

# Hub

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Editors: Lee Harris and Alasdair Stuart.  
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## Wanting to Want

One of Hub's first published tales (*Wanting to Want* by Eugie Foster, Hub issue 1) is now available to download as audio fiction from [pseudopod.org](http://pseudopod.org) (although Hub are uncredited in the podcast). Congratulations to Eugie – it's an excellent story, and highly recommended.

## British Fantasy Society Nomination

Also from issue 1 of Hub, Alasdair Stuart's *Connected* has been nominated for Best Short Fiction in the forthcoming British Fantasy Society awards. Congratulations to Al! *Connected* will shortly be distributed to all subscribers as a Hub Special – if you're a member of the BFS and you enjoy the tale, please consider voting for it when your ballot papers come through.

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## Back Issues

If you have missed any of the electronic-only versions of *Hub* (Issue 3, onwards) they can be downloaded **free-of-charge** from our website. Issues 1 and 2 (high quality, glossy printed magazines) can also be ordered for a small fee.

## Support Us

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 (of any size) over at [www.hub-mag.co.uk](http://www.hub-mag.co.uk).



Dark Space is not really dark.

Neither is it empty.



The new space opera by Marianne de Pierres - in all good bookshops from May 2007 / [www.mariannedepierres.com](http://www.mariannedepierres.com) / [www.orbitbooks.co.uk](http://www.orbitbooks.co.uk)

## I Look Forward to Remembering You by Mur Lafferty

*First published as audio fiction by EscapePod at [escapepod.org](http://escapepod.org)  
(Episode 61, 6 July 2006)*



The time whore - time *escort*, he'd insisted - stood in front of Susan Apple while she surveyed his virtues and flaws. She studied the ridges of his abdominals and the curve of his buttocks. He was thin and wiry, with tight muscles creating a compact frame devoid of any unnecessary bulk. The young man looked to be about twenty, with firm, pale skin. Susan looked him over for a good five minutes, instructed him to turn a couple of times, and finally to remove his boxer shorts.

She smiled at last and gave a satisfied little sigh. He was just as she'd ordered. Without raising her eyes to his face, she asked, "So when do we begin?"

"We just have some paperwork to go over," he said. He bent over to pick up his bathrobe and Susan stared as his muscles flexed. Kevin slipped the robe on with the slow grace of someone who was unashamed of his nakedness. "Once we take care of that, I'll go back to headquarters and take my trip back to 1992, find your younger self, and seduce her."

"Excellent, Kevin," she said. She imagined saying his name after a night of sweaty sex, and it felt wrong. "Kevin. That won't work for me. I'd rather have you be Paul," she said.

He nodded. "I'll introduce myself to you as Paul, then." He paused. "As long as there is no one in your past called Paul. That may cause confusion for your younger self."

She kept her face straight. "No one."

Kevin picked up his briefcase that he'd left by the door with his folded khakis and sweater. "We need to go over the paperwork before you sign, Ms. Apple." He walked to Susan's heavy oak dining room table and pulled a chair out for her.

Susan gripped the sides of her chair and pulled herself to her feet. Her bad knee, injured twenty years ago in China, wobbled and threatened to give out. She hissed and it seemed to rethink its direction. She silently cursed her vanity that caused her to leave her cane in the other room. He was a whore; she didn't need to impress him. And anyway, she wouldn't be sleeping with him in her current state. She shuffled over to the table and took the proffered chair with a smile of thanks. Up close, he smelled of musk.

Kevin looked quite businesslike and official in his bathrobe (complete with the monogrammed logo "TEI" - for "Time Escorts, Inc.") He put his briefcase on the table and leaned over her shoulder. He scent was more pervasive, and heat drifted off his skin as he slid a paper in front of her, brushing her arm. Susan swallowed.

"I have been sterilized by both a vasectomy and a Nano Vas. I am tested for disease after every mission - you can see the documentation here." He pointed at the lines on the paper, which repeated his statements in more businesslike terms. She initialed the bottom of the page.

"Here our are guarantees," he said, whisking the paper away and producing another one. "They protect you from time paradox, possible mental anguish, and a full money-back and experience-deleting guarantee."

"That was what made me finally decide to do this," Susan admitted. She felt heat rise to her wrinkled cheeks for the first time that day.

Kevin smiled, and she felt hotter. "That's what most of our clients say. We offer the best guarantee in the business. If you experience mental anguish, disease, family grief, physical harm or death due to this service, the experience will be erased and your money returned to you," he said.

Susan stared at the legal jargon on the page and couldn't make heads or tails of it.

"By signing this, however, you do acknowledge that there may be unavoidable changes to your current way of life," Kevin continued. "While we do cover drastic changes in the life path, we do not cover minor ones. You could wake up tomorrow morning wearing a different color of nightgown or be close friends with someone you currently hate. You will remember both paths of your lives, although the previous path - your current path, that is - will fade over time."

Susan put up her hand. "Wait just a minute. Are you saying that I could wake up tomorrow a different person?"

