



SCIENCE FICTION HORROR FANTASY

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EDITORIAL:

by lee harris

The first major awards of the season have just been and gone (the Aurealis Awards in Australia) and a host of others will be upon us quicker than you can say "actually I'm not disappointed I didn't win, I'm happy for <insert name of winner here>" - the Gemmells, the Arthur C Clarke's, the BSFAs, the Stokers, and *more* - and that's just in the early part of this year. I've been involved in a debate recently about the nature of (what I consider to be) one of the most important genre awards - The Hugos. One commenter suggested that an award has no value if it does not lead to at least a 100% increase in sales for the product. I could not disagree more. Awards aren't for the marketing departments, or the sales reps - awards are an acknowledgement to the creator of a work that their creation *matters* - it's a thank-you from us to them for producing something worthwhile. They're a way of saying "we appreciate the work that you've done, and by the way: it's bloody great!"

And that's gotta mean more than a bunch of extra sales... right?



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FICTION

Trust and Travesty

by d. k. thompson

It can be said of most women in the current corporate cutthroat climate that the lure of becoming a corporate widow is more enchanting than that of becoming a corporate newlywed. Certainly, it could be said of Charlotte, since she had just divulged as much to Mr. Bennett Travesty after making desperate love to him.

An hour ago, they had traded in the dizzying strobe-lit social scene of the ball below to enter the bedroom of Mr. Travesty's employer and begin a more dizzying dance. Neither Charlotte nor Mr. Travesty seemed concerned in the least that this tryst took place where it did, nor were they bothered that Charlotte was a fiancée potential of Mr. Travesty's employer. Indeed, quite the contrary. Mr. Travesty had a small smile on his face as Charlotte stood naked by the window of the bedroom while she watched a zeppelin glide through the night sky, the warm glow from its pixilated advertisements washing over her pale body like a translucent scarf.

"He is certainly not a man of either financial success or lasting vision," Charlotte confided. "Otherwise, he would never have found himself in such a damnable need for a corporate wife. Really, what kind of future would he and I have together?"

Mr. Travesty, being a relatively wise man, propped himself up on his elbows in the bed but remained silent, for he was well aware, as a few of my readers may be, that women enjoy the thrill of mystery. He had worked hard to cloak himself in an enigmatic shroud to satisfy Charlotte's yearnings using the simple tool of silence, and he would be hard-pressed to turn on something that had benefited him so well.

Charlotte stepped away from the window and picked up a cigarette and a book of matches from the bedside table. "I suppose I'll have to retain one of those Insurance Samurai after the honeymoon."

"Really?" asked Mr. Travesty, who was quite interested by this.

She struck a match, lit her cigarette, and then tilted her head forward to smile deviously at Mr. Travesty. "You must think me positively evil for speaking like this," said Charlotte. She exhaled, flushing colored smoke from her nostrils. The smoke twisted above her head, forming a rose on the vine complete with thorns. The mirage filled the room with an emerald and crimson haze, then evaporated and plunged them back into semi-darkness.

Mr. Travesty shook his head and smiled. "On the contrary, I find such honesty refreshing. I was simply curious as to how a delicate creature such as yourself would go about procuring one of the infamous insurai." He tossed the sheets to the side, rose from the bed, and stepped across the polished hardwood floor to where his clothes lay.

"So you've heard of them? Not everyone has, you know. And it's not as difficult to find them as one might think, if you know where to look," Charlotte laughed. "In fact, I've done a little bit of preliminary research into the matter and discovered an insurai is actually in the area looking for honest work. Interested in our Mr. Wickham, I was told."

"Really?" asked Mr. Travesty again. An insurai for hire, in these parts, was a dreadful thing for him to hear. He began picking his clothes up off the floor and pulled his pants on.

"See!" Charlotte laughed. "I did scare you away!" The tips of her breasts pressed against his bare back, and he soon found his neck peppered with her delightfully warm little kisses. The cold fled from his body.

"That's not quite it, my sweet Charlotte. You see, I happen to work in insurance myself. And these insurais have a most reckless reputation."

"Oh?" she asked, her hands moving down his stomach to where he'd just fastened his jeans around his waist. "Would you care to elaborate?"

He gripped the miniature revolver in his pocket and sighed. "To be frank, I'd rather not. But since you seem quite insistent about the matter –"

A look of anticipation filled Charlotte's brown eyes. Mr. Travesty placed the gun against her breast and squeezed the trigger. The shots were muffled by both the muzzle's flat silencer and the throbbing music from the ball below.

Now, it is most important that my readers understand Mr. Bennet Travesty was not a heartless man. Far from it. Although he did have some cybernetic hardware and wetware upgrades (most in his cerebral cortex), he still had his natural (and perfectly functioning) heart. The temperature of his heart, however, is somewhat unclear.

Nevertheless, it would be uncharitable to allude that Mr. Travesty had no feelings. In actuality, he had very strong feeling about certain topics. Mr. Travesty had been truthful when he told poor Charlotte (poor in death of course, she was quite rich in life) that his line of business was insurance, but as an insurai Mr. Travesty had been far more interested with becoming acquainted intimately with the young woman's mind and motivations than he had with her body (although that acquaintance *did* have its merits).

Ah, I see some of my readers are not familiar with Mr. Travesty's line of work. Insurai are men (and women – the workforce is not prejudice, simply male-dominated) who can be retained or contracted by corporations for a very large sum of money to deal with, shall we say, unfortunate developments in the corporate world. These individuals are typically invisible on paper. There is no record of birth certificates, fingerprints, DNA, bank accounts, or even crimes to trace back to them. They are paid cash in advance. These discretions appeal to corporations in a tight spot. But despite the obvious demand for insurai, they are an uncommon profession. Which brings us back to something our hero (or perhaps we should only call him our protagonist, seeing as he has yet to do anything heroic) cared about: money.

Mr. Travesty quickly went about cleaning the room, disposing of the body, pulling on his white ruffled shirt and leather shoes, and making his way down to the ball to find his employer.

