

Hub

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Issue 19 Contents

Fiction: *Ten Thousand Spaceships* by Paul E Martens
Reviews: The 4400 (season 3), Friday Night in the Beast House
Fiction (reprint): *The Library* by Christopher Brosnahan

Apologies

Last week's issue contained the evocative ghost story *The Library* by Christopher Brosnahan.

Unfortunately, though the story was published in full, a paragraph from a previously published story found its way to the end of the piece, spoiling the ending somewhat.

Hub would like to unreservedly apologise to Christopher for this oversight, and to all our readers.

The online issue will be amended shortly, to reflect the correct wording. In addition, the story is reprinted in full in this issue.

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 over at www.hub-mag.co.uk.



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Ten Thousand Spaceships

by Paul E Martens



There were ten thousand one hundred thirty eight spaceships scattered around the world, as if sown by some alien Appleseed. They seemed to sprout from back yards, front yards and driveways. They appeared on streets and on rooftops, next to huts and yurts and shanties. In the first few hours after they materialized, one thousand five hundred ninety seven of them closed their doors on curious visitors and took off, their destination, or destinations, unknown. Another two thousand six hundred five had visitors but neither closed their doors nor took off. The other five thousand nine hundred thirty six attracted stares, inspired by fear or awe, but no one was brave enough, or foolish enough, to enter them. The Authorities took charge of the ships and soon concluded that they awaited specific passengers and would blast off only when the one or

ones for whom they waited entered. And, it was determined, they would fail to budge in any way if there was anyone extra aboard.

For instance, the ship in the driveway of 441B Ludwigstrasse in Heidelberg did not take off when Helmut Schneider climbed in by himself, but when his son, Peter, joined him, Bang! Zoom! off they went, leaving Helmut's wife, Gretel, all alone. Gretel made her way to a bar, got drunk, went home with a stranger, found herself pregnant and claimed the baby was an alien. She sold the story to the tabloids and earned enough money to start a business making hats. She was very happy, except when she missed Peter.

Mary Conover's spaceship stayed firmly in place in front of her Canberra home when the bloke from the government got in, even after Mary climbed on board behind him, but when the government bloke left, off Mary went. She had no family or friends, and worked from home on her computer. No one really cared that Mary was gone, except for the government bloke, who had had a brief fantasy about going off to an uninhabited planet with Mary to found a new race. He went home and listened to Puccini and wished again that he'd been born a girl.

*

Gerry Brignola's spaceship was in his backyard, right on top of his daughters' swing set. It was tall and sleek and gleamed in the morning sun like a castle in a fairy tale. A rocket ship! His rocket ship! His ticket to the planets, the stars, the universe.

Of course the men and women from the FBI, or the Army, or Homeland Security or wherever, didn't see it as actually belonging to Gerry.

"Look," Gerry said to them. He stood on the porch outside his back door, about as close as they would let him get to his ship. He was holding up the morning paper. "It's all over the news. The rockets will only take off for the person they belong to. You can play around all you want, sooner or later you're gonna have to let me have it." They ignored him, just as they had for the last week, every other time he'd said pretty much the same thing. He sighed and went in to eat his breakfast.

Nine-year-old Heidi was reading a book at the kitchen table, her cereal soggy and untouched in its bowl. Jill, who was six, had finished her cereal and had her arm inside the box, trying to find the toy it promised, unaware that Heidi had already claimed it by right of primogeniture. Jill gave him a grin, her smiling brown eyes implying she had either already done, or was contemplating doing, something she shouldn't. Gerry's wife, Marta, was nibbling an English Muffin and studying stock prices.

A thought snuck up on Gerry. Suddenly he couldn't breathe. His stomach collapsed in on itself and seemed to weigh as much as a neutron star.

Marta said, "Gerry? What's the matter? That thing in the yard is going to explode, isn't it?" She stood quickly. "Girls, go out though the front and get in the car. I knew we should have gone to a motel until they took it away."

Gerry made a noise in his throat where his words had gotten stuck behind his heart. Then he managed to say, "No. No. It's not that."

"What is it then?"

"What's the matter, Daddy?" asked Jill. "Did you shoot one of those damned burro-craptic busy bobbies?"

Marta's look of concern mingled with one reflecting a mother's displeasure with her husband for speaking in the hearing of big ears.

"No, Honey," Gerry said. "Daddy didn't shoot anybody. And don't say damned."

Jill smiled and could be seen mentally filing the word away for later use.

"So what is it, then?" asked Marta again. "You look like you just had a nightmare."

"Maybe I'm still having a nightmare," he said.

Marta sighed. "Would you please just tell me what's bothering you?"

He swallowed. "What if the rocket isn't for all of us? What if I'm supposed to go and leave you all behind?"

