

Hub

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Rescheduled Feature and Review

The 2000AD feature we had planned for this week's issue has had to be postponed until next week. Apologies to everyone, especially Al, who wrote it with a very tight deadline, and managed to get it ready despite hourly phone calls asking "is it ready yet?". He only knows as he's reading this... Sorry, Al! To make up for this, we will be running a very special competition alongside the feature. Tune in next week – same time, same inbox. Also, the review of Mike Carey's *Dead Men's Boots* will also feature next week (hint: it's excellent – buy it now!)

Rescheduled Hub

Hub has a new publication day. From this week you should enjoy your regular fix of short fiction, features and reviews every Saturday instead of Friday.

Spamalot

If you have tried to get in touch with us recently, and received no reply, it may be because our spam filters seem to be working overtime. We're currently trawling through our spam box, and finding emails that need answering. Be gentle with us – we'll be in touch, soon (this goes doubly to anyone who has submitted a story – we plan on having our slushpile cleared by the end of this month).

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.



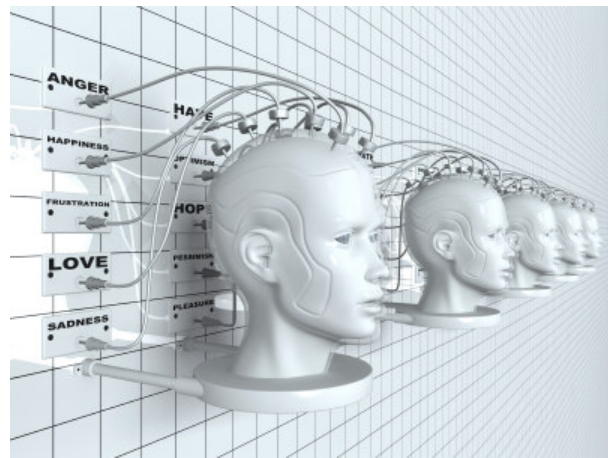
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The Mechanism

by I.C. Johnson

Every day I've watched her on her routine inspection of the freighter. I have followed her, one shadow behind, down into the machinery of the vessel, then back to her living quarters. Her tour is confined to a relatively small area. It takes forty minutes at most. Then I watch her showering. It is easy for me to do this. We are alone on the five-million-ton ship — the only crew it needs.



Chanya. I'm watching her now from the gallery outside her quarters, gripping the wire mesh. She is working gel over herself methodically. My fingers flex in sympathy. Her skin has turned silver under the cool overhead light. Her mouth is a straight line. I want to touch her, to feel warm metal against warm flesh. As I imagine it.

I'm a pervert.

#

FILENAME: First Entry

My name is Rheia. I'm not so different from you. I have tried to explain why to myself. I will try to explain why now.

I work as an onboard engineer for a large freight company specialising in interplanetary contracts. Ten years ago it wouldn't have been possible for one like me to attain such a position, but even my kind has unions now. The Company covers my health and maintenance insurance and the pay is good enough to satisfy my other needs.

I have never seen my manager at Company headquarters. He knows I'm a competent worker. My intelligence and my various enhancements see to that.

When at Company HQ I'm not permitted to spend time with most of the other employees or to use their cafeterias. Separate facilities are set aside for my kind. In my off time you can usually find me in the research section of the Company library.

Sometimes I get advertising from the Company's clothing and cosmetics departments on the second level. It never contains anything I can use of course, but I do cut some things out and paste them in a small notebook which I take with me when I go into space on the carriers. I have the notebook with me now, though I never look at it.

I don't buy from the Company's music stores either. I could record the tracks which the Company pipes into my apartment, but the Company's copyright tax on data units has become too expensive. Besides which, the music tends to be trite. I used to record documentaries, 'til it became difficult to find shows dealing with other than shipping and promotion.

Company HQ is a long way behind us now and we aren't yet halfway to our destination, the Mars terraforming project.

And I'm not sure I have explained anything after all.

#

An Earth news report is showing on the wall monitor, but neither of us is watching it. I am closing up my wrist and returning the tools to my utility belt, which I have placed on the desk. My work is less nominal than Chanya's. I carry out running maintenance and occasionally sustain minor damage. Chanya's official role is down as *Ship's Inspector*. We cyborgs are aware that this term really means *Ship's Captain*.

The wrist repair has left a sharp tang in the air. Disposing of the residue cleared from the joint, I stand to fasten the utility belt around my middle.

The news report switches to politicians in a studio. They are taking turns to answer questions from an audience. A voice-over says: *"However, scientists are optimistic that a cure for these disorders..."*

"Rheia, doesn't doing that bother you?"

