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by alasdair stuart

Island Time

I'm playing five computer games at the moment. Not right now, of course, that would be weird, but I'm in the middle of Dead Space, Arkham Asylum, Dragon Age: Origins and Portal 2. They're all extraordinary works, extraordinary pieces of art and they all play with the format to hugely mischievous effect. Each gives you these little moments of pure pop culture joy, whether it's the few times you aren't attacked on Dead Space or the reaction of a goon finding his unconscious friend in Arkham Asylum or just playing with your dog on Dragon Age: Origins. Little explosions of emotional connection. Little deaths of pure, cultural joy.

None of them hold a candle to Dear Esther, a game I played for two hours two weeks ago and still can't stop thinking about. Dear Esther is an indie 'first person thinker' which casts you as the sole inhabitant of a Hebridean island. You have a flashlight, you can wade out to sea a little and as you move around, a voice begins to narrate his time on the island. A man came here to be alone, to find something, to research a shepherd who died on the island, or a cartographer who never got to one side of it. Three stories sit on top of one another like sand on the beach and they fade and shift and move as you do, the words triggered by your gradual progress around the brutally beautiful, haunting Hebridean landscape.

It ends badly, or very well, I leave that up to you to decide. There's closure certainly but the emotional impact is more real than any I've experienced with the other games I'm playing. As you make your way across the empty landscape, picking your path across the wreckage of other people's trauma, you get more and hints of the story. There's a bereavement, a genuinely terrifying moment where everything around you shifts and the cartographer and the shepherds and the narrator and you all mix together until...

Genuine emotional catharsis, it's a genuinely amazing game, taking the normal shapes of game narrative and doing some quite brilliant with them.

Not a boss fight in sight either.

Dear Esther is available here: <http://dear-esther.com/>

The Dry Heat, The Dust, the Martinis and the Insects

by rj barker

1)

Edwards had sworn when he'd first seen where they had arranged for him to stay. He'd sworn long and fluently in as many different languages as he was conversant in and a few in which a couple of expletives were his only recourse. That done, he'd stood at the entrance to the looming white building and, sweating in the parched desert heat, tried ringing his agent to swear long and hard at him. All he'd got was a no signal message, so he'd sworn long and hard at that instead.

Eventually, his mouth dry from a long stream of invective, he'd decided he may as well have a look around.

He'd thought they had sent him to some sort of religious commune to hide away from the newspapers and prying cameras. It was a natural reaction on seeing the giant white domes lying amid verdant greenery and surrounded by that most precious of the deserts commodities, a serene blue moat of water.

"Bastards!" he'd thought, "you lying bastards."

Despite everything he'd said to them they'd done it, sent him to some sort of retreat to "recuperate". Except "recuperate" was just the word they used; what they meant was "get him out the way until all the fuss dies down".

The building, with its pale, marble clad domes and air of peace, bore an uncanny resemblance to a mosque though it was just a hotel. Edwards had been happy to find out his swearing and sense of victimisation were groundless. He'd walked over the faux medieval drawbridge and through the iron gates only to find his fears ebbing away in the quiet cool of the spacious lobby.

He'd dropped his small suitcase near the empty reception desk and walked around, admiring the hanging lamps that hung from the ceiling like vast upturned copper mushrooms. Curlicues of spindly metal twirled around the electric fittings. The lamps were obviously a lot older than the electricity supply connected to them, they had been cheaply modernised, making them still beautiful to look at but also strangely disturbing. As if they had been forced into a time in which they did not belong.

On one wall Edwards found a history of the hotel and its builder.

"The Oasis Fastness Hotel" he read aloud to himself, then read on, wondering at the clumsy sound of the name.

It had been built in the roaring twenties by an oil magnate, sure that the fashionable set would flock to his hotel in the centre of the desert. That they would come in their hundreds, to swim in the moat and stare over the rolling sand dunes. He'd been wrong, as he'd been wrong about so many other things and his empire had slowly collapsed leaving the hotel gradually decaying as it changed from one owner to another.

Edwards arrival was four years ago now and he was still here, but Edwards liked the slight decay of the building. It wasn't the damp smelly decay you got in wetter climes. It was the slow dusty decay of the desert, of the building gradually ossifying. The outside walls slowly changing, being pulverised by wind and sand, becoming one with the desert and leaving a constant veil of dust over the cool marble floors.

Most of all Edwards liked the bar. His room was fine, airy and light and with a large fan to keep the desert heat at bay, but the bar was his favourite place. Eight giant ceiling fans constantly twirled above the patrons, moving the still, hot, air from corner to corner, creating a breeze that had the occupants of the bar raising their heads in thanks. Soft leather chairs, their upholstery slightly frayed, were placed around low tables of the kind favoured by the hotels Arabic owners and, like the rest of the hotel, the bar possessed a feeling of life becoming slower and calmer.

Edwards, of course, never sat in the comfortable leather chairs. It was stools or standing for him, always had been in any establishment he chose to frequent. Though of course he hadn't chosen to be here, who was he trying to fool? He'd been sent here so he wasn't an embarrassment after the 'incident'.

God! He could still see the body even now, nearly four years after the fact. Still hear the seagulls

keening, their sad cry of lament outside the room. Still see her sitting in that chair, the bullet hole between her eyes. Still smell it, decay so strong it was a physical force, something he swallowed rather than breathed in. Still hear the skittering as those damn roaches ran from where they'd been feasting on her slowly putrefying feet.

Dirty fucking things.

The rest was as expected. He'd been arrested and questioned over her death. Eventually he'd been absolved of any blame but that didn't matter. Not to a man in his position. Not when the police closed their enquiry without looking for another suspect. Not with so many sharks waiting in the wings, teeth bared ready to shred at the least excuse.

And the letters hadn't helped. Whichever bottom-dwelling journalist had dug them up deserved to be shot. No one who'd known Edwards had believed the allegations. They all knew that in any conversation he'd had with her every third word had been bitch. Just as she'd always referred to him as "that bastard". It was how they spoke. The public didn't know that though, and the tabloid-loving, scandalmongering, lowest common denominator public that read the articles had practically bayed for his blood.

It made him wish that he hadn't given in to that rare burst of public spiritedness that had caused him to call in on the silly old bat when someone mentioned she'd not been seen for a couple of weeks.

Curse Hugin and Munin.

Curse the thoughtless, dead, bitch!

Ruining his career and leaving him with the image of those bloody, (literally bloody, caked with the putrescence they'd been feeding off) insects scuttling around his mind.

It was quiet in the hotel. Edwards gave it that. Maybe the quiet was what he needed even though he itched sometimes for the hustle and bustle of his old life. Edwards had been surprised that he felt comfortable at first as there were so few people here. Just him, Akbar the barman, the fat man, who was always in the bar playing chess against himself, and two old ladies. His agent had found the place, sent him away. Away to 'recuperate'. Bastard. They were all bastards, always were, always would be. The only person Edwards didn't believe to be a bastard was Akbar, the bartender in the Oasis Fastness.

The two old ladies only occasionally showed their faces now, after Edwards had unleashed his savage tongue on them one night. Worse the wear for alcohol, Edwards had mistaken one of them for a maiden aunt he'd always hated and given vent to a torrent of abuse. The two old ladies had quietly finished their game of canasta and left the bar, never to return while Edwards held sway, swaggering king of all he surveyed.

