

Hub Magazine

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EDITORIAL:

by phil lunt

This editorial is going to bounce all over the place. My excuse? I'm recovering from some sort of Venusian death flu that has had me whimpering in a corner for a good few days. No, it's not Venusian MAN flu, I said DEATH flu, there's a big difference. Only it hasn't killed me yet but that's the sort of thing we can gloss over like a detail in a storyline of *Lost... meow!*

I'll take this opportunity to apologise for the hubfiction.com website being out of action for a period of time a week or so ago. Demand for Mur Lafferty's *Marco and the Red Granny* has been amazingly high, and rightly so. However, demand was at such a level that the cogs ground to a halt amidst shouts of "She cannae take any more, Cap'n!" and folk had to be threatened with many eternities of badgering to get the site back up and running. So, again, apologies to anyone who had problems. I suggest everyone should run and check out Mur's series NOW before the gremlins strike again... and it *is* the season for gremlins!

Also, I have to mention Thought Bubble 2010 while I'm here. It ran over 18th-21st November in Leeds with the "Comic Convention" segment running all day on the 20th and it was simply brilliant! It was my first ever convention and I decided to help out as a volunteer and, frankly, that just added to the fun! It's not just for comic book or sequential art fans, either. I firmly believe that if you're a fan of sci-fi, fantasy and/or horror then, if you have a chance, get along to it in 2011.

I know, I probably felt exactly the same way after my first music festival (All Tomorrow's Parties in 2002... ah, that was fun...) but Thought Bubble really is a well run event, chock full of interesting panels and people and I'd like to add that I'm not even being paid to say any of this so it must be genuine.

Right, enough of my meanderings. On with the show....

FICTION

And the Northmen Brought Their Gods

by louise morgan

It is said that before the Northmen sacked that most blessed of places, God's own church at Lindisfarne, dire portents appeared over the kingdoms to the north: great flashes of lightning and fiery dragons were seen in the skies. How fortunate were they to have had such warning - we had none.

The light of the torch is fading now, its fire dying, and I have but little time to put down this account. I do not know what the dawn (should it come: should it ever come) may bring, but I must believe that another soul will find these words and know what has befallen us.

Many of the kingdoms have succumbed to the Dane, and only Wessex continues to resist. Our great king Alfred: son of Aethelwulf, brother of Ethelred, still rides out against the Northmen, and still they harry us at every turn. They are determined to take this land from us, the land we have bought so dearly with our blood; the land gifted us by our fathers and their fathers before them. The king's court is full of whispers, and the King himself spends much of his time closeted with his advisors and exchanging letters with my lord Asser in Dyfed. The army is disheartened and weak. The men grow weary of a war that looks not to end within our lifetimes and wish to return to their families. These Northmen, they take not just our land but our way of life.

Alfred still mourns for his brother. His succession to the throne, too, troubles him more greatly than he would have it openly known: he fears dissent from his nephews, youths yet but who will be grown men someday. The land feels his unease, I think, for many crops have failed and the Northmen pillage much of what survives. They come like rats into a barn; as foxes to the hen coop - taking not from need, but for the sheer joy of theft.

Northmen have come before now, before this - it was always thus. Eyes from many lands have long settled on ours, now united under Alfred. But times have changed: never before have there been signs and portents such as those that came in the summer of Lindisfarne's fall, and never before have the Northmen been so vicious, so cruel. Some greater force is driving them, it seems, some greater need or desire which we cannot understand.

When the first ships were sighted, there were rumours of another boat which accompanied them. Not a longship, as is the wont of the Northmen, but a strange craft unlike any seen on these shores. It was of a dark-stained wood and though its sail was unfurled, it travelled quite without the need for wind or oars. Its passengers - or crew, for no-one could say for certain who or what they might be - all were hooded in cloaks of black stuff darker than the night-sea. Those on the shore who were close enough to see them pass told of a great chill which settled over the land, a cold and hard despair which overswept them where they stood, and they were afraid.

It was but three nights after the arrival of the first ships before they began to come: the women, the children; the weak and the old. All who had fled at the sight of the Northmen. And they, too, told of the strange darkship; told how the men aboard stood and watched as the Dane rampaged through the place they came to rest. There was something else, too - something which remained unsaid between them, something they had seen which was too terrible to breathe aloud. No reassurance or guarantee of safety would sway them but while their lips remained sealed, their eyes spoke of horrors that cry to the very steps of Heaven.

