

Hub

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Our New Website

Longtime readers of *Hub* might not have visited our website for some time – after all, many of you get *Hub* delivered direct to your inbox. Well, our web monkeys have tinkered behind the scenes and upgraded our site to a spanking new Wordpress-based affair. As well as emailed subscriptions you can now subscribe via the magic of RSS (web monkey tells me that this will mean something to the hip and happening kids out there!), and we'll be publishing commentary and news on the site that won't necessarily make it into the pages of *Hub* itself. Well worth a look.

About *Hub*

Every week we publish a piece of short fiction, along with at least one review and sometimes a feature or interview. We can afford to do this largely due to the generosity of our sponsors over at **Orbit**. If you like what you read here, please consider making a donation over at www.hub-mag.co.uk. We pay our writers, and anything you donate helps us to continue to attract high quality fiction and non-fiction.



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The Flag Game

by Marianne de Pierres

On occasions butterflies swarmed Carmine Island, blown in by the spirit winds during that hot, unsettled spell when summer cavorts like a lively, beautiful woman.

My first time, I stood in wonder as they engulfed me on the dunes above Bara Beach. A swirl of wings: exotic, dancing petals whisking me inside their kaleidoscope. I stood still, lost in the fluttering, marvelous eccentricity of it all.

Eventually, they drifted away down to the giant sandcastles that made Bara Beach unique, leaving me curiously bereft. My impulse was to follow but as always, when it came to Bara Beach, I hesitated. In my early days on Carmine I had been warned from visiting there on the understanding that it was a place only for the locals.

Still not considering myself a local, or wanting to, I decided instead to ask Katrin and Lauren about it, on one of our evenings together on the patio of my beach shack at Glimmer-by-Dark.

On those evenings the three of us would drink pink champagne and gaze at the sea in its tidal flux. More often than not the wind blew warm and moist from the north wrapping us in its damp, salty cloak.

Mainlanders blamed the warm northerly for the strange happenings on Carmine, saying it brought the canopy of spores that had settled like a translucent, gauzy canopy over the Island, anchored to the sand by whim or chance.

Perhaps it did.

‘Butterflies signal a fertile year,’ Katrin pronounced with a teasing in her voice that bordered on wistful. She stroked her beloved Lauren’s hair in a restless ‘Katrin’ way.

Lauren strained to see her, for truly her sight worsened daily now, a legacy of the spores that had cured her terminal illness, only to leave her near blind.

I had known them a year or more now. While our silences had become more comfortable, our memories ached in shared recollection: the murder of the journalist Charles Mills-Thomas and the gaoling of Lauren’s husband for his part in it; then later, the strange incidence of wealthy Blade Reeves and the *kadaicha* at the Carmine Ritz - another spore-driven tragedy.

‘And the sandcastles on Bara Beach?’ I asked. ‘Is there a connection?’

‘You are finally learning, Tinashi. Nothing on Carmine Island is unrelated.’ Her face twisted in cruel amusement. ‘When the butterflies swirl on Bara Beach it’s time for The Flag Game. You will be eligible this time.’

‘Katrin,’ warned Lauren in an uncommonly stern tone.

I stared between them.

Lauren held out her glass in an appealing manner. ‘The sandcastles are spore work, Tinashi? No one knows quite how they remain standing against the tides.’

I thought of the immense, rose-tinted citadels that stoically endured wind and water. How I yearned to climb their ramparts at low tide and learn their secrets. Like everything on Carmine, the most dangerous things were the most enticing.

‘When the butterflies swirl, the locals play a game among the castles. It must be completed before high tide, for no swimmer can survive against the water’s pull.’

‘And what does the winner receive?’ I asked, intrigued despite myself.

Katrin regarded me from underneath her lashes. I saw a flash of cruelty. ‘To outsiders the prize is seen to be a parcel of land but the truth is that the spores decide. They say, one year, they got the winner with child,’ she said.

‘How is that possible?’ I allowed scorn in my voice, though my heart pounded.

‘On Carmine anything is possible. *You* should know that by now.’

Her answer tumbled me: a breaking wave from underneath which I could not catch my breath. I left them, stumbling down the steps of my bungalow and into the darkness of the dunes.

A child. When mine had been taken from me. Had she guessed my secret I wondered? Did I wear my tragedy on my face? Is that why she delivered her words with the acuity of a sadist?

I stayed alone with my past on Glimmer Beach until they finished their champagne and strolled home, arms entwined.

In the ensuing days I avoided their shack and the beach as if denial would make the memory of the evening vanish. But as the butterflies swelled in numbers and Lauren came to see me.

‘Have I offended you somehow, Tinashi?’

So typical of Lauren to seek fault in herself and not in her partner. I made her black tea with honey and cinnamon in my only cup and marveled at how unaffected her sleek, blonde glamour was by the sightlessness behind her dark glasses. Katrin must fix her hair.

‘There is little that offends me,’ I lied.

‘Strange, she said, ‘you left so abruptly when Katrin spoke of The Flag Game.’ Feeling ahead with one hand, she placed the cup carefully on its saucer.

I refrained from helping her. She needed her confidence.

She clapped. ‘So we are still friends. I would so hate to lose you, Tinashi, especially at Festival. You will accompany me tomorrow won’t you?’ She leaned forward, anxious lines creasing her forehead. ‘I have a surprise for Katrin.’

