

# Hub

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## A Brief Christmas Message

As I write this intro there are fewer than 10 minutes until the clock strikes midnight – Christmas Day. It's tempting to write about all of the things that have happened to me – and to *Hub* – since the magazine's inception this time last year, but I'll probably leave that for an end-of-year retrospective next week – our final edition of 2007. In our first *Hub* of 2008 we have 7 (count 'em – seven!) pieces of flash fiction, and we say hello to my favourite podcaster – Mur Lafferty – who joins us as a regular columnist. Check out her current podcast novel *Playing for Keeps*, which you can download free of charge (and legally!) at [www.playingforkeepsnovel.com](http://www.playingforkeepsnovel.com).

This week's edition is slightly late as my wife gave birth to a beautiful baby girl last Wednesday (our second) and even *Hub* had to take a backseat to my paternal duties, so apologies if you're waiting for an email reply from me – I'll catch up, soon! If you're reading this on Christmas Day, Merry Christmas! If it's the following week, then have a great New Year! If this is a back-issue for you – welcome onboard. You're currently reading Europe's most widely-read weekly electronic genre fiction magazine. I hope you'll stick around. (Can anyone find out what the world's most widely-read electronic weekly genre fiction magazine is? We'd like to say "Hi" to them).

Anyway, I have to run – I just heard a noise on the roof and I want to be sure I'm asleep. You know... just in case...

**Lee Harris**

## 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](http://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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by Paula R. Stiles

I hear the motorcycle long before I see it, the faint thrum of a well-cleaned carburetor drifting to me over the trees through the summer haze. He radioed ahead over an hour ago. Didn't want to show up unannounced, he said. Already, that puts him in my good graces, and that is difficult to accomplish. Just ask my two ex-husbands.

I watch from inside the house, through the window. The wind is blowing from the southeast today, from where the city used to be. It trickles over the blast wall outside and whispers against the walls in many dead tongues, accompanied by the clicking of the geiger counter that measures the radiation hitting that side of the house. When I got out to greet him, I should not stand outside for too long.

When the motorcycle rolls into the yard, I see he's all bundled up against the radiation and the possibility of a crash. I come out bundled up myself with a scarf wrapped round my head to keep from breathing any isotopes, like one of my great-something-grandmothers awaiting a troika full of relatives for Christmas. Any perceived carelessness with procedures might make him nervous.

He shuts off the motorcycle, pops down the kickstand and dismounts. I show him where to put it in the shed next to mine. He comes up the steps and I usher him in. He waits until we are both inside and the two doors have closed behind us before pulling off his helmet and undoing his facemask. Underneath them, I see light-brown hair and a younger face than we usually get out here. He holds out a gloved hand in the shadowed room. "Hello. I'm Sam."

Even though we should both decontaminate first, I shake his hand firmly. Manners come first out here where life is permanently unsafe. "Hello, Sam. I'm Mariya. Welcome to the Red Zone." In Russian, "red" is a color of beauty, not terror. I wonder how he sees it.

We decontaminate in the shower by the foyer--Sam first because he's been outside longer. Afterward, he gives me his file, sealed by smart-tape. I show him around the house before installing him in the guestroom upstairs. I have a month to give him the shakedown tour. The previous twenty-four candidates for my project partner and eventual successor all failed within three weeks. No need to make an evaluation; the place sent them scurrying away--or screaming. The home office complains that I am too hard on them. I don't bother to set the home office straight.

Later, we toast his arrival with a glass of water and potassium iodide anti-radiation pills. They're probably unnecessary so long after the primary event, but we all have our little rituals. Sam seems pleasant, sensible. I cannot yet see any fault lines as I serve him a courtesy meal of potato stew a few hours later. They're there, of course. This place always brings them out in due time. None of us comes here whole.

"It's quiet, here," he says as he washes up for me afterward. I assume he means besides the geiger counter, whose clicking rises and falls with the wind outside. "I noticed the birdsong stopped about thirty kilometers in from the border."

"Oh? Is it that far in now?" I have been underestimating the reclamation in my reports for most of my time here—eight years, now. The animals have come in all round in a great ring, edging toward the ruined center as the machines do their work of slowly, softly spraying the air and soil clean. It's only here, ten kilometers from the edge of the city, that the birds don't go. But I suspect there might be some rodents already. And the surviving trees always somehow grow well.

He nods and one side of his mouth quirks up. "They asked me to report any new improvements, eh, but I think I won't. We'd just end up with more government squatters."

