

Hub

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ASCENT

by Simon Clark

All my research, of late, is concerned with levitation. The mysterious power to hoist a body, animate or inanimate, into the air. One of its supreme exponents was Joseph of Cupertino (1603-1663). Eye-witnesses say that before he floated skyward the saint gave 'a little shriek.'

H.P. Lovecraft to Alfred Galpin, September 4, 1918

*AD 835. The Church embraced the Celtic festival of Samhain, which was celebrated on the first day of November. However, ecclesiastical authorities disingenuously rededicated it as All Saints' Day. The pagan roots for All Saints' Eve run deeper; it didn't merely serve as an arena for ghosts and demons -- for this is the night when natural laws are suspended, reversed, perverted. **Beware...***

The Touch of Velvet by Professor Ruth Porteous, Director of Contemporary Myth, Flyyte University, Illinois.

I didn't give a 'little shriek.' I gave a big one. A bloody great roar that rattled the bedside lamp and set the dogs barking next door. One moment I lay on my bed, while wondering if I should take another look at the dressing on my appendectomy wound; a wound that itched as its raw lips knit themselves together; the next moment I hurtled from the mattress to the ceiling.

Pain hit me with such brutal force I howled. If a battle tank is capable of sensations then, surely, this is what it feels like when a missile punctures its armour plate. I clutched at my flank, clamped my teeth together, screwed shut my eyes, howled louder than I'd ever done before. All that intense pain swamped rational thought; it hurt too much to bother about listening or seeing; there was only that fiery stab as if torturers poured molten iron into the void, which had once played host to my appendix. Even though the pain eventually eased my concerns centered on the surgery. Had the wound ripped open? Is that stinging symptomatic of abscess rupture? Were the sutures still intact?

Cold air blasted into my face, yet my torso burned like a furnace. Then: **Scents.** The Halloween barbecue at the tennis club near my home: intense savoury aromas of sausage, hamburger, kebabs, a rich marinade of herbs and red wine. That distinct sharp smell of the night air as Autumn transmutes to Winter; a blend of wood smoke, ripe berries, mushrooms pushing their white fingertips through the turf. **Sounds:** cars purring along the road, TV laughter from an open bedroom window. At number fifty-four Doyle's rock band rehearsed in the garage. Drums thundered in unholy union with a screaming electric guitar. **Sensation:** rising, rising, rising... **Sights.**

But why did **sight** take so long to kick in? It can only be because the sights were so impossible that they failed to register inside my head for a minute or more. Yet when sight returned I saw the following with perfect clarity: I floated in the cold October air above the roof of my house. Below me: brown roof tiles, TV aerials, chimney pots, lawns, bushes, paths, driveway, the car by the front door. All lit by streetlights.

And streetlights? I saw hundreds of them, forming a fiery orange ocean beneath me. More lights at the tennis club revealed the gray oblongs of its courts, each one marked out with precise white lines. Along Hangthwaite Road danced the Rappour children; they swung sweet-filled pails in one hand and devil pitchforks in the other. I saw the flutter of black plastic capes. They must have been wearing masks but I was too high to tell.

"Catch hold of my hand!"

All I could make out in the darkness as I rose five hundred feet above the ground was a pale shape.

The voice came again, "Please, catch hold of me. I'm going to fall!"

The pale shape that swam out of the dark sky resolved itself into a woman of around thirty, her blonde hair rippling in the breeze. My skin crawled as I recognized the extent of her fear. It transformed

her eyes into something like a pair of blue marbles that bulged from their sockets. In the whites of her eyes veins had swollen into thick red filaments as emotion ratcheted up blood pressure.

She reached out to me, fingers grasping. "Please hold me. I'm going to fall... *I'm going to fall...*"

"Get my hand," I panted. "Hold on."

It's a fundamental response. A fellow human in danger. If you can reach them you can save them. This wasn't time for rational thought: all we understood at that moment as we drifted high above the rooftops was that to hold hands would bring mutual protection.

Her fingertips brushed mine, "Nearly..."

"I can't reach..." she cried.

"Try again." The only experience of weightlessness I'd known was in water. So, as if I swam through the night air, I kicked my legs in an attempt to drive myself forward. Questions of why she floated there in her white nightdress didn't occur. Nor how I'd levitated through the solid, bedroom ceiling. Or why had only certain individuals been 'elevated'? After all, some people beneath me were still happily attached to the Earth. This turbulent swirl of events happened so quickly. All I could do was act on instinct. So: once more I tried to reach the woman as air currents pushed her away. Her hair fluttered while those huge blue eyes locked onto mine as she desperately tried to reach me.

"Listen." Her voice quivered with tension. "We've got to get away from here. They're in the clouds." Her eyes rolled up toward the under-belly of cumulus that was dimly illuminated by light pollution from below.

"But what's-"

"Shh! Can't you hear them? That sound ... if you listen, you can make out the sound of flapping wings." As if she'd hit an air pocket she dropped ten feet. "*Oh! Get my hand! You must get hold of my hand!*" Panic shot through her voice. "*Please! I'm slipping!*"

This time I had to reach downward as if the woman stood in a hole at my feet. Only the bottom of the 'hole' was transparent. Beneath her billowing nightdress from where her bare legs kicked I could see the geometric roof shapes of houses on my road, a bus rumbled around the corner. In the tennis club gardens I could see the tops of heads as people ate their hamburgers. One of the trick-or-treat kids spilled their pail. A cascade of foil-wrapped sweets twinkled on the pavement.

"Oh, God!" The woman's voice became a scream. "It's leaving me. I can feel it. I'm slipping! Get my hand. FOR GODSAKES, CATCH ME!"

I thrust my hand downward to meet her up-stretched arms. Our fingers brushed again; my eyes met hers as hope gave way to nothing less than a sense of doom that seemed to explode those blue irises.

Then she left me. Gravity had her once again in its grip. No, more than that. Gravity seemed to take her back with a vengeance. *She's mine; you can't have her; I'm keeping her down here.* The nightdress fluttered against a backdrop of rooftops. All I could do for her was witness what happened next. She plunged five hundred feet into a floodlit tennis court. The force of the impact didn't just break bones; it disintegrated her. The brilliant lamps revealed a mass of fragments break away from the body to roll across the surface of the court. Then her white cotton nightdress turned all red.

*

Now: rewind back a few days. Work had gone well on the script. The company secured funding from a major commercial investor. The producer finalized contractual terms with the animators. Production would begin January 7 and finish April 31. Mistress Fate, however, abhors a straight line from A to B. Instead of neatly following that straight route from project initiation to completion the production snapped away on weird tangent.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. My initial idea for the film had been clear-cut. Over the Christmas of 1929 the cult writer of the weird, the wonderful and the awe-inspiring, H. P. Lovecraft, penned thirty-six sonnets. All these streamed from his pen in a glorious outburst of activity in a matter of seven days, and formed something with the mouthwatering title *Fungi from Yuggoth*. These sonnets, which I genuinely love, told of cosmic voyages, demonic apparitions, explorers uncovering stuff that should stay hidden, all leavened with lighter touches that reveal Lovecraft yearning for his lost homeland of yore. Okay, the plan: I write the script. The producer locks down funding. We make *Fungi from Yuggoth*. But it's the straight line thing again, and Mistress Fate's hatred of anything straightforward.

