



## Issue 71 27 December 2008

Editors: Lee Harris, Alasdair Stuart and Ellen Allen  
Published by *Right Hand Publishing*.

### Contents

Fiction: *The Watchers at the Window* by Marie Faye Prior  
Reviews: *The Clone Wars s1, eps 6-7, I Zombie, Doctor Who: The Next Doctor*

### Hub's New Home

Inspired by Gary McMahon's *Under Offer* story in issue 70, we are moving home. From now on you can find us at [www.HubFiction.com](http://www.HubFiction.com). Please amend your Favourites list. Our first home ([www.Hub-Mag.co.uk](http://www.Hub-Mag.co.uk)) will be maintained for a while, but the new address is where it's all happening.

### Scores on the Doors

Huge thanks to Vaughan Stanger, Darren Ledgerwood, Martin Willoughby, Stuart Bromwich and Christopher Burton for their kind donations to *Hub* – these will go toward ensuring *Hub* is able to continue to pay our authors.

If you would like to support *Hub* you can make a one-off donation for any amount (and any amount is very welcome) by creditcard/PayPal over at [www.HubFiction.com](http://www.HubFiction.com). Alternatively, you can set up a monthly subscription for £1 per month (approximately US\$1.50) if you prefer.

### Back in your Inbox, Yo

After a somewhat erratic publishing schedule over the last few issues, *Hub* returns to its weekly format from this issue. Next week, our Annual Fiction Special! Woohooo!

### Lee Harris is a Twit

Finally, a year or more after the cool kids have joined, *Hub* editor Lee Harris has joined **Twitter**. He can be found at [@LeeAHarris](https://twitter.com/LeeAHarris) if you feel like stalking...

**We hope you had a very Merry Christmas, and that  
2009 is everything you want it to be!**



The interview went badly from the start. Jake paused at the doorway, desperation thick on his tongue. The sun was against him, slamming through floor-to-ceiling glass, and shattering his vision into a complex dance of glowing red shards.

“Thank you for coming, Mr Rhodes.” She had a pale purr of a voice, spoiled honey in his ears. He waded, squinting, to the desk, and stuck his right hand into shadow. It was gripped, shaken and released in a reflex motion, leaving him the with the pressure of the interviewer’s palm and the slight suggestion of a smile, a spark of gold in a floating oval of scarlet. “Please, sit down.”

“Thank you for selecting me,” Jake said.

The chair swivelled as he sat, the arm-rest thudding into his thigh. He clutched at the seatback with his fingertips, afraid his sweat would leave telltale shining streaks. The leather juddered, warm and slightly repellent. He lowered himself into a seat as resistant as marshmallow, and used the cover of the desk to wipe his hands on his trousers.

She told him her name, and it slipped away on the breeze from the air conditioning. He smiled and nodded. Speak only when spoken to, he reminded himself; confidence without arrogance.

There was a tape recorder on the desk, just as the receptionist had said there would be, for the benefit of those who couldn’t be present. It squatted dully in front of him, grinding slightly as it wound.

He wondered if his voice would make it to the post-interview analysis, or if they would fast forward through him, already discarded on his dazzled smile and damp handshake. Jake thought of his sister back in Doncaster, her cheerful no-strings handouts, the cheque he knew she’d write for him. She brought him shopping, hauling bag after bag up the steps to his flat before he could tell her no, he was all right, he was getting by. But he wasn’t getting by, and the cash he saved on food was swallowed by his credit cards.

The sun dipped, but not enough to vanish behind the interviewer’s head. Time was measured by the tape recorder, wound away in the revolution of the spools. It could have been twenty minutes; it could have been an hour. Every so often the interviewer nodded, but that was all Jake could make out. Any nuance of her expression, any subtlety of her body language, was lost in the glare.

“We’ll be in touch, Mr Rhodes.” She didn’t stand to see him out. He smiled weakly.

“Thank you,” he said, and left the office without looking back.

