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# Theaker's Quarterly Fiction

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Issue 26

Winterval

2008

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# Anatomy of a Failure

## Stephen Theaker

Gutted! I didn't win NaNoWriMo this year, breaking a winning run that lasted four sweet years. I topped out at 23,000 words, just under half-way through. The only other time I'd failed was the year we had our first baby two weeks into the event.

After taking part for six years, now, I know all the kinds of things that losers always say. "This novel needs more than a month." "I don't want to rush it." "Life got in the way." "My social life is just too hectic." The actual reason is generally that either they didn't have time, or that they didn't make time. For me, it was definitely the latter.

Knowing I had the last five days free to write left me too complacent, and I left myself with too much to do during them. 9,000 words a day from a standing start was just too much. I should have at least left myself with a target that was more easily achievable during a normal working day, so that I could recharge and plan in the evenings. And so I ended up making myself unhappy, really stupidly. I should have been celebrating writing 7,000 words in a day instead of going to bed disappointed that I'd fallen short.

I failed by about the same amount that I wrote at the write-ins last year, so missing most of the write-ins this year clearly had an effect as well. It was just that little bit harder to get

away to them when I didn't have the excuse that I was organising them! Plus, I'm still a bit traumatised from last year, when the café that hosted our write-ins got really sick of us on the last day. It made it hard for me to relax this time around; I was just waiting for someone to come up and start telling us off!

Another part of it was that I had a bit of a post-ML meltdown... Previously I felt I had to keep writing to set a good example – this year, not so much! I realise people probably didn't notice what I was writing in the past; but it felt like part of the job was to show that it could be done.

Another mistake was that, because I knew I wouldn't be ML-ing this year, I planned to write a novel with a slightly more ambitious plot and a larger cast of characters. But then, even though I didn't do any planning at all, I still leapt into the same plot, quickly finding out that I had no idea what all those characters were supposed to be doing, or how they were supposed to relate to each other. One thing I'd like to think about next year is the idea of character arcs; I might even add an extra page to the novel-writing handout (which, amazingly, was downloaded over 9,000 times over the last couple of months).

For another excuse, take a look at this issue's review section – there's a lot of writing time in there that I



should have been putting into my novel! Not to mention a few thousand words of reviews for the BFS, and an editorial for *Dark Horizons*.

I also spent loads of time reading submissions for *Dark Horizons*. Oh well. It might have been an avoidance strategy, but I've got an issue of *Dark Horizons* pretty much typeset now, so something good came out of it!

In short, I made a lot of mistakes. I've got lots of excuses, but they all amount to one thing: I didn't sit down and do enough writing. I've learnt my lesson: next year it's back to a sensible 1,666 words a day for me!

Once it became obvious that I wouldn't make it, I was very tempted to stop altogether, but I at least pushed myself to do 1,666 words the next day, and sorted the novel out so that at least I can pick it up again without too much trouble.

All of this will seem awfully silly to "real" writers. And every so often I do think it would be nice to try and do

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a bit of “real” writing. But then I remember that I didn’t do any writing at all in the years before I started to take part in NaNoWriMo, and even now I rarely write any fiction from December to October. NaNoWriMo is a great way for me to get the writing bug out of my system, leaving me to concentrate on editing the rest of the year round. And anyway, 1667 words a day is very, very little. If I wanted to take my writing that little bit more seriously, I could always take two hours to write them instead of one-and-a-quarter!

\* \* \*

The more book reviews I write, the more I become awkwardly aware of how narrow my frame of literary reference is, but I’m trying to improve. From this issue I’ve begun to include ratings out of ten at the end of my reviews. It’s a reflection of my current limitations as a reviewer! My reviews tend to be quite nitpicky: they could easily give the impression that I didn’t like something, whereas in fact I just found I had more to say about its faults or oddities! Until I develop the vocabulary to intelligently say why I liked books, ratings will help me out by indicating pretty clearly how I really felt about them.

## Contributors

*John Hall* is best known as a Sherlockian scholar, and a member of the International Pipe Smokers’ Hall of Fame. His numerous literary interests include Raffles, Sexton Blake, H.P. Lovecraft and M.R. James.

He is the author of *Special Commission*, a medieval murder mystery. Previous stories by John appeared in TQF#23 (“Shaggai”) and TQF#25 (“In the Vale of Pnath”).

*John Greenwood* has made contributions to most issues of TQF, and was ultimately made co-editor in recognition of his efforts.

To this issue he contributes a further magnificent episode in the astonishing life of Newton Braddell.

*Eric Lowther* has made many appearances in the small press since contributing “Rural Legend” to TQF#19 (still one of my favourite stories to have appeared in the magazine). See: *Blood Blade & Thruster* #3; anthologies from *Scotopia (Dark Distortions I*, available now) and *Magazine of the Dead; Night to Dawn* #13, *Drollerie Press, Necrotic Tissue, 7th Dimension* and *All Hallows*. He contributes a weekly column written in-character as “Arthur Helms” titled Dead Center for the alternative-present website *Zombie World News* (zombieworldnews.com). He is currently shopping his first completed novel to the industry.

*Richard K. Lyon* is a semi-retired research scientist/inventor whose hobbies include collecting pulp SF magazines and writing. He has also published numerous short stories and novelettes. A collection of the latter, *Tales From The Lyonheart*, is available from Barnes and Noble, etc. In collaboration with *Andrew J. Offutt*, famed author of *My Lord Barbarian*, he wrote the Tiana trilogy (*Demon in the Mirror, The Eyes of Sarsis* and *Web of the Spider*), and *Rails Across the Galaxy* for *Analog*. To our magazine they have contributed “The Iron Mercenary” (TQF#19), “Arachnis” (TQF#22), “Devil on My Stomach” (TQF#23), “The Hungry Apples” (TQF#24), “Naked Before Mine Enemies” (TQF#25), and, this issue, “Inn of the White Cat”, which unfortunately is the last in the series.

*John Shanks* is the cover artist of this issue. John previously produced the spectacular cover of *Theaker’s Quarterly Fiction* #16, depicting a diver pursued by a giant sea creature, a scene drawn from the adventures of Howard Phillips. He has his own website – Homegrown Goodness (www.homegrowngoodness.co.uk) – from which you can request bespoke cartooning, or purchase his hilarious animal encyclopedias.

*Stephen Theaker* is the eponymous editor of *Theaker’s Quarterly Fiction*. He wrote all of this issue’s reviews, the editorial, and even this bit right here. He is also the editor of *Dark Horizons*, the journal of the BFS.

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(Frankly, subscribing is quite pricy – probably why no one’s ever done it! The best thing is to download each issue for free and then buy the annual bound volumes, which are relatively cheap.)

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## PostScripts Now an Anthology

Doubtless running afraid of some of the new publications (ahem!) that it might have faced in Best Magazine categories at awards shows, *PostScripts* magazine will now be classed as a quarterly anthology rather than a magazine.

Unfortunately, it'll only be available in hardback; the paperback version will sleep with the fishes. You can save a bit of money by subscribing for five years at a time, but it's still going to be a bit pricey. Ironically, when I subscribed to McSweeney's a few months ago, the exchange rate made its price very attractive – now the shoe is on the other foot, making *PostScripts* quite the bargain for Americans!

At present PS Publishing has five titles on the way to publication, including the next issue of *Postscripts* (#16). The others are *Living with the Dead*, by Darrell Schweitzer; *Impossibilia* (PS Showcase #5), by Douglas Smith; *The City in These Pages*, by John Grant; and *The Day It Rained Forever*, by Ray Bradbury

There should be reviews of at least one or two in this issue, now that I've worked out how to get the review pdfs onto my trusty old Rocket eBook!

## No More Drumming

It's very hard to run a small press. By definition, you're always at the wrong end of economies of scale. PS Publishing seems to get around that issue by offering high margin products such as signed and limited editions, and lots of other small presses have followed suit. But there are only a limited number of people with the money to pay for such editions, and

only a limited number of authors who are going to attract their custom.

For example of how tough it is to make the figures add up, to get a book on Amazon Advantage (i.e. for Amazon to stock it in their warehouse) you have to give a 60% discount, at least up until you reach a certain level of sales. Once you take into account printing and postage costs, it's pretty hard to find a price on a regular paperback that will be attractive to customers and get you anywhere near a break-even point, without taking a gamble on a large print run.

That's all by way of lead-in to same sad news: Humdrumming, one of the larger small press publishers around, have gone into liquidation. The news broke first on Ramsey Campbell's messageboard, before then being reported on the BFS boards, provoking an emotional response from both fans and writers. The response of Steve Upham of Screaming Dreams was typical, "This is indeed a sad day for readers. I have been a huge fan of Humdrumming since the start. They have produced some of my fave books in recent years and it's a shame to see them disappear from the scene." David Howe of Telos Publishing said that he "loved their sass and their gumption".

Ian Alexander Martin, director of the company, resigned a week before the collapse, leaving Trudi Topham and Lee Thompson in charge. A final press release from Humdrumming said: "We appreciate that some of you will be-out of-pocket as a result of our closing down. For this we can only apologise. Previous company directors (and shareholders) Lee Thompson and Guy Adams invested a large amount of their own money in to the company, an investment that they will not see again, and we ask that you understand this was not a decision taken lightly."

Many authors reported that they had been able to buy unsold stock of their books, and were doing a brisk trade selling them directly to fans to make up for lost royalties. Other authors were able to find alternative publishers for their upcoming books.

Comments by Trudi on the BFS board suggested that shipping costs may have played a part in making the

enterprise unprofitable: "Dealers didn't pay Humdrumming a penny for postage. And when shipping to non-UK dealers, that was a lot of money the company lost, particularly as the books were so lovely that the boxes shipped to them were very heavy (often in the 6kg range)."

The company's affairs are now being handled by David Chappell, GCP (DavidChappellGCP@aol.com).

## The New Doctor Who?

Phillip Rhys, talking on BBC News 24 to Tasmin Lucia Khan about the remake of *Survivors*, was in the middle of lauding his excellent co-stars. When he mentioned Paterson Joseph, he then said, "who's gonna be... um, *potentially* going to be the new Doctor Who." The clip was on YouTube very shortly after, and from that clip it looks utterly certain to me that he will be the next Doctor.

I couldn't be happier. He's a brilliant actor with all the range and more that the Doctor needs, from serious drama to comedy and back again.

Like a lot of people, I first thought of him as a potential Doctor after watching *Neverwhere*, back in the days when we were just dreaming of a new series: I'm ecstatic that he might finally have got the job.

If you want to see what he'd be like playing the more serious side of the Doctor, readers are encouraged to find a copy of *My Shakespeare*, shown originally on Channel 4. It was a documentary in which he directed a group of inner city teenagers in a production of *Romeo and Juliet*. He showed in that how he could be both ruthless and inspirational as the situation required, just like the Doctor.

There will definitely be a new Doctor by the time Christmas 2009 is over. Whoever Steven Moffat chooses, I've faith that he'll be great. But if it is Paterson Joseph, great choice!

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# We Three Kings

Eric R. Lowther

“That was not a good idea,” Caspar said.

“The king invited us back, never a bad thing,” Balthazar said as he shifted his muscled bulk on one of the stone benches ringing the town fountain. “Stop complaining. If you want the highest help, go to the highest source. Not only will we be well-paid, we have the king’s seal of approval.”

“There are higher sources,” Menchoir said as he watched a green flame dance across his palm. “And I must agree with Caspar. The king has other ideas concerning our task; ones I fear will not be in line with our own.”

“Put that away!” Balthazar swung at the mage’s hand. “Your slant little eyes already draw attention! Do you want us locked away as warlocks? Besides, we do not even know *why* this babe is so important or even *what* we may be facing in finding it. Do not forget it was your idea that put us in the king’s court! We would have found a babe far easier by questioning the midwifery than by seeking out a mother with child. Now all of them are suspect, not only ones that have just given birth! We shall need the help of an army if we are to find this needle in straw. Place the blame at your own door and no one else’s.”

“I only mentioned we could better guarantee the safety of the child if we found the mother before she would give birth,” Menchoir said as the flames died.

“Why was I saddled with the two of you? I could have done this with my eyes closed.” Balthazar spat.

“As I assume you do all else in your world,” Menchoir quipped.

Balthazar shot him a warning look

and wagged a scarred finger. “I have killed over less insult, magi...”

“Of course, you will not. First, you seek your precious gold. And second, you would die before your steel could clear your sash. You would not accomplish the first and would find the second in the merest wave of my hand.”

“Gentlemen!” Caspar hissed then went into a sneezing fit. Warrior and mage chuckled at him softly as he regained his composure. “This is no help!”

Balthazar cleared his nose into the well, enjoying the grimace of distaste from the mage. He was known far and wide, the survivor of countless wars and as hard a man as had ever been. Men of his calibre did not come cheaply. He’d been hired to protect them and use his sword as he saw fit to accomplish the task. It mattered little to him that their task had yet to be as defined as he would have liked, but mercenaries were well-used to the shifting goals of their masters. Those that couldn’t adapt ended the day with rust on their swords.

Caspar was a man of science and reason, an ink-stained scholar that left no subject from his purview. Architecture, mathematics, the arts; no pursuit daunted the small, constantly sneezing man. Chief among them were cartography and astronomy, though the latter had a penchant for buying him more trouble than worth when his predictions came to disastrous truth. He had been hired to watch for, of all things, a new star and to guide the rest in its path to some unknown destination. Truth be known, Caspar was little interested in gold and silver, save to sustain him to the next idea. The task had come with

the promise of seeing what no other had seen, and it was this more than coin that signed him on with this lot.

Of the three, Menchoir was the most mysterious. His manner of dress, slight yellowish complexion and the glaring absence of facial hair in these lands certainly marked him as a man of the East. The fact he was true Magi made certain those less-enlightened in these desert lands gave him little issue. His full purpose among them hadn’t been divulged by their employer, just like pretty much everything else about their mission, though both Balthazar and Caspar knew with certainty the mage was well aware of his place. Their promised payments more than made up for their annoyed curiosities, though it didn’t mean Menchoir’s smug looks and slight smiles gave them any less grief.

“We need return to the inn,” Caspar said. The others grimaced. The only thing that seemed to calm his nose was his incense. The scholar had developed its burning into a medicinal treatment, breathing the frankincense fumes the others found noxious in the close confines of their tiny rented room.

“Let us stop for a bit of tea to fortify ourselves against your vapours,” Balthazar said. He held his head to the side for a moment then turned towards the path they’d just used.

“What is it?” Caspar asked, his finger under his nose to ward off another attack.

“Sandals and swords...” The grizzled mercenary’s hand fell to the huge scimitar at his side.

“Well, they should not be coming for us, we have the approval of the king,” Caspar said.

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"Precaution is the better of bravery," Menchoir said as he slid around the side of the well. "I would suggest you invest in it." Caspar struggled off the bench, scurrying behind the mage. Balthazar took turns looking at them and the path. The sound of marching feet was easy to hear now over the low din of the market. Balthazar cursed to himself, his mind whispering that perhaps the magi had a point, and came around the well to join them. Moments later, the head of a column five-deep entered the marketplace.

"By order of King Herod, all women with sons born since three days past will come forward!" the officer announced, his eyes scanning the crowd as he spoke. A moment later the crowd parted as rough hands expelled a young couple forward.

"What is it you seek?" the young husband asked, pulling his wife close. The infant in her arms squealed as his mother held him tighter to her breast.

"By order of King Herod, answer my questions," the commander ordered tersely. "Good wife, did you bear a son these past three days?"

"I... yes..." she answered hesitantly.

"Is this that child?" the commander asked. She nodded mutely, turning her torso so the babe was between her and her husband. "Turn the infant over to me; *now*."

"I do not understand!" the young man stammered, squeezing the infant more fully between them.

"God has spoken to our king. He has decreed that evil has been born in the form of a son. You will turn your son over to me." Three soldiers advanced on the young couple. The father took a step forward, placing himself between his wife and the soldiers. But his youthful bravery was no match for a spear. His last breath brought Balthazar's sword half out of his sash.

"No..." Menchoir said softly, his hand like iron on the pommel. Balthazar struggled a moment against the unnatural weight.

"Stop your tricks! They are going to..." Balthazar started.

"We cannot help them. To do so will only have us killed, and then we are of use to none." The three slipped

off silently around the well and down a side street. But even the distance couldn't mask the screams of the boy child, or the horrendous, sudden silence after.

Back in their tiny room, Caspar slumped to the floor, his charts scattered about him. "They... they killed that child..." he whispered, his bottom lip quivering. "Because of us..."

Menchoir sat at a small table, a cup of hot tea before him that had not been there a moment before. He sipped then handed it to Caspar. "Drink, it will help."

"Nothing is going to help!" Caspar barked on the brink of another fit. "They killed the child because of us! *We* killed it... his parents..."

"Soldiers killed them," Balthazar said, his hand on his sword, "the act of cowards, using cowards' weapons."

"It seems this Herod does not like challenges to his divine rule," Menchoir said.

"I cannot do this... I do not care what the pay..." Caspar breathed.

The three fell silent for a few moments, listening to Caspar's laboured breathing. Menchoir rose and fished about in Caspar's bag, finally coming out with a bit of his incense. He lit the brazier and watched as the thin smoke lifted into the air.

"Caspar..." Menchoir began, "that is the precise reason why we must continue. Our task is obviously far greater. That a king would set about killing infants in the street says as much."

"But more will die," Caspar said.

"More will die, if we continue or not," Balthazar said. "That father stood before soldiers with nothing more than his courage and was slain like a dog. If we do nothing, that man, his wife and their son will have died in vain. Every father, mother and child that dies this day in this city will die in vain." He turned suddenly from the window, his eyes glassy and dangerous. "I will continue, with or without you. There is honour and there is gold. I will not deny the first nor give away the last."

"As much as it pains me, you are correct," Menchoir said. "I will continue as well. I feel something in the air... power... change... there is

much more than meets the eye this day." He looked down at Caspar. "We need you, Caspar. Somewhere there is another mother, another father, another child that may yet be born that needs you..." Menchoir's eyes suddenly rolled back in his head. He stumbled then fell as a long moan slid from his throat, just missing Caspar as he crumpled to the floor.

\* \* \*

Menchoir knew this room, every corner and crevice, every inch of the thick padding that covered the floor. A smile crossed his lips as he turned and looked to the back of the room. The old man was there, a long scroll laid out on the floor before his cushion.

"Master," Menchoir said, before dropping to the floor in supplication.

"Rise, my student," the old man said warmly. The voice that had once been so strong had become weaker, softer. Menchoir rose slowly and approached, seating himself on the floor.

"It is good to see you again," the old man said. Menchoir's smile faded. The old man's eyes had taken on the milky pallor of blindness. It had been ten years since Menchoir last saw his master. He'd grown much in those years, but it seemed as much as he'd grown his master had faltered.

"As it is to see you..." Menchoir returned.

"Ah..." the old one said. "You seem troubled."

"No, master. It is only..."

"It is only your master's appearance? All age, Menchoir. All die. Everything that lives, dies," the master said.

"Are you sick?"

"Your master is only what you see. Nothing more or less. Nothing is as it was, or again," the master said.

Menchoir cocked his head at the cryptic statement. "I do not understand."

"There is little to understand and much needs to be learned. You embark on a new quest, while your master finishes his," the master said.

"You speak in riddles," Menchoir said.

"Is that not what life is? What *magic* is; the greatest riddle, the most

intriguing of enigmas? Knowledge gained leads only to more questions, with each answer leading to still more questions. Is that not so?"

"You taught that long ago. You also taught life was never-ending, that death was only another step towards knowledge, the same path in a different land," Menchoir said.

"In that, there is truth. Life is never-ending. The vessel that carries us may change, but we all go on. Have you followed a path, my student? Have you sought the magic... the knowledge?"

"I have," Menchoir said.

"There is a force at work," the old man said softly. "The magic your master has lived is dying."

"That cannot be!" Menchoir stammered. "Magic holds this world together! It binds everything..."

"In that you are correct. It holds *all* worlds together," the master said, holding up a spindly hand to interrupt Menchoir. The sight of his palsied hand struck Menchoir like a stone. "Magic does those things, more. But man has been going about it the *wrong way*. Magic does not come from the land, from the animals, from the people. It was *given* to all, to everything. There is a benevolent force that controls this power. That force has decided to change all that we know."

"Is it a god?" Menchoir asked.

"A god?" the master asked whimsically. "For thousands of years men have made them, broken them. Those that chose to study the true power, the true *knowledge* of our existence though, those who call themselves *magi*... always knew, yes? Ever knowing truth the idol-worshipping masses could simply not fathom, eh? That there were no gods, only magic that thrived on the power in both the living and dying of all things. Truly enlightened and learned magi *knew* this."

"Of course we did!" Menchoir said.

"The magi knew *nothing!*" the old man roared. "Denying the simplest of explanations for power they believed the magic ethereal, unconnected from most yet prevalent in all. The most simple and basic answer was ignored, played away as the ramblings of an

ignorant world, and in so doing the greater question was ignored. There is only *one* God, Menchoir. It is He you have to thank for the magic."

The master's words slammed through Menchoir's mind, his way of speaking grating against his senses, all Menchoir had ever known challenged by the only man he'd ever truly believed his superior. "Magic has *died?*" Menchoir asked.

"As you have known it, it dies by the moment. It trickles away and back to Him. Your magi have always known the power. But it was guarded secretly, jealously, even among your own. You believe in it because you can see it, manipulate it. The rest, the brotherhood of man, is not so lucky," the master said.

"You no longer count yourself among us?" Menchoir asked.

