

# Hub Magazine

SCIENCE FICTION HORROR FANTASY

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## EDITORIAL:

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by **alasdair stuart**

If hell is other people, what's heaven? Back when I was in University, and Channel 4 hadn't given up on all but two demographics, they ran a show called Vids that, appropriately, reviewed movies. I suspect now it'd be called DeeevDs. I'd watch DeeevDs.

Anyway, Vids got something of a cult following which led to one of the final episodes involving the hosts, Nige and Steph, being killed and getting a preview of their afterlives. Steph's was crammed full of mid-80s hairfarm rock women whilst Nigel's, well, Nigel's can only be described in his own words:

'Biscuits! THOUSANDS AND THOUSANDS OF BISCUITS!'

You can't argue with the concept of a biscuity Valhalla, or the underlying idea that heaven is whatever we want, whatever we need it to be. It's this concept that lies at the heart of Mur Lafferty's superb Heaven podcast series, which we begin looking at in depth this week. We've also got a couple of reviews and a superb story by Marshall Payne.

Hub. It's not heaven, but we do have the biscuits on order. See you next week.

Alasdair

# FICTION

## Pandering Dwarves

by marshall payne

Once upon a time there was a little sidepocket universe consisting only of midgets who had been harvested from the Golden Age of Hollywood. No, that wasn't entirely true as there was Barney Banks, their oversized manager. He too had been plucked and placed into this microcosm. As had Tom Tum.

"So what's the job?" Tom asked in his high-pitched yet husky voice. Sitting in Banks' office, his feet barely scraped the floor from his position in his impresario's tall wooden chair.

Barney Banks puffed on his fat cigar before feigning a shrug. "A future couple wants to do a wife-swap thing. I'll need both you and Little Betty, of course. They specifically requested you two." Banks was a huge man, even for a giant. The word "giant" meaning anyone above five feet in this sidepocket. Still, he fit the stereotypical image of the old-school impresario to a tee: a rotund, balding man with fat fingers that could effortlessly intimidate with a jab.

"What exact year are we talking about?" Tom had to ask. There had been talk.

Banks tried to keep the dissemblance on his face, motioned with his cigar as a stall tactic, but finally admitted: "2305," giving Tom a level gaze.

Tom became livid. That was smack-dab in the Red Zone. The years 2301-2309 were the focal point of how Tom's world had come into existence, when a generation of degenerate time manipulators had used their new technology to act out their desperate fantasies. For the past two years, their participation in Tom's microcosm had been proscribed, which was why Tom was so red in the face now. He and his castmates thought they had a contract, and now he was pissed.

"Well, I for one am *not* going back! And I'm offended that you'd think I'd even consider taking my precious Little Betty there," he said, then let out a series of tiny huffs.

Banks removed his cigar to counter, but Tom cut him off: "We have a contract. *No Red Zone!*"

Banks gave another of his classic shrugs. "I know, Tom. I know. But things have been rough here on my end. Listen, do this one job for me and I'll stick you back in the twenty-fifth century. Society banquets, or maybe even a neo-church group, letting them know the wrong done you by the Temporal Creation Act of 2295."

But Tom stood firm. "No, we're *not* going. Some of the things those people wanna do..." He shuddered.

All this quickly escalated into an argument where Barney Banks extended his huge index finger, threatening to poke Tom in his tiny chest with it. Phantom pangs from it were already resurfacing in his mind. The finger had grit.

"Now listen to me, you fucking little dwarf!" Banks bellowed. "You need me more than I need you. Do I have to remind you what that means?"

"*What?* That you'll reverse the harvesting procedure?" Tom ventured, trying to feign insouciance. "Send me to oblivion?" Banks was always threatening such. But when Banks only glared at Tom, an epiphany sideswiped him. Certain events of late made sense now. Bonnie Fey, Gnomy Green's wife, recently missing. And all his castmates still wondered what had happened to lovely Tremblina, who had a habit of "calling in sick."

"Try me," Banks said. "If I were still a 'real' Hollywood manager, I'd drop you quicker than you could say Rumpelstiltskin. You never could act. The only work you ever got was as an extra in a handful of all-midget Westerns." He chuckled.