The King's thanes rode out at first light. The King withdrew with his advisors. And though it was perhaps a little more than a day's hard ride to the shore, there was no word from them for many dawns. Alfred sent scouts and messengers to follow their tracks, but none returned. It was as though they had ridden into

the air. But while there was silence from our men, word began to reach us of the horror of the Danefall: of villages plundered, farms and crops burned - and of Northmen spattered with the blood of God's priests, while the hooded men looked on unmoving. Alfred could no longer endure the silence, nor the insult the Dane offered the kingdom by way of tribute. And so we rode.

Oh, that I could un-see what I have seen; forget the stench of spilled blood, of cut horseflesh that ripens under the gaze of the dead. Such things, yet these are not the worst of them.

The sun was at its height when we found the first trace of the thanes. A waterskin, discarded far from the path, and beyond it the remains of a village. I will not speak of what we found there, for to speak of it would make it real and to me it seems that there are nightmares enough abroad in our land. This was but the first of their work that we found. There had been battle there, hard-fought and fair-won. The thanes could not save the village, but they avenged it with sword strike and axe blow. We followed the tracks of many men into the woods: whether they were our own, or the Dane, we could not tell - for the most skilled of our trackers was among the party we sought. When darkness fell, we hunched around what firelight we dared, and listened to the woods long into the night.

The day brought little comfort. A cold rain, more like to that found in the north, began to fall and muddy our way. We looked for more traces, more tracks, and discovered few - barely enough to show us the right path. We stumbled through copse and through forest, through close-grown trees and fields of cattle, all dead; their bellies split by hands unknown. I cannot say how long we walked before we found ourselves at the gate of a priory: a mean place of small consequence, which may have been its salvation as the Northmen passed it by. The Prior spoke little, save to tell us that my lord Aethelwulf was within and he was sorely wounded.

On seeing him, I do not believe I knew how he survived for he was wounded unto death. The blows which he had suffered would quickly be mortal to a lesser man than he, and I fear that should he live even now, he will not see a great many tides to come. His body raged with fever, and I thought that it must have crossed into his mind, for he raved as one greatly afflicted - not merely by pain, but by a madness such as I have never seen. He told us of a darkness in the Northmen's eyes, of a cold wind that came from beneath their cloaks... of a devil that followed on their heels, blood-bound and fog-soaked. But as we made our farewell, he snatched at my hand and drew it to him, pulling me close. "The black priests! Fear the black priests - and above all, fear that with which they travel. Fear it! *Fear it*, for it will devour your soul!" And with that, he pressed my hand to his lips, then threw back his head and began to laugh. It was a madman's laugh, and it echoed hard in our ears far past the doors of the priory.

Who are these Northmen, and what doom have they brought to our shores?

Although we did not speak of it, we knew that we were no longer seeking our own men, but were following the tracks of the Dane - for where we found one, we would surely find the other. And while each man would have been pleased to dismiss all that Lord Aethelwulf had said as the ravings of a dying man, we likewise understood that there was some truth, however strange, in his words when he spoke of the black priests. We rode on, and drew our cloaks about us as though they could ward off the chill that had settled in our hearts. With each abandoned village and farmstead we passed, each smouldering church, we despaired. Lands that were once fertile and familiar were blacked, blasted and burned; strange to our eyes. A sour smell of ash lingered in the air and caught in our throats, and any hopes we had that it would clear when we reached the coast were soon dashed.

We followed them all the way back to their landing site, beyond that first village. How hard those fleeing the Dane must have journeyed, for they walked in three days what took us two on horse. And no wonder they fled.

The Dane had set their camp where marsh met sea. To the north, the boggy ground gives way to beaches and, from there, to the stout cliffs upon which we have so long relied to aid our defence. To the south, the beach becomes bay becomes ocean - the same ocean they crossed in their ships to find us. What ships they were; some as sleeping dragons at ease in the bay, some drawn onto the beach, ropes and canvas slung between to provide shelter. The main encampment was further up the shore, further beyond the reach of the tide - a cluster of tents and huts. And then the cages.