Mr. Wickham was significantly heavier in person than the electronic images Mr. Travesty had downloaded into his brain. His untrimmed sideburns did not help matters, nor did the ill-fitting yellow polyester suit that had become unfashionable decades ago.

"Well?" demanded Mr. Wickham. "What did you find out about my prospective fiancée?"

"I'm sorry to report that she was intent on doing you evil and thus no longer qualifies as a prospective anything."

"You killed her?" said Mr. Wickham.

"Hush, my dear fellow. As long as you socialized publicly, you have no need to worry about what happened in the bedroom."

"The bedroom?" asked Mr. Wickham. "Am I to take it that you –"

"Yes," sighed Mr. Travesty. "And because of my sacrifice, I must confess doubt as to whether you would have even progressed much further than the wedding stage." Seeing the look on Mr. Wickham's face, Mr. Travesty made a decision to lie about poor Charlotte's talents. "If I might be so bold to suggest, sir, I believe you would have found the honeymoon lacking."

"Indeed?"

"In deed, more specifically in execution, sir."

"Well, what's done is done," said Mr. Wickham. "But may I remind you that there is still plenty more to do. I am, after all, still without a proper fiancée."

The musicians struck up another song, an intoxicating melody and pulse incorporated with strobe lights.

"I am well aware," he replied, raising his voice to be heard over the music. "Rest in the knowledge that I will rise to the challenge. My libido is at your disposal and is thankfully not prejudiced." He slipped out onto the dance floor, accessing the images hardwired in his brain, and tried to match them with the faces in the crowd.

Only two fiancée potentials were left, Emily and Anne. For Mr. Travesty to fulfill his contract, he had to decide which would be the most suitable suitor. The contract was very plain on this matter: Mr. Wickham

was desperate to find a bride, fall in love, be married off, and consummate the marriage. In short, he needed the money.

There were many images and streams of Emily: conducting a hostile corporate take-over in a smart business suit; scuba-diving off the Great Barrier Reef in a bikini. She was a mesmerizing creature: daring, intelligent, beautiful, and above all else, wealthy.

For the moment, Mr. Travesty decided not to dwell on the problems Anne's files presented. He danced back and forth, to the left and the right, much to the delight of the women fawning over him as he cut between them. It did not take him long to spot Emily. She stood by the refreshment bowl, her crystal glass filled with emerald fluid, and appearing decidedly unhappy as she conversed with a thin, cadaverous-looking Colonel who could only be her chaperone. The elder man's dark, wrinkled uniform sagged over his body, and contrasted his red face.

Mr. Travesty gave a rakish smile, stepped in front of the Colonel, and offered his hand to Emily.

"I hope your chaperone will allow us a dance," Mr. Travesty said.

Emily finished her drink and handed her empty glass to the Colonel. The Colonel had long stopped smiling, but Emily had only just begun. Mr. Travesty pulled her into the crowd and twirled her around in all the most romantic steps.

The music slowed considerably to something like an old-fashioned gospel tune, but sung with such desire Mr. Travesty thought it complimented Emily's movements quite well. She flung her arms around his neck, pressing her bosom and hips firmly against him as they swayed, a light coat of sweat covering her tan skin.

"Have we met before?" asked Emily, her blue eyes staring at him. "Looking at you, I feel as if we have known each other all our lives. As if we've confessed our darkest secrets and deepest desires to each other since childhood."

"I am sorry to say that we have not, for I would certainly remember. However, if you would like to hear my confessions, I am more than happy to share. Although I warn you, it may take much of the evening to get through them all."

Emily smiled and gave a breathy laugh. "Do you think we can arrange a more private encounter? I would simply die to think anyone might be eavesdropping."

As she spoke her hands passed over places of Mr. Travesty's body that might have made a lesser man lose his head. "My dear, whatever are you afraid they will hear?"

"If you meet me in the heart of the garden at half past the hour," she whispered, "I shall allow you to make of it what you will."

"Am I to assume this will be a meeting that does not involve your chaperone?"

She ran her tongue over his ear. "I don't think a chaperone will be necessary. Do you?"

The music stopped and Emily kissed his cheek, licked her lips, and applauded the musicians with the rest of the crowd. Her warm breath still tickled his ear, even as she walked gracefully off the dance floor, casting a smile over her shoulder at him.

Mr. Travesty adjusted the ruffles of his sleeves and moved toward the bar. Things were going exceedingly well, even by his standards. One down, one up, one to go. The only real problem was Anne, the third suitor. Mr. Wickham had transferred precious little information about her into Mr. Travesty's cerebral cortex, unlike the histories he had received on both Charlotte and Emily. Other than her age, name, and bank account statistics, Anne was a mystery, which made Mr. Travesty quite anxious. There was always something to access about anyone, with the obvious exception of the insurai themselves, of course.

And then Mr. Travesty remembered what Charlotte had said: *an insurai is in the area looking for honest work.*

Of course! Why had he not seen it before? When she first said it, Mr. Travesty had been overcome with a sense of uneasiness, thinking his true profession exposed. But if that had been, then why had Charlotte allowed him to seduce her in the first place? No, the only feasible answer was that Charlotte knew of *another* insurai looking for work in the area, one interested in Mr. Wickham's marriage. Was it not entirely possible that one of Mr. Wickham's fiancée potentials had secured an insurai of her own, to inherit his estate and then dispatch of the poor mogul? An insurai could delete or plant such files and statistics. So little was

known about Anne and Mr. Travesty doubted very much her corporate PR firm was so skilled. Was it possible that this mysterious coquette could be a competing insurai?

All these things were racing through Mr. Travesty's mind when a woman collided with him, and Mr. Travesty's cocktail spilled over her elegant ballroom mini-skirt.

"A thousand pardons, my dear. I don't know how I missed you," said Mr. Travesty.

She giggled, her smile illuminating her face. Her hair had been cropped just above her neck and she wore little jewelry, but there was something about her, an almost elfish look, that made her whole being sparkle more than any woman Mr. Travesty had encountered.

He surprised himself by telling her, "You have a very nice laugh."

"Do I?" she asked.

He found it hard to tell whether she was pleased by the compliment or put off, so he added, "Oh, yes. I hope you do not think it too forward of me to say so?"