Kevin put a diagram in front of her. "Everything we do in life affects everything else. Your cat knocks your keys off the table and you take five minutes to find them. You leave later than you'd intended, and are not there when a bus driver loses control and kills three pedestrians. That tiny detail saved your life and you didn't even know it. We do everything in our power - with your help - to schedule the sexual encounter during a time in your life when it will affect the fewest number of outside events, but we cannot guarantee small changes won't happen. Not to mention how losing your virginity at 19 will change your life and make you take a different path than you are currently on."

Susan made a face. This wasn't sounding as good as before. "What if I don't like the changes? Can I erase the encounter then?"

"Of course," the escort said, smiling a charming grin. One of his front teeth was crooked. Susan felt a thrill of both excitement and anxiety; this guy was good. He knew his stuff. "We can modify the time continuum a second time if you are not satisfied with the outcome. These modifications do come with an additional fee, however." He handed her a rate card.

Susan's eyes widened. She could have the encounter, then have it erased for double. That was unexpected. She looked into the fireplace across the room and her eyes drifted to the mantle. Pictures of her aiding children in Africa, meeting the UN Secretary to receive a humanitarian award, going walkabout in Australia, hiking in the Rockies. She was alone or with friends, never with a lover. She'd experienced nearly everything in life. Nearly.

"Fine. Where do I sign?"

#

Kevin had promised to leave for 1992 that night at six o'clock. Susan had an early dinner of soup and soft bread - she could no longer chew the crunchy loaves she'd loved in her youth - and settled in front of the fire with a glass of wine. The memories should start flowing in around six-thirty, and by tomorrow morning she would remember everything about her sexual encounter with the handsome Paul that she had when she was nineteen. Plus anything that had changed due to the encounter.

She sipped the wine and leaned back. Images, memories and smells began flowing to her, feeling recent as her mind processed the new memories. A bad day in college. She had been dumped by Bruce, her boyfriend who was turned off by her intelligence and her social awkwardness. He had been a bad kisser, she had told herself, crying as she walked across campus to her dorm. Then she had met a kind man, someone named Paul, who showed his concern for her by slowly and deliciously initiating her in the glories of the flesh.

#

Kevin thought that the young Susan wasn't that bad looking. He sat on the steps of the Foreign Languages building and waited for her to get closer. She held herself awkwardly, hunching over

and hiding her form. She hadn't yet achieved the sharp intelligent confidence that the elderly Susan had; her intelligence was a hindrance to her, something that made others dislike and mistrust her. He had read Susan's account of her college years thoroughly and had run her journals through their personality computer. He knew just how to approach the young woman to begin the encounter.

His employers had developed the personality matrix software. Even if people wanted to change their past to include more and better sexual encounters, their selves in the past wouldn't know what was coming. The encounter could fail at a costly loss for the company - traveling through time was not cheap, and they couldn't afford many refunds - or could even be construed as harassment or rape. Kevin did not know of any circumstances where this had happened, but the trainers at Time Escorts heavily emphasized the psychology of seduction to fit the person.

She was crying, just as he'd expected. He took a deep breath - the first meeting was the hardest - and fell into step beside her as she scuttled past. He was so intent on catching up with her naturally that he didn't see the woman coming the other way. They brushed shoulders and she stumbled. Kevin excused himself quickly and fell into step beside the sobbing woman.

"Hey, are you OK?" he asked, putting concern into his voice.

She sniffled and looked up at him. "What? Oh, I'm fine, yes, thank you. Yes."

He smiled and saw her mouth hang open a moment. "You don't look fine to me. Fine people don't take a stroll on campus while crying their eyes out. What happened?"

Her lower lip trembled and more tears spilled over her cheeks as she looked away.

"Is it a guy?" he asked. She nodded.

"Do you want to get some coffee and talk about it? I'm a good listener," he said. "My treat."

She looked at him for a moment, and he saw her calculating the safety involved. *This is it.* "Do I know you?" she asked.

"I've seen you in my Econ 10 class. I usually sit in the back," he said. He'd looked for the biggest class on her schedule, the easiest to get lost in. Most freshmen took that class. "I'm Paul." He extended his hand.

She took it, and he let his fingers trace across her palm lightly after they had shaken hands. "Erica," she said.

#

*Asshole, fucker, shitface, bastard, um, asshole.* Susan ran through all of the swear words she knew, and when she was done, she repeated them. So she wasn't social enough, was she? She wasn't pretty enough, studied too much, partied too little, and wouldn't let him touch her *there*.

"Maybe I wouldn't let you touch me there because you kiss so poorly that I'm afraid what you might do elsewhere!" she'd screamed at him before leaving. At least she'd gotten the last word in.

She'd stopped by her Japanese TA's office to check her midterm grade and then got plowed into by some shmoe who said, "Sorry!" before running after some girl.

*Yeah, always they're chasing someone else. Fuckers. All of them.* She rubbed her shoulder and decided to go back to her dorm by way of the Student Union. Walking her usual way would have her following the jerk and his girlfriend, and she really didn't feel like putting someone else's problems on her shoulders. It was her night to feel sorry for herself, dammit, and she was going to treat herself to a donut or three.

