

# Hub Magazine

SCIENCE FICTION HORROR FANTASY

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## EDITORIAL:

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by **alasdair stuart**

### The Day Before The Day

Two days ago, Felicia Day, actress, writer, producer and all around Renaissance woman put a message up on her Twitter account revealing that the episode of Dollhouse she appeared in would not appear on TV. Later that same day, Joss Whedon put a confirmation up on the Dr Horrible Twitter feed.

Now, putting aside the internet meltdown that ensued, and side stepping the seemingly endless debate about whether or not Dollhouse is actually any good, this is the second time Twitter has outstripped conventional news feeds. The hostage crisis in Mumbai earlier this year saw Twitter accounts being used by the BBC as a complement to their coverage whilst in February the news that a hostage crisis in Greenville was over came to a local reporter via the daughter of one of the hostages' twitter account, several minutes before the official statement.

We may not be the full twenty minutes into the future Max Headroom talked about but it's getting close. We're now at the point where information is so ubiquitous, so fast that the rules on how this information is used are being rewritten on the fly. Editors in particular are going to find it very tough to sort the wheat from the chaff, to separate the 'citizen journalists' from the people looking for attention.

But the real point is change, the sort of sweeping and ubiquitous change we won't know until it's already happened. Twitter may well just be the catalyst, but the speed and breadth of information available to us has never been faster and wider. It's going to be fascinating to see what people do with that information.

It's fun living in the future sometimes, isn't it?

# FICTION

## Mother Sponge

by mur lafferty

The food shaman muttered a prayer as he slowly sliced the meat on the chopping block. Jenni, fifteen with bruises healing on her face, watched alongside her family.

Gavin, the food shaman, was a huge, strong man, but older than any Jenni had ever seen. When he was done with his prayer and the meat lay in neat slices in front of him, she ventured a question.

"What did you do before the war?"

He turned slowly to look at her, the large knife still held lightly in his hand. Her father gasped behind her and smacked her hard on her ear.

"Forgive her, shaman," he said. "She doesn't understand."

Jenni smoothed her hair and glared at the ground, but she knew not to argue that she understood the etiquette breach. But she had never encountered anyone as old as the food shaman, someone who would remember life before the war, and she wanted to know what the world had been like. She wanted to know badly enough to ask the ultimate rude question.

Gavin regarded her again, and then returned to his work, pouring fragrant oil over the meat in front of him on the chopping block. (*Piece of meat, that's all it is*, Jenni told herself). But to her surprise, he began to speak. "I suppose you can say I was an entertainer."

"Oh. Like you are now?"

"Not quite, but close enough," he said, a trace of a smile crossing his lips. "I was very different than I am now."

"How long have you been with The Mercury?"

Her father stiffened behind her, and she dropped her eyes again, anticipating the blow. It came, a slap to her same ear that left her hearing muffled and her head reeling. She tumbled to the floor as her father apologized for her again, and then dragged her from the room.

"Your mother is three weeks dead and you honor her by asking pointless questions to the shaman who prepares her death feast?" he hissed at her, holding her upper arm tightly as she fought back tears.

He pushed her down and rubbed his face, looking suddenly tired. Jenni wondered if she was supposed to feel pity for him, widowed and suddenly forced to raise four children by himself. It didn't come, and she felt nothing but hatred for him when he returned to the kitchen to stand with her three younger siblings, shutting the door behind him. She knew she wasn't expected to follow.

The Mercury, a diplomatic train that was considered foreign, neutral soil, had passed through town just at the right time for her mother to get the ultimate passage to Beyond - a food shaman was on The Mercury to guide her there and comfort the family.

Jenni looked out the shiny front room window - recently replaced after her mother had tripped and fallen against it, breaking her neck as well as the glass - to where the community was preparing for the Day of the Dead festival. It was a small community; only her mother was to be honored at this festival. But no one refused a good Day of the Dead feast, so everyone decorated the square for the celebration of Jenni's mother's life.

Her classmates hung black streamers from the glass sculptures in the town square, great barbed things that had been cut from the glass ground in the desert, cut from glass that had been created forty years previously in the war when the very sand had melted.

Jenni missed her mother, but could not hide the contempt she had for the woman. Small, weak, tired, and utterly unable to stop her husband from hitting her children, or herself. Jenni had learned in school about maternal instinct to protect the young at all costs, to where mothers would kill much larger predators for the sake of their children.

The familiar bitter feelings rose in her throat like bile and she shook the tears from her eyes and took a deep breath. She wasn't going to miss out on her mother's preparation for her final journey. She went back into the house and slipped up to the kitchen door. She pushed it open gently and silently and breathed a sigh of relief as she saw her father's back to her. The food shaman still sliced carefully at the meat in front of him as her family whispered prayers, little Opal watching the knife with wide eyes.

Gavin was slicing a small piece of meat for himself, slipping it into a lidded cup that hung from his belt alongside several other vials and containers.