"Your master has joined with the true magic, Menchoir. He has found that which he has sought," the master said.

"If you have become one with the magic, how is it that it dies? You speak to confuse me," Menchoir said.

"You have answered your own unspoken question," the master said. His face seemed to grow even more haggard, tired. "God never intended for the knowledge, for *magic*, to be so elusive to His children. But we are far more frail and fragile than all that. When the magi made the study of magic so elusive and elite to the masses, man became more interested in science and their own selfish natures than in His gifts. And in so doing, they made the study of magic a game at best and an affront to humanity at worst. How many times have mothers hid their children from you as you made your way, eh? They whisper about you, worried you will turn their camels to straw. He never intended magic to be so. He intended it for all. Perhaps the magi have their own natures to blame. Perhaps if they would have freely shared the knowledge..."

"I do not see how we can be held to fault," Menchoir said. "Men are ignorant, savage. They choose not to believe. They are incapable of understanding *true* power."

"You are different?" the master asked. "You are a man just as the

shepherd or king. Magic is changing, growing in use but diminishing in selfish desire." He stopped speaking and slowly closed his eyes.

"What is it?" Menchoir asked.

"You have important work. You are young and strong, a man of good heart. You can learn the new ways. Your master's life is too closely wrapped to the old. This task you have undertaken, it is far greater than the coin the brute seeks, the curiosity your scholar looks to slake or your own desire to understand. Your task will change the world. It will change all knowledge. And, it will change magic at its very core," the master said.

Menchoir had forgotten his quest, his party. Even now he could hear the ghosts of their voices calling to him. "Then... please... thank this God for this moment He allowed us."

"The key to unlocking the magic requires you to tell Him that *yourself*. If you seek the knowledge, if you seek the power, you must now *ask* it of Him. Follow His words and ways. Sometimes, the magic will work. Sometimes, it will not. You will not always see it, feel it. But, you must always have *faith* in it. If you have such faith, you and all others that follow will be rewarded." The master rolled the scroll before him tightly and regarded it as if he held a child. "To spread the word of the new magic, God has sent His only Son, to be a beacon to those without faith or cause, for all to use their faith to unlock His magic."

"The mother we seek..." Menchoir started.

"God has deemed His Son be born and grow as all men, so He may know their pains and trials. The woman you seek carries the child of God. You must protect and keep them from harm until the babe is born. Tell your scholar to cast his eyes eastward this night. Now go, and be wary. Just as there are forces for good there are forces that keep the birth of the Son as ill omen for their cause." The master handed Menchoir the scroll. "Your master's last spell; it will require more than your voice to release it."

"I shall never forget you," Menchoir whispered.

"Do not mourn your master, Men-

choir. Have faith in the one God, and know that He watches over you on your quest."

\* \* \*

"Menchoir! Menchoir!" The mage's eyelids fluttered open to see the large glob of water fall from the pitcher held over his head. He sputtered, gasping at the sudden cold. Balthazar smiled like a child caught in a prank.

"I am awake, brute!" Menchoir gasped, shaking his head to clear away the last of the cobwebs. Caspar helped him to unsteady legs. "How long..." he started to ask, the taste of sake still strong on his lips.

"A few moments, Menchoir," Caspar said. The scholar started fussing with his eyelids, lifting them and looking deep into his pupils. "Are you well?"

"I believe so," Menchoir said.

"Menchoir..." Balthazar said. The mage looked at him then back to the scroll in his fist. "You were not holding that before you fell."

"You are as observant as you are oafish, Balthazar," Menchoir said as he slid the scroll inside his robes.

"What happened?" Balthazar asked.

"My master called for our spirits to meet." Menchoir turned to Caspar. "We are to look east this night."

"And what are we looking for?" Balthazar asked, annoyed. "We should be seeking the mother. Herod's proclamation will have spread, and any with a male child will try to leave the city."

"I fail to see the worth in going out to traipse across the desert with no real direction, either. We could easily go one way while the woman goes another," Menchoir said.

"That would be better than standing in this room doing nothing at all!" Balthazar added angrily.

"A thousand pardons," Caspar said, "but we *should* be on our way; east. If that is the direction we are to look, logically that is the direction they will go." The mage and warrior turned and regarded the scholar. Caspar shrugged his shoulders. "Sometimes, the simplest answer is the correct answer," he said.

"And sometimes, the correct answer is not so simple a thing," Men-

choir said, his travelling satchel full of the bits of flora and fauna for his more powerful spells suddenly at hand.

\* \* \*

It had taken more than two hours for them to leave the city, Herod's proclamation having clogged the various egresses as soldiers inspected every bundle and cart. During their waiting Menchoir explained his meeting with his master. Caspar had never ranked matters of faith very highly and continued to question and probe long after Menchoir was forced to repeat himself. For Balthazar, Menchoir's tale was just that. The warrior had no god and had faith only in his sword and the arm that carried it. It was enough for Balthazar to know in the end he could gain some measure of satisfaction and not a small amount of gold by seeing their quest through. He patted his coin purse each time he spoke, the purse that contained one-half his fee paid to him by their mysterious employer.

They had spoken little of that shadowy figure in their time together. Each had been hired separately and each could vividly recall their meeting. But just as each knew these things, each drew a blank when they tried to picture the man's face. Caspar attributed it to a life-long inability to remember faces, though he knew it to be more. The loss of the man's features had actually been one of the reasons Menchoir had stayed with the quest, knowing that such things were rarely the fault of the observer and more likely done by intent. And it was painfully clear that Balthazar could not care less about the face of their employer so long as his coin could be seen. Such uncertainty of the mind made for uncomfortable talk, so each decided to avoid it as much as possible. Now in light of Menchoir's vision, each had come to the conclusion it was perhaps best not to dwell on it further.

\* \* \*

The sun had set by the time they found a discernible track in the shifting sands. They continued east, heartened by the tracks; those of a man

and a mule walking side by side, the latter leaving deep impressions as if weighted. While Balthazar kept his eyes to the ground and Menchoir kept his to the horizon Caspar cast his gaze where it was most comfortable; to the stars. The pinpoints had finally started to show through night's curtain. Every few feet the astrologer would hold his lantern to his charts, mumbling or making slight changes in their course. They kept on this way for a time until Menchoir looked behind them to see the scholar had stopped. Caspar stared, mouth agape, into the sky.

"Looks like stars to me," Balthazar said.

"Caspar..." Menchoir gently shook his shoulder and squinted up, hoping to see what enthralled the scholar.

"There..." Caspar whispered. He dropped his prized chart and pointed to the sky. "Do you see it?"

"I see only stars. I need you to give them meaning," Menchoir said.

"There is a new star." Caspar's arm remained stock-straight, his finger jabbing into the night. The warrior held his hand up as if to shade his eyes and squinted.

"Looks the same to me as it ever has," Balthazar said.

"The stars have remained unchanged for a thousand years, Balthazar," Caspar said, "and yet, there it is. A star that was not there just last night..."

As they looked on, thin tracers of light suddenly shot from the star in all directions, their paths bringing them low to the ground. Several of them sped over their heads, illuminating the night. In the sudden light, the warrior's eye caught movement just ahead. He squinted hard at it and let out a grunt. "There... due east; large enough to be an animal."

Caspar peeled his eyes away from the sky and pulled a small cylinder from his robe. He pointed it east and peered through it. "Not a camel... a donkey. And it is burdened."

The trio set off over the sands moving towards the shape as the sky dimmed back to night. Without warning, Balthazar stopped.

"What..." Menchoir whispered. Balthazar pointed several yards ahead



where a large shape moved just below the surface of the dune.

"Caspar..." Balthazar whispered, pointing at the scholar's lantern. Caspar moved a plate affixed to its side, forcing the light through a small hole. When the beam of light hit the mound it stilled.

"Whatever it is, we have its attention..." Menchoir said softly.

"Keep the light on it," Balthazar ordered. He slid his scimitar from his sash and crept across the sands, taking a less than direct approach towards the end of the light. The warrior closed to within a few feet of the mound then stopped short, the sound of shifting sand hissing from behind. He strained his ears, his arms spread out in anticipation until suddenly he spun his sword and sank it into the sands.

The world went red and hot in that instant. Balthazar screamed as a geyser of flame shot up around his sword like wine past an ill-fitting cork, the force of the eruption throwing him into the air to land several feet away towards his companions.

The shape of a man covered in flames rose up from the sands. Easily half again larger in all dimensions than Balthazar it towered over them. It was smiling. Caspar took in its massive horns and cloven feet and dropped his lantern from nerveless fingers. Menchoir heard Balthazar groan. He was a short distance away from them, between them and the monster. His hair reduced to a smouldering clump, the warrior slowly rose to his feet. Steam and smoke wisped away from his body as he raised his sword and let out a hoarse cry for battle.

"Balthazar! No!" Menchoir cried, his feet already moving. Balthazar seemed not to hear or care. Menchoir's lips moved soundlessly, his hands crumbling a bit of dried ginger. He grabbed the warrior about the shoulders, his hands glowing in a soft blue light. Aided by magic, his strength was enough to throw the warrior behind him to land at Caspar's feet. The creature opened its mouth, sending a stream of flame towards the mage. Menchoir flipped backwards and let his momentum

carry him back as the flames blasted the ground he had occupied.

"I should kill you... magi..." Balthazar groaned as he got to his feet.

"It would have melted you as easily as it did that," Menchoir said, pointing to the warrior's hand.

"Look at your sword!" Caspar said. The flame had warped and melted the blade, making it little more than a steel club.

The demon laughed then looked down at its feet. There in the sand was Balthazar's coin purse. It plucked the pouch from the sand, sniffed it then leered at the group.

"Gold..." it hissed. "So precious..." The demon made a show of licking the leather pouch with the tip of its forked tongue. It cupped the bag in its taloned hand and laughed as flames consumed both bag and metal, gold dripping through its fingers and hissing into the sands. "And so fragile. Just like man." The demon folded its arms across its massive chest and stared down at them. "The Son of the Accursed One is to be born, the hope of *all* His weak, insignificant children, and *this* is what they send? Against *me*? It is good my master did not come. To me, you are nothing. To him, you would have been insult most foul."

"If we are so small, why send you at all? Why not simply have the desert swallow them?" Menchoir asked defiantly. He knew such conversation would do little for them, but the longer they kept the demon occupied the more time they bought the blessed couple to get further away.

"The will of my master is not subject to the question of worms," the demon said.

Menchoir shot a look behind him. Caspar stood only because his legs were locked by fear, his eyes set open as he watched the demon start slowly towards them. Menchoir said a small, silent word of introduction to this new God.

"Prayer?" the demon growled as it stalked near them, sensing Menchoir's silent plea. "You are of the East, magi. What would you know of the Accursed One, eh? He will not listen to heathens and fools. You are godless, worth even less than these other maggots."

Menchoir shoved his hand into his satchel and pulled out a small glass globe, a faint blue mist swirling inside it. He crushed the globe in his hand, wincing as the tiny, razor-like shards sank into his palm while he called out a word in a language long-dead. The swirling vapour mixed with his blood, turning the mist to its colour. It hung in the air a moment then expanded, roiling as the demon neared to cloud the party in its haze. The mist coloured their vision crimson, making the flames from the now-enraged demon seem all the more hellish. But the sudden respite from the sight of the demon was enough to snap Caspar out of his terror-induced coma, bringing him back to the world no less terrified but more or less in control of his senses. Balthazar kept glaring at the hazy shape of the demon through the mists, his near-useless sword clutched at his side.

"I could have..." Balthazar began angrily.

"Got killed?" Menchoir supplied helpfully. "Yes, and us with you."

The demon roared outside, pounding on their now-solid, misty shell.

"What are we to do? Wait until it tires and goes away?" Caspar asked.

"The mist will not last long. At best we have a moment to collect ourselves," Menchoir said.

"It has already taken my gold! I will be damned if I will allow it to slaughter me without battle!" Balthazar growled.

Menchoir kneeled as the demon raged outside. He pulled the scroll from his robe and placed it unopened on his legs. "If you have not noticed, your sword is wasted and the only thing keeping your legs under you is stubborn nature."

"Then what are we to do?" Caspar asked, flinching with each blow to their shell. "The mists are already starting to evaporate!"

"I suggest we call upon a new weapon," Menchoir said.

"Bah! Do something useful with your magic and make my sword whole again! I will make the demon rue this day!" Balthazar said.

"What do you mean?" Caspar interrupted. "The faith you spoke of, to the one God?" Menchoir nodded and folded his hands over the scroll. Cas-

par traded his glance between the seething warrior and the mage before settling himself beside Menchoir. "I will regard this as an experiment," he whispered softly to Menchoir.

Several of the demon's fingers poked through the mists, hissing as they sliced through the ethereal barrier. Balthazar roared and pulled a curved dagger from his sash, bringing it around to slice through the offending digits. But as soon as it hit the demon's skin it melted in a dull red flash in his hand, bits of melted steel dripping onto him. He screamed and dropped to his knees, cradling his hand.

"Nice of you to join us, Balthazar," Menchoir said wryly. Balthazar looked up, pain mixed with hate in his eyes.

"May your gods burn as I do!" Balthazar spat into the sand. "If your god is so powerful, why has he not come to our aid? Eh? If he is so great, why does he allow his son to be in peril?"

"Perhaps we have not asked for His help," Menchoir said.

"Perhaps it is because he does not exist!" Balthazar shot back. He was looking less like a man and more like an over-baked loaf with each passing attack.

The demon's whole hand breached the barrier above them, clawing and reaching at the air over their heads. Caspar sat transfixed for a moment before he caught Balthazar's wounded gaze. "Balthazar, is the demon real?"

"Fah!" Balthazar exclaimed and spat, ducking his head. "As real as my sword when I cleave you in two..."

"If the demon is real, logically there is a hell from which it sprung. Yes?" Caspar interrupted. Balthazar kneeled more deeply in the sand to avoid the probing hand and nodded just slightly at the scholar. "It would stand to reason for hell to exist there must also be heaven. And if there is heaven, a God rules that heaven, just as the demon claims a master in hell, yes? The presence of the demon supports the existence of both hell and heaven. I would suggest we seek it... quickly."

Balthazar grumbled on his weak

companions and tried to mimic the posture of the mage as best his singed body could. Each fell silent in counterpoint to the still-shrieking demon outside.

"Show yourself to me! Show me you are worthy of my worship!" Balthazar challenged at the corners of his mind.

\* \* \*

He found himself on a lone dune under high sun. He was shirtless and armed with his scimitar, both of them whole and new, the sting of wind-borne grit on his heavily scarred and tattooed flesh. A warrior that would've made the demon a dwarf stood before him. He was dressed in a robe of white that shimmered so brightly Balthazar couldn't make out his face. The chest of his robe fluttered open in the desert breezes, revealing the tattoos of a chieftain. Each hand held a scimitar larger and finer than any Balthazar had ever seen.

"It is *you* that must prove yourself worthy to receive *my* blessings, warrior. Come..." his opponent said. Balthazar smiled and brought his scimitar to the fore as the two crashed together in glorious battle.

\* \* \*

Caspar looked about. The workshop was vast, endless. Tables full of odd contraptions sat everywhere. Massive sculptures and tiny portraits sat haphazardly about the place. There were no windows. In their places stood shelves that ran down the length of the room and out of his sight filled with all manner and sizes of tomes and scrolls. His eyes followed up one of the shelves until it ended in an inky blackness across the ceiling. He gasped and stumbled backwards as he beheld a perfect map of the night sky where the ceiling should be. Many of the stars he recognised, but there were many more he'd never seen. In awe of such perfection, he failed to notice the small, bald and bearded man threading toward him from the depths of the laboratory.

"You like the stars?" the man asked, smiling. The sudden words

snapped Caspar's head back to regard him.

"This is... incredible! How..." Caspar said.

"That is a story for which you have not the time, nor the comprehension." A stool suddenly appeared and the old man sat.

"Are you... ah..." Caspar started. The man smiled warmly and picked up a small, half-assembled clock from a table.

"I am all and yet nothing, childe," the man said. "You could consider me a creator, an inventor, an architect like yourself. You could consider me more than that, or less. But in all things, I would at least warrant consideration."

"What is this place?" Caspar asked.

"What you see here is what man is capable of achieving."

Caspar looked around the room, trying to memorise everything he saw. A thought struck as he looked in all directions. "I see no walls here... it seems to just... *go on*..."

He smiled at Caspar. "There are no walls... man was conceived to be limitless in potential. The ceiling is nothing but the heavens since that is where man can reach. Some projects in this room are of my design. You, for example." The old man chuckled softly. "Some represent knowledge man has discovered. As he seeks knowledge and truth, more tomes are written, more inventions are born... and the workshop grows. You sprang from my knowledge, crafted in my image so that you too could seek knowledge."

"Could you not simply *give* man such knowledge? There would be no war, no kings... if all men would have such knowledge..."

"If I did what you suggest, man would never strive, achieve. He would never be forced to a moral choice and he would never develop the curiosity so vital to his existence." He stood slowly, the stool gone. "A question; what would you do if you knew *everything*? All the knowledge world and stars have to offer. I know you as I know all my children. You would shrivel away to nothing. With nothing left to learn, no curiosity to slake? I have placed knowledge

throughout this world and these stars, in the hopes that man would seek it, better themselves... to *learn*. Consider it my own great experiment."

"But that very thing makes proving your existence all the more difficult. Science does not allow for what cannot be proven. If you cannot offer yourself up to study, how do you expect man to follow you, to worship you? You have created paradox," Caspar said.

"I guess I have, eh?" the man said. "*Faith*, my child. Science, technology, crafting... I have given these as tools. Valuing them is of no affront to me. But the intricacies and exacting natures of these things must be placed in balance if they are to lead to true enlightenment. That balance is faith. If a man can balance faith and science, there is nothing he cannot achieve. You have been a teacher, Caspar. Why? Why take the time to teach others?"

Caspar was quiet for a moment. "I enjoy it."

"Why, Caspar?" he asked.

"I take pleasure in seeing others learn."

"And in the process do *you* learn as well?" the old man asked.

"Yes, I suppose I do," Caspar answered.

"Our philosophies are not so different then. I take pleasure in teaching my children. And, just every so often, even *I* learn something from *them*." He chuckled again, this time turning and moving off between the tables.

"Wait!" Caspar said, suddenly remembering the demon. "I have more questions!"

"Then you should seek their answers," the man answered over his shoulder.

"What about your Son? What about the demon?" Caspar asked.

The old man stopped. "My Son is also a crafter and scholar, much like me and much like you, much as He will be in the world of men. He will have important knowledge for you all one day." He started walking again and the room began to swirl around Caspar. "As to the demon, they absolutely *despise* silver... silver and myrrh."

\* \* \*

Menchoir sat in meditation. He called to this God but nothing would come. He asked over and again; no sign, no vision, no voice from beyond. He had done as his master had told him and still no answer would come, no proof of His presence. Balthazar's sudden, pained gasp broke his trance just in time to flatten gracefully as the demon's whole arm broke through the barrier and swept over him. A bright flash of light suddenly flared from the warrior's body, destroying the tattered remains of their protective shell and hurling Balthazar several feet through the air to land behind Caspar, his useless sword burying its blade in the sand nearby. Menchoir pulled his legs beneath him, rolled in the same direction and spun to face the demon in the same motion, nearly bowling Caspar over in the same instant.

"That was a pointless and deadly waste of time!" Menchoir whispered to Caspar as they both looked up into the grinning face of the demon.

"Was it? I found it enlightening," Caspar said. Menchoir took a look behind them at the warrior face-down in the sand.

"The demon has claimed Balthazar," Menchoir reached down and picked his scroll from the sand where it had dropped. "And God has not deemed to aid us. I only hope there is enough magic left to power this."

"Your prayers have gone unanswered!" the demon hissed.

It extended its neck, gnashing its teeth at them. Menchoir opened his master's gift. The scroll was blank. He flipped it over several times, trying to find the spell captured in the skin. He found no words, no arcane symbols.

"It seems they have," Menchoir said, still clutching the empty scroll. He stood quickly and raised a hand as thin, spidery words of magic crawled from his mouth. A glowing ball of bright red energy shot like an arrow and slammed into the demon's chest. It fell back only a few yards, still on its hooves. Caspar stood up beside the magi and calmly slid his travelling pouch to its normal position across his chest. Menchoir's mouth opened

slightly, whispering another string of powerful words.

Caspar leaned over to Menchoir as if they were seat mates at dinner. "Demons *hate* silver and myrrh," he said, as if talking about the dry meat at the table without the host overhearing.

"*What?*" Menchoir exclaimed, the banal statement enough to break his concentration from the spell he had been weaving.

"I have it on good authority that demons hate these things. Do you have any?" Caspar's nonchalance fuelled a dark look from the magi as the demon spread its arms wide and roared at them.

"I have no silver!" Menchoir screamed above the demon's cry. But the seemingly careless manner of the scholar had jolted his mind away from the absolute terror of the moment. He shoved his hand into his satchel of magical components and came up with a fig leaf-wrapped bundle. "I do have myrrh..." He offered it to the scholar along with a look of sheer confusion. They were about to be incinerated in a burst of hell-fire and Caspar was concerned with spices. It seemed a fitting end.

Caspar opened the leaf and palmed the pile of powdered, pungent spice. The demon bent towards them and started to inhale, the breath expanding its chest as the smell of brimstone rushed at them. Tiny flames started to dance from its nostrils as Caspar flicked his wrist, sending the powder into the air. The tiny flecks followed the demon's inhalation deep into its chest. The demon ceased its breath, its eyes growing wide as it took first one then another step backwards. A taloned hand wrapped itself around its neck as if it were choking. It dropped to its knees, coughing great goutts of flame that turned the sand beneath it to glass.

