

Hub

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Issue 13 Contents

Fiction: *Passing Out* by D.J. Muir
Reviews: *Highlander: Search for Vengeance*
Opinion: *The Tate Debate*

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Slush Pile

We've been extremely lucky here at Hub, and have received a huge amount of fiction submitted from talented writers from all around the world.

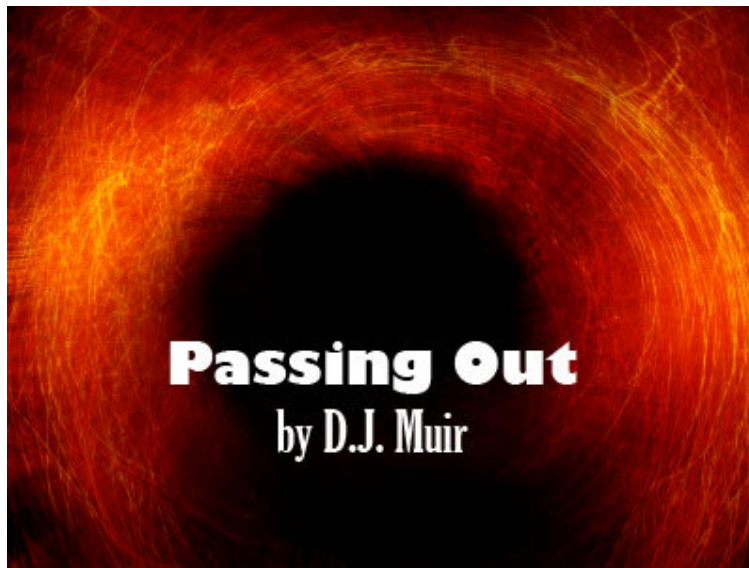
We've received so much, in fact, that we've got a bit behind on our reading. If you're an author waiting for a response from us, please accept our sincerest apologies for the delay – we've just taken on a new team of readers, so we should be able to clear our backlog sooner, rather than later.

For our weekly Hub readers, of course, this is excellent news, as it means that we have a large selection of quality fiction from which to choose our weekly story.



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"Two minute drill, Cody," I barked into the mic in despair and frustration.

It worked. Onscreen, I saw Cody suddenly focus. He took just one second to gather himself and assess his situation.

Flat and grim, he replied, "Two minute drill, Mark."

Another second, and he smiled, and this time when he said it, he sounded different. To hell with the hand he'd been dealt. It was time to work miracles.

"Two minute drill."

Then he lost consciousness again.

We'd been roommates at the Space Service Academy. Even then, we both planned on going career. No four year stint and off to some civilian job; we wanted to see the galaxy. To see all the amazing things out there.

We'd been teammmates, too. Cody didn't get into a game our freshman year. He didn't mind. He studied the playbook, and made every practice session, and stayed firmly at third string quarterback.

Then one quarterback graduated, and Cody was the backup when, early the next season, down twenty points in the fourth, the coach mentally threw in the towel, benched his starter, and decided to give this kid some playing time.

Cody didn't throw in the towel. But ten minutes ran off the clock and we were still down twenty.

I glanced at the clock from the huddle.

"Two minutes, Cody."

He grinned at us. "C'mon guys. Let's have some fun here. Two minute drill."

The *Amundsen* hit something that shouldn't have been there. All the simulations indicated *Amundsen* was far enough above the accretion disk to avoid debris. Something clipped it anyway; something too tiny for the sensors to pick up. It was an instant death sentence for Cody.

The probe lost a stabiliser, and started to spin. Half the lights on my console aboard the *Antarctica* turned red.

I saw Cody looking around the screens, his more red than mine. He started reading off numbers, without order or plan. The camerashot in his cockpit didn't show anything which betrayed the spin, but the centripetal force hammered him.

He blacked out.

I remember it was a crisp afternoon, fall trees gold and scarlet. I remember the clear blue scent of the air. I can still tell you every play we ran. Every detail.

Cody worked the sidelines, inch perfect. He didn't go down the middle of the field until he hit the first touchdown pass. Two minute drill is all precision. Control the clock, make sure it's stopped after every play to buy yourself time.

It's perfect co-ordination, quarterback and receiver. The exact moment to throw, the precise force to get the ball into the one place your receiver can catch it inbounds and make the play.

It's all focus. It's all clarity.

He kept talking--babbling.

He wasn't conscious.

I listen again later, and it's mostly incoherent. But I can still catch the moment when he said, "Eyes right."

