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SCIENCE FICTION HORROR FANTASY

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EDITORIAL:

by **alasdair stuart**

Why Do We Keep Hitting Ourselves?

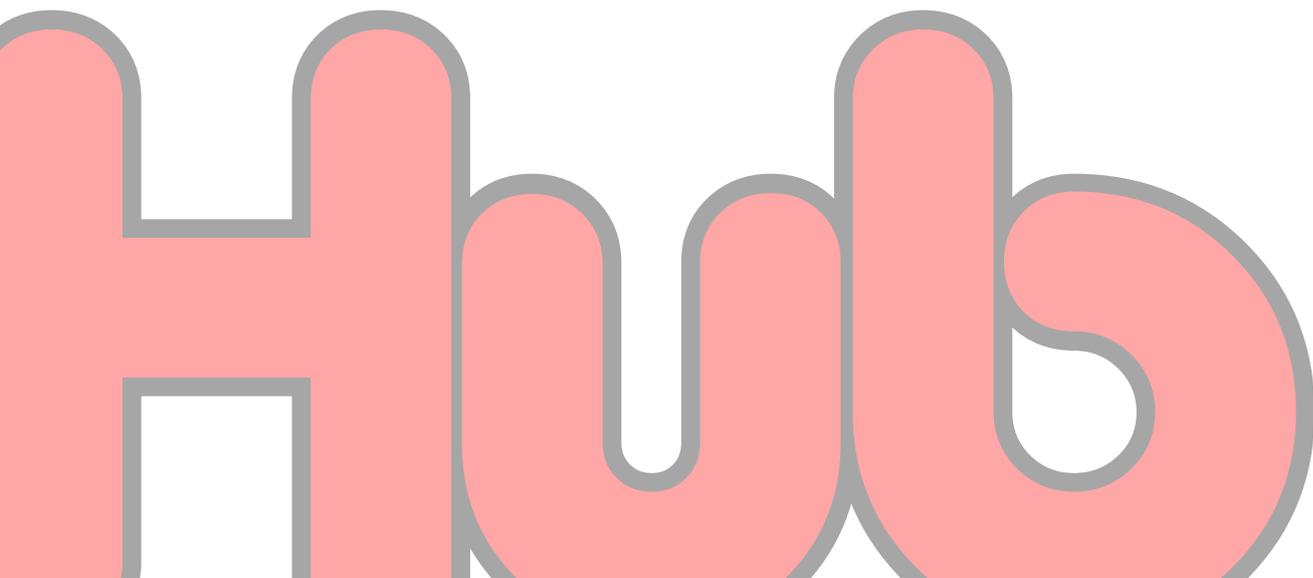
I'm a TV and movie guy, that's my natural habitat, the place where I'm at home. As a result I've been very interested in, and passionate about, the fact that in terms of geek culture, those are areas where we've won. A lot. Anyone who thinks different is clearly not living in a world where the Harry Potter movies are such a big deal, Sky are previewing a scene from the last one on the back of the second to last one. Oh also? Harry Potter, Twilight, Artemis Fowl, Percy Jackson and the rest? They're all genre fiction. We get to stand to next to Twilight fans and guess what? We don't get to be snotty about it, because the second we do, we turn into exactly the sort of people who sneer at us for being genre fiction fans. And do you want to be AA Gill? Really?

In terms of literary acceptance though, that's where we hit trouble. There are a couple of authors who've pulled off what I call The Amis Manoeuvre, where a previously critically and commercially successful author writes a science fiction book and it's treated as normal literature but by and large, popular culture is mass culture in the eyes of the literary scene. One of the reasons for that? Is because we look at the Harry Potters and the Twilights and we turn our noses up, step away from them and loudly denounce any association with them.

Here's the thing; there are bad literary fiction books. Thousands of bad literary fiction books and they breed, they reproduce until the shelves are teeming with Bridget Jones knock offs and po-faced pseudo-Ishigoro's who like to complain about the awfulness of life and the facelessness of technology as they're

fantasising about whether Kate Winslet will be in the film version. They get bad reviews too, sometimes they get eviscerated, but they never, not once get isolated. Literary fiction owns its bad writers, it stands next to them, and from time to time, in front of them. We? We mock them, we push them away and we throw rotten fruit at them even as we complain that that's all people do to us. And then, to make matters worse, we complain that no one takes us seriously.

I'm not saying you need to like Twilight. I'm not saying you even need to read it, what I'm saying is you, and by you I mean us, need to stop trying to be the biggest target. People like what they like and the fastest way to get them to hold fast to their stupid, flawed reasoning is to tell them they're wrong. So don't tell them. Let them be and if you get the chance, recommend something to them. They don't have to read it, you just have to make the effort because if we all do? Then we stand united and if we stand united, then we'll stop hitting ourselves and if we stop hitting ourselves? Other people will stop hitting us too.





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FICTION

A Nose For Such Things

by ian watson

*First on the head of him who did this deed
My curse shall light—on him and all his seed...
— Lord Byron, "The Curse of Minerva"*

When I was a kid, my grandmother told me, "You have Lord Elgin's nose."

She showed me a photo of a portrait of a gent dressed in a frock coat with velvety cuffs and lapels buttoned once over a much-buttoned waistcoat; plus knee breeches, stockings, and buckled shoes. His right hand rested upon the hilt of a scabbarded sword. His other hand, braced against his waist, held a cockaded hat. His curled powdered hair might or mightn't have been a wig. His nose looked long and refined. Like mine.

Gran meant, of course, that I'd inherited his nose even though a dozen generations had passed since that particular Lord Elgin's day and despite our own family not being remotely noble; my dad was a long distance truck driver. That we were very remotely connected was a point of pride to my gran due to the Elgin Marbles in the British Museum, which she took me to see one birthday. "A glory, saved by your ancestor!" she proclaimed while I took in a muscular naked one-armed man kneeling a one-armed centaur. Apparently Elgin had rescued the figures and friezes from barbaric neglect in Greece a couple of hundred years earlier.

At the time I wasn't much wowed by those old stones, but when I was sixteen, since I was showing an interest in journalism as a career, my parents started taking the quality *Sunday Times* as well as their regular *News of the World* full of crimes and scandals; and one Sunday I noticed a picture of that very same centaur in combat underneath the headline GREEKS DEMAND RETURN OF PARTHENON MARBLES. The accompanying story gave me a rather different insight into Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin, as a vandalistic plunderer.

Briefly, in 1799 Elgin managed to become British ambassador to Constantinople, where the Sultan ruled over a Turkish empire which still included Greece. This was at the time of the Napoleonic Wars. Thwarting Napoleon's ambitions in Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean was the goal of Elgin's diplomacy, in which he was successful, however his real obsession was to bring back ancient Greek masterpieces of sculpture to London to uplift English cultural life...

Nowadays indeed I'm a freelance journalist; and a few weeks ago editor Max Falconer phoned to say, "Nigel, will you fly to Greece for us pronto with a photographer? Reuters say there's some sort of bizarre ghost haunting Athens."

"Makes a change from students rioting," I said to show that I was at least semi-informed about my destination. Oddly, I'd never visited Greece before. Or maybe not so oddly in view of my ancestor's misdemeanours. Not that I bore the name Elgin, nor Bruce for that matter; I was a Johnson. Admittedly *Nigel* is an anagram of *Elgin*, and I suspect Gran had something to do with *that*.

"You mean," said Max, "this ghost business might be a stunt to take people's minds off politics?"

"That would be a story in itself," I hastened to say, not wishing to put him off funding a jaunt to Greece. Max's paper has a penchant for reportage about weird phenomena such as crop circles or panthers loose in the English countryside, but a political scandal was also fair game, especially if it cast a bad light on our European Union friends.

"A stunt," he said. "You have a nose for such things."

Getting back to the matter of Lord Elgin's nose, which Gran claimed I possessed, it was only when I was sixteen and bothered to find out more about Elgin that I discovered he had actually *lost* his nose. His nose had rotted off in Constantinople. Allegedly this was due to a 'severe ague'. Normally in that era an ague meant an acute malarial type of fever, yet such couldn't be so in this case unless a mosquito infected with some variation upon flesh-eating Ebola virus had stung him upon the noble proboscis, and the virus restricted itself to eating that organ alone. Lord Byron, who hated Elgin, declared that the nose-rot was due to syphilis, which seems plausible. This could explain Lady Elgin's later detestation of her husband on more than merely aesthetic grounds. As for Lady Elgin's subsequent enthusiastic adultery with a certain R.J. Fergusson, maybe miraculously his Lordship had failed to infect her or else the pair cared not a hoot for the pox.

When I learned about Elgin's missing nose, for a while I became like a child who naively misunderstands what an adult – in this case, my gran – meant. At the ripe age of sixteen I was wondering whether Gran supposed that Elgin's lost nose had somehow migrated from his face to mine?

"What does this ghost look like?" I asked Max.

"Someone pulling something, with strange things flying around. It's fairly bright but vague. Sort of out of focus."

Like an incompetent holographic projection?

"This all started during some excavations. Maybe something got disturbed or released."

Some vapour such as swamp gas, responsible for will-o'-the-wisps? But I didn't wish to deter Max.

"Sounds very spooky," I said.

"You can cover any riots as well," said Max. "Our Phil will sort out flights and hotel and email you."

That same evening I flew Aegean from Heathrow to Athens along with Phil Pursey, photographer, who'd been to Athens the previous year to cover troubles caused by disaffected young people. Six months ago Phil and I had done a feature on a haunted bedroom in a castle in Lancashire, along with a couple of psychic investigators; and indeed that place had given us the shivers when the temperature dropped unaccountably. A couple of the photos showed a strange person-sized glow which Phil insisted couldn't be a reflection of flash or a technical malfunction. This made a double page spread.