Jake stepped out of the building, and the sun stayed with him, a red-blue veil between him and the city. It was evening on the street. Sodium and neon and the dying sun lapped wavelets on the dust-dry tarmac, the acres of glass. His palms were still sweating; he’d learnt not to bother hoping that they’d stop.

He took out his A to Z and tried to get his bearings. The papers they’d given him before the interview were crammed in the back pages, folded and unread. He’d been too nervous, preoccupied with preparing himself for the handshake, working his way through the bunched-up tissues in his inside jacket pocket.

Just two streets from Piccadilly Circus, and he would have been lost without the map. It was a world of narrow little roads compressed by their buildings, made narrower still by the storeys of brick and

steel and concrete rising on all sides. But it took a good eight paces to get from pavement to pavement, and Jake found a strange solace in the way that London warped the scale of things.

The sky faded to orange, a sickly pale darkness that admitted no stars, and put Jake in mind of the Great Fire.

After a few false starts, he found the Underground. Downstairs it was perpetual midsummer, a stark white light exacerbated by the vicious slap of the ticket barrier.

He checked his tube map for the sixth or seventh time, and ran down the escalator. North on the Metropolitan Line: straight up to King's Cross. He'd studied the map all morning, reading the names of the tube stations, wondering which one he'd get on at when he started his job, how close to the office he could afford to live. He walked to the end of the platform, avoiding the rows of suited commuters. He resented them their good fortune.

There were mice between the rails. Or rats, but smaller than he thought rats should be. He couldn't see if their tails were furred or pink; they were all dark, scuttling in shadow. They snuffled and spun in a strange little dance, guided by scent or whimsy, and he craned to see them. If he looked at them for long enough, he might forget how badly he'd fucked up. A little girl leaned forward on her father's arm, curious to see what he saw, and he pulled back.

The train came in, impossibly fast, and the rat-lings scattered. His heart thudded, and he glanced again at the tube map, the overhead display, the map again. The doors opened, and he stepped on.

The carriage was upholstered in a variety of brown and yellow stains. The original orange, a garish sunset shade, poked through at the tops of the backrests. He'd thought the Underground had cleaned up its act, but he must have heard wrong. The dirt was ingrained; grease and grit, sucked in, processed, and then excreted somehow from the weave-formed pores of the fabric. He sat down, gingerly, as the train lurched off, and could feel it clinging to the drying sweat on his palms and pressing at the gap where his shirt had rucked up out of his waistband.

The track clunked by below him, and he stared out of the opposite window. Posters gave way to graffiti gave way to darkness, momentarily broken by lines of lighter grey, the ghosts of maintenance doors and electricity cables. He tucked his shirt back into his trousers and sat back; the rhythm was a pacifier, stable and soothing.

The darkness became graffiti became adverts again, and *Leicester Square* appeared in large blue letters on ceramic tiles. Jake watched the carriage empty. He shuffled back on the seat, ready for the inevitable rushed influx of passengers bound for Covent Garden, but none came. Maybe they'd all realised it was quicker to walk. He wiped his grimy hands on a tissue, now that there was no one to watch him.

Covent Garden, Holborn, Russell Square; Jake followed the stations on his tube map and the map on the carriage wall, not trusting either one by itself to be correct. Almost there. Then the train to Doncaster, a sandwich and a good stiff scotch, a long hot bath.

The train accelerated around a corner, and Jake had to brace himself against the armrest. His back prickled, a flush of adrenaline, a shiver of cold sweat. Blood collected in his cheeks, instantly chilled by the rush of air from the tunnel. He turned his face to the breeze, but it began to dwindle. The hypnotic rush of wheel against track slowing to a gentle thud-thud, and then to nothing.

Jake shifted uncomfortably. The humid ever-heat of the Underground swept in to fill the space left by the retreating breeze.