"If I do think it too forward, sir, what then?"

"Ah." Mr. Travesty opened his mouth but quickly closed it again, realizing he was at a loss for words, a position he was unaccustomed to. "Am I to understand you *do* think it too forward of me?"

"Not precisely. I merely think it forward of a gentleman to ask if something is forward when the gentleman already assumes it is not. Do you take my meaning?"

"I am afraid that I do. Perhaps I should apologize?"

"What good is an uncertain apology?" she replied.

"Very little, I am certain. But then what good is any apology if a wrong has been done?" asked Mr. Travesty, who felt certain that despite the woman's tone, a playful spirit was at work.

"Sincerity, of course," she said. "So that trust may be restored."

Mr. Travesty bowed. "Then it is with sincerity I extend my apology."

She curtsied. "Now that we understand each other, I would like to ask you a very forward question which you are in no way obligated to accept."

Much to Mr. Travesty's surprise, he found himself filled with curiosity about this woman (as it may come of no surprise to my female readers, if I still have any). More than a professional curiosity, I feel obligated to add. There was something fresh and distinct about her, and he felt he could stare into her eyes and lose himself in conversation and witticism for all eternity. But instead he simply answered, "Of course. I accept any obligations you will ask of me."

"Do you think it possible to love a man you have never met?"

"I know very little of love, miss, but allow me to introduce myself. Mr. Bennett Travesty, at your service." He kissed the back of her hand for the full effect.

"Oh dear," she said, her cheeks flushing. "No, I'm afraid you misunderstand me, my dear Bennett. A thousand pardons I now owe you, but I was speaking of someone else. Perhaps that makes us even."

"It does indeed," replied Mr. Travesty, trying very hard not to frown. Rejection was certainly not something he was accustomed to and yet now that he had been refuted on several occasions he found himself even more intrigued by this mysterious woman. "May I inquire as to the specifics of your circumstance?"

"Certainly. See that man over there?" she asked, pointing across the ballroom. "He's offered me his hand in marriage. Corporately, of course. I've never actually met him, only observed him in one-way digital streams."

Mr. Travesty stared with her, somewhat surprised at the sinking sensation filling his stomach. Even before he saw who she pointed out, he knew it to be Mr. Wickham.

"It's a merger, you see," she continued. "Between our two companies. Granted, not the picture of romance I foresaw in my childhood. Which is why I pose the question to you, a complete stranger."

The last words sent a pang of anguish through Mr. Travesty. "And why would a complete stranger's opinion matter?"

She laughed, as if the answer was obvious. "Because you have no reason to be dishonest with me, of course. So will you answer? I seem to remember you submitting yourself to any obligation I demanded of you, and I do demand an answer."

Oh, how her laughter affected Mr. Travesty. "Aren't you a trifle young to be the head of a corporation?" he asked, trying to gather his bearings.

"How very bold and forward of you," she laughed again. "I expected you to ask me what it is he has to offer."

"Well, it certainly isn't the money," said Mr. Travesty. "I would assume that's what you bring to the marriage. Perhaps you lack the sense of security only a man or a marriage can provide."

She gasped at his response, covering her mouth.

Now, it is important we are not too hard on Mr. Travesty. He had been under much pressure from Mr. Wickham and although this is something he was accustomed to, the feelings he found stirring within him as he spoke to this woman, whose name he dared not ask, were not. Perhaps my gentlemen readers feel surprise at how quickly Mr. Travesty was taken by these feelings, but something instinctual had begun to drive him upon conversing with this new acquaintance, and I would assert he was very apt at reacting to instinct.

The woman straightened and regained her composure. "Is that what you think? That a woman can only gain such things from a man? How very pig-headed of you, Mr. Travesty. A true product of our backward society, where a woman cannot gain legitimacy as an individual, but only in a corporate union."

"I only meant it is known in certain circles that Mr. Wickham is in dire financial straits."

"Is it? And what is said of me in those circles?"

"I am afraid I do not know, as I am still deprived of your name." He realized only now that he had been dreading this question since she had pointed out Mr. Wickham.

"Anne," she said.

Oh, how Mr. Travesty's heart did sink at the name! "Little is said about you because little is known," he whispered.

"Well, then anonymity is still good for something, I see," Anne replied. "Perhaps my publicist deserves a raise."

"Perhaps," said Mr. Travesty. Across the room, he saw Emily's Colonel twirling his moustache and looking very bored, standing at the door leading to the garden. He had half a mind to shoot Anne right then and there on the dance floor but something inside him urged against it. Would it not be better to secure his employer's relationship with the only acceptable suitor? Far better that Mr. Wickham marry Emily, something of a coquette, than Anne, something of a killer. Mr. Travesty could even suggest to Mr. Wickham that fidelity conflict chaperones be hired post-marriage. Would that not secure his revenge on Anne for causing him to feel these things, to feel the way only someone trained in the art of the insurai could cause him to feel? Yes, it would be quite a revenge, in all likelihood damaging her professional reputation.

Pulling out his pocketwatch, Mr. Travesty exclaimed, "Oh! But look at the hour, Anne. If you'll excuse me, I have business to attend to in the garden." He turned without another word, walked toward the refreshment table, acquired two glasses of julep, then proceeded past Emily's Colonel, and through the exit.

The humid evening breeze caused Mr. Travesty to break a sweat. The smell of jasmine permeated the night air. He sipped at his cocktail as he strode toward the heart of the garden and found Emily waiting for him there. She lay on a marble bench, her coat removed to accent her corset, and her dress hoisted up just below her thighs. Her bosom rose and fell as she watched him approach.

"I apologize if the wait has inconvenienced you," he said, offering her a glass.

She smiled. "You can inconvenience me all you want, Bennett."

Perhaps he had had his share of liquor this evening, for Mr. Travesty's stomach became unsettled. It did not deter him, however. He sat on the bench and pulled Emily to him in an embrace. As he closed his eyes he found himself imagining it was Anne sitting with him, not Emily. As their lips met, he wished it even more.

"I must confess to you," Emily said, "I'm thinking of someone else."