"Working on my arm? No. Why should it?" I try to hear concern in Chanya's voice, but catch only distaste. I sit facing away from her, pretending interest in the report.

"I just wish you'd do it where I can't see it."

"Sorry."

An earnest-looking woman is addressing the show's presenter: *"It is self-evident that poetry succeeds where reason does not. These people are broken. What they need, in my opinion..."*

There's nothing much to do in the rec room. I come up here hoping that Chanya needs some company, but all she does is sit around and channel-surf.

I am checking my chronometer against the ship's settings when she yet again changes channels.

"The project to transplant the Terran biosystem..."

It's time. Turning in the seat, I say —

"I need to put the drip in. Would you mind giving me a hand?"

— and stand and cross to the nutrient units, stealing a look in her direction as she rises to follow.

She has prepared the drip without needing to think about it, and is brushing my hair back from my temples, when she notices the scent.

#

I visited CyTech factory on a weekend in May. The sun was high. Stepping down from the transport, I paused to look around me. The other passengers were mostly elderly humans, and they tried to not notice me. We stood in front of a crouched complex of buildings under the blue and white sky.

Entering the lobby, I immediately saw several other cyborg visitors. Like me, they were keeping to themselves. Teachers from regional schools stood along the plastic-panelled walls, watching as their pupils wandered across the expanse of blue floor. Someone pointed out the café overlooking the lobby. "It'll be quieter up there." I hung back, not seeing any reason to follow them. Instead I sat in a window niche and scanned the lobby more closely. A small red balloon was caught in the exposed machinery under the white ceiling. It had the factory logo on it, so had probably been bought at the gift shop...

It was 2.30 before our tour guide appeared.

I'd received the application to visit the factory not long after the emancipation, as part of a community promotion package by CyTech. It was actually the standard form sent out to schools, but accompanied by a letter saying that many of the criteria wouldn't apply to me, and that CyTech hoped the trip would be productive in building relations between humans and cyborgs. Irrespective, I applied immediately.

We were just inside the visitor's route when our guide mentioned that CyTech had been open to the general public since before the emancipation, something I'd not been aware of.

The tour became increasingly and uncomfortably aware that cyborgs were among them. Our guide, apparently embarrassed, felt more obliged to acknowledge us. He paused the tour outside the assembly area to say a few words about our history:

"Cyborg production was undertaken because of the need for an additional technologically skilled workforce. Could robots with top-ranking human ability be manufactured, the cyborg class might never have come about. As you all know, until very recently this class was not accorded full human rights. Emancipation has now been declared. We are, ah, encouraged to welcome these new people into our society." He made no mention of the continuing widespread segregation.

A matronly woman remarked to her neighbour: "What makes me uneasy is that not one of them has a face the same as another, and they even use facial expressions. If they had blank, identical faces like robots, I'd know how to react."

Those around her laughed nervously. I ignored them. Humans often behave as though neither children nor cyborgs understand the spoken word.

We were led into the assembly hall. Brains and spines were grown there, developed from cloned cells. These were immersed in nourishing liquids before being fitted into cyborg bodies. Further on were the long aisles of nurturing casks in which the matured brains were fed information, preparing them for the outside world. Finally, we saw the nuclear-powered bodies being put together. The cyborg body is like that of a robot, though our sensory network is more advanced and rivals the organic body in its subtlety and suppleness. It is a combination of light metal alloys and polymers.

As we came out into the lobby, we were handed glossy leaflets extolling the future. I scanned mine and disposed of it in a recycling unit. I would not realise until later that I did not know which of the several assembly lines I had emerged from. But does that matter? My understanding of myself would not be deeper for my knowing which ores went into the making of my body.

The group disappeared into the mezzanine café until it was time to leave. I wandered off down a side corridor toward a small rest area, regretting that I had not brought reading matter...

Sitting alone and dejected on the bench was another cyborg. She didn't look up as I approached. Sitting down beside her, I caught a pleasing scent which I had only ever associated with human women.

She, a cyborg, was wearing perfume.

I studied her face. It was more individualised than normal cyborg faces. That meant CyTech had not permutation-sculpted it from the list of standard features, and that meant —

"You were human once, weren't you?"

She raised her head and nodded. A double-helix pendant hung from her neck.

"Why?"

"The usual reason."

“The usual reason” never means disease or injury. Medical science can pre-empt the need for a prosthetic body. Human-cyborg transfer is almost always done to prolong life-span. Cyborgs live about fifty years longer than humans.

“How old were you?”

“A hundred and nineteen. My face is like it was at thirty-five. And I feel thirty-five.” She shifted until she faced me. “But I’m not happy.”

I’d heard that many who’ve undertaken the transformation have led profoundly unhappy lives, failing to adapt. I felt unable to understand this, having always been a cyborg.

