

Hub Magazine

SCIENCE FICTION HORROR FANTASY

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EDITORIAL:

by lee harris

It's a glamorous life, this publishing business. Every year we get to traverse the globe to attend conventions, where we get to network with the best authors in the world, and (perhaps just as importantly), consume beer throughout the day, and curry after the panels have packed away for the night.

My first convention was a one-day event in Derby three years ago, called alt.fiction, but it was with FantasyCon that same year that my interest in conventions really came to the fore.

My wife isn't a genre fan, and the idea of her husband attending a convention was supremely embarrassing to her. For weeks before the event she was desperately trying to think of a reason for me being away, should anyone ask. I think she settled on "He's in prison for exposing himself in the park", which was far less embarrassing to her than "He's at a science fiction and fantasy convention".

If you've never been to a convention you're missing out. I've only been to UK-based cons so far (though I'm off to Montreal in August for WorldCon) and they're marvellous affairs. You quickly make friends, and subsequent cons are as much an opportunity to catch up with old friends, as they are for attending panels, networking etc, and you don't have to stay the full weekend – you can buy a day pass for any day of the con – but you should try to stay if you can, as the best part of the con is often the after-hours networking, chatting and general carousing.

I'll be at EasterCon in 2 weeks time in Bradford, West Yorkshire (not the most glamorous of locations, but it's the perfect place for a curry fan), and I'm looking forward to it immensely. If you're there, look me up. I'm the one near the bar, and mine's a lager, by the way.

For more details on EasterCon (April 10 – 13), head on over to www.lx2009.com

FICTION

Gifted

by philip palmer

I was a gifted child. At eight, I had an IQ of 300. At nine I'd mastered calculus and could do sums in binary notation and I'd read Newton's *Principia* from cover to cover, and I'd even annotated it with a green felt tip pen. At ten I decided to learn Latin and by the time I was eleven I spoke nothing but Latin and Greek in the playground and had no friends at all.

My father despised my precocity. He was a lorry driver, he was away a lot, and whenever he came back he'd quiz me about my pals at school and what mischief I was getting up to and how I often I went to the park to play football. In fact, I had no friends at school, and I never got up to mischief, and I couldn't play football. I was very happy with my life and my range of interests, but my father thought I was a "fucking freak" and said so, often.

But I didn't care what he thought. Why should I have cared? What did he know about life? He was just a stupid lorry driver.

When I was twelve years old I



This is me. I am forty-two years old.

I am prematurely bald, almost totally bald in fact, apart from little tufty triangles of hair in front of my ears, which are grey. My skin is leathery and unpleasant to touch and I have dark shadows under my eyes. I am very skinny and very pale. I look cadaverous.

The last thirty years have not been good to me. I have no education, no O Levels, no A Levels, no degree, no vocational qualifications. I never learned to drive. I cannot type, or use a computer. I am unemployed, I have no money. All I have are the clothes on my back, which I do not remember buying.

I was a gifted child; and I am a gifted forty-something man. I do not panic in adversity. I do not have a nervous breakdown or throw a wobbly. I do not grumble or whinge. I apply myself to the task of picking myself up.

I begin by finding somewhere to live, under an oak tree in Kilburn Park. I am beaten up a few times by melancholic Irishmen who resent my habit of talking to them in Greek. But after a while, they get used to me. I become one of the 'gang'. A grey-haired Irish woman with a red nose adopts me, and tries to fondle me at night. I don't mind, though it gives me no pleasure.

But the weather is getting colder, so I find out where the hostels are and I move into a hostel. And then I find out how to claim benefit and I fill out the forms and I apply for a shop stacking shelves in Safeways and I start earning money.

All this takes me some time but I am an assiduous and tireless worker and I never complain and I eventually earn enough money to pay rent on a small and ghastly and appallingly decorated flat. I live frugally. I eat soup, nothing but soup, and supplement my diet with Pret à Manger sandwiches, which I salvage when they are thrown away at the end of the day. I buy my clothes in charity shops and make them last. I join a library and borrow ten books a week and I catch up on developments in modern physics and computing. I see a computer for the first time in the public library.

