



Hub

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Fiction

Our first piece of flash fiction, for all those of you who have had to put up with an idiot manager all week.

The New Kids on the Block

It has been a while since a new genre title was launched nationally in the UK, and in the last few weeks we've had two! I've spent all my spare time this week curled up with a copy of both of them, along with the latest edition of SFX to see how they compare to the market leader. Read my comparison on page XXX, along with comments from two of the magazines' editors.

Help Hub

If you are enjoying your weekly dose of fiction, reviews and features there are three things you can do to support us:

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Your feedback will help us keep improving the magazine.

What if I don't like reading while sat at my PC?

If you have a PDA or other device capable of displaying eBooks, you will soon be able to download a special eBook version of this issue from our website (versions for Palm Reader and Microsoft Reader are planned, and we will be experimenting with a version for the iPod). Failing that, hit the PRINT button.

How Frequent is Hub?

Hub is published 52 times a year! No, that wasn't a typo. *Hub* is also now free to read! (Neither was that).

Every week we will be publishing a piece of short fiction, along with at least one review (book, DVD, film, audio, or TV series) and we'll also have the occasional feature, too. We can afford to do this largely due to the generosity of the people over at Orbit, who have sponsored this electronic version of the magazine, and partly by the generosity displayed by your good selves. If you like what you read here, please consider making a donation over at www.hub-mag.co.uk.

CAREER CHANGE

By John H. Stevens



“Hey Buddy, got any spare change?”

Fred Hutchison pulled up before reaching the outstretched cup. The man holding it wore a dirty coat that may have been green at one point in the distant past. Dark spots covered the front of his khaki pants. Fred assumed they were paint splashes from an odd job previously performed. The Chicago Bears emblem was coming loose from the man’s blue wool cap.

Fred reached into his pocket, pulled out a single, and stuffed it into the cup. “You got it, Pal.” Even though they’ve been playing this game for years, they never bothered to learn each other’s name, so they went by the pseudonyms of Buddy and Pal. He started to cross the street to his office but decided that today he would finally satisfy his curiosity. Doubts about where his career was heading made him wonder if the panhandler didn’t have the right idea. Maybe it was time to bow out of the rat race. “Hey Pal, please don’t take this the wrong way but I’ve been dying to ask you something.”

“You’ve always been generous and I don’t have a pressing appointment. Go ahead and ask.”

“How do I say this?” Fred wrestled with the question but ended up pinned to the mat. He decided to get right to the point. “How did you get here? Were you ever part of the daily grind?”

A wry, yellow-toothed smile peaked out from the dirty gray beard. “Yeah, I’ve been there. One day I just got fed up.”

Fred shook his head. “I wish I had the balls to quit.”

“Quit? Hell, I killed my boss. The son of a bitch pissed me off for the last time. I’ve been doing this ever since. Some days are better than others but overall it’s better than working for the man. I set my own hours and I have unlimited vacation but I have to admit the pension plan sucks.” His boisterous cackle startled the other commuters who stepped up their pace to avoid catching the panhandler’s insanity.

Fear and wonder froze Fred to the concrete.

“Buddy, before you go, I want you to have something.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a gold coin. “Like I said before, you’ve always been good to me. I’d like you to have my good luck piece. Well, I guess it hasn’t been too lucky for me but maybe it’ll bring you luck.” He grabbed Fred’s hand, inserted the coin, and closed the fingers around it.

The coin was surprisingly heavy and the warm aura made Fred’s palm sweat. He opened his hand and stared at the gold piece. It looked very old but there wasn’t a date. A head of some bygone ruler, maybe Greek or Roman, was on one side and a scaly beast, a grotesque parody of the American eagle, graced the reverse side. “No, really I couldn’t take it,” he protested but unconsciously slipped the coin into his pants pocket.

“Take it. It will bring you good luck.” After Fred crossed the street, the man snickered, “You’ll need it.”

The burning from Fred's knotted stomach informed him it was time for the meeting with his boss, Mr. Hack or The Hacker as he was called behind his back. Two Tums later – he particularly liked the banana-flavored kind – he began his quest for the cheese in the cubicle maze. Five steps down his row, he faced a gray roadblock. After a quick left turn, the aisle lasted twenty feet before another row of cubicles forced a right turn. Ten feet later, a real wall stopped Fred. He had made it out of Cubicle City. Now it was just a matter of slinking along Manager's Row to the last office where Mr. Hack performed his special form of bureaucracy.

In corporate speak, Mr. Hack was no longer a manager but a leader and Fred wasn't an employee but an associate. Fred didn't care what he was called as long as he got his paycheck. As for The Hacker, he couldn't manage or lead but he was excellent at affixing blame and Fred was his favorite scapegoat. Fred didn't mind being the fall guy. In fact, it gave him job security. If The Hacker fired him, who would be there to take the fall?

The Hacker's door was open but Fred still knocked. He wanted to give The Hacker time to switch his PC screen from solitaire to a useless PowerPoint presentation he had been working on for years and would never give.

"Fred, please come in and close the door. Have a seat at the table." Mr. Hack rose from his plush chair and joined Fred at a small table. Mr. Hack was proudly putting into action what he had learned from one of his many leadership classes. Sitting behind his big desk was intimidating to the lowly associate. However, sitting next to an associate on equal footing showed that you were open and cared about the person.

Fred wished he would stay behind his desk. When The Hacker tried to be personable, the insincerity oozed from every pore. Plus, he had bad breath and Fred would have to breathe out of his mouth for the entire length of the meeting.

The Hacker put on his "I'm concerned" face. "Fred, I'd like to know what happened last night."

"Well, Mr. Hack, they woke me at 2 A.M. and told me the server was down. I got on the system and I was able to find the problem. I backed off the changes the application team installed and restarted the server. We were down for about twenty minutes."

Fred thought back to his early years in data processing. His manager would thank him for getting up in the middle of the night and congratulate him for finding and fixing a problem that he didn't cause. That was before the politics of the corporate world penetrated the computer field. The Hacker's voice snapped him out of his reminiscence.

"Damn it Hutchison!" Mr. Hack slammed his fist on the table for emphasis. "We can't afford these outages. Why did it take you so long to fix the problem?"

"First I had to wake up and answer the phone. Then I had to tell my wife to go back to sleep."

"Hutchison, you're trying my patience. Do you see this?" Mr. Hack gestured to a foot-tall, glass obelisk rising from a black marble base. "Can you read what's on the plaque? 'To John Hack for record uptime in March 2005.' How can I win another one of these when your incompetence cost me twenty minutes last night?"

