

Hub Magazine

SCIENCE FICTION HORROR FANTASY

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CONTENTS:

- FICTION:** *A Little Mystery* by Len Bains
REVIEW: *Demons*
Star Wars: The Clone Wars Series 1 – Episodes 15 & 16
- FEATURE:** *Bleeding Words #1: The Write Time* by Gary McMahon



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EDITORIAL:

by lee harris

Welcome to Issue 75. As you can see, we've still got the new improved look and feel, courtesy of our Design Monkey, Phil Lunt (*I'll dance for peanuts, too! PL*).

We've had some extremely useful feedback so far, but if you'd like to add anything, head on over to HubFiction.com and let us know what you think...

FICTION

A Little Mystery

by len bains

Wonders are not as rare as people think. In fact the world is crowded with the extraordinary, with things bizarre, arcane, occult, you name it. Each as unique as a snowflake, and yet in total as mundane as the drift that you have to dig your car from on a January morning.

There's a man three houses along who has a window in his basement looking out onto a street in ancient Greece. He could tell you, if he had the courage, that the timestreams are far more stable than popular fiction would have us believe. Nothing he has put through that window has had the least impression on the present. Two and a half thousand years puts a damper on most things.

Opposite us Mrs Shandos can hold a clear conversation in her head with any woman in her mother's line, back seventeen generations. She thinks she's gone mad, and so did they as it happens, but she really can do it.

Our paperboy discovered he can fly about four months ago. Not when anyone is watching, but even so. Actually the 'not watching' part makes it very dangerous. If anyone spots him at it, he just starts falling.

My own little wonder is a gold ring, a plain band with bright-cut edges. I picked it up at a yard sale a while back. The woman sold me a box of bric-a-brac, and there it was in the bottom of a small blue vase, along with two dirty erasers, a pencil sharpener and some French coins all dating from the 1950's.

I thought about taking the ring back. I didn't think it was worth much, \$50 at the very most, but I knew she hadn't meant it to be there in that vase. First though, I put it on. I hadn't even expected it to fit, but it did, snug but comfortable. And of course, once I had it on I lost all thought of taking it back.

When we see new people I'm sure everyone is prone to a little speculation. We might wonder where they came from, what they've been up to, maybe if they're a good kisser. The thing about this ring of mine is that when you wear it, it's not speculation any more. You just know the answers. It's like everybody's biggest secret is just floating out there in front of them, spelled out in neon letters. You see someone crossing the road, and a stray thought wanders across your mind, 'he's just left his mistress' house', and somehow you just know you're right.

I'm talking to a man at the door. It's a hot day but he's wearing a suit, a cheap blue one. He's a salesman. Apparently you sell better smart and sweaty than scruffy and comfortable.

"Sir, you'd be missing an opportunity. A fine opportunity."

I look at the bracelets he's selling, scattered over a velvet-covered piece of card.

"Really, no-"

"Not to worry, Sir." He keeps his smile bright, and the bracelets under my nose. "I've no concerns about selling these this afternoon. The only thing that bothers me is the cops. I sell so cheap that folks always think they're stolen!"

"Well-"

"This one though." He pokes at a hoop of yellow metal. "Eighteen carats. You'd be doing yourself a favour putting that around your wife's wrist tonight."

The salesman gets his goods from a catalogue. The ring tingles on my finger. He doesn't remember where the catalogue came from, but you can find everything on its pages. Everything. The price is always a little more than you want to pay, but they take VISA.

"I don't-"

"I'm giving this one away, Sir. If I told you fifty dollars, you'd think it was stolen too, wouldn't you?"

I don't have a wife. Anymore. How can you stay married without secrets?

"Twenty dollars. There, I've said it." Still the smile. "It's too hot to argue. I'm just going to let you rob me. You'll laugh when you tell your friends."

I had friends. But most friendships aren't build to withstand honesty. Not the kind of honesty that comes with the one-way confessional on my ring-finger.