First problem. A student searches the former home of Alfred Galpin, one of Lovecraft's friends. She finds a letter from Lovecraft to Galpin that contains the *thirty-seventh* sonnet in the *Fungi from Yuggoth* cycle. Scholars had hitherto agreed that there had always been thirty-six, the last one being *Continuity*. So I began work on incorporating the newly found poem into the movie script; the final scene is now *Ascent*. For anyone with an interest in Lovecraft there is debate whether the sonnet is indisputably his work. But here are the first two lines: -

The Earth cast me into that Moon-drawn grave

Where ghosting comets through the ether crawl...

Second problem. On meeting the production team to fine-tune the budget my appendix became dangerously inflamed. Medics say that an appendectomy is one of the simplest surgical procedures. They don't even gut you like a fish anymore; instead they conduct something called a laparoscopic intervention. That means they make two small incisions in the side of your stomach -- one for camera, one for snipping tool to remove the festering appendix. It's fast, the patient recovers quickly with hardly any pain.

'Hardly any pain' meant two sleepless nights after returning home from the hospital. Janine is a stoic wife. However, after my recital of pained grunts she tended to shy away from our bedroom. So there I lay in the centre of the bed, a beached writer. I divided my time between watching television and making tentative prods at the dressing on the right hand side of my belly. The white sticking plaster boasted Van Gogh style brush strokes in reds and browns. This pigment, the nurse explained, is normal seepage. Now 'seepage' is a word I don't like at the best of times. There's no such thing as a 'nice seepage.' You don't visit a restaurant and hear the waiter boast, 'You'll enjoy Chef's special today. The fillet of beef has the most delicious seepage.'

So I repeatedly studied the Appendectomy FAQ sheet issued by the surgical department. The paragraph under the heading 'Post Operative Dangers' formed its own gravitational pull and drew my attention time and again to: **Seepage of prurient exudates**. There was so much I didn't like about that line: the grave, black type. That word 'seepage' again. And 'prurient' and 'exudates' triggered warning klaxons inside my head.

Being ill sets you apart from the normal world. The usual rules don't apply. You can't move properly, especially after an appendectomy. A five second stroll to the bathroom is now a ten minute shuffle as you try and not move any muscles in the stomach, nor cause the surgical wound (wounds in my case) to perform anything that resembles a grin in your side. Every step uploads mental pictures of gut sutures breaking open, cascading intestine, blood and more blood.

Although Janine cheerfully brought me meals eating was dire. Even when I chewed gingerly as a kitten it felt as if storm-troopers drove bayonets into my stomach. Sleep evaded me. Lying in one position is torture. This litany I can maintain for hours. I've not even mentioned the horror of knowing you're going to sneeze after you wake from the operation. And as for the prospect of intimacy...

October 31: I decided to stop being an invalid. I managed to dress in sweatshirt and loosely elasticized jogger bottoms, and took pleasure in accomplishing the garment donning contortions without harming my surgical gashes. By early evening I managed to walk out onto the driveway for a taste of fresh air. My first trip to the outside world in four days. The first wave of trick-or-treaters had begun to scurry from house to house -- these were the youngest ones, accompanied by parents or big brothers and sisters. Costumes were cute rather than scary. With Janine patiently standing beside me, holding the box of novelty horror sweets, I managed to hand out edible teeth and monster eyeballs to the children.

Then my side started to hurt again and all I could think about were those grim words: **seepage of prurient exudates**, so I climbed the stairs back to the bedroom. Fortunately, I found only the same old tawny smears on my dressing. Nothing freshly seeping, nor prurient.

I promised myself I wouldn't lie there like some anomalous blob found in a tomb, so I half-lay, propped on pillows, to work on the script. What I needed to do now was to insinuate sonnet thirty-seven, *Ascent*, into the climax of the story. I had Lovecraft's words of course; my job was to match compelling visual images to those stanzas. As I worked I could hear excited calls as children scared treats out of local residents. My thoughts were a commingling of Lovecraft, that archetypal weirdmonger from Providence, USA, his eerie verse, memories of my own Halloween adventures as a child. Although when I was a kid Halloween had to vie for importance with Guy Fawkes night, when we burnt the effigy of the would-be bomber of Parliament in 1605. Come to think of it, during that season we had a concentration of festivals with pagan roots. As well as Guy Fawkes Night these swathes of Northern England enjoyed 'Mischievous Night.' Whereas Halloween had Celtic roots Mischievous Night must have been a pagan relic from Viking invaders. Mischievous Night meant children weren't restrained by normal rules of behavior; what's more, it

was customary to commit acts of mischief -- usually knocking on doors and running away, or throwing eggs at neighbors' windows. All this drifted inside my head as I gazed out through the bedroom window over the nighttime grounds of the tennis club. And once more I was drawn back to the conclusion that when you're ill you find yourself in another world -- one where normal rules don't apply. A moment after that trenchant observation I found myself falling *up* toward the bedroom ceiling.

*

Beneath me, the ruin of the fallen woman formed a dark splash mark against the tennis court. *She fell*, I told myself; *the same could happen to me. I've got to get down*. Once more the only action that made any sense was to try and swim through the air like you'd swim to the bottom of a swimming pool. Yet the moment I struck out that upward force caught hold of me again. A scream erupted from my mouth as it hoisted me skywards. The streetlights blurred into a sea of orange fire as a brutal tug upwards threatened to tear open the appendectomy wounds. A pain so intense that I didn't have time to ponder on the mechanics of how I flew vertically from the earth's surface, as if the world was so sick of my presence it had spit me out. At best, all I could understand of my situation was that I rushed upward with the speed of a rocket. And whereas I'd been looking down on dozens of houses together with a couple of roads I now saw hundreds of buildings -- not only houses, but schools, factories, warehouses, pubs, supermarkets, while five miles away pale fingers of apartment blocks pointed into the cloud's underbelly.

Gulping for air in the icy slipstream, I guessed, when my senses returned to some approximation of order, that I must be close to five thousand feet from the planet's surface. A fall of five hundred feet had literally detonated the body of the woman. At *five thousand feet* a plunge to earth would mean I hit the ground with the force of a high explosive bomb. The mental image of such a descent, the acceleration, the screaming as I knew what end lie in wait for me, provoked a wave of vertigo that made me retch. Bizarrely, it was the flare up of pain induced by the muscle spasm that kept my mind in balance. That hurt, burning away just above my left hip, became the safety line to cling to.

"Halloo there... halloo..." From beneath me a man in a raincoat fluttered upward with a huge grin on his face. "Halloo!" When his eyes locked on mine I saw they were quite mad. The inexplicable act of levitation had cracked his sanity. Once more he sang out, "Halloo, there, yourself. It's quite lovely, isn't it? All those lights, the big factories, and all. Quite lovely. Look, sir, I can my house from here." Laughter bubbled from his lips in a spray of saliva. The grin became a grimace of panic. "Won't you take hold of my hand, sir? I need your hand like I need the embrace of the Virgin Mary right now." As he lunged at me I punched him away. Although my fist smashed his nose it all seemed absurdly hilarious to him. The last I saw of the madman was him rising above me toward the red belly of the cloud, laughing all the way as if this was the funniest day of his life. Remorse filled me. Why had I struck the man? It wasn't his fault shock had tipped him over the edge, was it? Instinct, however, whispered that if he'd gripped hold of me, he wouldn't have let go until we'd both gone crashing downward.

