

Odin



ISSUE 15

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Artwork

The cover art for *Grimdark Magazine issue #15* was created by Jason Deem based on Anna Stephen's story *Just a Little Murder*.

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Language

Grimdark Magazine has chosen to maintain the authors' original language (eg. Australian English, American English, UK English) for each story.

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From the Editor

ADRIAN COLLINS

With our change of distributor well underway and ownership of most of our ebook listing now back under our control, the team and I put in a huge effort to absolutely pack this issue with goodies. We've got a range of interviews (including one with Australian fantasy legend Garth Nix); fiction by Anna Stephens, Mark Lawrence, and Raluca Balasa; articles on Medieval Europe and writing different points of view; and, a review of a book that's a bit out of left field to tantalise your grimdark tastebuds this quarter.

Personally, I'd like to send a massive shout out in welcome to the twenty-seven new subscribers who joined our Patreon subscription service in March. To our already-established subscribers, I tip my glass to you for your ongoing support. The team and I are working feverishly on coming up with more ways to add value to your subscription. If you have anything you'd like to see more of, please give me a shout. My social media and email door is always open for a chin wag. If you haven't checked out our subscription service yet, head over using this link:

<https://www.patreon.com/user?u=177000>.

Financially, it's the best way you can support GdM while getting all that grimdark goodness.

Keep an eye out for our delayed, but impending release of *Knee-Deep in Grit* in April, and I hope you enjoy this issue!

Adrian Collins
Founder

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Kings and Queens

RALUCA BALASA

Sitting on the edge of a fountain long gone dry, Cruel-T admired his palace. Half of it had crumbled the first day earthquakes had hit Toronto, and now vines grew up its remaining walls, but to him it was more beautiful than ever.

Because now it was his.

He returned his attention to the AK-47 in his lap. He'd removed the magazine and thrown it into the fountain behind him with the other weapons. No need for ammo right now; he just liked holding it. It reminded the others that he was in charge, that he was more heavily armed than any of them and more willing to kill, too.

Did you work as a cop, man? In your real life?

This is my real life.

Come on, T, you can tell me. Were you like a SWAT team leader? Holy shit, were you in the mafia?

He liked to keep them guessing, but the truth was that he hadn't existed back then.

Drops of sour rain trickled down the scar tissue where his ear had been. The armed men on either side of him shifted, but they wouldn't move without his permission. Twice as big as him and they didn't dare ask to go inside.

"Storm's comin'," one of his men muttered.

Translation: will you let us take shelter?

Cruel-T reached behind him for the magazine, noting the way his bodyguards tensed when he inserted it into the rifle and pulled back the charging

handle. A satisfying *click-clack* sounded. Yes, he liked to keep them guessing.

“You’ll stay here until Big Ben’s back from the perimeter check,” he said. This last year had been trying, what with canned food running low and the Queen gang shitting on the truce he’d spent weeks drafting. He needed his bodyguards at all times now. Sure, he was good with a rifle, but he didn’t have eyes at the back of his head, and a man had to sleep sometime.

Finally, a figure emerged from the fog on Bay Street. Cruel-T stood, holding the AK close. Sweat stained Big Ben’s shirt and his bald head gleamed as he came to a halt before T in what had once been the Commerce Court.

“Spit it out,” Cruel-T said when Ben hesitated. “Find any Queenies lurking around my turf?”

“Yeah, I got one.”

“Did you kill it?”

“Wanted to check with you first.”

Cruel-T flipped the rifle up and poked Ben with its muzzle. Ben put up his hands, his eyes widening. “The fuck, T? Calm down!”

“I told you, I want them all dead.”

“This one said she’s your sister.”

* * *

Rain soaked through Cruel-T’s combat boots, drenching his jacket and sticking his matted hair to his forehead as he walked. Rusted cars and bicycles—those fuckin’ bikes, always in the way—lined Bay Street, half-fallen into craters that had split the pavement when the earthquakes first started. His gang had picked the street clean of goods long ago, but he couldn’t help stealing the occasional glance through windows, just to be sure they hadn’t missed anything. Decaying buildings leaned on either side of him, their limestone cracked and glassless window frames glaring like empty eye sockets. The CN tower rose

against the horizon, civilization's last indicator, still pointing south.

"Does she look like my sister?" he asked Ben.

The big man shrugged. "How would I know? She was a kid last I saw her. What's it been, seven years? This girl's the right age, I think. Dark hair, gangly?"

Truth was that Cruel-T wouldn't know any better than Ben did. He grunted and sidestepped a hole in the pavement.

"Got the crown, though," Ben added.

Cruel-T stiffened. The crown, the crisscrossing scar carved into the cheek of every Queen member. She could've joined any gang, and she'd chosen Queen? If this girl really was his sister, she'd joined the damned Queens to get back at him. Never mind that he'd sent her away for both their sakes.

A pair of shadows appeared through the fog: a girl sitting on the hood of a car and the other—T's man Sid—standing guard with a rifle aimed at her. Cruel-T held up his hand and Ben, with his bodyguards, stopped walking.

"You three scout around, make sure she's really alone," he said.

"Already did, T. Maybe the Queens don't want her no more?"

"It's a trap, you morons. Climb to the roof of that fuckin' Tim Horton's, get the high ground and look the fuck around." He slung his rifle over his shoulder and started toward the girl.

She slid off the car as he approached, not to greet him but to keep an eye on him, to watch his movements in a jittery way that might've meant she was scared, or drugged, or both. She looked stretched thin in every sense, her dark eyes hollows in her face and her arms spotted with bruises. "Tracey?" she whispered.

