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CONTENTS:

EDITORIAL:

by alasdair stuart

No More Heroes Anymore

I finished watching Game of Thrones yesterday, which was a remarkable piece of television. It's easy to label it as 'Rome with extra magic' but that would be doing the series a disservice. It's a supremely well made, epic scale piece of television that incorporates numerous plots, locations and concepts and presents them all in a clear, concise, involving way that never once feels stodgy in the way a lot of fantasy I've read in the past has. Game of Thrones is a show that's light on its feet, and that's quite an achievement.

It doesn't have any heroes though. At least not any who are leaving the first season alive.

If you look out of the left side of the magazine you'll see a debate over whether square jawed heroes have a place in modern fantasy or whether it's all gone horrible and nasty and dark and can't we go back to swashes being buckled and everything being lovely?

We won't be landing there.

The simple truth is that heroes are still present in fantasy, they're just starting to get back to a very interesting position; one where they aren't safe. This is the place the Shakespearean hero spends a great deal of time, usually being a bit mad; Hamlet as the king of infinite space, Lear battling his failing faculties and Leontes going utterly, utterly mad for no reason at all. This is also the place Ned Stark lives, and dies,

in. He's a good man, a chivalrous man, a man from a different model of story, an earlier, simpler time. He's doomed the second he's asked to come to King's Landing.

He's also a reaver, a man who toppled a king and killed countless young men who happened to have a slightly different ideological world view to him. In that respect he's not a good man in the slightest, but he is an honourable one, a man who sticks to his principles even at the expense of his life, his family and his reputation. He's a man with blood on his hands but it's there on his terms and he's made his peace with that. He shares critical space with a whole raft of Shakespearean characters there, from Iago to Hamlet and through to Leontes. The secret is to be able to live wth yourself and Ned Stark can do that, even when he's confessing to crimes he knows aren't true. He's not a good man but he's a hero, looking his death straight in the eyes and welcoming it, ironically, much like his friend Robert Baratheon.

This is where the hero lives in modern fantasy, or at the very least, in modern fantasy. In a space which is defined by his values and which is not even a little safe. It's a space he carves for himself in the full knowledge it can be taken from him at a moment's notice and he does it anyway. The modern hero isn't absent, he's where he always should be; out in front, in constant danger, seconds from death. He wouldn't have it any other way.

FICTION

The Train

by keith harvey

Alistair O'Roy, a railroad engineer for the Hudson Bay Company, stood under a metal awning on the train platform of Load–Terminal 1-903, just outside the grain outpost of New Calgary, watching flakes of snow swirl above the train dock. Max Schilling, trade-agent for AN Corporation, stepped into a puddle of freezing water, cursed, and then laughed, as he sought shelter underneath the tin cover with O'Roy. He shook his polished boots free of ice and mud before shaking hands with O'Roy and then opened his leather overcoat to extract a black plastic phone. In response, O'Roy pulled his phone from a pocket on the right sleeve of his jumpsuit and touched it to Schilling's; all authorization codes and releases automatically downloaded. Upon completion, both phones moaned and O'Roy asked: "Am I good to go?" Schilling nodded and buttoned up his coat. "You had better get out of here. Weather alert predicts heavy snow tonight." O'Roy checked his chronograph and reached for Schilling's hand. "See you in a week."

"Yep," said O'Roy, jumping off the platform onto the black gravel that lined the adamantine tracks. His engine, *The Eaglet,* one of the original Taggarts, designed in Stuttgart in 2036 and built in China, was pulling seven hundred grain cars on this trip and hosting a crew of twenty-four; four of whom were strangers to O'Roy, dropped on him at the last minute by his client, the Corporation. He was worried. Not about the load; he had hauled bigger loads but about the crew: he did not like traveling with strangers. Although this trip looked like an easy haul: a straight shot through the empty heart of Nord-America to Heroica Nogales to drop off the wheat then over to Ciudad Juarez to pick up five hundred cars loaded with gravel and two hundred of Mexican slate for the return trip to New Calgary. It should be easy, he thought, but these trips through the wall to the southern load terminals were never easy. Once you left the safety of NA and entered Mexico anything could happen.

Lannie Nichols, the pilot engineer of Engine B, exited the wheel house and moved to intercept him. He caught a glimpse of her emerging from the warmth of the building and stopped to admire her lithe figure silhouetted against the light. No matter how beautiful she was, he thought as he waited, he didn't want her on his team. The Corporation, for some unspecified reason, substituted her engine at the last minute and shifted his regular Engine B crew to a train of shell-oil tankers earmarked for a trip west to Vancouver to be off-loaded onto a super tanker for transport to a refinery in the newly united Korea.

The ugly truth was that Lannie presented an insolvable and potentially dangerous problem. She constantly railed out against the government's construction of the Wall and the mandated exclusion of all immigrants from NA. In fact, she seemed to detest the Anglo-American Alliance and reminisced every chance she got about the good old days when Canada was a separate, multi-ethnic state. The truth was, however, that she was so young during the Second Confederation that she could not possibly remember those halcyon days. It was an idea fixed in her mind by someone—her parents or friends—and the espousal of that idea made her dangerous. It was all right to talk to him privately about her likes and dislikes but on a train full of patriots, xenophobes, and four strangers it was dangerous to talk so freely, even though freedom of speech was supposedly one of the rights granted the citizens of NA under the Articles of the Confederation promulgated under the Freedom Act of 2025, the year Canada, England, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, and South Africa and the United States formed the first confederation. However, you never knew who was listening. The government was not above bugging the cabs or installing a Freedom Commissar among the crew or even arranging for an accident that incapacitated a person for years.

"Are we cleared?" she asked.

He nodded, as she skipped to keep up with him.

"Are you pissed?" she asked, matching his long stride.

Embarrassed at his anger, because he really liked her and did not want to hurt her feelings, he dissembled: "No, of course not, I am glad to have you on board." He hurried toward the end of the line to his idling engine. Finally, she said: "Could you slow down. It looks like you're trying to ditch me."

As he waited for her to catch up to him, he brushed snow off his coveralls and unabashedly admired the freckles sprinkled over the bridge of her nose and her green eyes flecked with brown. *Damn*, he thought, *I don't need to take up with an anarchist*. To cover up his interest he said: "Sorry; I'm just anxious to get out of here. It's the schedule; you know how it is."

She nodded. "I was just curious about our route."

He examined her face closely before he replied: "You know that is confidential; just between the Chief Engineer, our company and our client, the Corporation."

"And the computer," she said wryly.

"And the computer," he agreed. "You aren't planning to hack it are you?"

She looked up at one of the surveillance monitors with a broad smile and said, "Of course not. Why would you suggest such a thing?"

He wiped his mouth and said: "I don't know why the thought crossed my mind."

He checked his watch again. "We'd better move; scheduled departure is in ten minutes." He touched the miniature communication bead in his left ear and asked: "Jean, are we ready?"

Jean-Jacques Grenouille answered in French: "*Oui,* Alistair. *Allons-y*."

"You had better get to your engine, Lannie, we are ready to roll."

