

Hub

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The Last Hub of the Year

It's been a busy old year. After Hub issue 2 was published, and I took the decision to print no more (due to lack of advertising), I embarked on a bit of a rollercoaster. Orbit's generous patronage in April meant that *Hub* was able to continue in an electronic format, and it seems this is its natural element. In just six months *Hub* went from being the newest weekly electronic genre fiction magazine on the market to being the most widely-read of its type in Europe, partly due to a National Lottery grant awarded to us specifically to pay for marketing. We have our eyes on that "in the world" accolade. We've published some big name authors, as well as a whole host of emerging writers – many of which have published books this year, many of which will publish next year. We're proud to be a (small) link in their bids for world literary domination.

This year I attended my first ever convention – FantasyCon in September, hosted by the British Fantasy Society. I was a little nervous (I went alone) and hoped I wouldn't be spending every spare minute propped against the bar, desperately clutching a beer, trying not to look like a wallflower. My wife was extremely embarrassed, and if asked where I was that weekend, she was planning to tell people I was in prison, in order to save face. In fact, our expectations were completely wrong. There were no Klingons in sight, no queuing behind stormtroopers in the lavatory, and no hairy-footed hobbits wandering around fingering their rings.

What I did encounter was the friendliest group of strangers I'd ever met. And boy – can they consume beer! At the end of the weekend-long festivities I immediately booked for the 2008 event (and if any of you are planning to attend EasterCon this year, I'll see you there!).

Plenty of reviewing work for other magazines in 2007 has guaranteed an extra holiday in 2008, and I became editor of *Prism* – the newsletter for the British Fantasy Society (my first issue being *mainly* successful – I forgot to put page numbers on it! Doh!)

Enjoy your New Year celebrations, and we'll see you next week, with our Flash Special, and our first column from new contributor (and my favourite podcaster), Mur Lafferty.

Lee Harris

About *Hub*

Every week we publish a piece of short fiction, along with at least one review and sometimes a feature or interview. We can afford to do this largely due to the generosity of our sponsors over at **Orbit**. If you like what you read here, please consider making a donation over at www.hub-mag.co.uk. We pay our writers, and anything you donate helps us to continue to attract high quality fiction and non-fiction.



by James Cooper

First published in
You Are The Fly: Tales of Redemption and Distress.

Humdrumming, August 2007

When I visited Frank to console him after his mother's death I found him sitting in his pyjamas eating meat. His face was grey from lack of sleep and his left eye twitched as he ate, but other than that he claimed he was fine.

He didn't look fine though; he looked sick. The house was filthy and smelt like a farmer's market after a day in the sun. I wondered how much of the meat had gone bad.

I wanted to hug him, but there was something writhing on the plate in his hand. When I asked him what the hell it was, he looked puzzled.

"They're worms," he told me, "dug up from the garden; a prize delicacy if they've been 'evacuated' on oatmeal for a few days before serving."

I looked at the plate, then at him, and felt sick. I turned away before he had time to prove it wasn't a joke.

You might think Frank and I were unlikely friends, but in truth, we had a lot in common. We'd both been raised in the same neighbourhood, tried to escape as young men into a variety of ill-fitting jobs, and been drawn back home to tend to parents too sick to fend for themselves. In his case, it was his mother, Jean, a quiet woman seemingly driven closer to death by the melancholia that had plagued her adult life. She lived sparingly, content with whatever affection she derived from her son, and died, like my own father two years before, with only a dim recollection of who she was. I'd been through the exact same process and thought I understood perfectly what Frank might be experiencing, but he was trawling a darkness far beyond anything I could relate to, and I felt increasingly removed from his life. I was saddened to think of Frank in this state, but I knew better than to intrude on a man's grief. Or thought I did. As it turned out, perhaps I should have followed my instinct and intervened in some way, but by the time I realised just how far Frank's delirium had carried him, it was too late. The damage had been done. He'd immersed himself in the darkness that attends every personal tragedy, and there was nothing I could do to make it stop.

I arrived one evening after work to find him in the kitchen wearing his mother's tatty apron. There was a picture of two sizzling burgers on the chest and the message: 'Barbecue Naked! Show off your buns' printed directly underneath. He was poring over a large hardback book entitled **Entertaining with Insects: The Original Guide To Insect Cookery**. It was surprisingly thick and I wondered who the hell, apart from wrecked people like Frank, might possibly be in the market for a recipe on how best to grill a moth! Even more salient, perhaps, was who the hell would invest valuable time researching and writing such a thing? In this instance, it was a Mexican named Miguel de Allende.