I think a lot about my life, and what I have done, and what I have not done. Sometimes I become very depressed but that soon becomes tiresome, and so I set myself challenges. I memorise the albedo and specific gravity and the distance from the sun of every planet in the solar system. I learn the names of all the stars. I invent a theory that explains the distribution of dark matter in the Universe. And I post my workings anonymously to a selection of Physics professors around the world, and follow the resulting sensation with mild curiosity. I am rarely bored. But when I do get bored I -



This is me. I am nine years old.

I have decided that my father is a stupid man. He claims he is a victim of the old secondary modern system and that he was thrown on the scrap heap at eleven and that he never had the opportunities that our generation had. But I have decided that this is just a pathetic excuse to conceal the fact that he lacks

intelligence and ambition.

He hit me yesterday. He smacked me in the face, and he threw out my Science Encyclopaedia because he said all this information was turning me into a “fucking freak” and he ordered me to go and play with my friends like a “normal boy”.

He's a fool of course; I'd already read the encyclopaedia from A to T, and I could remember every single article, almost every single word. *That's* the kind of gifted I am. The other children who are supposed to be gifted are actually pretty dumb compared to me. I see Isaac Newton as my peer, and perhaps Mozart, except I have no talent for music, I simply mean in terms of his *precocity*. But then, what is precocious? Who is to say that everyone's brain has to develop at the same rate? Is there a theory about this? I must find out.

I am aware there are gaps in my knowledge. I have read very little about history and politics; I haven't yet got to grips with relativity or quantum physics; and of course, my knowledge of general science is a chasm of ignorance from U to Z. But in fairness, I am only nine.

I decide not to give my father the satisfaction of knowing he has hurt me, so I go out and “play” with the children from my street. We kick a football about for a while and I am terrible at this, and then we play cowboys and Indians in the sand dunes. And I find it exhilarating. I am an Indian, and I conceal myself on top of a wooden beam that used to be part of the old railway track connecting the beach with the docks. I fire my bow and arrow and ambush two cowboys; and I leap off the beam and land on the dune and everyone agrees I'm not so bad after all.

This is a wonderful day for me. The sun is bright, I am brave and resourceful, my pals all like me, and I have won a moral victory against my father.

That evening, my mother cooks me chips and beans and corned beef, all my favourite things. The Pop Man has brought Dandelion and Burdock, which I really like. My father is out down the pub. And Mum kisses me, and says, “If that bastard ever does that again I'll walk out on him.” And I know that she loves me unconditionally.

That night I have a stiffie in bed, and I realise with delight that my little body is growing up.



This is me. I am forty six years old, and the last four years of my life have been remarkable. I have totally turned things around, since those dreadful bleak days in Kilburn Park. I now have a better paid job in the supermarket, and a nicer flat, I have bought my own computer, second hand and reconditioned by myself, and I eat meat twice a month. I have started contributing little pieces to a scientific web forum and I am attempting to get myself enrolled in a further education college so that I can get some GCSEs so I can do some A Levels so that I can apply for a degree course, probably the Open University. But it's difficult. Because I am so gifted, with such an astonishingly retentive memory, I am already more than capable of getting a first class honours degrees in physics, chemistry, mathematics and history. But I don't exist, legally, and I haven't yet devised a system for creating a new identity.

I decide to visit my father and mother. Perhaps that is the simplest way of resolving this.

I travel to Newport and knock on the door of my old house and a stranger answers. I learn that my father is dead, and has been dead for four years, and this comes as a shock to me for a number of reasons. And I learn that my mother is living in sheltered housing in Cardiff. This fills me with some despair, for she was always a proud and a houseproud woman, and I can't imagine her being 'looked after'. She must be in her seventies now, not that old, so perhaps her health is poor.

I travel to Cardiff on the bus. The journey brings back many memories, and only some of them are painful. I like Cardiff, though it has changed enormously. There's a huge development in the Bay, where there used to be docks and mudflats and scary pubs. Now there are restaurants, and an arts centre made out of Welsh slate, and a water-tower. And actually it's quite impressive.

My mother's home is in Caradoc Drive. I think the residents must have quite a nice view of the Bay from the first floor windows. I knock on the door and introduce myself as a friend of the family.