"As am I." Mr. Travesty wiped his brow, still feeling as though something were not quite right.

"Of course you are," she replied, her fingernails stroking his cheek, sparking in his vision, and she positioned herself atop him.

"Emily, I have it on good account that you are a fiancée potential."

"Do you indeed?"

"I must know of your intentions toward Mr. Wickham."

"Must you? Very well. I shall demonstrate them to you. Do not feel guilty, either for the employer you betray or the woman who haunts your thoughts. If you like, Bennett, you may call out her name in a moment."

Mr. Travesty went rigid and thrust her to the ground, just as her hand slid between his legs. He slipped his revolver out of his coat and leveled it at her. How could he have been so foolish? "You are the other insurai," he said.

"What?" she gasped. "What is this ridiculousness?"

"I never told you my name," Mr. Travesty said, "My line of work, you may have deciphered, but not my name. How else could you have known?" Although Mr. Travesty's voice echoed with triumph, it would be fair to say something else lingered in his mind, namely guilt. Poor Anne! How he had wronged her in his thoughts!

The innocent look on Emily's face transformed into a devilish smile. "Very good, Bennett."

"Who are you?" he demanded. "Certainly not the Emily Mr. Wickham takes you to be."

"Of course not," she replied. "Merely her decoy."

"Then she is here also?" demanded Mr. Travesty. The look on Emily's face gave him all the confirmation he needed.

"I was hired to protect her from you and dispose of your employer after the marriage was solidified."

"So Mr. Wickham's business would pass on to the real Miss Emily. And the deed? How was it to be performed?"

Her smile grew. "A lady must have her secrets."

Mr. Travesty reflected upon the situation, at the way she had attempted to seduce him. "Intercourse," he said at last. "A chemical coded into your body, ready to be unleashed by only the most intimate passion. The reaction between it and my loins would be fatal."

"How candidly you see everything. What will you do now?"

"My dear Emily, if I may continue to call you so for the brief remainder of your life, I regret to say I must now wash your corset with your own blood."

She laughed at the remark and glanced past Mr. Travesty. "Oh, I disagree, Bennett, as does my chaperone."

The Colonel leapt out behind him, slashing at Mr. Travesty with a vibrating knife. It sliced through the wool fabric of Mr. Travesty's coat and into his side. Luckily, upon seeing Emily glance over his shoulder, Mr. Travesty moved fast enough to escape the full force of the thrust, and fired his revolver into the man's chest. The Colonel fell onto the path, the gravel going red with his blood.

Unfortunately, it was enough time for Emily (as I feel obligated to continue to call her) to spring upon Mr. Travesty with a crushing blow to his temple, effectively knocking the revolver from his grip, and dropping him to the ground. Emily dove for the revolver but Mr. Travesty, although dizzied, was still in command of his senses and managed to leap on top of her. Unfortunately, Emily scooped up a handful of gravel, flung it into Mr. Travesty's face, and temporarily blinded him. To his credit, Mr. Travesty refused to release his grip on her.

"Very well," Emily panted, rolling atop Mr. Travesty. "I don't need that gun to kill you and this way will be much more satisfying." She unzipped his pants, straddled the blinded insurai, and hoisted up her dress. Mr. Travesty did his best to roll from under her, but her grip was very strong and she was (most likely) very practiced at this type of murder. To his horror, Mr. Travesty found himself still aroused by Emily's touch. Yes, she was very practiced at this type of thing.

Yet still Mr. Travesty wriggled, straining to reach the dead Colonel, whose outstretched hand gripped the vibrating knife. He managed to lift his knee between himself and Emily, who, busy gripping him and positioning herself for the final thrust, was thrown off balance. Free from her hold, Mr. Travesty clutched the vibrating knife, grabbed Emily (but was careful not to climb on top of her), and thrust the blade through her corset. Her eyes went wide with shock, she coughed up blood, and tore at Mr. Travesty's coat until her last breath fled from her body.

The air outside remained warm and Mr. Travesty found himself no longer left with the mere thought of his job, for his thoughts drifted to a certain young lady. There were only two possibilities he could foresee. The real Emily was here in the ball, as was Anne. Both fiancée potentials. He could fulfill his contract by recommending either one of them, despite knowing that the real Emily's intentions were not altogether faithful. But would it be right to condemn the only seemingly innocent suitor to Mr. Wickham? Mr. Travesty shuddered to think of it. And yet surely Anne had agreed to be a potential out of some necessity, though it was obviously not finances. Would Mr. Travesty's intervention really be for her best, or simply a reaction of the abnormal feelings he had for her?

He walked back toward the mansion, the ballroom glowing from inside, and immediately saw Anne standing on the balcony. "I have been debating the words you spoke to me since you left and I demand an apology," she started, staring at the blood. "Oh! My dear Mr. Travesty, what has befallen you?"

"It is nothing, I assure you. The garden has its thorns. And I do beg your forgiveness, but please, I must speak with you of another matter." Across the ballroom floor, he saw Mr. Wickham, talking with a rather plain-looking woman. "Why are you a fiancée potential to Mr. Wickham?"

Anne's face reddened. "It is not the money, in that you were correct. There's a legitimacy I can gain through marriage that, due to my sex, nothing else in this life can grant me."

"Do you really desire such legitimacy?"

"I don't know," Anne said. For the first time since they'd met, Mr. Travesty saw a look of doubt cross her face and realized how vulnerable she was. He wanted to hold her very close but instead let her continue. "Perhaps I have been a fool, struggling against the rules of society for so long, only to contemplate embracing them. But I have waited up until now for something else, some alternative that would not compromise myself, and sometimes I fear *that* belief, *that* procrastination, is the most foolish thing I've done."

Mr. Travesty took Anne by the arm and said, "Not an hour ago you expressed your faith in a complete stranger's opinion. Do you truly trust yourself to such blunt honesty?"

A somber look crossed Anne's face but she nodded in the affirmative. "I do."

"Very well. I hope to do you justice, and pray, if I am still capable, that you will think no ill-will of me."

"Mr. Travesty, whatever are you talking about?"

"Please excuse me, my dear," Mr. Travesty told her. "I must counsel my employer on his pending engagement."

