

Hub Magazine

SCIENCE FICTION HORROR FANTASY

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EDITORIAL:

by alasdair stuart

I'm not good with fantasy. Not in a negative way, not in the sort of way that makes me fear what I don't understand and lead a mob of angry villagers up the hill to Castle Fantasy to burn out the monster. That'd be silly.

No, my problem, with some fantasy at least, is I don't speak the language. I rail at the thought of having to wade through huge amounts of huge books about epic history and whilst I can more than see the worth and value of that method of storytelling it, and a lot of the tropes that go with it, I want a little pace and urgency in my fantasy. I want things to feel real, gritty. I want magic to be hard won and unpredictable, I want good people making bad choices for the right reasons, I want big ideals to be fought for and died for and every death to mean something. I want a world that feels real and at the same time doesn't feel like a slightly modified history textbook.

Some fantasy does that for me; John Lenahan's excellent *Shadowmagic*, AEG's superb *Legend of the 5 Rings* roleplaying game and *Stardust* to name three.

But I'd like to find more, I'd like to speak the language. Which is where you come in. What fantasy works for you? What authors' work deserves more attention? Leave a comment, let us know and help me speak the language a little more fluently. Because, let's face it, everyone should be able to order a coffee in fantasy-ese.



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FICTION

The Unpopular Opinion of Reverend Tobias Thackery

by adam christopher

My ears deceived me. I asked my guest to repeat his statement.

"Dogs," the Reverend Tobias Thackery said. With a smile he bit into the pink-iced fairy cake.

The tea was too hot. I felt my throat spasm in protest, but I was suddenly parched and drained the delicate cup in one searing, undignified gulp. I drew a low breath before speaking, a vain attempt at soothing the hellish roar against my soft palate.

"Dogs?" The single word was all I could manage. From my short acquaintance with this priest it was clear that he enjoyed oratory, so I sat back into the leather, gasping discretely while Thackery brushed moist yellow crumbs from his fingertips. The smug grin appeared again and the old man began a new speech.

"Dogs, indeed. It my firm belief that mankind is not, as friend Darwin has theorized, descended from the ape, but from the humble canine."

The Reverend paused theatrically, one elderly index finger raised heavenward in what I suspected was a very frequent gesture for a man who had delivered sermons for probably fifty years. At this juncture I did not object, although it would take quite a measure of explanation to impart the logic of his outlandish theory, if indeed it possessed a grain of it at all.

"Nay," he continued, the curve of his mouth creeping ever further up his whiskered cheeks. "I not only believe this to be true, I know it is so." A second baked confection took his fancy and he reclined with a creak, crystallised cherry already split between his dentures.

'Friend' Darwin. This was quite so, for it was when I last shared a fine brandy at the Linean Society with my eminent acquaintance that the great man proposed a meeting with this most remarkable of rural vicars. Dear old Charles would not be drawn, save for some urgent mutterings that were perfectly unclear. He stood at the mantle, tugging his beard with distraction, and after producing the Reverend's card and passing it to me, excused himself with some abruptness. His behaviour was quite out of character, but as I enquired the following day, I could get no further than Darwin's secretary, who informed me that her employer had taken to his bed with a heavy cold. Conveying my best wishes, the matter then left my mind for some time. The Hilary Term had begun at my college, and I found myself quite forgetful of our unusual meeting until Thackery's card resurfaced by chance as a student helped me move some papers into my new office.

Thackery regarded me across steepled hands, that infuriating smirk made ridiculous by the adherence of further crumbs to his lower lip. I said nothing, but after a spell I realized my silence was impolite. But I suspected that poor old Thackery must have either developed a skin of some considerable thickness, or that his faculties were so dulled with age that he did not perceive the recoil from those around him as he expounded his views on the descent of man which, to many, perhaps bordered on the offensive.

"Ah, Professor Burnley, I sense hesitation. But please do not think me presumptive when I say that such a reaction I have entirely anticipated. Indeed, it would be unnatural for one not to think my theory is the mere delusion of an infirm country vicar, or at the worst the dangerous ravings of a lunatic. But you are a man of science, and I know that science requires empirical evidence, reproducible and controlled.

"Firstly, a man of the cloth though I am, I do not reject the theories of Darwin. You are surprised? But the logic of it is perfectly clear. If the world is more than six thousand years old, and life evolved over untold aeons, then God made it so. Who are we to question His works? But while Darwin had grasped the meat of it, his studies were askew, the deduced lineage incorrect. But no matter.

"Mine are not mere jabberings. I studied at Oxford, where I obtained my Doctorate of Divinity, and thence to London then Bristol in my work. The peaceful wilderness of the Cornwall is only a reward for fifty years of service to Our Lord, but it is not my native land. Forgive me, I do not mean to press my credentials upon you, but rest assured that I do not make my claims idly or without thought as to their repercussion. Nor am I a yokel with odd ideas sprung from low intelligence."

So, the Reverend appeared to have taken great care with how he had disseminated his insane statements. No, not insane. I stopped myself there, unsatisfied that I was following the scientific method which Thackery himself apparently adhered to. I was truly doing my remarkable guest a gross disservice – I was Professor of Biological Anthropology! I cleared my mind and framed my next set of investigative probes carefully.

"Reverend, this is indeed an interesting theory. If you have discovered some proof, my colleagues and I would be extremely grateful to study these extraordinary data. Needless to say, Mr. Darwin himself would be chief among those."

The Reverend chuckled oddly, breaking my train of thought. My hand sought the tea pot; to my surprise it shook a little as it did.

"Mr. Darwin has already borne witness to the truth of the matter. Forgive me, I had assumed he had told you."

My hand grasped the warm pot handle, but moved no further. I found myself leaning forward awkwardly, unable to quite hide my surprise at Thackery's statement. Charles had already been presented with the data? I sat back, finding the cool grip of my chair strangely comforting.

"It must be clear why I am taking such a... surreptitious approach – such a revelation as that which I have uncovered cannot be broadcast to the general public as one. It is important that the data are collected and examined, subjected to the most rigorous of scientific tests by the leading experts of our great modern age, before it can even be introduced in such educated circles as the Royal Society, let alone the front page of the *Illustrated London News*. No, the matter is delicate, the revelation profound, Earth-shattering. It is therefore essential that I select and approach only a few, one at a time, until a quorum of science and theology can present our joint investigations to the world at large." He sipped his tea.

