

# Hub

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## The Feeding of the 5,000

We had a bumper week for new subscribers – more than we've ever seen in a single week. This brings our current readership to just over 5,000 per week!

Huge thanks go to Orbit, who pay us so we can pay our authors (and keep *Hub* free to read). Thanks must also go to the Arts Council who have provided us with enough Lottery funding to last us a year (the Lottery funding is specifically for marketing and increasing reader numbers).

Huge thanks must also go to you. Thanks for reading, and thanks for subscribing.

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# *Sleepless, Nameless*

by Bret Tallman

Christopher Fish just wasn't built for a normal life, though he did his best. He tried to ignore the stares his pale skin, white hair and faded gray eyes earned him. He learned to stop following certain people around whenever he caught some strangely familiar scent of decay clinging to their skin. He pretended in conversation that he slept like regular folks do, knowing better than to tell people that he had never lost consciousness in his entire life and wasn't the worse for it.

But there were times that it was just so clearly not working and he would lose his temper and spew such rage that he soon had a reputation for being cruel as well as ugly and weird. It was probably for the best that three weeks after his twenty-second birthday, his attempted life, the time wasted sweating at Chester Cheese's and lurching around campus and just the whole charade, came to an end.

It was one o'clock on a Saturday afternoon, so of course Chester Cheese's was a prepubescent madhouse. Fish nimbly weaved his way through the schools of darting, shrieking children in the dining hall and shouldered through the kitchen's swinging doors into the reassuring smell of burning cheese and grease. Nobody in the kitchen greeted him or even looked up as he passed through to the rough little lounge in the back room.

There, lying draped across the stained couch like some cartoon-world hunting trophy, he found the Chester Cheese costume it was his job to endure. He would wear the suffocating, sweltering mouse suit and serve birthday kids their pizza and try not to run away when he saw the resentment in the parents' eyes, the hatred they had for their own offspring. Christopher Fish lacked that part of the mind that shields the heart from what people truly are and was, as a result, something of a hate detector.

He dressed with morbid resignation and was prepared to heft Chester's bulbous, grinning head over his own when a metallic squeak sounded behind him. He turned to see Jared Gladstone struggling free of one of the lounge's rusted lockers. Fish could only gape as the little man jerked his second foot free and then stood there staring back, swaying slightly.

"There you are, Christopher." Gladstone's voice wasn't the nervous hum it usually was; in fact, he sounded a little raspy, almost parched.

"Were you hiding in that locker?" Fish had to fight the urge to slap the restaurant's assistant manager. "Have you lost your mind? Spying little creep. This is too much even for you."

"Why did you leave home, Christopher? I planted you, like a little banzai tree, in Chicago but here you are in Denver. What were you thinking?"

Fish was nonplussed all over again. Gladstone was a hectoring little jerk who made far too many off-color comments, but he didn't usually talk nonsense.

Gladstone took an unsteady step towards him and continued, "I was delayed, distracted. But now I'm back and I'm going to need you in Chicago."

“What are you talking about?” Fish asked, noticing now that the other man’s nametag was on upside-down and that his shoes were tied in strange, ugly knots instead of bows. “Jared, are you feeling alright?”

Gladstone awkwardly crammed a hand into his pants pocket. “Oh, don’t worry about Jared, he’s a happy whore-hopper. It’s Mr. Nine who needs special consideration now.”

Fish’s world went quiet; the clanging in the kitchen and the distant music of the animatronic animal band fell away. Fish clutched Chester’s hollow head like a child does his teddy and couldn’t speak.

Gladstone yanked his hand from his pocket and haphazardly brandished a snub-nosed .38. “It’s mostly my own fault. I should have been back for you years ago but there was this shaman, the memory of a shaman really, with sand for skin and reef for bones. He chased me across a chain of islands that ran a ring around a world; he chased me until we reached a living tar pit and there I undid him, finally.”

Gladstone paused expectantly, as if waiting for congratulations. Fish managed a weak, “No. Don’t do this.”

Gladstone scowled and took another two steps closer. “Yes. We do this now.”

“No.”

Gladstone pressed the gun against his own temple. “Come back to Chicago.”