"And how will you counsel him?" asked Anne. Mr. Travesty noted (with some happiness, to be sure) that her face showed not the least hint of surprise at the revelation of his employer. Instead, she smiled and continued to stare into his eyes.

"Forgive my boldness, but I suggest you take your leave of the ball and discreetly wait for my message at your limousine."

"Why, Mr. Travesty! Such certainty befits you far more than dishonest manners. Very well, I will await you."

Mr. Travesty smiled and thanked her, then proceeded across the floor to Mr. Wickham who continued his dialogue with the other woman.

"Ah, Mr. Wickham! I see you've found your fiancée potential. How do you do, Miss Emily?"

The woman glared at him. "Very well," she replied in a cool voice, and he noted as he kissed the back of her hand that her skin felt as equally cold on his lips as her name.

"Fiancée potential?" Mr. Wickham repeated, his eyes wide. "Ah, yes, I thought it might be her, Mr. Travesty, though she looks nothing like the files her PR firm distributed!"

"And what does that mean?" demanded Miss Emily. "I'm not pretty enough?"

"No, my dear, you misunderstand my meaning!"

"So now I am both ignorant and ugly?"

"Perhaps we could confer in private?" suggested Mr. Travesty, drawing his employer away from the livid Miss Emily. "Your Miss Emily's far too shrewd to allow herself to be so exposed. Take the secrets and mysteries as symbols of the happy future you will share with your wife. And I must confess, the caliber of your

intelligence astounds me. I am surprised you were able to decipher her true identity so easily."

"Well," said Mr. Wickham. "Yes. Of course. My mind is an astounding thing. Perhaps it's the reason I was so sought out by these fiancée potentials."

"Perhaps, sir," said Mr. Travesty, who then went on to explain in simple terms, that in addition to the malevolent Charlotte, he had discovered Anne also had something less than fidelity on her mind and thus had been forced to dispatch her agents in the garden. He assured Mr. Wickham he would take matters regarding the real Anne into his own hands, but regardless, Mr. Wickham's affair was now solved. In addition, Mr. Travesty also suggested full-time fidelity conflict chaperones be acquired, but regrettably no, he was unavailable for the position.

I am sure it comes as no surprise that Mr. Wickham was quite pleased with the news of his impending marriage and wealth. He pumped Mr. Travesty's hand enthusiastically, inquired whether or not the bedroom Mr. Travesty had used earlier was clean (which of course it was), and then expressed a desire to not leave his newfound fiancée waiting.

To Mr. Travesty's delight, Emily tried to stifle the look of horror on her face as Mr. Wickham returned to her. He bid the couple goodnight and walked to front of the mansion, where the limousines hovered and waited with his hands thrust in their pockets. One of the limousines glided down toward him. A door opened and Mr. Travesty climbed over the plush leather to sit beside Anne.

"I take it your employer was satisfied with your counsel?" Anne asked.

"Yes, very well perceived." Mr. Travesty frowned. "Anne, I am sorry for my rude behavior earlier this evening. And for any offence it caused."

"Ah, such sincerity, Mr. Travesty! I see you now understand the importance behind it."

"Quite," he replied. "And now allow me to propose a question to you. I hope you will not think it too forward of me, but I am willing to take the risk."

"Very well, then."

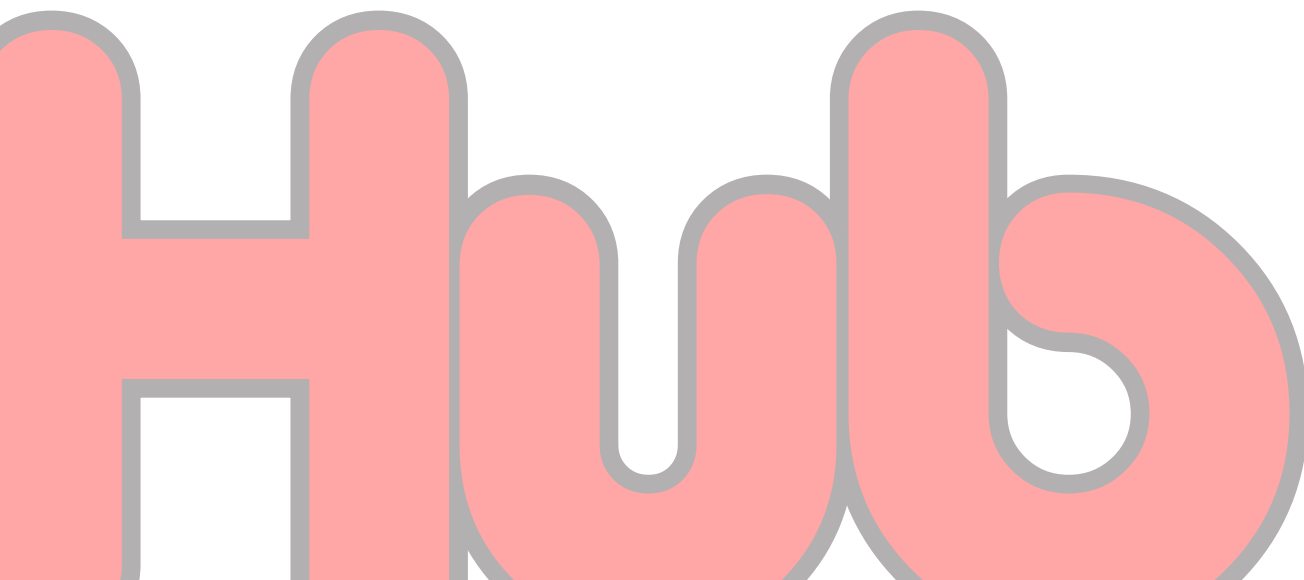
"Is it possible to fall in love with a man whom you have only just met?"

"How very, very forward of you, Mr. Travesty!" laughed Anne. "But perhaps it is not forward enough. Am I too understand you are offering me a kind of legitimacy?"

"No, my dear," replied Mr. Travesty. "I would have you remain as illegitimate as you wish to be."

Anne smiled. "Then please shut the door behind you so we may press ahead, into this dangerous, uncharted, new territory."