She pouted and then broke into a run. He laughed and sprinted after her. As he drew closer, she increased her speed and they raced through the falling snow to Engine B, her engine attached directly to his; the second in line and one of six.

Nine minutes later he sat in his command chair, as Jean-Jacques plugged eight jacks from the computer console into his head, neck and back. Donning the electronic 3D goggles he entered the virtual command booth and activated the accelerator with the touch of his mouse. As the engines, all six of them, responded to his touch and the train began to accelerate down the high-gauge adamantine tracks, he verbally commanded the computer to accelerate to six hundred kilometers per hour and maintain until further orders.

As the train increased its speed he monitored not only its internal system but also the line and its constituent frames and its natural, spontaneous, and virtual gestalt. At six hundred kilometers per hour any error, defect, or obstacle could be fatal. An elk wandering onto the track in Montana could kill them; a butterfly smashing against the cab's window could disorient them.

Minutes later they reached cruising speed and he initiated first contact with the load-terminal controller outside of Heroica Nogales before conferencing him in with Calgary command. Between the United Nations controller in Nogales and the Corporation's in Calgary, they worked out the route and the speeds; and once they all agreed, he confirmed the itinerary, encoded it, e-mailed a copy to the global military scan in Sioux City, and then sealed it as confidential into the server linking the three nodes.

Two hours later Jean-Jacques disconnected the plugs and wires from O'Roy's body and, freed, he staggered to his berth to sleep off the effects of sublimating his conscious mind to the operations of the machine. His Co-Engineer, Tom Dollar, strapped in next to him, became operational fifteen minutes before the switch to minimize any conversion or diminution of power or command. Two hours on; two off: that was his schedule for the trip; four hours to travel between Calgary and Nogales; a day to unload, perform maintenance, and then off to Ciudad Juarez. *Time is money*, he thought as he fell asleep.

During his nap the train sped underneath a hive city, La Vegas, and then resurfaced ten kilometers beyond its wall to the south. The track between Las Vegas and Nogales was dangerous. As a result of the removal of industrial infrastructure by the robotic corps of engineers, nature in all its forms had returned to the southern hinterlands and posed various pitfalls for the trains; massive buffalo herds grazed on wild pasture land southwest of Calgary and only the buried electrical fences prevented the creatures from approaching the constituent gestalt of the tracks.

On electronic cue and drug stimuli, O'Roy awoke, stretched and moved to relieve Dollar. When they

were fifty kilometers west of Tucson station, the computer slowed the train and they entered the tunnel that would carry them under the Great Wall. They surfaced minutes later inside Load-Terminal 616, a distribution center the size of Manhattan Island and one of nine centers for collection and distribution of trade products between Meso-America and Nord-America. It was sovereign territory of the United Nations, governed by the Anglo-American Alliance, and secured and protected by Argent Noir, an international security force based in Quebec and a subsidiary of AN Corporation.

As soon as the train rested in its berth, robotic loaders uncoupled the cars and pulled them away to be re-attached to other trains, while servitors monitored the proceeding and lent a mechanical hand where needed. Upon the signal of all-clear, the crew climbed slowly from their cabs and gathered on the platform with O'Roy being the last to disembark. Blinking in the bright sunlight of the Sonora Desert, sweat beaded on his forehead and ran down his cheek. Lannie stood off to his right talking to one of the new crewmen; a tall man, thin, about thirty years old, with dark black hair and brown eyes. O'Roy had never seen him before, which was odd; he had been piloting trains for fifteen years and he thought he knew everyone in the business. As he approached them, the man smiled, shook Lannie's hand, and moved away, as if he didn't want to greet the Chief-Engineer. Watching the man disappear around a corner of a warehouse, O'Roy asked Lannie: "That was one of the new crew members, right?" She nodded and picked up her kit and fell in line with him as they moved toward the exit where they waited for an electric car scheduled to take them to the Japano-stacks. Above them, a solar-powered dirigible arriving from the Orleans ship port glided over the load-terminal and shadowed the platform.

O'Roy shifted his kit over his shoulder. "What's his name? Where's he from?"

"Hey what's with the questions? You can check the manifest and crew roster?"

Angered at her tone, he grabbed her arm and asked: "You have a problem with giving me his name?"

Her eyes narrowed and he could tell she was now as angry as he was. She waited a few seconds, obviously trying to calm down, and answered: "Nathan Grossman, out of Anchorage."

"Never heard of him; is he new to the Company?"

She pulled away from him and spat out: "Jesus, Al, I don't know."

Once outside the gates of the platform, Lannie rushed to an electric car flashing O'Roy's name. O'Roy followed her slowly and threw his bag into the trunk but she slammed the door before he could slide in next to her and the car sped off with his bag.

"My bag," he yelled at the car as it turned a corner and disappeared into the labyrinthine network of the load terminal. Tom Dollar sidled up to him and pushed him roughly: "Get turned down, Chief?"

"Damn it, Dollar, shove off," he growled and then said: "No, belay that; get us a car."

"Aye-Aye," laughed Dollar as he hailed a rickshaw puller, who was delivering a fare to the platform.

Seated in the rickshaw, watching the puller's sweating back, O'Roy asked Dollar: "Tom, did you see any of the new crew before we left Calgary?"

"Nope, they arrived just minutes before departure. All I got was confirmation from Lannie that they were on board."

"Which engine did they join?"

"They replaced the guys on engine F."

O'Roy rubbed his chin and said: "The reserve Engine; one of the ones I don't check but leave to Lannie."

"That's right Chief but that's her job isn't it, as Engineer B?"

The rickshaw puller panted to a stop in front of the Japano-stacks and a robotic valet welcomed them in Spanish. O'Roy noticed his bag was on the sidewalk outside the check-in kiosk. As he slipped his ident-card into the slot of the kiosk he examined the hotel. Japano-stacks hotels are the same around the world, he thought. They contain two thousand sleeping squares, the size of a large coffin, communal baths, and a cafeteria open around the clock. People arrive, insert their phone or ident-cards, and the automated hotel assigns a sleeping square after deducting a credit for the night. The sleeping squares are clean, soundproof, and safe.

In the elevator that ran on the outside of the building, Dollar asked: "What are we doing tonight?" He paused and said: "The usual? Right?"

O'Roy was thinking about Grossman and didn't hear the question. "What did you say, Tom?"

"I asked if we were going to the Tempest tonight."

"Of course, Manuel is expecting us."

"You mean Luna is expecting you?" Dollar said with a laugh.

"Maybe," said O'Roy with a shy grin.

He stored his bag in his square, grabbed a paper robe, and headed for the showers, where Lannie, nude, was already there scrubbing her hair. He showered with cold water and averted his gaze, even though Lannie was now talking to him. "So are we meeting at the Tempest, Chief?" He cleared his throat and said: "Yes, I reserved a table for the crew at eight."She finished showering before him and, as soon as she stepped from the shower, he sighed and turned on the hot water. Later in his square, he plugged his wireless jack into his computer and pulled up the Corporation's employee website, entered his pass code and searched for Nathan Grossman.