“No.”

Gladstone shrugged. “I don’t want to have to do this again.” And then he pulled the trigger.

Fish lowered Chester’s head over his own and instead of suffocating, the suit felt safe, like soft armor. He would go and serve birthday kids their pizza now. He walked through the kitchen and ignored the questions from the cook. What was that noise in there? It was a gunshot, silly.

He walked out into the dining hall and waved to the kids watching the unliving figures twitch onstage. He heard a high little voice say, “Look, Mommy, it’s Chester! He spilled pizza on himself!”

Evening was creeping into the city by the time Fish finally wandered home, his mind still a numb jumble. It was heartening then to walk through the door of his absurd little apartment filled with paper maché oddities and see Daryl, his roommate, embedded in a green beanbag chair, playing a videogame on the hulking television that dominated their living room. It was regular, if not completely normal.

“How was work?” Daryl asked, without turning around.

Fish finished throwing the three locks on their door and kicked aside one of the capering figures he made in the silent night hours. “Gladstone killed himself today.”

Daryl maneuvered the little character on the tv screen right off a cliff. “Wow. But that’s probably how managers of Chester Cheese’s usually die.”

Fish grunted appreciatively. Daryl used to be shocked by Fish’s own displays of black humor but he was coming along nicely now. He kicked off his shoes, padded into the kitchen and started rummaging around in a cupboard. There was no mention of Mr. Nine as he narrated the day’s events while microwaving a bowl of spaghetti-ohs. When he finished and the steam from the bowl was wafting pleasantly around his face, he saw Daryl walk his game character over the edge of a lava-filled pit.

“Man, you suck tonight.”

“My eyes are a little sore,” Daryl admitted, turning around so Fish could see his face, see what was done to it.

Fish dropped the bowl, splattering his feet in tomato sauce.

“Come back to Chicago, Christopher,” Daryl said, mild as can be. “Come back or we can just keep doing this.”

Fish found his voice and his rage at the same time; Daryl was as close to a friend as he had. “What the hell do you want from me?” he snarled and snatched the toaster up as if to use it as a weapon, a faintly ridiculous move considering the problem.

“One favor. Just one little favor and then we’re forever done with each other.” Daryl held up a straight-razor and said in a squeaky voice, “Golly, Mr. Nine, I’d sure love to open Daryl’s jugular. Can I? Can I?” Then he answered in his regular voice. “Not yet, my little friend. Let’s give Christopher a chance to do the right thing.”

Fish hurled the toaster just inches past Daryl’s head, hitting the television screen smack in the center. The game’s repetitious guitar soundtrack cut off with an explosion of glass and crackling sparks. “You win. Go ahead and tell me how to find you but you’re not going to like it when I do.”

Daryl frowned. “Perhaps. You are immune to just about anything I can do but I bet you’ll lose interest in harming me when you see what I have to show you. Northwestern Memorial Hospital. Be there or I kill this square.”

It was nearly a solid day’s drive to the Windy City, even for a driver who didn’t need to sleep. The entire way there, Fish brooded on how to kill his enemy; he had never before taken a life but he knew himself, knew that murder could fit his soul reasonably well. By the time he parked his car, a dented and dinged old Saab, two blocks away from the hospital, however, the vague scenarios he had concocted dissipated like smoke.

Late-spring was already hot in Chicago and he hated the city year round anyway. Only a handful of memories from here warmed him and they all involved a woman and her unexplained interest in an orphan; her visits always meant green jell-o salad, tenderness and seemingly outlandish tales. The rest of his childhood was a collage of savage children, vaguely hostile adults and periodic encounters with a madman.

The madman in question was waiting for him outside of general admittance. He still dressed the same in unremarkable dark clothes, a long raincoat and fedora, like a man trying so hard to be inconspicuous that he was instead completely the opposite. A collection of bone flutes still hung from a thick leather belt around his waist. He leered enormously when he spotted Fish, revealing the same ivory teeth, each engraved with a different sigil; these were the tools that sent his voice across leagues and made his words move like quicksilver, liquid and lethal.