"Silly old bitches," he'd mumble under his breath whenever the barman brought up the subject of them.

Overall, if Edwards had been given a choice of where to stay for who-knows-how-long, he would probably have chosen somewhere much like the Oasis Fastness. Though Edwards would never have knowingly chosen to be stuck anywhere. The urge to wander was in his blood.

"Another Martini Akbar," Edwards slurred at the barman.

He wasn't called Akbar of course; he had a western name that gave the lie to his Arabic appearance and manner, but Edwards had quite forgotten it. Edwards had, for a long time, nursed a fond memory of a barman in Egypt and he'd been called Akbar. Edwards had simply transferred his fondness over to the Oasis Fastness' barman and with it he'd brought the name. The barman had accepted it with magnanimity and Edwards had been happy that he'd found a new friend. Edwards often complimented the barman on his poise and ability to listen quietly without spoiling the beat of Edwards' rambling narrations.

"Akbar!" Edwards would exclaim, "you are a prince amongst barmen."

And Edwards was a connoisseur of barmen.

Akbar placed a Martini in front of Edwards. "Careful Mr Edwards, you may end up drunk." The barman laughed, showing teeth whiter than the marble walls of the Oasis Fastness' bar.

"I'm already drunk Akbar my man and it's Edwards...no mister." Edwards paused his focus slipping momentarily. "I'm not worth a mister, apparently," Edwards' voice tailed off as his mind attempted to sort

through long forgotten incidents.

"You only have two suits," the barman said, bringing Edwards back into the present.

"Bloody right!" Edwards' head snapped up at the familiar and oft repeated prompt. "That's all I have to my name and no fucking chance of getting any more..." Edwards hesitated, thinking hard and using his tall-stemmed glass as a point of focus before he carried on. "Two suits and they both smell of sweat. Bloody heat. Too bloody hot Akbar, too bloody hot, that's the problem with this place."

The barman grinned. "You are in the desert. Heat is part of the experience."

"Well it's too bloody hot anyway. Bloody desert."

The gentle sound of sobbing drifted across the spacious bar, interrupting the conversation between the two men. Edwards turned around on his stool. He moved unnaturally slowly, being careful to keep his balance, a look of lizard-like malevolence spreading across his taut-skinned face. Edwards worked the leathern skin around his eyes, squinting and trying to focus through an alcohol-induced miasma. His almost colourless lips turned up into a smile as he saw the slumped figure of the fat man in one of the leather chairs.

"Shut up!" Edwards shouted, a trace of wicked glee in his voice. "Shut up! It's no use, no one is coming, no one gives a damn about us, they have enough problems of their own. Now shut the fuck up and stop spoiling my drink." Edwards turned to the barman, an amused shine in his blue-green eyes. "A man's drinking time is sacred Akbar, very important." He smiled, then turned around quickly, almost losing his balance, "Fat bastard!" he blared his final rejoinder to the sobbing man in the battered leather chair.

"Edwards, he is a sad man," Akbar slowly wiped a towel around the inside of a glass. "There is no need to make him any sadder."

Edwards tossed down his drink in one gulp and looked at the barman, his eyes becoming mean slits. He took the cocktail stick with its small green olive impaled on the wood and slowly pulled it off the stick with his teeth while thinking about the barman's words. With the olive sitting acidly on his tongue Edwards tried to talk but only succeeded in making round vowel sounds. He transferred his concentration to swallowing. Akbar waited patiently for his answer.

"Akbar, the world is full of prey and predators. I am a rather predatory animal and I see no reason why..." he stopped to think, his thin face wrinkling up into a look of puzzlement. "Where was I?"

"You were being predatory," replied the barman. His grin unfaltering at a theory he must have heard hundreds of times before.

Edwards raised a hand in a gesture of affirmation, "of course, predatory, I am. And I see no reason why I should not." Edwards wavered slightly before concentrating on his stream of thought, nodding slightly he carried on. "Why I should not use his pathetic situation and already unhappy demeanour to try and get what little happiness I can. May I also add," Edwards raised his hand even further, knocking over his empty glass, which was deftly caught by the barman. "Sorry. I would like to add that happiness is in such short supply here that I must take my amusements where I can find them. However petty they may be." He nodded lopsidedly, happy with the justification of his outburst. "Could I have another Martini, old boy?"

The barman looked out of one of the arched windows with its thick layers of mosquito netting. "It is twilight. Sorry, I'll have a pitcher sent to your room but the bar closes at twilight. You know the rules."

Edwards nodded sadly and got up, trying his best to remain upright and dignified. He walked out the bar, detouring slightly to knock over the king on the chessboard that the fat man was setting out. He grinned back at the barman and walked slowly towards the door. Only betraying his drunkenness when he slipped as he went through the doors, his arm shooting out to steady himself on the frame.

In his room Edwards pressed play on the small tape player by his heavily netted bed. He sat in his favourite chair by the French windows, poured a Martini from the pitcher on his side table, and stared out over the desert. Akbar had asked him not to remove the screens from the large French windows that opened up onto the balcony. Edwards, in one of his typical pigheaded moods, had decided to do it anyway.

He admired the beauty of the desert; he admired the harsh environment that allowed only the strongest

to survive. He admired the way the floodlights, angled up to light the Oasis Fastness, reflected off the walls and bathed the sand in light, making it silver in the rapidly encroaching darkness.

The sound of crickets chirping came to Edwards from the small cassette player. He'd always loved the sound of crickets. It reminded him of holidays with his mother and long nights with the beautiful women of his younger days. He never heard the sound of crickets anymore, not real crickets, but the tape relaxed him and at least allowed his mind to go back to a time before, well, before the "incident". Edwards leant back in his chair and sighed, loosening the collar of his shirt and sipping from his drink and as the taped crickets chirped, he waited for the horror to begin.

The first sign of their approach was little more than a finger of darkness against the silver of the desert dunes. It rolled across the sand, swelled, then doubled and tripled in size. The black oily mass came forward towards the hotel, flowing like water, a dirty black tide of ravenous insects rapidly turning the white desertscape into a carpet of seething ebony.

"Bastards! Nasty little fucking insect bastards!" Edwards shouted at the mass of cockroaches rapidly enshrouding the desert.

He watched as they massed and bulged, looking for a way over the moat. Eventually, the pressures of their numbers would become overwhelming and thousands of insects would tumble into the water and drown. Briefly beaten they would fall back, then flow forward again forcing themselves onwards in a voracious deluge towards the glowing beacon of the hotel. A pearl set in the jet black of millions upon millions of insatiable insects.

"Go on!" Edwards shouted, standing up and leaning against the frame of the window, his drink slopping over the side of the wide brimmed glass. "Go on, drown you fuckers. I know you want a meal but you can't have me!" Edwards frantically gesticulated towards himself, his movements growing wilder as the days drinking filtered through his blood. "Drown, drown, drown. All of you. I want to stand here and watch you all try and swim. You'll fail you nasty, nasty..." Edwards' drink scoured imagination failed him, "Nasty things!"

