



CHARLES STROSS HALTING STATE

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Issue 65

14 September 2008

Editors: Lee Harris, Alasdair Stuart and Trudi Topham.
Published by *The Right Hand*.

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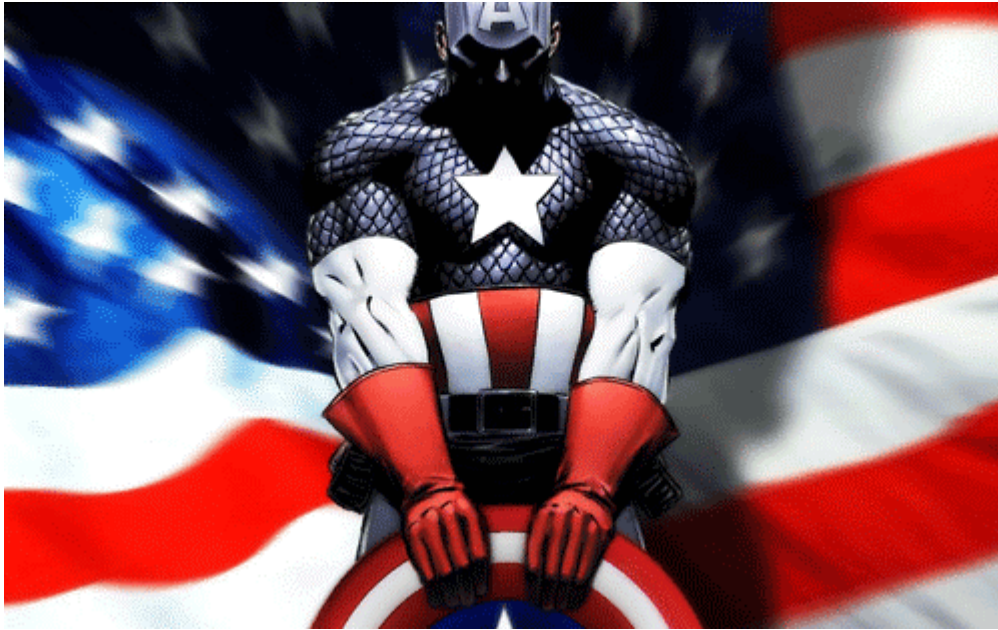
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Will Smith as Captain America

Two responses to that, the first is a scream of anguish, the second is 'Hmm...okay.' I appear to be alone in the second reaction. The rumour surfaced and was quelled, in under 24 hours this week. Smith apparently isn't in the frame, in the slightest, never has been, they never even talked to him etc.

That sound you can hear, like unto a mighty wind? Fandom breathing sighs of relief.

They're wrong. Here's why.

The Truth is a superb mini-series published by Marvel and written and illustrated by Kyle Baker a few years ago that explored the idea that exposing Steve Rogers, a nice, middle-class white man, to the super soldier serum first was utterly counter intuitive for the time. Instead, it suggested that the first men who the serum was trialled on were black. Many of them died, a few made it into the field and of them only one, Isiah Bradley survived. He spent time in prison, his mind degenerated through long term exposure to the serum and when released, became a legend in the US Black community, culminating in Steve Rogers visiting and reconciling with him.

A black Captain America. Historically accurate, with a fascinating back story and an unflinching look at the racial truths of the time.

There's a chance to do something different with the character here and that word scares a certain stripe of fandom more than any other. These are the people who bemoaned Ultimate Spiderman as a direct threat to 'their' books, the people currently lobbying for Watchmen to have a minimum three hour run time. These are the people for whom art is frozen in amber, forever exactly as it was the moment they saw it for the first time.

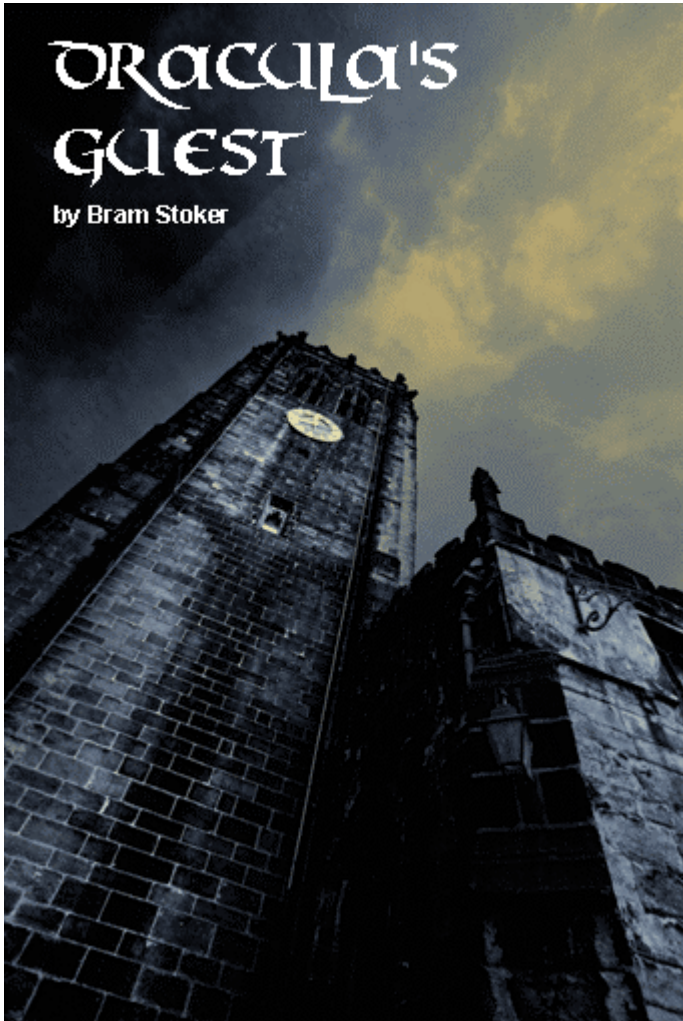
And they're wrong. Art, in any form, whether it's sculpture or podcasting, oil paints or comics is different every time someone encounters it, regardless of whether they've seen it before. There are new details I still see in Blade Runner on a tenth or fourteenth viewing for example and I was amazed to see how ambivalent I was to Alien after having not seen it for a couple of years.

Art isn't solid, isn't inviolable. It's a puzzle you spend your life solving, something you hold a dialogue with regardless of what genre it is or what other people think of it. Art is a mirror held up to show the viewer not only something new about it but something new about them. It's change personified.

So embrace it, welcome it. Will Smith as Captain America.

