

# Hub Magazine

SCIENCE FICTION HORROR FANTASY

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## EDITORIAL:

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**by alasdair stuart**

### **Phil Coulson: Agent of SHIELD**

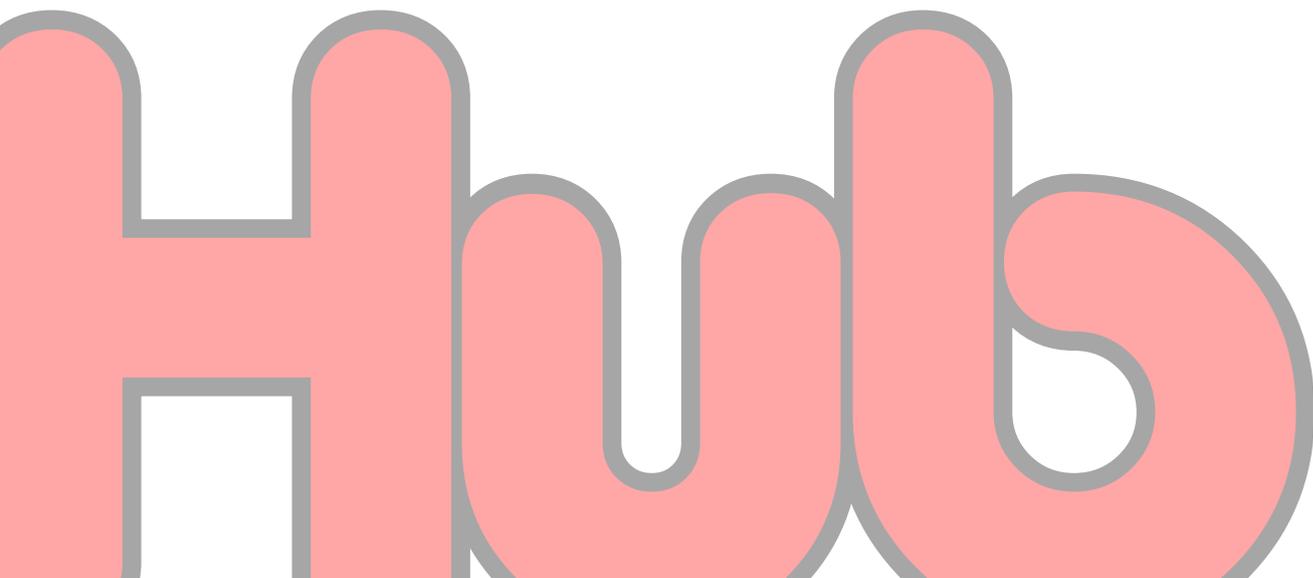
Whilst a lot of the attention about the upcoming Avengers movie is focussed on the cast, and the rest is focussed on the writer and director, no one has yet paid very much attention to the glue that holds the Marvel movie universe together. I speak of none other than Clark Gregg, as Agent Phil Coulson. Quiet, softly spoken and unflappable even in the face of Asgardian Death Machines, Phil Coulson is the Michael Garibaldi of the Marvel movie universe, a man so unflappable even Tony Stark is a minor irritation.

The time has come for Phil Coulson to enter comics full time. A mini-series, bridging the two Iron Man movies and written by Joe Casey has already been produced but it's not enough. Because you see, Phil is that unique figure in comics, the every man. He has no powers, no special abilities just a highly trained, somewhat laconic intelligence agent with a gift for managing people and a bigger gift for working with superhumans.

Drop an ongoing Phil Coulson series into the Marvel universe and you can use it as the glue to tie everything together. Stark's gone off the rails? Again? Call Phil. Rogue Asgardians trying to rebuild Bifrost from this side? Call Phil. You can even use him to tie in other, less well known Marvel characters. He's a man who seems to know a little about everyone and everything so when a pair of homeless teenagers are horribly altered and begin fighting crime as Cloak and Dagger? Maybe an old friend of Phil's from the Police Department gives him a call. When a brilliant surgeon turned Mystic turns up at SHIELD's New York Office explaining how vital it is that he regain the Eye of Agamotto? Call Phil. Or, when the world's most brilliant scientists are transformed

by cosmic rays, send Phil Coulson out to the crash site to talk them down.

Smart, calm and fundamentally a nice guy, Phil Coulson is the most interesting thing to come out of the Marvel movies so far. Give the man a comic, after all, DC have finally brought Chloe Sullivan into the Superman comics, and watch him soar. Or watch and say something laconic as other people soar, which, let's face it is more likely.





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# FICTION

## Warts and All

by mark morris

It started as nothing more obtrusive than a small bump between the second and third knuckle of the index finger of Jason Platt's right hand. It itched ever so slightly, and Jason rubbed at it as he lay back on his bed and stared out of the window. It was the summer holidays. The days were white-hot. Jason watched the tops of trees nudge the undersides of wispy clouds like cattle prods. Birds were chirping. Faintly he could hear the pigs snorting in the sty. He sighed as he heard the back door slam, and was pulling on his baseball boots even before his mother's footsteps began to clump up the wooden stairs.

He was tying the second shoelace when her head appeared round the door. She looked weary, the skin around her eyes dark, her hair scraped carelessly back.

"Jacey," she said in a tired voice, "could you feed the chickens and fetch in the cows for milking? I'm going to have to phone the vet. Ermintrude's come down with something again."

"Sure, Mum," Jason said, springing from his bed as though in the hope that a show of vitality would somehow rub off on her. Since his dad had run off with "that woman" they had had to deal with one crisis after another. First their prize pig, Lizzy, had died of bloat. Then some of the cows had eaten some fungus in the top field which had affected milk production. Then the farm's plumbing, which had been on the way out for years, had finally packed in. And now Ermintrude, the goat, whom his mother adored, kept coming down with these mysterious illnesses.

"What's wrong with her this time?" Jason asked, crossing the room.

Beth, his mother, shrugged. "Oh, I don't know. Diarrhoea. Bringing up her food. And her eyes look...funny. Cloudy."

Jason didn't like the sound of that but he tried to keep his voice casual. "It's probably just a bug she's got. Mr MacDonald'll give her something and she'll be right as rain in the morning."

Beth's lips twitched into a smile. "I hope so. But I'll still have to pay his bill, won't I?"

Jason placed a hand on her arm, tried to instil as much earnestness into his fifteen-year-old voice as he could. "We'll get by, Mum, don't worry. We'll be all right."

His mother smiled, touched his hair briefly, but her eyes showed she was unconvinced. "Course we will," she said, then started down the stairs.

Jason followed, watching the way her shoulders slumped, the way she stooped like an old woman. He saw a few errant white hairs among the chestnut that he was sure had not been there a month ago. He loved his father achingly, but he also hated him for what he had done. Love and hate: sometimes Jason got so confused that they seemed like the same thing. Scowling, he trailed his mother through the kitchen and out the back door. Almost unconsciously he rubbed at the bump on his index finger.

"Nettle sting?" Beth asked.

Jason looked up almost guiltily, unaware that she had been watching him scratch. It was now night and the animals were quiet. The two of them had struggled through another day. Jason liked this time best - the quiet hour before bed when his mother sewed and he read his book. Sometimes the two of them played cards together or Trivial Pursuit or Scrabble. Or sometimes, though not often, they watched a film on the black and white TV, whose reception in winter made programmes take place in a snowstorm.

"No," he said and held up his hand on which the bump was now the size of a pimple. "It's this thing. It itches like mad. I noticed it this morning. I can't stop scratching it."

Beth put aside the cardigan she was darning and took his hand. Her own hands were delicate, long-

fingering, but work-rough. "Hmm," she said, "it's a wart. You shouldn't pick it, it'll spread. Look, you've made it bleed already."

She bathed the wart in TCP, which got under the broken skin and bit like ants. Then she peeled the backing from a plaster and placed it carefully over the growth.

"Now, leave it alone. Tomorrow I'll get you something from the village." She reached for the cardigan again, then her hands were deflected to her mouth which opened in a yawn. Blearily she looked at the clock and straightened, placing a hand in the small of her back. "I suppose I'd better go and check on Ermintrude," she said tiredly. "Would you make the cocoa, love? I'll only be five minutes."

"Yes, Mum, course," Jason replied.

They stood up together.