Mr. Hack continued his lecture but Fred's mind was focusing on the sharp point of the obelisk. It would be so easy. A haze crept over Fred's reality.

Fred rushed The Hacker. The two men and The Hacker's chair caromed off the wall. Fred quickly got the upper hand and his left and right combinations pummeled The Hacker's face until his body went limp. Fred reached for the obelisk and raised it above The Hacker's chest. "It's time for you to receive your just reward." The Hacker's eyes shrieked in terror as the obelisk plunged down, the sharp point penetrating the ribs and impaling the heart.

"Well, Hutchison?"

The image of blood spewing out of The Hacker's chest dissipated and Fred turned to Mr. Hack but he couldn't get the obelisk out of his mind. "I'm sorry. What was the question?"

"I asked 'Do you like working here?' but your inattention has already answered that question." Mr. Hack withdrew behind his desk and stood erect with authority. He always knew that touchy-feely stuff didn't work in the real world. Employees are like animals, they're only motivated by fear. "Hutchison, I'm putting you on report. From now on, I want to be alerted about all unplanned outages or it'll be your job!"

Fred knew better but he couldn't help himself. "But Mr. Hack, if an outage is unplanned, how would I know about it beforehand?" Fred could actually see The Hacker's blood pressure rise but he didn't care. Maybe the obelisk was the answer.

"Hutchison, I'm sick of your smart ass comments. Get the hell out of here before I fire you on the spot."

Fred remembered staring at that stupid award with the marble base and the glass obelisk that would look so good

protruding from The Hacker's chest, then he was back in the hallway.

Fred was more than happy to head back to the cubicle maze and return to his rat hole. He looked at the clock and, in an act of defiance, grabbed his coat. I'm going to leave five minutes early and if they want to fire me, let them.

Sirens filled the air as he returned across the street to Union Station and gave a nod to Pal.

"Hey Buddy, come over here for a second."

Fred slowed but kept walking until he was grabbed by his coat and forced into a recess. "C'mon Pal, I've already gave you some money today. I just want to go home."

"You're not going anywhere looking like that."

Fred followed the man's gaze down to his khakis. There were bright spots of crimson, some still dripping. Fred unzipped his coat to reveal the front of his shirt was also covered with the pestilent red. "What the hell happened?"

"You know what happened and if you're smart, you'll follow me." When Fred didn't move, Pal seized his coat sleeve and led him down a staircase into the bowels of Union Station.

#

"Mister, you got any change you can spare?"

The commuter dropped a couple of coins into the battered Styrofoam cup, barely noticing the man with stained khakis and the wool hat with the Bears emblem almost completely detached.

"Mister, wait a second. You've always been good to me. I'd like you to have my good luck piece." A smirk washed across the face of Fred Hutchison as he pulled a gold coin from his pocket and placed it into the man's hand. "Well, I guess it hasn't been too lucky for me but maybe it'll bring you luck."

REVIEWS

INTRUDERS reviewed by Paul Kane

THE HOMELESS CHANNEL reviewed by David Tallerman

CURSE OF THE GOLDEN FLOWER reviewed by Jonathan McCalmont

RE-ANIMATOR reviewed by Paul Kane

SPIDER-MAN 3 reviewed by Lee Harris

INTRUDERS

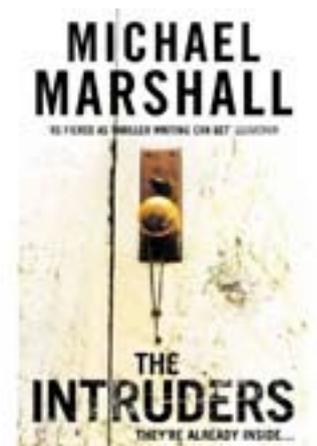
by Michael Marshall

Published by HarperCollins

RRP: £12.99 (hardback)

When Michael Marshall Smith – already a bestselling and award-winning author with the books *Only Forward*, *Spare* (optioned by Spielberg's Dreamworks), *One of Us* and *What You Make It* behind him – wrote the thriller *The Straw Men* under the name Michael Marshall, which went on to spawn two sequels, it looked like he was leaving the SF/horror genres behind forever in favour of more 'mainstream' fare. However, as the author has stated, *The Intruders* marks his attempt to bridge the two sides of his writing: namely an intelligent thriller with distinctly supernatural overtones. Not an easy thing to do, but if you can pull it off – as John Connolly has shown with his fiction – the rewards can be enormous...

The novel focuses on Jack Whalen, a former traffic cop who has left the force and has somehow accidentally wound up as a successful writer – after bringing out a photography book based around phone pictures taken in locations where break-ins have taken place. The book is called *The Intruders*. Little does Jack realise who prophetic that title is, because he's about to become involved in a mysterious conspiracy when an old friend from school turns up on his doorstep seeking help.



Now a lawyer, Gary Fisher tells him about the murder of a woman and her son nearby in Seattle, whose house was then set on fire. Police are looking for the husband, but Fisher has reason to believe he's not the real culprit. But Jack can't quite see what this has to do with him...yet. There are strange things going on, not least with Jack's wife, Amy, who is beginning to act suspiciously and has odd messages on her mobile phone. Her apparent connection with whatever's going on draws Jack in and gives him a motivation for digging deeper – using his police connections to aid in his quest.

At the same time, a young girl called Madison O'Donnell goes missing on a beach outside her house, leaving her parents frantic and turning to a FBI man called Shepherd. Madison seems to be following some sort of bizarre call, travelling across country and blacking out with no memory of how she's got to places. As with most thrillers, all these nebulous threads – and more – come together towards the end, as we finally see who, or what, the real intruders are. And you will never look at a loved one in the same light again...

Make no bones about it, *The Intruders* is one of Michael Marshall (Smith)'s best novels to date. In my opinion he's admirably done what he set out to do, combining the tense and suspenseful plotting of *The Straw Men* trilogy with mythology, in this case Native American, the paranormal, and actually some sf themes as well. But rather than leaving this a muddled hotch-potch and confusion of ideas, the blend works exceptionally well. Marshall's character's are so well drawn you believe that they're probably out there somewhere, still reeling from the events in the book. And his dialogue is so naturalistic, you'd swear he'd simply jammed a tape recorder into their faces and then just transcribed the results.

Though some might find it jarring, I actually found the narrative switches from third person (for any non-Jack chapters) to first (to show things from his personal viewpoint where possible) clever and inventive – it was also part of what made *The Straw Men* work so well. There's also plenty of action to be found, particularly when the conspiracy begins to be revealed in the last hundred pages or so, and the ending is an absolute belter.