DRACULA'S GUEST

by Bram Stoker



When we started for our drive the sun was shining brightly on Munich, and the air was full of the joyousness of early summer. Just as we were about to depart, Herr Delbrück (the maître d'hôtel of the Quatre Saisons, where I was staying) came down, bareheaded, to the carriage and, after wishing me a pleasant drive, said to the coachman, still holding his hand on the handle of the carriage door:

'Remember you are back by nightfall. The sky looks bright but there is a shiver in the north wind that says there may be a sudden storm. But I am sure you will not be late.' Here he smiled, and added, 'for you know what night it is.'

Johann answered with an emphatic, 'Ja, mein Herr,' and, touching his hat, drove off quickly. When we had cleared the town, I said, after signalling to him to stop:

'Tell me, Johann, what is tonight?'

He crossed himself, as he answered laconically: 'Walpurgis nacht.' Then he took out his watch, a great, old-fashioned German silver thing as big as a turnip, and looked at it, with his eyebrows gathered together and a little impatient shrug of his shoulders. I realised that this was his way of respectfully protesting against the unnecessary delay, and sank back in the carriage, merely motioning him to proceed. He started off rapidly, as if to make up for lost time. Every now and then the horses seemed to

throw up their heads and sniffed the air suspiciously. On such occasions I often looked round in alarm. The road was pretty bleak, for we were traversing a sort of high, wind-swept plateau. As we drove, I saw a road that looked but little used, and which seemed to dip through a little, winding valley. It looked so inviting that, even at the risk of offending him, I called Johann to stop—and when he had pulled up, I told him I would like to drive down that road. He made all sorts of excuses, and frequently crossed himself as he spoke. This somewhat piqued my curiosity, so I asked him various questions. He answered fencingly, and repeatedly looked at his watch in protest. Finally I said:

'Well, Johann, I want to go down this road. I shall not ask you to come unless you like; but tell me why you do not like to go, that is all I ask.' For answer he seemed to throw himself off the box, so quickly did he reach the ground. Then he stretched out his hands appealingly to me, and implored me not to go. There was just enough of English mixed with the German for me to understand the drift of his talk. He seemed always just about to tell me something—the very idea of which evidently frightened him; but each time he pulled himself up, saying, as he crossed himself: 'Walpurgis-Nacht!'

I tried to argue with him, but it was difficult to argue with a man when I did not know his language. The advantage certainly rested with him, for although he began to speak in English, of a very crude and broken kind, he always got excited and broke into his native tongue—and every time he did so, he looked at his watch. Then the horses became restless and sniffed the air. At this he grew very pale, and, looking around in a frightened way, he suddenly jumped forward, took them by the bridles and led them on some twenty feet. I followed, and asked why he had done this. For answer he crossed himself, pointed to the spot we had left and drew his carriage in the direction of the other road, indicating a cross, and said, first in German, then in English: 'Buried him—him what killed themselves.'

I remembered the old custom of burying suicides at cross-roads: 'Ah! I see, a suicide. How interesting!' But for the life of me I could not make out why the horses were frightened.

Whilst we were talking, we heard a sort of sound between a yelp and a bark. It was far away; but the horses got very restless, and it took Johann all his time to quiet them. He was pale, and said, 'It sounds like a wolf—but yet there are no wolves here now.'

'No?' I said, questioning him; 'isn't it long since the wolves were so near the city?'

'Long, long,' he answered, 'in the spring and summer; but with the snow the wolves have been here not so long.'

Whilst he was petting the horses and trying to quiet them, dark clouds drifted rapidly across the sky. The sunshine passed away, and a breath of cold wind seemed to drift past us. It was only a breath, however, and more in the nature of a warning than a fact, for the sun came out brightly again. Johann looked under his lifted hand at the horizon and said:

'The storm of snow, he comes before long time.' Then he looked at his watch again, and, straightway holding his reins firmly—for the horses were still pawing the ground restlessly and shaking their heads—he climbed to his box as though the time had come for proceeding on our journey.

I felt a little obstinate and did not at once get into the carriage.

'Tell me,' I said, 'about this place where the road leads,' and I pointed down.

Again he crossed himself and mumbled a prayer, before he answered, 'It is unholy.'

'What is unholy?' I enquired.

The village.'

'Then there is a village?'

'No, no. No one lives there hundreds of years.' My curiosity was piqued, 'But you said there was a village.'

'There was.'

'Where is it now?'

Whereupon he burst out into a long story in German and English, so mixed up that I could not quite understand exactly what he said, but roughly I gathered that long ago, hundreds of years, men had died there and been buried in their graves; and sounds were heard under the clay, and when the graves were opened, men and women were found rosy with life, and their mouths red with blood. And so, in haste to save their lives (aye, and their souls!—and here he crossed himself) those who were left fled away to other places, where the living lived, and the dead were dead and not—not something. He was evidently afraid to speak the last words. As he proceeded with his narration, he grew more and more excited. It seemed as if his imagination had got hold of him, and he ended in a perfect paroxysm of fear—white-faced, perspiring, trembling and looking round him, as if expecting that some dreadful presence would manifest itself there in the bright sunshine on the open plain. Finally, in an agony of desperation, he cried:

'Walpurgis nacht!' and pointed to the carriage for me to get in. All my English blood rose at this, and, standing back, I said:

'You are afraid, Johann—you are afraid. Go home; I shall return alone; the walk will do me good.' The carriage door was open. I took from the seat my oak walking-stick—which I always carry on my holiday excursions—and closed the door, pointing back to Munich, and said, 'Go home, Johann—Walpurgis-nacht doesn't concern Englishmen.'


The horses were now more restive than ever, and Johann was trying to hold them in, while excitedly imploring me not to do anything so foolish. I pitied the poor fellow, he was deeply in earnest; but all the same I could not help laughing. His English was quite gone now. In his anxiety he had forgotten that his only means of making me understand was to talk my language, so he jabbered away in his native German. It began to be a little tedious. After giving the direction, 'Home!' I turned to go down the cross-road into the valley.

With a despairing gesture, Johann turned his horses towards Munich. I leaned on my stick and looked after him. He went slowly along the road for a while: then there came over the crest of the hill a man tall and thin. I could see so much in the distance. When he drew near the horses, they began to jump and kick about, then to scream with terror. Johann could not hold them in; they bolted down the road, running away madly. I watched them out of sight, then looked for the stranger, but I found that he, too, was gone.