Cruel-T stopped across the street. That, *that* was why he'd sent her away. He couldn't revert to Tracey, the schoolteacher who'd thought learning to shoot a

gun would alleviate his anger after every damned day his third-graders didn't listen to him. This was a new life, an opportunity to be the way he felt inside. He wouldn't trade it for anything.

He cocked his rifle. Sid lowered his own rifle to watch her reaction. She didn't flinch when T's voice rang out. "Why are you here, Morgan?"

"I ran away. The Queens are shits, they beat me and... I thought maybe you'd take me back?"

"I told you, we don't need an extra mouth to feed." He locked back the slide on his gun. "Cleo sent you to kill me, didn't she?"

Morgan picked at a scab on her elbow, her posture like a wilting flower. "No, Trace, honest—"

"She's lying," Sid said. "Shoot her. It's fuckin' raining, and I'm cold."

Cruel-T lowered his weapon again. He saw the surprise on both their faces. He hadn't won a spot like the Commerce Court by showing mercy; his name alone made that clear. They would agonize wondering why he hesitated now. It was good—essential—that he keep them guessing.

Morgan recoiled when he approached. Alarm and then anger flashed in her eyes. That look told him all he needed to know: she hated him. This was no longer the sister he'd known—and he *had* known her, though she'd never truly known him—but someone molded and trained by the Queens as a weapon.

He grabbed her skinny wrist and pulled her against him in a hug. "You know what, Sis? I really did miss you. 'Course you can come back."

Morgan stiffened. "What?"

"Isn't that what you wanted?" He patted the rectangular device bulging the back of her shirt. "Or maybe you hoped I'd shoot you and blow myself up. My little sister, on a suicide mission. Didn't think I'd ever say this, but I'm proud of you."

She began pounding him with her fists, but he didn't loosen his grip. "Tell me how to deactivate it and I'll let you go."

She was shaking. It took him a while to realize it was laughter. He pulled back from her a little, feeling like the moron in the classroom who couldn't get the brats to shut up, wanting to hit them, to hit *her*.

Morgan looked up at him with a big, stupid grin. "Kill me and it goes off. Send me away and I'll just come back. Looks like you're stuck with me 'til you figure it out, Trace. You like guessing games, right?"

* * *

Cruel-T took the tunnel stairs two at a time, Big Ben behind him with both of Morgan's wrists trapped in one hand. She stumbled and fell, then cried out when Ben yanked her back to her feet. The third time it happened, T barked, "There's a fuckin' bomb on her!" and they all slowed their paces.

The bricks on the TTC walls read KING in faded red letters. A few fluorescent strips down here still worked, and the air smelled like charred meat; some of the smaller gangs liked roasting rats over bonfires after a victory. Under normal circumstances, Cruel-T didn't bother with the subways. They made good shelters, but they were rife with exposed wires. These holes flooded every time it rained, and after that at least a few bodies were found face-down on the tracks or bloated and black on the staircase, rats tearing the flesh off their hollowed cheeks

"Where the fuck are we going?" Morgan asked. "Is this where you live?"

Sid cursed as a rat intercepted his path with a bone in its mouth.

"I live everywhere. Everything from King to Dupont is mine now. I have more sub-bases than Cleo has numbers for, so shut your damn mouth and walk."

That was what Cleo wanted: for him to take Morgan to one of his bases, maybe one of the main ones in the

Commerce Court. Then the brat could report back to her if not bomb it the moment she entered. No one owned the subway lines because no one wanted them, but most people, including the Queens, used them to get around. If Morgan was going to blow something up, this would hurt the Queens the most.

He halted deep in the TTC's bowels where the subway tracks gleamed in the sparks from bare wires. It smelled like wet dog this deep underground. He motioned toward the tracks and Ben nudged Morgan forward.

"Don't throw her in," he called over Morgan's protests. "Get down there and tie her to the pole. Careful not to touch those metal strips, or you'll fry." Ben hesitated, and he snapped, "What're you waiting for?"

T watched as Ben wrestled Morgan onto the tracks and tied her to the pole with the rope Sid had brought. Cruel-T's hands twitched by his sides and twice he had to stop himself from reminding Ben to be careful. That bomb had been surgically implanted into the kid—the scars he'd glimpsed through the torn back of her shirt told him that much—and if her heart stopped, it would go off. Even by his standards, Cleo was a cruel bitch.

"Tracey?" His sister gazed up at him through puffy eyes. "What're you doing? You can't be serious."

"Did Cleo really think I'd risk my crew for a bug-eyed shit like you, when I was the one who sent you away?" Cruel-T snapped his fingers and Ben stopped tying knots. Sid looked up from the rats swarming over a dead pigeon on the floor. "Here's *my* plan: I'm going to leave you here to starve to death or fry in the next rainfall, whatever happens first. When your heart stops, that bomb in you goes off and this entire station goes to hell. The flooding will keep every kind of vermin off my turf. Your Queens use these tunnels more than anyone, don't they?"

Instantly, Morgan's eyes cleared and her face went stoic like the statues in Museum Station. "Maybe that's what the Queens want." There was a taunt in her voice, but her expression stayed grim. "You were always shit at science, Trace. You're willing to murder your own kid sister on the far-fetched chance it'll hurt the Queens? Tracey, look at me. I'm your fucking *sister*—"

"Shut up!" He had to stop himself from jumping down there and quieting her with a fist to the face. *Shut up!* he'd yelled back when he'd been Tracey, a spineless shit who couldn't command a classroom or his own anger. Wasn't that why he'd sent Morgan away? Not just because she remembered Tracey, but because she brought Tracey back to life every time he recalled hanging up the stupid macaroni crafts she'd made him at Christmas and beating the punks who'd hurt her at school.