She took a step back, eyes wide, as if she'd been accosted by a free-range lunatic. "I'm not getting into that thing. And don't you even think about trying to get the girls in there."

He blinked. "But ..."

"And you don't really want to go anywhere, either. Do you?"

"But ..." He'd just assumed ... How could anyone have a rocket in their backyard, their very own spaceship, and not want to go?

Marta kissed Gerry and caressed his cheek. "I know you think you'd like to go into outer space, honey, but you don't." She said it kindly, the way a wife reminds her husband that he's actually retarded and would die in some idiotic manner if she wasn't there to take care of him.

"Yes, I do," Gerry said. Didn't he? "Of course I do. I started reading science fiction when other kids were still reading Dr. Seuss. I've seen every movie ever made that had anything to do with outer space or aliens. I know the names of all the astronauts since the original seven. And what about the rocket ship tattoo that I got in college?"

"But what have you ever actually done when you were sober? Did you study astrophysics or celestial mechanics or learn to fly supersonic jets? Did you study medicine, or engineering or anything that could lead to your becoming an astronaut?"

"Well, no, but ..."

"You were an English major, and you became an insurance salesman. Is that what somebody who really wanted to go into space would do?"

“Maybe.” How could he make her understand? “Sometimes a dream is just a dream. It isn’t a plan or a career path. But that doesn’t mean it’s not real.” He stared at her as if he could download what was in his mind, in his heart, into her by some invisible wavelength broadcast by his eyes. “And sometimes dreams can come true, not because of anything you’ve done, but just because you want them to badly enough.”

She shook her head. “No, honey.” She smiled sadly and seemed to be seeing something that wasn’t there. “Just wanting something isn’t enough,” she said softly, as if she spoke from experience.

“Mr. Brignola?” A woman in a dark suit stood in the doorway. “We’d like you to come out and enter the ship.”

“What? Me? Now?” His legs seemed to be off line, he wasn’t even sure he still had legs. Part of his brain was yelling, “Whoopee! We’re going into space!” Other parts weren’t convinced that a whoopee was warranted.

“There’s no danger,” she said. “We’ll be onboard with you. It’s unlikely that the ship will take off.”

But not impossible, he thought, wondering what it would be like to be trapped in outer space with a bunch of ‘burro-craptic busy bobbies,’ perhaps for the rest of his life.

“I know that,” he said. “I’m just surprised you’re finally letting me into my spaceship.” He preceded her across the yard, stopping at the base of the rocket. From that angle, it seemed extraordinarily tall, as though, if he climbed to the top, he would already be halfway to the stars. He stared up at it until the G-woman coughed.

He glanced back at her. “I’m going, I’m going. Thanks to you people this is the first time I’ve gotten this close to it, you know.” He touched a tail fin reverently then put his foot on the first step of the ladder, feeling like Neil Armstrong in reverse. He took a deep breath and climbed the rest of the way, and into the ship.

It was just the way he knew it would be; all curves, and chrome and crystals, exactly like a Sci-Fi movie from the fifties, one of the good ones. There were four seats, couches, really. And screens, and dials and gauges. The cabin was filled with a soft, almost sepia, light that didn’t seem to come from anywhere in particular. Gerry felt like a Catholic in St. Peter’s, or a Make-a-Wish kid entering Disneyland. “Neato,” he whispered.

There were four government men in the ship, plus the woman who had followed him. Three of the men shook their heads, as if unable to fathom the mysterious ways of civilians, but the other one gave him a wink and what Gerry decided was an empathetic smile.

“All right, Mr. Brignola,” said one of them. “Have a seat.”

Gerry looked at him, then at the seat, then back at him. “Um...”

The man looked tired. “Look, we just want to see if the ship reacts in any way, if it registers your presence. It’s not going to take off. None of the rockets anywhere have taken off with anyone of any authority onboard.”

“Not yet, anyway,” said the guy with the smile.

“Shut up, Beasley.” The Agent of Whatever turned back to Gerry. “Please sit down. I thought you were so anxious to get in ‘your’ ship. Well, you’re in. Was all that talk just noise?”

“No! But ... Well ... I mean ... my family isn’t here. I don’t want to risk taking off without them.”

“I told you, it ain’t gonna happen.”

Gerry looked at the couch, swallowed, closed his eyes, and sat.

Nothing happened. He opened his eyes and saw the men and the woman checking the instruments, taking readings, measuring.

“Okay. That’s it. Let’s pack it up,” said the guy in charge.

“What do you mean?” asked Gerry.

“I mean, we’re done. We’re leaving. There’s nothing more we can do. The ship is all yours.” He looked at Gerry. “Just like you wanted.”

Gerry stuck his chin out at him. “That’s right. It is what I wanted..” The others started to make their way out of the ship. Gerry cut in front of two of them. “But, uh, like I said, I don’t want to go anywhere without my family, so if you’ll excuse me, I probably shouldn’t be the last one in here. Just in case, you know?”