Jason tossed and turned, unsure whether he was asleep or awake. He seemed full of a hideous, grinding itch, which he scratched and scratched and scratched but which still did not go away. He suddenly jerked upright with a cry, his eyelids ripping open. He saw insipid light crawling over his curtains, a pink dawn staining the room. He looked down at his bed, saw smears of half-dried blood striping the sheet and the pillow. The plaster his mother had placed over his wart the night before was screwed up like a small roll of pink flesh. Jason grimaced, his head thick, his stomach slightly nauseous. He rubbed his right hand on the edge of the bed, trying to soothe the itching which had escaped his dreams.

He was unable to do so. The itching persisted, biting-jabbing-rippling over his skin. Clenching his teeth, he held up the hand in front of his face and examined it. The original wart had been reduced to a raw bloody wound by his fingernails. Jason was dismayed to see three more warts clustered close to the original like offspring. His mother had told him that if he scratched the wart it would spread, but Jason hadn't reckoned on the process being this rapid. He toyed with the idea that he'd contracted measles or chicken pox, but then discarded the notion. No, he'd had both of those by the time he was eight, and he didn't think you could catch them twice. Hissing breath through his teeth, his right hand clenched into a fist, Jason hurried down the landing and into the bathroom.

Almost feverishly he put the plug in the wash basin, then twisted the cold tap. The water splattered up off the enamel, wetting his pyjamas, but Jason didn't care. He plunged his hand into the cold water and immediately gasped in relief. The warts stopped itching as though shocked by the temperature. or as though the itching had been a layer of sensation that the water had sloughed off. With his left hand he rummaged through the bathroom cabinet above the basin, found TCP, a lotion called Bug-Away (which was really for insect bites but which Jason thought might help ease his itching) and a roll of bandage. He drew his hand from the water, dried it carefully on a towel, then put TCP on the damaged wart. The stinging made his eyes water, caused him to clap his left hand tightly to his mouth. When it began to ease a little he applied the Bug-Away, then wrapped the bandage awkwardly around his hand, tying it in a clumsy knot with the aid of his teeth. That done he returned to his bedroom, sat on a chair (he was too repelled by the blood-smeared sheets to return to bed) and drifted into an uneasy sleep.

He woke a little later to the sound of weeping.

"Mum?" Jason said. "Mum, what's the matter?"

He felt an internal fist squeeze his stomach and chest. His mother was slumped over the kitchen table, her head in her hands, her eyes red and swimming with tears. Her hair hung down like curtains, exposing the back of her neck. Jason stared at the soft down on her skin, the delicate nubs of vertebrae, and his eyes too filled up. He had never seen his mother look so vulnerable, so...exposed as she did at that moment. His right hand, which had begun to itch again, but only slightly as if it was a sluggishly awakening wasps' nest, now jerked as though enlivened by her wretchedness. Holding it tight to his chest like a frightened kitten, Jason dragged up a chair and sat beside her.

"Mum," he said tightly, "Mum, please don't cry." He laid his left hand self-consciously on the curve of her back. "Talk to me, Mum, tell me what's wrong. I don't like to see you like this."

He grimaced as she sniffed and raised her head. She looked like a witch, haggard and ugly. Something crackled in her palm. Jason had thought it was a handkerchief she'd been pressing to her face but he now

saw it was a piece of paper.

"The electricity bill's come," she said in a reedy voice. "And I just don't know how I'm going to pay it. That... that bastard left us with nothing, Jacey. A farm that costs more than it earns and bugger-all else. We're... we're going to have to sell some of the animals, that's the only solution. Even with you off school this place is too big for us to manage on our own..."

She choked on a sob and wiped her face with her sleeve. For the millionth time that summer, Jason said, "We'll manage, Mum, you'll see. We'll get by, the two of us. We've got to really, haven't we?"

His words received no reply and after a few moments he stood up and wandered over to the cooker. He filled the kettle, lit the gas, and began to potter about, making breakfast. His hand was itching but he tried to ignore it; yet he held it as a dog might hold a paw pierced with a thorn. Behind him he heard the creak of the chair as his mother sat up, the sound of her blowing her nose. He sensed she was watching him but he didn't turn to look at her. At length she asked, "What's the bandage for?"

Jason picked up the tea pot and carried it to the table. He felt oddly embarrassed by the question, as though she'd asked him something deeply personal, or like the time he'd been examining his newly-sprouting pubic hair in a small hand mirror in the bathroom and she'd walked in. He put down the tea pot, pulled a chair from under the table and sat on it. Awkwardly he said, "It's that wart. I must have been scratching it in my sleep. When I woke up this morning it was all bloody. And there were three more on my hand."

Beth raised her eyebrows. "Three? Are you sure? They don't usually spread that quick."

"Well, these have," said Jason, "and they itch like crazy. I feel like chopping off my hand just to make it stop."

He poured the tea and reached for the Cornflakes. Beth said, "I'll make an appointment for you with Dr Miles. He should be able to fit us in sometime this morning. It's not normal for warts to spread like that. And they don't usually itch either."

Jason nodded and spooned Cornflakes into his mouth. He felt clumsy holding the spoon in his left hand. His right hand he held tight to his stomach, balled into a fist like something asleep.

Dr Miles was an avuncular man in his sixties. He wore a waistcoat and a watch on a gold chain, and had bushy mutton-chop whiskers like a character from Dickens. He had been Limefield's doctor for over thirty-five years, and seemed as permanent as the dark stone buildings and the brooding hills. When the Platts were admitted into his surgery, he stood up and lumbered towards them, hands outstretched.

"Elizabeth, my dear, how are you? And young Jason - my, you're a big lad. I expect you'll be a six-footer just like your... hmm... yes, well, it's good to see you."

He covered the faux pas quickly, and without losing his joviality, yet Jason still saw his mother's lips purse, the skin tighten around her face as though she were drawing in her defences. Miles waved them to seats which looked moulded from glazed liquorice, perching himself on the edge of his colossal desk. Toying casually with the end of his stethoscope, he said, "Now then, Jason. Your mother informs me you have some rather unusual warts."

Jason nodded, and repeated what his mother had already told Miles on the phone while the doctor carefully snipped the knot on the bandage and peeled it from Jason's hand. As the bandage came away, Jason's voice tailed off, and he and his mother both stared at what lay beneath the material.

There were now five, six, seven, eight, *nine* warts on Jason's hand! *Nine!* Which meant that five new ones had sprung up in the last four hours! The original wart was a crusty lumpy scab. The others ranged from small white-tipped bumps to hard dry nodules like split peas. For a long moment nobody said anything. Even Miles was silent, his eyebrows raised quizzically. At last Beth murmured, "It can't be. They can't be spreading as fast as this." She glanced at Miles. "What exactly *are* they, doctor?"

Miles ummed and arred. He examined the warts closely, probed at them with what looked like a plastic blunt-ended toothpick. His brows were beetled. He clucked his tongue. At last he said, "Well, I'm ashamed to admit I'm baffled." He sat back, frowning. "They certainly *look* like warts, but if what you tell me is true..." He paused. "You're quite sure you only had four of these when you woke up this morning?"

Jason nodded.

"And when did you say you noticed the first one?"

"Yesterday morning."

"And that was this one here?" Miles said, pointing at the scab.

Jason confirmed that it was. Miles shook his head and dragged a notepad towards him, taking a pen from his breast pocket with his other hand.

"Well, what I'd like to do, with your permission of course, is to make you an appointment with a colleague of mine. He's a skin specialist, his name is Stephen Lester, and he's based in Leeds. In the meantime I'll make you out a prescription for something that *should* cauterise the warts and something that *should* stop the itching. If you find that what I've prescribed works, then let me know and I'll cancel the appointment. How does that sound?"

Jason glanced at his mother. It sounded okay to him, but her expression was one of reluctance. Knowing pride would keep her from explaining why, he said, "Well, the thing is, doctor, it's a bit tight for us at the moment, and I'm not sure we can really afford-"

"Nothing to afford," Miles interrupted, holding up a hand. "It's all paid for on the National Health. All you have to do is show up." He reached for the receiver. "So are we agreed? I really do think you need to get those things seen to, Jason."

They both looked at Beth, who nodded. "Of course," she said, and added indignantly, "Even if we do have to pay for it."

Miles made his call. Putting down the phone he said, "Well, that's that. Your appointment is for next Tuesday at 2 p.m. Here's your prescription. And remember what I told you - any improvement, you let me know."

Jason smiled and thanked him. After Miles had carefully applied a clean bandage to his hand, he and his mother left and made their way to the chemist's to pick up the prescription. The stuff to cauterise the warts was like white glue, the lotion to ease the itching a greasy yellow. In the bus on the way home the itching got so bad that Jason had to rip off the new bandage and smear the yellow stuff over his hand. He re-applied the bandage with his mother's help, then leaned back, closing his eyes, gritting his teeth. He felt a little thick-headed, a touch feverish, but put this down to the stiflingly hot bus, the jolting and grinding of gears as the driver negotiated ruts in the road. Thankfully the yellow stuff seemed to act quickly and within minutes the itching was little more than a subdued tingle.