Edwards darted backwards, clumsy hands scrabbling at the draw beside his bed he produced an old revolver, tarnish painted it with false shadows which twisted the ugly, snub nosed shape out of true.

"I'll show you!" he shouted before loosing a shot into the mass of insects. "I'll bloody show you!" Edwards fired again

Their numbers were limitless of course, all of Edwards shooting and screaming couldn't change that as the insects, desperate to reach whatever lay within the hotel, threw themselves into the shining waters around the Oasis Fastness.

After firing his last shot Edwards threw the gun back into his room. He stood, arms spread and resting on each side of the floor to ceiling window frame Edwards started to shout again. "How did you like that? Don't like it do you?"

Eventually he became tired of shouting and, as always, the elation he felt at watching his hated adversaries die fled. The days drinking took a firm hold and dark memories tried to escape the murky recesses of his mind. Edwards sat on the edge of his bed and sobbed.

"How do they know? How do they know?"

He lay back, squeezing his eyes shut and covering his ears, he wondered at how the sound of millions of chitinous bodies rubbing against each other could so much resemble that of the sea beating against the shore.

"How can they sound beautiful? How?" he slipped into the blessed escape of sleep. The moisture from his eyes dampened the pillow and quickly evaporated in the heat, while from outside the sound of the sea drifted across the desert as waves of insects tried to find a way past the shining blue moat.

2)

The barman was cleaning a glass when he heard the screaming. It was high pitched and girlish but familiar enough that he dropped the glass and vaulted the polished oak bar. The screaming echoed from the stone walls, seeming to come from a number of different directions at once but the barman had no trouble finding their origin. He recognised the voice and knew the daily routines of all the people staying at

the hotel well enough to home in on the pitiful wailing.

Edwards was in a corner near the swimming pool, curled up into a wet ball. His skin was almost dry due to the early morning heat, though his mop of silvery white hair still dripped water onto the terracotta tiles surrounding the pool. Edwards was shivering and although he'd stopped screaming, was now quietly whimpering and rubbing his bony hands so hard against his face that they left white streaks on his tanned leathery skin.

"Edwards!" exclaimed the barman as he bent worriedly over the quivering man.

Edwards turned, his wild staring eyes drank in the figure of the barman and he reached out with bony fingers to pull him close.

"Akbar, thank God!" whispered Edwards. "They've got in," tears ran down his face, "we're finished, we have to get out! Out!" Edwards shook the barman "Akbar, now while it's still light and they are in hiding, we have to get out now, please, please." The older man's sentence ended in choked sobs.

The barman held on to him in spite of his wriggling and attempts to escape. "Shh, shhh, tell me Edwards, tell me what has happened."

"They're in goddammit! Don't you understand? In! In!" Edwards struggled against the barman but was no match for the younger man's wiry strength.

The barman lowered himself onto his haunches, never letting go of the writhing man, he slowly wrapped his arms around him. Then began to gently rock him backwards and forwards.

"Tell me what happened my friend. Tell me this morning's story."

Edwards' breathing became more regular as the gentle voice and slow rocking calmed him. His wracking sobs and desperate struggling subsided as he began to speak.

"I was swimming," Edwards blinked his bloodshot eyes to shake off some of the tears webbing his eyelashes. "Just my usual morning swim, you know?" Edwards shrugged his shoulders, his face twitched slightly. "Must have done four or five lengths of the pool, I dived Akbar, just a quick duck dive really, just to wet my face and refresh myself a bit. Then, well, then there it was. Just floating there, legs outstretched, struggling against the surface tension."

"What was?" the barman loosened his hold on Edwards who was now staring fixedly into space.

"One of them," Edwards glanced up at his friend, water running from his hair and down his face. "An insect Akbar, a cockroach." Tears started to well in Edwards' eyes again. "They've found a way in, we're finished, finished". The older man dissolved back into sobs.

The barman was silent for a moment before he smiled sadly. "Edwards this is an old building, we have, and have had, our own population of cockroaches for a long time. We try to eradicate them but I am afraid they persist." The barman looked into Edwards' eyes "this will not have been one of your cockroaches, I promise you. There is no need to worry, you are safe here."

Edwards looked at the floor and traced a finger through the spots of water that had fallen onto the tiles from his wet hair. "You have seen them haven't you. At night, like a dirty great tide washing across the desert. You've seen them" Edwards' voice changed as he realised he was not stating a fact but asking a question. "You have seen them?"

The barman smiled sadly again and shook his head. "Unlike you my friend I am not an owl. I sleep when the night comes and rise with the sun."

Edwards' face changed subtly, as if for a moment he became a different person. "Where am I Akbar?"

"The Oasis Fastness hotel, amongst people who care for you."

Edwards chewed over the barman's sentence in his mind. "Are they real Akbar? Are they real, or am I just a sour, mad old man losing his mind to alcohol and ennui."

The barman smiled. "Who is to say who is mad, Edwards?"

Edwards' face fell; he looked down at the floor then raised it again to meet the barman's eyes. "Damned Arabs, always choose the worst time to be inscrutable," he said, a hopeful smile starting to brighten his face.

The barman's mouth turned up into a wide grin. "You should get dressed, you may miss your ten thirty AM Martini."

Edwards' eyes became round with surprise. "Oh my! What shall I wear?"

"Well, you only have two suits."

"Yes and they smell of sweat," Edwards beamed at the familiar and comforting dialogue.

"Damned heat!" the barman added clapping the older man on the back.

3)

Later, in the bar, Edwards became drunk and cantankerous in an attempt to gloss over his earlier fright. His creased face twitched and jumped as he moved jerkily on his stool, almost falling off more than once. The only occupants of the bar were Edwards and the barman. The fat man had vacated the bar earlier after Edwards had slapped him across the face.

Edwards had become enraged with the fat man. "Idiot! With your stupid chess set," he had shouted. The fat man had tried to shrink, to make his rotund body smaller in the hope Edwards would no longer take any notice of him but Edwards needed a target for his anger and fear to be released upon and would not be diverted. The blue eyes of the fat man were wide with apprehension, one seeming even bluer than the other due to the birthmark stretched like a piece of raw liver across his cheek. The fat man tried to ignore Edwards and lose himself in the chess pieces on the board in front of him.

"You and your fucking chess set," Edwards had sneered. "All the pieces are white you idiot." Edwards made a clumsy grab knocking most of the pieces onto the marble floor where they skittered in crazy spirals. Edwards took back his hand staring at the white queen he had managed to get hold of.

"There's no point, no point at all, no point." The fat man had started to whisper

Edwards stared angrily at him. "Is that why they are all white? Is it some third rate attempt at symbolism?"

Edwards sneer had become more pronounced, lending a sharpness to his features. He moved the queen forward until it was in front of the fat man's face, slowly, Edwards began to move the queen backwards and forwards then round and round until it was dancing.

Edwards began to sing in a high pitched mocking tone.

"No point, no point at all. There is no point, no point at all."

The fat man cowered back in his chair, occasionally his hand would move forwards, a small, cautious movement as though some part of him wanted the chess piece but he was too scared of Edwards to reach out for the gyrating queen. Suddenly, Edwards flung the chesspiece across the bar, eliciting a small whimper from the fat man. Edwards started to dance, capering and swaying his hips madly, Edwards hopped and twisted to a tune only he could hear, his voice became higher and shriller chanting, "No point, no point at all! The fat little madman has no point at all."