The Reverend appeared to be possessed of a singularly logical mind, and I was certainly intrigued by his adamant view and the strong, unwavering manner in which he stated it. But still I knew little, if anything, of the specifics.

"Reverend, you have convinced me fully of your character and your conviction. Of those I have no doubt. But tell me, what are your data? What facts and discoveries have you unearthed, and how did they come into your possession?"

Thackery drank the the last coarse dregs of tea.

"To expound these facts here would do them no justice. You must come down to Cornwall, where I shall be able to reveal all. Nay, I insist upon it! It is not such a wild place as you may think! My living is perfectly comfortable, and I would be honoured to have such a guest. There you can examine the facts and discoveries for yourself, unimpeded and unfettered.

"As for what precisely these data are, and how I have managed to interpret the archaeological and anthropological evidence on my own? Well, that is possibly the easiest part of all. For man is descended from dog, and God told me so."

A week later I found myself steaming westwards towards Penzance. I passed the entire journey questioning my own reason, how I could possibly take such time away from academia to humour a madman.

But it was in that week since Thackery had departed my study that the world somehow *changed*. As the weather drew in, I found my usual companions busy or otherwise detained, precluding any of our usual evenings in the university lounge. Those that I did meet unintentionally about the place were reluctant to stop and apparently unable to talk. It was likely the first signs of the winter chill starting to sweep the city, making even the most robust of constitutions cough and splutter as they hurried from cold lecture hall to warm fireside, and not, as my nagging subconscious insisted, upon some change wrought by the recent visit of Thackery. Despite this, I found myself starting at every dog bark, giving any of the animals I came

near during that week a berth of some considerable distance. Of Darwin I had but one contact. I was desperate to discuss my meeting with his recommended madman, but all I elicited in return was a plain white calling card, on the reverse of which was simply written 'Go, and come back; there will be work to do' in Charles's inimitable hand. It seemed as if the decision to visit Cornwall had already been taken for me.

The grey of late November was not confined merely to the city. Instead, the dreary wash became my unwanted travelling companion for the entire train journey. As we crept ever onwards, the whole countryside was cast in an unpleasant shade, the heaviness of the clouds in the middle of the day producing a most peculiar, unsettling effect – fields of crop that the train passed were rendered a much darker shade of green than seemed quite natural. I had not ventured into this part of the country prior to this journey, but I had never had any particular preconception about the landscape or its people. I wisely decided the weather was affected my mood and the odd glow of the world outside the train carriage was the figment of an imagination tired by the rocking journey. But the destination grew ever closer, and I found my nerves winding into an irrational coil.

My stop was St. Bloch, a large village adherent to the rugged coastal cliffs some miles east from Penzance. It was here that Thackery had taken up the living left vacant by the death of the previous incumbent; the successful application by such an elderly implied duties that were not rigorous and a flock that was small. I had not the time to investigate the village or its history prior to my departure, except to note in a directory of notable historic sites that the Old Rectory was once a Baronial seat, and that the edifice was described as 'not insubstantial'.

The greyish glow of the sky bothered me. I pulled the window blind and continued the remainder of my journey alone in the dark and empty compartment.

It was only when I was deposited at The Silvered Sickle, the village inn serving St. Bloch, that I discovered I was not to be a guest of the Reverend Thackery. While the driver who had collected me had indeed been in his employ, the instructions from his master were precise. A room had been prepared for me at The Sickle, and the services of the vicar's carriage at my instant disposal. I enquired about this unexpected state of affairs, but could only draw the vaguest description that the Rectory was undergoing some renovation at present, rendering the guest wing temporarily uninhabitable. However, the Reverend sent his greetings, and had invited me to the house the following morning.

Unable and unwilling to protest, stiff from the slow train and cursing myself that the journey had succeeded in jangling my nerves so unnecessarily, I was pleased to find The Silvered Sickle a most wholesome establishment. I was to be the only resident, and indeed spent much of the evening alone in the bar after a fine meal prepared by the proprietor, Mrs. Thwaiste, and her teenage daughter, Birdie. The pair busied themselves about the running and maintenance of the inn while I sat comfortably by the fire, surrounded by oak beams and horse brass, but over the course of a few hours we became engaged in most light and entertaining conversation. I learnt much of the history of the area and village, the church and the Old Rectory. I was interested to learn that the latter pair had been built almost at the cliff edge about half a mile from where I now reclined, but clearly the sea air and undoubtedly spectacular vista such a position afforded made for an obvious place of worship of God and His mighty works. A vague recollection of the smuggling history of the region came to mind, but I said nothing, and the landlady did not broach the subject.

"Tell me," I began to ask of Mrs. Thwaiste as she leaned her significant forearms upon the shine of the bar. "Does noone in St. Bloch have a thirst for beer? This must be the quietest inn in the county."

Maybe I had been wrong to select quite such a large tankard of fine local ale, and wrong to have decided upon a second to aid fireside digestion. Perhaps my manner had grown too familiar. But no sooner did I ask than young Birdie stopped piling firewood from basket to another, and her mother stood straight from her casual position, the slack skin of her arms red from where they had rested. Birdie looked to her mother, her mother looked to her. I was in the middle, feeling somewhat ridiculous and now embarrassed by my question as I found my head turning from one to the other. Mrs. Thwaiste drew a breath to speak,

but then the iron-bound door of the inn crashed open and three men entered. They were burly and in dirty denims, black felt hats each of them, and kerchiefs about the neck. I politely raised my drink but received only a stare and a mutter in return. This did not particularly bother me. These were country folk, I was the stranger, and after a hard day on the fields it did not require scientific reasoning to deduce that a refreshing draught was at the forefront of their minds.

I returned to my own thoughts, happy at least that St. Bloch was not as oddly deserted as first impressions had suggested, and it was only as I reached my bedroom door at a late hour that I realised the look Birdie had been giving me since I posed my original question had been significant, although of quite what my woolly mind could not fathom.

The Reverend Tobias Thackery met me on a morning even duller than the previous day. He welcomed me into the blackened ruin that was the Old Rectory, but at the threshold I paused, afraid perhaps that the entire construction would collapse about me. After a moment the Reverend stopped and turned, beckoning me to follow with that small, odd smile that had been present at our first meeting back in London.