She trudged to the Union, purchased her donut, and went to the TV lounge to see what was on the big screen. She stayed near the back, hoping no one would notice her blotchy face and her tear-streaked eyes.

"Susan?" the voice said from behind her.

She gasped, sucked in a bit of donut, and went into a coughing fit. A hand thumped her on the back and she was free of the offending pastry. She wheezed a bit and straightened up.

"Oh man, I'm sorry, didn't mean to startle you!" It was Paul, her lab partner in geology. She avoided his blue eyes, as always, and looked directly at his slightly crooked teeth.

"That's OK, I just didn't hear you come up," she said, trying to regain her composure. Aware of her swollen eyes and crumbly mouth, she passed a hand down her face. Unfortunately, the hand had more sugar from the donut and she just succeeded in getting more stuff on her face.

"Are you OK? You look, ah, upset," he said.

"Oh, yeah, just had a bad night. Thanks. Just, stuff. You know," she gestured vaguely with her donut then dropped it in a wastebasket. She turned and grabbed for some napkins from the condiment table.

Nonchalantly cleaning her hands and face, she attempted a smile at him. He still stared at her. "So, uh, what are you up to tonight?" she asked.

"I was supposed to meet the anime club in a basement room, but no one showed, now I'm stuck with a bunch of tapes and some AV equipment. I just came up here to grab a Coke before having my own private viewing," he said, waving the bottle of Coke at her.

"Do you like anime?" he asked.

"Well, I've never seen any," she said, hoping he couldn't hear her thundering heart. "But I'm an International Studies major and hope to study in Japan in a couple of semesters."

"Then you should watch some!" he said. "Come on!" He walked off towards the stairs without looking behind him.

*Men. Always expecting you to do what they say.* She tried to think this with acidity, but it felt hollow. She'd nursed a crush on Paul all semester, but squashed it because of her relationship with Bruce. And hell, she knew she wasn't a catch.

She followed.

#

Kevin's voice caught in his throat. This wasn't Susan, and he didn't know where she was. If he had missed her, he had no idea where she would end up. He'd have to try her dorm.

But there was the problem of this girl. She looked up at him with wet brown eyes, taking in the natural charm he had inadvertently oozed at her. *Shit, I'm so going to lose my job for this.*

He checked his watch and gasped. "Oh, crap, I'm sorry Erica, I forgot I'm late for a study group. I'm so sorry to leave you like this. Can we get that coffee in an hour? I'll meet you at the Daily Grind - I'll buy you the biggest double chocolate mocha you can drink."

She bought it. "All right, thanks Paul. I really need someone to talk to now."

Kevin dashed off towards Susan's dorm, pulling a map from his pocket.

#

Two episodes of Ranma 1/2 and Susan was hooked. Paul had insisted on watching in Japanese with subtitles, and she told him where the translation differed from what the characters really said. They sat next to each other on folding chairs and every once in a while their knees touched.

While changing tapes, Paul looked at her. "So why were you crying? Really."

"I just got dumped," she said, looking at the floor.

"Aw shit, I'm sorry. You were with that guy for, what, four months?"

"Yes, how did you know?" she looked up at him.

"Well," Paul focused his attention on the VCR. "I was going to ask you out, but you came to lab all excited about this new guy you were dating. So it kinda stuck in my mind."

"Oh."

"So what happened between you guys?" he hit a button and returned to his seat.

"I am not enough of a party girl for him. Not pretty enough, not fun enough, not, you know, physical enough." She fiddled with the zipper on her jacket. Her ears were hot.

"Oh, so you were a smart girl who wouldn't put out, right?" His voice was mocking.

"What's wrong with that?" she asked.

"Nothing at all. Just that he was a retard who didn't see what he had.

"Check this out, there's a new character in this one." He pointed to the TV. "A guy who always gets lost."

The opening credits came on, the chirpy Japanese theme song circling the confusion and excitement somewhere in Susan's middle.

#

Susan didn't answer the phone at her dorm, and no one would let Kevin through the locked doors to get up to her room without an escort. Had elderly Susan said something about sexual assaults going up that year? He couldn't get his focus.

Where else? Susan was smart. Libraries. She was upset. Coffee shops or Student Union. She was heartbroken. Boyfriend's dorm? He had no idea. It was obvious his appearance had already changed something in the timeline; Susan was supposed to go from her boyfriend's dorm to her dorm, where she lived in a single room. Kevin was going to seduce her there with no interruptions. It was supposed to have been easy. Find the girl, console the girl, fuck the girl, get out. Easy money. He'd never messed up like this.

With hope, he could still catch her. He checked his map again and went off at a run towards the library.

#

Halfway through the second tape, Paul took Susan's hand. She didn't withdraw it, even though his palm was hot and sweaty. After putting in the third tape, Paul closed the door to the room and returned to sit with her.

"So is it too soon to ask you out?" he asked. His face was red. "I mean, it's not soon to me. I've been waiting for months. But soon after your breakup, I mean."

She surprised herself by kissing him. He surprised her by sliding his arms around her middle and holding her tightly. His lips were soft and electrifying, nothing wet or insistent or Bruce-like about them.