"We have learned something this day, eh Menchoir?" Caspar said, completely unaffected by the sickened demon expelling fire and ash just a few yards away. "Though I feel we should do something else... he will be rather displeased with us once his wind returns."

"How did you know about the myrrh?" Menchoir asked.

"God told me," the scholar said simply. "Did he not speak to you?"

"No," Menchoir answered.

"It was *you* that told us of Him," Caspar said. "If any of us were to find Him, I would have thought..."

"It was not!" Menchoir said. "My spell was not nearly as powerful as I had designed! As my master said, magic is dying!"

The demon ceased its heaving and rose menacingly to its hooves. "Your deaths shall be slow..." it wheezed, "...you will feel the flames of hell on earth before you are consumed by them in the domain of my master!"

"I must concentrate..." Menchoir said, placing his feet wide apart and lowering his head. "I have no spell that will slay this demon. I only hope we can slow him more from his pursuit."

Caspar watched the demon for a moment before his ears caught the pained moan. With his lantern half-buried in the sands behind them, the only light in the desert was from the demon's own flaming skin, enough light to see Balthazar stir behind them. "The warrior lives!" he whispered, more to himself than the chanting mage beside him. Caspar turned back to the demon and watched as it started to close across the sands, though more hesitantly than before. Had the myrrh given it pause? "Menchoir!" Caspar whispered. The mage did not respond, only kept to his chanting. The magi's body had started to glow softly, though Caspar had the notion that in another time such an act from the talented mage would have lit up the night sky. Already, even the glow he had achieved was fading from him though his chanting came more feverish with each passing moment.

"It dies, mage," the demon hissed, "I know it dies. It is fitting that you die with it!" Caspar took the measure of the demon's stride. He was toying with them, moving with deliberate ease to intensify their fear. For all his new-found confidence Caspar was no fool. Their deaths were imminent. Perhaps God had need of a laboratory assistant? He supposed he would find out soon enough. A sudden notion took hold of him, powerful enough to risk grabbing the mage to shake him

from his casting. As he grabbed Menchoir's shoulders and broke his concentration the magical energy he'd been forming released instantly. With no will to control it the power exploded, the shockwaves throwing the pair apart by more than a dozen yards. The demon was taken by surprise as much as the mortals at the explosion. Powerful, but only enough to give him pause.

"Caspar! Damn you to the abyss!" Menchoir said as he struggled to his feet, hand still clutching the useless scroll. "If you would have let me finish the spell..."

"The demon stands! The magic would have done nothing then as it did now!" Caspar shot back as he half-walked, half-crawled towards the magi. "That power is *gone*, Menchoir! Even I could see it failing."

The demon stood laughing at the mortals as they crawled across the sands. "I have had my fill of this, however amusing it may be." It breathed twin plumes of fire through its nose and started at them, its pace far quicker than before.

"Menchoir!" Caspar yelled. "Your master! You spoke to him! You didn't visit your master! That was your vision! Menchoir... God *did* speak to you! What did he say?"

Menchoir thought back. It had not truly been his master, at least not his mortal master, had it? He cursed himself a fool. There were so many questions he'd have asked. The new magic was faith, faith in the one God; unseen and untouchable. He'd been given the scroll, but his own words alone were not enough. Was the magic he held in his hand the last vestiges of a dying power? Or was it the first spell of this new magic, gifted from the one God?

He held the scroll up before him and turned to face the demon. Closing his eyes, he spoke first to himself then to the one God. His vision explained it to no one other than himself, he found he did have faith in this One God, and that he could believe in His power. He'd sought to fight the demon with what little remained of the old magic when he should've had faith enough to embrace the new. He prayed there to the one God, acknowledging Him and the power that

faith in Him could unleash. When he opened his eyes the scroll had sprouted a single word in its centre.

It stopped there in the sand just as Menchoir's eyes shot open, the demon feeling the power of his prayer. More importantly, it knew there'd been an answer. Its face a mask of hate it turned in mid-stride and went straight for the magi. Caspar cried out and tried to get to Menchoir before the demon did, knowing he wouldn't make it. But just as Caspar had been upon awakening from his own prayers there in the desert Menchoir had become now. His face was peaceful, unlined and seemed to glow with an inner light visible in the desert gloom. The magi raised his hand as the demon let out a tortured roar, the horrendous sound preventing the word he read from the scroll from reaching Caspar's ears.

A beam of intense, white light shot from the magi's hand, the same light that'd tossed Balthazar away when their magical barrier had been shredded. The light slammed into the demon with the force of a thousand suns, shoving it backwards through the sand and washing out its own hellish light. The glow around the demon slowly faded, leaving a softly-glowing yet solid chunk of ice where it had once stood.

"By God..." Caspar said.

"Yes," Menchoir said as he walked to where the scholar had stopped. "By God."

"Are you... well?" Caspar asked, tearing his eyes from the confined demon to examine Menchoir.

"As well as I have ever been friend Caspar, perhaps more. We should go to them now. Mark your map so that we may return for Balthazar's body..." Menchoir started then stopped. A tiny red glow had started in the centre of the ice, a glow that was intensifying by the moment. Great cracks formed and just as quickly as it had been imprisoned the demon was free in a shower of icy slivers. It stood a moment, its chest heaving violently as it shook off small bits of ice and water from its crimson skin as if they were acid.

"So much for that," Caspar said. "Would you happen to have another scroll?"

"No," Menchoir answered. He looked down at his empty hand, the scroll no longer there.

"Well, he does not look happy with us," Caspar observed.

"I would think not." Menchoir watched the demon remove the last bits of steaming ice and start for them. But it didn't shine with firelight as it had before and with each step it took its flaming skin faded that much more. "He is... weaker."

"But he is not weak enough for the likes of you two!" a deep, growling voice called from behind them.

"Balthazar!" Caspar exclaimed. The warrior stood over his plunged sword as his savaged skin reformed and his hair grew back to its wild and proper length before their eyes in the dimming light of the demon's form. He reached down and gripped the now-jewelled pommel of his weapon and yanked it up into the air, catching it as the hilt swung back down to him in a graceful arc. The formerly worthless blade now glowed with that same light, restored as if fresh from the forge.

"Demon!" Balthazar roared, exulting in his healed body and perfect sword. "God has granted His favour! I am His sword, His enemies mine! Face me and die honourably! Turn from me and die a coward!"

The demon regarded the warrior only a moment before taking a breath and roaring fire at him. But instead of jetting across the sands the flames shot only a few paces away and disappeared. The demon tried again and was rewarded with only a gust of sulphurous air. Balthazar smiled wickedly and charged across the dune, his battle cry ending only when he came within his sword of the beast.

It raged at him, massive claws searching for a chink in the warrior's spirit. With each attempt Balthazar was able to find the demon's own weaknesses. With each rage-fuelled attack, Balthazar snaked his scimitar past the demon's fury. Caspar and Menchoir watched their dance of death as the demon's blood sizzled like fat on the warrior's blade. When finally the demon managed to land its claws across Balthazar's chest he paused only for a moment to watch

the flaming scars before launching his own attack, his laughter chilling the onlookers almost as much as the demon's had done.

"He is... not *right*, is he?" Caspar asked Menchoir quietly, nodding towards the berserker warrior. Menchoir didn't even look away from the battle and gave only a slight nod in reply.

Moments later the beast made its last mistake. With a cry of victory Balthazar ran his scimitar into the demon's gut and shoved upward, slicing the demon's heart in two. The demon opened its mouth but was cut short by an explosion that made the desert night as day. Caspar and Menchoir shielded their eyes against the sudden glare, and when they looked again the desert night had returned.

"Balthazar?" Menchoir called out quietly into the suddenly still night.

"Do not fear, mage," Balthazar answered from the gloom. "I am still with you. Someone needs to protect you weaklings."

Caspar scanned the dune until he found a pinprick of light winking back at him. He walked to it and plucked his still-burning lantern from the sands. Caspar turned the shutter completely open and held the lamp in the air, revealing nothing more than their tracks. No trace of the demon was left save bits of glass from its myrrh-induced sickness glinting in the lamplight, that and something that glowed metallic on the spot where the demon had met its fate.

"What is that?" Caspar asked, focusing the shutter on the lump in the sand. Balthazar reached down, picked it up and bit at a corner of the roughly-shaped brick.

"Gold!" Balthazar said breathlessly. "Demons turn to gold when they are slain!" He held the bar aloft in one hand, his perfect sword in the other. "You are truly a just and great God!" he exclaimed to the heavens.

"Well, that is one way to ensure Balthazar's sword in His service," Menchoir said.

"I would not want to be a demon within a thousand dunes of Balthazar," Caspar said. He produced one of his maps and after a few moments and several glances to the new star he nodded. "Still East."

"What lies that way?" Menchoir asked as they started their trek across the dunes once more.

"There is a small town. Bethlehem, I believe they call it and not so far from here. If she is heavy with child we should seek there first. Perhaps they have taken refuge."

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They found the inn almost immediately in their path at the edge of the town. Men both rough and refined, scholars and shepherds and all manner in between and animals by the score littered the ground outside the stables. They picked their way through the crowd and stopped where a young boy sat on the ground, a small drum made of stretched goat skin over an earthen pot on his folded legs.

"Child... what is all this?" the mage asked.

"You were not called here? Did the angels not appear before you? The son of God has been born this night, there in the stables!" the boy said, his face alive with joy.

"It seems we have found the proper place and all is well," Caspar said.

"We should see for ourselves. We have not come this far to take the word of a child," Balthazar said.

"Agreed," Menchoir said. The crowd parted as they continued on, the warning whispers about the approach of the magi and the warrior leaping yards ahead of them. By the time they made their way into the stable most of the people had respectfully made room, giving them access to the stall where the Son had been born.

"Who are you?" the new mother asked, her eyes narrowing at the sight of the huge sword at Balthazar's hip.

"We are..." Balthazar started before Caspar stepped up between the warrior and mage.

"We are from the East," Caspar interrupted, nodding towards Menchoir as a way of explaining his facial features, a type little seen in these lands. "We have heard the call and have come to give our good tidings to the Son of God, King of all men."

"You are magi?" a tall, bearded man asked from the other side of the cradle.

"Uh, yes. Magi," Balthazar said,

awkwardly sliding his robes to cover the hilt of his sword.

"Gifts we bring to the newborn Son," Caspar said, trying to cover Balthazar's weak explanation. "Tokens, really," he added to the dark looks his companions gave him. He fumbled in his pouch and came up with another, smaller pouch. "This is frankincense. It can aid in clearing congestion and bad humours of the lungs." He handed the pouch to the mother and stepped back, avoiding the eyes of his companions.

"Yes... hmm..." Menchoir mumbled. He rooted around in his own satchel and came out with another fig-wrapped parcel. "This is myrrh. Among other things, it has the power to... ward off evil spirits." He handed this to the father and stepped back respectfully from the cradle. The babe slept peacefully, far more peacefully than he would've expected one so fresh from the womb.

Balthazar kept looking between

the parents, the babe and sidelong at his companions. "I have nothing to give!" he whispered harshly. "I have only my sword! My gift of slaying the demon should be more than enough..."

"You have more than your sword," Menchoir reminded him. Balthazar's eyes went wide, his sash suddenly heavy where the glob of gold hung inside it.

"You cannot mean... I will be left with nothing from this!"

"Nothing?" Caspar asked. "You saved the life of the Son of God. That would be *something* I would think."

Balthazar's eyes narrowed as he swore ever-so-softly in his native tongue. At that, the child's eyes flicked open to regard them. If he hadn't known better, Menchoir would've thought the baby was amused by Balthazar's inner turmoil. The warrior sighed heavily, reached up under his sash and pulled out the fist-size bar of gold. "To help provide

for the Son," he mumbled roughly. The father exchanged looks with his wife as Balthazar set the gold down beside the makeshift cradle.

"Magi... it is too much! We cannot accept such..."

"Please!" Balthazar said through clenched teeth, a sidelong glance to his snickering companions. "I *insist*."

The parents nodded gratefully. "You have our thanks for your fine gifts. I am sure they will all be put to good use."

"It is we who should thank you, for bringing the new King among us," Caspar said earnestly.

"We should go now. I am sure the family would like a chance to rest," Menchoir said. The three said their goodbyes and left the stable, passing among the growing throng and back into the cool desert night, walking to the tune of Balthazar's grumbling.

"*Gifts we bring...*" Balthazar whined in imitation of Caspar. "*Tokens, really...*"



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# Inn of the White Cat: a Tale of Tiana

Richard K. Lyon &  
Andrew J. Offutt

“Here, kitty kitty!”

As Darganda of Reme was not a skilled thug, he specialised in the robbery and murder of drunken sailors. It was hardly a rewarding occupation; oft by the time his victims were drunk enough that he dared attack, they had little left worth stealing. Indeed, Darganda had done death on five men this month to so little profit that he'd have starved by now, were it not for his second occupation or rather “occupation”: cat butcher.

Once again he lurked in an alley behind a tavern in Reme, chief port and capital of Ilan. His stomach was growling, and it was too early in the evening for seamen to be helpless with drink, and Darganda was pleased to see himself approached by a cat. The wiry man fingered his knife eagerly. Keen of edge and needle-pointed, it was a true thug's weapon. Darganda was no warrior to keep his blade all shiny and eye-catching; it was dull and lacklustre as the eyes of his habitual victims. Few had seen the blade, though many had felt it. They did not remember.

“Here kitty kitty – come here and let Darganda cut your darling throat.”

He saw that the animal was sleek, well fed, without scar or blemish. Interestingly enough, appropriately enough – as Darganda lurked behind the Inn of the Sign of the White Cat – the fur of this cat was pure white, and rich as sable. Clearly this was no alley beast, but the pampered pet of some aristocrat, a veritable god among cats. He waited. It continued to pace toward him, with tail high while it stared at him with large luminous eyes green as gems. Musing that the pretty thing would yield a tender stew indeed, Darganda was startled to note that it wore some sort of necklace.

*This'll be the first time I ever robbed a cat!*

He reached forth his arms and the cat, obviously expecting to be petted, hopped into them. Darganda cradled the animal in one arm while he drew his knife. It was then that he received the next to last surprise of his life; he looked closely at the cat's necklace.

The man expected a cut glass trinket worth a few coppers. Instead he gazed, intoxicated, upon a faultless diamond of a thousand winking facets, wide as a man's thumb and

blasting with internal fire. *A king's ransom*, Darganda thought, for his thoughts, like his sparse converse, went little beyond the most standard of clichés. The sale of this treasure – here, in his arms! – would bring more gold than a man could carry! The feet of the wiry little thug of Reme were set on the road of Empire, sure!

Like many another worthless harbour rat, Darganda imagined himself a great man denied opportunity by cruel circumstance. Now destiny seemed to open its door. Bustling to enter, he saw himself as a successful bandit chieftain, and then as a robber baron: general of a vast conquering army, he burned, pillaged, enslaved whole nations. He dreamed of himself as emperor and visualised scores, countless beautiful slave-girls to do with as he pleased. No no: noblewomen, for was he not emperor?

The myriad vainglorious dreams burst like bubbles, in the alley behind the Inn of the Sign of the White Cat.

All this was provided he was not killed and robbed of the jewel before he departed this alley! With his new wealth, every man was his enemy. *Every face that of an enemy*, he

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thought; *every hand raised against me! All will want to steal my treasure from me!*

His rat's eyes ranged their gaze up and down the alley to assure himself that it remained deserted. A bit of lamplight crept from a high rear window of the tavern. The only other source of light was the full moon, a silver skull suspended high in the sky. The tavern's rear door represented a threat; at any moment it might disgorge attackers. Hugging his cat, his prize and his treasure, Darganda moved deeper into the shadows. It was imperative that the white cat die silently.

"Nice kitty, kitty."

Darganda petted the cat, which purred luxuriously. Its large green eyes stared luminously into Darganda's. Like the diamond the cat's eyes seemed to hold hot fire prisoned within. Staring into them, Darganda did not notice that the diamond was changing. One by one, each of its thousand white facets was turning into a blood-red star.

The cat stared, the diamond blazed, and the thug raised his knife. He placed sharp edge to pulsing throat.

"Nice kitty, this won't hurt you a bit."

His words were entirely true. A single swift movement drew knife's edge across throat, severing the jugular vein. Blood bubbled. The cat sprang from the man's arms and Darganda collapsed into the filth of the alley. It was then that Darganda made his tardy discovery, the last surprise of his life: the throat he had just cut was his own.

While his blood poured forth onto the ground, he saw the cat clean itself of the few droplets that had spattered its gleaming coat. Though Darganda's eyes closed then, his ears heard for another moment. The last sound he heard was the cat: it was lapping and purring as if drinking the finest cream.

Its meal finished, the cat turned from the corpse. Fastidiously it cleansed its whiskers and button nose of scarlet stains and, with the easy natural grace of its kind, paced down the alley until it was beneath the tavern window. An effortless leap car-

ried the animal up onto the sill. There perched the white cat, surveying the Inn of the White Cat.

The scene within presented a paradox. The tavern's patrons were pirates, hard and gristly and grizzled sharks of the sea. Yet seated in the place of highest honour at the very head of the Table of Captains was – a woman, of both youth and beauty. Her hair was misty sunset and her eyes flashing emeralds; a black cloak was furled back to display a lush body sparsely clad in a tight green shirt and short skirt, both of silk.

A newcomer might well wonder why this choice morsel remained untouched in the very midst of a hungry wolf pack. A more discerning eye would provide the answer: those round arms concealed muscle and the woman's beauty drew attention from strength and speed. Too, the hilts of the rapier and dagger at her belt were worn from use. All were wolves here; one happened to be a vixen.

It was a measure of the daring of Tiana, captain of *Vixen*, that she left her crew behind and came alone to such a den. This night she was manifestly enjoying herself. Her fellow sea-wolves listened with awe to her adventures, roared at her jests and ribald jokes, and were fervently diligent in keeping her wine-cup brimmed. This homage she accepted as her due, for Tiana knew she was the best of the pirates who sailed from Reme.

She knew what she looked like, too, and was well pleased with the knowledge; naturally, these men cherished some childish plan to get her helpless with drink and rape her – for after all, she thought, who did not! But she knew too that she could and would drink them all under the table. They were only men.

"D'ye think it be true, this belief some hold that ships and buildings have their geniuses," an overweight corsair wondered aloud, so that there is a black sword presiding over my ship, *Black Sword*, and a vixen that's the soul and spirit and protector of your ship, cap'n Ty-annee, and – oh, say a white cat that's the soul and guardian spirit even of this inn?"

"Huh," another said, a man whose skull bore more scars than hair. He

sloshed a bit of his ale in picking up the mug. "If the White Cat had a guardian spirit, it'd be doing something about the place's becoming a den of pirates and the stories of good seamen disappearing around here!"

All laughed, for they were pirates all, and their host nervously wiped his hand in his apron. The trouble with these damned boisterous murderous scarred hard-drinking pirates was that their money was so good.

Tiana lifted high her mug without spilling a droplet of wine, despite its just having been filled to the brim by a yellowshirted, hairy-chested ox who'd dreamed of her for years – and who now watched not her face or arm or the mug but the interesting lines of stress that leaped up in her blouse with her movement.

"HAH!" she cried. "I know not about your *Black Sword*, Mandias, but as for my ship – I am the vixen of *vixen!*"

And again laughter rose loud, and the white cat completed its observations.

It jumped down and walked unnoticed toward a dark corner of the inn. There squatted Arond, a former pirate turned beggar by one excellent swordcut several years ago; now he waited for such food as fell to the floor. This he did by smell and touch, for his eye sockets were dark empty holes in his head. The cat halted before the beggar and stared up at his face. The diamond on its neck was a shining white – that was slowly turning red like a crystal goblet being filled with crimson wine. Somehow the blind man sensed the cat's silent approach, and had anyone noticed they'd have seen he was frightened by what he sensed.

None noticed. Tiana held all attention; Tiana and the goblets and mugs on the Captain's Table. She had been asked to relate how she'd despoiled the Tomb of Kings up in Calancia of Nevinia, and she did love to tell that tale, assuring all that she'd known no fear not even when buried alive or menaced by the ghouls that awaited her within Nevinia's good earth.

No one saw Arond's ugly face while his fear became terror. He drew breath to scream, but his face went blank and his cry emerged only as a



muted whimper that was hardly as loud as Mandias's sudden burst of laughter, across the room. Rising slowly, Arond walked to the rear door of the White Cat. The white cat followed closely, tail high. Arond was not feeling his way; he walked as swiftly and surely as a sighted man. He opened the door unerringly and he and the cat passed into the alley. No one saw. The cat's tail-tip twitched as it followed the blind former pirate to the bloodless corpse of Darganda.

Even a sighted man could not have detected the thug's knife in the darkness and filth of the alley; Arond picked it up without hesitation.

As he walked back to the inn's door, the cat sprang onto the windowsill. It sat once more surveying the tavern, tail moving only at the tip. The White Cat's vein-faced proprietor was just taking away the empties in exchange for the new crocks and jugs of wine and ale he set upon the Captain's Table.

"You were entirely naked?" This from Cap'n Barkis, called the Weasel.

"I had a ribbon in my hair," Tiana said blithely, and eyes rolled.