“Have you considered suicide?” I asked.

She stared, then laughed. “Ah, like the rest of the assembled ones, you’ve no sense of tact.” She smiled. “Kill myself? I can’t. They put in a neural block to stop you.”

That hadn’t occurred to me.

A few tourists were descending from the café and making for the transport. I rose to follow them. She rose too. “Please, come this way. I want to show you something.”

She led me down a corridor at the end of which was another exit, but before reaching it she took my hand and drew me into an alcove.

“This is what I miss.”

Cyborgs are forbidden by law to wear human clothing. Our bodies are clad in a light alloy with a rubbery substance which doesn’t take scuff marks and maintains a pristine whiteness. We ourselves are designedly slim, epicene, but with groins which preserve the female inward curve. She reached down with one hand and began to stroke me there. The plastic sensation was peculiar, novel, unexpected. I have only minimal pleasure receptors, but her closeness, her obvious excitement, were enough to reach dormant neurons. I, too, was excited. I, too, felt pleasure.

My arms went around her. She brushed her face against mine. Then she placed her head on my shoulder and began to sob. “Them. Human women. They won’t touch me. They won’t touch me!”

#

“Rheia,” I say, and pause.

Why would a cyborg wear scent?

“Please put the drip in, Chanya.”

The perfume is stronger as I lean in to make the insert. Rheia sighs as the nutrient pumps into her central nervous system. Does she feel fed? I remove the drip and let her hair fall back into place. It’s dark, soft. Funny that most cyborgs have hair like this one does, a nod to their femininity — and, as her hair goes whispering through my fingers, I remember that humanity’s new technical *cadre* is all one-sex. The male brain is always poisoned by its own toxins during cybernisation...

I’m still touching the edge of her hair. I put my hands behind my back and clear my throat. “Rheia, can’t you do things like this on your own?”

She turns and looks up at me and I can’t read her expression. I’m about to tell her that I’m too tired to play guessing games when her eyes, nearly indistinguishable from human eyes, take on some quality. She says: “You have something I want.”

Her metal fingers are warm through their rubbery integument when she touches me, brushing my neck. I flinch and reach up to push her hand aside — to ask her what the *fuck* she

thinks she's doing. Then her other hand is on my waist. My breath catches. Rheia's body gives off heat but not sweat or arousal, just the white smell of warm polymer.

Her hand moves beneath my tabard, drags across my belly...

I push her away, hold her out at arm's length, ignoring the stab of arousal. I am shaking. I let my hands fall to my sides. Someone in training college once said to me: *Remember, they aren't human.*

"Get out."

She parts her lips to speak —

"No, get out!"

With Rheia gone, I sit and try to think, but I'm dwelling on the way her body looks. Her boyish chest, like so many young men I've lain down with. Her spare, unnavelled belly. Her clean limbs. Her body's texture. What she did. What she nearly did. *That texture.*

I close my eyes and hunch forward over my need. Rheia may not be human, but I'm alone on this ship with her. Alone and tens of millions of miles from anywhere. It'd only be like masturbating. And no one will know. If necessary, I can make sure of that. I'm her superior.

Composing myself, I wave at the intercom. "Rheia, come back in."

I stand when she returns. Her head's hanging like she expects to be chastised. My hand goes under her chin and I bring her face up, guide her to the table and push her back. After a moment she parts her thighs and I press myself in against her, rubbing. Dissatisfied with that, I pull back and shrug off my suddenly too-tight Company slacks. I hook my arm beneath her leg, lift it — press, indulgently testing the sensation. The integument is smooth against me and the metal pelvis is firm and warm through it.

I glance up at her eyes. No arousal there, of course.

I close my own eyes and concentrate on the sensation. Eventually, I bring myself off. The strength of my release surprises me. I'd meant to climb off her and go straight to the shower. Instead, I lower myself trembling across her.

Then she does it. Her arms go around me and she begins exploring me with her hands. She murmurs appreciatively, methodically touching my depilated body everywhere she can reach. She moves her hands to follow the movement of my muscles every time I shift. I don't know or care why she's so fascinated by my body. What she's doing is effecting me. So when she begins kissing along my shoulder with her small mouth, I push myself up on my hands and quickly find my rhythm again.

After an hour, I can't come any more. I'm too aware of her and the smell of my own sweat and what I'm doing.

But Rheia still clings to me. Her physical passion has turned to affection, as if compensating for her lack of pleasure nerves. She rests her cheek against mine.

She tells me she loves me.

I pull back and look at her, allowing myself a luxurious shiver of self-disgust.

Then I head for the showers.

#

Maintenance and inspection continued as usual, but Rheia no longer spied on Chanya.