That was more or less true. Tom Tum's only acclaim to minuscule fame was attributed to his short stature

when the casting call went out. Though acting was his chosen profession, he wasn't very good at it. Unlike Little Betty, who sang like an angel, he'd been cut from *The Wizard of Oz*. He couldn't carry a tune in a purple pail.

Wearily, he stood, but couldn't resist one last demand. "Don't call me a dwarf!" he exclaimed. "Okay, Little Betty and me will do your damned job."

Without bothering to finalize the details, Tom left the office and went to tell Little Betty.

Barney Banks calling Tom a dwarf didn't annoy Tom all that much. He knew the man was purposely goading him, skillfully playing his game of intimidation. If there was one thing the denizen's of Tom's world maintained was that they were *not* dwarves. They were midgets, although many of them preferred the term "little people."

Leaving the one-block downtown district, Tom made his way to the residential borough. After a short walk, he found himself trudging down Lilliputian Avenue, still reeling with trepidation and concern of how he'd tell Little Betty.

"Hello, Tom," a voice called. Halting, he turned to see Doc Rivera standing on his front porch. All the homes in Munchkinland had a gingerbread quality about them, Doc's a burnt orange with lavender trim.

If anyone could help Tom, it would be trusty Doc. He made his way to the porch and explained his meeting with their manager. "Is refusal to cater to Banks' demands why Bonnie Fey and Tremblina are no longer among us?" he asked.

Doc Rivera, a grizzled midget of four foot one, spread his hands in understanding. "That very well could be, Tom," he said, benevolence in his ancient eyes. He puffed on his meerschaum pipe, darkened from years of use. "What have you decided to do?"

"Do? I really don't have any choice, now do I? That despicable giant pulls all the strings. He always has. If we don't play it his way then..." Though his own nonexistence wasn't such a horrible notion, he had Little Betty to consider.

Doc gave him an avuncular wink. "Times they are a-changing, Tom. Now I can't advise you on what's best for you, but know this: You have friends here. Good friends." He raised his arms to take in the small expanse of Munchkinland, though a couple of blocks over reality was a fuzzy thing indeed. "Trust, Tom. Have a little faith."

But before Tom could asked, "Have faith in *what*? Trust in *whom*?" the elderly midget said he had things that demanded his immediate attention. Supposedly he was the proud owner of a muse, though no one knew precisely what that muse was. Soon Tom found himself trudging toward his own home on Humble Helpings Lane, anxiety waxing with his every step.

If Tom Tum was anything, he was a conservative midget. Since they'd all been sequestered in this temporal-modified domain, the values that most of them had shared in 1930s America had been thrown out like dungy dishwater. For everyone but Tom, that is. True, he sometimes engaged in the occasional extramarital activity with a female castmate, but his heart was never really in it as his heart belonged to Little Betty. He wished he could say the same for his beloved. So it came as no surprise that when he arrived home he found her in bed with Dan the Dirty Little Man. For such a little guy, he certainly had an enormous...

"We need to talk!" he told her, then slammed the bedroom door so they could either finish or get dressed.

"What's wrong, Tom?" Little Betty asked after Dan had zipped up and slipped out the back way.

"Red Zone!" he said. "Barney Banks is sending us back to the Red Zone."

Now that didn't even bring a frown to Little Betty's Shirley Temple face. But she'd always been a fine actress and a woman of aplomb. "We survived it before, we'll survive it again. Still, Tom, I thought we had a contract."

"I thought we did too," he said with a huff.

Apparently seeing how distraught Tom was, she took his small hand in hers and nudged him toward the bedroom. Never one for anyone's seconds, he wanted to decline, but needed her comfort. Unfortunately

many midgets in Munchkinland sought solace with his beloved as well. With her buxom chest and shapely pins, Little Betty was a hot little number. Because Tom was almost as misshapen as a dwarf, he was always baffled as to why she had chosen him.

The Red Zone.