"The oil will preserve it for time before the feast. Now I have to go back to my quarters and prepare

for the ritual. Please do not disturb the kitchen before I return."

Her father and siblings nodded. Gavin looked at the door - straight at Jenni - and frowned. "Brother Matthew, why do you not discipline your children? Your girl is disobeying you."

Jenni gasped and backed away from the door as if it were hot. It flew open and out stormed the food shaman, followed by her father looking murderous. Before her father's fist could fall, Gavin's scarred hand stopped it.

"She spied on my ritual, I will be the one to discipline her," he said, trapping Jenni's wrist in his other hand. "She is mine for the afternoon."

Jenni's breath caught in her throat. She looked at her father frantically and when he didn't protest, she squirmed in the food shaman's grip and began to cry. Her brothers' eyes widened and Paul, the older at fourteen, stepped forward. Her father held him back and nodded. "Perhaps it will stop that willful streak."

The food shaman pulled her, screeching in fear, from her home.

Jenni's cheeks burned with shame as the food shaman picked her up and threw her over his shoulder, carrying her across the crowded courtyard and to the waiting silver train. Her classmates stared at her tear-streaked face.

Once they entered the train, his hands on her became much less rough as he took her off his shoulder in the metal and wood trimmed hallway. His huge hands closed on her shoulders and she shrank from him.

"You are on neutral soil now. No one can harm you here. Your father cannot harm you here. Come with me." He took her hand gently but firmly and led her down the hall.

Jenni followed in mute confusion, tears still flowing. What did he mean? No one could rescue her? Then she remembered - residents of the warlord states couldn't enter the train unless invited, it was like a foreign state.

Gavin slid open a door to a room about half the size of Jenni's family's kitchen, but much more well-stocked. One half was a tight but organized kitchen nook, with cabinets, jars, cookware, a small icebox and a small gas stove. A smudged window in the wall looked over the town courtyard where mourners still hung decorations in preparation of the evening's festivities. The other half of the room held a sleeping area, with a bookshelf cabinet with clear doors, a tall closed cabinet Jenni guessed held the shaman's clothing, a small bunk that folded against the wall, and a chair bolted to the floor. It was a tidy, orderly living space, and Jenni was immediately claustrophobic.

The shaman put her in the chair and slid the door closed behind them. She folded her arms around herself and tried to make herself as small as possible.

He smiled sadly. "You haven't figured out yet that I'm not going to hurt you, have you?" She shook her head. "Well then. I will answer your question. You were right - I am old enough to remember the time before the war. Back then I was a musician. It was forty-one years ago, and I was the hottest thing since Jim Morrison. You won't know who he was, but trust me; he was a big deal. So I was a star, and then the bombs fell, and for a while, nothing mattered."

She wiped her tears. "How did you become a food shaman?"

"After the war, no one cared whether you could play a guitar or write a song. They wanted to know if you could set a broken bone or make antibiotics or build a house. Me, I could cook for a lot of people - my mother was a chef and we had a large family. I started cooking for a small commune in what is now the warlord state of New Vegas. The water wars started a couple of years later, and it got really ugly." Gavin rubbed a scar on his cheek absently. "It was around that time that The Mercury came along. I wanted out and they needed a cook. I've been with them since."

Jenni frowned. The food shaman's voice had calmed her down, but his story still didn't make sense. "But-" she bit down on her question. Her father hated questions.

"-How did a chef become a holy man?" Gavin asked. "Never hesitate to ask me a question, Jenni. You learn by asking, not by me telling. After the wars, some communities took on primitive, well, that is to say, older views of religion. Everyone lost family in the wars. So we became more attached to the family we had. When we lost them to sickness, injury, even the ones lucky enough to die from being too old, it was a strange psychological hit. We wanted to be closer to them."

He rummaged around in his cabinet beside the gas stove and brought out a small wooden chest. It was ornately decorated in gold filigree and locked. He pulled a small key from a chain around his neck and unlocked it. "This is, as far as I know, one of three collections of food from before the war. Our heritage, so to speak."

He held up a vial filled with a golden brown oil. "This is cooking oil. You can reuse cooking oil several times, but when all is done, you must keep a vial of it before throwing it out. Once you start with fresh oil, you add the vial of the old oil to add just enough impurities to make the new oil perfect."

He handed her the vial and she stared at it, marveling at the color. She handed it back to him carefully.

"These are spices you can no longer find." He held up a small jar with a red powder inside and unscrewed the top. "Paprika. Smell it."

Jenni took a cautious whiff and wrinkled her nose at the weak, unfamiliar smell, but then smiled as

she got used to it. It smelled like what she imagined the desert smelling like.

"I keep it around just in case we can ever reproduce it, or know what it is if we find it again. Or," he frowned, "at the very least it's a connection to the past. Do you want to smell more?"