He had aged, though, become thinner and a bit more lined. And as they moved towards each other, Fish noticed a discordance in what had once been the most assured stride he had ever seen, a slight limp in the right leg.

So Fish greeted the other man with a lunge, hoping to inflict some quick damage to whatever injuries he had, but Mr. Nine hopped back, narrowly escaping Fish’s grab for his collar.

“No more of that now. No more,” he laughed, unhooking a long ivory pipe from his belt and twirling it like a baton. “Made from the femur of a will-o-the-waves, knight of the ocean lost and the spiny sunless. On this, I could blow a single note of such despair that every tumor would will itself malignant, every strained heart would burst, every patient balanced between life and death would double back flip into the next world. Keep your hands to yourself, please.”

Fish angrily returned some of the stares they were getting from passersby until the scrutiny passed, then asked, “Why am I here?”

Mr. Nine flashed his nightmarish smile again. “Good. Look at you, so tall but so washed out. I didn’t see that happening. Did you bring those books I gave you?”

“Nope. I didn’t bother to take them when I left the foster home.” This was a lie; he had sold them for several thousand dollars to an eager, twitching little occultist whom he never saw again.

Mr. Nine looked stricken. “But you remember what we talked about? What I taught you?”

“You didn’t teach me anything. You would just show up and rant about magic as mathematic systems and music as equations. I remember a whole bunch of garbage about language as keys...”

“Garbage!” Mr. Nine spat. “After all the things I have shown you, you doubt?”

“No, but what good has it done you? What do you have to show for yourself? You-”

“Shut up!” Mr. Nine roared and the ageless voices of the Ravenous Thousand roared with him. A momentary hush fell over the city. Fish went silent too but only because he chose to.

Mr. Nine turned abruptly and began limping towards general admissions. “Follow me,” he muttered over his shoulder.

He produced another instrument, gray and barely longer than his hand, and played two alternating, undulating notes all the way to the elevator and then again from the elevator to the sixth floor room that was their destination. Nobody stopped them or even noticed their passage.

The room’s lone occupant was a sunken relic of a man, old and still, a lifeless mass under stiff white sheets. In the slack, jaundiced features of the patient’s face, Fish saw the bluntness of his own nose, the sharp slope of his own jaw-line and brevity of his own mouth.

Mr. Nine watched Fish watch the old man, eyes shining with eagerness. “Well?”

“Who is he?” Fish whispered.

Mr. Nine waved a thin hand. “You can be as loud as you want, he’s not waking up.”

“Coma?”

“No. He’s sleeping. He’s been sleeping for the past twenty-two years and he’ll sleep till the day he dies; I’ve seen to that.”

Fish felt as if the room were suffused with some strange cloud of possibilities and wondered if this was hope; a world that made a little more sense seemed just around the corner. “This is my father, isn’t it?”

Mr. Nine swept all that away with a flippant shake of his head. “Nope, not at all.” He removed his fedora and ran a hand over the swirl of symbols and numbers branded and scarred into his bald scalp. “He’s you, actually. The real you. His dreaming mind is the engine that generates you.”

Fish blinked. The he laughed in disbelief. Then he stood there gazing at nothing until his expression collapsed in anguish and Mr. Nine grinned like a half-moon.

“I don’t really need to convince you, do I? Truth is a knife that slips so easily between the ribs.

“His name is Christopher Fowler.” Mr. Nine’s lips curled downward in amused chagrin. “You know, I had some kind of witticism in mind when I named you, a specific line I was going to say on this day of days. But twenty-two years on I can’t remember how it went, the exact wording of it.”

“Why?” Fish slumped onto an aggressively orange plastic chair and gazed at the slumbering wreck in the bed. “Why would you do this?”

“Because he betrayed me and did something only he can undo.” There was no trace of humor in Mr. Nine’s voice now. He put his fedora back on and pulled it low over his eyes. “No matter what I did, he wouldn’t undo it, wouldn’t even acknowledge that he had cheated me. Insufferable arrogant bastard. I couldn’t force him to; we were too evenly matched.

“But I could give him something he wanted, deep down in the polluted pool of his mind. It’s not even that unusual, though. Who doesn’t want a chance to live their life all over again?”

