

Hub Magazine

SCIENCE FICTION HORROR FANTASY

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EDITORIAL:

by alasdair stuart

Join Starfleet, See The Universe

I'm not going to bore you with yet another look at the new Star Trek movie as by now you've either seen it, won't bother or about to see it again. I caught it in Edinburgh last week and, a week on, I realise it's finally helped crystallise what I love about Star Trek. It's not the ships, it's not the action or the willingness to sit modern issues in an SF context and poke them.

It's Starfleet.

The idea of a transnational and transplanetary organisation, one that encompasses the military, the sciences and to some extent even the arts is both tremendously old fashioned and immensely attractive. The series has always owed a tremendous amount to the historical view of England's 19th century navy and certainly there are elements of that but it's the way that martial force is tempered with intellect, with compassion that's almost impossible to turn away from. This is an organisation with the power to protect the people it works for, both physical and intellectual, an organisation whose one solitary goal is to find out more, to make things better. It's altruism with good uniforms, the best and the brightest of every discipline educated and tempered and sent out to make things better.

It's our best qualities made manifest. And as we slump towards the end of a second week of scandals about MP's expense in England it really hits home; we can be better than this. We should be better than this.

Plus the uniforms are great.

COMPETITION UPDATE:

For all you unpublished UK-based writers, there's still plenty of time to enter our short-story competition, and win a cash prize plus publication in Hub Issue 100 and a limited edition paperback run!

Check out **issue 85** for full details.

Good luck!



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FICTION

Nightlife

by dean grondo

It was a small nondescript version of a bar and grill, the type of place that probably had a good lunch crowd because of all the office workers in the area. Tommy might have been there once before, but he didn't recognize the short, stout man with the thin moustache behind the bar and he really wasn't sure. Offering a nod as Tommy approached, the bartender told him, "Two for one drafts during the game."

A glance at the television in the corner above the bar told him it was the Raiders in Dallas. Sitting on a stool, he answered, "No, I'll have a Bud, thanks."

"Got Budweiser on draft."

He gave a shrug and dropped a five out of his wallet. "All right."

The bartender served him his beer and tossed a red poker chip next to the change, saying, "For the next one."

"Thanks."

There were only a half dozen people scattered along the bar and a young couple in one of the booths lining the wall. The two young people were arguing, trying to keep their voices down, so no one would notice. Tommy smelled burgers grilling. His eyes found the TV and he idly watched the game.

"Excuse me."

Tommy looked to his left. A couple of stools away, an older man wearing a black baseball cap from someplace called HIGGINS PETROLEUM gave him a smile. "I wonder if I could ask...?" The man was hesitant.

"Yes?"

"My name's Paul Barnett and I'm from Cincinnati. I'm staying at the Regency. I was wondering if you could tell me---?" Barnett seemed embarrassed. "Is there- any action around here?"

He was gay. Tommy smelled the cologne and saw Barnett's nervousness inside the blue eyes. He probably had a wife back home who didn't know anything about his true calling, but that didn't mean anything. The ball cap and the Bengal's sweatshirt disguised the manicured fingernails and the suggestive smile, but underneath, Tommy was pretty sure the man was wearing something pink.

Tommy gave him a wink. "Oh, we're not all prudes," he said quietly.

The blue eyes blinked in surprise. They stared at Tommy's face. "Oh, you...?"

Tommy nodded. "Oh yes!" His voice was excited.

Time froze for a moment. Barnett coughed nervously. "I- Can we...?"

Smiling slyly, Tommy said, "Let's finish our drinks."

"All right." Barnett picked up his vodka-something too quickly and sloshed it.

Sipping his beer thoughtfully, Tommy watched the nervous blue eyes and smiled.

The smell was beginning to make him nauseous. And all Barnett's screaming! Tommy was getting a headache, he realized. He crouched over the hole in the concrete, announcing, "THIS — isn't working."

Inside the hole, a quivering mass of burnt ruined flesh roiled in agony. "Ahhhh!" Barnett moaned.