Long before that ignominious decade, gene splicers had eradicated the pedophilia gene so such atrocities robbing children of their innocence were pretty much a dark chapter in humanity's past. It still happened, of course, but it wasn't an epidemic like it had become in the 21st century. But near the end of the 23th century a recessive mutant gene sprang up in a small but virile cross-section of an entire generation. But these adults--not only men but women as well--had no interest in youth. For some bizarre reason they craved midgets! The problem for them was that gene splicers had eradicated dwarfism as well.

But the newly created field of temporal retrieval entertainment supplied the answer for these deviants. It wasn't like anyone could actually travel backward in time, temporal paradox nixing that. But people from the past could be transported to the modern era. Fortunately there were governors to the technology so the future wouldn't find itself replete with denizens from the past. Once being brought forward, they could only exist for a short span of hours before fading back to...well, nothingness, as they weren't really that same person from the past but a sampled version of the original. But it became awkward having to constantly reinvent the wheel. Hence, that was how Tom Tum's sidepocket universe came into being. Just a little icon on someone's desktop when they were in a "playful" mood.

Now Little Betty may have been promiscuous, but that didn't mean Tom didn't love her desperately. Though it disturbed him, he couldn't really fault her for her lascivious activities. Or any of his fellow "Munchkins." With what they'd all been put through in the Red Zone, he was surprised that he wasn't a bed-hopping fool himself. Besides, sex among their own kind was rather like keeping it in the family, was it not? Despite her licentious behavior, deep down he knew that his beloved loved him most of all, and that was no small thing.

So it was with that notion, and fear of the unknown, that Tom led Little Betty, hand in tiny hand, to the community center where the temporal displacement facility was housed. But this time there were more than just Barney Banks to send them off.

"What are all of you doing here?" Banks demanded of the rabble, 139 midgets strong.

"We came to see Tom and Little Betty off," replied Ronald the Petite Pirate, sporting his colorful garb and eyepatch.

"We know you're sending them to the Red Zone," said Tiny Texas from various low-budget midget Westerns from the Golden Age.

The group turned to regard Gnomy Green who had recently lost his cherished Bonnie Fey. Tears filled the gnome's eyes. The Lollipop Kids weren't in attendance, of course, having been prime candidates for the future-folk and casualties of the Red Zone.

"We had a contract!" cried Tom Tum.

Puffing on his cigar, Barney Banks eyed him balefully. "You have what I say you have. Or would you rather be unharvested?" A euphemism for nonexistence.

Tom glanced around to find Doc Rivera, hoping he could offer guidance, but the elderly midget was nowhere to be found. Probably off dealing with his muse, or smoking his damned pipe.

"Why must we do the Red Zone again?" cried Tiny Tessa. If there ever were an epitome of innocence, she was it. Though nowadays she was as promiscuous as Tom's precious Little Betty.

"Because I said so!" the impresario insisted. He turned to Tom and his wife. "Are you ready? Or do you choose the alternative?" He let out a chuckle.

Not wishing oblivion, the couple stepped onto the platform and Banks set the controls for the Red Zone. One hundred and thirty-nine hands waved goodbye, concern in their bright eyes. As the temporal field engulfed Tom, fear swaddling him like a skin-tight tutu, that customary feeling of giddiness overwhelmed him.

"Don't worry, everything will be fine," the woman assured them. "My name is Merada, and this is my husband Carlisle. My, you two are quite the pair. Just like in the iconographs...is that the correct word? No, 'photos,' I mean. Carls, pour our diminutive guests a drink."

Carlisle motioned the two midgets to step further into the spacious room they'd just materialized into. Tom Tum looked up at the cavernous ceiling of the home of the two giant future-folk. Probably not all that spacious to its owners, but to Tom and Little Betty it was a magnificent room.

"What would you like?" Carlisle asked in overly precise English. "Fruit punch? Soda pop? Milk?" He was dressed in a crisp black suit, his facial features perfect lines and planes.

Tom Tum sighed. This was a common misconception in the Red Zone, where they were assumed to be surrogate children. "Do you have any bourbon?" Tom asked, staring up at the tall, tall man. Two worlds away he'd acquired a liking for bourbon when Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. had once offered him one on the set of *The Prisoner of Zenda* where Tom had been auditioning. He didn't get the part.