“So I put him to sleep and conjured a dream that leaves footprints in mud and snow and ash. A simultaneous reincarnation. You don’t want to know about all the sacrifices the magic required, not a project to be undertaken lightly.”

Fish held his head in his hands. “So am I real? Do I even need to eat?”

“How the hell should I know? I’ve never done anything like you before or since.”

“When he dies-”

“The dream ends. Something to keep in mind, yes? If you cooperate, I won’t hold a pillow over his face and you might live for another twenty years.” Mr. Nine paused a moment, letting that sink in. “I planned on raising you myself-”

“But you couldn’t be bothered,” Fish interrupted. “Thank God for that much, at least.”

“I was busy,” Mr. Nine corrected. “There were other worlds to walk and other projects to run.” He knelt before Fish and his next words were unnaturally earnest. “Christopher, that life back in Denver would never have worked; my return has saved you from wasting your few years trying to be something that you’ll never be.

“Tonight, you’re going to return the favor. You’re going to untie the Knot your older self tied.”

The moon hung high and white amidst bruise-colored clouds, illuminating the deep green grassy mounds and winding gravel paths stretching out before the two men. Fish had been in Garfield Park as a child and never cared for it, but night and lonesomeness made it beautiful. They had entered from the west side, the east being far too exposed to the street.

Mr. Nine was so excited he was practically skipping and Fish had to work to keep up.

“This is it,” the older man babbled, “the heart of the city that is the heart of this land. We’re on the continental divide, you know. Men have always settled here, this place of power, of transition. It’s the center of movement within your great American empire but even before-” He froze suddenly, his feet and his tongue coming to an abrupt halt at the same time.

He stood there, his eyes wider than Fish had ever seen them, until he spun and dove behind a mound, hissing frantically at Fish to follow him. Fish let out a grumbling, exasperated breath and did so.

“I can’t believe he’s still here,” Mr. Nine muttered as Fish crouched down next to him.

“Who? I didn’t hear anything.”

“This place was once prehistoric marsh and shades of those things that ruled here still linger deep in the layers that remember them. Years ago, when I tried to force the Knot open myself, the land spat something up and drove me off.” He cautiously crept up the slope of the mound and peeked through blades of grass

Fish heard him gasp and had to look for himself. He saw a barely discernible naked figure standing in the center of an unbelievably thick cloud of insects just thirty yards away. It strode towards them with stiff, inexorable purpose.

“Yet another enemy,” Fish murmured. “Everywhere you go.”

Mr. Nine glared at him. “I’m the victim here. I’m the one betrayed.” He leapt to his feet, stood atop the mound and lifted the largest, ugliest instrument from his belt; it was oily gray, twisted and jagged. “I’m ready for you this time.”

But apparently the creature had also given this encounter some thought. As Mr. Nine brought the flute to his lips, the swarm surrounding it surged forward and closed the distance in an eye-blink. Mr. Nine all but disappeared in an onrush of mosquitoes and dragonflies that stuffed

themselves into the flute's airways and his mouth. Mr. Nine gagged and thrashed until his right leg failed him and he tumbled down the green slope.

Fish spent a few seconds waving his own arms, trying to fend off the attack, until he realized the swarm had avoided him completely. By then the creature had joined him on the moonlit hill; it may have once been a man, but now its skin was a bilious yellow and its eyes an endless black. An enormously engorged, strawberry-red tongue lolled and lunged from its gaping mouth.

It gazed vacantly down at the struggling, sputtering Mr. Nine, seemingly unaware of the man standing right next to it. Fish felt a macabre thrill as he watched fat, full mosquitoes return to the creature, alight soft as air on its eager tongue and kiss the red, wet surface with their tiny needle-mouths.

The thing smelled like an open doorway to death and it made Fish feel more alive than he ever had and though he could not recall Fowler's memories, he could feel the empty spaces they had left.

Without giving himself any time to rethink it, Fish hit the creature with as much momentum as he could pack into an uppercut. Its jaws snapped together and its tongue ruptured, falling to the grass in plops and patters.