She nodded eagerly. After smelling some other exotic spices that had, according to the food shaman, long since lost their potency, she nearly forgot her fear.

"There's one bit of history that I have to keep cold," Gavin said. His face had become animated as he reached into a small ice box on the other side of the stove. He pulled out a glass jar and handed it to Jenni.

She put her face close to the glass and peered at the white, bubbly mass inside. "What is it?"

"That is my mother sponge. She's been on this train as long as I have."

Jenni made a face. Gavin nodded enthusiastically. "Really. It's flour, water and wild yeast. When you want to bake a loaf of bread, you start it off with half of what's in that jar. Then you add a little flour and water and let her grow again. She gives herself to make her children, but stays strong, ready to give more and more. She's been with me since I became a shaman, and she's my prize possession."

Jenni looked again at the bubbly mass, and then back at the shaman. While the mass didn't convince her, the look on his face did.

"I guess," she said. "But what does this have to do with being closer to our loved ones?"

Gavin smacked his hands together, suddenly not the terrifying shaman. "Right! That's what I was getting to! I'm sorry, I get excited when showing off my history." He rifled in his trunk again and pulled out a jar with small white disks inside.

"And this," he said reverently, "is what they called the host. It was early transubstantiation. The Christians of the time used this as part of their rituals. Priests would bless these wafers, Christians would eat them, and they would claim that it turned into the body of their god while in their stomachs. Then they could say they had the god inside them."

Jenni wrinkled her nose. That was supposed to be pieces of a god? "But how-"

"I'm getting to it. People wanted to be closer to their lost loved ones after they died, like they had been to their god. That's when they moved transubstantiation from white crackers to loved ones. But you can't have a priest that knows nothing about cooking just start cooking up human meat. So priests and chefs started training together, and then the food shaman was born. I studied with a couple of priests who survived the war after I encountered my first community that wanted me to transubstantiate a dead loved one for them."

"So... people didn't have Day of the Dead ceremonies where they transubstantiated their relatives before the war?"

"They had Day of the Dead ceremonies, but it wasn't the same thing. Only in the past thirty-five years or so have we brought the actual bodies into the ceremonies. Which reminds me," he said, taking the jar of little god wafers from her, "we need to have a look at your mother's brain."

"Look at it? I always thought the shaman took their part of the brain so they could eat it and be closer to the person they're preparing, like the family. You're supposed to have everyone you've ever helped on their journey inside of you, right?"

Gavin sighed and pulled out a tall box from a cabinet. "That is what we tell people, yes. But really, there's a more important reason we have to take a piece of the brain away." He pulled a very odd looking device from the box. Her friend Amy had a spyglass that her father had used on his boat before he died, it had been long and made of brass, wood and glass, and was gorgeous. This device looked like a spyglass had been mounted on a tripod, and the viewer was forced to look straight down at the table.

Gavin took a small, wicked-looking knife from his belt and sliced off a very small piece of brain from the piece in the jar hanging from his belt. He slid it onto a square of glass and slipped it under the spyglass. He took a tube from the device and screwed it into a nipple on the wall. Jenni heard the hiss of gas, and a light came on and flickered underneath as Gavin looked through the spyglass.

He frowned and turned a knob. He swore quietly to himself. "Jenni, I may have some bad news. Hang on, I'll need another opinion." He slid open the door and called into the hall. "Gloria! I need you!"

He returned to his device as Jenni wondered what he could be looking at. A woman of about forty came in, finishing braiding her long graying black hair. "You could have said please. You never say please."

"When I think I'm looking at the cause of the human strain of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy, manners tend to leave me," Gavin said, standing back and welcoming her to the device.

She frowned and took a look herself. When she looked back up at Gavin, her face was white. "It's not the standard human variant. It's Anthropophagous Spongiform Encephalopathy."

"Are you sure?"

She nodded. "I saw it when I was traveling on The Marionette. You know, they had the North-South route. When I was in the Heartland warlord state, I saw this. It wiped out a whole community. We didn't have a food shaman with us, so they had a local holy man prepare the ceremony. He wouldn't listen to me when I told him not to prepare the brain for the family. Everyone who ate that brain was dead within two to three days."

Gavin nodded slowly. "That's right. That's why you moved back to The Mercury wasn't it?"

She grimaced. "My job carries more weight with a food shaman around. Hello, who is this?" She had

spotted Jenni.

Jenni had been watching their exchange, understanding only half the words. She blushed when the woman looked at her, but when she had looked annoyed and sharp when talking to Gavin, she smiled when she saw Jenni.

"This is the daughter of who we're looking at. Her father is an enthusiastic disciplinarian, and I figured I'd give her a break. Show her some history."

The woman - Gloria - laughed. "You showed her your anthropology box, didn't you? And the mother sponge?"

Gavin grinned. "Don't I always? And that mother sponge is -"

"-The oldest and tastiest of mother sponges that exist today, I know, trust me." Gloria went to Jenni and held out her hand. Jenni shook it tentatively. "He scared the crap out of you before you realized he was helping you out, right?"