I raise an eyebrow but he only stares back with a bland face. "What brings you here, Sam?" I say, instead of beginning a discussion too early for us both. No need to test our loyalties to this place on each other just yet. "They said you were an anglophone." Which is why we are speaking English and not Russian.

"I'm bilingual with French, actually, but yeah, I'm an anglophone for the most part. My Russian isn't too good, yet. I can try it, though, if you'd like."

"That's all right. We can switch between English and French." I have never felt comfortable with Russian, even though I've spoken it from the cradle. It wasn't my people's tongue before the Russians came, but since we have forgotten that one, I must make do lifelong with one that does not understand me very well. I try to place his accent, which seems odd, not common. "You sound...American?"

He chuckles. He's taller than I am, of course, for I'm not very large at all. But he doesn't loom over me like most Westerners, like an uprooted tree ready to fall. "No, Ma'am. I'm Canadian. Grew up on the west coast. Spent a lot of my career—such as it's been—in the Arctic cleaning up water pollution."

"And that qualified you to come here?"

"Oh, more or less. I can work the machinery, if that's what you mean." He blinks at me as he wipes a plate with the dishtowel. His eyes are rounder than my almond-shaped ones, the irises dark blue. Exotic. I suppose he feels the same about mine. "I read in your file that you're from Siberia? Somewhere down near where the Silk Road used to be?"

I shake my head. "Oh, not that far. I lived in Mongolia with my first husband, a few hundred miles east of here. But I come from much further north on the Chukotka peninsula—outside Anadyr on the coast up near the Bering Strait. My grandmother was an indigenous Siberian, a full-blooded Chukchi." Very fierce, my grandmother, like all of her race. Stubborn in the old ways. Whenever I angered my first husband, he'd call me a throwback. He was right, but I still divorced him.

I should read Sam's file, but after twenty-four failures, I see no reason to search for information the twenty-fifth could supply himself. "I've worked on oil and nuclear testing clean-ups in the Arctic Ocean most of my adult life," I add. "I began my career cleaning up RTGs in the northwest."

He frowns. "You mean those nuclear-powered lighthouses they put up there during the Soviet period? I thought those were cleaned up decades ago."

"We missed a few." Quite a few. "It's a different experience from yours, but we've had much the same function in life." I wonder if he has experienced the same failures and struggles. A woman's lot is not easy even in this day. I did not reach the age of sixty without a struggle, though I did myself no favors by having the wedding banns pronounced two times too many. I am not easy to live with. Perhaps that's what really explains the twenty-four failures. "If you will forgive my asking, Sam, you seem young for this job."

He shrugs, his face twitching as at some unpleasant memory. "I turned forty last week, Ma'am; I'm older than I might look. I know that's still a little on the young side for doing this sort of thing, but it's a good job and the pay's fantastic." He blows out a breath, as if considering the obvious caveat. "The cancer risk isn't all that bad. Only thirty percent of us get diagnosed for every ten years we spend here."

So. The first fault line already. No one comes here unless something in their lives has already contaminated them worse than radiation ever could. I wait for more, but the silence stretches between us as we stack the rest of the plates together and put them away. He's not ready to tell me. He may never be ready. Few of the others told me their true secrets, either and he already knows more about me than I told any of the others. Outside, the wind fades.

"The wind is changing," I say finally. "If the weather report is good tomorrow, I'll take you out to see the machines."

He smiles. "That would be good, Ma'am...Mariya. Thank you."

#

\_Sam leans against the sill of an open window, one that faces the city. Outside, the air is still, the geiger counter silent. As the city explodes behind him, he tilts his head forward to light a cigarette, face lit by the glow of the lighter and the distant mushroom cloud together.\_

I open my eyes to a dark ceiling. The house is silent, save for the lazy ticking of the geiger counter every few seconds and the sound of breathing from the guestroom. Disturbed by the last tendrils of my dream, I slip out of bed and go across the hallway. Pushing the door open gently, I peer into the guestroom. Sam is curled up in the bed, having cocooned himself in the quilt and blanket. Unlike my dream, his face is in shadow. He breathes slowly, easily, as if enjoying real sleep for the first time in years. I close the door, not wanting to disturb him. But though I return to bed, my own sleep does not come.