Chanya's advances inevitably brought Rheia into the woman's sleeping quarters. There, nervous that she had declared her feelings too soon, Rheia concentrated on satisfying Chanya's

greater capacity for sensory pleasure. She didn't dare to speak of love again until, after many weeks, Chanya's dutifully severe expression had relaxed into one of ecstatic languour. And when Chanya drowsily murmured words in return, Rheia became inexpressibly happy.

#

FILENAME: Life Before the Emancipation

The knowledge and skills of an in-flight spacecraft engineer were impressed upon by brain during my assembly at CyTech. So too was a rudimentary set of social skills. Yet my contact with humans was limited to such things as delivering progress reports to employers. Interaction between cyborgs was confined to the few off-time work facilities set aside for us in the Company communal sector.

In the early days of CyTech production, corporate psychologists noted that cyborg conversation tends to be flat, factual, and lacking in social nuance. What I remember from the off-time meetings is the range of emotions which the other cyborgs expressed — especially when they discussed our human masters.

Through these meetings I realised that the cyborg class had not made its mark on history. Little had changed by the time of the Mars project.

#

They were relaxing in Chanya's quarters. Rheia had discovered that Chanya enjoyed having her spine stroked. She traced the vertebrae through Chanya's skin. What was the sensation like for Chanya? Rheia's own spine was locked in metal casing. A strip of internal bracing ran along her back, but it could not be detected from the outside and was less flexible.

The comparison caused an unpleasant recollection. Shortly after her activation, Rheia's supervisors had taken her through one of the Company's ground installations. Hanging from gantries had been the old, worn-out components of Company technology. Engines. Pumps. Diffusion plants... These occupied space in her imagination. Her mind saw rafters hung with butchered machinery. Ribs of metal in decay. Forms locked in rust. Wasted opportunities for reconstruction. She had thought: *I am like that. I am a mechanism. To be used and discarded. To be alone.*

Rheia paused in her ministrations, resting her hands flat on Chanya's back.

I am not alone now.

Chanya's monitor was on. It showed a news transmission from Earth. Solar activity had made reception unreliable, but now it was clear.

The World Government was being castigated over the Mars project. Rheia and Chanya watched with interest. This was why they were here — as part of the attempt by the Terran biosystem to reproduce itself on Mars. Terraformation had been in progress for fifty years, preparing the way for colonisation by thousands of Earth species, including *Homo sapiens*. Company freighters had made more than a dozen runs like this, ferrying machinery, materials, and, on every trip, four million tons of topsoil.

Lately there had been accusations that the project was not on course, that the terraformers had made miscalculations. Media representatives from all the major corporations were present to question the government: *"Can the Minister really claim that the cost is any longer justified? Would it not be better to cut our losses?"*

The Minister was defensive and defiant. *"A project as complex and long-term as this is more than a piece of accounting. It is a step forward for humankind!"*

"We were promised a breathable atmosphere by now!"

Rheia returned her attentions to Chanya. The woman's mouth had relaxed into sulkily sensuousness.

"Chanya, when Mars is terraformed, we could live there together."

Chanya stirred. It was a while before she replied.

"What about the Company?"

"We could apply to be posted there."

"If we were discreet," Chanya murmured vaguely, looking at the screen where the Minister's discomfort was becoming more obvious. "Perhaps you could be my assistant or something. A servant, maybe."

Rheia did not stop her hands moving. "Yes. We could pretend. I could be your servant, as far as everyone else was concerned. It would be fun."

Chanya waved at the monitor, flicking it off. She turned, eyes hot, breathing heavily. "Yes. Yes, it would be."

She pulled Rheia down onto the sheets with her.

Before sleep took her, Rheia felt assurance return.

#

FILENAME: A Dream

In the dream it was noon, and I walked among the terraced gardens on the lower slopes of Olympos Mons. The air was powerful with fragrance. Breezes carried the sound of thaw rushing from the heights to water the many valleys.

Lost among common jasmine, I found flowers unlike any I'd seen before, just coming into bloom. I woke before I could scent them, and remembered that there aren't yet gardens on Mars.

#

To make her initial move on Chanya it had been necessary for Rheia to build up her nerve. Now she was building it up for something else. She chose a time when she had sated Chanya and the woman was lying back in her arms, drowsy and cradled by Rheia's body.

Rheia put her face near Chanya's and murmured: "Do you remember what we said about Mars? Maybe we won't have to wait so long. There must be others like us. Or there will be. Other perverts."

Rheia felt Chanya stiffen. Had she brought up the subject too soon? Had she used the wrong words? She didn't always understand the nuances of her vocabulary.

