

Hub Magazine

SCIENCE FICTION HORROR FANTASY

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CONTENTS:

- FICTION:** *Growing Pains* by Ian Whates
- REVIEW:** 9
 Cirque du Freak - The Vampire's Assistant
 2010
- FEATURE:** *Interview with Claudio Sanchez*



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EDITORIAL:

by lee harris

Well, what a week that was!

Not only did we hit issue 100 last week (One Freakin' Hundred!), on Friday we signed up our 10,000th subscriber! That's right - *Hub* is now read weekly by over 10,000 people! Another brilliant milestone less than a week after our hundredth issue!

Next week we'll have the results of our *FAQ About Time Travel* competition, which received a record (for *Hub*) number of entries, and in a couple of weeks we'll be announcing another competition.

It's all go, you know!

Oh, and if you're in the UK, be sure to pick up a copy of the *Guardian* newspaper next Saturday (Halloween) - *Hub's* own Alasdair Stuart has an article in the *Guardian Guide*, explaining just how to go about writing an effective ghost story. He gets around, does our Al.

Enjoy this week's issue, and well see you again in seven days' time...

FICTION

Growing Pains

by ian whates

I was up early that particular Saturday; I mean *really* early. It was having Rachel and her family staying that did it. I'd been on tenterhooks from the moment, late on Friday afternoon, when their silver Merc picked its way gingerly along the narrow lane and drew up outside the house. Don't get me wrong, I love my sister and Geoff's okay, she could have done a lot worse. Come to think of it, she *had* done a lot worse – I remember her first husband.

It was not even the fact that she was a city girl through and through. Okay, so she thought I was crazy to have turned my back on the rat race and taken up fruit farming in the back-of-beyond, but hell, I could hardly blame her for that. Half the time I agreed with her.

No, it was the timing of their visit that was the problem. Looking back, perhaps I should have been firmer, but I'd already put them off so often they were beginning to take offence. I suppose secrets do that – create tension where none belongs and cast the shadow of anxiety over normal interactions, even with family. David was my main worry. It was hard to remember sometimes with all that had happened of late, but he was still just a kid. Could he really be expected to go the whole weekend without letting something slip, without giving us away?

To date Rachel just *thought* I was crazy. I preferred to keep it that way.

Then, of course, there was my niece, Jude – she refused to answer to 'Judith'. Jude was eight months older than David and in theory having another child around of similar age seemed like a good idea. In practice the thin veneer of their apparent common interests hid a gaping chasm of differences. They both loved music: she was into chart stuff while he was addicted to sub-genres I'd never even heard of, but which sounded to me like grunge and new metal. They both loved virtual reality games: she enjoyed creating virtual families and designing their virtual homes, while he enjoyed blowing things up. They were both into clothes: she loved to dress up and he took delight in dressing down. They both loved the outdoors, but he was inquisitive and never happier than when getting down and dirty, while she preferred her countryside sanitised – preferably viewed from the back of a horse... and we never have owned a horse.

There was also David's love of all things mechanical, particularly anything that vaguely resembled a weapon. He was rarely to be seen without a toy gun of some sort in his hand, often taking aim at someone or other. During that particular weekend, the designated someone was invariably Jude. Rachel had already made a couple of comments about the need for a 'feminine influence' and my son's 'worrying violent tendencies.' My dismissal of such concerns with 'he's only playing' seemed to cut very little ice and I was hardly in a position to explain that I actually *encouraged* such play, or to explain the reasons why.

Add into the mix the fact that one was a boy and the other a girl and you were left with two surly kids who would rarely acknowledge each other's existence without being bullied into doing so. None of which helped make the weekend any easier.

It was still dark when I tip-toed downstairs and into the kitchen to make myself a cup of tea. The unforgiving stone floor radiated a slight chill that seeped up through the soles of my bare feet, and I was glad to retreat to the comparative warmth of the lounge carpet.

David's alarm was set to wake him in little over an hour. Hopefully we could be out of the house before anyone else even realised we were up.

I settled into my favourite chair, switched on the standard lamp and tried to read; failing dismally

for the most part, my thoughts constantly straying onto other matters. When sounds of muffled movement finally came from upstairs I had managed just a couple of pages, and they would need to be reread.

I rose and headed back into the kitchen, without bothering to check the time. Then something prompted me to pause and listen more closely.

Over the years I'd grown accustomed to the rhythm of David's footfalls, the sound of his rummaging, and this didn't *sound* like him moving around up there.

Sure enough, the figure that appeared seconds later was far too large to be my son.

Geoff; his tall, broad-shouldered frame seeming to fill the entire stairwell. So much for sneaking out unnoticed.

"Morning. You're up early."

I winced at the unrestrained boom and wondered fleetingly whether 'Geoffs' came with any form of volume control.

Some level of disapproval must have registered on my face, because he waved a hand dismissively, saying, "Don't worry about Rach – she'll be asleep for hours yet. And as for Jude, it would take a bomb going off to wake her up."

No concern for disturbing David, I noticed.

Not that it mattered; I could already hear more movement – the rumbling protest of disturbed bedsprings, like the warning of some far-off thunder storm, and the creak of trodden floorboards. Seconds later a dishevelled bundle of pre-adolescent energy came hurtling down the stairs to vanish into the cloakroom, a stage-whispered, "Hi, Dad," trailing in its wake.

Geoff observed the mini-typhoon's passage with a wry smile and then proved that he *could* moderate his voice when it suited him, saying in subdued tone, "He's a great credit to you, you know. It can't have been easy since Susan left."

My response was some meaningless platitude or other. I hate talking about Susan, almost as much as I hate thinking about her.