I see my mother in her room. It is bare, and there are no photographs on the wall. She seems frail and forgetful. She doesn't recognise me, but then I didn't expect her to recognise me. I start by asking her questions about her son Martin, and she tells me some tedious anecdotes. And then I try to explain to her that I am Martin, her long lost son, and she calls me a “fucking pervert” and becomes hysterical and bursts into tears. I am escorted from the premises. I am aware I didn't handle things well.

I become upset and distressed and



This is me. I am forty-six years old and it's been a week since I saw my mother. I know this from the date in the newspaper. I apologise to my boss in the supermarket where I am now the assistant manager, and I invent an elaborate lie about a family crisis involving my senile and invalid mother to explain my bizarre one week absence from work. He is unimpressed, and warns me that the next time I “piss off” in such a fashion, without permission or warning, he will sack me. So I offer to work a month without pay and that

placates him, though it also makes him look at me strangely. I can tell that he thinks I am weird.

And indeed, I am. Weird, and barren, and worthless.

I am forty-six years old and I have nothing. A shit job, no prospects, no dignity, no life, no money, no history, no family, nothing. I want to die. I think about dying.

No, no, no, I don't want to die. I just don't want -



It's raining.

I am cold, bitterly cold. I am sleeping under a tree in a park I do not recognise. I am wearing clothes that I do not recall buying.

I mooch about the park until I find a bin. Then I pull out the newspapers, which are sodden and stained with the drippings from discarded burger boxes. I discover that the Russians have invaded Georgia, and learn also that there is much outrage about it. I check the date on the newspaper and I realise that an entire year has passed. I deduce that I am now forty-seven years old and I no longer work at the supermarket. And I further deduce that I no longer have a home. I no longer have a shit job and no prospects, I have less than that, I have less than what I thought was nothing.

And the rain falls in sheets and chills my bones.



I am eight years old. It's my birthday. Dad is away on a trip, but Mum has baked a cake and is singing Happy Birthday.

I am blowing bubbles into my glass of Coca Cola and it is making a horrible farty noise.

'Happy birthday dear Martin, Happy Birthday to you,' she sings. 'Make a wish.' And I laugh, a little gurgly laugh.



I am five years old. It is my birthday. Dad is home, and Mum and Dad are both singing 'Happy Birthday.' Dad has a beautiful tenor voice, it's a joy to hear him.

'Blow the candles out, lad,' he says to me then.

I blow out the candles and make a wish. I wish this moment could last forever.

Daddy is smiling. He scuffs up my hair. I am his best boy.



I am four years old. It is my birthday. Daddy is drunk and he has quarrelled with Mummy. They don't realise that I know this, because I'm only four, and they think that means I'm stupid. They don't even know I can read the newspaper and I know who the Prime Minister is and I know the distance between the Earth and the Moon.



I am three years old. It is my birthday. We are having a party in a Ball Room, which is a new thing apparently, with millions of plastic balls and my little friends are throwing plastic balls at each other and at me and I am bored.

But my Daddy and my Mum are very happy and my Daddy is sober. And I remember that he is no longer seeing that slut, and everything is good and I am happy too.



I am one year old. It is my birthday. Daddy has left home to be with "that slut". Mummy has told me all about it and has explained all the things she'd like to do to the "fucking whore" who has stolen Daddy. She doesn't think I can understand what she is saying, and I don't really. I don't know what a slut is, or a whore. But I know that a slut and a whore are both words for "that woman" and I know that "that woman" is with Daddy, and I know that Mum believes that "that woman" will go to "fucking hell".

So it's just me and Mum today, but it's my birthday and Mum loves me and I love Mum and I feel happy despite all the badness around me. And besides, I remember that Daddy comes back in twelve months time, and I know that everything will be happy again then, and so Mum's tears today don't spoil it for me. And I want to say to Mum, 'It's okay, he comes back in twelve months time, and you live happily together for years and years,' but I can't speak, and if I could speak, I couldn't speak about things that my older self knows. That's one of the rules.