"I've asked a useful local chap to meet us first thing tomorrow," Phil told me once we were in the air. "Name of Mehmet."

"Mehmet doesn't sound much like a Greek name."

"No, he's Turkish. He's lived in Athens for years. Has a couple of carpet shops. He keeps his ear to the ground."

"I thought you *looked* at carpets and walked on them, not listened to them."

"I mean figuratively. Mehmet was rather useful to me and Johnny during the riots." Johnny specialised in Euronews. "More objective than a Greek informant might have been."

I had my doubts about this. "I thought Turks and Greeks didn't get on."

But Phil waved this aside. The inflight movie was some thriller which I ignored while I boned up on Athens using my palmtop. After we landed at two in the morning we took a transfer bus from the airport numerous miles to a square in the centre of town, very near which, Phil assured me, would be our hotel. Rather than a taxi to get there. "If we're modest with some expenses," he suggested, "maybe we can paint the town red one night without Max grousing."

It did prove a very short haul from bus stop to hotel, so maybe Phil was right about Mehmet too. And the hotel was quite close to where those spooky things were happening, in the Ancient Agora, the marketplace of long ago; but by then it was well after three in the morning and I was bleary-eyed.

Mehmet was a bearded, jolly chap, tubby though muscular. He wore a thick knitted sweater under his jacket and a wool hat; the start of December was distinctly cool of a morning and would be chilly by night, but Phil and I had brought adequate coats.

While we were in the air the previous night, another manifestation had happened! Useful Mehmet brought with him copies of a Greek tabloid called *Espresso* picturing a jumbled glow upon a stretch of

ancient roadway, amidst darkness; and *Athens News* in English showed a few hundred spectators gaping or taking pictures through a line of police. A long Greek title which meant *Free Press* carried on its front a picture of protesting young people, but inside was a similar photo of the glow along with a map of the site, an arrow showing the direction in which the glow travelled, and commentary that was all Greek to me, though Mehmet summarised. All was still a mystery. *Athens News* and *Eleftherosomething* said that scientists planned to set up special measuring equipment.

Mehmet led us by way of narrow streets full of mostly elegant souvenir shops, then passing over a railway, to the modern entrance gate of the Ancient Agora which was blocked by a couple of police cars, its ticket office shut. In the middle distance on our left stretched a long pillared classical arcade where I imagined Socrates holding forth, although the building looked rather fresh and unblemished.

"The stoa of Attalos," said Mehmet. "A restoration."

Trees and shrubs interrupted some of the view of an ancient stony roadway to the right of the stoa sloping up towards...

"But where's the Parthenon?" I asked. I'd so expected to see it! The great mass of the Acropolis rock to the rear, steep and broad, did house two or three minor temples, but...

"Parthenon is on *far* side of Acropolis," explained Mehmet. "*That* there," indicating the broken roadway, "is where ghost travels. Panathenaic Way. In ancient times used for a procession to honour goddess Athena, taking new cloak for her statue inside Parthenon. Big festival every four years."

"We'd have a better view from up top," observed Phil.

"Up is temporarily closed," said Mehmet. "Ghost-watchers might fall off the rock."

We withdrew for coffee to a nearby restaurant, open to the air under awnings. Already sunshine was warming the morning; just a few fleecy clouds in the cobalt sky. A road-train like a huge red toy trundled tourists past. First we were bothered by a swarthy old gypsy woman toting embroidery, then by a little girl who could have been her great-granddaughter equipped with a desultory accordion, then by a black guy selling watches; all of whom Mehmet saw off while we were talking.

"I wonder," Phil said to Mehmet, "if we can rent an upstairs room somewhere along here for tonight to take photos, so we have a better view? Assuming the ghost shows up again. Do you think fifty Euros would be reasonable to offer?"

"Hmm," mused Mehmet. "Agora is archeology site. Might even be classed as museum. For sites and museums, Press persons need special permits."

"We wouldn't be *inside* the Agora."

"You are not needing foreign press accreditation from Public Relations Directorate because you are not based in Greece, but *it* issues the special permits you would need."

"Using telephoto from a private room..."

Mehmet grinned. "Better if you can be inside with the ghost!"

Just then a couple of official-looking white vans came past us down the narrow street, to turn towards the Agora, and Mehmet jumped up.

"I know a face! Come, come!"

Those vans belonged to the National Technical University, and Mehmet knew a Professor Zygourakis as well as, for a bonus, an accompanying Ministry of the Interior and Public Order woman called Anastasiades. Upshot: there would be a cordoned viewing area inside the Agora for TV and press and interested parties, in which we'd now be included.

Since so far the spooky phenomenon had only appeared by night, Phil and I could turn our daytime attention to the rebellion by young people, anarchists, and radicals. Its base was the Exarchia district a bit north-east of Athens University, though it seemed that trouble easily spilled further, resulting in lots of broken shop windows, stones versus tear gas, and intermittent closures of the center of town.

We took a subway, gleaming heritage of the 2004 Olympic Games, then walked a while as Phil and Mehmet held forth about youth unemployment, anti-capitalism, anti-globalisation, rage at government and the economy, hatred of the police, and a 15-year-old schoolboy martyr called Alex who'd been shot dead a couple of years back, perhaps accidentally, perhaps not.

After a bit I said, "Mrs Anastasia from Public Order – "

"Anastasiades," Mehmet corrected me.

"Her being at the Agora... well, if the so-called ghost obligingly causes enough of a sensation..."

"You think this is being manipulated?" asked Phil.

"It's convenient. Anniversary of the martyr's death."

"These protesters are stupid, stupid!" broke in Mehmet. "Why wreck innocent shopkeepers' windows, and even burn shops and cars? What good does that do to anyone?"

Of course Mehmet had his carpet business to worry about.

Presently we were passing groups of police at the ready, and before long we came to the martyr's shrine in a street daubed with graffiti and posterred with declarations. The street had been renamed after him by activists. Bunches of flowers and pot plants were piled, along with outstretched football scarves, empty beer cans, candles and scrawled tributes. Young people thronged the roadway, many of them hooded, others dressed like Palestinians. Armed riot police with visors down, wearing gasmasks, bunched nearby clutching shields. Mehmet translated some slogans.

"That one says *Kill the Cops*. And there's *We Won't Go Away*. *Fight the State*. Oh, and: *Buy till you die! There is no right to shop*. Idiots."

Several more maturely dressed onlookers appeared respectful.

"Those are communists," said Mehmet.

A young, scarfed woman in a black tracksuit was animatedly addressing a group of her contemporaries, while constantly pushing her long dark rebel hair aside from a chubby face. She paused to stare at Phil who, apart from his professional-looking camera with which he was taking pictures, stood out, being tall and skinny with ginger curls and very blue eyes. Me, I was chunkier, my brown thatch close-cropped. Abruptly she strode over.

"Are you foreign journalists?" she asked in excellent English.

"British," I said. "May I interview you?"

She squinted at Mehmet with a degree of suspicion, as though he might be an official minder, but Mehmet rattled off some explanation in Greek, and she relaxed.

"I could use a beer," she said. "My name's Eleni. Nothing will happen yet. If it does, the people organise themselves spontaneously. I just tell my boyfriend." She darted away to a surly-looking hooded fellow with pocked cheeks, a long nose and an attempt at a moustache, who evidently was very much under her sway since she returned to us on her own almost immediately. I noticed how ski goggles nestled within the ample scarf Eleni wore and made the connection: protections against tear-gas. Her black trainers would be for speed if needed.

Eleni led us quickly through several streets, which looked as though a minor running battle had taken place, till on a bigger thoroughfare she hustled us inside a rather posh pub that seemed to have migrated from Germany or Belgium, judging by the veritable exhibition of glass and stoneware drinking vessels on many shelves. *Beer Academy*, the place was called, and it boasted a redoubtable beer menu several pages long.

Mehmet excused himself. He had business; he'd phone about meeting up later. Anyway, he was probably Moslem and immune to the delights of beer.

Presently we were all sampling a delicious strong Trappist ale, and a great platter was arriving laden with various sorts of German sausages, sauerkraut, sliced radicchio, and mustards.

"Gosh," remarked Phil, "there's enough here to feed an army."

Eleni unzipped the top of her tracksuit, revealing several newspapers. Worn for added warmth or to blunt the impact of rubber bullets if any got fired?

"What we don't eat," she said, "I shall wrap up and take back."

So Phil and I, or rather Max, would be providing a snack for the youth troops.

"I take it this place is immune from left-wing *kristallnacht*," Phil murmured to me. In Exarchia we'd seen fancy bistros and sexy lingerie boutiques as well as walls sprayed with anarchist symbols. By and large it was bigger shops downtown that had their windows smashed.

I put my little recorder on the table.

"You want to know about our rebellion," said Eleni while munching some frankfurter. "It'll be an insurrection nationwide if the police kill another one of us..."

Presently I happened to mention that what brought us here initially was the 'ghost of Athens', and Eleni flared up.

"That is a distraction from the struggle! The Greek civil war has never truly stopped, and now we have a farce of failed greedy capitalism using television as a brain-deadening control mechanism. Last night a panel of idiot experts argues about the ghost instead of asking why half the women who leave high school are jobless. Can this stupid ghost happening right now be a coincidence?"

"Maybe I'll find out tonight when the scientists do tests in the Agora." I cut some wurst while it was still hot and dipped it in a sweet mustard.

