

Hub Magazine

SCIENCE FICTION HORROR FANTASY

PUBLISHER
LEE HARRIS

MANAGING EDITOR
ALASDAIR STUART

COMMISSIONING EDITOR
ELLEN J ALLEN

DESIGN/LAYOUT
PHIL LUNT

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by alasdair stuart

The First Step

We're coming up on issue 100, and it's at times like this that your thoughts turn to first steps, and that moment that comes before a first step. There's a single moment, trapped in amber, where you've decided to do something but haven't yet and the oddest thing about that moment is how peaceful it is, how serene. You know what you're about to do, you know that your actions will have consequences and you know you're ready for them. They are Van Wilder's 'dare to be great' moment writ large, a point in time where just for a second you are exactly as big and heroic as you think you are.

It's been on my mind recently, not just because of Hub but Pseudopod. I've been the host over there for about two years and a little while ago I got talking to a colleague of mine over there about an idea. He said it sounded great and I should podcast it myself and...I didn't have an answer.

Because he was right, there is no reason on Earth why I shouldn't podcast the story myself, other than one; comfort. Pseudopod's a great job and I have instant access to a framework already in place so it made sense for me to assume that I could podcast my work through them and not have to worry about the set up and promotion.

But that's as important a part of the work as the story itself. Getting people to care, working out how to make a project work, producing it and finally seeing it out in the wild. At University my friend Ali and I put together a magazine and distributed it for free. We really did put it together too, down to cutting out the individual articles and photos and gluing them to the master copy. It was very hard work made all the harder by folding it around lectures and I can honestly say I was never happier at University than during that period.

All that work, all that fun came from one moment, the moment before we had the idea, the moment before we talked about it and I'd forgotten how much fun projects can actually be,

So, the work starts here. I get to cut an entirely new story from scratch and it's going to be tough but it's absolutely going to be worth it. So, if you've got a project you've been meaning to get around to, then get around to it. You'll get out twice what you put in.

Finally, in a relentlessly shameful plug, I will part of a small, elite group of Vikings ascending the Minster Tower in full gear for Red Nose Day. If you feel like giving some money to a good cause or at least find the thought of me suffering through 275 steps in full Viking kit amusing, go to www.myrednoseday.com/JorvikGamesVikings and donate.



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FICTION

Hidden Underneath

by malin larsson

The cab driver sighed and crept another foot towards the traffic lights. New York rang with the endless clamour of engines and honking but that didn't do anything to drown the irritating sound of Chinese or whatever language the middle-aged couple in the backseat was speaking. They were gesticulating wildly and drowning him in questions though they had barely left Grand Central. The cab driver gritted his teeth; this late in the day he had no patience with small yellow people speaking bad English. He spat through the open window and nearly hit a bike messenger swooping past, zigzagging between the cars at a breakneck pace.

The cab driver was a strange-looking man, small of height and width, who needed a hard pillow on the seat to get a good view of the streets. The tint of his skin suggested he might have had Indian ethnicity and his hair had stripes of black amongst the grey. The eyes that might have been slanted were deeply set in his wrinkled face, a face that was completely round with a mouth much too large for his size. The identification card on the dashboard said that his name was Ben Wanger.

"This library, yes?" asked the man in the backseat, pointing at the huge building in front of Bryant Park. "In film."

"New York Public Library," Ben answered grouchy as the queue began to move again.

A truck shoved its way into his lane and he cursed it loudly through the window. Nevertheless he managed to push through the intersection just as the lights flashed back to red.

"My wife like shopping," the man stated. "I hear famous bags cheap in New York. You know?"

The cab driver nodded, suddenly so enthusiastic that he looked like one of those toy dogs you place on the dashboard.

"It's Canal Street you're looking for, not far from Chinatown."

He slammed his breaks on to avoid a motorcycle that was veering out from a side street but continued his tirade undaunted.

"They hide the knockoffs in secret rooms at the back so you need to ask for them. Be discreet about it," he advised him.

The wife pointed at a man strolling down the sidewalk in nothing but a pair of very small shorts colored as the US flag. She quacked something in their odd language and they both looked at the almost-nude man in shocked disbelief. The cab driver raised his eyebrow at their amazement. As the under-dressed man disappeared from view and they passed another crossroad, the Asian man turned back to him and leaned closer.