Jenni nodded, her eyes wide.

"Don't worry, he's mostly harmless." She lost her smile as she focused again on the device on Gavin's counter. "But if you eat your mother's brain, that's another story. Back before the war they called it mad cow disease, and the human variant was called Creutzfeld-Jacob Disease. But since then it's evolved with the practice of human transubstantiation. Mad cow took years to kill you, while Anthropophagous Spongiform Encephalopathy can kill you in two to three days. Did your mother participate in any funereal rites in the last week before her death?"

Jenni shook her head. "She'd visited her sister in Zebulon a couple of days before she died. But I don't think she went to any funerals."

Gloria rubbed her forehead. "Zebulon. I'm surprised that community is still around. They dry brains, grind them, and add them to meals for months after the family member's funeral. Anyone who ate that brain will be dead by now."

"My mother died of a fall," Jenni said after a pause.

"Did she die soon after getting home?" Gloria asked.

Jenni nodded. "The day after."

"Then the disease didn't have a chance to get her. She could be considered lucky, except, well..." Gloria frowned at Jenni. "I'm very sorry for your loss, Jenni."

Gloria reached over and switched off the gas to the device. "Regardless, your family cannot participate in the final part of the ritual, or else they'll all die."

Gavin had left the train to prepare the rest of her mother's body. He had donned the ritualistic hood that shamans wore when cooking funeral feast. Gloria stood behind Jenni with her hands on the girl's shoulders at the window in Gavin's train compartment.

"Do you know why they wear those hoods?" Gloria asked.

"I thought it- " Jenni faltered. She didn't know anything anymore. Her mind raced as she wondered what else was merely an illusion.

"If someone had an illness when they were sick- Not as bad as mad cow disease- I mean something like influenza - it could make the shaman sick as he's working on the body. Once the meat is cooked, there's no harm in it, but the one preparing it could get sick. It looks mysterious and holy, but it's really a way to protect him."

"Oh." Jenni chewed on her lip.

"You don't have to go back, you know," Gloria said softly. "You're on neutral ground. Your father can't follow you here. Gavin chose you. It's what he does."

Jenni tasted copper, then realized she'd bitten her lip hard. "It is?"

"I was his first," Gloria said, sounding far away. "I was seven. I lived in a community on the border of New Vegas. It was after the water war, and my parents had arranged to have me sold for two hundred gallons of water. I was on the sales block when Gavin rescued me during a Day of the Dead ceremony. I was raised on The Mercury. I learned from the physicians, and became, well, the closest thing to a doctor we can have these days."

Jenni's head swam. "How many others?"

"How many does he rescue? Depends. Clearly the train isn't full of children, although we do have some. He averages about one or two a year. Some are younger, like me. Some are older, like you. You didn't laugh at him when he showed you his treasures. I'm sure he'd love to make you his apprentice."

Jenni pulled her eyes away from the window to look up at Gloria. "How did you know I didn't laugh?"

"He looked so delighted when I asked him if he showed you. That meant you have promise. You show interest. We need more shamans in this world, if only to keep people from transubstantiating sick family members."

At that moment, Jenni realized her mother was well and truly dead, and Jenni would be denied the ritual that was designed to bring her close to her one last time. "I have to go back," she whispered, and pulled away from the physician's grasp.

"He won't save you a second time, Jenni," Gloria called after her as she sprinted down the hall and



leapt off the train.

Jenni's oldest brother, Paul, was bleeding from a head wound when she got home.

"Is Dad here?" she asked, taking his hand from the cold compress he was holding and putting pressure on it.

He shook his head and winced. "He knocked me into the door on his way out looking for you. He thought you should have been back by now. Are you all right?"

She nodded. "I'm fine. He didn't do anything."

"You'd better not be here when Dad gets back."

"But I thought he was looking for me?"

Paul looked at her through an increasingly swelling eye. "You know how he gets. He needs to be the one to rescue you from the situation he willingly put you in. If you get out on your own, then you make him impotent."

He took the compress from her as she reached for a wash cloth to wipe the blood from his face.

"What happened in there, anyway?"

"The food shaman was just getting me away from Dad. He and another lady on the train showed me some stuff. Nothing important. Did he come back?"

"Yeah, he's in the kitchen preparing the feast."

Jenni swallowed and stared at the door. "Are you OK?" she asked without looking at Paul.

"He's done worse. I'll be all right. God, Jenni, I dream about getting away every day. I can't wait until I'm fifteen and can get apprenticed and out of here."

Jenni shook her head. "Yes, it's not safe here for any of us. Get away when you can, Paul." She stood and headed for the kitchen.

"You can't go in there, Jenni - he's still doing the ritual," Paul said, alarm animating his voice.