After the Feds left, Gerry and Marta had to deal with the press on their own. They stood on the front lawn, a vulpine semicircle of reporters hemming them in against the house.

“When are you leaving?” The question was shouted at them.

“We’re not entirely sure, actually,” Gerry said. Marta raised an eyebrow at him but didn’t say anything.

“But you are going, right?”

“Um ...” Gerry deferred to Marta. “We’re not sure about that, either,” she said.

More shouts came at them. Marta said, “Look, we don’t know when we’ll decide if we’re going, or, if we decide to go, when we’ll go. So you might as well all go away. We really don’t have anything else to say.” Together they turned and went in the house.

After he closed the door, Gerry said, “So, there’s a chance that you will decide to get on the ship?”

She looked at him as if he’d asked if there was a chance she would let him drop one of the girls from a tall building to see if she would bounce.

Jill wandered into the living room. She eyed them indignantly, as if she held them responsible for the fact that she had an older sister. “Heidi went to the rocket ship,” she said. “And she told me I couldn’t go with her.”

“Oh, my god,” Marta said. She and Gerry ran through the house and out the back door.

“Heidi!” they both shouted. There was no sign of her in the yard. “Heidi!” they shouted again. Gerry reached the ship first and started up the ladder. Marta said, “Gerry! Wait!”

He stopped in mid-climb. “What?” He glanced back at her briefly, then resumed his ascent.

“Gerry. Stop. It’s okay.”

He paused again. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s okay. If the ship was going to take off, it would have already.”

“Oh,” he said. “Right.” He relaxed.

“But if you go in ...”

“Yeah.” He faced upward and called, “Heidi! Come on out, honey.”

There was no reply.

“Heidi? It’s okay. We’re not mad. Just come on out and let’s go back in the house.”

There was quiet, then, “I can’t, Daddy. I hurt my leg.”

Gerry climbed up to the hatch and looked in. Heidi was lying on the floor on the other side of the cabin, too far away for him to get to her without going into the ship himself. “What happened, baby? Can you scoot yourself over to me so I can lift you out?”

She shook her head and bit her lip, fighting back tears. “I was standing on the chair trying to look at the dials and things and I fell off. I think my leg is broken maybe.” She almost stifled a sob. “It hurts when I try to move.”

“Okay, honey. Hang on. I’ll be right back.” But Marta was already behind him on the ladder, trying to look around him to see Heidi. “Mommy is here, baby. Everything is going to be all right.”

Gerry said to Marta. “I can’t get her without the chance of leaving you and Jill behind. And you can’t get her for the same reason. We can’t even send Jill in case we end up losing both of them.”

Marta bit her lip, looking like Heidi. “What about an ambulance? Or Joe Welles from next door?”

“There’s no way of knowing who will trigger it.” He grimaced as if steeling himself. “The only thing we can do is all go in together.” He went on before she could protest. “Do you want to take the chance of sending our daughter into outer space, maybe forever, with somebody she doesn’t even know?”

Marta was silent for a moment. Then she said, “We could ask those government agents to come back. We know the ship didn’t take off with any of them in it.”

“But Heidi wasn’t in there then.”

Marta opened her mouth, then closed it. She glared at Gerry. “It certainly sounds as if yours is the only solution, doesn’t it? Almost as if you planned the whole thing to get your own way.”

“Are you kidding? You think I would taking the chance that she would take off immediately? And that I would somehow arrange to break her leg, too?”

She looked as if she had been considering that very possibility and was reluctant to discard it. “Okay, fine. It’s not your fault. Do you have any suggestions that don’t involve taking off to who knows where in a rocket ship left by who knows what?”

“Mom!” Heidi’s voice came out of the ship. “Mommy!”

Marta eyes went to the hatch then back to Gerry. “And there’s no guarantee that it will even take all four of us.”

“I know. But it might.”

“Mom!”

She raised her head. “Hang on, sweetie, I’m coming.” She looked back at Gerry. She rubbed his back gently. “I’m sorry, honey, we’re not going into outer space. Not today. Now let’s figure out how we’re going to get her out of there.”

*

There were two thousand seven hundred sixty two spaceships scattered around the world. Gerry stood in the doorway of his kitchen and contemplated the one in his backyard. Some days he was content just to know it was there. Some days it teased, tantalized and taunted him. He was so close to getting what he wanted.

Unless he already had what he wanted.

He turned his back on the ship and contemplated his family. Heidi was at the kitchen table doing her homework. Jill was in the family room, doing something that involved a doll, a toy truck, rubber bands and glue. Marta was watching the news. She glanced in his direction and smiled before returning her attention to the TV.

He went over and sat on the sofa next to her.

“What’s so great about Earth?” he asked.

