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Neither is it empty.



The new space opera by Marianne de Pierres - in all good bookshops from May 2007 / www.mariannedepierres.com / www.orbitbooks.co.uk

Hub

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About Hub

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 (of any size) over at www.hub-mag.co.uk.

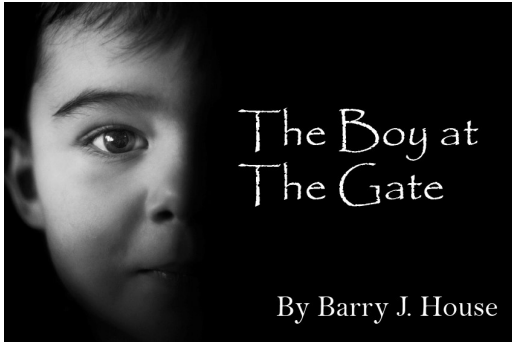


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The Boy at The Gate

By Barry J. House

I lie here in my room; the room with the locked door and the bars on the window. The boy stands at the foot of the bed, waiting. He is dressed in the same clothes as always: faded blue shorts, a grubby white tee shirt, and brown plastic sandals. He wants me to go with him — it is all he has ever wanted.

Very soon, now, I shall be ready to leave.

The boy doesn't speak; he has no need for speech. I can gauge his demands by the disapproving frown on those fragile lips, by the delicate wrinkle of his slender nose, by the accusing stare frozen in those beautiful chocolate brown eyes. It is his eyes that unsettle me the most. Red rimmed and bloodshot, they are twin whirlpools of perfect, limitless hate. And yet, there are times when he watches me and I perceive more: a desperate longing, and something far worse, something akin to pity.

This phantom is no static-riddled TV image, no faded sepia photograph. He is as clear as day, as if a real, live, boy stands before me. Except, of course, for that fuzzy patch on his cheek (less perceptible, now, for some reason) — the root of all his troubles. My fingers involuntarily slide across the latticework of tiny scars incised into my own cheek — the root of all *my* troubles, too.

It all started with the dream, countless years ago, when I was only a child myself; when I could still rely implicitly on my mum and dad to keep me safe from harm. But even they couldn't protect me from the dream.

In the dream, the boy would be standing outside my house at dusk, calling me. He would be leaning against our garden gate, the wrought iron one we had back then, and somehow I would *know* he wanted me to follow him, *know* he needed to show me something.

In the dream he would be smiling, but without the faintest hint of pleasure. He had a little, fuzzy patch on his left cheek, just below the eye. It was hardly noticeable, yet vaguely menacing, as if withholding that tiny part of himself somehow gave him an advantage. And there was something familiar about his eyes. In fact, his whole visage seemed strangely known to me.

In the dream I would lie in bed, powerless, listening to the mysterious boy call my name into the twilight, over and over again. I would remain exactly where I was, however, as if glued to the mattress, too afraid to get up and follow him. Only a dream, yes, and yet, somehow I had never felt more damned lucid, more alive.

"Come," he would say. And then he would laugh. An odd, feeble laugh, more like a whimper.

And I would awaken, slick with sweat, my heart hammering relentlessly against my ribs. Or was it the determined patter of sandaled feet racing down the garden path towards me?

I remember telling the child psychologist, Doctor Hooper, that I believed the fuzzy patch on the boy's cheek was significant but I didn't know why. Doctor Hooper had explained the dream symbolised something, and together we would unlock its meaning; any healing process couldn't begin until we did. I didn't believe there was anything to unlock, though; I

didn't know the boy from Adam. And it was kind of like the truth, back then. Doctor Hooper never did succeed in helping me to understand who the boy was. I found that out all by myself, didn't I?

And I found out how all of this will end, too.

The dreams began to increase in frequency. By the time I left my teenage years behind me, they were happening every, single, night. Gradually, I became convinced I did know the boy, after all. I *had* to know him. And if I dug deeply enough, I would surely remember him. For months, years, I racked my brains for any clue as to who the boy might be. When I had exhausted the obvious, my thoughts became wilder. Could the boy be a glimpse from the past, an ancestor, perhaps? Or a descendant of mine, maybe the son I was yet to have? Or could he be some kind of earthbound spirit that sought my help? But, if that was the case, why had he latched onto me?

