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FLASH FICTION SPECIAL

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Hub’s New Home

Don’t forget we’ve moved - from now on you can find us at www.HubFiction.com. Please amend your Favourites list. Our first home (www.Hub-Mag.co.uk) will be maintained for a while, but the new address is where it’s all happening.

Happy New Year!

Welcome to the first *Hub* of 2009! We have lots of changes planned for the coming months – some small, some big, some that sort of middling-size you can never adequately describe. We also have some great stories lined up, including the odd tale from some writers whose names you’ll definitely recognise!

Next Week

Feature: *Eye of Harmony* by L.R.G. Carter.

“L” was at my weekly writing group before Christmas. Clearly insane, “L” informed us all – in great detail, I have to say – about “L”’s theory that *Doctor Who* is, and has ever been, heavily influenced by the Illuminati. Nonsense, of course, every word of it, but “L” was insistent, and asked if we would like to publish it in *Hub*. Well, of course, when someone cursed with insanity asks me a question like this, my immediate thought is one of self-preservation, so I agreed. After all, “L” knows where I drink...

We hope 2009 is everything you want it to be!

Quartermaster

By Steve Cooper

The quartermaster sits behind his desk, twitching his pencil point across the paper like a jittering cursor, trying to find a mistake in the calculations. He reaches the last number, and pauses. The pencil tip quivers momentarily before he puts it down, very softly, and reaches into his pocket for the key to the locker. He will have to atone for his earlier kindness.

Six hours before, the ship had been heading down through the atmosphere. Through the forward windows he could see the plasma sheet cutting the landscape in two. On the far side, the land was scorched black, and the air ionised and as dangerous to the lungs as glass dust. The sheet itself was a line of fire, arcing like a magnesium-bright sabre across the world, advancing steadily towards towns and cities doomed to incineration. He thought of Genesis, and the cherub with its flaming sword, casting man out of Eden, and he shuddered.

Around him in the upper atmosphere, he could see hundreds of little flaring points against dark space -- the other ships that had come to answer the pleas for help, coming in ahead of the sheet to rescue as many as they could. Hundreds of ships had come, ready to make the months-long trip to the nearest planet. Hundreds of ships, to save millions of people.

They touched down two hours ahead of the sheet, in a small farming town buried in fields of green corn. In the dim sodium glow of the hangar, he slapped the red button to lower the cargo ramp. It opened like a jaw, letting in bright light, and he cast two shadows into the interior; one from the sun, and one from the plasma sheet itself, visible in the south. Clean air swirled in, replacing the smells of engine grease and soot from the dioxide splitters. Outside, in the cornfield, a nervous crowd had already gathered. Silently, gratefully, they began to board.

The quartermaster tallied them. Seventy three souls: the whole town. Had he not suppressed the rational, savage voice at the back of his head, he would have quickly calculated the maximum number of people the ship could carry. He did not. As each passed him at the foot of the ramp, they looked at him, a plea for clemency in their eyes, and he stopped listening to the hard voice that whispered a warning.

Now, sitting there in his office, he realises that there is a mathematics to murder.

He knows, because he requisitioned the fuel, that there are one hundred and sixty-eight days of travel ahead. He knows, because he is the ship's quartermaster, how many ration packs they have: just two thousand. He has calculated the calorific total in the hold – twelve million calories – and the calories needed to sustain a sedentary human for one hundred and sixty-eight days; one quarter million. And that tells him how many people he can feed for the journey – forty-eight – and how many must die before the day is out – twenty five.

Because he is the ship's quartermaster, he has the keys to the arms locker. He has opened it, and holds one of the automatics. He loads it with Low-Velocity rounds from a box stenciled LO-VE.

Day Trippers by Ellen J Allen

Wiping his hands on an oily rag, Dave crossed the garage and picked up the phone.

'Yeah?'

A familiar voice answered. 'Dave? It's Alan. We've got a problem.'

'Oh, aye?' Dave said, leaning against the cinderblock wall.

'There's day trippers up on Bleaklow Moor, jeans and trainers brigade. Londoners.'

Dave sighed. 'They lost?'

'Not yet.'

'So what's the problem? It's May Day, not November.' Frowning, he looked over to where his bike lay, engine half-assembled. He had a feeling he wasn't going to get it finished today.

A panicked edge crept into Alan's voice. 'They're calling at Bleaklow Stones. And they're honeymooners.'

'Oh, crap!' Dave closed his eyes briefly.

'Yeah.'

'My bike's in pieces, Alan. What time did they set off?'

'About two hours ago.'

'Let's hope they stopped to take photos, then,' Dave said grimly. 'Can you pick me up?'

'Already on my way. I'll be with you in five minutes,' Alan said. 'Grab your gear.'

Dave hung up without saying goodbye. Stripping off his stained coveralls, he dropped them on the floor and ran through into the house. Digging in the under-stairs cupboard, he tugged out a rucksack, unclipped the top and quickly checked the contents.

Rapidly he changed his jeans for a pair of hiking trousers, pulled on a pair of thick socks and stuffed his feet into his hiking boots, grabbing his waterproof coat just as the doorbell rang. He picked up the rucksack and answered the door.