"I'm not the only madman here!" Shouted the fat man from his chair.

Edwards stopped dancing. "What?" Edwards had straightened up, all mocking gone from his voice, his face became sombre and took on a look of murderous intent.

The fat man said nothing.

"What, say it, say it or I swear I'll make you eat every piece of that chess set you love so much," Edwards threatened in a low, whispered, growl.

The fat man snapped, all fear fled from him in a moment of outrage and he stood up shaking his finger at Edwards. "You and you're insects and your incessant shouting and stupid shouting at night. There are no insects, it's all in your head! You call me mad but we all know about you..." Edwards slapped the side of the fat man's face hard enough to make his cheek redden, a twin to the strawberry birthmark on the other side.

"Take that back you mean-spirited little shit! You know they are real, you've seen them. Take it back!"

Edwards face was bright red and his breathing had become shallow.

"Shan't. I shan't because it's true!"

Edwards lunged at the fat man only to be caught by Akbar who had suddenly appeared between the two protagonists. The fat man ran from the bar leaving Edwards shouting after him.

"I won't forget this! You know I won't! Take it back you little bastard! You tell the truth, tell the truth

or I'll find you and make you!" Edwards collapsed into the restraining arms of the barman once more overwhelmed by sobs.

By the afternoon Edwards had become thoroughly drunk and wretched. He'd hurled imprecations at the barman until he had refused to serve any more drinks. Then Edwards had turned from insults to begging and wheedling for "Just one more drink" until the barman had upturned a vermouth bottle to show Edwards it was empty.

"It is finished, Edwards. None left"

"Well get another fucking bottle."

"There isn't any Edwards. It is done, you have drunk us out of vermouth, I cannot mix any more Martinis for you."

Edwards had spun his stool round so he had his back to the barman, still managing to slouch in a sulky fashion he had ignored the him for the best part of two hours.

When he had sobered up slightly Edwards span round on his stool, his smile back in place and asked the barman. "We're really out of Vermouth, Akbar?"

"Yes, it appears we are."

"You're not just saying that are you? I mean, because I got a little out of hand earlier? It's just that I can't drink anything else."

"It's gone Edwards, finished."

"I've made everyone here uncomfortable haven't I?"

The barman didn't answer, just watched as Edwards stood, rather shakily, and placed his white Panama hat on his head. "In that case I think I'd best go." Edwards walked towards the door.

"But Edwards, your insects."

Edwards paused and looked down at the floor, a half laugh escaped from his mouth. "Yes, my insects, that's just it isn't it? They are not real, are they, Akbar? Only I can see them. No, I'd best go."

"You won't last the night in the desert, please Edwards, I could make you vodka Collins." But Edwards was gone, the only proof he had been in the bar was an empty glass and some ghostly footprints in the dust that covered the marble floor.

The barman turned back to the bottles stacked behind the bar. In truth, Edwards was the only one of the people at the Oasis Fastness that he talked to, the only one who was any relief from the unremitting tedium of being alone all the way out here. Sadly, the barman remembered there were things he had been meaning to do for a long time and, with a sigh, he went outside.

4)

The barman had been digging blockages out of the filter by the pool for most of the afternoon when he noticed a shadow enter the corner of his vision. The only other distraction had been hours earlier when shouting had come from the hotel followed by three loud reports. The barman had shaken his head and wondered what havoc the three remaining guests had left for him to find when he went back in later.

Akbar concentrated on his task for a moment before he looked up to see who had intruded upon him.

"Edwards! I am glad you decided to return!" The barman's grin was wide and genuine as he pulled clinging silt and decayed green matter from the filter hole at the edge of the pool.

"I have been thinking, I sat out on the dunes and thought everything through, I also had some things to take care of." Edwards sat down heavily in the shade, his voice seemed slower and wearier than usual. "Akbar, there are some questions I need you to answer."

"Ask away my friend, I will continue to work," he cleared more grime from the hole.

"How did you get your job here?"

"Sometimes Edwards, a man sees an opening and he knows he must take it." Another handful of green-gray sludge landed on the tiles.

"Why are there no pictures of you in the lobby Akbar? There are pictures of all the previous members of

staff." Edwards shook his head and his voice became quieter, "but no pictures of you."

Still grinning the barman reached further into the hole and started to tug on something stuck fast. "I do not like," he grunted with effort as he pulled, "to have my picture taken, never have, steals the soul." He laughed at his joke.

Edwards moved edgily within the shaded area where he stood. Something furtive about his movements alerted the barman, who slowed slightly in his task. "What happened to all the other members of staff Akbar? Why is there only you left?"

"The owners are not rich Edwards," a note of irritation polluted the barman's voice, "with so few people here it was decided I could manage the place myself, it would be cheaper." He tugged harder on the obstruction.

"How did you stop them eating you?" Edwards asked from the shadows.

The barman carried on tugging, keeping his voice low and calm as though he was dealing with a wild animal, "what do you mean?"

"It came to me in the desert." Edwards stood up. "The emptiness of the dunes allows such clarity of thought. Somehow you must all be in league with them. It's the only way you could survive. Otherwise they would have eaten you when they ate the rest of the staff. That is what you meant isn't it? You said you saw an opening and you took it. You and your filthy insect companions, you can't hide it from me anymore. I know this is a madhouse, you're one of the inmates, in league with the fat man and the old witches and the insects. You can't fool me any more. No more drink see?" Edwards pointed at his head, "it has allowed my mind to clear." Edwards voice became cold, "I'm the only sane one here."

The barman carried on with his task keeping his movements as even and calming as his voice.

"Edwards, they just went away that is all, they left me here to help you."

Edwards was pacing in the shadows, he turned quickly and his voice became shrill. "He told me, don't lie!" Edwards shouted. "Oh he took some persuading, all that weeping and snivelling but he told me. He told me he couldn't see them but it was a lie, he as much as admitted it to me before he got what he deserved."

"Edwards! Edwards what have you done?"

"Murderers, all of you, all those people in the photos, dead," Edwards took a deep breath which he let out as a strangled sob and his face crumpled into tears. "Murderer, got what murderers deserve." He stepped out from the shadows, his white suit was stained with a long line of crimson and his hat was gone, his silver hair was slick with sweat against his head. In his claw-like leathery hand he held his ugly little revolver.

"You all told me it wasn't true," Edwards sobbed, shaking his head. "You are the worst, the fat man told me you control them, he told me, I thought you were my friend."

The barman leant forward, still tugging at the unseen obstruction, wary about making any changes in his movements. "Edwards, listen to what you are saying, listen. I am your friend, I always have been, how can any man control insects? They cannot, Edwards, listen to me, listen, please Edwards, put the gun down."

The gun in Edwards hand wavered slightly then straightened as a look of animal cunning crossed his face. "That hole, that hole where does it lead? It leads outside, stop pulling, stop it, stop it you're trying to let them in!"

The barman, numb with shock, continued mechanically pulling on the obstruction. "Edwards listen, please put the gun down."

"Stop pulling."

"I am your friend, Edwards, please."

Edwards face was transfigured into a mask of misery, "please, stop pulling."