His words unheeded, Jenni opened the door to the kitchen. The hooded head that was slicing an undistinguishable piece of meat snapped up, and then he relaxed. "Jenni. Come in, close the door behind you. Did anyone see you come in?"

"Paul. He won't tell Dad."

He went back to the meat and began rubbing it with salt and herbs. "You were safer on the train, you know."

"You could have told me you intend to take me with you," she said, watching him truss the roast.

"Did I fail to mention that?" he asked absently.

"I don't have a hood. Can I come closer?" She asked.

"Your mother died of being beaten by your father, Jenni, not an illness. I wear the hood regardless of my subject just to keep up appearances. They expect it. Come closer."

He stepped back and indicated a bubbling stew pot. "Stew made from the leg bones, spine, and hands, flavored with vegetables, pasta and meat from the calf muscle. In the oven are pies made from the fine muscles on the face, fat, and sugar. This," he slapped the roast in front of him, "is a roast made from the long thigh muscles. It needs to cook for a couple of hours. The rest of the steaks will be cooked out in the courtyard for your neighbors."

She nodded, fascinated. Her mother's brain still lay on the chopping block, preserving oil glistening on its folds. "Gavin."

He pulled his hood off and looked at her. "Yes, Jenni?"

"You're right. He killed her. If I stay, what do you think will happen to me?"

His voice was stony. "You know the answer. As you get older and closer to womanhood, he may rape you. His willingness to give you to me indicates that may have already happened. I'm sure you'll be beaten regularly until you manage to escape, either by apprenticeship or marriage. You'll likely stay in this town until you die, down the road from the man who tormented your first fifteen years."

She looked at the brain and thought about her mother, her quiet, kind mother who could not protect her children from the man who had killed her.

"I'll come with you."

Jenni took very little time in the room she shared with her younger sister, Opal. She threw some clothes into a pillowcase, a picture that her mother painted for her, and her favorite two books. She grabbed her comb and toothbrush and ran down the hall.

As the fist came toward her face, she realized she probably shouldn't have stayed to pack.

Her father's fist connected with her jaw and she crumpled, dazed from the pain exploding in her head.

"You little slut, you whore yourself out on the day of your mother's funeral, then have the gall to return here and take part in the feast. Your mother would hide her face if she knew." He reared back and kicked her in the stomach.

Jenni knew it was pointless to bring up that he had given her to that fate. Selective memory was a skill of his unparalleled by any but perhaps his unerring punches. She heard the kitchen door open as she fought for breath, and a hesitant peek showed Gavin enter the room before he was obscured by her

father's foot as he kicked her again.

With a start she remembered Gloria's words; if Jenni got off the train, Gavin would not interfere to save her again. He stood, watching the beating, his arms crossed.

"Did you enjoy her? Did you enjoy taking what's mine?" her father yelled at the food shaman. Looking at Gavin, he drew his foot back yet again, aiming this time at Jenni's head. She took advantage of his split attention and blocked the kick, grabbing the foot and twisting hard.

Utterly flummoxed by the surprise of Jenni's move, her father fell sideways and down, landing on his hip. Something snapped and he howled in pain.

Jenni got to her feet. She glanced once at Gavin and said, "I'll be on the train when you're done." She spat a mouthful of blood at her father. "No one will be here to transubstantiate you, Dad."

She left the house, fighting back adrenaline-charged sobs and ignoring her father's demands to return. Outside, Paul ran into the yard, his wound closed with white tape. "God, are you OK?"

She nodded, spitting out more blood and making a face. "It's my last beating. He had to make it a good one. I'm leaving, Paul. Please make sure Opal and Christopher are taken care of."

She paused and took his bruised head gently in both hands to force him to look into her eyes. "And please, Paul, listen to me: make sure no one but Dad eats the stew."

He nodded, eyes wide. "Why?"

"Think about it as Mom's final message to him, and only him. When really it'll be her final gift to us. I love you, Paul." She kissed his forehead.

"Will you come back?"

"The next time The Mercury comes through, I'll be on it. Be good, and take care of the others. Things will get better in two to three days, Paul."

She paused before reaching the edge of their property, the shining specter of the train glinting like a beacon in the dying afternoon sun. She looked back at her brother.

"Just don't eat the stew."



# The REAL Easter Bunny

by peter roberts

Your tiny face all flushed and bright with glee:  
The morning comes not soon enough for thee.  
But now, my dearest, lay your head to rest  
And let the Easter Bunny do his best.

When ripened sunlight springs afresh to show  
On dappled bed and dew-washed patio  
My gifts to thee, as sweet as nature's wine,  
Then take of them my child, this Easter time.

Hush! Say no word but only close your eyes  
To dream away the hours before thy prize.  
Partake of wonders through the witching hour;  
I'll pray for thee, my precious little flower.

Forthwith the garden where I must begin -  
Before the veil of darkness wears too thin -  
To hide your bounty, wondrous to behold,  
In beauty's dawn-kissed colours, red and gold.