Since the Red Zone had been proscribed two years hence, the denizens of Munchkinland had been summoned strictly to a gentler future where Tom and his castmates were more of a novelty than anything. True, he often fornicated with these kinder strangers, but it was more or less consensual. On his last trip to the year 2402, he'd flown solo to be the companion of an elderly matron at one of her society affairs. A pleasant evening overall, though the taste of the old woman's vulva after the dinner function still tanged in his mind. But the Red Zone...

Once Tom Tum, Muscular Marty, Minutiae Floyd and Darren T. had been whisked into the future on assignment, appearing in a mud-wrestling ring for the entertainment of their raucous patrons. After wallowing around for the better part of an hour, bloodying the mudpit, they were swept off to be buggered by these crazed Red Zone perverts, all men of course. One of these sickos fancied the noose, and Minutiae Floyd had been the unfortunate one to draw that man's fancy and never made it back to Munchkinland. Now, all Tom and Little Betty had to do was last the five or six hours it would take before their patterns began to fade and they'd be home safe. And looking at this couple, rather quaint they seemed for the Red Zone, he had hope.

It wasn't until they were seated at the dinner table that Tom noticed Merada's facial ticks. She was an attractive enough woman, for a giant. Her dark, stylish hair graced her exquisitely shaped ears, and her patrician nose was the quintessence of perfection. Her maroon gown was cut low, revealing a finely hewn clavicle and elegant shoulder blades. Tom might have found her fetching, except he only had eyes for Little Betty. Still, there were the unnerving facial ticks when she spoke.

"We've provided a favored delicacy from your era," she said. "Hot dogs and potato chips." Sitting to Tom's right, she prepared a plate and set it before him. Again, the misconception that midgets were mere children. Moreover, Tom hated hot dogs, preferring filet mignon back in the Golden Age when work was steady and he could afford it.

"And here is yours, Little Betty," Carlisle said, laying a plate down in front of her.

"Won't you be joining us?" Little Betty squeaked, motioning to the empty placemats in front of the two giants.

"Merada and I are on dietary restriction," Carlisle said. "But please, you two enjoy yourself."

Eat slowly, my beloved, Tom thought. Perhaps they could stretch this meal out until they faded back to Munchkinland, though he knew that would never be the case. As Little Betty sat across from him, he admired his beloved. The way she daintily ate, nibbling on her hot dog with her fine little teeth. At that moment he'd never been more in love with her and he doubted if any man, be he midget or giant, could love a woman more. His passion for her was--

Merada slapped Tom's hand. Face ticking, she said, "Don't look at her. Look at *me*." She offered a disingenuous smile, revealing ultra-white teeth too big for even her large head.

"Yes, ma'am," he forced himself to say, knowing how the game was played.

But after Tom's third hot dog, all of them eaten at a glacial pace, Merada said, "I think you've had enough." Tom had to agree. He was sick of hot dogs and the way the woman stared at him through the entire meal was unnerving. "Time for dessert," she said.

"Shall we adjourn to the den," Carlisle suggested, though it was neither a suggestion nor a question.

Merada took Tom's hand in her larger one, as did Carlisle with Little Betty, and they were led into the sunken den. Two small couches, loveseats actually, were set facing one another and each mismatched couple took respective seating. Tom tried not to think what was in store for them now, but "dessert" seemed to be just that.

"Now we shall join you," Merada said, sitting next to him. From an end table she took a plate with a large orange on it, and with a fillet knife she began peeling the fruit. Carlisle had a similar plate and knife on his end table, his containing a single pear, however. Funny, Tom presumed they'd be served ice cream.

Merada whacked Tom's hand with the flat end of the knife. "Don't look at them, look at *me*," she said. But this time Tom didn't reply with "Yes, ma'am," he merely nodded, albeit grudgingly.

Another thing Merada had were big thumbs, which she used dexterously as she peeled the orange with the knife then cut it into perfect slices. "Open up," she told him, holding a slice before his mouth. He did and found the orange bitter though not unpleasant.