What if I am jumping to conclusions, hoping he's like me? I can't afford that, not after the other two I lost to the city. Warning him won't help; I warned the other two and it did no good. Back at the home office, they think those were simple suicides: tragic, but no reason to stop such a large project where damaged personnel are the norm not the exception. But there's nothing simple about the city.

The wind whispers against the outside window. Is it my imagination or are the voices louder tonight, more curious? They seem to run on a diurnal cycle, though they're more active at night when the wind turns and blows in radiation from the city. They always grow more restless whenever a new one comes, but it could just be my anxious imagination. If Sam notices, I can't hear it--the breathing from the guest bedroom keeps on, steady and slow. Eventually, it lulls me back to sleep.

#

The next day, I take him out to see the machines. We go on his motorcycle--a dirt bike with a red tank, a high, long black seat, and no electronics. I get on behind him, putting on his spare helmet over my facemask. Our clothing is lined with lead, to keep out alpha and beta radiation. Gamma radiation only comes when it rains, one of those thunderstorms that rage unchecked across the steppe, blowing in particles from the still-deadly heart of the city's ground zero.

I can ride a motorcycle (my own is in the shed), but to keep a good balance, the shorter person should always ride behind. Neither of us sees any reason to take out mine, since it would only mean one extra machine to decontaminate before we put it in the shed at the end of the day. He kicks up the stand, revs up the engine and we roar off. The motorcycle has a flat, straightforward growl to it, no nonsense and no frills.

My second husband was an anthropologist who married me as the perfect field study. I was one of the dwindling Small-Numbered Peoples that obsessed him, the granddaughter of whalers, hunters, shamans and suicidal drunks. I kept my own peculiar views about the world to myself, but he sensed I was holding back and it angered him. I could go from Noble Savage to Thieving Savage inside one argument. When I left him, I took his truck. I didn't mention that when I applied for this job, even though I drove it to the interview. I've waited eight years for him to track me down and reclaim it, but not a word.

No one else has lasted out here longer than a month. That gives me the right to claim the Red Zone as sanctuary. If Sam lasts long enough, he will gain that right, too.

The lead-shielded tracker for the cleanup machines has a pen-shaped dosimeter attached. You don't go anywhere in the Red Zone without a dosimeter. I've clipped it onto the gauges between the handlebars so that we can both see it, my eyes just clearing Sam's shoulder. The machines aren't very near the city today--over four kilometers from the edge of the crater. I can't hear the whispers above the motorcycle, but as long as the dosimeter reading stays normal and the wind from the northwest, we should be all right.

The machines are modified sprinklers. They come from a warmer world, but they still have uses. They can arc across an entire acre, lined with nozzles that spray Potassium fertilizer solution. It soaks up radioactive Caesium before we plant grass and trees, to prevent the uptake of the Caesium by the plants. We can't do much about the Strontium-90 in the water table yet. I may live long enough to begin that cleanup if Sam and his skills with water quality hold up, but likely not. It's a difficult enough task decontaminating our own drinking water.

After considerable debate, the U.N. board in charge of city reclamation decided not to remove the trees outside the original blast zone, which now only has scrub grass and bushes at its outer edges. The

only non-labor-intensive way to remove them was burning, which might have spread atmospheric radioactive contamination farther. The simplest way--if not the safest--was to leave the radioactivity locked up in the wood and make it off-limits to harvest. We will see how long it takes for new settlers to ignore that injunction. I will be dead before they resettle here.

We stop the sprinklers and walk down the line, checking them for any parts that need replacement or repair. One of them glitches, spraying solution on Sam's boots. He jumps back, cursing, and we both furtively glance up at the machine. It remains still, but we circle wide until we've cleared it. The machines, a good three meters high, seem spidery and delicate from a distance. But they'd crush us if we got in their way during one of their runs.

"They really want to repopulate this area, do they?" Sam says.

"I think that is the idea, yes: reclamation and repopulation. Bring things back to normal eventually." Whatever "normal" is now. I watch him. Those of his predecessors who wanted to repopulate as quickly as possible all left first. No one ever thought to come up with a reclamation plan for the city people.

He turns and looks at the horizon toward the city. "It seems a shame--it's so quiet here." He looks back at me. "You've been lying about the rate of reclamation, haven't you?"

"Perhaps delaying a few results." I see no reason to lie to him. I didn't lie to the others, either; it made no difference. None of them told on me. They were too busy running in the opposite direction from both me and this place.