She took a second to answer, as if she had to decide whether or not to humor him. Again. “Well, air and water, for example. Sunshine, blue skies. People. Food. Movies, music, books, plays. Even television. How many do you want?”

“What about the possibility that somewhere the air is sweeter and the water is clearer? What if there were two suns, or three and the sky wasn’t blue but golden? What if there’s somewhere better than Earth?”

“It’s possible, I suppose. Somewhere. It’s a big universe. But what makes you think this rocket ship is going there?”

He squeezed his eyes shut as if trying to find the words, then gave up and shook his head. “I just know it. I don’t know how or why. I just do.”

She took his hand. “It’s not enough, Gerry. Even if you’d be willing to take that kind of a chance for yourself, what about the girls? Are you willing to risk their lives?”

He wanted to tell her, there’s no risk, no danger. He wanted to tell her everything would be wonderful and they’d all live happily ever after. But was that because it was true, or because he wanted it to be true?

“You know I would never do anything to hurt you or the girls.” He felt the spaceship in the yard getting further away from him, even though he knew it wasn’t going anywhere.

“Maybe one of the others will come back someday and we’ll know for sure that it’s okay,” Marta said.

He tried to smile and squeezed her hand. “Maybe,” he said. “Someday.”

Gerry knew that was the end of the discussion. For now. But ‘someday’ could mean tomorrow, or the next day. Someday. The ship wasn’t going anywhere. Yet. He could live with the way things were. He had Marta. He had the girls. And now his dream was more than just a dream. It was real. He could go out in the backyard and touch it whenever he felt like it. He’d been waiting a long time, he could keep waiting.

*

There were three hundred twenty three spaceships around the world, waiting for people who were too afraid, or too busy, or too happy to leave the Earth. Or maybe the right people just didn’t know they were the ones to whom the invitation had been addressed.

The ship in Gerry Brignola’s backyard waited and Gerry waited with it. The ship was like an old friend. Gerry would sit on a lawn chair with a beer and talk to it, tell it what was on his mind, what was going on in his life. He told it when Heidi, then Jill went off to college, when they got married and had kids of their own.

He’d fixed a tarp over the hatch to keep out the snow and the rain and the squirrels and the birds. He trimmed the grass around the struts. It never needed painting. It remained as shiny and as silver as it had been the day it appeared.

Gerry and the ship were still waiting the day after Marta’s funeral, after the girls and the husbands and the grandkids had filled his freezer with casseroles and gone home.

Finally he was alone with the ship and his dream. And finally his dream could come true.

It hadn’t been a bad life. He loved Marta and they had been happy. His kids and grandkids had been a joy, most of the time. And always the ship had been there, waiting.

His bag was all packed. Some pictures, some books, some music. Not many clothes. Who knew what he would need where he was going?

He put the bag down on the ground next to him and looked up at the ship. The ladder seemed to have more rungs than it used to. He felt in his pocket for his pills. It would be unfortunate if his heart gave out just as he was finally getting his heart's desire. Maybe the aliens would fix him up. Hell, they could probably make it so he would live for a long time. Maybe forever.

He started climbing, pausing often to catch his breath. He didn't mind, it gave him the chance to savor the anticipation. He convinced himself that it was the anticipation and not the exertion that caused his heart to beat so hard.

At last he made it to the hatch. He tore away the tarp and, for the first time in a long time, looked in at the place that would be his home for ... hours? ... months? ... years? ...until he got to the new planet.

But what if the ship wouldn't take off? What if it had been sitting there too long? What if he dropped dead? Or what if Marta or Heidi or Jill was supposed to go with him? What if he wasn't meant to go at all?

"Knock it off," he told himself.

He took a deep breath. He wished Marta was going with him. He wished his heart would stop pounding. He wished, most of all he wished that he and the ship would take off together for the planets, the stars, the universe.

He stepped into the ship.

The End

About the Author

Paul has had over forty stories published or accepted for publications in magazines and anthologies including *Rosebud*, *Weird Tales*, *Writers of the Future XVI*, *I*, *Alien*, *Lowport*, *Golden Age SF: Tales of a Bygone Future* and *3SF Magazine*.

Reviews

All reviews by Paul Kane

The 4400 (Season 3)

Starring Joel Gretsch, Jacqueline McKenzie, Patrick Flueger

Paramount DVD

RRP: £39.99



When **The 4400** first came along back in 2004 – was it that long ago? – it was basically a mini-series, a mystery to be solved which was tied up at the end of the first season. 4400 people had been abducted from different points in time and then suddenly came back in a big ball of light. Each of them displayed different powers, for example Shawn (Flueger) can cure people just by a laying on of the hands, Maia (Conchita Campbell) can see the future. But the question was: why? Where had the 4400 been and how come they'd need superpowers when they returned? Was it aliens, a government conspiracy? Nope. By the second season we were well aware of the fact that it was people from the future who'd hand-picked them because a disaster was going to strike. However, we were still going through the 'power of the week' motions. By the time **The 4400** reached its third series, things had changed quite a bit...