He strained for a change in the subtle pulse of the engine, and tried to stop himself. He didn't like it when trains paused between stations. Unidentifiable noises stirred on the edge of perception, matched with flickering shadows like little ratty tails. Jake searched for something else to occupy his mind.

There was a woman at the end of the carriage. Jake exhaled his relief, slow and long so she wouldn't hear; he wasn't alone.

She sat with her head between her knees, elbows on thighs, staring at the floor. Despondent, he thought, or bored. She hummed a collection of notes, and began to swing her dangling hands in time with the loose rhythm. After a while Jake decided that his initial impression was a long way off the mark; she looked quite cheerful.

"Hmm." She sat up, her hands still swinging. She had a piercing in her left eyebrow, and her cheeks were studded with tiny sparks of diamante, stars in the night. She glanced around the empty carriage. "Hey."

"Hello," Jake said. He turned to face her, but didn't move any closer.

She grinned, and scooted along the seats in his direction. "Sodding trains keep stopping," she said, "We could be here for the long haul. So, you got a name?" She spoke like a soap actress, a self-aware crust of young South London laid over a subsoil that was all middle England.

"Jake," he replied, his voice altogether too soft in the quiet din of the idling engine. He looked away, inexplicably ashamed, as if the failures of the afternoon were explicit in the enunciation of that one word.

"What's up, Jake?" She flashed him a smile. She had a gem stuck to one of her canines; it was pink.

"Nothing much," he said. "Hoping we'll get going soon so I don't miss my train." He found himself copying her, hands hanging limp-wristed between his knees, head down so he couldn't be accused of staring. Not that he didn't want to stare; the stars on her cheek showed Orion, the belt angled up towards her ear.

"Going anywhere nice?" she asked.

Jake shrugged. "Just home," he said. "I'm down for the day, job interview."

She sat back against the crusted plush and crossed her arms above her head. "It didn't go well," he ventured, swallowing dryly.

"Harsh," she replied, licking a smear of berry gloss from her front teeth. The pink zircon winked at him.

Jake thought of the shifting red and blue shadows, the light in his eyes and the silhouette of the interviewer, her gilded hair glowing like a halo. He'd spent almost an hour in her company, but he didn't think he'd be able to pick her out in a line-up. This woman had the same steadiness about her, a similar cadence to her voice, smoke and mirrors and a thousand tiny pinpoints of fractured light. But she wasn't blonde, and she wasn't pale; her thick dark hair was scraped back and fastened tight, lacquered and immaculate, studded with a net of blue glass beads.

"Interviews can be tough." She gave him a sympathetic smile. "I'm Serena." She stuck out her right hand; Jake took it, amused at the Englishness of her gesture. "So," she said, "where's home?"

"Doncaster," Jake replied. The train still wasn't moving, and he found himself straining again for a change in the engine. He was rewarded with a sudden, ringing silence.

"Yep, looks like we'll be here for a while." Serena uncrossed her arms and inspected her nails; each one looked like it had been dipped in quicksilver.

"So, you local?" Jake spoke to stop himself from thinking.

Serena shook her head. "Kinda. More local than you."

Jake smiled. "Why d'you think we've stopped?" he asked.

Serena shrugged. "So, was it a dream job?" She raised her eyebrows, and her brow ring juddered.

"Actually, no." Jake risked looking at her, but was intimidated into staring at his feet. His wrists swung. "Well, kind of." He wasn't sure what to say; they'd made him sign confidentiality before the first round of interviews, then again at the assessment centre. It had been a miracle he'd got to the final rounds. Maybe he'd got the job after all, he'd come so far, the psychometrics, the medical. Maybe he was wrong about failing. "It was just a job," he said, "a good, well paid job, with all the trimmings, but still just a job. The thing is, I really want out of Donny. No jobs there. It was going to be my ticket to London."

"Maybe that's what went wrong," Serena hazarded. "You picked the wrong motivation."

There was a rat behind Serena's left foot. Jake's wrists stopped swinging, and he stared at it. It stared back, its long whiskers quivering, little sleek hands rubbing at its nose. Serena's mobile began to ring.

