

Hub Magazine

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EDITORIAL:

by **alasdair stuart**

Storyville

Forty two years ago, my dad bought '*An Expensive Place to Die*' by Len Deighton. A book fiend of the highest calibre, he picked up the first edition which featured an unusual gimmick; a dossier of secret files central to the plot was also packaged with the book, placing the reader and the main character in the same situation.

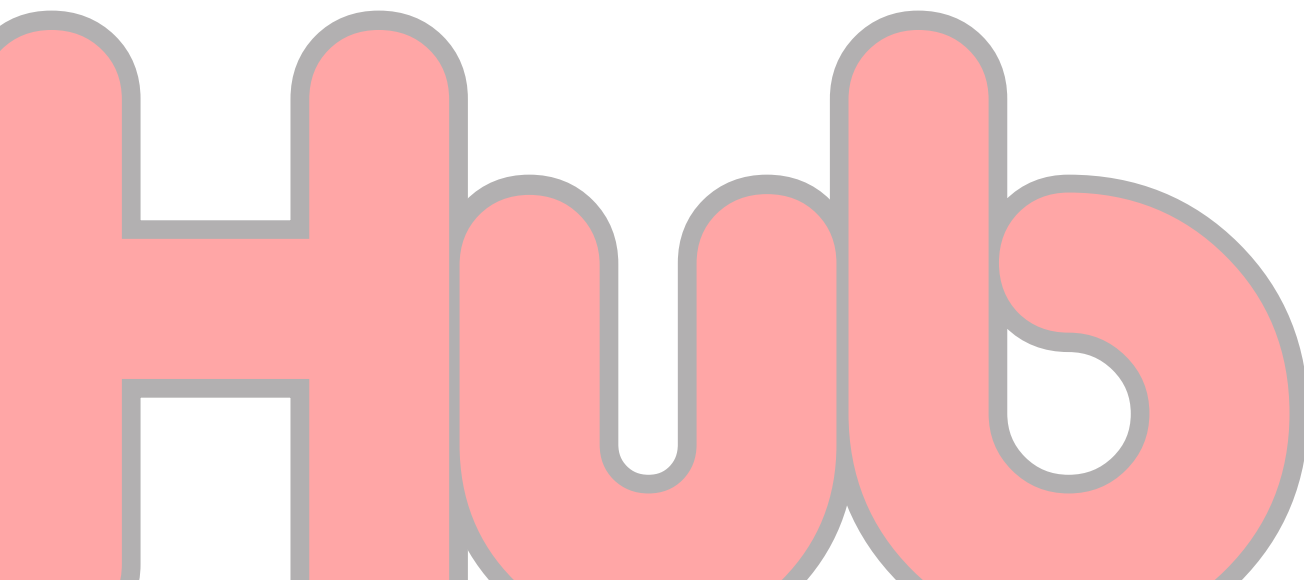
Eight years ago, I watched the trailer for *Donnie Darko*. It felt like something new, something unique and the film's official website only confirmed that. It was arranged like a puzzle, unfolding in jagged fractures of imagery and video to slowly lead you into the fevered, broken world of Donnie and the horrific trick the universe plays on him. For the first time, a film website felt like something more than a shop window, adding depth and anticipation to the story whilst still holding value of it's own.

Two years ago, I watched the Statue of Liberty's head land in the middle of New York in a trailer for what would later be identified as *Cloverfield*. Not long after, multiple websites were unearthed, one of which, www.1-18-08.com, featured a haunting series of photographs taken during the events of the movie. That site eventually became a jumping off point for something that fell halfway between a viral campaign and an alternate reality game that went as far as the film's international DVD release. Whilst the campaign petered out rather than ending definitively, for months prior to the film's release it presented a 'side story' that not only promoted *Cloverfield* but was fascinating in it's own right.

Which brings us up to date and to JC Hutchins. Hutchins is best known for the *7th Son* trilogy of audiobooks and has just made the jump across to print with *Personal Effects: Dark Art*. It's a hugely ambitious debut novel and builds on the foundation created by Alternate Reality Gaming and viral marketing to create a story that's both comprehensive and bigger than the novel itself.

We're living in a time where the veil that separates print and web, story and game is positively diaphanous and the possibilities are incredible. The intellectual tools we've been given through years of working with DVD extras and viral marketing techniques are changing fiction quietly but definitively, turning it into something that will be more expansive, more involving than ever before and Hutchins is one of the first people over the wall. The word 'story' is going to mean something very different by the time I'm my dad's age and that does nothing but excite me. And, of course, make sure I keep my copy of *Personal Effects: Dark Art* in a very safe place.

Our story this week is from English author Andy Remic and is an exclusive short set in the same world as his upcoming novel *Kell's Legend* from Angry Robot Books. This month's Big Screen Future looks at James Cameron's often over looked classic *The Abyss* and our reviews cover everything from Sarah Pinborough's new novel to a genuinely unique look at *Inglourious Basterds*. Hope you enjoy it, and we'll see you next issue.



FICTION

The Clockwork Hunter

by andy remic

The canker stood in the shadow of ancient oak woodland on the summit of Hangman's Hill, a natural chameleon on the outskirts of the desecrated, crumbling monastery. Snow fell, drifting in light diagonal flurries and adding a fuzzy edge to reality. The canker was huge, the size of a lion, but there the similarity – and nobility – ended. Muscles writhed like the coils of a massive serpent beneath waxen white skin, the smooth surface broken occasionally by tufts of grey and white fur, and by open, weeping wounds where tiny cogs and wheels of twisted clockwork edged free, ticking, spinning, minute gears stepping up and down, tiny levers adjusting and *clicking* neatly into place. Only here, in this canker, in this *abnormal* vachine, the movements were not so neat – because every aspect of the canker's clockwork was a deviation, an aberration of flesh and engineering and religion; the canker was outcast. Impure. Unholy.

As evening shifted towards night, the sky cracked open with purple bruises and jagged saw-blades of cloud, so the canker watched two men progress like distant avatars, making their way gradually across a vast snowy plain. The small entourage zig-zagged between stands of lightning-blasted conifers and ancient, pointed stones, one stocky man leading two horses, the second, more slender and well-balanced, master of a heavily laden-donkey. The canker shifted its bulk, aware it was invisible to the men, blending as it did with the ancient tumble of fallen stones and thick woodland of thousand year oaks, and doubly hidden by the haze of wind-whipped snow. It turned, superior clockwork eyes observing the trees, gnarled trunks and branches ripe with protrusions, whorls and nubs of elderly bark. A product of ancient vegetative inter-breeding, a meshing of woodland technologies – of nature, and soul, and spirit. Like me, thought the canker, and smiled as far as such a bestial, twisted, deviated *creation* could smile; for its mouth was five times the size of a human mouth, the jaw jacked wide-open, lips pulled high and wrenched upwards over the skull with eyes displaced to the side of its head. Huge fangs, twisted and bent in awkward directions, glistened with saliva and... blood-oil.

Blood-oil. And blood-oil magick...

The basis for Vachine Civilisation.

The nectar of the Machine Vampires.

The canker smiled again, a bitter smile as it remembered its long past, as it remembered the pretty *man* whom it knew so well, and this time the thoughts behind the grimace were equally twisted. For the canker was deviant, unholy, cast out by the Engineer Episcopate, and yet now, however, conversely employed by the very vachine Engineers who had condemned it. The canker could hunt. And it could kill. And in some small way attempt to find a token retribution, some faith, some hope for that entwining symbiotic battle of flesh and clockwork which had twisted and usurped the canker since shortly after its meeting with... Graal. When *clockwork* had been introduced to fresh human flesh.

Graal. The canker smiled. Now, *there* was a man to hate.

The canker was obedient. It had been bribed with a future promise of returned and retuned flesh, of fresh mortality, of assimilation into purebreed human where it could return to a life of normality; without the eternal internal pain of battling machinery.

I can do it, thought the monster.

And if not? Well, the instruction had been implicit.

I must kill, it thought.

For it is the only way to be sane again.

The canker watched the two men dwindle into twilight, drifting ghosts merging with snow, and even from this great distance it could smell the oil on their weapons, the sweat in their clothes, the unrefined blood in their veins. Hunger pulsed in the canker's brain, amidst a turmoil of miniature gears and cogs and painful memories, *so painful*; brainmesh, it was called. It hurt worse than acid.

In eerie silence the canker stood, stretched powerful muscles, and padded down the hill between elderly, twisted, ingrown oaks.

"I thought you said there was a fortified town this way out?" grumbled Kell, stopping and leaning on his axe with a weary sigh. Snow shifted around his boots, and the huge tangled bearskin across his broad shoulders sat crusted with rimes of ice, shining silver. The two geldings halted behind him, and one pawed the frozen earth with a heavy, iron-shod hoof. "It'll be night, soon, and I would dearly love hot food and three hours in a soft bed, out of the bastard cold."

"Ah, Kell old horse, you are so narrow-minded in your simple warrior's vision! A plate of banal peasant vegetables, surely that cannot be your only lust? What of the warm inviting thighs of some generously proportioned inn-keeper's daughter? What of her eager rouged lips? Her fast-rising tightly-strapped bosom?" His eyes glowed, dark and glittering. "And that keen, peasant need to please?"