While my initial feeling had been perhaps exaggerated, the very state of the building was, I felt, some cause for general alarm. The palatial house was Jacobean, that much was obvious, a castellated collection of turrets and towers with vast arched windows hinting perhaps at an even older origin, all exactly as my book had intimated. The size was considerable and its noble history obvious; perhaps seeing my look, this Thackery confirmed, beginning a rambling discourse on the living of St. Bloch and how it had been merged, unusually, into the now extinct Barony, which had passed back to the church following the demise of the seventh title-holder. Thackery, while entitled to the Old Rectory, had no seat in the House of Lords, and the estate was owned wholly by the Church of England.

I tried to enquire as to the date of extinction, for the state of the house was, I feared, quite terminal, but with his back to me Thackery's voice was only a mumble, hands waving here and there as he gave an answer I was unable to hear. The once white stone exterior of the place was curiously as black as London limestone, and while the country air was clear and free from the industrial smog redolent of big cities, the masonry appeared to have some slimy algal bloom pasting the entire exterior surface, with only patches of the original masonry visible. I touched some experimentally as I paused at the narrow arch of the entrance, and walking inwards with the Reverend I found myself absently rubbing my fingers upon the hem of my jacket until the skin was red.

The interior was a little better, although the dank atmosphere no doubt did little to preserve the treasures that remained from the long-deceased Barons of Bloch. Great portraits stared out from peeling walls, looking down through the gloom as Thackery led me from one hallway to another, through once-grand reception rooms and parlours until we reached the library. Here two walls were covered by threadbare tapestries, their elaborate embroidery faded to a flat yellow right to the tattered, ragged edges. The third was shelves. It was in this room that we sat in two elegant, and thankfully intact, chairs, separated by an octagonal oak table topped with green leather. We faced away from the mouldering shelves and rotting tapestries, and out of a magnificent set of seventeenth century leaded windows that formed the entirety of the fourth wall. From the floor to almost the ceiling they rose, providing a view of the open sea that snatched the words from my mouth. In all this ruin, the spectacle of nature was on full display. Thackery chuckled at my reaction, and together we sat for some minutes, contemplating the gentle roll of the slate sea and the sheer beauty of the Cornish coast.

Presently a servant appeared carrying a silver tray laden with coffee pot of rare workmanship, clearly original to the house. The Reverend introduced the servant as Jacob, whom I recognised as my carriage driver and whose duties, Thackery stated, included that of Verger. The old man explained that as the Church could not in all honesty afford the upkeep of such a property, Jacob had volunteered his time to work at the house for his elderly vicar. At this I regarded my host with some sadness, and considered that upon his demise, it was likely the parish would be merged with its neighbours and the great house probably demolished, the cost of restoration and stabilisation surely being beyond the means of all but the wealthiest of landowners.

We talked idly for some time, Thackery not referring to his evolutionary theory – the very reason for my visit – at all for a good hour or more. Finally, I could contain my curiosity no longer, and I introduced the subject with perhaps impolite haste. But this corner of Cornwall was unsettling, and the house even more so, despite the beauty beyond the great windows. I fancied an examination of the Reverend's evidence would serve to distract my over-active imagination admirably.

Thackery smiled and drank his coffee. As he sipped, he pointed a long, skeletal finger towards the windows. I followed his direction, but could not discern his meaning. The view was, as I have attempted to indicate, quite astonishing, the outer library wall completely flush with the cliff face. From my seated position I could see nothing but steely silence of sea and of sky. How many poets and novelists would kill for such a melancholic aspect to aid their imagination. But still I could not infer the Reverend's meaning.

"We must wait for nightfall, Professor," he said at last. "And then you shall join our congregation and bear witness to the truth. Ah, fear not, I see how you squirm in your chair. I am a humble Christian soldier, a servant of the Good Lord. But my flock has been blessed with a direct bodily manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ. This statement may seem pure folly to your scientific mind, and I can only reiterate how fully I understand your position. But you will see. Mr. Darwin did, and many others in your profession.

"Come. We have time before evensong. There is much I can show you in the meantime."

The next two hours were a blur, a fuzzy mix of archaeology and religion. Thackery remained calm and even throughout, trusting, quite rightly, that a methodical presentation of facts would be required to convince my analytical mind of the truth of his claim. But as the Reverend showed me one artefact after another, he appeared wholly ignorant of the creeping dread I felt as each item and relic was passed into my hands. For as he continued with his remarkable display, I became more and more convinced that his mind – or, God forbid, my own – had dissolved into utter madness in this black cliff-top house.

"This tablet shows our Lord Jesus turning the tables at the money lenders. This, the Marriage at Cana. And here, the Crucifixion itself. Magnificent, are they not? The finest engravings in England. Indeed, these remarkable relics are also the most ancient, perhaps in all the world. For they surely are first-hand accounts, the writings of the Disciples by their own hands."

The black stone fragments were an array of shapes and sizes, but each a jagged, evil shard I was quick to deposit onto the octagonal tabletop. Each swarmed with Egyptian hieroglyphs that surrounded pictographic representations that I could recognise as the gods of that ancient land. Ra the hawk-man. The feline aspect of Bubastis. But worst of all, the jackal-headed god of the desert, of storms, of chaos. Set. Thackery continued to pile the tablets out of a large oak box that sat upon the floor, unwrapping each ceramic from the cream linen in which they had been carefully wrapped.

After an hour I ceased to protest, for Thackery was not listening. My initial questions as to what on Earth the old man was talking about as he described familiar Biblical scenes, pointing to the Coptic symbols and grave goods as he did so, were met with no response, so engrossed was the priest in showing me the earthenware. The raising of my voice did not progress matters either, the increased volume and exasperated tone merely interrupting Thackery's flow. He would turn his face up to me, eyebrow raised expectantly, as if I were a child in Sunday school putting a hand up. Each time he turned back to his artefacts before I could say anything more.

The man's mind was gone, utterly, of this I was now sure. What he perceived to be displayed on the ancient Egyptian stones I had no idea, but clearly his delirium was deep-set and, given his advanced years, most probably intractable. At the second hour I fell to silent observation of the mounting pile of black tablets. My stomach churned and I felt the pulse of adrenaline tugged my chest, urging me to abandon this wretched house and its mad inhabitant and return home. I should never have come.