More surprising things happened, all of them quite good. The most surprising thing was that she initiated most of them. He let her lead, and she ended up on top of him, watching the animated heroine lose her ponytail during a battle scene.

#

Kevin had no idea what to do if he found her. Losing his seductive nature in his frantic search, he interrupted several people in the library looking for her. Inside the Student Union, he searched the top two floors and paused to rest on the way to the basement.

What was he qualified to do if he lost this job? He had been trained in avoiding paradoxes, extreme time management, all the levels of seduction. Perhaps they would put him on a desk job. Less exciting, but at least he could still eat. Maybe he could find a wealthy older woman who wanted a boy toy. Heck, Susan had seemed to like his looks. The thought repulsed him.

He got up, determined to finish the job, and descended the stairs. Susan now, so he wouldn't have to do Susan later.

#

They were experimenting again, this time letting Paul take a turn on top, when the door opened. Susan gasped. Paul swore and rolled off her. The lights were off, so there was only a silhouette of a man in the hallway.

"Whoops," the man said. "Um, Susan?"

*Fuck.* "Yeah, what?" she said.

"Hey, it's Paul, you know, from... Econ 10... I needed, uh, to borrow some notes. But, crap, never mind. Sorry." The door closed.

"Who the hell?" asked Paul.

"I have no idea." she said.

"Well. This isn't the most private place, now, is it?" he said, the still-running anime lighting up his wicked grin.

She returned his smile. "I have a single room. It has a door that locks."

#

Kevin trudged out of the Student Union, head hanging. He could find no way to fix this now. He couldn't sneak back to the home office and use the machine without his superiors' knowledge. The time travel machine was a complicated device that required seven people to operate, and there was no unofficial company business to be conducted with it. He was fired for sure. Unless Susan didn't like the way this turned out.... but she had seemed pretty damn happy when he'd walked in on them.

Not paying attention to his direction, he heard someone yell, "Paul!" It took him a moment before Kevin remembered to turn. *Susan?*

He'd passed right in front of the outside coffee bar. Erica sat at a table, waving at him. He studied her for a moment, then checked his watch. One hour until the device would call him home. He had time to kill. Might as well enjoy his job while he still had it.

#

It was seven-thirty when Susan gasped, realizing that the memories that were flooding her mind had nothing to do with Kevin. Had she even met him? She had requested someone who had looked like Paul, someone who took the name Paul, without ever remembering her old college crush. Tears sprang to her eyes as her new past wove itself in her mind's eye. Paul. Their time together in college. Their letters when she traveled the world, studying other cultures and eventually getting work as a diplomat.

She stood uncertainly - was her knee stronger? She couldn't tell. The pictures on her mantle were fading and changing. The picture of her shaking hands with Chen Chua Xing, the UN Secretary, morphed into a picture of her and an older Paul in front of a temple in China. She smiled. He had studied kung fu during the months that she served at the American embassy. The picture of her hiking in the Rockies didn't change at all, but she remembered that Paul had taken it. Instead of aiding children in Africa, she was passing out food crates to earthquake survivors in southeast Asia. And there was no walkabout picture at all; there was a statue of an open hand; an award for humanitarian aid that she and Paul had won.

She smiled, tears streaming down her face. Her life was unchanged, only enriched by the man she'd chosen to spend it with. This was better than anything she could have expected. It took up to twelve hours for the current timeline to catch up to the restructured past, so she went to bed, looking forward to waking up beside her husband.

#

The memories hit her before she even opened her eyes the next morning, causing her to cry out. The hostage situation ten years ago. Paul had been planning on leaving Indonesia with the other aid workers - she had been in Australia on the walkabout she'd always wanted to experience - when the terrorists had grabbed him and twelve others. He'd been the first beheaded when the Australians hadn't complied with the demands.

She wept, the pain that had dimmed in the past ten years suddenly new and fresh. She cried and screamed into her pillow until she fell into an exhausted sleep.

She spent the afternoon flipping through photo albums and going through her house to find remnants of him. He had been a spearhead of humanitarian Internet news radio, and she discovered multiple CD's of his programs. She listened to several, laughing at the inside jokes he inserted for her.

That night, there was a knock at her door. Sniffing, she shuffled to the door and opened it.

Damn, but Kevin looked like Paul. She wondered if she had chosen him because of this, but couldn't remember. He glanced at her face and looked down at the floor. "Can I come in?"

She held the door open.

"This was all my fault. I... missed you and found another girl who looked like you, who was also crying. And I guess I caused you to find that guy. You aren't going to die a virgin like you feared, but this was not what you paid for. My company is here to offer you a money-back guarantee and an experience erase, free of charge." He looked as if he were going to cry.

"You were the guy who bumped into me before I went to the Union," she said, her eyes widening. "I was going to go back to my dorm before you ran into me."

He nodded. "I am so sorry. It looks like I really screwed up."

She looked at the crumpled, moist tissue in her hand. Remembering what it was for, she dabbed her eyes again. "We got married after college. Traveled the world together. He died ten years ago."

Kevin stared at her, stricken. "We can fix all of this. Really. For free."