The ancient thing saw him then and looked on him with such confusion that Fish would always be haunted by an inexplicable guilt whenever he thought of it. It took a faltering step back, then slowly raised a hand and drew its own eyelids down. All at once, it fell limp and rolled lifelessly down the mound where the grass swallowed it like the waves of a jade sea.

Fish turned in time to watch the swarm dissipate suddenly, blown away by an intangible wind, leaving behind a gasping Mr. Nine whose skin was an appalling white with tiny red speckles.

Fish tromped down the hill and dropped a knee across the supine man's throat. Mr. Nine went bug-eyed and tried to buck him off but Fish didn't budge. "You're going to unbuckle that belt and take out your teeth and give them both to me or I'm going to kneel on your neck until you die, okay?"

Mr. Nine opened his mouth but no sound came out. He hesitated a moment but as his face started to turn crimson, he frantically did as he was told. Fish hefted the belt triumphantly and accepted the teeth with a bit less enthusiasm, then got off Mr. Nine who exploded in a fit of gasps and ragged wheezing.

When this had subsided, the older man, exhausted, toothless and beaten, rolled over on his side and began to cry silently. Fish watched for a while, fascinated and pitiless.

Finally, he said, "Stop your blubbing already and get up. You're still taking me to the Knot. I want to know what all the fuss is about; I want to know what my life is about."

"Alright, which one do I use?" Fish rattled the bones hanging from his belt.

Mr. Nine scowled at his ignorance. He had been mopey and silent for the remainder of the walk to the west entrance of the Garfield Park Conservatory. Even his fedora looked defeated, bent and as encrusted with crushed bugs as his coat was. He pointed a thin finger at a stubby little flute etched with spirals.

Fish unhooked it, vigorously wiped the mouthpiece with his sleeve and blew a note that made Mr. Nine scowl even harder.

"Don us play anying!" He sounded like an angry toddler without his teeth.

"Thanks for the tip," Fish whispered with a grin, "but it would be easier if you just showed me what fingers to use." A bit of a risk but under current circumstances he figured Mr. Nine wouldn't be too hard to fight off if he made a grab for it.

Mr. Nine reached over and tapped Fish's fingers in a short sequence. Fish played through it three times before the door softly unlocked. "It worked. Magic is handy." He took a step back and searched the dark space within the glass for any sign of movement, but all he saw were the looming, prickly silhouettes of desert plants.

People knew on some level, Fish realized, that this was where places met and paid tribute to that convergence by surrounding it with handfuls of environment from around the globe. He cast a suspicious glance back at Mr. Nine, wondering what, of all the doors between worlds the older man knew of, made this one so special.

The moon peered down through the glass ceiling as the two men crept into the Desert House and followed a walkway past a row of hedge cacti into the Children's Garden, where moonlight and shadow made the giant-sized flower and bee displays menacingly surreal.

Fish was so on edge as they entered the Sweet House that he almost cried out when Mr. Nine grabbed his arm and hissed, "Guard. Come."

Fish allowed himself to be dragged off the path and into some sugar cane. He lifted the small gray flute Mr. Nine had used at the hospital and his companion nodded his approval. The focused glare of a flashlight rounded the coconut trees further along the path; it paused as Fish falteringly started playing the two alternating notes, then began moving in their direction again.

The security guard, a swarthy and squat specimen, swept the flashlight right over them and seemed not to notice. As the man continued on his oblivious route, Mr. Nine motioned for Fish to pick up the tempo. Without thinking, the younger man complied and was shocked to see the guard stumble and fall.

Fish threw Mr. Nine to the ground and pinned him with a forearm across his throat. "What did you make me do?" he growled.

"Sleep," Mr. Nine forced out, "us sleeping."

When Fish had checked and was satisfied that the man was indeed sleeping, the two continued through the Palm House, where they had to repeat the spell on another two guards, and into the Fern Room at the center of the conservatory. Centuries old cycads rose to the ceiling in a continuous leafy green mass and bordered the artificial lagoon at the center of the room.

