
Just as the news breaks that Russell T. Davies is to step down as the showrunner/executive producer after 2009's specials we are treated to what can only be described as his greatest contribution to the show since he helped relaunch it over three years ago. We can only cross all our fingers and toes and hope that he will continue to contribute scripts of this standard once the show has passed into the assured hands of Steven Moffat!

An Interview with Gris Grimly

By Richard Whittaker

Childhood is a difficult time – not least for parents stuck reading happy, cheery, all's-well-with-the-world kid's tales over and over again. That's why they have Gris Grimly and his warped, wonderful children's illustrations to be thankful for. The creator of the Wicked Nursery Rhymes series (the third volume of which sees print this summer), illustrator of vampire romance Boris and Bella and collaborator with Neil Gaiman on his recently-released The Dangerous Alphabet, has saved many parents from a saccharine bedtime story experience.

Growing up on a farm in the American Mid-West (that's the only part of his early private life he will divulge, apart from the fact that he credits his parents with raising him well),



Grimly describes himself as “a very imaginative kid. I didn’t play a lot of video games or watch a lot of TV. I spent a lot of time outside, pretending, making up worlds and living in them.” As a child with a fascination with the fantastic growing up away from major art galleries, he turned to comics and magazines. Attracted by its chaotic energy, he started ripping Ralph Steadman’s art out of issues of Rolling Stone.

But there was a problem. “I wasn’t really allowed to read most comics, so I would bike down to the gas station, buy comics, hide them in my study books, and read them in my room.” While many kids headed straight for the superhero section, Grimly was inspired by more alternative artists like Sam Keith (The Maxx), Bill Sienkiewicz (Elektra: Assassin) and Dave McKean (Cages, Batman: Arkham Asylum). But there was another, less dark inspiration: Berkeley Breathed, the newspaper cartoonist behind Bloom County and Opus. But the politics of his strips passed the young Grimly by. “I would buy all his books to study his art. Now I’m older I go back and read them, and realize the points he was making that I didn’t get because I was just interested in his cartooning.”



When he grew up, he kept his fascination with art, but never planned on being child-friendly. Instead, he wanted to draw horror comics, and his current career started accidentally. After graduating from college, Grimly was at a Steadman exhibition in Los Angeles, CA, where he started talking to one of the staff about a shared admiration for Edward Gorey. “She asked me if I did children’s books. I said no, but I could be interested. This gallery/bookstore was interested in doing limited edition projects with artists that would be like nine-page children’s books. Each one would be all original art and they’d sell them for a \$1,000.” Taking Gorey as his inspiration, he worked on a series of demented morality tales. They started with the boy with a helium balloon for a head, who complains constantly about the problems having a balloon-head causes – until a bird lands on it, and solves his problems in a terminal way.

His agent showed the work around, and Hyperion Books came calling. In 2001 his first commission as a children’s illustrator, Marilyn Singer’s *Monster Museum*, saw print and word quickly spread in the publishing industry. “Once you get your first book published and exposed, it opens the floodgates. It’s like a calling card that does its own work,” said Grimly. His earlier ambition to move into comics got sidelined. “If I’d have got that one comic through the door, it would have opened that floodgate. But I got that one children’s book through the door, so it opened that particular floodgate instead.”

This doesn’t mean publishers who hire him for his dark and twisted style always like what they get first time. “I have been asked to tone it down. Sometimes there’re some arguments between me and an editor on what they want, and what I want, and how to meet in between.”

While Grimly’s career was kick-started in children’s books, he sees himself first and foremost as an artist who happens to have done some kids books. “I’m not necessarily a children’s illustrator as much as I like monsters and horror.” When talking about his contemporaries and peers that he admires, it’s not other children’s illustrators. It’s Eric Powell, creator of *The Goon* comic; retro-ghoul artist David Hartman (who counts Rob Zombie and Jack Black as fans); and Camille Rose Garcia, one of the highest-profile names in the burgeoning Low-Brow fine art movement. The only illustrator he mentions is Crab Scramley, who has his debut kid’s book *The Floods* in print this summer but made his reputation as an artist on *Nightmares* and *Fairytales* for Slave Labor Graphics.