"Please Edwards, put the gun down, please"

"Stop Pulling!" Edwards roared.

Suddenly and with a harsh screech of metal on metal the obstruction came free and the barman's hand flew out the hole carrying a small metal disk with a handle on it, at the same time a shot rang out,

deafeningly loud in the small courtyard.

Slowly, the sound of the shot ebbed away leaving only the ringing of the small metal disk spinning on the terracotta tiles in front of the pool. In the pool itself, pink ghosts drifted as blood from small pieces of skull, sheared off the barman's head, diffused into the water.

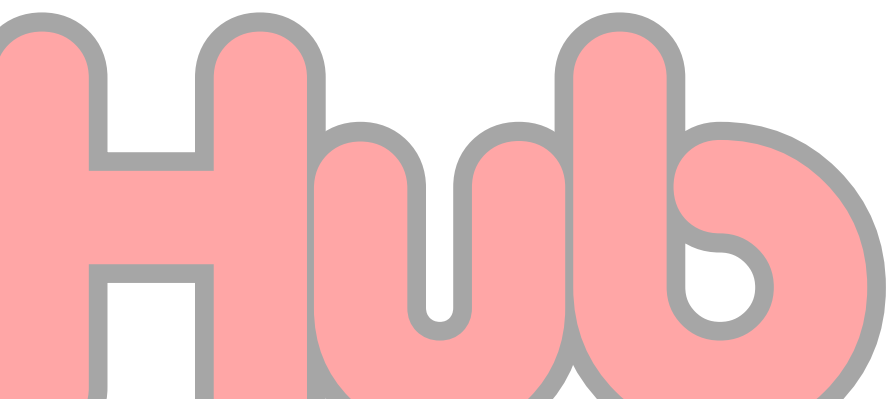
Edwards stared in horror at the hole. "No, no, no. He's let them in. Oh no, no, no," he repeated to himself. Edwards stood without moving for ten, fifteen, twenty minutes. Nothing came out the hole. No scuttling legs or chitinous bodies tumbled out. No hungry mandibles latched onto Edwards tanned, leathery, skin. All that moved was small piece of grass stuck to the lip of the hole, waving mockingly in the breeze.

Edwards stick-thin frame started to fold in on itself, convulsed by wrenching sobs, he took great gasping mouthfuls of air. He found himself unable to walk, tears blurring his vision and mucus running from his nose, he crawled towards the shattered body of the barman.

"Oh God, Oh God, what have I done?" he croaked through his choking sobs. "Akbar, Akbar my friend, I'm so sorry, so, so sorry. I was so sure, it all seemed so real." Edwards sat on his haunches and pulled the head of his friend onto his lap. Blood soaked through his white trousers, making them crimson where they clung to his skin. Edwards wept, then tried pinching the greying cheeks of the corpse. "Wake up, wake up! It's all right, I won't hurt you. It's all right." Edwards slapped the corpse hard. "I only have two suits, please Akbar, I need a drink, please. I'll drink anything you make. Please. No, no, no."

As night fell, Edwards remained by the cooling body of his friend, his sobs drifted up into the clear desert sky. Edwards hand reached out, almost of its own accord, to find his gun, lying on the tiles, next to the body of the barman. He stared hard at the gun before he slowly fitted its ugly, short, barrel into his mouth. Eyes tightly closed, he pulled the trigger. It clicked onto an empty chamber. Tears of pain and frustration streaming down his face, Edwards pulled the trigger again and again and each time only heard the hollow click of an empty chamber. Eventually he collapsed, eyes squeezed shut, trying to hold in the tears, and once again wracked by sobs he buried his face amongst the clothes of his dead friend.

He never saw the first small body as it struggled out of the hole by the pool. It turned, antenna waving in the air, and rapidly scuttled to a small puddle of blood by Edwards feet. Behind it, another insect squeezed out from the crush of black shelled, bodies.



The Well of Ascension

reviewed by catherine mann



By Brandon Sanderson
Gollancz
£8.99

This review contains some spoilers. If you haven't read *The Final Empire* I suggest that you do. Not because *The Well of Ascension* doesn't stand on its own, but because you'll be missing out on an enjoyable experience. I won't mention specific plot events from the first volume, but you will have an idea about the outcome of the previous book.

The Well of Ascension is about the challenges inherent in rebuilding society. The city of Luthadel is under siege from armies led by power-hungry men, and is defended by an unlikely group of people. Elend Venture -an academic young noble- has become king, much to his surprise. A notorious thieving crew have become officials, much to their consternation. And Vin has become a tool for something greater than herself. The stakes are raised as politics and diplomacy lead to double-cross and desperate measures. Can half-forgotten prophecies provide any hope for the future? And why are the mists behaving so oddly?

The format of the previous book is repeated, each chapter starts with an italicised passage from a manuscript, which will eventually be discovered in the main story. These sections tantalisingly suggest answers, but often lead to more questions. If you're anything like me you'll go back after you've finished and read these bits again to see them come together. This should give you an idea of the care and forethought that has obviously gone into these books.

The Well of Ascension picks up the story a year after the events of *The Final Empire*. The setting is geographically the same however the world is in political and social turmoil. The plot of this book depends upon the actions and motivations of several characters, rather than having one main driving force as the last volume did. The desire for real, stable change preoccupies the characters, but the route to that goal -and indeed its precise nature- is debateable. The members of the thieving crew return, but now they're officials with a kingdom to run. The personalities, relationships and banter are still there, but the characters are under more pressure than they've experienced before, and they deal with this in their own ways. Vin is once again a major viewpoint character. Her confidence in her Mistborn powers, combined with her street instincts, make her deadly in her self-appointed role as bodyguard, protector and -when necessary- assassin. Her fear and paranoia are no longer spurred by self-preservation, but care for those she loves and the society they are trying to build together. Her Allomantic confidence is mirrored by her lack of confidence in herself. She's comfortable in the shadows, and avoids the limelight and admiration of others. She fears that who she is, and what she's becoming, isn't worthy of Elend and so their relationship dawdles.

The viewpoint shifts between various characters with parts to play, but Elend and Sazed are the main male leads. Both are knowledgeable and educated, they tend towards self-deprecation and uncertainty about themselves, but they don't let this get in the way of duty. In *The Final Empire* Elend was the most compassionate noble character. He cared about the treatment of the skaa, as well as avidly researching fairer forms of government. He became King in order to build the better system he'd always dreamed of, however with real responsibility on his shoulders Elend is in desperate need of lessons in statesmanship. Sazed is a Keeper, someone who preserves lost knowledge from the time before the Lord Ruler's millennial empire. Unlike Elend, Sazed is incredibly mild-mannered, having been trained and employed as a steward all his life. His calm wisdom makes him a counsellor to Vin and the crew. Like Vin he is certain in his role, but privately doubts his own worth. He is torn between his duty and his desire to help his friends, feelings which are only complicated when another Keeper arrives in the city.