"Does that bother you?" I say. He doesn't answer. He's staring out past the scrub toward the crater that marks the remains of the city. I can't see his expression through his facemask, but he hears the city people; I'm sure of it. And sooner even than the two who took the long walk out there in the end. Normally, I wouldn't interfere. But after twenty-four failures, I've become lonely. I walk up to him and tug on his sleeve. "Sam?"

He starts and looks at me. "Sorry. I was a million clicks away."

More like four, I suspect, but I say nothing. I tell myself it's because I don't want to interfere. If he chooses to make his bargain with the city people in the end, I can't stop him. "Let's go back before the wind turns," I say. The contaminating wind will erase our efforts as soon as we turn our backs. The city people don't like the idea of reclamation.

He nods. "Yeah...yeah, we should do that." But he glances over his shoulder several times as we walk back to the bikes, so much that he nearly walks into one of the machines. It's a comical mistake, yet I don't feel like laughing.

#

"What happened?" he asks later that night over dinner. I raise an eyebrow, my fork halfway to my mouth. "I mean, to the city. I heard there was a nuclear accident."

"That depends upon your definition of 'accident'." Though even then, one would be hard-pressed to call it such. "If our superiors choose to call it that, perhaps that is best. Even after thirty years, the subject makes some people very nervous."

"It was a terrorist bomb, then? I wondered. I was just a kid when it happened. They didn't tell us much."

"There isn't much to know." I was up north at the time with a team of oceanographers. We had to come down below the Arctic Circle before the nuclear winter set in. I had a hard time finding work for several years. "Everyone who was there died. No one really knows what happened." Unless, of course, you listen when the wind is up. Then you learn many things. "Whatever it was went off just south of the city center and vaporized several hundred thousand in an instant, creating a shallow crater about ten kilometers wide. Over two million died, overall--some nine tenths of the city. Most of those that didn't die instantly died in the firestorm afterward. Only the 'lucky' few lived long enough to die of radiation poisoning. It was quite an intense blast."

He stares at the kitchen wall, as if he can see them out there. Maybe, in his mind's eye, he has a more-than-accurate, more-than-safe image of them. "It's all a mass grave now, isn't it? We're sitting on their last resting place, breathing their ashes, hearing their voices in the wind?"

I feel a chill. Is my voice louder than theirs? "On a bad day, we would be, when the wind turns. Those ashes are still radioactive." It's our job to defuse them and somehow lift the curse, coax a blessing out of the angry spirits.

He shudders and turns away. He doesn't eat any more, only pushing food around on his plate. I don't object when he makes his excuses and takes his plate away to wash up. He goes up to his room with no other words.

Later, when passing by his door, I see him hunched over on his bed, his back to me. Not that he's hiding much from me; the sound of a pill bottle opening cracks through the quiet house, momentarily masking the geiger counter. It makes me sad. I can think of only one type of medication that would bring someone here, qualify him younger than usual to work this job. The question will be how well the city people can use that against him.

#

"Why did you really come, Sam?" I ask him the following day. We are working in the opposite direction, toward civilization. I'm taking pictures of the landscape and the tree growth while Sam digs up soil to test. I don't like the rising wind today. The dosimeter reads within acceptable levels, yet I feel as if we're upwind of a predator.

He turns away from me, hunched over, just like last night. "I like the silence."

"Weren't you in the Arctic? Surely there is plenty of silence up there."

He stands up and puts his hands on his hips, stretching his back. "In some places, yeah. You could hear the ice crack." He glances over his shoulder at me, but still doesn't turn back. "I couldn't get hired up there on any more jobs. It's competitive and I sort of got blacklisted."

"Blacklisted?" I stare at him. I was expecting something, but not quite that, not from this one, Number Twenty-Five. "What for?"

He shrugs and turns halfway to look at me again, too casually, arms swinging against his sides. "They like you to call in every week, to make sure you're all right. It's easy to get out of touch with the rest of humanity these days. I went out on walkabout a lot and I got careless about calling in. My bosses for that job assumed the worst and got a bit freaked out."

"They fired you?" He nods, looking embarrassed. "How long were you out of touch before they came to pick you up?"

"Two months." He cocks his head, staring up at the overcast sky. "When they showed up, I was out on the ice with no way to contact me." He shifts his gaze in the direction of the city, like a damaged weathervane. "They saw that as a problem. I didn't and I said so when they found me. It got me a one-way ticket back to 'civilization'." His mouth twists around the last word. "I had to make a deal to get this job." Now he looks directly at me; this is a truth, though not \_the\_ truth. "I'm on medication, to make sure I don't...um..."