A frown slapped over his face and Tommy jabbed the cattle prod into Barnett's thigh. "Shut up!"

Screaming horribly, the man in the hole wriggled away from the prod's tip. There was the stink of burnt flesh. Tommy shook his head. No, this wasn't working at all.

Moving away, Tommy stood by the basement wall. His eyes dropped to the stack of bags and the trowel. Could he just cement over the hole while Barnett was still alive? No. That could get awfully messy.

He went upstairs. In the pantry, he found the glass bottle sitting at the back of the top shelf. Tommy swished it around, watching the yellow liquid swirl inside. Smiling to himself, he went back down to the basement.

The cattle prod had been a mistake. Standing over the hole again, Tommy unstopped the bottle and poured a thin yellow stream over Barnett's back. Howling in agony, Barnett bucked like a wild animal as the acid ate into his skin. "PLEASE! No!" he screamed.

Excitement welling up inside him, Tommy splashed a generous amount of acid onto Barnett's face and the man *screamed!* His eyes and mouth and nose all seemed to dissolve into a puddle of orange mush instantly. Giggling, Tommy emptied the bottle over Barnett's head. After a few moments of hissing and bubbling, Barnett was gone and his lifeless body collapsed.

It took only a few minutes to concrete over the hole. There was a slight pinkish tinge to the finish, but that was to be expected. Tommy stopped on the stairs on his way up afterward, looking at the other six discolored spots on the floor.

It'd happened again! Tommy cleaned up in the bathroom and changed his pants. He stared in the mirror. What was wrong with him!

He needed to get out of the house. He needed a drink. He drove Barnett's car back to the bar. The game was still on. He took his stool again and the bartender retrieved the red poker chip and gave him his second beer. Tommy watched the game and began to relax.

"Pardon me."

A gray haired man dressed in a blue suit had sat down. The overhead lights gleamed off his well-trimmed fingernails. Tommy started to smile and said, "Yes."

"I'm sorry to bother you." The man flashed a nervous glance around the bar. "I'm new in Indianapolis and...."

A rush of excitement swept through Tommy. "You're looking for some fun?"

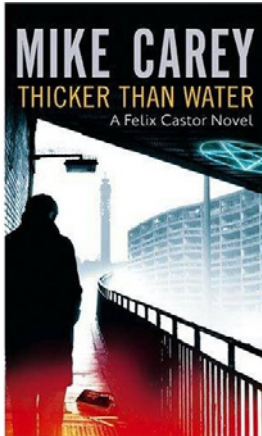
Surprise and a hint of anticipation played inside the man's brown eyes. "You-?"

"Oh yes!" Tommy assured him. "I like to have fun!"



Thicker Than Water

reviewed by phil lunt



by Mike Carey
Orbit
£7.99

Up until October 2007 I'd never heard of Felix Castor, down-beat exorcist and detective on-the-side combined. I'd heard of Mike Carey, of course. He's the bloke currently writing one of the X-Men comics, you see, my comfort zone. Then I heard Mike was going to be attending an event at Guildford Book Festival, regarding the future of fantasy in literature. Great stuff, thinks I, a chance to grill him regarding writing comics and how to get into the industry! I'm sure I'm not the only person to ever think this about meeting a successful writer but I might be one of the few to ever admit to it, though. Anyway, I shall now also admit, with my hand on my heart, that I picked up the

first *Felix Castor* novel that night so that I had something other than my X-Men issue #200 for him to autograph. However, I began to read the novel later that night and I think I'd finished reading it within a week. I had already bought the second novel before finishing book one and, similarly, bought the third book before finishing book two. Such was my addiction once hooked; chain-reading. I've since had to wait about a year for book four, *Thicker Than Water*, to land on my doormat but I find I'm hooked once more.