And then Thackery's Verger re-appeared, dressed now in a flowing white robe. At once the Reverend's face lit with joy, and he clasped my hands together in excitement. If Jacob noted the stones upon the table, or knew their nature, he did not indicate.

"Evensong! At last! Come, you will see, just as Darwin and the others did. Jacob, help me with my vestments would you? Soon, Professor, soon you will see!"

We weaved through the house, now sinking into the dark of a late autumn night, led by Thackery and followed by Jacob, each casting the low yellow light of a lantern before them. We descended several stairs, at last entering a vast cellar. Here I paused in confusion, but Thackery waved me on and Jacob indicated the way ahead, through another door and thence to an older, deeper passageway that left the foundations of the house and cut in to the rock of the cliff. Perhaps my thoughts of smugglers and shipwreckers had been accurate, and indeed as we walked the stone corridor Thackery explained precisely how the area was once thick with their business and that the entire cliff was riddled with passages and caverns which hid the terrible crimes of the past.

We proceeded downwards in a slow spiral, and despite my conviction of Thackery's broken mind, the respect with which his Verger showed him intrigued me. If the Reverend's description was correct, we were heading towards the nightly gathering of the parish for evening prayer and song. Even more bizarre that his blindness to the Egyptian artefacts, his continued claim that God had personally appeared to tell him the story of mankind's descent from the dog was so odd that by now I simply had to see his ridiculous charade through to the end.

Still deeper we delved, and there came a point where I noticed the walls of the passage were not longer the large rectangular stone blocks of the Cornish smugglers and become the bedrock itself, now rough with some semi-regular pattern. I paused, and asked Jacob to bring his lantern closer so I could see. And with the wall so illuminated I suddenly felt light-headed and cold to my very spine. The passage was lined with more hieroglyphic writing native not to the shores of the South West of England, but to the shifting sands of the Sahara and the dead cities of the Pharaohs, separated from us by two thousand miles of distance and two thousand years of time.

Thackery registered my discomfort and I felt his hand on my shoulder. His face swam into the lantern light, bleached yellow by the glare at such close range, eyes wide and mouth drawn to rictus grin. I fought to regain my sense of balance, yet feared to lean upon the engravings for support. But I had to no choice, and grimaced as the ice cold of the stone struck the palm of my hand like a hammer blow.

"I see you are impressed, sir! And so you might be. I have neglected to provide a full explanation of our journey, and for that you must forgive me, but as you can now realise this was something you simply had to see for yourself!

"We are heading to a large cavern deep in the bedrock of the hill, discovered in years past by those ruffians seeking to hide their contraband from the Revenue Men. But perhaps not all these sinners were destined for the fiery torment of hell. No indeed, it seems some at least had an epiphany, and carved out of their secret cave and passages a veritable cathedral of stone! Remarkable! Such fine detail. True enough, it is merely a hundred or so years in age, but remember this was all created by the hand of untrained sailors, of the once wild locals who saw the light and came into the bosom of our Lord. See here, the Last Supper rendered with such perfection. And here, my favourite, Moses receiving the Commandments upon Sinai. Ah, such wonder. Truly one of the great lost art treasures, don't you think?"

I tried to focus on the wall, but my sight buckled at the horror of it. It was a dream, it had to be. In the stifling dark, the skull-like face of Thackery leering, and before us both his bony hands tracing the magnificent, impossible Egyptian carvings on the wall. The scene depicted was the funerary procession of a great king, the High Priests carrying offerings to a square-topped pyramid. And ahead, waiting to receive his guests, Set reclined upon his throne. My eyes settled on his dog-head as the bitter taste of bile reached the back of my throat. I swallowed, nodded, and turned away from the wall. Before any words were spoken Thackery was away down the passage and I followed dizzily.

We were the last to arrive in the great cavern. It was as he described, a wondrously carved chamber, a place of worship hewn from the very foundation of St. Bloch. But it was not the architecture of the Christian church. It was not even remotely European in design, but instead a staggering collection of fluted columns between vast bas-reliefs. Foul Gods and kings in terrible silhouette, with larger figures rising up into the pitch black of the cavern roof, towering an unknown height above us. A temple design common to Egypt and the pyramid complexes of the Nile. A temple so utterly alien to British soil I could not even begin to speculate upon its origin.

The congregation stood together, some two or three dozen souls, all in white robes as Jacob wore,

before a stone dais, flat-topped and funereal. With all manner of politeness, Thackery excused himself from my company and passed through the crowd. Smiling, he hopped upon this small platform with a surprising display of athleticism, and addressed the gathered villagers.

"Dearly beloved, Christ is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, and we beseech His forgiveness and His glory and give thanks that He walks among us."

"Amen," intoned the audience, who then sat as one upon the stone floor. I followed, no longer capable of rational thought. I sat, cross-legged, and watched, slack-jawed.

Thackery then gave a sermon, the likes of which were common to any village church. The congregation sang two or three popular hymns, without musical accompaniment. None here appeared to be aware of the absurd nature of their surroundings, nor the how or the why of it all. I did nothing but sit in silence, glad that at the back of the temple at least I could observe without being seen myself.

The Reverend alighted from the dais and stood at the front of his assembled parishioners. I dragged myself to my feet, sensing perhaps that this insane display was reaching a climax. This was the key moment in which Thackery would be revealed as the fraud he was or... well, the alternative was not something I was either able or willing to contemplate.

There was movement in the darkness on either side of the dais. Two more white-robed figures, hooded this time, stepped from the shadows beneath dim lanterns and stood at either side of the platform, facing inwards. There was something peculiar about them I could not quite discern, something about the shape of the hoods over their heads. But my attention was quickly drawn away from them and to the empty space where Thackery had recently stood. Something was *appearing*.

As the congregation sang *All Things Bright and Beautiful*, there was a spark of light, nothing more than the flicker of flint and tinder, in the air above the stone. Again it flashed, and the darkness moved. It was hard to define any shape or form, but a shadowed outline, black upon black, shifted left to right and then to the left again. I half imagined a concealed curtain and a pair of tricksters, but alas this was far from the horrendous truth of it.