"Run mad?" He looks down at his feet, as if afraid the shielded vidrecorder in my hands will record his confession. "You hear them, don't you?" He starts, but doesn't look up. "The city people?"

I've pushed too far, too fast. He sinks back into a crouch and digs viciously into the earth with his spade. "Let's get this over with so we can get back to the house," he says.

He doesn't speak to me for the rest of the day.

#

Until now, I have ignored the file that Sam gave me--first, because I didn't want to become attached to him and later, out of a sense of courtesy. But I feel the need now.

I go into my room and open the seal on the envelope that Sam brought in his pack. It's in hard copy to prevent electronic loss of information from radiation damage. How bureaucratic, to want me to receive the message precisely the way that they sent it.

Not that this prevents them from lying. According to the cover letter, the home office sent Sam because of his "skills in dealing with extreme conditions." It cites Sam's "ability to anthropomorphize environmental risks in order to deal with them more efficiently." I couldn't think of a better way to describe the city people if I tried.

Of course they sent him out here where I could keep an eye on him and he on me. They need people like Sam and me for our abilities. But they do not want us to live among them, mocking them with our atavism, our skills that until a few decades ago were obsolete and dysfunctional--"savage"--and now are suddenly so necessary.

"It's the end of the world, yet you seem to be doing just fine," my second husband told me just before I left him. The look in his eyes made me wait until he slept before I packed my things and bundled them into his truck. He was seeing me in a new light and I feared he would not let me live to see him in that light.

I hear a noise and look up. Sam stands in the doorway. He looks sad. "I was hoping you wouldn't open that."

I lick my lips. "It doesn't have to change anything."

"Yes, it does." He turns away. I want to call him back, but I know it won't work. He won't hear me.

#

Later in the night, I wake to silence so deep I could hear ice crack. I stare at the ceiling, eyes wide, heart pounding as if I'd had a nightmare. But I can't remember anything bad, only Sam's eyes as he looked toward the city this afternoon. Then the geiger counter clicks and I hear a sound that always gives me dread: a rumble of thunder to the south. I sense the real nightmare--the house is empty. He is gone.

I slip out of bed and go to his room. Even though I know already what's happened, I have to confirm it. I push open his door. The room is dark.

"Sam?" No answer. When I turn on the light I see pill bottles scattered across his bed. When I open some of them, I find them mostly full of pills broken in half. I recognize two of the prescriptions. Though I've always managed to hide my abilities from the wrong witch doctors, I've known others less fortunate, others like Sam. One prescription is an antipsychotic and the other one is for depression. As if you could block out the city people with a few potions. Did he even take any of them? Not that it matters right now. He hasn't overdosed, at least not on pills. I know where he's gone.

His motorcycle is missing from the shed, but he hasn't bothered to sabotage mine. The other two did that, delaying me so I couldn't stop them. Perhaps he was strong enough to resist, or too dazed to care. I choose to see it as resistance--a good sign--as I rev up and head out into the trees, toward the city.

The forest fades into scrub, then grass, then bare dirt. I'll never live to see this part become forest again, but it's safe enough until the wind turns. Lightning flashes against clouds in front of me. I see movement in the distance, slow and stately like galloping giraffes, coming at me from the east--the decontamination machines. If I don't get to Sam before they cross the track, we could be trapped as the radiation rises around us in the storm. I stop to fish out their tracker and push the abort button for their programming. Nothing happens. Either the signal or their chips have been fuzzed. Chilled, I peel out down the trail. I have to get to Sam.

I haven't been here since Sam's predecessor jumped months ago. As I approach the city, the crater appears like a black hole, sucking all light from the atmosphere above it. I spot the light of Sam's motorcycle first from its headlamp. I see Sam next in the glare of my own light. I drive up next to his motorcycle, which is silent. If he hears mine, he gives no sign. His eyes are fixed on the city.

I try to start his motorcycle, but something is wrong with the motor. I leave mine in neutral with the kickstand down, afraid it won't start again if I turn it off. The wind is still. It hasn't turned yet, but I couldn't hear it above the rising whine of the city people if it did. Sam can hear them, too. He can't help but hear them as he stumbles toward the crumbling edge of the shallow cliff, reaching up to his facemask.