I am thirty minutes old. It is my birthday, my real birthday, the actual day of my birth. Daddy is holding me and there are tears coming down his cheeks and he keeps telling me he loves me and that I've inherited my father's good looks and Mum looks exhausted but she is happy too.

I know my Daddy loves me at this moment and I always wonder if I made a mistake, when I did the thing I did. Maybe it would have been all right. Maybe, despite what he did to me, we could have been friends again.



This is me. I am fifty-seven old. I need reading glasses now. I am skinnier than ever and my knees ache when I walk. Hair has erupted from my ears and nostrils. I clip the hair out every day because I can't bear to be hairy in my orifices.

It was harder to get my life together, the second time, but I managed it. At the age of forty-seven, I had found myself destitute again, and homeless again, but I didn't despair, I didn't panic. Instead, I patiently and carefully applied myself to the task of rebuilding my life, and rejoining society. Firstly, I lived rough, for six months. I avoided Kilburn Park this time, instead I favoured an alley near Waterloo. I befriended my fellow down and outs. I sold the Big Issue for a while, with some success. Then I finally got a job helping at a centre for the homeless. Then I stole some money and went to jail for a few months and it was pretty terrible there but at least they fed me up.

It's possible to be anonymous in jail. People don't really care who you are. They don't check your papers with any degree of rigour.

My mother died when I was in jail; but I only found that out when I left. I'd missed the funeral. I thought about claiming the money from the sale of the house but that would have meant a lot of questions. But I did manage to get into a further education college, and adding that on to my time in homeless hostels and in jail, that gave me some kind of cv to work with. So I began to build up an identity. I did my A Levels and a degree in physics and a degree in maths. Then I published papers in scientific magazines and secured myself a PhD through publication. And finally, I was able to get a job as a lecturer in Physics at Leeds Metropolitan University. They were very forgiving about my chequered past; and, of course, they were astonished at the quality of my published papers. And so I developed a rhythm of life. I lived in a flat, I walked to work, I had a cup of coffee and a chocolate chip cookie in the ground floor Costa's every morning, and I taught.

I was quite a good teacher. And I liked being around young people. Sometimes they took me to the pub and tried to get me drunk, but I never breached my one pint rule.

In the evenings I did my original research and wrote papers for scientific magazines to build my profile. I wrote about the ecology of stars and collated a great deal of primary material into an overall synthesis. It wasn't difficult. But my real work involved quantum physics and relativity, which I had finally got to grips with, and which were both rubbish. I marvelled at Einstein's folly in conceiving a grand synthesis that was so close to and yet so far away from the mark. And his inability to accept the principles of quantum mechanics showed his fundamental lack of insight.

I found superstring theory interesting but also wrong, and I jotted down a more accurate synthesis of the fundamental principles of the universe. I had to create my own mathematical symbology, and I didn't have time to prove the basics, and I couldn't be bothered to publish and be subject to peer review. But essentially I saw very clearly the interconnection of space, time, mass, matter and consciousness. There is a multiverse; and each universe within that multiverse is a self-contained system in which consciousness is a consequence of the possibility of time and space. That's a crude summary of course; but this theory explains how the things that are possible for me are possible for me.

For I am not merely gifted, you see. I have a different quality of consciousness to every other human being in the world.

And I am not the equal of Newton, Leibnitz, Einstein, Bohr, Dyson, Feynman, Heisenberg, and Fermat; I am qualitatively different and superior to each of them. My focus is total, their focus was partial. My concentration is flawless, their concentration was flawed. I am able to directly experience the space-time continuum; they merely guessed at it.

But what is the point of all this, if I may say so, fucking cleverness? What does it benefit me to do what I do? For I have had no kind of life.

I am fifty-seven years old and I have never driven a car. I have never had sex, apart from some gropings with an old female wino in Kilburn Park. I have never had an adult friend. My life has been a total waste of far far too little time.

I try not to despair.

And I have good moments. Many good moments. I walk through the park near Leeds University and see a rainbow bursting through clouds. A magical moment. Time stands still, and I savour the magical moment for half a day.