The lunatic had risen faster than me. In moments I'd lost sight of him against the clouds that hung in a threatening mass of bloody reds. Streetlights lent them a kind of hell-fire glow that stoked the fear. They seemed to loom with ominous possibilities. As this sense of danger filled me I heard the madman again. Even though I couldn't see him, I could make out his distant laughing, "Halloo there. Halloo yourself. Good evening, sir, good evening." The laughter returned only briefly before it morphed into a scream of agony. "No, no, no..."

He's falling, I told myself. If he hits you he'll take you with him. My muscles tensed as I prepared to contort my body anyway I could to avoid his chubby form if it tumbled down out of the clouds toward me. But when I heard his screams again they weren't approaching -- they were receding. He howled as some force bore him even higher.

Shudders ran through me. Not just the blast of the north wind but fear, and not solely the fear of falling, but a fear instilled by an insight that danger loomed above me, up there in the red clouds.

Once more came the pull, as if gravity had flipped into reverse, repelling me from the ground. The wounds in my side stung. Cold currents zithered through my hair as that uncanny levitating force accelerated me higher. Now, when I glanced back, I couldn't even see individual houses. Roads were arterial lines of light along which silvery beads of vehicle headlights flowed. How much higher? If I didn't fall to my death, the cold together with the thinness of the atmosphere would finish me.

Because I'd been staring either up or down I hadn't been checking horizontally. When I did, I saw more figures floating there. What's more, they converged into my airspace. For a moment I anticipated a dozen or more bodies would clash together as we rode the invisible escalator. A hundred yards away, fifty, forty, thirty... I saw approaching human shapes resolve into individuals. Adult men and women. I even recognized one of them. A white-bearded man of around seventy. He'd been my old mathematics teacher at

school. Now, clad only in blue pajama bottoms, his plump body flew through the air toward me. Most of the people were shouting (or sobbing or screaming), and as such I couldn't make out any individual words. One man, however, of around twenty, dressed in a business suit, with his green tie flapping in the breeze screamed, "Judgment Day!" and, "Rapture!"

A woman aged forty, I guess, clad in a silk kimono with a gold dragon embroidered on the back drifted closest to me. Surreally, she clasped a bottle of red wine to her chest, while her pepper and salt hair was swept upward by the slipstream, until it resembled the monster-woman's hair in *Bride of Frankenstein*; a mass of horizontal black and silver streaks. She didn't shout. Her expression had a stone-like quality to it; nevertheless, her bulging eyes rolled in her head as if taking in her surroundings, and yet not so much in shock: no... she'd expected this.

My old teacher of mathematics locked his eyes on mine. His tongue bulged from his mouth; even though he tried he couldn't shape any words.

Then -- whoosh! He dropped; this was no gentle descent; it was a violent plunge downward from the group. To him it must have felt like his entire stomach tried to exit his mouth. For an instant I saw his eyes blazing up at me, an expression of horror deforming his face. Both hands clutched his ribs over a heart pounding against the chest wall. How long does it take to reach the earth falling from five thousand feet? Twenty seconds? Fifteen? The impact must turn bones, flesh, brain and skin into jelly.

The woman in the dragon kimono floated within six feet of me as we ascended. She gripped the wine bottle as if it was the only thing keeping her aloft. When her eyes rolled to meet mine I identified awe as much as fear.

"I knew..." she gasped. "I knew right from when I was five years' old. They said I'd imagined it... we lived on the top floor of the apartment block... one night I watched my father go out onto the balcony to smoke a cigarette. Something came down... it was black and shiny ... it took hold of him and carried him away..." Then, what she said next, turned my blood even colder. "Listen," she whispered, "don't you hear them? Wings... you can hear wings... thousands of them..."

I followed her stare to that reddish cloud. The underbelly of the cumulus might be no more than a few hundred feet away, yet just inches above my head I could make out a mist -- an impossible mist in that hard breeze. Eerily motionless, it was a pale yellow colour... faint, indeed so faint it appeared gauzy... a blonde vapor from another realm.

What I saw above and below crowded my thoughts but, good God, yes, it was what I heard that dominated now. Above me... faintly... I heard a clattering sound. I recalled watching birds in an aviary, hundreds of them, disturbed by a noise, all flapping their wings at once.

"I know what they are," the woman breathed. "When I grew up I searched for an image that matched what carried my father away from the balcony." She poured wine into her mouth from the bottle. Red liquid streamed down her chin; moments hereafter, it would fall as crimson rain on the earth. "Night-Gaunt. That's what it was. A Night-Gaunt stole my father away." A sad, booze-sodden smile tightened her lips. "That Night-Gaunt robbed me of my sobriety, too."

The dozen people I ascended with entered the yellow mist. A second or two later we were above it. A horizontal plane of misty yellow stretched from horizon to horizon. Instantly, the sound of flapping grew louder. With it came clicks as if hard surfaces snapped together. Then came the swish -- no doubt about it, a solid object had suddenly darted through the air.

"They're coming," howled the woman as much in triumph as terror. "They are coming! I told my family. Nobody believed me... but you'll believe. You'll see them for yourselves!"

We no longer ascended. More's to the point, we seemed to bob up and down now. One moment we were above the yellowy layer. Then beneath it. To me, it appeared to form a membrane. One just a few inches deep. And one which we rose through before quickly dropping again. Many of the people who fell screamed as if they expected to plunge to earth but the invisible force that levitated them caught their bodies the moment they pierced the yellow mist on the downward movement then thrust them up above the thin layer again to repeat the bobbing action.

Meanwhile... *meanwhile*... the deadly beat of wings grew louder. A cracking sound almost; the way pigeons sometimes flap their wings so hard they beat against their own bodies to make that machine gun snapping.

The intoxicated woman sang out, "They're here. Can't you see them? They're coming!" Her face assumed an expression of such joy it became more shocking than one of terror. "One will be my father.

They took him away so he could become one of them. He's coming to save me." Then her voice rose higher into a girlish, "Dad... Daddy... Daddy."

Her lost father swept down from the clouds to her. His dark body was long and slender. Projecting from the crown of his head were two pointed horns that must have been a full two feet in length. Supporting the lithe body, a pair of black wings that were as glossy as patent leather. Behind the flying man whipped a long tail armed with a V-shaped barb.

"Daddy, it's me. Gloria! Do you remember me, Daddy?"

Long muscular arms caught hold of the woman. A second later he bore her aloft through the clouds into his heavenly kingdom.

All too clearly I heard her screams of agony. Shortly after that the wine bottle plunged by me. Then scraps of her hair. Then half her face, trailing a stream of blood.

That was no father -- transformed or otherwise. When my fellow riders on the night air rose above the membrane of vapor the Night-Gaunts swept out of the clouds to snatch them with their talons. Once more I saw the barbed tail, the vast bat-like wings, the bodies that were as shiny as black plastic. But there were no faces on those creatures' heads. Only mouths that opened wide.

