

Hub Magazine

SCIENCE FICTION HORROR FANTASY

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ISSUE 96 · 23RD AUG 2009

CONTENTS:

- FICTION:** *Obsession* by Jo Thomas
- REVIEW:** *The Clone Wars Series 1 – Episode 22*
- FEATURE:** *Big Screen Future #4* by Alasdair Stuart



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EDITORIAL:

by alasdair stuart

Emergency Response Fiction

I was watching the last episode of ER the other day. It's a nice capstone to a series which, by a lot of weights and measures outstayed its welcome by a few years, putting the ridiculous set pieces of the last few years aside in favour of a single, simple truth; there will always be sick people, there will always be another shift. It's both comforting and oddly poignant, the series ending where it began with normal people on the worst day of their lives being treated with compassion and kindness by doctors as normal as they are.

So, where's the emergency response science fiction? Where's the science fiction analog for shows like ER? Or House for that matter?

I read and loved the Sector General books when I was growing up, and they're as close as I've ever been able to find. The story of the first multi-species hospital it managed to combine epic scale SF with the sort of problem solving at the heart of shows like ER and a varied, likeable cast of characters. They're wonderful books and continually find interesting ways to get drama and action out of something as simple as a character being ill, up to and including how to carry out an operation on a creature the size of a planet.

But that's all there is or, at least, all I've found. Where are the stories following doctors trying to deal with post singularity patients? Where are the stories about paramedics and firefighters struggling to deal

not only with the advances in technology but the endless new ways people find to kill themselves using it? Where are the stories not about the brave new world but about what happens on our way to the brave new world? Because genre fiction deserves its own ER, its own House and I'd love to read them.



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FICTION

Obsession

by jo thomas

'Our studies have revealed that the plant we call pine-bramble is a modified strain of the Norway Spruce. We don't know what its creator intended, but the fact that it's spread so far in under a year indicates that it is incredibly invasive and therefore dangerous.'

The ecologist on the news looked tired, his face more lined and worn than Edward remembered it being when the man had made his first appearance months ago. The drive to find out the truth about this weed was clearly becoming an obsession; and the ecologist was suffering for it. He should have been more careful. It was all too easy to be seduced into such a fixation.

One of the attendant journalists called out, 'So this is some kind of Frankenstein plant?'

'We estimate that it was released in early January last year,' the ecologist replied, 'That speed of growth is clearly not natural.'

'So what did you need the tests for?'

'To find out what it had been modified from and who by. We've narrowed down the place of origin. We know where it's from.'

In contrast, the woman beside him--the latest bright young thing to have been placed in charge of the emergency task force--looked rested and well-groomed. Her body language was confident and relaxed as she leant across and spoke into the microphone, 'Be assured, the Ministry is treating this issue as serious. We will find who is responsible for releasing this injurious weed, and they will be prosecuted.'

Like Edward watching from his breakfast bar, she obviously had a talent for controlling herself; for leaving work behind at the office at the end of the day.

The journalists all clamoured 'Where is it from? Who released it?' but the minister and the ecologist ignored them all. The press conference was finished.

Edward shook his head at the ecologist as he returned to his breakfast. It was difficult to keep work from becoming an obsession, from taking over one's life, but it was not impossible. Both he and the minister obviously had the knack, but the ecologist was suffering. He had no doubt that the man had felt every sling-shot and arrow that the press had sent at the task force over the last months. Edward's own work had been too important for him to take most of it in, but he had noticed how the public had been getting upset. Their nonsensical panicking was wearing.

'Nature should be controlled by Man. We no longer need to be controlled by it. We build our own world.'

He looked over to his wife to see if she had heard, but Alice's face remained blank, her eyes focussed on some middle distance. He returned to their usual companionable silence with a small smile.

She was busy planning the day ahead and had no interest in the goings on of the outside world. His wife had a small life in a small world of her own, and he was happy to keep things that way. He worked hard at it, leaving his other life behind in the office.

While work had taken long hours out of every day of his own life for the last ten years, he and Alice had still managed to spend their time together happily. Had he had a more intelligent and interested companion, Edward might have been tempted to explain and discuss his days with her; but his wife would

not understand, let alone have an interest in, the intricacies of his research and development work. Instead, they cultivated their brief discussions and their long companionable silences.