Susan looked at the apartment that still seemed new to her, a world of a man she never got a chance to experience. She focused on the throb within her chest, the ache that she remembered took two years to heal and still flared up on holidays and whenever she saw old anime. All she had wanted was not to die a virgin. She hadn't asked for this.

She went to an open photo album that focused on their work with inner city children. Paul was hugging one of the many children they had sponsored, a girl who had shown a gift for languages and they'd padded her few scholarships so she could follow in Susan's footsteps in International Studies. She pointed to the photo.

"What do you think will happen to her if Paul disappears from her life? Gunned down in a drive-by? Raped? Under appreciated in a minimum-wage job? There's no way of telling." She stared at the girl who grinned widely in the picture. Tasha still visited during some holidays, like most of the children they had helped out of bad situations. Having no children of their own, they had loved all they could of those who needed it.

"I can't do it," she said quietly. "I can't remove him from their lives. I can't remove him from mine." She looked at Kevin's face. He was pale. "Are you going to get in trouble for this?"

"I - they didn't say. I had to come here and offer a refund and fix. Then, I don't know," he admitted. "I'm still so sorry."

"Don't be," she said. "It was a good life. Not what I expected, but then life never is, is it? I'm surprised this doesn't happen more often. Butterfly wings causing hurricanes and all that. If you'd like, I will contact your employers and give you a recommendation. What I had with Paul was more fulfilling than a one-night-stand ever could have been."



Kevin sighed, visibly relieved. "I can't tell you what that means to me. Thanks a lot. Is there anything I can do personally to make it up to you?"

Susan motioned for him to follow her to the kitchen. She took two beers from the fridge and handed one to him. "I am curious. My college friend Erica told me that she, too, slept with a dark-haired, blue-eyed Paul the same night I did. We joked that we were Eskimo sisters, that my Paul had somehow made it into her bed after mine. But now I wonder..."

Kevin smiled at last. "Mrs. Apple, I never give private information about my clients."

### **About the Author**

Mur Lafferty is a freelance writer, published in over fifteen RPG books, and currently building a reputation for her fiction. Her podcast novel *Heaven* is a firm favourite (and can be downloaded from [www.podiodbooks.com](http://www.podiodbooks.com), and she runs the weekly(ish) essential self-help podcast for wannabe writers *I Should Be Writing* (at [www.ishouldbewriting.com](http://www.ishouldbewriting.com) - also downloadable from iTunes).

# REVIEWS

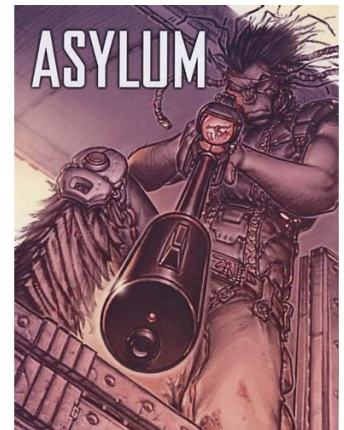
*Asylum* Reviewed by Alasdair Stuart

ASYLUM Written by Rob Williams, Illustrated by Boo Cook

Published by Rebellion

RRP: £11.99

Rob Williams, in his startlingly self-deprecating introduction, spends a great deal of time apologising for the rough edges on *Asylum*, his first work for 2000AD. Best known for his work on the excellent political superhero comic *CLASH\$WAR*, Williams' script here has all the anger and energy of that series but stretched over a longer, more assured script.



Over three centuries from now, alien immigration is common place. Thousands of aliens from hundreds of species come to Earth in search of a better life, and find themselves contained, at least temporarily, on a holding station in Earth orbit (Drawn by Cook as a colossal, inverted church tethered to the planet). From there, they go to an island on Earth and are gradually integrated into society. The few that escape are tracked down by hybrid agents, including Marshall Holt. Holt's a nice guy, likes his job and accepts it for what it is until something awful happens to his partner. As Holt investigates, he uncovers not only stories of vivisection and horror at the alien compound, but the dark secrets his own organisation has been keeping.

*Asylum* crackles with anger and relevancy, its addressing of the immigration issue both neatly handled and never getting in the way of the story. 2000AD has always been at its best when its addressed the concerns of the day and *Asylum* is no exception. Whilst it never once pretends to do so subtly, there's a palpable anger to the perception of the aliens (and immigrants) that gives the story a great deal of its edge and power.

This is further enhanced by Holt himself. An intensely likable, every man hero of the sort that 2000AD does so well, Marshall Holt's rise from Hunter to reluctant leader of the opposition is handled with unusual maturity. There's a moment early on in the second volume, also collected here, where he's asked whether he's proud of what he's achieved. Holt's response is that in three days of all out war they've all done things they're not proud of, including him and his world weary approach to life only accentuates the tragedy of the book's darker moments.

This in turn is helped by an unusually even handed approach to the characters. Everyone, from the ghastly Reverend Ashcroft to Holt himself finds their actions questioned by others and to Williams' credit, there are no easy answers and no clearly defined line between good and evil. Instead, this is a world where horrible things are done in a good cause as well as bad and where the best you can hope for is to be able to live with your decisions.

