

Hub

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Spamalot

If you have tried to get in touch with us recently, and received no reply, it may be because our spam filters seem to be working overtime. We're currently trawling through our spam box, and finding emails that need answering. Be gentle with us – we'll be in touch, soon (this goes doubly to anyone who has submitted a story – we plan on having our slushpile cleared by the end of this month).

About Hub

Every week we will be publishing a piece of short fiction, along with at least one review (book, DVD, film, audio, or TV series) and we'll also have the occasional feature, too. We can afford to do this largely due to the generosity of the people over at Orbit, who have sponsored this electronic version of the magazine, and partly by the generosity displayed by your good selves. If you like what you read here, please consider making a donation over at www.hub-mag.co.uk.



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As the Crow Flies

by Dave Hoing

When my granddaughter Caemyin ain't helping me tend my crows, she's off watching the cutters harvest the peat moss that's Finchlan Glan's only claim to fame. Says she likes hearing the men cuss as they load their wagons, but I know what she really wants is to see a dead body. One was found, oh four, five years ago now, buried deep in the peat and perfectly preserved, only with skin tanned to leathery black by the acids in the swamp. Happiest corpse I ever saw. Throat had been cut, yet he went grinning to his death like me and mine might sit down to a meal with good friends.



Today she's with me in the rookery, learning to swab cages. Not much in this world stinks worse'n chicken shit, but my crows come close. Caemyin—Yinnie—is none too thrilled with this task. “How'd you like it if you had to live in a room with your own filth?” I ask, and she says, quick as you please, “Well, Grandah, if you can train 'em to talk and carry messages, how hard can it be to make 'em poop *outside*?”

Hello? croaks Syba, the eldest and, once, the best of my brood. Almost 20 now, Syba has grown huge and fat and blustery. He's got some bald patches on his breast and under his wings where he's pecked at a few too many mites. I retired him from his routes years ago, but he still rules the rookery, or believes he does. The other birds hear his voice, get excited, and start *helloing* and cawing at the same time. They think it's feeding time. They *always* think it's feeding time, and make such a to-do about it. Gives me a headache. I focus my augraam on Syba's tiny bean of a brain, *Shhh, Shhh*, which calms him and then the rest. “Waste of time training a bird to talk, Yinnie,” I say. “He either learns it on his own, or not at all. And as for the other, unless you cork 'em, they'll sling their droppings where they will.”

I'm joking about the corking, but Yinnie's eyes light up like a gas streetlamp. “Can we try it, Grandah? Can we?”

I give her a look and she deflates. But then she giggles and I know she's having me on, too. “Why ruin good corks?” she says.

I tousle her hair and send her out to the pump for a pail of water. Most everybody's got running water these days, pipes everywhere, going underground into their houses and barns and sinks. Even got indoor toilet rooms, I hear. You just do your business in a big porcelain pot, pull a chain or push a button or some damn thing, and water carries the waste through *another* pipe and off to gods-know-where. Seems like a lot of bother and confusion, when an outhouse works just fine. Still, the crows *do* stink, 'specially on hot, still days like this one, and it might be nice if I had a little plumbing to keep down their smell.

When Yinnie comes back with the pail, I put my glove on and reach into Syba's cage. He eyes me suspiciously—like we've never done this before!—and *helloes*. No sense wasting my augraam on this, so I tap his breast with my wrist and say, “Come on, stupid, you know what to do.” When he finally decides to hop onto the glove, I take him to the tether post. Most of my crows have the new cages, with bars on the bottom and a removable tray underneath. Makes cleaning real easy,

and you never have to take the birds out. Syba, though, he never did like changes too well. Just threw a fit till I put him back in

his old cage. Age's got its privileges, I guess.

If he's lucky he's got another five, maybe ten years left in him, so Yinnie's gonna have to learn to handle him. She's only eight, though, and that's too young. Syba's my favorite, but he can be one mean bastard when he's got a mind to. Pecks and flaps and screeches and cuts with his talons, and if that don't work, he craps on you. Well, maybe that cork ain't such a bad idea after all. And a muzzle ...

Yinnie hands me the pail, then fetches a rag. She tries to give this to me, too. "Nope," I say. "Cleaning's *your* job. Part of being a crowmaster's apprentice."

"Yuck," she grumbles as she dips the rag in water. Her hair is golden now, but it'll turn black, like mine did, before she's grown. Like the old lore says, *the hair of a true crowmaster will seek the color of the birds*. One of the benefits of our profession. I'm looking back on sixty, yet my hair's as dark as it was forty years ago, not even a streak of gray. "Don't wanna be no dumb apprentice," Yinnie says, "if this is all I get to do. Crowmaster, neither."

"It's not all you get to do, and sometimes, child, your profession picks you, not the other way around. You got the augraam, so you *will* be a crowmaster." She hates it when I call her *child*. "So swab the shit and stop your whining."

"Bad word, Grandah! Bad word!"

My daughter Ana would have my tongue in a bucket, she ever heard me cuss in front of Yinnie. But Yinnie don't really mind, she's just being pouty 'cause I'm making her do the dirty work. Swearing's one of the things she likes about the peat cutters. I smile and wink at her. "You don't tell your Momma I said *shit* and I won't tell her I saw you kissing a boy up in the loft."

"I did *not*!"

"Let's see, who was that now? The Jori boy? Or was it Ril? Maybe it was both."

"*Grandah!*"

She wipes the bottom of Syba's cage with the rag, then flicks foul water at me. Hits me right in the eye, too. I gather myself up with fake anger, but can't keep a straight face, and we both start giggling so hard we have to stop to get our breath. Then the tickling starts. With her it's the ribs, with me the side of my neck.

We roll around on the straw floor, tickling and laughing, me making kissy sounds and her launching new attacks, while Syba sits on the tether post and watches us with that bird-curious look.