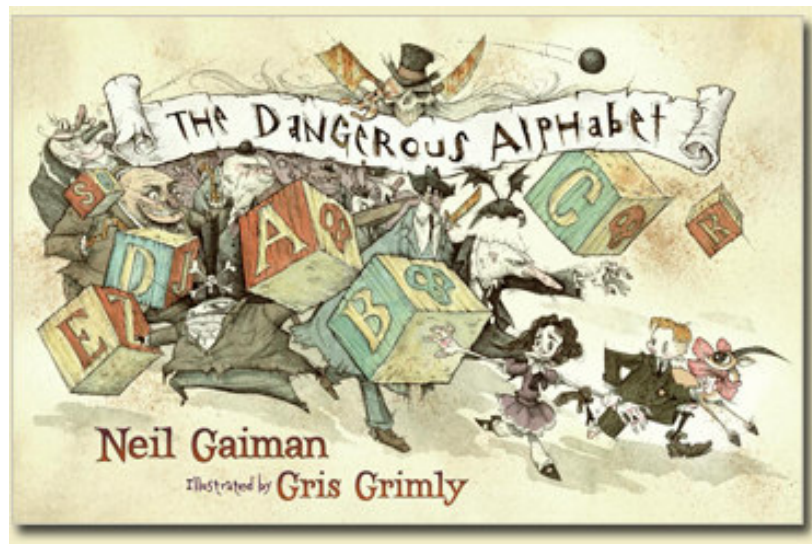
They are part, Grimly argues, of an inadvertent scene, of artists with a shared love of monsters and ghoulies and the darker things in literature, who represent a change. In the same way that grunge was a reaction to glossy ‘80s pop, “maybe things did get a little too sugar-coated for kids in my generation, and you’ve got a reaction against that.” It’s not a deliberate attempt to create a movement, Grimly said. “I find that me and my friends will do a lot of the same artwork without seeing each other’s pieces, and that only

goes to the point that we share a lot of the same influences and they're swimming around in our brains."

He's also illustrated new editions of children's classics, like Pinocchio and Sleepy Hollow, which has led to work for a more mature audience with his adaptations of Edgar Allan Poe's Tales of Mystery and Imagination (a second volume of which will be published early 2009.) But now, like his inspiration Dave McKean, he's working with Neil Gaiman, the writer of DC's Sandman and the novel Coraline. Their first collaboration, The Dangerous Alphabet, will be published on May 5. "It was really cool to work with an author I really respected," said Grimly. "I got an email from his editor who said, Neil's seen your art and is wondering whether you'd be interested in illustrating a book for him. I said, fuck, yeah." For Grimly, this is a major point in his career. "I know what I like out of the authors I've worked with, but there's never that response of, wow, I'm going to get to work with so-and-so until I worked with Neil."

He also has a new collection of twisted campfire tales, Sipping Spiders Through a Straw, which Grimly described as "the most disturbing book I've ever made." It's also been the longest-gestating, taking four years to complete. Part of the problem was finding that middle ground between himself and his editor. "There's a song in there about jumping rope with your intestines and tying your sister up with them. They wanted me to portray kids playing with guts, and maybe it's me and I'm more demented, but I saw it all bloody and gory, and I was saying, are you kidding, you want me to do this? In another one, to the tune of Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star, but it's Creepy, Creepy Thing in a Jar, I did a pickled punk, and they didn't like that. I said, what are you talking about, we've got bloody intestines."

That mixture of ghoulish and childish is what has won Grimly a massive young following, but also attracts adults who find squeamish joy in his drawings. For him, the trick is that he never tries to second-guess his readers. "I don't approach these books and say, what do other children's book look like, or what are children looking for, or what are editors looking for. I approach these books as, OK, what do I like and how can I achieve that in this book. If I approve of what I do, I think other people who are my age or older or younger will approve."



For more on Gris Grimly, visit www.madcreator.com

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