"Tracey—"

"Is dead," he barked. "And so are you." Without the crank-up flashlight Sid held, T could only see her as a grim silhouette. What had happened to the emotional girl he'd known, the one who'd sobbed when he'd thrown her in the streets and told her to leave? She hadn't understood then, but with Ben and Sid and Rusty and One-Eyed Jack by his side, he could hardly have explained it to her. He snapped his fingers and both Ben and Sid began walking back toward the stairs with him.

"Why Queen, Morgan?" he called over his shoulder. "Why the fuck did you choose Queen?"

At first only the drip of water from the ceiling echoed back to him. Then, her voice low and steady in the dark. "I've never cared about any gang. Just you, Trace. I wanted to make sure I'd see you again."

* * *

Seven Years Ago

T glared at the dirty faces around the bunker. They wore the same flat looks he'd learned to expect in the old world, only these looks would kill him if he didn't do something about them.

"Why should you take Freddy's place?" Jack shouted.

"I got you this joint, you shits. Who'll turn that scrap metal into weapons? Who'll tell you which berries to eat and which are poison?" The joke fell flat; Jack didn't like to be reminded of the time he'd mistook woodbine berries for blueberries. T continued anyway. "You need a leader like me."

No need to mention he'd killed the old one. Freddy had been brainless and overly reliant on force, even more so than Jack. The smart types, the types that made good leaders, had been shit fighters who'd clung too tightly to the old world's rules. They hadn't survived long after the earthquakes forged a new world based on unpredictable geography navigated only by physical stamina. Later, gang leaders would kick themselves for not thinking to hold a doctor or a mapmaker. The Queens, though, had kept two engineers and a surgeon. T was no engineer—most of his knowledge came from an obsession with survival shows—but the Kings needed him.

"You're a scrawny cunt, is what," Brant said as he staggered up to poke T's chest. "You can't fight for shit, can you?"

The classroom all over again, where being smart got you kicked out of the cool club. Tracey would have paused to hear if the others laughed, but T didn't hesitate. He grabbed Brant's head with both hands and slammed it against the cobbled wall, putting all his weight behind the blow. A *crack* echoed. He did it again and again until the wall became red and the breaking skull began to sound like grinding gravel. There were gasps of "Jesus!" and "Fuck!" but no one stopped him. T smashed Brant's head until the man's weight

became too much and the corpse slid face-down to the ground. It couldn't have lasted more than ten seconds.

Breathing heavily, T turned to face the Kings. "Talk shit about me, you gotta be ready to back it up."

Being the smartest of the group also meant being the most vicious. Scanning their faces, no longer skeptical but stunned, T knew there was only one thing left to do to complete his transformation: get rid of the sleeping child upstairs.

* * *

T woke with sweat beading on his chest and forehead. Images of blood still played across his mind, blood that turned into tides and swept him away. He blinked at the ceiling, gulping in the stale, musty air. When he dreamt of his murders, it meant gang politics were going badly.

Slowly, T unclenched his muscles. He'd gotten used to sleeping with his hand curled around the dagger under his pillow in case he woke to find an assassin at his throat, which put pressure on his left shoulder. He threw off his roughspun blankets and sat up in his hammock. Two shadows slumped by the door with rifles lax in their arms. He tightened his grip on his knife, but even as he did he heard his bodyguards breathing, saw their chests moving in the moonlight. Another night he might've killed them for that, but tonight it suited him. Better they didn't ask questions. He twisted out of his hammock and, as he'd gotten used to doing, probed the floor with his toes before setting down his feet.

Rain pattered the window like tapping fingers. Light flashed across the room, followed by the low rumble of thunder. T walked to the window and gazed down at those stupid elephant statues in the court. They gleamed in the rain, rusted and dull now but still standing. He squinted at the fountain and wondered if anyone had remembered to take the rifle cartridges in.

Even now his authority felt like an ill-fitting coat, but what mattered was how he carried it. He didn't try to

tread quietly as he left the room, didn't pull his hood up and didn't slink like a man apologizing for where he'd found himself.

"What's up, T?" Ben asked. T slammed the chamber door behind him—its bronze sign still marked the office of a *Mrs. Naismith*—and snatched Ben's gun before continuing down the hall.

"Going to hunt some Queens." Ben started to get up. "Alone. Don't wait up."

If any of these fuckers knew he was returning for Morgan, they'd say he'd gone soft. Truth wasn't any better: his sister's reappearance had revived the old Tracey, the paranoid Tracey who needed to know, check, and check again. Had Cleo anticipated his idea of flooding the TTC to cut off quickest route between the Kings and Queens? Was it possible she wanted him to do that? T yanked at his thinning hair, knowing he couldn't let Morgan die until he was sure.

One of his watchmen looked away as he stormed, cursing, through the main doors. Outside, wind hurled hail at his face. Lightning ripped the sky, flashing green and sometimes blue from the changes in atmospheric—no, that was Tracey talking. T gritted his teeth and continued down Jordan Street, toward the intersection with King. He walked with his left fist in the air, forefinger and thumb raised to tell the King snipers on duty not to shoot. Everyone would hear of his escapade tonight, and they'd ask why he'd gone out alone, but they wouldn't dare follow him.

All he had to do was find a secret place to keep Morgan until he figured out what to do with her.

The steps leading into the TTC tunnels were slick. T gripped the railing, then retracted his palm when it came away with flakes of rust. In his haste, he'd forgotten his flashlight. He pulled his lighter from his belt and sparked it clumsily. The orange light looked odd after the white-blue of the lightning, which he could

still see flashing on the stairs as he descended. His shadow flickered on the walls.