"Three dollars, ninety nine cents. Gold-style hoop bracelet. Item 100.21.6. Page fifteen hundred and seven," I say. It's the reference from his catalogue of wonders.

His smile breaks, like a tent coming down when the guy-ropes snap. "How?"

"How indeed?" I say. Wonders will never cease. "When you showed it to your mother she couldn't see anything in there at all. Every page was blank."

He starts to back away. The sweat rolling off him now. I've hurt him. Hurt him on a lot of levels.

"Here." I toss him the ring, and he snatches it from the air, an instinctive move.

"Maybe it'll help," I say.

He frowns, out there, baking on the asphalt drive.

"Page seven thousand. Item 666.13.3," I say. What he wants. Works for. Needs more than oxygen, and can never afford.

He turns and runs, the velvet, the cardboard, the yellow metal bracelets, all scattered, his fist white around the ring.

It's a salesman's dream that ring. You could earn a mint with a ring like that. Maybe even enough to buy back the dead.

All I'm sure of is that I don't know any more. The ring is gone, and suddenly I'm full of maybes.

I shut the door and go back to the kitchen for a coffee. The jar is empty. I was sure I had some left. I stand looking at it for a while, grinning like a schmuck. I'm feeling something I haven't felt in too long a time. Surprise.

The wonders have ceased. They've gone, and I won't miss them. And what have they left behind? A little room. Some space. Room enough for maybes, and for a little magic in my world once again.



REVIEWS

Demons - Episode 1

reviewed by andrew edwards

Broadcast on ITV1 on Saturday 3 January.



Demons follows programmes that include both *Doctor Who* and *Primeval* in being genre-based fantasy programmes occupying prime-time slots on UK terrestrial TV. Expectations ran high prior to the airing of the debut, primarily as a result of a high profile advertising campaign on ITV1 and also the inclusion of Philip Glenister, who was a key element in the success of the fantastic *Life On Mars*, and by far the best thing in its patchy successor *Ashes to Ashes*.

Glenister plays a character called Rupert who, through the course of the first episode, becomes a mentor to a teenager whose destiny is to vanquish demons. Sound familiar? It should to fans of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and it's there that the problem lies. There is little that feels original in this first episode, which seems like a watered down copy of *Buffy's* origin, combined with ideas stripped from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (notably the Van Helsing and Harker names). Both mentor figures are ex-pats, and while Anthony Stewart Head's refined accent is ideally placed, Glenister's attempt at an American accent does not success – it neither convinces nor seems necessary, except perhaps as a feature which the producers will hope will appeal to syndication across the Atlantic. Also, the use of words such as 'smite' and 'thee' seems a forced and artificial reference to the origins of the Van Helsing lineage, and are not skilfully used here.

The other characters are very much rooted in the *Buffy* formula – young, attractive and well-intentioned, although it is far to early to say whether any meaningful character development will occur during the series' run. It is hoped that the lingering shots of Luke, the descendant of Van Helsing (of *Dracula* fame), specifically his naked torso, aren't seen as an adequate substitute for a good plot and well-developed characterisation! The villain of the episode, Gladiolus Thripp, was played by Mackenzie Crook. He was essentially a bizarre creation, part demented parrot, part-creep, but unfortunately not very scary! Perhaps future episodes will furnish us with more substantial threats.

I was initially disappointed with this first episode, but I'm willing to give it the benefit of the doubt and continuing watching, in the hope that now the characters and concept have been introduced we will see some experimentation with characters and plots in future episodes.

Star Wars: The Clone Wars Series 1 - Episode 15 - "Trespass"

reviewed by richard whittaker



Directed by Brian Kalin O'Connell

Written by Steven Melching

Starring: Matt Lanter, James Arnold Taylor, Brian George

There's nothing like *Star Wars* for obsessive-compulsive fact collectors. Remember in the cantina sequence in *A New Hope*, with the hefty, white-furred, four-eyed creature that gets a two-second cameo fiddling with his mouth-tube-thingy? Ever wonder what one of those was, but didn't want to be seen visiting the Wookieepedia (yes, there really is such a thing)? That, gentle reader, is a Talz, and *Trespass* is full of them.