Across the room, Carlisle said, "Little Betty, you were in *The Wizard of Oz*, is that not correct?"

"I was," said Little Betty around a slice of pear. "I was in the chorus that sang 'Ding Dong! The Witch is Dead.' Would you like me to sing it for you?"

"No, that won't be necessary."

"And you are the illustrious General Tom Thumb," said Merada. "Of P. T. Barnum fame, are you not?" Yet another misconception on future-folk's part. He'd learned long ago not to fess up and say he was merely Tom Tum, a minor midget actor who'd altered the famous moniker to boost his own career. It amazed him how these people could take such interest in them while their knowledge of history was so spotty. General Tom Thumb had died before the silent movie era had even begun, let alone the Golden Age of Hollywood.

Tom avoided her question by saying, "You flatter me, ma'am."

Taking a slice of orange for herself, Merada said, "My, since this is our first time to sample this motif, we feel honored to have such distinguished little guests in our home."

"Yes," said Carlisle to Little Betty, "we've had a couple of versions of Napoleon pay a visit, and a Jackie O. last spring, but you are our first midgets. Last month we had an Elvis come to call, but we've been avoiding this particular fetish." He sighed.

It was odd the way they carried on the conversation, both Merada and Carlisle continuing the thread but only addressing the one seated next to them. "Yes, we've been reluctant to try this motif because..." Merada said. *Tick. Tick.*

"Because...?" Tom asked, looking up into her big green eyes that he'd just noticed were perhaps spaced a bit far apart. In a world of giants who had been bred to "perfection," it was odd that her eyes weren't aligned more properly. "If I may ask, why the interest in us now?" Most midget fetishists needed to feed their addiction so desperately that they sampled Munchkinland exclusively, adamantly.

Carlisle said, "Little Betty, we've tried so hard to control our desires over the years, but finally this day has arrived."

Merada nodded. "Don't worry, Tom," she said. "We didn't bring you here to have sexual relations with you. Heaven forbid! Carls and I don't even..."

"Merada and I sleep in separate beds, Little Betty," the husband said. "We've sinned in the past, I won't deny that, but we strive hard to keep our wicked thoughts as just that, thoughts. With our congenital defect, even the thought of the act that might produce offspring is most horrid to us."

"Then why did you bring us here?" Tom had to ask. Out of the corner of his eye he could see that Carlisle had his arm around Little Betty now and was pressing himself ever closer to her.

"Why?" Merada said, wide-eyed, riveting Tom's attention toward her. "To murder you of course."

Now panic gripped Tom. "No, you can't. I mean--"

"Shut up, you fucking little midget!" she said. "Don't you realize that this is all *your* fault? Maybe science has bred such abominations like you out of humankind, but that doesn't stop the craving we're feeling inside."

"Tom," Little Betty called, and he turned to see that Carlisle had pulled up her dress and was fondling her with one hand, fillet knife in the other.

"Carls!" Merada screamed. "We're supposed to kill the impulse not give into it!"

"Yes, I know we are, but she's so...cute," her husband replied as he peeled down Little Betty's panties.

"No!" Tom cried. He tried to hop off the couch, but Merada grabbed him and held the fillet knife to his throat. This was the end--he knew it. Nowhere were they near the five or six hours until they'd revert back to Munchkinland. They were going to die! Despite the blade at his jugular, Tom tried to break free.

"Forgive me for what I must do, little man," she said, tears filling her eyes.

As Merada hopped off the couch, Tom felt his neck growing warm and wet with blood. His blood! As his life drained from him, he watched helplessly as the woman, bloody knife in hand, moved toward her husband. Carlisle had his pants down now and was mounting Tom's precious Little Betty, who was now kicking and screaming.

Merada's killing stroke on his beloved was just as accurate and quick.

Somewhen later, Tom found himself giddy, disoriented, and staring at a huge transparent tank filling with water. Inside the tank, gasping, head barely bobbing to the surface, Barney Banks struggled to keep from drowning.

"What? How?" Tom muttered, struggling to stand.