Mr. Nine took a long, challenging look at Fish as he shrugged off his coat and tossed aside his fedora, then silently began wading into the water. Fish kicked off his shoes and followed, trying to remember every stupid New Age calming mantra he had ever heard as he submerged himself in cold darkness. He spent several moments completely blind underwater, until he spotted a faint red luminescence, a large object below, backlit by some unseen source.

He swam down and saw great black roots that broke up through the bottom of the lagoon and wound around each other in a tangle. Beneath the Knot, something burned red. Vaguely aware of Mr. Nine drifting beside him, Fish ran his hands across one of the roots' cold, coarse surface and felt symbols there. Something that wasn't quite an equation, a sequence of notes or a riddle bloomed in his thoughts and coiled itself around his mind, awaiting his answer.

Fish surfaced from an ocean of red voices and woke with a wave of disorientation and a burst of fear. He jerked himself upright, realized he was sopping wet and covered in grit, and found himself in a vast spherical cavern. Glittering pools of still water dotted the landscape around him and, impossibly, above him. From each pool rose a black tree with vast, meandering branches and broad green leaves. Each bore fruit but no two the same and none Fish recognized. Vast swarms of fireflies drifted and swirled through the air and the light they cast was both frightening and beautiful.

"The pool next to you is the way home," said the familiar, nasal voice.

Fish turned to see Mr. Nine squeezing excess water from his socks, smiling in his wolfish way. "I see you've got your teeth back."



Mr. Nine pointed at the belt around the younger man's waist. "Yes, while you were away in your mind. But I let you keep the flutes; you'll need them to play your way out of the conservatory when you go back. Consider them payment for a job well done, Christopher."

"You're not going back?"

Mr. Nine cackled giddily. "Oh, I am but I won't need such tools anymore. Things are going my way from now on." He pulled his socks on, reached into his pocket and produced something that looked much like an apple core. "I've already eaten the fruit of our tree. Now all I need is to get the Ancient to write my name in his book and the world will truly be home."

Fish began to wonder which of the flutes would be effective against the other man if it came to that. "And what does that mean?"

Mr. Nine sighed as if he was dealing with the most obstinate child who had ever lived. "Christopher, countless beings may be born into a particular world but it is never home to them. Who is happy? Who is at peace? Which of the countless worlds is not an enemy to the men walking it? I have been to so many and my educated guess is none."

"So, what? Whatever your doing will rewrite reality to your benefit?"

Mr. Nine tsked him. "Nothing so melodramatic. There won't be fiery pits full of my enemies and statues of me as far as the eye can see but events will subtly shape themselves to give me the best possible life. Look, before the real you tied the Knot, many men had found this place and lived flawless lives as a result."

Fish shook his head. "That can't be without effect. Who knows what kind of ripples those changes made? And do you seriously think you deserve this?"

"Nobody gets what they deserve," Mr. Nine snapped. "The very existence of that word is sheer absurdity." He stalked away, apparently done humoring him.

Fish lifted his eyes to the fat red spheres dangling from the low-hanging branches overhead. He leapt, snatched one and bit into it before he even had a clear idea of what his plan was. It was crunchy and very tart and somehow vacillated between being delicious and unpleasant. He ate the rest of it as he hurried to catch up to Mr. Nine.

It was a long walk and Fish knew they must be climbing the curve of the chamber but felt no change in gravity's pull. They seem to come upon their destination all at once; the Ancient was nowhere to be seen until they passed a thick cluster of the world trees and suddenly there it was.

It sat on a stool next to a table, both of intricate ironwork, pouring over a huge volume that a man would have trouble even lifting. A black, hooded cloak hid most of its body except for the taloned hands, the long segmented tail curling and uncurling idly behind it, and the massively jawed snout sticking out of its hood. If standing, it would have been nearly nine feet tall.

Fish cried out and turned to run but stopped when he heard Mr. Nine's howling laughter. "Oh Christopher, I forgot what it's like to be so provincial. This is the Ancient, the slithering shepherd of man, the angel of the cold-blooded; he is a facilitator of history and believe me when I tell you he is a friend to man. He stands between us and much that would harm us."

Despite these assurances, Fish couldn't keep from jumping when the creature fluidly rose from its seat and disappeared into the large domed hut behind it.