It's back to the Outer Rim for this episode of the *Clone Wars*. For fans of old-school *Star Wars*, there's more than a little bit of Hoth about the snow-covered Orto Plutonia

(series producer Dave Filoni has admitted going back to legendary artist Ralph McQuarry's original designs

for *The Empire Strikes Back*, and in places the CGI landscapes look a little like the “Escape from Echo Base” opening section of the old Nintendo 64 game *Shadows of the Empire* with far better rendering.) Of course, the old-schoolers are the same people that will get upset about the main plot idea: That the hands of the Jedi are tied by politics.

The government of the nearby moon of Pantonia has claimed the chilly Orto Plutonia as an uninhabited world and their sovereign property. When a clone outpost on the glacial plains is destroyed, the Pantonian leader Chairman Cho (George) demands that the Republic find out who is responsible. Anakin Skywalker (Lanter) and Obi-Wan Kenobi (Taylor) initially suspect Separatists: But when a droid ship is found wrecked and its crew broken down into scrap, it becomes clear that there’s something else there that doesn’t want either droids or clones on their home world.

While this is undoubtedly a gorgeous and above-par episode, if it doesn’t work as well as the previous story mini-arc it’s because it feels rushed in places. Possibly that’s simply because the last plot had two episodes to let the underlying drama breathe a little more, and this story could have benefited from that extra time. Thematically, there are similarities: Two cultures that want nothing to do with the Clone Wars. But while the Lurmen of *Jedi Crash* and *Defenders of Peace* were furball pacifists, the Talz are big, angry warriors that want to be left alone – and have the muscle to do something about it (also seemingly force-sensitive enough that there’s a Jedi Talz, Foul Moudama, by the end of the clone wars, as shown in the old 2D animated series. Nerd out, y’all.)

If the difference is that the Talz don’t speak English and that they can’t explain their motivation like the Lurmen could, that’s a mistake (*Star Trek: The Next Generation* fans are currently tutting and re-playing the magnificent episode *Darmok* in their heads.) Trespass touches on some extremely complicated issues: While Cho writes the Talz off as barbarians, savages or simply wild animals as the definition fits his ends, there’s twinges of racism, imperialism and nativism at play in his rhetoric. Yeah, it’s heavy politics, but *Star Wars* always combined politics and big, hairy beasts.

In fact, it’s the politics that make it interesting. The Jedi do what Jedi do – try to broker peace. When the fight does break out, it’s muddled whose fault it is. This plays on an idea from the films that the Republic has a bad way of sealing its own fate by betraying its principals. Before November’s U.S. presidential elections, this would have been seen as much more of a metaphor for American foreign policy in Afghanistan. For that kind of cultural pertinence now, the driving story would have to be something about out-of-control bankers manipulating the political system for their own ends (mumble mumble *Phantom Menace* mumble mumble.)

If this had been a 45 minute story, maybe those components could have been fleshed out, but instead it’s boiled down to a taut little actioner that hits its stride when Cho declares war on the Talz. Director O’Connell and scripter Melching last teamed up early this season in the *Malevolence* story arc, and they bring back the same breathless speed of combat that powered that storyline. Just because the Talz use clubs and spears doesn’t make them less deadly than clones on BARC speeders, and the result is as brutal a depiction of a massacre as they could get away with in a PG-rated cartoon.

As that small actioner, it’s a great episode. It just could have been a little more.

Oh, and FYI: The Talz in the cantina in *A New Hope* was called Muftak and did an anti-drink-driving public service announcement for US Department of Public Transportation in 1979. Seriously, it’s on YouTube.