The rat waddled forward and brushed against her leg, its fur a shade darker than her skin.

Jake blinked and the rat was two rats, three, four, a cushion of rats, a carpet. Not brown modern rats, huge and filthy, but sleek, black and clever, plague rats, the rats of Old London. They poured in and around them, twitching and quivering, curious.

Jake stood up, but Serena was unconcerned.

"You weren't expecting me, were you?" she said. The phone continued to ring. The rats carried their shadows, not following meekly on behind, but piled up on their backs, dark and writhing, clinging to their fur. Serena crossed her legs, and leant back in the seat. She held out the phone.

“It’s for you,” she said, smiling with the gloss of her lips, the stars in her cheeks. She blinked, and the ends of her lashes were hung with dew. “Don’t mind them, they’re just checking you out. We’ve already approved you, but they were nosy. They made the rats carry them here to see you.”

Jake stumbled back, slipping on the grime of the floor. He caught hold of a pole, but his palms were slick and wet, and he fell. The carriage floor was damp, an organic must that stole into his nose, his mouth, probing and filling. He backed away, belly up, shuffling on all fours. Serena stood still, holding out the phone; it was open, and the static crackled noisily.

Jake glanced behind him, felt for the door handle, hauled himself up. It must open, he thought, it must open, a mantra, a prayer. And it opened, but there were two doors between carriages, and the air outside was thick and hot, the track whistling by below him. The engine was still silent.

“Just answer the phone, Jake,” Serena said, wagging it in his face. “And close the bloody door, eh?”

The rats had gone, but their shadows remained, pooled up like carcasses, like empty furs around Serena’s feet. They were still moving.

“Something tells me you don’t read everything you’re given. Believe me, you want to take this call.”

Jake fumbled with the second door, caught the latch and swung into the next carriage. Something slipped around his leg, sucked at it and he pulled forward, hauling himself along the carriage floor until he could kick the door shut.

This carriage was empty. No people, no rats. Jake lay on the floor and panted, sweating, blood in his ears like the scream of a kettle, and they were pulling into a station. Darkness and posters and the curving tiled walls of King’s Cross St Pancras. The doors opened, and Jake stumbled out. He glanced into the last carriage. Serena waved at him through the open door, snapping the flip-phone shut.

“Oh, Jake,” she said, shaking her head. “You really weren’t prepared, were you?”

Jake did not want to take the train back to Doncaster. He washed his face in the sink of the men’s toilet, the halogen strips burning sunset red and blue at the periphery of his vision. He wondered every so often if he was going to faint.

You really weren’t prepared, she’d said, and he thought no, I was prepared. I was prepared for the interview. But he hadn’t been. He’d signed confidentiality, but he hadn’t read it through. At the assessment centre, they’d given him the contract, sent him away with it overnight. He remembered laying out the sheets on the bed so he didn’t have to hold them to read, so his slick palms couldn’t wrinkle the paper.

He’d read the first page and started on the second, but there was so much, and he’d been eager to get to the bar, to find a table with one or two of his assessment team before all the seats had gone. He’d thought it was silly. He’d thought they were having him on, that it was some kind of joke he had to go along with to get to stage three.

The ad. had been for a courier, legitimate packages, expensive contents. That had been back in February, discrete and well worded in The Guardian jobs section. They’d needed someone, they said, with education, someone aware of foreign cultures. The confidentiality agreement had not mentioned couriers. It had referred to the successful applicant as a host.

And Jake had laughed at it, had thought of silly dinner parties and *Ferrero Rocher*, had scrawled his signature and gone down to the bar.

A host.

He thought of the rats with the shadows writhing on their backs, dumped at Serena’s feet, of the neatly folded pages at the back of his A to Z. The pages he’d been given before the interview, and had not read.

The job had promised to expand his horizons, to improve his confidence. To make something of him. They offered a comprehensive programme of physical and psychological development. They offered private health insurance.