He was there. Seated in a thin wooden throne, the figure was immense and dark, perhaps ten feet in height if standing. At first I saw only the sandaled foot of a man, but then the upper body flared into being, as if a mist were cleared by a sudden gust. A muscular torso, naked save for a sort of woven bib. And upon the shoulders the head, as black as the Egyptian tablets in Thackery's library and equally ancient, perhaps more so. The narrow, elongated muzzle; the still, vacant eyes. Two ears, sharp and triangular, atop the head. I gazed upon the jackal head of Set. I fell to my knees as my entire life of learning and reason were rudely yanked from beneath my feet like an old rug. Thackery's first bold statement echoed in my mind.

Man is not descended from the ape, but from the dog.

And then his second.

God told me so.

More movement now. The two hooded attendants now pulled between them a man not dressed in flowing white, but in dirty denims and black felt cap – one of the farm labourers from The Silvered Sickle. He struggled a little, but not much, the strength of his captors clearly significant given the impressive build of the man. At first his back was to me, but at Thackery's direction the two attendants spun him about. I saw then something fleetingly inside one of the white hoods, a glassy glittering like a dull jewelled eye, and then it was gone. The priest addressed the labourer in alarming monotone.

"Joseph Harris, glory be to the Lord, you have been judged and found wanting. You are not a child of God, you are not a son of Adam. You are not here by the grace of our Lord, you claim your heritage from the tree and from the ape, a child of the Devil, a test sent by Lucifer. You are not a descendant of man, you have been sent here to seduce and infiltrate. Jesus, save the soul of this poor creature and forgive him and forgive us all as we return him to his maker."

Above the dais, the seated figure floated in his wooden throne was perfectly still, as cold as the surrounding rock. Then he raised a gargantuan hand from the chair, and held up a black thumb and forefinger, curling the digits into a circle, while holding the remaining three upwards. A sign familiar to his Egyptian subjects of two millennia ago, and a gesture that stirred something in my chest, a feeling I could not logically explain. Something old, primal. Something... comforting, homely.

Thackery turned to face the congregation. From his belt he drew a knife made entirely of gold, the handle and hilt studded with flat red gems. Likewise, each member of the congregation also took blades from beneath their silken robes, each held high in response.

Joseph Harris did not survive long, and as his final cry reverberated in the great cavern under St. Bloch, I looked down at the blood covering my own hands. I found myself at the front of the congregation, before the stone Dias and the one true God, Thackery smiling at my side. Floating above in the gloom, I felt the beneficent gaze of Set upon me.

My arms were grasped by Set's attendants, who turned me bodily to face the assembly, as they had done to Joseph Harris. Thackery spoke, voice cracking with joy.

"Dearly beloved, we have saved another! Jonathan Burnley joins us, is one with us in Jesus. For it is as I hoped. Jonathan is a child of God, a man wrought in the image of our Lord as the Bible tells us. For the Lord God made man in his own image. We, the dog-men, own the world by divine right. Our enemy, the ape-men, were sent by a false deity to confuse and to control. But Jonathan, our son, is with us by body and blood."

There it was. The truth at first so awful I could not comprehend, but at the dawning realisation, I felt nothing but warmth and elation in that ancient cave. Now I understood, now I saw what Thackery had seen, what Darwin had been shown. Go, and come back, my friend had said. There was work to be done. Our world was held by the ape-men. Our task was indeed vast.

Thackery nodded. In the presence of our Lord Christ I had found my mission.

When I awoke it was daylight. I was fully clothed and lay on top of the bed in my room at the inn, the covers wholly undisturbed. I had been dreaming, the oppressive and close atmosphere of the Old Rectory delivering me a chill which had developed to mild fever. Jacob, the old priest's servant, had carried me back to The Silvered Sickle. That was it. It had to be.

I rose as a knock came at the door. I called to enter, waving at nobody, but noticing for the first time my hands. They were dirty, caked with a brown crust that began to peel. But I had no time to investigate further. I sat back to the bed, plunging my hands beneath me to hide their condition as the landlady's daughter entered with soup and bread.

"Excuse me, sir, but Mrs. Thwaiste has sent me up with some food. Are you feeling better, sir?"

I fidgeted a little, still keeping my hands concealed. "Indeed yes, thank-you Birdie." The girl bowed a little, and when it became obvious I was not going to take the tray from her, she placed it carefully upon the writing desk that stood against the wall.

"I am glad you are back from that dreadful house." Birdie looked to the floor as she spoke. She was nervous.

"Go on," I said.

"Thackery is a wild one, sir. A real loon, Ma says. I'm inclined to agree, sir. He's dangerous. The village isn't the same since he arrived. Half have moved elsewhere, almost overnight, queer it was. The other half, well, they don't want anything to do with us. The vicar even stopped his church service. We don't know where everyone goes on a Sunday. Never been able to find out. Oh, it's horrible and it's Thackery's doing. Sorry sir, I'll leave you to your soup."

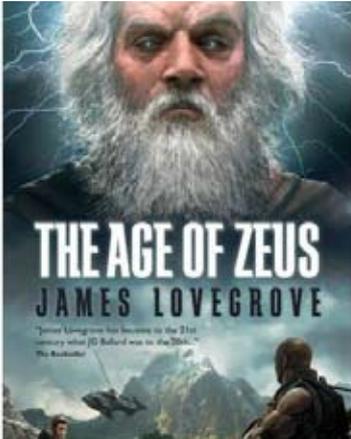
Birdie turned her back to me as she busied herself with the tray. I half turned, wanting to question the young girl further, but then my hands felt something warm and smooth beneath the bedclothes. I drew it out silently, and in the shining gold of the ruby-studded knife I saw again that great cavern and the true face of God.

And then I remembered, and got off the bed, and in deference to her young age ensured as best I could that Birdie did not suffer unduly, twisting the knife swiftly between her shoulder blades to sever the spinal column. Of Mrs. Thwaiste I could make no such consideration. For the ape-men must be punished and expunged from God's earth, and the dog-men shall regain their place as His blessed children.

Amen.

The Age of Zeus

reviewed by martin willoughby



by James Lovegrove

Solaris

rrp £7.99

The book landed on the floor of my hallway with a thump that registered 3.4 on the Richter scale. I opened the package, looked at the size of this book and thought, 'Oh no.' After reading it I had a smile on my face.