The three of us sat down to breakfast in the kitchen, with David unusually quiet. He clearly realised that Uncle Geoff's presence was not part of the plan and kept glancing in my direction as if imploring me to do something. I ran through various possibilities in my mind as the haphazard pile of toast – which started out resembling some roughly-built cavalry fort in an old Hollywood western – was steadily demolished, log by log, and cereal bowls were wiped clean. By the time we'd finished, David's furtive glances had gained an edge of desperation.

"Right then," I said, pushing my chair back from the table and standing up. "Are you all set, David?" Without waiting for a reply, I turned to Geoff; "Don't worry about washing up the breakfast things, I'll see to them when we get back."

"Where are you off to?"

"Just a few bits and pieces that need doing; we won't be long."

"Work? But it's the weekend."

I smiled, hoping it did not come across as too patronising. "You're in the countryside now, Geoff. Things don't take a break from growing on Friday night and put their feet up 'til Monday. They keep right on going all through the weekend."

"Sure, but I thought with us here... I mean, you haven't seen Rachel or Jude in what... six months?"

"At least. But this is a working farm. It's how David and I earn a living and it's a critical time of year right now; the strawberries are just about there and we'll be opening up for pick-your-own next weekend. We can't afford to neglect them."

He seemed to absorb that for a second. "Okay, point taken. Guess I'll tag along with you, then."

No! Somehow I managed to avoid voicing the protest, although the look of horror on David's face shouted it effectively enough. Fortunately Geoff was completely oblivious.

"No need," I said, as casually as I could manage. "It's just boring, routine stuff."

"Fine. Rachel's always saying I should take more interest in what you guys do around here."

His mind was made up and nothing I said could deter him. Short of being rude or physically tying him to a chair, we were going to have to accept his company and just pray for an uneventful morning.

David had produced a gun from somewhere and was running around mock-shooting our guest from every conceivable angle.

I knew exactly how he felt.

It was a tight squeeze with three of us in the cab – neither Geoff nor I are small men – and today the truck seemed determined to find every bump and divot in the dirt-track that masqueraded as an unmade road. The three of us jolted and shook in unison, like a trio of plastic monkeys fused at the sides and sculpted by a single mould. Fortunately the ride was a short one.

“Whatever happened to walking?” Geoff wanted to know. “I thought this was supposed to be the healthy life; didn’t realise you just jump in a car to go off to work like the rest of us.”

“It’s a truck, not a car,” David snapped peevishly as we drew to a stop.

It was a lovely morning – the sort that ought to explain to anyone far better than any argument of mine precisely why we had abandoned the City. I have no idea whether or not Geoff took the point.

The first thing I noticed on climbing down from the cab was the song of a sky lark. The fact that it was already aloft so early in the day spoke volumes for just how warm it was. I glanced up, trying to spot it, and amazed myself by doing so. Normally the sound drifts down from on-high like the song of some unseen angel, tempting you to spend an age of frustration searching for its source, but today I saw it immediately – a tiny speck on-the-wing, voicing its glory.

Rather than being an isolated voice, the lark was more a soloist, its song set against the background chorus of other birds declaring their presence and their territory. Even Geoff paused to listen and it occurred to me that being born and bred in the blandness of suburbia he might never have heard a real dawn chorus like this before.

The sun’s nimbus was just clearing the hedgerow. I found myself increasingly on edge and hoped the anxiety did not convey itself to Geoff. If anything was going to happen, it would be in the next few minutes.

David and I helped each other wriggle into our harnesses with practiced ease.

Geoff looked on, bemused. “And those are for...?” he asked, indicating the cumbersome plastic containers we now had strapped to our backs, both heavy with water.

“Watering the fruit,” I explained. I tested the pressurised gun that fed off the tank. Satisfied, I looked up to find David already a few rows away, eager to begin. At my nod, we set off. Geoff accompanied me as we walked between the lines of strawberry plants sitting proud on their straw-topped mounds, flashes of red amongst the green, yellow and brown.

“Rachel tells me you’re expanding the ‘pick-your-own’ side of things,” he said.

“Yes. In addition to the soft fruit – raspberries, blackcurrants and the two varieties of strawberry – we thought we’d give some vegetables a go this year.” I was talking on automatic pilot, most of my attention focussed on scanning the edge of the field. I knew without looking that David was doing the same a few rows away. “So we’ve got peas, beans, mange tout, cauliflower and cabbage.”

“Why two types of strawberry?”

I had explained this before, realising from his glazed expression at the time that it was going in one ear and out the other. “One’s a June bearing variety. They produce the best crop but only fruit once each year – in late spring/early summer.”

“Now, in other words.”

“Right. The other is an ever-bearing strain, which fruits again in the autumn, giving us a second crack at the strawberry-loving public. There’s less demand at that time of the year but also less competition, so the smaller crop works well.”

The conversation was helping to divert him from pondering any awkward questions, such as why David and I had yet to spray a single drop of water from the heavy tanks we insisted on lugging around.

I caught a blinding flash over Geoff’s shoulder, as if sunlight had glanced off a reflective surface straight into my eyes. My heart sank. Why today of all days? David spotted it too and was already scampering hurriedly towards it. I steered Geoff in the same direction at a more leisurely pace, trying not to be too obvious. Absurd really – he was hardly going to remain unaware for much longer, but it seems that secrecy is a habit we cling to until the bitter end.

Another flash; right beside me this time. Geoff's startled hop backwards and exclamation of "What the..." would have been comical in other circumstances.

I ignored him and concentrated on the bolter. It had touched down at the start of a row, as they invariably tend to, then instantly arced to hit another plant two or three removed from the first before jumping to the next row and a further plant. This all occurred in a split second, the impression of a bridge of light more visual after-image than actually seen. I reacted instantly, raising my 'gun' and sending a stream of water in pursuit. Too slow. The bolter had already moved on, continuing its dance down the row. Wherever it touched, the strawberry plants were left unharmed but stripped of fruit.