I break into a run. "Sam! Sam, stop!" If I don't stop him, they will take him just like the other two. I reach him a few meters from the cliff and grab his arm. "Sam! We have to go! The wind is turning!"

He sways, staring out across the gaping canyon, so caught up in the voices that he's lost himself inside them. I shake his arm, but he doesn't respond. Desperate, I slap him in the face so hard my gloved

hand goes numb against his mask. The blow snaps his head back. He rocks on his heels, grunting in surprise. Ignoring the sting in my own hand, I slap him again. He rips free from my grip. "Stop it! Wait!" He shakes his head, as if to clear it. "What did you do that f--"

"The wind is changing." He shudders. "You know I'm right. The city people come ahead of the storm, Sam; they herald the radiation that killed them. Millions of them. They're like the Greek sirens. You remember that myth? The women who called sailors to their deaths on rocky shoals? They'll sing you to sleep as the roentgens build up around you, walk you right out over the cliff to join them if you let them. They took two of the others before you. I won't lose you, too."

His breathing is harsh in his mask. "I think I ran out of gas, but we'll never get out on foot in time." He glances over at my motorcycle, still running. "We'll have to risk it."

"Both of us? Can you get us both back in one piece?"

He nods. "We don't have time to siphon enough gas to get both bikes back."

I'll have to trust him to do it. I'm shorter than he is and the taller one must drive the motorcycle. "All right."

The spirits are rising out of the crater like a glowing mist ahead of the rain. When Sam catches sight of them, he turns away. I grab him by the back of his jacket and push him toward my motorcycle. He takes the hint and breaks into a run. He's faster than I am. By the time I catch up, he's got the motorcycle back up and is straddling it. I get on after him, grabbing him around the waist. I glance once at the dosimeter, its readout already glowing with an alarming number, then look away. He revs up the motorcycle and peels out. I put out my feet for balance as we slew dangerously before straightening up.

The scrub flashes past, too close. I pull in my feet. Sam is bent low over the gas tank, gloved hands clenched on the handlebars. An insect-flicker to our right catches my eye. The decontamination machines are less than ten meters away and closing fast. I don't know if Sam sees them and I don't dare alert him, lest it upset his concentration and we crash. I have to hold on tight as he crouches lower on the handlebars, like a horse going flat out, ears laid back against his skull. He sees them.

Wind blasts over my facemask and helmet. The machines seem to speed up as the darkness of the forest looms in front of us, making the path almost impossible to see in the uncertain waver of the headlamp. We run a gauntlet of huge, silver spiders flashing past, blocked by a wall of dead scrub on the other side. A spray of solution slashes cold and impersonal across my back. Then we are amongst the trees, safe from the machines. But the city people pursue us mercilessly like raging fairies, loud as hornets, and the dosimeter on the handlebars is glowing red. The thunder behind us seems almost constant now, lighting the sky in flashes.

Now I can hear a distant voice among the chorus, thrumming even higher than the rest. I have only heard it twice, when those two of Sam's predecessors committed suicide. I was fleeing north at the time. It's the gamma radiation from particles being swept up and blown our way. I pray they're not close enough yet to give us a fatal dose.

Sam swerves, skimming past a tree that unexpectedly blocks our path. We go into a skid. I push out my feet again for balance. Dirt scrapes my left heel and then we're upright again. The trees flash past. I spot a clearing that opens into the front yard of the house. Sam hauls up just short of the porch. I scramble to get off as he drops the motorcycle right there in the dirt. I don't protest that we'll have to decontaminate it later. We'll need a "later" first. He grabs me before I can fall under the bike and drags me up onto the porch. We stumble inside, slamming the two doors behind us in the disembodied faces of the city people as the wind rises and the geiger counter starts to rattle.

Without a word, we both head straight for the cellar, grabbing the flashlight at the top and pounding down the old wooden stairs. As we huddle together in one corner, the rain hits. It echoes the rage of the city people, battering the house above us, making it shake. The geiger counter clicks turn into a continuous blur of noise. We cover each other's ears. Sam is crying, eyes tightly closed and tears running down his cheeks with no sobs.

Toward dawn, the storm dies down. The morning silence seems full of echoes. I lift my head, staring over at the dimming flashlight. "We should get upstairs before we lose our light."

Sam nods wearily and stands up, clinging to the concrete wall. Dried sweat spikes his hair. "Do you think they'll come back?"

I shrug. "I don't know. You're the first one they didn't get or drive away."

He gives me a measuring look. "Except for you."