‘But I am not permitted on Bara Beach and in The Sapphire Lounge. From the very start...’

She clapped her hands. ‘Oh that is a nonsense; a ploy to keep the tourists away. You’re one of us now, Tinashi.’

*

One of us...

That night I slept restlessly; Lauren’s words an echo that I could not escape. What did they mean, I wondered, in those wakeful spaces between dreams?

Sometime before dawn, even the dreams left me, and I could no longer deny the despair I had sought to avoid by coming to Carmine. Louis’ faced drifted before my eyes like a page in water: blurred and sodden. Dead in my arms. My beautiful son. My only child taken by a pain and illness that no doctor could explain.

Mama, don’t let me die...

But I did. I was not clever enough to stop it.

Grief claimed me between dark and dawn. I moaned and uttered shameful sounds: crude noises that should never be witnessed nor remembered. And as their intensity abated I knew that when Lauren asked me to help her again, I would say yes. Forever it would be 'yes', until I found a way to assuage my sense of failure.

*

When Lauren arrived mid-morning, she wore a cool, white dress revealing the straps of her bathing costume underneath, and a flush on her cheeks that was excitement, not heat.

'You must wear your costume to play The Game, Tinashi,' she said.

I stared at her. 'You asked me to accompany you to the Festival, not in The Game. The way that Katrin spoke, it sounded dangerous. If you cannot...'

'See? I know – but you will help me Tinashi. You won't let me down.' She reached her hand out to me in a gesture of trust.

Mama, don't let me die...

And there it was.

A puppet to my foolish need for atonement, I donned my bathers and took her arm.

We walked the long way to Bara Beach and, on Lauren's insistence, paused above the headland.

She turned her face to the warm wind. 'Describe it for me,' she said.

I stared down at the sandcastles scattered the length of Bara Beach rising like miniature palaces - work of the mysterious spores, bringing recognizable form to random matter. Although wind and water had blunted turrets and collapsed rampart walls, somehow they survived tidal ebb, soldiers in a perennial last stand. The rocky headlands that buttressed them were cloaked in brilliant splashes of algae.

'The tide is low and the beach is covered with brown weed. Can you smell it?'

She sniffed. 'Yes, I can. What of the sandcastles?'

'Worn down I would say. Blunt-edged.' Somehow I could not impart their beauty or sense of mystery to her. It did not seem right to try when she could only imagine.

'You are a kind one, Tinashi,' she sighed. 'Katrin would tell me how beautiful they were, and how much I was missing.'

I did not reply. It was what I would expect from Katrin.

Lauren laughed at my silence. 'Do not think ill of her for it. Cruel is her way, but so is honesty. I cherish that after Quentin's dissembling. He was sleeping with young Jaella Armagh, you know. I didn't find out until later. Katrin told me so I would stop visiting him in gaol.'

Lauren referred to her husband, incarcerated for the murder of the journalist Charles Mills-Edward. 'I'm sorry, Lauren.'

'Don't be. I am much happier with Katrin. Her wildness is precious... irresistible.' She dragged me closer. 'That's why I want to do something for her. Something she could not possibly forget.'

'Lauren?' The intensity of her expression alarmed me. So did her fingers on my wrist. Their grip was neither gentle nor winsome but the clasp of determination and, dare I think it, slight madness. Had the spores that robbed her of her sight spoiled her mind as well?

'Now tell me, Tinashi,' she urged. 'Can you see the butterflies?'

I let my gaze return to the sand castles. Already there were people on the beach setting out flags and ropes for the festival. Snatches of carnival music drifted up to us. I squinted against the glare from the jeweled waves. ‘Yes. I think so. Above the last sandcastle, I can see something like a cloud of smoke.’

Lauren bit her lip. ‘We will have to be quick Tinashi. The last sandcastle is the most dangerous when the tide comes in. Two years ago the sea took poor Ditter Along. You remember Aloys?’

Aloys Along. The name bought back that night at the Ritz when the *MalconFunk* sensation had performed his synthetic rap to the full moon and Blade Reeves had thrown himself from the balcony. ‘Is Ditter his wife?’

‘No. His sister. Aloys has had deep ties with Carmine since the poor girl got swept to sea from atop Popo. He will perform today in her memory.’

Suddenly my doubts outweighed my longings. ‘I don’t think this is a -’

But Lauren put her fingers to my face, trailing them across my cheek until she found my lips. ‘Don’t let me down, Tinashi. This means more than anything. *Anything,*’ she implored.

*

I led her down the winding, steep sand-path to Bara Beach. People called to her as we threaded between wind-blown tents. She was so loved for her beauty and grace.

I recognized most of them and their wares. Freddie the Frog, nouveau Earl of Territories, busily poured jugs of his pica-brewed beerwine, setting them out on a pristine, white tablecloth. The blue-blood, Comtesse Vonny Plessis-Belliere, reclined on portable chaise lounge under the haunting bone chimes being strung in lines by Shaka the Island’s Voyant.

‘Tinashi! What brings you in for the festival?’

It took a moment to register the question was for me and not Lauren. I turned to find Inspector Messier standing behind me. The sweat stains under the arms of his white uniform shirt were as dark as old blood and he puffed with the exertion of walking on the sand in polished shoes.

I hesitated, unsure of what to say him. Our acquaintance hinged on the murder of Charles Mills-Edwards and Blade Reeves’ suicide – neither incident conducive to an exchange of light conversation.