When they got back the first thing they saw was Ermintrude the goat lying on her side in her pen.

This was not unusual in itself; Ermintrude slept often, especially in the heat. But there was something about the way she was lying that immediately drew the eye. Maybe it was the fact that she was so, so still. Or maybe it was the flies, buzzing around her motionless form, clouds of them landing on her face then taking off, like a busy airport in miniature.

The reason, however, was not important. The fact was, as soon as Jason saw the goat he felt a blend of dread and weary inevitability. Beside him he heard his mother mutter, "Oh my God," then the two of them were through the gate and stumbling up the slight grassy incline beside the house.

Up close the truth could not be denied. Ermintrude's tongue lolled from her mouth; her eyes, implacable as dark glass, were half-open. The collar she wore round her neck, and the long chain attached to it and secured to a peg in the ground, looked like some slack and clumsy torture device.

Beth dropped to her knees and abruptly began to cry, trembling right hand frantically stroking the goat's fur as though to massage life back into it. Jason stood at his mother's shoulder, staring down, listening to the flies whose incessant drone was like the empty idiot hum of death itself. The sun beat on their backs, its apparent optimism like a mockery of their situation. Though he knew it was pointless, Jason could not help thinking that this was his fault. If only they'd stayed at home and not gone to the doctor's about his stupid warts, then maybe Ermintrude might still be alive.

Though she did not blame him for what had happened, Jason felt that his mother's silence was accusation enough. The two of them went about their tasks with barely a word to each other for the rest of the day, their eye contact reduced to a bare minimum. For Jason, however, guilt was not his only problem. Coupled with it was an increasing physical discomfort, the root of which, he felt sure, lay in his itching hand. The

yellow stuff had done its job for a while, but now the itching was returning, and not just that but it seemed more voracious than ever and had spread as far as his elbow. Also the stuffy feeling in his head had worsened, as had his feverishness. It was almost five o' clock when Jason stumbled back to the house and up the stairs to the bathroom. He decided to change the dressing on his hand, take a couple of Aspirin and have a lie down before supper.

He unwound the bandage slowly, both hopeful and fearful of what he might see. He tried to convince himself that the white stuff the doctor had given him must be working, that the itching had increased because the stuff was getting inside the warts and burning them away. A pulse was jumping in his throat which he tried to swallow but couldn't. He smiled at his own nervousness. His left hand was trembling slightly as he tugged the last of the bandage away.

The smile froze on his face. For the first time fear jumped into his mind, slid down through his body like a rain of sparks. Jason cleared his throat and tried to tell himself that what he was seeing was not as bad as it seemed. It was the stuff the doctor had given him that made his arm look such a mess. Once he had washed all the gunk off it would be okay.

He placed his arm in the sink and let cold water sluice over it. As before he felt relief from his itching, though this time it was not so absolute; he felt the itching biting back, fighting against his attempts to drown it. He dried the arm carefully with toilet paper, then examined it again. The pulse hammered in his throat, he felt sick to the pit of his stomach. There were - it took him almost a minute to count them - twenty-four warts on his hand and forearm. *Twenty-fucking-four!* Almost an average of one every hour since yesterday morning.

Jason shook his head. No, it couldn't be. Apart from the warts, some of which were growing together like clumps of fungus, his arm looked... sickly. Wasted. As though all that lay beneath the skin - blood, muscle, bone - was turning mushy like old banana.

He shuddered at the thought and closed his eyes to stop himself from puking. It was just his imagination. After all, there was no pain, just this bloody awful itching. Stubbornly he applied more of the white stuff, more of the yellow stuff, and smothered it in clean bandage. He tied the bandage tight, as though to contain the... the infection beneath the constrictive material. By this time tomorrow, he assured himself, the white stuff will have begun its work; his warts would be shrivelling away. He looked at himself in the mirror and was reassured that his face looked normal, if a little flushed. Next moment he gripped the edge of the sink convulsively as his name came screeching up the stairs at him:

"*Jaasonnn!*"

Jason turned towards the sound. Of course it had been his mother's voice, and preceding it had been a hideous screeching, squealing noise which was still going on. He thought wildly of something huge, like a juggernaut, careering out of control, slamming on its brakes as it ploughed towards the house. Then he realised what the noise really was: it was the pigs. They were screaming with terror, as though a lion had been let loose in their sty.

Jason raced downstairs, out the back door and round the corner of the house. He saw his mother leaning over the wooden wall of the sty, screeching as loudly as the pigs, brandishing a broom in her hands. Her eyes were stretched wide; spittle was flying from her lips. Reaching her, Jason too leaned over the sty wall to see what was going on.

It was Napoleon, father of many, the oldest, dirtiest, fattest pig that they owned. He was going berserk, charging about the sty, chomping, trampling, in a random and terrifying act of destruction. One of the younger pigs, Boxer, was a crushed mass of torn flesh. The others were huddled together, squealing, tumbling over one another to get away each time the huge boar charged.

Beth was using the broom as a bludgeon, bringing it down again and again, clubbing guilty and innocent alike.

"*Mum!*" Jason yelled at her. "*Mum, stop it! It's not doing any good!*"

She turned to face him, startled as though from a dream. Jason took the broom from her and climbed up onto the sty wall. He dug his feet between the wooden slats and leaned over as far as he dared. Napoleon was snorting and rolling his eyes - black stone-eyes, empty and merciless, like a shark's. Creamy froth was dripping from the pig's gnashing mouth, bubbling from his flared snout. As Jason watched,

Napoleon teetered slightly as though drunk, then let out an enraged bellow and charged head-first into the opposite wall.

The impact caused the sty to shudder, the pigs to squeal anew. Jason clutched the top of the wall to stop himself losing his balance. Napoleon grunted and shook his head, then seemed to sense that someone was watching him and swung slowly around. Choosing his moment, Jason raised the broom, then brought it swiftly down. The broom-head made a sickening crunch as it impacted with Napoleon's skull.

Jason felt a judder pass through his body, but it seemed at first that Napoleon had been unaffected by the blow. The pig stood where he had been hit as though in measured and silent contemplation. His snout twitched; more froth drooled from his mouth. Then in a horrible kind of slow motion his legs buckled, his eyes glazed, and he rolled heavily onto his side. His flanks heaved - in, out, in, out - and he grunted softly as though in the midst of a contented dream.

Supper was cancelled. Beth seemed too traumatised by this latest episode to even consider preparing any, and Jason felt too ill to eat anyway. Between them they managed to drag Napoleon's unconscious body out of the sty and into Jason's father's tool shed. Jason covered the pig with a blanket, locked the tool shed door, then called Raich Tanner, known as the Meat-Man, who promised to drop by and pick up Boxer's carcass in the morning. He was about to call the vet too, to come and look at Napoleon, when his mother stayed him with a hand on the arm.

"Leave it until tomorrow," she said. "I can't face seeing anyone else today."

Jason felt inclined to argue - Napoleon might need immediate attention - but the look on his mother's face discouraged him. In the end he simply said, "Okay, Mum," and replaced the receiver with a soft ching. That done, he did what he had planned to do earlier. He went upstairs, took two Aspirin, lay back on his bed and slept.

He had a strange and all too vivid dream. He was walking in the woods that bordered the farmland, his right arm itching horribly. He was looking for something, perhaps something to ease his discomfort, a herb or a plant or a root. It was early evening. Sun was dripping through the trees, dappling the ground, but soon Jason knew it would grow dark; the trees would turn black as though sucking the darkness in. He stumbled over rocks, around bushes, around trees, until suddenly he was in a clearing. This was where he was supposed to be...yet still he couldn't say what he was looking for. He walked forward cautiously, head turning this way and that as though afraid of ambush. Something caught his eye: a butterfly perched on a leaf, delicate red wings shimmering like petals of blood. "Butterfly," Jason murmured, and was entranced by the word, as though really hearing it, relishing its lilting cadences, for the first time. He walked forward, saw the butterfly's antennae trembling, its eyelash-thin legs poised as though to spring. He moved closer. "Butterfly," he whispered again as though the word was a charm that could glue the insect to the leaf. Still the butterfly didn't move. Now Jason was only an arm's length away. He stopped and breathed, "Butterfly," for the third time, then slowly raised his bandaged right hand. He extended his index finger and brought it slowly, tremblingly, towards the fragile insect. The butterfly remained where it was. Jason's finger touched one of the wings, began to stroke it gently. He smiled, enraptured, and began softly to coo. Without warning the butterfly crumbled to black ash and was scattered by the breeze.