And one day, I am on the train to London and there's a beautiful young woman in the seat ahead of me. I can see her reflected in the train window, so I am able to stare at her without her realising that I am staring at her. She has dark flowing hair, and bushy dark eyebrows, and beautiful features, a sweet smile, and a colourful scarf around her slim neck. And she has an iPod, and she is singing along silently to the songs, quite uninhibited, unaware that I am watching her. And her reflection appears to be outside the train, she is flying outside the train, past the trees and through the InterCity train going in the other direction.

And then our train stops and she starts to get off but time stands still and I watch her for another hour or so.

Then time starts and she gets off the train and



I am on the train to London and there's a beautiful young woman in the seat ahead of me. I can see her reflected in the train window, so I am able to stare at her without her realising that I am staring at her. She has dark hair, and bushy dark eyebrows, and beautiful features, a sweet smile and a colourful scarf around her slim neck. And she has an iPod, and she is singing along silently to the songs, quite uninhibited, unaware that I am watching her. And her reflection appears to be outside the train, she is flying outside the train, past the trees and through the InterCity train going in the other direction.



I am on the train to London and there's a beautiful young woman in the seat ahead of me. And I stare shamelessly at her beauty, I savour her hair, her eyebrows, her smile, I laugh at the way she mouths along to the song lyrics with such delicious animation. And I marvel at the way her reflection appears to be outside the train, she is flying outside the train, past the trees and through the InterCity train going in the other direction.

And the moment is perfect.

And the moment is perfect, again.

And the moment is perfect, again, and again, and again.



I am thirty minutes old. It is my birthday. Daddy is holding me and there are tears coming down his cheeks and he keeps telling me he loves me and that I've inherited my father's good looks and Mum looks exhausted but she is happy too.



I decide not to give my father the satisfaction of knowing he has hurt me, so I go out and "play" with the children from my street. We play football for a while and I am terrible at this, then we play cowboys and Indians, in the sand dunes. And I find it exhilarating. I am an Indian, and I conceal myself on top of a wooden beam that used to be part of the old railway track connecting the beach with the docks. I fire my bow and arrow and ambush two cowboys; and I leap off the beam and land on the dune and everyone agrees I'm not so bad.

This is a wonderful day for me. The sun is bright, I am brave and resourceful, my pals all like me, and I have won a moral victory against my father. And I try not to remember that in just three years from now my father will quarrel with me, and punch me in the face, and tell me that he wishes I'd never been born. No - no - banish that thought, that memory - don't -



This is me. I am sixty-two years old. I overshot. My life has gone. I am no longer a University lecturer, I have no flat, I am living rough again.

I try going back, but the past is a blur between 'I am fifty seven' and 'I am sixty two'. That time literally does not exist for me. It is lost time, like the thirty years I lost from the day when I was twelve years old when my father called me a useless prick and punched me, to the day I rejoined the world.



I am thirty minutes old. It is my birthday, my real birthday, the actual day of my birth. Daddy is holding me and there are tears coming down his cheeks.



I am sixty-three years old. I have got some kind of life back together. Social Services have been looking after me, after I was found collapsed in the Cut suffering from double pneumonia, and taken to hospital. When I recovered, I told the social worker I was nearly eighty years old and she believed me, because of my skeletal frame and haunted eyes, and that gave me priority in accessing home helps and other services. For a while, I even contemplated faking Alzheimer's to get into a home.

But on reflection, that feels like a dismal prospect. Twenty or thirty years of slow decline, surrounded by stupid geriatrics, bossed around by patronising care staff? Is that really as good as it gets, for someone like me?

So instead, I get a job teaching Physics at a further education college. I forge references, and charm the administrator. And I earn enough to get by, and to sustain some small quality of life. For I am resolved: I must stay in the present, and amass as many more memories as I can, before I achieve immortality. So I go for long walks, I get up early and watch the dawn. I sit in the pub and I listen to other people's jokes. I walk past the University and see the students, laughing, and admire their beauty and confidence.