Kell hawked and spat, and focused on the dandy. Saark was tall, athletic, handsome – no, more than handsome. He was a *beautiful* man. His face was sculptured like the finest alabaster bust, his hair long and dark and curled, thick with oil and perfume – despite Kell's consternation. No matter how much he chastised Saark his foppish dress, his lace and silk and frills and bright colours, his frippery and pointlessness, the more Saark seemed to thrive on Kell's annoyance and discomfort. "Saark mate, you misunderstand me. Exhaustion is the first thing on my mind; followed by an ale. And anyhow, look at you, you should have been born a woman! All that pompous lace and courtside extravagance. It's enough to make an honest woodsman puke."

"But Kell, Kell, dear Kell – a woman, you say?" Saark grinned, perfectly symmetrical teeth displaying a boyish humour that had broken many a woman's heart – and purse. He winked. "Is that because you find me secretly attractive? Through all our battles, all our triumphs, the mighty Kell, grizzled old warrior, hero of *Kell's Legend*, superior in strength and violence to his many frightful enemies... *secretly*, all along, he was a boy-fancier and lusted after a slice of Saark's pork pie?"

"You go too far!" stormed Kell, and lurched forward, mighty axe *Ilanna* held in one hefty fist, face crimson with embarrassment and sudden rage. "Don't be smearing me with your own backward deviant wants. You might enjoy a roll with a man; I do not. The only use I have for a man," he hoisted his axe purposefully, "is to detach his head from his fucking *shoulders*."

Saark took a step back, hand on sword-hilt. His smile was still there, but mistrust shone in his eyes. He knew Kell to be a good friend, and a mighty foe; honourable, powerful, but ultimately compromised by a bad streak of temper made worse by even the smallest drop of whiskey. "Kell, old boy," his words were more clipped now, for the stress of the journey – and the hunt for Nienna, Kell's granddaughter – was wearing hard on both men. "Calm down. I was only jesting. Soon, we will find a tavern. And you can satiate your own personal desires."

"What's that supposed to mean, laddie?"

"I'm sure they'll have a drop or ten of Falanor's *Finest Malt*."

Kell made a growling sound, more animal than human, and took another step close. Saark, to his credit, stood his ground. He may have looked like a rampant peacock performing in the midst of a silk market theatre production, but he had once been King Leanoric's Sword Champion. Many times, he had been underestimated – usually at the expense of somebody's life.

"You in the mood for a fight?" snapped Kell.

Saark held up one hand, shaking his head, eyes lowered to the snowy ground. "No, no, you misunderstand." He gazed up then, reading Kell's pain. Nienna had been gone far too long, and their quest to find her seemed as hopeless now as it had when the land of Falanor was overrun by the albino Army of Iron.

Ultimately, Kell's missing granddaughter was a thorn in this great lion's paw; but one nobody could

easily extract. Only Kell could do that. And the chances were, the search and rescue would be carried high on a tide of mutilation, murder and annihilation. Kell was not a forgiving man.

"My friend, you are worse than any irate vachine! Calm down! I was just trying to lighten the mood, old horse."

"I'll lighten your bowels," growled Kell.

"You really are a cantankerous donkey."

"And you're a brightly feathered Nightingale, too damn fond of your own song. Shut your mouth, Saark, I can't say it any plainer; before I carve you a second smile."

Saark nodded, and they understood one another, and they moved on through the now heavily falling snow.

"There's the town," said Saark. "Kattleskull Creek. They know me there."

"By 'know me', you suggesting there are fifteen bastard children waiting for a wayward father?"

Saark tilted his head. "Ha. Kell, for you that's pretty good. But no. I have only four bastard children I know of, although I'm sure there are many more scattered throughout the provinces." He gave a wry smile, eyes distant, as if reliving a catalogue of beautiful women. "I did a lot of travelling in the name of the king. So many stunning, eager young ladies; and so little time." He sighed.

But Kell wasn't listening. He had turned, was looking down their back trail. In the distance huge brooding hills blackened the sky through twilight snow. Kell searched from left to right, both hands clasped on *Ilanna* his mighty battle-axe. "Let's get to the town," he said.

"A problem?"

"We're being followed."

"You sure?"

Kell turned, and the look in his eyes chilled Saark to the marrow. "Your skill is wooing unsuspecting ladies, laddie. Mine is killing those creatures who need to be dead. Trust me. We are being followed. We need to move now... unless you relish a fight in the dark? In the ice?"

"Understood," muttered Saark, and led the way towards the high walls of the stocky timber barricade.

Saark had spoken the truth, the villagers knew him, and they hoisted the bars on the twenty foot high gates and allowed the two men entry. As Saark turned, smiling, he faced a porcupine of steady, unsheathed swords.

"What's the matter, lads? Did I say something to offend?"

"Gambling debts," said a man with strange, black tattoos on his teeth. He was tall and rangy, with dark looks and bushy brows that met at the centre of his forehead. "Let's say that last time you was here Saark, well mate, you made a swift and unexpected exit."

Saark gave an easy laugh, resting back on one hip, his hand held out, lace cuff puffed towards the ranger. "My man, you have read my honourable intention most succinctly. I have indeed decided to return in order to pay off my substantial gambling debts." Saark moved to his saddlebag, fished out several coins, and tossed them over with an air of arrogance. The tall man grunted, catching the coins, fumbling for a moment, then examining the gold carefully. Slowly, the swords were sheathed one by one. Saark gave a chuckle. "Peasant gold," he said, head high, eyes twinkling as they challenged the group of men. Several went again for their weapons in a sudden scramble, but the tall man stopped them, and waved Saark on.

"Go on, about your business. But don't be causing any trouble. There's enough in Kattleskull who have cause to challenge you, King's Man."

"No longer King's Man, I think you'll find."

"As you wish, sir."

They strode down the frozen road, and Kell muttered, "'Peasant's Gold'?"

Saark gave a thin smile. "It does one no harm to be occasionally reminded of one's place."

"Surely you meant 'Stolen Gold'?"

"That as well," smiled Saark, sardonically.

The main inn, *The Spit-Roasted Pig*, squatted beside a huge, warehouse-type building, dark and

foreboding, set back from the road and piled high with banks of snow. Kell stared up at the structure, wondering as to what type of factory it once was; then dismissed it. He followed Saark towards the inn.

"Remember," rumbled Kell, grabbing Saark's shoulder and pulling him rudely back. "Keep a low profile in here. We restock, refuel, then we're off again to find Nienna. No funny business. No women. No drinking. You understand?"

"Of course!" scowled Saark, and held apart his hands, face a platter of innocence. "Would I do anything else?"

Kell stared at the half-full bottle of whiskey. It sat on the bar, filled with an amber delight, a sugary nectar which was sweet, oh so sweet, and it called to him like a woman, called to him with honeyed words of delicate promise. Taste me. Drink me. Absorb me into your blood, and we can be one, we can be whole. Around Kell the noise of the inn blurred, and fell into a tumbling swirling spiral of downward descent. Only he, and the whiskey, existed, and he could taste it, taste *her* on his tongue and she was delight, summer flowers, fresh honey, a virgin's smile, and how could Kell possibly say *no* to such an innocent invitation? How could he refuse?

Slowly, he reached out and grabbed the bottle. It was aged twenty years in oak vats. It had cost a pretty penny of gold, but the gold in his saddlebags was stolen from the albino army, the invading Army of Iron; and Kell cared nothing for their loss.

"I'm going to my room," said Kell, tongue thick, mind swirling, focus dead.

"There's a good lad," smiled Saark, eyes glittering, and watched the old warrior depart.

Saark loved many things in life. In fact, there were so many simple pleasures that in his humble opinion made life worth living, he doubted he could list them all. A child's laughter. Sunlight. The clink of gold on gold. The soft kiss of a woman's lips. The velvet skin on the curve of a hip. The slick handful of an eager quim. Liquor. Bawdy company. Bad jokes. Gambling...

Saark coughed, and the next blow knocked him from his feet. He hit the ground, confusion his mistress, and he swam through treacle and felt himself being dragged. A cold bitter wind caressed his skin, but it felt good, good against the swellings on his face, the tortured flesh battered and bruised after a pounding of fists and helves. What happened? he thought, dazed. Just what the fuck had happened?

"Not so cocky now, are you, King's *bitch*?" snarled a face close to his, bad breath and garlic mixing to force a choke from Saark's lips. In the gloom he fought to recognise his assailant, but his mind was spinning, and the world seemed inside out.

"I'd lay off the garlic, next time," advised Saark through bleeding lips. "You'll never get intimate with a lady when you stink like the village idiot." There came a growl, and a boot connected with his ribs, several times. Then he was hefted along, dragged through snow and into darkness and over rough wood planks. He felt splinters worming into his hands and knees, but it was all he could do to scramble – and be dragged – through the next few minutes.

"Watch your step, lad, wouldn't want you to drown," came a half-recognised voice, and laughter accompanied the voice and with a start Saark realised there were men, many men, and this wasn't a simple dispute over a spilt tankard of ale; it was a lynching party. Sadness sank deep through him, like a sponge through lantern oil. He felt the pulse of blood in his veins, slow and rhythmical. He was in trouble. He was in a barrel of horse shit.