The Nathan Grossman he found was sixty-years-old, overweight, with gray hair; and, according to his biography, he graduated from McGill University with a degree in accounting. The man on the train, whoever he was, was thirty years younger than Nathan Grossman. O'Roy, then, linked on trains and schedules and the computer required a second security code; a code he possessed by virtue of his rank. He typed it in and then reviewed the page and a graph showed the real-time status of unloading and reloading. He clicked on crew and looked up Nathan Grossman. A picture appeared not of Nathan Grossman the accountant or the man that O'Roy met on the platform with Lannie but another man, a third man. He checked the employee number, the social security number, and birth date of the man pictured and they were all the same as Nathan Grossman the accountant from Banff. He scratched his head as he studied the picture of the new Nathan Grossman. This man was lean, dark and in his mid-forties.

"Jesus," whispered O'Roy, "What the hell is going on here?"

He copied the photo on the website, clicked on an electronic application icon that was issued and available for download only to Anglo-Alliance security officers, and entered his security identification number and security badge number. No one on the crew knew he possessed governmental security clearance. He attached the photo to the search function of the facial recognition software and pressed start. After three tries without any results he gave up. The picture of the third Nathan Grossman did not exist in the security records. Widening the search to other databases, including those of AN Corporation, he found nothing. Now he was worried. He wished he had a photograph of the man talking to Lannie; he could reach out to Terminal Security and take an image off their security cameras but then he would implicate Lannie. But he wasn't ready to do that; she was still a member of his team and there might be a valid explanation for the pictures and for the new crew of four. More importantly, this whole set-up smelled of corporate intrigue. He had seen it before and he knew better than to involve himself in AN Corporation business. So far no one from the Hudson Bay Company had died in the various schemes and games hatched in the corporate offices of An Corporation in Quebec City; nothing had been stolen and no bombs had exploded, but he feared there was always a first time. He didn't want it to be on his train. Sighing heavily, he logged off his machine, switched off the lights and fell asleep.

At seven in the evening a wake-up buzzer sounded in O'Roy's Japano-square. His sleep had been deep and, as he struggled to wake, he felt lethargic and leaden. Checking the time, he remembered he planned to meet his crew at the Tempest. Gathering his strength and pushing downward with his legs and pumping the metal release of the coffin's locking mechanism, he emerged like a butterfly from the narrow container. He dressed in the communal bathroom.

The Tempest was a western theme bar in the center of Load-Terminal 616. The waiters and waitresses wore costumes and the food was a variation of tavern fare circa 1887. Luna Tavish, a Scottish ex-pat and an experienced B-girl, ran the place for Manuel. Most people thought the real owner was AN Corporation. Luna stood at the door when O'Roy arrived. She wore a bodice with a low, round neckline and tight sleeves, with a matching petticoat pinned into flounces on a drum or cartwheel farthingale. Her thick red hair was tightly pulled back and pinned; the only jewelry she wore was a pair of pearl earrings. Her green eyes flashed in recognition as she said, almost in a whisper: "Alistair, you're back." Each time he saw her, he felt a flutter in his chest and his nostrils flared because he didn't really know what to say to her. For some reason she made him feel foolish, like a tyro, so, in response, he sputtered: "Has my crew arrived yet, Luna?"

Smiling, she said: "Follow me, Chief. Dollar reserved the usual table in the back away from the mariachi band." As they wound their way through the crowded bar, she bumped against him and her hand touched his causing a frisson of desire to rush throughout his body. Nearly all the crew was seated at two tables pushed together in an alcove near the back of the bar. Tankards of ale and bottles of beer covered the table; the crew's eyes were bright from drinking. Lannie leaned against Dollar, laughing, and O'Roy quickly inventoried the guests: twenty, counting him. The four strangers were not there.

Luna touched his shoulder and then returned to the front, as a man, dressed as a cowboy, complete with wide-brimmed sombrero, leather chaps, boots, and spurs recorded O'Roy's order—a *cerveza* and a shot of tequila—on an electronic pad, the size of his palm. Meanwhile, the band paused, while a young man stepped forward, put down his guitar, and groped the microphone with both hands and began a song about a cowboy, whose girlfriend betrayed him with a friend. The waiter returned with his drinks and O'Roy downed the cold *cerveza* just as the singer reached the part of the tale where the *caballero* ambushed his friend in an alley in *Nuevo Laredo* and fled across the *Rio Bravo* only to fall into the hands of the Rangers. The song, full of pathos, touched O'Roy and he felt himself easing into the evening, as he gulped the tequila and signaled the waiter for another round.

Later, half way through eating a steak, O'Roy noticed a female officer of the U.N. Security Force in full metal winding her way through the crowded tavern toward their table. He put down his knife and fork and sucked on a piece of meat lodged in his teeth. Although the woman, like a bird of prey, surveyed the room as she approached, she kept a semi-steady bead on O'Roy; he knew instinctively she was coming for him. He wiped his hands on a red cloth napkin, one of the anachronisms of the café, and stood up. Seeing him stand, she touched the Colt .45 automatic on her right hip and signaled him with her open left hand, palm down, to remain seated. Only he was aware of her presence at this point; the rest of his crew was drunk, sleeping or eating. None of them noticed the woman.

The woman, a captain in the United Nations' Security Force, pulled a chair next to O'Roy's, turned it, and straddled it. Her skin was a dark brown and her eyes black; the badge on her right breast read Ondaatje and O'Roy guessed she was Singhalese, one of the Pac-Asians. When she opened her mouth he knew he was right.

"Chief," she began, 'I need you and your crew to accompany me to our headquarters."

O'Roy noticed his crew was slowly becoming aware that something was amiss. "Why Captain?"

"There has been an incident this evening in the hive-city involving some of your crew members. We need to question you and your crew to establish the extent of their involvement."

O'Roy sighed and said: "Captain, my regular crew is here and has been here all evening. Four men, who joined our train at Calgary at the last minute, are not here. None of us know them."

"I'm sure that is true Captain but we need to ask some questions. I have a platoon of men outside and I'd rather not have them enter the café if possible. However, if they do come in they are armed and ready to deal with any contingency." She looked at him soulfully, her eyes widening in supplication, and O'Roy suspected she was sincere in not wanting to disturb the clientele of the Tempest. "It will be in your best interest to accompany me peacefully."

O'Roy nodded. Both she and he knew that as an employee of Hudson Bay Company there was no way he was going to get into a drunken brawl with a member of the security force of a Load-Terminal. He nodded and began herding his team up out of their seats and toward the exit, where Luna waited, her mouth set in a grim smile next to a helmeted Security Force sergeant, his automatic rifle locked and loaded.

That night his crew slept off their drinks in jail. The next day, at six o'clock a.m., the Captain ordered O'Roy's cell door, which he shared with eight other male members of his crew, opened. "Chief, come with me," she said in her sing-song English.