"Good eats?" I asked, entering the kitchen.

Frank looked up vacantly and smiled. "Ever eat an insect, Bill?" he asked.

I shook my head and tried to ignore the mess that Frank had somehow generated since I'd last been round to tidy up.

"Not really my thing."

Frank wiped strands of hair from his eyes and looked pleased with himself.

"Incorrect," he said. "Incorrect!" He looked back down at the book.

"How so?" I said, when it became apparent that his attention had wavered.

He looked at me as though he was about to impart some closely-guarded government secret.

"There are loads of foods we eat that have insects or insect parts in them, Bill. Tiny fragments that we can't even see. Everyone knows that." Another nose-dive into the book.

"I'm not sure I follow."

He sighed. "The Department of Health has set a standard called the Food Defect Action Levels, which –" He suddenly threw the cook book onto the table and pulled open a drawer, frowning as he ransacked it like a petulant child. "– here we are," he said, retrieving a slim official-looking document, "which, and I quote, 'are set on the basis of no hazard to health. These levels are set because it is not possible, and never has been possible, to grow in open fields, harvest and process crops that are totally free of natural defects.'" He slammed the book shut.

"Such as insects," I added.

"Exactly!"

He whipped his hair out of his eyes and threw the book back in the drawer.

"It's an interesting concept," I said, trying to keep the tone light and conversational.

Frank stared at me. "It's not just a concept," he said, sounding more and more like a conspiracy-theorist. "It's a bloody way of life!" He took a step towards me and I could smell the rancid apron and the unwashed body beneath. "Follow me," he said.

He left the kitchen and headed for the stairs, assuming implicitly that I'd follow him from the room. Shamefully, I have to admit that I considered walking away there and then, leaving the man to slowly unravel in peace. But fear of what we both might become if I didn't accept his invitation compelled me to move towards the stairs.

"It's a bit messy," Frank said from above.

"Don't worry," I muttered. "I've seen worse."

I entered the small box room, which was no less unkempt than any of the other rooms I'd had the misfortune of visiting, and saw that Frank was hunched over a small desk, peering into a microscope.

He withdrew when he saw me and ushered me in.

"Take a look," he said, offering me the chair.

I sat down and squinted into the lens. On the slide was a dark amalgam of colours and shapes that I failed to identify.

"What am I looking at?" I asked.

"Mashed cornmeal, rodent hairs and insect fragments."

I cringed. "You're kidding me?"

Frank looked mortified. "Absolutley not! Here –" he said, thrusting a sheet of paper under my nose that had been lying on the desk. "Read it."

I took the paper and couldn't help noticing the tacky fingerprints at the edges where Frank had repeatedly handled it, serving his delusion to obscene levels, it would seem. This is what the document contained:

Product	Action Level
Apple butter	5 insects per 100g
Berries	4 larvae per 500g OR 10 whole insects per 500g
Ground paprika	75 insect fragments per 25g
Chocolate	80 microscopic insect fragments per 100g
Canned sweet corn	2 3mm-length larvae, cast skins or fragments
Cornmeal	1 insect per 50g
Canned mushrooms	20 maggots per 100g
Peanut butter	60 fragments per 100g (136 per lb)
Tomato paste, pizza, and other sauces	30 eggs per 100g OR 2 maggots per 100g
Wheat flour	75 insect fragments per 50g
<i>Source: The Food Defect Action Levels: Current Levels for Natural or Unavoidable Defects for Human Use that Present No Health Hazard. Department of Health & Human Services</i>	

I read the contents twice, feeling my stomach heave at the dreadful implication, and handed it back to Frank.

“Well?” he said.

I didn’t know how to respond, so I merely smiled and said: “Maybe there are some things it’s best not to know.”

I turned to leave, but Frank held on to my arm and looked into my eyes with grim lucidity. “That’s what they want you to think,” he said. “That’s how all of this works!” He threw his hands into the air in contempt and charged off back down the stairs. “You make it too easy for them!” he shouted, though when I returned to the kitchen, Frank once again had his head buried in the bizarre cook book.