I read novels that I know I will enjoy reading again, and again, and again. All of Tolstoy. All of Jane Austen. All of Dickens. All of Wilkie Collins. Proust, in the original French. *Tristram Shandy*, *Finnegan's Wake*, *Ulysses*. And plays too - Brecht, Beckett, Pinter, Shaw, Ibsen, Chekhov, Rattigan and Noel Coward. I watch films. Renoir. Hitchcock. Godard. *Singing in the Rain*. Every British crime movie ever made, including all the Ealing comedies, which I love. I listen to the collected works of Beethoven and Mozart and Bach, and I listen to jazz and Cole Porter and Stephen Sondheim and every album ever recorded by Charlie Parker and Nina Simone, and thousands more albums beside.

But though I keep relentlessly busy, my life is dreary and futile and I am depressed most of the time. And after ten years of this half-life, I decide that I have had enough. Soon, when the moment is right, I will



I am ninety-two years old. I am in a hospital. My skin is like old parchment. I wake up coughing, and I know that I am dying. Thank Christ for that, I think to myself, at last. And time stands still.

There is no such thing as time travel, by the way. I proved that conclusively, in my detailed analysis of the space-time-consciousness continuum. I have no idea where those notes are, I lost them during one of my fastforwards, but I remember every detail and if I choose I can go back to the time when I wrote what I wrote, and see the equations written down.

Time is a flux that is malleable by the event of consciousness. That is my insight, and that is my Gift. But I have used it badly. I have left no legacy. My parents were lost to me. During the best years of my life, between the age of twelve and the age of forty-two, I sped through all the time I did not want to endure, and for those thirty years I did not exist.

The day of my awakening was the day my father died; I have no idea how I managed that.

But there are some consolations available to me. What I did experience of life, I will always have. For I can move backwards, as well as forwards, through time.

And so I choose never to allow time to touch the moment of my death. For this way, my consciousness will be free to re-experience any and every experience in my life, from birth to a-whisker-away-from-death, for all eternity.

I was a gifted child; and I am an extraordinarily gifted old man.

For I am ninety-two years old and I know, beyond all doubt, that I will never, ever, die.



REVIEWS

Doctor Who: Orbis

reviewed by *guy adams*



Written by Alan Barnes and Nicholas Briggs
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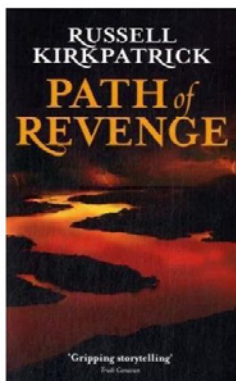
Seafood is pernicious stuff and I for one am at a loss as to why the fact is not universally accepted. What is it with people turning a blind eye towards clearly unpleasant organisms simply because they hail from underwater? Prawns are sea insects... bluebottles of the waves... Doesn't stop you lot cooing over them like they're God's gift to the palate... Oysters? Dear Christ... the day I need to ingest shelled snot to stimulate an erection is the day I convert to celibacy. It's not as if we're running out of things to eat now is it? Develop selective taste, you idiots, before evolution turns its back on us for not getting the joke!

The Eighth Doctor certainly wouldn't eat seafood: how could he? On the evidence of *Orbis* he's been cohabiting with some for the last 600 years and NOBODY with an ounce of gastronomic savoir-faire eats something it's possible to have a conversation with. In fact, during his time on the planet Orbis the Doctor has grown very fond of the jellyfish-like inhabitants, acting on their behalf against the invasive cruelties of the Molluscari. These shelled swine, led by the Great Crassostrea – played by Andrew Sachs, whose running commentary about the development of his female sex organs might have taught humour-vacuum Russell Brand a thing or two about the potential for obscene phone calls – want to take over the planet of Orbis and use its waters for breeding... a bit like the English in Benidorm.

I confess that after the epic quality of last season's *Vengeance of Morbius* (and its resultant dual cliff-hanger) I had expected a similar tone here and it took me a few minutes of listening to the amusing gurglings of Orbis's *fruits de la mer* to shift my expectations. Orbis isn't a kettle-drum pounding, jaw-dropping hour of high drama, it's a charming tale that seeks to remind you of the Doctor's emotional leanings rather than present any great challenges to the Very Fabric of Existence. On reflection I think this was a sensible route, providing a pleasant reintroduction to the whimsies of the Eighth Doctor and his relationship with Sheridan Smith's Lucie. True, in the last quarter things get a little more weighty – in a beach scene that runs perhaps a fraction too long, fraught exposition and dramatic storms rage just a shade past our inclination to stay thrilled at them – but overall this is a fun start to Big Finish's third series of Eighth Doctor and Lucie adventures and no worse off for it.