With a light heart I turned down the side road through the deepening valley to which Johann had objected. There was not the slightest reason, that I could see, for his objection; and I daresay I tramped for a couple of


hours without thinking of time or distance, and certainly without seeing a person or a house. So far as the place was concerned, it was desolation, itself. But I did not notice this particularly till, on turning a bend in the road, I came upon a scattered fringe of wood; then I recognised that I had been impressed unconsciously by the desolation of the region through which I had passed.

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I sat down to rest myself, and began to look around. It struck me that it was considerably colder than it had been at the commencement of my walk—a sort of sighing sound seemed to be around me, with, now and then, high overhead, a sort of muffled roar. Looking upwards I noticed that great thick clouds were drifting rapidly across the sky from North to South at a great height. There were signs of coming storm in some lofty stratum of the air. I was a little chilly, and, thinking that it was the sitting still after the exercise of walking, I resumed my journey.

The ground I passed over was now much more picturesque. There were no striking objects that the eye might single out; but in all there was a charm of beauty. I took little heed of time and it was only when the deepening twilight forced itself upon me that I began to think of how I should find my way home. The brightness of the day had gone. The air was cold, and the drifting of clouds high overhead was more marked. They were accompanied by a sort of far-away rushing sound, through which seemed to come at intervals that mysterious cry which the driver had said came from a wolf. For a while I hesitated. I had said I would see the deserted village, so on I went, and presently came on a wide stretch of open country, shut in by hills all around. Their sides were covered with trees which spread down to the plain, dotting, in clumps, the gentler slopes and hollows which showed here and there. I followed with my eye the winding of the road, and saw that it curved close to one of the densest of these clumps and was lost behind it.

As I looked there came a cold shiver in the air, and the snow began to fall. I thought of the miles and miles of bleak country I had passed, and then hurried on to seek the shelter of the wood in front. Darker and darker grew the sky, and faster and heavier fell the snow, till the earth before and around me was a glistening white carpet the further edge of which was lost in misty vagueness. The road was here but crude, and when on the level its boundaries were not so marked, as when it passed through the cuttings; and in a little while I found that I must have strayed from it, for I missed underfoot the hard surface, and my feet sank deeper in the grass and moss. Then the wind grew stronger and blew with ever increasing force, till I was fain to run before it. The air became icy-cold, and in spite of my exercise I began to suffer. The snow was now falling so thickly and whirling around me in such rapid eddies that I could hardly keep my eyes open. Every now and then the heavens were torn asunder by vivid lightning, and in the flashes I could see ahead of me a great mass of trees, chiefly yew and cypress all heavily coated with snow.

I was soon amongst the shelter of the trees, and there, in comparative silence, I could hear the rush of the wind high overhead. Presently the blackness of the storm had become merged in the darkness of the night. By-and-by the storm seemed to be passing away: it now only came in fierce puffs or blasts. At such moments the weird sound of the wolf appeared to be echoed by many similar sounds around me.

Now and again, through the black mass of drifting cloud, came a straggling ray of moonlight, which lit up the expanse, and showed me that I was at the edge of a dense mass of cypress and yew trees. As the snow had ceased to fall, I walked out from the shelter and began to investigate more closely. It appeared to me that, amongst so many old foundations as I had passed, there might be still standing a house in which, though in ruins, I could find some sort of shelter for a while. As I skirted the edge of the copse, I found that a low wall encircled it, and following this I presently found an opening. Here the cypresses formed an alley leading up to a square mass of some kind of building. Just as I caught sight of this, however, the drifting clouds obscured the moon, and I passed up the path in darkness. The wind must have grown colder, for I felt myself shiver as I walked; but there was hope of shelter, and I groped my way blindly on.

I stopped, for there was a sudden stillness. The storm had passed; and, perhaps in sympathy with nature's silence, my heart seemed to cease to beat. But this was only momentarily; for suddenly the moonlight broke through the clouds, showing me that I was in a graveyard, and that the square object before me was a great massive tomb of marble, as white as the snow that lay on and all around it. With the moonlight there came a fierce sigh of the storm, which appeared to resume its course with a long, low howl, as of many dogs or wolves. I was awed and shocked, and felt the cold perceptibly grow upon me till it seemed to grip me by the heart. Then while the flood of moonlight still fell on the marble tomb, the storm gave further evidence of renewing, as though it was returning on its track. Impelled by some sort of fascination, I approached the sepulchre to see what it was, and why such a thing stood alone in such a place. I walked around it, and read, over the Doric door, in German:

COUNTESS DOLINGEN OF GRATZ
IN STYRIA
SOUGHT AND FOUND DEATH
1801

On the top of the tomb, seemingly driven through the solid marble—for the structure was composed of a few vast blocks of stone—was a great iron spike or stake. On going to the back I saw, graven in great Russian letters:

'The dead travel fast.'

There was something so weird and uncanny about the whole thing that it gave me a turn and made me feel quite faint. I began to wish, for the first time, that I had taken Johann's advice. Here a thought struck me, which came under almost mysterious circumstances and with a terrible shock. This was Walpurgis Night!

Walpurgis Night, when, according to the belief of millions of people, the devil was abroad—when the graves were opened and the dead came forth and walked. When all evil things of earth and air and water held revel. This very place the driver had specially shunned. This was the depopulated village of centuries ago. This was where the suicide lay; and this was the place where I was alone—unmanned, shivering with cold in a shroud of snow with a wild storm gathering again upon me! It took all my philosophy, all the religion I had been taught, all my courage, not to collapse in a paroxysm of fright.

And now a perfect tornado burst upon me. The ground shook as though thousands of horses thundered across it; and this time the storm bore on its icy wings, not snow, but great hailstones which drove with such violence that they might have come from the thongs of Balearic slingers—hailstones that beat down leaf and branch and made the shelter of the cypresses of no more avail than though their stems were standing-corn. At the first I had rushed to the nearest tree; but I was soon fain to leave it and seek the only spot that seemed to afford refuge, the deep Doric doorway of the marble tomb. There, crouching against the massive bronze door, I gained a certain amount of protection from the beating of the hailstones, for now they only drove against me as they ricocheted from the ground and the side of the marble.