He followed her to an elevator they took to the roof, where a black Sikorsky helicopter waited; its engines idling softly. In the distance through a haze he could just make out the outline of the giant hive-city emerging from the slums around its base. He had never entered Heroica Nogales in all the years he had run trains from the North. Just the thought of those teeming masses of people living on top of one another made him shiver.

The Captain took his arm and they crouched down and ran to the open sliding door on the side of

the craft. Waiting for them was a giant of man, wearing a tropical gray suit, white shirt and pale gray tie. His white-blond hair, left parted on the side,fell naturally over his ears. The Captain pushed O'Roy into the leather seat directly opposite the man, who leaned forward and extended a bear-like paw of a hand toward O'Roy, and said: "Van Kahnweiler, Chief, vice-president of AN Corporation, in charge of Sonoran operations."

O'Roy extended his hand and the man grabbed it and squeezed; bones cracked and the Chief grimaced, as he extracted his hand forcibly from the man's iron grip. After a tech-sergeant pushed the door closed, the pilot took off, circled the roof of the U.N. *militarium* and headed toward the hive-city. Van Kahnweiler leaned back in his chair and smiled. "Ever been in the Emerald City before?" he asked O'Roy, who shook his head in the negative."It's the fastest growing city in Mexico. Look at those slums surrounding it. Those untapped consumers down there make my mouth water."

O'Roy looked down at the miles and miles of tents and cardboard shelters abutting the third wall surrounding the hive-city. Police helicopters and ornithopters flitted above the chaotic hoard of unemployed people waiting for entrance into the hive-city and the possibility of employment either in the sub-levels of the edifice itself or in one of the foreign-owned *maquiladoras* to the southwest. Those foreign-owned factories belched toxic steam into the sky, turning it an emerald green and employed thousands of workers--mostly women and children—to work twelve hours a day, six days a week. Sunday in this Catholic country was reserved for worship in the ubiquitous gold-encrusted cathedrals.

The helicopter landed on an elevated landing strip on the twentieth level of the hive-city near the criminal courts and jail. As soon as O'Roy stepped from the copter onto the metal strip, two *Policía Federales,* waiting under a drab-green tarp, approached him, handcuffed him and pushed him toward steel doors that opened into the city's jail. Captain Ondaatje watched him marched toward the building and then climbed back into the copter and ordered the pilot to take off. As the copter disappeared into the verdant haze hovering above the tent city, two men in mufti greeted van Kahnweiler and led him across the landing strip to a bronze door marked "private."

The PFs pushed O'Roy into the building and then down a narrow corridor to an open cell that contained a stainless steel toilet, a sink, and a rack suspended from the wall. Standing in the middle of the cell with his arms extended he could touch both sides. Left alone he sat on the rack and moaned softly.

Five weeks passed without his talking to another person. During that time he grew a prodigious red beard and learned to bear his own stench and the relentless silence of the prison. At the beginning of the sixth week, two guards roused him out his bunk and escorted him to a bathroom where he was ordered to shower and brush his teeth. When he finished they handed him a clean cotton shirt, a matching pair of pants, and a pair of leather sandals with soles made from re-cycled tires. He guessed the shirt, pants, and sandals were manufactured by the prisoners.

While he was out, someone cleaned his cell and fresh sheets and a blanket placed on his cot. He sat on the bed and waited. At two-thirty, the guards appeared again and nodded for him to stand. They marched him to an elevator and punched the fifteenth floor. He pointed at the number and asked: "Que?" Neither man responded. On the fifteenth floor he was placed in an interrogation room, where he waited quietly. At some point he began to chew his nails.

He was not sure how much time passed. Finally, the door banged open and a man, wearing a dress uniform of the Mexican army, entered the room. He was tall, with olive skin and black eyes; O'Roy thought he looked like a movie star.

Castor Calypso, colonel in the Mexican army and brother of the President of the Republic, pulled out the metal chair across from O'Roy. "Chief, my name is Calypso."

O'Roy nodded.

"Your answers are being recorded and there are several observers on the other side of that mirror." He did not turn; he just bent his head in the direction of the mirror to his right and O'Roy's left. His first words sounded like a croak. "Why am I here?"

"Ah," Calypso rubbed the skin beneath his right eye. "You're being retained as a suspect in the attempted assassination of Prospero Plantain, Governor General of Sonora."

Several seconds passed before O'Roy could respond. "That's ridiculous. I didn't know, until this moment,

the name of the Governor General. I'm an engineer. I'm bio-geared to drive trains, not kill people."

"We know that Chief, but the men who tried to kill Plantain arrived on your train."

"Ask them if I had anything to do with it."

Calypso placed his hands flat on the cool steel surface of the table. "They're dead. We executed them four weeks ago."

O'Roy in a panic coughed, choking on his own phlegm. His body seemed to be in revolt. Adrenaline pumped into his system and he wanted to run. Several minutes passed before he could calm his runaway emotions. "What are you going to do with me? Do I get a trial?"

"Alas, that is impossible. We have made a deal with your government. You and your crew will be held in custody here in Mexico for an indefinite time. Your crew has been sent south to work on a prison farm. You, however, as the chief have been assigned hard labor in the mines in the west. You leave tomorrow."

Calypso pushed the chair back to leave but O'Roy called out to him."Why did they try to kill Plantain?"

Calypso smiled. "They said he was diverting grain due the citizens of La Ciudad and exchanging it on the black market for designer drugs he smuggled into Nord-America."

"Is it true?" asked O'Roy.

Calypso turned toward the mirrored glass and said with the same cold, ironic smile, "of course not."

As he turned once more toward the door, O'Roy asked one more question. "You said you made a deal with my government. Who did you talk to?"

Calypso turned and said: "The man you flew with from Load Terminal 616 — van Kahnweiler. He made the deal the day we executed the assassins."

"But he isn't a member of my government. He said he was V.P. of Sonoran operations for AN Corporations."

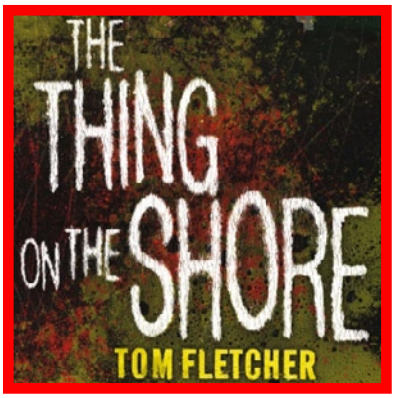
"Exactly," responded Calypso, as he slipped through the door.

When he was alone, O'Roy said out loud to the cameras. "I work for the Hudson Bay Company not AN Corporation. AN Corporation does not speak for me. I am a citizen of Nord-America. I am a free man." Several minutes passed and he whispered: "I am a free man."

REVIEWS

The Thing on the Shore

reviewed by niall alexander



by Tom Fletcher
Quercus Publishing Plc
rrp £7.99

Tom Fletcher's first novel was a weird and wonderful beast of a book: powerful and progressive speculative fiction which marked, to my mind, the emergence of a tremendously promising new voice in dark fantasy, potent in precisely such a way as one Caitlin R. Kiernan, with whom Fletcher shares certain key predilections. Since reading The Leaping last Spring, and falling entirely under its sensual spell, I've been on tenterhooks waiting to see what this young author would do next.