I can always tell whether a book's working for me, and that's because I find that chapters have flown by in a very short space of time. I'd read a large chunk of this after only intending to pick it up and flick through it. And it went on like that until I couldn't bear to put it down before I'd crossed the finish line. It might have taken the author a while to deliver this one, but it was definitely worth the wait; and I for one can't wait to see what he comes up with next, hopefully bridging the gap even more? *The Intruders* has apparently also been picked up for development as a TV series, so get ahead of the game now and pick up the novel of the future show everyone will be talking about. Forget **Lost**, forget **24**, this one will get under your skin in ways you can't even begin to imagine.

THE HOMELESS CHANNEL

by Matt Silady

Published by AIT-Planet Lar, May 30th 2007

RRP: \$12.95

If you've ever wondered how to start a career as a comic writer then you could learn a lot from Matt Silady - the story of how his creation went from pet project to international release is almost as unusual as the one told in his graphic novel *The Homeless Channel*. First of all there's Silady's elegant solution to the problem of finding a like-minded artist - which was not to bother, and to do the art himself instead. Not actually being able to draw called for an even more unorthodox approach, namely photographing friends and family, inking over printed scans of the photographs and constructing the final pages in Photoshop. Even the lettering and cover design are Silady's own work.

The Homeless Channel began life as a series of four minis, sold at conventions and preserved as chapters in the final graphic novel. It graduated to book format when, bored of working on his own, Silady started inking at a desk in his local comics shop - attracting the attentions of Larry Young from publisher AiT/Planet Lar, whose headquarters were just across the street.

All of this home-grown free enterprise might lead you to expect a fairly amateurish effort - but that's not the case at all. *The Homeless Channel* looks as professional as any book on the stands, and brings more originality to the table than most. Silady's stark photo-based art betrays its origins but it's crisp and distinctive and his panel arrangements are frequently imaginative. There are a few inspired moments, like a double page spread



representing the heroine's life as a board game, and it would have been nice to see more - but the visuals both convey and enhance the narrative, which is arguably what good comics art should do.

As for the story itself: the book centres on Darcy Shaw, creator of the titular TV channel. The fictional *Homeless Channel* is exactly what its name suggests - a 24-hour station about homeless people and their lives. It's a strange hybrid of reality programming, charity work and docudrama featuring such shows as 'On the Road', ("two college graduates, two cameras and six months without a home") and 'Home Town', (a roundtable discussion programme that's "like Big Brother with smart people.")

It's obvious from the start that the channel is a mass of contradictions, perched uncomfortably on the border between humanitarianism and commercial exploitation. And Darcy is just as conflicted - the narrative is driven as much by her private life as by the fortunes of her strange creation, and her private life is something of a mess, what with her own sister being homeless and her entering into an on-off affair with the liaison from the company that's financing her station. She genuinely wants to do some good, but she wants to succeed as well, and as things progress she finds it increasingly difficult to do one without sacrificing the other.

It's this conflict that's at the heart of *The Homeless Channel*, more so even than the issue of homelessness itself. Mostly Silady doesn't preach, allowing his homeless characters to speak ably for themselves but keeping the focus on asking interesting questions rather than offering easy answers. This is definitely a good thing. But what's even better is that Silady is a talented enough writer to keep his material constantly fresh, interesting, and funny, without shying away from such a big and difficult subject. He's an excellent writer of dialogue, and although a few panels are cramped by characters saying too much or speaking over each other, the speech is always strong and authentic. Silady relies almost entirely on conversation to carry his story, and the gamble pays off.

The Homeless Channel isn't flawless - the ending feels slightly forced and unsatisfying and when you come down to it there isn't a huge amount of story here. Occasionally the lettering isn't as clear as it could be, and a handful of panel arrangements are a little difficult to follow. But this really is nitpicking - by any standards Silady's graphic novel is a provoking, inventive, and enjoyable read, and for a first effort it's nothing short of remarkable. If you enjoy smart comics or good books in general, then *The Homeless Channel* is well worth seeking out.

CURSE OF THE GOLDEN FLOWER

Directed by Yimou Zhang. Cast includes: Yun-Far Chow, Li Gong, Jay Chou, Ye Liu, Dahong Ni

Sony Pictures

RRP: \$28.95

There was a time, not so long ago, when kung fu films were considered "cult". The preserve of devoted fans and enthusiasts, they were considered to be slightly cheesy and definitely not very serious. Then came Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). Between the beautiful photography and the substantial period plot, Ang Lee's film catapulted the Kung Fu genre from the cult end of the market to the kind of mainstream respectability extended to other foreign language dramas. However, while Ang Lee initially opened the doors of western cinemas to Wuxia, Yimou Zhang has single-handedly wedged them open.

Much like Zhang's *Hero* (2002) and *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), *The Curse of the Golden Flower* is a colourful and visually stunning period drama featuring beautifully choreographed martial arts and a huge set piece battle that can only be likened to watching ten thousand men being fed into a blender. However, unlike previous films in which a thin plot is stretched over a series of lavish set pieces, *The Curse of the Golden Flower* places the accent very much upon the plot and the relationships between the characters. This is unsurprising as this film's tale of a family imploding under waves of incest, madness, poisoning and betrayal is based upon a play by Cao Yu that is so influential in China that it is said to hold a similar place in their theatrical tradition as *Hamlet* does in ours, which is in itself interesting as Western audiences will doubtless see similarities between Shakespeare's work and this film. Perhaps somewhere out there is a Chinese version of *Withnail and I* featuring a Chinese Uncle Monty who sighs that he will never play the (Emperor) PingÓ.

Unfortunately, *The Curse of the Golden Flower* is no *Hamlet*. Despite clearly wanting to make a proper drama, Zhang is evidently unwilling to cut himself off from the Kung fu-loving audience that has made him so successful outside



of China. This means that the film is lumbered with admittedly well made action sequences that not only add to the film's problems of pace but actively undermine the fantastic sense of claustrophobia that underpins the entirety of the film's drama through hundreds of extras and the use of a fantastically garish colour scheme that ensure that the characters are never alone and never in peace. In fact, the whole point of the film is that the characters are trapped with each other but Zhang insists upon showing them escaping to the outside world and trying to fight their way out of trouble. These options were not open to the characters in the original play and Zhang's adaptation suffers as a result.

