



Hub

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Various Bits of News from *Hub*

First of all, huge apologies for keeping you waiting. This issue is a week late due to an extraordinary bout of sickness that has swept clean through *Hub* Mansions. We have summoned our private physicians, and they have given us a clean bill of health.

This has had a knock-on effect on the admin that goes on behind the scenes at *Hub*, so if you are awaiting an email/contract/pint of beer from us, it will be with you soon. We're all back on our feet and raring to go!

Which brings us onto a piece of news that makes all of us at *Hub* very happy, indeed. For quite a while, the incomparable Ellen Allen has been working behind the scenes as a proofreader and slush monkey. Due to her sterling work in managing the submissions for us, recently, I have asked her to join the editorial team, and she has graciously accepted. Ellen – as Commissioning Editor – will be responsible for managing submissions to *Hub*, and I can't think of anyone I'd rather have onboard.

Oh, and it just occurred to me a few nights ago – December 6th sees the 2nd Anniversary of the launch of *Hub*. If you're in York on that night, feel free to come along and buy us all a drink. We'll let you know where we are, closer to the time...

If you're free this weekend pop along to NewCon 4

October 11th – 12th

Held at The Fishmarket, Northampton.

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Special Guest Star: Paul Cornell

www.newcon4.com

Life From Mars

By

Penelope Friday

“Let me tell you a story.”

The space scientist had a pleasant voice, but the group exchanged glances. They were serious students and they weren't used to being offered 'storytime' as if they were a bunch of recalcitrant five-year-olds. She caught the expressions and smiled.

“Oh, there's science involved. Don't worry about that. The story is perhaps the jam around the pill.”

“What's it about?” inquired a resentful soul.

She shrugged.

“What are you studying?”

“Physics.” “Earth Sciences.” “Biology.” The answers came simultaneously.

“Then that's what it's about.” There was a twinkle in her eyes as she said “Are you all sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin...”

“Imagine, if you will, a world something like this one.” She pursed her lips in thought. “A few differences, perhaps; it was a different age. But in basics, very much the same. The inhabitants of this world lived... well, maybe not in peace, but certainly in reasonable prosperity and the sublime knowledge that they were the rulers of this land. They knew that no other creatures in the world could conquer them; did not even consider the possibility that there might be other worlds – alien species which might take over their planet.”

She looked along the rows of students. Her first questioner was sitting forward, elbows on desk, an expression of disapproval on his face. Further along, a blond-haired young man was drawing butterflies and snails on the side of his (otherwise blank) paper. In the second row, a girl appeared to be playing a game on her mobile.

“You never know,” she added in parenthesis, “they might even have doodled in their odd moments.”

The blond dropped his pen as if shot. The scientist appeared obligingly unaware of his situation, resuming her story.

“But to continue...”

“This state of affairs went on for – oh, a very long time. The creatures evolved, of course - but remained in essentials as they ever had been. Never believing that they could be defeated; that they might, in fact, one day no longer exist.”

There was a rustling and a shuffling at these last words, as if the scientist had somehow cheated her audience by telling them the end of the story before the middle.

“Do you mean to say,” demanded an aggressive woman, exchanging a meaningful glance with the scientist's first questioner, “this is a story about aliens?”

The scientist leaned back against the front desk and looked her up and down.

“Wait and see.”

“And when does the science come in?” The resentful student joined his colleague in voicing his protest.

“Yeah...” Another voice added her opinion. “We were told you were part of the space group that took a probe to Mars. We thought we were going to get into, like, major scientific discovery. And all you're doing is telling baby stories.”

“A story,” corrected the scientist. “Just one story. But you’re by no means obliged to stay if you don’t wish to. That’s the nature of university – you make your own decisions. Now, where was I?”

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She noted with amusement that none of the students had left: apparently being invited to go was all that they needed to make them want to stay.

“That’s right. When the inhabitants of my world believed themselves utterly untouchable, lords of all they surveyed. Then it happened.

“Are you waiting for the aliens? You’ll have to wait a little longer. It was not the aliens themselves that caused the downfall, you see. Not explicitly. No, it was not them but their... spacecraft, if you wish to

call it so. It landed on the Earth – on this world – with an enormous crash. Any normal creatures would have been killed by the impact. But not these.