Lauren rescued me. ‘Is that you Samuel?’ She reached out.

He took her hands and kissed them. ‘May I say, Lauren Carson, that your beauty nothing less than eternal.’

She gave a sweet laugh and her cheeks flushed with pleasure. ‘You are too kind, Inspector. But tell us, what brings *you* here?’

‘Festival time has had its problems and The Bureau wants no tragedies this year.’

‘I am comforted to hear that,’ she replied.

Vonny Belliere appeared at Lauren’s elbow wielding a pai and melon-garnished cocktail in one hand and a strip of flowing silk in the other. ‘Lauren, do come and feel these scarves. They are simply exquisite, my darling.’ She drew Lauren away to a nearby stall.

Messier took the opportunity to lean closer to me. ‘I should warn you, Tinashi, that Professor Wang has returned. He was granted parole just last week. I applied for a stay on his residency but the court dismissed it.’

I felt a lump obstruct my breathing, remembering Wang’s pleading...

Let me cut him...you promised I could cut him...

‘And the rest?’ I asked.

‘Safely incarcerated: Geronimo and Carson have been denied appeal.’

The lump eased a little. ‘Then why is Wang free?’

He sighed. ‘The law can be obtuse at times, I’m afraid. His mere *desire* to cut the journalist’s body up when he was dead - as came out in the trial evidence - was not sufficient to render him a first-degree accomplice. The parole board has allowed him to return to the Island to pursue post-doctoral research. It’s the spores, you know. The world is desperate to know more about them, but frightened to take up internship here for fear of infection by them. If Wang can uncover their secrets then no other scientist will be put at risk.’

We exchanged a look of understanding - the spores changed everyone who lived on Carmine Island, sometimes in ways they did not even comprehend.

‘Thank-you Inspector. I will be careful,’ I said.

I left him and made my way past the line of fluting bone chimes to the Admission Tent where I paid our entry to The Flag Game to a girl with a bulging forehead and brilliant, aqua eyes. I recognised her from the Realtor’s office.

‘You’re still here then?’ said the girl. Her eyes appeared to turn emerald as she spoke - some quirk of refraction in the bright sunlight. ‘Please sign the indemnity clause.’

‘Yes,’ I said, scrawling my signature. ‘And yes.’

The girl chewed her gum thoughtfully. ‘Good luck and watch out for that last sandcastle. They call it Popo after a volcano somewhere or other. It’s the one that Ditter got swept from... and you’d better hurry, it will be starting soon. First prize is land on Los Nidos and...whatever else.’ She winked and her eyes became aqua again.

Whatever else. That thought haunted me as I searched for Lauren. I found her still at the scarf stall. ‘I have paid our entry. Are you - sure?’

Lauren turned to me in the way nearly sightless people did, with her jaw angled too high, her neck a little stiff. ‘Surer,’ she laughed, knotting a bright rose and emerald strip of silk around her hair like a bandana. ‘Let’s play.’

*

Freddie The Frog recapped the rules to contestants: locate one of the flags hidden on each sandcastle. First to return with all nine flags would be proclaimed winner.

‘N-no l-late entries and assistance on the c-course brings dis-s-squalification. R-remember, l-last one h-home’s a-a d-dead duck!’

No one laughed.

I glanced along the starting line while Aloys Along took the microphone and gave a staccato rendition of the ballad ‘*One More Kiss, Dear.*’ The contestants were all women, middle-aged mostly, excepting for one pretty, young thing wearing only the briefest of scarlet swimwear and transparent reef-walkers on her feet.

Jaella Aramagh! What was Quentin Carson’s young girlfriend doing entered?

Lauren trembled. ‘It’s Jaella isn’t it?’

‘How did-’

‘I can smell her perfume,’ said Lauren. ‘I could smell it on Quentin.’

And then The Frog dropped his cravat and The Game began.

Jaella streaked ahead of the rest to the first sandcastle and began to climb its ramparts effortlessly. As Lauren and I reached its base, most others were already halfway up, scouring the many crannies for evidence of a flag. I began, what became the first of hours of instruction to Lauren. ‘Right leg high – there is a ledge that you can step onto. Left hand...’

‘TINASHI!’ Katrin’s voice pounded at our backs like a blow from a hammer.

I turned towards it.

She stood at the start line, hair wild, arms restrained by the marshals. ‘Damn you, Tinashi, bring her back!’ she shouted.

‘Don’t listen to her,’ hissed Lauren. ‘She cannot stop me. Here!’ She brought forth her hand from a crevice and showed the crumpled flag.

At that moment I realised the extent to which they had drawn me into their lives. I was the third partner, the invisible lover – the fool and the foil. I should have walked away then, left them to their fates, but my own needs towed me forward.

We repeated the pattern at each sandcastle. While the other contestants ran between castles and climbed quickly, they wasted time searching for the hidden flags. For Lauren and I the walking and climbing was painstaking, but it seemed her sightlessness heightened her other senses, and each time we caught up with the others by finding a flag in a timelier manner.

By the time we reached the eighth castle though, the tide was lapping at our feet and all had retired from The Game for fear of drowning on the incoming tide.

All but us and Jaella Armagh.

As we secured the eighth flag and climbed back down to the beach, Jaella waded waist deep through waves to the ninth castle.