For the next few minutes it was as if Eleni was interviewing me. Tests? Tonight? Witnessed by specially admitted TV and journalists...?

"A media circus," she said, "to blind gullible viewers and readers to reality. An alternative to silly girls dancing in their underwear: paranormal rubbish."

We ate. We got on with the interview. Alex the martyr. The evil of consumerism. The vicious police. The absence of genuine individual rights.

"Greece," I said, "seems stuck in a kind of 1968 time-warp when Red Brigades and Baader-Meinholds were all the rage."

"No," said Eleni, "we have taken over the baton in the contest for freedom and dignity."

Presently she wrapped up the unconsumed sausages and sauerkraut in a newspaper, tucked this inside her tracksuit, and departed.

"Not much wrong with the police," said Mehmet later. "If you go for assistance, they are helpful and polite. Hysteria about police is due to previous dictatorship under the Colonels. Someone must keep order against mindless anarchy."

After the interview with Eleni, Phil and I had gone back to our hotel to catch some sleep since we might be up till the early hours of the morning ghost-spotting. Mehmet collected us at six and led us to his favourite place for doner kebab, a meal fit for heroes, he joked, since that's what the name of the meal sounded like in Greek; it was certainly large enough for Hercules. That was near Monastiraki Station – I was getting my bearings! – from which it was only a few minutes' walk to the Agora. Phil apologized to Mehmet about keeping him out at night in the chill, but Mehmet wasn't going to miss a manifestation.

So, by 9 p.m., we ourselves and at least three hundred others including TV crews, journalists, scientists, government people and a score of police were in the huge Agora in a large cordoned area parallel to the Panathenaic Way. Garden lights, specially installed, softly illuminated the ground which was quite irregular due to stones of antiquity. No floodlights lit the Acropolis, the better for us to see what might transpire by the faint light of a sickle-moon now risen.

I sought an opinion from Mrs Anastasiades – must get her name right.

"This is so well organised," I said. "Almost as if you can *guarantee* something's going to happen. What if we stand here all night and nothing does?"

"Of course we cannot guarantee anything, Mr Johnson! We have no idea of the cause."

In one respect she was to be proved right almost immediately in a way that neither she nor presumably her colleagues had foreseen...

Out of the darkness and scattered bushes to the right, hundreds more people began to emerge, taking up chants. Torches flared – the sort with flames. Flickering firelight revealed a converging army of young people in hooded balaclavas, crash helmets, Arab-style keffiyehs, football scarves and masks, the rebels against society from Exarchia and probably others besides.

"It's a pitch invasion!" exclaimed Phil delightedly as he snapped photos.

In the vanguard I recognized Eleni, brandishing a pole with a flag which she swung to and fro to reveal... ah, the word started with A so it might be the name ALEX in Greek; or maybe the A was for Anarchy.

Sirens started up in the direction of Monastiraki. More police were hurrying into the Agora to reinforce

the score of officers already with us, who were deploying to form a line to protect our flimsy corral. Mrs Anastasia was jabbering into a phone. Could there be five hundred protesters bearing down on us by now? They must have infiltrated the wooded extremes of the extensive Agora by cutting through whatever fences or maybe scaling those using ladders. A policeman panicked and fired several pistol shots over the heads of the oncoming mob... which began to howl vengefully, as though this was the provocation they desired. Photo-journalists and TV people were colliding with one another in their eagerness to capture what was happening, knocking over garden lights, while scientists protected their monitoring apparatus.

Of a sudden a bundle of radiant brightness appeared upon the Panathenaic Way. For a few seconds this dazzled unidentifiably – and I felt a strange electricity surge through my body, not a shock exactly but the kind of sensation as when your teeth accidentally bite on some tinfoil, only much multiplied and throughout the whole of me. “Ouch, did you feel that, Phil?” “Feel what?” Next moment, the brightness came into clear focus.

A man made of light, clad in rags of some bygone noble-looking apparel, was toiling wearily up the ancient roadway, roped twice around the chest so as to drag behind him on a pallet the white marble head of a horse, eyeballs bulging, mouth open.

As the man swung his head like a dull tormented beast, I was riveted by the absence of a nose.

“It’s *Elgin!*” I cried. “It’s Lord *Elgin!*”

Yes, that man of light was none other.

Around him, now here, now there, flickered a cute little boy and a cute little girl, two cherubic figures of light who stabbed at *Elgin*’s posterior with sharpened sticks, goading him on... no, not sticks, those were artist’s paintbrushes, reversed, the pointed ends to the fore. The progress of the pallet struck me as distinctly smoother than if were proceeding over the irregularities which I knew were present, more as though it was sliding slowly up a decently laid roadway.

Goaded onward, the Seventh Earl lurched and staggered, haggard and gaunt.

“Poor chap’s in an awful shape,” said Phil. “But what do you mean, *Elgin?*”

“He is a *ruin*,” Mehmet joined in. “Don’t try to say that in Greek” – as if we could! – “*háli* is a ruin, but *halí* is a carpet. Bad business to say one’s carpet is a ruin.” Yes thank you, Mehmet.

A voice – from where? it seemed everywhere – wailed loudly, “Oy-mayyyy! O **Kos**-mayyyy...!”

An American nearby demanded loudly, “What’s that mean?” as more words lamented through the air.

His companion, a woman, replied, “O me! O World! It’s Ancient Greek. O World! O Woe! The Goddess’s Temple Was Ravaged by Him!”

“Ravaged by *Elgin!*” I called out. “That’s *Elgin* there! The man with no nose!”

Because, of course, *I* had his nose on my face...

As the Seventh Earl proceeded laboriously up the Panathenaic Way, hauling his burden towards where it had been looted from, tormented by spectral boy and spectral girl, the army of youths came to a standstill, staring at the bright eerie sight. Everyone, even police, were gaping.

Mrs Anastasia was by my side, demanding, “What do you mean, that is *Elgin?*”

Her tone conveyed that my ancestor’s name was tantamount to a swearword. If she was complicit in some government hoax, her astonishment was well acted.

“Isn’t it obvious?” I said. “He’s being punished for his crimes – by having to drag marbles back to where they came from. But what are those cute imps that are goading him?”

“Yeah, what *are* those acrobat kids?” joined in the American.

They were cartoon characters, the mop-headed boy wearing short turned-up trousers, a loose t-shirt and baseball cap, the girl with her long Bardot tresses likewise. Big cartoon trainers on their feet; their eyes, big cartoon ovals.

“I know those,” declared Mrs A. “They’re from a colouring book for children. Called something like *Paint Athens 2004*, yes it was published for the Olympic Games.” She crossed herself, and her voice rose direly, almost an echo of that sourceless O **Kos**-mayyyy voice which had fallen silent for the moment, although a keening noise could now be heard like microphone feedback. “But those aren’t the happy children in that book – they’re the Erinnyes, the Eumenides with a modern appearance! The avengers of blasphemy as well as of parent-slaughter. They can take any form they choose.”

Other people around were calling out in Greek something like Eumenides.

"Come again?" said Phil.

"They're the Dogs of Hades who tormented the guilty, who pursued Orestes here to Athens, *here right here at this place*, he who murdered his mother, the Furies singing a spell-binding song to secure their victim!"

Surely that thin screeching I was hearing was merely microphone feedback; though from where, and how?

"That happened right here?" I said.

"On the Areopagus hill just over there, where Orestes was tried, and the Goddess Athena – Pallas Minerva – she voted for mercy, and to appease the Furies she invited them to live in a cave near here, and be honoured by the citizens, and be the defenders of Athens forever. My God, what is happening?"

I thought I knew what was happening, rationally at least...

Parts of the youth army were chorusing a word that sounded like **koro-idea!**

"They say hoax, mockery," from Mehmet. "They think this is a... *téchnasma*, an artificial stunt."

A phantasm produced by technology... With my detested ancestor as a scapegoat dragging his burden slowly onward and upward, to act as a lightning conductor for political anger. Actually, this all seemed rather monstrously unfair to old Elgin. After all, early Christians also vandalised the Parthenon, then Turks made it into a mosque by adding a minaret, and later the Turks even stored gunpowder inside the building which a Venetian artillery shell exploded, blowing the roof off and knocking down columns. Much havoc had already been wreaked by the time my obsessed ancestor (divinely inspired, so he thought) bribed the Turkish authorities to let him 'rescue' the best remaining sculptury, even if in the process, using explosives and saws, his workers caused more collapses and shatterings to the extent that even some Turkish official shed a tear and lamented, "It's the end!" One wonderful cornice had fallen and smashed into umpteen pieces. Proudly Elgin had carved his name half way up the Parthenon, as well as his wife's name.

But hadn't he been punished enough, driven half mad by events, haggard, raging, constipated and staggering about (a bit like the ghost, although obviously I knew nothing about the ghost's bowels), then losing his wife to a lover, going bankrupt, fleeing his creditors, dying in poverty in Paris? Or had the Furies been responsible for those calamities too, prior to Elgin's afterlife? If Elgin hadn't stolen the marbles, Napoleon would almost certainly have done so. However, Elgin succeeded (by and large), so he became the *bête noire*, the bogeyman, guilty of crimes like a looting Goering.

Those Furies, Disneyfied...

"What's the different between Erinnyes and Eumenides?" I asked Mehmet, who looked blank.

Mrs A said distractedly, "Eumenides means *kindly ones*."

"Is that sarcasm?" asked Phil.

"No, that was their new name after Athena's merciful verdict on Orestes, to appease them as benevolent protectors of Athens. It's all in Aeschylus."