Once our eyes were drawn to the cages, we could not tear them away. Four rough cages, boughs

wrested from trees and lashed together, standing side by side. Beyond, closest of all to the sea's edge, a large black tent, its banner traced with strange markings we could not understand but which we took to be a form of lettering. The tent of the black priests. What need have priests of cages? Even the Dane, who we know to pillage and ravage and take all that they are able, do not imprison their slaves in cages, but rather restrain them with bonds and with fear. There is much about these new raiders which is changed, and only now, now it is too late, can I see the source of it.

The cages were empty - but not for long. As we watched from our position on the cliff, we saw one of the Northmen lead out a string of prisoners, bound to one another at hand and foot. Among them we saw our men, yes, and some we knew from their dress to be captives from the lands around us - but so too were there men with Viking looks... their own soldiers. Why should such a party treat its own so ill; what could be their crime? The Northman drove the prisoners into the furthest of the cages and secured it with bindings, turning next to that dark tent. A priest emerged from its folds and spoke, it seemed, with the Northman before returning to the shadows.

As he passed them by in their prison, his comrades cried out to the Viking and thrust their hands through the bars as though to beg for release. He turned his head away, instead raising his eyes to the sky - and in so doing, saw our party, caught in the last of the light on the clifftop. We did not wait for him to raise the alarm, but lifted our banner and rode down to the camp.

Such a party as ours could not be seen to be a threat, and the Dane are wise with war strategy. We were no raiding expedition, nor anything other than envoy and as such we should be treated with full courtesy, as is the custom. Only a fool would have deemed himself safe, as we had seen much of the works of these Northmen - works which told us they were different somehow - but nonetheless we rode to their camp lightly armed and cautious of spirit.

We were met by a small guard, perhaps a dozen men, clearly among the best of their warriors. They were wrapped about with drab woolen cloaks, trimmed with fur, which they kept drawn about them as though a great wind would strip them of their skin. Their hair was long, twisted into the war-braids we have come to know and fear through years of raiding, and they had all the arrogance of their forebears in their faces. But there was darkness in their eyes, and a shadow hung over that camp such as I had not seen in my time on this middle earth: a hollowness that reached its fingers towards me and scabbled at my heart. They spoke to us in their language, coarse words that rolled from their throats like so many boulders in a river, and we could not answer. It was only when another came to join them, one who spoke in the tongues of Rome, that we were able to understand.

They were here, he said, at the order of their lord, who had long considered these shores more friendly than his own. He meant no threat to the rule of the kingdom entire, only to claim a piece of land for his own; land where he would be free from the harsh treatment he had suffered at the hands of the pagans of his homeland. Could we not, the interpreter asked, as a kingdom which had so recently thrown off the yoke of false gods and idols, extend charity to one who would do the same?

We could not speak for our King, we replied, and would relay a message to him if sanctuary was all that was required. But until such time as he chose to answer, the raiding - most cruel and vicious as it has been - must end, and the Dane must agree to abide by our lord Alfred's judgement. Should they not, we would raise the armies of Wessex and the kingdoms against them, and ride with the forces of the one true God at our backs. The Northman smiled and shook his head. "I doubt that greatly," he said, and shouted something to his companions who laughed, some of them looking away from us, towards the sea. The light was truly failing, and a sudden breeze swirled about us, filling our throats with the taste of the waves. From somewhere far off, there came a great cry - not of man, nor beast, but the cry of an older horror than any we could dream. The interpreter narrowed his eyes, his fingers tapped on the hilt of his sword. He would give us, he said, all but one of our men - those who yet lived - as a show of good faith. One was to remain behind as hostage, and we should likewise take one of the Northmen: the son of Guthrum, a wealthy and powerful warlord among the Dane. For reasons we could not then know, he was eager that we should be gone before nightfall.

Before we had even given our answer, he barked an order at the men with him, and some returned to the tents. Others crossed to the cage and to the black tent of the priests. One of them paused a moment

at its entrance, passing afraid to our eyes, then called out. A hooded shape appeared from the dark within as though taking form from smoke, turned his cowed face in our direction and then nodded, vanishing again a moment after. The guard signalled to the other men, who unlaced the bindings on the cage and hauled out several of the prisoners, dragging our own men to the damp sand and throwing the others back before once again sealing the entrance. I hoped never again to hear cries of despair such as those that issued from those left inside. We did not speak of the one left behind, and we did not seek to meet his gaze. We knew his name, and knew that we would honour him - that was enough.