Mr. Travesty quite contentedly obliged her.



Antichrist

reviewed by richard whittaker



Starring: Will Dafoe, Charlotte Gainsbourg

Written and directed by Lars von Trier

Cert. 18, 109 mins.

This is not a review of Lars von Trier's *Antichrist*.

Attempting to review it is almost impossible and nearly pointless, because von Trier has created something that is either designed to be utterly confrontational, or that is so pure and unadulterated an expression of his artistic vision and word view, that grading it sort of defeats the point. After all, the purpose of most reviews is to say whether there is some enjoyment to be gained from the created work in question, and *Antichrist* is a remorseless, joyless, frightening and traumatic cinematic experience. Arguably, it's the single most important piece of film as pure art produced since *Koyaanisqatsi*, Godfrey Reggio's remarkable 1982-released documentary meditation on modern life.

At its simplest level, one can describe it as von Trier taking three of his least favorite archetypes in the narrative world – a woman and a therapist, both American – and dropping them in the wilderness to abuse and mutilate each other as they fail to come to terms with the death of their only child. He (Dafoe) and She (Gainsbourg) are never named, but the camera remains on one or the other for almost every frame of the picture. The only other character is their infant son Nick, seen in the opening sequence (entitled *Prologue*) falling to his death. That sequence is, without doubt, gorgeous: A black and white, slow-motion snow storm outside of the couple's Pacific North-West apartment provides the backdrop for a furious and graphic sexual encounter, while the child pinwheels out of the window. As much as von Trier rebelled against the artifice of contemporary cinema with his ultra-lo-fi Dogme 95 movies (where film makers signed off on a Vow of Chastity, in which they would eschew every modern tool, from studio shooting to artificial light), *Antichrist* is the most, well, cinematic movie he has produced to date. In fact, the movie pointedly breaks every single one of the ten rules, even down to going for 2.5:1 widescreen ratio, rather than Dogme's diktat of 4:3.

The most interesting violation may be of rule 8 ("Genre movies are not acceptable") since *Antichrist* is a horror movie. How so? Not simply because it is graphic in its portrayal of violence: With its implications of Satanism and psychological collapse, it's a strangely and peculiarly 1970's-style horror. Its heady brew of self-hate and sexual mutilation has a few precedents. The emotional claustrophobia, intense carnality and brutality surrounding a child's death places it in the same territory as Nic Roeg's classic *Don't Look Now*, but it probably owes as much to Ingmar Bergman's elegiac *The Virgin Spring* as it does to Wes Craven's quasi-remake, the original (and masterful) *The Last House on the Left*. It could also lend itself well to a double-bill with Craven's fellow one-time victim of the 1983 Video Nasty scare, Matt's Cimber's 1976 art house/grind house oddity *The Witch Who Came from the Sea*.

So why is it called *Antichrist*? Like much of von Trier's work, that's left somewhat ambiguous, but again there are hints. To begin with, the film is riddled with overt religiosity in a way not seen in his work since his English language breakthrough, *Breaking the Waves*. The nameless couple's idyllic country retreat is called Eden. If that makes them Adam and Eve, then so be it. The driving force of the action is almost Genesis in reverse: He wants to intellectualize everything, not realizing that it is this quest for knowledge that will lead to their downfall. She, on the other hand, rages through uncontrolled sexuality and brutality. Their redemption,

of sorts, comes when she rejects her carnal side in the most serious and literal way possible – by slicing off her clitoris and smashing his genitals with a log that her child had played with the previous summer. Only when he rejects common sense and emotion, by throttling his wife as she tries to murder him, does he gain any peace. He then takes the opportunity to, for no apparent reason, sit down to eat some berries from a bush – the antithesis of fruit from a tree.

There is an alternate but equally oddly pious interpretation: That this is the anti-nativity. The film begins with the death of a small child (Young, rather than Old, Nick, as if that could be a coincidence), followed by a trip in which he attempts to take her to cast off the shadow of her child. She is the anti-Madonna, revealed in the films closing reels to be far less nurturing than she may have pretended, and possibly responsible not solely for her child's death, but subtle abuse beforehand. After her collapse at the funeral, she is far more whore than virgin, and von Trier's script raises some interesting, if deeply perturbing, questions about the attachment in nature between mother and child. The implication is that children are, to most species, disposal and replaceable. After all, Nick died when his parents were working on a sibling – or a replacement. If that seems heartless, von Trier slams the message home by having her note that the gentle tap-tap-tap of acorns on the roof of the shack is actually the sound of another generation of miscarried oak tree fetuses.

There are even the three anti-wise men. On their travels, the couple are menaced and haunted by the Three Beggars – a disemboweled fox, a buried crow, and a deer with a still-born fawn still protruding from its rear. They may be the ultimate expression the density of von Trier's writing, violating a simple biblical cosmology to add something arguably more Scandinavian, more naturalistic and atavistic. Native Dane von Trier has talked about resonances between his own work and that of neighboring Swedish novelist August Strindberg: The author's dabbling with alchemy and the occult found their most vivid and personal expression in his warped semi-autobiography *Inferno* and, whether by choice or by accident, von Trier expresses the same Gnostic belief that Earth is hell, and life is in itself a form of damnation. When Gainsbourg's character announces that "Nature is Satan's church," it is arguably not metaphorical.