Aeschylus. Ah yes, him: the playwright. *That*, I could check up on. Why ever would Mrs A blurt out the source of this...

"**Koro-idea! Koro-idea!**" chanted the youth mob.

...this hoax, to a journalist, if she was a knowing party to it? To try to lead me astray from blaming the government, by appearing innocent and bewildered? Anyway, would the plan be to repeat this *son et lumière* on subsequent nights? Come to think of it, the alleged scientific measuring equipment might be partly responsible for producing the spectacle, which had only snapped into proper focus tonight, amplified...

"O **Kos**-mayyyy...!" mourned that bodiless voice loudly again.

"**Koro-idea! Koro-idea!**"

A missile of some sort flew by – no, I'd swear that was an owl on the wing. Surely it should have shunned the rowdiness and brightness. The owl veered over the apparition – yes, clearly it was an owl – and headed out of sight in the same direction as Elgin and his burden.

An astounding realization came to me. The sharp pang which had passed through my entire

frame a while previously, and which Phil hadn't registered at all – so that it couldn't have been some electromagnetic side-effect of a power source or projected images – that had been followed a moment later by the intensification and much clearer focus of the apparition. Could it be that my own presence, me with Elgin's nose upon my face and consequently a particular cluster of genes in every cell of my body, had resonated with the ghost, or the ghost with me?

Before I could puzzle about this, a flare flew from out of the youth army, arcing high, burning bright, as if to dim or rival the spectacle on the Panathenaic Way. A second flare followed. Someone must have got hold of a Very Pistol or some single-shot tubes of distress flares. Stolen, maybe, from some yacht; there'd be lots of those moored along the sea front. The youth of Athens were indeed distressed, yet this was a reckless way to show it.

The first flare dropped down towards us in the corral, still burning. Panicking, people pushed aside, and the flare dropped into a vacant space, illuminating all around. Moments later the second flare likewise fell amongst us without setting fire to anyone's clothes, although there were more squeals of fright.

A sudden flash and a fierce bang made my heart jump as if a grenade had gone off. Then came another similar explosion in our midst, and screams, though those didn't have the agonised sound of injury. Fireworks, that's what! Some of the rebel youths were hurling bangers at us.

At that moment a thunderous crash rolled over us, as if Zeus himself had answered. Still dazzled by the fall of flares, I couldn't see any thunderclouds. Shrieks came from within the youth army; I suspected someone had blown his hand off – mishandling a firework too dangerous, or maybe a maroon.

"Fucking hell," said Phil. "This is getting hairy."

I was knocked aside by a visored, gasmasked policeman in full riot gear. He and others were heading for the youth mob – which reacted by rushing to break through the flimsy corral into our midst, swelling our numbers hugely as they used us as cover. Those police who had already been amongst us were now wrestling and punching hooded adversaries. Would the riot police fire tear gas into this confused medley of apparition-spectators, many of them hysterical by now, and their own colleagues, as well as protestors out of control?

Eleni appeared before me, still clutching her pole.

"You!" she exclaimed. Since I'd been clutching my little recorder all this time, to store my own commentary and Mrs A's responses, I thrust this at Eleni.

"What are your plans?" I asked, rather stupidly.

She grinned wildly like a madwoman. "Thank you for inspiration!" was her reply. "It's just like ancient times when the people arose against tyrants right here!"

Oh shit, I thought, hoping that Mrs A nearby wouldn't register the first remark. But then Eleni registered Mrs A, discarded her pole, which almost beamed Phil who was still trying to take pictures, and she launched herself upon Mrs A, embracing her so that I thought for a moment that Mrs A was Eleni's respectable bourgeois mother, agent of the establishment and the evil government, whom the daughter had rejected yet whom, meeting her now so surprisingly at such a hectic moment, Eleni attempted to hug.

No such thing. Eleni shouted, so that two hoodies responded by also seizing hold of Mrs A. One of them I recognised as Eleni's surly pock-cheeked boyfriend. Swiftly Eleni unwrapped her scarf, twisting the garment till it was more like a woollen rope, and tied it around Mrs A's mouth as a gag; whereupon the hoodies began dragging the resisting, kicking Mrs A off through the milling confusion in the direction of darkness – they were trying to take her hostage.

"Stay out of this!" Eleni ordered me, before hurrying to join the would-be abductors.

How could Phil and I let this happen? "Police!" I called out. "Help!"

"Voeethya!" (or something) bellowed Mehmet who hadn't made any move to intervene earlier.

A policeman did appear quickly before us, heeded Mehmet's explanation and gesticulations and pulled out a radio. Then he headed where Mehmet had pointed.

By now many people had spilled on to the Panathenaic Way so as to escape the fighting. Urged by Mehmet, Phil and I struggled in their wake. Max was going to be very pleased with his little investment. Just then I blundered into a small bush and tripped, scuffing my palms.

Scrambling up, I realised I'd been so distracted that I'd stopped paying attention to the apparition, or

to where it was. As we emerged on to the ancient roadway, there it still was, in the middle distance, the spectre of Elgin toiling exhaustedly to drag his horsey hunk of marble uphill, pricked by those flitting little fiends. By now surely they should have been out of projector range, if any of the apparatus in the corral had been responsible; or maybe more was elsewhere. As the three of us pursued the phenomenon, clouds of gas erupted. The riot police must have run out of any other option as to how to quell the jumbled chaos, irrespective of how this would affect the innocent, or how it would come over in the news; or because that was their true nature as the young people claimed.

A wind had sprung up, so that some gas drifted rapidly uphill in our direction, and I smelled a curious odour which I didn't associate at all with tear gas, CS gas, which I'd experienced in the past in Israel.

Had something else got into the armoury of the police? Maybe a rogue cartridge of hallucinatory riot gas – BZ, yes that was the name of the stuff – accounts for my, for want of a better word, hallucinations? Dare I say visions? Which, be it noted, Phil did not share...

I saw ahead of me, in tunnel vision as though through the wrong end of a telescope, a tiny scene which suddenly raced towards me, expanding.

Goaded and on his last legs, my ancestor hauled his load towards a towering female figure which just had to be that of Athena, goddess of Athens, who once dominated the interior of the Parthenon.

The Goddess was crowned with a triple helmet, three curving crests rising from figurines – two griffins flanking a sphinx. A pleated gown, gathered at her waist, hung down to her sandals, her toes showing. Torques clasped her upper arms. Snakes writhed on a short cloak reaching midway down her draped breasts. Resting against the inner crook of one elbow was a spear not unlike Eleni's pole. A wide round face, straight nose, dark-pupil eyes. She was magnificent, aglow.

Halting at last, Elgin sank to his knees, his rope falling loose. Would this be the moment when, just as with what's-his-name punished in Hades by being compelled to push a heavy stone uphill, the pallet and marble horse-head proceeded to trundle backwards, picking up speed, all the way down to the bottom of the slope once more?

As may have happened over and over. Otherwise surely by now Elgin might realistically have heaved back to where they rightly belonged the ghosts of all the marbles he stole two centuries and a bit ago?

Time – or eternity – might be entirely different for him, and for the Eumenides...

The two child-Furies sprang to this side, to that, as if unappeasable, their energy inexhaustible. Like hyperactive kids, no less. Athena was speaking, although I heard no words. The wreck of Elgin was replying silently. The kids seemed to be squawking in protest.

And the Goddess stretched out a hand. Reluctantly, each Fury surrendered its goad into her palm. Swiftly Athena reversed the goads, so that when the kids in their baseball caps and big trainers received the sticks back again those were artists' brushes held for painting – or for tickling – rather than for jabbing.

Of a sudden the scene raced away, shrinking, collapsing... as likewise, I assume, so did I.

I woke to daylight in a hospital bed – one glimpse of my surroundings, plus that characteristic odour, absolutely shouted hospital even before I propped myself groggily on one elbow to focus upon beds in a ward. To my left, sitting up against pillows studying a newspaper, one arm in a sling, was Mrs Anastasiades in a hospital gown and cardigan. Her mobile phone lay on the blanket in front of her. Doubtless other occupants of the row of beds were victims from the previous night. A bored policeman sat by the door.

"You were rescued!" I called out to Mrs A. Did she know the part I played in shouting the alarm on her behalf?

She regarded me wryly. "In fact I raised my knee between the legs of one of the young men, and in the eyes of the other I managed to put my fingers. But then unfortunately I fell over a big piece of stone."

"Oh. So you fought them off. Congratulations." Furtively I checked that I wasn't catheterised or some such.

"I apologize about our hotheaded young people. Last night was most unfortunate. Some of them," she added, rustling the newspaper, "even vandalised the Parthenon with paint."

I hauled myself up. "Did you say *paint* – ?"

At this point Phil arrived, with Mehmet. "Good to see you back in the land of the living! Interviewing already, old son? Your recorder ought to be in that cabinet beside you." He produced my palmtop which I'd left at the hotel. "I reckoned you'd be wanting to write the piece for Max asap."

"Yes, yes... Did you see what happened to the ghost?"

"Just disappeared, that's all. Out like a light. Quite like you."

Mehmet beamed. "I'm happy to see you well, Mr Johnson."

"Thanks, yes... Mrs Anastasiades," I managed, "what kind of paint?"

"Obviously spray cans, to cover so much in blue and red."

"Did you know, Mr Johnson," put in Mehmet, "the Parthenon was originally painted blue and red, and gold too in parts?"

"Eh?"

"You're joking," said Phil.

"No, the Greeks painted buildings, and statues too. Parthenon stones nowadays are not as Pericles saw them."