For the moment, he could relax again and forget the long hours. His work on growing crystal matrices had passed its last test. His brain-child was a success, his employers were happy and he was now the acknowledged expert on using crystals for construction. He was indispensable. Edward smiled, satisfied and a little smug. Perhaps tomorrow he would take the day off and start a hobby.

The traffic wound slowly through and around the town, slowed by its own volume and uncaring of the pine-bramble that grew around and over the streets, blocking sight of the buildings. Uncaring of the delay, Edward decided to detour and kill even more time. There was no hurry to be in at the office today. Any work done for the next few days would be a mere formality, marking time until his employers handed down the first real project, the first industrial use of his crystals. Changing lanes as smoothly as he could, he took the route to the old offices one more time. He amused himself considering the text of the blue plaque that would one day grace the side of the buildings, provided that they survived the ravages of the invasive plants.

'Here Dr Edward Lelloes created the first construction crystal,' he mused aloud. Perhaps he should come up with a better, catchier name for his invention, if marketing had not already beaten him to it.

As the traffic continued to stop and start deeper into the pine-bramble tangle, he noticed for the first time how the cones hung about the roof and walls of the tunnel. They looked like paper lanterns, some of them even glowing in the dark. He had never noticed that before, too blinded by the lights of the vehicles around him. It was pretty, almost comforting.

He rolled down the window with a gentle touch of a button as if removing the glass between himself and the cones would make their fragile light clearer. The heady scent of pine filled the car and he took a deep breath, pulling it to him. Perhaps pine-bramble was not so bad after all.

It was hard to believe how quickly it had spread. He had first noticed some small, sickly looking plants in January, near the old offices--before they became the old offices. Eleven months later, it was choking the buildings and covering over the roads and motorways as it spread to do the same in other settlements. It had already absorbed several buildings. No one was sure whether it simply grew around them or into them. The old offices had been one of the first buildings to be lost. They were all evacuated, just in case. When the task force had enough time and people, the buildings would be examined and declared either unsafe or fit for use.

In retrospect, he should have reported the plants when he had first seen them, but how was he supposed to have known that they were so apparently dangerous? He knew nothing about plants. He had not even realised that they were something unnatural. He knew that he should have reported the sighting since, but somehow had never found the time. Besides, it could not be that dangerous or important. It was just a plant. The task force should just cut it down. If the Government thought as much of this 'crisis' as they claimed, they would spend more money on more men with chainsaws.

The traffic continued to inch its way forward and Edward watched for the old familiar buildings, or at least their shape. He did not intend to actually drive in, just drive past and continue to his work, but it would be silly to drive past it without knowing. Would he be able to recognise the shape, shrouded in pine-bramble and hidden from the road by the green tunnel made of more of the plants? He might be able to see it through small gaps. The most likely event was that he would not see it all, but he might be able to recognise the entrance to the car park.

It was funny how the tangle did not seem to grow through roads, just over them, the trunks marking the boundary between public right of way and the land around it. Edward felt a chill run up his spine as the thought hit him. Surely the plants should be pushing themselves everywhere? Surely the roots should be breaking up the surface of the road, as he understood invasive plants like Japanese knotweed did? Ignoring the horns that beeped behind him as he ignored the car advancing before him, he looked down at the surface of the road being revealed by the movement.

There was no asphalt.

The floor of the tunnel was something else. Something else that was as green as the rest of the tunnel.

He squinted at it, unsure of what he saw. It looked as if the needles dropped by the pine-bramble had formed a new surface. The almost crystalline slivers--that sickly look that he had noticed all those months ago--had been broken against each other. Some substance had oozed out of the breaks and now coated the mass, holding it together in a strange, organic facsimile of asphalt.

With a quick stab of his finger, Edward closed the window, shutting out the traitorous scent of pine.

He knew that his employers also funded and housed research in genetic modification. He had not realised that they had put it in competition with himself and his crystals.

Quick growing tunnels that supplied basic light, apparently moved the air about to keep in fresh--everyone knew that the air under the pine-bramble tangles was clean thanks to the ecologist's tests--and maintained a working road surface. What else could pine-bramble be but competition for his crystals?