But first a word or two for the uninitiated. Castor's world is one in which the undead are very much apparent. Ghosts and spirits roam all over the place but not everyone can see them. Castor can because he's sensitive to them and, as an exorcist, he can also project a certain amount of control over the undead. In Castor's case this is through music or, more specifically, through playing his tin whistle. Apart from your bog-standard ghost, spirit or poltergeist, the undead also take the form of zombies and loup garous. Zombies are spirits who have exorted control over a dead body, be it their own or someone else's. Loup Garous are spirits that have exorted control over an animal's body, or bodies, with the animal fighting back for control almost constantly but far more prevalently during a full moon...

It's easy to be hooked as *Thicker Than Water* starts off brilliantly and plunges you into the action. It begins with a fast paced, classy and, seemingly, well organised kidnapping of Felix Castor's best friend, Rafi Ditko, from the Stanger Care Facility, the institute he's been held captive in for the first three novels. I won't be spoiling too much by saying this all goes swimmingly well but it's what happens next that kicks this novel off properly as Castor is framed for murder. Having your name written in the victim's own blood on his car windscreen can do that, you see?

Add to this the fact that the victim was a childhood acquaintance of Castor and his brother and the memories start to flow. But we don't stop there. Throw into the mix the Anathemata, a rogue Catholic group with "*End of Times*" leanings towards the rising dead, and Castor's brother Matthew, also a Catholic priest, along with the usual crew of Nicky the data gatherer (Zombie) and Juliet, another exorcist who also happens to be a (reformed?) Succubus who still has a contract on Castor from book one – but she's one of the good guys now, people! Honest. Through an interesting, and violent, twist we're introduced to a new character, Nurse Ryall, who I'm guessing might just be a romantic interest for Castor in future novels, but I could be being led purposefully down the wrong track, there.

Like in all good detective novels all the evidence you need is there, pointing towards who has done what and why, laid out for all to see... Well, you realise this at the time if you're extremely observant or, for the rest of us, it all becomes clear as, bit by bit, the pieces fit together.

Is this the best Castor novel though, as I've heard others cry? Well, it certainly has its moments. It's by far much pacier than the other novels. Mainly due, I think, to a certain lack, or reduction of, re-introductions to characters and places but Castor's rolling monologue is still present. Carey's eye for detail is just as keen, as is his expert ability at portraying and changing pace. *Thicker Than Water* comes across as an intensely personal novel. I can't help feeling that the memories of Castor's childhood and Mike Carey's own could very well be one and the same – barring the ghosts and the exorcising of his own dead sister, maybe... However, like the Zen butcher when asked for his best piece of meat (*Zen Koan #31*, for the doubters...), it's difficult to say *Thicker Than Water* is the best when comparing it to the other Castor novels. They all have their highs and lows but, overall, they're all very good. Dark, witty, sarcastic, and that's just the leading character! All the books have humour, all the books have violence, all the books have *pathos*, and *Thicker Than Water* is certainly no different.

Thicker Than Water left me hanging, heart thumping, for more. We're teased with more background information on the whole mythos of Castor's world, whilst also successfully dealing with the matters in hand, and we're left firmly pointing towards the end of the tunnel... at least, I think we are. This time around my wait for the next book hopefully won't be too long!

Dollhouse - Season 1 Episodes 1 & 2

reviewed by alasdair stuart



"Ghost" & "The Target"

Every now and again, the time delay between the US and UK works in our favour. *Dollhouse* has been a ridiculously storied, relentlessly over analysed show, frequently by people who haven't seen it and certainly by the network that has given every intention of wanting the show it paid for dead. Yet, against all odds, at time of writing reports are coming in that the show has been renewed for a second year, that somehow a show with consistently desperate ratings is being given a second run. The question then is no longer is *Dollhouse* good but rather is it worth the time?

Yes.

Starting on SyFy this Tuesday, *Dollhouse* follows Echo, played by Eliza Dushku. Echo is an Active, a blank slate human who can be hired to have any personality and fulfil any need. Sometimes she's the love of your life, sometimes she's a big sister, a hostage negotiator, a mid wife, a safe cracker, whatever is needed. Actives are Swiss Army Humans, run by the Dollhouse, an LA-based organisation that caters to the highest paying clientele.