And then, one night, for no apparent reason, the dream progressed further. I dreamt I climbed out of my bed, drawn, as if by a powerful magnet, down the stairs and out of the front door, to join the boy, reluctantly, at the gate.

"Come," he said, turning to leave.

The first night we got several paces down the road before I woke up, knowing things had irrevocably changed. Thereafter, in the dream, I was unwillingly pulled to the gate every night, and led a little further from the safe harbour of my home, before awakening. My dream surroundings were so eerily familiar; just as I remembered things as a child: the streets, the houses, even the little corner shop on the edge of our estate, now long gone.

The weeks passed by like this until, one night, we turned a corner and I sensed we had reached our destination. It was a block of flats, maybe half a mile from where I used to live, and I was following the boy along a broad, paved path, which ran adjacent to the building. I knew the area somewhat, I used to play there as a child, when it was still a construction site. But that was all.

After a while, the path narrowed, running between the flats and a row of cramped concrete sheds, all of which had the same bright green doors, like so many garish toilet cubicles. The boy turned a corner, and vanished.

Dreading what I might see around there, I followed him, juggling a combination of morbid curiosity, and *déjà vu*, with barely suppressed panic. But the boy had merely come to a halt, pointing resolutely at the ground in front of one of the sheds.

From that night onwards the dreams invariably finished with the same scene: the beautiful, slender boy pointing at the spot on the paving, as if commanding me to stand there next to him, or place something before him on the path. Somehow, I knew spot was every bit as important as the fuzzy patch on his cheek.

I started writing to the police after that. Anonymous letters, of course. It isn't that I wanted to taunt them — I didn't think I had done anything wrong — but I desperately needed to tell somebody how I was feeling. I just couldn't cope much longer. The years of nightly turmoil were beginning to take their toll, affecting my daytime hours, too. My work was suffering, and my boss, like so many of his kind, was a complete, unfeeling bastard.

I decided I had no choice but to physically visit the location by the block of flats, where the dreams always ended. The answer would be there, if anywhere. The flats were far over on the western boundary of Southampton, and I hadn't been that way, as such, for many years. I knew the building was still there, however, having sometimes spied it when travelling by on the bus. At last, I reached the place and began to pace nervously down the wide path. I couldn't help feeling like I knew the area intimately; it was identical to that in the dream, even down to those same sickly green shed doors, facing the flats across the paving.

Up ahead, I could see the turn in the path, and I knew, *I just knew*, (as surely as I know the sun rises every morning, and, aeons after my death, will continue to rise) that when I turned the corner I would see the boy standing there, pointing at the same damned spot on the ground.

I turned the corner, nevertheless.

I managed to convince myself (for perhaps as long as one, whole second) that I had been mistaken, and it was just an ordinary, living boy who had paused there to examine something. Just an awful coincidence. And then his head swung around, and his gaze locked on to mine. My fragile pretence collapsed. He was there, all right, and this time it was the middle of the day; I couldn't be more wide awake.

In those first few moments after recovering from the shock of seeing him, I was struck by something profound: the boy was, beyond all doubt, a ghost, and only I could see him. Or, at least, the coppers, who were bearing down on me from all directions, didn't seem to have noticed anything.

What the hell had I told the police in those letters of mine? More than enough to raise their curiosity, by the look of it.

I was unceremoniously brought to the ground. My head cracked against one of the paving slabs, breaking my nose, spraying blood across the path at the boy's feet.

"Is this what you wanted?" I screamed up at him, through a scarlet haze.

But the question was rhetorical, and the spectre didn't answer.

One of the coppers sat on my back (the largest one, judging by the suffocating weight), and, as she handcuffed my wrists together, the red cloud descended further, blocking my vision, entirely. A rushing, whirring sound began to build within my head, and my thoughts were forced inwards. I became disorientated and nauseous, fearing I would faint. It might well have been better if I had lost consciousness, because the nausea doubled, and then redoubled in intensity. I found myself wondering if I might actually die. At the very point that the vomiting began, I was hit between the eyes by a juggernaut of escaping memories, the impact of which threatened to kill me, regardless.