They did identical jobs, but one was organic and one was not. And apparently the organic form was uncontrollable. The plant's escape would have been an unforeseen gaff; a mistake that had cost the company the chance to make money out of the technology's application.

If he reported that he had seen pine-bramble about the old offices in January, would his employers still think him indispensable?

Somewhat against his own judgement, Edward joined his team at their coffee break. It was rare for him to socialise with them but he felt the need to talk to others and to see other human beings. He had to break through the mental fog that the realisations on the drive-in had brought to him. Unfortunately, his team seemed to be caught up in the same panic as the rest of the public and could talk of nothing but the problematic tangle.

'But what are they looking for?'

The nervous voice of Leigh, Edward's young assistant, was even more nervous than usual. Did she know something? Had she known about their competition?

She had been edgy since last December, although that could equally be because she was new to the team and still did not fit in. She had brought Edward's wrath down on herself by bringing Christmas decorations in and she had not improved with time. It only made him more convinced that it had been right to include the decorations in the crystal reset process. The treatments had destroyed them, both plastic and plant, and the remaining ashes had been so few that he had simply thrown them on the ground outside. It was a fitting punishment for bringing such nonsense in to work.

Sandy, his computer expert, grinned at Leigh over his mug, 'The first instance, of course.'

'I wonder what it is,' Edward interjected as gently as he could. He did not want to upset the other man. He could not help but feel uneasy about the man, though he hid it. It was well known that many IT people did not interact with others as well as they might. Sandy's amusement at Edward's choice of punishment for Leigh's gaff had suggested that the computer expert was not a pleasant man. It had been an act of punishment, not entertainment. 'A cone? A cutting? A whole plant? Maybe even just a few cell samples.'

The team looked at him as if he had just arrived from another planet. They had not expected him to speak. He never involved himself with their conversations. Edward put down his cup and left. He was unwilling to discuss the subject more, anyway. Any one of the people that he had worked with might know more about his employers' business than he did. Any one of them might report that he knew too much and that he was talking about it.

Nor would it pay to upset Sandy. Without him, Edward would not have been able to develop the interface between computer and crystals that allowed his invention to be programmed with the construction design. He was not totally convinced that he would be able to find someone else to do the job now that the design phase was complete. His computer expert was another one for making himself indispensable.

Edward let himself into his house at six o'clock. It had been a short working day and some trace

of this morning's satisfaction remained to him. Until he and his team received their first construction assignment, all of his days would be this easy--as long as he did not think about the pine-bramble and its implications.

He wandered into the kitchen and found it empty. He looked for a message and found nothing. He supposed that Alice might have started an evening activity of some sort and not told him. He frowned. He did not expect his wife to answer his every beck and call, but some consideration would be nice.

Stomach rumbling, he decided to change his clothes and left the kitchen for the master bedroom.

He found the note on the bed, on his pillow. Perhaps he had upset himself too easily. She had remembered to let him know that she was going out, after all. The note would surely tell him when she was due back. Maybe she had remembered to put some dinner aside for him and had left instructions. He put the piece of paper to one side as he changed before picking it up to read it.

Dear Edward,

By the time you read this, I will be gone. I know this will come as a shock to you, but you have been so involved in your work for so long. At first I hoped that there would be a time when we could be together. But it was a false hope and I no longer see a light at the end of our tunnel.

I wish you every success in your work. It's obviously very important to you.

Alice

Dazed, Edward looked up at nothing. Nothing mattered enough for him to take it in. How could she do this? Why? Everything he had done, he had done for them, for her. He had built their life for them.

This was not real. It was not happening. She would be back; tonight, tomorrow or the day after. Soon.

There was a knock on the front door, hardly heard from the opposite part of the house. It came again, louder and more commanding, and he shook his head. It must be Alice, despite the uncharacteristic imperious quality. Had she gone out without her key?

He walked slowly down the stairs and across the hall. There was no point showing how much her fake threat of leaving had upset him. He did not get upset, after all.

He opened the door, pasting a smile on his face as if nothing had happened.

'Dr Lelloes?'

His welcome froze on his lips, his tongue becoming an unwieldy block of ice in his mouth. It was not Alice. Strangely, it was the ecologist from the news, a couple of uniformed policemen and a woman in a suit.