My calling's undeclared to thee this day  
As shadows suck and squeeze the truth away;  
And dark informs their aeon span of lies,  
Thy childish innocence their sole disguise.

Parents, Alice, trust them nevermore.  
For as you search and find and reach the door,  
A desolation opens up inside  
To crush and choke thy heart, sweet hope denied.

You cannot hear me, dear, of that I'm sure  
So I shall simply hide behind this door  
And watch your tragic suffering unfold:  
My secret issue, hungry, uncontrolled.

'Look, dolly, there's a bright one over there!  
And look, another: hurry, we can share!'  
The morning green is damp beneath your knees,  
Your teeny hand outstretched into the trees.

You find it, feel it, take it in your fist  
When sudden prick of thorn entraps your wrist;  
And then another, tearing through the skin;  
You cry and drop your prize, but can't see in.

Now tears are streaming, washed with disbelief,  
As paralysed you feel the bunny's teeth  
Come sinking, ripping, biting hot and true,  
Until at last you pull your hand back through.

The sun appears and floods your skin with gold,  
To complement the sparkling red you hold.  
Where once were fingers, dainty sweet and fair,  
There now are bleeding stumps beyond repair.

You can't cry out; you cannot find a word  
As sounds of other children can be heard.  
From where I sit it's plain for all to see:  
The Easter lies delivered you to me.



# REVIEWS

## Skellig

*reviewed by alasdair stuart*



**Starring Bill Milner, Tim Roth, Kelly Macdonald, John Simm, Skye Bennett, Edna Dore, Jermaine Allen, Alexander Armstrong and Navin Chowdhry**

**Written by David Almond and Irena Brignull**

**Directed by Annabel Jankel**

**7pm, Sky 1, Easter Sunday**

Mikey (Milner)'s life has become a series of small, adolescent apocalypses. His mother is pregnant with a sibling he doesn't want, his father has moved them to a partially derelict house on the outskirts of town and both his parents seem entirely focussed on the new arrival.

Feeling thoroughly over looked, Mikey begins exploring and discovers a shed at the bottom of the garden, occupied by Skellig (Roth). Skellig is a filthy, grumpy man with a pock-marked face, a deep-seated hatred of the outside world and a taste for snails. But, as Mikey's sister is born and something begins to go seriously wrong, Skellig may prove to be much more than that...

Adapted from David Almond's award-winning novel, *Skellig*, on paper, does nothing exceptional. The story of Mikey beginning to grow up as his sister struggles to survive, Skellig's gradual return to the world and Mikey's evolving relationships between best friend Leakey (Jermaine Allen) and neighbour Mina (Skye Bennett) is nothing that hasn't been seen before. It should feel tired, pat, even stereotypical especially in the closing scenes where the three plots collide.

It's clear within minutes that Skellig is nothing but exceptional. The script takes a pragmatic, grounded view to events that never leads to pointless histrionics or emoting, instead focussing on a peculiarly English way of dealing with long-term illness. Bad things happen to good people, all the time, and that fact is implicit not just in the script but in how the characters deal with events. The cracked brave face that his parents put on events is painfully realistic, and Simm in particular does an exceptional job as a father trying his best to hold his family together even as everything around tells him he will fail. These aren't good people in a bad situation, they're normal people in an impossible situation and that normality, that grounded approach hits harder than any stirring orchestral piece or tearful speech ever could.

That pragmatism extends all the way through the cast. Macdonald is a perfect match for Simm, an intelligent, loving parent who is never perfect but always there, always connected to her family. It's a softer, more passive role than Simm's but she registers as strongly and the two are utterly believable as a long-term couple.

Skye Bennett and Jermaine Allen as Mina, Mikey's neighbour and Leakey, his best friend are two sides of the same coin, one offering Mikey a future, the other stability. Interestingly, both are broken in the same way that Mikey never quite becomes, Mina losing her father at an early age and Leakey doing his best to avoid his step father. Neither event is central to the plot but both are vital, defining moments for them, mentioned in passing in the way these events are in real life. Once again, there are no tearful conversations in the rain, no desperate confrontations just two people trying to understand how they fit into their world and the world of their friend. Both performances are the equal of the adult cast, as intelligent, as pragmatic, as grounded.

Interestingly, even the stars, Milner and Roth, are as sensibly written and performed. Milner is clearly a talent to watch, bringing a calm and intelligence to Mikey that never comes across as mannered or conspicuous acting. He's a deeply flawed, deeply likeable boy who makes mistakes and often has only his best interests at heart. He's a uniquely well realised teenager, articulate, angry, brash and timid by turns and he carries the weight of the film effortlessly.

He and Roth, as Skellig, play off one another effortlessly. Roth's guttural but pained growl slowly gives way to something lighter but at the same time alien, a man filled with the same energy as the child who tends to him but who holds it in check. He gives Skellig the same potential for movement, the same energy contained as a bird and that energy is slowly released, even as Mikey becomes comfortable in himself and his new life.