One of things darted at me, its limbs stretching out, a shadowy shape that was the epitome of predatory menace. When I anticipated I'd be carried into the clouds like the others to be torn apart the force supporting me weakened and I dropped beneath the layer of yellow mist. The Night-Gaunt didn't follow. Instead it recoiled from the yellow barrier as if it would have blasted the skin from its body. The faceless head fixed on me in a way that suggested rage but, nevertheless, it darted back up into the cloud as if defeated.

Yet, it wasn't over. Once more I bobbed back up through the yellow layer. So did my surviving companions. One by one they were seized then eagerly carried aloft into the boiling mass of red cumulus. Seconds later shreds of clothing dropped past me. Then came other objects -- wet, red things, hunks of raw meat, pink bone stripped of flesh.

Then it came. From the north I saw a dark shadow gliding toward me. It swam through the clear air between the cloud's underbelly and the yellow mist that formed the membrane through which the Night-Gaunts couldn't penetrate. It had no shape, as such, but I sensed this leviathan had a monstrous bulk, bigger than a blue whale -- bigger than a cruise liner. Without any hurry or fuss it approached. Even though there were no features or limbs I sensed its shadowy form grow in bulk; it became strangely puffed as if that once streamlined body grew tumescent.

My attention had been distracted by the vast intruder. I hadn't realized I'd risen above the yellow mist again. A Night-Gaunt seized hold of me. Its talons clutched my wrists, while it wrapped its long, black legs around my waist. The horned skull was level with my own, just inches away. I gazed into the leathery front of an eye-less head where a face should have been. Its mouth opened to reveal needle-sharp teeth. Its legs tightened around me, the thighs pressing harder against my waist. The surgical wounds should have hurt beyond belief, but the sensation at that moment was a strangely provocative tingle. It squeezed harder bringing a sense inside of me of melting abandonment. My heart pounded.

Then the huge shadow arrived; a torpedo shape surging through the night air; a vastness then filled my field of vision.

It passed by in a second and was gone. The Night-Gaunt's taloned hands still gripped my wrists. But that's all. Blood poured from severed arteries. Then the talons relaxed allowing the remains of the limbs to fall away.

And at that moment I knew this fact: *we human beings aren't the prey.*

We are merely bait.

Simon Clark is a two-time winner of British Fantasy Awards – once for Best Short Fiction, once for Best Novel (The Night of the Triffids).

*Simon has launched a 'making-of' blog for **THE MIDNIGHT MAN** (Severn House - UK: April/U.S: July): a novel about ghosts, murder and madness, which features Vincent Van Gogh during the most turbulent year of his life. It can be viewed here: <http://midnightmannovel.blogspot.com/>*

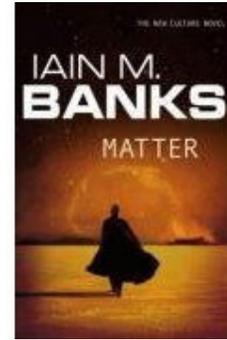
The blog also serves as a gateway to films about the artist and to a virtual tour of The Yellow House in Arles.

REVIEWS

Matter and *The Dragon's Nine Sons* reviewed by Ellen Phillips

***Matter* by Iain M. Banks**
Orbit, February 2008
£18.99 (Hardback)

Matter is Iain M. Banks' first Culture novel since *Look to Windward* in 2000. Widely anticipated and long-awaited, *Matter* is a great addition to the Culture oeuvre. The novel revolves around Sursamen, a shellworld in Morthanveld-controlled space. Shellworlds are mysterious: vast created worlds, at one time they surrounded the Galaxy, but their builders are long-since vanished and their original purpose is unclear. Of the surviving shellworlds - a large number have been deliberately destroyed by another long-since-vanished race - some have been disarmed of their esoteric defences and turned into homes for various species.



One such species is the Sarl, a human-like race who inhabit the eighth level of Sursamen. In terms of technology, they fall somewhere between a feudal medieval society and the industrial revolution. They are at war with the Deldeyn, members of the same species who inhabit the ninth level. The Hausk family rule the Sarl, but with the treacherous death of King Nerieth Hausk, his son Ferbin sets out on a long journey to find help in his quest for justice.

In many ways, *Matter* is a story about journeys. Not simply the one which takes Prince Ferbin and his servant, Choubri Holse, off Sursamen in search of first Xide Hyrlis, then his sister, Djan Seriy Anaplitan, but also the one which leads him finally to understand the sacrifice inherent in being a king.

Prince Ferbin isn't the only one with a journey to make. In his absence, he is declared dead by the Regent, General Tyl Loesp, who now rules Sarl on behalf of the youngest Hausk, Oramen. Verging on the autistic, Oramen first begins to function in society, then puts his scholarly mind to work on unravelling the puzzle surrounding him. In the frozen ruins of the Nameless City at the bottom of the vast Hyeng-zhar falls on the ninth level, he becomes a ruler: the only question being if it has come too late.

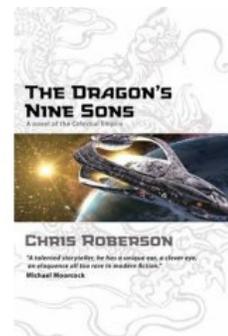
Djan Seriy Anaplitan's journey is arguably the longest. An unwanted daughter, she was bargained off to the Culture, finally ending up in Special Circumstances. She has almost finished her training when she's told of the deaths of her father and Ferbin. She decides to return to Sursamen, even though that means the removal of most of her superpowers. Accompanied by her drone, Turminder Xuss, Djan is caught between the political manoeuvrings of the Culture and the Morthanveld, and within them, the Oct, the Nariscene and the Aultridia - right up until the moment something world-shattering is revealed within Sursamen and Djan becomes the official Culture representative. In some ways, going home is the most difficult journey of all.

The novel skips between characters and worlds, as is usual in Iain M. Banks' novels. Mostly set outside the Culture itself, the differences in technological levels between species is a constant backdrop to the story. In some ways, those differences are what drive the entire plot, and it is fitting that the climactic battle takes place among the massive machinery at the very heart of Sursamen. *Matter* has an unexpected and abrupt ending, which is utterly appropriate. Fortunately, after an appendix which lists the people, races, places and ships, Iain M. Banks takes pity on us poor readers and leaves us with a short, sweet epilogue which wraps up the last couple of loose ends.

Powerful, enthralling and challenging, *Matter* is satisfying in the way that only Culture novels can be. I just hope that we don't have to wait another eight years for the next one.

Chris Roberson - *The Dragon's Nine Sons*
Published Solaris Books, February 2008, £10.99

This is the first novel set in the Celestial Empire. Imperial China rules the Earth, except for the lands belonging to the blood-thirsty and savage Mexica. The First Mexica War has been fought to a stalemate. But the Celestial Empire has begun colonising Fire Star (Mars), and the Mexica want it, provoking the Second Mexica War. Fought in space and on the surface of Fire Star, the conflict drags on until a band of Chinese prisoners are chosen to pilot a captured Mexica spaceship to Xolotl, the Mexica's secret asteroid base. Their



mission: to destroy the base. But when they get there, they find dozens of Chinese prisoners who will be sacrificed to keep the Mexica's blood-based technology functioning. Their suicide mission rapidly becomes a rescue mission - but the base must still be destroyed.