*

My messenger crows bring news from all over Arra, even a note or two from the new government that set itself up in Bylar. Never been but one kind of people in Finchlan Glan, so their fancy equality laws don't mean too much to us up here. And the other stuff, that's just words, some lawyery notion that what you call a thing is more important than the thing itself. Makes no sense, you ask me; but then, nobody ever does. Anyway, the government usually leaves us alone, except to collect taxes on our peat—*that* didn't change!—but today I got a message by bird announcing some official mouth-man'll be coming to Chamal in a few days to, well, make an announcement. The note wasn't in code and so, not being confidential, I gave it to Yinnie and let her take the pony in to see the mayor. That way she'll get a chance to play with some of her town friends. Crowmaster's apprentice or not, she's still a kid.

'Course, when the mouth-man comes, I'll need to go have a listen in case he accidentally says something worthwhile.

I watch the west end of her eastbound mount. She waves and rides off into the green

marshes, muck sucking at the pony's hooves even now, at the beginning of summer.

The province of Finchlan Glan (oh, all right, the *county* of Finchlan Glan) is in the northwest part of Arra. The seasons we get are winter, winter, stinking-hot, and winter. Our cold ain't the clean, snowy cold of, say, Dallya, but that dreary, miserable damp that worms into your bones and shivers you from the inside out. Rain clouds bump up against the Tombs Mountains to the east and dump their load on us most every day for three quarters of the year. And summer? The air's so heavy and dead that if you fart in the morning the smell will still be hanging there when night falls.

"Father!"

That would be Ana, calling from the barn. By now she's noticed the pony is gone, and Yinnie with it. Gods, what a fit she'll pitch! Always does, every time I dare let Yinnie do grown-up things. But taking the message was just an excuse. The main thing is to let the girl play, which ain't grown up at all. Ana won't like that neither, she thinks Yinnie's too good for her friends. How'd that woman ever spring from my seed?

Yinnie's almost out of sight now, sloping down the ridge toward Chamal. The Korcen River's straight ahead of her. From here I can't see the river or the town, but I can see the mountains rising out of the mist across the plain. That mix of white and purple and sun overhanging the green sure is pretty, the only real scenery this swampy wasteland's got. Otherwise the Glan's dull as a sack of stale manure.

"Father!"

Much as I don't want to, I turn around and head back to the barn. Ana meets me halfway, already shaking her finger.

"Don't start," I say, but she starts anyway.

"I thought I told you to go into town," she says. "We are out of butter and yarn and nails, and the chickens need feed, and it wouldn't hurt if you bought yourself some decent shirts. Your crows have fouled your old ones so bad I'll never get them clean. And ice for the cellar, so we can keep fresh meat for a change. I'm tired of chicken and salted beef."

I've heard all this before, too. "Thought maybe I'd wait till the roads dried up a bit. Major supply run means taking the carriage, and it's just a pain in the ass digging wheels out of the muck every ten paces."

"Language, Father ..."

"Anyway, everything's so expensive this time of year ..."

The Korcen River corkscrews out of the Tombs and follows the ridge all the way down to Sorl. We depend on Sorl for most everything. Not many paved roads up here, 'cause the, whatcha call it, the *con-crete* never sets right in this climate. Except in high summer, mud and slop make wagon caravans near impossible, which leaves only barges to deliver goods the rest of the time. And that ain't easy, neither, on account of the Korcen's strong current. Getting boats upriver to Chamal is so much work that merchants feel the need to skin us for the extra cost and effort. And skin us they do. Poorer folks can barely afford to eat.

"Always the excuses," Ana says. "Are we short of money? No. Are we short of supplies? Yes. This is how it works: we use the money, which we have plenty of, to buy the supplies, which we don't. Now, when I tell you to go, go."

My wife Bet, she's gone now some fifteen years, not too long after I bought Syba. Ana's husband's dead, too. Got his stupid self kicked in the head shoeing an ox. Ana took Bet's place at my side when he died, doing everything Bet used to do—well, except *that*, which I don't remember enough about to miss anyhow.

Times was, old Bet used to blister my ears with her complaining, but Ana's better at it than my wife ever was.

I mutter a cuss word under my breath.

I know she can't hear, but she says, "Stop mumbling! You know how I hate that. And don't think I don't know about Caemyin and the pony."

Sometimes I wonder if her husband didn't maybe stick his head in front of that ox's hoof on purpose ...

*

"You have to concentrate, Yinnie."

The girl hasn't settled down since she got back from Chamal. Chatter, chatter, chatter about a *steamsailer*, some damn new-fangled boat her town friends are blabbing over—like "new" means "better." Meantime, Syba sits in his cage, looking bored with the whole thing. I use him with Yinnie 'cause his patterns are as set as they're ever gonna be, while the young crows, they got a lot of wildness inside them bitty little brains. Yinnie needs to learn the difference 'fore she can start molding them into true messenger birds. "Now, the augraam ain't a substitute for real training," I tell her. "It's just a way to ... to *condition* them, you might say. To make them *want* to be trained."

Yinnie stares into Syba's eyes, but he don't react, not even a *hello*. Usually we know when we're making contact with crows, 'cause they'll squawk or get jittery or plump their feathers up to show their indignation. It's a kind of violation, I guess, worming our minds into theirs and peeking at what's inside. But it's just part of the process, nobody's hurt in the end, and the birds are better for it.

"I don't know what I'm s'posed to *see*, Grandah."

"Patterns, girl. Patterns. I know it just looks like squiggles and dots now. But it'll all make sense soon enough. Focus on old Syba. See how his squiggles sort of line up?"

"Maybe ..."

"Good." I walk her over to the cages with the nestlings. "Now look into these chicks. Their squiggles're all over the place, no order to 'em." 'Course this ain't completely true; all living things got a grid inside that keeps them in the flow of nature; but what we crowmasters do, we lay down a human compass on top of their wild patterns and steer them in the direction we want. Teaching Yinnie, though, I try to make things as simple as possible.