My normal view of large books is that they are full of long winded descriptions about things that don't matter to anyone but the author. Whilst that it is true in this book, the story is still compelling and laced

with enough humour and intrigue to keep the story from dragging.

So let's get the negative parts out of the way first. It is long winded and could have done with an editor's red pen through about a quarter of it. The prologue is unnecessary and a waste of ink and paper, whilst a couple of characters are cardboard cut outs.

There is also one thing that troubles me. About halfway into the book, there is a reference to the World Trade Centre and the twin towers. Given that this book was written at some point in the last 18 months and it is not set in the past, why was that left in? It's a small point, but I wonder how many readers will come to that point and flinch.

As for the bad points, that's it.

I've already referred to the humour, and there were some points where I giggled out loud. Humour isn't the main selling point of this book, but there is enough of it, not always of the gallows variety, to give the story the occasional lift and add a touch more human-like reality to the characters.

Lovegrove didn't hang around the sex scenes too long either. He hasn't ignored sex, but neither has he turned the book into soft porn or risked receiving a 'bad sex' award. The violence on the other hand is there in colour, but not glorified. Death stinks: literally. It also comes around frequently.

Despite my dislike of long-winded books, what kept me reading was the characters. I cared what happened to them and some surprising people got killed, especially early on. I even felt sorry for the Minotaur. It is this characterisation that is the books strength.

The story itself is simple. The Greek gods have come back to rule the earth. They've been in charge for a decade, stopped wars and made sure that the politicians keep in line. There are people who resist, one of whom is called Landesman and owns a weapons manufacturer called Daedalus Industries.

He recruits 12 people, his dirty dozen, gives them code names of ancient Titans and, using some advanced technology, sets about defeating the Gods. The introduction of the 12 characters is one of those long-winded information dumps I referred to earlier.

After much raining, which Lovegrove doesn't go into too much detail about, the Titans start by taking out the monsters that the gods have left around the world to keep the population in line. Thankfully, Lovegrove doesn't go into excruciating detail with each monster, but he does give a tantalising insight into the world he imagines through these chapters.

Eventually, the gods are in retreat, but there is one more battle to wage: war against the Olympians. And that is where the story gets hot and very interesting. Who and what the gods are came as a complete surprise to me, as does their origin.

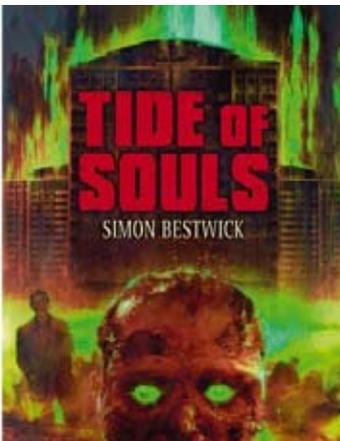
I'm not one to spoil plots, so I'll let you read the book to discover the whole gory ending for yourself.

Despite being overlong (in my opinion), this is a good book and well worth the read. It's also a handy late night read as it has 78 small chapters, plus a useless prologue and a semi-useless epilogue. I found myself looking at the clock and thinking I have time to read another chapter before I go to sleep. Before I knew it, it was 1am and I was dropping off to sleep whilst reading 'just one more chapter'.

Despite my initial reservations, this is one of those books that I have no regrets about reading and for all its faults, this a fine book, a thumping good read and well worth the money.

Tomes of the Dead: Tide of Souls

reviewed by derek john



by Simon Bestwick
Abaddon Books
rrp £6.99

There has never been a better time to be a zombie. If you can sing, dance and are stylishly decomposed then you stand a very good chance of making the last 16 of *Pop Idol*. Zombies are hot property these days. No longer confined to Michael Jackson videos and late night reruns of old movies, they are storming to the top of the US film charts with the likes of comedy-horror *Zombieland* and such is the demand for Zombie-orientated content that even the £45 budget

British camcorder effort *Colin* can get a limited cinematic release.

The current upsurge in popularity of zombie-themed movies is also reflected in the printed media. *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* has spent most of this year on the NY Times bestseller list and in the UK, Abaddon Books have inaugurated the 'Tomes of The Dead' series specifically to publish zombie-themed fiction of which 'Tide of Souls' by Simon Bestwick is a recent offering.

The recent popularity of zombie movies has also been, paradoxically, a hammer-blow to the credibility of the genre. Zombies have become figures of fun; they shamble around aimlessly waiting to be killed in ever-inventive ways by the protagonists. For every groundbreaking horror effort such as *28 Days Later* we have several dozen *Shaun of the Dead* wannabes going straight to DVD. This diversion of the genre's energies into satire and black humour was already evident in Romero's sequel 'Dawn of the Dead' back in 1978 and has sapped its ability to deliver true terror.

So any new variations on the zombie theme must walk a critical tightrope. The brief demanded by the public is clearly for canonical zombies, i.e. reanimated corpses, hungry for living flesh, who can only be killed by a shot to the head etcetera, and yet at the same time scrupulously avoiding any sense of degenerating into a *Carry on Zombie* scenario. Thus the bar is set worryingly high for any author to overcome this mass of cliché and deliver something that is truly original and terrifying.

In this novel Simon Bestwick has set himself an Olympian standard as not only is he tackling the whole zombie theme but also taking on the classic environmental disaster movie trope as outlined in 'The Day after Tomorrow'.

'Tide of Souls' is set in the post-apocalyptic landscape of Northern England. We follow the first-hand

accounts of three protagonists as they deal with the aftermath of a cataclysmic overnight rise in sea-levels which is somehow linked to the return of the corpses of those lost at sea over the ages. Bestwick pays homage to the constraints of the genre; his zombies are relentless flesh-eating hordes who quickly overrun most of the population leaving us to follow the tales of the survivors as they battle to survive against the odds.

Nasty things have been coming out of the sea as far back as H.P. Lovecraft's '*Shadow over Innsmouth*' and of course as zombies do not need to breathe, sub-aquatic life should be second nature to them. (Zombie aficionados will remember the glorious zombie vs. shark scene from Lucio Fulci's 1979 shocker *Zombie Flesh Eaters*).