One aspect of Zhang's work that has come in for some criticism is his relationship with the Chinese government. In *Hero*, Zhang appeared to be arguing that totalitarianism is inherently morally superior to democracy and pluralism on the grounds that one single unifying voice is better than hundreds of squabbling ones. *The Curse of the Golden Flower* sees Zhang on similar political territory as he turns what was originally intended as a critique of the corrupt social system of Imperial China into a critique of people who would question the natural order of things. This is strikingly conveyed through the film's final scene in which human blood spattered on a square table representing the world and surrounded by a circular carpet representing heaven spoils the image's perfect symmetry. If humans knew their place then all would be perfect. Zhang's slightly sinister and sycophantic politics are nothing new as Zhang's films continue to be funded by the Chinese state but it is nonetheless interesting to see an attack of a corrupt and authoritarian society turned into a propaganda piece for a society that is arguably equally corrupt and even more brutal in its treatment of dissidents.

Despite these concerns, *The Curse of the Golden Flower* is easily as spectacular as Zhang's other films and it is interesting to see him steer away from his usual populist territory in order to take on a more script. It is just unfortunate that he continues to be concerned with reaching as wide an audience as possible in order to spread his questionable political views. Without such impediments, Zhang would undeniably be one of world cinema's most exciting directors.

RE-ANIMATOR

Directed by Stuart Gordon. Cast includes: Jeffrey Comb, Bruce Abbott, Barbara Crampton

Anchor Bay Pictures

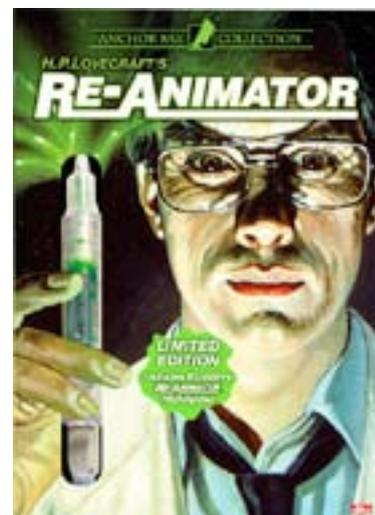
RRP: #21.99

Before *Re-Animator* Stuart Gordon had already made a name for himself on stage, with his Organic Theatre company – providing Grand Guignol thrills for audiences, which sometimes landed him in trouble. Little wonder, then, that his seminal 1985 horror hit, based on the work of his beloved H.P. Lovecraft, was no less controversial, with viewers both repulsed by and yet attracted to the mixture of gore and perfect black comedy. Now Anchor Bay, God bless 'em, have released a gorgeous two-disc special edition of the movie in, appropriately enough, a controversial boxed set which includes a syringe (sans needle, I hasten to add) full of Herbert West's glowing green serum. Yum.

For those who need reminding, or just weren't around when the movie first hit the screen, *Re-Animator* begins with an experiment gone wrong in a Swiss hospital involving West (Jeffrey Combs turning in a manic career best performance) for which he is kicked out. Cut to Arkham hospital where young medical student Dan Cain (Abbott) is frustrated at not being able to save his patients, taking them down to the morgue himself when they check out. To cheer himself up he's romping with the Dean's daughter, Megan (Crampton), unbeknownst to daddy dearest. Then along comes new student West, who appears to know more than the resident expert on death – especially brain death – Dr Carl Hill (David Gale).

West applies for the vacancy in Abbott's digs, and seems a little too interested in all the space in the basement... When Megan finds their dead cat in the fridge and West swears he found it that way, she wants him out. But things take a bizarre twist when Dan stumbles upon a zombie version of the cat being chased by West in the basement. They catch and kill it again, but Dan can't quite believe what he's seen. Proving it to him by bringing back the cat yet again, West asks Dan to help him with his macabre dabblings.

Reluctantly he complies, but not before the Dean kicks him off the course as well. What follows is a series of theatrical set-pieces designed to make the most of both the space and the camera, with blood – and heads – flying,



not to mention re-animated corpses galore. Oh, and watch out for one of the zombies because when West is done with his serum, he has guts to spare...

Never claiming to be the height of good taste, *Re-Animator* works because of its original blend of tongue-in-cheek humour and shock value. When West tells the disembodied head of Hill, "Get a job in a sideshow!" you can't help but chuckle along. And when that same head *gives* head to a strapped down and naked Crampton, you find yourself squirming uncomfortably and hoping for Dan to get there before it goes any further. In fact, David Gale makes for a truly memorable villain, who is sleazy and slimy in his desire for Crampton's Megan even before he wheezes through his lines as a head on a tray.

Abbott is good, too, as the square-jawed 'hero', trying to do the right thing but always getting it horribly wrong. But it's Combs who steals the show here. He brings West to life, creating another iconic, obsessive mad scientist who will live on in horror and cinema history alongside Victor Frankenstein, and who is just as clouded in his judgement when it comes to bringing the dead back to life.

But as well as the film, Anchor Bay have included tons of extras for fans. Choose from two audio commentaries, one with Gordon on his own, the other with producer Brian Yuzna and actors Abbott, Combs, Crampton and Robert Sampson (Dean Halsey). The superb documentary *Re-Animator Resurrectus* is almost as long as the movie itself and tells you everything you ever wanted to know about the making of the film, but were afraid to ask...for obvious reasons. Plus you get separate interviews with Gordon, Yuzna, writer Dennis Paoli, composer Richard Brand (whose shameless 'reworking' of the *Pyscho* theme fits in perfectly with the tone of the film), *Fangoria* editor Tony Timpone about the effect the movie had on him, deleted and extended scenes, TV spots, production stills gallery, behind-the-scenes still gallery, posters and advertising stills gallery, storyboards, Gordon bio, and a copy of the script. What more could you ask for?

With another sequel coming up helmed by Gordon himself, *House of Re-Animator*, which aims to re-unite the cast and stars William H. Macy as the President of the United States, what better time to Re-Acquaint yourself with the original?

SPIDER-MAN 3

Directed by Sam Raimi.

Cast includes: Tobey McGuire, Kirsten Dunst, James Franco, Thomas Haydn Church, Bryce Dallas Howard

12A. Out Now.



We all had high hopes for Spidey's third outing. Fan-favourite villains? Count 'em - three! Potential love rivals for MJ? Two of those! So, what went wrong?

The always-terrific McGuire *is* Spider-Man. It's not *impossible* to think of someone else in the role, but it's difficult to believe that anyone else could emote quite as believably as he. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of Dunst, who was miscast from the beginning. MJ has always been a wild, fun-loving, bold supermodel type - the polar opposite to Parker's nerdy science major. Dunst's MJ is a quiet, homeloving actress (failed). We should be amazed that MJ would even look at Parker, rather than thinking "they make a cute couple".