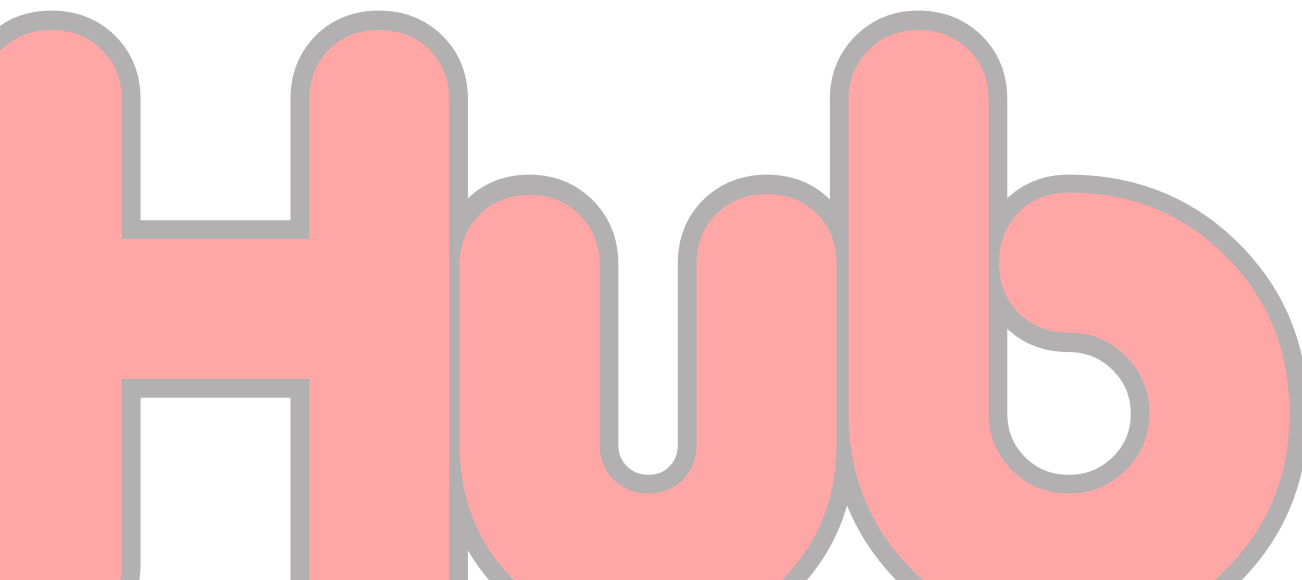
So what part of the Bible is von Trier meditating upon? It's not mutually exclusive that it is both Genesis and the nativity, because the whole film is almost immeasurably dense. But a core question will be, is this all just a manifestation of von Trier's misogyny and misanthropy? That's very hard to tell. As a director, he has always been quite happy to present abuse of women, but that doesn't make him a misogynist. However, there is something different about *Antichrist*. Her abandoned thesis is about the treatment of women through the centuries, with a heavy bent on the witch trials as an example of gynocide: But her conclusion is that women weren't the victims of a phallocentric conspiracy, but were actually evil and responsible for all the crimes of which they were accused. Yet she embraces that role, much like Molly, the protagonist of *The Witch Who Came From the Sea*, who believed that mermaids were pure malice even as she attempted to become one. Being connected to some primordial darkness could explain why it is Gainsbourg's character, not her husband, not only claims that the ground beneath Eden is burning, but somehow burns her feet through her boots as she treads the grass. Again, *Breaking the Waves* indicated strongly that von Trier is prepared to let a thick strain of mysticism enter his work, since in that movie Bess McNeill (Emily Watson) somehow cures her husband's paralysis by allowing herself to be raped to death. *Antichrist* is as rich with implication, just as it is frustratingly short on resolution – beyond the murder of the maniac wife and murderous mother.

Ah, yes, the gynocide, both euphemistic and literal. In fact, the genital mutilation in general. It's hard not to see the third act of the film [*Chapter Three: Despair (Gynocide)*] as ironically titled, since it serves as both the title of her thesis and the core act of the final sequence, *Chapter Four: The Three Beggars*. It's one of a handful of extremely bleak jokes scattered throughout, like the fact that, by masturbating him to the point of cumming blood, she has given him a period. Yes, the laughs are mercifully few and far between, and if critics of von Trier are searching for a basis for accusations of misogyny, this is probably

the most important moment. She smashes him in the crotch with a piece of wood but, like the edited (read, censored) version of Nagisa Oshima's 1976 confrontational classic *Ai no Korida*, the action and impact takes place just below the screen. It's not that there is a coyness about showing male genitalia (the opening sequence includes one of the most graphic portrayals of intercourse in a non-porn film to date), which makes it more noteworthy that her self-cliterectomy is shown in astonishing anatomical detail.

That is a bold moment in cinema, but it is only one of a series of highly graphic images of the kind that get the self-appointed censors in a tizzy of barely suppressed jealousy. An often-overlooked part of von Trier's career is that, aside from heralding the age of graphic sex in art house films with 1998's *Idioterne*, he's also a *de facto* porn producer. Seriously. His production company Zentropa is also home to Pussy Power: Part subsidiary, part film making creed like *Dogme*, its mantra is to produce female-friendly hardcore movies. It's the sexuality that makes the film so raw, while allowing Gainsbourg and DaFoe to produce two of the most unrelenting performances of the decade. Gainsbourg, as befits her role, is astonishingly sexual while still oddly ethereal, and it raises the question of what the film would have been like if von Trier's original choice – Bond girl Eva Green – had not pulled out. However, it's almost impossible to envision the movie without DaFoe: His character balances both hubris and good intention – again, possibly an extension of von Trier's ambivalent-at-best attitude towards psychiatry.

There are no simple solutions to what *Antichrist* means. Considering how erratic and unpredictable von Trier's output can be, it's hard to say that it's even indicative of what will come from the director (even though he has promised that his next project, *Planet Melancholia*, will be a “psychological disaster movie”). But it will arguably be his most hotly debated film for a long time to come.