"Why would they paint beautiful white marble? Well, not white exactly. More honey-colour, isn't it?"

I hadn't even seen the Parthenon yet. Which seemed odd when I recalled that, to ensure correct perspective, its columns cleverly converged and would meet one and a half miles up in the sky, so it ought to have been visible... I put the daft thought away.

"Why paint it?" said Mehmet. "For adornment. And to show off. In fact the white of Pentelic marble would not *stay* white. Mixed in it, is iron. This rusts. Iron oxide. So now marble looks honey."

I had to laugh. "You mean, lacking the original paint, what's left of the Parthenon is *rusty*? So to restore and protect it properly, the Parthenon ought to be painted?"

"That's ridiculous," said Mrs A. "We'll clean the vandals' paint off."

"As many times as you have to?"

"What do you mean?"

"What if the paint reappears?"

"We'll have better security! It's strange how the vandals weren't spotted last night."

"Don't you remember that the kiddy Furies, just like in that colouring book you told me about, were using the sharp ends of paintbrushes to goad Elgin? What if they gave the brushes to Elgin? Magically replenishing brushes?"

"Did you bang your head badly last night? We shall scrub the columns clean once and for all."

"You mustn't do that!" I protested. "That's as bad as the British Museum did with the marbles. They even used metal scrapers to clean them, which was stupid. You ought to leave the paint, or add to it."

"Mr Johnson, how dare you criticize our custodianship after admitting the vandalism of the British Museum! That is why the marbles must be returned to their home!"

"Yes, but not to that new museum you built at such expense. To the Parthenon *itself*, where they belong. Surely they can be re-attached after a spot of rebuilding."

"Easy, easy," Phil hissed at me. "Did you bang your head?"

"Re-attaching is how my ancestor would want to atone, seeing as Athena has forgiven him by now."

Everyone was gaping at me. I seemed to have lost control of what I was saying. I felt like some oracle at Delphi gasping the words of a god.

"Easy, old son!"

I couldn't help myself. "And now the Furies have become *Semi-Kindly Ones* at least, thanks to Athena. What's she supposed to look like, by the way, Athena?"

"Mr Johnson," said Mehmet, worried, "how can we know how an imaginary pagan goddess looks?"

"What did her statue in the Parthenon look like?"

Maybe a madman, or a concussion victim, should be treated circumspectly. Mehmet heaved a sigh.

"I believe the golden idol had a short cloak of snakes hanging from the neck... On her head was a helmet with three... horns? no not horns, wrong word..."

"Say no more." I had truly seen the Goddess.

Mrs A looked daggers. "Mr Johnson, did you just say that Lord Elgin is your *ancestor*?"

"State you're in, Nige," said Phil, "you shouldn't write *anything* for Max today."

"How else could I recognize Elgin last night? Because of pictures, where his nose, um, wasn't yet missing. Why am I so familiar with pictures of him unless there's a *family* connection?" I was on the point of adding *I have his nose*, but I censored myself in time. "Don't worry, Phil, I can stick to facts for Max."

"Before you send anything, I'd better take a look at the story."

Mrs A looked poised to demand the same, although she couldn't order any such thing even if she was the Minister of Order herself.

"Is that why you came here to do a story, Mr Johnson?" she asked instead. "Because you *already* supposed Elgin might be involved? *Why* should you imagine that? Is the British Government involved in this *manifestation*? Is it some crazy scheme to keep the stolen marbles in London by making Greece seem ridiculous? It is *you* who shouted out that the supposed ghost was Elgin, no one else! Are you an *agent provocateur*?"

Aha, I could see her drift. Far from the manifestation being a political distraction organised by the Greek government, which had gone badly wrong, here was some perfidious James Bond exploit on the part of the British. The British Museum in cahoots with MI6 had prepared the ground, then I'd arrived to infiltrate myself. Us Brits would carry out any devious stunt to retain the marbles for which we'd fought against Napoleon! For that matter, an international consortium of museums might be responsible, since if Britain ever sent the Parthenon marbles back to Greece this would set a precedent for restitution of many looted art treasures to their countries of origin. Maybe the Russian SVR were the pranksters, using some miniaturised technology that melted after use, to protect the collection in the Hermitage if any of it was vulnerable.

Such could be the spin the Greeks might give to the chaos last night. I could see how Mrs A was already working this out, her newspaper dropped, her fingers unconsciously fondling the mobile phone. My god, if she had her way I could be arrested as a suspect, taken in for questioning. Which would certainly delay my writing a story. I might even be transferred to a psychiatric hospital, as delusional, unfit to fly on any plane. Or was I being paranoid, the way Elgin became due to stress?

Mrs A got out of bed, placed her mobile phone in the fingers protruding from the sling, and stalked off down the ward, doubtless heading for the toilets where she'd have privacy.

"Look, Phil," I said, "I have to get out of this place right now. We need to fly home *today*. *Asap*."

"But you can't leave without being discharged first. Doctors usually do their rounds late morning, don't they? Anyway, what about tonight?"

Misunderstanding, I remembered Phil's idea of painting the town red at Max's expense. "Phil, the Parthenon has already been painted red – and blue."

"I don't quite follow you..."

Then I cottoned on. Obviously he couldn't see things from my perspective. For only I had seen the Goddess.

"Phil, nothing more will happen in the Agora tonight."

"How do you know?"

"The climax was last night. The energy discharged."

"You mean the riot?"

Useless to explain, so I nodded. "Yes, the riot happened. Now things will calm down, because... because a riot in the Agora will have shocked everybody. The militants will have lost whatever popular sympathy they had because of the Parthenon being daubed with paint."

"You could be right," he conceded. "Still, one day more?"

"One day more," said Mehmet enthusiastically. "I take you to an interesting club."

"I want to get dressed right now and just walk out."

Mehmet said, "I think the policeman prevents you."

With a sigh, I relapsed against the pillows. The prospect of interrogation and or detention in a mental hospital for observation was drawing closer.

After a while Mrs A returned, laid her phone on the blanket, and got back into bed.

She cleared her throat. "The young woman who incited my attempted abduction was arrested, you know. Apparently a British journalist tipped her off about arrangements in the Agora. Mr Johnson, I think

you should leave Greece quickly before people become impatient with you."

A wave of relief passed over me. She had consulted, reporting my peculiar state of mind as she saw it. The wisest council evidently was that my babbling about Athena and my ancestor meant I was an embarrassment waiting to happen. So I should take my nervous breakdown elsewhere. An editor would be unlikely to print any such revelations even in a paper of Max's stripe, a point that Phil had already hinted at. I'd have no choice but to make my story more normal. Which I could easily, since I was perfectly sane, and not stupid.

If I wrote a full account, it would need to be dressed up as fiction.

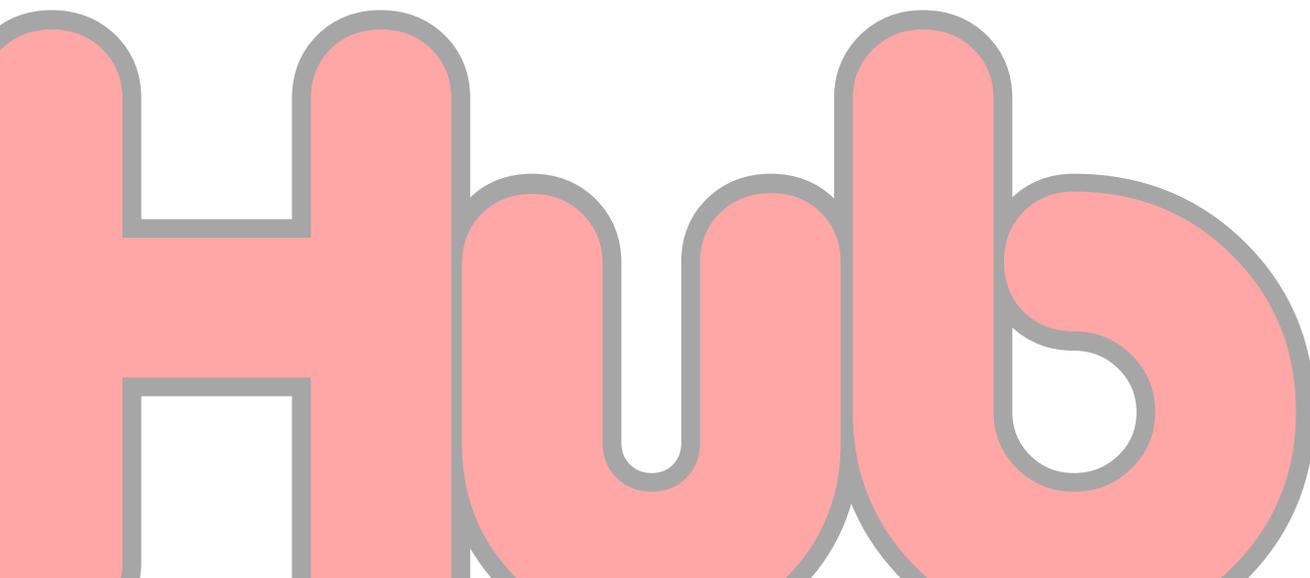
Even though I knew the truth.

For I had seen the Goddess.

For I have the nose of Lord Elgin.

For Sissy

fin



REVIEWS

The Viking Dead

reviewed by jared shurin



by Toby Venables

Abaddon

rrp £7.99

It is 976 AD. Bjolf and his motley crew are having a run of bad luck. They've had wind of a cushy, easily-raidable village on the back end of beyond. But when they show up, axes sharpened and ready to raid, Bjolf's men discover that a rival band of vikings have already looted it. Worse yet, the rival band (bigger, meaner and better equipped) are still in the area.