"You can thank my muse," Doc Rivera said, standing to his right. "As well as all your friends who overpowered Banks."

"But...?" Panic filled him. "Where's Little Betty?"

"I'm right here, Tom," she said, taking his left arm and nestling close.

Beyond her stood Tremblina, and Bonnie Fey in the arms of her husband Gnomy Green.

"Sorry we couldn't tell you, Tom," Little Betty said, "but frankly we thought it best to keep you in the dark. Doc's musing had a purpose, and we thought this way best."

"No offense, Tom," Doc Rivera said, "but acting has never been your strong suit."

"And by your own admission you're a conservative at heart," said Ronald the Pirate. "And this was a most radical solution to our problem."

Tom Tum looked around the community center, now 144 midgets strong. And one gargantuan impresario who had his comeuppance coming. "You think this will work?" cried Barney Banks as he started taking in water. "Don't you think I have safeguards installed for this possibility? I'll be back, you fucking dwarves. I'll be..." His eyes bulged as his head slipped beneath the water for the final time.

Tiny hands and voices gave resounding cheer!

"He's right," Doc Rivera said when the fervor subsided. "He will be. But this is a start. Eventually the tables will be turned in our favor."

"I don't know," Tom said ruefully. Though he'd be the first to admit that all this time manipulation was beyond his ken, though obviously not trusty Doc's.

"Have a little faith, Tom," the elderly midget said.

Though still dubious, Tom Tum was sure of two things. That he loved his precious Little Betty deeply, and that he cherished his good friends. But as he stood there watching Barney Banks' lifeless body floating in the tank, he came to a firm conclusion. That this little sidepocket universe they were all living in was a fucking mess. And no one was going to live happily ever after.



# REVIEWS

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## SWORD

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*reviewed by alasdair stuart*



Written by Kieron Gillen

Art by Steven Sanders and Jamie McKelvie

Published by Marvel Comics

Abigail Brand has a problem; his name is Henry Peter Gyrich and he's the co-Commander of SWORD, along with her. SWORD, the Sentient World Observation and Response Department, is SHIELD's sister organisation and it has a wide variety of problems, ranging from a fugitive begging for sanctuary from a bounty hunter to the fact an alien war fleet seems to rather fancy taking North Carolina away from them. Hank McCoy, Abigail's boyfriend, has no problems; after all, he's

brought the morning coffee and remembered the muffins too.

SWORD, picking up on characters introduced by Joss Whedon during his run on *Astonishing X-Men*, is possibly the single most fun comic you'll read this year. The stakes are clearly massive from the first page and Gillen's script never lets us or the characters forget it but that's not all there is. Under the constant imminent disaster there's a barely contained sense of glee, a joy at your day job being negotiating with alien warlords and bounty hunters, that your office is in Earth orbit, that you have your own spaceship. This is a comic about having the best job in the world and it's constant flow of movement, ideas, characters and jokes is reminiscent of *The West Wing* at its best.

It's in the characters where Gillen really flies though. Abigail Brand is neatly repositioned here as a fiercely competent, droll young woman who is far better at her job than she gives herself credit for. The romance with Beast is inspired too, Abigail's tightly wound militaristic approach perfectly contrasted by the amiable, blue-furred scientist. Gillen has struck gold with them as his central double act and thanks to Sanders' energetic artwork and skill with expression they can make you laugh simply by sharing a panel.

The other characters score too, in particular Lt. Sydren, a slightly put upon telepath and UNIT, a friendly, congenial figure kept in informational quarantine who is clearly the most dangerous figure in the book. There's also a welcome return for Lockheed, Kitty Pryde's dragon, that promises one of *Astonishing X-Men*'s biggest loose plot threads will soon be resolved. Finally, Gyrich and a guest appearance by Death's Head, Marvel UK's Transformer-sized bounty hunter rounds the cast out to give the book the epic scope it needs whilst still keeping it focussed on character.

SWORD is a rare book, one that fits perfectly into an established universe but clearly has it's own voice and identity. It's quick witted, funny, oddly sweet and filled with likeable, interesting character. Smartly written and beautifully drawn, this is about to close to perfect as a debut gets. If you're even a little fond of science fiction, character based drama or amiable, blue, furry scientists then this is for you.