We pick up the threads in 'The New World' parts one and two, where regular characters Richard and Lily Tyler (Mahershalalhashbaz Ali & previously Laura Allen) are facing a crisis. Lily's baby, Isabelle, which was implanted in her when she was abducted, has all grown up – literally – into a shapely woman (Megalyne Echikunwoke), leaving her mother to age rapidly (and be played by none other than Tippi Hedren). Isabelle is the key to the story arc this season, as she develops god-like powers above and beyond the rest of the 4400. We were also left with the shocker cliffhanger that Jordan Collier (the 'is he good, is he bad' self-proclaimed saviour of the group, played by Billy Campbell) wasn't dead at all. Trying to make head or tail of all this again are NTAC agents Tom Baldwin (Gretsch) and Diana Skouris (McKenzie).

In 'Being Tom Baldwin' we were introduced to a 4400 who can imitate other people, and who is framing Tom for murder – while creepy Matthew Ross (Garret Dillahunt) who is helping Shawn to run the 4400 centre tells him to get to know Isabelle better, and Kevin Burkhoff (**Re-Animator**'s Jeffrey Combs) is showing signs of an ability after injecting himself with promicin (the drug derived from 4400's). The following episodes 'The Gone' parts one and two, deal with a visitor from the future (played by Alice Krige) who takes Maia back with her, and Tom's attempts to communicate with them, in a rather dramatic fashion.

'Graduation Day' sees Alana (Tom's 4400 love interest played by Karina Lombard) trying to find out what happened to her husband and son, and Isabelle discovering that Tom has brought back a way to kill her from the future. Then in 'The Home Front' Alana is arrested and Tom has to face a difficult decision about her future. In 'Blink' Tom and Diana are tricked into taking a drug which has traces of promicin in it, and in 'The Ballad of Kevin and Tess' we see Burkhoff fully develop his ability while on the run with Tess (**Serenity**'s Summer Glau).

Following this is 'The Starzl Mutation', a major episode which sets the scene for the end of the third season with Jordan turning up at Shawn and Isabelle's wedding with amnesia. This leads nicely into 'The Gospel According to Collier' where Tom leaks a photo of the resurrected Collier to the press and gets his son Kyle (Chad Faust) off the hook for his murder. With 'The Terrible Swift Sword' Collier reveals his plans to distribute promicin to the masses – with only a 50/50 chance of

survival. Hence the last episode's title 'Fifty-Fifty' in which Isabelle is finally stopped in her tracks and Shawn winds up in a coma.

With the fourth series currently airing on Sky, this is the perfect chance to refresh your memory about the season in which the story arcs really came into their own. The future revelation stuff rubbed shoulders with political intrigue and Isabelle's antics, making this a truly memorable television event. Included on the last DVD are the documentaries **The Architecture of Series Storytelling** which gives us an insight into how serial genre shows are written and plotted, featuring interviews with cast, producers and writers (it's comforting to know they have at least some idea of where all this is leading), **Power's Grid** and **TVFX** which focuses on the special effects (see how they created a faceless Maia).

What I thought was really great was the character tree, including short snapshots of the characters given by the actors who play them, plus a gag reel and a first draft screenplay of 'Being Tom Baldwin'. Buy this set now, in fact buy all the series, because in years to come this is going to be seen as one of the milestones.

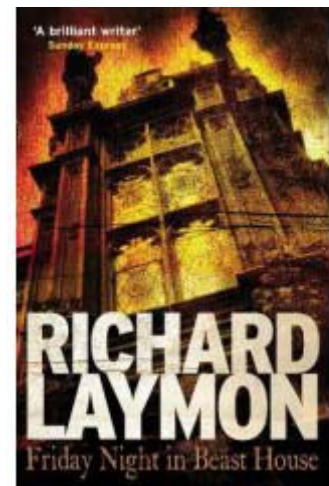
Friday Night in the Beast House

Written by Richard Laymon

Published by Headline

RRP: £17.99 (hardback)

In the 80s and 90s, Richard Laymon was part of the spearhead of horror writers that transformed the landscape of the genre. Known for his no-compromise brand of chillers, which confronted everyday characters with the most brutal and violent of situations, his most famous works are probably the Beast House novels – which began with his first published book *The Cellar* (1980) and continued with *The Beast House* (1986) and *The Midnight Tour* (1998). After his tragic death in 2001, we still saw periodic Laymon novels released purely because of how prolific this writer was, and the fact that he left several manuscripts behind on his passing. *Friday Night in The Beast House* was actually first published the year of his death as a limited edition by Cemetery Dance, and it's only now thanks to Headline that it's freely available for all.