As I leaned against the door, it moved slightly and opened inwards. The shelter of even a tomb was welcome in that pitiless tempest, and I was about to enter it when there came a flash of forked-lightning that lit up the whole expanse of the heavens. In the instant, as I am a living man, I saw, as my eyes were turned into the darkness of the tomb, a beautiful woman, with rounded cheeks and red lips, seemingly sleeping on a bier. As the thunder broke overhead, I was grasped as by the hand of a giant and hurled out into the storm. The whole thing was so sudden that, before I could realise the shock, moral as well as physical, I found the hailstones beating me down. At the same time I had a strange, dominating feeling that I was not alone. I looked towards the tomb. Just then there came another blinding flash, which seemed to strike the iron stake that surmounted the tomb and to pour through to the earth, blasting and crumbling the marble, as in a burst of flame. The dead woman rose for a moment of agony, while she was lapped in the flame, and her bitter scream of pain was drowned in the thundercrash. The last thing I heard was this mingling of dreadful sound, as again I was seized in the giant-grasp and dragged away, while the hailstones beat on me, and the air around seemed reverberant with the howling of wolves. The last sight that I remembered was a vague, white, moving mass, as if all the graves around me had sent out the phantoms of their sheeted-dead, and that they were closing in on me through the white cloudiness of the driving hail.

Gradually there came a sort of vague beginning of consciousness; then a sense of weariness that was dreadful. For a time I remembered nothing; but slowly my senses returned. My feet seemed positively racked with pain, yet I could not move them. They seemed to be numbed. There was an icy feeling at the back of my neck and all down my spine, and my ears, like my feet, were dead, yet in torment; but there was in my breast a sense of warmth which was, by comparison, delicious. It was as a nightmare—a physical nightmare, if one may use such an expression; for some heavy weight on my chest made it difficult for me to breathe.

This period of semi-lethargy seemed to remain a long time, and as it faded away I must have slept or swooned. Then came a sort of loathing, like the first stage of sea-sickness, and a wild desire to be free from something—I knew not what. A vast stillness enveloped me, as though all the world were asleep or dead—only broken by the low panting as of some animal close to me. I felt a warm rasping at my throat, then came a consciousness of the awful truth, which chilled me to the heart and sent the blood surging up through my brain. Some great animal was lying on me and now licking my throat. I feared to stir, for some instinct of prudence bade me lie still; but the brute seemed to realise that there was now some change in me, for it raised its head. Through my eyelashes I saw above me the two great flaming eyes of a gigantic wolf. Its sharp white teeth gleamed in the gaping red mouth, and I could feel its hot breath fierce and acrid upon me.

For another spell of time I remembered no more. Then I became conscious of a low growl, followed by a yelp, renewed again and again. Then, seemingly very far away, I heard a 'Holloa! holloa!' as of many voices calling in unison. Cautiously I raised my head and looked in the direction whence the sound came; but the

cemetery blocked my view. The wolf still continued to yelp in a strange way, and a red glare began to move round the grove of cypresses, as though following the sound. As the voices drew closer, the wolf yelped faster and louder. I feared to make either sound or motion. Nearer came the red glow, over the white pall which stretched into the darkness around me. Then all at once from beyond the trees there came at a trot a troop of horsemen bearing torches. The wolf rose from my breast and made for the cemetery. I saw one of the horsemen (soldiers by their caps and their long military cloaks) raise his carbine and take aim. A companion knocked up his arm, and I heard the ball whizz over my head. He had evidently taken my body for that of the wolf. Another sighted the animal as it slunk away, and a shot followed. Then, at a gallop, the troop rode forward—some towards me, others following the wolf as it disappeared amongst the snow-clad cypresses.

As they drew nearer I tried to move, but was powerless, although I could see and hear all that went on around me. Two or three of the soldiers jumped from their horses and knelt beside me. One of them raised my head, and placed his hand over my heart.

'Good news, comrades!' he cried. 'His heart still beats!'

Then some brandy was poured down my throat; it put vigour into me, and I was able to open my eyes fully and look around. Lights and shadows were moving among the trees, and I heard men call to one another. They drew together, uttering frightened exclamations; and the lights flashed as the others came pouring out of the cemetery pell-mell, like men possessed. When the further ones came close to us, those who were around me asked them eagerly:

'Well, have you found him?'

The reply rang out hurriedly:

'No! no! Come away quick—quick! This is no place to stay, and on this of all nights!'

'What was it?' was the question, asked in all manner of keys. The answer came variously and all indefinitely as though the men were moved by some common impulse to speak, yet were restrained by some common fear from giving their thoughts.

'It—it—indeed!' gibbered one, whose wits had plainly given out for the moment.

'A wolf—and yet not a wolf!' another put in shudderingly.

'No use trying for him without the sacred bullet,' a third remarked in a more ordinary manner.

'Serve us right for coming out on this night! Truly we have earned our thousand marks!' were the ejaculations of a fourth.

'There was blood on the broken marble,' another said after a pause—'the lightning never brought that there. And for him—is he safe? Look at his throat! See, comrades, the wolf has been lying on him and keeping his blood warm.'

The officer looked at my throat and replied:

'He is all right; the skin is not pierced. What does it all mean? We should never have found him but for the yelping of the wolf.'

'What became of it?' asked the man who was holding up my head, and who seemed the least panic-stricken of the party, for his hands were steady and without tremor. On his sleeve was the chevron of a petty officer.

'It went to its home,' answered the man, whose long face was pallid, and who actually shook with terror as he glanced around him fearfully. 'There are graves enough there in which it may lie. Come, comrades—come quickly! Let us leave this cursed spot.'

The officer raised me to a sitting posture, as he uttered a word of command; then several men placed me upon a horse. He sprang to the saddle behind me, took me in his arms, gave the word to advance; and, turning our faces away from the cypresses, we rode away in swift, military order.

As yet my tongue refused its office, and I was perforce silent. I must have fallen asleep; for the next thing I remembered was finding myself standing up, supported by a soldier on each side of me. It was almost broad daylight, and to the north a red streak of sunlight was reflected, like a path of blood, over the waste of snow. The officer was telling the men to say nothing of what they had seen, except that they found an English stranger, guarded by a large dog.

'Dog! that was no dog,' cut in the man who had exhibited such fear. 'I think I know a wolf when I see one.'

The young officer answered calmly: 'I said a dog.'

'Dog!' reiterated the other ironically. It was evident that his courage was rising with the sun; and, pointing to me, he said, 'Look at his throat. Is that the work of a dog, master?'

Instinctively I raised my hand to my throat, and as I touched it I cried out in pain. The men crowded round to look, some stooping down from their saddles; and again there came the calm voice of the young officer:

'A dog, as I said. If aught else were said we should only be laughed at.'

I was then mounted behind a trooper, and we rode on into the suburbs of Munich. Here we came across a stray carriage, into which I was lifted, and it was driven off to the Quatre Saisons—the young officer accompanying me, whilst a trooper followed with his horse, and the others rode off to their barracks.