Chris Roberson's novel is a good page-turning read that feels shorter than it actually is, despite needing a bit more editing in a couple of places: I don't need reminding about decisions and events from two chapters ago - I haven't forgotten!

That notwithstanding, the challenges faced by the prisoners as they struggle to complete their mission are engaging and involving. Captain Zhuang and Bannerman Yao, the two main protagonists, are reasonably complex characters and their mission is as much about redemption for past (in)actions as it is about completing the mission for their Emperor.

The other prisoners are a mixed bunch; from Paik, who fancies himself a quickdraw gunslinger, to Syahuaxan, the Muslim language expert from Khalifah (California), they include a gambler and two murderers. Locked in close quarters on board the ship, their stories emerge one by one, with unexpected repercussions.

The action on board Xolotl at times needs a bit of polishing, but the description of the Mexica - the first time most of the characters have come face-to-face with the culture - is excellent. Seen entirely from the Chinese' point of view, the Mexica civilization is barbaric, based on human sacrifice, with haemoglobin sensors built needlessly into important equipment. Such as the startup controls for the ship, and the regulating controls for the main power plant at the heart of their base. It isn't explained how the Mexica have managed to build up their technology level with such restrictions in place: the sheer number of human sacrifices needed horrify the Chinese.

But the Celestial Empire isn't without blood on its hands: it is quite capable of ordering spaceships to place themselves in the path of Mexica ships, or ordering troops not to intervene in a Mexica attack on an undefended civilian colony. And it is quite capable of ordering its prisoners to go on a suicide mission.

The rigid hierarchy of the Chinese Empire comes through very well, and little touches such as the description of the differences between the Chinese and Mexica spacesuits and ships adds depth to the world of the Celestial Empire.

All-in-all, it's well worth a read. And if you can't wait until it's published, you can always go to Solaris Books, where you can read a free chapter, or read *Three Unbroken*, which is free. It's another novel by Chris Roberson about the Celestial Empire and the Second Mexica War, with a new chapter being loaded up each week.

Links:

- Solaris Books - <http://www.solarisbooks.com/>
- Free chapter of *The Dragon's Nine Sons* - <http://www.solarisbooks.com/pdf/extract-dragons-nine-sons.pdf>
- *Three Unbroken* (free novel) - <http://www.solarisbooks.com/books/three-unbroken/free/index.asp>

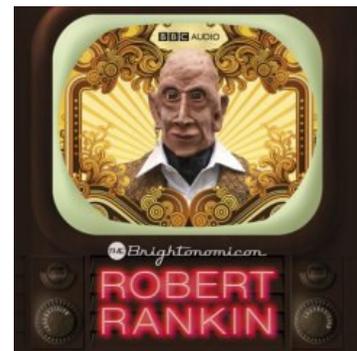
Creating The Brightonomicon – part 2 of 4: How to Make a Full Cast Audio Adaptation

By Neil Gardner, Producer, Director, Co-Adaptor, Milk Monitor

So just HOW do you go about making a 7 hour, 13 episode full-cast audio series? You have the questions, and I have the answers... so let me take you on an exhaustive tour of just how we went about it...

Q – Why did you make *The Brightonomicon*?

My day job is as Creative Director/Executive Producer for Ladbroke Productions. Now it may sound fancy, but in essence I am one of two people who spend all year trying like crazy to get the various national BBC radio networks to buy our ideas for radio programmes...and then when they do we work like crazy to make those programmes! It is a non-stop ideas machine with a lot of disappointment and desperation



interrupted all too infrequently with cool productions. Don't get me wrong, it is a great job at a great company...but there are a lot of aggravations related to pitching to the BBC radio networks, not least is the fact that independent producers are only allowed to pitch for 10% of the 'eligible' hours on the networks. So in reality, about 150 companies pitch against each other for about 5% of the output of, for example, Radio 4. And radio budgets are minute compared to TV, online and film...so when we do win a pitch we rarely make much money from it. However, all that said, making programmes and series for the BBC has been a dream of mine for, well, always! So even though I may see 99% of my ideas die every year, I am immensely proud of the 20 or 30 shows we do get to make. Plus it makes my Mum proud to hear my name at the end of a prog or see it printed in the Radio Times! So, as you can imagine, it is always important to look for alternative ways to make programmes (and money!) using the core skills of the company and people I work with. As the download culture started to grow from music into audiobooks and radio series, it became apparent that there could be a market for high quality radio-style audio features. Big Finish were already doing well with their Dr Who and Blake's 7 audio series, and the god-of-audio Dirk Maggs (HHGTTG) was embarking on an online adventure of his own with some serious backing and writers attached. I felt that now was the time to start investigating for myself. For years I had been discussing with Robert an audio version of one of his books. He had always been kind enough to allow me the right to go ahead with my plans...and those of you with long enough memories may remember a short article in this here tome back in 1997/8 asking for people interested in playing a part in an audio version of "The Book of Ultimate Truths". Sadly that time I didn't have the resources needed to convert the plans to reality. But as I moved to work at Ladbroke Productions in 1999, I kept the idea of making a Rankin audio series bubbling away in my mind. I knew it would take a lot of hard work, reputation and favours to pull off, simply because audio drama is not cheap to make (although compared to TV and film it is made for a pauper's sum!). I kept talking with Robert and other friends about it...my intention was to try and do Armageddon the Musical...over the years, but things never quite felt right. And then, a year after the death of my best friend Pete, I found myself working with the legendary David Warner on an audio reading of Oliver Twist for BBC Radio 2. Don't ask me the how or why, be it spiritual, mystical, religious or a figment of a depressed mind, but I had an epiphany from Pete..."David Warner as Hugo Rune!" During the production of Oliver Twist David and I had built up a friendship and he had talked to me about keeping him up to speed on any projects or 'mad' ideas I may have for future collaborations. I wasted no time in calling Robert and asking his opinion of David as Hugo. Robert's response was very pleasing...he thought it was a great idea and was a mammoth fan of David's. It was during this conversation that he recommended adapting The Brightonomicon due to its episodic nature. And so, I got together with David, introduced him to far-fetched fiction, The Brightonomicon and Hugo Rune...and hastily I put together a pitch to produce a pilot episode of the series...something we could take to the BBC and other broadcasters to try and get some money to make the whole thing. David said yes, came on board as a partner in the production company I hurriedly formed and suddenly I was making The Brightonomicon audio series!

Q – So how did you get started?

The one thing I needed to get going (more than anything else) was a script. Without a script there was no way to steer the project. Now, I had some experience adapting Robert's work, having already done quite a bit for The Book of Ultimate Truths project years before. I had written quite a few radio scripts (drama, comedy and documentary) over the years. The big lesson I had learned was that as a fan I had a tendency to be too close to the material, too in awe of the original book. It is damnably difficult to cut and alter the original work of your favourite author. So I knew I needed some help with the scripting. I also knew, from long experience that writing with a partner brings out the best in my work, and had the added bonus of allowing me to put some of the pressure on to someone else. I knew that I would end up doing a lot of the work on the final series myself, and so having a partner-in-crime was a must. Therefore, my next step was to find someone I could work with...ostensibly on the script...but also as a business partner, second brain and to bring skills that I didn't have. In one of those scary confluences of doodahs, I had met a chap called Elliott Stein in 2005 who was a ridiculously experienced comedy writer from the US, a film and TV producer and all round nice bloke. He was also someone who, like me, enjoyed tough projects and taking control. So, I met with Elliott, outlined The Brightonomicon concept, and as easily as that he came on board. Along with Robert and David, we formed Hokus Bloke Productions and Elliott and I started work on the pilot script.