Our men were all brought before us, some from the cage and some from the tents. All were bound, few would speak. The Danes brought horses and, cutting the bonds at the prisoners' ankles, helped them to mount. Despite our strongest protest, they refused to permit us to cut the bonds at their wrists, indeed telling us that to do so would be an act of war, and we were in no position to declare ourselves the victors. The hostage, too, followed from the tents - this son of Guthrum who would ride with us and throw himself on the mercy of Alfred. The interpreter brought for us a single torch, lit from their camp fire, and a message from his lord. Our terms would be kept, and there would be no further raids, provided we met terms of their own: that we should ride from the camp at once and not look back until we were far beyond the rise of the cliffs. These seemed fair and we were eager to be away from this most strange of places. As my lord Egbert reached for the torch, the interpreter's cloak fell away from his shoulders and for the first time we saw the skin about his neck. It was carved with strange symbols, long-cut and hard-scarred; twisted lines that curved and intertwined about his throat, running up along his jaw and behind his ear. Such markings! The very sight of them filled me with a cold dread that I could not understand, a fear I might not explain.

He watched us as we rode: a shadow flickering in the light of the torches his men held.

Our men did not speak. The hostage lowered his head and at first, riding alongside him, I thought that he whispered to his horse, but the ragged breaths that racked him spoke the truth: that as we rode, he wept. "Our lord Alfred is a wise man and a good King." I spoke to him in Latin, not knowing whether he would know my words as comfort. "You have nothing to fear while your people hold their bargain."

"It is not your lord I fear," he answered with rough voice, "but my own." And as he looked up, I saw by the light of the torch that his face too had been carved with the foreign sigils, much as those in the savage northern kingdoms are said to daub their faces with the signs of their gods. But these signs could not be the work of any god - true or false - so cruelly-cut were they. "I would ask a favour of you," he said, his voice low, "that should there be any chance your King would send me back to my own people, you would cut out my heart and send me back a corpse."

"Why should I do that, unless you do me some great wrong?"

"Because they will do worse." He would answer no more of my questions - not of his people, not of his lord.

We had reached the highest point of the cliffs when one of our rescued men, one of the great thanes, cried out in pain. We halted the horses and as one moved to his aid, lifting him from his mount. He moaned as we lowered him onto the grass, and as we saw what we had not seen before: he too was covered in markings, fresh-cut on his flesh, his hands, his throat, his neck - and beneath his clothing, his chest and belly. All marked with these same signs. He turned his face from us in shame.

The hostage answered us before we could speak. "The priests. It is their doing. He bears the marks of our lord, as do I."

"But so many! You say you bear the same marks: how can it be that one of the Dane and a mere prisoner would be branded as equals?"

"You know little of my lord."

"I had heard it said that the Northmen were barbarians. In all the dealings we have had with your people, I have never felt it as true as I do now. You may choose to accept these markings..."

"It was not my choice. Nor have you had dealings with my people before; well might you be thankful for that."

"And the purpose of these scars?"

"To mark us as his."

"Like cattle? What sort of a man..."

"My lord is no man." As he spoke, his voice was empty, full of nothing but loss and despair, as though his very soul blackened like timbers in a fire.

I had a mind to ask him the meaning of his words, but again there came that cry, the sound of a thousand nightmares riding on the night winds. In that moment, we forgot the terms of our retreat and cast our eyes back towards the Northmen's camp. Towards the shore. Towards the sea.

I have been fortunate in many things in life, and God in his wisdom has seen fit to bless me in many ways. But God himself cannot undo the thing which I most regret and would most fervently wish to change: that I looked out to sea.

The Northmen had brought their black ship close to the shore: that strange ship of which we had heard so much, and had decked it with torches and braziers. From our vantage point on the cliff, we could see the men upon it: the priests. How had we not known there were so many? Two dozen or more of them, robed but with their hoods thrown back. Their arms aloft, they faced the sea and even now I can hear their voices, chanting and calling, cajoling as a child to a cat, as they drifted over the bay to us. It was not the speech of the Northmen but a hard, black language as dark as their robes. And as we watched them, the light of the torches flickering across them, I saw that their heads were shaved - so unlike the Dane with whom they traveled - and however I might pray that it were not true, I knew that their faces, their bodies, their throats, their hands and their very scalps would be scratched with the signs of their god.