"It's impossible not to get the cold sweats around him, isn't it?" Mr. Nine murmured, mockingly. "There is a story that tells of a world completely taken by a plague of madness. It says he walked that place and killed everything he found there, by himself, simply emptied the world out."

He fell silent as the Ancient returned, sat back down on its stool and placed a large birdcage under a satin cloth on the table. A voice, high and reedy, called from the cage, "You have eaten the fruit?"

"I have," Mr. Nine answered.

The Ancient lifted a large, sharp quill and held out an open hand. The voice in the cage asked, "And what is your name?"

"Mr. Nine," he answered, gingerly placing his hand in the Ancient's.

"But what kind of name is that?" Fish cried out. "Who gave it to him? Is that even his real name?"

"Shut up!" Mr. Nine roared at him and turned his attention back to the Ancient, only to find the creature motionless, waiting. "It... is the only name I have ever known. It was given to me by the man who taught me the worlds and the arts. It's real, I swear it."

"What was the man's name?" Fish asked.

Mr. Nine looked pained when the voice in the cage repeated the question. "What was the man's name?"

"Mr. Eight! But what does it matter?"

Fish approached the Ancient warily, looked into the shadowed hood where he thought its eyes were and was glad he couldn't see them. He said, "He set this in motion over twenty years ago and he still needs it. What's he been doing with all that time? Why can't he change?"

Mr. Nine flew into a rage. "Enemies keep thwarting me! People like you who won't just—"

The Ancient's sudden motion was faster than any living thing Fish had ever seen. The great jaws snapped and Mr. Nine was gone from the shoulders up. His body tottered and fell.

"And do you know yourself?" the voice in the cage asked Fish.

Fish forced his gaze away from the corpse and thought a moment. "Sometimes I think so but I get surprised an awful lot."

The Ancient held out its hand. It was warm and dry and when it pierced his palm with its quill, it didn't hurt as much as he thought it would. The Ancient leaned over the tome, poised to write, a thick droplet of blood falling from the quill.

"What is your name?," asked the voice.

Fish wondered on his short, unhappy life and thought there probably wasn't a power in the universe that could make him fit with people, that could make him happy. So he said, "Christopher Fowler. Put down Christopher Fowler."

It took a couple weeks to find her, but he did, living in a trim little blue house on the outskirts of Chicago. She was meditating in her back yard when he first approached her, sitting in a circle of small stones, burning incense. She still had the waist-long iron gray hair he remembered.

"Emma Fowler?" Fish asked.

The old woman opened her eyes, gaped in surprise and then smiled broadly. "Christopher! Figured out who I was, eh?"

He sat down, cross-legged, next to her and nodded. "I found out who I am or was or whatever. There was a wedding ring on the old man's hand and I remembered one on the woman who took such a strange interest in me way back when. So I looked for you under his name."

She pursed her lips and asked gently, "Are you okay?"

"Well, one of the stories you told me came in very handy. You could have told me a lot more, though."

She took her straw sunhat off and fanned herself with it. "Not without deciding your path for you. I wanted to help you without destroying your second chance."

"But don't you care that your husband is sleeping his life away? You know... I ate the fruit and put his name in the book but he's still sleeping and I'm still here."

She reached out and touched his face. “I remember when he looked like you. For some people, though, time erodes more than just their bodies. Sometimes we move away from our best selves. Towards the end of our time together, I loved Chris more for who he could have been than who he was. I would look at him and see something beautiful marred in ways I couldn’t repair. Nobody could.

“And now there’s you; so maybe he’s getting what he wants.” She withdrew her hand, set her hat high on her head. “You do what you want to, honey, but let the old man sleep.”