Thank goodness, then, for Bryce Dallas Howard. Her portrayal of Gwen Stacy is everything that MJ should be, but isn't. Stacy is played as MJ is written in the comics. She's bold, she's beautiful, she's confident, she's fab! It's just a shame she doesn't get more screen time.

The surprise of the film, however, is Franco. He exudes a quiet confidence missing from earlier chapters, and though his plot-thread is woven with the flimsiest of silk, he plays it straight and wins us over - despite many of us thinking "not another bloody goblin plot!"

The effects are excellent, as you would expect them to be, but the writing... Oh dear, the writing... At several points during the film I wished I was watching it at home so I could throw something at the television! Two standout moments among many - Osborne's butler's confession (when I wanted to shout "Well, why didn't you say something years ago?") and the first meeting between Venom and Sandman, where

Venom mentions a vital something that he had absolutely no way of knowing, simply because it would act as a catalyst for the Sandman's call to action.

The set-pieces are exciting (though the first Spidey/Goblin chase is perhaps a trifle dark) but if you cannot guess the final moment of the film within the first ten minutes then you have no right leaving the house on your own!

The first two films were near-perfect examples of how to film a superhero movie, and Raimi made a lot of friends in the fanboy community. After Spider-Man 3, many of them will be secretly hoping that he doesn't return for the next installment. Watchable, but ultimately disappointing.

Origins

The First Doctor : 1963-66

Written by Scott Harrison

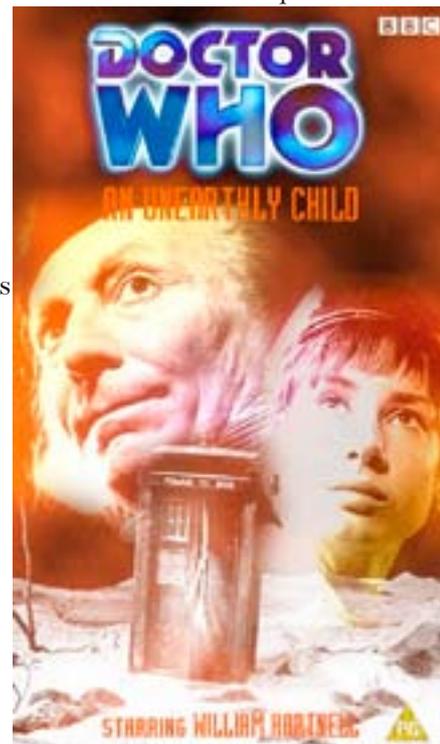
When *Doctor Who* first appeared on our television screens some forty-four years ago, back in those flickering halcyon days of the early 1960s, the concept of having an alien as its central character was a startlingly original and surprisingly brave move on the part of the programme makers. Relatively speaking television was still in its infancy and science fiction was still very much an untapped well – on British television at any rate. The 1950s had seen three hugely important series of Nigel Kneale's *Quatermass*, who's immense popularity with audiences had paved the way for more experimental Sci-Fi serials such as *A for Andromeda* and *Out of the Unknown* at the beginning of the following decade. But in a time of kitchen-sink dramas, *Play for Today*'s and gritty urban soap operas (ITV's *Coronation Street* was by now in its third year and proving a ratings hit) introducing a principal character who was not only of this time but not even of this world would prove to be the most groundbreaking of all. Surprisingly though even as late as September 1963 the Doctor's origins were to have been slightly different to those that we know so well today.



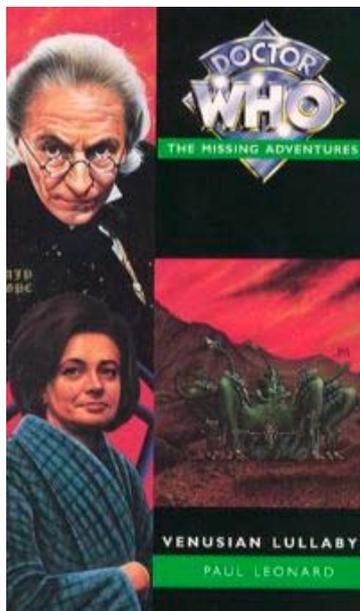
When *Doctor Who*'s first pilot episode went before the cameras a little over two months before the series began transmission on 23rd November a subtly different script was being recorded. When school teachers Ian Chesterton and Barbara Wright pushed their way into a seemingly ordinary early 20th Century Police Box to be confronted by the extraordinary sight of the Doctor's Time and Space machine, Susan, the Doctor's Granddaughter, explains to them that they were "born in the 49th Century", furthermore that they are "wanderers in the fourth dimension". Unhappy with many aspects of this original pilot Sydney Newman, the show's initial creator and then Head of Drama Serials at the BBC, called for a remount and several changes were made to the proceeding production, including a dramatic change in the character of the Doctor himself; Newman disliked the arrogance and bad tempered nature of the character in this episode and demanded that it be toned down to make him more "cute" and accessible to a family audience. By the time the second version of the pilot went into production a month later the most notable revision to the script was that of the Doctor's origins. This time around it is explained that the Doctor is an exile from his own planet, cut off from his people without protection. No longer is he merely just a "wanderer" but now it is inferred that he travels in his ship because he has no other choice, he has nowhere to go, that he cannot go home.

In outward appearance the character of the First Doctor was of a human male in his mid-sixties, white-haired and walking with the aid of a cane; very much the archetype of the loveable old grandfather figure. Although never actually stated on screen during Hartnell's three year run on the programme the character was in fact much much older, having lived in excess of over 600 years. In an early character synopsis written by Newman himself in early 1963 he states the Doctor's age to be 764, although later drafts written by Staff Writer C.E. Webber and Story Editor David Whittaker amended this slightly, bringing it down to 650 years.

Perhaps the most startling contrast between the First Doctor and his successors was that he was very much what could be considered the Anti-Hero. Although his character would mellow slightly in later seasons (not to mention later incarnations) this is very much the case for Hartnell's first season. Reluctant to become actively involved in confrontation this Doctor was content to sit on the side-lines, keeping a low profile, and allow events to run out their natural course. His continued bouts of irascibility, arrogance and sheer stubbornness would put him at loggerheads with his more level-headed, compassionate and (excuse the pun) humane companions; his deceitful and dishonest nature often leading them all into danger – his absolute insistence to explore the 'dead city' in *The Daleks* and their resultant capture and being exposed to a lethal dose of radiation being a prime example of this. It was not uncommon for this Doctor to adopt a much more aggressive solution to removing himself and his companions from difficult and dangerous situations. I have lost count of the number of times the First Doctor has clubbed his enemies to the ground with his cane or delivered a vicious chop to the neck. Undoubtedly the most shocking of these instances being in his first story *An Unearthly Child* when an incredulous Ian Chesterton stops the Doctor from clubbing one of the cavemen to death with a rock so that they can escape.