Q – I'm a writer, tell me about the scripting process...

I don't know how other two-man writing teams work, but on The Brightonomicon it was a fairly simple arrangement. First, I banned Elliott from reading the original book...I wanted him to come fresh to the scripts as audio/drama storytelling, and not be influenced by Robert's style, characters or pacing. Next, we

needed the book in electronic form. And then it was time to set about the adaptation. At this point I wonder whether I should use a plot device to hide from you the hidden arcane art of adaptation? In the past I have asked many adapters how they do what they do, and none have been able to adequately explain it. Part science, part art, part mystical thingamabob...adapting is a strange process. I laid down some basic rules for how I wanted to go about the job:

1. Retain all of the dialogue wherever possible (I would trim this later)
2. Make all of the author's voice into the Narrator
3. Turn long speeches and/or explanations into vignettes

And that was it. As the next stage was to let Elliott play with the script, I didn't want to remove too much sub-plot or too many characters. So I worked my way through the prologue and first chapter, speeding up the opening scenes, paring down some of the dialogue and removing scenes that didn't move the story forwards in a suitably audio drama manner. This 60 page script was then played with a few times to trim and tidy, and went off to Elliott for his input. (N.B. 1 page of script = 1 minute of audio approx.) And then something intriguing and surprising and shocking and exciting happened. Elliott sent me back a script that was just over 30 pages long and had scenes shifted, and speeches turned into vignettes, and new characters inserted, and explanations shortened, and...well...it was what I had been looking for, a 30 minute script that fizzed, and buzzed, and told the story of how Rizla met Hugo Rune. Between us we finagled the script for a few more weeks until we were pretty happy with it...sending it off to Robert for his thoughts and insights, and to David to ensure he was happy with the way Rune was coming off the page. After a brief pause to launch the project in June 2006 to the Robert Rankin fan club, the scripting continued...and now it was on to full scripting duties, using the same process as before, I would work on an episode first, then Elliott would fine tune it...and when I say fine tune this shouldn't be taken as a minor job, Elliott has brought so much to the script that I can honestly say that without him we wouldn't have The Brightonomicon. As he worked through each episode Elliott remained distant from my fans-eye view of things and introduced some incredible concepts. Many of the plot devices you will hear that are not in the original book are due to Elliott's brilliance...I owe him a real debt of thanks. Every running gag and every scene I wanted to keep in I had to justify and defend and he kept me honest and moreover ensured that the final scripts gave as much to the non-fans as to the fans...I hope you will agree it is a listen that in no way requires a knowledge of Robert's other books to enjoy (although there are plenty of in jokes left in to keep the fans happy!) As we wrote each script we then met up after work to do read-throughs...a hilarious time considering I can't act for toffee. But these read-throughs allowed us to hear what was working and what wasn't, where scenes were running too long, whether a character was saying the right thing. A lot of changes were made to each episode after these sessions! Scripting takes a hell of a long time. Let me remind you that we are talking about 13 half hour episodes, each requiring dialogue, music, SFX, directions, etc... We could have spent another few years polishing the scripts, but there comes a time when you have to call a stop to the process...for us it was around August 2007 when I had the first set of actors booked in to record.

Q – How did you get the money to make the series?

OK, so working on something as big as The Brightonomicon is not a linear process. As all of the scripting was taking place, I was dealing with where we would get the money to produce the series. Both Elliott and I were working for no money, and I knew I would be producing the whole thing for no money. But we needed money to pay for the rights to make the series, and to pay the actors and the composer. One relief was that my employers, Ladbroke Productions, agreed to allow me to work on the series during my work days when I didn't have other work to do and to allow me to use the company's resources to produce the series – we have our own radio studio in Central London. This immediately meant I was saving a fortune in studio fees and post-production costs. They also offered to handle all the accounting, which made dealing with all the invoicing, VAT, payments, etc...was suddenly a burden I didn't have to be overly concerned with. And on top of that, by becoming co-producers with Ladbroke Productions we could retain ownership and they gave us a legitimacy that a new company desperately needs...being the oldest UK radio independent production company brings with it many benefits, and The Brightonomicon certainly got to experience those benefits. So, with a co-pro deal in place with Ladbroke Productions I was able to start speaking with various broadcasters about commissioning the series. During autumn/winter 2006 I spoke with BBC Radio 4, Radio 7 and the newly formed Channel 4 Radio about whether they would invest and broadcast the production. Sadly Radio 4 was unconvinced at this stage, but asked to be kept in the loop and wanted to hear the pilot episode. BBC 7 doesn't directly commission such productions, so they were out. But Channel 4 was very interested, as they were looking for large keynote productions for the launch of their new national radio stations. We had many positive conversations with Channel 4, but in the end,

while a deal was on the table, we decided to hold back...there were issues with ownership and rights which couldn't be agreed upon. A shame, but we are sure that we will get Rankin on Channel 4 sometime in the future! During November 2006 I recorded the pilot episode at Ladbroke Productions. We had purposefully made the episode character-lite so that, since we had no money, it would cost as little as possible to record. The right casting made this process so much easier! But more on casting later...over Xmas 2006 I edited together the pilot episode, and by mid-Jan I had something that sounded like a real radio comedy/drama. With the addition of a truly outstanding theme tune and underscore music from composers Jeremy Paul Carroll and Hugh Edwards, the pilot was done and ready to be presented to the world. The intention was to send it out to the BBC and others, with a pitch for the entire series, and hope it caught a commissioner's attention. We also wanted to release it to the fans who were following the production...but there was a wee small problem, a spaniel in the works!

Q – Hang about...what about the rights?

Back when I first touted the idea to Robert, we had both been under the impression that he held the audio dramatisation rights to *The Brightonomicon*. And so, we had sailed forth with no thought of rights issues. Ooops! In January 2007 Robert called to say that his publishers, Orion, held the rights and as such he was unable to grant them to me. I would have to approach his editor at Orion and 'have a chat'. Now I am not inexperienced with audio rights negotiations, it is part of my day job, but still, the thought of Orion saying no was a real fear for me, and one that could put a stop to everything. But, pretending to be the professional I claimed to be (rather than the 14 year old who never grew up I think I actually am!) I went in to Orion and met with Robert's editor and several other members of the Orion editorial team. I was nervous...REALLY nervous. I had prepared a 12 page pitch document, and brought with me the pilot episode to play them. Let's jump forward an hour, and I am leaving the Orion building a happy man. Orion immediately understood the project, liked the pilot episode and was supportive of the endeavour. They agreed to give me permission to seek funding for the series, at which time we would negotiate a rights deal that wouldn't break the bank. Sadly the deal also meant not being able to release the pilot episode in full to the fans, but we were allowed to release the first third, which as tasters go, wasn't that bad at all! Let me remind all you adapters out there...sort out the rights first, don't make the mistake I inadvertently made!