I nod. "When I first came, they didn't know their own strength. They honed their skills on your predecessors."

"Poor bastards." Sam licks his lips, tongue flicking in and out over them. "Maybe I shouldn't have..."

"Cut down on your medication?" He looks startled. "I saw the broken pills in your bottles."

He sighs. "I was trying to wean myself off it. You can't quit that stuff cold turkey." He hesitates, as if weighing truths he's not sure of yet. "The home office wouldn't let me come without it. It seemed to help at first. It kept me from hearing the city people."

I nod. "That was the point. But blindness only helps with things that aren't real."

He looks sick and angry. "How long have you heard them?"

Perhaps the home office lied to him but I never have and I won't start now. "Eight years. It's been lonely."

He looks away. "Yes," he says, half to himself. "Yes, it has."

I follow him up the steps into the kitchen. Grey morning light seeps in through the windows. A quick check through with a dosimeter gives reassuring news--the walls have blocked the radiation and we won't have to decontaminate the entire place before we can live upstairs again. "Does that mean you intend to stay?"

Instead of answering, he goes down the hall to his room. He comes out with pill bottles clutched in his fist and dumps their contents, one by one, down the kitchen sink. We both watch as he turns on the water, washing them down the drain. I should stop him, but I don't. He's made his choice. He turns to me. "Once it's safe outside, we should decontaminate your motorcycle, see if we can salvage mine. We've got a lot of work left to do."

I smile. He smiles back. It's tentative but genuine. It seems I've found my successful candidate after all.

# Review by Marie O'Regan

## **Transformers**

Directed by Michael Bay

Written by Roberto Orci, Alex Kurtzman

Paramount Home Entertainment. £24.99 (2 disc Special Edition)

Release Date: Out now

For those who grew up with the eighties animated series of **Transformers**, seeing this movie was a must. Anticipation of a 'live action' version, given the state of the art effects now available, was high. So did the movie live up to expectations?

For me, it did. Shia LeBoeuf stars as Sam Witwicky, a geeky kid trying to get the girl (ably played by Megan Fox). After just about scraping the grades he needs to ensure his father buys his first car, Sam drags his dad along to a used car lot run by the very funny Bernie Mac – and they end up buying Bumblebee. The Transformers have targeted Sam as he is the grandson of explorer Captain Witwicky who, unbeknownst to the general population, discovered the 'Allspark': the lost source of all life on the warring robots' planet. Now Sam is the only one in possession of the knowledge needed to guide the Transformers to it', thus saving the Earth from those who would claim the 'Allspark' for their own nefarious purposes.

Thus the scene is set for battles galore between the heroic Autobots, led by Optimus Prime, and the villainous Decepticons, led by Megatron – with the human story of Sam bolstering what is effectively a movie designed around action set pieces. Purists will probably complain about certain things – such as the fact Optimus Prime has a mouth, or that the backstory for this movie barely resembles that of the original cartoon series – but if you take this as a stand alone action movie you won't be disappointed. The effects are brilliantly done, the story rattles along at breakneck speed – and the human aspects of the plot play out very nicely indeed, with a great comic turn from John Turturro as Agent Simmons, a paranoid officer from a 'secret' arm of the military, as well as a very hip and believable performance from the young Le Boeuf.

Extras on this include a documentary by Stephen Spielberg detailing his love for the franchise, how it was adapted and Michael Bay chosen to direct; a look at how the actors were selected and also their training for their roles, including stunts. There's also a feature on the senior military officials who consulted on the movie, and where it was filmed. Disc 2 contains features on the making of the film – liaising with Chevy and Hasbro on adapting the transformers to film, including modifications made to the cars seen in the movie; a look at the desert attack and how it was filmed, from storyboard to conclusion, concept art etc.

Fun for all the family, Transformers is a fast-paced action romp that stays true to the spirit, if not the letter, of the originals.



**Interview:** Matt McAllister

Editor, *Dreamwatch presents Total SciFi* – [www.dwscifi.com](http://www.dwscifi.com)

The popular genre news-stand magazine *Dreamwatch* sold its last issue in January of this year. The title lives on through its Titan-backed website, with news, features, interviews and reviews. We caught up with one of the editors – Matt McAllister – to find out what makes *Dreamwatch* tick.