"True that people in night drive with no lights, if blink lights, you die?"

"Definitely," answered Ben. "This other cabbie knew a guy who was killed like that. It's the gangs who do it, as an initiation ritual. I never flash my lights at anyone."

The man's eyes glimmered with curiosity and he leaned so close that the driver could smell curry on his breath even in the stink of pollution from the throngs of cars outside.

"I hear they steal cars, even with children inside."

"They steal everything that is not guarded. If you leave the car parked you often find it without wheels and batteries when you come back. It's happened to a friend many times."

The Asian looked stunned as they turned a corner at Times Square and melted into the meandering queue of cars on Broadway. The woman gasped and pointed at a giant billboard, ignorant of their conversation. She quickly pulled out a camera and photographed the Coca-Cola sign. The man ignored

her and so did the cab driver.

"Very dangerous living here," the Asian stated thoughtfully.

"Indeed, even the babysitters are brutal. I once drove two girls in my cab and one of them complained about noisy children. The other then told her that when she had trouble baby-sitting she just turned on the gas in the oven and stuck the baby's head in there. When it got drowsy she put it to bed and she could then watch TV undisturbed."

Ben sounded amused at the thought and obviously enjoyed telling these dubious anecdotes to this naïve foreigner. The man's eyes widened in shock at this statement and he shook his head mumbling things Ben couldn't understand.

"And white alligators under sewer? Living there?"

Ben's expression changed from enthusiasm to offended anger.

"Pure lies. Idiotic urban legend! Why would alligators live in the sewers?" he snarled.

Startled, the Asian recoiled from the frowning expression of the cab driver. Ben shook his head and snorted.

"Alligators in the sewers!" he repeated scornfully.

He turned left onto West 46th street and parked in front of Paramount Hotel. The Asian couple left the car, dragged out their luggage and paid him. They probably forgot the peculiar cabbie as soon as they stepped under the white arcs of the hotel.

Ben quickly drove off, still annoyed over what people believed. They were so gullible and immature. He sighed and decided to take the evening off. Driving north and avoiding the main roads, he reached a parking lot as the sun was setting. He nodded to the security guard sitting in his small shed and the fat man casually waved back.

Having locked the car, he headed down the street whistling to himself. He wound through narrow streets until he stopped in an alley next to a brick house covered in graffiti. Making sure no one else was around, he bent down and opened the manhole. Hidden as it was by some cardboard boxes filled with litter, it wasn't the easiest thing to do.

Surprisingly agile for his age, he slipped down and placed himself on the ladder. After closing the lid, he climbed down to the bottom of the hole and pulled out a small flashlight from his jacket pocket. The ray burned through the heavy air, which carried the odour of algae and rotting remains. Although this was an unused part of the sewer since long back, the residues of the stench lingered in the walls.

Ben headed east without hesitation and strode determinedly onwards. As he walked further, the sewer became narrower and started to smell of rats and of something odd that quite resembled the aroma of cinnamon but drier and tinged with ammonia and sulphur. The sewer parted and as the light slipped over the tunnels something scuttled away, something much bigger than a rat. Ben went left, turning his back to whatever had shied from the flashlight.

His steps echoed and splashed as he continued, but sometimes the echoes sounded more like clicking and shuffling, as if they weren't echoes but something following him. Heedless of this, Ben started to whistle joyously.

As the sewers grew wider again the noises that could be echoes became more insistent. Another T-formed crossing loomed in the weak light and the rays lighted up the left tunnel. It reached but some twenty feet before being abruptly cut off by some random bookshelves filled with books and objects as haphazard as the shelves themselves. The area also contained a bed, a worn and patched armchair and a table missing a leg and therefore leaning on a stack of books. A camping stove was placed on a low nightstand covered in children's stickers and a teapot was placed on it. Ben bent down and pulled out a dented cupboard from under the chair. The cupboard, which had once hung on a kitchen wall, had now been reinforced with a hatch and a lock. The cabbie unlocked it deftly and pulled out a bag of dog treats from among the bags of chips, cookies and other not so very healthy food.