When we arrived, Herr Delbrück rushed so quickly down the steps to meet me, that it was apparent he had been watching within. Taking me by both hands he solicitously led me in. The officer saluted me and was turning to withdraw, when I recognised his purpose, and insisted that he should come to my rooms. Over a glass of wine I warmly thanked him and his brave comrades for saving me. He replied simply that he was more than glad, and that Herr Delbrück had at the first taken steps to make all the searching party pleased; at which ambiguous utterance the maître d'hôtel smiled, while the officer pleaded duty and withdrew.

'But Herr Delbrück,' I enquired, 'how and why was it that the soldiers searched for me?'

He shrugged his shoulders, as if in depreciation of his own deed, as he replied:

'I was so fortunate as to obtain leave from the commander of the regiment in which I served, to ask for volunteers.'

'But how did you know I was lost?' I asked.

'The driver came hither with the remains of his carriage, which had been upset when the horses ran away.'

'But surely you would not send a search-party of soldiers merely on this account?'

'Oh, no!' he answered; 'but even before the coachman arrived, I had this telegram from the Boyar whose guest you are,' and he took from his pocket a telegram which he handed to me, and I read:

Bistritz.

Be careful of my guest—his safety is most precious to me. Should aught happen to him, or if he be missed, spare nothing to find him and ensure his safety. He is English and therefore adventurous. There are often dangers from snow and wolves and night. Lose not a moment if you suspect harm to him. I answer your zeal with my fortune.—*Dracula.*

As I held the telegram in my hand, the room seemed to whirl around me; and, if the attentive maître d'hôtel had not caught me, I think I should have fallen. There was something so strange in all this, something so weird and impossible to imagine, that there grew on me a sense of my being in some way the sport of opposite forces—the mere vague idea of which seemed in a way to paralyse me. I was certainly under some form of mysterious protection. From a distant country had come, in the very nick of time, a message that took me out of the danger of the snow-sleep and the jaws of the wolf.

BIG SCREEN FUTURE

BY ALASDAIR STUART

ALIEN

Our regular series, in which Alasdair Stuart examines films of the past that deal with stories of tomorrow.

Aliens, by rights, shouldn't work. The original film has a definitive ending and there's a sense of completion to the story that's difficult to work around. On top of that, there's a case for saying that what makes the Xenomorph work, what makes *Alien* work is the fact that we have no answers, even as the film closes. Humanity wanders a little too far from the campfire and we touch something vast and unknowable

and violent. The Xenomorph is Grendel, is the thing that waits in the darkness and the moment we shine a light on it, it's diminished, reduced, made safe.

That's a problem the series would eventually fall prey to, but here, in the hands of James Cameron, David Giler and Walter Hill, the story is taken in a very different, very logical direction. In many ways, this is a film as revolutionary as *Alien*, but unlike the original, a lot of those revolutionary concepts still impress more than twenty years after it was made.

The most successful, and influential, of them is the way that Cameron, Giler and Hill bring the corporate element to the fore. The scenes on Gateway Station where Ripley is faced with a Board of Enquiry have a pitch-perfect banality to them that sums up middle management perfectly. The fact that the rest of her crew are dead, the fact that she herself has been robbed of her entire life is irrelevant when compared to the 'substantial dollar value' of the *Nostramo* and its cargo. In the hands of lesser writers, there would be antagonism in these scenes but they're made by the lack of it. Ripley doesn't matter, what happened to her doesn't matter and her emotion, her engagement with those events marks her out as something as alien as the Xenomorph itself.

That sense of isolation is carried across to the colonies on LV-426. There's a sense of community, of the sort of relaxed, informal system that arises when you're at the far end of an organisation and no one's paying any attention to you that makes their eventual fate, to say nothing of the fact that it's off-screen, all the more tragic. This is a world where people don't matter but ideas, concepts, brands do and it's definitively not a world Ripley or any individual belongs in. There's even a case for saying that the Fire Team she returns to LV-426 with are ultimately doomed because of their individualistic and distinctive personalities. In this universe, unless you're a corporate entity or a faceless killer there's no room for you.

However, it's the film's approach to gender that really impresses. Ripley, here, is in a position of authority she didn't have in the original. She's seen these creatures before, knows exactly what they're capable of and, when things go south, Hicks in particular is absolutely comfortable deferring to her. It's actually worth taking a moment to look at what exactly that means in this context;

- a science fiction film, a militaristic science fiction film, no less, with a *female* lead.
- Even better, a militaristic science fiction film with a female lead, a female villain and a mother/daughter relationship at its centre.

That's pretty extraordinary, even now, even post Sarah Conner, Ellen Ripley and Buffy Summers. It also lends the film an incredibly strong central conceit; that not only is Ripley returning for her own peace of mind but also to ensure that this time, someone other than her or her cat actually escapes. The Special Edition, which is vastly superior to the theatrical cut and is pretty much exactly what Cameron intended, makes this overt by folding back in the sub plot about Ripley's daughter growing old and dying whilst she was adrift. A woman trapped between two faceless entities, both hostile, one known, one alien and she holds her own, stands her ground and does so, it should be added, wearing a remarkable amount of clothes. Even now, eight years into the 21st Century, that seems to be the exception not the rule.

The final thing that makes *Aliens* shine, however, is the sheer pragmatism of the film. Everything from the steady-cam shots that drop the viewer into the action as another marine to the practical effects and the grubby, functional, run-down colony of Hadley's Hope tell you again and again and again that this is a real, functional world. Even Bishop the synthetic human, arguably the most outlandish concept in the series, is completely plausible, completely believable and Lance Henriksen's gentle, strangely asexual portrayal was always going to be a fan favourite. None of it feels forced, or unreal, or outlandish and in a film whose central premise is a race of parasitic warrior ants with acid for blood, that's an incredible achievement and the key to its success. *Aliens*, more than *Alien*, more than either of the two films that follow it and more, even, than films like *Event Horizon* that co-opt this style, feels real, feels human. That's the film's, and Ripley's, final victory and that's why it still has such power even today.

Next time, *Alien 3*, one of the most difficult shoots in history. Is it a disaster or does it still hang together?

This article was first published online at Hivemind (<http://www.sfcrownsnest.com/hivemind/home.php>)

REVIEWS

Orphanage Reviewed by David Gullen

The Steel Remains Reviewed by Ellen Allen

ORPHANAGE

Written by Robert Buettner

Orbit, £6.99

Reissued by Orion, *Orphanage* is the first book in Robert Buettner's near-future space war series in which planet Earth is attacked by aliens who have colonised and 'terraformed' Ganymede, one of Jupiter's moons.

