



Issue 64

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Lovers Sleeping

by M P Ericson

I do not know if I can make you understand.

Perhaps only a fighter can understand something like this. If you are not one, you will never know. If you are, you already know, and I have no need of telling you.

I love her. *Love* – that seems too small a word. She has travelled with me, slept with me, woken with me, watched out long lonely nights with me; fought in my hand, fierce and fell, sharp and keen as a dragon's tooth; the first to leap, the first to bite; my Flesh-eater, Bone-carver, Blood-drinker. She has killed countless men in my defence, and she is mine.

You do not understand.

Let me tell you, then, of how I first came to take her for my own. I was young, and strong, and foolish, and I thought one sword was much like another. I thought I could vanquish any man in battle; I thought the world was mine for the taking; I thought myself invincible, immortal, a god's son bestriding the earth.

He was good. I had seen him fight, and I knew that he was good. I knew his wife was pretty, too, and – well, there you have it. To kill him, in fair fight: a man like that, scarred with battles won; a chieftain, some would say a king, and my own commander whenever the natives got restless, which believe me they did constantly. To kill him, and bed his wife, and be known as the man who did both: that was too heady a draught for me to resist.

So I challenged him, with all the proper forms. We left the golden liquid warmth of the firelit hall, and strode out into the frozen star-pierced night. Four of us: he and I, with one friend each to see that all was done as it should be, and to fight to the death in their turn if it was not.

The others followed us, of course. The young men came to cheer me on, raucous in the arrogance of youth; the old men to click their tongues and say fighting was not what it used to be, and nod solemnly as he slew me; the boys to gaze raptly at the flash of blades in the starlight, and reach out in awe for the bloodied corpse that would soon sully the snow.

Yes. A cold night. Snow on the ground, not thick; ankle deep perhaps, though at the door it had been trampled into ice by many feet. It crunched under our leather boots, and the sound made me shiver, as it always does. There was laughter then, as some men thought I was afraid.

I was not. I was drunk with courage, and the night was clear, and I was immortal.

The call was made. We both drew.

Something happened in that moment. Something that I still do not fully understand.

She screamed as he drew her, screamed like a woman in anguish. She leapt wide of me, as if she would not touch me; not though her lord would die for it.

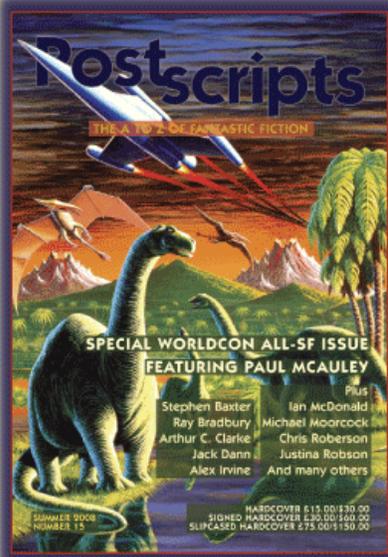
Even then she was already mine, only she knew that and I did not.

I swung my own blade – a good strong swing. The edge of my sword struck his jaw from below and cleft his skull. A mead-bowl of bone and blood and brains flew through the icy night and struck the boys, who shrieked like girls and ran. The other half of his head remained, one eye still staring at me, disbelieving, as he fell.

There was silence. Utter silence. No cheering, no laughter: nothing. It was as if the men behind me, mute dark shapes against the light that flowed through the open door, were all struggling to comprehend what they had seen.

I leaned down and took the sword from his yielding hand. I unstrapped the scabbard from his belt, and took that as well.





Postscripts 15

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Then I went back inside.

They all followed me. They all saw his wife raise her head and stare at me, as I walked in through the door, carrying his sword and my own.

They all saw her eyes blacken like coals in her frozen face, and they all knew, or thought they knew, what I would do next.

I did not do it.

I looked at her, and wondered that I had ever thought her pretty. Then I looked at his sword in my hand, and was entranced.

A beautiful blade, long and clean and even, without a mark to tell of the many battles it had fought. There was a sheen to it, soft as firelight, yet cold as the gleam of stars on the snow outside. It seemed to flicker from within, with a tracery of veins under the smooth metal surface. The hilt was solid and strong, cast in the likeness of a double-headed hawk, fitting into my hand as if made and meant for me.

She would not touch me. She betrayed the man who held her, and gave her own life to save mine.

Of course – you are no fighter. Well then, consider this: no one but a fool would trust a weapon that has failed to protect its lord. But I was foolish, young and strong and foolish, and I thought nothing of that. I only knew that I must possess her, at any cost to myself.

She should have been broken in two and cast into the river, to lie alone and forgotten for all time, never again to betray a man's life into the hands of his enemy. She should have died for me, and she knew it: she chose that death, freely and openly, so that I might live.

Never could I part with her.

Never could I watch her die.

I took her for my own. Yes, I took her; yet it was she who took me; it was she who chose

me. I let myself be possessed by her. I gave myself to her, flesh and spirit alike, and never once, in all our years together, did she fail me – never once.