## Paranormal Activity

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*reviewed by richard whittaker*

Directed & Written by Oren Peli

Starring: Katie Featherstone, Micah Sloat, Mark Fredrichs,  
Amber Armstrong

"Ahahaha!" Johnny Rotten screamed from the stage of the Winterland Ballroom in '76. He knew what





the audience was getting: A warmed-over Sex Pistols gig with some great PR and hype attached. "Ever get the feeling you've been cheated?"

That's kinda the experience of watching *Paranormal Activity*, which somehow has become the most bloated and over-rated indie horror of recent memory. Skulking around since debuting at Screampfest in 2007, it's hard to see why it, out of every great little low-budgeter struggling out on the festival circuit, has become the studio system's anointed one.

The pitch was obvious. This is a suburban *Blair Witch Project*, with a nice young middle class couple, Katie (Featherston) and Micah (Sloat), besieged in their home by an unseen demonic force that becomes more and more brutal as the nights progress. The film is supposed to be culled from footage the pair shot. It starts well into the haunting action as Micah buys a high-end camera to leave running all night and catalog what they think they hear and may have seen. It's supposed to be claustrophobically creepy, with a handheld verité feel, but what the audience gets is less *Blair Witch* fantastic and more *The Last Broadcast* clunker.

The plot boils down to the same formula pretty quickly. Weird thing happens at night and are caught on tape, Micah reviews tape, shows Katie, Katie freaks out, tells Micah not to annoy demon, Micah ignores her, annoys demon, weirder things happen which are also caught on tape. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat. While the slow-burn is supposed to ramp up the tension, it's all so predictable that there's nothing shocking. It's a little scarier than an episode of *Most Haunted*, but less creepy than having Derek Acorah come round your house to cold read your dog.

The best thing about *Paranormal Activity* is Featherstone, who is the closest thing to something to care about at present. But the worst thing is Sloat. It doesn't help that Micah is an inherently obnoxious character (seriously, is anyone rooting for a 20-something preppy day trader any more?) but Sloat ramps up the annoying factor by being a pretty mediocre improv actor. With much of the dialogue riffed, it's awkward, and with he and Featherstone present in every scene, it's pretty crippling for the film. That's worsened by every twist and every action being utterly predictable: If Katie tells Micah not to do something, it's just foreshadowing for his next bit of misguided demon-baiting.

As for the cinematography, well, the entire purpose of the 'found footage' horror subgenre is that it's supposed to be culled from what's available. However, that means that what should result is something unusual and unexpected. Take *Blair Witch* again: Much as it has been lampooned and mimicked, the accidental up-the-nose confession to camera is a unique and iconic image. There's nothing here that sticks in the memory: Maybe being stuck in the controlled environment of a nice three-bedroom house with hardwood floors, rather than the Spartan wilderness of the Maryland woods, took the rawness out of the end result.

So where's all the genius in this that has attracted massive crowds? It's not the film. It's the publicity campaign. In the US, distributors Paramount released it in a handful of cities, then lashed out cash on a TV campaign saying, basically, if you call and demand it, we'll be forced to release this film. They got a million people to sign up, and voila, the people had spoken. Suddenly this was the movie 'The Man' didn't want you to see, so the crowds were around the block. This is the kind of publicity gimmick that would make horror entrepreneur William Castle glow with pride. He was the guy that claimed there was a spook in the audience for *The House on Haunted Hill*, set up coward's corners in cinemas for *Homicidal*, and handed out fake insurance certificates for patrons watching *Macabre*. Now that man knew a good publicity shakedown, and that's what *Paranormal Activity* is – nothing more, nothing less.

Even with an increasingly blasé film audience, 'found footage' horror can still be incredibly effective. *Cannibal Holocaust* is a gore landmark, *Blair Witch* is implied horror as art, and if the upcoming Hollywood

adaptation of 2008 Australian indie flick *Lake Mungo* does anything, it should at least bring the heart-rending and heart-stopping original to a larger audience. Bar a couple of mild 'how did they do that?' tricks, and a predictable if effective ending that is wrecked by the trailer, *Paranormal Activity* could have stayed in the film festival stack.