With humanity thrown onto its collective back foot by a constant rain of city-busting meteors guided by alien suicide pilots, we follow the progress of Jason Wander from unwilling gobby maverick grunt recruit to angsty maverick officer. Jason overcomes a range of personal tragedies and survives many wartime space adventures. He also rises to the rank of General in a battlefield promotion on Ganymede itself during the final, desperate hours of planet Earth's last and only hope against a pitiless enemy.

Except it's not Earth who is fighting, it's just America, because somehow Buettner isn't really bothered with the rest of humanity. Europe is reduced to an army of hot uniformed babes from Sweden, and the Egyptians field a force that only grows a spine when the officers are stripped of their ranks, lined up and shouted at very loudly in English. Despite the vagaries of the desert at night it seems the poor things simply aren't used to cold weather. Nobody else gets a significant mention, and that's a shame because beyond telling the SF adventure of Earth in peril, Buettner has things he wants to say about the modern world too.

Right from the opening dedication to a Senior Drill Sergeant and the quote from a soldier on Omaha beach, it's clear what drives Buettner's storytelling is his knowledge, personal experience and desire to inform us about the life of the modern American infantryman. There are not that many authors inhabiting the micro-genre of Earth in a losing war against the Aliens, but they include some good and famous ones and comparisons are inevitable. For a novel with a character arc that includes the death of parents from an alien bombardment to soldier nearly busted for incompetence and girlfriends that are first out of his league then killed in war, the inevitable comparison is with Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*. There are several others, from Benford's vast Galactic Centre Saga, starting with *In the Ocean of Night*, Steakley's magnificent *Armor*, which like Buettner's book is part inspired part homage to *Starship Troopers*, and Wyndham's intelligent and inspired *The Kraken Wakes*.

In particular with Benford and Wyndham, the aliens are subtle and considered, with a comprehensive grasp of science, technology and bio-technology far beyond our own. They are intelligent, dangerous, determined, and very, very alien.

Buettner's aliens are somehow both clever and stupid: suicide jockeys flying pilotable bombs yet able to transform the atmosphere of Ganymede to suit themselves. They fight like the Chinese in Korea, swarming in untold thousands in Mongol-horde attacks without tactics or strategy but cross the interstellar gulf, though there is no evidence of their star ships in the battle or anywhere else.

This isn't hard SF or indeed a hard environmental story. Set thirty to forty years into the future, technology is the remnants of twentieth century military and a few space shuttles. Likewise the environmental and food supply problems of the 'nuclear winter' caused by the alien bombardment are lightly skimmed over.

It's easy to criticise on details like these, with possibly the worst example of this neglect being the excuse that our nuclear bombs don't work because the aliens 'permeate space with a sub-atomic particle that slows down neutrons'. Yet portraying the aliens as repellent slug creatures dehumanises them into simply 'the enemy'. They're not human, there's no need to introspect on their nature or motivations, all you have to do is kill them. Buettner's sub-text is clearly that of America alone, and in particular the American soldier, standing against the enemies of civilisation in a world whose politics he explicitly acknowledges is post 9/11. You do start to wonder whether this portrayal of the enemy was simply a lack of desire to address that part of the story-telling, or if it is a window on how America sees its current struggle – solitary and poorly equipped, a slightly self-pitying beacon of hope against faceless monsters you do not need to bother trying to understand. A victim.

Buettner has risen to the challenge of writing near-future SF informed by contemporary issues. His writing is uncomplicated, the tale fast-paced and beneath it, like Heinlein, are his own opinions and politics. I like this book for the way it makes you think, but it's not necessarily along the lines or about the subjects Buettner wants you to.

THE STEEL REMAINS

Written by Richard Morgan

Hardback, Gollancz, £12.99

This latest offering from Richard Morgan is a departure from the hard-edged technology-driven SF we've come to expect. *The Steel Remains* is described as 'fantasy noir', and the premise is "*a trawl through exactly how unpleasant it might be to actually have to live in the average fantasy universe*". If you were expecting the usual fantasy world of sorcery, fantastical beasts, different races, swords and epic quests, well, you wouldn't be far wrong. Only this is fantasy **noir**. (Remember those black-and-white Humphrey Bogart films?) With the brutal violence which underlies much of Morgan's work, this is no place for the lighter side of fantasy.

The protagonist, Ringil, is a scarred veteran of a bloody war, the hero who led the charge at Gallows Gap - and he's an outcast from the aristocratic world of his childhood because he's gay. At the start of the novel, Ringil is living in semi-retirement, telling tales of his exploits for coin at an inn, slowly descending into middle-aged boredom. Until, that is, his mother arrives with a quest: to rescue his cousin from slavers. It's not exactly an epic quest, and the fate of kingdoms doesn't rest on the outcome. But as Ringil returns home and enters a murky world where politics, slavery, legends, gods and worlds clash, it rapidly becomes clear that far more is at stake than just the safety of a distant cousin.

Other veterans of the war march through the novel until their destinies entwine once more with Ringil's: the Kiriath engineer Archeth, last of her race and in the service of the Yhelteth Emperor, and Egar Dragonbane, head of his nomadic barbarian tribe. As with everyone in the novel, the characters are more complicated than those descriptions would suggest. Archeth is very black in a world where the only people with black skins were the Kiriath, and they have left in their fireships, seeking a way home through the pressurised places at the heart of the world. She's also a woman of power in a society which accords power to men, and a lesbian in an empire precariously balanced on the edge of intolerant religious fanaticism. Roaming the northern steppes, Egar misses the heat and civilization of the south, of the woman he left behind. Surrounded by ambitious brothers and close-minded clansmen, he feels stifled, until a clash with the clan Shaman brings the Gods into play.

Behind all of this are rumours of the Dwenda, a vanished folk who were fought to a standstill by the Kiriath a very long time ago. Able to move between worlds, dimensions, realms at will, they may or may not still exist. To make matters worse, if they do still exist, they may be insane, possessed of incredible powers, and be looking to settle the score.

This is the first book in what promises to be a very good trilogy. *The Steel Remains* is grim, bloody, visceral in all senses of the word. But running through it is Morgan's trademark black humour and his ability to create characters who recognise the stereotypes they are meant to embody, but refuse absolutely to be other than their complex, complicated selves, to be reduced to stereotype and caricature. Definitely worth a read!