The priests chanted. The Northmen of the camp gathered on the shore. The men in the cage began to cry out and for the first time I saw how close the cage was to the water's edge; the waves now lapped at their feet with the incoming tide. How I pitied them. How little I knew of what would befall them.

That sound again, that monstrous call - but louder. Closer. The hostage gripped the reins of his horse so tightly that his knuckles grew white and blood dripped from his palms. And then...

The abomination rose from the sea slowly, at first. The waters swelled before the priests' boat and rose as they might before a great wind. But they did not abate. They rose, and rose until they towered above the mast - and as I wondered how the waves did not bury the ship, I understood that what I saw was not water, but a *thing*, a horror beyond imagining. I have heard men speak of demons beneath the sea, of devils that breathe water in place of air, but no words can describe the creature I saw before me: how its many limbs writhed and thrashed, turning the sea to a churning foam! How its cry, now clearer than ever, cut a swathe through my soul! How it reached for the cage on the beach and drew it slowly towards its body, and how the men within screamed.

How, at last, it seemed to turn whatever eyes it has upon us, and fix on the single torch that lit our party.

How I understood in a moment that *this* was the lord the Northmen spoke of; how this would be only the first, how there would be more that followed. How they will enslave the kingdoms of this land, and brave Wessex along with them. How we will fall at the feet of an empire greater than Rome's and soaked in the blood of the world. God cannot save us - nor even could the old gods to whom some still hold - for the god the Northmen bring with them comes from beyond time.

We must ride. Whither, I do not know, for we dare not bring the wrath of the beast down upon the court and find my lord Alfred unprepared. We may hope to find shelter inland and time enough to send word to the king that a devil-god is among us; that he does not march abroad but hides in silence beneath the waves. I fear that prayer is of little use, but still I pray that we might accomplish this much. None should feel the chill of that gaze as it settles upon them and marks them as its prey: no man of Wessex, nor that of any kingdom.

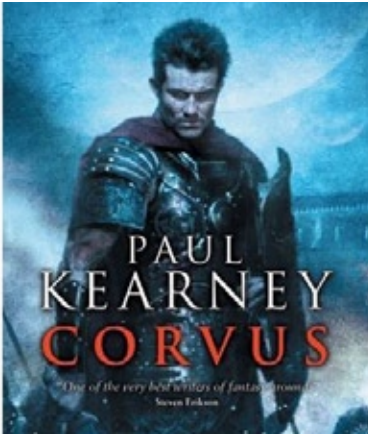
The camp of the Northmen is emptied now, and the black priests ride. What time I have is spent. Peace be with you, and may the Lord in his wisdom and mercy spare you from the sight of the things which I have seen...

They come!



Corvus

reviewed by keith harvey



by Paul Kearney

Solaris

rrp £7.99

Paul Kearney's *The Ten Thousand* (Solaris 2008) was the first entry on my published list of the best fifteen fantasy and historical fictions that feature warfare as their predominant theme. At the time I composed the list, I compared Kearney to Steven Pressfield, David Drake and David Gemmell. His new novel, *Corvus* (Solaris 2010), however, although bloody and militant like *The Ten Thousand*, moves his Macht narrative into a deeper, darker poetic, comparable to the novels of

George R. R. Martin and Steven Erickson. With *Corvus*, Kearney plants himself firmly in that lineage that emerged at the fork in the genre, that moment when tough-minded, solid, somewhat psychological writing split off from Tolkien's many imitators (mostly Americans) to follow a grittier course. This new way produced a rougher, more complex, psychological fantasy that employs brooding, sanguine narratives with complex, adult characters. Oddly, this fantasy, unlike the imitators, may be truer to the original spirit of heroic or epic fantasy. Consequently, *Corvus*, which relies on Greek history (Philip II of Macedonia), like *The Ten Thousand* (*Anabasis*), feels familiar and real, rather than manufactured; more like history unfolding, rather than a fantasy world emerging.