# FEATURES

## Heaven Book 1 : Heaven

by *alasdair stuart*



By Mur Lafferty

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There's a moment in *A Matter of Life and Death* where, in the reception hall for heaven, a group of American bomber crew step off the escalator, get issued their wings by the prim Angel behind the counter and step through into the hereafter. One hears a ball game, another the sounds of a busy street and the third just stops, looks around and then steps through. It's a beautiful moment in a film filled with them and it's message is simple; you die, but the good news is it's not the end.

Mur Lafferty's *Heaven*, a five book series exploring what happens when the afterlife itself is threatened refuses to take the easy route from the very first page. Her two main characters, Kate and Daniel, are room mates who die in a car accident and cross over with all the baggage everyone carries. Kate has always loved Daniel, she's always secretly hoped Daniel had loved her and Daniel has always run merrily from one relationship to the next. But on the other side of the human pulse, they both finally find the time to address their problems and solve them. Their lives are perfect, placid and filled with nothing but love.

It doesn't last.

Mur Lafferty's *Heaven* series is, quietly, one of the most ambitious pieces of podcast fiction ever produced. It sneaks up on you too, thanks in no small part to Lafferty's mischievous murder of her two leads in the opening chapter. This is a story that doesn't just begin where others end, it takes a certain glee in taking accepted wisdom and turning it on its head. There are angels in heaven, there is God and every loved one you ever lost is there waiting for you. The twist, when it's delivered, is horrific without being malicious, a moment that curdles every act of kindness without rendering them obsolete. It's a moment which is horribly plausible and that in itself is unsettling because every one of these characters, every one of these locations, exists in the world we go to after we die.

What really makes the book fly though are the characters. Kate and Daniel are painstakingly well drawn and painfully normal and the story is at it's best when their normal actions are combined with the abnormal world they make their way through. Kate is quiet, compassionate and absolutely reluctant to commit to the world around her in case she gets hurt. Daniel is brash, cynical and desperately altruistic, spreading himself too thin where Kate keeps too much to herself. They complete one another in a way that never feels forced and the way their relationship changes and evolves feels completely natural. The fact that this relationship also includes Kate's tryst with a Greek god and a crucial emotional moment revealed in *Dog Heaven* only serves to make the quality of writing more impressive.

This combination of vast concepts and deeply flawed, human characters is where Lafferty excels and it's only at the end of the book that you realise exactly how well she fits the two together. Kate and Daniel's decision to travel between the Heavens, and their differing reasons for doing so, are a subtle, but insistent

dramatic engine that drives the first half of the book and puts them in gleefully epic situations. Their intervention in the Elysium games is particularly good as is the sequence in Dog Heaven, where the uncomfortable truth about Daniel begins to be revealed. However, the standout for me is the description of how the various Heavens are linked, Kate and Daniel making their way through a carefully anonymous but increasingly threatening environment that begins to curdle as the worlds begin to end and millions of dead spill out into the afterlife. It's a very clever workaround, showing the results of armageddon instead of armageddon itself and it culminates in two sequences that are by turns heart rending, horrific and epic.

By the end of the book, Kate and Daniel have had not only their true natures but the true nature of their journey revealed. What seemed epic in scope is suddenly placed in context and it becomes clear exactly how high the stakes are and exactly how fragile the characters are. They're painfully human and out of their depth but they're also unique and uniquely suited to the journey ahead of them. This, in turn, leads to the subversive core of the book, a moment that's so subtly presented it almost passes you by; Kate and Daniel have been to Heaven but Heaven isn't enough.

Heaven is character driven, epic fantasy of a rare stripe. It's a fascinating, dark, romantic, funny story about two people and what happens after they die and are faced with the realisation that their dissatisfaction is the only weapon they have. It's exemplary fiction and it sets up the volumes that follow it beautifully. After all, if Heaven isn't enough, the only place to go is down...



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