The ceiling looked blurred. Jason gazed at it but could not pinpoint exactly what it was that made it seem... different. He was lying on his back, fully-clothed, on top of his bed. Sunlight that contained the freshness of morning poured in through the window.

His arm hurt. Badly. Not just itched but really *hurt*, as if someone had come along and broken it in the night. The itch was still there but now it seemed swamped by the pain. Or rather, not swamped but squeezed upwards along his chest and the right side of his face.

He opened his mouth. The itching fizzed along his jaw, in and out of his ear, cut a trail across his cheekbone and the rim of his eye socket. *Shit*, it felt as though hornets were hatching out inside his skull. But his arm, that was the main thing. His arm hurt so *bad*.

He tried to move it and found to his relief that he could. He clenched and unclenched his hand, wincing against the prospect of further pain, but the ache remained constant; movement seemed not to affect

it. He shuffled into a semi-sitting position and brought his right arm slowly round where he could see it. Beneath the bandage the arm looked... misshapen, somehow pulpy. The thought made him nauseous. He plucked at the knot and unwrapped the bandage with fumbling fingers. The thing revealed beneath was so horrible, so utterly awful, that for a few moments he could do nothing but gaze at it.

It was hard to believe that the twisted emaciated limb smothered in warts had ever been a human arm... and it was even harder to believe that the obscenity was still attached to Jason's body. A cold clinical part of his mind furnished him with a memory, an approximation: a dead tree branch he had found in the woods a few weeks ago that had been yellow-white with insects' eggs. He whimpered as he moved his hand. The fingers were like fat lumpy white worms, the arm itself boneless, fluid as a snake. He swung his legs to the floor, putting his left hand out to the wall to support him.

He froze. Fear raced through his body, slamming doors, blocking off air. The wall beneath his hand was... bumpy, as though there were pebbles beneath the wallpaper. And the carpet beneath his feet. And his bed. They were bumpy too.

He looked. Stared. Properly for the first time. Everything in his room - *everything* - was covered in... in lumps.

In warts.

*No! No, it was impossible!*

Jason slid to the floor and brought his knees up to his chin. He began to snigger, then to laugh, and then finally to scream. When he had done his throat felt sore and tender but his mind felt clear, his thoughts almost unnaturally lucid. He looked around the room - warts on the cupboard, warts on the chair, warts like soap bubbles in the glass of his window - and he thought, Mum. What about Mum? Oh shit, what about Mum?

He stood up, his legs weak and trembly, and stumbled out of his bedroom. Warts were popping up everywhere - on the landing, on the banister, even on the ornaments and plants and books and... everything.

He went into his mother's room. It was empty, the bed covers thrown back. The bed was full of warts, which from this distance looked like white beads.

He came out of his mother's room and went into the bathroom.

She was not there either. Jason felt like going back to bed, warts or no warts. His arm hurt - fucking hurt - and his fluey symptoms (stuffy head, fever) were galloping through his body.

He half-turned and caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. Reflective blisters flawed the glass but there was still enough of a smooth surface for Jason to see what his face had become. He stared at the image - his right cheek reduced to lumpy porridge, his ear a cluster of fleshy bubbles - and he shouted, "No! No! No!"

Instinctively he struck out with his left hand. The mirror burst, a spider's web that exploded into slivers of discordant tinkling music. A stripe of blood welled up over the back of his hand. He ignored it, let it drip.

"Mum," he moaned. "Mum, where are you?" He sat on the edge of the bath. "Why are you doing this to us, God? It's not fair. It's not fair."

No answers came, not from God or anyone. Over the past couple of months Jason had come to learn that often in life there were no answers. Things happened, bad things, and when you asked why, when you pleaded to be told what you'd done to deserve them, you were presented only with the blank and uncaring mask of Fate. There was no way round the mask, no way inside it, no way of examining Fate's motives, trying to make sense of its randomness. All you could do was accept its actions and carry on. Because the more you picked and probed and questioned, the more infected the wound it had left in your life became.

Jason wanted, at that moment, to sleep, to die, to sink into a black and silent oblivion where he could forget this awful, awful... *thing* that in less than two days had taken over his life. But first I have to find Mum, he told himself, I have to make sure she's okay. I have to get her away from here.

He stood up, walked slowly along the landing, down the stairs, into the kitchen. There were warts everywhere - on the bread, the cooker, the cutlery, the mugs - but still there was no sign of his mother. His right arm hung limply, unbandaged, by his side. He felt so ill, so very, very ill, but in a way he felt he'd gone

beyond that, as though physical pain was somehow only a minor by-product of a greater horror. He walked to the back door, pushed it open, went outside. The sun blinded him, swathed him in heat, as though in a last desperate display of beauty, warmth, life.

"Mum!" Jason shouted. "Mum, where are you?"

He heard movement to his left, round the corner of the house. He turned towards it as a voice, his mother's, spoke the first syllable of his name, "Jay," as though pointing out a bird. Then, before the name could be completed, it bubbled up into a high ratcheting scream.

"Mum!" Jason yelled and forced himself to run towards the sound. He heard another scream, then a single sobbed word, "No," then a further scream, abruptly cut off. His body felt sluggish and it hurt - *it hurt* - but Jason pushed it to its limits. The corner of the house lay ten feet away... seven... four... one...

Then he skidded round it, saw the yard, the sty, the milking shed, the barn...

And caught a glimpse, just a glimpse, of something scuttling, shapeless, *warty*, dragging his mother into the barn's gloomy interior.

"Oh God, no," he moaned and sprinted towards the barn's open door. As he ran he thought crazily, *Don't touch the butterfly, don't touch the butterfly, don't touch the butterfly*. Half-way across the yard he slipped on a cobblestone and fell sprawlingly, hands raised as though in surrender. He bumped his head, jarred his hip, but clambered to his feet and carried on.

The barn was dark after the sunlight. Shadow lay on shadow in a sombre and confusing collage. The smell was a blend of cows and hay - rich, sweet, musky. Gashes of light lay on the walls like luminous cuts.

Jason walked forward, aware of his rustling footsteps, his breath like tearing paper. He saw mounds of hay, tools against the walls, a wooden ladder leading up to a hayloft. At the far end of the barn, cloaked in shadows, was what he could only think of as a *construction*.

It was eight feet high, five feet across. It resembled a kiln built of papier mache, or a colossal wasps' nest. It had grown, or been made, within the last twenty-four hours. Jason had come into the barn yesterday morning and there had been no sign of it then.

"Mum," he called. "Mum, please answer me." His voice boomed hollowly and received only silence in reply. He walked towards the construction (*the hive*, he thought suddenly), his arm hurting, his body feverish, black fear gnawing at his stomach. Each moment he expected something to fly at him out of the gloom, to come screeching out of the dimness, but nothing did. When he was six feet from the hive he stopped, the itching crawling over his face, making it twitch, and said again, "Mum? Mum, are you there?"

He heard something from behind the hive. A small but persistent sound that had him inching his way forward, straining his ears. It was a delicate sound - wet, smacking, repetitive - like a baby stamping its tiny feet in water, or... or... an image bloomed suddenly in his mind... Bess, his father's sheepdog, slurping her way through her midday bowl of Pedigree Chum.

"God, no," Jason breathed. "Oh God, please no..."

He tried to shout, "*Mum!*", but the word dissolved in his mouth, became a choking sob. He took a lurching step towards the hive, then stopped as the slurping sounds were replaced by silence. He began to back away as a looming shadow, darker than the rest, sidled round the edge of the hive and seeped across the floor.

Something followed the shadow. Something hunched, fat, bulbous with warts. A sickeningly pungent smell spiked Jason's nostrils, and he turned his head away as he felt his gorge rise. When he turned back a second later the thing was staring at him unblinkingly.

Staring at him...

(*No, it couldn't be! It couldn't!*)

...with Napoleon's eyes.

"Ne... ne... ne... ne... ne..." Jason mumbled idiotically, his legs leading him a strange backpedalling dance. He thought of the broom crashing down on the pig's skull, the dead weight of the vast body he and his mother had dragged into the toolshed. The pig's eyes were black. Mean. So cold, so... so soulless that a flash of any kind of emotion, even hatred, would have been welcome in them.

"Napoleon's locked in the shed," Jason whispered as though his words could make it so. The warty thing growled at him softly, a black wound opening below its eyes to reveal crooked chomping teeth. It oozed

forward, though at first made no move to attack, as though it were merely protecting its lair.