Saark was dumped to the ground, which echoed ominously, and boots clattered around him. Saark waited for more pain, but it didn't come. Curled foetal, he finally opened his eyes and took a deep breath and spat out a sliver of broken tooth. That stung him, that tooth. Anger awoke, like an almost extinguished candle wick exposed to oxygen. This was turning into a *bad* day.

What happened?

He was laughing, joking, there was smoke and whiskey, they were playing at the card table. The villagers from earlier, at the gate. He was taking their money like honey-cakes from a toddler – winning fair and square, for a change, and not having to resort to the *many* gambling tricks at which he was so adept. Then... a blow from behind, a helve, his face clattering against the table and taking the whole gambling pit

with him. Boots finished him off. He didn't see it coming.

But why? In the name of the Holy Mother of Falanor, why?

"He's awake. Sit him up, lads."

Saark was dragged up, forced onto a chair, then tied to it with tight knots. Saark tested his bonds. Yes, he thought. There was no breaking free of those! He gazed around, at so many faces he did not know. Except for one. What was the man's name? Jake? Rake? Drake? Bake? Saark suppressed a giggle. It was the rangy man from the village gate, earlier...

"What's this all about, Stake?"

"The name is Rake, dimwit." The circle of men chuckled.

Saark looked about uneasily, and rolled his neck. He could still feel the press of his narrow rapier against his thigh – but had no ability to reach the weapon. Like most villagers, the group underestimated the danger of such a narrow blade; what they considered a "girl's weapon". If it wasn't an axe, pike or Bastard Sword, then it wasn't *really* a weapon. Saark gave a narrow smile – very much in the mould of Kell. They would find out the truth, if he was given half an opportunity. Of that, he was sure.

"Surely I don't owe *that much* money?" snapped Saark, fury bubbling.

The circle of men closed in, and he could read anger, rage even, and a certain amount of *affront* on their faces, many bearded, several pock-marked, all with narrowed eyes and clenched fists and brandished weapons.

"Look around you," said Rake, unnecessarily thought Saark, although he deemed it prudent not to be pedantic. "Fathers. Brothers. Sons."

"Aye?" Still Saark wore confusion like a cloak.

"Enjoyed many a pretty dalliance during days passing through, haven't you Saark, *King's Man*? When you arrived, word went round fast. Here was Saark, the arrogant rich bastard, unable to keep his child-maker in his cheese-stinking pants."

Saark eyed the circle of men once more. Now he understood their almost pious rage. "Ahh," he said, and realised he was *really* in trouble. "But surely, gentleman, we are all men of the world, aye? I could perhaps recompense you with a glitter of gold coin? I could certainly make it worth more than your while..."

"You took my daughter's *virginity*, bastard!" snarled Rake, and punched Saark with a well-placed right hook. The chair toppled and Saark's head bounced from the planks. Beyond swirling stars, he saw a broad, still pool of gleaming black. More confusion invaded. What was this place? This pit?

The men righted the chair, and Saark had to listen to the sermon, how rich arrogant bastards shouldn't poke around with their diseased poker where they weren't welcome; how families had been destroyed, children cast out, bastard children born to angry fathers, yawn yawn get to the damn point mused Saark as his gaze fell beyond the men to what looked like a *lake* of black oil. It gleamed in the light of the lanterns, and suddenly Saark felt extremely uneasy. He noticed the planks across the oil, resting occasionally on rusted iron pillars, and over which he had been dragged. And then he noticed, as they almost materialised from the gloom, huge, ancient machines, of angular iron with great clockwork wheels and gears, meshing and interweaving. So. An old factory? From Elder Days? Abandoned. Derelict. With *no understanding*. But here they were, in the bowels of the factory, the sump, where cooling oil was once stored. Horse. Shit.

However, one bright element drove through Saark's thoughts like a spear through chainmail. Why bring him here?

He grinned, a skeletal grin like Death. He wasn't leaving this place, was he? They were going to drown him in the oil; and it would swallow him, and leave no mark of his passing. He would simply *vanish*...

He stared into the black pit, motionless now, but as a man moved on the wooden planks so tiny ripples edged out and betrayed the liquid viscosity of centuries old oil, filled with impurities and filth. The perfect burial place, *hiding* place, for *murder*.

With senses fast spinning, Saark counted the men. There were twelve. *Twelve*? He didn't remember accosting twelve women, but then the nights were cold and long in Kattleskull, Saark easily bored and so, apparently, were the local housewives and frisky daughters. Hell. Was he really that decadent? Saark stared long and hard into his own soul, and with head hung low in shame, he had to understand and admit

that he was.

"What are you going to do?" he asked, finally, watching as Rake tied a knot in a thick length of rope. A noose? Wonderful, thought Saark. Just perfect.

"We are going to Purify you," said Rake, face a demon mask in the lantern light, and moved forward, looping the rope over Saark's neck.

"No you're not, lads," came a growling voice from the darkness. Then Kell stepped forward, his shape, his *bulk* hinted at by the very edges of softly glowing lantern light. In this gloom it mattered not that he was over sixty years of age; he was large, he was terrifying, and the great *Ilanna* held steady in bear's paws was a horrible and menacing sight to behold. "Now put the popinjay down, and back away from the chair."

The men froze, helms and a few rusted short-swords held limp and useless. Rake, who held Saark in a tight embrace – a bonding between executioner and victim – stared at Kell without fear. His eyes were bright with unshed tears.

"Go home, old man. We have unfinished business here."

Kell gave a low, dark laugh. "Listen boy. I've been killing men for over forty years, and I've killed every bastard who stood in my way. Now, despite your violence on Saark here, I understand your position, I even agree with you to a large extent..."

"Thanks, Kell!" mumbled Saark.

"... but this is not his time to die." Kell's eyebrows darkened to thunder. His voice dropped an octave. "I have no argument with any man here. But anybody lays a finger on the priapic dandy, and I'll cleave the bastard from skull to cock."

Time seemed to freeze. Kell's words hung in the air like drifting ash... and as long as nobody moved, the spell was cast, uncertainty a bright splinter in every man's mind. But then Rake screamed, and hauled on the noose which tightened around Saark's throat dragging him upright chair and all, his legs kicking, heels scraping old planks, and Kell took four long strides and the terrible axe *Ilanna* sang through the air and Rake's head detached from his body with a thump of sodden flesh, then sailed into one of the dark oil pools. There came a *schlup* as Rake's head went under. His body stood, rigid in shock for several heartbeats as blood pumped from the ragged neck wound. One leg buckled, and slowly Rake's body folded to the floor like a sack of molten offal.

There was a *thunk* as *Ilanna* rested against the planks, and Kell's gaze caressed the remaining men. "Anybody else?" came his soft words, and they were the words of a lover, whispered and intimate, and every man there lifted their hands in supplication and started to back from the chamber.

Kell turned to Saark, reached down, and with a short blade cut the ropes. Saark climbed to his feet, massaging wrists, then probed tenderly at his nose. "I think they broke it."

"No less than you deserve, lad."

"And I thought you were my knight in shining armour!" scowled Saark, voice dripping sarcasm.

"I was never a knight. And see, no armour," shrugged Kell. He lifted his axe, stocky shoulders tense, and glared around.

"What's the matter, Kell?" Saark rolled his neck, and pressed tenderly at his ribs. "Ouch. And look at that! The bastards tore the silk. Do you know how much silk costs up here? Do you know how *hard* it is to locate and procure a fine tailor? Bloody heathens, bloody peasants... no appreciation of the finer fragrances of life."

"Take out your pretty little sword," said Kell.

"Why?"

"DO IT!"

There came a scream. And a *crunch*. It was a heavy, almost metallic crunch. Like an entire body being ripped in half. This was followed by a thick slopping sound, and ripples spread across the black oil pool towards the men.

"That sounded... *interesting*," said Saark, his recent beating instantly forgotten. He drew his sword, a fluid movement. The way he held the delicate rapier spoke volumes about his skill with the weapon; this was not some toy, despite its lack of physical substance. Saark's speed and accuracy were a thing to behold.

"Interesting?" snorted Kell, then ducked as a body went whirring overhead, limbs like a ragdoll. It hit a wall of crumbling stone, and slid down like a broken toy, easing slowly into the black ooze. The stunned face, with ragged beard and oval brown eyes, was last to disappear. Kell and Saark watched, faces locked in frowns of confusion and apprehension; then they spread apart with the natural instinct of the seasoned warrior.

The single lantern, brought by Rake and his men, spluttered noisily. Its stench was acrid and evil, but not as evil as the shadows cast by the stroboscopic wick.

Kell took a step back. More crunches and screams echoed from the darkness, then fell gradually to an ominous silence.

"What is it?" whispered Saark.

"My mother?" ventured Kell.

"Your humour is ill placed," chastised Saark. "Something just silenced eleven men!"

"Well," grinned Kell, "maybe it'll have the awesome ability to silence you! Although I doubt it."

"I am so glad we're both about to die," hissed Saark. "At least I'll die in the knowledge that you were ripped apart, too."