Path of Revenge

reviewed by *david gullen*



by Russell Kirkpatrick
Orbit
rrp £7.99

The first book of Russell Kirkpatrick's 'The Broken Man' trilogy is big, bold, and has the grand sweep of destiny combining a clash of empires with the fate of individuals, many human, some not.

Noetos used to be a fisherman. Now he is on the run from the emperor having defied and fought the royal Recruiters who once came in the past to take his daughter and have now returned for his son. In another part of the world Lenares is a Cosmographer, a gifted member of a near-defunct sect of visionary mathematicians in the service of a ruler who's fear and greed have turned him into a tyrant.

Then there is Stella, Queen to a recently dead King. Now the princes and politicians her husband

once ruled want her dead, or at least they are going to have a damned good try. For Stella, who was once the lover of the Undying Man, the immortal emperor and enemy of her recently dead husband, has a profound secret. The Undying Man has given her gift of endless life.

These three characters form the core of the narrative, each starting from very different locations and situations, each driven by their own urges and the circumstances that surround them. So do we simply have yet another quest, where a group of disparate characters from varied backgrounds find themselves drawn together in common cause? Not in this instance. For one thing, these characters never meet, and for another, they are all being unwittingly coerced.

Deep in the dungeons of the Undying Man lies Hrusk, a rebellious wizard broken by the Undying Man's magic. Hrusk is down but not out and he harbours dreams of revenge. Over time he has carefully gathered his resources. Noetos, Lenares and Stella are the unwitting instruments of his will.

Russell Kirkpatrick's world is rich and detailed, and the book is prefaced by some of the loveliest fantasy maps I have seen. This is not surprising; he makes atlases for a living, and this delight with detail comes through in his writing. Sometimes though this can go too far, for example Chapter three opens with an eight page excursion into the world of a minor disposable character. Interesting background, but a point of view that is irrelevant. This, however, is less a fault of this writer than the style of modern fantasy, where more is deemed to be more, and many agents and editors of the genre set minimum word counts rather than maximums. By the time I'd reached the end of this long story I was wishing the narrative had been more tightly focused and the story further developed.

Russell Kirkpatrick is an accomplished writer, changing voice and tone to bring depth and variety to both the characters and the desert, coastal, and magical landscapes they move through. Initially concerned with his own family, Noetos finds himself at the head of a rag-tag band defending the coast against pirates the Undying Man appears happy to let raid. Lenares, obsessed with number and list, is drawn into the history of her ancient land, where conquered peoples have been bred into intriguing sub- or possibly un-human races, and the surviving Gods brood in the desert. Of all the characters Hrusk, the spider at the centre of the book's web, is the least successful. Mainly this is because his role in the book is confined to a handful of pages. As a result his apparent influence on the destinies of the three main protagonists is light to the point of irrelevance and the feeling is this tale could unfold perfectly well without him.

If you are looking to immerse yourself in a vivid and diverse world and are happy to go where the writing takes you, then at 650 pages and the first third of a trilogy, this is absolutely the book for you. The plotting is intelligent and imaginative, and it slowly becomes clear that beyond all the machinations of Hrusk, and the perceived wisdom of the kingdoms and empires in the book, nothing is as it seems. The Undying Man, immortal and sorcerous emperor is not necessarily the brutal and all-powerful threat he appears to be. Someone or something very powerful is interfering with Hrusk's carefully drawn plans. Perhaps it is to do with the 'hole in the world' Lenares can perceive with her algebraic magic, or perhaps it is the Undying Man himself still taunting his vanquished foe. Certainly there are far more players in this complex and entertaining game than I shall mention here. While occasionally lacking pace, the Path of Revenge is an intricate and enjoyable book and there is clearly plenty more story to be told about this world and the peoples that inhabit it.