This book has a more supernatural feeling than its predecessor. There is a sense of creeping unease. When Vin sees a ghostly apparition in the mists -which are themselves behaving in a decidedly sinister manner- she is convinced that something is watching and perhaps waiting. Vin's confidence as a Mistborn leads her to research Allomantic metals in the hope of finding previously unknown abilities. This book has more information about Feruchemy, which was introduced in the first volume. Feruchemists cannot gain abilities from metals, but they can use them to store various attributes -knowledge, speed, weight, strength, senses- for later use. Like Allomancy, Feruchemy is an inherited ability and isn't treated as magical by its practitioners.

The other major fantastical elements are the creatures that inhabit the world. The Kandra are a race of sentient non-humans with an unusual and unsavoury method of shapeshifting. A kandra becomes central to the plot, and more is revealed about this mysterious race. The Koloss are massive, brutal fighting machines, high on aggression and low on intellect. It's no wonder that the Lord Ruler used them for control, but kept them away from urban centres. Despite the low-magic feel of the setting Sanderson has created two original races that fit nicely into the setting and provoke feelings of fear, intrigue and mystery in both the human characters and the reader.

According to its author *The Well of Ascension* is the book he planned to write when he started the trilogy. As Sanderson quite rightly points out on his website, there are many stories of heroes defeating evil and knocking down tyrants, but there aren't a lot detailing what happens next. It's refreshing to see someone tackle an under-used plot, and wonderful to see them pull it off and produce an interesting and engrossing story. The process of rebuilding and reshaping the structures you helped to knock down, whilst keeping chaos at bay, is a challenging and interesting prospect. The set-up provides plenty of opportunity for conflict, action and speculation, which makes good fantasy. Creation vs. Destruction is one of the central themes of the Mistborn Trilogy. Here it's made painfully clear that newly created things -be they kingdoms, relationships, alliances, religions, and even freedom- are especially vulnerable to destruction. In my review of *The Final Empire* I said that you couldn't tell what would happen next. *The Well of Ascension* follows up on this, when I started I couldn't have accurately predicted how this book would end. Something that I think is a major positive.

The Alchemy Press Book of Pulp Heroes & The Alchemy Press Book of Ancient Wonders

reviewed by rebekah lunt



Pulp Heroes edited by Mike Chinn

Ancient Wonders edited by Jan Edwards and Jenny Barber

The Alchemy Press

£10 each

I generally enjoy short story collections as I feel they can give you a great choice of a wide variety of authors whose writing you may not have come across before. These two collections give exactly that opportunity, with a wonderful taster menu of some excellent quick reads.

The first is stories themed around pulp fiction, and the second around 'ancient wonders' which seems to generally relate to mystic locations, encompassing mythologies, time travel and so on. Both collections have some interesting and gripping stories; although I more naturally lean toward the type of stories in the second book, I also found plenty to keep me reading in the first. In some cases the stories made me wish there was more – a particularly good example is the first story in '*Ancient Wonders*': *Bones* by Adrian Tchaikovsky has an intriguing mythology, and the world hinted at seems mysterious and curious in its seemingly alien yet quite familiar way.

Many of the stories in each collection have led me to look up other examples of the author's work. All of the stories are quick and easy reads, but maintain the quality throughout. I would highly recommend both of these books for a really enjoyable read.

FEATURES

Interview: Doug Jones

with richard whittaker



With nearly 100 movies credits to his name – many of them in big genre films – odds are that you've seen Doug Jones without knowing that's who's on screen. When film makers are looking for an actor to suffer under pounds of latex, or emote through foam rubber prosthetics, then they turn to the lanky, gregarious Jones. Whether as the spindly, spiderous, deformed Ice Cream Man in 2009's *Legion* or as the noble Norrin Rad, the man beneath the Silver Surfer's reflective skin in *The Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer*, Jones brings a humanity to the rubber creations of the world's finest effects houses. However, he's not just a monster man, having appeared in movies like *My Name is Jerry*, which he called "a departure for me, a relationship

drama with an indie vibe where I play a white guy going through a mid-life crisis." This year he appears unmasked alongside Paul Giamatti and Clancy Brown in *John Dies at the End*, the latest from Don Coscarelli (*Phantasm*, *Bubba Ho-Tep*.) Yet he remains best known as one of the finest creature actors in the business. From the moon-headed mascot for McDonald's "Mac at Night" ad campaign to the tragic undead romantic hero Billy Butcherson in *Hocus Pocus* and one of the unnerving Gentlemen in arguably the finest episode of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, 'Hush,' he has transcended the misconception that creature actors are just walking props. No director has appreciated his skills more than Guillermo del Toro, who cast him in several films to date including multiple parts in his *Hellboy* adaptations: The Chamberlain, the Angel of Death, and of course Abe Sapien, the mysterious fish man with a penchant for demon hunting, speed reading, and rotten eggs.

Hub Magazine: You've become one of the go-to guys when move makers are looking for someone to perform under a lot of latex. How did you build that career?

Doug Jones: By complete accident. I went out to Hollywood in 1985, thinking that I would be a sitcom star. Look at me. I'm a tall, skinny, goofy white guy, being a goofy next door neighbor or the funny office mate who does armpit farts and says funny lines here and there. That's what I thought my destiny was and that's what I wanted to do. But being a tall, skinny, goofy white guy also lends itself extremely well to the creature world, which I never knew. It's not a genre that I ever watched much of or pursued. I didn't go out to Hollywood saying I want to be a monster. To double back, also in college I was a mime, so the movement comes into play now as well. You have this tall, skinny guy who moves well. And I learned from my mime days in college how to communicate and have lots of dialogue with your body that's non-verbal. That also lends itself very well to creature work. So when the Mac at Night campaign came along in 1986, I went for this audition and moved well, so they stuck a moon head on my head for 27 commercials in three years of making McDonalds commercials, and that sort of marked me as the guy that does this.

My career has snowballed from there with referrals, with people within the creature FX community who say, 'Oh, we need a tall, skinny guy to wear this alien costume' and they like me because I don't complain in the makeup. A lot of actors, well, we're prima donnas. There's a reputation there for good reason, there's a stereotype there for good reason. So when I say yes to creatures who are not human, the farther from human you get the more time you are spending in the make-up chair. I know I'm saying yes to that when I'm saying yes to a role like that, so complaining is just futile. At the end of it, though, I've gotten to play so many characters who are beautiful, otherworldly, that expand my horizons as an actor beyond what I could do with my face.

HM: You've worked a lot with Guillermo Del Toro, most notably as Abe Sapien in the *Hellboy* movies. How did that relationship come about?

DJ: We met on *Mimic* in 1997 ...

HM: A very under-rated film ...

DJ: And when he gets to do his director's cut it will be even better. They filmed *Mimic* up in Toronto but were doing pick-up shots in LA. When the Toronto actor who did all bugs couldn't make all the days they called the tall, skinny actor that they did know, and that's Doug Jones. This is Guillermo del Toro's first American film and a big studio budget, the whole thing, so it was kind of a first for him. So he was like an eight year old fan boy who got this great opportunity, and that's what he acted like. He's a genius, he's a great storyteller, visual artist and an amazing human being, but so accessible, so when you meet him you are talking to an eight year old fan boy. To this day, even with all the Oscar nominations and all this success, he is still a fan first. That's what I loved about him, and he loves drawing and creating characters for me in his movies that are long, lithe and graceful. He calls me the Fred Astaire of monsters, which is a title I wear with great pride. So *Mimic* is 1997, and five years later *Hellboy* happened, and when my name came up in the creature effects house, Spectra Motion, that was designing the Abe Sapien character, they made a statue maquette of this character and told Guillermo 'You know, the perfect person to play this is Doug Jones.' He says, 'Doug Jones? I know Doug Jones!' and pulls my cards out of his wallet that I gave him five years before that. So that's how *Hellboy* happened.