On its most basic level, *Corvus* is an exciting read. Very rarely do I lose myself completely in a novel but I did in this one. I read it in two sittings in the evening in front of my fire and each night I read until my eyes ached. After reading for over fifty years, I very seldom have such a satisfying reading experience. So, on that basis alone, I highly recommend the novel.

But there is more to *Corvus* than just a rousing story. The story begins with our re-introduction to Rictus, the leader of the mercenaries in *The Ten Thousand*, twenty plus years after the war in the east. At the beginning of the novel, he and his men are stretched along a road, returning home from some petty internal dispute of the Macht. This initial description is cinematic and seminal and catches the reader's attention with its archetypal imagery: "Behind him, on the northern slope of the ridge, a long line of men sat by the side of the track. Every one of them was burdened with packed cuirass and strapped shield. Every one had a spear in his fist. They looked up as he turned to them, and their eyes were pale glitters as the sunset shattered across the mountains behind them." (*Corvus*, 14). What becomes immediately obvious is that this is good writing, almost poetic in its use of alliteration and striking imagery. Note the men are "burdened" and their eyes are "pale glitters." This language lifts the novel from mere adventure to myth. It also introduces a theme: the mercenaries are tired and worn from internal disputes among the Macht; Rictus wants to return home to his homestead and stay, allowing the mercenaries to disband and be absorbed back into society. Of course, we know that retirement is never an option for men like Rictus and that trouble looms on the horizon. The trouble specifically is *Corvus*, a general from the east, who is defeating Macht cities one at a time. When Eunion, Rictus' retainer, asks: "And what news from Machran, master?" He answers: "It's hard to separate myth and fact when it comes to talking about the east." The eponymous *Corvus*, of course, appears shortly after we have met Rictus' family and friends and forces him and the mercenaries to join his campaign against the city states of the Macht.

The tension of the novel revolves around *Corvus*, Rictus, and the leaders of the Macht. As *Corvus*' army moves west, conquering everything in its path, the reader is sometimes confused: is *Corvus* a good man, trying to pull the Macht together in order to face the challenge of the east, or is he a mad man, a blood-

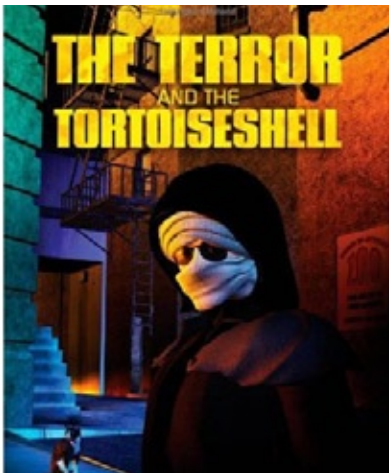
thirsty conqueror, thrusting his army forward in revenge for perceived past wrongs perpetrated on him and his family? And, more specifically, where do Rictus' loyalties lie? Does he follow Corvus out of fear or because he believes in what he is doing? It is this tension, plus the almost perfect rendering of the bronze-age battles, that provides the novel's internal intensity. Through the use of three or four points of view Kearney reveals both sides in the life or death struggle, as well showing the middle view: the victimization of the innocents, the civilians caught up in the war. This balanced view and the roundness of the characters make the reader work (think) at times. Not once are we able to say with absolute certainty that Rictus or Corvus is the hero of the novel. Rictus is the protagonist but he is not perfect or even completely likeable; instead, he is a severely flawed man, who suffers greatly through the events unfolding in the narrative.

Finally, without saying too much about the plot, there are some surprises which will shock the reader. Additionally, it is important to note that *The Ten Thousand* didn't rely on magic and none seems evident here. But there is something about the armor (Curse of God) that the Macht wear that seems to portend more secrets and creates suspense; this hint of otherness unrevealed shows the sophistication of the novel and, of course, leads to the roundness of Rictus' world, while hinting at further adventures.

Corvus is a jewel of a novel and easily meets the challenge of the very successful *The Ten Thousand*. It feels very much like a Gemmell novel but it differs from Gemmell's work in that it is harder, sharper, and tighter. For similar works, I recommend Gemmell's *Waylander* series or George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Fire and Ice*.