The Thing on the Shore is what. An odder narrative still, with the sea-salt stink of Lovecraft hung fetid in the air about it, Fletcher's second novel is, alas, rather a disappointment. Don't mistake me: it makes for fine horror in its own right, but what implicit promises the young author made in The Leaping, I hate to say he circumvents in The Thing on the Shore.

So the story goes, then: Artemis Black is back.

Artemis who? I hear you cry.

Why, Artemis Black, the creepy call centre manager - none other! Don't you remember him from the bit-part he played in The Leaping? Well, never mind... nor did I. He plays rather a more central role in The Thing on the Shore in any event. He comes to the miserable seaside town of Whitehaven, near Sellafield, to do what he does best: take over Outsourcing Unlimited, where both Arthur and his dad Harry work that they might make ends meet in an economy spiralling downward faster than the naked eye can track. Both Millers are haunted by the memory of a wrenching loss from long ago; the loss of a wife and a mother - a family, in no uncertain terms - which the reader bears silent witness to from the perspective of an adolescent Arthur in the first chapter of The Thing on the Shore.

Decades later, something wicked this way comes, and Arthur finds himself obsessed with the ocean in which his mother met her untimely end. Meanwhile, something decidedly discomfiting is going on at Outsourcing Unlimited, where Artemis Black now rules the roost. There's bullying, date rape, and discrimination against the differently abled - but never mind all that. After all, Fletcher doesn't really seem to; his primary concern in narrative terms is that the call centre seems to have developed a voice all its own, which calls out to Arthur, a chilling siren song.

Cue sex with an unfathomable sea creature, a pantomime villain who drinks double measures of Midori, a melon liqueur, and some unfortunate pondering over the philosophy of Animal Crossing - though not necessarily in that order. Ultimately, there is nothing in Tom Fletcher's fiction so horrifying as the horror of everyday existence; specifically what passes for such in and around England. The hateful drudgery of work, the accumulation of time, the fleeting weekends we seem to live for only to waste away when - finally! - they come... these are the real terrors of The Thing on the Shore, these, and not the Lovecraftian monster Fletcher names his novel in honour of.

At one point, Arthur muses as much himself: "Maybe the thing wasn't from the sea at all? Maybe it was from space? Wherever, whatever, it didn't really matter." (p.132) Nor, for far too long, does it seem to. And when at last it does - matter, that is - perhaps a half of the whole is in one fell swoop rendered redundant; only so much half-cut chaff to fatten up a calf into a cow. In such a way, The Thing on the Shore seems a graduate of the Being Human school of British speculative fiction - which is fine as far as it goes. Yet I've always believed Being Human would be a markedly better series if only it didn't have to fill an hour each and every week. Instead it falls to digression at odds with character beats from only an episode ago, indulges in repetition to the point of monotony, and spares in the erstwhile a disproportionate amount of

time to events with little bearing on anything.

But such is the nature of television. In the novel, mistakes along those lines are more difficult to overlook, given that one's experience of them is inherently more protracted, and more testing by that same token - to the reader if not also the writer. Thus, though I could accommodate Fletcher's first mention of a particular plumber, by the time he'd grown so distracted by Super Mario Galaxy as to attempt a diatribe on its import to our understanding of the world - you know, what we perceive versus what is, and how what is is so forth shaped in some sense by what we see - by then, I'm afraid I'd begun to twiddle my thumbs some. However much tension The Thing on the Shore has succeeded in summoning is made a mockery of on the tenth occasion the author starts banging on about Nintendo.

These issues are doubly disappointing in light of the ease with which they could have been - nay, should have been - remedied. Yet despite all its problems, The Thing on the Shore remains an affecting and moderately effective novel. Fletcher's characterisation of these unremarkable odds and sods spinning their wheels in the ass-end of nowhere is convincing throughout; he captures the awkwardness and the pointlessness of such people and places to a T; and at the beginning and the end of the book, even the story threatens to entertain. The Thing on the Shore may fall short of delivering on the fantastic promise of The Leaping, then, but it makes for a perfectly competent horror novel irrespective of its prescient heritage. Whatever his missteps here, Tom Fletcher should continue on as an author to watch with a close and many-irised eye.

Dungeons & Dragons: Daggerdale

reviewed by phil lunt

Bedlam Games / Atari
Xbox Live Arcade (also coming to PC and Playstation 3)
1200 points (£10.20)

Rezlus, a worshipper of the Black Lord Bane and full-time Zhentarim Cleric, is up to no good. He's building an army to conquer the "Forgotten Realms" land of Daggerdale. A mysterious mage, Lorin-Aria, has called on you, with possibly up to three friends, to put him in his place!

Dungeons & Dragons: Daggerdale is an action roleplaying game available for Xbox, PSN and PC which can be played with 1 to 4 players. It is based on the 4th Edition D&D system with players able to choose between playing as a Human Fighter, Elf Rogue, Halfling Wizard and Dwarf Cleric. Customisation comes from levelling up as experience points are gained and from picking up or purchasing items and weapons.

It's predominantly set in the Mines of Tethyamar and play involves wandering around talking to Dwarves who will give you quests to embark on. Initially this is to help rid them of pesky goblins but soon other, bigger, evil-types join the fray!

The quests can get a little repetitive but there's nothing quite like beating ten shades of sushi out of a goblin underboss with a flaming warhammer, especially when you're a dwarf. Nothing. Music beats away in the background when you're horribly outnumbered by swarming goblins, crazed dwarves or skelingtons, adding to the atmosphere well, and it's a good indicator of if there are any enemies around when you can't quite see them hiding somewhere.

Between and during missions the player can wander around smashing barrels to their hearts content to pilfer whatever might be inside them, be it gold or other items. I was glad to eventually meet the Dwarven Cooper who greeted me with "Who has been breaking all my barrels?" Bit old school, that. I like it!

It can descend into a button bashing experience during battles, though, but this emphasises the pick-up-and-play aspect of a downloadable game. Anyone can just pick up a joypad and get stuck in without

needing to fully understand what's going on in the background with relation to level, weapon type, character stats etc.

At its most basic *Daggerdale* reminded me of a modern take on *Gauntlet* but with far more complex mechanics at work. There's nothing wrong with that as I liked *Gauntlet*, and if you don't know what Gauntlet is/was then go check it out on Wikipedia. For a more modern reference it also reminded me of the dungeon crawling sections of *World of Warcraft*, however *Daggerdale* has a much smaller game-world and is less harsh on the wallet.

Having said that, *Daggerdale* currently weighs in at 1200 Microsoft points on Xbox Live, roughly equivalent to £10.20 in real money, which could put off the casual purchase. It has a few other flaws, too. The menu screens can sometimes be buggy, to say the least. I felt the graphics are a bit unpolished for a modern game, especially when on a close up view of someone, and the camera angles can be a bit jumpy. Also the difficulty curve is an interesting one, and failure in some missions sometimes means going all the way back to the start of them to redo everything. Even if you've saved it right before the end. And you lose all the items you picked up during the mission. That's annoying!