'Come on, then,' Alan said by way of greeting, turning to jog back to the car.

Dave pulled the door shut behind him and followed.

'Got everything?'

'Aye. Bag's been ready this past year, ever since Mr Johnson called to say the last bride died,' Dave said, buckling his seat-belt.

'How old was she?' Alan asked, zipping through the junction as the lights turned red.

'Eighteen when it took her, sixty-four when she died,' Dave nodded. 'They kept her in an institution after her baby was born.'

'Christ.' Alan sent the car racing up the hill towards Holme Moss. Navigating the hairpin bends with frightening speed, the little car's engine laboured as they rapidly gained the top, where it was already beginning to rain. Shooting down the other side, Dave closed his eyes as Alan skidded very close to the sheer drop.

At last they reached the valley bottom and the junction with Old Manchester Road. Pulling out into the fast-moving traffic, Alan ignored the blare of horns and red-lined the car on the approach to the road across Hollinshead Reservoir. Over the dam, he swung the car sharply back on itself, taking the service road until he reached a farm track, cursing as he had to slow to a relative crawl. Jouncing over the ruts, Alan guided the car skillfully up the hill and onto Bleaklow Moor until at last the track ended and the two men were forced to get out and walk.

'How long, do you reckon?' Alan asked, zipping up his jacket against the drizzle.

'Depends which end of the Stones they're at,' Dave replied, shouldering his rucksack. 'Closest bit is a couple of miles from here. If they're at the Wain Stones, it's at least three. Grinah Stones, about the same in the other direction.'

'Christ on a fucking crutch,' Alan swore, turning up his collar as he marched up the last of the hill. 'If we've to go searching end-to-end, we'll never find them.'

'It's usually the Wain Stones,' Dave said. 'At least, that's where Dad found most of them.'

Heads down, they hurried along the rough trail as quickly as possible. Dark moss and peat surrounded them, the ground to either side of the trail boggy and unstable. In silence they strode over the broken ground until at last, the first boulders came into view.

'White Stones,' Dave said approvingly. 'Not far now.' Glancing up, he could see the clouds closing in.

Alan grunted and strode ahead. In the distance, outlines blurred by the rain which was starting to fall in earnest, the first of the Stones rose into view above the peat bog.

The Bleaklow Stones squatted, devoid of their usual tally of hikers on the cold, wet May Day. The views, stunning on the best of days, were non-existent, the surrounding valleys and hills shrouded under lowering clouds.

'Maybe they thought better of it,' Alan suggested as they worked their way towards the Wain Stones, picking their way over the grassy hummocks interspersed with rain-slick stone.

Dave shook his head. 'Not today. The Moor's got them and I'm betting it won't let go without a fight.'

'You ready for it?' Alan asked.

Dave nodded. 'Yeah.'

Finally the Wain Stones came into view. From certain angles, it looked as though the stones were kissing. From other angles, the rocks took on a more obscene outline. Carefully Dave and Alan made their way around the back of them as quiet as possible, until at last they could see the flat slab which sat at the feet of the kissing stones.

'Looks like a bloody altar,' Alan whispered.

'Or a bed,' Dave muttered, inching round the last of the Wain Stones. 'Same difference, really. 'Shit!' He froze. Alan peered round him and froze too.

'Too late,' Dave said.

There, spread-eagled on the flat rock, lay a woman. Her hair, drenched by the rain, fanned out around her head like a dark halo. She was naked, her eyes shut, her mouth hanging slack.

Above her, also naked, was her husband. He stood with one foot on either side of his wife's prone torso, hands clenched into fists, head thrown back. The rain streamed down him, making the blood on his genitals run in rivulets down his legs and drip from his penis onto his wife's chest.

'Shit,' Alan said, ducking back behind the Wain Stones.

Dave joined him, shrugging the rucksack off his shoulders and opening it up. 'Here,' he said, pulling out something wrapped in cloth.

'What is it?' Alan asked.

'It's a rock,' Dave said. 'Dad got it from the Wesleyan chapel over in Heptonstall.' He pulled out another cloth-wrapped rock. 'And the cloth is from an old Methodist banner. Has the Ten Commandments sewn on it.'

'Does that make a difference?' Alan asked, hefting the rock in one hand.

'Fight an old god with a new one? Grandad reckoned so. Besides, it's a rock. If you hit the guy with it hard enough, it'll knock the Moor out of him,' Dave grinned.

Together they crept back around the Wain Stones. The tableau hadn't changed.

'Three,' Dave whispered. 'Two... One...' Together they hurled their rocks at the figure. One glanced off his shoulder, but one caught him square in the groin.

Soundlessly, the man crumpled, toppling back.

Dave rushed over and clambered up onto the rock. He pulled a survival blanket out of the rucksack and covered the woman as Alan climbed round to check on the man. As Dave fished in his bag, the woman sat up and screamed.