And then, without warning, it let out a hideous screaming bellow and charged.

Jason turned and fled, hot needles blazing through his body, ground glass speeding through his veins. Yet, despite his ailments, he ran faster than he had ever run in his life before. His brain seemed to jolt in his skull, dislodging his thoughts. The sun glared at him. The yard seemed to stretch forever. Jason's feet flew over the cobbles. Once he almost slipped and offered up a brief despairing prayer before regaining his balance. At last he reached the corner of the house, and seconds later was bursting in through the kitchen door, turning and slamming it behind him.

He stood, his back to the door, sweat pouring down his face. He was not sure how close to him the Napoleon-thing had been, nor even if it had followed him out of the barn, for the grinding, pounding, roaring machine of his own body had drowned out all other sound. That machine was winding down now, breaking into its constituent parts: pain, itch, fear, fever. Suddenly exhausted, Jason slid to the floor, leaving a smeary sweaty mark on the door's warty wood, and closed his eyes.

Time passed. Jason was not aware he'd been thinking but when he finally opened his eyes again he realised he had come to a decision. With difficulty he dragged himself to his feet, looking round the warty kitchen until his eyes alighted on the big box of Swan Vestas his mother kept handy to light the gas. He picked up the matches, grimacing at the feel of warts on the box like blisters beneath the cardboard, and put them in his pocket. Then he crossed the kitchen and dragged open the heavy door that led into the cellar.

He went down the cellar steps, feeling warts of stone pushing against the soles of his feet, warts of rusty iron on the banister. The cellar was cool and quiet and dark. Jason switched on the light at the bottom and everything jumped into brightness. He sat on the bottom cellar step, suddenly overcome by a feeling of horror and depression. He sunk his face into his left hand and started to sob and shake his head. After a while he began to murmur, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," over and over again through his tears.

Once his quiet hysteria had run its course he stood up and crossed to a set of shelves that were affixed to the opposite wall. He took down a rusty cobweb-strewn can of petrol, held it to his ear and jiggled it. Liquid sloshed inside. Not much but enough for his purposes. Can in hand, matches in pocket, Jason ascended the stairs to the kitchen.

He looked out of the kitchen window. There was no sign of the Napoleon-thing, so he opened the door a crack and peered out. He half-expected something to come at him squealing, but nothing did, so he opened the door wider and stepped into the sunshine. He left the door ajar, and as a precaution unscrewed the cap of the petrol can and threw it away. It hurt his right hand to do all this but he gritted his teeth against the pain and thrust the hand into his trouser pocket. It felt like someone was grinding his bones to a pulp, but he managed to close the hand around the box of Swan Vestas and pull it out. Then, with a deep breath, he began to walk towards the corner of the house.

Actually turning the corner into the yard was the worst part. He had to force his legs to perform the action. He wondered how quickly he could splash on the petrol, take the match from the box, strike it and throw it, especially with his gammy arm. The procedure seemed time-consuming and cumbersome. He suspected that if the Napoleon-thing came for him again he would simply throw whatever he was holding at the creature and run. He sniggered at the thought despite his fear. His laughter died and he looked around with wide eyes as he entered the yard.

It was empty. The only sound he could hear was the lazy drone of summer. For the first time he noticed the door of his father's tool shed, the bottom half shattered like matchwood. He swallowed, or tried to. The pulse in his throat was jumping again. His body felt like a clumsy burden as he crossed the yard and re-entered the barn.

Silence. Gloom. So deep, so profound, that Jason felt almost like jumping and shouting to counter it. At the far end the hive sat in its nest of hay and shadows like a giant egg. The Napoleon-thing was nowhere to be seen.

Jason began to walk forward. The petrol sloshed at his side; the matchbox felt solid and comforting in his wart-encrusted right hand, despite the pain. If that thing comes for me, he thought, I'll turn it into bacon rashers - and this time he tried not to think of the awkward procedure that this would involve.

He could smell the petrol. Could smell something else too, something besides the hay. It was a hot smell, raw, unpleasant. Bacon rashers, he thought desperately, fucking bacon rashers. He walked right up to the hive, heart gibbering, and began to jerk petrol around its base.

Something moved behind the hive. Shifted. Grunted quietly. "Bacon rashers," Jason muttered and waited for the Napoleon-thing to emerge. He waited long moments until the grunting softened and the movements ceased. Wary of the smell of petrol, he thought. Either that or the thing's asleep.

He splashed petrol over the hive itself, unaware that he was humming softly. The chemical smell made his stomach turn, but Jason ignored it. When the can was empty he tossed it onto a mound of hay and fumbled open the box of matches. He was about to reach in for a match when he thought: I wonder what it feels like.

The thought seemed unbidden, almost startling, like something scuttling from beneath a rock on the beach. "I wonder what it feels like," he said out loud, and next moment had transferred the box to his left hand and was reaching out with his gnarled right arm. He stretched his fingers, like white-barnacled worms, and laid his palm flat on the hive's exterior. It was warm. Dry. Alive. And more... more than that... it spoke to him...

It was not an actual word, but a boom, a throb, a pulse that resounded throughout his entire body. Jason's itching flared, then stilled, like fire doused with water. He felt suddenly... free. That was the only phrase to describe it. Free as a bird, free as the wind, free as... free as...

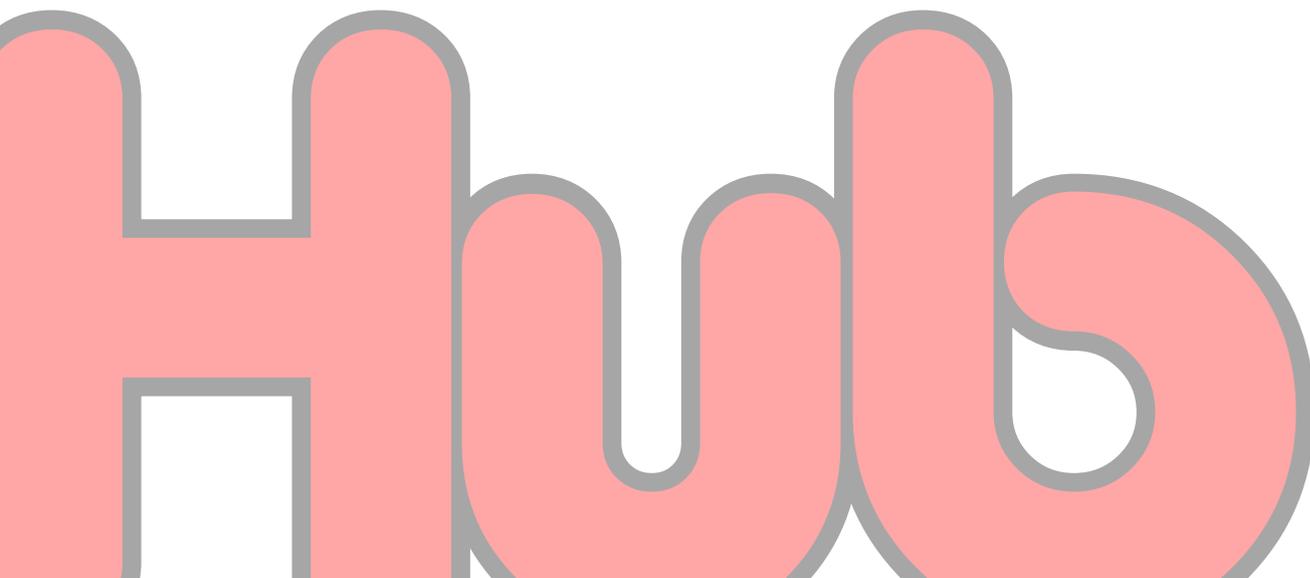
Free.

"Free," he said. And smiled. The word sounded good in his mouth.

Free. That single word somehow, magically, seemed to embrace a complete and perfect philosophy.

"Free," he said again, and chuckled delightedly. "Free."

Then he threw the matches away, squatted back on his haunches, and waited.



## The Cypress House

reviewed by niall alexander



by Michael Koryta  
Hodder & Stoughton  
rrp £19.99 (hardback)

If there's somethin' strange / In your neighbourhood / Who you gonna call?  
Michael Koryta, perhaps?