We return to Malcasa Point, scene of the original Beast House murders – which stretched back generations – and now a tourist trap for followers of the macabre. As we found out in *The Midnight Tour*, the house itself has been turned into a tourist attraction detailing the grisly stories of how the beasts originated and how they satisfied their carnal desires and propagated their species. Enough time has passed though for people not to take it all as seriously as they once did. Which is probably why when 16 year old Mark Matthews asks the girl of his dreams out on a date, he stupidly agrees to her one and only stipulation.

'I want you to get me into Beast House. Tomorrow night after it closes. That's where we'll have our date,' Alison tells him. Like any horny teen, he agrees, and sets about trying to figure out a way to get into the house undetected and then let Alison in when all the staff have gone home. Taking the day off school and almost getting caught by the local hot-shot cop Officer Eve Chaney (who just happens to be hot in others ways as well; let's just say Mark fantasizes about her frisking him), he breaks in and waits down in the cellar – in the mythical tunnel connecting Beast House to the old Kutch place, where the beasts were originally bred. But when he finds a souvenir from a beast

murder, which may or may not be recent, Mark begins to suspect that the Beast House might not be as dormant as folk think...

Now, I'm a big fan of Laymon's work – I'll say that right from the start. Yes, some of his books can be more miss than hit, but on the whole you'll get an entertaining horror ride when you read his fiction. And I love the Beast House trilogy, especially the way it parodies the tourist industry which will gladly take grisly murders and turn them into big bucks (just look at The Ripper Tours in London). The whole concept of the albino creatures themselves, in some ways human, in others monstrous, is in my opinion fascinating – and would have made excellent movies (they might still, who knows). But I think it should have been left at just three books.

Actually, it might as well have, because *Friday Night in the Beast House* really adds nothing to the mythos. There's no real sense of a continuation of the storyline, nor a picking up of events after *The Midnight Tour*, and the bulk of the novella is taken up with Mark's attempts at getting into the place and hiding. We're given pages and pages of internal thought about everything from how he feels about Officer Chaney – who is introduced, only to be dropped completely – to how hungry he is and whether he's packed any sandwiches. The action only really gets going in the final thirty pages, and even then is over far too quickly to be satisfying, with an ending that pushes the boundaries of credibility to the limit.

At £17.99 for only 154 pages you might well feel a bit cheated by this slim volume, brought out ironically to do the same thing as the Beast House attraction itself and cash in on the 'legend'. If you're a Laymon completist like me, though, you'll probably still end up buying it.

Coming Next Week: Fiction: *Someone Else's Paradise* by Igor Teper

If you have enjoyed this week's issue, please consider throwing some of your hard-earned shekles at us. We pay our writers, and your support is appreciated.

Fiction Reprint (See page 1 for details)

The Library by Christopher Brosnahan



The day my sister died, I was in the library. I was doing what I could loosely class as revision, but if I was pressed for more information, I could not honestly tell you what I was doing. I know I wasn't exactly working, and was instead reading an article on something, but I couldn't tell you what.

The library was a strange mixture of modern and antique. It was an old building that had been clumsily modernised some years previously, and then extended. What was originally a small library had become a multi-media centre of sorts. On the left of the building was the main research centre. Many rows of bookshelves, behind which were three rows of videos, with a row of combination video/televisions. Moving upstairs led you to the computer room, generally full of first year students discovering the online world, and final year students panic-stricken and trying to write dissertations.

Moving across to the right, you began to realise just how old the building was, as you were brought

directly above the main lobby, and the glass façade of the left hand side was replaced with an older, brickier, dustier feel as you went through the doors to the right. There were research books here, but they were specific to the teaching students. This led you to a glass corridor, behind which were a series of painfully old computers in the next room

It wasn't until my third month in the university that I found the fiction section. Hidden at the back of the oldest part of the library, behind the rows of children's texts, was a small steel spiral staircase. When you climbed this, there was a small room, four small bookshelves which housed a strange, eclectic mixture of fiction books, which seemed to be ordered with no specific logic. There was also, next to the badly cleaned window, a row of small desks with reading lamps, and old, comfortable chairs. There was something strangely familiar about this room, and it quickly became my favourite area to study, or to relax away from everybody else with a good book.

My phone was on silent, in accordance with the library rules. Normally it was my habit to keep the phone on the table, next to whatever work I was doing. Although there would be no noise, the lighting up of the display would be enough for me to be able to leave the room, and take the call. But this day, I had neglected to take my phone out of my jacket pocket, and there it remained, hung over the back of the chair I was sat on. And so I missed the most important phone call of my life.