Three doors holed the inn's walls: front, rear, and side. While Tiana continued with her story, a man entered by each door, simultaneously. By the rearward exit Arond returned, to move toward the Captain's Table in an uncanny manner: unseeing yet unerring. In truth, his walk was the old confident swagger he'd affected as one of the sea's boldest pirates. He'd been a bold one, aye, before he had several years ago forgot himself and sought to seize the ship of his fellow corsair Caranga, whom Arond had dared call Black Caranga.

In by the side door, meanwhile, came a man unknown to the pirates of Reme; a tall, slender, hawk-faced fellow he was, with dead eyes as cold as a virgin's bed. He walked with an oddly liquid limp; the lean body shifted ultra-lithely from side to side as though he were powerless to control it.

He went unnoticed, as did Arond, because of the advent of the third man.

This one thrust himself boldly through the front doorway, where he stood a moment to survey the place.

Though he was not over-tall, his broad powerful shoulders seemed to fill the doorway. Grey traces gleamed in his black, tightly curly hair. Otherwise he was as a slice of night confidently entering the White Cat; his face and bare chest, his loose leggings and boots were all black as coal.

Striding into the tavern as though he were its owner, he bellowed greeting to fellow pirates. They called back in happy camaraderie: "Ho, Caranga! About time!"

The white woman and the black man could not have been in greater contrast save had she been blonde; yet she smiled and called, "Father! You're just in time! Do try Cartro's roast beef – it's truly excellent tonight!"

The newcomer thus addressed glanced at the inn's host, smiled, and nodded. Cartro bustled to his kitchen. The flame-haired pirate queen was starting to create a place for Caranga when an expressionless voice spoke, from her right.

"Captain Tiana Highrider, I have something for you."

She turned questioning face to the stranger. While his eyes looked at her with neither emotion nor recognition, he extended a scroll of parchment. Tiana automatically reached for it – and the attack came, a sudden and complete surprise. Arond sprang.

The stranger had no chance to evade the knife the blind man thrust unerringly into his heart. Whirling, the beggar stabbed at Tiana. She was just able to twist aside and grasp his wrist. She forced the arm down while her knee shot up. An audible snap accompanied the breaking of Arond's arm. Yet Arond's hand remained fisted around the knife while with his other hand he reached for the woman's neck.

Tiana dared not release the knife-hand, broken or no. She stepped toward her attacker. As Arond's left hand closed about her throat, she kicked him in the groin with a small foot shod in a large, square-toed boot. The murderous beggar showed no sign of having noted the blow that was a standard part of Tiana's fighting repertoire – and always effective. Not this time. Arond's fingers con-

tracted about her throat like iron bands while his broken arm strained to drive the knife at her.

While Tiana fought horror and death, the man she'd called father was far from idle. He charged with a bellow, scattering men and tables like a bull elephant on the rampage. As Arond's fingers squeezed tighter about Tiana's throat, the burly man's heavy cutlass flashed up and down to sever the beggar's arm just above the wrist.

"I should have killed you that other time, damn you! My sweet Tiana told me I – Susha's paps!"

Without the slightest expression of pain, Arond dropped like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

His fingers, meanwhile, continued to contract about Tiana's neck. She tore at the severed hand while her face darkened. If anything, the thing's strength and lust to kill had increased with its disconnection from its arm. She could not breathe. Her lungs were afire and the lights of pain flashed before her eyes.

With the world a swimming blur, she somehow managed to force her fingers beneath the crushing thumb. Only by pulling back with all her strength did she break the strangling clutch. Instantly the hand was limp and lifeless.

Immediately Tiana squatted by the body of Arond. Her considerable skill at battlefield surgery was of no use, she swiftly ascertained; no life remained in the beggar.

"This death," she muttered, "is as unnatural as the life of his hand."

He showed no wounds that should have proven instantly fatal; in any case she knew that the body always struggled to retain life, if only briefly. The beggar her foster-father had once blinded – in self-defence, without having sense enough to give him another stroke, damn it – had shown no pain, no struggle. The moment he could no longer attack, his life had ended.

"It's almost as if... as if he was discarded," she muttered; "a broken tool no longer useful to... the owner." She looked up, frowning, as two big black hands came down to her.

Caranga helped her up. "Well,

daughter, your sweet old father saved your life this time!"

"Please... father," she snapped, "I'd rather do it myself!"

"But this *dog* attacked you!"

"He'd not have done, if you'd killed him years ago instead of letting him go because he was blind and... *helpless*? Besides, if you'd just given me a minute, I'd have disarmed him. Then he could have answered my questions."

"What questions?"

"To begin with – how does a man without eyes see so perfectly?"

"My dear nose-y daughter," Caranga snorted, "stick to honest piracy like a good fellow, and leave black mystery alone!"

"You're a fine one to use 'black' as an adjective, my dear interfering fa—"

"Captain Tiana," the flat expressionless voice said, from behind Caranga. "I have something for you."

The reformed cannibal turned respectable pirate whirled; he and his adopted daughter stared at the stranger. He still stood upright despite the stab wound – which was bleeding only a little. With a "Here," he placed the scroll in Tiana's hand. "For you." Then he lay down on the floor on his back. He straightened his legs with the thighs together, closed his eyes, and folded his arms over his chest. And he was motionless.

"G'night Caranga, Tiana," Captain Mandias of *Black Sword* said, and in departing he started a general movement throughout the White Cat.

Caranga did not answer; swearing under his breath, he had squatted to examine the supine messenger. He heard his daughter's awed voice.

"Has all the universe gone mad? Arond should not have died and did, on the instant. That one's wound should have been instantly fatal. For that matter – father? Why did he bleed so little?"

Caranga ended his examination and straightened. "Did you note this man when he entered – how he walked?"

"Only as he approached me. He had an odd limp. His upper body seemed to – to slip from side to side."

"Ah yes. So I'd expect – his spine is broken. Was broken. To answer your questions: if the universe has not

gone mad, this inn has, and I for one will no longer be a patron. Your, ah, message-bearer's wound was not fatal, and he bled so little because... this man has been dead for several hours." Caranga watched her face closely. She took what he said; he had raised her well to join the family business, and she was strong, for all that she'd been born a duke's bastard and left to die. "Now, daughter, if you will take my advice for once: burn that scroll, unopened. Whatever this evil affair is, we're best out of it. And here. The White Cat's gone as bad as the Smiling Skull we used to frequent – till you burned it."

The roast beef she had praised was a cold heavy lump in Tiana's stomach. Although the night was cool and three doors hung open, she was sweating and her mouth was dry. Tiana was vain of her courage, far too vain ever to make conscious admission of fear. Her voice emerged angry.

"I'm not about to hoist the surrender flag. We've won. There's an explanation, somewhere."

"In the mind of a sorcerer or demon!" Caranga gestured sweepingly to show her an empty tavern. Who's to see the flag of surrender? These flea-bitten curs have run away with their tails between their legs. White men were never cut out to be pirates – they know it's ill to see what we've seen and they flee lest the dark powers ensnare them. I've no curiosity about that scroll."

Tiana said, "Dung!" And then, "By the mud on the back of the Turtle that bears the world..."

Then her voice and face softened: "Dear father. As usual you are doubtless right... but do tell me this: were you alone, which would be stronger, your prudence or your curiosity?"

"The dead do not walk for friendly purpose, Tiana!"

"No and you didn't answer me, either, old fearless."

"Oh all right, open the Susha-blasted thing and *then* we'll burn it!"

The scroll was sealed with wax; before breaking the seal, Tiana examined it. Some figure had been impressed in the wax. Narrowing her eyes, she peered more closely.

"The impression's poor and not recognisable."

"Let me see," Caranga said. "Ha! There may be grey in my hair, but my eyes are still keen. This is the face of a cat, daughter. Here, see?"

Snatching back the scroll, Tiana broke the seal and unrolled the parchment. She stared. Caranga waited. Tiana only looked about, and returned her staring gaze again to the bit of parchment. Frowning, Caranga moved to her side to see what sort of message had been so important that a dead man had been returned to bear it.

"Sweet Susha's... feet!" he muttered, and swallowed to cover the little quaver in his voice.

The "message" contained drawings. At the top: a white cat, seated on nothing, gazed down. Below: a one-handed man with empty eye sockets lay sprawled, while nearby lay another, on his back, neatly composed in death with his legs straight and his arms folded.

Moments later the two pirates departed the inn with considerable alacrity, while Cartro the proprietor hurried to the Captains' table to slap out a little blaze that consumed a bit of parchment.

Cartro had no more business of the sharks of the sea after that – and no more visits from the Guard, for no more sailors were found dead nearby – but he did not long mourn his loss of business. As if by magic the better people – indeed, the best! – of Ilan discovered his inn, and Cartro waxed prosperous, and fatter, and redder of face, and took on several aides, all of whom were required to handle his business. One of them, a pale lovely blonde who ever affected about her neck a black ribbon set with a large handsome piece of clear, faceted glass, fair took over the place so that Cartro left it her when he succumbed to the demands of his ever-more-gross body on a heart that at last stopped to rest. It's a good place for wayfarers to stop, now, and there is surely naught unusual about the fact that most in the Inn of the Sign of the White Cat call its proprietress simply the Cat Lady.

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# Newton Braddell and His Inconclusive Researches into the Unknown: the Cruellest Month

John Greenwood

Within minutes the walkers, chilled and exhausted from their night's march, were surrounded by questioners. I was not alone in casting doubt on their claims, but the messengers were adamant: the population of City Hall had not dropped a single point during the day-long Punggol onslaught. To be precise, it had increased, for one Citihallian child had been born, either on the slopes of the volcano, or in a similar underground shelter to ours. The messengers had no further details of this child's inauspicious entry to the world, but apparently mother and baby were both fine.

Apart from this the most serious medical emergency was a broken leg, and this more than likely caused by a malfunctioning pair of hiking boots. A few cuts, grazes and twisted ankles made up the rest of the casualty list.

Was it possible? Had none fallen victim to the Punggol? We had all witnessed the terror of the bombing raid, and I, who had first hand experience of this war-like civilisation, remained sceptical. My Citihallian friends were less inclined to disbelief, and their astonishment quickly turned to relief. The refugees wept for joy

and hugged one another with abandon. I too found myself embraced by several ecstatic Citihallians, apparently at random, including Mr Yewtree, my acquaintance of the previous evening (although I sought in vain for the familiar face of Miss Lavender in that happy crowd).

"It's a miracle!" cried Mr Yewtree, enfolding me in an alarming bear-hug. "They're all safe! Every one!"

"But that is statistically impossible!" I protested as I tried to free myself from his embrace without appearing ungracious.

"It's unlikely, that I grant you. Impossible is a very strong word. But let us not quibble over semantics. My friends and family are safe. That is all that matters!"

I decided not to pursue the argument, nor to point out that it hardly behove one so apparently devoted to the rational life to speak so unguardedly of miracles. I saw that a great burden of anxiety had been lifted. I had not considered it before, but inevitably families and friends had been separated in the pandemonium of the evacuation.

For the rest of the morning the Citihallians celebrated their incon-

ceivable good fortune. Cherished bottles hastily grabbed in the evacuation were now uncorked and circulated freely, along with tidbits of food hoarded away in rucksacks. A slightly crazed atmosphere descended on the camp, and the expedition leaders had to remind their fellow citizens that thrift was still the order of the day, nor were we any further from danger than we had been a mere twelve hours ago. Certainly this wild-eyed revelry appeared out of character for a race who had presented themselves as models of sensible restraint. Perhaps it was the novelty of their surroundings that had upset their serene poise, for few Citihallians had set foot outside the safety of their hidden city before. Yes, City Hall had its artificially maintained gardens, its acres of underground lamp-lit crop fields (that is, until yesterday), but how could such meagre imitations compare to a pine forest that populated whole mountain ranges from horizon to horizon? There was no way to predict the effect of such spaces on minds that had known only the walls and warmth of Mount City Hall's interior.

Then again, one could not under-

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estimate the trials the Citihallians had undergone, and their extraordinary triumph against the threat of annihilation. The vicissitudes of fortune exert a heavy psychological burden on the most level-headed, and the Citihallians were nothing if not that, with their dogged pursuit of sanity, enlightenment and peaceful co-existence.

Lastly, I could not help but notice the unusual quantities of sedatives, sleeping aids, anti-vertigo and anti-anxiety medicines consumed by my fellow campers. Combined with liquors of uncertain strength and vintage, this pharmaceutical cocktail was no doubt partly responsible for the euphoric abandon of the survivors. Despite the warnings of more sober onlookers, rations calculated to last the rest of the week were squandered in an impromptu feast that lasted until well after noon, when most of the Citihallians slouched back to their bunks for an extended siesta. Lacking a bunk of my own, I was one of the few still awake, and who had not over-indulged in the recent beano. Indeed I had hardly eaten a morsel since leaving City Hall, and cannot deny that part of the reason for my staying up late was the hope of snatching a few solitary moments to eat in peace, using my hands for utensils instead of the hated wheel I had not mastered, to the polite consternation of some of my companions and the amusement of others.

The use of that singular item of crockery and cutlery combined was mandatory at every meal. Whoever eschewed the wheel to eat with his bare hands was regarded as at best infantile, at worst bestial. Such was the strength of this culinary custom that I found myself quite unable to defy it. Unequal to the task of feeding myself from the elaborate, spinning metal dish. I preferred to fast through regular mealtimes rather than expose myself to further embarrassment.

My plight was not made any easier by the revelation that there was not one wheel, but several designs in circulation at the camp, some of which incorporated indentations for sauce which would, in defter hands than mine, run out through radiating channels under the influence of centrifu-

gal force to flavour each dish in turn. Faced with such complications, I abandoned my attempts to master Citihallian table manners.

Through such a combination of circumstances and my own personal diffidence was I reduced to skulking around the kitchens while the rest of the campers slept, wolfing down plates of leftovers with my hands, and hoarding away some of the less perishable dishes amongst my luggage to enjoy later, in the small hours.

Of course Raffles, the curious limbless mammal I had adopted as a pet, had no such qualms, and not being subject to the same strictures as his human master, gorged himself on my leavings. This had the one advantage that my own apparent lack of appetite was scarcely noticed by my neighbours at the communal dining table, as the insatiable snake-mouse made sure my plate was always scraped as clean as anyone's. The difficulty lay in persuading Raffles to remain discreetly in my pocket and await the tidbits I could feed him while other eyes were averted. The keeping of pets was known to the people of City Hall, but generally regarded as a pursuit for children. Hence Raffles was tolerated by my hosts, even if they did consider him an affectation of his eccentric owner.

From the expression on Mr Yewtree's face when he discovered me that afternoon, cramming my mouth with tiny rolls of unleavened bread, he would have applied a far stronger adjective than eccentric. I immediately pretended that I had been cleaning away the leftovers, and Mr Yewtree, to save my embarrassment, went along with it, although neither of us was really deceived.

"Not tired?" he asked.

I shook my head, although the truth was quite the opposite. The stresses of the previous day, combined with the hardness of the cabin-floor, had left me craving sleep, but the need for sustenance took precedence.

Mr Yewtree merely frowned at my gesture, and presently I recalled that, among the Citihallians, nods and shakes of the head did not equate to assent and dissent, and of course my Dover and Somerset was powerless

to translate such non-verbal language. I tried to explain to Yewtree that these gestures were so fundamental to many Earth cultures that they could not be easily shaken off. There was no obvious counterpart in the customs of City Hall, although a system of hand gestures did exist, the scope and subtlety of which had so far eluded me.

One of those gestures fluttered now across Mr Yewtree's fleshy fingers as he smiled a little ruefully.

"I cannot recall ever encountering a more highly developed delusional system," he commented. "So your belief in your extraterrestrial origins remains unshaken, does it?"

What answer could I give him? I turned away to disguise my irritation and pretended to busy myself with washing the dirty food wheels.

"Oh, leave that to the others," said Yewtree. "They can clean up their own mess. Why don't we take a stroll outside?"

The idea was an appealing one, but the thought of the Punggol warships made me hesitate. We had been warned to stay out of sight in our underground bunker until the City Elders gave the all clear.

"What if we're spotted?" I asked.

Mr Yewtree shrugged. "The forest will shield us from any airborne observers," he said, "and we will be wearing our camouflage suits." A hint of a smile around his eyes suggested that Mr Yewtree had as little faith in such devices as I had. They would be little match for the Punggols' surveillance equipment. I had already seen for myself the technological sophistication of those aggressive purple spheres, and remained baffled as to our continued survival. Was it tempting fate to venture out so early?

"Come on!" urged Mr Yewtree. "If we are destined to be vaporised by a Punggol missile, then it will happen sooner or later. One little stroll in the woods can't make any difference to that."

While his remarks struck me as fatalistic, I agreed, and minutes later we found ourselves enclosed on all sides by some unknown species of Kadaloorian tree. One would have been forgiven for mistaking them for the pines of Earth, were it not for

their curiously curved needles. The youngest leaves began their lives as stem-green spirals, straightening out in maturity into grey-green crescents. The light that drizzled down from a blotchy, clay white sky was dim and shattered by the time reached the forest floor, and we walked through a muted twilight, each gazing about us in awed silence, if for slightly different reasons. I myself marvelled at the similarity between Kadaloorian flora and that of Earth, and it was not the first time I had been struck by such parallels. Mr Yewtree, who had in all likelihood never seen his namesake growing in the wild, had a very different reaction to our surroundings. Nothing could have differed more greatly from the bright, ordered corridors and gangways of City Hall. Here, as in all forests, I felt that barely palpable sense of being watched, not by our Punggol tormentors, for all my worries about revealing our whereabouts to the enemy had melted away the moment we entered the woods, but by the forest's native inhabitants, who surrounded us in their invisible millions. The whine of insects was the only audible sign of life.

I could not help but wonder how the Citihallians would cope with the nomadic existence that had been thrust upon them. So far they had, by the most absurd stroke of luck, survived unscathed, but such luck never persisted long. Their civilisation had matured over centuries in cosy hibernation. Would their cherished credo of psychological well-being protect them from the loneliness of exile?

These and many other musings drifted through my mind as Yewtree and I ambled through the moist leaf litter, until my reverie was broken by a sudden movement amongst the trees, at the very edge of vision where one trunk blurred into the next. A sharp cry informed me that my companion had noticed the commotion too.

Before I could ask him what he had seen, Yewtree darted away in the direction of the noise, and was soon swallowed up by the tightly packed tree trunks. His heavy footsteps were all I had to guide me as I gave chase. I called after him to wait, uselessly as it transpired, for I had no knowledge

of the Citihallian language and was still wholly dependent on my Dover and Somerset, the maximum volume of which was woefully inadequate to the task.

I ran, choosing my direction almost at random, for all signs of either Mr Yewtree or our unseen observer had faded to silence. Had Yewtree seen more than I? Whatever the identity of our quarry, be it man, Punggol or mere wild animal, it served no useful purpose as far as I could see to charge away after it, alone, unprepared and unarmed. Already our excursion into the woods had broken the rules of the camp. Now we risked bringing the might of the entire Punggol warfleet on our heads.

I was immediately lost amid crowds of identical trees, without landmarks or even animal tracks. For a moment I considered returning, if possible, to the camp and confessing our foolhardy actions to the rest of the group, but this felt too much like a betrayal of Yewtree's confidence. This was not the first time I had bemoaned my Dover and Somerset's lack of a simple magnetic compass. Later models included such a device, along with an odometer, miniature toolkit and solar powered torch, but an ill-advised cost-cutting exercise at Spaceflight Academy had left me stuck with an outdated model. Would that my superiors back on Earth knew what dire straits their budget stretching had cast one of their agents into!

A moment's reflection was enough to dispel these private grumblings: no Earth-made compass could account for variations in the magnetic fields on the billions of undiscovered planets in the galaxy. And all other things being equal, what use would it serve me to know the direction of magnetic north, when I had no notion whence I had come? My circumstances were acutely reminiscent of that first bewildering day on Kadaloor. I had stood on the edge of the blast crater thrown up by the *Tanjong Pagar's* crash landing and surveyed the forests of the Bird People. Reviewing that painful episode in the mind's eye, a curious notion occurred to me: was it remotely possible that the Bird People, or other tribes of the same species, had flourished even in these

remote mountain forests, many hundreds of miles distant from my original crash site? That movement in the trees, glimpsed for no longer than a heartbeat, had seemed anthropoid, or at least upright and bipedal, but beyond that all was indistinct.

Presently the land began to rise, and I took what seemed to me the only sensible decision I had made that morning, and followed the gradient upwards, in search of a vantage point by which I might regain my bearings, perhaps a rocky outcrop commanding a view over the lower slopes of Mount City Hall.

It was purely a guess, but a prescient one, for within yards I emerged into a clearing and onto an outcrop of lichen encrusted stone, smooth and grey like limestone. From this platform Mr Yewtree surveyed the carpet of foliage below us.

"Did you spot him?" I gasped, tapping him on the shoulder.

Startled, Yewtree whirled round, and I saw the vegetable knife clutched in his pale fist, its dull point aimed at my chest. When he recognised that it was I, and not our unseen observer who had surprised him, he flung away the blade in disgust and instead clasped me to him in one of his immoderately vigorous embraces.

"Thank heaven you're alive!" he exclaimed, overjoyed, as though we had been parted for decades, instead of minutes.