A host.

He'd abandoned the contract, had gone to the bar and sat with his team, but latecomers had forced him to the margins. The tide of conversation had pushed him steadily further and further out until finally, stranded, he'd decided to go to bed. No one had noticed, and he hadn't said goodnight.

Someone pushed past him, grabbing at the soap, and Jake leant back. Could say excuse me, he thought, but kept his mouth closed. Someone else jostled him, and he stared at the mirror, watching the shadows pour like smoke, curling in arabesques from the edges of the glass. Weaving and waving, they stroked along and across and down to his reflection.

But they weren't shadows, not really. And no one else could see them.

Jake lifted a hand to his face; an evening graze of stubble pricked roughly at his fingers, and his cheeks were flushed. In the glass the shapes pressed in, not frightening, somehow, but watchful, like the shadows dumped at Serena's feet; disappointed. Something oily licked at his eyelashes, probed the surface of his tear duct.

Jake swiped it away, but it was only in the mirror. Air, empty air, and he was running, banging his thigh on the turnstile, kicking at the metal, then falling up the stairs and out onto the causeway. Strangers looked and looked away, making of him a blank, a nothingness. Overhead, the information boards flickered.

The call came for his train, a blurred and echoing announcement for the 19:58 GNER service from London King's Cross to Edinburgh Waverly. Halfway between was Doncaster, home, whisky and a bath. And his mum ringing to see how he'd got on. The dole office on Tuesday morning. His sister's kind offer of a loan.

Serena had closed the phone; he'd refused them. He thought of the rat-shadows, come to find out who he was, staring out from the mirror, disappointed, desperate. Jake ran for the Underground.

She was on the platform, standing in the doorway, hand out. He didn't take it, but slipped past her into the carriage. Serena laughed and relief bloomed bloody in the darkness of her cheeks. Her stars twinkled.

The train lurched off; the rats were nowhere to be seen. Had they been hosts, he wondered, couriers?

Serena sat down, smoothing her skirt over her thighs, prim and neat. "Had a change of perspective?" she asked.

Jake nodded, and sat down two seats from her. The upholstery was blue this time, and slightly sticky. He wiped the residue between his hands until it crumbled.

"What do I do?" he asked. Serena shook her head.

"You still didn't read it," she commented, and passed him her handset. "Take the call."

There was a charm hanging from the phone, silver wire and beads like dew on silk. Another constellation, he thought, but did not know which one.

They passed through Caledonian Road, and Serena left the carriage. Jake felt a stab of panic; they were heading out of London, and his ticket was for Zone 1. But there were tiles and posters, and the smooth blurred dark of the tunnel, and it was too late. Jake took a breath, deep, calming. His reflection looked washed out, wavering pale in the curve of the glass. Shadows clustered and wavered with him, looking out at him with eyes like January frost. Their breath was an iridescent condensation; they were waiting. The phone vibrated, twice, against his knee, then rang, an ordinary phone sound, robust and incongruous.

He opened it, and held it to his ear.

"Congratulations, Mr Rhodes," the phone told him, the words echoing, giving the impression of distance. "We would like to offer you a position."

"As a host," Jake said, transferring the phone to his other hand; he wiped his palm on his trouser leg. The train jolted and the phone scudded out of his grip, sliding under the opposite seats. He launched after it, scrabbling on the soft mossy floor. He held it back to his ear.

"Where's Serena?" he asked, the static crackling, reflecting his voice and bouncing it back to him.  
*Where's Serena?*

The train jolted again, and Jake struggled upright, into a seat. In the window opposite his reflection had vanished, clouded out by the watching things. The glass rattled. He looked into the next carriage, but it too had disappeared.

"We had to take you somewhere else, somewhere she's already been," the phone said. The voice was quieter now, and Jake struggled to hear it. "She'll be here soon; she's on the other line."