'Bollocks!' Dave made a wild grab for her as she lunged for the edge of the rock. Scrabbling wildly at the bottom of the rucksack, he produced a syringe labelled 'Progestogen - emergency use only'. Peeling open the wrapper with his teeth, he plunged it into the woman's arm and pressed the plunger, only to be kicked in the jaw.

Seeing stars, Dave hurled himself after her, knocking her down again. He managed to pull out the needle just as the woman's eyes opened. She looked dazed.

'What's going on?' she asked faintly.

'Bit of an accident,' Dave explained. 'Don't worry, you'll be fine. I think your bloke's banged his head, though.'

Alan appeared with an armful of clothes, leading an equally dazed man. 'Best get these on,' he said, distributing them to the confused couple. 'Not really the weather for this sort of thing, is it?'

Jollying the couple along, Alan and Dave got them into their clothes, back across the moors and into their car.

'We'll give you a lift back to the station,' Dave said. 'You'd better get back down to London, get that bump checked out. Don't want to be taking any chances, eh?' He kept up a stream of chatter until the couple had been safely deposited onto a train heading south.

Alan drove Dave home at a more sensible speed. 'Think we caught it?' he asked as he pulled up outside Dave's house.

'Yeah,' Dave nodded, rubbing the bruise on his jaw. 'I don't think they'll be back, and thanks to the wonders of modern medicine, there won't be any babies this time around.'

Alan shuddered. 'What happened to the last one?'

'Buried in the peat bog up near the Stones,' Dave said grimly. 'By the man the Moor used. Dad never got over it. But we're good. The Moor won't get another chance to take a bride for seven years.'

'Bit of a long time to go between getting your rocks off,' Alan said casually.

'Funny,' Dave grinned. 'I guess it's not that long if you're a big hill with a bunch of stones on top. Time's on its side.'

'Until the next lot of day trippers, eh?'

'Aye. Until the next ones,' Dave agreed, climbing out of the car. He headed back indoors to restock the emergency bag, while outside the rain continued to fall on the silent moors.

The Girl in the Rose-Tinted Glasses and the Man in the Mirrorshades

by D J Muir

They were coming up the riverbank path, side by side. The girl in the rose-tinted glasses stood five feet nothing; the man in the mirrorshades looked to be over six feet, but he was thin and stood straight, and it might just have been an optical illusion. The morning air was cool – the first frost had come last night – and he wore a black coat; she wore one in grey. Her hair was long and brown, his short and black; her expression a bright and wily half-smile, his a cypher, revealing nothing.

"You should smile more," she said. "It's not as if it's completely against your nature."

"And yet I don't. Care to draw any conclusions?"

"Miserable bastard," but her smile deepened as she spoke, and he knew she didn't really mean it.

"Up here," he said, indicating steps which led up from the path. They took the steps, keeping side by side.

The rose-tinted glasses were small, round, wire-framed; behind them you could see a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. The mirrorshades were aviator frames, and you had to have the right angle, and catch the right light, to see his eyes at all.

They reached the top of the steps, which came out by the side of a road.

"Is that it?" she asked, inclining her head to indicate a café on the opposite sidewalk.

"That's it."

"She's definitely in there?"

His brow wrinkled in concentration for a moment, then he nodded.

"And you've got a plan, I suppose?" she asked as they started across the road.

"I go in through the front door. Of course."

"Oh, of course."

"Well, what's she going to do?"

"She might try, I don't know, running away?"

"And you know how much good that'll do her. Anyway, it's time. See you in a minute."

He strode up to the café's door, then paused a few moments, straightening his coat front, before pushing the door open. A bell jangled. The interior was all in rich earth-tones and dark wood; the smells of newly-ground coffee and fresh baking were aromatic kicks to the senses. The room glowed with homely warmth.

He saw the target immediately, in one of the booths by the left-hand wall. She was facing away from him, but he knew it was her.

The man in the mirrorshades stepped forward, coat swinging open.

The target sensed him. Maybe from a reflection in the metalware of the coffee machine; perhaps the sound of his tread on the boards -- maybe the chill that followed him in. She looked over her shoulder.

No glasses on her deep blue eyes: nothing to hide the fear.

She stood, turning to face him as she did. She wore a sundress tied-dyed in brilliant blues and yellow and green, and bangles on her wrists.

"Not yet. Please, not yet."

The man in the mirrorshades said nothing. He advanced.

And then she did try running away; she bolted, clipping the table as she went, sending an arc of herbal tea spraying across the booth.

He didn't run, just stalked toward the booth.

She raced down the narrow corridor, past the restrooms, into the kitchen, toward the open back door -- and took a moment to register her abrupt halt there, and the sudden welling of pain.

The girl in rose-tinted glasses stood just behind her, where she'd waited, just inside the kitchen. Her left hand gripped the target's shoulder. The slender knife in her right hand was buried to the hilt, piercing the sundress, driven up under the ribcage.

"Not yet--"

"Too late for that," she answered quietly.

The girl in the sundress stopped straining; there was one spasm, then she went limp.

The girl in rose-tinted glasses pulled the knife out. Her left hand let go of the shoulder, and the body crumpled down to the floor. She dropped the knife, smiled at the cook, then walked down the corridor. She met the man in mirrorshades as she emerged into the front of the café.