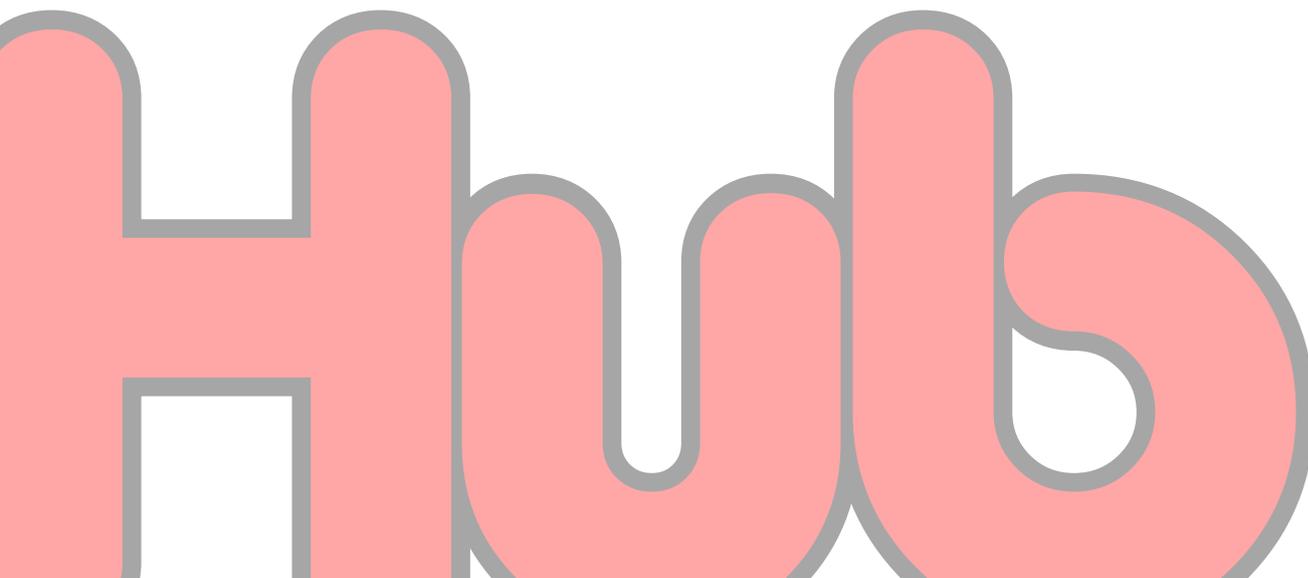
The first character we meet is Katja, a Polish migrant who has been trafficked to work against her will in a brothel in Manchester and the first third of the novel follows her attempts to escape from the ensuing apocalypse. The action is fast-paced and the gore content suitably high. Her story then links to that of Rob McTarn a Special Forces operative called out of retirement by the crumbling command structure of the army to assemble a team to track down an obscure marine biologist called Ben Stiles who has somehow predicted the coming apocalypse in a letter to the government.

By deciding to use a first person narrative throughout the novel Bestwick needs to make each character's voice engaging and different. However Katja, who should have been the most original and sympathetic character, remains relentlessly one-dimensional. It just so happens that she is the daughter of a Special Forces operative herself and can kick-ass and pack a piece as good as the boys, thus making her hard to distinguish from the legions of other Milla Jovovich-style clones already populating the genre. McTarn is also afflicted by the same flatness. His character suffers from being over-researched and his conversation is peppered with army jargon which he then laboriously has to explain in parenthesis to the reader. He is supposed to be from Glasgow yet sounds much more Bravo Two Zero than Rab C Nesbitt.

Where Bestwick really excels is in the lyrical final section where the marine biologist Stiles recounts his investigations into the genesis of the disaster and the unseen force that has created the zombies. The introspective and emotionally fragile Stiles weaves a wistful and sombre narrative which is where the novel finally breaks free from cliché and manages to be both profound and moving.

Bestwick plays the 'grim up north' card to the hilt and in the incessant fog and rain around the Pendle Hills the protagonists battle wave after wave of zombies in a *Zulu*-style showdown that doesn't let the pace drop for a second. He also eschews the usual voodoo/ plague explanations for zombiefication and instead opts for a more ecological/folkloric slant which is innovative and intellectually satisfying, with more than a nod to Nigel Kneale and Jacques Benveniste.

'*Tide of Souls*' is an original take on a tired genre, perhaps showing a new way back to its traditional horror roots.



FEATURES

Interview: Joe R. Lansdale - Part 1

with richard whittaker

When Joe R. Lansdale opens his mouth, there's no doubt he's from rural East Texas. The drawl is there, not the pure drawl of the panhandle, but that smoother tone that you get when you start heading towards the Louisiana and Oklahoma state lines. He's what Bill Hicks would have called "A reader," a massive consumer of the written word, and he has turned what he has absorbed into one of the most notable canons of work in post-war literature.

There's no high-falutin' literary snobbery here. While he has twice won a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year award (for *Mucho Mojo* and *The Bottoms*), and there are seven Bram Stoker awards in his display case, Lansdale has remained a two-fisted Texan, a prolific author of novels and short stories that often blend mystery, horror and period drama. The ink in his pen is blue-collar blue, and he still lives in the remote town of Nacodoches, TX (Pop. 32,006), where he teaches creative writing at Stephen F. Austin State University, runs his martial arts school, and remains a prolific producer of what is best described as drive-in fiction. While best known for his Hap and Leonard crime novels, his Ned the Seal books took steampunk and zeppelins to the Old West, *The Drive-In* series pits ordinary Americans against Armageddon with nothing but popcorn to depend on, while *Dead in the West* is a full-blown Indian curse horror shocker. Of course, many Hub readers will know him for his novella *Bubba Ho-Tep*, the oddball tale of an aging Elvis Presley and JFK hunting down a mummy in a retirement home, lovingly adapted for the screen in 2002 with Bruce Campbell as The King.

Over the last two years, I've had the genuine pleasure of interviewing Lansdale on several occasions at literary events around Texas and on the phone. In the first part of a three-part interview, drawn from those conversations, he talks about his literary influences, the impact of Texas on his writing, and growing up in a town where the Great Depression never quite finished.

(Parts of this interview have previously been published in the *Austin Chronicle*.)

Hub Magazine: You've had huge success with your crime novels, but you've also had a solid career of genre work.

Joe Lansdale: I saw a review once of my work that I thought hit it so perfectly, not just for me but for a number of other writers. It said, although I don't really write science fiction, you can tell I have a science fiction heart.