'Dr Lelloes?'

Edward forced his lips to form word shapes once more, 'Yes.'

'We'd like to talk to you about your experiments with modified plants.'



The Clone Wars Series 1 – Episode 22

reviewed by richard whittaker



"Hostage Crisis"

Directed by Giancarlo Volpe

Written by Eoghan Mahony

Starring: Matt Lanter, Dee Bradley Baker, Catherine Taber, Corey Burton

If Anakin Skywalker has spent the entirety of the Clone Wars fighting in the Outer Rim, exactly when is he supposed to have got Padme pregnant?

Well, possibly right around this episode. No, no, don't worry, it's not time for some sub-*hentai* CGI rumpy-pumpy. For the first time all season, Anakin (Lanter) has made it back to Coruscant, capital of the Republic, and the secretly loving arms of Senator Amidala (Taber.) Well, almost. She's busy helping fend off the Enhanced Privacy Invasion bill (a small nod, no doubt, to the state-sanctioned snooping clauses of the Patriot Act.)

But date night gets cancelled when the bounty hunter Cad Bane (Burton) arrives. The blue-skinned and growling killer has assembled a team of low-life scum. That cadre includes a glacial but brutal appearance by the franchise's most intriguing set dressing, the kohl-eyed and white-fleshed Aurra Sing (voiced by Jaime King, who is probably best known as Goldie from *Sin City*.) They have one purpose: Liberate Ziro the Hutt. While some viewers thought they had seen the last of the half-slug, half-Truman Capote, neon-and-glitter gangster when he was arrested at the end of the *Clone Wars* opening movie, he's back. But Bane's plan isn't to storm the prisons of Coruscant: Instead, he takes a small number of senators hostage, to be used as bargaining chips in exchange for the Hutt. When he gets Ziro, Ziro can pay him. It's a lot simpler motivation than trying to take over the galaxy.

So why doesn't Anakin simply carve up the ne'er-do-wells? Because, in a fit of the very same hubris that will be his downfall, he has given his lightsaber to Padme as proof of his love. So when the kidnapers arrive, he's bereft of his go-to weapon. Even with his mastery of the Force, he still faces a challenge (even Jedi can't outrun a blaster bolt) and is left to improvise. Admittedly, this does result in the entertaining sight of the Jedi beating an assassin droid to death with its own rifle, but this is the first time in the series that it's seemed that the Jedi (and maybe even one Sith lord) are both outwitted and out-gunned.

With Lucasfilm making it clear that Bane will be a major recurrent in season two, this is less an ending to season one and more a transition to the next stage in the story. Its success depends on whether viewers will want to come back for Bane. So far, the series hasn't had a great success with dabbling with the world of pirates and smugglers, as anyone that endured the extremely mediocre and weakly-plotted *Dooku Captured* will recall (quick hint, script writers: Out-takes from *Pirates of the Caribbean* plus blasters do not space pirates make.)

But Bane has the makings of something more. Designed with more than a tip of the wide-brimmed hat to Lee Van Cleef's razor-sharp cheekbones and guttural hiss, Bane's casual approach to violence is shocking even in the middle of a war story. The initial raid on the Senate only just scrapes inside the family-friendly side of PG, as injured guards are mercilessly dispatched as they beg for help. That brutality seems to owe a lot to Eoghan Mahony's script, and he brings the tempered but ruthless streak that has raised his oddball psycho-crime-drama *The Mentalist* above the normal quagmire of tepid *Dexter* rip-offs.

If there's a disappointment, it's that the producers may be too well aware that there will be a next season. The episode and the series sort of drip to an end, without adding any satisfying conclusion. But, oddly, that's usually a sign of one of the better episodes of *The Clone Wars*. It's a series that thrives on ambiguity, hints and suggestions of bad things to come (after all, anyone with any knowledge of the film franchise knows that this is hardly likely to end well for Asoka.) The idea of venal scavengers like Bane

working the battlefield, unconcerned about who wins between Republic and Separatists, could be a rewarding theme for the show to mine, especially since it could be hard to top the best of the all-out-war episodes (the *Malevolence* and *Ryloth* arcs, and stand-alone episode *Trespas*, *Rookies* and *The Hidden Enemy*.) If it wants to avoid becoming a series of unrelated morality plays, or re-playing the same war stories on different battlefields, it needs a new big bad. Bane has all the makings of that vital character they'll need to keep the series on-track. Plus, he does have an awesome hat.