The Terror and the Tortoiseshell

reviewed by martin willoughby



by John Travis
Atomic Fez Publishing
rrp £19.99 (hardback)

Reading the blurb on the back, I was lulled into thinking this was a comedy. Whilst it has its lighter moments, a comedy it is not. Once I'd got used to that idea and started looking at the story differently, it got much better. And what a story it is.

This is part horror, part alternate history, part SF, but mostly a SF/detective story with a sly line in humour. The main character is Benji

Spriteman, a six foot tall PI who used to be a house cat. Yep, I did say a house cat.

This is where the 'Terror' of the title comes in. The idea is based on a story by Arthur Machen in a book called, 'The Terror' published in 1917, which is referred to a couple of times in the book. You can find out more about this semi-interesting man on Wikipedia.

Travis takes that story's idea a step further by making every pet and animal in the world become sentient in the space of a few weeks and take over the world. This terror is well described early on and has some stomach churning moments, especially at the zoo.

The terror and the murderous rampage against humans that followed are present throughout the story and, although it steps into the background as the story goes on, rears its very ugly head later on.

The story itself is that 'Sappies', the new name for humans, are being murdered and left in animal-like poses, all of them horrific in nature and two of which made my skin crawl. As a result, the rats who now run the newspaper (ha ha) are calling for a police force to be set up. Cue the dogs. An organisation called SPCH is claiming responsibility and they are tracked down to... Nah, that would spoil the ending for you.

The process of the investigation is what you'd expect from a detective story, but has a surprising twist at the end that explains the role of one of the earlier characters. The ending is gory, involving experimentation,

blood (naturally) and the body parts of various humans and animals.

So, what of the characters?

Benji was owned by a PI called Jimmy Spriteman who, when he saw his cat change overnight into a six foot tall, English speaking, sentient being went mad and ran away screaming. Jimmy was last seen trying to escape from a pack of sentient Lions who had just torn a couple of humans to pieces and eaten various parts of them.

He's obviously picked something up from his owner as he takes to the life of a PI quite well. Unfortunately he cannot take his liquor and so Jimmy's stock of whisky gets thrown out, though he does develop a taste for an egg-based liqueur which leaves him a lot worse for wear. Not only does he now act like a human, he starts dressing like one too, complete with the regulation overcoat.

The best of the other characters is the head of police. He is a large dog with a nose for trouble and a better than average sense of smell. Not only that, he bears more than a passing resemblance to Lt Columbo, right down to the dirty mac, the dodgy car, the smelly cigars and the wife he seems to spend so little time with. He's also picked up some, probably all, of Columbo's mannerisms and lines: 'Just one more thing, sir'.

The world that Travis has created is set in a US style mid-twentieth century city similar to many in the detective genre. What sets it apart from that norm are the animals and the way they settle into their new lives.

There are numerous descriptions of how they take on the businesses and homes of the now dead humans. The general rule is that if they lived in a place with a human, they now own it. The animals also take on the roles that their owners used to have in life, mostly due to inertia. Some, such as the rats, take to their new roles with gusto and start behaving as badly as the humans used to.

One of the aspects of this new world is that, as far as the animals are concerned, the rules that the humans lived under no longer count. They make up their own rules as they go along and then follow them. Police questioning can be what the dogs want it to be for example, which leads to some rather comic moments when they have to arrest a porcupine and stop him from firing his spines at them during his interrogation.

There are, as you can imagine, similarities between this book and *Animal Farm*, but not many. You can see our world through animal eyes and it isn't pleasant. It's easy to imagine humans doing the same things, only in some cases more viciously, in some cases less so.

Despite the horror, there is a fair amount of humour running through the book. Sometimes it is of the deadpan variety, other times it is more straightforward. One example early on comes when Benji sees different species getting together and having kids. A Frog and a Pig become a couple and have offspring that are referred to as Friggs. He also hears of a Frog and Duck getting together and having offspring: but they're not called by the name that you're thinking of.

The story is part horror, part detective, with a nice line in humour. There are twists and turns as you would expect and more than a few surprises along the way. It's one of the best books I have read this year and I hope that there are many more of these Benji Spriteman mysteries to come.