She rested her hands upon Chanya's belly lightly. "When we get back to HQ.... let's tell people about us."

"Tell people *what* about us?" Instantly alert, Chanya pushed herself away from the cyborg. The woman's eyes were wide.

"Well, that we are..."

Chanya opened her mouth, but no sound came out.

"We're emancipated now. There will be more humans and cyborgs falling in love. It will happen a lot."

"It will *not* happen a lot," Chanya said firmly. She climbed off the bed and gathered her uniform from the floor. "I don't know what you can be thinking of. Society hasn't really changed."

She quickly pulled on her things, went over to the door, paused, straightening her tabard. “You’re not to tell. Not anyone. It wouldn’t be understood.”

Chanya left without waiting for an answer. Rheia’s reassurance, and all hope, departed with her.

#

As the freighter entered planetary orbit, they saw what the Minister had not imparted to the private news services. Mars was engulfed in a planet-wide storm.

In the early days of terraforming, such storms had been a climatic feature of the planet. Mars’s atmospheric pressure had only been seven millibars in those days. Tailored bacteria, releasing oxygen and carbon dioxide, had thickened the atmosphere since then. But the storms should have stopped.

Encrypted messages from the surface outpost confirmed that the freighter’s cargo could not be offloaded till the storm abated. Chanya was unofficially informed that the predicted ionisation layer wasn’t in place yet either. Mars was nowhere near becoming habitable.

#

In the observation room, Rheia stood looking up at the monitor image of Mars. Clouds the colour of dark rust swirled over it. She switched to satellite close-ups of the troposphere and saw flashes of atmospheric lightning. The storm formations were intriguing, but she could make notes on them later...

There was a sound behind her. Turning, she saw that Chanya had entered the room. The woman’s mouth had reverted to a straight line. She held a small gun in her right hand. She was pointing it at Rheia.

Rheia met the woman’s eyes.

“What have you got there, Chanya?” Her voice was neutral.

“Every Ship’s Inspector has one, in case a cyborg has to be disposed of.” Rheia didn’t respond. “Sorry about this, but I can’t let people know. I *cannot*.”

“That easy?”

Chanya shrugged and pulled a face.

Rheia put her hands behind her back. “Being... attracted to me... surprised you.”

“Don’t be stupid. You’re not a person. You’re a *thing*. You’re just here to make sure we get a faster turn-around at the end of each run. You were *assembled*. The only *real* part of you was grown from a stem cell, you don’t even know whose. You never had parents. You never grew up.

“You don’t even have a cunt.”

Rheia did not break her gaze. “You don’t understand. We’ve been emancipated.”

“A lot of nonsense, if you ask me.”

“It will be murder.”

“No one will investigate. I’m your *superior*. You’re just another part of the ship. So much so that you aren’t cleared to go onworld even if we could land. Anyway, it’s not murder. No one ever called throwing away an old sex aid ‘murder.’”

Chanya pressed the gun’s stud.

There was a faint buzzing, but nothing else happened.

#

I take the gun from Chanya. "I knew about the gun, so I took precautions after our quarrel." I unlock the weapon smartly, showing Chanyar the empty power chamber. "You see? I removed the energy cell. Perhaps being emancipated has made me think for myself.

"But perhaps you still don't understand what that means."

#

FILENAME: Second Entry

These, my personal files, are buried among the work files that are part of my cranial enhancement. Only I can retrieve them.

My name is Rheia. I'm not so different from you. I have tried to explain why to myself. I will try to explain why now.

Like you, I have emotions. Emotions which you tried to suppress in CyTech. You tried to use me as a tool. As a mechanism.

But you are no less mechanisms than I am. You are simply the mechanisms that use and discard each other.

I can explain this now because I have discovered that I can be hurt when I am betrayed. Just as you can be hurt.

And, like some of you — like you, Chanya — I am a pervert.

But there is a way in which I am different from you.

I am smarter than you.

#

I turn my back on Chanya and what she represents and direct my gaze to Mars. Foresight comes to me with the certainty of a vision. The Mars project will fail. The planet will never be more than half-prepared for human colonisation.

But it will be all right for cyborgs. We don't have the same narrow and delicate requirements as humans. Even if the ionosphere never forms, we'll still be protected from the ultraviolet by our machine bodies. The future Martian civilisation will be a cyborg civilisation.

The cyborg class could only have been produced for one reason. There are no longer enough intelligent humans to run Earth's increasingly technical economy. And the global worldview has presented humanity with too fatuous, too flattering an image of itself to do the obvious thing and restrict reproduction to the brightest. The species is breeding itself into imbecility.

Cyborgs are different. Our minds are grown from the top point nought one percent. All female, of course. And they can be cloned again.