"The US phenomenon admired by Michael Connelly, Dan Simmons and Dean Koontz" had five more traditional thrillers under his belt before setting his sights on the supernatural in *So Cold the River* last year: guaran-damn-

teed the best book about haunted mineral water you'll ever read. Parallels with the work of a certain Stephen King - you've heard of the fellow, perhaps? - were immediately drawn, and for once not without cause. Dark and deft and down-to-earth, *So Cold the River* had an earnestness to it, and a sense of tension barely restrained which brought the so-called modern day Dickens of the genre to mind. Nor was Koryta's novel at all diminished by the comparison.

So how's his second dalliance with the weird and wonderful? Well, I'd say it's much of a muchness... which is to say, in a similarly silly sort of way as in *So Cold the River*, *The Cypress House* is superb.

In 1935, so it goes, Arlen Wagner is a CCC man: a veteran of the Great War making ends meet during the depression of post-Prohibition America by helping to build bridges. He and his young companion - all-purpose prodigy Paul Brickhill - mean to take the train to Florida, but as the pair approach their intended destination, Arlen is shocked to see a troupe of dead men:

"They filled the shadows of the car, some laughing, some grinning, some lost to sleep. All with bone where flesh belonged. The few who sat directly under a light still wore their skin, but their eyes were gone, replaced by whirls of grey smoke." (p.5)

Though his uncanny ability has been in remission for a few blissfully ignorant years, Arlen has seen the dead walk before, and so too will he see such sights again; acid flashes of smoke and bone he understands to be heralds of death in the imminent. God love him, he tries to persuade his fellow travellers to get off the ill-fated train at the next stop, "*but men don't heed such warnings. They won't let themselves.*" (p.5) Via a devastating hurricane on the Keys, as it transpires, all the passengers but for Arlen and Paul are bound for the next world.

However our man and his boy hitch on, ever onward until they come upon The Cypress House: a hotel which seems to suppress Arlen's second sight, managed by a beautiful woman Paul immediately falls for. They stay awhile, of course, each for his own reasons. Yet there is more to The Cypress House than meets the eye. Soon enough the twosome find themselves drawn into a ring of fire poised to burn them both - and that, you understand, is but a best case scenario.

There is something almost alarmingly addictive about *The Cypress House*. Likely you will read it in an evening or two, or better yet, an airy, sun-beaten afternoon in the garden with a couple of beers in a cooler. Dialogue-heavy and disarmingly beautiful, it demands so little from the reader - for the narrative has a clear and thrilling throughline, and the characters, though crude, are rendered quickly and effectively - and heaps upon one's meagre investment such rewards as to make *The Cypress House* something of a no-win, no-fee proposition.

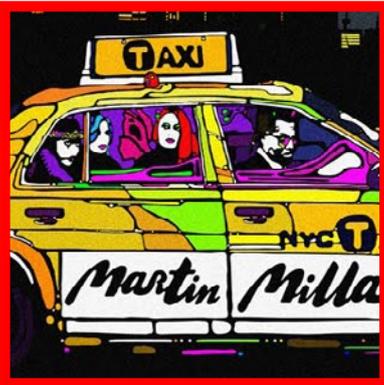
That said, I hope you'll forgive me if I insist there's win all over Koryta's latest: there is method, certainly, to this young author's madness. Hand-in-hand with a marvellously noirish sensibility he brings to the table a seductive evocation of place, a breakneck idea of pace, and an atmosphere strung tight with tension. Paul and Arlen are for their part a pleasing pair, alluringly uncomplicated - whatever their respective

complications - rather than undercooked, and Koryta handles the conspiratorial hijinks they become embroiled in with a winning sense of sincerity that only occasionally falls to self-seriousness.

By turns endearing and exhilarating, and laser focused on its purpose in a way precious few books can claim to be in this, the Age of Verbosity - and don't I know it! - *The Cypress House* tears along from start to showdown, and if it isn't the sort of story to haunt you for years to come, well... what of it? Let's say Michael Koryta's second supernatural novel takes the fun out of profundity, does away with all the extraneous characters of that particular descriptor - that's all the others, pretty much - and abandon all those who insist on navel-gazing in their novels to gaze the good times clean away, no harm, no foul. *The Cypress House* is not merely serviceable, but sumptuous Summer reading: an ideal way for the genre reader to begin the coming season.

## The Good Fairies of New York

reviewed by martin willoughby



by Martin Miller  
Piatkus Books  
rrp £7.99

This comedy was originally published in 1992, and has been re-issued this year with an introduction by Neil Gaiman. On the bright side, it's a story that can be entertaining and raise a smile at times, but for the most part is quite dull.

The dullness comes not from the writing, which is good, or from the story, which has merit, but from the two main characters.

The two leads are stropy fairies very reminiscent of spoilt teenage girls. Heather and Morag are not engaging, but simply irritating and self-absorbed. They spend the entire book getting drunk, shagged, arguing and being infantile, all the while causing chaos around them. These are the good fairies of the title.

The other thing that doesn't help is the constant shifting of scenes. Within the space of one page you can be in three different scenes with three different sets of characters, sometimes four. Had there been a little more focus throughout the book, instead of the chopping and changing it may have been easier to read.

That being said, the three human characters main the book make the story readable.

Kerry is a woman who suffers from Crohn's disease and little by little it's killing her. She wants to win the local community arts competition with her flower alphabet, partly because she likes flowers, but mostly to prevent her ex-boyfriend Cal from winning it. Morag ends up living with her and tries to help her get the three-coloured flower that will complete the alphabet, but fails. Kerry also attends Cal's gigs and hurls abuse at him from the audience for dumping her because of the disease as well as not teaching Kerry how to play New York Dolls songs on her guitar.

Dinnie is an unlikeable character at the start, but you can't help but feel sorry for him. He's a loser who wants a quiet life, but has no money, no girlfriend and spends his days watching porn channels. His TV habits are abhorrent to Heather, who drops in through his window and agrees to help Dinnie win the heart of Kerry, so she can get hold of his violin. The violin just happens to be the MacPherson fiddle, one of the treasured relics of the fairies. Despite himself, he mellows, especially towards the end when he discovers about Kerry's illness.

Dinnie changes into a warm and caring person, whilst Kerry is healed by 8 fairies and they, probably, live almost happily ever after.

The other main human is Magenta, a bag lady roaming the streets of New York convinced that she is Xenophon leading a Greek army against the Persians. She also keeps coming into possession of the flower

that Kerry needs to complete her alphabet. Her mortal enemy is Joshua, the leader of the Persian army, whose recipe for a potent alcoholic brew she has stolen. Magenta also saves the fairies of New York by organising their battles lines into squares against the fairy invaders from Cornwall.

The invaders from Cornwall...I'll let you find about that for yourself. Suffice to say it involves rapid industrialisation, rebels, mercenaries and propaganda leaflets.

Heather and Morag do not change throughout the book and are the same people at the end as at the beginning: deeply irritating and in need of a spanking. Which leads me on to sex. There's a lot of it going on between the fairies. Heterosexual, homosexual and incestuous.

It's hard to judge a writer on one book and it would be unfair to do so, especially one who is still writing under his own name as well as under the name of Martin Scott. This, however, is not a good book and one to avoid unless you are an avid fan of the author.

## **Doctor Who: The Curse of the Black Spot**

*reviewed by guy adams*



**Written by Steven Thompson**

**Directed by Jeremy Webb**

Poor old Steven Thompson, he suffered flak for having written "the weak one in the middle" of last year's SHERLOCK (though, for what it's worth I really enjoyed his episode). Still, it worked out well, he's writing Doctor Who... with pirates!

And plot holes. Lots of them. Really horribly big ones that you could lose a doubloon in.

Now, I have a love/hate relationship with plot. It can often be the nuts and bolts stuff that gets in the way of a really good story. But then I'm a writer that likes to write silly things and gets ever so bored with the need to justify and explain those silly things beyond "it's fun, get over it."

Doctor Who has often had a love/hate relationship with it as well, as writers not necessarily well-versed in sci-fi tried to hit their emotional high points and dramatic set-pieces while stumbling over all those pesky aliens and their shoddy grasp of physics.

I honestly think the odd bit of grey area in a plot is easily forgiven if the story justifies it. I am told that MIDNIGHT, Russell T. Davies masterly episode from the fourth series has the odd plot hole. I was told about it several times in a convention bar in fact. I still don't know what it is as I was far too busy throwing bar olives at the speaker's joyless face while screaming about how they were missing the point. They were moaning about possibly the single finest Doctor Who story ever told and the fact that they didn't see that was making my drunk self a bit cross. I get loud when people miss the obvious. It's a terrible feature. But really, you pale faced fun-vampire, shut your cold, happy-vacuum of a gob. It was wonderful and your ashen soul is sucking all the brilliance from the room.