FEATURES

Open Sourcing Armageddon

by Alasdair Stuart

Something is about to happen but, as the man once said, something is always about to happen. Hollywood has caught apocalypse fever again with the Strause Brothers' *Skyline* having come and gone and no less than three "end of the world" movies due next year, including *Contagion* from Stephen Soderbergh and *Battle: LA* directed by Jonathan Liebesman. It's an interesting idea, combining the ground level military approach of films like *Blackhawk Down* with the big budget destruction of *Independence Day* to create a boots on the ground look at an alien invasion. It's not the first film to do it, with *Skyline*, *Cloverfield* and even *Signs* hitting similar marks but *Battle: LA* has one thing going for it that none of the others do. Potentially, it could franchise the end of the world.

To be clear, inside the US, the film is being referred to as *Battle: Los Angeles* whilst outside it, it's being marketed as *World Invasion: Battle Los Angeles*. It's a simple marketing twist and an effective one but it could be so much more, marrying the deliberately low budget, low tech approach that films like *Skyline* embraced with the creative power of the internet.

Think about it, think about what those two words imply; World Invasion. This is an event that's happening everywhere to everyone, and the marines in *Battle: LA* are just a tiny part of it. So what's going on in New York? Or London? Or Bradford? What's going on on the Isle of Man for God's sake? Well that much I can at least tell you; the odds are that my countrymen would look at the coming armageddon with a combination of apathy and hostility that all small communities have to events outside themselves. Plus, depending on the time of year, the fog over the Irish Sea is so intense there's a reasonable chance the aliens would miss the island altogether.

But I digress. In the run up to the release of *Cloverfield* one of the promotional contests was to produce the best video simulating what happened when the monster passed by whilst *Flashforward* attempted to make the Mosaic website, tracking people's experiences during the global blackout an artefact that existed both inside and outside the fictional universe. They're both great ideas and neither of them go far enough. What could occur is something that *Battle: LA* is uniquely placed to create, something which takes the standard Alternate Reality Gaming and promotional approaches taken by other films and expands them to dizzying levels.

Facebook, Twitter, even Livejournal come first. You offer a 'starter' kit, a pdf of background information or a collection of images or events or an app that allows people to set up an account in their names, or the name of their character, in the same universe. You unfold weekly events, releasing them through 'non player character' accounts and allow the people keeping journals or twitter feeds to react to them. The first week? It's an unusual comet. The second week? You pick random people and throw them secondary packs containing details of sightings in their area, the third? Random attacks and the fourth? All hell breaks loose.

That's all well and good but the second level of immersion comes from iPhones, smart phones, BlackBerrys, iPads, etc. A free app is made available to people who want to participate that ties into the camera and the GPS and throws set elements out into the world. One week you're taking a picture of your friends posing outside a bar, the next it's your friends by a smoking ruin. Throw in location specific content for GPS apps like Foursquare, something that the Monsters pre-release campaign did supremely well and suddenly you have a national or international web of content that your users can interact with, win prizes from and tell their friends how great it is. Who of course sign up, who of course find out about your film, who

of course, maybe, go and see it.

The fourth level of immersion is where things get interesting. You fire out a second and third pack of multi-media, images, video, audio and let the door swing the other way. Create a central register of people interested in exploring what happens in their area when the aliens land, use Facebook networks to put them together and be prepared for the fact that a measurable proportion of them will flame out and never produce anything. Those that do club together, though, are encouraged to produce videos set in the same universe, using set events to make sure they all remain coherent and in continuity. For example, a week after the invasion, London is won back by the armed forces and BBC radio returns to the air. Release the same broadcast to all the English groups in the same week and see how each reacts to it.

Then, on the fifth level? You draw all of this together on a website, every video, every blog entry, every piece of audio and you use it to prove how creative your audience can be. Hell, if you're very smart you get in contact with local universities across the world and get them to help, sponsor or co-ordinate the groups of fans. To sweeten the pot, you offer prizes for the best or most consistent work and even use some of the material in the inevitable sequel. The film makers become the audience, the audience become the film makers, the film becomes less a passive experience and more a space for people to work in, a foundation for them to build on.

Of course there are huge problems, not the least of which is the co-ordination involved and the budget needed, although that second is offset somewhat by the new, leaner budgeted science fiction movies pioneered by the likes of *District 9* and *Monsters*. But if it could be done? If it did work? Think of the talent that could be given a chance to shine, the stories that could be told. The end of the world has never looked like a bigger opportunity.