"She did try to run," he observed without agitation.

"She always tries to run. Every year. Never works," she answered. "Can we stay for a coffee?"

"We need to be going. It's not our time now."

"Pity. I think I'd have liked a coffee here."

"You can come back."

She gave him a look which seemed to say that she'd like her coffee now, not later.

No one paid them any heed as they talked. The waitress slipped by them carrying steaming mochas.

"All right then. Let's go," she conceded grudgingly.

He opened the door to hold it for her as they left. The girl in rose-tinted glasses smiled at him and walked out; before he could follow, a woman walked up from outside, and he held the door for her too. She paused a moment to drop and stub out a cigarette at the threshold, exhaled smokily and swept in past him, the odour of the smoke in her wake mingling with a scent hinting of harvest fields and orchards.

The man in mirrorshades walked out, letting the door close behind him.

He smiled then, and he and the girl in rose-tinted glasses set off, side by side, to the place where they would wait their turns.

The Harvest of the Machines by R J Smith

That was the winter that everything changed.

And it did change for the good. People find it hard to remember. It's easy to resent, with what we know now, but overall, things did get better.

Winters have always been hard, in my memory. There's some that remember what it was like before, but they don't like to talk about it. Not that the summers were easy, 'course, but the winters were hard – you know? Harvests were pitiful; carefully hoarded food was withered by drying, or salted, or vinegared. It's OK when it's what you know, but it's not great. It's not like you forget what spring tastes like – when the berries are juicy and the meat's fresh. We remembered. Even when you're not allowed too many of the berries, when most everything had to be saved, you remember what you can have.

Thing was, we didn't expect anything, you know?

Harvest. Stock up. Wrap up warm. Hope for the best.

And then it happened. Weirdest thing to see. I mean, it's not like I'd not seen chines before, but people tell you that something used to move, used to be useful... enough of 'em say it that you have to believe 'em - but it's still a bit like magic, you know? It's mythical, and it's gone – the power's never coming back.

And then – without nobody touching nothing – it happens. And it's not those frozen goliaths and things that your Gramma said used to whiz and spin. It's rupting out of the ground: fields, forests, towns. Didn't know what to think.

We celebrated at first.

Don't get me wrong – I was standing right next to one when it went up, and it freaked the life right out of me. Whole field started shaking, and then I saw it: lance after lance of bright metal poking right out of the ground: chopping it up, cracking it up; readying it for spring. Dread to think what might have happened if I'd've been standing out in it.

And that happened to some, of course. Tommy Lantner got skewered right through. It was sad and tragic and that, but it couldn't entirely dampen it for us. And it wasn't just that it was like magic, see? Nah, don't s'pose you can, but the way things were back then... we felt forgotten, left behind. We were the survivors, so they said, but we weren't sure it was a good thing – you know? Life was just so goddamn hard. And then this happens – like a message from the past: they hadn't forgotten us.

We didn't know why they'd waited all them years, but the oldens had clearly planned something. They'd meant for us to survive, after all; and they'd sent us something to help turn things around: to make it all alright again. Here was all this work we wouldn't have to do come spring. And more: these little mobile chines popped up and went whizzing about the cities – cleaning 'em up, cutting back the grasses, shoring up the buildings, smoothing down the roads. I can't tell you – it was like all our birthdays and harvests and springs were come at once. They were making it nice again, and they were doing it all for us.

But of course, they weren't. Not really. They were just chines. They didn't know we were there – and neither had the oldens.

We had a good few months of living it good. The chines cleaned up the houses, and they made 'em heat up again, and we moved in. They did our planting for us, and we ate the wild fruits and animals. We could gather more because we didn't have to plant; and the chines had planted more than we could have on our own. We thought ourselves kings and queens of a new world where the machines of the olden days would be our servants.

That was, 'til harvest finally came, and we saw what they did with all that food. First shock was when we found they wouldn't let us pluck it ourselves. Didn't hurt us none – not really – but if you walked into one of their fields and started to pick at the crop, one of them little chines'd come rushing in, beeping at you. And if you still hung around, it'd give you a little shock.

We laughed at first – it's not like we'd never seen a scarecrow. Things just couldn't tell the difference from us an' the birds. It wasn't like the chines were doing it all for 'emselves – machines don't gotta eat. They knew where we lived, they'd cleaned up our houses for us – we just assumed they'd bring the food to us when they were ready. Some people muttered about it a bit, but some people always do; and anyway, it was too late to worry 'bout whether we should have planted a crop of our own. An' we had plenty stored up from the forests to last us to harvest and past. We thought it'd be OK.

And then harvest came – the Harvest of the Machines.

They didn't take the food to us; they took it somewhere else.

We followed.

The chines took it out away from the towns, and we followed. They took it out to a barren, rocky place, high in the hills, and we followed. Then they took it down, underground; and there we could not go. We tried, but it was like in the fields again. First they screamed their little beepings at us. Then they chased us with their harmless little shocks. We didn't want to press 'em further at first... but all that food we'd watched grow up nice and plump; and all the food that we hadn't planted, 'cause they'd planted in our fields, and we'd thought they were planting for us... We'd eaten well that year, but we hadn't saved as much as we ought. The next winter would be hard - harder'n before. If we didn't get the food from the machines, a lot of us might die.