The script, adapted by Irena Brignull is smart, honest and compassionate and fits perfectly with Annabel Jankel's earthy, practical direction. This is a world where magic exists but so do takeaway packets and run down buildings and the end result is a film that soars without ever bragging, that flies without any

pretension.

Skellig is a story about flight, a story about angels, a story about children and a story about what we find out about ourselves in moments of great stress. It's also that rarest of creatures; a genuinely new story cut from old cloth. Filled with quiet, polite miracles, it's something awfully close to magical and even closer to a modern classic. Tattered wings, it seems, really are the best kind.

## One

reviewed by anthony leigh



by Conrad Williams  
Virgin Books  
rrp £7.99

It's not easy to categorise this book. SF? Horror? Williams has managed to fuse the genres together, seamlessly.

In *One*, the UK has become a barren wasteland. Richard Jane finds himself a whole country away from his family – from his son. With no reliable transport available, he begins the journey on foot.

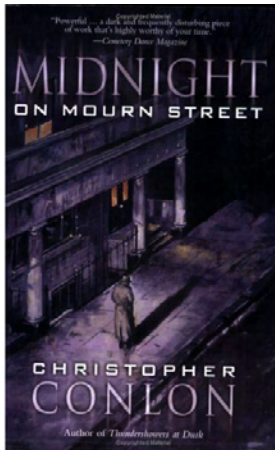
There are a few minor pacing problems in the first part of the book, but the prose is so elegantly written you don't mind. When the novel shifts up a gear, though – woohoo! You'd better strap yourself in, as it grabs hold of you, and doesn't let go.

It's a story of a father's dread for his missing son. It's a story of a world gone to hell. It's a story of unrelenting horror.

It's perhaps Williams' finest novel to date. You should buy it.

## Midnight on Mourn Street

reviewed by stephen bacon



by Christopher Conlon  
Earthling Publications  
rrp \$16

Christopher Conlon will be a name not unfamiliar to most readers of genre fiction. He is the editor of *He Is Legend* (Earthling Publications), the recent tribute anthology to Richard Matheson, and *Poe's Lighthouse* (Cemetery Dance), and the author of several poetry collections, *Thundershowers at Dusk*, *The Weeping Time*, and *Mary Falls*. He has had short stories published in the likes of *California Sorcery* (Cemetery Dance) and *Masques V* (Gauntlet Press).

*Midnight On Mourn Street* marks his debut as a novelist. After reading this slim but attractive book I can wholeheartedly say he is an exceptional talent, and one to expect great things from.

Featuring an introduction by William F Nolan and a stunning cover by Edward Miller, the book is basically about three characters; Reed Waters, a middle-aged man with a dark past; Mauri Dyson, a teenager who lives on the street; and Will Bliss, a young man who desperately wants to escape the confines of his predetermined future. They live in Washington DC, a place that is vividly brought to life in the pages of the book. The characters are rounded and realistic, with lifelike traits of good and bad in them all. Because of the grey areas in their behaviour, Conlon makes it incredibly difficult for the reader to guess what will happen, though the story arc is propelled by a sense of doom-laden inevitability that may or may not be fulfilled.

To reveal any more about the plot would be to ruin the layers of intricacies and suggestion that Conlon weaves into the story. Each chapter is told from an alternating viewpoint, to the extent that you become totally involved in the situation of the characters. The prose style is pared to a minimum, almost like a screenplay. But the language betrays Conlon's success as a poet – the words flow easily, and you feel you enjoy the act of reading almost as much as you enjoy finding out what happens.

It paints a stark depiction of life on the streets; at times it can be shocking. There is also a strong sense of loneliness attached to the character of Waters. The events of his past have ravaged away a vital part from his current life. The book deals with the consequence of loss and the effects that it has on our

lives. Reed and Mauri both crave redemption for different reasons, and I enjoyed the journey I took with them. The revelations - when they come - are stark and uncompromising.

Ultimately, this is a story of secrets and motives. It deals with the darkness in us all, and the way loss impacts those around us, like ripples on a pond. Whilst not technically a horror story, there is enough darkness in the novel to satisfy the readers who enjoy crime, dark suspense, or purely literary tales. This reader loved it and recommends it highly.

## Fast & Furious

reviewed by *alasdair stuart*



Starring Vin Diesel, Paul Walker, Michelle Rodriguez, Jordana Brewster, Sung Kang, John Ortiz & Laz Alonso

Years after his escape from the US, Dominic Toretto (Diesel) and Letty (Rodriguez) are highly successful international criminals. But with the police hot on his trail, Dom realises the only thing he can do is leave before he takes Letty and his friends down with him. Then, Letty is murdered and Dom returns home, finding Brian O'Connor (Walker) waiting for him...