INTERVIEW

Richard K. Morgan interviewed by Ellen J. Allen & Alasdair Stuart



1. What attracted you to fantasy after establishing yourself in SF?

Well, it's always fun to have a crack at something fresh – and really, I've always been quite enamoured of good old-fashioned sword and sorcery. I grew up reading masters of the form like Michael Moorcock and Karl Edward Wagner, and I think that at the back of my mind there was always the idea I'd like to do something along those lines. Plus I've been talking a good fight for a long time now about importing the same noir sensibility I plundered for my SF into a fantasy landscape, and it seemed like time to finally put my keyboard where my mouth is.

And given that you've been wanting to write 'real fantasy', or 'fantasy noir' for a long time now, what was the impetus to write the story of *The Steel Remains*?

In fact the story really grew out of the characters. And the characters grew out of not much more than a general sense of how that noir tendency would work in a fantasy setting. So - no big pitched battles, just skirmishes and back alley stabbings; no Great Worthy Quests or Struggles, just conflicting personal agendas, error and bloody incident; no capitalized Good and Evil, just shades of grey and a morality teetering on the edge of bankruptcy; no noble warrior heroes, just damaged men of violence and thugs of questionable morals.

2. Was it really all that different from writing your SF, or was it more that the violence is a little more low-tech? (Barring the Dwenda's weaponry, which may or may not be magic...)

Certainly, the logistics of fantasy are tough when you've been used to SF – for example in *Black Man*, I could get my characters from one side of the globe to the other in forty-five minutes on a sub-orbital. In fantasy, journeys of any distance have to be done on horseback or by sail, and it can take days, weeks or even months to get anywhere at all. Something like that applies its own limits, obviously. But the violence was actually one case where the limitations worked out perfectly, because violence with bits of sharpened steel is far more brutal and desperate than most of the higher tech killing done in my SF books. And that brutality and desperation is something I'm very keen to see attached to the portrayal of violence wherever possible.

3. Have you started work on the sequel to *The Steel Remains* yet? (Please say yes!)

Yes. But it's going slowly – the original plan was to alternate SF with fantasy, so I had my next SF book if not exactly set up then certainly under construction. Now I've taken a decision to write the three Ringil novels back to back, I've had to start very much from scratch. Contrary to a belief that's been cropping up a lot in reviews, *The Steel Remains* isn't (and isn't meant to be read as) the first installment in a mapped out trilogy; it's a standalone novel in much the same way as *Altered Carbon* was, it tells its own story to a (I hope) suitably solid closure, and I wrapped it up without a great deal of thought as to where the characters might go afterward. So it's taking me a while to work out what the themes and dynamics of the next one will be.

4. Do you subscribe to the view that any technology sufficiently far advanced must look indistinguishable from magic? And if so, could there come a time where you write a story written in your *Altered Carbon* universe from the point of view of, say, someone in Ringil's position?

Yeah, I think Clarke got that one right as far as it goes – though really the issue isn't how advanced the technology (or whatever) is, it's whether those who have to deal with it are technological in outlook or not. Modern human society does not (cannot in all seriousness) believe in magic anymore. There are always idiot individuals of course, people who believe in gods and demons or homeopathy or the healing power of crystals, but as a culture we're beyond that now. No matter what level of god-like beings we might encounter out there among the stars, we're never going to approach them as anything other than a culture with technology we don't

(yet) understand. In that sense, we have lost our innocence. Inhabitants of fantasy universes, on the other hand, tend to have a more simplistic approach to these things – magic simply *is*, gods and/or demons simply *are*, and that's the end of the matter. The issue is not decoding or analyzing these factors – you simply cope with them as best you can. In Ringil's case that usually means with sharpened steel.

As far as writing about the *Altered Carbon* universe from the point of view of a non-technological barbarian goes, I suppose it *could* be done, but I'm not convinced there'd be much point. For me, the fascinating thing about the SF worlds I've created is the way the technology impacts on humans. In order to do that justice, you have to be able to take a technological approach, and that approach then informs the kind of book you write. While the motivations and actions of my SF characters are certainly susceptible to ambiguity, the technology they use generally isn't; in the Kovacs books, we *know* how sleeving works, it holds no mysteries for us or for the characters who avail themselves of it. At that level, *The Steel Remains* is a wholly different kind of story-telling, and the approach is correspondingly different – the various mystical or sorcerous elements are left that way for maximal effect. The reader may feel they recognize, or rather, half-recognize something familiar, but that uneasy half-recognition is exactly what I'm trying to achieve – SF-style clarification would only weaken and ultimately ruin the effect.

5. I still love your sleeving technology (from the Altered Carbon world). Have you any plans for using it in another book? (I only ask because it seems to have so much potential, not least for hiring personal trainers. Can't be bothered to work out? Let your trainer work you out...)

I wouldn't flat out rule out another book in the *Altered Carbon* universe, or even another Kovacs book, come to that. In fact, given the right inspiration, the right ideas to explore, I'd do it like a shot. It's just that right now I can't see a way to do anything very fresh with the material, and I don't want to end up writing replica novels – I have this enduring horror of becoming a series hack, and over-exploiting your material is a surefire way to end up on that path. You got to try to stay fresh, and that means you can't stick around too long at the scene of previous successes. Like Satchel Paige once said, *don't look back, something might be gaining on you*. Never truer words, though actually, there's no *might* about it. Something *is* gaining on you – and in the end it'll catch you. But you might as well give it a run for its money.

6. With writing violent scenes, do you still draw on your work as an EFL teacher, or have you finally got that out of your system?

Yeah, that's pretty much exhausted now as a source of rage. But then I'm never short of fresh sources. Just read the papers.

7. We're seeing the concept of identity itself begin to alter, most notably through the radically different behaviour some people exhibit through their online identities and avatars. Given your own fascination with this concept, where do you think it will go next?

Well, in fact I wrote an article for *Index on Censorship* last year (it's now posted on my site under the title *Meredith's Mistake*) in which I said that I didn't think the internet was going to do much to change basic human behaviour. I still stand by that, especially where identity is concerned. World of Warcraft is just Dungeons and Dragons with less need for a vivid imagination. Role-playing in chat rooms or Second Life-type spaces is really no different than role-playing at S&M parties or masked balls, and that stuff's been going on since forever. The internet is simply taking these games to a new level of insulating anonymity, and it's that insulation of course, that fuels these radical differences in behaviour. Similarly, the nerd rage you see so much of in forum posting from people who (I'm told) are sweetness and light in person isn't really much different to the kind of drunken idiocy you see in the centre of any major British town

on a Saturday night from people who wouldn't dream of acting that way without the insulating wrap of alcohol or illegal drugs. So rather than thinking in terms of conceptual shifts in identity, perhaps it would be more useful to perceive the web as just one more addictive and mind-altering substance, with all of the attendant social fallout that implies if we don't keep an eye on our intake. But really, I think there are a lot of other social factors in play that are far more worthy of serious concern. Nerd rage, I can live with; underage knife crime worries me a whole lot more.