Something else I foresee. Cyborgs have a need. I, Rheia, have discovered that. There will have to be some human women on Mars, sheltered from the harsh Martian climate. Humans for *us* to use.

For us to touch.

Warm metal against warm flesh.

REVIEWS

1408 reviewed by Alasdair Stuart

The Mammoth Book of Best War Comics reviewed by James Bacon

1408

Starring: John Cusack, Samuel L Jackson, Mary McCormack and Jasmine Jessica Anthony

Directed by: Mikael Häfström



Mike Enslin (Cusack) is a professional cynic. The author of a best selling series of paranormal travel guides, Mike has made his living debunking ghost stories and in doing so, giving valuable publicity to the places that host them. Single and bitter, he's picked a fight with the world and from what he can tell, he's winning.

Then he gets a postcard from the Dolphin Hotel in New York. It reads simply; don't enter 1408. Mike does some research and discovers that room 1408 has been subject to over twenty murders and suicides. Intrigued, he pushes further and eventually finds himself, against the wishes of hotel manager Mr Olin (Jackson) staying overnight. But this time, he's in way over his head.

1408 is an unusually restrained piece of horror, favouring psychological and surreal shocks over gore. From the moment Mike gets the postcard, there's a gradual but definite ramping of tension as it becomes clear, to everyone but him, that this is a very, very bad place to be. Häfström's decision to lock the action down into 1408 for most of the final hour, as well as his constantly roving camera gives a real feeling of unease, a real sense of voyeurism as we watch Mike Enslin slowly dig himself deeper and deeper into something which, if it isn't hell, is a very good approximation of it.

The best horror, the most terrifying horror is mundane by nature and the script plays off this beautifully, even giving Cusack a chance to speak some of the original story, including a fantastic monologue about how fundamentally frightening hotel rooms are, into his tape recorder. However, the script really comes into its own with the room itself. 1408 is played as a definite personality with a very, very nasty sense of humour. Items as mundane as the telephone, the paintings on the walls and the window are used as weapons against Mike and the film's biggest scares come from this subversion of the mundane into something infinitely more disturbing. Trust me, after this, you'll never look at a fire exit map or a radio alarm clock in the same way again.

Matters are helped immensely by a top drawer cast. Cusack is an effortlessly good actor, a man who at this stage of his career can turn in great performances seemingly without trying. His hangdog, world weary Mike is great fun, a man who is both peppery enough to be dislikable and smart enough to realise, very early, exactly how much trouble he's in. The script relies almost entirely on Cusack and he carries the film utterly, his gradually distintegrating sanity making for some distinctly stark, and in one case flat out terrifying moments. The supporting cast are equally impressive with Anthony doing good work as Mike's daughter, McCormack's typically naturalistic, impressive performance as his wife and Jackson almost stealing the show as Mr Olin. It's an incredibly restrained turn from a man known for histrionics and it pays dividends. The scene between Cusack and Jackson crackles with electricity as two extremely smart men verbally spar with one another and the smarter, for once, loses. Urbane, darkly humourous and honestly terrified, Olin is the first real indicator of how much trouble Mike is in. He doesn't listen, we do and it only ramps the tension further.

1408 isn't perfect, there are a couple of cheap scares (Cusack's long-term friend, ex-world kickboxing champion Benny 'The Jet' Urquidez turns up as a hammer wielding maniac for no reason, it seems, other than to have a hammer wielding maniac in the film) and the ending may fall flat for some. For most however, 1408 is a hotel room that you'll check out of, but remember for a long, long time. A classy piece of horror, and a rare treat.

The Mammoth Book of Best War Comics

Edited by David Kendall
Robinson. Pb 514pp £12.99 July 2007

The C format of this book surprised me, as I reckoned it would be the Comic book size when I first heard of its publication, but then this collection is no way a mediocre product and the pleasant surprise was sustained throughout the read. At over five hundred pages of some of the best war comics ever produced this is not just fantastic value but also an inspired selection by David Kendall.

War comics have been around as long as Super Heroes and the whole genre has had cyclical success over the years. In recent times Garth Ennis has been reigniting interest in this genre, but even he admits to loving comics such as *Battle* from 1970's and 80's Britain.



The collection goes out of its way to try and capture a broad church of war stories from the classic digest sized story with two panels per page, two of which are fully reprinted therein, to a story from the very collectable *Blazing Combat* anthology.

There is something in her from all the eras of comics, covering a variety of wars all falling in the 20th century. Impressively stories which one would not expect, like the first episode of *Charleys War* by Pat Mills and Joe Colquhoun is cleverly put in, and despite being only one episode of a tale that spanned hundreds of comics, this is its own nod to such a great war comic and really lends a level of inspiration to the choices. Of course *Charleys War* is a seminal war comic and highly influential on many of today's writers, but it's a brave and admirable move to put the first four pages in all the same.