My sister was seven months pregnant at the time, and had been declared fit and healthy by the Doctor just the week previously during her third trimester scan. Although she had broken up with the father, she was upbeat, and looking forward to the birth,. She was as scared as she was exhilarated by the prospect. My parents had fallen out with her over the pregnancy and the break up, and as a result the bond between the two of us had strengthened. She had been at the university I was now at a few years previously, and still lived nearby. Perhaps our proximity to each other was what caused her to call me, rather than an ambulance.

That night, she had been walking home, and had been attacked. The person who attacked her had taken her purse, and had brutally beaten her when she tried to stop him. By the time she had picked herself up, and walked back to her flat, pain overcame her and she collapsed on her living room floor. She dragged herself to the phone, and rang me, and as she miscarried and bled to death over the next hour, she called me repeatedly.

She first rang within five minutes of my having sat down in the library. I didn't check my phone until three hours later. The number of missed calls alone was enough to send terror shooting through me. Terror which gave way to grief as I stood outside the library in the rain, and listened to the messages that she had left on my voicemail. As I listened to my sister die.

The following month was spent with my family, as we grieved, fought, and generally attempted to repair the emotional wound that my sisters death had left us all with. The funeral came and went in a stunned silence. After a month, the emotional drain had become too much to keep my parents and I together, and I returned to university.

My friends had been as supportive as only true friends can be, and the faculty had been understanding. I was able to slot back into my classes, without missing too many beats, and had been assured by everybody that whatever I needed to get through the time, I would receive. But before too long, the comfort that so many people were giving me served only to make me feel more uncomfortable, and one night I decided that I had to be alone for a few hours.

My room in the halls of residence was no good. I couldn't isolate myself when I was surrounded by people that I knew on the other side of the floor, ceiling, and the walls. And the student bar was far too crowded for me to comfortably drink myself into an anti-social stupor. So instead, for the first time since my sisters death, I found myself drawn back to that small room above the spiral staircase.

I didn't associate it as closely with the emotions surrounding my sisters death as I had previously worried. After all, this was not where I had listened to those sickening messages - I had listened to those outside. If anything, I felt safer than I had previously felt anywhere since her death.

Before I even realised what I was doing, I had picked a book from one of the shelves, switched on one of the reading lamps, and began to read.

It felt like just a few minutes later when I heard some movement nearby. I checked my watch, and realised that I had been there for a number of hours. I had only read a handful of pages of the volume in my hands. I did not remember falling asleep, but it was the only explanation that presented itself. I glanced round, confused at the sudden flow of time, just in time to see somebody moving out of sight around the bookshelves furthest from me. I returned the book, and left the library.

That night, I slept well for the first time in a month, and the next couple of days were easier. However, a few evenings later, I again craved isolation. And so I made my way through to the older part of the library, and up the steel spiral staircase. The fiction area seemed almost like a cocoon of comfort. I couldn't remember what book I had last started reading, so I picked up another volume at random.

I made myself comfortable, switched on the reading lamp, and opened the book. I was only a few pages in when I heard an announcement over the speakers, audible from the room below. The announcement was that the library was closing for the night. Puzzled, I looked down at my watch, and was shocked to see that it was already half past ten in the evening. The previous three hours had gone by in a flash.

As I made my way down the spiral staircase again, I glanced upwards. Why, I do not know. I saw a grey figure moving about at the chair where I had been. Had I been feeling more cautious, or perhaps more paranoid, I would have gone upstairs, and gone to find out more, but following my short stay in the library, I felt calm, serene. I went back to my room, and I slept as soundly as the dead.

This calm stayed with me for the better part of the next day, but by the late part of the afternoon I was again beginning to feel uncomfortable. As I made my way up to the student bar to try and drink my way to comfort, I passed the library and stopped. I looked at the spot where I had stood with my phone, and the feelings came flooding back, nauseating me with their intensity. Panic and grief overcame me, and I felt like I couldn't breathe. A survival instinct of kinds directed me, as I staggered in through the main doors, and up the stairs into that strange research centre, and to those steel spiral stairs. Even as I climbed them, I could feel the anaesthetic calm sweeping over me, and my breathing began to calm. Within a few minutes, I had forgotten the anxiety attack that had overcome me, and I had - almost with a force of habit - picked up a book at random, settled down at a desk, and begun to read.

I had barely opened the book, when I suddenly became aware of how dark the day had gotten. I switched on the reading lamp, and cast my eyes back down to the book. I glanced upwards after I had finished the first page, and was met with the black of night. On a calm, logical level, I knew that I should be scared, and that I was obviously suffering some sort of blackouts, but the sleepy sense of calm that had overcome me convinced me that all was well. The announcement that the library was closing came again, and this time it did not startle me. I returned the book to the shelf, and looked around, half expecting to see some grey figure. However, all I could see were the four bookshelves. I did not remember going home, but I must have done, because I awoke in my own bed.