So we fought them, or tried too. We did manage to do for a couple, but they did for us much harder in return. A chine's a tough thing to kill – tougher than a human being, it seems.

What could we do? We left them to it. And we starved.

Every now and then someone'd get desperate and go at it again, but it was no use. Come springtime, even from inside our cosy warm homes, we were bitter – very bitter – at what the chines had done. We screamed and yelled at them as they trotted out again into what used to be our fields. But they ignored us – went about their business just like before.

There was talk of moving on, but we were curious too. There'd be less chines to guard the harvest, now that they were back in the fields. We decided to give it one last try.

It actually worked. Can't deny I was surprised. But we'd had a winter to prepare, and it's not like we'd learned nothing from our little skirmishes after the harvest. And there were less of 'em.

What we found down there, though – that was the real blow.

See, the oldens hadn't been thinking of us at all.

The food, the houses, the heating – they weren't for us; they were for you.

You, the little babbies we found like fairies eggs at the bottom of a well – bein' fed by machines on a pulped mash of what we'd thought was our food. Our present from a past that we'd thought'd abandoned us.

I'm tellin' you this because I want you to understand. There's some as wanted to kill all you littluns outright - but not many. We were tired, and we were bitter, but we weren't monsters. Lots of us wanted to keep you for our own – couldn't bare to think of you cared for by all them cold, heartless machines that couldn't tell your kin from a brainless animal. But we didn't know what the chines'd do if we tried that. We got in to the food OK, but there was far too many of them nanny chines flitting about the likes of you.

So, we took what we could from the stores and scarpered. Went off South. We needed lands of our own.

But we came back, and when they started to let you out, we went to meet you – to know you.

An' I know that you're bitter, an' you're angry at how we've treated you – some of us. But we didn't mean for it to go that way – not really. It's just...

It's been easy for you. So easy. And we thought – just briefly, we thought it'd be that easy for us too. An' then it was so very, very hard.

So I want you to know. I want you to know that we're sorry, and that some of us do know that we had it easy at first, and that that was 'cause of you, and that it was our own stupid fault for assumin' we knew what was going on, and sittin' on our lazy arses all year.

I want you to know that, but I also want you to know why we're angry. Ma'bes the food them robots sewed and cut and stored wasn't ours by right, but we had a right to feel bitter. 'Cause the oldens shoul'da have thought of us.

But they didn't. They thought only of you.

And I guess what I want to ask is: can we be different? You an' me? Your people, and my people? If I come here to you an' say: 'This is how it was for us, but I see also how it was for you'? Can we look at

what was an' agree to set it aside – to move on with just in mind how things could be, if we work at it, together?

Can we? D'you think we can do that?

REVIEWS

Dark Wraith of Shannara reviewed by Phil Lunt

“Dark Wraith of Shannara”
by Terry Brooks
Orbit, £6.99



Why give up the “*wishsong*”?

Also, while we're at it, what the blazes is this “*wishsong*” anyway?!?

Straight off, i'm a “newbie” to Brooks' fantasy world of *Shannara** and this seemingly small detail of the main protagonist, Jair Ohmsford, wanting to stop using some seriously powerful magic ability that he possesses dumbfounds me. Or, more plainly, the lack of any form of explanation dumbfounds me. As a reader I am thrown straight into the deep end, starting with a dream sequence referencing the preceding works, “*The Wishsong of Shannara*” and “*Indomitable*”, a short story which served as the epilogue to “*Wishsong...*”. In the introduction Brooks says, “No introduction in the form of previous Shannara stories is needed to read this book”, but I'm not so sure. This is Brooks' first foray into the world of the sequential art form so let's think about this for a moment; you're reaching out to not only your hardened fans but also a huge customer base who just might not have ever read your work before.

Enter me, stage left, pursued by bear... A fan of fantasy and a fan of comic books - that sequential art form I mentioned a few lines back. I guess I should be prime target audience for this project. Anyway, back to this “*wishsong*” - I'm guessing it's good but, if overused, it can be bad... ok, I'll admit, I had to check out the stub on Wikipedia for that one but it just goes to show that even the prologue does little more than to promote Brooks' other books without giving a proper grounding for “*Dark Wraith...*”.

The story revolves around the aforementioned Jair Ohmsford and his quest to foil the plans of the Mwellrets and their new ally, the Croton Witch, to steal the magic of the Druid's Keep. To do so, the Mwellrets have kidnapped two of Jair's old allies, Kimber and Cogle, and it's a race against time to save them! However, Jair must call upon another old friend, Slanter, grumpy gnome and tracker extraordinaire, to help him find them.