He continued to the northbound platform where he'd left Morgan. He didn't call out. There was still the possibility that this was a trap, an ambush, maybe. Cleo probably had a locating device on Morgan. That bitch was better at guessing games than he was.

But when he held out his lighter and squinted through the long shadows thrown across pipes and beams, he saw only a girl with stringy hair like her brother's, sagging against a pole. Water from the flooding hadn't reached her, but it would soon begin snaking long fingers toward the tracks. He was painfully aware of the sound of dripping as he jumped down onto the tracks and moved toward her.

"Morgan." The name left his lips like an omen. Before he knew it he was grabbing her shoulders, her face, tilting it toward the light to try gauge the damage. He didn't know what he dreaded more: that she was still alive and a problem, or that he might've killed his own baby sister. Her lids were swollen, her skin frigid.

Her dry lips twitched up at the sight of him, cracking the sides of her mouth. "I knew you'd come for me," she said.

At that moment he knew Tracey had never left him, not really. He had manifested into a different sort of caregiver, one who'd become responsible for the brainless oafs in his crew rather than his baby sister. When had Ben and Sid and Jack replaced his flesh and blood?

But the real Morgan hated him for abandoning her. He'd glimpsed it on the street this morning in the flash of her eyes. This smiling, sniveling creature wasn't his sister.

He released her suddenly, whipped out his pistol and turned in a tight circle. "Where's Cleo? This is a trap, isn't it?"

She didn't scream or cry or beg. Instead she began cackling like she'd done as a baby, that open-mouthed laugh now revealing chipped teeth. "You're so deluded you can't see the real danger in front of you!"

What was that supposed to mean? Cruel-T wanted to smack her with the butt of his gun or just fall to his knees and cover his ears. The *drip, drip* of water from the ceiling was nails on a chalkboard, his students' taunts in his ears. And there was another sound, one he'd learned to distinguish from the moans of a crumbling city the first time the Queens had sent assassins after him.

"Show yourselves, fuckers!" he called, gripping his gun with both hands. Behind him, Morgan chuckled.

"Setting this up was too damned easy. For someone so paranoid, you're never looking in the right direction. It didn't have to be this way. I could've helped you."

The footsteps continued. T squinted, but the lighter had fallen to the floor and its flame had fizzled out. His clothes felt too heavy as he clambered off the tracks and back up onto the platform. Voices he recognized echoed off the walls: Queens. A trap, just like he'd thought.

"Whoa! Don't shoot! This is a fuckin' truce, man!" called one of the voices. "But the shadow held something long and cylindrical in its fist, and more were emerging from every corner as T's eyes adjusted to the dark. This was no truce; it was an ambush.

T couldn't help glancing over his shoulder at Morgan, but her face was veiled in darkness and he could only hear her breathing loudly. "You brought them here, didn't you? You little shit!" He turned his gun on her, then back to the approaching shadows when he heard feet splashing and saw the glare of a flashlight.

“You're too predictable, Trace,” Morgan whispered. “You needed me, but you chose the Kings. Why'd you send me away?”

“He's drawn his gun!” the man from before shouted. “It's a set-up!”

With the desperation of a cornered animal, T fired.

A body slapped the water, and Morgan shrieked. Voices echoed in the tunnel. The Queens' guns now gleamed in the low light. Two of them carried something large that looked like a bomb. Tracey's heart pounded. He squeezed the trigger again and again. Answering bullets landed by his feet and he hoped they would hit Morgan, would hit *him*, rid him of this constant worry that something in the dark would get him. Death would be a release.

Finally, his slide locked back. T kept pressing the trigger like a fuckin' amateur, pointing it at Morgan even though he knew it'd be useless and she wouldn't care, anyway. Water streamed down his face from the pipes above. Lightning flashed, and through the holes in the ceiling the moonlight illuminated the bodies around him.

He prodded the nearest corpse with his foot. The man rolled face-up, and on his cheek was the thick white Crown of the Queens. T couldn't tell if Morgan was laughing or crying behind him.

“You killed them. You dumb fuck, you *actually* killed them.”

The thing in the man's fist wasn't a gun, but a scroll of paper. T lifted it with shaking hands and unfurled it as he crouched by the man's corpse. The bleeding ink down the page was Cleo's hand.

Tracey,

I'm so pleased you've decided to accept our peace offering on this neutral ground; your sister says you were very joyous to receive her. She carries on her person an intercom, through which we can maintain communication. I send you this official armistice via a

few of my most trusted men, as well as a chest of canned foods as a sign of goodwill. I look forward to a long and prosperous alliance with the Kings, and hope that my men will be treated well in your company. A ceremony celebrating our alliance can be held at your earliest convenience.

To new friendships!

—Cleo[GdM]

Raluca Balasa is currently pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Nevada, Reno, where she also works as a teaching assistant. Her approach to writing is character-oriented, often dealing with love-hate relationships, antiheroes, and antagonists who make you agree with them. Her short work has appeared in *Andromeda Spaceways*, *Aurealis*, and *Psychopomp Magazine*, among others. When she's not writing, she can be found playing the piano or spilling things.

An Interview with Ed McDonald

TOM SMITH

Hello again Grimfolk! Today we join master swordsman Ryhalt Galharrow, I mean Ed McDonald. In addition to his skills with the Italian longsword, he is a medieval historian. But, that's likely not how you know him either. You probably know Ed best for his grimdark debut novel *Blackwing*. If you haven't read it yet, I suggest you minimize this screen and go to the bookseller of your choice and get started.