‘We - can’t - make it - Lauren,’ I panted. ‘The tide is - nearly in. The waves will - take us.’

‘Jaella?’

‘Halfway to Popo.’

‘Quickly,’ she cried insistently. ‘We must follow.’

I glanced behind us. The beach was disappearing. Only a tiny strip of sand remained between the waves and cliff face. Above, on the headland, tiny figures watched down on us. Katrin would be among them, cursing me.

‘It is over,’ I said firmly. ‘We have to go back’

‘No.’ She tore free of my hands and lunged a few steps toward Popo.

The waves rolled in, dragging her under.

I dived without thinking and felt for her amongst the froth and weed. It tumbled me once, twice then with relief my hands contacted her flesh and we surfaced, gasping.

The sea had pulled us closer to Popo than the eighth and when my feet touched sand I dragged her with all my strength to the base of the last sandcastle.

She wasted no breath on apology or exclamation. ‘The flag is on the peak. I can see it.’

I did not argue with her for the thin strip of sand had gone now and our survival depended on reaching the top.

Jaella Armagh was above us, wailing with disappointment as flags were washed from their hidey-holes and her grasp by the lash of the waves.

‘There is one left,’ Lauren whispered. ‘I sense it near the broken turret. Near the butterflies.’

I saw where she meant - the smoky cloud of them above a narrow, flat-topped tower. I coaxed her feet and hands to safe ledges and grips.

‘Have faith, Tinashi. Have faith.’ She said it over and over, and I clung to it as my feet slid on trapped seaweed and the salt stung my every scratch and cut.

Jaella reached the top before us but chose the other turret to search.

We tumbled over the lip of the butterfly tower and collapsed but within seconds Lauren was up, crawling around, letting her fingers and mind’s-eye lead her. I lay gasping for breath.

Lauren gave a little cry of victory as her fingers found the last flag. She fell back in a gesture of surrender. Taking a small vial from the halter of her bathers she held it aloft.

Jaella saw her and lunged across the small divide between us, a brutal, wild expression wild on her face. I put my hands out to ward her off but she pushed me away and toppled onto Lauren, clawing and shrieking.

I tried to pull them apart but they were locked in a tussle for the vial.

‘Tinashi,’ Lauren cried. She threw the vial in the air. I caught it reflexively but the stopper dislodged and the contents sprayed over my face.

Blood. I could taste it on my lips, feel its viscosity.

The whirling cylinder of butterflies descended to engulf me, blocking out the light. I felt the flutter of a thousand wings on my face and innumerable tiny stings from their proboscises, as they clamored for the blood.

‘No. No...’ I don’t know which one of us was screaming.

*

Professor A. Wang: Carmine Island Notes, 2051

I examined the most remarkable ‘spore work’ today in a pregnant Afri-Caribbean woman (45) named Tinashi Obeah who presented to the local clinic. Knowing of my studies, the doctor called me in to view the ultrasound - unbeknown to the mother.

The foetus was not formed as it should be for 18 weeks gestation and the woman’s womb contained a liquid mass that was NOT amniotic fluid. Tissue could be seen to be forming in random sections and the doctor has ordered an amniocentesis.

To my knowledge the only creature that presents a similar type of gestation is the blood-feeding *Heliconius* butterfly. I suggested a blood sample to confirm my suspicions but it will be several days before the results are conclusive and until then I will keep my thoughts to myself.

According to the mother’s confused reportage, her child was conceived during The Flag Game (see: Island Customs). I can only hypothesise, if the DNA evidence supports it, that the woman has been exposed to foreign peptides and this has somehow compromised her reproductive strategy. Whether the child reaches full term, or indeed becomes a child, is yet to be determined.

NOTE: if the foetus was ‘accidentally’ stillborn it would make an outstanding study specimen.

About the Author

Marianne de Pierres lives in Brisbane with her husband and three children. Her latest novel, *Dark Space*, is published by Orbit, and was reviewed in *Hub* issue 5. Our reviewer concluded: *readers who hunger for perceptive, intelligent and unflinching literary science fiction should seek this book out as soon as possible. If the sequels to Dark Space live up to the promise of this opening salvo, de Pierres will become a serious challenge to the big boys of the genre.*