Unfortunately the dialogue and overall narration is fairly monotone until the introduction of Slanter into the story. The action-gnome who likes his ale constantly berates Jair and questions his actions. There also seems to be a constant struggle between what you're seeing and what you're “hearing”; the visuals clashing with the written narrative or dialogue. Action scenes with long descriptive narrative boxes often makes for a slowing of pace which defeats the point and this certainly occurs at more than one occasion during the book. There are also little to no “sound effects” which, as an avid comic book reader, was highly unusual.

On to an artwork quibble: in my opinion, the toning is far too strong in places which makes for a very dark look to the whole book. Looking at the “making of” pages at the back, I personally prefer the look of the artwork before toning was introduced, when the strength is in the detail of the line drawing.

The novel is lined up, it seems, to dip into the fan-base of the hugely popular “Tokyopop” series of books; the format of the book appears to be based on that of the Westernised Manga line of graphic novels

that fill whole sections of Waterstones. However, I feel those who will get the most from this book are the folk who are already enraptured with the world of Shannara, already familiar with Brooks' previous works and who need no introduction to the characters or physics of how the world works. It's good but it could be better and feels a little too much like a marketing exercise. Reading this has certainly piqued my interest to read more of Brooks' novels but, then, maybe that was the point?

** Shannara isn't actually the name of Brooks' fantasy world but actually the name of a noble family. "Four Lands" is the world's name but even that isn't explained in this book apart from a quick mention on the blurb, I had to rely on Wikipedia*

The Hub Awards, 2008

Welcome to the second Annual Hub Awards. ish.

As with last year's star-studded ceremony, the Hub Awards are simply a chance for me (your genial host, Lee Harris) to reflect on some of the genre highlights of *my* year. (Important note: These are **my** choices, and do not reflect the views of other members of the editorial team at *Hub*). This list includes a number of "Best Of"s. These include categories such as "Best Horror Novel" and "Best Film". These aren't necessarily items that were published/released in 2008; rather, they are indicative of the best I have enjoyed this year – thus, there may be works that have been produced prior to 2007, but that (for whatever reason) I didn't get the opportunity to enjoy them when they were first released. So... onto the Awards...

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

1. **Best Science Fiction Novel**

I've enjoyed quite a few SF novels over the past 12 months. Personal favourites include Eric Brown's *Kethani* (strictly speaking, a collection of his Kethani short stories, with linking material to enable Solaris to release it as a novel) and Charles Stross' superb *Halting State*. For sheer fun, however, the award goes jointly to John

Scalzi's *Old Man's War* and *The Ghost Brigades*. I've enjoyed Scalzi's non-fiction for a little while, and felt it was time to check out his fiction back catalogue so I plumped for these two books (re-released with artwork by Vincent Chong). *Old Man's War* and *The Ghost Brigades* are cracking reads, and great adventures.

2. Best Horror Novel

It's been a slow year for horror for me. A couple of new writers (Bill Hussey and Joseph D'Lacey) burst onto the scene to wide acclaim, though their books still adorn my ever-growing "to read" pile. Despite reading a relatively small number of horror books this year, I've been lucky to have chosen some pretty good ones. Adam Neville's *Banquet for the Damned* was first published four years ago by UK independent press PS Publishing, and rereleased by Virgin Books this year. Neville's only horror novel to date (he specialises in erotic fiction), *Banquet* is a masterpiece in atmosphere and pace. If I hadn't taken Ramsey Campbell's *The Grin of the Dark* on holiday with me, however, it might have won. However, I did. Somewhat embarrassingly, *The Grin of the Dark* is the first of Campbell's novels I have read. I recall attempting (and giving up) on one of his books about 25 years ago (I don't recall which one) and in retrospect I suspect my reading preferences at the time were just not sufficiently matured to appreciate his prose. *The Grin of the Dark* contains some of the most disturbing imagery and subtle horror I have ever read, and I found myself curling my legs up while reading it, knowing that the shadows in the room couldn't hurt me, but lifting my feet off the floor anyway. Just in case. A magnificent book, and the reason my bookshelf is now groaning under the weight of Ramsey Campbell books awaiting reading.

3. Best Fantasy Novel

It's been a strong year for fantasy. Ian C Esselmont's *Return of the Crimson Guard* is typical of the high standards set this year (if we dismiss the multitude of "Oh, my – that man I fancy is a vampire" novels). Runner-up this year is a novel that crossed genre boundaries. Part fantasy, part horror, part crime novel, Simon Spurrier's *Contract* succeeded on every level. My choice, though, is a book that was re-released in January, though it was first published in December 2006. Markus Zusak's exceptional *The Book Thief*. Though only just qualifying as fantasy (the story is narrated by Death, though the events in the tale are not fantastical in the slightest), I've allowed its inclusion, as it is such a wonderful read. If you are not reduced to tears (or at least, wipe away a discreet droplet of condensation that has somehow found its way to your eye) then you need to book a visit to get your emotion circuits overhauled.

4. Best Comedy Novel

Not a great year for genre comedy, unfortunately. I enjoyed Christopher Moore's *The Lust Lizard of Melancholy Cove*, but not enough to want to honour it with something as life-changing as a *Hub* Award. No 'Best Comedy Novel' award this year, therefore.