"I don't die easy," said Kell, and rolled his shoulders, eyes narrowed, lantern-light turning his greying bearded face into a demonic visage. His eyes were hooded, unseen, but Saark could feel the cloak of solid violence which settled over Kell's frame; it felt like the high charge of electricity during a raging thunderstorm. It was there, unseen, but ready to kill like a striking cobra, with maximum violence.

The creature came from the gloom, moving easily, fluid despite its bulk, despite its size. It was a canker, but more than just a canker; this was immense, a prodigy of the deviant, and Kell grinned a grin which had nothing to do with humour.

"Horse shit," he said, voice low, "I think Graal saved this beauty for us!"

"It's been searching for us," said Saark, eyes narrowed, some primeval intuition sparking his mind into action. "Look at its eyes. There's recognition there, I swear by all the gods!"

Kell nodded, hefting his axe, movements smooth and cool and calculated as he stepped forward. The canker was on a narrow bridge now, a thick plank of timber which bowed under its weight. It stopped, eyes fastening on Kell, fangs drooling blood-oil to the wood.

"Looking for me?" said Kell.

Within the canker's flesh tiny gears and cogs spun and clicked. Its huge shaggy head lowered, and Saark had been right; there was recognition there. It sent a thrill coursing through Kell's veins. Here, he looked into the jaws of death. And he was afraid.

"General Graal sent me," said the canker, its voice a strange hybrid of human, animal and... *machine*. A clockwork voice. A voice filled with the tick-tock of advanced Watchmaking. Its huge shaggy head, so reminiscent of a lion and yet so twisted and bestial and deformed, tilted to one side in an almost human gesture that sent a shiver of empathy through Kell; he knew. Knew that once these creatures had been human. And it pleased him not a bit to slay them. "I am a messenger," continued the beast.

"Then deliver your message, and be gone," snapped Kell, brows furrowed, face lost in some internal pain which had nothing to do with age and arthritis, but more to do with the state of Falanor, the invading Army of Iron, and the abuse of *humanity* he was currently witnessing at the hands of the expanding, proud and increasingly *desperate* Vachine Empire.

"He would speak with you. He wants you to return with me. I am to bring you in... alive."

Kell grinned, then, rubbing his beard. "He's worried, ain't he? The Great Graal, General of the Age – worried about an old warrior with impetigo and a drinking habit? Well, once I said that if we met again I'd carve his name on his arse. That promise still stands."

"He needs your help," said the canker, voice a low-level rumble.

Kell considered this. "Well. I bet that was hard to admit." He rubbed his beard again. "And if I say no?"

"You are coming with me. One way or another, old man." The voice was one layer away from overt threat; but threat it was.

Kell stepped forward, rolling his shoulders and lifting *Ilanna* from her rest against the floor. *Kill it,*

whispered the bloodbond axe in his mind. *Kill it, drink its blood, let me feast. It is nothing to you. It is nothing but a deformation of the pure.*

Kell shrugged off Ilanna's internal voice – but could not ignore Saark's. He was close. Close behind Kell. His voice tickled Kell's ear. "We can take it, brother. After all we've been through, you can't let Graal dictate. He's sent this *special messenger* and there's a reason. I'd wager it has something to do with when you once hunted vachine in the Black Pike Mountains."

"And I would second that," said Kell, and launched a blistering attack so fast it was a blur that left Saark staggering backwards, mouth open in shock and awe as Kell's axe slammed for the canker's head but the beast moved, also with inhuman speed, with a speed born of clockwork and it snarled and dropped one shoulder the axe blade missing its face by inches and shaving tufts of grey fur to lie suspended in the air for long moments. Then reality slammed back and the canker went down on one shoulder, rolling sideways and missing the pool of oil by mere inches. It launched at Kell, huge forepaws with long curved talons slashing for his throat, but Kell side-stepped, axe batting aside the talons and right fist cannoning into the beast's head. Again he struck, a mighty blow and a fang snapped under his gloved knuckles. The canker's rear legs swiped out, and Kell leapt back to avoid disembowelment and the canker charged him but Ilanna whistled before its face, checking its charge. They circled, warily, amidst the glittering pools of oil sludge. Saark had stepped back, to the edge of one pool, crouching beside the sputtering lantern, rapier in his fist but eyes wide, aware he was no match for a canker in single combat but willing to dive in and help at the soonest opportunity. Suddenly he darted forward, the razor-edge of his rapier carving a line down the beast's flank. The canker squealed, rearing up, head smashing round as flesh opened like a zip and coils of muscle spilled out integrated with tendons and tiny clockwork machines which thrummed and clicked and whirred. A claw lashed out, back-handing Saark across the platform in a flurry of limbs. He rolled fast and lay drooling blood, stunned. Kell attacked, but the canker snarled, ducking a sweep of the axe and slamming both claws into Kell's face knocking the old warrior back. Kell went down on one knee, and the canker reared up, grinning down through strings of saliva and blood-oil – then turned, head twisting, focusing on Saark who had crawled to his knees, eyes narrowed.

"Don't you recognise me, Saark?"

"Yeah. You look like my dad."

"Truly? You cannot see my human flesh... the woman I used to be?"

Saark scowled, crawling to his feet, rapier extended amidst soiled, box-pleated ruffles. Then, he frowned, and his head moved and eyes locked with Kell. He breathed out, and staggered as if struck from behind. "No," he said, and moved closer to the canker. "It cannot be."

"I was a woman once, Saark." The canker settled down, a clawed and bestial hand moving back to the wound in its flank, and pushing spilled muscle into the cramped cavity like pushing eels into a pastry. "They chose me... because of my association with you. Because... once we were..."

"No!" screamed Saark, and images flowed like molten honey through a brain twisted with rage and horror and disbelief. For this was Aline, an early love of his life, his childhood sweetheart. They had spent months wandering the pretty woodlands south of Vor, making love in shadowed glades beside burbling brooks, carving their names in the Tower Oak, words entwined in a neatly carved love-heart, whispering promises to one another, sneaking through cold castle corridors on secret love trysts – the stuff of young love, of passionate adventure, with the honour and seriousness of the naive. But it was never meant to be. Aline was cousin to royalty, and her arranged marriage and fate sealed by a father with huge gambling debts and a need to secure more land and income. Their parting had been swift, bitter, and involved five soldiers holding a sharp dagger to Saark's throat. He still had a narrow white scar there, and his battered fingers came up to touch the place now. Through words choked with emotion, he said, more quietly than he intended, "Aline, it cannot be you."

"They did this to me, Saark. They knew it would hurt you. They knew it would persuade you. I must take Kell back to Graal; only then, will they make me human again. Only then, can I be a woman again."

Saark's gaze shifted, from the abused deviation of his childhood sweetheart, to the fully erect, ominous figure of Kell. Kell's eyes were shadowed, but his head gave a single movement. A clear message. No. Saark looked back to the canker, and only in the eyes dragged back sideways over the skull, only

in a few twists of golden hair which remained, only in a certain set of wrenched facial bones which, if imagination wrapped them around a normal skull could mentally reconstruct a *face*... did he recognise the woman of his childhood. "No," he said, again, as if by denying it he could make it so.

"Help me," pleaded the canker, head lowering, submissive now before Saark who felt his heart melt and his brain lock and his soul *die*.

Saark, gazing down, rapier forgotten, reached out with his delicate, tapered fingers. He touched Aline, touched the pale skin, the tufts of fur, worked in horror over the merging of flesh and clockwork. And then she – it – screamed, high and long and Kell was there, looming over her, Ilanna embedded in the canker's back narrowly missing the thick ridged spine. Kell placed a boot against the canker, tugging at his axe which had lodged awkwardly under a rib.

"No, Kell, no!" wailed Saark but Kell wrenched free the butterfly blades which lifted high trailing droplets of blood and a shard of broken rib and several strings of tendon and the canker whirled low, claws lashing for the axeman in a disembowelling stroke which missed by a hairsbreadth and on the return stroke *Aline* smashed a fist into Saark's chest and he was powered backwards, almost vertical, his legs finally dropping as he hit the ground, rolled, and splashed into the oil with desperate fingers scrabbling the platform like claws...

Kell leapt again, axe whirring, and he and the mutated woman circled with eyes locked, and then struck and clashed once more in a blur of strikes which left a trail of sparks glittering in the gloom. "Get out!" snarled Kell, glancing back to Saark. "Get out of here, lad, now!"

"Don't kill her," whispered Saark.

"She can never change back, don't you see?" hissed Kell, axe slamming up, claws raking the blades. He staggered back under the immense impact, and jabbed axe points at the canker's eyes. It snarled, head shaking, spittle drenching Kell. "It's a one way process! You cannot *revert!*"

The canker was pushing Kell back, claws lashing out with piledriver force and Saark could see Kell weakening fast. Within moments, he would be dead; dead, or drowning in oil. With an inhuman effort, Saark's fingers raked the harsh boards and legs kicked against thick, viscous oil. He rolled onto the deck, panting and foetal, then levered himself to his feet where he swayed. He grabbed at his rapier, but sheathed the weapon. Kell saw the movement, and his face went grim, went dark, his eyes becoming something more – or indeed, something *less* – than human.