## REVIEW

*Bram Stoker’s Dracula: Collector’s Edition* reviewed by Scott Harrison

Directed by Francis Ford Coppola

Starring Gary Oldman, Anthony Hopkins, Winona Ryder, Keanu Reeves

Sony Pictures

£15.99



Since its original publication in 1897 Bram Stoker’s gothic horror masterpiece, *Dracula*, has been the subject of over 150 movie and television adaptations, spin-offs and spoofs. Some of these, such as FW Murnau’s *Nosferatu* and Universal’s massively over-rated 1931 *Dracula* have attained ‘classic’ status, while others – Hammer’s diminishing *Dracula* Saga and the criminally under-valued 1979 Frank Langella vehicle – have been largely overlooked. By the time celebrated film director Francis Ford Coppola announced in late 1991 that his next film project would be yet another adaptation of *Dracula* interest in Stoker’s vampire novel was sadly on the wane and the news was met with extreme disinterest. Yet, on its release a year later, the film became such a huge box office success that it once more revived a great interest in the 100 year old literary classic.

Sadly, time has not been kind to Coppola’s *Dracula*. While it still retains the ability to amaze and stun with its sumptuous visuals and lavish set pieces, other aspects have not aged so well in the 15 years since its original theatrical release. Given that director Coppola and screenwriter James V. Hart continually insisted that they wanted to remain faithful to Stoker’s novel it is somewhat baffling as to why the film constantly veers away from the original text towards Hollywood clichés and historical confusion. There is a tendency for writers and directors to put too much emphasis on Dracula’s connection with the historical figure of Vlad the Impaler, an association that Stoker himself had never intended for his titular character (the novel was virtually complete when Stoker stumbled across accounts of Vlad Tepes’ life and decided to incorporate certain historical events into the Count’s ‘history’), and director Coppola is no exception. Coming across like a comic-book superhero’s origin story the prologue sees Vlad Dracula, denouncing God after returning from the wars to find the love of his life has committed suicide and the church has turned its back on him. Grafting onto Stoker’s story a rather bizarre subplot of true love reincarnated across the centuries the film flashes forward some 400 years and begins to get itself back on track, that is until Dracula reaches London and Hart’s subplot begins to derail the very essence of Stoker’s story. Add into this mix some very dodgy acting (Keanu Reeves please step forward and take a bow) and some English accents of the Dick-Van-Dyke-circa-Mary-Poppins variety and the film begins to flounder like a drowning man going down for the third time.

This new 2-disc Collector's Edition of *Bram Stoker's Dracula* has been a long time coming (originally rumoured for a release as far back as 1999) and many of us have had to make do with a rather lacklustre, extras-lite 1-disc version for the past 10 years. Much speculation, confusion and controversy has arisen amongst *Dracula* fansites and DVD forums in the run up to this DVD release; quibbles over the cover artwork, the lack of a definitive Director's Cut of the film (rumour is that there were over two dozen different cuts of the film before it's original release) and much bewilderment over what will be included on the additional disc. Many British DVD sites stated that, in addition to the extras available on the region 1 version, the region 2 release would include a *Dracula* radio play, screen tests and production notes. Annoyingly these have failed to materialise and both the region 1 and 2 releases are identical. All frustrations aside this new 2-disc edition boasts a rather satisfying and thorough extras package. There is an option to 'Watch Bram Stoker's *Dracula* with Francis Ford Coppola', which consists of a brief introduction from the director followed by an informative and wonderfully entertaining feature length commentary, while over on Disc 2 four brand new documentaries which can be viewed as one continuous 69 minute feature covers every aspect of the production from visualisation, costume and script including interviews with all the cast and crew of the film. 26 minutes of deleted and extended scenes are presented in various stages of completion, some using animated storyboards where shots or scenes are missing, and are a tantalising glimpse into what the movie could have been if Coppola had worked on a Definitive Cut as he originally promised. Last, and by every means least, the entire package is completed by the obligatory Theatrical Trailers and (yawn) endless photo galleries.



It's the age-old story of 'Collector's Edition' tag being erroneously used once more. Yes, the extras are good but you can't help thinking that some of those fans out there on the interweb were right. After 15 years a brand spanking new Director's Cut of the film would have been just the thing to inject new life into an increasingly dated film... and I can't help thinking how fantastic it would have been if that Radio Play had been included on the region 2 version as originally promised. Still for only £15.99 you can't really go wrong, I suppose. Definitely worth a look if you've got a bit of spare cash in your pocket and nothing new to watch in your DVD collection!

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