Also, some people might see the pick-up-and-play aspect in a negative light; that this is a generic action RPG that just happens to be in a *D&D* wrapper. It's the balance between making something accessible to all or one for just fans of the *D&D* licence. Well, I've only just recently been getting back into *D&D* gaming and, on that count I didn't see any problems with *Daggerdale*.

The majority of the internet seems to be against *Daggerdale* but I'm not the majority and overall it's a fun multiplayer dungeon crawl within a well known fantasy background, even if that could possibly have been expanded on more. Apparently it's part of a planned trilogy of games with players able to use saved characters from *Daggerdale* in future releases. If that's the case then it'll be interesting to see what comes next.

Doctor Who: The Rebel Flesh / The Almost People

reviewed by guy adams

Written by Matthew Graham
Directed by Julian Simpson

"That's horrible," says mother, recoiling from the screen as the plastic-faced Gangers loom. In fairness she does tend to recoil from the screen a lot. We think there's something wrong with her glasses, causing a distorted 3D effect, she was convinced Kirsty Allsop was trying to bite her the other day.

They certainly are an eerie looking bunch, there's always something disturbing about a skewed mirror image. Not that the latest two-part story aims for anything as simple as heroes and villains. Like a lot of good drama it would rather we asked more awkward questions of ourselves than that. Like a lot of good Doctor Who it does this while being a grand, action-adventure.

Some of the more outspoken souls in the brittle, jagged world of internet fandom were sceptical of Matthew Graham's return to the world of Doctor Who. After all this was the writer responsible for Fear Her, the lowest-ranked story since the 2005 revival according to Doctor Who Magazine's 2009 poll. Of course, this ignores the rest of Graham's extensive writing C.V. (co-creator of Life on Mars and the writer of 1999's marvellous The Last Train just to skim the surface). Besides, even if Fear Her was awful -- in my opinion it wasn't, but it's rare that my opinion matches any sort of global consensus -- any writer is allowed a Spearhead from Space to trump their Space Pirates and this two-parter was a solid, exciting, thoughtful

chunk of Doctor Who. Which is a relief as I was somewhat dreading reviewing it. You see, there's nothing worse than reviewing the work of people you know, it can lead to either honesty malfunction or a solid punch in the throat.

I'm not really referring to Mr. Graham -- I met him a few times while working on the never-ending Life On Mars books that fill up my C.V. and liked him a great deal, he's a lovely chap with a real passion for storytelling but it would be awful exaggeration to claim his friendship

The director, however, Julian Simpson, is a man I have casually insulted on a fairly regular basis, which I like to think is the backbone of any amicable relationship.

So... in the spirit of full-disclosure, I was probably never going to say this story was awful.

Though I would certainly have pointed out that the limping tit seen insulting his crew in Doctor Who Confidential was an arsehole.

An arsehole who thankfully managed to make the most of a great script and bring us a couple of brilliant episodes of Doctor Who.

A couple of episodes that brought out the very best in Rory Williams, a character whose gentility might be mistaken for blandness by a writer lacking depth or inclination. It's lovely that Amy married the nicest, most loving human she had ever met. It gives all of us soppy soft-touches the potential taste of heroism.

Matt Smith was also as superb as always, to think some people criticized this man in the role... he is one of the finest actors we've ever had. Ever. He managed to play his dual role with relish but always staying the right side of self-indulgence. No easy task.

And as for the final scene... well, maybe we'd better leave discussion of that until the next episode...

Doctor Who: A Good Man Goes To War

reviewed by guy adams

Written by Steven Moffat
Directed by Peter Hoar

As we come upon the half-season break two armies are forming. One, an unconventional selection of allies brought together by debts both emotional and honourable, the other a single-minded group dominated by fear and a need to adhere to established doctrine. And that, as they say, my poor long-suffering reader, was just the audience.

What is it about Steven Moffat's Who that divides the opinion so markedly? I'm not being in the least rhetorical, I wish someone would tell me. The criticisms I've seen (in the rarified atmosphere of the internet, a place entirely unrepresentative of any global consensus) are not proper criticisms at all, just the usual online keyboard farts of "What a load of bollocks" ad nauseam. The only two criticisms I've managed to discern amongst the the percussive twaddle are: "too complex" and "too fast paced". Two distinctly subjective criticisms.

Of course, subjective is fine, this is a piece of entertainment we're talking about and you are by no means forced to like it. And yet it's also a useful benchmark of your intelligence and taste and I'm in the mood to be a unreasonable bastard this morning, so...

Too complex? Really? By what standard? If you're confused I recommend you ask a ten year old child, they will happily explain it to you. With graphs. And a despairing look.

Too fast-paced? I am now forced to imagine the poor viewer gripping the side of their wood-veneered

Ferguson gagging from vertigo as they're assaulted by all the colours and sounds. "Quick Valerie," the damp, be-vomited creature moans, "come and turn it over to Dad's Army before I defecate my brain."

The precise criticism was that it was too fast-paced for character development. I disagree, the guest cast were perfectly fleshed out with some wonderful and witty lines and I adored them all enormously. In fact I'm rather cross that Commander Strax died as I want more of him and his wonderfully contradictory attitude to life. That aside, this was intended as an all-out action-packed finale episode. To criticize it for being fast-paced is a misguided as bemoaning *Ring of Bright Water* for being "all about otters".

"The spitfires and pirates were silly" says another online 'fan' we shall call, for the sake of ease, Joy Vacuum. Looked at another way of course: "the spitfires and pirates were fun". Again, many seem to mistake this show for a po-faced science-fiction drama of the *Battlestar Galactica* stripe. In our house, the moment Henry Avery stepped onscreen, flintlock raised, was greeted by a genuine grunt of happiness. It was a cool, fun moment, a light point to be cherished and cheered. I pity these grey, lifeless homes, whistling wind rustling the discarded Daily Mail supplements as the powdery, myopic residents tap out poems on their Casio calculators, looking for plot-holes and hitting passing smiles with tear-stained toffee hammers. Stop taking life so seriously.

Of course, I'm being horribly unfair. As I said above people are entitled not to like something. Of course they are. But, as one wise internet stroller commented "nobody hates Doctor Who like Doctor Who fans" and having ploughed through a headful of non-qualified arse-guff about what a poor writer Moffat is or what a terrible actor Smith is I fancied redressing the balance! There is no doubt that the vast majority of the audience will have loved the episode -- and indeed all of the series so far -- it is still our finest ever television programme, a show that manages to excite us, make us think, make us laugh, make us cry all while providing such a positive and hopeful view of the universe. I've never grown out of it and it still manages to make me feel like a tearfully happy eight-year old whenever it's on. Roll on September and the gloriously titled "Let's Kill Hitler!"