The young birds panic at her augraam's touch, which sets the rest of the crows to bellowing. *Quiet!* I think at them, and they shut up. When I'm this forceful, they know I mean business. The young ones quiver on their roosts, gawking up in terror as Yinnie probes them.

"It's just the same ..." Yinnie says, real pissy-like. Her mind's off on that asinine boat this morning. "Inside, the babies look the same as Syba."

"They are *not* the same, child. Concentrate!"

"*I am not a child!*"

Full of tears and fury, she stomps away from the cages and out the rookery door. A willful one, this girl. Gets that from her mother ...

I give her a few moments to calm herself, then follow behind her. The sun's throwing shadows off the Tombs Mountains and across the plain, and the mist is on the marshes. Yinnie herself is a shadow against the rising sun, its light a glowing outline around her. The Glan's all she's ever known, and while I think she prefers town to country, she does like the view out here. The ridge blocks the river straight east, but way on to the south, at just this time of the morning, the sun paints a thin ribbon of sparkle where the Korcen jags out of bluffs on its journey toward Sorl.

"Grandah," she says, sniffing, though I've made no sound. The augraam is so strong in her. She senses patterns she don't even know are there, and that includes mine. She turns to face me, and her cheeks are still wet, but her eyes are bright with wonder. Never was one to stay upset too long. "How's a steamsailer work?"

I wish now I didn't let her take that note into Chamal. The father of one of her friends rode down to Sorl some time back and heard stories about this new kind of boat, s'posedly can come up the river easy as going down it. The rumor's not news to me—I got crowmaster friends all over Arra who send me stories of every bonehead notion ever concocted by man. Well, crowmasters gossip like anyone else, and just 'cause we can train birds to carry our messages, that don't make our gossip any more or less true than anybody else's. I've seen this steamsailer nonsense often enough, but still ain't decided whether I believe it or not. Yinnie does, though, and I can't get her mind off of it and onto her work. Maybe I should just let her talk it out of her system.

"That's assuming," I say, "there's even such a thing—"

"There is, Grandah!"

"All right, then. Do you know what an engine is?"

"A machine?"

"Something like that."

"So a steamsailer's an engine?"

"No, it's a boat that's *got* an engine. Sails, too. It uses the sails most the time, but when there's no wind, or when the wind or current's against it, it's got this engine that runs on steam." Yinnie looks confused, and no wonder—I don't have the first idea what I'm talking about! "You know how oil lights a lamp? The oil's called fuel. Well, steam is the fuel that runs this engine."

"But what does the engine *do*? How can it make a boat go against wind and current?"

"It's got this thing called a *propeller*." I take her hand and spin her like we're dancing. When she giggles, her laughter is the prettiest music in all of Arra. "The propeller goes 'round and 'round, and pushes against the water. And that makes the boat move forward."

She pulls away, her face clouding up. "But *how*, Grandah?"

Now, it's no easy thing to admit to my grandchild that I don't know everything there is to know. But I'm a crowmaster, not a ... whatever it is you call a man who builds engines. Truth is, I *don't* understand how steam makes the engine work, or how that engine spins the propeller, or even how a spinning propeller can push a boat against the current. I don't know any of that. I just know what I read in the messages, and that ain't much. Maybe the whole steamsailer business is just gossip anyway. Least, that's what I want to believe.

I kiss my girl on the brow. "It's just magic, Yinnie."

"Sure will make getting stuff up the river simple," she says.

*

Far as I know, the only thing the augraam's good for is training crows. Oh, every now and again I catch Yinnie doodling bugs with hers, making them jump or fly in circles or whatever comes into her head. They're stupid, don't need patterns to make them dance. But really, hexing bugs ain't much use 'less you can plain keep them away, and it takes too much energy to do that for more than a short while. Easier to just swat them when they buzz too close.

Last year this time she tried to use her gift in the marshes to catch frogs, but frogs have bigger brains than bugs, and they got spooked when they felt her mental touch, just like baby crows do. Yinnie was sure disappointed. Yeah, frog legs is good eating, I said to her, but why waste a talent like the augraam on slimy things anyway? We only get frogs one season out of four, and nets scoop them up real well.

It's a kid's normal need for mischief, I guess, and for testing limits. She plays with her power like another child might play with fire. I tried to tell her once that the gods made her for better

things—for crowmastering—but even Ana laughed at that. “What do you know about the gods and their purposes?” she said.

Not much maybe.

But I *do* know what the augraam’s for, and what it ain’t. And what it’s for is crows.

*

Ana finally got fed up and loaded Yinnie into the carriage with her to go for supplies. They won’t get far. I tried to tell her the roads’re still too soft, but she goes deaf on me when I’m saying something she don’t want to hear. I s’pect she’ll be sending Yinnie back for me any time now to come get them unstuck.

Meantime, I plan to sit back on this deck I built with her husband a few years back and load some ditchweed into my pipe for a good smoke. When she’s around she don’t let me smoke in the house, or the barn, or the rookery or, come right to it, anywhere under the great blue sky, so I got to sneak in a few puffs when I can. Not that she don’t always know. The woman’s got a better nose than the mayor’s old bluehound, and that dog can sniff a fly’s breath from here to the other side of the Glan. Ana smells it in my clothes, my hair, on my breath ... I swear I could strip myself naked and lay in a pool with only my mouth and pipe above water, and she’d smell it on me. Shit, I could swallow a mouthful of rotting garlic cloves mixed with vinegar and grol, and she’d *still* smell it! Thing is, Ana likes being a momma so much, she thinks she ought to do it in *both* directions.

I light my pipe with a thing called a *flintstick*. Ain’t really flint, just some chemical on the end of a little stick. When you scrape the end against something rough, up pops a small flame. These things’re all the rage right now in town, and I got to admit, they’re real handy. I mean, sometimes “new” *is* “better;” all I’m saying’s that the one don’t *necessarily* follow the other. I suck sweet smoke down into my throat and let it sit there, tingling and burning till I can’t hold my breath no more, then blow O’s real slow out my mouth. It’s a clear afternoon early in our season of stinking-hot, and the sun’s out on the Tombs, and just for this quiet moment everything’s all right in the world.