“For the crash had far-reaching consequences. It had the sort of power and impact that at the present we associate with nuclear bombs. The world’s surface changed dramatically; the sky clouded over with dust and particles (- is that scientific enough for you, or do you want details about the make up of those particles? Not just now? Very well, I’ll continue.); the temperature of the world plummeted, for the sun could not be seen behind the layer of debris. And these inhabitants? These proud rulers of their world? Had their evolution, their strength and power, prepared them for this?”

“No.” Number two of the superior pair in the front gave the answer in a bored tone.

“You already told us they died,” added her friend.

“Did I tell you?” asked the scientist with interest. “Or did I just imply it?”

“You... well...”

The group looked at each other, and she took pity on them.

“You are right, of course. They didn’t survive. One by one, species by species, they died out.” She paused. “But the creatures from the spaceship? Your ‘aliens’? Oh, they had not died, not on impact, not even in the trauma of the years – centuries – that followed. It was their turn for this planet: they evolved, little by little. They became the new Lords of the world. And the previous inhabitants? They were little more than a memory – not even that, for no one now lived who had seen the merest glimpse of them. They were fossils, relics of a previous age – nothing more.”

“So what are you saying?” demanded student one. “There’s life on Mars and this is some ‘might be’ prediction for a million years hence?”

The scientist raised an eyebrow.

“Oh no. I’m a scientist. I don’t deal in ‘perhaps’. And there’s no life on Mars – now. All we found were traces of previous life. No, the story I just told you was the true story of the dinosaurs, and their death when a large lump of rock from Mars – hardly worthy of the name of spacecraft; not built to be any such thing; but teeming with single celled creatures – landed heavily – destructively - on the Earth.”

She paused.

“Which means, of course, the only Martians now alive... are us.”

BIG SCREEN FUTURE BY ALASDAIR STUART

ALIEN RESURRECTION

Our regular series, in which Alasdair Stuart examines films of the past that deal with stories of tomorrow.

After the rolling disaster that was the production of *Alien 3*, Fox seemed intent on stacking the deck in favour of *Alien Resurrection*. Five years had passed since the last film and the endless parade of musical scripts and directors that had choked that instalment half to death was replaced by a relatively simple process that brought five consistent and well-respected players into the film's orbit.

First and foremost, Joss Whedon was hired to write the script. Whedon had impressed them with work on *Toy Story* and *Speed* and was approached to write a film centred around a clone of Newt due to the belief that Ripley's story was finished. He duly handed in a treatment only to be asked to re-write it to place a clone of Ripley in the lead, an idea, ironically, suggested by David Giler and Walter Hill who despite

their work on the previous films were vehemently opposed to a fourth. Nonetheless, work continued and Whedon duly handed in a script.

Meanwhile, the search for a director took in some stellar names. Danny Boyle, riding high off *Trainspotting*, was approached, as were Peter Jackson and Bryan Singer, all of whom passed on the project. It ultimately went to Jean-Pierre Jeunet, a cult director whose previous features, *Delicatessen* and *The City of Lost Children*, had exhibited exactly the visually unique approach that the series was known for.

From there, an eclectic cast was assembled around Sigourney Weaver, who returned due to how much she enjoyed Whedon's script. Winona Ryder, Michael Wincott, Brad Dourif and Dan Hedaya joined Gary Dourdan (who would go on to find fame as Warrick Brown on *CSI*) and Jeunet stalwarts Dominique Pinon and Ron Perlman (who would go on to play *Hellboy*). A unique director, an up and coming writer and a fascinating cast. What could possibly go wrong?

Every now and again, a film, or TV series, comes along that is populated with fascinating and talented writers, artists and directors and yet, somehow, is broken at root. *Alien Resurrection* is one of those examples and it makes for fascinating, if frequently deeply frustrating, viewing.

Straight out of the gate, there's a clear reverence for the previous instalments and that's a serious problem. The almost passing reference Ripley makes to Newt is subtly and poignantly played and the interplay between Johner and Christie, openly modelled on Parker and Brett, gives the film some of its best moments. That being said, there's so much of the previous films here that two crucial problems emerge; firstly the film is constantly winking at the audience and pointing the similarities out, and secondly, it's a continuation.