I didn’t feel it my place to point out that his outrage might be a little misplaced, given his intense interest in the recipes, but the irony of it made me smile at a time when I wondered if I’d ever smile again.

Frank pulled his head from the book and seemed to be struck by another random thought. He threw the volume onto the table yet again and rushed out to the back yard, shouting over his shoulder: “I need to fetch something from the shed!”

For a moment, the kitchen was oddly silent, as though its personality had departed along with Frank, and I realised with a rush of heated emotion that this was probably the case. Without Frank, this house, this kitchen, would be nothing; just another empty box waiting to be filled. It was Frank, with all his energy and crazy hurricane ideas, that breathed life into the place and made it such a powerfully affecting home.

I picked up the cook book and arbitrarily turned to a page somewhere in the middle. This is what I read:

Mealworms and crickets are easy to obtain from bait and tackle shops, or from distributors. If mealworms come packed in newspaper, they need to be changed to bran meal or corn meal or starved for 24 hours, to purge their guts. To separate mealworms from any attached food, waste material, or other debris, place a handful of them in a colander and gently toss. Remove any dead worms, and wash the remaining live insects under cool water. Place the worms on paper towels and pat dry. The mealworms are ready to be cooked or frozen for later use. Crickets should be placed in a refrigerator before attempting to wash them, to slow them down. If, before they are

completely washed, they become very active, put them back in the refrigerator. You may want to remove the legs, wings, and ovipositor of crickets after dry roasting them.

I turned to the back of the book, in search of an author photo, but the man had sensibly kept his image to himself. I replaced the book on the table, feeling less sure of the world in which I lived, and watched Frank come running back down the garden from the shed.

When he entered the kitchen he was breathless and I could see, with an increasing sense of dread, that he was carrying a container that was crawling with ants. He gently placed it on the Formica worktop and started unscrewing the top.

“Do you know what *hormiga culona* are, Bill?” he asked.

I shook my head, hoping that the gesture would be enough to stop the conversation in its tracks.

“*Hormiga culona*,” he said with delight, rolling the unfamiliar words on his tongue, “are big-butt queen ants that live in Mexico and Central America. Columbia’s exports of these insects are down this year because of the harsh winter they’ve endured and because of the aggressive lizards and birds that have migrated from the north. But here,” he said, holding the container proudly aloft, “is our very own batch, which Mr Allende will help us prepare!”

I shuddered at the thought of the fattened ants escaping, though the idea of preparing them for anything other than a timely squishing was no less horrifying, and I silently urged Frank to replace the lid. Instead, he reached his hand into the container and allowed a dozen or more to crawl up his wrist.

“These are usually served dipped in chocolate,” he said, “but they’re pretty tasty cooked in a little red wine too.”

He shook the insects into a frying pan, added a healthy dash of Merlot, and turned up the heat. I could hear the ants spitting in their own fat from halfway across the room.

“These babies are full of protein,” he said, spooning them back into the pan. “They’re very aromatic and have a rich taste like mint or cinnamon.”

From behind, Frank looked like one of those crazed gourmet chefs, the kind you find on reality TV shows, all flying sorbet and rattling pans, lost in his own creation. I wanted to pity him but he seemed perfectly happy, with his black hair flailing and the queen ants popping in the pan.

I walked out of the kitchen and left by the front door, certain that he didn’t even know I’d gone. As I climbed into the car, I wondered what I might eat for tea; wondered if I’d ever eat anything again.

The next few days passed in a blur and I was unable to pay Frank a visit. He wasn’t far from my thoughts though, and neither was his grief, which had manifested itself in such a peculiar way I barely knew where to start. I knew what had driven him to such an extreme response, but felt ill-equipped to deal with it as I intuitively knew I should. I tried to think back to my own father’s passing, still a tough issue to ponder for long, and grimly recalled how black my life had seemed back then, each day haunted by images of my father’s final days, the nights a terrifying reminder of what awaited me the minute I woke up. It was an awful period in my life and I desperately wanted to ease Frank from whatever harrowing journey he currently felt compelled to endure.