Boo Cook's artwork is the final piece of the puzzle, straddling the line between organic and hard edged. The technology, the bread and butter of any story like this, is impressive but Cook's work really sings when he's called on to draw the aliens. Skunk and Belly are particularly great, a laconic blue dog-like alien and his colossal, green rabbit-like friend whose unique view of the world is at the heart of several of the series' best moments. Each one of them is a unique individual and each one of them is clearly sentient making the horrible violence of the closing pages all the more affecting.

Rounded out with some of Cook's sketchbook, this is a high quality package of a high quality story. Intelligent, bleak, darkly funny and savagely violent this is one of the best original stories to come out of 2000AD in years. Williams' self-deprecation aside, this is a great piece of hard edged, contemporary science fiction.

# Stardust-On-Wye

Words: Ellen Phillips

The Guardian-sponsored Hay Festival takes place every Spring Bank in a little town called Hay on Wye. You may not have heard of the festival or the town, but if you're interested in reading fiction - and since you're reading Hub, I'm assuming you've at least a passing interest - you should check it out. For around 10 days every year, this tiny little town in the Welsh Marches plays host to a staggering array of writers, publishers, politicians and broadcasters, to say nothing of the increasing numbers of members of the public who come to hear them talk about their latest oeuvre. But why hold it in Hay, so far from any form of motorway or decent public transport? Because this little town, nestled in the green hills of the Wye valley and surrounded by sheep, this town has one feature which makes it the only place in which an event such as this unique festival could possibly take place. It is the second-hand bookshop capital of the UK.

This year's g-literati included The Hairy Bikers, Gordon Brown, Sandi Toksvig and Bonnie Langford, John Major, Alexander McCall Smith, Simon Armitage, and so on and on and on. Stars of previous years have included Bill Clinton, who glad-handed a very welcoming crowd and described the festival as the "Woodstock of the Mind". And this year, on the second Saturday of the festival, a whole tent-load of people turned up bright and early to see Neil Gaiman.

Neil Gaiman is, famously, the creator of the immensely popular *Sandman* series of comics, the *Neverwhere* TV series (and subsequent book and comic). He's written *American Gods*, a powerful tale of the Old Gods struggling for survival in the New World, now followed up with *Anansi Boys*. His books *The Day I Swapped My Dad For Two Fish* and *Coraline* are wonderful children's books; but such is the cachet of the Hay Festival, Neil had flown all the way across the Atlantic and endured a tortuous journey across the country and into Wales to talk about something else entirely. Something magical and fantastic. Something now starring Clare Danes, Peter O'Toole, Ricky Gervais, Robert De Niro, Charlie Cox, Michelle Pfeiffer and Sienna Miller. That something is *Stardust*.

*Stardust* started life as a 4-part comic series published by DC Comics in 1997. It was quickly followed up by an illustrated novel, and followers of the esteemed Mr Gaiman's blog will know that the film has been in production since last year, with shooting in places as diverse as the Isle of Skye and in Oxfordshire. Excitingly, for a while it was rumoured that the entire film would be shown at Hay. By the time Neil landed in London last week, though, the production team were still working on the audio dub, and dragged him off to Soho to listen to different versions of sound effects. As Neil related to the amused audience, to his jet-lagged ears there was only one response: "Great. That's great. It's all great."

Neil was still jet-lagged when he walked into the marquee. Looking a little older and greyer, and definitely rumped, I suspect that had the entire film been shown, he would have been asleep in that gloomy tent. At least, that's the consolation I take from not having got to see the whole thing! As it was, Neil showed us clip after clip from the film, and talked about each of them. The story is magical; Neil claims he set out to produce a fairytale for grown-ups, and in that he has definitely succeeded. The sheer number of children in the audience, though, confirms his popularity as a writer for all ages. The clips Neil showed gave us glimpses of the love story, evil kings and scheming princes, wicked witches desperate to regain their youth and fallen stars with a sharp tongue and a quick wit. All of it is beautifully filmed, and the sound-effects that they included were, to my partisan and untrained ears, just great.

The film follows the book fairly faithfully, except for the parts where it doesn't. More of which, later. The clips began with Tristan's (Charlie Cox) hopeless love for Victoria (Sienna Miller), and then the pledge which leads him over the Wall and into the Kingdom of Stormhold, in search of a fallen star. What he fails to realise is that in that faery realm, a star isn't just a lump of meteoric rock. In fact, the star, Yvaine (Clare Danes), is pretty annoyed at having been knocked out of the sky, and is clearly unimpressed with Tristan's wish to take her back to his village for his girlfriend.

The path to love, and back to the Village of Wall, certainly doesn't run smooth for Tristan, as princes fighting for their father's throne search desperately to find the necklace worn by Yvaine, and a very wicked witch, Lamia, played beautifully by Michelle Pfeiffer, wants to cut out the fallen star's heart in order to regain youth for her and her sisters. In one fantastically creepy scene, she pauses in her quest (riding a mini-chariot drawn by two goats) to share Ditchwater Sal's meal of roast hare. Sal's attempt to drug the truth out of Lamia backfires spectacularly, as the wicked witch curses her in such a malevolent way that I had goosebumps on my arms.