Did you do it? Ok, good. Let's get started then!

[TS] Ed, thanks for taking the time out of your busy schedule!

[EM] Hi, and thanks for having me. It's a real pleasure to be asked to contribute to GdM.

[TS] First off, I had a hard time classifying *Blackwing's* setting in the first 50-100 pages. I went back and forth between new fantasy setting and post-apocalyptic fantasy setting. It wasn't until closer to the end when more info came to light that I decided it was a new fantasy setting. In some ways the Misery reminded me a little of the Mourning in the Eberron RPG setting but much darker. What is it about having the bad guys on the other side of your flimsy backyard fence vs just being hidden that makes the danger more intense?

[EM] I've always been a believer that the best stories happen on frontiers. The frontier is where the only certainties are change and the danger that comes with it. Whether we're talking about the savage horde assaulting Dros Delnoch, the wretched hive of scum in Mos Eisley, or the wall protecting the Seven Kingdoms from wildlings and white walkers, it is when you're perched on the edge of the precipice that characters need to stand tall and put themselves forwards. It's an issue of passions, sorrows and bravery. The people who live on a frontier have to have a damn good reason to be there; they tend to be damaged, desperate or seeking glory, and all of those make for good stories. Heavy-politics stories about very rich, well supplied people don't really do it for me. I'd rather be with the down-and-outs.

I'm not sure what the setting for *Blackwing* is exactly. It wasn't something that I planned before I wrote it, it mainly just came about through various things that I got excited about as I was writing. For me, that's the most enjoyable way to work.

[TS] In *Blackwing*, you used magic in an interesting fashion. It was central to the story but not really widely in use. Sorcerers were few and far between and had widely varying levels of usefulness. Then you had the Nameless and the Deep Kings who were on a whole different level entirely. Did you intend the Nameless and Deep Kings as gods/demigods or as just super powerful near immortal wizards?

[EM] I think that you can approach magic in different ways, but for me the really exciting forms of magic lie in figures that are so far beyond us in terms of power that they're barely recognizable as people at all. The Deep Kings and the Nameless both fall into that category. Other popular examples would be The Ten Who Were Taken in Glen Cook's the Black Company,

or the balrog as it's depicted in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Scant on detail, terrible in power, with all that fearful magic going largely unspoken; that's what the Nameless are. There's power in the not-knowing all of the details, provided you understand what their limitations are (or aren't!). I know how all the magic works, but Galharrow doesn't, so the reader shouldn't either, but everything should have a sense of internal logic even when it's not explicitly stated. I think that the question itself raises further interesting questions about what makes an entity a god, and what would happen if mortals were capable of reaching power-levels greater than those that are meant to be deities. Can you become a god, provided you have enough magic?

[EM] I know you have an origin story of sorts for the Misery in our mutual friend Petros' fantastic 'Art of War' anthology, but will we ever see a backstory for the Nameless and the Deep Kings?

We will, and those themes end up being integral to the ongoing story. We'll start beginning to understand something of where they come from in the second book, *Ravencry*, with significant further expansion on the ideas in the third book in the series, *Crowfall*.

[TS] With your educational background, you already have a solid career. What inspired you to start writing fantasy?

[EM] I've been writing fantasy since around the time I learned to hold a crayon in one form or another (NB: I'm somewhat better at it these days, but my crayon drawings were pretty awesome according to my mum). When I was a teenager it was something that I did just for fun, but I think that I always knew that it was what I wanted to do for a living, but I didn't necessarily think it would happen.

I did pretty well on my book deals, but I think it would be premature to jack in the day job with only one book out right now, but it's what I plan to do a little down the line when all the craziness of being a debut has calmed down. Having said that, I think that I'd go insane if I tried to do nothing but sit at home and write, so when the day comes to move on from my day job I'll be looking to do something else that gets me out the house—political campaigning, work at a cat shelter, become a vigilante, something like that.

[TS] Just how much has your training in martial arts and swordplay helped in your writing? Do you think it makes drafting fight scenes easier or actually more difficult because of your in-depth knowledge of how a fight actually flows?

[EM] Some of the best feedback that I've had from readers has come from a couple of well-respected HEMA (historical European martial arts) trainers who said that they could really get into the action sequences because they felt visceral to them, and that's high praise indeed. In early drafts of *Blackwing*, there was much more technical swordplay content; that's the researcher/martial artist in me wanting to convey the things that excite me. But as a writer, the truth is that what a reader is interested in is pace, high stakes and danger. Mostly I try to keep things brief, bloody, and dangerous—just as a real sword fight tends to be. We fantasy writers love to go on about the clashing of blades for page after page, but the realities of any fight are that it's usually over very quickly, and usually in an unglamorous way. Most of the technical stuff got cut, but I think I managed to leave just enough so that those with a special interest will get what's happening, but those who don't train can just enjoy the story.

[TS] Who were your biggest writing influences when you were starting out? Have you ever had the opportunity to talk shop with any of them since?

[EM] My biggest influence is David Gemmell, and unfortunately that's a chance I'll never get. Second would be Robin Hobb and Joe Abercrombie, both of whom I've met a few times (Joe is surprisingly good at karaoke), but when authors get together, it's pretty unusual for us to actually talk about writing. Robin has been good to me in terms of giving me some advice for coping with the writing life, and occasionally when I need a bit of advice I've asked Mark Lawrence how he has handled situations. Fantasy authors are a pretty lovely bunch, and as a community they're generally helpful, but when it comes to discussing writing, we all probably feel like imposters anyway so it's mostly griping about the price of pints at the hotel bar.