It was during these first three years that the Doctor would encounter what is arguably the most varied and wholly original collection of 'monsters' to be seen in its entire forty-four years on air; the Voord, the Sensorites, the Zarbi, the Mechanoids and the Monoids, to name but a handful, all making only a single appearance on the programme before sadly vanishing from our screens forever. There were two, however, that would return time and again, going on to become as popular and as iconic as the Doctor himself and his TARDIS; the Daleks and the Cybermen. Making their first appearance as early as the second story in the shows run, The Daleks proved so popular with the public (literally doubling audience figures in the space of a few weeks) that they would make no less than four further appearances in the shows first two years – not to mention a brief cameo as a museum exhibit in the story *The Space Museum*. By 1965 the Daleks would prove such a massive hit that a big screen outing was quickly planned, this time battling a somewhat different Doctor (more of which in the next article!). The Cybermen, on the other hand, arrived at the opposite end of Hartnell's tenure as the Doctor; his final story *The Tenth Planet*. Unlike those seen in the recent series the origins of these Cybermen were based in our universe, from Earth's twin planet of Mondas. They were much more organic in their appearance, still retaining many of their human (or Mondasian) components, a far cry from the glimmering metal giants they would become during the Troughton era and beyond. It would not be long, however, before their popularity with the viewing audience would only be outmatched by the dreaded Daleks themselves. In retrospect it is remarkable how little we actually discover about the character of the Doctor himself during those first three years of the programmes' history. Yes, we learn in the very first episode that the Doctor is not from our world but it would not be for a further six years (at the very end of the Second Doctor's run) before we learn that the Doctor is a Time Lord, another four years after that until we discover that his planet is called Gallifrey. Aside from a single reference he makes regarding certain telepathic abilities he possesses (*The Sensorites*) the First Doctor presents himself to the viewing audience to be nothing more than he appears to be – a white-haired man of advancing years. For the most part he appears frail, wracked with aches and pains, unable to walk for great distances without being overcome by exhaustion and bouts of breathlessness, dabbing at his forehead with a handkerchief and complaining that he must sit down and rest. He is absent minded (often getting his companions names wrong; 'Chesterfield' instead of 'Chesterton'), impatient and prone to oddly mistimed hysterical laughter and cruel humour. No mention is ever made of his 'twin hearts'. In fact, whenever stress or strain takes its toll upon the Doctor's hearts he is apt to clutch the left hand side of his chest, exactly as a human would. The only truly alien characteristic (and by far the most important of them all) displayed by the First Doctor is seen at the end of his final story when, suffering from exhaustion and complaining that his body is "wearing a bit thin", he collapses onto the floor of the TARDIS and undergoes a startling metamorphosis. Aside from the TARDIS itself, regeneration is the first real indication that the Doctor's race is so totally removed from that of our own.



In 1993/4 Virgin Books began to release their New and Past Doctor Adventure range of original novels, the first novel to be released to feature the First Doctor was

Venusian Lullaby by Paul Leonard. A mere four further books would be released during its three year run after which the license was picked up by BBC Books. Like the Virgin novels before it the BBC's Past Doctor books attempted to slot themselves seamlessly between the stories of the TV series and featured various companions as they appeared in the programme. Unfortunately those featuring the First Doctor were somewhat restricted by the limitations imposed on them by the shows early years, therefore nothing new is learned about the Doctor nor is his character expanded on in any significant way. Instead the First Doctor novels tended to concentrate more upon the relationships of his human companions (particularly Ian and Barbara) and, unencumbered by the time and budgetary constraints of the programme, would expound with great relish upon their newly created alien races, cultures and exotic locations, something that the television series had sadly been unable to do on its modest £2000 a show budget. Of all the novels released by Virgin and BBC Books only three titles are worthy of particular note; *The Witch Hunters* and *Salvation* both by Steve Lyons and *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* by Christopher Bulis. Not only did they managed to capture the feel, style and underlying drive of the original television series but also managed to broaden the canvas, push the First Doctor era out of its three-studio-wall confinement, giving us a foretaste of what Doctor Who could (and would) be when it finally returned in 2005. In late October 1966, just two stories into Doctor Who's fourth season, the series underwent a sudden and shockingly dramatic upheaval. Due to ailing health and increasing artistic differences it was mutually decided that William Hartnell should leave the programme. Very little had been revealed about the Doctor since his first appearance in that junk yard in Totter's Lane some three years earlier. Apart from the Doctor himself and his granddaughter Susan only one other member of the Doctor's race had ever been referred to on screen, the nameless character of The Monk who was seen in the stories *The Time Meddler* and *The Daleks' Masterplan*, yet all details of his planet of origin and culture was still very much shrouded in mystery. But all this was about to change. Things were about to get out of his control and he would soon find that he must call on the very people for help that he was trying so hard to avoid – his own people. The Doctor's past was about to catch up with him!

The New Kids on the Block

Written by Lee Harris

SFX has dominated the SF&F magazine scene in the UK for many years. Launched in 1995, it soon became the magazine of choice for genre fans across the country (as well as a credible option abroad). A number of competitor titles have come and gone since then, most notably *Dreamwatch*, which became an online-only title at the end of January 2007.

SFX has attracted much criticism over the years – particularly latterly – over its editorial style, particularly its tendency to jump on the bandwagon of popular contemporary shows, by devoting high page-counts to the latest fashion. Although there is a grain of truth in this, the criticism is an unfair one – a magazine has a duty to its readers to report on areas that interest them most, and a duty to its publisher to attract as many readers as possible. Magazines like *SFX* are popular because they appeal to a large number of readers, and the success of *SFX* is indicative of the fact that they have consistently addressed their readers needs more than competitive titles.

The outright success of a magazine can sometimes be its undoing, however. With the restructuring of *Dreamwatch*, there were few other titles on the shelves to compete with *SFX* on its home territory. Without competition it is easy for an editorial team to become complacent, and while *SFX* has always tended to listen to its readership (particularly recently, as its forums are constantly busy with readers, freelancers and staff writers alike), with no other magazine threatening to take their sales there was always the possibility that complacency might set in.

Luckily for British SF readers, two other titles have recently entered the arena.