*

When I’m wrong, I admit it. No sense standing on pride when the facts’re against you. Ana had me believing the carriage didn’t get stuck. I was all ready to apologize for not going for supplies first time she told me to—and would’ve, too, ‘cept Yinnie told me they *did* get stuck, and more than once. Had to have the peat man next place over pry the wheels loose. He ended up riding into town with them, listening the whole way, I’m sure, to Ana’s favorite song: what a burden her father is, what an irresponsible old bastard. Ana made Yinnie promise not to say anything, but soon as she had a chance she blabbed it all. Her momma wanted to paddle her right there, but I said we don’t punish people for telling the truth ‘round here, and you ought to know that better’n anyone.

“But we punish them for lying,” she said. “You’ve been smoking again.”

“Well, then, no supper for me tonight.”

“What a disgraceful example you are to your own granddaughter.”

Ain’t it funny how she can turn it around so fast? She’s caught bare-ass lying, and I’m the one getting yelled at.

“You can have my supper, Grandah,” Yinnie says.

“Neither of you will get supper tonight, thank you very much.” Ana fluffs up her apron like an angry crow and stomps out of the room. Takes Yinnie and me about two blinks before we’re howling on the floor. Ana hates our giggle times, ‘cause she just can’t figure how her father and her

daughter can get along so well, with her in the middle, not knowing how to connect with either one. Must be hard being on the outside of laughter. More'n anything, I'm guessing, it's the augraam brings me and Yinnie so close. Nothing we can do about that. The "Gift of Knowing" don't always skip generations, but it did this

time, and Ana's the one left out. And her with her husband dead.

She cries a lot, when she thinks no one can hear.

"Grandah," Yinnie says, "there's a big celebration in town tomorrow."

"Oh?"

"Momma don't want us to go, but we got to, Grandah, we *got* to!"

"And why's that?"

"Cause a government man from Bylar's gonna give some talk, which, who cares, you know? but guess what?" She's so excited, she's bouncing back and forth from one

foot to the other, like her bladder's about to bust.

"I s'pose you're gonna tell me ..."

"He's coming in a steamsailer! Really and truly, Grandah, a *steamsailer*! With an engine and a pro-pell-er and everything! I *told you* they were real!"

I tousle her hair. I squeeze her shoulder. I smile my best happy smile.

Well, shit.

*

Hello.

Syba cocks his head at me and stares like only a crow can. In the gaslamp his eyes really sparkle. Then all the boys start in with their racket. Sometimes when they think it's feeding time, it really *is* feeding time. I scoop out a cupful of seed for each cage, then as a special treat add a cube of fresh chicken meat. They don't know they're eating their cousins, but I don't s'pose it'd matter to them if they did.

I'm a crowmaster, yet the old government in Hoxa never did give me a breeding license. I have to buy my birds like any common *hobbyist*, and that's what gets under my skin. 'Course, that means only males. Not that I'm complaining, I always get my pick of the best ones. Still, maybe the new government in Bylar'll issue me a license. I'll talk to the o-fficial mouth-man in Chamal tonight. Might be there's nothing he can do, but won't hurt to look into it.

I save Syba for last. The other birds gobble down the chicken first, then start pecking away at the seed. Syba, though, today he's patient. I open his cage and, without being asked, he steps onto my arm, real gentle, like he knows I'm not wearing the glove.

When I scratch the small feathers at the top of his head, he sort of coos and arches his neck in approval.

"Come on," I say. We go outside, me and Syba, and together we wait for the sun. So quiet this time of day, Ana and Yinnie asleep, just the crickets and the songbirds, fading stars and dark leaning toward light.

Syba hops up onto my shoulder and nuzzles my cheek with his beak.

"Been a good long time, ain't it, old fellow?"

Right up next to my ear, like a lover's whisper, he goes, *Hello.*

I could talk about all the hollering and smells and pushing, the drinking and eating and carrying on, the music and flags and colors; or I could wonder how five thousand people somehow squeezed themselves into a town that holds two hundred. Not to mention the horses and carriages and stalls full of useless junk for sale.

I could talk about the flaming fight I had with Ana to even let Yinnie go to town tonight. I could talk about all that, but thing is, Yinnie and I *did* come, and Ana, too, just to spite us, and we elbowed through all the people, and now we stand on the shore of the Korcen and get our first look at this *steamsailer*. Don't know what I expected, but really it looks 'bout like any other small sailing boat, 'cept on top it's got a ... chimney, I guess you'd call it, sticking out between the two little masts. No doubt what it burns; thick, smelly coal smoke blackens the furled sails. Well, coal ain't steam—Yinnie's confused by this, too—so I ask the mayor if maybe me and her and Ana can go down below and have a look at the engine. The mouth-man ain't scheduled to speak for some time yet,

and after all, even a crowmaster in Finchlan Glan commands *some* respect, so the mayor introduces us to the captain, and the captain takes us down to the engine room.

Yinnie chatters so much I have to clamp my hand over her mouth. "This is *so-o-o* exciting, Grandah—"

"Shh. I know."

First thing I notice is the two men shoveling coal. "Firemen," the captain calls them. They're as dirty and sweaty as peat cutters, and they cough like someone's standing on their chest. Above the fire there's a boiler, and then there's "pistons" and "valves," and gods know what else. All the while the floor of the boat vibrates like, well,

like nothing I've ever felt, but it's kind of pleasant. "The fire heats the boiler," the captain says, "and that's what creates the steam that makes the whole thing work."

Ana crinkles up her nose to show her distaste.

"I want to see the pro-pel-ler," Yinnie says. After all of the build-up, I think she's disappointed in the actual truth of the steamsailer.