A second stream of water intersected the bolter's path. There was a loud crack, reminiscent of a fire-cracker going off, and a blinding flare of light, accompanied by a young boy's triumphant roar of "Yes!" The bolter was gone. Thank God for David. My reactions are pretty good but my son's are a fraction faster, presumably because he is that much younger. When things happen at this speed, a fraction makes all the difference.

"What the hell was that?" Fear or shock made Geoff's question over-loud and angry.

I held up a restraining hand as he went to step forward from the field's edge. "Don't come between the rows. You don't want to be touched by one of these things and you've seen how they can arc across." The fact that David and I were standing between rows was something I did not need reminding of. We were both in a position to defend ourselves.

Even as I finished speaking it began again. Multiples this time; I didn't stop to count how many. I fired instinctively... and missed. Crack, flash and cheer to my left told me that David had been more successful. One came hopping down the row towards me, like some mischievous imp of light. I tried to gauge where it would be rather than where it was, squeezed off a jet of water and got lucky, but there was another immediately behind it.

There ensued a brief period of chaos: bolts of light dazzling the periphery of vision, jets of water missing, hitting, flares and small explosions, whoops of childish delight, spots dancing before my eyes and trousers that were somehow soaked through by the end. As ever, I gained an impression of vitality and purpose from these small, self-contained bolts of energy, but no real indication of whether or not they were even aware of us.

Suddenly it was over, leaving me with the vague sense of a task unfinished. I stood there, breathing hard, adrenaline still pumping, waiting for the next wave, but none came.

David gave an exultant cheer as the realisation sunk in that this really was the end and not simply a pause. "I got twelve," he declared proudly. "How many did you get, Dad?"

"Five." Well, four that I was certain of and a fifth that both of us had gone for at the same time.

I looked around and knew the relief of success. About us the strawberry crop had vanished, the plants stripped bare, but it was a mercifully small area. We'd succeeded in containing the bolters to the corner where they had come through on this occasion. Unchecked, an incursion like that would have stripped the field of fruit in a matter of minutes. If even one bolter had slipped past it would have been a disaster. But none had.

"So what on earth was that all about?"

I couldn't help it, I laughed. The release of tension and the return to the mundane encompassed in Geoff's question set me off. "I'm sorry, Geoff."

"Bolters," David supplied as I brought myself under control. "As in lightning bolts."

"Those were *not* lightning bolts," Geoff stated emphatically.

"No, you're right," I agreed, composure restored, "but that's what we call them: bolters." I knew nothing about them when I bought the place – I don't think anybody who comes into fruit farming from the outside ever does. A trade secret, so to speak.

Geoff crouched down to examine one of the plants whose fruit had been harvested during the raid. "I thought it was going to be burnt," he murmured, "but there's not a mark on it."

"I know. Clever little devils, aren't they?"

"But *what* are they?"

"Self-contained, animate parcels of energy," I explained. "They're electrical in nature and they love

soft fruit." Two sentences which encapsulated virtually everything about bolters that anyone was certain of.

"Self contained...? They just looked like short lightning bolts, anchored between plants, bending and... I mean, it's not possible."

"Yes, I went to the same physics lessons you did," I assured him. "You're right, bolters ought to be impossible, but..."

"They just appeared out of nowhere." He really was struggling with this, unable or unwilling to accept what his eyes had reported. "They must have come from somewhere."

"But not from here."

"What do you mean?"

"Aliens," David chipped in gleefully.

"Oh come on!"

"Think about it," I said. "They contravene every law of science we were ever taught, yet clearly they exist – so wherever they come from their existence *isn't* an impossibility, it's a fact. And wherever *that* is, it's not here."

"Yes, but... aliens? Where's their space ship?"

"They don't need one. I don't think they come from 'up there' at all," I waved vaguely at the heavens.

"What do you mean?"

This was where things got a little tricky. I took a deep breath. "Membrane theory." Just because I was a fruit farmer didn't mean I'd lost touch with such things.

He looked blank and shook his head.

"It's a theory which supposes that we're just one of an infinite number of multiple realities existing in parallel with one another. I think the bolters come from one of the others, or maybe exist between realities, crossing several in search of food." In my mind I had the image of vast swarms of bolters floating in the gaps between, creatures of the void that were drawn to any place where they sensed food, able to cross into different realities when conditions allowed.

"You don't honestly believe in all this nonsense, do you?"

"You've seen the bolters; got any better ideas?"

There was silence while he mulled it over. You could almost see the cogs turning beneath his furrowed brow. "So when you spray them with water..."

"We don't know for certain." I shrugged. "There's a release of energy and they vanish. Perhaps that means we've killed them..."

"Course we've killed them," David interrupted

"...or perhaps the water shorts something out and simply snaps them back to wherever it is they come from," I continued. "To be honest, it's anyone's guess. And do you know something else?"

"What?"

"I really couldn't care less."

"But..."

I held up a hand to forestall whatever he was about to say and spoke over him – I was starting to lose patience. "Look, Geoff, we're not even sure these things are alive. They could be constructs for all we know; machines of some sort sent here to harvest the fruit for unseen masters, or they might be mindless creatures with a sweet tooth who've evolved an instinctive means of crossing dimensions to feed. If they *are* alive, there's never been any indication they're sentient. All anyone has ever seen is a mindless drive to devour fruit and sometimes a reaction to avoid water. Hunger and self preservation, two of the most basic instincts you could wish for. But I still know exactly what they are."

"Which is?" he asked on cue.

"Vermin; inter-dimensional fruit-eating vermin. And we know what to do with vermin, don't we David?"