After what I judged a respectful interval, I wriggled free and repeated my question. Yewtree had seen no more than I: a moving darkness amidst the trees that may have been no more than the shifting of light and shadows. But my friend had already made up his mind, and was not to be dissuaded: he had been chasing a Punggol scout who would now be guiding his fleet towards our hideout. That anything but the most gently undulating terrain presented a serious obstacle to the mobility of our spherical enemies was to Mr Yewtree immaterial. Before we had found our way back to the camp, having spied from our vantage point the tell-tale wisp of smoke, Yewtree had convinced himself that he had stared into the creature's terrible face, a statement I knew to be false, as I had seen

for myself how the Punggol had no faces of their own, or any analogous feature, but manifested orifices and appendages on any part of their continuous surface as they felt necessary. Only out of politeness had the Punggol attempted to present me with a human visage to which I could give my attention, and then it had been my own face, oddly distorted as though in a convex mirror, that greeted me at every turn. Mr Yewtree's remarks were sufficient to convince me that he had seen nothing remotely resembling a member of the Punggol. His version of the encounter varied wildly with each retelling.

I had my own suspicions as to the identity of the creature in the woods, but I kept my theories to myself. Eunos had never been far from my mind since I had found his quarters empty and his luggage gone. Was he now spying on his former master? And for whom? Given his history of deception, nothing would have surprised me about that strangest of men. I was now convinced that Eunos was no more an android than I. There was no reason for me to doubt the word of Mr Orchard in this instance. That Orchard still refused to accept that I had travelled here from Earth, and even doubted the existence of my home planet, was perhaps not entirely surprising in a culture that had either lost its spaceflight technology many generations ago, or had never developed it in the first place.

Jealousy may have played its part in my conjectures. I freely admit that the extent of Eunos's relations with Miss Lavender still vexed me intensely. My own relationship with Miss Lavender remained on friendly, if slightly distant, terms. The odd smile and nod, a few minutes of small talk were my heart's only nourishment and, needless to say, only served to increase my hunger for her company. She seemed to be entirely unaware how this uncertainty pained me. A diffident suitor at the best of times, to make matters worse I was wholly unacquainted with Citihallian courting etiquette. My ignorance was paralysing, for I dared not even hint at the depth and intensity of my feelings, lest I unwittingly offend her and find myself shunned and disgraced.

After several false starts, we found our way back to camp. Those in charge of our gang of four hundred and one took Mr Yewtree's tall tale rather seriously, and my interjected doubts were disregarded, as the rumours spread through the whole camp. It irked me that the others took Yewtree's half-imagined account as gospel, but perhaps I should not have been surprised that none would heed the words of a man widely believed to be suffering from an acute psychological disorder.

Yewtree's account of his Punggol encounter was so vivid that the decision was taken to abandon the camp and put even more distance between ourselves and City Hall. In a few hours the last of the rucksacks had been packed, and the fires put out. The entrance to our camp was roughly covered with earth and branches, and we set out once more, a snaking column of four hundred Citihallians and one Earthling.

In my memory the next two months blur into an indistinct smear. I can recall clearly only a handful of panoramas, conversations, moments of reflection or emotion. There was little to distinguish one day from the next. We made steady progress, and within days the perfect grey cone of Mount City Hall dropped beneath the horizon for good. A few tears were shed, and sighs sighed, but many of my fellow evacuees, particularly those of the younger generation, felt no great yearning to return to their volcanic refuge. They were only just discovering a fraction of what they had been denied during their long hibernation, and it was more exhilarating than they had imagined.

From the austere and relentless pine forests of the uplands we descended into deciduous country, along banks of fast, swollen streams, through impossibly narrow ravines. We swam in barely thawed lakes. It felt to me like early spring, but I suspected that this was a false analogy. Were we wandering through Kadaloor's temperate zone? I tried to ask Miss Lavender, who was the most well-informed among my acquaintance in matters meteorological, but her answers only served to confuse me the more. Of course the four sea-

sons had no place in her explanation of Kadaloor's climate. In their place, a baffling system of currents and counter-currents, localised weather systems and cycles within cycles criss-crossed the planet's surface.

But to me, it felt like spring. Everywhere there was growth and new shoots emerging from the decaying matter underfoot. Some of this sprouting was less than welcome, however.

I was not the first to notice it. Miss Lavender, who was directly behind me one morning as we marched in single file down a steep, dry riverbed, was the first to make the grisly discovery. We were making for a rendezvous point where several groups of Citihallians had already gathered and struck camp, over a thousand people already converging on a high, flat plain sheltered by surrounding hills. But that was still a week's march away, through unknown terrain. We had been walking now almost every day for nearly a month, and while our party was subdued, never far from hunger and fatigue, spirits were kept buoyant by the promised reunion ahead of them. Of the Punggol and their ugly swarm of aircraft we had seen no sign, and Mr Yewtree's dire predictions of a renewed assault from the skies had thankfully not materialised.

For a few hours I had been half-conscious of a persistent itch at the back of my head, but it was only when Miss Lavender pointed it out that I gave the matter any serious consideration. Of course, located where it was, I could not see the affected area myself, but according to the testimonies of all who examined it, I had been scratching at a kind of weeping sore. When I touched the spot with my fingers, they came away smeared with a mixture of blood and watery pus.

Yewtree cast his professional eye on the wound and declared the cause on insect bite. Did I have any recollection of being bitten? I had to answer in the negative, but my worst fears were immediately aroused by Yewtree's diagnosis. What if I had been bitten, not by some denizen of the woodlands around us, but from within? So horrified was I by the no-

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tion that I did not share my worries with any of the City Hall folk. They thought me mad enough already. Yewtree applied some unnamed form of antiseptic covering to the wound, announcing as he broke open the emergency medical supplies that I was the first one of the group to suffer such an injury. As it turned out, I was the only one.

Over the next few days the dressing was regularly changed, but instead of healing over, the broken patch of skin widened and grew increasingly tender and foul smelling. With the aid of two mirrors artfully positioned, I was able to examine the injury for myself, and was the first to spot the dark shape emerging from the wound.

We were taking a few minutes rest by the side of a brook that cut through hillocks of spongy grey grass. I squatted in the shadow of a stunted tree to

remove the fabric bandage once more and examine the raw fleshy hole on the back of my head. Yewtree had warned me not to poke and prod at the wound, but I was horribly fascinated. Perhaps it was to escape Yewtree's disapproving looks that I sought solitude so frequently in this period. What I saw in the tiny mirror I had lodged in the crook of a branch made me yell out in alarm, and brought several running, Yewtree and Orchard among them. Mr Yewtree bade me sit still while he examined the back of my head.

"What is it?" I demanded. "A wing?"

In the reflection I could see Yewtree's face frown at this suggestion. "A wing? No, no, nothing of the sort. Hold still there a moment. I think you must have something caught in there. Now didn't I tell you not to keep removing the dressing?"

Stand back, you people!" he instructed the crowd of onlookers. "Give a chap some room to work! Yes, it looks as though you have an old leaf caught in there. How the devil you managed that I do not know. Highly unsanitary. Well, hold on while I pull it out."

I leapt to my feet in sudden, piercing pain. Mr Yewtree stood astounded, his tweezers clutching nothing more than the empty air. My hands went instinctively to the back of my head, where they found what felt like a sinewy vine, strung with fleshy, heart-shaped leaves, emerging from the fissure in my skull. I dug a nail into the surface of a leaf, and felt another judder of pain. There was no question of trying to uproot the trespasser. The organism, plant, parasite, whatever it was and however it had got there, had become part of my nervous system.

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# The Burrower Beneath

John Hall

**A**nd in these latter dayes we are mayhap grown something proude and foolifhe; should we not learn from the Parable of the Tower of Babel, and feek not to reach the very starf? Our anceftorf in the Golden Age, aye, and in the filver, no great time agone, built unto themfelfef huf of wattle and daube, and betimef buried their dead beneath the family hearth, whereon were cooked pottage and meatf; while now we build ever and ever higher, in our finful Pride, while our dead lye unmarked and forgotten in the church yarde, that should be hallowed grounde, and no man knoweth what lief under hif shoef af he taketh hif eafe and eateth hif fupper. Forget not, foolifh man! Forget not thif, that fo high af thy dwelling may be, fo much there if unknown beneath thy feet; for an houfe if like unto a tree, that hath evermuch rootef belowe the grounde af that trunk above which reacheth to the bleffed Heavenf. And forgette ye not thif, proude man, that build ye ever fo high, cometh alwayf the burrower beneath.

“How much is this one?” asked Edmund Fiske.

The bookseller, who had been moving towards another customer like a leopard stalking its lawful prey, turned and glanced casually at the little volume: bulky, bound in dirty velum, the hinges cracked, abundant evidence of old worm; the title handwritten in the tiny and curled late

eighteenth century script characteristic of “EC”, that great annotator and collector; *Sermons: Anon, late 16th Cent.* Worth a couple of dollars, ten at most. The bookseller’s gaze shifted to the pile of morocco-bound works on the table that Fiske had just selected and paid for – and paid well, too. “Oh, that’s yours. My compliments. Good customer, and all that.” And off he went to pounce upon the poor man browsing through seventeenth century dramatists.

Fiske took his books home, and – as is the way of collectors – dumped them all of a heap on a side table, while he went out again to a meeting with his bankers. Some matter of a company which had defaulted on its payments to him and others, I think, for this was the late 1920s and business failures were by no means rare. After bathing and taking light refreshment on his homecoming, he turned to the books; primarily to a splendid two-volume set, *A Skeptical Answer to the True Discoverie of Witchcraft*, printed in English in Paris, if the colophon were true, though neither date nor publisher were noted. This perusal lasted the rest of the evening, and Fiske had more business to attend to in the next day or so, trying to save the ailing firm, and did not actually pick up the little volume of anonymous sermons again until the following week.

As so often with books – and other things – the anticipation was far superior to the performance. To be

sure, the binding was mellow, the font was black-letter, and there were old marginal annotations (unfortunately illegible); but there was no clue as to author, printer, or date, beyond internal evidence. Worst of all, the sermons themselves were of an almost unimaginable dullness and pomposity, enlivened only occasionally by a passing reference to the Scarlet Woman of Babylon – but even here the author seemed embarrassed by his boldness and quickly changed the subject. The one and only passage of any real interest was that quoted above, about the foundations of a house being like the roots of a tree, which had originally caught Fiske’s eye when he’d first opened the book in the shop. This was the sole lively paragraph of an inordinately long discourse on the sins of pride and acquisitiveness, but it held his attention for a direct and intimate reason.

Fiske had always been something of a gypsy and the various curious, and indeed disturbing, events of the previous couple of years had meant that he was – yet again – in new quarters. This time he had settled in rooms in one of the oldest skyscrapers in one of the oldest and largest cities on the East Coast. It was not among the highest, not when Fiske moved in; indeed, at a mere twelve stories (and it really was twelve, there is no missing thirteenth floor in this tale) it was dwarfed by its neighbours. But it was old and prestigious. More to the immediate point, its architect had – per-

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haps from caprice, or perhaps for reasons of stability – created twin towers, the North and South, linked by a narrow structure which held elevators, ducts, electric cables, and other necessities. From the shape of the building the locals had derived its name: officially 128 West Third Street, it was universally known as the Barbell Building, and sometimes Barbell Tower.

Now the similarity of the nickname to “Babel” would have done nothing more than amuse Fiske, were it not for another singular circumstance in his new abode. I have said that there were twelve stories, but the first five of these were in fact devoted to offices. Not, *bien entendu*, dubious private investigators or professional correspondents, nor yet surgeons with diplomas from unheard-of colleges who would oblige ladies in their hour of need; but lawyers and doctors of the highest class – discreet, grey-haired men with suits tailored in Boston or London – who would listen sympathetically, promise immediate help, and then as like instruct “my little man”, who would deal with the aforementioned dubious characters. Although the clientele of these men was the very best, still there was a constant stream of visitors to the lower floors. In order that the residents should not be troubled, then, the elevators ran – so far as casual visitors were concerned – only to the fifth floor; the buttons to the higher floors being locked out unless one possessed a certain key. The elevator captains (there were ten or a dozen of them who worked shifts), men every bit as discreet as the doctors and lawyers in the lower depths – and far more understanding – kept one of these keys, transferred at each change of shift. This was solely for the assistance of such residents as had been forgetful, or who were temporarily incapable of using their own key, regrettably a not uncommon occurrence.

Thus far, the elevators do not perhaps seem so very different from a few hundred others. What made them slightly strange – and this was something Fiske had already noticed in an incurious sort of way – was that the buttons below ground level were sim-

ilarly discriminatory. Below “1” was “G”, which he knew stood for “garage”, though he kept no car and had never been down there; then came “B”, presumably “basement”, also *terra incognita* to Fiske; but then came “B2” and “B3”. Beside these last two there was another keyhole. One evening after he had looked at the *Sermons*, Fiske chanced to take the elevator at that curious dead hour between business and dinner. He was the only passenger and the captain happened to be a man called Barnes, a particularly obliging individual. Fiske decided to ask about the buttons to the lower depths, especially “B2” and “B3”.

“Well, sir, you’ll have been down to the garage? Oh, I forgot, you haven’t a car. And of course you don’t do your own laundry, so you won’t have visited the basement, will you?”

“Is there a laundry there, then?”

Barnes permitted himself a discreet smile. “The most up-to-date machines, sir. The maids launder the sheets and the rest down there when the tenants don’t send them out. And there’s storage space too – why, have you not seen your own space, sir?”

“My own space?”

“Are you in a hurry, sir?”

Fiske frowned. “Not especially. I have no dinner appointment, or anything. Why?”

By way of answer, Barnes pressed “B” and the elevator slowed in a dignified manner, turned round – so to speak – and glided gently down until the light at “B” glowed red. Barnes opened the door and stood aside to let Fiske out. “I’ll show you, sir.” He fiddled with the elevator controls to prevent it being summoned without him, and led the way past gleaming washing machines, steel sinks, and cages full of mops and buckets, to a door of steel bars.

“Now, sir,” he said, “you’ll have been given two keys. One is for this door – I have one as well” – he held it up – “and one for your own little room.”

“Oh, that’s what they’re for. I did wonder. I thought they were for the garage, or fuses, or something.” Fiske took out his silver key-ring, found the keys, and unlocked the steel grille.

Beyond were a couple of narrow corridors lined with doors, not unlike the conventional image of a gaol.

“You’re twelve-oh-three – that right, sir? Over here, and the other key will open it.” Barnes stood by the side of the door marked “1203” while Fiske unlocked it. “Electric light switch just inside, sir.”

“Ah, yes.” Fiske looked round the little cubby-hole, which was perhaps a trifle dusty, but otherwise empty, and in every way suitable for the storage of such books as might overflow the apartment. “Capital! I hadn’t realised this was here. Thank you, Barnes.”

“Thank you, sir,” Barnes pocketed the gratuity and coughed delicately. “I should be taking the elevator back, sir...”

“Lord, yes. Sorry to keep you.”

As they busied themselves locking up and returning to the immobilised elevator, Barnes volunteered, “Though it isn’t my place to say this, sir, you’d be surprised what we’ve found in these storerooms at times.”

“Oh?”

“When the tenant’s died and there’s no family, you know, we have to open them up and clear them out.” Barnes lowered his voice. “I could tell you tales that would make your hair curl, sir! Film stars, big strapping gentlemen that played a hundred love scenes opposite the most beautiful women – but down here, racks of evening dresses! For them – the men. And silk underwear! And pictures, photos... shocking, sir, quite shocking.”

Fiske smiled at this revelation, and asked, “Can anyone come down here? The general public, I mean?”

“Here and the garage floor up above, sir,” Barnes jerked a thumb at the ceiling. “Lots of clients come in cars, naturally, to see the doctors and lawyers. There’s nothing to stop them coming here, but why would they want to, sir?”

“Just a thought,” said Fiske. “What’s down in ‘B2’ and ‘B3’, then,” he added.

“Now there you have me, sir. Even my key won’t work those buttons, nor yours neither.”

“Oh?”

“I’ll show you, if you like.” Barnes

inserted his own elevator key, and pressed first "B2", then "B3" to no avail.

Fiske tried his, also without result. "That's odd," he said.

"It is at that, sir," Barnes replied equably. "But then I expect it's pretty dusty, for nobody ever goes down there – or hasn't while I've been looking after this elevator, and I've worked here twenty-five years. Not the sort of place you'd want to visit, I guess. Though if you were interested, I expect Mr Aloysius has a key, and would take you."

"Hmm." Mr Aloysius was the manager, a peculiar man with very white skin and very black hair, from what Fiske had glimpsed in passing. "I don't think I'll bother him, thanks."

At which Barnes caused the elevator to rise to the first floor, where an irate gentleman – who had been detained in traffic – boarded, and implied that Barnes and Fiske were responsible for his late appearance at his wife's side. The gentleman insisted on using his own key and flounced out with a theatrical sigh at the sixth floor, much to the ill-concealed amusement of both the other occupants.

"No tip there, Barnes, nor even a word of thanks! And since it was I who kept you –"

"No need at all, sir. Well, if you insist. Thank you, sir. Perhaps feeling that this second tranche of largess merited something extra, Barnes volunteered, "You asked about the lower basements, sir? Well, I couldn't say for sure, but I wondered if the legal gentlemen don't store papers and the like down there. That would explain the precautions."

"Yes, I suppose it would."

"Just so long as the medical gentlemen don't store bodies down there, eh, sir?" Barnes laughed heartily at the thought. "Here we are: twelve. Good night, Mr Fiske."

Now, as you will have realised, in Edmund Fiske the very natural sense of curiosity was developed almost to the point of obsession. After his conversation with Barnes regarding the basements, Fiske began to take particular note of where the elevators were going. Not that he lurked on the

landing, but when he happened to be awaiting the arrival of an elevator, he studied the lights as they gleamed bright or grew dull with more than the usual attentiveness, and tried to visualise the occupants of the elevator, their destinations, and their business there.

One evening Fiske had returned late from some modest festivity – a college reunion, I understand – and had a little difficulty with the lock of his door. We are all familiar with this phenomenon and most of us recollect straightening up and staring at the key, as if to reproach it for its stupidity. This Fiske did, and noticed that one of the elevators – not the one in which he had just ridden up – was descending. The light for the garage glowed, then the basement light, then – to his considerable surprise – the lights for "B2" and "B3". He glanced at his watch. It was indeed quite late, later even than the cosmopolitan, and somewhat raffish, inhabitants of the Barbell Building were wont to return home as a rule.

Fiske, now quite sober, unlocked his door without difficulty and went inside. Before closing it, he looked again at the elevator, which still showed "B3"; the others all showed "1". Fiske had intended to sleep late anyway, after his celebrations, so he determined to place a chair by his door – which he left slightly ajar – and see just when the elevator shifted from the mysterious "sub-basement", as he had mentally tagged it. One hour he waited. Two, three, four. His eyelids were growing heavy, and he had all but decided to give up his vigil, when – of a sudden – the light blinked and went out.

Fiske sat up, alert. "B2", then "B", "G", "1", "2", "3"... Fiske realised almost too late that it was heading for "12" – his own floor. Hastily he closed his door until there remained but a scant quarter-inch gap, and to this he applied an eye that was somewhat bleary with wakefulness, but otherwise as keen as that of any Pinkerton man hot upon the trail.

Fiske saw the elevator indicator arrive at "12", the doors open, and three men emerge. One was Mr Aloysius; the other two were a good deal wrapped up in dark clothing and he

couldn't see their faces. They all went across the landing, without haste, and turned an angle of the corridor so that they were out of Fiske's view. And that was all. He waited an hour or so to see if they might return, but they did not, and he sought his bed for what remained of the night. As Fiske undressed, he reflected that it had been somewhat of a frost. But for all the disappointment it was still odd, for if Aloysius and the other two had legitimate business in the lower depths, why should they not conduct it in the light of day, during normal business hours? But then the newspapers were full of the activities of dark-clad, mysterious men. The thought that there was an illicit still – a speakeasy, perhaps – in the basement, caused him to laugh out loud as he fell asleep.

It did not seem quite so amusing next day. Fiske was no friend of Prohibition, but he was no admirer of organised crime either. The idea that the basement might be the haunt of gangsters was disturbing. Disturbing and yet curiously attractive in a perverse sort of way... intriguing. In any event, it was clear that Aloysius was involved, and so Fiske determined to find out what he might about the strange manager.

Fiske himself was a rich man. Despite the financial turbulence then raging, he had followed good advice from his bankers and brokers, and the effects of the crash on his wealth had been minimised. He thus had no need to turn out to earn a crust each day, and could devote his time to such enterprises as he chose. He therefore contrived to hang about on the sixth floor, where Aloysius had his apartments and his office. After an hour or so he spotted the manager scurrying down the corridor, and lost no time in hailing him.

"Hello! None the worse for your late night, I see?"

Aloysius stopped, swallowed as if with difficulty, and stared at him. "I beg your pardon, Mr... Fiske, is it not?"

"Yes. Oh, you'll have to excuse me, I was trying to be funny. Only I had a late night myself, and I happened to catch sight of you and – and your friends, up on twelve."

Aloysius was so very pale that he could not blanch, but he did recoil, clutching at the wall for support.

"I say, are you quite well?" asked Fiske, who was not a hard-hearted young man.

"Well? Yes, thank you, Mr Fiske. Only – only I have some business to attend to, if you will excuse me." As he hastened off, Aloysius added, over his shoulder, "But I think you are mistaken about last night, sir. I was in my room from nine onwards, and never left it until this morning."

That's a thumping lie, thought Fiske. And the way Aloysius had been affected was significant, if not downright suspicious. Fiske resolved to watch him carefully in future.

It is, of course, perfectly possible for a man who has no other demands upon his time to stay up all night, but it can present certain difficulties. It therefore occurred to Fiske to check his diary to see if last night was a significant date in any way. It was not, but it was a Wednesday and Fiske wondered if "lodge" was not held each week on that night. So, despite his curiosity, he went to bed at his usual hour for the next six days.