Superficially, there's nothing in *Fast & Furious* that's remotely above the norm. The film has exactly the amount of maximum volume rap, tricked out cars, bad attitudes and Vin Diesel growling as you'd expect. There are some nice callbacks to all three other films in the series, most notably a very welcome appearance from Han (Kang), a character from *Tokyo Drift*, the third movie, and a welcome, brawny sense of action. It is, superficially at least, exactly what you'd expect it to be; a big, chunky, testosterone-drenched action movie.

But there's actually something much more interesting going on here as well. The constant obsession with cars and status, the faceless criminal organisation running literally under the radar and the high tech but ineffective measures deployed against them all combine with the sense of anarchy the film projects to mean one thing; cyberpunk is still here and it's gone mainstream. Everything about the film fits, stylistically, with the likes of *Neuromancer* and *Ghost in the Shell* and in particular *Mad Max*, as two men who are no side other than their own struggle to survive dealing with both the criminals and the police. This is a world one step away from oil being the only currency, a world where one man's anarchy is another man's justice. This is, in short, a world where the likes of Molly Millions would feel very much at home.

It's also huge amounts of fun, with Diesel in particular relishing a return to the haunted but honourable Dominic and Walker finally stepping out of his shadow and becoming a legitimate leading man in his own right. They're backed up by sterling work from Rodriguez and Campos in particular and Justin Lin, the director of *Tokyo Drift*, stakes his claim as one of the best action directors working today. A horrific road race (Complete with needlessly cheerful GPS systems) and the opening highway robbery are particular standouts, as is the climactic running battle through a series of tunnels beneath the US/Mexico border.

*Fast & Furious* is brash and loud and will, odds, irritate most non gearheads who watch it. But for all that, it's also fun as well as final conclusive proof that 'geek' culture is now mainstream culture. The future, it seems, is now and it has a fantastic paint job.

## FEATURES

### The Not Knowing

by *conrad williams*

I am a father to three boys. Ethan (6), Ripley (4) and Zac (1). Being a dad was something I had always hoped would happen. I was never against the idea of having children, but it still comes as a bit of a shock to suddenly find myself in a house filled with noisy sons. I would die for these cheeky monkeys. I wouldn't think twice about it. And in that commitment - one that will chime with every parent reading this - lies the impetus for my new novel, *ONE*.

I've always been a worrier. My parents possess photographs of me as a toddler wringing my hands together, no doubt fretting over school (I was not a happy lamb in my infant classes), so when Ethan was

born, as well as the thrill at witnessing this everyday miracle, I was pierced with concern. The first night we had him home, my wife and I started at every snuffle, cough or burp. I was convinced he would be stricken with a rare, untreatable disease. My dreams were filled with terrible slo-mo situations in which I needed to save him from some awful accident. I would lose him in a crowd. He would be abducted. The worry did not go away and it was compounded when Ripley and Zac came along. I felt like I was juggling with water; I could not get a grip on my neuroses and it began feeding into my work. My novella, *Rain*, is more autobiographical than most of my fiction. And so is *ONE*, but in a more oblique way.

Having read Cormac McCarthy's crucifying (but achingly beautiful) novel *THE ROAD*, I began to think of writing my own end-of-the-world story. I tried to think of a scenario that would utterly crush me; of course, it was being far away from my babies at the moment of the planet's death. And surviving. My protagonist, Richard Jane, would be forced to walk 300 miles to London to see if his son, Stanley, survived. Jane believes he did, as we all would in his shoes, despite the odds being stacked mightily against it. It's the not knowing that kills us, that chips us away from the inside. The not knowing is far more excruciating than stumbling into a cindered bedroom to see the outline of your child blasted against the far wall. There is a relief, of sorts, in a positive identification down at the morgue. But Richard doesn't even have that.

Although I wrote the book quickly, it was the toughest thing I've ever written. It was both cathartic and stultifying. Chapter 25 - The Farm - was a chunk of work I fretted over for a long time. My editor at Virgin jokingly assured me that we'd both go to prison because of it. It was an entire life of anxiety distilled into 4000 words: the zenith (or nadir, depending on how you look at it) of my personal fears. Writing this book upset me on a number of occasions and I came away from my sessions with Richard and Stanley at the end of the day seeking a cuddle with my bemused sons. They are my crutch, but also my Achilles heel...

Post-apocalypse novels are always going to be written and read. It's the ultimate fantasy of the horror writer. I knew I would have to have a crack at one sooner or later. There are notes and ideas in my files appertaining to stories about the Earth's demise going back many years. But I knew that I would not be able to invest a novel with anything like the integrity and feeling it demanded or deserved if I had not become a father first. The panic has lessened (a little bit... a fraction...) as the years go by and I've become more adept at being a dad, but it's never truly gone away. I suppose I would hate it do so. To those of you who are yet to plunge into the zygote pool and want to know what both plumbless horror and pure love feels like, have yourself a baby...

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*ONE* is published by Virgin Books on April 2



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