Accordingly, I'd love to forgive THE CURSE OF THE BLACK SPOT its holes. But... but... well, there really are a lot of them and they are awfully big.

First we're told that the "monster" can manifest itself using water as a portal. OK, that works (it makes no logical sense of course but, screw that, it's fine, this is a pirate story... water is deadly... nice). Then, in a moment that Doctor Who fans know the world over as the I've Been A Fool Threshold (a story point Peter Davison used to sell so breathily around the climax of episode three), the Doctor realises it's not the water. No. It's shiny things. Like treasure. Because this is a pirate story and wouldn't it be cool if they had to choose between the treasure and their lives? Well, yes, I can see where you 're going with that and it would be cool... but... but... well, it doesn't quite work does it? You've spent the previous chunk of the episode avoiding water but not shiny things. Thus far it hasn't caused a problem. Now we have to accept that shiny things are the danger. OK, smash all the windows and mirrors, throw all the treasure in the sea. Or, you

know, just keep it in the sack where clearly it can't harm anyone. A fact you'll later prove.

But it's OK, because nobody's dead. How does the Doctor know this? Well, he doesn't really, he just decides that this will be the case, much like the writer did.

I'm a great fan of the "cover it with a line" school of writing, This is the get-out-of-jail mentality for those of us who consider story more important than plot. You can do anything, just make sure you sell it hard enough with a line of justification. That allows the reader or viewer to surrender their disbelief and run with you. Steve Thompson simply doesn't bother and it's a shame as it's easy enough.

"What's that?" the Doctor sniffs, there's a scent in the air that has caught his attention, even above the storm, "theta particles! And what does that mean?" Companions shake their heads, baffled. "It means matter displacement! They weren't destroyed, they were transported!"

"Transported? What are you talking about man? Transported where?" Shouts Avery.

"I don't know," says the Doctor with a grin, "let's find out shall we?" He then stabs them all with a nail.

Load of old guff but it does the job. After a few revisions and a bit of thought (it's my anniversary today and Debs and I are going out for the day. I'm writing quickly... yet again my devotion to Doctor Who There's more of course. In fact the whole climax, while lovely in spirit, constantly threatens to come to a juddering halt as the story skirts so close to the edge of believability it becomes self-aware and begins to cry at its own failings.

Hopefully the kids loved it. Kids often don't think about things so deeply, they're sensible enough to just get on with the noble business of enjoying themselves, We reviewers have a trickier time.

It could have been brilliant. Indeed, it should have been. But it needed to do just a little, simple work, to sell its ideas. Let's hope for more next week when, as my mad old mother howled on seeing the "Next Time" trailer: "Ooh the Snood!"

## **Doctor Who: The Doctor's Wife**

*reviewed by guy adams*

**Written by Neil Gaiman**

**Directed by Richard Clark**

"Ooh," says mother, echoing most of the viewers on either side of the Atlantic, "this is the one by Neil Gaiman."

"Yes," I agree.

"Is he?" she asks, confusing me as only she can.

"Is he what?"

"A gay man."

Only my mother's brain works this way. Or maybe its all mothers. Does she think all the production staff are named in a Dickensian manner? Like showrunner Steven Paradoxifanbastard.

"No." I explain, "he's not."

"Shame." For who we can never really guess. "Isn't he the one with the hair?"

"He has hair."

"No, you know," she mimes cranial eruption.

"Yes," I admit, "that's the one."

"No need for it is there?" she says with disapproval, "like you turning up to meetings in jeans and Crocs. Disgraceful. I do wish writers were smarter."

So do writers usually.

We're in a junkyard outside the universe and mother's partner, Antonio, is confused. Her off of Coronation

Street has just swallowed a TARDIS. In fact *the* TARDIS. It's dark, bizarre, witty and fabulous, all before the titles. This is going to be splendid. What a relief.

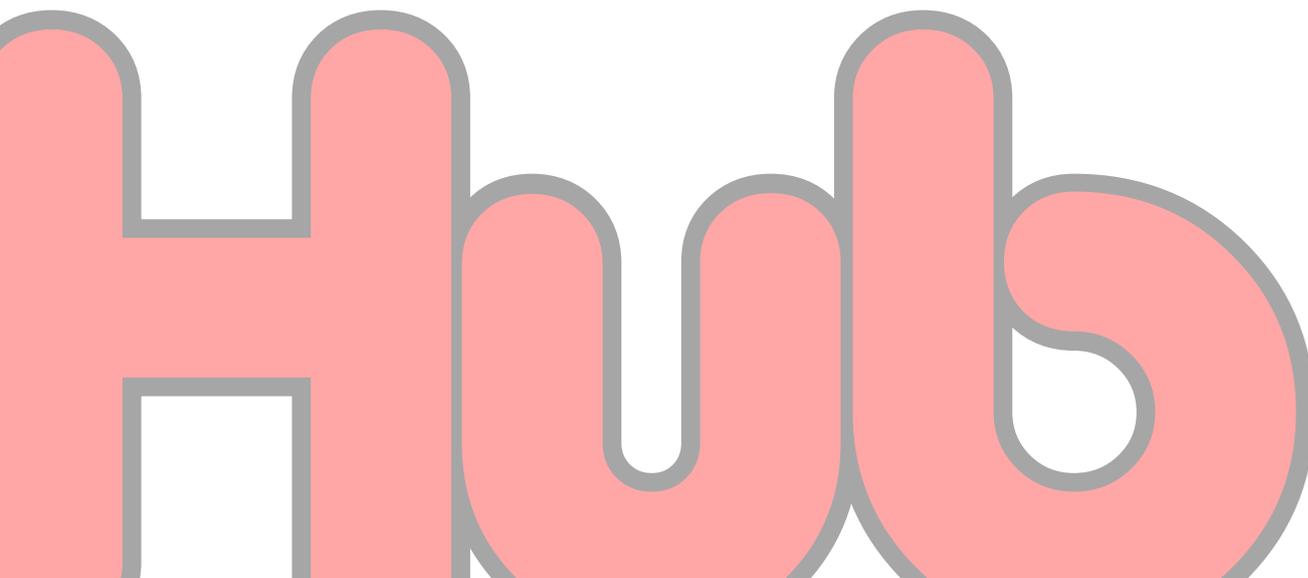
Because you never can tell, can you? I love Gaiman's work. In fact he's one of those rare folk that haven't written a bad book. Which is just rude, really. But expectation has always been the enemy of an enjoyable evening and I tried not to come into this loaded too heavily with it.

But look. I mean... just *look*. It's lovely isn't it? Thick with ideas, and rich with an emotional context to bed them in. Gaiman is a master at sweet Gothic, something dark and yet delicious all at the same time. A sense of fairy tale but without the lessening of drama that a wholehearted 'fabulist' vibe can entail. Gaiman manages to make everything and everyone seem real even when up to it's top-set in absurdity. This is, of course, the Philosopher's stone of fantasy writing, ensuring it all still matters even when at the furthest reaches of your imagination.

And it does matter, every single bit of it. From the Doctor's delightful relationship with his oldest, dearest companion, to the mental games played on Rory and Amy by House.

Perhaps sweetest of all is the resonance of the title. When *The Doctor's Wife* was announced it naturally caused the internet to make an "ooh" noise. In fact if you held your ears particularly close to your telephone line you could usually hear the fizzing of online fan forums and the banjo-like pinging of knickers being twisted. When the trailer was released we saw a clip of Idris and the Doctor arguing and, almost subconsciously we go "Oh yes, there you go, that's his wife... you can tell, they're irritating each other." This is TV you see and words are shortcuts to clichés, "wife" usually means "shrewish termagant" just as "man" usually means "buffonish figure of fun who can't tie his shoelaces". But no, here it can be no surprise that a man who has recently, successfully, blissfully got married uses the word "wife" as a description of a beautiful, genuine love between two people (and, damn it, the TARDIS counts as a person in this example so shush).

My partner sums it up by having a good little cry and announcing "that was the best episode for ages." She's quite right.



# FEATURES

## Interview: Steve Niles

with richard whittaker



If you love vampires but hate *Twilight*, odds are that you know Steve Niles. The author of *30 Days of Night* has just announced that he will be returning to the blood-splattered series that made him a modern horror icon, resurrecting it as a monthly title. That would be enough for most writers, but Niles is preparing to unleash a tidal wave of horror this year. Aside from writing duties on the upcoming *F.3.A.R.* video game (due May 27), Niles has just launched his own imprint, Bloody Pulp Books. The first volume to hit the shelves is a new prose work about the star of his long-running monster-mystery series *Criminal Macabre* entitled *Cal McDonald: Detective Tales*.