Neil explored some of the differences between his book and the film. He explained that there were places where, of necessity, they had to do things a different way to achieve the same effect. Notably, in the introduction of Ricky Gervais's character. He's a merchant, and the clip had him attempting to haggle with

Robert DeNiro over the price of a barrel of lightning, caught by the sky-pirate at great personal risk. Neil admitted to having been very nervous about the character right up until he saw that same scene. Afterwards, he had no qualms about Ricky's character whatsoever.

Neil showed the trailer for the film, which you can see at <http://www.stardustmovie.com/>. He knew very little about the production of trailers until he saw them putting together trailers for Stardust. Apparently, there were around 30 different trailers, all of which made it look like a completely different film. One made it clear that *Stardust* is a pirate film; another, a film about witches. The final trailer, while clearly the best at conveying the essence of the film without giving away the entire story, makes it seem as though the film is full of swashbuckling sword-fights. Apparently it's not. Pretty much all the sword-fighting in the film is shown in the trailer. I don't think I'm alone in wishing we could have seen some of the others; after internet successes such as *'Brokeback to the Future'* (check Google; I'm sure you'll find it) I have to admit a fascination with the way in which trailers can present a completely different film to you from the one you end up seeing.

When, much to everyone's regret, the clips had finished, Neil answered questions from the audience. One memorable question managed to bewilder the great man himself. 'Do you wish you were more widely read, or would you rather have fewer, more devoted fans?' After a pause, Neil pointed out that he'd had a number-one New York Times bestseller. He seemed bemused by the way people tend to fall either into 'never heard of him' or 'love his stuff', and the ones who love his work tend to believe they're the only ones who have ever come across him. There are millions of fans out there, he explained, each one of them utterly convinced that no-one else has ever heard of his books. So he gets to have his cake and eat it: he's widely read and has lots of devoted fans.

Many of the questions were from his younger fans, including one who wanted to know if there are any plans to make *Sandman* into a film. As always, the answer is no. Neil explained that the rights to *Sandman* are held by Warner, and they have no idea what to do with it. Plenty of directors have expressed interest in making a film, but all have, ultimately, foundered on the rocks of that large corporation. This is something for which Neil is avowedly glad. He would love for it to be made into a film, or, better still, a series of films. But the director is not yet there who is as passionate about the graphic novels as Matthew Vaughn (prompted by his wife, Claudia Schiffer) has been about *Stardust*. And that makes all the difference.

*Stardust* looks like being a truly incredible film. I wanted to go and see it before I'd seen any of the clips from it. Having watched scenes beautifully acted by a deliciously wicked Michelle Pfeiffer, who is still the sexiest woman on film, Peter O'Toole as an aging fairy king with the kind of evil asthmatic laugh which makes me want to reach for cold iron and an inhaler, and Clare Danes as the understandably annoyed fallen star, I can't wait to go see it when it's finally out in the cinema.

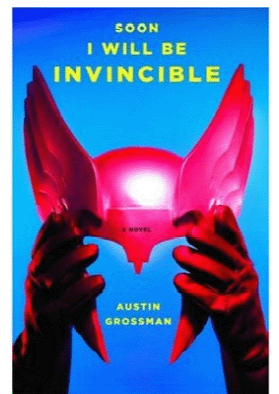
But I think the most telling recommendation is this: I can't wait to see it, the rest of the audience can't wait to see it - and neither can Neil. His writing is always of such high quality, and thankfully, that's been carried over into the film.

*Stardust* is currently due for release in the US on August 10th.

# INTERVIEW

Austin Grossman

Last week we reviewed Grossman's debut novel *Soon I Will Be Invincible* – a superhero tale about belonging and world domination. Here he tells us a little about his life, and the novel.



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**Did you read superhero comics or watch superhero cartoons as a child? If so, what drew you to them?**

I have very early memories of watching the Hanna-Barbera *Super Friends*, which were a kind of watered-down version of the classic Justice League heroes, plus the execrable Wonder Twins.

I liked how dramatic the characters were, how they had to perform their Superness or Batness all the time. And despite the blandness of the show's scripting, I gradually figured out that the way Batman and Superman dressed up was a reflection of a personal story, which was both an experience of violent trauma and the source of their superpowers.

I liked that, and I liked that even though they had all that strangeness in their past – crazy vigilantes, alien planets, Greek myths – they could all still be buddies. Super friends, as it were.

**If you could be a superhero/villain, what powers what you have and what would your name be?**

My superpower, frankly, would be to subjugate this puny Earth purely by the power of my enormous intellect. I wouldn't have a name – people would call me "Our Dread Master." And I'd be able to fly.

But I think it's probably true that no one gets to choose their superpowers. Like a lot of other things in life, they choose you. I'd probably be someone like Bloodstryke, who shows up in *Soon I Will Be Invincible* for only about two seconds. It's not his fault he inherited a cursed suit of armor that drinks blood! He's doing the best he can with what's got.