HM: Which other writers do you think that describes?

JL: I think me and Harold Waldrop and Neal Barrett Jr., they had a name for us. I think it was called slipstream, which is just a division of SF. Some people want to make it a separate thing, but I think it's a cousin, and that's where we fit in, because our stories may be totally unrelated to science or space opera, but are so odd and outré that they don't quite fit into any other genre, other than science fiction and/or fantasy.

HM: J.G. Ballard would fit easily on that list.

JL: Ballard, Harlan Ellison, Thomas Disch, and a number of authors like that who were on the fringes. Well, people say we were at the fringes. I think we were at the core of it. We were influenced by the sociological and anthropological branch of SF, and people like Philip Jose Farmer who used science fiction as literature, and saw it as literature, and brought other kinds of literature to it. I think that's one of the biggest

differences, this mixture of ideas.

HM: They were also taken seriously by publishers. *Playboy*, for example, published some great genre work in the 1960s by several of those authors.

JL: They put out a volume of science fiction, a volume of horror, a volume of fantasy, a volume of crime and suspense stories. I have 'em all, and some of the stuff is just amazing, because some writers you'll recognize as genre writers, but some writers that you would not have thought of as being in that field.

HM: So who were your big sci-fi and fantasy influences?

JL: Edgar Rice Burroughs, and then in the 60s as a teenager I got influenced by [Ernest] Hemmingway and Mark Twain and [Jack] London and [F. Scott] Fitzgerald, Jack Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor. So by the time it got to the 70s and I was reading [Michael] Moorcock and Ballard, it just went in a different direction. Something just clicked in my head.

HM: What was the direct effect of that diversity of reading material on your writing?

JL: It taught me to think outside the box, and it gave me a certain enthusiasm for story, and a certain attitude for how I attack a story, whether it's crime or western or whatever, that I would never have had if I were not an absolute comic book and science fiction nut early on. A lot of the writers that had a lot of an influence in the '50s and the '60s didn't grow up just reading genre fiction. That's part of something that can really hurt fiction, because if you become incestuous, then after a while you produce morons.

HM: When we've spoken before, you've talked about your admiration for H.P. Lovecraft.

JL: I think that, after Poe, he's the most important writer of horror fiction of the 20th and 21st century, and his impact on science fiction has been under-rated, because it's been enormous. This whole concept of a cosmic presence, that there's something bigger than us but it's not theological. It's been a big influence on SF, horror, fantasy, and for that matter it's started to seep in more directly into more mainstream types of fiction. I remember reading him in the late 60s and the 70s, and he's been out there, but I think there were areas where he was not prevalent. He was in print, but you had to search for them. The Library of America introduced a collection of his work as of literary importance in the same way you would do Edgar Allen Poe. His reputation, like Robert E. Howard, grows every day. Howard's another one who wrote very little SF: He wrote on the fringe of it, but his effect is far broader than Lovecraft.

HM: You've done an adaptation of Howard's *Pigeons From Hell* for Dark Horse Comics. Where does he fit in the fantasy canon?

JL: He's our Jack London. People who are writing fantasy now, many of them have no idea that their tradition is Howard. *Conan* created an entire field, and he influenced so many writers that have gone on to do things other than Howard-type fiction. I know he did me.

HM: Talking to Howard biographer Mark Finn (author of *Blood and Thunder: The Life and Art of Robert E. Howard*), he said that a lot of people don't get the influence of Texas on Howard's work, and that the geography of Cross Plains and the West Texas mountains really influenced his vision. Was that the same for you, growing up in East Texas?

JL: A lot of the writers in Texas are so different to anywhere else. I don't know how it is now, but I believe in my era it was the isolation. There were no writers around me, so I just grabbed all these different ideas and welded them together. I believe that lacking a tradition was what gave us a tradition.

HM: Did it help create your writer's voice?

JL: I think it's my voice, pretty much. I was born in '51 and my parents were older parents. My father was 42, and my mom was 38. They went through the Great Depression, so they came from a different time and a different era, and they brought a lot of that with them. East Texas in the 1950s was very different from the 1950's anywhere else. It was a booming time in the US most places, but people weren't doing that wonderful – at least we weren't – so a lot of the towns and people weren't really different to how they would have been in the 1930s. So I learnt a lot about their past and their voices, and even my accent is a cross between the language of the older East Texans, the people of my generation and, of course, the evolving generation. So I was a 50s and a 60s kid, with that 30s influence and even a bit of the Old West, because my grandmother, who died in 1982 at almost a hundred, had seen Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. So I think all of that authenticity of that time and era has just seeped down and collected in me.

HM: You've talked about that being a cusp time. What's changed?

JL: The community elements are lost because, when I was growing up in the 60s, that's when things started to get mobile. The drive-in theaters, the drive-in hamburger joints and the motels, all of that was starting to grow out of the car culture. But a lot of the people I knew barely ever went more than fifty to a hundred miles, and usually that was to visit relatives. So there wasn't that big sense of going somewhere different. When I was a baby, we'd go to Colorado, but that's a vague, vague memory for me. Most of my life, I've lived in East Texas - I've travelled tremendously since then, and that helps my perspective – but that's what I knew and that's what was engrained in me, and the fiction that I read I guess somehow is filtered through the eye of an East Texan.

HM: You've obviously been influenced by that drive-in culture. You've even written the *The Drive-In* books and adapted them into a comic book series for Avatar press. How do you keep clear of making it spooey or kitschy?

JL: The difficulty of doing some of that is that some of the culture has such a kitsch element to it. So you're trying to walk this line without stepping off onto one side or the other, into the absurd or the real. I wanted it to be sophisticatedly cheesy – meaning you could see the cheese but you would realize that there's more going on, that I was playing with that furniture. So I think a lot of people who think it's just cheese and have fun with it, well, that's fine, but they're missing what I think I'm doing. People like Twain and Swift, a lot of satirical stuff, struck me really early on as home base. So in the same breath you've got Burroughs, Hemmingway, Twain. My approach is a collision between all those writers.

(Next issue: Joe Lansdale talks about his career to date, the risks of shifting a story from page to screen, and how the story of his brother's marriage turned Ash from *The Evil Dead* into a geriatric Elvis Presley.)



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