"What's out there?" Jake asked. Something dark bulged at the ventilation hatch, and Jake flinched. It pulsed slightly, a weird fleshy translucence. Indistinct shapes swam into view behind it; a flash of chitin, a curve of carapace. A hint of great bulk, anaemic and shadow-sheathed.

"It's hiding you," the voice cut in, leaping from the static. "You don't want to know what's outside."

"How do I get back?" Jake yelled. The carriage groaned as if squeezed. The watchers at the window groaned with it, flattened against the glass. He'd thought they were the same as the things in the mirror, but they weren't. They chattered excitedly, vibrating like the phone, shivering.

"You can take two," the voice told him, and it was Serena, feeding him honey, cooling his blood. "Maybe three. I'll have the paperwork ready when you get back."

Jake nodded, croaked an "OK", swallowed.

"Take deep breaths, they don't like it if you're nervous," she said. "They'll panic if you do, they'll run away and then they'll die. We don't want that." Serena didn't panic; he could hear the smile in her voice, see her lip gloss shining, the stars glimmering from the curve of her cheek.

Stars like frost, like their eyes, shimmering huddled on or in or between the glass. Jake took a breath, then another. The phone was slick in his palm, and his hands were shaking.

"They're refugees," Serena said, and it wasn't Serena, but the woman from the interview. He remembered her face, a pale blur, her blonde hair haloed in the setting sun. "Can't you see how scared they are?"

"Take three," the first voice said, crackling and far away. "But no more."

"How?" Jake said, but the glass was bowing inwards, flexible as rubber, and little frost-fern hands of lace and ice were reaching out to him, little mouths chattering, eyes blinking like the flash of distant pulsars.

"Take a deep breath," Serena told him.

They seeped onto his fingers, dripping like condensation from the window, a cool, crisp tingling, and he breathed them in. One, two, three, gas and smoke, and the chill of midwinter. He closed his mouth, drew back, and others reached for him, so many others, scraping their fern-frost hands against the smooth, retreating glass.

There was a heat in his chest, a discomfort like indigestion. He sat down, bending, his head between his knees, and the feeling rose. It caught like bile in his throat, then was gone. Something chattered in the empty dark behind his sinuses; the three shuffled round, prodding and poking, excited. It didn't hurt, but he could feel the pressure of them, expanding and settling. Thankful.

The train juddered around a corner, slowed, and Jake realised that he'd dropped the phone. He went to pick it up, but Serena got there before him. She sat down on the next seat, and held out a sheaf of papers.

"We should have sorted this before, but the windows open on a schedule, and we had to get you out there. Had you actually read what you'd been given, we'd have had time." She lay the papers in his lap, and passed him a pen. "Nevertheless, you did it," she said. "Well done."

Jake nodded and signed. Serena detached his copy of the contract, and lay it in his lap.

"Now what do I do?" he asked. His head felt lighter, somehow, as if his three creatures, his refugees, were buoying him up. The doors opened on Turnpike Lane, wherever that was.

"Get off the train, catch the next one from the opposite platform, get off at King's Cross and go home," Serena said. "You'll need a bit of time, to adjust, you know?" She tapped her head, and a pair of little eyes winked like frost from each iris. "Get to know them, let them know you. Keep healthy. They can't survive without you, keep yourself safe. Don't look like that, just check both ways before crossing the road, that sort of thing. Any questions, any at all, call me." She pointed out her number, highlighted in

yellow at the top of the contract beside the word *mentor*. “When you’re settled with them, you can think about relocating, get your ticket into London.”

Jake nodded and stepped off the train. Serena patted him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry,” she said, “you did a good thing.”

A good thing. They’d fallen silent, his three refugees, and he wondered if they were sleeping, or just waiting, working out who he was. One of them made a contended noise, and he found himself smiling. He glanced at the contract, at the high salary and excellent benefits, the company car, holidays, health insurance. All this, just for them.