"Shoot them!" He yelled with such enthusiasm that Geoff looked deeply shocked, which caused a broad grin to break through despite my best efforts. Geoff could be a real tight-ass on occasion and I enjoyed seeing his world view shaken a little.

He and I returned to the truck, while David headed off to do one more circuit of the field, just in case. There was unlikely to be any more trouble that morning – assuming the bolters stuck to their familiar pattern – but it would help him to burn off some excess energy and calm down a little following the raid.

“You’re going to have to report this, you know,” Geoff said, once we were both in the cab.

I shook my head. “No point. It’s been tried before. A grower reported it back in the 80s, apparently.”

“It’s been going on that long?”

I nodded. “So I’m told.”

“What happened?”

“He was ridiculed and dismissed as a crackpot. Presumably people still had all that fuss about crop circles fresh in their minds.”

“Hardly surprising if he was just one lone voice, but if others speak out – a whole load of you – someone would have to listen.”

“You reckon? Other growers *have* reported it. The most recent I know of was a couple of years ago and not far from here. Seaforth’s are a commercial producer, much bigger than us. They were taken seriously. Scientists with all sorts of gadgets descended on the place and staked it out for a week.”

“And?”

“Nothing. The bolters didn’t show. After a week or so of kicking their heels for no return, the experts packed up their equipment and left. Rumour has it they reckoned old man Seaforth was trying it on, angling for some sort of government subsidy.”

“So these things knew enough to avoid the place, then.”

“Doubt it. There’s no telling when the bolters will come and go. Last year they raided us three times in a week shortly before the picking season began and then left us alone for the best part of a month. When they do appear it always seems to be just after dawn but otherwise there’s no apparent pattern to it.”

Geoff was working himself into a real state – though whether through excitement, rage or simple after-shock was unclear. “For God’s sake, it doesn’t really matter about this Seaforth or what’s gone on before. You *can’t* justify not reporting this. It’s too important. First alien contact or inter-dimensional contact, whatever it is, people have a right to know.”

“Yes and no doubt they will, but not from me.”

“Oh come on, what were you in a previous life, an ostrich? You can’t just bury your head in the sand and hope this’ll go away. You can’t leave it for someone else to do the right thing simply because doing the right thing might be a bit difficult.”

“Watch me.”

“You have a duty...”

“Yes, I have a duty,” I interrupted, matching his growing indignation with my own. “To my son, to David; that’s where my duty lies.” I was almost shouting the final words

Wisely, he shut up.

I made a conscious effort to calm down. “Of course the world is going to learn about the bolters and doubtless uncover all their mysteries, but not until the world is *ready* to listen and it sure as hell isn’t now. I’m not about to get myself labelled as a scammer like old Seaforth or worse, a crack-pot. Can you imagine what that would do to David? You do remember what school was like, don’t you – how cruel kids can be when they get the chance?”

“Look, I can understand you feeling so protective towards the boy, especially after the way Susan...”

“This has nothing to do with Susan,” I snapped, on the verge of really losing it and determined not to stray onto that particular subject.

At which point David came running back to the truck, his arrival effectively ending the conversation and taking the heat out of things. He was still far too excited to pay any attention to the mood, or to notice that Uncle Geoff said not a word on the brief drive back to the house. I noticed though, and trusted that he had plenty to think about.

"I still don't agree with your decision to keep a lid on all of this, but I've decided to respect your wishes and keep my mouth shut about it for the moment," Geoff informed me as we shared a beer.

"Thank you." This hardly amounted to a solemn undertaking, but it was better than nothing.

It was Sunday. To everyone's amazement, not to mention relief, the two children had declared a temporary truce and found something to play on the computer which they could both enjoy. Rachel had gone upstairs to lie down for half an hour, complaining of a migraine. All of which left me with Geoff, in comparative privacy.

David and I had gone out again that morning. The bolters failed to show, which disappointed him and delighted me. There were plenty of other things that needed doing around the farm and we had little problem in filling a couple of hours with more mundane duties.

Geoff had said nothing further about yesterday's events until now and I was anxious to see where this conversation was going. Unexpectedly, he started to grin. "It's bizarre, don't you think?"

"What is?"

"First contact with aliens and it's not made by astronauts or scientists or even politicians, but by fruit farmers."

Suddenly we were both chuckling. "Score one for the little man!"

"I'll drink to that."

It was the closest I've ever felt to Geoff, that fleeting instant of camaraderie. Will he stand by his decision to stay quiet about the bolters, or will that resolve erode now that he's back in the City routine? Impossible to say; I guess only time will tell. Just give me until David has finished school and I might even start shouting about all this from the rooftops myself, but not while my son remains so vulnerable.

One thing that became clear over the course of the weekend was the growing distance between Rachel and me. Looking back, the burden of secrecy did make me unusually reticent and was certainly a contributing factor. It was nothing uncomfortable as such, but we spent the entire time politely skirting around each other like cordial strangers. Her obvious concerns over David only made matters worse. That was an issue I had resolved in my own mind a long time ago and I resented her worrying, even while understanding its cause. You see, I feel more than a little proud of my son and the way he has adjusted to life, particularly since his mother walked out on us. He has plenty of interests, willingly helps around the farm, keeps out of trouble for the most part, is socially popular and doing well academically. What more could any father ask for?

He is *not* a psychopath in-the-making, whatever his aunt may fear. He just happens to like shooting things – an attribute that's proved more than useful under present circumstances and something which I'm convinced will not cause long term harm.

Perhaps I should have been more understanding. I think Rachel genuinely arrived wanting to get to know her only nephew a little better, but she never has been the most maternal of women, and raising Jude seems to have given her little insight into how to connect with an adolescent boy; at least, not this particular adolescent boy. She tried, but her best efforts tended to come across as patronising.