He already has the next two books lined up: An official biography of *Aliens* and *Pumpkinhead* star Lance Henriksen, to be followed by a comic adaptation of Jeffrey Combs' one man show about Edgar Allan Poe, *Nevermore*. If that was not enough, he is also working with the guru of gruesome Bernie Wrightson on a sequel to his groundbreaking 1983 adaptation of *Frankenstein*. Niles said, "I take on too much, and it creates this pressure that gets me to work. It definitely looks like I'm way overcommitted, but when it's all you do it can be a lot of fun."

**Hub Magazine: Your resumé is so thick that, whenever you're announced for a convention, the poster makers have trouble working out what books to name drop. With so many ideas, how do you work out which story belongs with which character?**

**Steve Niles:** Some of those decisions are really practical. Not that what I write is interchangeable, but I have a very practical method, and it's, 'Who's the angriest editor?' I'll just keep all these ideas, and I just sort of decide where these things go. I did a thing called *The Lurkers*, and that was a Cal McDonald story, but I had too much *Criminal Macabre* coming out at the time. So I took the character and I re-worked it. I gave him a wife and took away the drug habit, did all this stuff. I know it sounds too practical, but this is what I do. I just sit around all day, playing with this stuff. I'm very lucky, and sooner or later I'm able to use most of this stuff that I come up with. If you look really closely, if I stumble on a new idea it will run through almost everything I'm doing.

**HM: You're known as a horror writer, but a lot of your work has a real noir feel. Cal is very much part of the world-weary gumshoe tradition, just with added undead. Why do you think the two genres work so well together, and where did the fusion come from?**

**SN:** Honestly, when I started doing that I was pretty much trying to mimic (Dashiell) Hammett or (Raymond) Chandler, David Goodis, Jim Thompson, these guys that I grew up just loving, but really what I wound up with was a really derivative detective story. The most natural thing for me to do was to first update him, because the thing with the hard drinking detective didn't play really well. So I made him a recovering junkie so he's a little more modern, and then I added monsters and horror, and it blended perfectly. I started writing this character in '85, '86 and now three novels and God know how many graphic novels later, he's finally found his way.

**HM: Even a lot of your non-noir stuff, like *30 Days*, tends to feature a lot of cops.**

**SN:** I like law enforcement a lot. I especially like detectives, because then I don't have to deal with too much technical stuff. Plus, the big thing with law enforcement, those are the people who get into trouble. So they can get you places other characters can't, which is the main reason I really love 'em. So it's a big influence on me. I'm a huge fan of old noir films and the books I mentioned. I've never felt quite comfortable enough just to do straight forward mystery. So like with *Dead, She Said*, I always like to throw in some Fifties B-movie fun and a little horror twist to it. Mystery and horror, noir and horror, detective and

horror, they just merge beautifully.

**HM: You're working regularly with Bernie Wrightson these days. Even for a writer who seems to have the pick of artists, that must be a pretty big honor.**

**SN:** I grew up on him. Bernie was one of the few people that I started working with that my mom recognized his name because I talked about him so much when I was a kid. The way it worked out was very strange. I'd met Bernie in Dallas, Texas, at a convention, only to find out that we lived two blocks apart. We became immediate friends, and actually we were friends for about two years because I figured everybody bugged Bernie to do work with him, and I was just very happy that my idol had turned out to be such a great guy and I was happy just being friends. Then one day he said, 'I've started getting back into comics. Let's do some stuff.'

**HM: Together you've created a kind of 'Wrightsonverse' of titles that are a little less bloody than most of your other work. Less gore, more goo.**

**SN:** It's pretty tame, fun horror. We've done *Dead, She Said, The Ghoul* and *Doc Macabre*, and those are our light horror trilogy. That's why now we're going to take the jump to *Frankenstein*, which will not have any of the humor, any of the lightheartedness that the other series have because that's something that I want to do with Bernie, both of us, get down to being scary again. Straightforward scares, no humor, no jokes, and that's where we're headed right now.

**HM: Talking to James O'Barr recently [see Hub Magazine 136] and he has a very complicated relationship with *The Crow*. It's the thing that made his career, but he has mixed feelings about what has been done with it. It's almost a decade on from the original *30 Days of Night*. How do you feel?**

**SN:** I feel really great about it. One of the things, and I think it's more with the movie than anything else, I think we were too early. Because right after that movie came out we had this big flood of vampire stuff. I always thought *30 Days* had a really nice place in there. You could literally have *Twilight*, *Tru Blood* and *30 Days of Night*, and have three completely different takes on the vampire.

**HM: A lot of modern vampire fiction misses a key point: Vampires are a virus, a top level predator.**

**SN:** That's the topic I'm going to focus on in the new series, actually focus on the vampires a little more. People find that they're very interested in that, particularly because they're the top tier predators. That's something that didn't really make it into the movie, but in all the comics the politics between the vampires is very different. It's a pet peeve of mine: In science fiction or horror, whenever you see a monster they're all the same, and I wanted to have a society of vampires that don't necessarily see the world the same way. In the case of the elders or what I call the European vampires, they like to live in the shadows, behind the legend. The fact that people don't know they exist is what gives them their power. But the younger, more brash vampires really find offense in this. They are the top tier predators, and they should not be cowering in the shadows. So we have a nice little tension there, so we can really look at the vampires as characters and not just as killers or how we've seen them a million times and that's as romantic interests.

I did an *X-Files/30 Days* crossover, and in that story I ended up focusing on just the nasty vampires, so Mulder and Scully could run the story. People responded to it really great, and I realized that's one of the big appeals of *30 Days*: Aside from the big concept, the darkness in Alaska, they just really like vicious, killer vampires with all the romance removed. So I'm sort of hitting re-set on the series right now. I've already turned in the first script, and I'm really excited right now. I still essentially love the reason why I did *30 Days*, which is that vampires are the least scary monster and it was just a response to that. I'm happy with the little niche it's found in horror.

**HM: The horror aisles shelves are filled with license mash-up titles, and generally they take place in some alternate reality bubble. The *30 Days/X-files* crossover broke the mold, as it really tied in with core continuity.**

**SN:** IDW and Wildstorm had three properties, licenses that they wanted to see if we could do a *30 Days*

crossover. One was *Friday the Thirteenth*, and I was like, 'Mmmm, can't really. That's like forcing a square peg into a circle hole.' Then there was *Nightmare on Elm Street*. Same thing. I can't see how these universes link up. And the last was *X-Files*, and really *30 Days* and *X-Files* link up because they both exist in this real horror world. In *X-Files*, all of these monsters exist, but they're not quite what you think they are. There's some spin to the legend. So *X-Files* and *30 Days* mix perfectly because these vampires, they don't react to crosses or any of the supernatural stuff. It's just very basic. Cut off their heads, sunlight, live forever, feed off blood. It's a very straight thing, so it really married very well together, and I had a great writing partner in Adam Jones from Tool. He came up with the big concept that tied the whole thing together.

**HM: Unusually for a creator-owner in comicdom, you have let other writers work on *30 Days*. At the same time you have also done *28 Days Later* spin-offs. Does it create any kind of strain, working in someone else's creation, and conversely is it hard to hand over the keys of your playground?**

**SN:** It is really hard. I let other people play with *30 Days of Night*, but you'll notice I'm the only person who has ever written Cal McDonald. I'm the only one who'll do that. I actually think that letting other people work in my universe is a very comic book thing. I grew up with comic books that were created by certain people and then the baton is handed on for decades. A hundred teams have worked on *Batman*. I really enjoy it, and it's very easy for me to watch over the *30 Days* stuff because the rules are so simple. Like Joe Lansdale just gave me a pitch, and I don't think I had a single note on it. He got it. I love seeing what they come up with, it's really great thing. But with Cal McDonald, the only person I've spoken to about writing Cal is Eric Powell, because he let me write *The Goon* and he was very happy with it, and I think he could write a really funny Cal.

**HM: And now you are taking your first step into video games with *F.3.A.R.*, collaborating with John Carpenter. With so much on your plate already, way make the jump to a new medium?**

**SN:** What they wanted me and John to do is take the franchise, figure it out and get it to some sort of conclusion. Get all these threads that have been flying around for all these years and get the story back on track, and of course surround it all with Alma, the haunted girl. Luckily Warner Brothers were very open to all the ideas. I was very surprised because some of the ideas I just thought they would say no to, and they've ended up using them in the ad campaign. It's just really fun, and I have a very hard time saying no to fun projects. I have a hard time saying no to anything, honestly.



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