Slipping a hand into his pocket, feeling for the papers at the back of the A to Z, Jake headed home.

---

---

## REVIEWS

*The Clone Wars* s1, ep 6 – 7 reviewed by Richard Whittaker,  
*I, Zombie* reviewed by Andrew Edwards

---

*The Clone Wars* Series 1 – Episodes 6-7 - *Reviewed by Richard Whittaker*  
“Downfall of a Droid” Directed by Rob Coleman, written by George Krstic  
“Duel of the Droids” Directed by Rob Coleman, written by Kevin Campbell and Henry Gilroy  
Starring: Matt Lanter, Ashley Eckstein, Ron Perlman, Matthew Wood

There’s never been a more popular trash can than R2-D2, so it was inevitable that the *Clone Wars* would center an episode around him sooner or later. It’s almost a surprise that it took so long.

R2 is kind of an enigma. A self-propelled Swiss Army Knife (purists still kvetch about how he’s too powerful in the prequels, but they miss the point that by *A New Hope* he’s actually broken, a 20-year-old machine well past his service date), his character is a little mysterious, beyond his remarkable loyalty and a minor mean streak. For all that, he’s incredibly popular, so it makes sense that his first center-stage story is about how loved he is – by Anakin Skywalker.

Writer Krstic is probably best known (and that’s generous) for minor cult hit TV show *Megas XLR*, the only *anime* set in New Jersey. Yet his opening script is subtle, because it is built around an established character flaw in Anakin. In *Revenge of the Sith*, it’s his failure to detach himself from the people he loves that leads to his downfall, genocide, dictatorship and a few other bad things. This time around, it’s his attachment to a thing – R2-D2, who he loses in a dogfight. The other Jedi are quite happy to abandon him, until Anakin reveals he never erased his memory banks and the Republic’s entire order of battle is in there, waiting to be sold by Trandoshan scrap dealer Gha Nachkt (*Hellboy*’s Perlman in an almost unrecognizable vocal cameo) to the Separatists.

The second half of this two-parter, *Duel of the Droids*, shows what happens when astromechs clash. Anakin ends up with a replacement as droid, R3-S6, but he’s far less competent than R2. What emerges are two symmetrical stories, as both Skywalker and Gha Nachkt have a little saboteur on-board. When the two droids finally get into a trundle-off, it’s a combination of





innovation and clunkiness that somehow still stays loyal to the character of R2. It's also surprisingly funny, considering that the only way either character can convey emotion is through booping sounds.

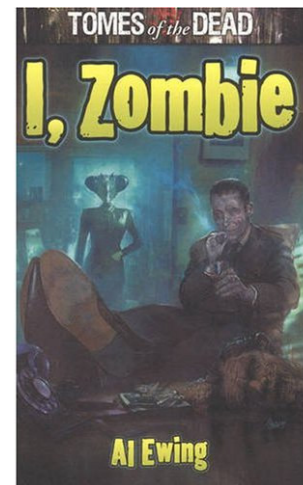
Where the two halves fit together best is that, while this could have been a comedy episode (and it does have some laughs), it's a cut-and-thrust war story. The battle of Bothawui, where Anakin loses R2, pivots on a clever bit of strategy that depends on a revelation from an earlier episode (hint: air-tight clone trooper armour). There're more nods to established continuity, including the return of IG units, and some nifty new anti-droid weapons: Plus, General Greivous remains a cold bastard.

The weakest point may be of the whole affair may be the soundtrack, which depends on a mix of off-the-peg generic trailer music and some dismal standard issue pop-rock that sounds like *Ben10* out-takes. But where this story stands out is in the animation, and most especially the lighting. Long-time Lucas staffer Coleman (the man behind the Yoda-Dooku sequence in *Attack of the Clones*) goes from the shadow-drenched gloom and filth of Nacht's floating trash heap of a ship to the ethereal, blown-out glow of a medical bay with an almost painterly eye. His directorial debut is a success, ensuring people still care about the self-propelled pedal bin.