He locked his makeshift pantry and left the room for the opposite side of the crossing. Also the right-sided tunnel ended abruptly, the sides of it torn asunder and the roof missing. It opened up into an uneven cave filled with clicks, rustling and whistles. As he walked into it, lizard-like bodies darted away from the light. Smiling, Ben whistled to them and rustled the bag of treats. The scuttling stopped momentarily and then began anew as the creatures crept nearer, clicking softly. As the white, slender bulks about the length of small ponies moved into the light, Ben clucked and shook his head, thinking again of the Asian's question.

"White alligators in the sewers," he repeated both amused and affronted at the same time as he patted one of the beasts that had dared approach him.

"How could anyone ever take you for alligators, my lovely beasts?" he wondered stroking the bat-like wing of the dragon.



REVIEWS

The Reach of Children

reviewed by guy adams



by Tim Lebbon
Introduction by Michael Marshall Smith
Signed and limited to 450 copies
Humdrumming

Books and truth have always tip-toed around one another; like a marriage made untenable through infidelity. All books lie. Even - some would say *especially* - those that purport not to (non-fiction? Please... just listen to two or three bar stories to know there's no such thing.). Still all books strain to sound true. This is how they affect us, they need us to believe them.

Tim Lebbon knows this and his new novella, *The Reach of Children*, knows it too. I don't think I've ever heard so much truth in a book.

The prose style is lean - which is not, please note, the same thing as sparse. It sets down the circumstances of ten year old Daniel Powell with a perfect balance of simplicity and flair. The death of his mother, the slow and terrible collapse of his father under the combined weight of grief and alcohol. And then that box, under his father's bed. The one that talks...

Lebbon's work is always lifted by a sense of beauty. Even when painting terrible pictures for us, things we *do not* want to see, there is lyricism and artistry. Nature - always a recurring theme - is a place of wonder: thick, green, lush and magical... A counterpoint to the drab life of the book's central character. The green is somewhere to escape to, a place where the taste of his mother's spirit lingers.

Daniel's loss and the changeable attitudes of those around him, are presented without showboat sentimentality and all the more effective for that. But then: if you have truth you don't require sentiment.

This is an important book, it will win awards. This is a given. More importantly though - and I honestly think Lebbon would share my opinion on this - this is a book that people will get evangelical about. They will insist their friends read it. They will get increasingly frustrated by people who claim to have not had the time or the money.

On the subject of the latter, yes, this is a somewhat expensive limited edition novella as opposed to an affordable paperback so I can see the argument. However smaller presses must play these games in order to get dealer support and if value is quantified by quality then the book's a bargain and worth every penny.

The Reach of Children is a very personal book to Lebbon, laced throughout with the recent loss of his own mother. It is the best thing he has written and I hope it was therapeutic. Buy it, love it and reassure him that it was worth every single one of the tears he clearly shed while writing it.

Wolverine and the X-Men

reviewed by phil lunt



Marvel Studios

I'm almost 31. Some would class people of this age as being grown-up so I probably shouldn't be watching cartoons in my spare time... Well I do so nyuh!

As mentioned in a previous review for Hub I am a reader/collector of comic books, be it in "floppy" form (individual issues) or as graphic novels, trade paperbacks and the like. Anyway, the other day whilst scrolling through TV channels to find something that our poor DIY aerial could manage to pick up digitally, without the screen breaking into 5-second stuttering mosaic patterns, I managed to stumble across the latest small-screen incarnation of the X-Men: *Wolverine and the X-Men*. To my mind titled because Wolverine, I believe, is one of Marvel's best selling properties and he's a member of the X-Men so

tagging the show as if "it's his gang" must surely do well for them. Still, mustn't grumble, the animation was fairly slick and the screen didn't break up so I settled down to 20 minutes or so of the goggle-box.

The X-Men mythos goes back to the early 60s so, in a typical TV style aimed at new audiences, a bit

of a rehash of the story is required. Luckily the X-Men movies weren't that long ago so the animated series (that's the grown-up way of saying "cartoons" nowadays) appears to build on that foundation. Don't know who the X-Men are? Where have you been?? Nah, just kidding! The X-Men are a team of young mutants who have been banded together by Professor Charles Xavier to help quash anti-mutant sentiment and promote peace between humans and mutants as well as learn how to use their powers responsibly. In doing this they occasionally also have to kick ten shades of sushi out of their opposition. In the Marvel Universe a mutant is a person born with super powers which usually awaken and develop during adolescence, as opposed to gaining them because of some incident in their lives, such as being bitten by a radioactive spider or having toxic waste tipped over you. It's all highly plausible stuff! Some people view mutants as the next step in the evolution process of humans so, naturally, they are feared and loathed by the general public who believe they will, at some point, use their powers to wipe out and replace mankind!