I died, as each man must, but it was not through any fault of hers. A fever in old age, after a life lived like a man, a life of hardship and battle and unflinching courage; nothing more sinister than that.

It had to happen.

When it did – and understand this, though your heart is that of a woman – *she was buried with me*. Not broken, not cast aside, but buried with me, as my faithful companion in life and my silent eternal companion in death.

Leave her be. She was never meant for your hand. Lay her back in the earth where you found her, next to my naked bones. Take me instead, take what little remains of me, but leave her here; let her lie in peace; let her sleep.

To you, she is an interesting archaeological find from a male high-status warrior grave.

To me, she is my beloved.

Big Screen Future

by Alasdair Stuart

ALIEN

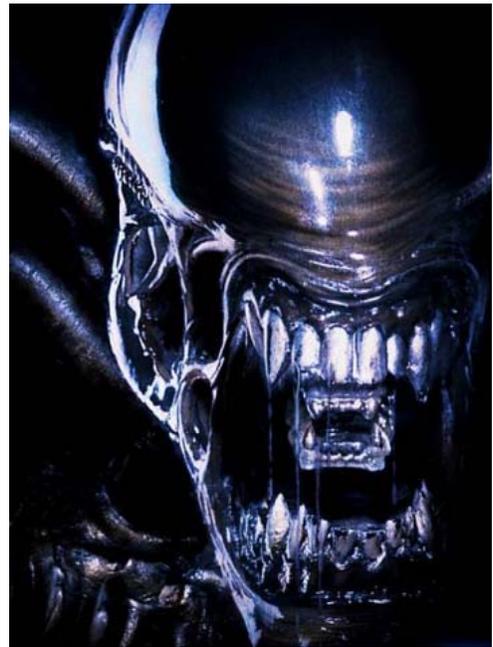
The second in a new regular series, in which Alasdair Stuart examines films of the past that deal with stories of tomorrow.

Alien is a classic, in every sense of the word. It's the sort of movie that people remember seeing for the first time, it's a film that regularly gets quoted as one of the best horror or science fiction movies ever made and it's also the first time anyone sat up and took serious notice of Ridley Scott as a motion picture director.

That's even before you get to the incredible influence it exerted on the films that would follow it. This was, let's not forget, 1979, a year after Phillip Kaufman's superb and incredibly dark remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and sitting on the absolute cusp of the 1980s, a decade that would see a seismic change in how authority figures and institutions were viewed across the world. This film, in short, sits in the exact gap between the Watergate scandal and the moment we began to learn words like mega-corporation and Zaibatsu. It's not quite Cyberpunk, despite the countless works of Cyberpunk it influenced but it's also as far as it's possible to get from a shiny, clean future.

In the space of two hours, we're shown a future which looks like every oil rig and truck stop, every bus depot and aircraft carrier on the planet. This is a future where the cogs show, a future where the closest there is to a square-jawed hero is a reserved, quiet man who seems more at home talking to the ship's computer than his own crew. This is a future where corporations run everything, a future where endeavour and exploration are put on hold to search for new petrochemical supplies. This is a future where everything is privately owned and the vast majority of work is carried out by automated systems. A future where nothing, and no-one, matters more than the profit margin. It's an incredibly bleak, incredibly timely story that sits, arguably, at the centre of close to thirty years of science fiction and horror.

In 1979, *Alien* was a revelation on every conceivable level, especially the design. HR Giger's nightmarish, blank-faced alien is a metaphor given form, an iconic creature that has no identity beyond the base needs to feed and reproduce. It's an incredibly powerful, simple design that exerts a tremendous gravitational pull, explaining SF cinema's continued attempts to reinvigorate or build on it for decades,



each time getting further from the savage, violent punch of its first appearance. Likewise, the ship and costume design, including work by Michael Seymour, Brian Johnson, Nick Allder, John Mollo and Carlo Rambaldi is as impressive, realising the Nostromo as somewhere between a tugboat and an office. It looks throughout, like a fully functioning spacecraft instead of a loose collection of sets and that only helps increase the sense of isolation. Scott's direction, especially his fondness for shooting characters to one side of the frame or even filming from outside a room drives this home still further and there's a real sense of unease to the scenes immediately following Kane's death. Everything looks functional, nothing feels safe and, bearing in mind the film was released immediately post-*Star Wars*, that's as impressive as it is revolutionary.

The cast continue this trend with Sigourney Weaver and Veronica Cartwright in particular turning in great performances of astounding roles. Ripley and Lambert are absolutely the equals of their male counterparts, as competent and trained as them and just as vulnerable. No-one's safe and that, arguably, is as revolutionary as the presence of two women, one in a starring role and both fully clothed, in a film of this type at this time.

The rest of the cast fare no worse with Tom Skerritt's reticent, quietly charming Dallas playing like he's walked in from a kinder movie and Yaphet Kotto and Harry Dean Stanton as Parker and Brett effectively acting as the Nostromo's own Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. It's their attitude to the situation that's truly refreshing though, with both men more concerned with their bonuses than the possibility of discovering alien life. It's a tiny little moment but it perfectly sums up what made this film different; no-one cares, as long as everyone gets their paycheque.