"That's under the boat, honey," the captain says. "You can't see it."

"This ain't magic, Grandah," she says.

"No, I s'pose not."

"But," the captain says, and he's smiling like what he's about to say will please me, "this boat can make the trip up the Korcen from Sorl in less than a day, a lot faster than any wagon caravan or barge. It means prices on your goods should come down.

And it means same-day delivery of the mail."

"The mail?" Ana says, and her eyes flash the first twinkle of interest I seen in her in a long while.

"Yes, Missus. We got a bag of it in the pilot house. Cheaper than couriers and more efficient than crows, eh?" And he claps me on the back, friendly as can be.

Yinnie tugs on my sleeve. "Grandah, what about our augraam?"

I focus my mind on the boiler, the pistons, the valves. I look for a pattern, a wild grid I can align and put in order. But there ain't no grid, no pattern at all, just a flat and empty ... nothing. This engine, this *steamsailer*, has not even the soul of a bird.

I wonder, if I was to lay down in a peat bog, if some future cutters would pull me out, a year or a century from now, skin tanned to black by the acid, what would they think? Would they think, well, ain't this the happiest corpse we ever saw? Or would they say, here's a man who did *not* go grinning to his death?

And yet I do smile, for the captain, for Ana, and for Yinnie. Here in the belly of the beast that's gonna swallow up my life's work, I smile.

Grandah, what about our augraam?

I pick Yinnie up, hold her in my arms. She's my heir, my heritage, and my hope. I had one gift to leave her, one. What'll I give her now, when having the augraam's no better'n not having it? I kiss her cheek.

"I don't know," I say.

Ana sure looks tickled, though. No, she ain't being mean. Just that, without the need for me and Yinnie's special talent, everyone in the house'll be the same. Maybe she thinks she won't have to be so sad now, 'cause at last she can bond with her girl like other mommas do.

I set Yinnie down. Ana takes her hand and says, real gentle, "I know."

REVIEWS

Labyrinth and *The Dark Crystal* reviewed by Paul Kane

The Servants reviewed by Marie O'Regan

Dead Men's Boots reviewed by Lee Harris

Labyrinth: 21st Anniversary Edition

Starring: Jennifer Connolly, David Bowie, Toby Froud

Directed by: Jim Henson

Sony DVD (2 disc) £10.99

After finishing the mammoth task of working on **The Dark Crystal**, and after saying they would never do anything like it again, director Jim Henson and conceptual designer Brian Froud promptly began work on yet another big puppet production. The difference was this time they'd be mixing actors with the puppets and adding more humour and music to the mix. The key idea would be goblins, and they would be ruled over by a goblin king. Although others were considered for the part (as hard as it is to believe, Michael Jackson was in the running!) that particular role went to David Bowie and the rest, as they say, is movie history. Incredibly, **Labyrinth** is now celebrating its 21st birthday – how time flies – so what better way to get all nostalgic and introduce a new generation to the magic than with a brand new two-disc DVD set?

We begin the film with teenager Sarah (Connolly, fresh from mucking around with creepy crawlies in Dario Argento's **Phenomenon**) trying to learn lines from her favourite book, *Labyrinth*. Realising she's late to look after her baby brother, Toby (Froud's real son, Toby), she runs back home in the rain only to get a chewing out from her step mother (well, there had to be one – it's a fairy tale, after all) before she leaves with Sarah's father for the night. In a mood, and annoyed by Toby's crying Sarah wishes that the goblins would take him away, just like in her book. Little does she know that the goblins are listening in, and do exactly that.

Jareth the Goblin King (Bowie) appears to her and says that Toby is now in his castle. If she wants him back she has only 13 hours to make it through the labyrinth. It's not as easy as it sounds. This particular puzzle makes Hampton Court Maze look easy by comparison. Sarah has to contend with not only shifting walls, talking doorknockers and trap doors, but peaches that make her forget when she eats them and the dreaded Bog of Eternal Stench. Luckily she picks up a few friends along the way, beginning with the dwarf Hoggle – who is being manipulated by Jareth, but comes good in the end – the gigantic furry orange creature called Ludo with the power to control rocks, and a swashbuckling dog creature called Sir Didymus. With time running out and the goblin army still to face, will Sarah make it to the castle on time, or will Toby remain with the goblins forever.

In one of the documentaries for this release Jim Henson's son, Brian, comments: 'As much as dad loved **The Dark Crystal**, I think he needed a bit of the absurd back.' And let's face it, creatures called The Fireys who dance around and take their heads off, talking worms wearing scarves, a wiseman wearing a chicken hat (voiced by Michael Horden – the wise man, not the chicken), and goblins dancing with a baby while David Bowie sings definitely qualifies. **Labyrinth** has a charm all of its own, and in spite of not doing brilliantly at the box office has built up a much deserved cult following over the years – so much so that there's a ton of merchandise now available, plus a Manga-style sequel which takes place years after the movie.

There are so many standout moments it would take several reviews to list them all but here are a few highlights for me: the hands in the shaft which Sarah falls through ('We are helping hands!'); the warning walls ('Oh please, I haven't said it for such a long time... That way leads to certain doom!'); and the finale in Jareth's Escher inspired palace. New additions to the set include a Froud commentary, in which he reveals how his first instinct is to pick up the crying Toby even though it's only a film (and actually we see the grown up version 20 years on in the documentaries section), there's the original **Inside the Labyrinth** in which we discover that one of the choreographers was **Star Trek: TNG's** Gates McFadden (previously called Cheryl), plus up to date documentaries like **Kingdom of Characters** and **The Quest for Goblin City** (the only thing missing in these are reflections from Bowie and Terry Jones – although might that be because the latter maintains little after Sarah eating the peach is his work – but we do get executive producer George Lucas). Add to this galleries, behind the scenes pictures and storyboards and you have a nice celebratory package.