She had one final go in the build-up to saying goodbye, while Geoff and I were loading the car. I came in partway through what was clearly a "what do you want to be when you grow up?" conversation.

"I bet I know what you're going to be," she said, smiling and mussing his hair in the way he particularly hates, "a soldier!"

"Nah," my beautiful son replied, giving her a huge, toothy grin, "I want to be a fruit farmer, just like my dad."

"Really?" It must have been the last thing she expected to hear.

"Sure. You get to kill more things that way."



reviewed by richard whittaker



Written and directed by Shane Acker, written by Shane Acker and Pamela Pettler

Starring: Elijah Wood, Christopher Plummer, Martin Landau, John C. Reilly, Jennifer Connelly, Crispin Glover, Fred Tatasciore, Tom Kane

Four years ago, Shane Acker created an 11-minute CGI short feature called 9. It was a simple tale of a little burlap-covered automaton with the number 9 painted on its back. This voiceless little make-shift warrior, the last of a tribe, was all alone in a ruined landscape. He was setting a trap for a sinister beast: A strange predatory robot with rusty iron for ribs and a cat's skull for a head that had slain all his brethren. It was tiny, elegant, heart-rending, and missed out on an Oscar in 2006 to the poe-faced *The Moon and the Son: An Imagined Conversation*, which goes right up there with *Shakespeare in Love* beating *Saving Private Ryan* on the list of "Bad mistakes the Academy has committed" (Stupid, stupid Oscars). However, Hollywood has been given an opportunity to make amends by paying for a big-budget, feature length adaptation. Thanks to the tender interventions of executive producer Tim Burton, Acker was left at the helm to enhance the scale and the depth of the story.

In his original short, the little numbered and silent automata were indistinguishable save for the number painted on their back: Here, they are given separate personalities and voices. Wood plays the titular 9, the valiant but innocent adventurer first discovered by the explorer 2 (Landau) and taken to meet the rest of the survivors, all of whom represent some archetype: The leader 1 (Plummer), the voiceless twins 3 and 4, the friend 5 (John C. Reilly), the fool 6 (Glover), the huntress 7 (Connelly) and the enforcer 8 (Tatasciore). However, they are far from alone: Out in the ruins, there is something unspeakable and mechanical, but not like them. An amalgam of bone and gears and oil and canvas that has the pretence of being alive, but does not have the soul of these rag doll men. This is the Fabrication Machine, and it is the sack creatures' task to come together and unravel the mystery of their own origin, the birth of the beast, and how they can save what is left of the scorched ruins they call home.

Acker's battle-ravaged Earth is shot throughout from a ragdoll's POV, six inches off the ground, but still has an epic scale that makes it clear that's it's not just a small pocket of destruction. Set after a conflict between man and machines in which no-one won, its mid-1930s design ethos suggests that World War II took a bad turn before it even started, so all that remains are the tiny clockwork hearts of 9 and his comrades. Sumptuous and dismal as the film is, it's really the characters that remain the basis of the tale. It could have been just as strong if, like the original short, they had remained silent, but the A-list voice talent is still a boon. That's particularly true for Landau and Reilly, whose lyrical tones match the strangely tender humanity that Acker's unique character design – all hunched shoulders and pear-bottomed slump – gives to the tin-and-cloth men. It's that humanity that raises the stakes as they are pursued and dismembered by the great machine's hideous and cannibalized constructs, and that may be the greatest measure of Acker's success.

Not only has the film won a cast that would make Paul Thomas Anderson swoon, but it has done so without sacrificing the clarity of the original short. What Acker has done is to expand the story, but to leave it with the same sense of wonderment and otherness. This has annoyed some critics and viewers, who have whined and complained that he should have explained his cosmology more, and to those people I say, *The Matrix Reloaded*.

Instead, Acker's choice is to have the innocent sacks surrounded by hints of a world they

don't understand, one with hints of the politics of the military-industrial complex, *War of the Worlds* and thaumaturgy: In that way, it is a classical fairy tale, where the viewer can gain pleasure without comprehending the allegory. It is also not an anti-technology screed: Instead, it's almost a battle of sci-fi tropes. The little stitchpunks (yes, welcome to a new genre) are really the charming and literal embodiment of steampunk, all hand-made and hand-polished brass, given heart and soul by artisan graft. The Fabrication Machine is pure cyberpunk, a mix of industrial and post-industrial, a scavenger beast with all the charm of the baby-faced machine swarm at the end of *The Matrix Revolutions*.

In fact, the whole film is the anti-*Matrix*: While that franchise's biggest flaw (Keanu Reeves aside) was its ponderous, over-bearing and over-long pseudo-philosophical pomposity, 9 is all heart. Again, this has disappointed some critics who seem to have wanted something more or other, but that's like criticizing *America's Next Top Model* for being about models instead of discussing oil prices, and should be separated from the discussion of how it executes what it does. On that level, it's hard to find any fault with what Acker has created, which is a pitch-perfect transfer of his original short. Three cheers for artistic vision.

Cirque du Freak - The Vampire's Assistant

reviewed by richard whittaker



Directed by Paul Weitz, written by Paul Weitz and Brian Koppelman
Starring: John C. Reilly, Chris Massoglia, Josh Hutcherson, Jessica
Carlson, Michael Cerveris, Ray Stevenson, Patrick Fugit, Ken Watanabe,
Selma Hayek, Willem Dafoe

There are three cool ways to run away from home. One, become a vampire. Two, join a band. Three, join a freak show. Stephanie Meyer kinda ruined (1) with that *Twilight* malarkey, and the cost of recording time means most people trying (2) should probably stay home and let their parents' cash feed them for a while. So that just leaves (3), and there aren't too many touring attractions of the bizarre left - Which makes them even cooler. *The Vampire's Assistant* actually combines (1) and (3) by having a teenager run away to be a travelling blood-sucker in a freak show. Plus his roommate, the lizard boy, plays the guitar. So really it's a threefer.