Back to the show at hand, the first story-arc encompasses the initial three episodes which sets the scene for the series. The story begins with a mystery: the X-Mansion is attacked just as Wolverine (mutant healing abilities, has claws, likes beer) is about to leave on one of his walkabouts. When the dust settles, Professor Xavier and Jean Grey (mutant telepaths) are both missing, presumed obliterated in the missile attack. Jump to one year later and Wolverine is travelling America in a style reminiscent of David Carradine in *Kung Fu* when he realises that the world still needs the X-Men! The MRD (Mutant Response Division) are rounding up mutants and mutant sympathisers alike and the US government are trying to push through a "Mutant Registration Act". Cue a trip back to the ruins of the X-Mansion by Wolverine and the challenge of re-forming the world's number one mutant superhero team begins.

Action scenes are colourful, pacy and plentiful and the story itself is engrossing and enjoyable, especially for one who has already spent a lot of time reading the comic book version of events. It's quite a mature show, appearing to be aimed at an older audience than the "X-Men: Evolution" cartoon series, and certainly not one for really young children, or that might be me getting over-protective in my, erm, old age. It's definitely more "CBBC" than "CBeebies"! Wolverine uses his claws a lot but mainly to cut through walls and disarm folk rather than dismember them. Dialogue is nowhere near as cheesy as you would expect from a cartoon of this nature and along with the overall story development helps to show how far comic book/animation writing (especially in the superhero genre) has come in recent years. The animation itself has an interesting stylized look to it that is reminiscent of many comic book artists today and certainly reminded me of the excellent "Batman: The Animated Series" from the early 90s.

The series was developed for TV by Craig Kyle who, along with Christopher Yost, also has writing credits on some of the episodes. Both have a pedigree on the X-Titles that Marvel produce, they currently co-write the latest incarnation of the "X-Force" title, as well as having plenty of experience writing other animated shows.

It's worth checking out whether you've read the comics, seen the films or not. It's written well enough to hook ardent fans as well as complete newbies, a fun way to forget yourself for 22 minutes! I caught it on the CBBC channel... but check your local listings for details, bub.

Scarlet

reviewed by ross warren



by Stephen R. Lawhead
Atom Books
£6.99

Historical fantasy can be a hard sub-genre to get right. Handled badly a novel can become so concerned with the historical details that the fantasy reader is left overwhelmed and undernourished. However if it veers too far to the fantastical the reader interested in the period of history being depicted becomes bemused.

Thankfully Stephen R. Lawhead, in this the second book of his *King Raven Trilogy*, is a skilled writer, able to get the balance right. The historical details are sparingly intertwined into the narrative with the bulk of the historical context expanded on in an author's note at the end of the book so that it is available if the reader requires it or would

like to know more. Likewise the fantastical elements are sparse and largely centre on the character of Angharad, the soothsayer of the hero's camp.

The majority of the story is told from the viewpoint of William Scatlocke, known to his friends as Will Scarlet, as he relates to a monk the tale of how he became a member of Rhi Bran y Hud's gang of outlaws and his subsequent capture by Sheriff De Granville, for whom the monk is taking down the story.

This is a retelling of the Robin Hood story that takes its basis from an original Welsh legend about a wronged noble called Bran Brychan, rather than the more common claim of Robin of Loxley that is the basis of the Nottingham tales of a century later. Lawhead ties his story to the more familiar version with a

number of neat links that are deftly handled, the best of these being the monk's inability to pronounce the Welsh 'Rhi Bran y Hud' and instead writing it phonetically as Robin Hood.

However it is our familiarity with the story that is also one of the major downsides of the book. The too-close-to-call archery contest, the escape into the trees of the forest and the narrowly avoided public hanging are all staples of any telling of the Robin Hood legend and all are sadly present here which serves to detract from what is otherwise a well written and engaging read.