Taking that first point head on, in many ways *Alien Resurrection* has the same problems as *Alien* does now. It's all, as the Barenaked Ladies once put it, been done, from the smoke-filled dingy corridors to the utilitarian, dirty future and the crews of colourful malcontents clashing with a faceless Corporate military. Simply put, there is very little new here, only old ideas in new clothes and that only compounds the film's central problem; that this is a story that was finished with *Alien 3*.



Which brings us to the second problem. *Alien*, fundamentally, is a small scale horror movie, *Aliens* places that world in a larger, more commercial context and then gleefully stamps all over it and *Alien 3* was perfectly described by a good friend of mine as 'Waiting for Godot to come and eat our faces.' Each one took a different spin on the central idea, each one explored how we face an implacable, emotionless killer and what we learn about ourselves, and each one broke new ground. *Alien Resurrection* breaks new ground in one area only and the end result is disastrous.

The Hybrid, on paper, should work. Whedon's script gets many of its best moments from the blurring of the lines between Ripley and the alien, and on paper the idea that the alien takes as much from Ripley as she does from it is the perfect way to evolve the concept and make the film unique. Give the faceless a face, add to the alien the one thing it's never had and been defined by: a personality. Even the birthing sequence is actually quite impressive, the sight of an alien Queen on her back, belly distended, wrong on an almost visceral level. This is 'Science gone mad!' as it was presented in '50s B-movies and for a minute there's a real sense of something new, of something different.

Then you see it and still it's not too bad. An albino, skull-faced cross between humans and aliens with a face, with eyes. Something that absolutely should not be, the living embodiment of a line being crossed.

Then it moves, and tries to speak.

The Hybrid is, ironically, the embodiment of everything that's wrong with the film. Neither one thing nor the other, it's stuck in the middle, a set of basically positive attributes contributing to a body that should be unique but instead is a hodge podge of events and attributes moving in loose formation.

The Hybrid is also exactly what previous scripts were rejected for, a dilution of the alien's established life cycle. It's no different in many ways from the alien spores of Gibson's abandoned *Alien 3*, an extra stage put in, seemingly, because it's a new film as much to expand on the previous material. It should be the dark mirror to Ripley, a combination of the traits of the two species with none of the grounding qualities she has, but instead it's an unwieldy, unthreatening mess of a concept that ultimately drags the film down.

Whilst the Hybrid devalues and muddies the threat posed by the aliens, the normal creatures come off surprisingly well. The underwater chase sequence is nicely put together and, due to the eclectic cast, there's real tension in the middle hour as well-known faces join the casualties. Far and away the best moment, though, comes when two aliens tear another one apart to use its acidic blood to escape from containment. The sequence demonstrates an intelligence that goes beyond simply hunting, an ability to solve problems that should make them a much bigger threat than they are. Instead, in the end they and even the Queen are window-dressing for the Hybrid.

The human side of things fares quite a lot better. Jeunet and Whedon are both far fonder of characters than ideas and the crew of the *Betty* are vintage Whedon, to say nothing of being an early run, of sorts for what would become the crew of the *Serenity*. There are a lot of stand-out performances in the group, with Perlman's wonderfully unpleasant Johnner right near the top, a brutishly charming figure whose hobbies include tormenting his crew mates and violence. Dourdan as Christie also impresses, bringing a stillness to the role that neatly contrasts with Perlman's hyper-activity. The two decided at an early stage to model their interactions on Brett and Parker from *Alien* and their double act became so successful Jeunet had to separate them from time to time on set to get them to behave.

The splendid Pinon turns in impressive work here as Vriess, the *Betty*'s crippled engineer. He's a spiky, peppery figure and the barely contained hostility between him and Johnner makes for some of the film's best scenes. He also has one of its most impressive set pieces as, early on in the attack, he assembles his weapon from parts concealed around his chair, an idea that originally extended to the *Betty* crew's entire arsenal.

Lastly, Ryder as Call joins Ian Holm and Lance Henriksen as the only actors to play artificial humans in the series. In many ways, Call is the antithesis of the Hybrid, a concept introduced to expand the mythos of the series, but done right and explored with intelligence and wit.