It feels like Mr Kendall is not just paying lip service to an unsuspecting public who lap up The Best of this and best of that, but like a mammoth comrade, Steve Jones, he has gone out of his way to find and source some great works such as *The Tin Pot Foreign General* and the *Old Iron Woman*, by Raymond Briggs, which aptly demonstrates like many of the stories the utter pointlessness of war and is a gentle reminder that although the Falkland's may have been twenty five years ago, war is still something very serious and that it deserves more contemplation than that which our political leaders give it.

Two Sam Glanzman drawn stories from early sixties, over sixty pages are printed in full colour, and provide fine examples of his work for *Combat* and *Air War Stories*, a veteran of World War II, its obvious that Glanzman not only knows his hardware but also the face of war.

Impressively there are a number of longer stories, that might have not featured in a page conscious collection, but which add another level of depth. An example of this is Nakazawa's *I Saw it*, an autobiographical account of Hiroshima from a young boys eyes, growing up afterwards and dealing with the legacy of slow nuclear death. Some of the shorter pieces are quite surprising in their anti-war message. Darko Macan and Edvin Biukovic a pair of Croatians write stories about world war two that sits nicely nest to an Archie Goodwin contemporary from 1966.

There is a feeling that the Editor has gone out of his way to offer new as well as the old, and the two Russian authored stories, one by Alexey Malakhov and another by Askold Akishin, despite being very different are an unusual find and shows Kendall to be a true scout out hunting down what one can rightly say is the *Best War Comics* one could hope for.

The Slug Master*

An Interview with Shaun Hutson
by Paul Kane and Marie O'Regan

Shaun Hutson is a bestselling author of horror fiction – titles such as *Erebus*, *Nemesis*, *Hell To Pay* and *Twisted Souls* – and has written novels under nine different pseudonyms. He lives and writes in Buckinghamshire with his wife and daughter and two pairs of Michelle Pfeiffer's shoes. His latest book, *Unmarked Graves*, is out now in hardback from Orbit (<http://www.orbitbooks.net>).



Paul Kane: Is it true that it was reading the books of Guy N. Smith that indirectly made you have a go at doing horror novels?

Shaun Hutson: Indirectly, because I read one of his books when I was eighteen and thought, "Christ, if he's getting paid to write stuff like that I'll have a go myself" Ah, the innocence of youth, eh? It sometimes worries me now when my own readers say "I read one of your books and decided I wanted to write..." I think, shit, is it for the same reasons I started...? Around the same time, I also saw the film **Cross of Iron**, directed by Sam Peckinpah and I really wanted to write something like that. I went on to write about fifteen war novels, every one of them with a nod towards **Cross of Iron** in it...

Marie O'Regan: What did you think of the film version of *Slugs*, and are there any other books in particular you'd like to see made into films or TV shows?

Shaun Hutson: The film of *Slugs* was good fun. I just thought at the time "if it's good I'll say it's because it was based on my novel, if it's shit I'll blame the film makers..." Any writer knows that when they sell their book for filming that not much of what they wrote will end up on the screen. It's no good bitching and whining about it, you just take the money and run and hope they do a good job. Obviously I'd like to see everything I've ever written turned into films and TV and all for huge amounts of money... If Paramount rang up tomorrow and said "we'd like to buy the rights for all your books for an obscene amount of money and turn them into musicals" I'd be delighted. The public are not stupid enough to think that a film's bad because of the book it was based on. Besides, if the studios pay you enough, who fucking cares...

Paul Kane: In *Shadows*, you deal with the subconscious and hypnosis, did you have to do a lot of research about this subject and what conclusions did you draw about the human mind from them?

Shaun Hutson: I went down to London to do the research, to a place called the Institute of Psychical Research and spoke to a nice lady - who thought I was a journalist trying to write an exposé - about astral travel, hypnosis, out of the body experiences and stuff like that. My conclusions about the human mind were pretty much made up without visiting that place though. The human mind is capable of some amazing things and some horrible things. Pretty obvious I know but, as I said before, we all have two sides to us and sometimes the darker side is more attractive. Sorry to sound pretentious but think about it, the human mind can produce thoughts like those of Einstein or like those of Hitler... Fuck, sorry, getting really arty-farty now, forgive me.

Marie O'Regan: You've used archaeology as a basis for a couple of your books – *The Skull* and *Relics* – is this something that interests you, and what scope do you think there is in the past for horror?