Based on elements of the opening four books in the twelve-volume *Saga of Darren Shan* by Irish author Darren Shan, *The Vampire's Assistant* may seem like standard contemporary tweencentric vampire tosh. There's little extraordinary about the background: On one side, there are vampires, who suck just enough scarlet to keep going and then their lightly mind-wiped prey go. On the other, the vampaneze, who regard humans as nothing more than tasty, tasty sacks of blood. In the middle of their philosophical disagreement stands Darren Shan (Massoglia), who had the misfortune to get caught up in the brewing battle when he catches the attention of the mysterious Mr. Tiny. The inaccurately-named, nay blimp-like Tiny is trying to kick-start the conflict between bloodsuckers, and thinks Shan will play some pivotal role. Begrudgingly, it's up to Larten Crepsley (Reilly), one of the last of the vampires, to take him in and protect him from Tiny's machinations. Crepsley's deal for Shan is a hard bargain: Fake his death, become a half-vampire, and join him on the road as part of the Cirque du Freak. Unfortunately, Shan's best friend Steve (Hutcherson) is convinced that he should have been the one cackling about the children of the night, and the beautifulness of their music. So he throws his lot in with the vampaneze. There will be blood, but this is a 12A movie, so not too much.

So far, so 'meh.' But from the opening shot of Shan in his coffin, playing with his PSP while his family and friends mourn his demise six feet above, there's more wit and verve here than might be expected. No sparkly vampires and dismal CGI werewolves here: Instead, there's a dash of the mordant humor and

bouncing verve that made *Dead Like Me* such a delight. So as fantasy franchise adaptations go, will this be the next *Harry Potter*, or the next *The Spiderwick Chronicles*? Tonally, it's probably the next *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, but it may be lucky enough to avoid that movie's descent into cult oddity status. And while it may not have Jim Carrey's *manic tour de force* performance, it undoubtedly has a few aces up its velvet sleeve.

Firstly, this performance is a side of John C. Reilly that, like *Chicago's* singing, is yet another revelation from the Oscar-nominated oddball. Crepsley looks like someone who would live on an all-blood diet – pudgy and well-fed – but Reilly gives him a dry humor that indicates a certain been-there, out-lived that depth to the character, as well as a menacing bulk. He's also the source of much of the film's dry humor, dealing with Shan's sense of wonder like a bored chemistry teacher explaining anaerobic combustion to easily pleased students. Film geeks will also get all twitchy about a cameo by Willem DaFoe as Gavner Purl, Crepsley's flighty confidante and fellow warrior in the brewing conflagration between vampire and vampeneze (Throw in some all-too-short appearances by Ken Watanabe as the ringmaster Mr Tall, Patrick *Almost Famous* Fugit as Evra the Snake Boy, and Salma Hayek (sporting even more facial hair than she did in *Frida*) as the circus mystic/bearded lady Madame Truska, to round out the freak show ensemble and the film-cred cast.) But where the film may gain most traction in the teen audience is the interplay between Massoglia and Hutcherson. The studio patently hopes they have the faces that will sell a thousand teen-girl-wall-covering posters but, more importantly, they can both act. Massoglia gets to play the kid that gets to run away to join the eternal circus, but still keeps a hint of the loss of home and hearth. Hutcherson gets all the fun: Now officially a genre veteran (*Zathura*, *Bridge to Terabithia*, *Journey to the Center of the Earth*), he plays the spurned Steve as a venal little rat, cunning enough to get himself into trouble and smart enough to side with the wrong people.

So how loyal is it to the books? Director Weitz will probably get as much flack for his fast-and-loose, more darkly comedic adaptation as his brother Chris did when he took all the atheism out of *The Golden Compass*. The only real difference between them is that Shan's books are primarily read by young teens, and so a chunk of the barbs flung his way will come in all caps. The film's biggest problem could be that, like Steve with blood, its eyes are bigger than its stomach when it comes to consuming the plot. Shan loyalists will probably condemn the conflation of characters and events, while non-readers will probably wish that the movie could settle down a little more, especially since the cirque itself seems a little underexplored. However if, as is the current plan, this becomes a four-film franchise then there will be more time for a broader explanation of the world: And there's always a strong argument for leaving a little to the imagination (seriously, does anyone need to see another round of Quidditch in their lives?) Ultimately, as a work in its own right, *The Vampire's Assistant* is head and shoulders above most of the vampire soap opera baloney on offer at the moment. Not least because it maintains a gothic sensibility and lurid charm that gives it (pardon the pun) a little more to bite into.

2010: The Year We Make Contact

reviewed by martin willoughby

Director: Peter Hyams

Starring: Roy Scheider, Helen Mirren, John Lithgow, Bob Balaban

Released in 1984, this is a film of its time. It assumes that the Soviet Union is still in one piece and that they and the US are still at loggerheads. That fact aside, the story itself is still futuristic, science based and the spaceships themselves do not look dated.

We come across HAL and the Discovery again, as well as Keir Dullea reprising his role as David Bowman. For those among the audience that missed seeing 2001, there is a short reminder of what happened before in the form of a mission report as the beginning. This report sets the tone for the film itself and neatly segues between the two.



The story of 2010 starts with Roy Scheider teaching at a university and being approached by a Soviet scientist who reminds him of the mission, the current state of Discovery and tells him to go and check its orbit. When he does so, he finds that the orbit is decaying faster than expected and the ship will crash into Io before a planned American mission can get there.