REVIEWS

Torchwood – Complete First Series reviewed by Scott Harrison

New Writings in the Fantastic reviewed by Lee Harris

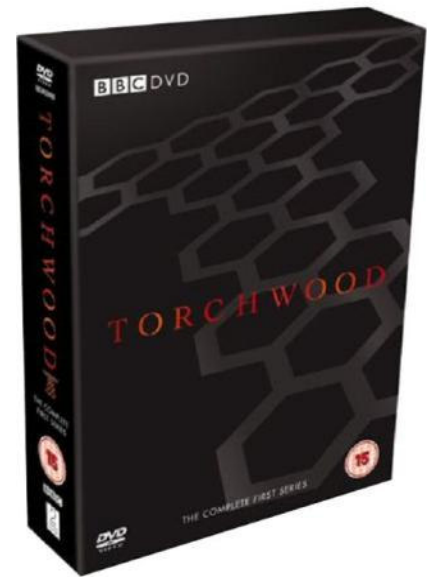
30 Days of Night reviewed by Paul Kane

Torchwood – Complete First Series

Directed by Brian Kelly, James Strong and others

Starring John Barrowman, Eve Myles, Burn Gorman, Naoko Mori

BBC, £54.99



It's a pretty safe bet to say that Russell T. Davies' much anticipated *Doctor Who* spin-off series, *Torchwood*, wasn't particularly well received when it first hit our screens back in October 2006. Many complained that the show's mandate of aiming at a more 'adult' audience simply meant a liberal sprinkling of four-letter words and gratuitously crowbarred in sex scenes, while others bemoaned the distinct lack of originality or a strong central motif in its collection of thirteen scripts. Very few series in television history has stirred up such intense controversy and ill feeling in its audience, even before it had begun airing. Yet from day one *Torchwood* sent the more 'extreme' members of the Whovian fanbase clamouring for their PCs in a desperate race to get online and slag it off. It's a wonder RTD and co didn't throw up their hands in despair and call it a day, ending the series for good after only thirteen episodes! But now that the dust has had time to settle and twelve months of bitter bile has flowed under the bridge, the question is were the fans right in their initial harsh criticism of the series and is it really that bad?

The answer is no...it's actually bloody good! To misquote the Bard, *Torchwood* is a series more sinned against than sinning.

Watching *Torchwood* again a year later, without all the horribly constricting preconceptions borne through watching *Doctor Who* it's surprising just what a cracking little series it is. OK, yes, it has its faults (of which we will come to in a moment) but we must remember that this is only its first series and as such is still finding its feet. TelevisionLand is littered with many culturally iconic and massively popular TV shows that were, to say the least, a bit wobbly at the outset. We only have to look at the first two cringingly awful seasons of *Star Trek The Next Generation*, season one of *The Simpsons* or the first six episodes of *Red Dwarf* to see that it's rarely plain sailing from the word go. Even *Doctor Who* took an entire thirteen episode series before it managed to eject those somewhat embarrassingly cheesy moments. But credit where credit's due, as first series go, *Torchwood* rather impressively manages to hit the ground running from very early in its run.

Set in modern day Cardiff and concerning itself with the Alien-busting exploits of Torchwood Three the first half of the series is told through the eyes of PC Gwen Cooper, a down-at-heels honest Welsh bobby who steps into the secret and violent underworld of the Torchwood organisation when duplicitous member Suzie Costello kills herself following an impromptu murder spree. Along with her fellow *Torchwood* colleagues – Owen Harper (doctor and self-proclaimed 'twat'), Toshiko Sato (the timid computer genius) and Captain Jack Harkness (of whom we are all familiar with by now!) – they set out to investigate the dark, weird and violent cases that are considered beyond the capabilities of the usual British authorities and arm themselves with whatever alien technology they can beg, steal or borrow in order to defend the Earth against future threats from outer space.

Torchwood's biggest drawback is in its episode running order and many of its problems could have been resolved if more care had been taken in where the stories were placed. The latter half of the series sees too many stories focusing on a single member of *Torchwood* while the remainder of the team are sidelined to brief appearances that bookmark the episodes. Though Gwen is undoubtedly the main character of the series, sometimes a little too much airtime is given to her character, relegating others, such as the tragically underused Toshiko and even the mighty Capt. Jack, to bit-part players. The darkly disturbing and bitterly tragic episode *They Keep Killing Suzie*, which spends much of its fifty minutes stressing the absence of an afterlife, that there is no 'higher plain' awaiting us after death, only the total void of absolute nothingness, is immediately proceeded by the God-awful *Random Shoes* (*Torchwood's* very own *Love & Monsters* episode!) which sees a recently deceased youth returning as a ghost to solve the riddle

of his own death – a scenario which seems to contradict the entire groundwork laid down by the previous episode. Perhaps the series' greatest weakness lies in its almost non-existent story arc (existing only as the line "Something is moving in the dark and it's coming for you" which is spoken only twice in the whole of the first series) and its monster-rampaging dénouement which not only seems an unoriginal and unimpressive climax after the *Doctor Who* two-parter *Impossible Planet/Satan Pit* which aired only four months before but rather confusingly fails to reference or acknowledge it in any way at all, leaving the viewer confused as to whether there is any connection between the two stories or the programme makers simply forgot that they'd already used that monster a few months earlier!

It's taken over a year for Aunty Beeb to finally get around to releasing *Torchwood* in its shiny complete series entirety (rather than the five months for the *Doctor Who* box sets) but it's certainly worth the wait. Along with its parent series' releases, these are without doubt the greatest television packages to hit our DVD shelves so far! Groaning under the weight of an impressively hefty collection of extras this seven-disc set has been put together with all the love, care and attention that is so woefully absent from just about every other small screen release. All thirteen episodes come with a wonderfully chatty, informative and downright fun commentary track from various members of cast and crew while the whole of disc seven is taken up with BBC3's behind-the-scenes documentary series *Torchwood Declassified*, crammed with wonderful interviews and backstage gossip from all those involved in the making of the show. Out-takes, deleted scenes, John Barrowman's video diary and fourteen making-of featurettes complete this fantastic box set and spoils us rotten in the process!

To all you *Torchwood* nay-sayers and bad-mouthers I say go out and buy this box set right now – *Torchwood* isn't as bad as you think it is! In fact, along with *Doctor Who* and the U.S. series *Heroes* it's one of the most exciting, fun and downright cool series currently airing on British TV!