"Aline." Saark's voice was a lullaby. A song of sweet, sickly nostalgia.

The canker paused mid-snarl, but did not turn. It's eyes were fixed with glittering hatred on Kell, his back to the oil, his axe resting against wooden boards. His chest was heaving, and his jerkin was sliced by claws showing shredded flesh beneath.

"Will you help me?" came the voice of Aline. And Saark could hear her, now, hear her tone and inflections entwined around the aural ejaculations of an alien beast.

"Yes," said Saark, with great sadness. "I will help you." He hooked his boot behind the lantern, and with a swift kick sent the flask of oil sailing across the platform, where it shattered against the canker and flames exploded outwards. Fire roared, engulfing the canker which screamed a high-pitched *feminine* scream and spun around in a tight circle, fighting the fire with claws whirring and slashing at itself as flesh burned and fat bubbled and clockwork squealed. Kell came at a sprint, head down, axe in both hands, and both he and Saark hammered down flexing planks into the darkness in the direction of the ancient factory exit...

The canker lowered to its haunches, burning, then glared through flames at the fleeing men. It roared, and charged after them, its burning flesh illuminating the way. Tufts of glowing fur fell from its burning body, into the oil, which slumbered for a few moments after the canker's passage and then suddenly, erratically, ignited. Fire roared along the surface of the oil pools, overtaking the canker and licking at the heels of Kell and Saark, sweating now, eyes alive with the orange glow of roaring demons as they ran with every burst of speed and energy they possessed, as heat billowed around them and sparks exploded and the *roar* and *surge* of fire was something both men had never experienced...

"We're going to dieeeee!" screamed Saark.

Kell did not reply, just heaved his bulk along flexing planks with fire at his boots, a stench of burning

chemicals filling his nostrils and smoke blinding him. He choked, gagged, and the fire overtook the two men who ran on blindly, across yet another narrow plank into darkness and smoke and behind them the roar of fire drowned the roar and screeches of the burning canker and suddenly both men slammed into the welcome ice-cold night, flames belching from the orifice behind as they hit the snow hard and rolled down a gentle slope to finally slide together, turning slowly on ice, to stop, Kell's great bearskin jerkin glowing and smouldering as he patted it.

The two men coughed and choked for a while, entwined like scorched lovers, then untangled themselves from one another. Kell staggered to his feet and hefted his axe, staring up at the factory doorway, brows furrowed, fire-blackened face focussed in concentration as his eyes narrowed and he readied himself in a centuries-old battle-stance.

"Surely not?" whispered Saark, climbing to his feet and coughing and spitting black phlegm to the snow. His fine clothes were blackened, scorched tatters. Beneath, his flesh was burn-pink in many places. He patted his head, when he suddenly realised his hair was on fire.

Kell did not reply. Just stood, staring at the doorway where an inferno raged. And then something moved, a huge, cumbersome, ill-defined shape within the shimmering portal, a demon dancing in the fire, an image of molten rock against the stage of a raging inferno, and Saark thought he saw the shape of the canker, of his twisted childhood sweetheart, of Aline, stagger within the opening and then slump down, clockwork machines *glowing* as they finally succumbed to the heat and ran in molten streams. Then the roof of the factory belched and slumped, and with a great groaning roar it collapsed bringing part of the walls down with it, and burning rubble filled the doorway and all was gone and still, except for the bright fire, and the demons.

"How could Graal do that?" whispered Saark, eyes still fixed on the blaze. All around the factory, snow-steam hissed like volcanic geysers.

Kell stared at him. "He did it to Elias."

"Yes, but... to a woman, I mean," said the scorched dandy. "An innocent. She was not fighting in the damned war!"

"Graal will do what he has to. To get the job done."

"Well, I want his head on a fucking plate," snarled Saark, suddenly. "I want that man dead."

Kell gave a curt nod, and turned his back on the inferno. "We all want him dead, laddie." He sighed, then. And gave a narrow smile which had nothing to do with humour. "But at least he's showed us one thing."

"And what's that?"

Kell's face was a dark mask, his eyes pools of ink. Unreadable. "He thinks we're a threat. He went to a lot of trouble to bring us in. And that means we are a danger not just to Graal, but to the whole damn vachine invasion." Kell began to walk away, back towards the stables. It was time to leave. It was time to leave *fast*.

Saark stood, stunned, watching Kell's back.

Fire crackled, and sparks spiralled up into a clear, freezing night sky.

Kell turned. Grinned a sour, twisted grin. "Come on, lad. What're you waiting for? We have to make *General Graal* earn his coin."

In silence, and with sombre heart, Saark followed Kell into the night.

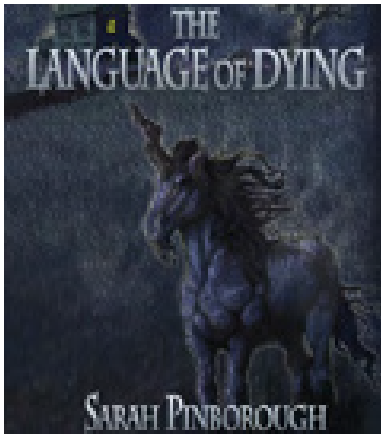
Andy Remic's *Kell's Legend - Book One of the Clockwork Vampire Chronicles* is out now from Angry Robot. See www.angryrobotbooks.com for further details



REVIEWS

The Language of Dying

reviewed by anthony leigh



by Sarah Pinborough

PS Publishing

£12 (hardcover), £25 (jacketed hardcover)

Sarah Pinborough is best known for her horror fiction. She's had four mass market paperbacks published through the US *Leisure* imprint, and a number of short stories through various markets. In the UK, her only novel to date is a *Torchwood* tie-in, though at 50,000 words it's a bit of a stretch to label it as a novel. It's at the upper end of the novella range.

The Language of Dying is another novella, though this time published as such through the UK's leading independent publisher, PS Publishing. It's a marked diversion for Pinborough in terms of both style and subject matter, who admitted that she was worried about the book's reception as it is so different to the rest of her work to date.

She needn't have worried. *The Language of Dying* is one of the finest works I have read this year. As a collector with far more unread books than time will ever allow, it is unusual for me to re-read a book these days. I finished reading *The Language of Dying* on the train on my way into work, and started reading it again the same evening. It's that good.

It's difficult to justify the inclusion of its review in a genre magazine, as it's not *really* a genre title. There's a unicorn, certainly (as you can see from the cover), but the unicorn is a metaphor for loss and new beginnings. It's not a novel full of magic and wonder, except for the magic and wonder of language, and of families, and of relationships and of resilience.

The book tells the story of a woman and of the last few days of her father's life as his body gradually gives in to the inevitable decay of cancer. The woman brings her siblings together to say goodbye to the father that raised them alone when their mother discovered that she really wasn't much of a mother, after all.

There are tales within the tale, histories half-remembered and histories best left forgotten. They're important, but not the point of the book. The point of the book is that it paints a very real picture of what it feels like to be part of a family (albeit one that is dissolving at the same time as the cancer dissolves the only common ground the family shares); it paints a picture of death; most of all, it paints a picture of life - of hope, of ambition, of love, of loss, of grief, of just-having-to-get-through.

This is easily the best thing Pinborough has ever had published, and a great promise of things to come. Absolute, wholehearted recommendation.



Directed by Neill Blomkamp, written by Neill Blomkamp and Terri Tatchell

Starring: Sharlto Copley, Vanessa Haywood, Jason Cope

Let's cut to the chase here: *District 9* is the most interesting, enjoyable and intelligent addition to CGI-enhanced fiction since 2007's absurdist monster masterpiece *The Host*. After a summer that has often felt like a long, slow endurance race across a paddling pool filled with ill-considered slop for genre movie fans, finally there is a movie that is exactly as good as the genre deserves. Go watch it now, come back,

then we'll talk.

OK, ready? Good, wasn't it? Now, on with the review.

A basic underlying idea of science fiction is that, barring apocalypse, whatever is around the corner means technological advances. Take aliens arriving on Earth: The machinery and science they used to get here inevitably means that something has to improve, right? It may take humans stealing it, but somehow the future has more alien symbols on its user manual.

Well, not in *District 9*, the debut feature from South African director Neill Blomkamp. The film begins, in faux documentary fashion, as a flashback to the arrival of an alien mothership – the typical vast flying saucer of the trope. Rather than heading to Washington to meet with world leaders (aka the US president) or blowing up the Houses of Parliament, it drifts lazily towards Johannesburg and just sits there. When humanity finally gets tired of nothing happening, the South African government cuts its way in to discover the aliens inside: A million sickly, starving and surprisingly stupid beasts. Half-cricket, half-Cthulhu, there's no real sign of why they came to Earth, what they want, or why they don't just leave.

Flash-forward 28 years and the Prawns, as they have been nicknamed, are dumped in a squalid shanty-town ghetto called District 9. Unemployable, loathed by the human population and basically annoying, Blackwater-a-likes Multinational United have been called in to undertake a mass eviction (at gunpoint) to reclaim the district and force the Prawns into a new tent city.