Coming to Terms with the End of Stephen King's The Dark Tower Part II - Epic: Homer, Virgil, and Tolkien

by ro smith

Thanks for coming back for the second part of my reflections on the way The Dark Tower ended. If you haven't read part one, please turn back to Hub 137 and check it out! But if you're too impatient, allow me to recap: I amongst many Stephen King fans, was disappointed and frustrated with the way his magnum opus, The Dark Tower, finally came to a close. However, over the years since I read the last page of the last book, I've come to a few realisations that have, to some extent, set my mind at ease, enhanced my flagging enjoyment. So, I'm taking this space to offer up my thoughts about why the story maybe had to end the way it did, in the hopes that it might help restore someone else's enjoyment, too.

In part one I discussed the influence of the modernists on The Dark Tower, and why ending which only returned us to the beginning, and which lacked so much of what we had been led to expect, possibly had to be that way. In part two I want to talk about epic structure, the Crimson King, and why everybody had to die.

Epic

Let's start with a name: Gilead, Iliad, Gilead, Iliad. Of course, I read 'Gilead' to rhyme with 'lead', in my half of the telepathy that is writing, so I missed this at first. I am told, however, that the name, as not made up by Stephen King, is properly pronounced to rhyme with 'Iliad'. For my own reading's sake, I don't care. It sounds wrong. I read it to rhyme with 'lead' for years and years, and I'm not changing now – that's my right. However, word-play aside, there's a strong symbolic connection between Gilead and the Iliad, or Ilium/ Troy. If you set out to write an epic quest story, you cannot help but work in the troughs Homer and Virgil furrowed, even if you've never read a word of The Iliad, The Odyssey, or The Aeneid. Our culture is founded on the dust of their bones.

The Odyssey is the classic journey story. The tale of a man, Odysseus, desperately trying to return to a home from which he has been banished by the gods. Roland has effectively been banished from Gilead, such that even as Gilead can be seen as Ilium (ancient Troy), the place from which the hero is leaving, it is also Ithaca, the place to which he longs to return.

Roland wants to stop the world from moving on, to return it to the glory days he remembers from his youth, but he has been set on a quest that leads him ever further away. Yet we can see Gilead as Ilium perhaps even more so from the other direction, with Roland as Aeneas, fleeing the sack of Troy, hoping to set up some new land. Aeneas leaves Troy with his aged father over his shoulder, and his small son following behind. That Roland's father looms over his shoulder, with all the legacy of tradition and the past, is an easy reading. We see echoes of this, too, in the monkey on Eddie Dean's back (heroin), and perhaps even in Susannah's ever-present pasts: Odetta Holmes, and Detta Walker. That Susannah and Eddie must jettison (or at least come to terms with) their over-bearing histories is dealt with overtly, as they are 'drawn' not just from our world into Roland's, but out of themselves as new, more complete people. Roland also has a multitude of father figures to find his own place against, though – his teacher, Cort the foremost.

As for the son? There is, of course, Jake. The son who is failed. The sacrificial lamb. One cannot help but feel that there's something very wrong in Roland's failure to save Jake, not once, but twice. Not 'wrong' as in 'wrong for the book to depict', but wrong in that it cannot bode well for Roland's quest. Children are the future. Aeneas' son founds Rome (or, at least, prefigures its founding). Roland must go back to the beginning to 'do it over' if he is to save Jake, and restore order to the world.

Why not just have him save the child in the first place, then? Is it just that that would be too corny? Perhaps, but I think it has more to do with kleos (glory), and the ancient necessity for heroes to die in a glorious manner. You are not truly a hero, in Homeric structure, if you do not die in battle. And each hero has his own set piece – his moment of significance – in which he is honoured. Thus we see Father Callahan, Eddie, Jake, Oy, and (in her own way) Susannah, pass on into the afterlife, helping Roland on with his quest. All Roland's companions must die, because that's what heroes do. And it applies not just the ka-tet with which the seven books of The Dark Tower are concerned, it is all of his previous ka-tets, too. Alain, Cuthbert, Susan, Sheemie… right down to his first faithful companion: David the hawk. Roland himself often shows a sort of resigned horror to the endless death he brings to his companions… but they do seem to have 'good' deaths. Heroic deaths.

But that's all very grim. Very Yeatsean. Jake isn't a hero if he's the only one to survive, but the Tower must fall if there can be no symbolic future. And, after all, Jake is also frequently referenced as an object of redemption, for Roland. He gets a second chance to save Jake, and it seems like, if he can just save this one boy, the rest may be forgiven. Because deep in the trope of worlds-saving behaviour is the thought that sacrifices are worth it because we save the world for someone else. Implicitly, it must always be for children, because without children the world would be saved for no one, in the end. By hitting the reset button at the end, King allows Jake not only to have his glorious death, and enter the halls of the heroes, but also to maintain his status as a symbol of hope, redemption, and rebuilding.

But, you might be thinking, Jake has already died, not once, but twice! He died for the first time in our world, so that the Man in Black could bring him to Roland's world through the door of death as a distraction for the gunslinger. But this is not a heroic death. He dies senselessly, as a child run over by a car on the way to school. Jake's second death is more complicated to analyse, and of more significance. He dies when Roland allows him to fall in the dark, forgotten railway tunnels beneath the mountains. Roland chooses to allow Jake to die so that he might finally catch the man he has pursued for decades across a land that has grown many leagues larger than it had been when the map was drawn. He let Jake die because that was what he had to do in order to carry on with the quest to the Dark Tower.

Only a light scratching at the surface is needed to see the great, empty, post-apocalyptic train station beneath the mountains as a symbolic underworld. It is even populated with the dead, in a sense: the slow mutants – dark creatures that were once human and have descended into near mindlessness. They don't speak, but they claw at Roland and Jake, seeking to devour them. In the Odyssey, Odysseus cannot get the ghosts to speak unless he first sacrifices a lamb to them, that they might drink its blood. As Eddie will later intone: 'All is silent in the Halls of the Dead' – that is, unless you feed them blood.

Of course, the slow mutants who live under the mountains have nothing to say that Roland would have any interest in hearing, but Walter does, and Jake is very much the sacrificial lamb who must die for Roland to finally catch up with Walter (the Man in Black), in Golgotha, the place of skulls. In the night that lasts ten years, Walter tells Roland's fortune on a pack of tarot cards not quite like any other (much as Eliot's tarot cards are not entirely the standard deck), and sends him a vision of the Dark Tower that will be crucial for his quest. Odysseus is told he cannot go home until he visits the land of the dead and speaks with them. Roland cannot reach the Tower until he speaks to Walter, a man he sacrifices his symbolic son to reach, a man dressed in black, a man who (it at least seems) is dead when Roland awakes. Roland, then, must also commune with the dead in order to continue on his quest, and he must pay their dreadful price.

Jake dies so that Roland might reach the Tower, but he does not do so willingly; he does it as a betrayed child, not as a warrior. It is worth noting, too, that The Odyssey is not the only epic echoed here. The homage to Tolkien is palpable throughout The Dark Tower. As Roland travels from Mid World to End World, one cannot help but be reminded of Middle Earth. The red eye – the sigul of the Crimson King – which is

graffitied throughout The Dark Tower, and Dark Tower related works – is surely also an echo of the Eye of Sauron, which looks out across the scarred, volcanic waste lands of Mordor. Is the blistered, monstrous, atomically cursed landscape between Mid World and End World not starkly reminiscent of the fractured land through which Sam and Frodo toil on the final legs of their journey to Mount Doom?