Next issue: You know him, you love him. Jar Jar Binks strikes back in *Bombad Jedi*.

---

*Tomes of the Dead: I, Zombie*  
Written by Al Ewing  
Abaddon, £6.99



Modern horror is undergoing something of a resurgence recently, with authors such as Joe Hill and Neil Gaiman setting the bar for intriguing modern horror, and greats such as Stephen King (Hill's father, incidentally), returning to classic form in books such as the recent novel *Cell*, which re-established the freshness and relevance of King's voice for the modern horror reader. Abaddon Press are staking (pardon the pun) their claim in the horror market with a range of fiction described by no less a leading light than Clive Barker as "the fallen angel of the abyss".

*I, Zombie* is Al Ewing's second novel for Abaddon Press, written specifically for the 'Tomes of the Dead' Imprint, and it's his attempt to create a horror novel through demolishing the established rules of thousands of creative writing classes, often to great effect. The opening of the novel is an attempt to create a narrative in a language reflecting a pre-historic perspective, and owes much to the opening chapter of Alan Moore's *Voice of the Fire*, which attempts a similar technique. Both novels ignore current wisdom which states that you need to engage and capture the reader from the very start, as such unconventional openings require you to work from the start to decode the odd syntax and language constructions.

What the opening does do is locate the zombie within an historical context which reaches far back into the ancient past, which in itself is an unusual approach to such material which tends to locate the creatures firmly within the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Another innovation is the reinvention of the zombie itself: the shambling slowness of a Romero-zombie, still an influence on contemporary imaginings from *Shaun of the Dead* to Image Comics' *The Waking Dead*, is given a Matrix-style make-over. It shouldn't work, but it does, largely due to the protagonist, named John Doe, who adopts the narrative voice after the prologue in an engaging, intimate manner, grabbing your attention and never letting go.

The second part of the book engages in switching between various narrative viewpoints, settings and historical periods, and again, Ewing ignores established conventions by not sticking to one narrative perspective throughout the book. He seems to challenge the reader to keep up with him and his story, and there is a breathless zest to what could so easily have become a confusing exercise in manipulating the narrative. The book is crying out for sequels, which would give Ewing further opportunities to develop this intriguing interpretation on the standard horror genre of Zombie tales.

*Doctor Who Christmas Special: The Next Doctor*

Written by Russell T Davies

Directed by Andy Goddard

Starring David Tennant, David Morrissey, Dervla Kerwan

Landing in Victorian London (is there anything that evokes Christmas quite as much?), the Doctor seems ill at ease. He's just left a memory-wiped Donna, and is evidently at a loose end. The prospect of a Victorian Christmas seems a little tame, until the Doctor hears someone screaming for his help. The Doctor smiles (someone in trouble? That's more like it!) and rushes off to help.

He finds a peasant girl screaming for the Doctor, but it's not him she's after. In storms David Morrissey, who describes himself as "The Doctor! The one, the only, the best!"

Dressed a trifle outlandishly, it's not beyond the realms of possibility that he is a future incarnation of our favourite Timelord. He does not recognize Tennant's incarnation, however, though a recent trauma (perhaps the trauma of regeneration?) has made him lose most of his memory. He knows himself to be a Timelord, he owns a sonic screwdriver (of sorts) and a TARDIS (again, of sorts).

Who Morrissey's Doctor is, and how he became the Doctor, is played with both flair and pathos. The subplot (Cybermen raising an army and crowning their Cyber-King) threatens to be overshadowed by the "2 Doctors" thread, but manages to keep our interest. Though Cybermen have resolutely failed to be scary in any of the past four seasons of *Who*, the appearance of a gigantic cyber-punk Cyberman (in fact, a dreadnought-class warship) is enough to dispel any thoughts of cyber-uncool.

This isn't an episode to strain the grey matter, but that's not the point. It's pure, unassailable fun, and perfect Christmas fayre.



---

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