To try and find a point of perspective on his new arrangement, I visited the library and ran a search on ‘insect cuisine’. I was appalled to discover that Frank’s diet, which had seemed so unsavoury to me just a few days ago, was actually very popular in many of the world’s most expansive cultures. My prejudice notwithstanding, it seemed that half the world had latched on to the nutritious value of eating bugs. Fried grasshoppers, Japanese ants, bee and silkworm pupae, the Mexican maguey worm: all of them featured heavily in the material I unearthed, usually followed by advice on how they might be prepared. Most common was shallow-frying in butter or deep-frying in vegetable fat, which reminded me of Frank and the fat-bodied ants. Testimonials as to how these creatures might taste left me feeling a little sceptical, for there was no one on earth with rhetoric persuasive enough to convince me that a worm might actually taste like a nut.

I replaced the books and logged off the computer, feeling dazed. Wasn't there something in the bible about not eating insects? Something about 'things that swarm upon the earth'? I'm not a religious man, but it sounded like shrewd, practical advice, and I wondered if Frank had acquainted himself with the good book lately in order to try and wrench himself from the hole into which he'd sunk.

It was unlikely; neither of us had much of a reason to turn to God, not before death had come calling, and there's something faintly sinister about stepping into a church knowing that you're only there because you're looking for someone to curse. God would never be the answer for Frank either, I was sure of that, though I was growing less certain of my footing where my friend was concerned with each passing day.

I decided to visit him that night, just to let him know I was still around, and I'd make sure to drop in Dr Brewer's name while I was there. God might have forsaken us, I conceded, but medical science had not. It seemed a vulgar course of action, but what prayer couldn't achieve, drugs most certainly could, and I left the library feeling more focused than at any time in the previous two weeks, keen to lead my friend into the light.

When I arrived, Frank was in the basement on his hands and knees, laying down bait for the rats. The bulb down there was dim, casting him in a cold, uneven light, but his eyes were bright with tension and hope. He looked like a Shakespearean fool, having crafted a lop-sided chef's hat out of newspaper that had yellowed in the sun.

"Christ, Frank," I said, as I descended the stairs. "What the hell's happened to you?"

He glanced over his shoulder and placed a grimy finger to his lips.

"Shhh! They're down here! I know they are. I just have to catch the little buggers out."

He'd set traps all round the basement and was now busy leaving scraps of meat in each of the wells, presumably leftover from whatever delight he'd rustled up for lunch.

"These are rats, man," I said, straining to impress upon him the horror of the situation. "Let's go upstairs. We can find something else to do, talk maybe, like we used to in the old days. What do you say?"

"Stop yakking," he said, barely even processing what I'd just said. "You'll scare them away."

"Frank," I said, raising my voice. "Listen to me. This is fucking sick. We have to go upstairs *now*. We have to talk. Okay?"

He turned and looked at me as though I'd just committed the worst social gaffe known to man.

"What about?" he said impatiently.

"About all this," I said, embracing the basement with a wave of my hand. "The insects. The worms. The fucking rats, man. What the hell are you doing to yourself?"

Frank stopped baiting the traps and gave me his full attention, the rasp of the paper hat sounding ominously like a snake's rattle as he turned. I saw the beginning of a bold headline in the reconfigured newspaper (**CREMATORIUM PLANS PUT ON**), before the creases and the folds robbed it of meaning. I found myself wondering if the sentence might finish '**BACKBURNER**', and wanted to giggle like a loon, before Frank took a step forward, adjusted his hat, and started to nod.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you Bill? To talk and talk and talk and talk."

He looked me in the eye and I saw a familiar gleam that made me feel nauseous.

"Let me tell you a little something about Vietnam."

I resisted the urge to grab him by the throat and instead tried to locate in his eyes the sensors that were still connected to whatever sanity his rational mind possessed.

"We don't have time for this right now, Frank. We just need to get out for a while, take a walk, try and figure out what it is we should do."

He shook his head, as though he could dislodge any vestige of reason from his brain, and smiled. "In the 1980s Vietnam came close to famine because of the disastrous attempt to force all the

country's small family farms to merge into giant collectives. People had to eat whatever they could lay their hands on, and as the exploding rat population was damaging crops, many of the peasants simply took to eating the rats.”

I closed my eyes and tried to dislodge the welter of images that were swirling back there in the dark. I wanted to leave Frank to whatever mania had consumed him, but I knew I was obligated to stay. Besides which, Frank clearly hadn't finished.