**Has being a game developer influenced your writing?**

Enormously – it's what I had instead of an MFA program.

Before I graduated from college I was writing mawkish fiction for the Harvard *Advocate*, at a time when Carver and Beatty were the reigning spirits, the stark, pared-down realist sensibility. Then, while everyone else got jobs in publishing or went for fiction MFA's, I started writing role-playing games – wizards, rogue supercomputers, superheroes, etc.

It was a strange and rich atmosphere in which to let my writing mature, like stepping back into dreamy early adolescence and forward into my twenties at the same time. It put me outside the mainstream literary culture. And it allowed me to write in a way I felt deeply and instinctively – to turn my suburban geekiness, my first language, into a literary idiom. To create a kind of Geek Lit.

**Why did you choose to write a novel, instead of creating a comic book or a video game?**

I wanted to push farther in the direction of Alan Moore, Frank Miller, or Jonathan Lethem. To create the kinds of characters and stories I love in comics, shown with the physical and emotional reality of a novel.

In a comic book, a superpower is often just a costume and some colored lines, showing some random "energy." Putting superheroes in a novel opens up a whole sensory world - superpowers have a sound, a smell, a taste, history, memory. Instead of just looking at a superpower, you can get at what it feels like to have the power inside you all the time, or what a superhero wanted to be when he was nine years old. What it's like to sleep and wake up with powers, to try to eat in a restaurant when you're a living fusion reactor.

**Superheroes are perennially popular figures – from Superman to the X-Men to TV's "Heroes." How does the superhero idea reinvent and reinvigorate itself? Why do you think people are so drawn to superheroes and villains?**

It's a cliché to say that superheroes and villains are contemporary myth, but they're useful, they're stories that help make sense of the world. Superhero stories revolve around real things - around trauma and identity and lost love. *The Incredibles* showed this very powerfully, or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which showed how going to high school really is like fighting vampires, every day.

Likewise, writing about an aging super-villain or a traumatized cyborg is a way of talking about something I can feel in my life – a sense of lost potential, disappointment, what have you. On some level it helps me, and I hope it helps the people who read it.

**In the book, you alternate between the narrative voice of Fatale and Doctor Impossible - how did you decide on these two voices, and how do you think alternating between them affects the narrative?**

Having two narrators underscores the idea that in a world of superheroes and super-villains you have to choose a side. There's no neutral perspective.

I started with Doctor Impossible – the villain. I wanted to write the super-villain's story, the super-villain *Catcher in the Rye*. In any superhero story the villain is the interesting character, the one who embodies intelligence, imagination, arrogance, imagination, thwarted ambition and lost love. Honestly, who else would you want to hear about?

But once I started thinking of a super-villain as human, I had to ask the opposite question – could I even imagine a superhero who was also a believable person? I started with Fatale, a cyborg still getting over

the trauma of losing her memory and having half her body replaced with circuitry. Then I branched out to the rest of her super-team, the Champions, as they came to life.

The more I wrote, the more I wanted to find out about these people: how does it feel when the cyborg has to interact with the faerie warrior, or the super-girl from the future? What does everyone talk about when they're having lunch in their big gleaming control room?

**The “invincible” in the title seems to have multiple meanings-referring to CoreFire's powers, to Doctor Impossible machinations, to the dreams of both the superheroes and super-villains. Do you think the heroes and the villains are so different in their goals for the world?**

This may be the question of the book: what does it mean to identify as a superhero or a super-villain. Where do you think you belong, and why – and at what moment do you decide?

Superheroes? Do-gooders. They're the schoolyard jocks, and they always get the cheerleaders. Bland opportunists who dress up and roam the world enforcing the status quo, normals ganging up on anyone who dares step out of line. Which maybe isn't fair – superheroes have plenty of weird stuff in their past. It's just how they deal with it.

Super-villains are the romantic nerds of the superpowered world – all those gleaming machines, dreams of universal power, cities of gold. They bring all the imagination, the perversity, the ambition, the raw passion. They come back every year, even though they're one person against the world, even though they lose every time.

**All the superheroes and villains you invented are fantastically imaginative, as well as being both funny and very human. How did you come up with all their back stories, and do their histories say anything about their paths toward fighting evil or destroying the world?**

I love superheroes and I'm obsessed with superhero origin stories. I love the idea that the trauma in your past, the shit that you went through and survived – losing your parents, being hit by a truck, stumbling into a mystic cave – is what makes you strange, but it gives you your mission and gives you superpowers.

If I just think of a guy calling himself, say, “The Quizzler” and dressing in a red leotard – a *real person* doing this – maybe his power is to remember all the trivia in the world; and it suggests a funny, poignant, complex, and human story. I don't even know yet if The Quizzler is a hero or villain – we'll have to see how the world reacts to him. Everyone's a hero in their own story.

**What's next for Doctor Impossible?**

He's like any other obsessive neurotic; he's never going to give up on some things. He's going to battle his nemesis, and he's going to try to take over the world.

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**Coming Next Week:**      Fiction: *The Blue Parallel* by Jessica Reisman  
   Feature: Origins – The Second Doctor  
   Interview: Charles Stross

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