Paul Ballard is, just, an FBI Agent. Played by Tahomoh Penikett of *Battlestar Galactica*, Ballard is a bitter, driven man given the *Dollhouse* investigation and finding himself chasing shadows. Sacrificing his marriage, his career and increasingly his mental health to the job, Ballard is intent on finding the *Dollhouse* and someone, it seems, is intent on helping him.

These first two episodes do a good job of setting up both the basic premise and the bizarre, shades of gray morality of the characters. 'Ghost' sees Echo imprinted with a composite of the best kidnapping negotiators on the planet to try and get a client's child back whilst new Active Sierra is made ready for work and Echo's new handler, Boyd Langton, struggles with the ethics of his job. It's been widely derided and was in fact the second pilot shot but there's a lot to like here, in particular the immensely creepy moment where Echo is programmed to be asthmatic because one of the elements of her personality was asthmatic.

The second episode, 'The Target' is both simpler and in many ways a third, better pilot. Echo is employed to be an extreme sports partner with a millionaire (Played with cheerful, physical aplomb by Matt Keeslar). The job turns hostile and as it does so we cut between her struggle to stay alive and something horrific happening at the *Dollhouse* a few months previously. It's tight, pacy, relentlessly nasty and sets up the true nature of Echo's personality beautifully; she's far tougher than she's programmed to think, far more resourceful and those qualities may be starting to resurface in her mind.

Dushku and Penikett are excellent here and are backed by a solid supporting cast, especially Harry J. Lennix as Boyd and Fran Kranz as the Xanderesque *Dollhouse* technician Topher. There's a curious feel to the series as well, one which may well have contributed to its hostile reception. No one is fully good, no one is fully bad and in a world where the human body is little more than a containment vessel for a mind, no one is indispensable.

Dollhouse is a difficult, smart, bleak show that learns as it goes. It's not an easy watch but it's a consistently interesting and surprising one. This is one puzzle that it's well worth putting together.

Time Will Not Relent

by mike carey

This article was first featured in the Spanish comics magazine *Dentro de la Vineta*.

Okay, I admit it – that was a pretentious and catch-penny title. It's taken from a poem by Wallace Stevens (*The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad*), where he's complaining bitterly about how hard it is to be a poet and at the same time to live the everyday life of eating and working and sleeping that we all have to live. If you could free yourself from time, he says, you could endlessly and perpetually create "new orations", new hymns of praise to each season as it comes around. "One might. One might. But time will not relent."

It's a lament that anybody who ever had to write to meet a deadline knows only too well. There never is time enough to do all the things that you need to do, and everyone ends up making complicated trade-offs between writing, housework, playing with the kids, going out to see a movie, and what not else.

But the idea of freeing yourself from time is one that has a particular resonance for a comics writer or artist – because part of what we do is to turn time into space, and once you've done that you can manipulate it in some pretty interesting ways.

What got me going on this topic in the first place was a script that I was working on a few weeks ago. I wanted an opening that was set a long time before the rest of the action, and my first idea was to just go with the usual default option: label the opening scene PROLOGUE and then have a very clear scene break before the main action kicks in, perhaps with some kind of visual or verbal echo to ease the reader through the gap in time.

That's what I'd planned to do. But I started to wonder if there might be a better – or at least a more original – way of doing it. I'd been watching a lot of movies lately that used the fracturing of time as part of the way they told their story: *Irreversible*, which tells its story in reverse chronological order; *21 Grams*, which leaps backwards and forwards seemingly at random, forcing the viewer to assemble the narrative by guesswork and then to refine our guesses as the gaps are filled in; and *The Rules of Attraction*, which literally rewinds so that you can watch certain scenes several times over from the point of view of different characters, as well as using split screen effects and an amazing fast-forward montage just before the climax.