You enjoyed it as a kid, so sit back now and enjoy it with your own.

The Dark Crystal: 25th Anniversary

Starring (voices): Stephen Garlick, Lisa Maxwell, Billie Whitelaw

Directed by: Jim Henson and Frank Oz

Sony DVD (2 disc) £10.99

Released back in 1982, this was a film like no other. Unlike previous Henson creations **The Muppets**, **The Dark Crystal** was a concerted attempt to do something just a bit more serious with puppetry, drawing on sources like *The Lord of the Rings* to tell a mythical – and magical – quest tale where all the main characters are being worked by five or six puppeteers. Based on the concept designs of Brian Froud, the creatures that inhabit this world are by turns bizarre and oddly recognisable, with Henson and Oz throwing everything in here from witches who study astronomy to swamps inhabited by giant toads.

The basic storyline revolves around an old prophecy, concerned with healing a powerful crystal. A thousand years ago when there was a conjunction of the planets, the crystal was cracked, creating a new dark era. A shard broke off, turning it into a Dark Crystal and creating two new races: the evil Skekses and the gentle Ur-ru (essentially two sides of the same coin). Other races exist on this faraway planet, like the tiny podlings and the all-but extinct and Hobbit-like Gelflings, like our hero Jen (Garlick – but puppeteered by Henson himself. His quest begins with the death of his master, one of the Ur-ru, who in his dying breath tells Jen to seek out the

shard because a second conjunction is imminent. If the crystal cannot be healed by then, the Skekses will rule the planet forever.

So Jen sets off to find Aughra the witch (voiced by Whitelaw and operated by Frank 'Yoda' Oz), who possesses the shard. But the Skekses, who have just had to appoint a new ruler, are onto his game and send out their minions to capture Jen: basically huge and quite creepy-looking beetles. Instead they come back with Aughra, leaving Jen to try and find his way into the Skekses' castle with the shard. Along the way he goes through strange lands and encounters many odd beings, like the giraffe-legged Landstriders (who look like they'd walked straight out of a Dali painting). But he also meets a flying female Gelfling called Kira (voiced by **The Bill's** Lisa Maxwell) who aids him in his mission. Will Jen and Kira be able to heal the crystal in time?

The look of **The Dark Crystal** is certainly unique – something that's mentioned time and again on the bonus documentaries (kids today apparently ask 'what was that?' when they watch it because there is no CGI involved; they just can't understand how it was all done live). Froud himself is a bit of a unique artist, so when you combine his ideas with a completely puppet world, what you get is something that makes it easy to suspend your disbelief. As Henson told Froud, he wanted the movie to be totally organic, and he definitely achieved that. But thanks to all the hard work of the puppeteers the movie also achieves something else: it makes you care about the characters. When Jen cries at the climax, we feel his pain, and when Kira is facing the Dark Crystal's power – in an effort to drain her life essence and revitalise the Skekses emperor – we're rooting for her to escape. As Henson told screenwriter David Odell, you can make puppets do anything, and he was right. They can also play with your heartstrings.

As well as the film, you also get a truckload of extras – as is to be expected with a 25th Anniversary edition. For starters there's Froud's audio commentary where you learn snippets like the Skekses concept costumes were made from melted down plastic toy soldiers sprayed with paint. On the second disc there are no less than three documentaries. **The World of the Dark Crystal** is the making of feature from the time of release, with behind the scenes footage from Elstree studios and the opportunity to see Froud sketching the characters. The new documentaries – **Reflections of the Dark Crystal – Light on the Path of Creation** and **Shard of Illusion** – take us through the ideas stage and filming stages. And lastly we have deleted and extra scenes, plus Froud's character sketches.

Fans of fantasy won't need me to recommend this one: it's already proved its worth as a classic of the genre.

The Servants

By Michael Marshall Smith

Earthling Publications (earthlingpub.com)

26 lettered hardcovers US\$400

175 numbered hardcovers US\$75

Trade hardcover US\$30

The Servants marks something of a return – the first novel published under the Michael Marshall Smith name for some time. More recently, the author has enjoyed a great deal of success as Michael Marshall, with his *Straw Men* thriller series (*Straw Men*, *Blood of Angels*, *Lonely Dead*) and this year's stand alone cross-genre piece, *The Intruders*.

This story, however, follows Mark, an eleven year old trying to handle many changes in his life. His parents are now divorced and his mother has remarried. His stepfather, David, is totally different to his beloved dad, and Mark has trouble adjusting to his new life. There's a new, unwelcoming house in Brighton to deal with, a far cry from his native London (and Brighton isn't the happy place he remembers from family holidays before the divorce), plus a mother whose

illness is hard enough to handle without his new stepfather's apparent over-protectiveness making Mark feel like an outsider... Nothing feels the same anymore. And things keep getting worse...

Then Mark meets the old lady who lives in the basement flat of their house, and inadvertently finds an ally. He finds refuge visiting for tea and cake, and when she shows him the unused servants' quarters behind her flat, a mystery is born. As things at home get worse, Mark is drawn back to the servants' quarters time and again, to the voices he can hear there and the people he can see. Voices and people that only appear to be there for him, and him alone.

But things aren't right in this hazy, maybe-real world either, and Mark soon becomes aware that each world works in tandem, so to right one he has to right the other.

On one level *The Servants* is an emotionally heartrending tale of a small boy's struggle to cope with the disintegration of the life he has always known, and his anger as things get worse. He has to deal with his mother's illness, as well as the fact that his perception of the world was flawed to begin with; nothing was really as he thought.

On another level, *The Servants* is an outstanding piece of modern fantasy, reminiscent of Stephen King's and Peter Straub's *The Talisman* in its scope and depth. A worthy addition to any collection, this book will stay with you long after you turn the final page.