Bjolf rapidly goes from predator to prey - forced to return to his ship at a very un-Viking-like run.

The *Hrafn*, Bjolf's ship, loses her pursuers at sea - helped by a convenient (if terrifying) fog. The Vikings wash up in a strange and spooky land. The natives live huddled behind an enormous wooden stockade - the reason for which becomes apparent when the first zombies stagger out of the forest.

Just to be clear, *The Viking Dead* is about Vikings... fighting zombies.

And, just to be completely clear, it is awesome.

There are some key structural reasons behind Mr. Venables' tome of legitimate awesomesauce.

First, Vikings. In *The Viking Dead*, Vikings are enormous, wise-cracking soldiers that combine masculine *chutzpah* with martial prowess. They're kind to women, paternal to young boys and operate by a complex code of honour that John Wayne would envy. Sure, they raid, but our good Vikings do so in a largely bloodless fashion - terrifying the farmfolk into handing over their goods. A spot of plunder is lovely in the morning, but there's no reason to be a dick about it. Vikings also never leave a man behind and occasionally rescue kittens from trees.

In a bit of hyper-geographical fun, Mr. Venables also populates the crew of the *Hrafn* with a global grab-bag of Vikings. Byzantine Vikings, British Vikings, Finnish Vikings, Icelandic Vikings... even a lady-Viking and little-boy-Viking that tag along... all wrapped in their own particular stereotype and armed with a distinctive martial knack.

Second, the Dead. Toby Venables has the sort of perverse imagination that makes me glad he's not in my gaming group. Primarily, he serves up the bog-standard, slow-moving, hit-them-in-the-brain zombie-zombie. However, that's not all that's on the menu. *The Viking Dead* also has some Viking undead - a pack of super-sized mega-zombie berserkers armed with a vicious melange of cutting/bashing/pulverizing instruments. And, perhaps the best of all, Mr. Venables invents an entire zombie ecosystem. Imagine, if zombies make zombies by devouring them, what happens to your bog-standard carrion-devouring wildlife? Zombie crows are horrific, but the zombie ants take the cake.

Third, Vikings fighting zombies. If you're not expecting 352 pages of bloody rumble, you're reading the wrong book. *The Viking Dead* is about as subtle as either of its namesakes. There's a bit of a distraction at the beginning, as Vikings fight Vikings. But this is really a warm-up...

Vikings fight zombies here and there
Then they fight them everywhere
They fight zombies in a boat
They fight zombies that can float

They fight zombies in the rain
They fight zombies armed with chains
They fight zombies from a box
They fight zombies with the pox*

Fourth, it actually works as a story. Mr. Venables' lunatic, anachronistic Vikings are a genuinely entertaining bunch of savages. They're not the brightest group of zombie-chopping raiders, but they endeared themselves to me with their manly-man acceptance of their insanely bad luck. *The Viking Dead* does a sketchy (but successful) job of outlining their evolution as heroes. Bjolf starts as a selfish raider, becomes a mercenary anti-hero and eventually finds himself as a knightly (if slightly-barbaric) crusader. None of it feels forced. Granted, the circumstances of *The Viking Dead* are wildly goofy to start with, but Bjolf's hearty belief in his Viking "code" leads him neatly down the path from outcast raider to altruistic savior.

Fifth, *The Viking Dead* has bonus depth (if you're looking for it). Not to say that this latest *Tomes of the Dead* entry is going to crowd *King Lear* out of the curriculum anywhere, but *The Viking Dead* does have a nice little Western-esque theme. Vikings raid - they don't produce. They're an utterly selfish part of the human ecosystem. Atli, a young village boy, craves the excitement and freedom of the Viking lifestyle. Bjolf, legendary raider, secretly wants the reverse - he constantly, wistfully banters with his best friend about retiring and having a farm. Although Atli never learns of Bjolf's dreams, he does come to acknowledge and respect his own background at Bjolf's insistence.

This connection between people (true men) and land (a true man's pastime) is flagged up repeatedly through *The Viking Dead*. The zombie plague is awful because it summons hordes of the brain-eating undead, but it is worse because it corrupts the land. The dead, the zombie ants, the scary trees - the very ground itself is poisoned. Bjolf warms to his role as anti-zombie messiah because it gives him a chance to protect the land for the first time in his life. This is Bjolf's opportunity to, if not produce, at least aid the means of production. This message deepens with the revelation of the zombie plague's origin. Without spoiling the mystery, it is noteworthy that a lack of respect for the land is at its core.

Still, *The Viking Dead* really is what it is - Vikings and zombies, gleefully bashing away at one another in a variety of strange and oddly enjoyable ways. There's no question that this book *should* be ridiculously awful. And, although it is ridiculous, it couldn't be further from awful. It is a testament to Mr. Venables' skill as a storyteller that *The Viking Dead* is pure, unadulterated, ludicrous fun - the distilled essence of pulp entertainment. Also, Vikings. (And zombies.)

*Sincere apologies to Doctor Seuss.

Source Code

reviewed by richard whittaker



Starring: Jake Gyllenhaal, Michelle Monaghan, Vera Farmiga
Directed by Duncan Jones, written by Ben Ripley

Talk about a game of expectations. In 2009, director Duncan Jones created a low-budget hard SF masterpiece (and almost singlehandedly saved the post-Hal 9000 reputation of talking computers) with his astonishing calling card *Moon* (Reviewed in *Hub* #94). By the same standard, Jake Gyllenhaal has spent much of his career in the shadow of his genre-bending breakout role in *Donnie Darko* and recently had disappointed audiences in high-budget, high-concept potboilers like *Prince of Persia*. As for Ben Ripley, it's not like anyone expects much from a writer that opened his career with the direct-to-video double whammy of *Species III* and

Species: The Awakening.

With *Source Code*, all three may have exceeded any expectations, disguising a complicated and multi-layered hard SF concept in the much more traditional garb of an action thriller.

In an amnesiac tip of the hat to the *Bourne* trilogy, the tale starts with Chicago public school teacher Sean Fentress (Gyllenhaal) waking up on a commuter train, confused about where and who he is, and heading into the heart of the city with his colleague Christina (*Eagle Eye*'s Monaghan.) Unfortunately, eight minutes later the train blows up and Fentress finds out he is not Fentress: He is USAF Captain Colter Stevens, a guinea pig in a cutting edge piece of research called the source code. Due to a complicated piece of neurophysiology and physics, he is able to be dropped into a brief bubble in time, extrapolated out of Fentress' neural map. While his body remains sealed in a sphere at project headquarters, the last eight minutes of Fentress' life can be cycled over and over again for Stevens. His job is to work out why the train exploded, and prevent a further disaster. Time is ticking: While the eight minutes can be stuck on perpetual loop, the real world menace cannot be rewound.

What starts off as Philip K. Dick's *Groundhog Day* quickly becomes Michael Moorcock's *Johnny Got His Gun*, as the eternal champion dies over and over again for the greater good. There is even a distinct nod to *A Matter of Life and Death*, courtesy of Colleen Goodwin (*Up in the Air*'s Farmiga.) Like Kim Hunter's radio operator in the Powell and Pressburger classic, her voice over the radio is Gyllenhaal's only contact with the real world between pling-time jumps.

But that question of reality is what drives both the heart and the mind of this film. As the project staff keep reminding him, the eight minutes he keeps re-entering are a phantom: More than a simulation, but less than actual, and any attempts to rewrite the past are misguided. Yet his urge to save the people on the train, real or not, and find some sense of justice and completion for himself is as powerful as any impetus to save the people outside of his bubble. That Ripley's script attempts this, especially when setting it against the politicized background of terrorism and counter-terrorism, shows daring.

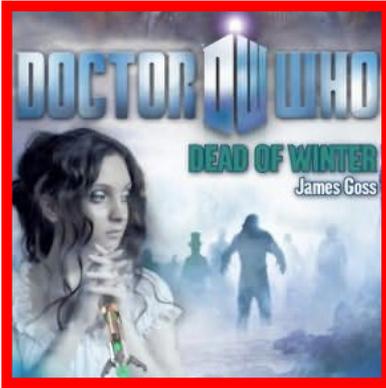
Source Code also proves that Jones' mastery of intelligent SF in *Moon* was no fluke. The sign of a good indie director is that they can be given a real budget and neither lose their heads in spectacle nor get drowned in an oversized production. Instead, Duncan uses the "big by indie/small by studio standards" budget to maximum effect, creating an elaborate and character-driven bottle episode as Gyllenhaal detects, combusts, repeats. After performing old-school minor miracles with practical effects in his debut, his effortlessly move into CGI is handled subtly, retaining the sense of drama and tragedy as Stevens sees the same people die over and over again.

It helps that, as in *Moon*, Jones has found a leading man capable of bringing both soul and sense to the central part. In all other ways, Gyllenhaal is the polar opposite of Sam Rockwell's erratic and lonely space traveler. While the moon man had all the time in the world, Gyllenhaal is on a constant tick, tick, tick, his hunt for the bombers constrained by that eight minute deadline. The script constantly exercises him. At a lean hour and a half, there is time for neither tedious repetition or boring grandstanding speeches, so Ripley makes this his one-man *Rashomon*, forcing Stevens to examine the same problem from different angles. Seriously, two *Species* sequels, and the guy had this in him. Astonishing.