“In North Korean prison camps,” he said, “rats are considered a gift from the gods, should one be found creeping from the bottom of the latrine. The prisoners catch it with their bare hands and devour it raw, as rats are the only source of meat they can find. They say the taste of a rat, even a raw one, is unforgettable, though if they're caught eating one they're beaten to within an inch of their lives.”

I felt sick; violently, hideously sick. Whatever horror was inhabiting Frank's brain, I no longer wanted any part of it. I mumbled something about visiting him in the next few days and ran from the basement, trying hard not to gag.

When I reached the front yard, I took a breath of cleansing air and tried to block out the image of Frank hunched over the traps in the dark. I no longer knew what to do for the best, so I simply clambered into the car, wound down the windows and drove away.

It was three weeks before I summoned the nerve to go back.

It's hard for me to *admit* the rest, let alone find the words to write it down. It doesn't show me in a terribly flattering light.

I wanted Frank to recover, to find a way through the grief that was eating away at him, but I also tried to push him from my mind. For three weeks, every time I thought about him there were commensurate images of those queen ants popping in the pan, of rats squealing in terror as the traps snapped their spines in the cooling bowels of the house.

I wanted him to dig himself out of it, just as I had, but I was sickened by my inability to help.

When I eventually wrestled with my conscience and paid him another visit, it was too late. The insects he had cultivated and the rats he had attracted with bad meat had somehow brought him to his knees, and the feast had clearly been in full swing for several days. How they had overwhelmed him I had no idea; maybe he had even slipped towards some final incapacity and had offered himself to them in the night. Perhaps it had been a sacrifice conjured from the very heart of his paranoia and pain.

In the final reckoning, it didn't matter a jot. They had got to him, just, I suspect, as he always imagined they would. When I pushed open the back door and saw his body swarming with black fur and flitting insects, I finally understood what it was that Frank had wanted to become.

Something I would never forget.

The Hub Awards by Lee Harris

Well, not really.

This is simply a chance for me to reflect on some of the genre highlights of *my* year. This list includes a number of “Best Of”s. These include categories such as “Best Horror Novel” and “Best Film”. These aren’t necessarily items that were published/released in 2007; rather, they are indicative of the best I have enjoyed this year – thus, there may be works that have been produced prior to 2007, but that (for whatever reason) I didn’t get the opportunity to enjoy them when they were first released.

So... onto the Awards...

1. Best Science Fiction Novel
2. Best Horror Novel
3. Best Fantasy Novel
4. Best Comedy Novel
5. Best TV Tie-In Novel
6. Best Comedy (Audio)
7. Best Film
8. Best TV Series
9. Best Audio Drama
10. Best Comic or Collection
11. Best Writer
12. Best Collection (single author)
13. Best Collection (multi-author)
14. Best Artist
15. Best Short Story (within Hub)
16. Best Short Story (non-Hub)
17. Best Podcast
18. Best Dead Tree Magazine (UK)
19. Best Website for Timewasting
20. Best Blog

1. Best Science Fiction Novel

I’d always felt myself to be more a science fiction enthusiast than fantasy, yet looking through the list of books I’ve devoured this year, science fiction plays a surprisingly small part of my year’s reading entertainment. I was looking forward to Warren Ellis’ *Crooked Little Vein* but was ultimately disappointed – it was easy enough to read, but felt like Ellis had a great idea for some set pieces, but no interest in connecting them in a coherent manner. The most enjoyable book I’ve read in this category this year was **Eric Brown’s *Helix*** (reviewed in *Hub* issue 9) – a bold space opera, and a fun read.

2. Best Horror Novel

I’ve read quite a bit of horror this year. I certainly recommend Gary McMahon’s novella *Rough Cut* (Pendragon Press), but the winning novel in this category goes to **Sarah Pinborough’s *Breeding Ground***. This is Pinborough’s fourth novel, but the first of hers I’d read (as a result of it being nominated for a British Fantasy Award). The story is boldly told, and the action begins quite close to the beginning of the novel. It is also truly a horror novel, in that it is truly horrific. It feels like an early James Herbert book (and the early ones were his best). Reviewed in *Hub* issue 36.