Dead Men's Boots

By Mike Carey

Published by Orbit (www.orbitbooks.net)

Out now. £6.99

Sometimes you discover a new series by a writer, and wish that you hadn't. I sometimes wish I'd not come across Carey's gothic/urban/noir/dark fantasy books starring down-at-luck exorcist Felix Castor. This is because the series to date has been so good that I'd like to have had the opportunity to buy them all and read them back-to-back. As it is, I've had to add Carey's series to the very short list of "can't-wait-to-have"s, and reconcile myself to the fact that after each one it'll be a year or so before I get to read the next chapter.

In the third book in the series, Felix Castor is having even more bad luck than before – not only is Rafi (an old friend who is now possessed by a demon due to a mistake made by Castor) due to be transferred to a facility where he's likely to be experimented upon, rather than cured, but Pen – Castor's landlady and only real friend – has thrown him out. Pen was the Castor's anchor, and without her, there's little stopping him from getting in too deep when he stumbles across an old society hell-bent on reincarnating mobsters and other homicidal low-life.

Like Charlie Huston's *Joe Pitt* books, Carey's Castor sequence is set in our world, but twisted a few degrees. We recognise the places, the people, the dilemmas, the options, and this makes it all the more real – more feasible. We don't question the absurdity of the central premise that the dead are rising around us, publicly, and in ever-increasing numbers. Of course, part of the reason for this is that Carey's prose skips off the page. It really is a disappointment when we realise that in order to function properly tomorrow we really must put the book down and grab some sleep. Just one more chapter, then...

The only bad thing about reading *Dead Men's Boots* now is the fact that it'll be another year or so until the next instalment. But don't let this put you off. Buy it. If you've not yet read the first two in the series, start with *The Devil You Know* – they function as stand-alone novels, but you'll get more out of reading them in order.

The Future in Eight Pages or Less

A Profile of 2000AD by Alasdair Stuart



Once a comic, or character gets to a certain age, history becomes their greatest asset and greatest potential weakness. After all, look at any given character, say Batman, and questions begin to arise. Why isn't he sixty? Why isn't he dead? Was he really around in World War 2? Not a company on the planet has escaped the horror of continuity and some have tied themselves in knots trying to explain everything.

Others have chosen simply to acknowledge their past and celebrate it and none more so than 2000AD. Whilst we're now seven years past it's project 'future' the decades of quality material produced by the weekly comic are ripe for exploitation and new owners, Rebellion have done just that.

There are two clear strands to the 2000AD graphic novel line that mirror the strands of the comic itself. One is the old reliables, Judge Dredd, Strontium Dog, Rogue Trooper whilst the other is the more esoteric, unusual, newer material. Starting with the 'originals', Rebellion have begun a systematic, ground-up reprint of every story from the very beginning.

Now with some characters this is a labour of near-herculean proportions. Take Judge Dredd for example, a character who is TWENTY-NINE years old and has appeared in every issue of 2000AD in some form since the second. That's a hell of a lot of material, but Rebellion have stuck to their word and there are now eight telephone book sized directories of Dredd stories with more to come. There are some gems in there as well including in volume 2, the epic 'Cursed Earth' that sees Dredd lead a small group of Judges across the radiation-soaked wastelands of America and encountering some seriously odd (And in one case famously copyright infringing) foes along the way.

If you're looking for something a little less intimidating than the mighty 'Books of the Law' however, you could do a lot worse than take a look at one of Dredd's stablemates. Rogue Trooper is another 'old faithful' and one that rewards far more sporadic reading than Dredd. The story of the last Genetic Infantryman (GI), a genetically engineered weapon betrayed by his creators and left to die on a world of perpetual war, it's like Commando with the volume turned up, a dizzying story of heroism, blue-skinned men and lots and lots of violence. Most notably, Rogue Trooper has arguably the most ghoulish gimmick in comic history in the form of the bio-chips. Each GI is fitted with a biochip back up of their personality that, provided it's removed within sixty seconds of their body being killed, can be used to control another GI's equipment. Aided by Bagman (his backpack), Helm (his helmet) and Gunnar (guess), Rogue battles not only to get justice but to get new bodies for his buddies. Of course, this being comics nothing is ever easy and 'Re-Gen' collects some of Rogue's finest hours as he clears his name, the chips get new bodies and it all goes wrong once again, in an entirely new way. War may be hell but Rogue Trooper is consistently fun and some of the best stories featuring the character are now part of the reprint library.

War of an entirely different and infinitely more horrid sort is on display in 'Goodbye, Krool World', a collection of the best Bad Company strips. The story of Earth's war with a hive mind known as the Krool, it follows Danny Franks, a raw recruit as he's inducted into bad company. A rogue fire team led by Kano, a man who keeps something awful in a box, Bad Company don't just want the war to end, they want the Krool to end too and Danny and his friends are swept up in



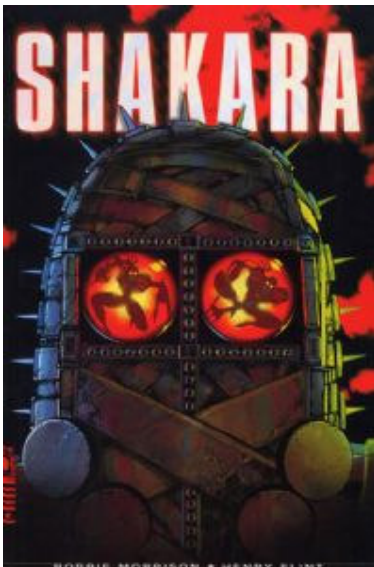
their hideous tidal wave of violence. Deeply surreal and staggeringly violent it's 'Oh What A Lovely War' to Rogue Trooper's 'Saving Private Ryan' and well worth your time.