SciFi Now (published by Imagine) and *DeathRay* (published by the newly-formed Blackfish) hit the shelves in April and early May, mere weeks apart. Stylistically very different, they are the first magazines to attempt to pose a threat to *SFX*'s dominance in the market.

The comments that follow are in relation to issue 1 of *SciFi Now* and *DeathRay*, and issue 157 of *SFX*. It is important to remember that the first issue of any magazine often represents the start of a learning curve for the staff on that title, and that issues only months down the line will almost certainly be different in terms of style

and quality. The editors of all three magazines were emailed and informed about this article, and asked a small number of questions. They were given less than a week to respond, which is perhaps why one editor sent no reply.



SciFi Now was the first of the pretenders to *SFX*'s throne to hit the shops. Imagine's intention was to launch the magazine through its main retailer – WH Smith – across the country, though distribution seems to have been a problem for the first issue, with many large branches not having copies delivered, or on order.

SciFi Now's content is well-written, if a trifle pedestrian. There is little to get excited about, and after finishing the magazine there was very little that stuck in my mind, with a few notable exceptions. The retrospective article on *Buffy* was an interesting and enjoyable read, and the longer reviews were well-structured (although some reviews were less than 100 words long, and used up to half that wordcount on trivialities). It reads like a magazine that wants to be *SFX*, rather than a title with a unique direction.

The cover was poorly-structured, using an over-familiar image of *The Doctor*, overprinted with other images placed with seemingly no thought given to the aesthetic.

Of the 148 pages in the magazine, only 19 of them were taken up with advertisements. As a new title we can expect a lower advertisement count than with an established magazine. Expect this number to increase month by month. Nineteen pages of advertising for a magazine of this size is almost certainly not enough to make it a viable concern. This is possibly why they accepted a half-page advertisement for pornographic DVDs – hopefully an oversight, rather than a trend.

It is always important to display confidence, of course, though their claim to be “The Premier Sci-Fi, Fantasy, Horror and Cult TV Magazine” should be taken with a pinch of salt.

The *SciFi Now* forum was up and running even before the magazine's release, and it already has a reasonable size of membership.

An interesting, and sometimes effective first issue – certainly a solid base, but the quality of the content needs to improve if it is to retain its readers.

DeathRay is a curious beast. There is much to applaud within the pages of its first issue, but much to be concerned about, also.

Its tagline is “Where Science Fiction Lives” and its stated intention is to bring a touch of gravitas to the genre. Its publisher – Blackfish – is owned by Matt Bielby. Matt launched *SFX* back in 1995, so he has some experience in this field. He states in his “Editor's Letter” that “*DeathRay* is cut to the same cloth [as *SFX*], but to a slightly more stylish pattern”. He also mentions that his intention is for the magazine to be “Just as much fun as *SFX* to read, but a magazine that takes things a little more seriously”. There follows an admittedly impressive list of the other magazines that he has launched in the past. At first glance this might seem a touch narcissistic, but it's important to remember that not only is *DeathRay* a new title, it's the only title by a new publishing company. Matt's previous credits are therefore immensely important if the magazine is to attract the advertising revenue it needs to survive.

Unfortunately, there are too many additional pages devoted to introducing Matt and his team later in the magazine. One page is devoted almost entirely to describing how the name “*DeathRay*” was chosen. Apparently, an early choice (*Heat Ray*) was discounted because non SF fans would fail to get the reference and Matt “always wanted to drag in the widest audience”. How the title “*DeathRay*” will help drag in the non core-SF audience is



not explained. It seems that the only way for the title to alienate more non-core purchasers would be for it to be written in Klingon!

Concerning the timing of the launch, and where it fits with the other titles on the shelves Matt told us “I’ve had *DeathRay* planned for a couple of years now, but it’s taken until now to do it - mostly taken up with getting the money together... It’s slightly more serious, more wordy [than the competition]. I’m a bit older than I was when I launched *SFX*, and this is more about where I am now.”

What of the content? Thankfully, this is far better. Features are generally meaty and well-researched, reviews well thought out, and it feels like the intention to make the magazine a little more serious than *SFX* is paying off. Two full pages are given to an obituary and brief bibliography for Kurt Vonnegut, for instance, whereas *SFX* (which was published later) managed less than a quarter of a page. There are, however, two major problems with issue one. First of all, a full thirteen pages are devoted to the SF credentials of Chicago in a semi-regular feature called “MegaCity”. An amazingly detailed and impressively-researched piece about the monsters, spirits and SF heroes that have hit the city, this could have made for an interesting three or four page diversion. Thirteen pages is no diversion – it’s a road block. Matt Bielby told us: “Certainly, the piece on SF in Chicago got slightly out of hand, but I still think it was packed with good stuff and I stand by it. Megacity will be in issues 2 and 3, and then I think we’ll give it a rest for a bit, but it will be back.”

The main problem with issue 1 is easy to fix. From a purely practical perspective, *DeathRay* is a nightmare to read. Interesting articles are chopped, with the end of the articles half a magazine away (continued on page 145). More worryingly, on some pages text is rotated 90 degrees, forcing the reader to hold the magazine in an unnatural reading position (it’s almost impossible to enjoy *DeathRay* in the bath!). Two sets of pages are not only “continued from page...” but also have text that is set in three different orientations! It may have seemed a neat stylistic idea at the planning stage, but it’s annoying for the reader (and a new magazine should never annoy the reader). Matt has promised that “we’ll tone it down a bit on issue 2, though it won’t disappear completely.”

A good start, and certainly one which fulfils their intention to be a more serious mass-appeal title (though I have deep reservations about the name). If *Blackfish* can keep the standard this high, *DeathRay* could find a permanent place on the newsagents’ shelves.

And what of the reigning champion – *SFX*?

It is almost unfair to compare *SFX* with *SciFi Now* and *DeathRay*, as *SFX* has 157 issues (plus numerous “specials”) under its belt. It knows what it wants to be, and the quality of the magazine is consistent. The editorial team evidently adore their jobs, and are not shy in saying so – this is sometimes interpreted by a vocal minority of its readers as arrogance, though this criticism is perhaps a trifle unfair. Most of the time.

In terms of page count, it is smaller than the competition by 8 pages, and far more of its pages are taken up by advertising (25%, compared with 9 to 13% for *DeathRay* and *SciFi Now*, respectively). Don’t be fooled by the smaller ad count for the new kids on the block, however – to become profitable they will need to attract higher quantities of advertising. It’s a small advertising pool, too – the market is niche. *SFX* is the market leader, and sells fewer than 40,000 copies a month (in comparison, *Heat Magazine* sells over 2 million copies in the same timeframe). *SciFi Now* and *DeathRay* are unlikely to attract significant additional readers (if any) and so must either take market share from *SFX*, or rely on readers buying more than one magazine. To succeed, there must be enough differential between the new magazines and *SFX* to persuade readers to spend more.