The last science fiction film to deal with the future as such a disappointing place was Mike Judge's clumsy and well-ignored satire *Idiocracy*. While *District 9* is also a comedy in places (pitch-black Judge's day-glo error), it wears its more serious influences (*V*, *Metamorphosis*, *The Fly*, *Alien Nation*) proudly on its sleeve. The eviction is lead by Wikus van der Merwe (Copley), a petty and seemingly ill-qualified pen-pusher who only gets the job because he's married to the boss' daughter (Haywood). The raid itself is carried out and depicted with the sort of bland efficiency of an episode of *COPS*, right until the point where Wikus raids the wrong tin shack and gets a face full of black goo. Then, in homage to Kafka, when Wikus awoke one morning from troubled dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a monstrous insect.

Ignore the fact that producer Peter Jackson's name is above the title: If Jackson was as much of a name as myth has him, then *King Kong* would have been a success and the last movie to get the PJ presents banner, *Black Sheep*, would be more than a limited-run oddity. This is absolutely Blomkamp's movie: Shot in his trademark half-documentary/half-narrative style, it has some of the most seamlessly integrated special effects of the decade. That possibly comes from his background as a 3D animator, as if he realizes that hyper-real looks unreal. Instead, he retains a gritty, slimy, and grainy visual approach, so that even when he flips between first- and third-person perspectives, it all seems part of one whole.

Based on his extraordinary short *Alive in Joburg*, it is also a uniquely South African movie, down

to the Xhosa-esque click language the aliens speak. It's easy enough to see the plight of the prawns as a metaphor for apartheid, but it's more complex than just throwing a simple political veneer over an action/adventure framework. The central plot component that MNU is moving the prawns out of District 9 and to a tent city outside of town harkens back to 1966, when the South African government began the forcible eviction of the black population of the Sixth Municipal District of Cape Town (aka District 6): But the underlying issue of gentrification in the evictions will strike some chords internationally.

It's not just prawn versus human: Wikus finds himself somewhat adopted by Christopher James (voiced by Cope), the sole prawn with seemingly half a brain and, therefore, his own agenda. There are parasites and power players within the district, like the Nigerian gang selling tinned cat food (which serves either as snack or drug for the prawns) in exchange for alien weaponry that they can't use (to coin a phrase, species-specific genetic trigger encoding is a bitch). Everyone seems slightly incompetent: The Prawns are a dimwitted bunch, while their human critics seem to be little more than bitter NIMBYists - although, in this case, their back yard is most of the solar system. Blomkamp and co-scripter Tatchell are prepared to make pretty much every character at least briefly unlikeable, sending the audience's sympathies scattering between the humans, the prawns and Wikus, who finds himself stuck between the two.

If it's Blomkamp that rules behind the lens and the pen, it's Copley that dominates the performances: A fact made all the more remarkable by the fact that he's not an actor by trade, but a writer and director himself. In his semi-improvised turn, he portrays Wikus as an Afrikaans Reggie Perrin, a ratty little bureaucrat with a surprising mean streak. Of course, Perrin's break with the business norm didn't come about because he started transforming into a seven-foot insectoid: Plus Perrin opened a store to rebel, he didn't go on a bloody, if haphazard, rampage with a lightning gun to find a cure.

Wisely, Blomkamp doesn't feel obligated to tie up all the loose ends, and instead goes for a resolution filled with doubt and ambiguities. But more importantly, the question now may be, where does Blomkamp go? *District 9* has undoubtedly shoved him to the forefront of contemporary directors, but it is also the summation of his work to date. Stylistically, it brings everything from *Alive in Joburg* and its kindred short *Tetra Vaal* (aka *Third World Robocop*) to their perfect fruition: So much so that reattaching him to the long-mooted (and arguably redundant) *Halo* film would be a bit beneath him. In career terms, he has made the leap from tech-gonk on adverts to world-class director that Ridley Scott would have made if his debut had been *Alien* (and not half-remembered period clunker *The Duellists*).

Inglourious Basterds/Shorts

reviewed by richard whittaker

Inglourious Basterds

Written and directed by Quentin Tarantino

Starring: Brad Pitt, Melanie Laurent, Christopher Waltz, Diane Kruger, Eli Roth, Michael Fassbinder, Mike Myers

Shorts

Written and directed by Robert Rodriguez

Starring: Jimmy Bennett, Jake Short, Jolie Vanier, Jon Cryer, James Spader, Leslie Mann, William H. Macy

It seems that the careers of Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino, the two surviving enfant terrible of 90s cinema (the third, Kevin Smith, has arguably disappeared into self-parody), will always be bound together.



It goes back well beyond their double-header master/disasterpiece *Grindhouse*, and before the Tarantino scripted/Rodriguez helmed *From Dusk 'Til Dawn*. It is probably no coincidence that their latest two movies were released on the same day. For all their differences (one is a piece of CGI-riddled summer fare, the other a grim period piece shot on location) they are also both, in their own ways, genre movies. Rodriguez's *Shorts* has the playful imagination of vintage children's featurettes, where ghosts and aliens and magical robots are as everyday as truant officers and pesky sausage-stealing dogs. Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* looks like a World War 2 combat movie, but it is also an alternative history (all be it one that doesn't reveal itself until the final half hour).

They are both, and this is to their credit, spectacularly self-indulgent. Rodriguez wanted to do another adventure film for his kids, and did: Just as his eldest son Racer provided the story for *The Adventures of Shark Boy and Lava Girl*, so younger son Rebel came up with the *Shorts* narrative. But, as with all Tarantino films, *Inglourious Basterds* is 10,000 influences refracted and focused through the unique lens of his cinematic vision.

Both films also are direct homages to vintage genres dear to the two directors. *Shorts* is a contemporary take on Hal Roach's kid-friendly antics *The Lil' Rascals*. There is a loose narrative thread: A magic wishing stone of unknown provenance drops into the Central Texas middle class tech-community of Black Falls. There it is discovered by several local children, and the inevitable hi-jinks and malarkey ensues. And there haven't been enough hi-jinks or malarkey in recent kids movies, so this is all for the better. *Inglourious Basterds* is a post-modernist take on post-WWII action movies. There are obvious hints, as anyone who has seen the trailer can testify, to every behind-the-lines adventure ever made: *The Dirty Dozen*, *The Eagle Has Landed*, and the original Italian exploitation classic *Quel Maledetto Treno Blindato* aka *Inglourious Basterds* in particular leave their stamp. Lt. Aldo Raine (Pitt, channeling his inner hillbilly last shown in the sadly neglected meta-spree killer treatise *Kalifornia*) has assembled a squad of Jewish soldiers to do, as the trailer says, one thing and one thing only. "We ain't in the prisoner takin' business," he proudly rumbles to a captured German officer. "We in the killin' Nazis business, and cousin, business is a-boomin'."

But this is a fraction of the film, as the basterds find themselves accidentally in the middle of a far more sinister dynamic. Shosanna Dreyfus (Laurent) is the sole survivor of a massacre instigated by Col. Hans Landa (Waltz, already attracting Oscar buzz as a man who can chill the blood by just asking for a glass of milk). She is a Jew: He, the Jew Hunter. Five years after he butchered her entire family, she is running a cinema in Paris which makes its money by showing Aryan puff-pieces to the occupying forces. There is, as a result, the potent mix of vengeance, cordite, and silver nitrate film in the air.

Both films rely on a chapter format. *Shorts* could be separated into a series of independent stories, much like Roach's work: But while it seems disparate and sometimes disconnected, Tarantino's sprawling tale is a single unit. To facilitate the episodic nature of their stories, both directors go with ensemble casts. Rodriguez violates the cardinal rule of cinema by working with kids: In fact, an entire pack of them. Toe Thompson (Bennett, who with *Orphan* and *Star Trek* under his belt, is this summer's go-to child star. Plus, he wrote the closing song. Yes, your offspring are officially underachievers) serves as the narrator, binding together the ridiculous, dayglo, sometimes icky but always pre-teen friendly tales of the gang's adventures. There's nothing too scary here: Giant crocodiles, robots, snakes, snot monsters, brothers being turned into dung beetles. Oh, of course there is the spooky girl who really doesn't like Toe at all (Vanier, guzzling down the junior grumpy goth stew that was once purely Christina Ricci's diet) which, as Rodriguez understands, is the real peril for boys of a "girls are ooky" age.

While every member of the *Shorts* gang gets their own story, Tarantino doesn't even feel obligated to introduce his entire cast. This isn't a definitive lesson in history. Characters are there for a purpose, and

are not even on-screen until the moment they are required. That can lead to some sudden and jarring changes in tone, such as the out-of-the-blue introduction of Lt. Archie Hicox (Fassbinder, a German-born actor paying the most cut-glass English character of the bunch), but ultimately adds to the breadth of the story.

Both directors also manage to throw in some star power for their casts of relative unknowns. Rodriguez puts them far more front and center, with Cryer and Mann turning in amiably goofy turns as Toe's parents. Meanwhile, James Spader as corporate boss-emperor Mr. Black seems to have actually been engulfed by Alan Shore, his quixotic lawyer that out-Shatnered Shatner in *Boston Legal*. Tarantino squeezes in some subtler appearances, including Mike Myers' surprisingly strong turn as a lugubrious British intelligence officer, and a tip-of-the-hat off-screen cameo by Harvey Keitel.