It was with a tingle of anticipation that he set his chair by the door, itself open just a crack, on the eve of the following Wednesday. Naturally, he had accepted that nothing might happen, that perhaps last week had been a "one-off", as it were. In that case he had decided he would give the matter up, and let Aloysius do what he would, with whomsoever he would, whenever he would. However, his vigil was not in vain. At around one in the morning the elevator suddenly whined into motion. Fiske was gratified to see Aloysius emerge, followed by two ladies – or so Fiske, a gentleman by instinct, called them, though he realised that men of lesser breeding might give them a cruder name. Aloysius wore evening dress, and the ladies fashionable frocks, as if they were bound to or from some night spot. Again, the three disappeared round the same angle of the corridor, and Fiske slumped in disappointment. But then he sat up again at the sound of voices. It was Aloysius and the two ladies, accompanied by another two who looked very similar to

those of the previous week, both a good deal muffled up and both walking with a distinctive sliding gait.

As they passed opposite Fiske's door and made to enter the elevator, one of the ladies turned to one of the mysterious figures and made a remark, of which Fiske caught only: "see your face, honey," or some such. The man to whom she spoke turned away quickly, and the lady shrugged her bare shoulders and pulled a face. She was pretty, but had a vacant look, probably the result of alcohol or some more powerful narcotic. Then they were all away in the elevator. Fiske noticed with a thrill that it sailed all the way down to "B3", but he was nonetheless disappointed. It looked as if Aloysius was organising – perhaps even participating in – some regular orgy in the basement, which would account for his not wanting uninvited guests straying down there. It was none of Fiske's business, though he did wonder for just a moment what went on, and what it would be like to be one of the company – but only for a moment. Then he put the matter out of his mind and went to bed.

Fiske now forgot about Aloysius, beyond an occasional smile at the thought of the manager's private habits and tastes. But, unexpectedly, his attention was drawn back to the matter by an article in his daily paper. The writer was fulminating against the crime spree taking place in the city and mentioned various outrages: bootlegging, gangland killings, protection rackets, and gambling. Then, in a paragraph on what he called "the white slave-trade", the writer mentioned the large number of young women who had vanished in the last year or so. The paper had printed photographs of some of them, with the plea that anyone who knew their whereabouts should contact either the editor or the police. One of the photographs was of a young woman very similar to the one whom Fiske had noticed a couple of months before. Remarkably similar, although he couldn't be absolutely sure they were one and the same. He had, you remember, been looking through a slit at the side of the door; it had been rather early in the morning and the

lights in the corridor were thus dim; and the newspaper picture was rather fuzzy. Yet Fiske was concerned, and he decided to act.

He had some slight acquaintance with a young man, an Assistant District Attorney, and sought him out.

"Edmund, what a pleasant surprise!"

Fiske was straight to the point: "I say, Dennis, are you involved with this white-slave business?"

Dennis was not, but he knew who was, and introduced Fiske to Captain Rainer, who raised an eyebrow at the rather disjointed tale before showing Fiske the original of the picture that had appeared in the paper.

"Mimsie Ashburton. Recognise her? Sorry the photo's not too clear."

Fiske shook his head. "It's very like her, but... no, I can't swear to it. In fact, I suspect it's nothing like her now that I look closely."

Rainer laughed. "Yes, I know what you mean. The fashions, the make-up, they all look much of a muchness."

"Do you know just when she disappeared, though?"

"I'm afraid not," said Rainer.

"My apologies for wasting your time, Captain."

Rainer smiled. "Not at all, sir. Always worth a look; that's the only way we'll crack this one."

"Is it very bad?" asked Fiske.

"The papers have only printed the merest outline. The truth is that almost a hundred girls have vanished in the last couple of months. Some are – well! But some are just ordinary kids. They come to the city for fun, for money, for reasons no one will ever know; then – just like that – they're missing."

"Phew! A hundred? Any ideas, at all?"

"No. They could be anywhere," said Rainer. "South America, the Far East, or dead; or back home on the farm, married. That's the devil of it: we never get to know if they're all right, which probably makes it seem worse than it is." He stood up and held out his hand. "Thank you for calling in, sir."

Feeling the biggest fool on earth, Fiske went home.

A week or so after his interview

with Captain Rainer, Fiske had occasion to return home later than usual, though by no means as late as he had on the night of his reunion. As he emerged from the elevator he noticed that the light of the apparatus opposite showed "B3", and this reawakened all his suspicions. He checked his watch, noting the early hour. The light blinked, and moved up to "G". After a moment it blinked again, and the elevator started off upwards.

Fiske quickly went inside, all but closing the door. The elevator came right up to the twelfth floor and Aloysius stepped out with a solitary lady. This time it was a genuine "lady"; more, one whom Fiske recognised at once. He had met her just a couple of days before – though even if he hadn't, he would have known her from the pictures in the society pages – Miss Heloise de Coeur, beautiful, wealthy, and independent. What on earth was she doing with Aloysius? Fiske was aghast. Some lady of the night – that was bad enough. But Heloise de Coeur! Still, it was none of his business. If a society beauty really wanted to associate with gangsters – and many did have such an ambition, if what one read in the papers was true – then it was nothing to do with him. Not, that is, until the next day, when the headlines screamed that Miss de Coeur had vanished – apparently kidnapped – though no ransom had yet been demanded.

Rainer himself went to see Aloysius, together with a sergeant and a half-dozen harness bulls. It was – Rainer acknowledged later – a mistake to take the latter, for at the sight of the uniforms emerging from the elevator, Aloysius darted into his office and locked the door. They heard a shot as they banged and shouted, and assumed he was resisting arrest. He was not. He was evading it – permanently. They took the keys from his body and opened "1211" to reveal a well-furnished, but otherwise empty apartment. There was a slightly musty smell, and traces of what looked like large snail tracks over some of the floorboards. Then they went to the level marked "B3".

Rainer and his men found some of the missing girls there, including Miss de Coeur. She was taken to a private mental home, where she refused to go to sleep, babbled of white slugs and things not of this world, and killed herself a few days later when left unattended for a moment. Of the others, three were alive – just. The sergeant was first into the room where the girls were being held and he, a good Catholic with daughters of his own, put a bullet into each of their heads.

He told Rainer what he'd done and Rainer, when he saw, told the man there would be no inquiry. The sergeant went home and sat up awake with a loaded pistol outside his daughters' rooms every night for the

next week, until his wife managed to reassure him. When he confessed to Father Malloy the priest stopped him after the first couple of sentences, and gave him absolution with no mention of penance.

Rumour is usually worse than fact. It was not so in this case, but the rumours – for the facts were suppressed – caused many tenants to leave the Barbell Building. For a time the place stood, sinking further into disrepair and disrepute, the haunt of ever more unsavoury tenants. Then the company that owned the land decided to knock it down and build a modern replacement.

When the day dawned, the crane with the giant metal ball arrived – explosives could not be used as the place was hemmed in by other buildings. The crane driver swung the wrecking ball, intending for a section of wall to be crushed. There was a sort of dull thud, and then the whole building simply collapsed – all of a heap – and seemed to sink into the ground. Of course, the crane driver received a good deal of ribbing from his fellows: "didn't know his own strength" and the like. He confided to his superiors – and Fiske, who had come along to see the fall of his erstwhile abode – that, "It was odd, you know, the old place seemed to just go crash. It was as if it was rotten, or the foundations had been hollowed out, undermined somehow or other."

# Theaker's Paperback Library

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# The Quarterly Review

## BOOKS

### A Dick and Jane Primer for Adults

Lavie Tidhar, Conrad  
Williams, James  
Lovegrove et al  
BFS, pb, 52pp

I was hoping this anthology would take a more formal approach, so I was a tiny bit disappointed with it as a whole. Nevertheless, many of the individual stories are interesting. The stories fall into two main camps, with some having a foot in both: adult stories written in the style of children's books, and grown-up stories about Dick and Jane themselves.

I'd never heard of Dick and Jane before, but they're the American equivalent of Peter and Jane (making them a slightly odd choice of subject for a publication only available to members of the British Fantasy Society); a foreword to put the stories in context would have been useful.

Writing a vocabulary-controlled book for children is a particular kind of exercise – the early books in the Peter and Jane series, for example, only introduce one or two new words per page. In this book none of the

writers try to write with a controlled, cumulative vocabulary. The linguistic references to the original texts tend to be just to the easily parodied surface elements – e.g. see Jane run – rather than trying to emulate their structures, and working within them, which might have been more subversive. It's a bit like producing a book of adult nursery rhymes that don't rhyme or scan. It's not wrong, just not quite as interesting as it might have been. Admittedly, a more formal approach might have led to much duller stories!

A lot too has been lost by printing it like a normal, adult book, in a small font with ordinary typesetting, with ordinary (if slightly inconsistent) punctuation. It works for the adult stories of Dick and Jane, but it would have added much to the power of the pseudo-children's stories if they had appeared in a format reproducing that of a children's book – i.e. a large font, just a few lines per page, no quote marks around dialogue (in the very simple stories), etc.

Obviously all those extra pages would have added a lot to the cost of printing, but it's nice to imagine this as a thicker book, with the artwork (by John Keates, which is very good indeed) used for fake covers in between the stories, taking us through an imaginary reading scheme.

One of my favourite stories from the collection was "Somewhere in the Street" by Ed Clayton. The strange, controlled dialogue of characters like Peter and Jane makes them sound

half-crazy even in real children's books, so it's not a leap to imagine them as fully psychotic, something Clayton does very well. For an example of such dialogue from the real Peter and Jane, see the chilling scene on pages 24 to 27 of *Key Words 2a*: "Here are Peter and Jane. Peter has some water. Here you are, Jane, he says. Here you are, Jane, says Peter. Here you are. This is for you. Here is some water for you." The picture shows Peter pouring water over Jane's head while she screams...

I enjoyed all the stories individually, but two others I liked in particular were "The Hushes" by Conrad Williams, which was very well written if a bit tangential to the anthology, and "We Go Down to the Woods Today" by Marion Arnott, which reads much like a Ladybird book written by Stephen King. 7 – *SWT*



## Chosen

Jerry Ibbotson  
Media Mill, pb, 308pp

Reinventing the wheel is a danger for every author, but especially for ones approaching a genre of which they are not devotees. Where the new author can sometimes run aground is by limiting their novel too narrowly to what they believe to be the confines of the genre. Of course, there are some fantasy readers who want the same things again and again, but most readers like to be surprised.

I've no idea how widely read this author is in fantasy, but from its beginning, from its very title even, *Chosen* made me wonder. It's easy to imagine someone writing this novel after reading a Narnia book, but much harder to imagine them writing it after having read, say, *Lord Foul's Bane*. It has a very similar premise – a guy from our world finds himself in their world – but none of the risk-taking (at least so far as I've read).

In *Chosen*, the train ride from Unbreakable is followed by the journey to Narnia in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. And then it seems like the rest of the novel will play out like an extended stay in a rural village on a planet in Stargate SG-1... (But it does take a surprising and exciting turn towards the end.) It feels at times like a box-ticking exercise: protagonist from our world (check), rural fantasy world (check), rather dull grown man with kids and a wife waiting at home (um...?).

Perhaps the wish to meet expectations, rather than subverting, confounding or exceeding them, explains the dull title. *Chosen* joins *The Hole* (by John Davey) and *Demon* (by Peter Mark May) in being small press or self-published books recently released with appallingly bland names. It's as if they don't want to stand out, they want to look like all the other books; almost so that nobody makes fun of them. Well, they don't stand out – none of those books comes within the first fifty results on Amazon from searching for their titles. Job well done!

I have to admit that after the first

fifty pages or so I began to skim-read, so obviously you should take this review with a pinch of salt. I probably missed a lot. But to be honest if I hadn't been reviewing it I would have stopped altogether after those fifty pages. Not because the book was bad, but because I felt as if I'd read it before and it wasn't exciting me. Though it was also a little bit humourless, which made the going hard for such a frivolous person as me! For example, imagine the scenario: two guys at an office party discover there's a door in their office that leads to Narnia. And they find themselves in a field of bluebells. And neither of them think it's at all funny.

Someone who really loves this kind of stuff might go for this book in a big way. It's competently written, with only a smattering of the usual oddities to be found in self-published books. There's nothing wrong with it in particular, but not a lot to get excited about, either. And I've got over a thousand unread books on the shelf: books need to really excite me to push ahead of all the books vying for my attention.

If I seem frustrated by this novel, and maybe even a little bitter, it's not Ibbotson's fault. He'll write other, better books, of that I have no doubt. And this one is better than anything I've written.

It's more that it shares its faults with a very similar book I published a few years ago by one of my best friends, *Elsewhere*. (What was I saying about bland titles?) Like this book, *Elsewhere* stuck too closely to the perceived rules, at least up until an exciting conclusion, and lacked humour. Now that my pal's no longer alive it's terribly frustrating that the only book he wrote is so unrepresentative of his personality and his potential as a writer. He tried to write the book he thought he should write, rather than one that stemmed from his own personality. If I took against *Chosen* too quickly, it's possibly because it set me to thinking of lost opportunities and all the books I'll never read that my friend could have written.

*Chosen* is a very handsome book, clearly put together with a lot of care; don't be put off by my lack of enthu-

siasm for it, which has much more to do with me than the book itself. –  
SWT

## The City in These Pages

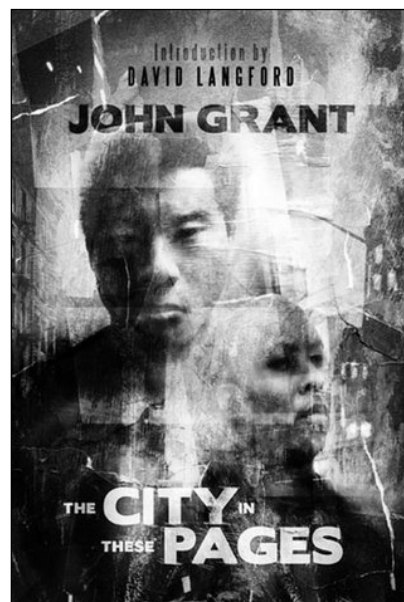
John Grant  
PS Publishing, hb, 80pp

Reviewing this is a lot like reviewing *From the Notebooks* from McSweeney's 22, in that it's a homage to something I don't know a great deal about. Whereas *From the Notebooks* was a tribute to F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The City in These Pages* is a homage to Ed McBain's 87th Precinct novels.

I think I do have one of them in the house, but so far it's unread. I've seen a couple of Columbo episodes adapted from his books ("Undercover" adapted *Jigsaw*, while "No Time To Die" adapted *So Long As You Both Shall Live*, I think as backdoor pilots), but that's not a lot to go on.

So I can't judge how closely Grant has stuck to McBain's template, but the banter is snappy, the crimes imaginative, the characters neatly drawn, and from the introduction (written by David Langford) it sounds very much like that's the kind of thing people like about Ed McBain's books.

Of the books I have read, this reminded me most of *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*. Admittedly that's



the book around which the rest of the literary universe revolves for me at the moment – I did go a bit mad for it! – but there are similarities. Both have a world-weary tough guy teamed with a bulkier partner (here they are black and Japanese, rather than Jewish and Tlingit), and both are set in a present-day world that isn't quite ours.

This book doesn't quite match Chabon's masterpiece, but it's very enjoyable. Its only real flaw is its short length; I'd quite happily have read much more of the same. It's more like an episode of *Homicide* than an episode of *Columbo*: you'll be left wanting more. The conclusion left me rather conflicted... I felt rather cheated out of a proper resolution to the criminal investigation, but I was very happy with it in science fiction terms.

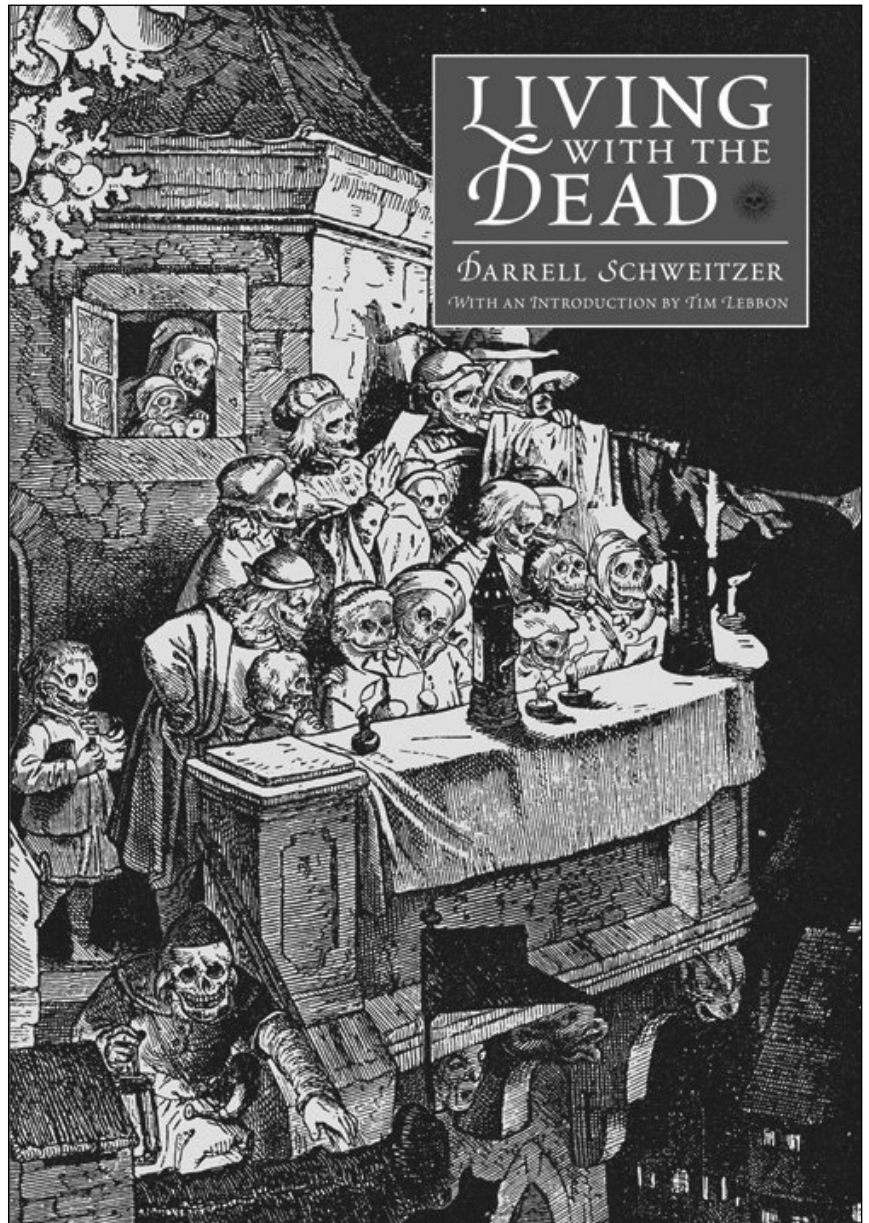
To get more of the same I guess I'll have to look up McBain's books. That must be the mark of a good homage: while you can enjoy it on its own account, it makes the uninitiated want to search out the originals. If Grant persuades a few die-hard fantasy and science fiction readers to switch lanes long enough to give the 87th Precinct novels a try, I'm sure he'll count this a job well done. 8 – *SWT*

## Living with the Dead

Darrell Schweitzer  
PS Publishing, hb, 72pp

Every so often, the people living in the dingy coastal town of Old Corpsenberg get the impulse to go down to the docks, where they find piles of dead bodies left by trawlers. They pick out the bodies they like best and take them home, making them as comfortable as possible, despite the inconvenience to themselves as the bodies pile up. They are... *Living with the Dead!*

Since this book comes with a built-in review, and one that's so persuasive and well-written (by Tim Leb-



bon), it feels a bit presumptuous to write another. I'll give it a shot, but if you want to read a really good review of it, take a look at the introduction. It's good when a book tells you what to think about it – saves having to think for yourself! Anyway, if you decide to read this review, you should know that you're settling for second best!

Let's get the quibbling out of the way first... *Living with the Dead* makes use of the most irritating narrative structure ever invented (in my opinion, at least): overlapping stories from different points of view. A curse on *Rashomon* and anyone who ever saw it! I don't mind reading or watching a story out of order, or cut-up, or upside-down, but have a deep hatred of having to watch the same events

over and over, just for the narrative to take a few short steps forward each time. I know I shouldn't blame *Rashomon*; in that film the events at least appear differently to each person. More often, though, when writers use this approach (as in *Living with the Dead*), we see the same events, but notice different things through the new pair of eyes. This book isn't as bad as some in that regard – the overlaps are fairly small – but there were enough of them to elicit a few here-we-go-again sighs.

I spent the early sections of the book wondering how anyone could live among so many bodies and not fall victim to disease. The answer is that the bodies don't rot, which of course raises even more questions, but they are answered, so have a bit

of faith in the book when you start reading it! (Though the ending throws things up in the air again, leaving me a bit baffled, especially since the most obvious explanation is explicitly ruled out by the back cover. Then again, should the reader take the back cover into account when trying to work out what has happened in a book? Probably not.)

The other big question I had was: who benefits from the people living like this? Usually, when people live in odd ways (or at least ways that seem odd to other people), it's because it benefits (or at least is thought to benefit) somebody; either themselves, somebody else or society as a whole. For example, women from some cultures cover their faces in public; it's not exactly on the scale of inviting dead bodies into your home, but it is inconvenient and seems odd to people from other cultures. We can readily conclude that someone gets something out of it, or at least that there are historical or sociological reasons why the practice developed. But who gets anything out of what these people do with the dead bodies? It's such a horrible way to live that custom alone is not enough to explain it. The question is answered, but not to the extent that it explains the townsfolk going along with it (though there are hints that mind control is involved).