And then, through all of this, I was convinced I heard the boy speak.

"Come," he said.

And, finally, just before I blacked out, I recognised that voice.

In fact, I remembered everything.

One summer, way back, those flats had been no more than irregular piles of brick, concrete, and glass, awaiting transformation into poky council dwellings. A few of us kids used to hang out there with a boy named John Kelly. We were a tough lot, the Kelly gang, and, during the evenings and weekends, the building site belonged to us. Throughout the whole of that summer the landscape may well have shifted on a daily basis, but to us it was timeless — our sacred, tribal land.

There had been a boy, Jake Evans (Kelly always referred to him as Joke), who used to live nearby. He would often race out of his house to call me over when he saw me en route to the building site. Jake used to fancy me; it was so obvious. How did I ever manage to put that out of my mind? He kept asking me if he could join the gang, and I found that strange because, apart from at school, I had never seen him outside his garden gate. It was John Kelly's gang, anyway; it wasn't up to me. And, because it was Kelly's gang, Jake was like a starving tramp at the door of a gentlemen's club: he didn't have the slightest fucking chance of getting in. Why on Earth did Jake Evans want to join the Kelly gang, anyway, when the older boy was so goddamned cruel to him?

Jake had a birthmark, you see, a blotchy port-wine stain on his cheek that rendered him extremely self-conscious. It meant nothing to me. Nothing. But Kelly took every opportunity to ridicule the boy about it, and, ultimately, it would be Jake's undoing.

Jake was nothing like the other boys I knew. He was sensitive, bookish, and charming. Despite the birthmark, he was also the most attractive boy I had ever laid eyes upon. I fancied him, too, you see. Oh, yes. I couldn't admit it back then, not to anybody, especially not to myself; I was too busy scaling the foothills of newly discovered adolescence. I suppose that, being one or two years younger than us, Jake didn't mesh with my fragile ego, and the charismatic John Kelly did.

After Jake begged me to speak to Kelly, one last time, about allowing him to join our gang, I was astonished to discover our leader appeared to have changed his mind. He seemed almost keen to see the boy. I was ordered to tell Jake to meet us at the building site at 8.00pm that very evening; there would be an initiation ceremony.

Having a bad feeling about the whole thing, I tried to put Jake off. And besides, I had plans of my own; I had decided to leave John Kelly to his sycophants. I was going to hang around with Jake Evans, instead. His lower age didn't matter any more. I just wanted to be with him. It had to be done the right way, though; I couldn't let Jake know yet, in case Kelly found out. Kelly would destroy us. When I told Jake about the initiation ceremony, however, his eyes lit up like miniature suns, and it dawned on me that joining the gang meant everything to him. He was so determined to be there that preventing him would have been impossible.

We were already gathered in the rubble strewn hollow we called our headquarters, when Jake arrived, and, in the fading light, started picking his way across the building site. The moment Jake stepped into the hollow, Kelly started on the boy; he was that quick to show his true intentions. He accused Jake of being a spy for a rival gang. Jake denied it, of course. Then Kelly grabbed a piece of brick, and lobbed it at Jake. It struck the boy's leg, and he let out a yell. The others followed Kelly's example, ignoring my cries to stop.

Lumps of old brick and masonry rained down on the boy. Kelly and his toadies had obviously planned this outrage, but I swear I hadn't known. And then, to my horror, I noticed Kelly had hefted a huge, jagged piece of concrete. Before I could stop him, he hurled the chunk at Jake's head.

Jake went down like a marionette with its strings suddenly cut.

"Enough!" I screamed, racing over to the stricken Boy.

Jake lay awkwardly on his side. I squatted down next to him, attempting to ignore the injury, wanting to make light of it for his sake. I found my eyes inexorably drawn to his temple, however, where the missile had struck. A steady stream of blood issued from the ugly gash. Surprisingly, there was no swelling; if anything, that side of his head appeared to be slightly concave.