3. Best Fantasy Novel

A bumper crop of Fantasy novels from which to choose, this year. Special commendation goes to Mike Carey’s excellent *Dead Men’s Boots* – the third in his highly enjoyable Felix Castor series. Charlie Huston also made a mark this year with his two Joe Pitt books – *Already Dead* and *No Dominion*. Huston seems to be doing for Vampires in Brooklyn what Carey is doing for exorcists in London. The Best Fantasy Novel I’ve read this year, however – ***The Lies of Locke Lamora* by Scott Lynch**. This

debut novel has garnered critical as well as commercial success since its release in 2006, and was followed up this year by a sequel – *Red Seas Under Red Skies* which sits on my bookshelf even now, whispering “read me, read me”. I’ll give in, soon.

4. Best Comedy Novel

I seem to have read quite a lot of these this year, too – largely as review material for other magazines. The Christopher Moore books I’ve read this year all have something to recommend them (*Lamb* is an enjoyable tale of Christ’s childhood, *A Dirty Job* tells a tale of one of the many incarnations of Death, *Fluke* is fun, then becomes just plain weird, and *The Stupidest Angel* is perhaps the funniest horror story you’ll ever read). Jonathan Barnes’ debut novel *The Somnambulist* also impresses. The winner, however, is **Paul Magrs’ *Never the Bride*** (followed closely by its sequel *Something Borrowed* – reviewed in *Hub* issue 36). After reviewing Magrs’ latest *Doctor Who* novella for *DeathRay Magazine* (and giving it something of a pounding) I was persuaded to read *Never the Bride*. It’s the story of two little old ladies (ok – one isn’t quite as little as the other) who live in Whitby. They have set themselves up as the guardians of the town, and protect it from all supernatural threats. It’s essentially *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* – *The Retirement Years*. Huge amounts of fun!

5. Best TV Tie-In Novel

I’ve read quite a few *Doctor Who* tie-ins this year (due to review commitments). The winner – **Mark Morris’ *Forever Autumn*** was an easy win – quite easily the best Tenth Doctor novel published so far, and surely a strong contender for best *Doctor Who* novel, ever.

6. Best Comedy (Audio)

Graham Duff’s Nebulous is the clear winner here, despite some high-profile competition from Dirk Maggs’ adaptation of Douglas Adams’ *Dirk Gently’s Holistic Detective Agency*. *Nebulous* was first broadcast on Radio 4 in 2005, and released on CD this year. It tells the story of a government agency, KENT (Key Environmental Non-judgemental Taskforce), and their fight against evil. Starring Mark Gatiss as Professor Nebulous, and ably supported by writer Graham Duff, Big Finish’s Nicholas Briggs and others, *Nebulous* is possibly the best present you can buy your ears (unless, you know, you have an ear infection, in which case some form of medication might be preferable). As funny as THHGTTG.

7. Best Film

A strong year. *Transformers* is never going to win any awards (disclaimer: it might), but was great fun, *The Illusionist* and *The Prestige* both impressed with their tales of Victorian magicians, *Children of Men* was a strong contender, beaten by a nose by ***Pans Labyrinth***. A story of hope and despair, and one of the most beautiful films I have seen in a long while.

8. Best TV Series

Another strong category this year. *Smallville* s7 lost some of the consistency it achieved in season 6, *Battlestar Galactica* continued to impress, and left us with a suitably intriguing cliffhanger. *Pushing Daisies* showed that there is still a market for whimsy, and *Reaper* was also enjoyable. The biggest newcomer, of course, was *Heroes* which did much to bring superheroics into the mainstream – key episodes include *Company Man* and *Six Months Earlier*. *Doctor Who* enjoyed its strongest season to date, with standout episodes such as *Blink* and *The Family of Blood*. For sheer consistency, however, ***Heroes (s1)*** is the winner. Season 2 (which has just finished airing in the US) is also a lot of fun, but hasn’t quite retained the quality of the first season.

9. Best Audio Drama

The majority of the audio dramas I’ve heard this year are from the Big Finish stable, and they vary in quality from “pretty good” to “excellent”, with most of them in the fourth quality quartile. Only one has failed to entertain, and made the listening experience feel like a chore. Of the better storylines, the 7th Doctor *Frozen Time* was excellent, and possibly McCoy’s best Who script (in either medium) so far. Several of the 2000AD tie-ins impressed (they’re currently being sold at ridiculously low prices at www.bigfinish.com) including the Dredd/Johnny Alpha crossover *Pre-Emptive Revenge* and the final Dredd story *Solo* in which Toby Longworth plays every character! The winning production, however, is ***Sapphire and Steel 2.5: The Perfect Day***. David Warner and Susannah Harker excel as Steel and Sapphire respectively, and this is a top quality script.