5. Best TV Tie-In Novel

I don't read a lot of tie-ins, but I do read the occasional *Doctor Who* and *Torchwood* books, as they are regularly sent to me by BBC Books. It's not surprising, therefore, that a *Doctor Who* book should emerge triumphant again, this year. What's more surprising, perhaps, is that the author is the same winner as last year. *The Ghosts of India* shows what a solid grasp Mark Morris has of the characters and the style of *Who*. Plotting and pacing is top-notch, and though the book was perhaps let down by an overly-simplistic resolution (though, remember the *Who* range are aimed at

the YA market, rather than us seasoned old fogies), *Ghosts* is another reason Moffatt should be giving serious consideration to booking Morris for season 5 of new *Who*.

6. **Best Comedy (Audio)**

Quite a strong year, with Dirk Maggs' fine adaptation of Douglas Adams' *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency*, as well as another season of *Old Harry's Game*. The winner by a country mile, however, is the Ladbroke/Hokus Bloke adaptation of Robert Rankin's *The Brightonomicon*, distributed by BBC Audio Books. On reading the cast list it would be easy to assume the production company had an infinite budget – David Warner, Andy Serkis, Mark Wing-Davey, and a cast of dozens (and you will have heard of most of them). This 13-part series also boasts one of the best (and most appropriate) theme tunes I have heard on an audio production. It is a fine introduction to the work of Rankin, and one of the few “must have”s of the year.

7. **Best Film**

Oh, what a year this was. Anticipation at year-start was high, with *Iron Man* to look forward to, a new Pixar movie, and even a new Indiana Jones film! Del Toro was back with a sequel to *Hellboy*, and everyone was talking about the new Batman movie...

Iron Man was tremendous fun, and another year might easily have won. Del Toro disappointed with *Hellboy II*, however, which looked stunning, but lacked coherence. I didn't watch *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* until just before Christmas, so I had already read numerous reviews stating how bad the film was. Anticipating something sub-par, my expectations were lowered, and I actually ended up enjoying the film as a result. It didn't win, though – I didn't enjoy it *that* much!

The prize fight, then, is between *Wall-E* and *The Dark Knight*. Pixar's tale of a garbage clearance robot and his love for another droid is wonderful, and even manages to eclipse *Monsters, Inc* as their best movie. Heath Ledger's *tour-de-force* in *The Dark Knight*, however, combined with Aaron Eckhart's considered performance as Harvey Dent, gives Nolan's Batman sequel the edge – despite Bale's frankly ridiculous Batman voice (buy some cough medicine, for goodness sake!)

8. **Best TV Series**

Last year's winner (*Heroes*) was never going to be in the running, which is a shame as the format still has plenty of life left in it. In the UK we had probably the best season so far of *Doctor Who* (winning yet another Hugo in the process) and our answer to *Heroes* was the late-night comedy *No Heroics* – the story of a few low-rent superheroes and their mundane lives (special mention has to go to James Lance for his performance as “Timebomb” – he manages to make his gay, alcoholic, sex-addicted sadist of a character one of the most watchable characters on television this year, easily outclassing everyone else in this hit-and-miss (though mainly hit) comedy).

Apparitions also impressed, though I didn't see all of the episodes, but I'll certainly be buying the box set.

The US, meanwhile, gave us *Pushing Daisies*, *Chuck*, *The Sarah Connor Chronicles*, and *Battlestar Galactica*. The winner, though, didn't even appear on television, but I'm stretching the scope of this award to allow it in – they're my

awards, and I can do what I like with them, so there! :-p *Doctor Horrible's Sing-along Blog*, though only 45 minutes in total (3 x 15 minute internet-broadcast episodes) raised the bar for online content (*legal* online content, that is). The story of the world's sweetest supervillain (the titular Doctor Horrible) and his quest to join The Evil League of Evil supervillain team, the show contained humour, pathos, and enough songs to fill a Broadway musical (now there's a thought...) If you didn't catch it first time around you can now buy it on DVD from Amazon.com (and it includes *Commentary: The Musical* – a whole new 45 minute musical commentary from the stars and producers).

9. **Best Audio Drama**

As ever, Big Finish dominate the audio drama recommendations this year, and as good as their *Doctor Who* range undoubtedly is, the quality is variable. For sheer consistency as well as listenability, their *Sapphire and Steel* range cannot be beaten. With a few excellent adventures to choose from this year, the award goes to *Sapphire and Steel 3.1: Second Sight* – an episode in which we find Sapphire and Steel have been missing for so long that they have been replaced by a new team – meet the next Sapphire and Steel...

10. **Best Comic or Collection**

Tempted though I am to award this to *Watchmen* (I re-read it twice this year), the award should really give given to a comic I have not read prior to 2008. Easily the most interesting (both in terms of content and distribution) is Warren Ellis' *Freakangels*. Distributed free of charge online, and later collected into a print edition, *Freakangels* is everything you expect from Ellis, and well worth your time.