New Writings in the Fantastic

Edited by John Grant

Published by Pendragon Press

£12.99, www.pendragonpress.co.uk

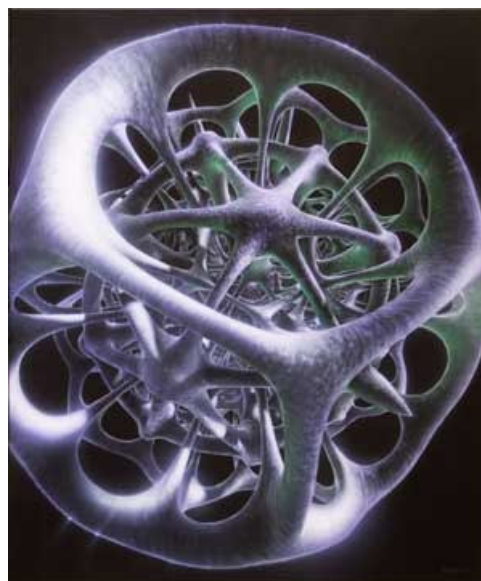
Pendragon is one of the most consistently impressive small press publishers in the country. Though their output is modest in terms of quantity, where quality is concerned, they almost always score impressively high.

New Writings is a collection of over 40 short stories by over 40 authors, linked only by their genre. Editor John Grant states in his introduction that the book is "an attempt to show the full scope of what the literature of the fantastic can do when it isn't being crammed into that preconceived, primarily non-fantastic marketing niche [perpetrated by the publishers of "doorstop fantasy"]".

He has a point.

Any collection of this size that doesn't rely on being the year's "Best of" is going to have a hard time of it. It is difficult to commission forty plus stories without running into some weaker works. Thankfully, Grant has chosen wisely, and there are very few tales within the anthology that are not worth reading. The quality of the stories tends to run from the very good (Derek J Goodman's *An Incomplete Palindrome Alphabet for Dyslexic Deliverymen*) to the excellent (Greg Story's *The Transmissionary*).

Like many small press publications, the cover price seems, at first glance, a little on the high side, but the quality of the work makes *New Writings* worth every penny. This is quite possibly the most important and most interesting collection in the oft-maligned fantasy genre to be published this year. Buy it.



30 Days of Night.

Directed by David Slade.

Written by Steve Niles.

Starring Josh Hartnett, Melissa George, Danny Huston, Ben Foster.

Out in cinemas now.



Just when you think nothing new can be done with the vampire sub-genre, along comes a TV series or movie to inject fresh blood into it. In the 90s it was Buffy strutting her stuff, proving that a powerful female lead could show Van Helsing a thing or two, giving us memorable vampire characters like Angel and Spike. Blade introduced us to a cool half vampire and an urban stomping ground where humans were familiars. A decade on and it's the turn of Steve Niles, whose 2003 graphic novel **30 Days of Night** has just been – deservedly – brought to a larger audience. The difference this time? Two things. 1) The setting: Barrow, Alaska, a town in the Arctic circle which for one month out of every year is in complete and utter darkness, thus taking away one of the best defences against vamps, sunlight. 2) The protagonists here are simply a group of survivors, hoping they can avoid the neck-chompers long enough to see another dawn...

The movie begins in epic style, with one man (Ben Foster) emerging from a frozen ship and making his way towards Barrow. His mission: to pave the way for the vampires – by destroying all the cell phones, killing the sled dogs and crippling the town's helicopter. Those inhabitants who don't want to endure the perpetual dark are already departing, leaving the town's asthmatic Sheriff, Eben Oleson (Josh Hartnett), to try and figure out what's going on. Stranded, too, is his estranged wife Stella (Melissa George) who was only there for a fleeting visit in her capacity as a fire marshal. Together, they capture the stranger and sling him in jail, but as the sun sets for the final time in 30 days and the power dies, they realise far too late that something is very wrong indeed.

All over the town people are being dragged from their houses and feasted on by a group of nosferatu led by Marlow (Huston taking a chilling part, speaking in a guttural ancient language). Almost feral in nature, they attack anyone they can find, ripping into their throats and drinking their blood. Soon only a small group remains – including Eben, his teenage brother, Jake (Mark Rendall), Stella and Beau Brower (Mark Boone, Jr.), a local snowplow driver who is also a bit of a loner. Hiding away from the vampires only gives them some breathing room, and soon they have to come out for supplies. But with the whole town a hunting ground, and up against a force much stronger than them, it becomes a question of who will make it through the month alive, who will be turned and how the vampires can finally be defeated.