10. Best Comic or Collection

Another category with a number of strong contenders. Mike Carey's run on X-Men has cemented his status as an A-player, and the first collection of his work on the title – *Supernovas* – is an excellent example of his ability to write team books with the best of them. His series *Crossing Midnight* for Vertigo is another excellent title, but is let down by poor monthly sales. Hopefully the trade sales will make up for this as the title deserves to continue. Charlie Huston also impressed with *Moon Knight* – a relatively minor Marvel character who could be a major asset to the publisher with Huston's continuing work, and the right treatment from Marvel. Paul Dini and Grant Morrison both did some excellent work with Batman, and Paul Cornell's run on *Wisdom* was a delight from start to finish. Collection of the year, however, is **Ed Brubaker's *Captain America Omnibus***. Not only the best collection of the year, but almost certainly the best run on Captain America in the history of the character. It's a big book (with a price to match) but well worth the investment in money and time.

11. Best Writer

Quite a broad category, this, covering writers of all media. Neil Gaiman is an obvious contender for his collection (*Fragile Things* – see next category), the film *Beowulf*, his blog and the comic series *The Eternals*. Brubaker's run on *Captain America* and *Daredevil* is enough to get him a recommendation. The winner, however, is **Mike Carey** – top notch comics work (*Crossing Midnight*, *Daredevil*, *Ultimate Vision*, *Ultimate Fantastic Four*, *Wetworks*, *Faker*, *The Stranded*) combined with one of the most enjoyable novel series currently published (his Felix Castor Novels). The fact that he's also one of the nicest people you could ever hope to meet is immaterial, but a nice bonus.

12. Best Collection (Single Author)

Gaiman's *Fragile Things* was a bit of a disappointment. Though there was plenty to enjoy in the book, there was also a lot of filler. James Cooper's *You Are The Fly* (from which this week's story is taken) almost won, but was pipped to the post by **Susanna Clarke's *The Ladies of Grace Adieu*** – a series of tales set in the same universe and period as her superb debut novel, *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*.)

13. Best Collection (Multi-Author)

I've disqualified the various "Best Of" anthologies from this category. Solaris have produced two excellent books in this category (*The Solaris Book of New Science Fiction* and *The Solaris Book of New Fantasy*), and the British Fantasy Award-winning *Extended Play: The Elastic Book of Music* (Elastic Press) is truly excellent, but the winner is Pendragon's superb ***New Writings in the Fantastic* edited by John Grant** – over 40 stories, and not a filler to be seen.

14. Best Artist

No contest for me, this year. **Vincent Chong**. Vinnie created the cover for *Hub*'s second (and last) print edition, and in September he won the Best Artist award at the British Fantasy Awards. As a direct result of the inclusion of his artwork I bought the two John Scalzi limited edition reprints of *Old Man's War* and *The Ghost Brigade* at £30 a piece, rather than picking up the standard paperback editions at about a fiver. His reputation is growing, and he will be very big, very soon.

15. Best Short Story (Within Hub)

With over 40 stories from which to choose, this is a difficult category. From the comedic (Al Stuart's *Lenny and the Travel Ninja* in issue 5) to the hopeful (*One in a Million* – Kate Kelly, issue 8) and the R-Rated (I.C. Johnson's *The Mechanism*, issue 22). All of them have something to recommend, but as I am forcing myself to choose one, I'll name **Jetse de Vries' *Transcendence Express*** (issue 2). A thought-provoking tale of computing in the third world.

16. Best Short Story (Non-Hub)

Gaiman's *How to Talk to Girls at Parties* (from *Fragile Things*) almost won, but was pipped to the post by Cory Doctorow's *I, Row Boat* (see the full text at <http://www.flurb.net/1/doctorow.htm>) and reprinted in *The Mammoth Book of Best New SF: Volume 20*.