8. There's a constant conflict in SF between fatalism and optimism. Do you see an ending in sight to that conflict? Or a victor?

I'm not sure that's a real dichotomy, actually – I think what you're looking at there is an illusory divide arising from a basic misunderstanding of what an SF novel is supposed to do – or more accurately from the misapprehension that an SF novel is supposed to do something specific at all. For example, I still remember one rather disparaging Amazon review of *Altered Carbon*, whose author could apparently not engage with the crime at the centre of the book because it was so insignificant in the grander scheme of things. As near as I recall the reviewer said something like “in a book like Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars*, the murder of a single billionaire would scarcely even register as a blip in the story.” Well, yes, quite. But the point here is that *Altered Carbon* is *not* a book like Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars*. Why should it be? Whoever said it was? Okay, they're both SF, but that's a pretty wide umbrella you're deploying there. Trying to homogenize everything under the umbrella is crazy.

So, getting back to the fatalistic/optimistic divide, yes, my own work is consistently categorized as “dystopian” (and there's the fatalistic, I guess), whereas Robinson might be described as writing “optimistic” futures – we get to Mars and succeed, with our wonderful terraforming technology, in turning it into a lovely place. But to contrast my books with Robinson's completely misses the point that Robinson and I are different kinds of writer, interested in and busy with very different kinds of projects. Robinson specialises in painting future trends in very broad brushstrokes, where individual characters are really just the grist to a mill of human progress. He's exploring what the human race can and might do *as a race*. And since that kind of project necessitates the technology actually working well, getting done what it has to do (otherwise you don't have a story), the broad perception is going to be one of progress, and as such probably optimism. My work, on the other hand, is unapologetically future noir, and since noir is concerned with the underbelly of things, it's inevitably going to offer up a fairly jaundiced (though ultimately, I feel, honest) view of the impact future technology will have on the less fortunate in human society – or perhaps more precisely the way in which that impact will be mismanaged and abused by those in power to serve their own corrupt ends and fuck the rest of us over. In my books, you get to see the seamy side of the future society, and a short, intense period in the lives of a few desperate and damaged men and women, who are never going to get a look at the big picture. The technology is explored through that rather narrow (but very human) aperture.

The thing is, SF is a broad church and there's room for every type of story telling within it. Robinson isn't pretending in his Mars trilogy that no-one ever gets murdered in the future – he just happens not to be interested in telling stories about it. And similarly someone like me (or, say, Jon Courtenay Grimwood) is not interested in surveying the broad and probably slowly upward shift of human technological achievement, because it's the grubby close-focus flaws of humanity that inspire us, not the sweeping historical narrative. So sure, your hardboiled post-cyberpunk tales are likely to be dystopian and gloomy in outlook, and yes, your generation spanning high concept hard SF is probably going to be broadly speaking positive. But there's no conflict here – just a healthy pluralistic spread of style and intent.

9. You've recently spoken out against the inverse snobbery a lot of SF fans seem to have. Do you have any further thoughts on why that mindset remains so prevalent?

Well, it's not actually inverted snobbery, it's just a frustratingly blinkered attitude to difference. *I know what I like and I like what I know.* There really are people in the SF community who simply *will not read* anything but genre, in much the same way that a lot of British package deal tourists won't eat foreign food. Even worse, and even more frustratingly, there are also people within the genre who will only read one *type* of SF&F – they read fantasy but won't touch SF, or vice versa. I mean, sure it's a free country – read what you like. But it strikes me as very sad to limit yourself in this way.

That said, it's important to realize that this attitude is in no way something limited to the SF&F community; you can see exactly the same dynamic at work among crime fiction readers – there are people out there who only ever read detective stories. There are others who limit themselves even more and will only read a certain kind of detective story – police procedurals, or Christie-style murder mysteries, and so forth. The same applies to a lot of romance fans, or chick lit readers for that matter – *that's all they read.* Oh, and of course – the thing we often miss – the same blinkered stubbornness is very apparent in readers of the genre formerly known as “literary” fiction. There's a reason those guys won't touch (for example) SF with a barge pole, and that reason is exactly the same limited and limiting vision that we've been describing above. So this is not a problem of SF as such, it's just the SF genre's fair share of those human beings, to be found everywhere, who are made uneasy by anything different to what they already know.

10. Is there a medium you'd like to work in but have yet to?

Not really – I have had some discussions about writing for the gaming industry, and others about doing screenplays, and while both those avenues might prove interesting from the point of view of experience, I won't be heart-broken if I don't get round to it. The problem with both the movie and the game medium is that they are collaborative, team-player activities – what you're writing is never a finished product, it's only ever at best the blueprint for a finished product that will (eventually, with luck) be put together by other people. In neither industry does the writer exercise much final control over what happens to the work. I'm too much of a control freak to be very happy with that state of affairs – the great thing about a novel is that when it's done, for better or for worse, it belongs to you. You own it as you wrote it, and that's really a much better fit for my temperament.

11. You have unlimited funds and resources. What's your dream project?

To replace the 1,000 most powerful men on the planet with women of similar qualification, age and experience. It would, I think, make the world a far, far better place to live.

12. Finally: the singularity. Any ideas as to when?

Well, Vernor Vinge tells me he'll be very surprised if it doesn't happen inside the next twenty five years, and he certainly knows far more about computer science and AI than I ever will, so maybe he's right. But I confess I'm very skeptical about the whole concept. Yes, yes, I know the rate of technological development is picking up speed, arguably at an exponential rate, Moore's Law and all that, but still – the whole idea of this sudden, massive change in everything strikes me as a bit messianic. And those messianic guys are just *always wrong.* Remember how the fall of the Berlin wall was going to herald the End of Hegelian History? And going back a bit further, how the First World War was going to be the War to End All Wars? In the fifties and sixties people thought nuclear power would herald the dawn of a new undreamt of prosperity through free energy – it'd be so cheap it wouldn't be worth metering, remember? Or it would render the whole planet a smouldering ruin. Remember that one too? People are always talking about these big, scary paradigm shifts, but from what I see of human history, we just go stumbling bumpily on, assimilating the changes and coping more or less. I look around and I see no reason why that won't continue to be the case in the future. Unless of course we get blipped by an

asteroid or a mega-volcano in the meantime – now that, unfortunately, is the kind of massive paradigm shift I find only too plausible. If it's good enough for the dinosaurs, it's certainly good enough for us.

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