Similarly, both stories are bound by a common thread, because they are really about the impact of media on culture. Rodriguez has two maguffins: The rainbow-striped wishing stone and the electric wonder of the Black Box. The stone (which may as well have "Metaphor for imagination" stamped on it) grants everyone what they wish for (and yes, it should have "Be careful what you wish for" written on the reverse). The Black Box is an obvious iPhone analog, a do-everything tool that becomes more of a burden than a blessing because of its perpetual interruptions (pure coincidence that Rodriguez' home town of Austin, Texas, is a total PC kinda burgh). While everyone in the neighborhood is a slave to the machine, the kids are actually having real lives, and so the suitably overt metaphor is inserted right here.

But, as is always the way, Tarantino has made a deeper movie. Beyond the blink-and-you'll-miss-them cameos, and the character names that are hidden homages to B-movie actors he adores, and the soundtrack that scours his own record collection (most notably Ennio Morricone) and the occasional scenes of horrible violence, what he has actually made is a movie about propaganda. Goebbels, the Reich's PR man, is the most prominent member of the high command depicted, and that's no accident.

It's an occasionally uncomfortable path that Tarantino treads. Rodriguez has a simple morality (Friends and family, good: Spending too much time on a computer, bad) but Tarantino carves into the ambiguity of great art made in terrible times for terrible purposes. For example, no-one with a sense of cinematic history will deny that *Olympia* was a major work in western cinema: But it was Nazi propaganda. That fact is carved into every single frame, just as Raine carves a swastika into the forehead of every member of the Reich he leaves alive, whether they be pant-wetting conscript or butchering commanding officer. Tarantino even goes so far as to create his own piece of jingoistic Nazi cinema, playing with all the tropes of the genre (in fact, that was Roth, who apart from wielding a skull-crushing baseball bat as Donny "The Bear Jew" Donowitz, directed the movie-within-a-movie *Stolz der Nation*). Without ever saying it, Tarantino puts across the clear message about history being written by the victors: And, implicitly, that the Nazis would have been obscenely good about rewriting their crimes.

The issues and compromises of the presentation of World War II are buried so deep in *Basterds* that Tarantino never has to be overt (a little Operation Paperclip here, a little Jewish Brigade there). Even his use of chapters, an established part of his oeuvre, seems different here: Less an opportunity to play with timeline, and more to do with Weimar Germany's visionary poet/playwright Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (clumsily translated as the alienation effect, but basically his way of disrupting story, to ensure that audiences remains critical of the events and the message). The script radiates that quiet and efficient brutality of narrative, throwing out the cultural asides that have been Tarantino's trademark until every word builds up the subtext. Some may find it frustrating that there are not more action sequences, and that the Basterds aren't even the core of the movie. Instead, when they do appear and do what they do best, the bloodshed is explanatory, not indulgent – that is, until the denouement, which is exactly the *sturm und drang* firefight the audience has awaited.

For a notoriously and gloriously wordy writer, Tarantino is prepared for possibly the first time in his career to leave icy silences. Rodriguez, instead, throws everything at the screen. For all the similarities between the two, and between their two films, it has never been clearer that they are now on two very different cinematic paths.

Personal Effects: Dark Art

reviewed by Janet Neilson & Alasdair Stuart



by J. C. Hutchins and Jordan Weisman
Melia Publishing Services Ltd
rrp £18.99

We are told throughout our lives that looks aren't everything, that you can't judge a book by its cover, that it's what's *inside* that counts. Later on, the world seems to prove the opposite. We are talking about a world where people can become famous just for being attractive, and where actors don't have to have any kind of talent to be big names; they just have to fill seats with ogles. So which theory is right? Is it all about the looks, or is it about what's within?

Personal Effects: Dark Art by JC Hutchins and Jordan Weisman is one of those stellar pieces of entertainment that has both the style and the substance, form and function. To truly review this piece, form and function have to be looked at separately, with a view to how they mesh.

In terms of the substance, the story within the well-designed covers does not disappoint. The story follows the efforts of art therapist Zach Taylor to engage a psychosomatically blind patient, Martin Grace, at 'the Brink', the grim and improbable Brinkvale Psychiatric Hospital. Grace has been charged with, and has admitted to, a murder he could not possibly have committed, and as Taylor attempts to help his patient, he finds himself travelling a dark path from the psychological horror thriller of the Thomas Harris variety into a far older and more subtle horror in his search for the truth and, eventually, in an attempt to save not only his life, but those he cares for most. Hutchins walks the line between psychological and paranormal admirably, never allowing his audience to get too comfortable and allowing that tension to further engage the reader. First person perspective is easy to do badly - the starting point for the story is generally harder to find and the balance in detail given can be hard to strike - but *Personal Effects* from Zach Taylor's perspective flows effortlessly. Hutchins has streamlined his style since his *7th Son* trilogy, and that streamlining takes the reaction to this tale from 'man, this is good' to 'Can't talk now. Reading. **Go away**'.

Moving to the style, *Personal Effects: Dark Art* has an innovative look, somewhere between really attractive hardcover novel and new World of Darkness sourcebook. The 'lined notebook paper' effect helps with a sense of immersion and a nearly voyeuristic investment in the text in that it gives the feel of reading someone's journal. The artwork is at once minimalist and evocative, sparing detail except where it is most required and effective. Even the cover's finish is smooth without unnecessary gloss, and rather tactile for it.

There is no overstating the innovation shown in the 'effects' bundled together with the book. Looking at the birth and death certificates, photographs, driver's licence, credit card, admittance papers and all the rest, one can't help but see the investment of time and effort, the sheer geeker joy it must have been for Jordan Weisman to design these things. Beyond what they add to the story, these effects are inspiring, and the fact that they exist at all nudges a reader towards the story. Seeing the effort put into the cover and the effects, a reader must conclude that the story between those covers contains the same hard work, attention to detail and inspiring non-gloss minimal invasive-yet-not creepiness that the packaging and extras do.

The flaws with this work are minimal. Setting up operational telephone numbers that could be reached by international readers free or for a nominal fee is likely difficult, after all, so it stands to reason that the phone numbers provided to give readers further tidbits would be North America only. However, given that Hutchins and Weisman are reaching for an international audience, it's a bit of a blow to the reader from Canada or Great Britain or Australia who cannot engage with all of the effects owing to financial considerations. The book itself is also not the most portable thing in the world, and there's a risk of losing the 'effects' if taking this book out to read on a commute. This is a book for home. There are also a few unfortunate printing errors – the lower-case letter O and the number zero are transposed from time to time – but nothing that truly detracts from the story.

Overall, *Personal Effects: Dark Art* is a brilliant piece of dark art in and of itself, with a story of subtle darkness and nail-biting tension, packaged with a cover and items that serve to make the tale more tangible to an audience. In this case, one truly can judge a book by its cover, and the overall judgement is very favourable indeed.

JN

Zach Taylor works at Brinkvale Psychiatric Hospital. Zach is polite, friendly, optimistic and has an unshakeable faith in his discipline; art therapy. He works with the most disturbing, most lost inmates of the Brink, communicating with them through pencils and paints, charcoal and canvas as much as speech. Zach's very good at what he does, which is one of the reasons why he gets Martin Grace.

People die around Martin Grace and he sees it coming every single time, despite being blind. On trial for murder, Grace is a furious, tortured figure, a fiercely articulate man who is so lost in the dark he can no longer see anything else. Zach is convinced he can help him, Zach's father, Grace's prosecutor, is convinced he's guilty and Zach's an idiot.

But there's something about Martin Grace that Zach can't let go of, something his father wants buried. As Zach begins to reach out to the blind man he finds himself drawn into the torrid history of his own family, the truth about Martin Grace's past and risks being trapped in the dark himself.

JC Hutchins' first print novel is an extremely ambitious affair, packaged with a set of documents designed by Alternate Reality Gaming legend Jordan Weisman. Everything from death certificates and driving licences to disfigured photos is included and the feeling of being able to handle the same documents as Zach is genuinely remarkable. One tip though; don't explore them too much before reading the book as it's much more fun to 'find' the documents as Zach does.