The central characters are well written and Will in particular is wonderfully evoked by the use of the first person. However some of the supporting characters are thinly sketched and amount to little more than stock figures. The descriptive passages more than make up for a few cliché characters though with a luxuriant eye for detail that conveys the harsh beauty of the landscape of the March to the reader. *Scarlet*, although part of a trilogy, can be read as a standalone piece and whether you are a fantasy reader who likes an historical setting or a history buff with a penchant for the fantastical you are sure to be entertained by this tale of Will Scarlet's date with the hangman's noose.

FEATURES

GUN FOR HIRE.

by **guy adams**

"Some people's photography is an art. Mine is not. If they happen to be exhibited in a gallery or a museum, that's fine. But that's not why I do them. I'm a gun for hire."
- Helmut Newton.

1. **Patience**

A couple of weeks ago, in the first of his regular columns Gary McMahon pinned down some of the methodology behind writing (only telling us how HE approaches matters of course, Gary is a clever man and knows that any discussion of this sort not approached subjectively is as likely to cause public ridicule as attempting to nail soup to the table in an expensive restaurant). In closing he commented "God knows what'll happen if I ever manage to break out of the indie press and into the mainstream, where I'll need to produce even more work to even tighter deadlines. I suppose I'll have to become prolific." Smug git.

I earn a living writing, it's my job (a statement that should be met with utter derision by the way... as much as if I'd just claimed David Essex as the father of all popular music), and one thing I can't help but say up front about my... oh what the hell, let's have a laugh and call it a "career"... is that it's rarely been about prolificacy. If only it were... I don't announce this to pompously suggest I know better than Gary or because I bear him the least ill will (he's a ginger little dwarf of the north but who can fail to love him?) however, not only can pinning down a gig seem hopeless and soul destroying but even when you do everyone in this business moves at so slow a pace they make tectonic shift seem pacey. I'm working on a project right now that took six months between being pitched to a publisher and actually being contracted. It wasn't an arduous sell, one publisher liked it straight away, decided to bid for it and won... Still: six months. If I could master the art of hibernation I would be tempted to try it.

It's not unusual either, especially when you bear in mind that I mostly do Tie-In work (when Gary comments about breaking into the mainstream he sensibly means achieving that holiest of grails: being paid enough to survive for writing what you want and to be fair I don't do that. No. I belong more to the dockyard-hussy school of writing where one's metaphorical mouth is wide and knees sore). In Tie-In absolutely everyone gets an opinion. It starts with an idea, then if that idea is deemed viable it becomes a full pitch and breakdown. That pitch document is then read by everybody. The editorial team reads it; the sales team reads it; the legal department reads it; the TV company or literary estate that owns whatever you're writing about reads it; a randomly selected gang of street gentlemen read it, smearing their pavement-stained fingers all over the thing, huffing the pages with meth-breath before announcing the middle section's flabby. Entire species have vanished from the planet by the time the damn thing is handed back to you with -- if you're so lucky as to actually be glowing -- approval. Then begins the contractual process... oh God... I just punched my fist through the desk merely thinking about it. I am now typing one handed trying to ignore both the splinters in my right wrist and the mental image of countless sub-clauses that are flooding through my head... Contracts are complex between a TV company and a publisher, both fighting like enraged chimps over percentages and rights. This is boring for the writer as we don't get any of those things as a rule. Not on Tie-In, we get a flat fee, assurance that whatever we come up with is the property of the publisher not us and a clause that says the cleaning staff are allowed to beat us up if they

find our homeless arses bedding down in any of the store cupboards over night.

The irony of course being that once all of this is done, once these months and months of discussion and negotiation have passed the writer probably does have to be as quick as that lithe keyboard-tapper, McMahon as chances are it's only a week before delivery deadline. There needs to be plenty of printing lead time of course as the whole thing's being whacked over to India where ink and hands are cheap before being shipped back on a leaky trawler alongside crates of bananas and cheap Primark Y-Fronts.

At which point you have to hope that you started trying to sell a book mere moments after pitching the first one as otherwise you'll be out of work for at least a couple of birthdays.

Prolific... no, that just isn't the word. Sustainable is more like it.



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