And then I noticed something else: the birthmark on his cheek had vanished. But no, it had simply been masked by blood and dirt. And still the boy's beauty shone through as remarkably as ever, perhaps even more so, considering the contrasting head wound. The surreal ambience of the moonlit building site only added to this effect, giving the impression of enduring pulchritude, like a rose blooming on a battlefield.

Only *this* rose was fading, fast.

Jake hadn't moved an inch since falling; he hadn't even tried to speak. I could only kneel beside him, witnessing the immense hurt — the perceived betrayal — trapped in his eyes.

"I d-didn't know..." I began.

But Jake wasn't listening. His soul had already slipped away.

For a while the rest of us stood around, blankly, not able to comprehend what we had done. Even John Kelly was dumbstruck; surely he hadn't meant to kill the boy. Kelly, however, soon regained control of himself, and the situation. He forced us to carry Jake's lifeless body over to the lowest corner of the hollow, burying him under the loose rubble, there. Afterwards, he made us swear, one by one, that we would never speak of it again. His sheer vehemence, together with the unspoken promise of retribution, guaranteed our silence.

After the events of that tragic night, I kept well away from Kelly and the others. I didn't dare go near the building site. A few weeks later, I passed by on the bus, hunched up on the other side of the aisle, struggling not to look, but my eyes were inevitably torn across to the fast emerging block of flats. The building was well underway; workmen had already begun labouring on the second floor. Our hollow was nowhere to be seen. It had disappeared beneath the flats, somewhere over the back, where the new path turned a corner and narrowed.

Deep, down inside, I understood the only way I was ever going to forge a semblance of normal life was to pretend nothing had happened that night. I resolved to forget Jake Evans, and the events surrounding his terrible demise. And I guess it worked, after a fashion. I somehow managed to repress those awful memories, gathering them up and heaving them back to some dark, isolated recess of my mind.

But there they had lain, cold and hard, like pebbles trapped in riverbed mud, sending out forays into my dreams, and then, later, into my waking life. Finally, on the day I had returned to the scene of my crime, the coppers had turned up, too, and all those memories had come leaping back into my conscious mind. When they dug up the spot the boy had been pointing at, there on the path, they discovered the remains of a child. He would have been about ten years old when he died.

And here I am, now, lying on my bed in this locked room, snapping the final piece of the puzzle into place. The boy, Jake, haunts me twenty-four hours a day — a constant reminder of my crime. He never speaks, though, apart from in the dream, where he meets me at the garden gate. If I could see Doctor Hooper, today, he would explain the gate symbolises the gateway to hell, and I would tell him Jake is waiting to take me through it; my recompense for blood spilt long ago.

Mine is the last, surviving soul of the Kelly gang to be collected, no doubt, because I played the smallest part in his demise. Oh, but Jake has suffered long enough, forced to watch me enjoy the years I snatched away from him.

Well, I am ready, now.

As if on cue, the apparition moves away from the foot of my bed, pointing at the corner of the wafer-thin mattress where he knows I have concealed the flex. My mouth becomes very dry as I tug it out. I trek over to the door, slipping the smaller loop around the handle. I shrug off my regulation blouse and let it slip to the floor.

Getting down on my knees, I noose the other end of the flex about my neck, and lean forward, away from the door. The cord instantly bites. My lungs struggle for breath. I hear a rushing sound all around me. My head starts to distend, like some misshapen balloon. There is a burning smell, somewhere. I battle to focus my whole being on driving my fists towards the floor.

The boy glides across the grubby tiles to face me, his head mere inches from mine. The fuzzy patch on his cheek has gone; his face is perfect, unblemished.

Now, at last, Jake opens his mouth to speak.

"Come," he says.

And I follow.

REVIEWS

Helix and *Soon I Will Be Invincible* reviewed by Lee Harris

HELIX By Eric Brown
Published by Solaris (4 June '07)
RRP: £6.99

In our first electronic-only issue of Hub (issue 3, 20th April) we published a new tale by Eric. In our introduction we described him as “the incomparable Eric Brown”. We’re about to confess a slight fib.