By coincidence the Soviets have a ship almost ready to launch, but don't have the people that can access the Discovery or restart HAL. So a joint mission is launched on the Soviet ship, with three American crew: Scheider himself, the engineer who helped build Discovery (John Lithgow) and the designer of HAL (Bob Balaban), who has since built a

new talking computer called SAL.

These opening scenes are slow, but not ponderous. They are also fairly tense. This tension is built not with dramatic or haunting music, but with silence. To modern viewers this may seem dull, but once we get into space, the story speeds up. The opening shots are also about the people, mainly Roy Scheider, and what they are thinking, and this is the strength of the film. Films that rely on special effects to weave their magic will fade over time and, if not forgotten, will certainly drop down the list of all-time favourites. This is unlikely to happen with 2010, given its emphasis.

Once in space we get to the meat of the story. They discover photosynthesis on Europa and send down a probe to investigate. The probe and all the telemetry from it are destroyed, leaving a lot of unanswered questions for the crew. By the time this occurs, the situation back on earth has worsened and the US and Soviet Union are almost at war, so there are some tense moments between the Soviet captain (Helen Mirren) and Roy Scheider.

After air-braking around Jupiter, a heart-stopping moment of the film, they arrive in orbit around Io and find the Discovery. John Lithgow and one of the Soviets drift across to it, then enter the ship. As an aside it is worth mentioning that Lithgow gives a thoroughly convincing performance of fear as he drifts over to the Discovery. It is worth mentioning that up to this point, when there are space sequences there is no noise, or at least very little. The only sounds are some high pitched alien-like noises similar to those in 2001.

When aboard, they discover the reason for HAL's erratic behaviour and malfunction. I'll let you watch the film to find out what it is, but it is believable. It is also an aside as the main story takes centre stage: the huge monolith that is orbiting Io. Despite Roy Scheider's objections, a manned probe is sent down to look at it, which, naturally, ends up being destroyed. At this point the tensions on Earth reach breaking point and the two crew are told to stay on their own ships. What happens on Jupiter, and the sudden disappearance of the monolith, forces the two crew to work together to get away.

I'm not going to spoil the rest of it by telling you much more about the ending. The only thing I will add, is that there are two endings. One that most SF buffs will appreciate, and one that Hollywood will love. When you watch the endings, you'll know what I mean.

The film walks a tightrope between the standards of 2001 and the needs of Hollywood and does so successfully. The tension is not artificially ramped up with music, but is brought about by some superb directing and acting. It probably helps that the cast is not stuffed with A-list stars, but great actors.

2010 is a film worth revisiting and the DVD is also cheap to buy (less than £3 at Amazon). It is also available on Blu-Ray for those of you daft enough to stay up to date with technology.

As a minor aside, remember Zooey Deschanel from 'Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy'? Her mother is in 2010. See if you can spot her.

FEATURES

Interview: Claudio Sanchez

with richard whittaker

Any SF genre fan that has thumbed through the discount bin at their local record store knows that there has long been a connection between science fiction, fantasy, and hard rock. Occasionally, the odd band has tried to go beyond the odd oblique lyrical reference and some cover art, forging something deeper. The grand daddies of that movement were undoubtedly the oddball collaborations between stoner kings Hawkwind and iconic author Michael Moorcock: In recent years, Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails turned the publicity push for his Year Zero concept into an alternative reality game, and rumors of a TV series continue. But no-one has reached the narrative scale of Claudio Sanchez, the vocalist, guitarist and lyricist for Coheed and Cambria.

The prog revivalists New Jersey are on the verge of completing their five album story cycle (plus a side-project/narrative side bar, *The Prize Fighter Inferno*). It's a sprawling science fiction epic of love, betrayal, plague-bearing dragon flies, interstellar religious cults, space faring racists and street gangs. Like the saying goes, every song tells a story, but for Sanchez, they are individual scenes in a grand narrative, following two generations in the Kilgannon family as they get caught up in a bloody interstellar crusade. It's a rich, dark story, laced with autobiographical references from Sanchez that become overt in a Philip K. Dick, fourth-wall busting way around album three (*The catchily titled Good Apollo I'm Burning Star IV, Volume 1: From Fear Through the Eyes of Madness*) when the last surviving Kilgannon, Claudio, decides to take matters into his own hands by hunting down god to ask him why he and his family have been singled out for such terrible treatment. In this case, god is the writer of his fate – literally. He's using his creations as wish-fulfillment – and he's also called Claudio.

The blurring of the line between autobiography and epic space opera has triggered endless Internet debate about the meaning of the songs, and exactly what it happening in the story. Now the band is recording the fifth album, the prequel to the series, and Sanchez has been overseeing the adaptation of the story into comic form under the banner *The Amory Wars*. In addition, Sanchez has just released a new non-Coheed comic, *Kill Audio*, along with a vinyl art figure of himself as the blood-soaked title character. On a brief break from the studio, Sanchez took the time to talk about the role of narrative in his albums, and his recent jump into the graphic medium.

Hub Magazine: *With the recent Neverender tour, you went back and revisited your back catalog in a way that no other band has really ever done, doing four-night residencies and performing everything you ever recorded, in order. How has that experience affected the band?*

Claudio Sanchez: It was definitely a bit difficult at first. The task was a bit daunting, going in relearn all this material. But it turned out to be really fun, and it was nice to revisit some songs we haven't played in very long. It made us realize that these are songs that we want to play as a band. With the last couple of shows, we've been incorporating a few of them. Sometimes, when you play a festival date, there are those immediate go-to's that people want to hear, but at the same time there are those that want to hear the deep cuts. It's easier to pick now, whereas before it was, 'God, it's going to be difficult to relearn the material.' Now we all know it. It's refreshing, really.