Ian Holm and John Hurt, as Ash and Kane, also have their flags to carry. This is one of the first times that the idea of a higher authority decreeing that characters are expendable is used in modern SF cinema and certainly one of the first times a polite Englishman explains how dead everyone is. Holm's performance is pitch-perfect, charming and friendly and just a little blank and, like the alien, it's easy to see why so many films that followed *Alien* have been chasing this sort of character.

Finally, Hurt as Kane could be said to be hiding the biggest surprise of all. A name actor who has a lot of screen time, is clearly set up as a principle character and then dies, suddenly, horrifically, Kane is an exclamation point in genre cinema, a line that's drawn, and beyond it absolutely no one is safe. Without Kane, you don't get Samuel L Jackson's close encounter with a shark in *Deep Blue Sea*, or any of the deaths in *Armageddon* or *Donnie Darko* or any of a dozen other movies. Kane's death, like Ripley and Lambert's presence, shatters a glass ceiling in genre cinema and nothing is the same after it. Gender doesn't matter, fame doesn't matter. No-one is safe unless the company decides they are and that can change at a moment's notice.

And that's the problem.

Alien is a beautifully directed, beautifully acted film that has been mined dry. Even before you get to the sequels, every principle concept in the film, every design, every plot twist has become part of modern cinematic grammar. Look at the list:

- A betrayal from within.
- The evil Englishman.
- The faceless amoral corporation.
- The implacable alien killer.
- Blue collar astronauts.
- Heroism in the face of total oblivion.
- Industrial set design.

Every single element of *Alien* has been dissected, picked apart and placed in other films. The revolution in this instance wasn't televised; it was screened, devoured and absorbed by legions of film makers that took every lesson, every twist to heart and in doing so succeeded in creating something entirely new. The only problem is, in doing so, they rendered mundane the very things they were using to upset the status quo.

This is the real tragedy of *Alien*, that it's a classic film which feels outdated, even trivial. Twenty nine years on, the film feels ponderous, even slow at times, and the designs and acting, whilst still



impressive, are robbed of a lot of their impact. It's become the new status quo, the new default and whilst it's still admirable, still a classic, it's also unassailable, untouchable. This is a film to admire rather than enjoy and whether that's a good thing or a bad thing, I honestly don't know.

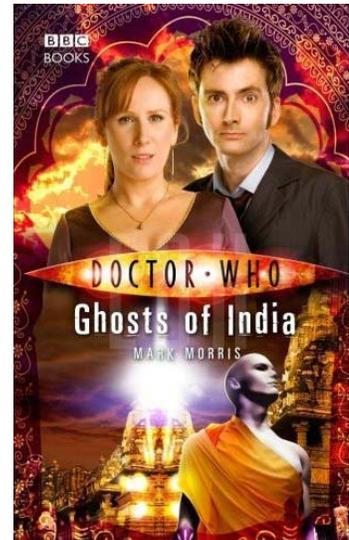
Next week, we bow to the inevitable and take a look at *Aliens*. Has it fared better than the original? Is it more *Starship Troopers* than *Starship Troopers*? Find out in *Hub* issue 65..

This article was first published online at Hivemind (<http://www.sfcrownsnest.com/hivemind/home.php>)

REVIEWS

Doctor Who: Ghosts of India Reviewed by Lee Harris

Doctor Who: Ghosts of India
Written by Mark Morris
BBC Books, £6.99



Last year's Who book by Mark Morris – *Forever Autumn* – was voted by *Doctor Who Monthly* magazine's readers as their favourite Who novel of the year. It was also arguably the best tenth Doctor novel so far published. It was always going to be a tough act to follow.

Ghosts of India is set during the time of the British occupation of India. Mahatma Ghandi has not yet begun his fast, but the British are starting to feel the effects of his presence. The powers-that-be are almost resigned to the fact that they will have to leave India soon, though they're damned sure they're not going without a fight. Literally, as well as politically.

When Donna and The Doctor arrive (looking for a good place for a curry) a mysterious disease is threatening to kill both natives and occupiers alike – black boils are appearing all over the the victims' bodies, and they begin to act out of character. Added to this are worries about large numbers of disappearances and “half-made men” who appear and disappear at random locations (the “ghosts” of the title).

Morris has proven time and again that he can write The Doctor (in various incarnations) and despite having only seen three episodes of Season Four before beginning to write the book, his characterisation of Donna is spot-on.

Of the other characters, the British Army personnel are believable (they threaten to turn into caricatures occasionally, although they never quite cross the line), but it's the Indian characters that jump out from the page – especially the beautifully written Ghandi, whose serenity – even in the face of advanced alien technology – is a calming influence on many of the supporting characters, and a joy to read.

And the plot? Well, surprisingly for a Mark Morris novel, the plot seems to be secondary to the characters – the ending, in particular feels like a bit of a cop-out, where peace and love are enough to defeat the nasty bug-eyed monsters, though to be fair it could be read as an allegory about our occupation of India, and the methodologies used by Ghandi to overthrow the British rule.

Definitely readable, and certainly enjoyable, though not Morris' best.

Recommended.

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