The revelation that Call is an Auton, a synthetic built by synthetics, and the story she tells about how she's been treated is a smartly constructed piece of writing that both echoes feminism and shows how far humanity has come. Call's reference to burning her modem is an obvious one but it's no less effective for that. Artificial humans are creating artificial humans and at that point, the line between sentience and technology, between the real and the artificial, the human and the alien all but vanishes. She's what the Hybrid wants but can never know how to achieve, a new type of life that's able to live on her own terms.

Unfortunately the crew of the *Auriga* are far less impressive. Veteran character actor J.E. Freeman is excellent as Doctor Wren, one of the doctors responsible for bringing Ripley back, and Raymond Cruz and Leland Orser both score as a marine and an alien host respectively; Orser's frantic, desperate performance especially impressive.

However, for all their successes, the two principle *Auriga* characters are disastrous. Dan Hedaya, best known for his excellent turn in *The Usual Suspects*, looks like he's wandered in from another film as

General Perez. His early scenes are impressive, but as the film goes on he gets more and more bug eyed and ludicrous until his eventual death, itself one of several jarring comedy moments.

Likewise, Brad Dourif, justifiably viewed as a legendary character actor turns in a terrible performance. Doctor Gediman, once again, looks like an escapee from a different film, a man so ridiculously dedicated to his work that he feels the need to monologue right up until his eventual death. Both men try for comedy, both fall flat and they drag down almost every scene they appear in.

That comedy in fact is one of the few elements of Jeunet's style that carries across. As stated before, he's a magnificent character director and *Amelie* is, flat-out, one of the finest movies of the last twenty years. That being said, his fondness for the grotesque, his desire to undercut tension with obvious gags gives the film a juddering tempo, the tension periodically thrown out in favour of an easy joke. Where the line between his direction and Whedon's script falls is very difficult to discern and moments like this don't make it any easier, especially as there are a lot of wonderful, genuinely funny lines that come up naturally and keep the film moving along.

However, the direction really shines in the action sequences. The underwater chase and the battle that follows it are consistently inventive and tense and can stand quite happily with the final chase in *Alien 3* or even the robo-sentries sequence in *Aliens*. The stakes are constantly raised, the tension constantly racked and some of the concepts and shots, especially those dealing with Christie and Vriess working in a buddy rig of sorts, are beautifully constructed.

The other stand-out is much earlier and is easily the film's finest moment. Ripley is alone, playing basketball, when the *Betty's* crew arrive. Johnner's brutish charms are counterpointed by Ripley's graceful, effortless, rhythmic juggling of the ball, a distant smile on her face the whole time. It's a wonderful scene, comedy tipping over into tension and violence as much because Johnner realises where the power in the room lies as anything else. He's no longer the biggest fish in the pond, no longer the top of the food chain and his reaction leads to a fight that's as graceful as it is brutal.

Finally, there is Ripley. Of course in this series, there's always Ripley, and Weaver is on top form. In fact, despite the weaknesses of the script and direction, she equals her previous performance here and is clearly revelling playing a very different version of her iconic role. This Ripley is distanced from her past both chronologically and genetically and, at the same time, is trapped by it. She's two hundred years in the future, cut off from her history once again, but she's also trapped in a body that's served it's purpose and yet still lives. She's a host without a parasite, an afterthought, someone who has escaped the brutally simple maths of both life and the alien's lifecycle and is clearly unsure what to do about it.



In the hands of lesser talents, this would fall flat but Weaver, Whedon and Jeunet are more than up to the task. Ripley's gradual discovery of her own abilities and her casual, feral physicality are never played for cheap titillation or laughs. This is a woman who was dead, who wants very much to be dead again and the conflict between that and her human instincts is elegantly played. From the basketball fight to the first moment she bonds with Call and even her scenes with the Hybrid, this is a Ripley who is slowly coming to terms not only with who, but what she is. She bonds with Call because like her, she's something new and she's broken hearted by the death of the Hybrid for the exact same reason. She is, in short, the single element of this film that clicks from the moment she arrives, not quite human, not quite alive and not quite ready to die. She is something new and the major reason why you should bother with this final, uneven entry in the series.

Alien Resurrection is the least of the series by a mile, so obsessed with honouring its past that in the end it's tied slavishly to them, choking the very individuality that defined the series. It's uneven, at times flat-out silly, and in the Hybrid, has one of the least successful ideas ever introduced to the series. Despite

that, though, there's still just enough good dialogue, just enough good performances, just enough visual flair to make this an entertaining if far from essential couple of hours viewing.