Not less evocative, though, is the similarity between Roland's mountains and the Mines of Moria. Mountains are the scenery of transition; they mark boundaries. For Roland, on the one side of the mountains is the stark, bleached landscape through which the gunslinger has travelled alone, as the last of his kind: the last knight of Mid World, the last son of the noble line of Deschain, the last descendent of Arthur Eld1. On the other side of the mountains Roland will find his fellowship; although, in Tolkien, the mountains pre-figure the breaking of the fellowship.

Reflected in the physical change from desert to endless water, an emotional transition must happen for Roland, as well. Jake's death opens a wound and a vacuum. In The Drawing of the Three that vacuum must be filled – Roland must give up his role as solitary gunslinger and forge new gunslingers out of Eddie and Susannah, and, paradoxically, Jake himself2. A similar transition happens for the fellowship, as they are pursued through the underworld of the dead dwarven city by goblins (the slow mutants are probably intended to recall this also). I'm sure the symbolism was not lost on Tolkien, either, not least because we see another necessary sacrifice: Gandalf's. And again, it is the sacrifice of a character who will rise out of his death to join battle with the Fellowship when they need him most.

Of course, Gandalf goes willingly; Gandalf's is a heroic death, but is there not some significant similarity between Gandalf's parting worlds: 'Run, you fools!', and Jake's: 'Go then, there are other worlds than these'? The latter are the words of a bitter, betrayed, semi-prophetic boy; the former those of a guardian to his boy-like charges, but the underlying message is the same: if I must die here, then you must go – you must make my death worthwhile.

So, like Gandalf, Jake dies the first time to aid the questing party's escape from the underworld. He also dies as a sacrifice to enable necessary prophesy. And he dies to open the desert of Roland's heart to the ocean of emotions, again, to make way for a fellowship to be joined. Perhaps this is also an expansion on the theme3 that human monuments and artistic endeavours are communal efforts – Roland's quest is doomed to failure if he goes on alone. Worlds are not saved by one man alone because worlds are not made of one man alone.

Perhaps. But Jake doesn't die a hero's death under the mountains, and he must return to provide a symbol of hope, even as the thematic resolution of this iteration of the tale – at the end of The Dark Tower – requires that he die for a third time.

One issue still remains:

The Crimson King

I think I will stand by my thought that the presentation of the Crimson King, when we finally see him, is disappointing. That he might have been locked out of the Dark Tower, condemned to be always so close, and yet so far from his prize, and that this might have sent him mad… Yes, I buy that. What irks is that it turns out to be a somewhat pathetic, almost comedic form of madness.

Stephen King is a connoisseur of horror, and his Danse Macabre is an engaging and interesting work

1 An echo of Aragorn here, surely, also.
2 The drawing of Jake and his initiation as a gunslinger actually takes place in *The Waste Land*, but the events of *The Drawing of the Three* are the catalyst for the later drawing.
3 See part one.

to be recommended to anyone drawn to the study of the genre. Of course he knows that the first rule of horror is that it's much more effective if we never see the monster – that our imaginations are always more powerful that the best special effects that can be devised. Until we see the Big Bad, it could be anything. Part of what works about It, the book, and what doesn't about It, the TV movie, is that even the giant spider that turns out to be the true presentation of 'Pennywise' in our world is not the full extent of what 'It' is. 'It' is a denizen of the wider universe of The Dark Tower, and the real battle the protagonists face is not a physical battle with the spider, but a mental battle, fought in the space between the worlds.

So, this is something Stephen King must have known, when he chose to show us the Crimson King. I suspect that we see in the Crimson King a parallel of the Christian 'Devil'. 'Crimson' is certainly the right colour, and he is excluded from the tower as the Devil is excluded from heaven. There's a trope that the Devil is always more seductive and frightening in his symbols and on the tongues of his servants than he is in reality. Evil tempts us with glamour, but this is a mere sheen over the harsh, unpleasant reality of what it is to sin. Certainly, the many-faced figure of Randal Flagg is more potent and intriguing a figure the King himself. The chilling eye sigul is more disturbing than the King's actual presence. It is the powers of his followers that make the Crimson King seem great. Reading The Stand and realising that Flagg is but a servant made me think with awe what the King himself must be like…

But if the aim was a simple disabusal of the powers of evil, then I remain disappointed. I think because it still feels like the author realised that if he ever showed us the Crimson King, nothing he could think up would be sufficient – like seeing that the monstrous alien with acid for blood was really just a man in a rubber suit. Unlike the rinse-repeat ending that allows us to make up our own story that can be as awe-inspiring as we want, by not going for broke on the Crimson King, having decided to show him, I cannot reconcile my disappointment. Not least because the servants of the King made for such good advertisement. Randal Flagg may have been defeated in the end, but he was not disappointing.

Indeed, I would go so far as to say that all the significant bad guys wind up with a less than satisfying end in volume seven. I can tell myself that, well, next time, it will be different. When Roland reaches the end of the quest that belongs only to our imaginations there will be a proper battle… But where's MacGuffin for the bad guys, to match Roland's horn, that will prevent their in-fighting and failures such that they will be able to give a good show at the end? I'm just not convinced.

There's a sense, I think, that Stephen King is trying to show the 'man behind the curtain' of evil, but I think the reason why that works in The Wizard of Oz is that the point is that what's actually beneath all the visible show and spectacle is more interesting and more powerful. The Wizard is a scientist, as well as a charlatan. And the wicked witch may have melted away at the end, but she put up a good fight. She was scary in her own right, on top of her guards, her castle, and her flying monkeys – even if all that it took to kill her was a bit of water. Maybe that's because there's something inherently disturbing to the idea that a person could just melt, which overwhelms the realisation we may come to later that having your weakness be water is actually a bit rubbish.

So, I'll concede defeat on the Crimson King. It wasn't worth the thematic coin, and if that's all there was behind it, it seems like a bit of a cheap shot, to me. Maybe someone will prove me wrong – I'd like to be convinced otherwise. As regards the rest, though, I think there's a lot to be said in King's defence. It shouldn't have to be said, perhaps. I would rather be able to enjoy the story without Eliot, Yeats, and Homer in tow – that's what I loved about The Dark Tower in the beginning, after all – and it's a shame that King couldn't fully realise the ideal of a work that can be enjoyed purely, and throughout, on whatever level you chose.

That said, the last three books of The Dark Tower remain stonkingly well written, and several cuts above the average. The disappointment largely stems from how wonderful, how close to perfect the work seemed

to be at the beginning. And by thinking about the modernists and the structure of epic, I have managed to set some of my ghosts to rest; I find myself excited at the thought of rereading the story from start to finish for the first time in years. Who knows, maybe this time even the Crimson King won't seem so bad – or rather: let's hope he seems worse.