He came round right after that, still babbling.

"The inside. Inside out. Not him, not him at all."

I had to focus him.

"Two minute drill."

We didn't win that game, but we were so close the coach named Cody starter from then on. We didn't become invincible. We still lost games. But Cody worked miracles when time was slipping away, brought us back to win in games where we shouldn't have had a chance. Sharp as a razor, he threw to the edges of the field like no one I've ever seen, before or since.

The *Amundsen* had longer than two minutes before its shielding would fail. The computer's best guess gave him six. Then he'd be into the thick of the accretion disk, and next stop the event horizon--though he'd never make it close to that point before supergravity took its two penny toll.

When he came round again, the nonsense stopped immediately.

"Mark, comms'll be gone soon. I'm pulling ten gee subjective here. I'm getting flashes when I go under. Like memories, but the detail's wrong."

"Cody--"

"Don't interrupt. No time. It was... remember graduation?"

"Yeah."

"That's the memory. Next time I'm going to try and--"

And under he went again.

Graduation. Proud, nervous soon-to-be officers, still cadets for a few minutes yet, ready in full dress. At a command, they bore to attention and at another, marched across the dusty parade ground toward the review stand where proud, nervous parents and officers and dignitaries awaited. Three scoutships boomed past overhead.

"The commandant," snapped Cody.

The comms crackled wildly.

"I can see the ceremony like it's clear as yesterday--" *and not, I think, twelve years past* "--clearer than memory. Something's recovered that scene, better than I remember. And I'm looking right at the commandant."

"We all looked at him. Eyes right, straight in front of the podium," I reminded him. I shouldn't have interrupted. I was never as focused as Cody.

"Something isn't right about him in the version I'm seeing now."

Quick march past the audience. The senior Honour Guard at the head of the column called out as he drew level with the podium, "Eyes right."

Our heads snapped round. The metalwork of the stands reflected the suns overhead, and dazzled me. In that moment, we were all of us looking into our bright, wonder-filled futures.

"It's inside, Mark. Waiting for me inside. But not inside--beyond."

"Say again, *Amundsen?*"

"The memory. The commandant I'm seeing isn't him. It's something else, editing itself in. It spoke to me."

If I didn't know how Cody could focus under pressure, I'd have sworn then that he'd lost it.

"It's in the singularity. Waiting for me. I'm going through"

"Cody--"

He said one last thing as the comm channel turned to static for the last time.

Hours have passed.

I listen to the recording one more time.

There's only *in* down there, no ways out.

Beyond?

"Ship, prep the *Shackleton* for launch."

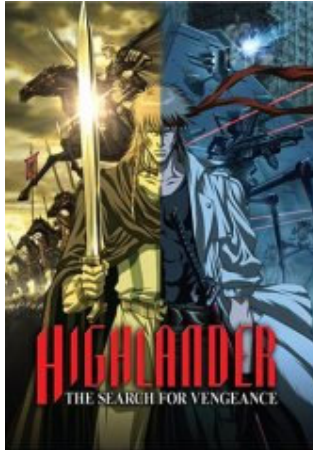
As I climb down to the probe's bay, I hear the echoes of Cody's last words.

"Incredible things, Mark. Incredible things."

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REVIEW

Highlander: The Search for Vengeance reviewed by Marie O'Regan



HIGHLANDER: THE SEARCH FOR VENGEANCE

Directed by Yoshiaki Kawajiri

Written by David Abramowitz

Manga Entertainment

RRP: £16.99. Released 9th July.

The release of this animé Highlander movie has been eagerly anticipated for quite some time now. Scripted by David Abramowitz, who previously wrote for **Highlander The TV Series**, and has penned the latest live action movie **Highlander: The Source**, and directed by Yoshiaki Kawajiri, of **The Animatrix (Program)**, **Vampire Hunter D - Bloodlust** and **Ninja Scroll** fame, I came to this with high expectations

Search for Vengeance follows immortal Colin McCloud (of the clan McCloud) – starting from the days of the Roman Invasion of Britain, when he is killed in battle, only to rise, immortal, and find his Clan killed and his fiancé crucified by Marcus Octavius. He is determined to avenge her death, so chases Octavius through the ages, getting killed over and over again in the process. He is accompanied by the long-suffering ghost of a druid priest, Amergan, who never ceases trying to teach him that revenge is not the way forward, though Colin won't listen. Amergan reminded me of a weird cross between the Dungeon master (**Dungeons and Dragons** – anyone remember that?) and Yoda. Very strange – especially when he's talking through a rat or a bird or some other passing wildlife. The culmination of the tale is set in near-future New York, a city now destroyed. We find Octavius is ruler here, too, intent on recreating Rome, as he has attempted to do time and again, through the ages. Needless to say, Colin is on the side of right, helping the survivors fight against Octavius, in an attempt to regain control of their city and rid themselves of Octavius' repression.