Next time we break out, not only of the *Alien* series but the alphabet! Join me next Wednesday, when normal service will be resumed, for a look at Peter Hyams' adaptation of 2010.

This article was first published online at Hivemind
(<http://www.sfcrownsnest.com/hivemind/home.php>)



REVIEWS

The Writer's Tale and *Cage of Night* Reviewed by Guy Adams
Halting State Reviewed by Dave Gullen

Cage of Night by Ed Gorman PS Publishing, £20 (hardcover)

Why doesn't *everyone* talk about Ed Gorman?

I came to him through his short fiction: 'Angie' a dark crime piece that (like a lot of good work in the field) physically *attacks* you in the last few paragraphs. That story alone was enough to sell me the two-volume (thus far) set of Gorman's stories PS Publishing released last year. They're big books, just shy of 40 stories and novellas. Know how many duds there are between the covers? None.

I say again: why doesn't *everyone* talk about Ed Gorman?

Now, thanks once more to PS, we have *Cage of Night* a novel that Stephen Gallagher's introduction informs us was once rejected by a mainstream publisher due to its 'fantastical content'. I doubt there are any *Hub* readers who need me to tell them that publishers can sometimes be *very* stupid.

Cage of Night - like Gallagher's *Valley of Lights* - is a crime novel with a peppering of fantasy. *Possibly*.

The blurb: Twenty-one-year-old Spence returns to his hometown after two years in the Army and falls in love with Cindy Brasher, Homecoming Queen and town goddess to a long line of jealous men.

A string of robberies puts Spence at odds with his obsessive love for Cindy. One by one Spence's rivals are implicated in horrific crimes.

Spence wonders how much Cindy knows and why she wants him, like her past boyfriends, to visit the old well in the woods...

Gorman's pitch-perfect prose is clean and solid, its ability to serve characters as *real* people putting you in mind of Joe R. Lansdale when in a conversational frame of mind. Unlike Lansdale - whose prose always threatens to split open and reveal violent lunacy or a *really* naughty joke - Gorman's writing has an undercurrent of nothing less potent than realism: we believe every damn word he tells us. In that sense alone he shares a quality with Cindy Brasher, the beautifully damaged girl sitting at the heart of the novel.

Despite the fact that you never forget you are reading a tragedy (with all the inevitable destruction that form promises) Gorman knows how to craft a story and keeps the novel's options wide enough to avoid utter predictability. Not that I for one would have cared, while Gorman can plot as well as the rest of 'em, it's the sheer pleasure of his storytelling that pulls me in. He is that apocryphal writer that could publish his shopping list and I'd still buy it (duct tape, bourbon, a second-hand Conan paperback and some decent Columbian coffee at a guess).

Recommended with rabid enthusiasm. Hell, I'll *make* everyone talk about Gorman if it kills me!

Halting State, by Charles Stross
Orbit, £6.99

Jack Reed is a geek, a loner, an overweight computer gamer and possessed of a set of near-unique software skills. He's also unemployed, drunk, and in a police cell in Amsterdam. So when he's head-hunted for a short-term contract he's not that bothered about, and at an outrageous day rate, he feels like he's landed on his feet for once. But this time he's not only working for auditors instead of a software house, he's also unwittingly involved in a global hi-tech conspiracy that threatens the economic survival of a newly-independent Scotland, a European Union that is about to absorb Russia, and the stability of the current world order.

Relentless, intense, witty and well-observed, *Halting State* is a fast-paced geek-procedural detective story where everyone is playing catch-up with the hi-tech hostiles and nothing, not even a piss-up in Amsterdam, is what it seems.

Starting with an impossible raid on an unbreakable bank in gaming cyber-space, Charles Stross's clever and entertaining story of the near future is an extrapolation of current trends in society, economics and power politics seen from the point of view of ordinary people. Software engineers, police, auditors and gamers are all relentlessly pulled into an ever-expanding and increasingly dangerous conspiracy of deceit and double-dealing as the country spirals towards the nearest thing to open war you can get without actually firing any guns.