HM: Many of the roles that you've had have either been silent or dubbed over, but in *Hellboy II* Guillermo comes to you and says 'That's it, you're the voice of Abe.'

DJ: I thought I was going to be the voice of Abe in *Hellboy* as well, so the Dave Hyde Pierce thing was a bit of surprise. I knew that they were thinking about a celebrity voice over, and that was in the days when people in the studio system thought that a guy in a creature suit was like putting a suit on a hanger, and then we've got to get an actor to voice him. That kind of thinking needed a little bit of a tweak, and I was the actor to tweak it.

The torch I've been carrying for the last eight years has been 'Let an actor play a part. Period.' I've been dubbed over three times that are key, and unfortunately those three times were big enough that people think I'm always dubbed over. So when I do contracts now I go in saying, 'If you want me to play this part, I'm voicing it as well. Just know that's part of the contract.' That kind of comes with me now, and I'm not being stomp-footy or mean about it. It's just that no-one would ever think of hiring Julia Roberts to do a part and then hiring Meryl Streep to voice her over because Meryl's got more of a thing. That's unthinkable, and it's as unthinkable to me. Guillermo del Toro's very on-board with returning to the Golden Age when Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi and Lon Chaney were monster actors who were allowed to be movie stars – nothing wrong with that. So I love Guillermo for creating roles that allow me to be a monster as a leading man.

HM: There was a time when everyone was acting like CGI was going to kill practical effects, but now film makers are doing suits again and then doing computerized tweaks in post.

DJ: That's what we settled on

HM: You've been under prosthetics throughout that transition, so how have they evolved in your time in the industry?

DJ: When I started, computer graphics was hardly ever used so everything was thought of as 'How do we do this practically?' So you had lots of puppeteering and rigging, and if you had extra arms or extensions then there was some guy off to the left and some guy off to the right manipulating those. Now CG does enhance and does complete a suit, so they can do something more lifelike more easily. But most audience members, when they ask what I think of CG versus practical, they tend to tell me that they like to connect with another human being. People like to watch people. If that means a performance in a monster suit but if it has a life and a soul and a heart to it that is being performed to you live and in front of you, we want to

connect to that as an audience. I'm that audience member too, and that's why I'm a big champion for keeping people in rubber costumes on film. The role of computer graphics is expanding and bettering itself every day, and the effects have gotten so gorgeous and beautiful, so I love all the possibilities. I still have yet to do a complete dot-pattern-on-a-leotard computer generated character. Even the Silver Surfer, I was in a costume, a rubber makeup muscle suit every day, and they did enhancements on me. WETA Digital, some of the best in the world, did that.

HM: A lot of actors echo that, that it's easier to work with someone in costume than a ball on a stick. How has it changed for you as the actor under the prosthetic?

DJ: Even from *Hellboy* to *Hellboy II*, playing Abe Sapien, same character in both movies, looked the same in both movies, but the makeup process in *Hellboy 1* was seven hours, *Hellboy II* was five hours. So they cut two hours off in just the four years between those two movies. That's because they were able to streamline how many pieces were glued on to me. That's another case where the blinking of my eyes were computer graphics, because that mask was so close to my head there was no room to fit the mechanics to make a blink happen. That's an easy CG fix in the end, to do something as simple as that.

HM: So what were the easiest and the hardest costumes to work in?

DJ: The Angel of Death in *Hellboy II*. Uh, it's gorgeous but those wings were a 40 pound pack of mechanics on my back. That was all practical, no CG at all. All those eyes blinked and looked around individually. We ended up trying to do a couple of takes and I lost my sense of humor, I lost my character, I lost the sense of dialogue. I was just, "Aaaah!" so they hooked up a cable to take the weight off it for me. Amongst the worst would be a movie that you've never heard of called *Bug Buster* with Randy Quaid and a whole bunch of *Star Trekers* from the series. Again the farther you get from human the harder these characters can be, and I'm a huge, overgrown insect, the mother bug. Stinger, wings, six legs, furry neck, pincers that were six feet long and made of fiber glass. It was absolute hell to wear, but again I said yes to a character that was not human. Really, really, really not human.

One of the easiest ones was the Silver Surfer, because he was very human looking in form. A very hot looking human, by the way. They added muscle in all the right places and kept me skinny in all the right places, to give me a silhouette unlike anything I've ever had before. But it was basically a glued-on, enhanced human suit, with a silver sheen to it. Very pliable, very movable. It was so form-fitted to every nook and every crevice of my real person that it was like wearing a very tight glove. That was a yummy one. The Surfer was like wearing a hug every day.

Interview: Joe Cornish

with richard whittaker



A long, long time ago on a late night Channel 4 show, Joe Cornish was best known as the voice of a vintage Luke Skywalker figure and the guy that microwaved a light bulb in a glass of milk. Now the co-star of *The Adam and Joe Show* co-hosts *Adam and Joe* on BBC 6 Music with his long-time comedy partner Adam Buxton and, along with *Dr. Who* show runner Steven Moffat and *Shaun of the Dead* director Edgar Wright, he got his first major Hollywood credit as a co-scripiter for Steven Spielberg's *The Adventures of Tintin*. He and Wright also recently turned in a fresh draft of their script for Marvel's *Ant Man* film adaptation. However, it is his directorial debut *Attack the Block* that really put him on the map. The tale of alien invasion in South

London is a mix of *The Warriors* and *Aliens* that Cornish has nicknamed *Super 8 Mile*: Even though it met a chilly reception at the UK box office, it has become a cult favorite in America, taking the festival circuit by storm and kicking down the doors. Hub Fiction caught up with Cornish the day after his film's debut at the SXSW Film Festival, and he talked about the personal experiences that lead to his alien invasion drama, the demonization of urban youth, and the importance of language in sci-fi and urban realism.

Hub Magazine: This is a long way from writing for toys on *The Adam and Joe Show*. You set yourself a very high bar for your directorial debut, then you broke the old rule about working with children and animals.

JC: And special effects and chases and explosions. I know. Edgar [Wright] said that before I'd shot it, he said, 'Are you sure?' But, you know, the list of first time directors in the UK is very long, the list of second time directors is much shorter, the list of third time directors is very short. So I thought, 'I've probably got one shot at this' and people in the movie business like to invest in the mysterious, new thing. You only get one chance to break your cherry, and I thought, 'Man, if I only get one chance to do this, why not be ambitious? Why not go for it? And if I fuck up, so be it.' And it wasn't until last week, when we showed it to some British press, I thought I had fucked up. You just don't know.

HM: It is obviously a science fiction movie, but it is very grounded real life, and particularly in working class South London.