Indie and Small Press Comics Picks of 2009

by stacie whittle

I love Small Press and Indie comics I do. I was a late starter when it comes to being a comic fan as I was in my late twenties before I picked up my first graphic novel, which was *Watchmen* by Alan Moore. I read every single thing I was recommended after that and I had a big list of recommendations to work through and when I finished those, I went to the comic shop to choose something for myself. I was bamboozled by the sheer volume of material. I stood feeling like an imposter gazing with panic at the superhero titles and turned instead to the Indies and the stand alone stories, which had a far less intimidating array of back histories, spin off titles and continuity. I have delved into the mainstream world quite a lot since and it isn't quite as intimidating as it first appears, and I am definitely not dismissive of superheroes or one of those people who think that if you read one you can't read the other. I have a bit of a fondness for Batman, but though mainstream titles are a lovely place to have a holiday for me Small and Indie press is home. The following comics have been some of my very favourites of the past year:

I made a fabulous new discovery this year in the Small Press world- *Sgt Mike Battle* by Graham Pearce. This has been running for quite a while and I think is up to #15 now, it managed to escape my attention for so long as I wrongly believed it to be a war comic, I thought it was going to be in the style of *Commando* or something like that. I couldn't have been more wrong and this small press comic is great. It features Sgt Mike Battle: The Greatest American Hero, he is a cliché spouting, stupidly patriotic, white toothed Cap parody and it's brilliant. #1 sees him stomping on a variety of threats to the American way, including Hitler in a robot suit which made me laugh out loud. This comic is very funny and satirical, and though the artwork in #1 isn't quite as good as it becomes by #14 you can see it improving panel by panel. I really recommend this comic and it's a good one to start with if you're new to the world of Small Press.

Another stand out small press comic is *Costume Party* by Jack Fallows. Jack runs the Newcastle based Paper Jam Comics Collective and is a bit of a talented git. *Costume Party* is a collection of short strips and illustrations; beautifully produced it's a thing of beauty. The story/s are darkly funny, poignant and almost painfully honest and the artwork is very good too. I think Jack Fallows is one to keep an eye on in the future.

Insomnia Publications released its first commissioned graphic novel this year, it launched at Bristol con and sold a ridiculous amount of copies! *Cancertown* by Cy Dethan and Stephen Downey is a great dark and twisting story with a slightly noirish or *Hellblazer* feel to it. The main character is Vince Morley and he has a brain tumour, he lives his life between the real world and another world he dubs Cancertown not being entirely sure whether it is real or a symptom of his cancer. With dark moody art, imaginative lettering and a story that keeps you off balance all the way through its rave reviews are entirely justified. I enjoyed this very much and look forward to the second instalment. There is also a great step by step guide to how the look of *Cancertown* was created by artist Stephen Downey in the back of the book; I love little touches like this, much more in-depth than a simple sketchbook it's like a comic version of a DVD's bonus disc.

Not everyone in the world is as big a fan of *Strangers in Paradise* as I am; I loved *SiP* and cried buckets at its passing. Then along comes *Echo* by Terry Moore – a very different story to *SiP* with a real science fiction feel to it but a similar warm tone and emphasis on the importance of relationships. *Echo* begins with the test flight of the Betasuit, a new weapon being developed by the government. They shoot down Annie – the scientist testing the suit – to make sure the weapon is destroyable. Parts of the suit fall down and land on another girl, Julie, and the story then follows Julie and what happens to her in the aftermath of the explosion. The story becomes a chase story, a road movie, a race against time and a discovery of knowledge. It is taut, tense and it keeps you guessing. It deals with the emotional and physical side effects

of this fallout, it's a gripping story. I love Terry Moore's artwork, very clean lines and often sparse it still tells you all you need to know deftly. I have no idea how the man is producing everything he produces and on time! This title is wonderful and one of the few I'm still picking up monthly.

The next comic I want to mention made headlines, its first run sold out, its second run sold out, you couldn't get the blumming thing for love nor money, finally a third run went out as a special along with a *Walking Dead* issue. I am of course talking about *Chew: Taster's Choice* by John Layman and Rob Guillory. This story features police detective Tony Chu and he's a Cibopath, this means that when he eats something he knows everything that has happened to that thing during its life and its death (except beets). In a world where chickens are outlawed due to avian flu, Tony's grisly talents are immediately put to use by the FDA. This book is gory, it's hilarious, and it's strange and very well developed. The world makes complete sense whilst you're reading the story and only sounds crazy when you try to explain it! The artwork and the colouring complement the story so well that it is impossible to imagine any other artist working on this book. The cartoony style makes the grisly and often gory scenes simultaneously more shocking and funny. The first trade is out now.

Another first trade hitting the stands (or online shop!) in the last few weeks is *The Slightly Askew Adventures of Inspector Ham and Eggs* by Stephen Lindsay and Lauren Monardo and produced by Brainfood Comics. The art in this comic is incredible in a Saturday morning cartoon style, a brief flick through the comic may fool you into thinking it's aimed at children but a closer look shows that cute guinea pig is a whore and a decapitated whore at that! Inspector Serrano Ham is a Holmesque detective and his sidekick Eggs is a tiny cute little chick who is also looking for his mother. The arch villain G'nok is a gorilla in a mobster style suit and the secondary baddie is a warthog called Baron Von Blackforest whose lackey is a cross-dressing racoon. This comic is comedy genius, the pacing and plotting are perfection, it manages to shock you in a "they didn't just do that did they?" style which works well because of the extreme cuteness of the anthropomorphic characters. It is one of the funniest and most fun comics I have ever read. The trade is just out which you can order through their website and if you're a fan of fun and funny and plot and awesome art then I strongly suggest you do!

My last big comic love of the year has been *2000AD*, I am bordering on the obsessed when it comes to the Galaxy's Greatest Comic. I am such a newbie to this world and whereas with mainstream titles a huge back history is intimidating and scary with *2000AD* I just find it a relief as it means I have more to read! I have read trades upon trades this year as well as picking up the Prog and the *Judge Dredd Magazine*. I have come to understand the reason why hardcore *Twooth* fans regard John Wagner as a genius. I have fallen in love with a man-eating green zombie whom only wears speedos; I have worried over talking gorillas brought to life by the smudgy, gorgeous pencils of artist Colin MacNeil. I have visited other time periods and other worlds, I have hung out with Tsars and Pirates and Zombie Queens and Hoodies and Angels and Aliens and Mutants – seriously, who could ask for anything more?

I am running out of space but I will briefly mention my favourite web comics of the year: *Spinechillers* by Ben Clark, *The Everyday* by Adam Cadwell and *Mindhack* by David Wynne, easily checktable online and worth every second of mouse clicking! Let's hope 2010 has such wonders to offer!

LINKS:

<http://www.sgtmikebattle.co.uk/>
<http://www.jackfallows.com/>
<http://www.insomniapublications.com/>
<http://www.terrymooreart.com/blog/>
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