Helix is an unashamed adventure story – SF so light it needs weighting to keep it from floating away. While the characters don’t *always* convince, there is much to be enjoyed, here.

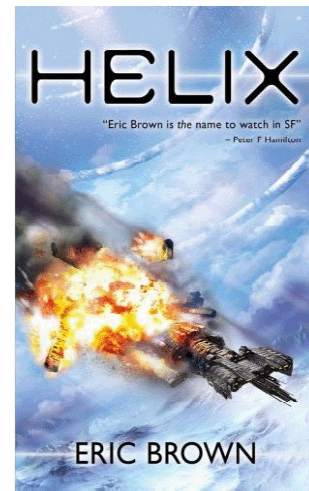
After mankind has destroyed the Earth’s ecosystem through constant warring and the ravaging of the land, a colony ship – the Lovelock – is launched with the intention of starting mankind afresh on a new world. When the ship crash-lands on an inhospitable planet, the crew discover that the world they are on is part of a helix – a vast, spiral construct of planets, wound around a single sun. The entire construction is exactly that – a construction. The location (and, indeed, continued existence) of the original Builders is unknown, and the reason for the build is also shrouded in mystery.

The crew meet a number of races – some deadly, some placid, some more complex – and plan a way to find a suitable world on which to revive their passengers, stored in cryogenic suspension.

Comparison with Niven’s *Ringworld* books is inevitable. Brown treads similar ground: vast planetary construct? Check. Alien allies and enemies? Check. Obligatory sex scene? Check. Mystery surrounding the artifact’s origin? Check. Two-dimensional characterisation? Ah. That’s a different matter. Niven’s book was bold, innovative, and a fascinating read. His characterisations, however, were two-dimensional and ill-considered. The protagonists in *Helix* are simply portrayed, but they have layers. At first glance it seems that Brown has fallen into the same trap as Niven, and made his world more interesting than his main characters, but as the book progresses we discover more about what makes these people do what they do, and we uncover some interesting revelations.

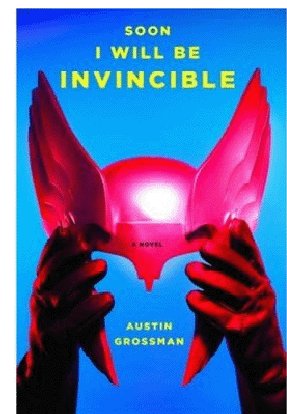
The same cannot be said of the antagonists, unfortunately, who have been roughly sketched, though this is not enough of a problem to stop me from recommending this book for anyone looking for a holiday read.

This is far from Brown’s best work, but as an uncomplicated boys-own-adventure in space, you could do far worse. An enjoyable romp.



SOON I WILL BE INVINCIBLE By Austin Grossman
Published by Pantheon (US, 5 June '07), Michael Joseph (UK, 16 August '07)
RRP: \$22.95/£16.99

Doctor Impossible (evil genius, diabolical time-traveller, wannabe world ruler) has escaped from prison. Again. It’s up to the New Champions (reformed especially to take down Impossible, despite the disappearance of their most powerful member, CoreFire) to save the world from his evil plans. Again. Told from two points of view (Doctor Impossible narrates



every other chapter, with intervening chapters told by the New Champions' newest member, the cyborg Fatale), *Soon I Will Be Invincible* is an amusing tale of super-heroics, and of what drives super-villainy. It's not a comedic tale, but it does acknowledge the ridiculousness of its own premise.

I leaned in to the microphone. Time to talk some trash.

"You didn't think your prisons would stop me, did you? You knew I'd be back. I... Doctor Impossible!"
It passed the time.

Superhero stories rarely work well in prose. Perhaps it's because we're too used to seeing their tales unfold in illustrated or filmed format, and the novel format seems too serious for this type of endeavour. *Invincible* works. It's a lot of fun. Bwahahahahaaaaaa!

Coming Next Week: Fiction: *I Look Forward to Remembering You* by Mur Lafferty

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We pay our writers, and your support is appreciated.