[TS] What is the best writing advice you have ever received? What writing advice would you give a newcomer if so inclined?

[EM] The best advice: the only thing that matters are the characters, everything else is window dressing. Provided you create rich, nuanced characters who have their own motivations and feel like real people, you can change all of the magic, the swords, the monsters and everything else into other shapes and the book stays the same. The characters are the only thing that have to remain the same for the story not to change, and that says something about how important they are.

My advice for newcomers would be that self-awareness and objectivity are vital, but overwhelming self-belief or overwhelming angst are the surest ways to kill off your chances. Approach everything as though

it were a business, because it is; remain professional in every way that you can.

[TS] With *Ravencry* the sequel to *Blackwing* due out in mid-June, I have to ask: Which was more difficult, writing a debut novel or the follow-up, and why?

[EM] The two have very different dilemmas attached to them.

Writing a debut novel, you are totally free to do whatever you want to. That in itself is both liberating and troublesome; you have unbridled freedom to do anything at all, but you also have no idea whether anyone is going to like anything that you've done. In a sequel, you need to do something new, but also ensure that you provide the same experiences that the first book gave (so for example, what proved particularly popular in *Blackwing* seems to be the slightly crazy Misery setting, the character interactions between a number of particular characters, and the fast pace of the plot). Originally I'd planned *Ravencry* to take place in a different part of the country, away from the Misery altogether (which I intended to come back to in book 3), and I'd already started writing it. I realized when reviews started coming in that I might well disappoint a lot of readers if we left the Misery for an entire book, so nope, we're firmly back on the frontier for *Ravencry*!

[TS] With the success of *Game of Thrones* and several other fantasy writers selling properties for TV and movies, have you ever entertained trying to market your work in a similar manner?

[EM] I think that it's impossible not to. I would love to see someone interpret *Blackwing* onto the big screen and my agency sub-contracts to a film agent in the states for that reason, but fantasy is a very hard sell. Naturally, I've got a whole imaginary cast lined up in

my head. I think that I write in a way that naturally lends itself to cinema because my stories tend to revolve around what I think of as ‘set pieces,’ which others might call ‘boss fights,’ and I’d love to see some of the magi-tech elements brought to life.

[TS] Besides your aforementioned sequel to *Blackwing*, what other big projects do you have in the works? Let your fans know what you are up to!

[EM] So, we’ll have *Ravencry* out summer 2018, and The Raven’s Mark series resolves with *Crowfall* in summer 2019. *Crowfall* is about 2/3 written, but last Christmas I was waiting to get edits back on *Ravencry* and decided to hold off writing any more until I had, but then I got itchy so I just started writing a new project which has the working title “Samurai Cowboy Dinosaur Mecha Grimdark Showdown.” Despite the title, my agent was happy to accept my first ten chapters and synopsis for a series, so we’ll be looking to try to take it to publishers sometime later this year. I have a third series that I’m really excited about working on as well, which I might co-write with an interested author, but I’m not sure how well I’d collaborate. This year, *Blackwing* will be released in French, German, Spanish, Russian and about six other languages too, which is also highly exciting.

Oh, and someone is developing a musical theatre version of *Blackwing*. There will be chorus numbers. It’s going to be amazing.

[TS] Ed, thanks so much for taking time out of your day for a chin wag, now can you please put the sword down?

[EM] Gladly, and thanks for having me. But it’s the poison in your tea that you should have been worried about.**[GdM]**

Why do so Many Fantasy Worlds Look Like Medieval Europe?

MATTHEW CROPLEY

When one thinks of fantasy, a romanticised, magical world reminiscent of medieval Europe springs to mind. Why? Why, in a genre with almost no constraints on setting do most fantasy worlds end up being very similar?

A fairly standard response to this question is that most fantasy literature is influenced by the works of Tolkien. However, *The Lord of the Rings* was published in 1954, and works of sword and sorcery like Robert E. Howard's Conan tales and Fritz Leiber's *Fafhrd* and the *Gray Mouser* stories were first published in the twenties and thirties respectively. These stories, while more focused on personal, less epic conflicts, were still set in worlds that any fantasy fan today would recognise as something like the standard medieval fantasyland. In, for example, the *First Law*, *Broken Empire*, *Grim Company*, *Crimson Empire* and *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, the world is filled with feudal kingdoms or empires, horses, swords, European landscapes, ale, copper, silver and gold coins, barbarians in the cold north, warmer climates in the south, and ruins of an ancient, powerful civilisation. Why, then, does this same type of setting keep popping up?

In medieval Europe, there was a sense of wonder in the world that simply isn't present in other eras. Only from the fall of Rome until the Renaissance, during the Medieval Period (or Middle Ages), was the world at its most wondrous and unexplored. In the Medieval Period, there's the impression that people thought a witch lived in the woods, a dragon in the mountains, and a wizard in the king's castle. Additionally, in medieval times, Europeans lived amid the ruins of a great, fallen society, which added to the sense of wonder and the idea that powerful relics could be found amid ruins. The era is simply ripe for exploration of the unknown and superstitiously believed. Fantasy is all about telling stories about what might have happened if these superstitions had been true.

Beyond wonder at the supernatural, fantasy set in medieval Europe also enables the modern reader to feel a connection to wild, untamed nature. An overwhelming number of fantasy stories feature main characters setting off on a quest through the wilderness. It's reasonable to think that this is because there's an innate appeal in reconnecting with our wilder side. Fantasy stories exclusively set in cities do certainly exist, but like fantasy stories set in a world not reminiscent of medieval Europe, they appear to be in the minority.