Moving forward in time a little, Rebellion haven't been backward about reprinting newer material. Robbie Morrison's Nikolai Dante series is one part cyberpunk swash buckler, one part War and Peace with added nanotech. Nikolai, the biggest bastard (literally it turns out) in the Empire is bonded with a war crest, a mission adaptable weapon only wieldable by members of the Royal Family. Who are mostly insane. Or just very dunk. Or often both. Adrift in an Empire coming apart at the seams, Nikolai finds himself a political pawn in a game which soon erupts into all-out war. Balancing swashbuckling action with political intrigue, it's no surprise that the series has been such a success. Start with The Romanov Dynasty, and work from there. Just don't show Dante your wallet. Or your girlfriend...

The other breakout hit of the period, Sinister Dexter, is also well represented. Finnigan Sinister is an amiable sociopathic, chain-smoking Gunshark. His partner, Ramone Dexter likes watching TV. On his eyes. Together, they're the two best Gunsharks in Downlope, a city which not only doesn't know your name, it doesn't care. Fast paced, ideas heavy cyberpunk with a strong streak of black humour, Dan Abnett's pair of gun toting ne'er do wells are some of 2000AD's most enduring characters and it's easy to see why. As well as being a classic double act there's enough depth to their world, thanks to Abnett's writing, for it to become clear that their lives aren't perfect or infinite. One day, one of them is going to screw up and that may be the last day of their lives. For now, there are three volumes of their adventures available and I'd recommend starting with Gunshark Vacation, the story of why it's a very, very bad idea for these men to take a holiday.

One of 2000AD's greatest strengths has always been the 'bus approach' to storytelling, namely; 'don't like it, then another one's along in eight pages!' That's reflected perfectly in their back catalogue and some of the comic's most ambitious one off series have been given a welcome second lease of life in collected form.

One of the best of these is 'Thirteen'. Written by Mike Carey and with art by Andy Clarke it's the story of a mildly telekinetic London punk and what happens when he gets his hands on a small black pearl with incredible power. Classic 'comics with guitars', Thirteen is huge fun and a perfect example of how to do a great story in a single volume.



Another standout, although a second volume was produced, is Shakara. Written by Robbie Morrison and with superb, spiky art by Henry Flint it's the story of an unstoppable alien fleet, the path of destruction they leave in their wake and Shakara, the seemingly invincible alien killer who's hunting them down. Almost European in it's use of silence, and gleeful in it's use of violence it's a superb piece of action SF and one that deserves a lot more attention that it's had.

However, the gem of the solo volumes is 'Storming Heaven'. Collecting the majority of the work Frazer Irving produced for 2000AD, it's a dizzyingly effective showcase of one of the best artists in the business. Featuring stories exploring the war between the creatures of the night, the true nature of monsters and the titular 'Storming Heaven' a dizzying alternate history of the Haight-Ashbury superhero scene it's one of the best, and prettiest books on the market. Irving's one of the best artists in the industry and after this, you'll see why.

He's also part of the splendid 'Necronauts', written by Gordon Rennie and best described as 'He's HP Lovecraft! He's Harry Houdini! He's Sir Arthur Conan Doyle! He's Charles Fort! They fight crime!' Necronauts is, simply put, huge fun. Four of the greatest men of their age team up to

battle an eldritch horror and it's all lovingly rendered in Irving's wonderfully scratchy, almost gothic style.

Moving still further up the line to the last couple of years, the last two books I'll talk about here are again single volumes and, again, basically modern classics. 'Leviathan' written by Ian Edginton and drawn by the marvellous D'Israeli is the story of an ocean liner that's been at sea for twenty years and the community that's grown up on it. A sickly piece of period horror, lovingly rendered in D'Israeli's unique style it's big idea horror at its best and one of the best books to come out of 2000AD in the last ten years.

Finally, Asylum, written by Rob Williams and drawn by Boo Cook is a book I've already talked about for Hub but which needs to be looked at again. Mapping the immigration debate onto aliens arriving on Earth it manages to combine familiar situations with social satire and comment to create a startlingly dark story about what it means to be human and cruelty justified by the greater good. Populated by a staggering array of alien races, all lovingly and individually drawn by Cook, it's a grim little story that makes it's point intelligently and still works as an action thriller.

There are, of course, lots of other books I could talk about. The complete Nemesis the Warlock, the complete DR & Quinch or any of the other Alan Moore volumes but half the fun of this sort of thing is finding out what you like for yourself. And believe me, regardless of whether your tastes run to future war, comedy, or out and out horror there's something in 2000AD's back catalogue for everyone. Their history is alive and well and bringing new readers in every day. Do yourself a favour, and make sure you're one of them.

COMPETITION

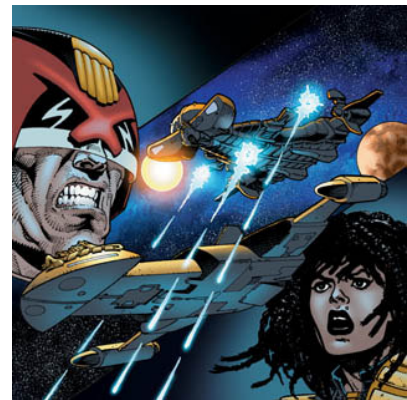
A couple of months back we ran a competition on our website to win the complete series of Judge Dredd Casefiles (a HUGE collection that had us in traction after carrying it to the Post Office).

This week we're running a competition to win some 2000AD-flavoured audio adventures – **thirteen** Judge Dredd audio dramas, and two Strontium Dog plays. That's about 18 hours (plus extras) of Big Finish audio goodness.

To win, simply email the answer to this question to competition@hub-mag.co.uk:

Which genre-loving actor plays Johnny Alpha in the Big Finish 2000AD productions?

The winner gets all 15 currently-available dramas. There will be one runner-up prize, too, but we haven't decided what that is, yet.



Coming Next Week:

Fiction: *House Trainer* by Ken Chiacchia

Coming Soon: The next instalment in our popular history of Doctor Who...

If you have enjoyed this week's issue, please consider making a small donation at www.hub-mag.co.uk. We pay our writers, and your support is appreciated.