FEATURES

Big Screen Future

by *alasdair stuart*

4. *Evolution*

"Gentlemen, you just got your A's."

There's an alternate universe where *Evolution* was a horror movie, some would even say that version of the film bled through to our world a few year's later with James Gunn's magnificent *Slither*. As it stands though, *Evolution* is, much like the creatures it features, a beast which is not quite one thing or the other.

The central plot is the same as the central plot of *Ghostbusters*, a group of whip smart science misfits fight otherworldly crime and save the world doing so. However, the group here is slightly different, with Duchovny's deadpan Ira Cane and Jones' cheerfully seedy Harry Block splitting the Venkman duties, whilst Julianne Moore's BLAH steps up as the replacement Egon. Sean William Scott's amiably dopey firefighter is even a pretty good match for the puppy-like enthusiasm of Dan Ackroyd in the earlier film.

However, *Evolution* differs from its predecessor by swapping out horror for science fiction. The result is a parade of wonderful, Basil Carlton-like creatures as the microbes on the meteorite sprint through every stage of life. There are some beautiful designs on display too, including a flying lizard and a creature whose sad eyes act as bait, drawing victims in to its second mouth. It's constantly inventive and, given the relative youth of CGI at the time of production, most of the effects still work very well. Unfortunately, the ones that don't work have dated, badly, the final scene especially.

However, the true problem with this aspect of the film it's that it peaks a little early. The one scene that has genuine and surprising menace to it sees the scientists attacked by bipedal, six foot hominids who are vicious, bestial and clearly very intelligent. This entire sequence feels like it's been cut in from another film, the sense of jeopardy suddenly very real and very much to the fore. We get a hint of the alternate, horror version of the film and the fact that it's one of the best scenes highlights the rest of the film's problems.

Evolution's other best scene highlights its strengths; the interplay between its characters. The chase between the first oxygen breathing creature, a dragon essentially, and Ira, Harry and Dwight is glorious, especially the climax, surely the only time karaoke and pump action shotguns have ever been successfully combined. The real moment of triumph though comes later, as the three drive through the desert, grinning from ear to ear, singing 'Play that funky music, white boy'. It's a note perfect moment of total geek triumph and it makes me smile every time I see the film.

There's an extra dimension to *Evolution* though, one which has only become apparent over time. It's a hybrid story, a moment of narrative evolution frozen in amber that serves to show exactly how far the genre has come. The female lead has graduated from scientists' daughter to scientist but is still little more than decoration whilst the only black character lives, but is a cheerfully sexist figure who suffers total comic indignity. Even Ira, the lead, is more comedic than serious, a straight-faced mischief maker more in line with

the comedy leads of the 1980s than the intellectual, angst-ridden heroes of the '90s. None of them are quite something new, but none of them are entirely faithful to the stereotypes they're drawn from, none of them are quite one thing or the other.

The script is equally strange, combining the wide-eyed love of authority of the '50s with the cynicism that dominated the '90s, exemplified in the film's treatment of Ted Levine's General BLAH. On the one hand he's presented as a good man doing a good job whilst on the other he's an antagonist for Ira and co to push against. Even the State Governor, an entertaining cameo by Dan Ackroyd, is played as a basically decent man who is smart enough to realise he's not smart enough to solve the problem.

Somehow, Reitman directed a film set in a post X-Files world with a pre-X-Files world view and the end result is a strange hybridised story that alternates between the best and worst qualities of both eras. There's the beginnings of the geek chic that would lead to The Matrix, hints of the cynical outlook of The X-Files and even flashes of the jet black humour of Slither. At the same time, the stereotypes of the '80s take one last bow, including one of the crassest pieces of product placement in recent history and the end result is a film that can see what it needs to survive but can't quite reach it. For all that though, Evolution is both great fun and necessary, a step along the way that shows how far genre cinema had come as well as how far it still had to go.



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