Star Wars: The Clone Wars Series 1 - Episode 16 - “The Hidden Enemy”

reviewed by richard whittaker

Directed by Steward Lee

Written by Drew Z. Greenberg

Starring: Matt Lanter, James Arnold Taylor, Dee Bradley Baker

Loyalty is a complex, complex thing.

Take the clone army. These disposable troops were designed for loyalty to the Republic and little more. So what if one displays the same rebellious streak of self-preservation that came from their genetic wellspring – Bounty hunter Jango Fett? Where would his loyalty lie then?

Deep in the war, Anakin Skywalker (Lanter) and Obi-Wan Kenobi (Taylor) are defending the planet of Christophsis from the Separatists when they and their forces are suddenly ambushed by droids. It soon

becomes clear that they have been betrayed by one of their own. But since 'their own' consists solely of clone troopers bred for loyalty, there's something deeper afoot than just a turn-coat's pay-off.

One of the advantages of being George Lucas is that it's probably pretty easy to get people to return your calls. That's probably how he got Drew Greenberg to plot this little conspiracy piece. Genre fans will probably be most excited about his background as a story editor for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Smallville*, but his status has been elevated by his work on the serial-killer-as-hero dramedy *Dexter*. While it's nowhere near as dark as that murderous romp, bringing Greenberg in for this episode makes sense because, like his other more mature and blood-drenched show, this episode blurs the lines between good and bad. As clone commanders Rex and Cody try to find the traitor, they're not just searching for a comrade but a brother. Voicing every trooper, Baker engages in some glorious schizophrenia, bouncing between characters that he distinguishes from each other with subtle cadences, adding personality and even pathos to what could otherwise be cookie-cutter set dressing. To boost their humanity, Greenberg even dares to make the Jedi slightly unappealing by comparison: After all, a clone is a clone is a clone, and the generals' attitude to their massed troops is ambiguously drawn. Is it the isolation of command, or a blasé dismissal of a replaceable asset?

What could cause real serious confusion is that, while this episode comes after *The Clone Wars* movie, it actually takes place before it. Which explains why Christophis isn't a ruin, the reference to the heavy cannons that are pivotal to the movie, and how there's a quick cameo by General Whorm Loathso, the Scottish-accented Separatist commander that sips tea with Kenobi in the movie. Eh, what's *Star Wars* without some reverse chronology?

But putting the series back onto its first battleground gives former story board artist-turned-director Lee an opportunity for something other directors haven't achieved before. The droid army has often been shown as clanking buffoons, but by shoving wave after silent wave of them at the Jedi, Lee makes them coldly threatening instead of foolish.

Action may be his strong point. The final fight between Cody, Rex and the traitor is an elaborate melee that owes some serious debts to Ultimate Fighting, and Lee keeps the tension high enough that the viewer might even ignore a massive plot hole (Sorry, Mr. Greenberg, but the story does depend on the Republic not being willing to spring for security cameras.)

But like all the best episodes of the series so far, the show is more than an extended action sequence. It leaves the audience with a quiet discomfort about the fate of the Republic even if it had won the Clone Wars (oops, big spoiler there for anyone that hasn't seen the movies. My bad. Guess I shouldn't tell you who Darth Vader is either.)

Next episode: Death comes to Naboo in *Blue Shadow Virus*.

FEATURES

Bleeding Words

Bleeding Words #1: The Write Time

by gary mcMahon

So, a regular feature about the art of writing – specifically how I write? For *Hub* magazine? Got it.

So where do I start?

The craft (for want of a better word) of writing is different for everyone: ask any ten writers how they go about it, and you'll get ten completely different answers. It's a purely personal approach; a method developed through time and necessity and a hint of madness.

To paraphrase (and maul half to death) a famous quote, writing about writing is like dancing about architecture. I often find it amazing how many people will write a thousand words on some internet blog site agonising over finding the time or the energy or the inspiration to write...well, instead of wasting a thousand words navel-gazing, you could have got down a third of a short story right there.