HM: *Some tracks, like The Final Cut, have always changed a lot from night to night. Has Neverender changed the way you play them?*

CS: Final Cut always evolved as a song, and when we wrote it the idea was to hopefully allow it to grow in a live setting. So we didn't go too far in the recording so, that way, when we did play it live, it would become a special event. But most of the stuff, I think energy-wise, being able to play "Al the Killer" or "Heartshot Kid

Disaster”, there’s a really young energy. Not to say that we’re old, but we’re coming from such a different place, and it reminded us of that place. When we play them, we really feel them. I know for me personally, playing a song like “Al the Killer”, one that we haven’t played in a while, I’m always excited to play it.

HM: *Performing Neverender also meant you were doing the story all in one go. Being confronted with not just the science fiction narrative, but your life over that time, how was that experience?*

CS: Revisiting the material, I certainly knew where these songs were coming from, from a personal place where, in the light, they are very much riddled with this science fiction concept. Bringing them back up was certainly about revisiting times in my life and memories, and times as a band when we were recording. It was certainly emotional, but at the same very fun, because it brought me to where I am now. It’s also inspired what we’re working on now. I think it was perfect for us to go and revisit this massive work with the intent that this stuff is certainly going to influence what happens next - next being the origin tale, the beginning of the concept. So that worked out perfectly, timing-wise.

HM: *Did that remind you of narrative themes you needed to finish up?*

CS: That happens a lot, and not even in Neverender, but just playing, as shows go by and as you’re thinking about them and playing. Certainly for Neverender, as we were developing the light show and the visuals that we were going to incorporate within the nights, a lot of that stuff, even if it isn’t literally from the book, we tried to take stuff that resembled what was happening at that moment in time in the story and put it up there. For example, on “33,” which involves the character of Patrick driving away from one of the Onstantine priests, we tried to put a car chase scene or some visual that resembled a car in panic. Certainly when going through that with Pete Stahl, who was doing production, and Blaze, our manager, I definitely started remembering things and making sure there was closure within the story, at least in terms of what we had already done. Just making sure all those end are tight.

HM: *In the early days, the story was left very ambiguous: You even deliberately started out of order, at album two. Were you surprised that people got so into the mythology?*

CS: Definitely. For me, as a lover of music, I had always wanted more. I would hear a song and always wonder what the story was behind it. It seemed much bigger than just a rock band. Then you have [Pink Floyd’s] The Wall, where it started to spill over into cinema. I don’t know if that’s for everybody, but I knew that’s what I wanted to do. To see that it’s been embraced by this audience, it’s just awesome. I don’t know how else to put it. I’m just very fortunate that it’s been received so well, and being that some of this material comes from a very personal place, I just thought it would be nice to share where these songs really originated, how the concept came to be. That’s why we had the documentary on the Neverender DVD release.

HM: *There’s the core Coheed continuity, and then there’s your work as The Prizefighter Inferno. How exactly does that side project album, “My Brother’s Blood Machine”, fit into the bigger story?*

CS: Prizefighter, in terms of the story, is really a prequel before the prequel. When I first conceived the story, the only character that was linked to the Amory Wars was Inferno, who gets resurrected. Before he can tell the story of the Amory Wars, he has to tell the story of the Blood Machine, and that’s what links the stories together.

HM: *Now you’ve started translating all this into comics. How did you make the move between media?*

Claudio Sanchez: I’ve always loved comics and wanted to do something in comics. Originally, I wanted to be an illustrator, but it just turned out that sequential art just wasn’t my thing. But I’ve always loved telling stories, and even before Coheed and Cambria a lot of the songs were taken from personal experience and embellished on until they almost became fiction. Being able to bring that to comics as a writer opens new doors for me as a lyricist and a songwriter. It helps, working in one medium and then being able to inject into the other.

HM: Prior to this, your storytelling has been based around the *Amory Wars* concept, which all springs from your band's work. With your new comic, *Kill Audio*, this the first time you've stepped outside of both the *Coheed and Cambria* continuity and the recording studio.

CS: Music certainly plays a role in *Kill Audio*, but it's not directly involved with *Coheed and Cambria*. There are certainly things within the imagery that fans may catch, but they're very small and you really have to look into the panels to see them.

HM: So how did you hook up with (*Kill Audio* artist) Sheldon Vella?

CS: That was [editor] Joe Keatinge at Image Comics. For a while, we were looking for an artist after the first volume (of *The Amory Wars*) was finished, we weren't sure who was going to complete the second volume, and before we found Gabriel Guzman, one of the suggestions was Sheldon. I loved his work, but for *The Amory Wars* and for continuity, his style was a bit too stylized. I thought the contrast would a little awkward for the people that had invested in the first volume, because we wanted to find someone who could take what was happening in the first volume and give it new life. At first Sheldon did a coloring job for us on the graphic novel cover, but I always thought there was something we could do. So when my fiancée and I were working on the *Kill Audio* doll, I was looking at it and realized that there was a story behind it, not just a likeness or caricature of myself. So I started working on the concept and when it clicked it was obvious that Sheldon was perfect for it, and it just spiraled from there.

HM: So what's next for *Coheed and Cambria*?

CS: We've been working on a new record. I'm in LA now, mixing the first half of it, and maybe November we'll complete it. We'll end the year working on this record, and it's coming along really well. I can't give away too much, but I'm working on a couple of other projects that coincide with it, that I think are really going to help the concept. [*Coheed's* first album] "Second Stage Turbine Blade" can be really confusing, because there are some really important parts of the concept that are missing from there. So I think, when this happens, it's going to be bring some light to the subject, and make some things make some sense.

The Amory Wars Vol. 1 is available now from Image Comics, and *Vol. 2* is scheduled for release Dec. 23. *Kill Audio #1* is now available from Boom! Studios. Parts of this interview have previously appeared in the *Austin Chronicle*.



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