There may be some real frustration from hard SF fans for the first hour, when what seem like massive plot holes become essential to the story. That is always a sign of bad writing, and it seems like Jones pastes over those problems with strong performances. In fact, Ripley's script is one step ahead. The third act takes what has been a fairly standard if well-executed conceit, and makes it both more emotional and more innovative than the surprisingly prosaic trailers would indicate. In fact, the hardcore SF fans should be jubilant about a movie that pulls a very successful bait-and-switch in the name of good genre thinking. With hints about the real nature of the source code dropped subtly throughout the film, there is even a sneaking suspicion that a second viewing is not only recommended but absolutely necessary, to be followed by a freeze-frame review on DVD. Honestly, it is 93 minutes of cinema that is definitely worth living through again.

Doctor Who: Dead of Winter

reviewed by guy adams



by James Goss
BBC Books
rrp £6.99

A few weeks ago I discussed the merits of tie-in fiction with a fellow writer. Writers don't get out much, they'll talk about anything. The essential argument of my colleague was that, while they would always do a solid, professional job on a tie-in novel, it would never receive the same amount of 'love' as an original work. I could understand that, the central characters are not your own, the money's poor and the schedule is often so tight readers are lucky the book doesn't peter out mid-sentence as our deadline-savaged editors clutch the MS from our panicked fingers. Yes, I could understand it, though didn't necessarily agree.

They then went on to say how, given the poor quality of writing in tie-in, whatever they produced would be a cut above the rest even given the restricted time and attention they gave to the project. And here I parted company completely with the argument.

You see I've read a great deal of tie-in fiction. As the sort of Doctor Who fan that can only be described as "committed" (as in "probably should be...") I've devoured the lot in my time. My childhood saw me read a Target novel a day (the Target novels were short adaptations of TV adventures, mostly written by Terrance Dicks, mostly using the same phrases, mostly wonderful).

I was fifteen when Virgin Publishing decided to continue where the TV show left off, producing original Doctor Who novels featuring Sylvester McCoy's Doctor. I read them as they came out. And there were plenty of them, especially when Virgin added "Missing Adventure" titles to their lists, novels set during previous periods of Doctor Who. Over the next six years there were 94 books. Read 'em all.

Then BBC Books took over, producing another 149 books between 1997 and 2005.

Read 'em all.

A lot of tie-in fiction. Told you.

I became a little sketchy over the next few years when books were published to tie-in with the revived series. It's no coincidence that, having ended up becoming a full-time writer myself (and one who doesn't live in the UK) I have less time and money than I once did and there are a lot of books scattered around the world's bookshelves I have yet to get around to. There simply isn't as much disposable *anything* when you write for a living. I've read quite a number of them though, including this month's *The Dead of Winter* by James Goss.

I've intentionally avoided making a list of "great" Doctor Who tie-in writers as you'll always end up missing someone off the list and regret it later. There are a great many though -- certainly more than my above colleague would credit -- and I consider a handful of them amongst my favourite writers regardless of their subject matter. James Goss is one of them and, as the current example on my desk, he will have to take the brunt of my admiration.

He won't have it -- being a self-deprecating little berk -- but *The Dead of Winter* is a perfect example of how good this sort of thing can be. Written to a ridiculously tight schedule (think in terms of weeks rather than months) it nonetheless has the perfect, crystalline, delicacy of a book that has been created at a stroll. Possibly in a park. By a duckpond. With a frilly parasol in hand. Well... this is Goss, he would totally rock a parasol.

It concerns mysterious goings-on at a tuberculosis clinic on the Riviera. A clinic far ahead of its time (the novel is set in 1783) thanks to the eerie assistance of ethereal beings known as The Familiar.

It's creepy, funny and staggeringly well written.

Told through a constantly shifting point of view, using letters, journal entries and the first-person recollections of those involved, it builds a contradictory picture. One told with such gentle, refined language that the weight of what's going on behind the words builds slowly, a mammoth glimpsed beyond a net curtain.

This is probably Goss' main strength: the delicacy with which he talks about the macabre. Like a cadaver moulded from lace doilies. A battlefield portrait painted in water-colour rather than oils. Sometime horror benefits from a full-on approach, shoving the reader's face into the terrors that surround them. Sometimes it's better approached obliquely, as here. The horror is all the more potent for it.

Goss' prose is perfectly balanced. It never drags, there isn't a single redundant word, and yet it finds time to show us the sights along the way. There is craft here, he doesn't just tell us a story, he tells a story *beautifully*. What can be better than that?

It is perfect tie-in fiction. This is not a pale imitation, it's as good as Doctor Who gets in any medium. It's also never less than a superbly written novel, whatever the logo on the cover.

So, yes, I can understand why some don't give tie-in their all but I'm relieved that there are those who feel differently. My reading life is all the richer for them and has been for many years.

Doctor Who: The Impossible Astronaut

reviewed by guy adams



Written by Steven Moffat

Directed by Toby Haynes

There's a divide of opinion over Matt Smith as the Doctor. Well, there is in our house and if we're arguing about it then for sure we're not alone. Mother thinks he lacks the presence of David Tennant but then -- forgive me -- she's half blind and deaf as a post so it takes a performance of some dynamism to actually draw her attention. Certainly you could never miss David Tennant. He's not a man who could hide in your living room for long.

To misquote the lunatic teeth of Tom Baker; Tennant was "like a lightbulb... he glitters!"

Debra on the other hand likes Smith, but then she's as much a child as me (ours would be a disastrous relationship otherwise, full of arguments and dollies hurled aggressively from giant prams). Matt Smith is capable of large, theatrical performances but he's also surprisingly gentle, his voice has a soft, fragile quality that forces you to listen. Especially as, by then, mother will be craning towards the screen, fag in one hand, ear trumpet in the other.

Despite her liking of the Smith, Debra's not as convinced by the stories since Our Beneficent Lord of the Valleys, Russell T. Davies left the show. I'm slightly baffled by this as -- as much as I adored RTDs stuff with a passion -- I would have thought Moffat's style more her liking. Debra is a lady who likes her plots to wire up properly. Heaven forbid a plot hole or suspension of disbelief, it must all make sense or there'll be trouble. Which makes her perfect as a writer's companion of course, she punches me in all the right places when I screw up.

Still, RTD was a fan of effect over reason, the "how's" and "why's" were secondary to the "how cool/sad/funny/exciting is that?". I have a streak of that myself I must admit (as the critics of my novel *The World House* are only happy to point out) and am a great fan of the Terrance Dicks style of writing ("But how will that work? Won't the audience think that's nonsense?" "Don't worry, I'll cover it with a line.").

But then RTDs stuff was emotionally writ large. To generalise terribly, the focus was on the heart rather than head. Moffat arguably offers the reverse and Debra finds, as a result, she's not as emotionally invested as she was.

"It doesn't matter that the Doctor's dead," she says, for example "because we know he'll get out of it."

True. Though I suspect the resolution will be more exciting than she suspects. To her, a non-fan who has read not a word of the pre-season interviews and articles, it will be a small detail turned on its head at the end of this story. To those of us with Doctor Who Magazine subscriptions, long-term obsessives who get giddy whenever they hear the first few bars of the theme, we know that it will likely be a big part of this year's overriding arc. Also, I can't help but be impressed by the writing chops that kills off its central character less than ten minutes into a new series. It's a bold touch. A wonderfully calculated act that shakes up your audience from the very beginning. You can picture the devilish glee with which Moffat must have greeted that idea when it popped into his curly head.

The same glee with which he would have met the idea of Alex Kingstons River Song being "quite the screamer" according to an editor friend of mine. Said editor believes Moffat to be sex obsessed and has grown tired of "having to explain the Coupling-style innuendo" to his young son. Perhaps there's a degree of truth here, Moffat's a fruity chap and the scripts reflect the fact. Still, his Doctor is the least sexual we've seen since the show returned to our screens. You could imagine Ecclestone and Tennant as capable of sex but for all Smith's intentionally clumsy flirting, he wouldn't have the first idea. If he did get River Song into bed he'd spend the first five minutes clapping and giggling. Then the next five minutes, tongue poking out of the corner of his mouth, sketching a graph that showed the scope of movement covered when her breasts jiggled.

I think it's a case of becoming abnormally aware of a small detail once it becomes an issue. I used to know an old lady who was an emetephobe, terrified by the sight and sound of people throwing up. To hear her talk it was all people ever did on television ("It's on every channel. I'm scared to turn the damn thing on, there was even vomiting in *Songs of Praise* this week, that lovely Aled Jones upchucking all over the front pews...")

Certainly it's not all jiggling breasts in Moffats Who (there's your misrepresentative pull quote). Moffat loves to build complex, absurdist pictures. An astronaut, up to his knees in a Nevada lake, the Doctor dancing with Laurel and Hardy...

"It makes no sense, no?" comments Antonio, my mother's Spanish partner who is staring at the wading astronaut as if concerned his television might have gone insane.

Certainly a tiny handful of early negative reviews complained as much.

But it only makes no sense if you're impatient (or just singularly unimaginative). If there's one thing we should have learned by now about Steven Moffat's writing it's that it all joins up in the end.

One thing we were all agreed on was the creepiness of the monsters.

"I thought it was the Drod..." says mother, "or the Snood..."

"The Ood," says Debra, proving you can't help but remember these things when you live with an anorak.

"That's the ones, they looked similar..."

I warned you about my mother's eyesight didn't I?

The Silence were certainly as promised, wonderfully designed, that perfect combination between disgusting and refined that all great monsters possess. They also offered another example of how much Moffat understands fear, what if we were surrounded by creatures that we forgot as soon as we weren't looking at them? It's a delicious idea.

"What did you think?" I asked Debra.