I had lectures that day, but as soon as I left my room, that choking panic returned. It was eight thirty in the morning, and the library was not due to open until nine thirty. I forced myself to breathe more normally, and made my way to the cafeteria, where I nursed a bitter tasting coffee over the next fifty minutes. I saw one or two of my friends come into the cafeteria, but I just looked down at my coffee until they went away. I was counting down the minutes until the library opened.

I was stood outside ten minutes early, waiting for the doors to open. The staff member on duty saw me there, and smiled, opening the door. She called me an early bird, and laughed at my eagerness to study. I lied, and made up some excuse about having an essay due in by noon that I desperately needed to finish. She let me in, but told me not to expect this to be a regular thing. I

thanked her, and made my way to the steel spiral staircase. As I did, I noticed a reflection of myself in the windows. I looked thin and gaunt, much more so than I had realised.

I could not remember which book I had last been reading, but I was accustomed to that now. I looked at the five...no, the six bookshelves which were there, and sleepily picked up a book, and sat at one of the desks. Within a few minutes, I became aware that it was already darkening outside. I struck a match, and fumblingly lit one of the gas reading lights by the side of me, unused to the mechanism, and glanced down at the book I was reading.

The sound of the librarian's bell alerted me that the library was once again closing, and I returned the forgotten book back to its place. As I descended the steel staircase, I glanced upwards, and saw that grey figure again. I was about to leave, when the cold panic again hit me. I hid at the back, behind the bookcases, and I waited for the library to close. Whether I waited there for seconds, or whether I waited there for hours, I do not know, but I finally had the library to myself.

I ascended the stairs again, fighting the impulse to take a book, and instead, I lit the gas lamp, and looked around. I walked down past the numerous ornate bookshelves, and around the magnificent fiction section (the envy of most universities). The room was entirely lit by gas lamps, and I walked back to the furthest set of shelves. There was nobody there, and nothing other than the leather bound volumes. I ascended one of the wooden ladders to reach the books highest on the shelves, and I returned to the floor, book in hand. As I walked down the lengthy room to the reading area, I could feel the part of my mind that was still awake screaming at me. I hesitated, and looked around again.

I was fooling myself. The library was safe, and as I made my way down to the large, comfy leather chairs, I sat down and opened the book. I lit the gas reading lamp, and I settled down to -

I slammed the book closed, and span around. The grey figure was there, watching me. It was thin, and angular, with long white hair, and ill looking, translucent skin. It smiled at me, lovingly, and I could feel what it was trying to say to me, its thoughts projected into my head. It was protecting me from the grief and the anxiety, and it wanted me to stay. If I kept feeding it, as I had been so painlessly, it would protect me, just as it had protected me from hearing the desperate calls from my sister.

It was the memory of my sister that made me break the gaze between us and look at my reflection in the window again. I looked ill, thin and gaunt. I looked back at the smiling, loving figure in grey, as it implored me to sit down and read.... Sit down and forget.

I tried to fight against it, but I could feel myself turning round, and opening the book. My shaking hand went to turn the page, when my conscious mind asserted itself. It didn't take much. It just took me pushing the book closer to the flame of the lamp. The flame licked the edges of the paper, and took hold, dancing across the writing on the paper. The sudden pain as the fire reached my hands brought me a sudden clarity, and I once again had control over my own movements.

Fear pushed me, as I rose from the comfortable seat, and ran past the screaming grey figure. He was no longer concerned with me, desperately trying to stop the fire which had, by now, taken hold of the desk. I ran down the steel spiral staircase, leaving the fire to consume what was behind.

I ran down to the main entrance, to be confronted with the glass doors. I looked around desperately, trying to find a way outside, away from the spreading fire behind me. I saw one of the chairs in the reception area, and I grabbed it and hurled at the glass. It cracked the glass, and rebounded. My mind was sharp for the first time in a long time, and I grabbed the chair again, swinging it at the glass door, time and again until the cracking turned into breaking.

The air felt like it was rushing in, clearing not only the smoke from the fire, but also my own head. I broke the glass further, making enough space to climb out through. The climb through the broken glass was painful, but I relished the sharp, shooting sensation. It was so different to that dull, throbbing calm I had been prisoner to for so long. As I breathlessly reached the cold air of the outside, my head filled with memories and emotions. They forced my entire body to rack with grief, and I curled up, desperately crying as the library burnt behind me.

I do not know if the creature in the library deserved my hatred. It was trying to help me on some level, regardless of its feeding on me. But my sister was precious to me. Life was precious to me, and the memories were precious to me. Without them, I could exist, but I could never truly live.

About the Author

Christopher Brosnahan lives in London, though he was one of the founding members of a York-based writers' group, specialising in SF. He was a runner-up in last year's SFX *Pulp Idol* competition for short fiction writers.