SFX has always been an accessible read, though the (often colloquial) style has sometimes caused critics to question its integrity as a serious magazine. There is often much triviality in the magazine, it’s true, but there is an impressive depth of knowledge on show, too, and as editor Dave Bradley points out it’s length of tenure has meant that it has “established a great many relationships with authors, TV producers, movie actors and the like, so nobody can rival us for exclusive access to the stuff that matters”.

SFX is also nothing if not flexible. Its occasional design tweaks, and new features are sometimes implemented as a



direct result of reader feedback – particularly now that it has a thriving community in its online forum.

What of the content itself? Issue 157 (published May 9th) contains everything you would expect a magazine of this type to cover – *Heroes*, *Doctor Who*, Captain Jack Sparrow. In addition there is an interesting interview with Stephen King, a report from the set of *28 Weeks Later*, an article about their excellent Pulp Idol short fiction competition, and a nostalgic look at the McQueen “classic” *The Blob*. The reviews are concise, the news section is interesting, and there is surprisingly little in the way of editorial padding (*Couch Potato* notwithstanding). There isn’t much “different” about *SFX*, but that’s because it’s the standard by which others are judged – it’s the competition that needs to differentiate themselves, not the established market leader.

It’s clear that there is a need for an additional genre title – competition keeps a magazine honest. In a relatively niche market such as this, it is debatable whether there is space for three big titles. *SFX* has a clear advantage – they have history and an established readership onboard. They will need to keep a close eye on the competition, but from a relatively safe position. At the moment.

The real fight is between *SciFi Now* and *DeathRay*. *SciFi Now* has the advantage that it is published by an established company with the resources to help it weather low early sales (though it needs to improve its distribution quickly, if it is to give itself any real chance at success). *DeathRay* has the advantage of better distribution, and content that is sufficiently different to that of *SFX* that it is a viable “additional choice”.

One thing is for certain – with three magazines now vying for your pocket money, they will all have to ensure their quality is consistently high, which can only be good news for everyone!

How They All Score

(Scores for items 1, 6, 7 and 8 are out of 10 – item 9 is scored out of 30. Items 2 – 5 are not included in the total score as they are just for interest).

	SFX	DR	SFN
1. Title and Logo	7	5	6
2. Number of pages	140	148	148
3. Number of advertising pages	35.5 (25%)	13 (9%)	19 (13%)
4. Number of pages devoted to <i>Who</i> / <i>Heroes</i>	14.5 (10%)	20 (14%)	17 (11%)
5. Number of pages without advertisements	104.5	115	112
6. Value	7	7.5	7.5
7. Design	9	7	8
8. Distribution	10	8	5
9. Content	22	20	16
Total Score (out of a possible 70)	55	47.5	42.5

Notes:

1. *SFX* is a good title, and its long history has helped establish it as a brand. This would have received an “8”, if it wasn’t for the designer’s constant need to cover the “F” so that it looks like “SEX”. Bad enough most months, but this month there’s a teenage cheerleader on the front, too!

DeathRay is a name that will be loved only by the most enthusiastic of genre supporters – the rest of us will have to roll the magazine when we leave the shop for fear of embarrassment. The logotype, too, is clunky and poorly conceived.

SciFi Now is a decent title – it tells you what you need to know about the magazine. The logo design is uninspired, however.

4. The number of pages devoted to *Doctor Who* or *Heroes* in the latest edition. This includes content pages, reviews and covers, where applicable.

6. Based on the quantity of non-advert pages, rather than the quality of content.

7. Internal design and layout. Ease of reading as well as aesthetics.

8. How easy it was to get a copy.

9. Marks out of 30. *DeathRay* was marked down for wasting so many pages on its Chicago feature.

Some of the questions asked of the editors (SciFi Now did not respond):

What makes [your title] different to the competition?

DeathRay: It's slightly more serious, more wordy. I'm a bit older than I was when I launched *SFX*, and this is more about where I am now - perhaps a bit less excited about the trivial stuff (though I still love it!), and more about the ideas behind SF. When I was dreaming *DeathRay* up I was thinking in terms of the more serious music magazines like *Mojo* and *The Word*, and the broadsheet newspapers. I also think it's the slickest, least geeky SF mag there's ever been.

SFX: *SFX* is the market leading magazine and has been since the 1990s. Over that time we've established a great many relationships with authors, TV producers, movie actors and the like, so nobody can rival us for exclusive access to the stuff that matters. Also, *SFX* has a unique style and tone, a sense of humour which makes readers feel like part of our club. We employ the best writers and designers in the business: the magazine is the perfect mix of well-informed and well-presented material, accessible, clear and fun but also expertly researched and detailed.

Your reader (who has already bought this month's copy of your magazine) has an extra £4 burning a hole in his pocket, and he's after another SF fix. What magazine should he buy, and why?

DeathRay: If he or she's after an SF magazine, I'd buy *SFX*. It's still an excellent title.

SFX: You could always put it towards the *SFX* Collection! We produce special editions too, remember. One devoted to anime and manga will hit the shelves on the same day as our next issue, Wednesday 6 June - priced £5.99, you'll need another couple of quid.

Do you think there is space for multiple genre magazines in the UK?

DeathRay: [Yes, because] There's the obvious reason: *Doctor Who*, *Lost*, *Heroes*, all those big SF movies out every month. SF has rarely dominated the mainstream like it does now. On a more personal level, I wanted my own magazine and magazine publishing company, and I thought I'd have more fun doing *DeathRay* than just about anything else. I've launched a lot of magazines in the past (*PC Gamer*, *SFX*, *Total Film* and many more), but I've never owned my own - now I do. Generally, I think if the offering is good enough you'll find an audience in just about any market, and *DeathRay* is a pretty good magazine. I think we'll do okay.

SFX: There have been multiple magazines in the genre market for many years, including many smaller publications that you haven't mentioned. But *SFX* has accounted for the majority of the news-stand audience for many years.

Websites

www.sfx.co.uk

www.blackfishpublishing.com

www.scifinow.co.uk

Coming Next Week:

Fiction: *Wings of Night* by Allyson Bird

If you have enjoyed this week's issue, please offer your support by commenting at www.hub-mag.co.uk/wordpress or by throwing some of your hard-earned shekles at us. We pay our writers, and your support is appreciated.