FEATURES

Collecting Campbell

by mark morris

The internet is a wonderful thing, but there's no denying that it has taken away some of the anticipatory pleasure of collecting books. I was thinking this the other day as I ordered a couple of out-of-print John Gordon novels for a penny each from the 'New & Used' section of Amazon.

I've been reading horror fiction – or at least, stories about ghosts and monsters – for as long as I can remember, but when I was younger I'd pick up any old thing with a lurid cover and give it a go. Derivative old crap about zombie plagues and vampire curses and man-eating spiders: I'd shovel it all in along with the good stuff, rather like a binge-eater who crunches the occasional apple to supplement all the MacDonald's burgers and boxes of KFC.

It wasn't until I read Stephen King's *Danse Macabre* round about 1982 that I began to become more selective about my reading matter. It was thanks to King's infectious enthusiasm for the work of such writers as Peter Straub, Shirley Jackson, Richard Matheson and Ramsey Campbell that I actively began to

seek them out (or rather, their books; I'm not, nor ever have been, a crazed stalker, regardless of what the courts might say).

Furthermore, at the back of *Danse Macabre* was a suggested reading list of around one hundred titles, which I made it my mission to track down. Trouble is, many of the books I was suddenly eager to read were out of print...and so, for the next god knows how many years (and I'd guess it was around the best part of a decade), I travelled the length and breadth of the United Kingdom, scouring second-hand bookshops for elusive treasures.

Actually, it wasn't *quite* like that, but it was certainly the case that if I was going to a town or city I had never visited before, I would first consult my *Skoob Directory of Second-Hand Bookshops* to see what that particular locale had to offer. As a consequence, I spent many happy hours in sleepy, out-of-the-way places, browsing the dusty shelves of musty bookshops, occasionally unearthing a much sought-after gem, but more often than not simply discovering and subsequently buying something which *just looked interesting*.

On one memorable occasion my good friend Nick Royle and I spent a few days in Hay-On-Wye, the second-hand bookshop capital of Britain. We spent countless hours perambulating happily from one book-stuffed building to another, and at the end of our time there we both had a stack of books so tall that we needed an extra bag to carry them all home in (and indeed, we had each brought an extra bag with us, for just such a circumstance).

One story which I have told before – in my introduction to the PS edition of Ramsey Campbell's magnificent novel, *The Overnight* – but which I'll tell again (simply because I can) is the one about my search for Ramsey's first novel, *The Doll Who Ate His Mother*. As soon as I read *The Nameless*, the first book of Ramsey's I managed to track down after reading King's piece on him in *Danse Macabre*, I became hooked on his skewed, often deeply disturbing world-view and his elegant, elliptical style. For the next year, finding Ramsey's books became my priority. A visit to a second-hand bookshop would always start with me marching straight over to the 'C' shelf of the horror section. In this way, bit by bit, I managed to pick up Ramsey's backlist: *Dark Companions*, *Demons By Daylight*, *The Fact That Must Die*, *The Height of the Scream*, *Claw* (written under the pseudonym Jay Ramsay), plus new paperback editions of *The Parasite* and *Incarnate*, which had both been issued by Grafton.

But, though I searched high and low for it, I couldn't find *The Doll Who Ate His Mother* anywhere. I became so desperate that I even gave several local second-hand places my number and asked them to ring me immediately should a copy turn up.

And then one day, in the mid-80s, my girlfriend Nel turned up at my bedsit clutching a small brown paper bag. "Guess what I've found?" she said, and slid the bag slowly off the item inside, revealing it little by little. I can still remember the leap of excitement I felt when I saw Ramsey's name, and then, to confirm my sudden giddy surge of expectation, the word 'the'. I still maintain that it's the best present Nel has ever given me – although admittedly my children do come a close second.

So there you have it...the perilous adventures of a second-hand bookshop browser. As I say, the internet has made book (and all other types of) collecting almost ludicrously easy these days. In many ways that's good – it saves an awful lot of time, and negates the tedium and disappointment of long, fruitless searches. But on the other hand it has taken away the thrill of the chase, and the occasional delicious sense of triumph and achievement, and I, for one, can't help but feel a little bit sad about that.

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