I wondered if I could do something a little bit more interesting with my opening – perhaps using a sort of stop-motion effect, staying with one fixed point of view while fast-forwarding through days and weeks, so that the reader gets the sense of the time passing more effectively than with a single jump cut to a new scene. That might be fun to try, but it would also be self-indulgent – because you'd have to give at least a page to that slow passage of time before you could take up with the narrative again. "Time will not relent": in a regular US comic book you've only got twenty-two pages to tell your story, and an effect like that has to be pretty central to what you're doing in order to earn its keep.

In more general terms, it seems to me, this is a battle that's fought out in every comic book: the battle between static and dynamic elements within the story and the art. You see it in its purest form whenever there's a splash page or a double-page spread, because those are moments which are formally cut loose from the storytelling: great, big, frozen moments that you revel in for the sake of their own impact, their own bravura. And while you're revelling, the story is standing still.

I know this is a bit of an over-simplification. Scott McCloud, in his wonderful book *Understanding Comics*, has talked at great length about how time operates in comics panels, and how you can have a span of time even within a single panel. Word balloons and captions take time to read, and therefore you get a sense of time's passage while you're reading them. With the help of these verbal yardsticks, a single image can model a succession of moments as characters describe, discuss and respond to the events that we can see on the page. The single panel needn't be a single frozen moment.

I absolutely accept this, but nonetheless I'd argue that when you have a splash page after a succession of multi-panel pages, there's an overwhelming sense of reaching a climactic moment and holding on it – giving it the weight and power that it demands in the narrative. Consciously or not, the eye lingers and the pace slows. The splash demands to be savoured, like a stressed syllable in a poem that is

held for longer than its unstressed neighbours.

To put it a different way, it's as though the tiers of panels in a regular comics page make us aware of the context – narrative past and narrative future – which surrounds and defines each image. Even while we look at one panel, one “package” of narrative time, we can see out of the corner of our eye other images which have already happened or have yet to happen. Time is laid out for us like a winding ribbon, and even if we resist the temptation to look ahead we can't get away from the knowledge that ahead *exists*. The future is coming right up.

Then we turn to a splash page – or let's say a double-page spread. The experience is different here because the context has been removed. A single image fills the whole of our perception, and the implicit framework of linear time provided by other panels, other moments, is much less vividly felt. We have come out of the river into the ocean, and we can't see the further shore.

Is this a good thing or a bad thing? It's certainly a kiss on the cheek to the artist, who has the chance (for once) to show what he can do on a large canvas, giving his imagination and his skill free rein. The results can be spectacular. There's a double-page spread in *All His Engines*, the Hellblazer graphic novel I'm doing with Leo Manco, which looks like an etching by Gustave Doré. It's a vision of Hell on Earth which is gorgeous and haunting at the same time.

In purely narrative terms, too, it's obviously a perfectly legitimate device to linger on a significant moment in this way. Think of all those action movies, from *The Untouchables* through to *The Matrix*, that use slow motion and even occasionally freeze frame to allow every nuance of their well choreographed climaxes to be lovingly rendered and obtrusively emphasised.

Time has been grabbed in an arm-lock and *forced* to relent.

But I have to hang my head at this point and admit that I have a prejudice. I don't like splashes all that much. In many ways I actively distrust them, because I think that freeze frame effect, jolting the reader out of the flow of narrative time, always comes at a price. You're made to admire in a way that stops you being fully immersed, it seems to me: you're called on for an aesthetic response when it's your guts rather than your eyes that ought to be engaged.

So I sabotage my splash pages: I find a way to sneak time back in. If you look at *Lucifer* as an example, you'll find very few full, unadulterated splashes or spreads. Instead, what I prefer to do is to have a splash with a single inset panel, or a two-page spread with three or four inset panels, so that you give full weight to the powerful moment but you still keep it within the “temporal flow” of the narrative. It's not completely cut loose, and it's not given permission to expand to fill all the space that's available. It's held on a leash.

I'm not claiming this as a particular virtue, or as a great technical innovation. It isn't either of those things. Like I said, it's a prejudice – in favour of time, and the flow of the story: in favour of the inevitable weight of cause and effect, I suppose, and against the occasional moments of weightlessness.

Because there's no such thing as a free lunch – or a free lunch-time.



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