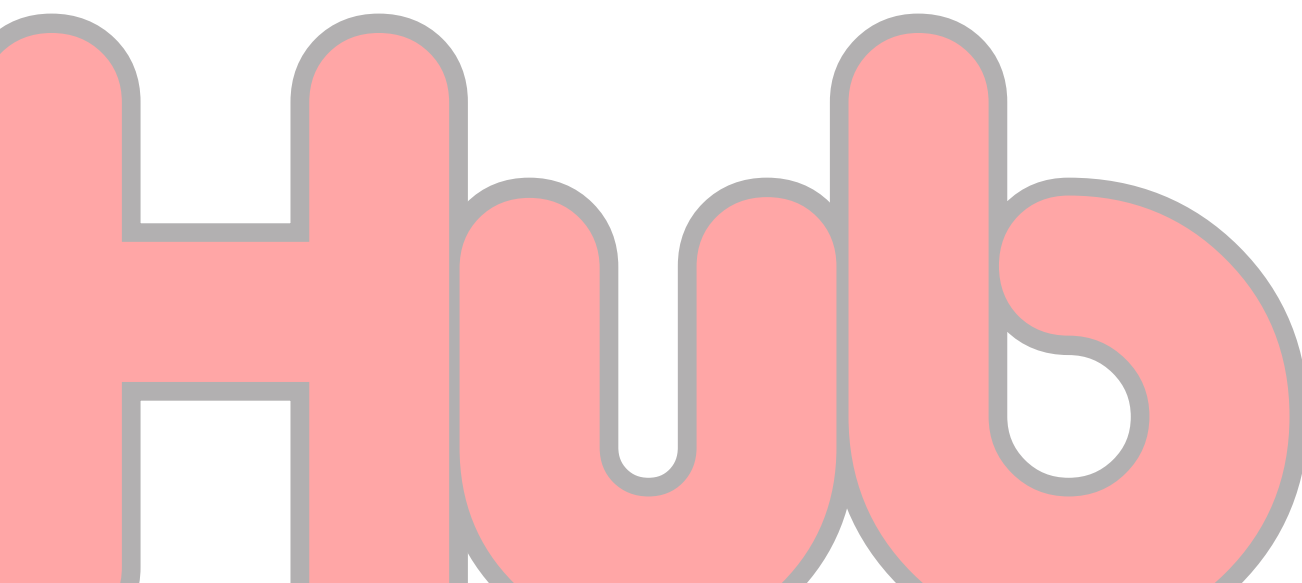
They also provide a welcome set of signposts for the rabbit hole Zach is led down. Hutchins never shies away from the dark and neither does his hero and the end result is a book which when it cuts loose is supremely unsettling. The fight scenes are particularly well handled and there's a real sense of danger to much of the book. These characters are human, fragile and alone and a second's hesitation, a single wrong decision will doom them all. As a result, some of the later sequences in particular are impossibly tense, especially a sequence set during a black out when Zach suddenly becomes aware of exactly how dangerous his environment is. No one's safe, no one's ready and everyone can break.

This danger comes at least in part from Hutchins' skill with characters. Zach is a remarkably likable protagonist, an easy-going, polite young man who is as capable of acts of tremendous kindness as he is acts of blistering stupidity. There's no square jawed action hero here, just a flawed young man with a heart slightly bigger than his brain trying to do the best he can for the people around him. Hutchins clearly loves these characters and the interaction between Zach, his girlfriend Rachael and younger brother Lucas is both funny and touching, but Zach's father and Grace both also impress, with the older Taylor coming across as a tragic, almost Shakespearean figure as the book progresses. It's Zach though who stays with you after the book's finished as Hutchins hints at something very dark in the past of his lead.

It's these hints, if anywhere, where the book is weakest. Hutchins is clearly not done with this world or these characters and some readers may be frustrated by the lack of closure in some of the secondary

plots. However, that ambiguity is balanced by the fact that the Brink is always open, that there are always new cases and that Zach Taylor deserves to be busy for a long, long time to come. This is a novel of unique approach and ambition, a horror story that spans media to create something which will be a foundation for a very different kind of storytelling. Recommended.

AS



FEATURES

Big Screen Future

by *alasdair stuart*

5. *The Abyss*

With his first film in twelve years, *Avatar*, scheduled for release this year, James Cameron is about to return to genre cinema. The director of *Aliens*, *The Terminator*, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* and *Titanic*, amongst others, Cameron's work is distinguished by monumental technical ambition and a grounded, plausible approach to the fantastic. It's ironic then that his best film, the one that sees these two interests in lockstep, is also his least commercially and critically successful one.

The simple act of shooting *The Abyss* was a herculean undertaking, involving re-fitting a half-constructed nuclear power station to become a huge water tank. The cast and crew were under water for hours at a time and frequently had to spend up to twelve hours in decompression chambers. The shoot was so difficult that Ed Harris refused to talk about it for years after filming and on completion, the cast and crew were all given t-shirts bearing the caption:

LIFE'S ABYSS AND THEN WE DIVE.

But despite, or perhaps because of this pressure, the film remains Cameron's best work as a director and writer. His background as a special effects technician has shown throughout his career and there are few directors better at shifting the focus of action from epic scale to individual people and back again, especially here. Cameron is as comfortable with quiet, personal character moments as he is with massive set pieces and the skill with which the two are nested within one another here is never less than impressive.

The crane crash sequence is particularly impressive as Cameron throws the focus around at tremendous speed but with absolute discipline. We follow the Benthic Explorer, the Deepcore II's support ship as it battles high seas and loses the crane carrying the Deepcore's umbilical. The action then cuts to the seabed as the crew frantically try and unbuckle the cable as the crane crashes down on them, are dragged over the lip of the Marianas Trench and come to rest, only to be forced to battle hull leaks and fires at multiple locations. It's an almost balletic sequence, each section building on the last and each driving home how fragile, how alone the Deepcore II crew are and how, in a second, the crew's safe environment can become a roiling, chaotic death trap.

Cameron's adept at putting a human face on disaster and there's a palpable sense of danger throughout the film. The water that encloses the story and the set is a constant, threatening presence and no one, from the doomed crew of the USS Montana to Bud and Lindsay Brigman are able to escape it until the film's final moments.

But for all the undoubted technical skill on display here, it's Cameron the scriptwriter who most impresses. *The Abyss* is a Russian doll of plots, each presenting a canvas for the other plot lines to play out across and each successively tighter in focus.

The largest sees Cameron borrow a trick from 2010, and use a fictionalized version of the Cuban Missile Crisis as both the catalyst for the story and a means of providing it with extra historical weight. The accidental crash of a US nuclear submarine not only brings the Deepcore II crew into the incident but also brings the Cold War into the spotlight. By doing this, Cameron establishes an instant intellectual connection with the Cuban Missile Crisis and its potential consequences, in turn raising the dramatic and emotional stakes of what is, superficially, a Summer blockbuster filled with empty spectacle.

The next story down from that addresses the empty spectacle head on, as Cameron builds an action movie that is arguably larger and more completely realized than any of his other work. The crane sequence mentioned above, the bruising submarine chase and Bud's final dive into the abyss are just three of the major action beats in a film that rarely pauses for breath. Cameron has a rare fondness for practical effects work and the ease with which the film not only shifts scale but type of effect is never less than impressive. The arrival at the USS Montana is a particular standout, the chunky, tough 'pick up truck' submarines of the Deepcore II crew dwarfed by the immense scale of the downed submarine.

The Summer tent pole movie in turn provides a unique spin to the science fiction plot. Cameron is on record as saying that he wanted a very realistic, grounded approach to the fantastic in *The Abyss* and that's exactly what's delivered. The blue collar main characters, Bud in particular, bring a welcome cynicism to events and their realistic approach puts a different perspective on what is at heart nothing more than a first contact story and a relatively conventional one at that.

Until the water tentacle sequence, where everything changes. As the aliens explore the rig and make contact with the crew, the accepted wisdom of special effects technology is shattered. Cameron's use of CGI, the first in a major film, is elegant and effective even today, using the relatively simple shapes and textures of the tentacle to side step technical problems. It also fits, perfectly, with the rest of the film, a seamless integration of the unreal with the real, the alien with the mundane. The process of evolution, the changes that would lead through *Independence Day* to films like *The Matrix* and *Donnie Darko* and revolutionize SF cinema starts here.

The water tentacle and all it represents provides the backdrop to the final, central plot. Cameron, for all his fascination with scale and technology, is passionately concerned with people and never more so than here. *The Abyss* is a literal and psychological presence in the film, each character faced with the realization that they have stepped beyond the bounds of safety and human knowledge, that they are staring at the unknown. How they react to that knowledge is what drives the central conflicts of the film, and does so in a remarkably even handed way.

For Lindsay, the abyss is an open door, with the promise of boundless knowledge beyond it. For Bud, it's a problem at best and a threat at worst and for both of them, it's a reminder that what they need most is not knowledge, or freedom, but each other. Ed Harris and Mary Elisabeth Mastrantonio are on stunning form here and they have a quiet, unforced chemistry that is completely believable. Whether it's Lindsay telling a sleeping Bud to turn over and him obeying or the pair frantically brainstorming ways to save a freezing Lindsay's life their relationship is realistic, plausible and at times deeply moving.

The rest of the cast are as naturalistic, as impressive but the other stand out is Michael Biehn as Lt. Coffey. Biehn is a Cameron alumni and, in a kinder world, would have been catapulted to mainstream success in Cameron's abandoned *Spiderman* movie. Here, he plays Bud's alter ego, a man as concerned with his job and his crew as Bud but lacking the human anchor Lindsay provides. Coffey is a genuinely good man, the script takes great pains to point that out but for him, the abyss is where the monsters live and he finds himself unable to move beyond that belief or, in the end, the abyss itself. Coffey is a tragic figure first and a villain second, the final casualty before the dawn of the new world.

The Abyss is immensely ambitious and meticulously constructed, the four plots harnessed together to create an incredibly powerful piece of drama. It's ambition outreaches it's grasp in several places, most notably some of the final effects, but the film succeeds far more than it fails and fails bravely when it does. Unfairly over looked, it's Cameron's best work and if *Avatar* is half as successful, then we're in for something very, very special.



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