"Impossible to say until next week," she replies, logically enough, "it could tie up perfectly or be a horrible mess, until then it's only half a story and I can't decide whether it's good or not."

Which is a fair point but I'm a great believer in enjoying the journey just as much -- if not more than -- the destination so I can happily say I'm loving it already. Besides, I trust Doctor Who, it's rarely disappointed me thus far.

FEATURES

How to Give Really Bad Interviews

by *guy hasson*

So you're an author and your newest book just came out. It's time to give interviews to try and sell the book. You want to be proper, respected, serious, inspiring, and to give an air of authority. But why? Why would you want to give a good interview when you can give a truly horrible one? Isn't it so much more fun?

I didn't start out as a bad interviewee on purpose. I stumbled onto it. It was destiny, I suppose. And now I'm ready to take it to the next level. I'm ready to turn it into an art. I am here to share my vast and shocking knowledge in giving bad interviews with any potential authors out there who would like to glean a bit of the technique from an old master.

But first thing's first: Let's see how it all began.

When I had my first interview, I was but a young pup, twenty years old. My career began in the theater, not in prose, and a play of mine was accepted to the competition of one of those fringe festivals. I should preface by saying that I had no idea what I was doing. It was the director's first time, too, and he didn't know what he was doing, either. The actors did their best to cope. And in the end, the set designer directed the play by sitting us all down and telling us what should happen on the stage.

So. There we were, the whole team, walking into the studio of a radio channel that is now dead (it's been nineteen years, after all), ready to start recording an interview, which thankfully was not live. After we had a few laughs and joked around, the anchor said, "Okay, we're starting now."

The sound technician started to record. The anchor introduced all of us: the director, the actors, and myself. Then he turned to me and said, "Guy, what's the play about?"

I froze. I didn't have an answer. Did I mention I didn't know what I was doing?

The sound technician later told me my face lost all color. I quickly began to mime to the technician with a motion to my throat: 'Cut! Cut!' He mimed back, 'Go on, go on, you're okay.'

I then knew what my answer would be. I slowly leaned towards the mike and said, "I don't understand the question."

And I swear, if someone had asked me at that second why I would say such a thing, I would have had a great explanation about why the anchor's question could be interpreted in many, many ways. But no one asked me. The anchor stopped the recording.

We took a few breaths, talked about it, I decided I knew what the play was about (I didn't), and we recorded the thing again. This time it went smoothly and I sounded just like any other artist who doesn't know what he's doing.

This was my first interview. Let's move on to the second.

The second interview falls into the category in which your interviewer has an agenda... which you refuse to play along with.

A couple of years later, another play of mine had been accepted to the competition of an international children's theater festival. Here's the background: I was the youngest playwright in the competition not only during that year, but historically.

The phone rang at my house, and I answered it. It was a reporter. She was doing a piece on the festival and she wanted to talk to me about being the youngest playwright there. She said, "You're alongside This and That Guy. Do you find it daunting?"

I said, "I don't know who that is."

She said, "Oh, he's a really famous children's playwright. He's very big and very famous. Are you daunted?"

I said, "No."

Even though it was on the phone, I could hear the reporter's mood change. She didn't like me now. I broke her nice story, the one she already had written in her head. This was not going to go well. So, like any good interviewee, I preempted the bad vibes by creating worse ones:

I said, "Okay. Write this down. Question: Guy, how big is your ego? Answer: As big as the solar system."

She said sourly, "I noticed."

And then we started the interview, which only took a few minutes. I never actually saw the article. But I don't imagine I was mentioned in it favorably, if at all.

I learned my lesson after these two incidents, and started giving good, solid interviews. There was only one tiny hiccup in something that can't even be called an interview. It was a book signing event, in which many authors participated, including me. For me, it was my first book and the adrenaline was rushing: I was going to change the world with my art.

A television crew came up, working for the late night news. I thought: Great! It's a chance to expose the book to a bigger audience and get people interested in science fiction!

However, this was not the crew's plan. They refused to talk or mention any of the subjects I had brought up. Instead, they were only interested in asking one question and getting a sound bite from each author, which they would then edit together. The question was: "What is literature?"

They immediately pointed the camera at me and asked again. I was so shocked at the shallowness of the news crew and news editor that had sent them, that with a somber voice I said, "It's a ten letter word." I said this, hoping to make them feel stupid at their ridiculous question. But it may be that I was the stupid one there. I'm not sure.

I was still at the event when the item aired. I don't know what they showed. But if I were them, I'd have taken my sound bite out.

So, like I said, I've been giving mostly solid interviews for the last few years. But deep down, a need has been festering and growing, a need to give *really* bad interviews. I have a few ideas, which I have only tried on hapless interviewers in my head (as opposed to real ones). Still, I hope that soon I will be able to realize my dreams. Here, in short, are the basic principles.

Festering Idea Number One: Interviewers of authors never double-check what the authors say.

Have you ever noticed that authors get asked about their childhood, the events that brought them to write whatever piece they're talking about – and the interviewers always take for granted that the authors speak the truth?

But, you know... we don't have to.

One of my festering ideas is to get asked about where I come from, and to just unleash the most ridiculous story the interviewer has ever heard. I am certain that no one would check and no one would stop me as I am talking. The current dilemma is: should I prepare ridiculous origin stories ahead of time, or should I just try and wing it as it happens?

Let me try and wing it now: "Why are my stories so emotionally charged, you ask? Well, it's my childhood, you see. When I was five and a half, we went on a camping trip, my father and I, and at night – I don't really want to talk about it – he was mauled by a bear right in front of me. When the bear had gone, I sat

there and saw the jackals gnaw at his body. It was horrendous. I'll never forget it. To this day, whenever I close my eyes, I see jackals gnawing at my father's liver. And later on, when I was eighteen, I was poor and had moved to an apartment in a bad part of town. The walls were paper-thin. On the left lived a drug-dealing mobster and on the right, a man whom I heard murder his wife and her sisters. I lay there, during the nights, trying to be as quiet as possible. But I wrote everything down. The adventures of the drug-dealing mobster – that was almost word for word my first screenplay. The wife murder? That was my first successful book."

I could go on and on. I'm sure I could find a way to get aliens in there in a way that wouldn't make me sound too crazy. If done right, the interviewer would never stop me. He wouldn't even think to check the facts. I'm an author; I tell the truth.

Festering Idea Number Two: What are you really asking with that question? Or: Interviewing the interviewee.

Have you ever noticed that interviewers have expectations of the interviewees? When interviewing a comedian or a stand-up artist, they're already laughing as they're starting the interview. In their head, all the comedian can be is funny, and everything he says will surely be funny. When interviewing a serious award-winning prose author, they're always asking big questions about philosophy, human nature, and politics – and they treat the answers (even before they've given) with reverence usually given to a pope. Serious prose authors, after all, are the conscience of us all. The interviewees expect to have the truth revealed to them in some way. They would, for the duration of the interview, put their morals aside and adapt the high morals of the author. But, in the end, will the reverence change the minds of the interviewer or those reading/listening? No. It's simply more comforting to know that we have a conscience... somewhere else. The reverence turns to ashes more quickly than burning wood turns to ashes.

Now. When interviewing a science fiction or fantasy author, the interviewer has other expectations: Perhaps something of the writer's imagination and inspiration will rub off on him. Just once, when interviewed, I would like to have the interview turned on its head: rather than answer, I want to find out what the interviewer really wants from me. This, basically, is how it would go:

"Guy, how do you get all these ideas? Where do they come from?"

"Wait. Why do you want to know?"

"Excuse me?"

"Why do you want to know where my ideas come from? Do you want to learn the process so you can do it? Did you learn anything from the answers the other fifty authors you asked gave you? Does your imagination give you lots of ideas now? Does it maybe not give you lots of ideas? If it doesn't, do you think my answer will change something in your brain and suddenly you'll have them all the time? What do you expect to learn from the answer I'll give you? You ask me like it's something magical, when actually different brains do different things. But here's the truth: if you felt something magical when reading the book, then you have the capacity to imagine new things like the things you've read. Now, some people have normal imagination, and some people have it on turbo, but everyone has imagination, and so do you. Why don't you spend time trying to let your imagination roam rather than asking me about it and later forgetting the answer?"

That's what I want to say. The truth is, you can actually turn on the interviewer on almost any question. It depends how badly you want the interview to go.

Festering Idea Number Three: Don't let interviewers stroke your ego. Rather, go against the direction of the stroke.

Interviewers stroke the ego of the interviewees all the time. Sometimes it's done with a somber tone, indicating that the matter is somber and important; and now you have to treat it as serious and important.

Sometimes it's done through compliments: "Mr. So and So, you've been hailed as the new master of fantasy. Tell us about your process." Now any interviewee subconsciously must justify the nice things said about him, and so he treats himself with too much respect and begins to give long speeches about how great he is.

My festering idea: If they tell you you're important, behave like an ass. If they tell you you're good, tell them everything you've done sucks, but that you're hoping to do better next time. If they tell you you're full of imagination, tell them that your mother has much better imagination than you. Imagine if an Oscar winner got up to the podium, and rather than give a straight speech, turned around and farted. That's what I would like to do. But then again, I like bad interviews.

Well, these have been the top three festering ideas about bad interviews. I have a couple more, but I should keep them to myself. After all, a potential interviewer may read this, and I need to keep a few surprises up my sleeve.

One last thing: I have a new book out. It's called 'Secret Thoughts'. Check it out: <http://www.apexbookcompany.com/apex-store/secret-thoughts/>

I'm taking interview requests.



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