JC: I grew up there, and that film is very much a love letter to that area. I've lived there my whole life, lived in Clerkenwell for two years, came running back to South London. Nothing bad ever happened there in my entire life until that night when a gang of kids mugged me back in 2001. That was the spark of the idea. It made me want to talk to the kid that did it. It was a weird situation. He was frightened, his friends looked nervous. I thought to myself, 'You probably live 'round the corner, we're probably into the same music, we're on the same level of *Call of Duty*, we've probably passed each other on the street, and yet here we are in this weird ritualized situation that bears very little resemblance or relation to reality.' So really the process of researching the film was almost like one of those therapy things, where the victim meets the perpetrator. I love South London, and I'd hate to think that anyone thought it was portraying it in a negative light. That kind of stuff happens all over London, and the purpose of the film is to show that those kids, who the papers demonize, are human and dimensional, and it's possible for people who do or have done bad things to have good in them.

HM: The whole tabloid war on 'Hoodies' has almost been like World War II propaganda posters, filled with stereotypes of what urban youth is about. There is a real kinship here with how Chris Morris attacks the tabloid depiction of British Muslims in *Four Lions*.

JC: I thought that when I saw *Four Lions*, 'This is not dissimilar. This is about a disenfranchised and demonized portion of society.' In *Four Lions* they're picked off by their own explosives, and in my film the kids are picked off by these creatures that they bait. So, yeah, that absolutely crossed my mind, but when you're making a movie you tend to see your own film in everything you watch.

There are a lot of extremely well made films in the UK that I find ethically questionable. As a writer, it's your job to see all aspects of all characters, certainly your main characters, and I think to use a type of kid who is already demonized by the press as a demon in a film is not for me a particularly imaginative or interesting way to go. They're children, and it weirds me out that society is capable of not only calling them monsters but creating films in which they are monsters, and expecting audiences to enjoy and identify with that.

HM: It's this idea that childhood only counts as long as the kid doesn't do something bad, then they're a grown-up. You touch on that with the central character of Moses, and that is such a pivotal performance. How did you find John Boyega, the actor who plays him?

JC: He was one of the first kids we found. He was in a play in a theater in North London. He was on stage for about five, ten minutes of a two hour play. We were looking for kids of a particular age. I wanted them to look young and a lot of these films you often get actors in their early twenties pretending to be teenagers, and I wanted to put younger kids on the screen because I wanted more empathy. I wanted to give a young black actor a lead role as well, because I see a much broader spectrum of racial backgrounds in the world than I see reflected on screen. So we had quite specific criteria, and we just looked everywhere and we just very luckily found this kid in this play. He looks great. He looks vulnerable and he has amazing eyes. John Boyega, if anyone thinks he's good then please see him. He's such an amazing kid, he's so hard working and devoted. He's really ambitious. He absolutely loves Michael Bay, he's obsessed with the

Transformers films. If I could somehow arrange for him to meet Michael Bay or Will Smith, he would flip his lid. American movies mean so much to these kids, and they feel so distant from it, so they were excited to be in a film like this.

I'm hugely proud of John. When he first auditioned, he gave a much more kidulthood, urban performance. When I said to him, 'John, this character is kind of taciturn and I want to see that in your eyes,' he was quite freaked out by that, because I think he'd never come across a piece of material that asked him to be internal. He was always being asked to be aggressive and confrontational, and he really seized on it. I couldn't be happier, I think he's brilliant and he really deserves to go places. It wouldn't have worked without him.

HM: The language also sounds very authentic, really catching the urban patois. Were you ever afraid that audiences, especially international audiences, might have trouble with that?

JC: I was very aware of that. There are brilliant film makers in the UK like Shane Meadows and Bob Clark, and they make these brilliant, very British films, but they have trouble internationally. I'm not saying mine won't, but we really thought about that and tried to do various things to try and make it play. We limited the vocabulary, so there is a glossary of about ten phrases in the film that are used repeatedly. The ambition was that, through context, an intelligent person would understand what was said. South London kids have a way of speaking that is pretty enunciated. North London is a bit more cocaine-y, it's a bit more rat-a-tat. South London is a bit more marijuana-y, it's a bit more lazy and annunciated. So when we cast, we looked for kids who had annunciation, and those who didn't we gave a little voice training to, to ensure that you could at least understand the word. I was very keen for it to not be a dialogue-driven film. My personal taste is toward movies that you can watch with the sound down. For me a lot of British movies are too dialogue-driven. They come from television, which is very dialogue-driven, and I didn't want that. I thought of *Apocalypse*, I thought of *The Gods Must be Crazy*, I thought of Yoda in *Star Wars*, of Klingon, and Nadsat in *A Clockwork Orange*. For me the language is another place where urban culture and science fiction intersected. It was something exotic and popcorny and cool.

HM: In that way it's very similar to the post-apocalyptic Pidgin English in *Ridley Walker*. Even if you don't understand the words, you get the rhythm of the language.

JC: I thought of *A Clockwork Orange* the novel, I thought of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, I thought of Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*. All novels written in argot. I figured that, if people can deal with Guy Ritchie, they can deal with this film. It's not *The King's Speech*. It's the street kids' speech.

HM: So how did the idea of adding a sci-fi element to that social realism come about?

JC: I described the mugging, and that made me very interested in the character aspect of this. And then, when I was a kid, I grew up in that area. I'm a bit less street than Prince Charles. I did not grow up in an estate, but I grew up in Stockwell. I remember the Brixton riots very clearly, I spent my whole childhood shopping in that area. When I was growing up, I was seeing all those amazing [George] Lucas and Spielberg films, *Gremlins*, *Poltergeist*, *Critters*, and like any kid I would project those fantasies into my environment. Just like *E.T.* was an amazing combination of suburban America and a little droplet of fantasy, I used to have fantasies on the bus to Stockwell or Dulwich, I used to have fantasies that the top deck of the bus was strapped to a Wampa. That's what I would do, and I think weirdly the mugging opened that little bit of my brain as an escape mechanism. I started to think, 'Well, what would have happened if this situation had been flipped by this out-of-this-world occurrence?' That intrigued me, how these kids who were confrontational might be my only hope. Then I started to look for science fictional things in that world, and I looked at the architecture of the estate, and I thought, 'Wow, this architecture is now used in down-beat films. Wasn't that the architecture in *A Clockwork Orange* and *Logan's Run*, and wasn't that built with a futuristic state of mind in the '50s? It used to be this aspirational architecture.' I thought that the kids looked like ninjas or warriors or samurai. They've got these strangely cinematic vehicles. The bikes reminded me of *E.T.*, the mopeds reminded me of speeder bikes. Even the maps of the estate reminded me of the maps of Middle Earth on the fly leaf of a Tolkien book.

SURVEY

give us some feedback...



Here's a simple survey that we'd like you, our dear readers, to fill in and get back to us. It'll certainly help us shape things in the future...

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- What would you like to see less of?
- What sort of regularity would you like Hub to come out on? Weekly with less, or six weekly with more?
- What format works best for you? (PDF/ePub/kindle)
- Are we covering genres that interest you?
- What genres would you like to see us cover that at present we don't?
- We rely on sponsorship and donations to pay our authors and cover our costs. Would you be prepared to back a Hub powered Kickstarter to enable us to break free of this model?

Thoughts and suggestions all welcomed. Please email your answers back to us at:
hubmagazinesurvey@gmail.com :)