17. Best Podcast

As podcasting becomes more and more popular, podcast sites seem to be appearing every day. There are some excellent new sites dedicated to genre topics, but the best still appear to be the old school – *Starship Sofa*, *EscapePod* and *Pseudopod* still lead the pack. My favourite of the year, however, comes courtesy of our new (from next issue) columnist, the mighty Mur Lafferty. Mur's (usually) weekly podcast *I Should Be Writing* is described as a podcast by a wannabe writer for wannabe writers. Mur describes her writing week, and gives and receives advice to/from her listeners in roughly equal measure. If you're interested in the process of writing, or if you want to improve your game/find the motivation to write, then head over to www.IshouldBeWriting.com and subscribe.

18. Best Dead Tree Magazine (UK)

When *Dreamwatch* became an online magazine back in January it seemed that SFX's domination of the genre news-stands was complete. Around May, however, two new magazines joined the fray. *SciFi Now* came from the Imagine stable – backed by an established publisher, it was the favourite to upset the SFX appcart. *DeathRay* Magazine is the first magazine published by new start-up, Blackfish Publishing. Helmed by Matt Bielby (you'll know him as the founder of other magazines, such as *SFX*) and former SFX staffer Guy Haley, *DeathRay* was the rank outsider. Certainly, it had the experience among its editorial team, but a magazine startup is always a risky venture, and Blackfish didn't have the weight of a company like Imagine to fall back on. Eight months later, and both newcomers have had time to establish their own identities. Ironically, despite being called *SciFi Now*, the Imagine title devotes a lot of its pagecount to features on classic and retro shows. Some schoolboy errors have been allowed to creep in (Flash Gordon was described as "the fastest man on Earth" (it's The Flash) and Garth Ennis was outed as the writer of *Transmetropolitan* when we all believed it was Warren Ellis!). *DeathRay* has the best review section of all the monthlies (including *SFX*) and the features are generally more in-depth, seemingly relying less on distributors' media packs than the other titles. *SFX* is still a quality magazine, but for some time has felt like the writers are allowing the readers to watch them having a good time, rather than writing specifically *for* the readers. On balance, my Best Dead Tree Magazine of the year is *DeathRay*. Top notch writing, quality reviews and they have listened to the criticisms of the first issue or two (mainly regarding layout and structure) and responded, accordingly. The main concern with *DeathRay* is the slightly erratic publishing schedule of the past few issues. If this can be solved, my money is on *DeathRay* becoming the best-selling magazine of its type in the UK. (NB I am an occasional freelance reviewer for *DeathRay* but I have attempted to remain completely impartial in the giving of this "award").

19. Best Website for Timewasting

As a serial timewaster, the internet has become something of a boon and a burden, with many wonderful sites dedicated to taking time from an otherwise productive day. www.SFX.co.uk has a good selection of news snippets posted most days, and is usually worth a look. www.dwscifi.com (the online home of *Dreamwatch*) has new reviews and news posted daily, and again, well worth a daily visit. The website most worthy of this extremely prestigious accolade, however, is Paul Raven's home at www.velcro-city.co.uk. Paul is the webmaster of *The Velcro City Tourist Board*. He also happens to write for *Futurismic*, *Interzone*, and *Vector* (the critical magazine of the British Science Fiction Association). *Velcro City* contains daily links to other items of interest around the internet, as well as essays, reviews and opinion pieces.

20. Best Blog

A few contenders in this category. First up – Neil Gaiman's blog at <http://journal.neilgaiman.com>. Gaiman updates his journal most days, from wherever he happens to be around the world. He writes about his life, his work and offers advice and opinion. One of my (many) daily stops. *Paul Cornell's House of Awkwardness* is also always worth reading (<http://paulcornell.blogspot.com>) though it isn't updated as often as some, so you really need to keep checking back, or add it to your RSS feed. Wil Wheaton's rise from "that-kid-who-used-to-be-in-StarTrek" to contender for Geek Writer of the Year has been a fascinating transformation, and boy does he write well! <http://wilwheaton.typepad.com> is where you'll find him these days. The winner – and there has to be one – is **John Scalzi's *Whatever***. Updated pretty much daily at <http://scalzi.com/whatever> Scalzi puts more effort into his blog than many writers put into their dayjob. If you read only one thing online, well, make it *Hub*. If you read two, *Whatever* should be your next port of call.

If you have enjoyed this week's issue, please consider making a small donation at www.hub-mag.co.uk. We pay our writers, and your support is appreciated.