Q – But what about the cash...who was paying?

With Orion's support and backing it was now time to get a deal in place for the money. By this time, March 2007, we had decided to try something new. The traditional commissioning route only gave us one option, Radio 4. Unfortunately it seemed they weren't all that interested for a variety of understandable but disappointing reasons. Channel 4 was a no go at this time, BBC 7 didn't commission, OneWord Radio was woefully underfunded and could never afford to commission us, and that was it. EXCEPT...over the past few years the online download market had started to grow for audio productions such as readings, dramas, etc... Ricky Gervais had opened the door to paid-for content and across the world niche markets were opening up. Following conversations with the likes of the mighty Dirk Maggs, we decided that the audio market was the way to go. There were many companies looking to invest in new content that could be sold online, through CDs, on memory sticks and streamed to 3G devices. And unlike the traditional broadcasters, they had money to spend! As we wanted to release the series as a physical product as well as a download/digital product, I started contacting those companies that specialised in the audiobook market. My main target was BBC Audiobooks, who I had a good relationship with due to the day job. They are the biggest player in the global audiobook business, have an established sales system, do both CDs and digital, AND it would mean the series had the BBC brand on it...something that really makes a difference when up against thousands of other products on a global stage. I spoke to the commissioning editor Jan Paterson who was very interested and so I sent him a copy of the pilot and a revised pitch document that spelled out exactly what money we needed and how it would be spent. Within a week, in fact it was a day or so before Easter, Jan came back to me with great news, BBC Audiobooks wanted to not just commission the series (all 13 episodes!) for the money we needed, but wanted to publish and distribute it all over the world...aaahhhhhh! What great news. It meant we would get a multi-CD box set as well as global digital distribution...all of a sudden my plan to bring Robert to a wider audience was very real indeed! There was contractual stuff to deal with, rights issues and release date to be set...and of course I had to go back to Orion and secure the rights deal with them...but by June 2007 we had the money, the commissioner, the publisher and the distribution in place...lucky Elliott and I had been writing the scripts, eh?

Q – How do you go about casting something as big as *The Brightonomicon*?

So we now had a deal, the scripts were getting written, what we needed next was a cast. This wasn't an easy task for several reasons. First off, the scripts were still being written so I didn't have a final list of characters that needed to be cast. Secondly, while the money we had was not a small amount, by audio/radio drama standards it was not much. I needed to be frugal with my spending and that meant asking actors to work for smaller-than-usual amounts. To do that I needed to offer them recording sessions at their convenience, keep the length of the session down to a hour or two and be willing to re-schedule at short notice. Casting is a difficult process at the best of times, but by the process I was using it meant that I also needed actors who could 'act blind' – in other words, not need the other actors to be present to act against. It is very rare to record each actor separately, but it is how *The Brightonomicon* was made (all bar a very few roles)...I hope you can't tell! At this point it was favour-calling-in time...I started speaking with every actor, agent and producer I had worked with and still knew to see if they could help out. The first bit of real luck was Rupert Degas...from his time acting in a multitude of theatre and TV projects he knew a plethora of top actors. Through Rupert I was able to approach and sign up Jason Isaacs, Kate O'Sullivan and Patrick Barlow. The next bit of serendipity was with the casting of top Scot Steven Cree. I had produced Steven in a drama in early 2007 and had been very impressed with him. So bringing him on board to play the various Scottish roles, and to be the evil Dr Proctor was a no-brainer. But he also brought with him a very well known comedy actor...the 'he's everywhere right now' Ben Miller. So all of a sudden I had the makings of a Hollywood movie-level cast. As the summer went on the scripts were finalised and I had my list of characters...88 of them in total! So, I needed a ton of actors to play all these parts. It was time for another dose of serendipity...in fact two doses...well, three actually! Serendipity 1 – I had always wanted Count Otto to be played by Andy Serkis, who I consider to be one of the UK's finest acting exports and someone who should be lauded for his incredible talent. While browsing for the agent of Mackenzie Crook, I discovered the agent for Andy...a company called Earache. So I put a call in and had a very long, enjoyable and bizarre conversation with the head agent Alex (a lady). She is a Brightonian and immediately seemed to fall in love with the project. Not only did she get us Andy to play Count Otto, but she brought us Katharine Parkinson, Jonathan Cecil, Tom Meeten, Brian Murphy, Steve Oram, Ricky Grover and Kevin Eldon – only the crème-de-la-crème of UK acting and comedy talent. My cast was exploding with top talent...I started to feel bad that I didn't have bigger roles for these guys to play! There is no thank you big enough to pay Alex and Laura at Earache back for everything they did to help make *The Brightonomicon* a reality...THANK YOU!!! Serendipity 2 – back in the summer of 2007 the BBC celebrated a big radio anniversary. I was lucky enough to be invited to their 'do' in London and at the event I bumped into an old producer chum, Pete Atkin. Pete produced the phenomenal 90 part *Empire* series for Radio 4, and I had the honour of engineering much of it with him. Well, while discussing the series with him over some cranberry concoction (your license fee at work!) I mentioned that I had a real problem casting the role of Fangio...I just couldn't hear the voice. The closest I could come was a sort of deadpan Zaphod Beeblebrox. "Aha," he said, "you should call Mark Wing-Davey then!" Well, yes, of course I would love to but let's be honest, Mark doesn't act much anymore and is a big time theatre director in the US and anyway he is one of my top 5 all time radio gods and I wouldn't know where to begin. "You're in luck there, he's a close mate of mine. Here's his home phone number...tell him I said you should call!" Aaaaaarrrrghhhhhh, I ran all over the place like a screaming idiot. So I called, and spoke with someone who had inspired me to work in radio (he didn't know this of course) and, of my lord, he said yes! He was in the UK in November and if it wasn't too late he would love to play Fangio. I think I fainted. Serendipity 3 – one of the previous serendipitous moments had been Steven Cree knowing Ben Miller. Well, even though Ben had said yes to playing Bartholomew the Bog Troll, I still needed to do a deal with his agent. In the course of discussing the series with her she asked if I was still looking for anyone to play parts. I was stuck with just one role un-cast...that of Jimi Hendrix. She immediately suggested the wonderful (and very funny) Colin McFarlane (in so many things it is embarrassing but personally I loved him in *Black Books*). He was perfect for the role, and even rattled off an American gangster character I had almost forgotten to record. There were other bits of momentous luck and good fortune in casting...much coming from having spent 12 years working on hundreds of radio programmes and building a strong list of friends and doing favours for people. My advice...build up favours, you never know when you can call them in!

Q – How did you get the music?