Aside from this sense of wonder, another reason for the innate appeal of this era, it seems, is that in medieval fantasy the individual has the greatest amount of agency. In a medieval setting, the child of a farmer can leave their village and wander into that supposedly haunted forest and no police will appear to tell him that he is trespassing. No bureaucrats will fill out a form saying that he's missing. In addition, this child could relatively easily acquire a sword, the skills to use it, and be a relatively powerful fighter with enough agency to, say, sneak in to a castle and rescue

their imprisoned father. The idea of companions coming together to quest off into the forest is one that works best in a medieval society, because a skilled and determined individual can make a real difference in a world where a lack of technology, communication and organisation are such that one is more free. It seems obvious why such a world holds an appeal for people living in the modern Western world, where so much of our time is spent adhering to strict laws, regulations and rules about how we must spend our time and money. Everything is owned or taxed, and a person's every move can be tracked. Fantasy strips that all back and returns power to the individual. Fantasy may be a power-fantasy, then, but a benign and fun one that lets us escape into adventure for a time. Medieval Europe is simply the time and place where this makes the most immediate sense.

A natural extension of this is the romanticism of combat that we see in medieval Europe. Before this time, in Ancient Rome, warfare was largely performed by legions of men operating as one entity, removing the need for individual skill or bravery. After the Medieval Period, when gunpowder was beginning to become widespread, the power of firearms eroded individual, skill-based combat. But in the Medieval Period, we have something very special: the power of one person with a sword. It doesn't need to be a sword of course, it can be a bow, a dagger, a mace, or even magic, but there's something undeniably special about the idea that one skilled fighter could forge a legend for themselves through skill and bravery. It's the age of heroes. Armour and the concept of knights on horseback take this deeper into the realm of just plain *cool*. A brave band of mounted knights charging into a breach evokes emotion that a score of Roman legionaries forming a perfect Testudo, or a platoon of redcoats firing muskets, wholeheartedly lack.

A lingering question is why *Europe* at all? Why not base fantasy stories on historical versions of completely different parts of the world? The short answer is that many writers do this, and there are amazing works of fantasy based on all manner of diverse cultures. However, in the Western world, a great many readers and writers are of European descent, and so it makes sense that many of them will naturally gravitate towards historical versions of their own ancestral homelands. Beyond this, writers who have grown up in a post-colonial European culture will probably be familiar with European history and myths set in historical Europe, and may thus wish to write stories that pay homage to these myths. This effect can be seen in other cultures, like the prevalence of wuxia fantasy in China.

There do seem to be several reasons why medieval Europe is the basis for so many fantasy settings. It's a time and place with a sense of wonder and belief in the supernatural. Nature was wild and untamed in a way that modern readers find appealing, and individuals had a level of agency that is unrivalled by any other popular era. There's simply something romantic about swordplay that the combat of other eras doesn't have, and Europe is a default historical location because of the Eurocentrism of Western culture. Because of all this, it's unsurprising that so many fantasy worlds are virtually indistinguishable from one another. **[GdM]**

Review: Peril in the Old Country

BY SAM HOOKER
REVIEW BY MALRUBIUS

Peril in the Old Country is a hilarious new novel by Sam Hooker (*The Winter Riddle*, not that you've heard of it). It pits the hapless and hopelessly timid accountant Sloop Peril against numerous adversaries as he attempts to protect the fortune of wealthy dimwit heir William Hapsgalt, discover his own identity, fall in love, and maybe even stay alive for a short while longer, not that that's entirely necessary in his opinion. In a style (very) reminiscent of the late Douglas Adams's *Hitchhiker's Guide* and *Dirk Gently* series, Hooker spins a very funny tale with some fairly complex characters, tense conflicts, philosophizing, a nicely realized setting, and line upon line of funniness. It's also chock full of nasty goblins, secret societies, ancient wizards, undead armies, wizards, and a little of the stabby stuff.

Thanks to the ineptitude of one of his co-workers, whose paperwork he must clean up in a hurry, Peril is thrust into the secret spy agency of Salzstadt, the capital of the Old Country (the name of which cannot be mentioned without inviting a congress of goblins into the general proximity, which then must be battled with brooms), against its longtime nemesis, the neighboring country of Carpathia. After his successfully brief summary of the giant stack of paperwork he corrects just in time, he is chosen by Mrs

Knife, the head of Three Bells Company, to help oversee the wealth of the daft heir to the richest man in the Old Country as the young lad (about forty years old) makes his own way in the world at the family's goblin-infested estate at Whitewood. Peril oversees the hiring of the household staff: Myrtle, a cute housekeeper, who is possessed by the spirit of a dead and very bored philosopher; Roman, a sneaky valet; and Nan, the 'young' heir's nanny, who won't take no for an answer and quickly rids the estate of goblins with her trusty broom. Once the hiring is settled, the enormous fortune and everything else in the estate is abruptly stolen, and Peril must undertake a deal with Winking Bob, the head of the underground mafia, Four Bells Company, to win a small portion of the money, still amounting to an incredible fortune, back or else face the wrath of Mrs Knife, among others. Dirty deeds and double-dealing ensue as Peril takes his team, plus Greta, local watchmaker, on an 'expedition' to Carpathia, a very nasty place whose citizens, as far as Peril knows, "wore the untanned skins of beasts they killed, communicated only through grunts and bloodthirsty screaming, ate fruit without washing it first, and worse," to help regain William's fortune. All of which ultimately leads to a deadly and comical climax as the forces of Salzstadt must battle an undead army of Vlads from Carpathia. Many, many twists and turns complicate the way to a surprising and funny, though perhaps slightly unsatisfying, ending, which I won't describe since it would spoil the fun.