Upon reflection, I think the people of Corpsenberg have an empathy for dead bodies that we just don't have; they respect them, and really want to care for them, when we'd want to dispose of them. They wouldn't think of them as dead bodies; they'd think of them as dead people, as people who just happen to be dead. It's not a huge leap away from the reverence shown in some cultures to ancestor spirits. It's not all that hard to imagine people hanging on to dead bodies if they didn't rot; look at how some people get their pets stuffed.

Having rattled through the book in a couple of hours, thinking mainly about the practicalities of what was going on, as noted above, I took a day or two to really appreciate it. It really came to life for me when I began to look around our living room and imagine bodies arranged along the

walls... At that point I started to think of the book in terms of feelings and images, rather than plot, and my estimation of it went up considerably. Reading it for plot, you miss a lot; it's a story of images and tableaux, rather than developments and revelations.

So, enough literalism... One way of reading the book is as a metaphor for life in a seaside town; somewhere like Blackpool. The dead are the holidaymakers and daytrippers, pouring into the town in their vast numbers, overwhelming the few actual inhabitants, who have to spend their whole lives catering to the needs of out-of-towners.

The book could possibly be given a more hostile reading, as an anti-immigration metaphor, the dead representing the immigrants and refugees brought by ships to our shores. Ultimately, though, such a reading is prevented by the affection the people have for the bodies. They don't fight them off, or try to get them out of town – they fall in love with them, turn to them for comfort, dance with them! If the book is a metaphor for immigration, in a curious way it's a positive one. The dead are inconvenient, but only because of their numbers. The people of Old Corpsenberg are generally enriched by their presence, just as I was enriched by reading this fine, atmospheric and unforgettable book... 8 – *SWT*

## Moomintrolls and Friends

Tove Jansson  
Penguin, pb, 64pp

Three very curious little tales. The first, "The Secret of the Hattifatteners", was especially good; it would stand out even in an anthology of short stories for adults. Moominpapa unexpectedly leaves home to go in quest of something he feels is missing from his comfortable life, something exemplified by the serious, dramatic lives of the sea-going Hattifatteners. It's a story about a mid-life crisis, for kids! 8 – *SWT*

## Ship of Strangers

Bob Shaw  
Orion, pb, 224pp

This fix-up contains five stories about the crew of the survey ship *Sarafand*. The *Sarafand* is only sent to map lifeless planets, which has fascinating psychological effects on the crew, something Bob Shaw handles with remarkable skill, and it also leads to some intriguing and unusual plots. At times they are closer to thought experiments like the prisoner's dilemma than to other science fiction short stories, though Shaw doesn't short-change the reader on spaceships and aliens.

In the first story, the ship encounters an ancient and dangerous life-form; the conclusion is a Tyke Tyler style reversal of expectations. The second considers the effect that dream tapes (a kind of virtual reality), and the resulting virtual girlfriends, have on the all-male crew. In the third story the crew discovers some mysterious alien technology; the story really strikes home with its depiction of the fear felt by a man left alone in a spacesuit in a hostile environment. The fourth story regards contact with an alien, time-travelling Shangri-La – plotwise it's probably the weakest and most contrived of the stories, but psychologically it's still very interesting. The final story is a mind-blowing humdinger that the blurb-writer should be shot for spoiling. (Thank goodness I didn't see the back cover till I'd finished the book!)

They aren't identified as separate stories, with chapter headings appearing within the stories as well as between them, but they are clearly discrete, with time passing between them and characters changing – though the protagonist, Surgenor, is constant throughout. In fact, a key feature of the book is that ever-changing cast, and Surgenor's reflections on why he keeps doing the job, year after year, while others come and go. The title, *Ship of Strangers*, derives from the way the crew relate to each other; never making strong



personal connections, trying to avoid any intimacy and arguments. They don't want to care when their friends leave, as they inevitably will, so they try not to care at all. Surgenor knows he is emotionally damaged, understands the need for it, and questions whether he could stand a return to the full range of human emotions, but still wants to try, one day, when the time is right. **8** – *SWT*

## Song of Time

Ian R. MacLeod

PS Publishing, hb, 302pp

Don't read this book if you're not in the mood for re-evaluating your life. As Roushana Maitland looks back upon her hundred years on planet Earth, the reader can't help but do something very similar. It's a reflective, thoughtful and poetic book, but that doesn't stop it being upsetting and rather depressing!

This didn't really need to be a science fiction novel, though the same could of course said for many works in the genre. The core of it – the very literary biography of a violinist – could just have easily have been a 19th century novel by Stendhal, or a 20th century one by Moorcock. Where the *Between the Wars* quartet is set against the turmoil of the 20th century, *Song of Time* takes us through the equally epochal events of the century to come.

But though it didn't *need* to be a science fiction novel, it *is* a very good one. There are many very interesting science fictional ideas in here, in particular with regard to post-death existence; just don't expect raygun fights. Many traditional science fiction novels are about people taking on a rotten society and changing it; this one is more about the way people get on with life despite the way things change. It's a very different kind of science fiction novel, but it's a welcome departure.

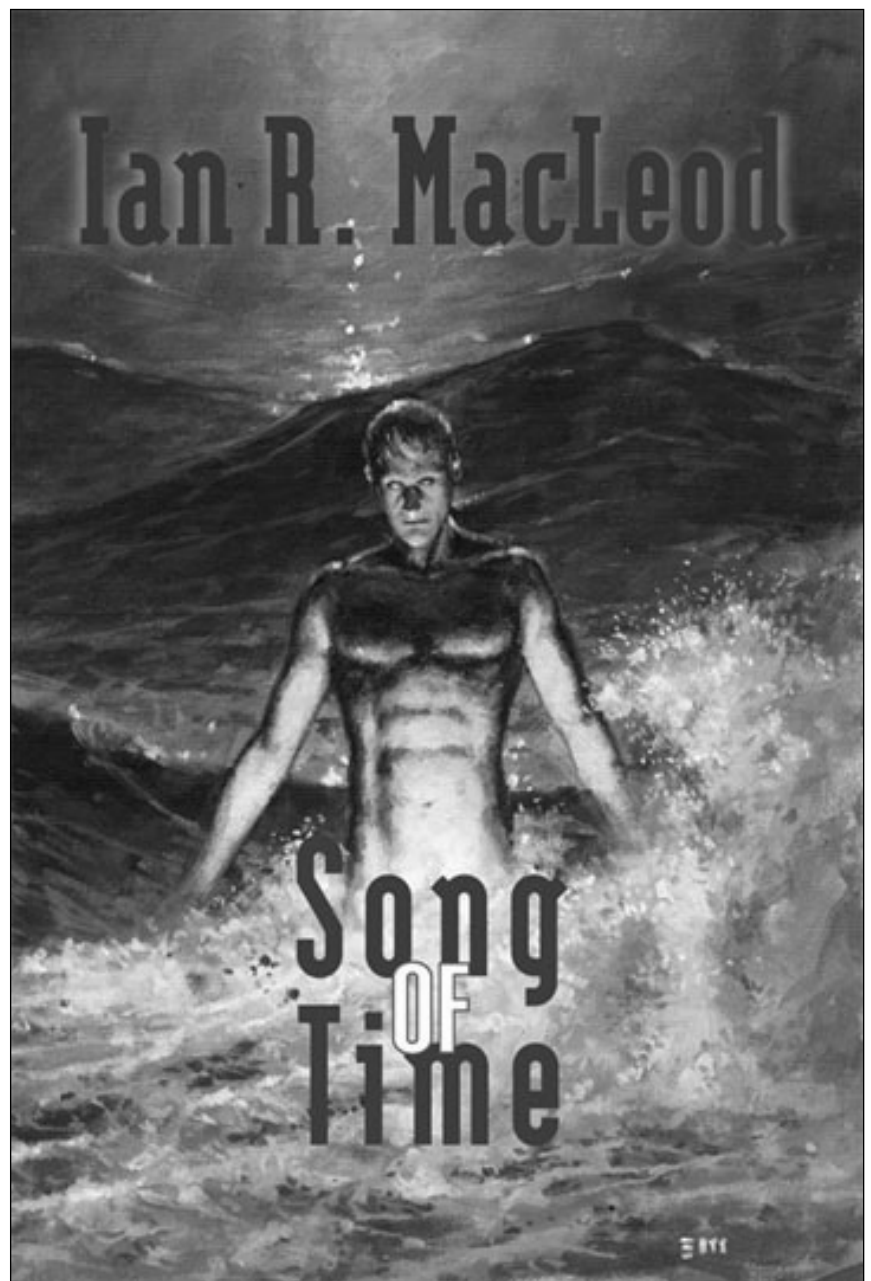
The early sections are reminiscent of Diana Wynne Jones's *Fire and Hemlock* in their portrayal of a adolescent girl's rather inappropriate

love. They set the scene for Roushana's interest in music, and lay out the themes that will dominate the book: love, death, music, empathy. After the great love of her life dies, empathy will be Roushana's weak spot, while it will become her mother's great strength.

The description of these formative years is careful, detailed and highly emotional, but the author judges his book (or his readers) well. Just as the reader begins to wonder if it will be this maudlin and introspective all the way through (not that that would necessarily have been a bad thing), he unleashes an apocalypse to shake things up, a nuclear war between India and Pakistan.

Unsurprisingly things get even more depressing for a while after that. The ramifications extend all the way to my own front door, as fighting breaks out in Handsworth and troops are sent in. Then there is a heart-breaking visit to a devastated India, in particular to the bombed city of Ahmedabad, now home to the untouchables, who have found a strange freedom amidst the radiation.

But things become rather more upbeat when the scene moves to Paris, in the grip of a new renaissance. There we meet Claude, a brilliant pianist and conductor who brings both the novel and its frosty lead character to life. Roushana moves out of herself and engages with wider worlds of art



and politics, bringing dynamism and vigour to the novel just when it threatened to slow down to a miserable crawl. Roushana and the reader are whirled through Paris, to America and then back to England for a conclusion of high melodrama.

*Song of Time* is a very different kind of science fiction novel, and one that won't appeal to everyone, but it's a superb book. It is very ambitious, but it fulfills those ambitions. For example, writing about music is notoriously difficult, but MacLeod does a marvellous job of it here – crucial since his lead is a violinist. He covers the sweep of history impressively, but not intrusively; Roushana isn't shoe-horned into events. Most interesting is the novel's clear-eyed but sensitive attitude to death. What would it mean for us if it was avoidable? Would that be a good thing? Are stories with endings inherently better than those that go on for ever? MacLeod doesn't force the reader into agreeing with his answers, but he makes his character's final decision entirely believable. 9 – *SWT*

## Vacation

Deb Olin Unferth  
McSweeney's, hb, 240pp

I should mention first of all that this isn't a fantasy or science fiction book. It's included here because... well, because I didn't want to let all these words go to waste when I've got a reviews section to fill!

This book is typeset, designed and manufactured with wonderful skill and attention to detail. The paper's so soft you could use it to upgrade your baby's bottom. Holding the book in your hands feels luxurious; reading from it is a privilege.

In comparison, the novel itself was just okay. It's nicely written, if a bit bland. The narration is arch and distanced, which suits the subject matter but becomes a bit dull after a while. It jumps around in time quite a bit, often from one paragraph to the next – as a result it gives away the ending long before you get there, making the

rest of the book a bit of a chore. Maybe that's too strong a word, because the rest is still fairly enjoyable to read, but from about halfway in you stop learning anything new about anything that's going on, other than the minor details; you're just watching things play out in more or less the way you expected, and my enthusiasm for the book waned the longer it took to get there.

The other main problem is that the plot relies upon the characters being stupid, and not just normal everyday people stupid, but Neighbours stupid. By that I mean the type of plot (typical of Neighbours) where a character is angry or suspicious about something their partner is up to, but they don't just try to clear things up – purely because that would short-circuit the plot. Instead, they decide their partner would have told them already if they really loved them, and stew about it until their partner leaves them for being such a grump. The entire plot of this novel derives from such dopiness. Maybe it makes sense for these characters to not talk to each other – the author gives them reasons for not doing so – but over the course of years it's hard to believe no one ever got drunk and said something like, "So, you've been following this guy around?" or "Tell me about the time you jumped out of a window."

The story makes a bit more sense to me when considered as a metaphor, or a fable, and the characters as symbols, of what we do in life, for questions of leaving and staying, and so on. There's something being said about relationships, and following each other, and routes not taken, and that kind of thing. But I'm not sure I agree with what is being said. The worst that can happen to a married couple in this book is to sit and watch television together, and then talk about it. That really didn't seem so bad to me: in fact, the characters could really have done with watching a few daft sitcoms to remind themselves what laughter felt like. Almost every character in the book was utterly humourless; to the point of inhumanity, even.

If *Vacation* had been a film by Wes Anderson, perhaps I would have loved it; if it had an appropriate

soundtrack to put me in the right frame of mind; if the characters had been played by actors I like and trust enough to follow on a strange journey; if the foreign locations had been shot in living beauty by a master cinematographer. It had a lot in common with *The Darjeeling Limited*: both feature characters questing in exotic foreign lands, and both are meticulously crafted, deliberate, and confident of their own worth. But where *The Darjeeling Limited* instantly became one of my all-time favourite films, *Vacation* was just that little bit underwhelming.

But take everything I say with a handful of salt: any book or film lacking aliens or spaceships will struggle to make me totally happy. (I only got through David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* by pretending it was set on Arrakis.) That I even finished this book, despite its shortcomings in the extraterrestrial department, shows it must have been pretty good. All credit to McSweeney's Book Club for getting me to try something new. If I've focused on the negative, it's only because those things preoccupied me while I was reading it: others may find much to love in this book. 7 – *SWT*

## Vow of Silence

Robert Laughlin  
Trytium, pb, 212pp

Karel Evandar is a young man inducted into the ranks of the datists, a privileged caste of officials who are charged with remembering the entirety of human knowledge. *Vow of Silence* follows him as he trains to enter their ranks, discovers that the privilege comes at a cost, and takes a stand against it.

I should mention first of all a possible conflict of interest in this review – I published a short story by this author here in TQF last year. Another disclaimer: I read this on my resurrected Rocket eBook, after saving from the review pdf into a Word file. Somehow I lost all instances of "fi" and "fl" along the way, so I may have

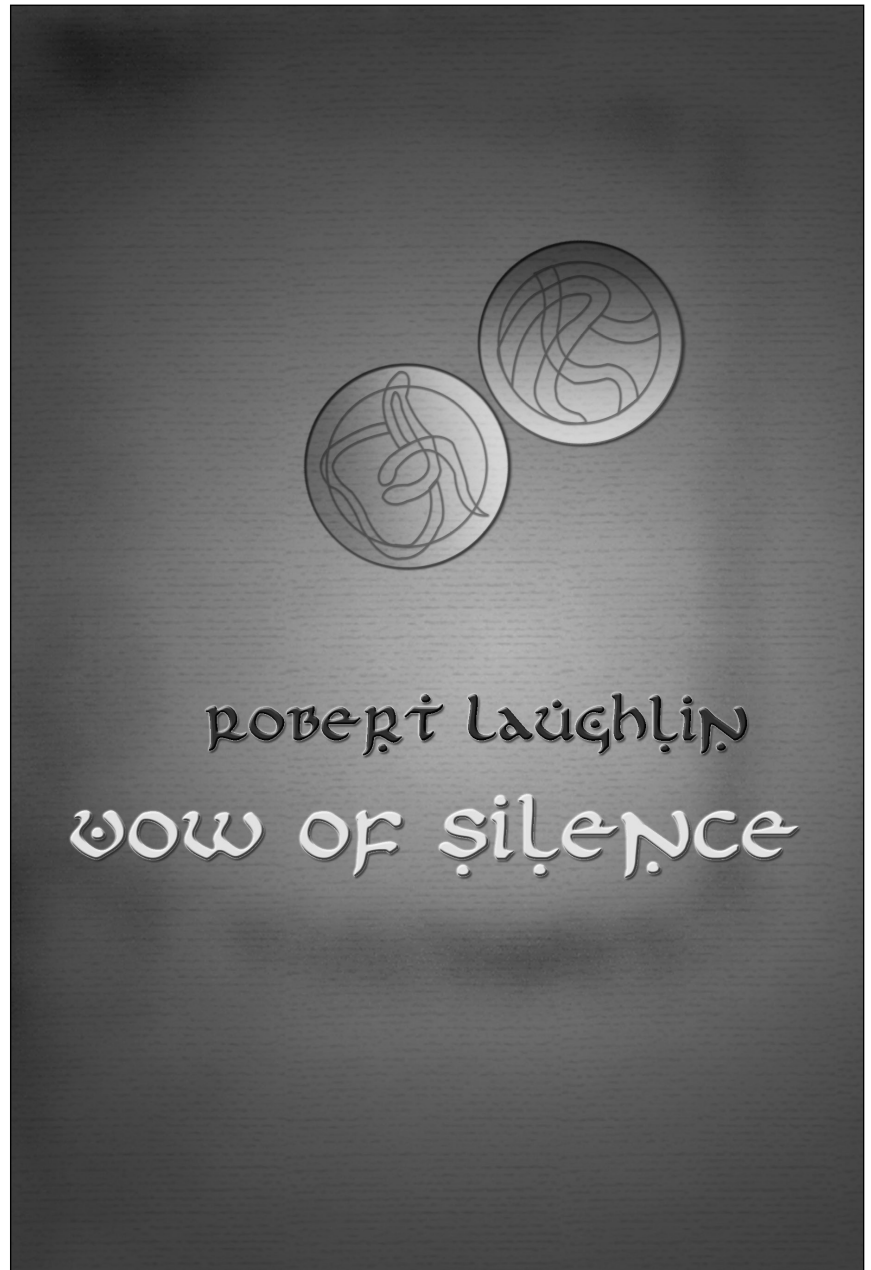
misinterpreted any plot elements revolving around those letters. In particular, a mention of a “re y” left me stumped for quite a while...

Don't be put off by the title: an entire novel about a vow of silence would, I expect, be pretty dull. There is such a vow in this novel, but it's not down to some monkish obligation, and it doesn't happen until a good way into the book. When it comes, it's a very dramatic event, with serious consequences for society as a whole. What's more, this is a book of about 45,000 words, divided into 53 chapters (and they all have titles), so dullness is not an issue – the book was a wonderfully smooth read. Like many small press books, it does suffer here and there from overly enthusiastic fonts and occasionally erratic typesetting, but the text flows clearly and easily on the page, as does the story.

Like a Jack Vance novel, this depicts a society deformed by one peculiar element; in this case, something's missing. I won't say what it is, since the realisation of its absence is something that should creep up on you. You could see this as a cynical attitude towards human behaviour: humans are so silly, allowing their lives to be shaped so casually by tiny things. I prefer to see it as hopeful: humans get by, whatever the circumstances; we do our best to keep going and find ways to adapt.

Having said that, I rather wished that the book had made the deformation more of an imperative, rather than a quirk; that there had been some good reason why the missing element was unavailable, say an absence of some essential ingredient, rather than just because no one had ever had the idea before.

It reminded me of a Vance novel in other ways, too. Laughlin shares Vance's interest in inventing musical instruments, for example. And like a Vance hero, we first meet our hero, Karel Evandar, as a young man. We watch as he grows to maturity, learns the rules of this world, masters them, and then takes a hammer to them. There's a feeling that only those who can beat the system are qualified to change it: don't complain just because it doesn't suit you personally.



On first reading, the concluding section felt slightly unsatisfying: though Karel strikes the expected blow against the existing order, he's not involved, other than as an observer, in its eventual destruction. But upon reflection I realised that he *is* indirectly responsible for the changes. At a crucial juncture he makes a secret decision not to help: that decision leads others to make the changes; and it's a decision informed by all his experiences in the book to that point. That's the moment that pulls the events of the novel together.

One interesting part of the book is its approach to relationships. We're led to believe that the datists will find it hard to build lasting relationships,

partly because they'll never forget a harsh word or expression, and also because they'll never forget the perfection of a relationship's early days. A couple who have been married for fifteen years might have a pretty good memory of how things were in their early days, but that wouldn't necessarily make new developments any less enjoyable. Also, would the ability to recall sexual experiences perfectly, for example, make a man disinclined to add to that stock of memories, or would it encourage him to accumulate more?

What's most impressive about this novel – aside from the carefully-crafted writing, controlled pacing, and the wealth of incidental detail – is

the way Laughlin develops his premise, the way he successfully extends it into multiple areas, and reflects profoundly on the implications for the people involved. It's the same thing I like about Superman comics in the fifties: he does everything in a super way, whether it's shaving his beard or playing baseball. This isn't just a book about someone with a superb memory; it's a book about how a class of such people would affect everyday life, and how their training would affect every aspect of their own lives.

Overall, a very interesting and promising debut novel. **8** – *SWT*

## COMICS

### Batman: the Resurrection of Ra's Al Ghul

Grant Morrison, Fabian Nicieza, Paul Dini et al  
DC Comics, hb, 240pp

This suffers from the usual problems of a crossover between different titles: important events falling into the gaps between issues; oddly in-depth accounts of minor plot points (Robin and Nightwing spend a full issue arguing about whether Robin should take a sample from the Lazarus pit); a contrived plot; and inconsistency of writing, artwork and tone.