As soon as the production took its first faltering steps back in 2006 I knew that what was needed to make it truly come to life was a music score that kicked some serious ass. For the past few years, whenever I produced a reading series for Radio 2, I had commissioned composers to write individualised theme tunes...and listeners and critics alike had praised them. I also knew from my love of *Hitch Hiker's Guide* that a soundscape that included original music added immensely to the overall feeling of an audio production. Following the launch in summer of 2006 and the setting up of the production website, I was approached by a couple of fellows called Jeremy Paul Carroll and Hugh Edwards who were [a] Rankin

fans and [b] top notch composers of music for film, TV, adverts and games. They kindly offered to create the theme and music for the pilot episode...and when it arrived in early 2007 I was just one of many who were blown away by what had been created. Every now and then a theme tune is written that perfectly sums up the programme and characters it represents...the king of such themes was Ronnie Hazlehurst (who sadly passed away in 2007 but will be fondly remembered forever!). The Hitch Hiker's had such a theme...we can't imagine the series without it. So consider the reaction we all had when we heard Logos of the Aeons, the theme for The Brightonomicon...oh my word, those chaps got it spot on! In fact, it is pretty much the first thing people mention after hearing the series..."That theme tune is fantastic!" or "The theme is perfect!". So we had our theme and some incidental music as well. But now we had 12 more episodes to create music for...a not-inconsiderable feat! It was an easy enough decision to use a format for each episode, the same theme tune at the start and end of every episode, but each ep had its own flavour and music could help bring that flavour out. So along with Jeremy (who had amicably parted from Hugh by this time) I created a set of music cues for each episode, including specific music themes for scenes (e.g. heavy metal music for ep 12; smoky jazz for Lazlo Woodbine) and where more atmospheric music score would be useful (e.g. the dream-world of Rizla; the encounter with Ahab the Space Crab; the chanting Witches of Chiswick). Between August and December 2007 the disturbingly talented Jeremy worked hard on all of these music tracks, slowly but surely sending them to me for inclusion in the final episodes. As with all best-laid plans, a deadline date cock-up had the poor soul delivering the two heavy metal tracks you will hear in the Hove nightclub scene in ep 12 just two days before the day I had to send the masters off to the BBC! But on such pressures are masterpieces formed...and I hope you will all agree that the music Jeremy has created for The Brightonomicon is sublime...it raises the series up and I think we would all enjoy a 'Music from The Brightonomicon' album sometime!

Q – How much work went into editing the series?

I have been told during the process of making the series that I am an insane man, because since this was always my baby, I decided to take on ALL of the production aspects of the series. Now, this may not sound that bad to you, but consider...a 7 hour full cast drama, that is 5.5 hours longer than an average movie, and 6.25 hrs longer than an average radio play. Every scene in every episode requires a soundscape, atmospheric, sound effects, stereo panning and music. And then everything has to be cut to the right length (OK, I may have failed a bit there!) and mixed and mastered. Post-production takes a long time. Of course, I had a day job to do as well (since June 2007 Ladbroke Productions have produced 12 BBC radio programmes/series/dramas and pitched 350 new ideas for work in 2008/9) which meant I couldn't devote every hour of every day to The Brightonomicon. And in fact, as I learned rapidly, due to the way we had cast, there was a lot I couldn't do until November because I simply didn't have the audio recorded yet! The process started in June when I started to collect every Sound Effect known to man...I purchased whole series of FX discs and created a database of almost 1 million SFX (about 200GB worth!) From these I worked out some of the basic soundscapes and atmospheric I would use later. In September Rupert and David recorded the Rune & Rizla lines for eps 2-8. From then on I could start building a very rough basic episode for eps 2-8. To do this I recorded all the other lines for each episode myself (called a scratch track) and used it as a basis for the underlying structure of each ep. I could then build in the Rune & Rizla lines, then the narrator lines, and then 'air-drop' in other lines as they were recorded. In October the rest of the Rune & Rizla lines were recorded (with some very annoying delays due to microphone failures) which meant I had the basis for all the eps now recorded. October also brought a lot of 1 hour sessions with the rest of the cast, as well as some extended sessions with Michael Fenton-Stevens for the narrator lines. By November I had about 80% of the series recorded and rough edited...but there were some actors who couldn't come in until November and the composer Jeremy was working his bits off on the music still. There were some major 'last minute' sessions in November and early December with Jason Isaacs, Mark Wing-Davey and then it was just the opening and closing announcements to record with Graham Rogers and we were done. Actually, the very last thing to be recorded was a line that went into episode 3...talk about last minute! Because of a hefty workload in the day job, I started coming in to work every weekday at 6am to edit The Brightonomicon until 10am, then do a day's work, and start again at 6pm and headed home at about 9pm. This was most of Nov and Dec for me, but was the only way, along with weekends, to get it all done. The deadline for delivery to the clever chaps at the BBC was Xmas, so there was a lot to do. Bit by bit each episode was completed...all of them over length of course...at which time I would burn them to CD and listen to them in the Ladbroke Productions studio for quality control. I then trimmed and tightened each episode and added the music tracks as they were delivered by Jeremy. Finally, it was the week before Xmas and I had to mix and master the series. Mixing and mastering is a fairly specialised craft, you need to balance the various volumes, frequencies and other variables...the aim is to make a vibrant and dynamic sounding CD without using too many audio tricks which could damage the sound. So for seven days, in between other jobs, I mixed and mastered each episode, then split each into tracks (the

BBC wanted each ep to have 10 tracks within it) and burned master CDs. These CDs were then listened to to check for problems, which there invariably were. After final corrections I created the final master CDs on the morning of the 21st Dec 2007, and they were couriered to the BBC at 6pm that evening. A rough guesstimate puts the number of hours spent purely on post-production at 1200...lord alone knows what it is when you add in recording times, scripting, promotion, marketing, deal-making, etc... I can tell you this, my sense of relief at sending off those masters is indescribable...all I will say is thank the lord for adrenaline and Gaviscon Cool (I think we may have to give some sort of sponsorship credit to Gaviscon as those little tablets kept the pain away for months!)

Q – So is that it now...what are you doing next?

Well it is all about the launch, letting the world and its aunt know about the series...we feel fairly confident that the Robert Rankin fans will buy it but we want to sell it to thousands and millions more all around the world...including the lovely readers of HUB. In the UK we are working on promoting the CD box set and download through various magazines, as well as some national newspapers, and in the third week of February you'll no doubt be hearing Robert and some of the rest of us on local and national radio and TV plugging the spaniels out of it! Interestingly, promoting something like this is very different to a radio show or film. Because we want it to sell for years to come, we do very little pre-launch promotion, and then lots after the thing is on the shelf! So expect at least 12 months of promotional activity. There was an official launch on Feb 14th in Brighton, as well as a pre-launch exclusive opportunity to buy the box set and get it signed at Forbidden Planet in London on Wednesday 13th February from 5pm to 6:30pm (search for Hokus Bloke on Facebook for some exclusive photos of the event) And you can expect us to be selling the box set at signings and through other events throughout 2008...so lots of chances to get a copy and then get another 10 copies! But that isn't quite it...I am in talks with radio stations around the world to see if they will 'buy' the series for airplay. Every time we do this we increase the number of people who are exposed to Robert's work and so hopefully more will buy the series and his other books...more fans, woo! And you may yet hear it on a transatlantic flight, or be able to borrow it from a library (no pirating please!), or via a mobile phone somewhere somehow. It is a big world out there and we are looking to conquer it. As a writer I am exceptionally proud of the series, as a producer/director even more so. I hope we have been able to inspire some of you to push your own projects out into the world...and who knows, maybe my next production will be based on one of your works?

NEXT WEEK: The Who's Who of *The Brightonomicon*

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