**Hub: Who are the current *Dreamwatch* team?**

Matt McAllister: The current team is myself, Simon Hugo, Brian Robb and Jonathan Wilkins, with Paul Simpson covering the majority of the news stories. We also have a pool of US and UK based freelancers/sci-fi nerds who cover many of our reviews, interviews and set visits.



**H: Describe a typical day at *Dreamwatch Total Sci Fi*.**

MM: A usual day would involve contacting various press and PR companies about sci-fi related releases, subbing and uploading the latest features, news and reviews on to our site and maybe heading out to conduct an interview or a screening. Then again, other days have involved being visited by a Hobbit bearing cakes or decorating shrunken heads, so it's pretty varied really.

**H: Why did *Dreamwatch* decide to go down the electronic route, rather than remain on the news stand?**

MM: Well, *Dreamwatch* was a much-loved magazine with a long history, and we knew we wanted to continue with it in some form or another. But we got to a point to where we realised that news stories were often out of date by the time the magazine went to press, and the sales figures weren't what they used to be.

So we thought that a website would be the perfect opportunity for *Dreamwatch* to 'regenerate' – a way to continue our dedicated coverage of all things sci-fi, but with more up-to-date news stories and archive material from the history of *Dreamwatch*.

**H: More and more magazines are embracing the internet as an important, often primary medium. How do you see the future of genre reporting? Will print magazines die out in our lifetime?**

MM: Certainly, many magazines have moved over to the internet as the most commercially viable way to continue their existence – often they *have* to as readers have turned to the internet rather than magazines for content on demand. News stories in particular are much better suited to the internet, as they can date or change so quickly. News spreads pretty fast on the internet. We've also got the scope for much more content online without the limitations we had in print form.

Saying that, I'd be sad if print magazines did die out completely. There's something real and tangible about holding a magazine or fanzine that's different about the internet, especially if it's got great artwork and design to back it up. So I think some magazines will inevitably die out, but a dedicated readership for print will continue.

**H: What are your ongoing plans for *Dreamwatch Total SciFi*?**

MM: There's definitely scope for a lot of development work in terms of making the website more user-friendly, and hopefully we will also be having a design make-over soon too. One thing we really need to do, is make the website a bit more interactive – blogs, podcasts, a forum and so forth, and hopefully this should be something you'll see in the new year.

**H: What feedback have you had from your readers?**

Many nostalgic readers have asked us to re-publish articles from early *Dreamwatch*, as we've interviewed pretty much every important name in the genre in our time. While we've added a limited amount of archive material so far, we'll be adding many more classic interviews and retrospectives in the coming months.

We're always interested in hearing in what people like or don't like about the website, or anything you'd particularly like us to cover! Readers can get in touch by emailing [dwscifi@titanemail.com](mailto:dwscifi@titanemail.com)

**H: We appear to be in another golden age of SF, with genre TV and cinema among the most popular productions currently airing. How long do you think this will last?**

MM: TV networks have realised that there's a huge audience for high quality sci-fi drama, and that it can be produced and marketed in a way that will appeal to people who perhaps wouldn't define themselves as SF fans. Shows like *Battlestar Galactica*, *Lost* and *Heroes* really pushed the boundaries in what could be achieved in the genre, while *Doctor Who*, *Torchwood* and *Life on Mars* showed that British science fiction could also play to massive audiences.

TV and movie making always goes in cycles in any genre, and it's important to add that not all recent fantasy television has been successful – just look at the dismal *Painkiller Jane*! But with new seasons of *Battlestar Galactica* and *Lost* next year (writers' strike permitting!), popular new fantasy shows like *Pushing Daisies* and *Chuck*, not to mention the *Life on Mars* spin-off *Ashes to Ashes* in the UK, I think it's safe to say that sci-fi will be massively popular for some time to come.

In terms of movies, fantasy epics are always a great way to show off the latest leaps in technology – this year we've seen groundbreaking effects work in *Beowulf* or *Transformers*. As CG technology gets better and better we're likely to be seeing many more big budget fantasies in the coming years, including the next instalments in *Harry Potter* and *His Dark Materials*. It's when the movies or shows forget about the basics like story and characters that it risks losing viewers.

**H: Your Desert Island question: What three SF items would you take with you, if you were to be stranded alone on an island? (Assume there's a working DVD player and sufficient power, if you need it).**

MM: This is the kind of question that I'm liable to give a different answer to every time I'm asked! Today I'm going to go with *Blade Runner*, *2001: A Space Odyssey* and the novel *Roadside Picnic* by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky.

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