11. **Best Writer**

This award almost went to Russell T Davies for his non-fiction expose of the writer's craft: *A Writer's Life* – full of fascinating insights into the mind of a television scriptwriter/producer, it is easily the best non-fiction book of the year. However, Ramsey Campbell's *The Grin of the Dark* was a revelation to me – after many, many years of reading horror I had become somewhat immune to its effects. *The Grin of the Dark* disturbed me again, and made me watch at shadows, which is why Ramsey Campbell is this year's recipient.

12. **Best Collection**

Single-author collections do not sell particularly well, which is why mainstream publishers tend to steer clear of them (except when written by A-list authors). We turn our attention, therefore, to the small presses for the best collections of 2008. The award was almost won by Allyson Bird's impressive debut collection, *Bull Running for Girls*. However, I was lucky enough to spend some time with Rob Shearman at this year's FantasyCon, and he mentioned he had a collection which was (at the time) being considered for a World Fantasy Award. I picked up a copy from the dealers'room, and started reading it when I got home. Published by Comma Press, *Tiny Deaths* contains tales of horror, fantasy, delusion and some decidedly non-genre tales. The writing is wonderful, the characters interesting and believable, and the humour (when present) is genuinely laugh-out-loud. Not only the best collection I read this year, but perhaps the best collection I have ever read! Buy a copy now.

13. **Best Anthology**

While small presses also have a goodly number of anthologies out, mainstream publishers also excel in this category – largely, it has to be admitted, due to their annual "Best Of" compilations. These compilations are dominated by three editors –

Ellen Datlow, Gardner Dozois and Stephen Jones. It's a Stephen Jones book that takes home the prize this year – *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror 20* contains no sub-par tales, and it should be on the bookshelf of every horror fan.

14. Best Artist

For his work on the two John Scalzi books in the “Best SF Novel” category, once again this goes to Vincent Chong.

15. Best Short Story (within Hub)

It's been a strong year for fiction at *Hub* magazine, and among the pearls I have discovered a few diamonds. Guy Haley's *Kasimir Larkin's Last Sale* was one of my favourites – nothing much happens (which is kind of the point), but there is some lovely characterization within the story. Way back in January in our start-of-year Flash Fiction Special, Tony Ballantyne gave us the wonderful *Why Are Rocks?* which will resonate with any parent, and which comes a close second to the winner in this category – Eric Brown's *People of Planet Earth*. I'm a big fan of Eric's writing, and when he told me he had a story that he was sure would never be accepted anywhere as it was just too disgusting to print, I knew it was something *Hub* had to have! It didn't disappoint, and garnered some of the best reviews of any *Hub* story to date.

16. Best Short Story (non-Hub)

Taken from Robert Shearman's *Tiny Deaths* collection, *Favourite* takes the prize, though the standard is so high throughout the book, it could have been any one of another half-dozen or so (including the World Fantasy Award nominated *Damned if you Don't*).

17. Best Podcast

For services to both the podcasting community, and would-be-writers, Mur Lafferty's *I Should Be Writing* (www.IShouldBeWriting.com) is a clear winner for the second year running. For years she has been offering advice to wannabe writers as well as presenting lessons based on her own successes and mistakes, and is a must-listen for anyone starting out in writing.

18. Best Dead Tree Magazine (UK)

Last year's winner – DeathRay – has had a tough year. Financial problems meant that its publication schedule became somewhat erratic, and after being rescued by Rebellion, it went quarterly for one issue and now publishes on a bi-monthly schedule, though the quality of the writing remains top-notch. SciFi Now, on the other hand, never fails to disappoint. Backed from the start by one of the UK's major magazine publishers, *SFN* certainly has the pedigree to succeed, but it all feels a little rushed. In contrast, the UK's best-selling genre magazine, SFX, appears to be watching the competition very closely. It has gone through a number of changes over the last year – changes of style, changes of content – and the changes all help to make the magazine fresh once again. For consistency of quality, scheduling and for giving the readers what they want, *SFX* is this year's winner.
(Disclosure notice: I am a regular reviewer for *DeathRay*)

19. Best Website for Timewasting

The site I have probably wasted more time on than any this year is *Facebook* – for *Scrabulous* earlier in the year, and latterly almost exclusively for the status updates alone. As this is not specifically a genre site, however, it cannot really be considered for this award. I've also spent an inordinate amount of time on other

sites including *Torque Control* (excellent, in-depth critical analysis), *SFX* (daily news snippets) and various author blogs, but I am pleased to say that the site I come back to time and again is the winner of last year's award, the *Velcro City Tourist Board*. Paul Raven trawls the net looking for interesting snippets, and then links to them. He's like an advance Google scouting party for genre enthusiasts.

20. **Best Blog**

This is a tricky one, as there are a growing number of authors who either understand the value of regular blogging, or simply enjoy doing it (or both). Frequent haunts include *WarrenEllis.com*, *NeilGaiman.com* and *Scalzi.com*. Last year's winner (John Scalzi's for his *Whatever* column) went on to win the Best Fanwriter Hugo award. His site (found at whatever.scalzi.com) contains daily musings on life, politics, writing and the genre community. Often updated several times a day, this continues to be a fascinating read, and wins the *Hub Magazine* Best Blog award for the second year running!

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