Shaun Hutson: The archaeological aspects of those books was purely a plot device but the research was fun in both cases. Trying to mix stuff from the past with present day is good fun and it's been done to death in films and books but, if the materials there then why not? I've got a book coming up that's set in 1812 and a few of mine have had historical connections. *Renegades* and *Nemesis* to name but two.

Paul Kane: If you possessed a powerful medallion like the one in *Death Day*, what would you use it for?

Shaun Hutson: I'd use it to make myself win about thirty million on the Euro Lottery then I'd retire...

Marie O'Regan: I read that you're like a 'method actor' with your main protagonists, getting into their heads – has this ever proved difficult for you?

Shaun Hutson: It's not always pleasant. Getting into the mind of a copper is bad enough but getting into the mind of a paedophile or a killer is horrible and sometimes very, very hard to do. However, in my books, I think that all sides should be shown equally. It should be possible for the reader to understand why every single character works the way they do and thinks the way they do.

Paul Kane: You've also used policemen as central characters quite a few times; what do you think makes these good heroes to write about? And have you ever visited a police station, watched their procedures for research?

Shaun Hutson: Police are useful as central characters because they're usually on the spot when something's happened. I find the idea of the bumbling amateur sorting things out a bit irritating actually so if you've got a police procedural novel then it's best to have a copper in one of the lead roles. Naturally I've spoken to policemen over the years for research and I visited New Scotland Yard while researching *Victims* (the Black Museum there, more specifically). Most of the stuff I need I can get from books or articles. If you start getting too technical then readers switch off.

Marie O'Regan: You've also written in various other genres, like war, western and SF under different names. Aside from horror, which one was your favourite to write in?

Shaun Hutson: I loved writing the westerns. Another genre that's dead and buried unfortunately. Same with war. No one publishes them anymore. If it's war then it has to be historical war. When I was a kid I read all the Sven Hassel WW2 novels about the Germans but there's no call for stuff like that now. Shame, because it's better than the slew of Chick-lit and Geezer books - Nick Hornby and Tony Parsons type stuff - that pollute the shelves. The readers have changed, that's the problem. Publishing is dominated by the middle classes and they prefer their stuff nice and cosy. Non-confrontational and not too challenging. Fuckers.

Paul Kane: *Twisted Souls* deals with fear – what's your biggest fear yourself?

Shaun Hutson: Death. Blindness. Morbid enough for you? I suppose I should say something amusing like being stuck in a room with a bunch of other authors but I'd be lying. No, seriously, I'm terrified of death. I tend to side with Woody Allen on that one. When asked if he wanted to achieve immortality through his work he said no, he wanted to achieve it by not dying...I'll go with that, Woody...

Marie O'Regan: What is it in particular you love so much about Michelle Pfeiffer's footwear?

Shaun Hutson: They're exquisite. She's exquisite. So are her feet...Oops, sorry, got carried away there...I happen to think she is one of the most underrated and brilliant actresses ever to grace the screen, apart from being one of the most stunningly beautiful women I've ever seen so, when

the chance to buy some of her shoes came along I thought, why not. I was also offered one of her T-shirts but declined - and no, this wasn't by some L.A. burglar, it's a reputable shop in London who sell film star memorabilia. I've got lots of stuff to do with Peckinpah films - none of Sam's shoes though, thank God - so, when a couple of pairs of Michelle's shoes came on the market I didn't hesitate. Surely it's no worse than a **Star Wars** fan buying a model of Darth Vader is it...?

Paul Kane: The subject of racism underpins everything in your new book *Unmarked Graves* - is this a subject you feel strongly about yourself?

Shaun Hutson: I feel strongly about people who can't mind their own business and if that includes not being able to see past the colour of someone's skin then yes. And it works both ways. People are intolerant regardless of their colour. I wanted to show that racism can be a two way thing, not just directed at non-English people. Racism of any kind is wrong, whether it's white against black or black against white. Having said that, anyone is entitled to have an opinion on the matter, it's just a question of how they express it. I believe in live and let live. As long as peoples' beliefs don't damage the way I live then that's fine.

Marie O'Regan: And lastly, are you a fan of zombie movies yourself?

Shaun Hutson: No. I can't stand zombie movies. The only one I really like is **Plague of the Zombies**, very stylish like so much of the early Hammer films. I know this is heresy to horror fans but I'm not too fond of Romero's 'dead' films either....sorry...

You can visit Shaun's site at <http://www.shaunhutson.com>

*The title of this interview was invented at the last minute by one of our editors. It's rubbish - we know that - but you're more interested in the interview, anyway, so stop hassling me! Go on - go! Ain't you got no 'omes to go to?

Coming Next Week:

Fiction: *As The Crow Flies* by **David Hoing**

Review Feature: 2000AD - The Best of British

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