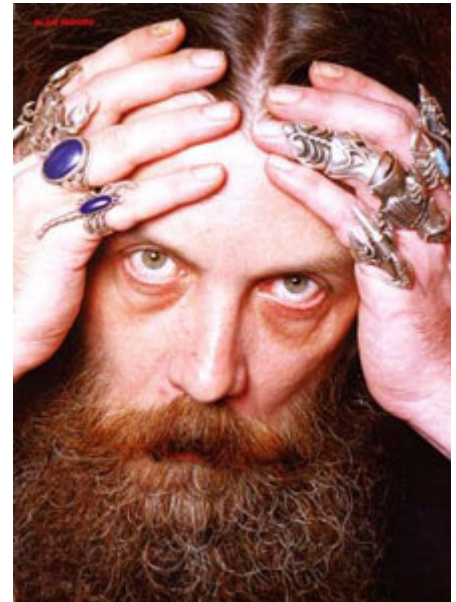
Director David Slade takes Niles' script, adapted from the original source, and really goes to town with it. I can honestly say there'll be something in here that will make even the most jaded horror fan whoop with joy. From a chilling little girl vampire asking if they 'want to play' to the frenzied and gore-soaked attacks on the townspeople, there are shocks aplenty. Some of the chills are subtle, some out and out nasty, but all of them work. Plus the relationships of the characters don't play second fiddle as they do in some horror movies. Actually, it's because you care so much about them and whether they'll get through this that makes **30 Days of Night** so different from others of its ilk. Eben is not a stereotypical hard-man hero, far from it, and only fights when he's cornered or is trying to save someone else. And the last scenes with him and Stella will guarantee that you never, ever forget this excellent piece of celluloid.

Like a nightmare you can't wake from, where you're being chased and can't get away, the audience is dragged along with the survivors in the film, never quite sure who will make it through the next attack – and, trust me when I say *nobody* is safe. Psychological horror rubs shoulders very nicely with bloody effects to create what will surely be a springboard for more vampire movies and television shows to come. If you thought this particular sub-genre had been staked in the heart, think again.

Author Profile: Alan Moore

By Andrew Edwards

Alan Moore has been creating comics for over thirty years, initially as a cartoonist, then as a scriptwriter. He was the first comics writer to make an impact in the USA, in turn opening the doors for other writers to follow, including Neil Gaiman, Grant Morrison and more recently, Mark Millar. He has lived in his home town of Northampton all his life and he is arguably the greatest living writer of comic books in the whole world. He has received critical acclaim for a number of his works, which are among the most significant pieces of science fiction and fantasy ever to have been published. He is also a practising occult magician, and he currently worships Glycon, a mid-second century snake god. Alan Moore is a one-off, an original force in comics and a cultural phenomenon.



Moore's emergence as a scriptwriter, with stints on self-drawn strips, short 'Future Shock' stories for 2000 AD and Marvel UK, and work on *Doctor Who* and *Captain Britain*, led to him bringing an adult sensibility to his comic scripting work. This found expression in his work on *Marvelman*, a defunct UK hero reinvented by Moore and artist Garry Leach (later with Alan Davis and other artists) and was published in the short-lived but influential UK comic title *Warrior*. Moore took Stan Lee's method of applying real life situations and relationships to comic book superheroes and injected sophisticated plotting and realistic dialogue, in turn creating scenes and characters which, in superhero comics, were more believable and true-to-life than pretty much anything that had come before. He was also influenced by Harvey Kurtzman's parody *Superduperman*, reapplying its parodic depiction of realism in relation to superheroes in a dramatic context. In addition, Robert Mayer's *Superfolks* novel was another influence in Moore's use of realism in *Marvelman*.

The character was originally created in 1954 by Mick Anglo and was published in Britain by L. Miller & Son. British reprints of the American series *Captain Marvel* were stopped after a successful lawsuit in America against Fawcett Comics by DC comics, citing the character as a clone of *Superman*. Anglo was instructed to create another series to replace these reprints, and *Marvelman* was the result. Much of the essential nature of *Captain Marvel* was retained in *Marvelman*: both could transform from a young boy to an adult superhero through uttering a single word – *Captain Marvel*'s 'Shazam', *Miracleman*'s 'Kimota'; both featured a 'family' of sidekick superheroes; and both heroes were created via the intervention of a mystical old man, although this would be revealed as a fake memory in Moore's revisionist approach to his new *Marvelman* strip.

Moore took the iconic imagery and stereotypes associated with superheroes and deconstructed them. Mike Moran was *Marvelman*'s secret identity, now grown to manhood, with no memory of his alter-ego. This was remedied in the first instalment as terrorists attempted to take over a nuclear power plant. He went on to discover his origins; specifically that he was an orphan and that his adventures in the 1950s were actually elaborate virtual reality-style scenarios created by Dr Emil Gargunza, the real life counterpart of *Marvelman*'s VR-world nemesis. In this, Moore moved the superhero genre away from generic, innocent juvenile entertainment to more mature plots and rounded characterisation that inspired a generation of comic book writers.

Marvelman caught the attention of Marvel Comics in the USA, who took issue with the use of the word 'marvel'. This caused problems, and the strip was suspended in *Warrior* (the magazine was cancelled a few issues later). It was reprinted and continued under the name *Miracleman* by Eclipse comics in America, and collected in three volumes. These are now out of print and rare; editions can be bought, but their rarity usually leads to a high price tag. In these later stories *Miracleman*, following a vicious battle with *Kid Miracleman* (a sidekick grown to adulthood in a superheroic body who turned evil during the years of Moran's amnesia), decides to rebuild London, and assume the role of the god-like leader of Earth. He is

helped by the Warpsmiths, the alien race whose technology was used by Gargunza to create the Miracleman family. Neil Gaiman, then also writing *The Sandman* series, took over for some issues, but his run remains unfinished.

Gaiman focused on the effects of the changes to society under Miracleman's rule and the resurrection of another sidekick, Young Miracleman. The character has recently been subject to legal proceedings over copyright and ownership following the purchase of Eclipse comics by Todd McFarlane, creator of Spawn. One can only hope that when the legal issues are resolved we will see Moore's work reprinted and Gaiman's run concluded.