It's an affectionate book too, Stross seems fond of most of his characters, they're normal, they have strengths and failings, and hopes and fears made worse by the increasing paranoia unfolding around them. Unlike many fantasy authors, Stross doesn't dwell on this to excess, he lets the character's actions inform us of their nature, and vice-versa, and then moves on with the narrative.

The style is intense, the pace seldom lets up, but there are quieter moments for the reader and the characters – time even for some nicely done moments of romance as Jack falls for Elaine, a slightly-built auditor with a neat side-line LARP and sword-fighting.

The background is detailed and comprehensive, this is a near future world we probably won't end up in, but it's a highly plausible one, where the EU, China and India are ascendant. The USA is struggling, held back by its now primitive infrastructure just as Britain, the vanguard of a previous technological revolution, once was.

Just when you're starting to wonder where this is all going, that the story so far is just too small, it kicks into a higher, nastier gear with good timing. Death threats against Jack's niece, an attempt on his own life, and an occasional corpse turn up, and yet again what is on the surface merely serves to conceal the truth beneath.

With traditional fantasy it's conventional to have a map, and sometimes a cast of characters. Set in a Glasgow and Edinburgh that Stross makes at once familiar and different, with driverless taxis and VR glasses showing a dozen overlays on reality, we don't need either of those. There were times though when I thought a glossary for all the TLAs (Three Letter Acronyms) FLAs (Four etc) that fill techno, police, and business babble would be useful for those of us not as (un)fortunate as me to have almost as much familiarity with as Mr. Stross.

Because I am part-geek too, which made it a little easier, but don't let the TLAs put you off if you're not. This is a fun, savvy and entertaining book. Go read and enjoy.

After all, if I was a complete geek I'd say that if the countries and corporations in the book were still running VMS, the only unhackable commercial operating system in the world, none of this would have been possible. But I like to think I'm not, so I didn't say that, did I?

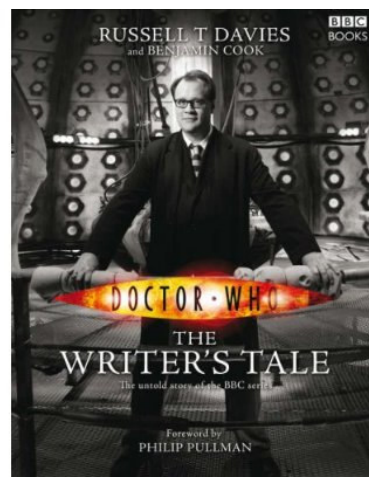
Look into the red light.

<plam>

DOCTOR WHO: The Writer's Tale by Russell T. Davies

BBC Books, £30

You know those conversations that get bloodthirsty? You start discussing a film, or book maybe, and before you know it you've found your absolute nemesis when it comes to artistic taste. As



much as you try and remember that, hell, this is *just* a film and it's not worth getting so heated, you still find yourself looking for something to use as a weapon in case this bastard doesn't see sense and back down in their vile and *wrong* opinion. I came close to blinding someone with a pub ashtray once just because they seemed incapable of seeing *Independence Day* for the contemptible, jingoistic *arsepie* it so obviously was.

God, but I know what I like...

So, I had one of these conversations the other day, it was about Russell T. Davies - no... let's play fair, let's make it clear what kind of conversation you're getting into, if only so you can get your arms up to defend yourself in time - I had this conversation about the *inarguable TV genius* Russell T. Davies. The woman I was arguing with - and yes, I'm old fashioned, her femininity was what saved her... it's just not right for a man to rip a woman's lungs out and beat her to death with them whatever the feminists say - she believed that Davies was a lazy hack who seemed congenitally incapable of plotting his Doctor Who work. I believed her to be Satan's Own Child with no more knowledge of how to write great TV stories than a peanut with learning difficulties.

These were points of view not open to compromise.

Now, I'll be honest in that Davies is not one hundred percent perfect, he's done things that don't gel with me... still... to come out with (and I'm paraphrasing as I was pounding my fists into my ears trying to block out the Bad Words) 'He obviously thinks children aren't capable of understanding plot, say what you like about *Pyramids of Mars* and *Genesis of the Daleks* but they're brilliantly plotted stories'.

Oh my giddy aunt...