And though Grant Morrison's name appears prominently on the cover, he contributes only two issues to this collection – four other writers contribute. He's in good company on the periphery, though, since Batman himself is a fairly minor player in the book. This is really a Ra's Al Ghul story, with the Bat-gang being occasional obstacles rather than protagonists.

One other slightly unwelcome aspect of the book is that in it we see the gravity effect at work, by which over time major characters absorb the

powers, attributes and motivations of lesser ones – here Ra's adopts the desire to control his descendants of Vandal Savage and the body-swapping of the Ultra-Humanite. Once this story's over let's hope he sticks to his normal territory.

But despite those issues, it's fairly entertaining. It reads more like a Wolverine or an Iron Fist story than your usual Batman, and that makes a nice change. It also does a good job of getting the casual reader up-to-date on the Bat-universe, and seeing all these Robins together is good fun.

It does give the impression that Tim Drake (Robin III) isn't long for this world – the stress put on all his friends (the Spoiler), family (his Dad) and contemporaries (Superboy) being dead makes him feel like a loose end. That's a shame, but Damian, Batman's new son, is an interesting character and would make a good replacement (if they really must replace Tim, who is my favourite Robin by far), though long-time readers might remember thinking similar things about characters like Azrael and Anarky.

Readers who bought this for twenty quid will probably rate it more harshly than someone who borrowed it from the library, but if you've ever fancied seeing Batman in a martial arts action movie, this will entertain. Just don't expect the fireworks you normally get when Grant Morrison's name is on the cover of a comic book. **6** – *SWT*

### Hellboy, Vol. 1: Seed of Destruction

Mike Mignola,  
John Byrne  
Dark Horse, tpb, 128pp

When looking at a collaboration between two creators whose work you know individually, it's easy to jump to the wrong conclusions about who contributed what. That happened with AI, for example, where a lot of peo-

ple said they hated the Spielberg bits and loved the Kubrick bits, without really knowing which was which.

I don't want to make that mistake reviewing this Hellboy book. Certainly, it seems much more like a traditional super-hero comic than later volumes, especially in the first half of the story, and it's tempting to put that down to John Byrne's scripting. But I'll resist that temptation: I think it's more that these four issues see Mignola himself finding his own voice after leaving Marvel and DC, his own style of storytelling.

I loved the artwork. Though Mignola's work is very stylised, and can from time to time be a little confusing, it's very beautiful, and suits the subject matter perfectly. I always enjoy the fact that Hellboy is asymmetrical; however nice this demon is, you should always feel a little bit uneasy about him.

The story here is a straightforward pastiche of Lovecraft, but that's not a bad thing when it's done so well. It's very different from the first movie, sharing only the bare bones of the plot, so don't be tempted to pass it over for that reason. It's not one of those books where, once you've seen the film, reading the book feels like going through the motions. **7** – *SWT*

### Hellboy, Vol. 5: Conqueror Worm

Mike Mignola  
Dark Horse, tpb, 168pp

A very enjoyable tale, mixing Captain America, Lovecraft and the Doom Patrol with a touch of Shazam. It's easy to see the influence of those other comics, but then those are our modern legends, the modern equivalents of the more ancient myths with which Mignola also works.

This was the first Hellboy book I've read for which Mike Mignola was entirely responsible, and the tone was strikingly confident and consistent. There's still the odd page that

left me casting around to see what was going on, but the artwork makes up for that in sheer beauty. For an artist, he's a very good writer – in fact, he's just a very good writer, no qualification necessary.

Overall, this was my favourite Hellboy book yet; I found it impossible to stop reading once I had begun.  
8 – *SWT*

## Rick Random: Space Detective

Steve Holland  
Prion Books, pb, 656pp

This book contains ten adventures of Rick Random, Space Detective (a character I hadn't previously heard of) from the pages of the *Super Detective Library* of comic books, digests similar in style to *Commando* and *Starblazer*. It contains issues 44, 49, 123, 127, 129, 133, 137, 143, 153 and 163. Some stories have been reprinted from their later appearances in *Buster Picture Library* (the reprint titles have been used instead of the originals).

The book puts the stories in very little context. There are no creator credits, and we're not even told when they were published, apart from a comment on the back that Rick Random first appeared in 1954. The introduction says that Harry Harrison worked on the title, and that that was when the title came into its own, but it's not clear if he wrote any of these stories. Similarly, the back cover seems to say that all these stories were drawn by Ron Turner, but the introduction mentions several other artists as well.

The artwork, whether it's all by Ron Turner or not, is generally very good. Backgrounds, spaceships and technology all look marvellous. The figure work is a bit looser than mainstream comics readers would be used to nowadays, but that's not necessarily a bad thing (though you'll have to search hard in this book for a pretty girl). In certain panels you could

think you were looking at work by Bryan Talbot or David Lloyd.

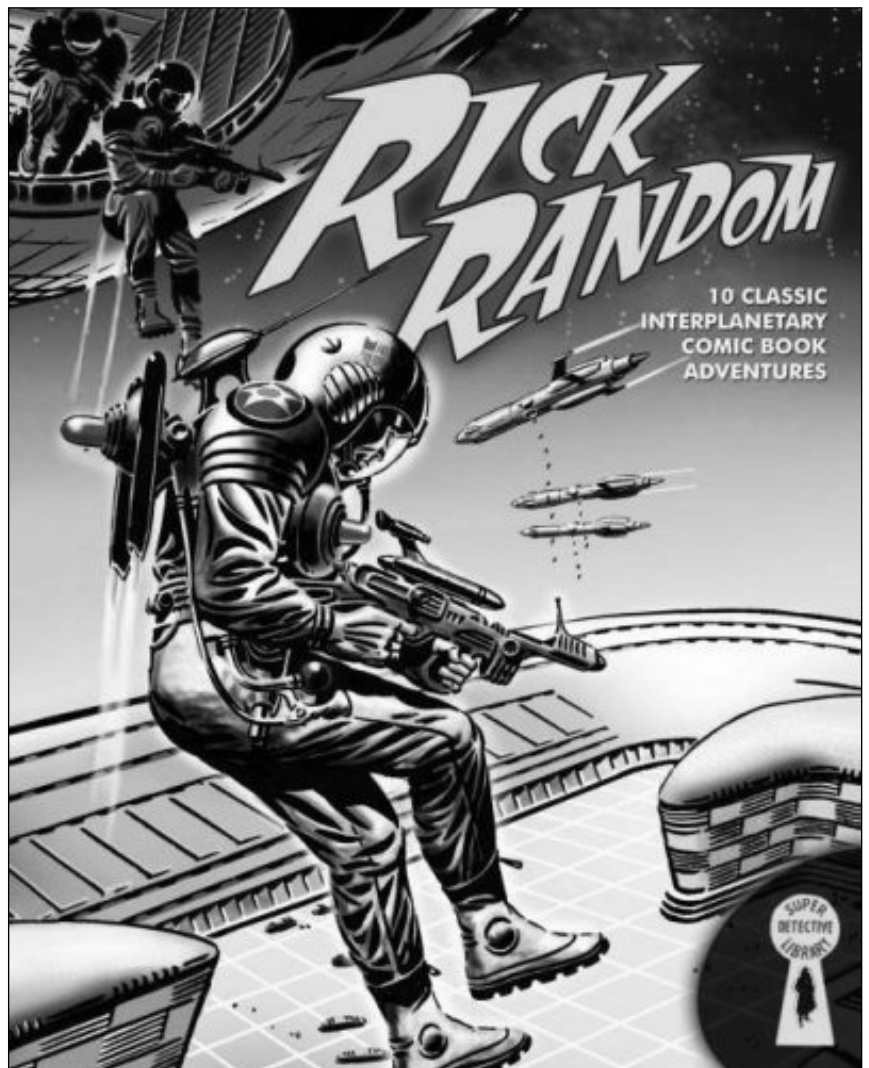
Since the stories date from the fifties, it's hardly surprising that it's a bit old-fashioned in some ways. The earlier stories have some oddly fascistic overtones. For example, everyone has an identification number tattooed on their arms, which even in 1954 would surely have raised eyebrows, and in "Kidnappers from Mars" Rick is point man on an invasion of a world which refuses to join their World Federation of Powers.

It's old-fashioned in other ways, too. In "Emperor of the Moon", said emperor has "dumb African slaves". Post-colonial critics would also have a ball with "Planet of Terror", where people say things like, "These primitive people have many gods, Rick" and "Don't most primitives have a human sacrifice on occasions like this?" In "Threat from Space" Rick Random works his way through

twenty cigarettes, possibly more. He loves his cigarettes! In "Perilous Mission" blue whales are farmed to feed Earth's population – though I'm not entirely sure if that's old-fashioned or visionary! And in "The Kidnapped Planet" Rick leads a "terrorist campaign" against giant-sized invaders. I suppose the only old-fashioned thing about that is that the story doesn't put a more positive spin on his bombings!

But being old-fashioned isn't always a bad thing. While I could have done without the smoking and the colonialism, there's a cosiness here that made for a very comfortable read. Reading these little-known stories made me feel as if my grandad had found them in the attic and brought them down for me. Some things may be a bit dated, but that generally adds to their interest rather than detracting from it.

As to the other stories, "Robot World" is an unashamed imitation of



Asimov's *The Naked Sun*, while "Frozen World" deals with the theft of gold from banks. (The frozen world of the title is Neptune.) Scientists recently suggested that the dilemma at the end of *The Italian Job* could have been resolved by super-heating the gold to turn it into a gas – at one point in this story (a mention of ventilation) I thought I'd found the scientists' inspiration! Unfortunately not, but it was nice to be surprised by the plot at least once: though these stories are often reminiscent of James H. Schmitz's hard-boiled science fiction, not least in their interest in ecology, expectations here are very rarely reversed. Everything is usually pretty much as it seems.

"Killer in Space" seems to be a bit inconsistent with the other stories. In that one it's the early days of space travel, and Venus has to be close to Earth to permit interplanetary travel, while usually Rick hops around between solar systems without any trouble. But then again, we have buses and planes in our world, but that doesn't mean buses can fly. Interstellar travel may be practical for Rick, but not for passenger ships. And anyway, consistency with old stories shouldn't get in the way of telling new ones (something Doctor Who has recently remembered, but Star Trek needs to learn).

Overall, reading the book was thoroughly enjoyable. The stories were exciting and entertaining, and full of variety: Rick's job gives him a great deal of latitude both in the cases he takes on and the approach he takes to them. This book is never boring. The dialogue is clipped and to the point. The art and storytelling is dynamic and efficient. Let your attention drift for a page or two and you'll be lost – every panel counts. If I've focused on what might be seen as flaws, it's because I found them fascinating. I'd very much recommend this book to anyone who fancies a bit of straightforward, traditional science fiction adventure.

I hope we'll see many more science fiction collections to join this one – of *Starblazer*, in particular. It's marvellous to see British comics other than *2000AD* being collected. **8** – *SWT*

## Showcase Presents: Batman and the Outsiders, Vol. 1 Mike Barr, Jim Aparo DC Comics, tpb, 552pp

Whereas the *Challengers of the Unknown* showcase book discussed below really suffered from the black and white printing, this book glories in it. When these issues were originally published (1983-1985) comics printing was at its most cheap and rubbishy (ironically the title went to pieces after graduating to fancy Baxter printing). Here the artwork is perfectly clear and very attractive. Jim Aparo does some wonderful work on the title, while Bill Willingham and Trevor von Eeden take enjoyably different approaches on fill-ins.

(I can't wait for the JLI showcase volumes that we're bound to see one day. If ever wonderful artwork was buried under unsympathetic printing it was then.)

As for the stories, written by Mike Barr, I think the *Slings & Arrows Guide* says it best (as usual): "pedestrian, but generally entertaining". There's nothing amazing here; it's run-of-the-mill team stuff, and the characters and their relationships aren't all that great. But despite that I've always had a soft spot for the *Outsiders* (to see them at their best check out *The Nail*, the JLA graphic novel by Alan Davis). If you're in the mood for a simple, self-contained team book, this'll do the trick.

For me the best thing about the book is Batman himself, or The Batman, as he is usually called here. He's not the affable duffer of the 1950s and 1960s comics, nor yet is he the middle-aged tough-love foster parent of the modern comics. He's as young as I've ever seen him portrayed – you'd think him in his mid-20s in some panels – and he's flawed, passionate, and still finding his way. He's a hero working with his peers; he's the best trained and best equipped of them, but they don't

worship him. This was a Batman I really enjoyed reading about. **6** – *SWT*

## Showcase Presents: Challengers of the Unknown, Vol. 1 Jack Kirby et al DC Comics, tpb, 544pp

The *Challengers of the Unknown* live in a world where anything can happen, and, best of all, there aren't any superheroes flying around to grab all the fun. If something weird is going on in their world, they're the people you call. It doesn't matter that they're just four better-than-average humans – or five, once June becomes a very welcome distaff member – they're the best this world has to offer, and they always give it their best shot. You have to love the spirit of four guys whose go-to move, when confronted with giants of all varieties, is to run at them in a big gang shouting things like: "Let's *all* hit him — together!"

The big problem with this book is that it can be very difficult to tell the *Challengers* apart in black-and-white. Usually their hair would help (red, blonde, brown and that strange hair colour only found in comics, the Superman blue-black), but in black-and-white, you've just got two blonde guys (one beefy, one slim), and two black-haired guys (one beefy, one slim), all in identical costumes. It got very frustrating, to the point that I began to think about getting my daughter to colour them in for me.

I never expected to say this about a comic, but it became much more readable once Jack Kirby stopped drawing it. What appalling heresy!

At the time, I thought it was down to the change of artist (to Bob Brown), but looking back through the book, I'm hard pressed to spot a really significant change in the way the

Challengers are drawn. It's more down to the (usually uncredited) writing.

In the early issues the Challengers are pretty interchangeable, apart from their specialised skills (pilot, diver/boffin, climber, wrestler). Then for a few issues after Kirby leaves the art, they suddenly develop personalities, ones that oddly enough aren't a million miles away from those of the Fantastic Four (Kirby's next book). The climber develops a bit of a Johnny Storm look and attitude, and starts poking and teasing the wrestler, who's turned into a bit of a Ben Grimm. Towards the end of the book, unfortunately, they revert to being totally characterless, but by that point June's role has become more prominent, which balances it out.

I'm a huge fan of the Essentials and Showcases. They've let me read and enjoy hundreds of comics that I would never have shelled out for in more prestigious and pocket-gouging formats like the Masterworks or the Archives. And as someone who grew up reading the black-and-white British comics of the seventies, I've never felt the lack of colour to be a huge problem. But in this case, it comes very close to spoiling the book.

What saves it is the Kirby streak that runs through all his comics: the feeling of freedom, of imagination left to follow its nose. If you want to find out what lies *beyond* the realms of possibility, he's your man... 7 – *SWT*

## The Savage Sword of Conan, Vol. 2

Roy Thomas,  
Barry Windsor-Smith,  
John Buscema  
Dark Horse, tpb, 544pp

The character Conan and the stories about him are sometimes seen as primitive versions of the fantasy stories that came later. Part of that is a

matter of chronology; part of it is his similarity to characters like Tarzan; part of it is that he's a pretty primitive fellow himself. But I think it's also because Conan is a character without any checks or balances. In roleplaying games, for example, you generally have to specialise, to choose one area in which to excel, and that often has implications for other aspects of your character. Conan has no such limitations. He's the strongest, and also the fastest. He's the biggest, but also the sneakiest. He's the best hand-to-hand fighter, but also the best general. He's the best at absolutely everything, even as a youngster, no matter how much different abilities might seem likely to clash with each other. He's a superhero, basically.

This must have been said before, but he is also, metaphorically, a phallus, pushing his way through the cloth of these adventures in search of women. His primary characteristic isn't his strength or his agility, it's that he can't be cockblocked: anyone who tries will feel the length of his sword (oo-er). When he meets a woman he wants, he knows he will have her, and so does everyone else. The message of his loincloth, like Tarzan's, is that sex is never more than a second away; it's both a threat and a promise. In fact, the entire book is a call to the reader's groin: a chance to let your imagination wander where your sense would never let you; a chance to luxuriate in fantasies of sex and violence.

That doesn't stop if from being hugely entertaining. In fact, reading this book was one of the most sheerly enjoyable, uncomplicated reading experiences of my life. Somewhere in the middle of it I stopped reading it for the sake of my ten-year-old self (for whom every Conan book and comic he could find was a priceless treasure), and started to read it for myself.

There was a lot to enjoy, even as a (relatively) mature adult: this volume is even better than the previous one. For one thing, the magazine settles down to a series of full-length stories, forty and even fifty-page epics. It also benefits hugely from the presence of John Buscema, contributing to almost every issue, bringing both conti-

nunity and, of course, brilliant artwork. There's a craftsmanship and artistry to these comics unusual for comics of the time, evident both in the art and in the writing of Roy Thomas. (Sometime I'd like to compare the comics with the stories to see how much of that writing is Roy Thomas and how much is Robert Howard – but even if turns out that all the writing I admire in these comics is from Howard's pen, credit would still go to Thomas for knowing not to interfere with it, and translating prose to comic so expertly.)

If there is one problem with the art, it's that the reverse C-shape panel layout is used too often – i.e. where panel one is above panel three, with panel two stretching vertically across them at the right. It's very confusing. But when a book contains some of the most befuddlingly attractive women ever created by a pencil, it seems ungrateful to complain about the layouts!

The original magazines had black and white interiors, so almost nothing has been lost from the artwork by printing these in the Essential/Showcase format (though I often think comics look better in black and white anyway, given how primitive comics colouring was until relatively recently). The exception would be the magazine covers, which deserve a colour book of their own to show them at their best (as has happened with the *Commando* reprints). Those paintings are simply stunning, even in greyscale.

The centrepiece of the book is "The People of the Black Circle", a one hundred and twenty page adaptation of the Howard story, which was serialised across four issues of the original magazine. It's absolutely marvellous, but then so are nearly all the stories in the book (though I could have done without the one about the cannibals, which must have seemed dated even in the seventies).

I had mixed feelings about a later story, "The Pool of the Black One". Conan always shows a reckless disregard for the lives of others – he's happy to kill guards and the like, if they're in his way, even if they aren't individually his enemies. In "The Pool of the Black One", however, he

commits a murder, plain and simple, just for his own convenience. Having not read the original Howard stories (I thought I had, till I came to catalogue them on Goodreads), I was a bit surprised by the story. It wasn't a nice guy he murdered, but it was someone who had saved his life. It seemed to me that Conan crosses a line in that one.

But then that's what he's for – he's for crossing the line, doing what we wouldn't. He's the unrestrained killer, the irresistible lover, the epitome of the male stereotype. He's what women would like men to be, but would despise them for being; he's the image men can't live up to, and the image they can't live down.

We were a bit short of money the month I read this book, to the point where I had to cancel our Sky subscription – maybe that's why I found a bit of Conan so compelling; he wouldn't have to worry about anything like that. I feel bad that I had to cancel Sky, but also bad that something as trivial as affording Sky feels like the measure of my manhood... Jeepers, listen to me... I'll be going hunting to make up for my inadequacies next... 9 – SWT

## MAGAZINES

### McSweeney's 22

Dave Eggers (ed.)  
McSweeney's, hb/3xpb,  
480pp

This issue of *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* contains three entirely separate books, bound into one magnetic cover by the metal strips in their spines. Police officers may take a dim view of literary types who go out into the night looking for trouble with one of these books concealed in their sleeves; prison librarians should ensure that this *McSweeney's* is absent from their collections.

The idea behind *From the Notebook: the Unwritten Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald* is a brilliant one: to

complete the stories suggested by that author's notes. (I have a similar notebook of unused ideas, if the same writers fancy helping me out!) Not having read any Fitzgerald, apart from *The Great Gatsby* a long, long time ago, it's hard for me to know how far the writers have tried to emulate his style, but I know that they haven't necessarily tried to recreate the exact stories FSF would have written, since some are set in the present day. It was a very stimulating read, and many of the stories were very good indeed.

*The State of Constraint: New Work from Oulipo* was my favourite of these three books. Playful, silly and intellectual in a way that typifies some of my favourite French writers, the Oulipo group labour to create works of literature under self-imposed restrictions. Some of it is daft, some of it is serious, but all of it is thought-provoking. Most enjoyable is the binary story by Paul Fournel (who also provides the introduction), if only because of the pleasure of finding a choose-your-own-adventure story in the pages of *McSweeney's*.

*The Poetry Chains of Dominic Luxford* was an eye-opener for me. I hadn't been aware previously of the wide range of modern poetry. I've said before (in a sort-of-review of *GUD* #0) that I don't really get poet-

ry, and I won't pretend that I've quite got it yet, but this book helped me make a little bit of progress. Much of this poetry resembles a short story that's been auto-summarised in Word – everything inessential boiled away, to leave a kernel of... well, on the whole, a kernel of pain. It's a pretty depressing volume, so don't read it if you're having a bad day. Of the poets here, I'm most likely to look for more work by Patrick Lawler and Sarah Lindsay, mainly because the subject matter of their poems interested me more than the relationship stuff of the rest. But there were another ten or twenty poets whose poems interested me enough to make me look them up in the contributors section. I read most of the volume while waiting to collect my daughter from school, which must have made me look terribly intellectual (or exceptionally pretentious).

Reading *McSweeney's* is always good for my vanity: it makes me feel that I'm much cleverer and more literary than I really am. Like buying books from the Folio Society (but at a much more reasonable price) it makes me feel to some extent that I'm becoming the person I wanted to be. This was one of their most educational and improving issues to date. And did I mention it's magnetic? 9 – SWT