Another of Moore's masterpieces, *V for Vendetta*, began its life in *Warrior*, and was eventually bought and completed as a 12 issue miniseries and then a collected graphic novel by DC comics in America. The series is set in the then-future Britain of 1997 and is focused on an anarchist known only as codename V, who is fighting against a dystopian, fascist state that has come to power in the UK following a nuclear war. Dressed in a Guy Fawkes costume, V succeeds where Fawkes failed and blows up the Houses of Parliament in his first act of terrorism/liberation.

He rescues a teenager called Evey, and it is through this relationship that the reader sees the human cost of the loss of freedom and denial of free will that fascism creates. The story is a complex and profoundly moving account of Evey's maturation into adulthood, with V taking the role of mentor. The supporting cast embody both the flawed humanity and coldness of people too embroiled in the fascist state, and focuses on those involved in the media, government, police and religion. It is a dark parable of the near future, far removed from superheroes, and another example of Moore's growing adeptness at moving comics towards more mature sensibilities. The art was provided by David Lloyd, whose superb original noirish black and white art in *Warrior* was complemented by his use of muted, delicate tones for the DC edition of the series.

DC comics' attention had been drawn to Moore through his UK work and he was hired to take over *Saga of the Swamp Thing* (later retitled to just *Swamp Thing*), a comic that had been suffering from low sales. Learning from his experiences with *Marvelman*, Moore came to the title with a desire to reinvent. Rather than stay with the idea that the character was a mutated scientist called Alec Holland, Moore told the reader that it was actually Holland's memories that had been absorbed by a plant elemental; as such, the swamp thing had never been Alec Holland and his lost humanity could never be regained. It had never existed in the first place.

Moore wrote about the modern horror implicit in modern American society in this series, and he focused on relationship problems, particularly in the cross-species love affair between the Swamp Thing and Abigail Arcane, the niece of enemy Dr Anton Arcane. He also created Liverpoolian magus John Constantine, who went on to receive his own DC title, scripted by Jamie Delano and others. His run on the title (issues 19 to 64, from 1984-1987) saw an increase in sales and popularity and provided the bedrock upon which DC later built its horror and mature readers comic imprint 'Vertigo'. It inspired a resurgence of interest in horror comics. A wave of horror and supernatural fantasy titles followed in its wake, chief among these being Neil Gaiman's critical and commercial success *The Sandman*. In addition, Moore began to contribute scripts to a number of DC's superhero titles, such as *Green Lantern*, *Batman* and the last two Superman stories before a reinvention of the character by writer/artist John Byrne, a reinvention no doubt at least partly inspired by Moore's own revisionist tendencies.

Moore's greatest work in comics is arguably the 12 issue miniseries *Watchmen*, later collected in graphic novel form, that he created with artist Dave Gibbons. It remains the only graphic novel to have won the Hugo award. Time magazine cited it as one of the top 100 English-language novels.

Moore's original idea was to create a story using heroes from MLJ comics, but Dick Giordano of DC comics suggested using heroes that the company had acquired from Charlton Comics. However, when the plot dictated that some of the characters would die, they decided to use new characters, as the death of the Charlton heroes would limit DC's ability to use them in the future.

Watchmen is a work of precision, a structural masterpiece. It mainly employs a nine panel grid per page, in which Moore and Gibbons foreshadow and create parallels with the imagery they use and juxtapose images and text to create an emotional and visceral effect upon the reader, thereby showing what comics as an art form can achieve. It is set on an alternate Earth where Watergate never happened, where superhero comics were replaced by pirate comics, where costumed vigilantes assumed the role of superheroes. The only super-powered human is Jon Osterman, a physicist who rebuilt his body following a disastrous physics

experiment who can control matter on a subatomic level and has a total awareness of his own past and future.

The plot involves an investigation into the death of a government-sponsored agent, The Comedian, by Rorschach, a mentally disturbed vigilante who has continued his illegal investigations despite non-government heroes being outlawed. It is supported by text pieces at the end of each issue of the comic, or chapter of the graphic novel, which serve further to flesh out certain characters and the society they inhabit. Moore has taken his cue from Marvelman and explored the effect of realistic superheroes on a much larger canvas: American society. In doing so, he and Gibbons created a science-fiction comic which has influenced the industry to the present day.

Moore also produced much worthy work during the 1990s and 2000s, including: *From Hell*, an exploration of Victorian mysticism, royalty, the Masons and Jack the Ripper; *ABC Comics*, a line of titles in which he returned to superheroes in titles such as *Tom Strong*, where he focused on the pulp origins of superheroes, and *Promethea*, where he explores ideas of mysticism, the occult and the nature of ideas. During his career he has moved from fantasy, horror and science fiction through realism, post-modernism and parody, written a novel, *Voice of the Fire*, and performed and recorded idiosyncratic musical pieces. He is one of the most original voices in comics and he remains a powerful cultural force across a wide range of media forms.

Next week:

- An interview with one of the stars of TV smash hit, *Heroes* (which was due to appear this week, but with such a bumper issue this time around we thought it prudent to give it some space to air).
- More reviews
- Another superb piece of short fiction.

If you have enjoyed this week's issue, please consider making a small donation at www.hub-mag.co.uk. We pay our writers, and your support is appreciated.