I'm serious.

It isn't a difficult concept, but I think a lot of people tend to over-think the situation. It's certainly an intimidating idea, this notion that you are about to sit down and create something with words. So, perhaps the best trick you can master is to *stop thinking about it* – just sit down, clear your mind of the crap of the day, and start writing...

That might sound a bit trite, but I'm all about simplifying things, boiling problems down to the fundamentals.

All that said, I suppose I'll begin with the basics: organising one's time, creating space in the day to actually sit down and do the physical work of writing. It's a lot tougher than you might think. Most people can't even manage it; as I've intimated above, they think and talk and blog a lot about writing instead of just doing it.

Other than the usual "Where do you get your ideas?" the most common question I'm asked when people learn that I'm a writer is: "When do you find the time to write?"

It's a very good question.

Where the hell *do* people like me find the time to sit down, gather our thoughts, and put them to paper (or laptop)? People with day jobs, with busy family lives, with normal worries and fears and crowded lifestyles.

Just how do we do it?

Bear with me, and I'll try to figure that one out.

I have a demanding day job: nine-to-five, five days a week stuck in an office in front of a computer screen. My wife has an even more stressful job than I do, and we also have a five year-old son to contend with, which brings its own unique and wonderful demands.

So, my usual day generally goes something like this:

My wife leaves the house half an hour before I even wake up, so when I rise and after I've showered, it's down to me to make sure the boy is up and dressed and take him to before-school club. Then I return home for a quick breakfast before heading off to work.

My first available writing slot comes during my forty-five minute lunch break. If I'm not popping out to Tesco for some provisions or attending some dull work seminar, I'm getting down a few hundred words. My record is 2,000 words in forty-five minutes, but this is a feat I never expect to equal. I was on a hot streak that particular week.

After a long afternoon in the office it's back to pick up the boy from his after-school club, via the train station where I pick up my wife, and then home for dinner. Then comes time spent with the family (of which we have precious little). The boy goes to bed around 7:30 or 8:00 pm; the wife goes up around 9:00 or 9:30 p.m. due to her early starts. This is when my second writing slot of the day opens up, my *substantial* slot.

Often I write until around midnight, but if I'm working on something specific or to a deadline I can easily go on well into the early hours. I've been known to write until 3 or 4 a.m.

Then it's back to bed for a few hours shut-eye before the whole cycle starts up again.

This is why I always look tired; it's why I have a short temper; it's why the house is always messy and a hundred DIY jobs never get done (or finished). But I wouldn't have it any other way: asking me to stop writing is like asking me to stop breathing. It just isn't going to happen.

I suppose I've been forced to train myself to be able to write at any time of the day or night, to bypass the demands of the muse and jump right into the creative mindset as soon as I get a spare moment. It's taken me years to achieve this, but it was either master the technique or become just another whining

blogger, wasting precious words in cyberspace.

Even writing this article is killing me, because it keeps me away from my stories and novels. A thousand words here (which I'm writing in my lunch hour) could have been another thousand words of the latest book.

See where I'm coming from? There's always time to write; you just have to grab it and make that time your own.

Okay, that covers finding (or manipulating) the time to write.

But what about *reading*?

As I'm sure everyone knows, reading is a major part of being a writer: you need to read and consume everything, good, bad or indifferent. It's how you learn what not to do (which is even more important than learning what to do). This education never stops; you must read always, right up until the day you die. Then make sure you're buried with a few books, just in case.

I read in the bath, on the toilet, standing in front of the cooker as I make dinner. I read in the queue at the Post Office and at the supermarket checkout. I read at weekends, between games with my son and conversations with my wife. I read in the car, when I'm stuck in traffic, at half time when I'm watching a football match on TV. I never go anywhere without having at least one book on my person.

God knows what'll happen if I ever manage to break out of the indie press and into the mainstream, where I'll need to produce even more work to even tighter deadlines. I suppose I'll have to become prolific.

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