Now - in an attempt to clarify this blindness that seems rife in certain classic Doctor Who fans - Doctor Who has never been anything more than a romp. A good romp. A *wonderful* romp. A romp that has given me the most splendid joy ever since I was old enough to find the Melkur bizarrely frightening... Still, for all it's wonderful scripts, great performances and classic moments you will always be on a hiding to nothing if you present it outside of the entertainment it is. *Caves of Androzani* may be an exciting and dynamic slice of adventure but it's hardly *The Singing Detective* now is it?

Urgh... I can hear them... the naysayers... 'That doesn't mean the plot isn't vitally important,' they cry, 'just look at Stephen Moffat!'

'No thank you,' I will say, 'he has all the visual appeal of a pork pie left out in the rain and you are missing the point.'

Plot is important, yes. But not always as important as *incident*. When writing a big-budget, ratings-winning show for the whole family plot is purely a framework for Good Incident... for action, emotion, humour, character... all the stuff that makes Doctor Who - most particularly modern Doctor Who - the wonderful thing it is. When faced with the realisation that a hole in the plot threatened a good bit in a story Old King of Who, Terrance Dicks would simply reply 'we'll cover it with a line'. This was a wholly sensible attitude and one that anyone interested in writing populist drama or fiction for children should take on board. Put simply: do not let plot get in the way of incident, bend your plot to make it work.

A modern example, a trifling but effective one - taken directly from *The Writer's Tale* the excellent book reproducing a year's worth of correspondence between Davies and journalist Benjamin Cook - when writing *The Voyage of the Damned* (the 2007 Christmas Special) Davies knew that the meteoroids that scuppered the Starship Titanic needed to be on *fire*. They needed to be on fire because it looked cool. It looked exciting. It would make kids and adults alike sit forward over their turkey-bloated bellies and coo at the screen because Big Flaming Balls were about to make explosions happen on their screen. Christmas Day High Adventure needs explosions. Davies is not stupid, he knows that they could *not* be on fire as they're in space and there's no oxygen. He actually puts a line in to cover this, has Russell Tovey (his favourite sex Pob) describe the meteoroids as being made from 'nitrofine flammable rock'. He then cuts the line as 'it's dull and I just don't care.' This was the *right* decision. It was not laziness, it was not looking down on his audience, it was not being a bad writer, it was serving the show and getting the images on screen the way they needed to be.

This evil fun vampire I was arguing with, this harridan of my TV viewing tastes, actually brought up the episode *Midnight* from the fourth series. An episode written at breakneck speed - as detailed, again in the superb *The Writer's Tale*, buy it... buy it *now* damn you - in order to fill a gap caused by a script that just wasn't going to play. She stated the glaring plot hole she saw in the episode: 'If nothing can exist outside the bus,' she mouth-farted, 'how can the monster be out there?'

'Because it CAN!' I screamed, 'It's a monster!! It will do whatever the writer tells it to so that we can watch Leslie Sharp giving a terrifying - and so wonderfully playground repeatable - performance. Look! She repeats everything everyone says! Then it gets closer and closer until she's saying it first! How creepy is that? Eh? Eh?'

Midnight is pure, claustrophobic genius. Not one missed line or performance. To ask how the creature can exist outside the bus - itself a flawed question when dealing with the genre, how can a Vampire turn into a bat? Why does silver kill a werewolf? Because I, the writer, say it *can* - is akin to gazing at a gallery painting and complaining about the magnolia paint on the wall it hangs on. You're looking in the wrong place. You're missing the point. The genius happened while you were distracted... ah... balls to it... where's the ashtray?... *clang... clang... splat... oof...*

I urge any of you joyless sorts who sit at home and guff opinion about how TV programs *should* be made (without having the experience of having made one, naturally...) to pick up *The Writer's Tale*. You need a copy. Seriously you do. It is not a 'how to' guide in the least but it shines a light on the process - and a hugely honest light at that, Davies is happy to own up to poor work, he is also happy to accept accusations of arrogance, he paints himself in a truthful and not always flattering light. It is essential reading for *anyone* who wants to understand TV. No... scratch that... it's essential reading for anyone who *pretends* to understand TV but ultimately *doesn't*. Arm yourself with information, talk from a position of knowledge... then you can slag Davies off as much as you like but be warned: he'll be happy to take you on, grinning like a mad bastard holding his BAFTAs like clubs. Me? I'll be right behind him sharpening the edge of my pub ashtray.

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