Search for Vengeance has a relatively simple storyline, and some of the animation is very good – but the film fails on several levels, as there is a lot of quite unintentional humour caused by bad dialogue and just plain bad storytelling. Colin, for example, learns absolutely nothing for a millennium, despite dying in exactly the same way at Octavius' hand several times over, conveniently always on holy ground, so that he cannot lose his head. The original scenes describe Colin and his clan as living in 'Northern England', when everyone is quite clearly Scottish – even if the accents are atrocious. Add to that his absolute failure to recognise his lost love in her reincarnated form over and over again, this leaves you with the impression Colin is stupid, which I'm sure wasn't the intention of the film-makers. Moreover, the character of Colin was in some ways the least well-rounded of all – a real shame.

Although it's doubtful whether the average **Highlander** fan will be impressed by this latest outing, for one thing it totally disregards the film and TV mythology, it probably will appeal slightly more to the animé audience. As mentioned, the artwork is of a high standard, especially in some of the action sequences, and the story overall is quite entertaining if you put aside its origins. So the search for a true successor to the **Highlander** franchise continues; could it be that there should have been only one?

Season Three of the new incarnation of *Doctor Who* ended its initial UK run on Saturday 30th June. *Doctor Who* fans are generally in agreement that this was the finest season of New *Who* so far (though the hardcore among them would probably argue that season x, y or z of “Classic” *Who* was far better. You can’t please everyone).

[End of Season 3 Spoiler Warning]

It only took a few days for the BBC to upset the applegart, however, with their announcement that Catherine Tate’s character Donna (from last year’s *Runaway Bride* Christmas Special) would be replacing Martha Jones as The Doctor’s companion.

Fan forums have been full of debate on whether the casting is good. Actually, that’s not quite true – fan forums have been full of debate concerning the best way to disembowel the producers and other personnel responsible for the casting.

Detractors cite Tate’s performance in *The Runaway Bride* as reason enough to burn her at the stake for the witch she most evidently is. It is true that Donna appeared to be Shouty McShout’s more vocal sister in that episode, but in her defence, she was running late for the most important event of her adult life, as well as having been kidnapped by an alien robot assassin. Her high frustration levels were perhaps at least a *little* justified. Also, of course, her performance was created by three people – herself as actress, Russell T Davies (who put the words in her mouth) and Euros Lyn, who directed the episode, and was therefore intimately involved in crafting the performance in relation to the rest of the characters and situations. If Tate hadn’t given exactly what the production team had required, there is little doubt that she would not have been invited back for a full season.

That leads us onto Tate’s acting credentials. A far more prolific and experienced actress than either Billie Piper or Freema Agyeman, Tate is classically trained. She served a year with the prestigious Royal Shakespeare Company, and has been nominated for numerous awards. She has appeared on numerous one-off productions and serials over the past decade, always successfully.

Unfortunately, she seems to be judged almost purely on her award-winning sketch show – *The Catherine Tate Show* – in which she plays a variety of characters, many of them (not all) unlikeable and annoying, as well as the first half of her *Who* Christmas Special.

Her performance in *Runaway Bride* was almost pantomimic for the first half of the show (well, it *was* Christmas), but layers were gradually uncovered as the programme aired, and a more sympathetic Donna emerged at the end. Sympathetic, and more worldly-wise.

It will be refreshing to have a companion who doesn’t go all doe-eyed every time The Doctor makes an entrance. Tate could be just the person to do this.

When Billie Piper was initially announced as companion, the angry mob called for Davies’ head on a plate, and Piper proved them wrong. Now they’re calling for the same entrée without knowing what Davies and his team have planned for Donna. A tad premature, and a shame they didn’t learn from their previous error.

Perhaps they’ll be proven right. Perhaps they’ll be proven wrong. What’s certain, of course, is that idle speculation achieves nothing. Hopefully Tate will ignore the grumbles of those who still choose to call themselves “fans” while publicly bashing the show, and get on with her job. I, for one, am rooting for her.

Coming Next Week: Fiction: *A Brief History of Slip-Time* by Mikal Trimm

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