Slout Peril is a beautifully conceived accountant: he is exceedingly self-conscious, hates to deal with anything that can't be assessed strictly in terms of numbers, is socially inept, and ridiculously afraid of anything not entirely sanctioned by the Domnitor, the head of the Old Country. Every morning, he wakes, says the Loyalty Oath to the Old Country, and walks to work, going a mile out of his way to touch Salzstadt's

north gate, which secures his home city from the very likely evil Carpathians who live directly to the north and have conquered pretty much everywhere else. His social circle consists almost entirely of conversations with his beloved mother, who reveals her secret identity to him, thereby crushing all of his preconceived notions of self, leaving him adrift on a sea of doubt. Nevertheless, he tries to court Myrtle, though her inability to stifle the voice of the cynical know-it-all philosopher, Arthur, who possesses her, makes it very awkward, to say the least. The other minor characters are equally as endearing in their own ways: Roman, a house valet, seems to know all about the underground, secret societies, and Carpathia; Greta, a humble yet kick-ass watchmaker, who longs for adventure but might be forced to marry Willie despite her pleas; Nan, the nanny, who forces herself on Peril and follows along, though uninvited, on their adventure and is really the character who turns this humble adventure into an extremely perilous one; and Willie, a forty-year-old spoiled brat who alternates between commanding authority and acting like a six-year-old (which Nan is convinced he really is, thanks to a spell). There are other important characters as well, including a couple of wizards, who act as nice foils to each other, Vlad the Invader herself, Queen of Carpathia, and the undead army of all past Vlads going back thousands of years, including the comically annoying Vlad who died of a head wound and can't remember that he is no longer king and is, well, dead.

As if the situations and characters weren't entertaining and humorous enough, the settings of Salzstadt and Carpathia are both thoughtfully rendered. Salzstadt comes with a strong dose of Orwell's *1984*. There are rules for everything, including swearing, fighting, and which fork to use, all seemingly to keep out goblins, which would seem to be easily eradicated were it not for a certain prohibition against

brooms. Carpathia, on the other hand, is comically spooky with gargoyles peering down from every rooftop, underground sewers, and a giant non-working clock tower. It is decidedly more medieval gothic than the Old Country, which seems more Victorian, but it really doesn't matter. It is the work of a lively imagination and never fails to set the stage for a relentless assault of humor and antics.

Overall, though, it is Hooker's writing that makes *Peril in the Old Country* so enjoyable. Yes, it cannot go without comparison to Douglas Adams, but nevertheless, the wordsmithing and phrase-turning of the third-person narrative and dialogue are the real stars here. For example, when Roman describes the rituals of a secret society, the Serpents of the Earth, he says

"Of course, they mostly do their black masses in the library basement. Fairly rare. Blood moons."

"Black masses? You mean with human sacrifices and the like?" [asks Peril.]

"Oh no," said Roman. "I mean yes, they do that kind, too, but they use the basement of the Great Cathedral for human sacrifices. Much better drainage."

Similarly, after watching the elite Old Country guard in battle, the narrator gives us Peril's thoughts: "It's hard to be proud of two dozen corpses no matter how shiny their armor is." And so on. It's great fun, if you're into that sort of thing. Fun, that is.

But is it grimdark? Nicholas Eames's brilliant *Kings of the Wyld* leaves no doubt that dark fantasy can be written with a hefty dose of humor. *Peril in the Old Country* brings humor to the forefront. However, both sides of this story's conflict, the salts of Salzstadt and the Carpathians, as well as a third party that arises, seem equally ridiculous, and none is always in the

right, if a 'right' even exists in this absurd melee. By the end, even Peril himself is unclear which side he is on and if it's the right one. So, if it's possible to create an all-out comic grimdark novel, I think Hooker has done so with *Peril in the Old Country*. Yes, I was a little let down by the last page or two of the novel, but *Peril in the Old Country*, all the way through its climax, is hilarious good fun, and many readers will enjoy the interesting ending twist. (No, it's not *all a dream* or anything stupid like that.)

Peril in the Old Country is scheduled to be released in trade paper and e-book by Black Spot Books on June 5, 2018.[GdM]

Climb

MARK LAWRENCE

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"Name's Braid."

The goat seemed unimpressed. Its yellow eyeball held him for a moment before returning to the tricky business of finding a path among the rocks. Braid watched as the goat sprang, and with a brief clatter of hooves, gained a higher ledge. It bent to nibble the lone tuft of scree-grass it had been hunting when Braid's arrival disturbed it.

"Braid the Climber." Braid spoke to the goat's back now. He was glad not to be the subject of its scrutiny any more. He'd always felt there was something alien about square-pupils, as if goats didn't truly belong among men, and dogs, and horses.

"... the Climber." Blood welled up over his lips, and trickled down his neck, neither hot nor cold. He turned his head to see where he had fallen from. Bone grated on bone, but without pain. Two boulders cradled him. His fall had molded him to their shape, as if he'd been broken on a wheel.

He could see the point, some seventy feet up, an overhang slick with ice.

The place where his skill had betrayed him in a careless moment.

Not a bad place to die. Held in the arms of the mountains.

Braid could see no sky, just the thrust of the mountainside rearing up and becoming lost in cloud.

And somewhere hidden high above, a lonely peak.

He remembered his first peak. The time when he first came to the Shrouded Mountains. He saw himself as he'd been then, young, letting his anger burn so fierce that it could almost mask his loss.

Snow began to fall from the cloud-base, tiny flakes so perfect Braid imagined they might chime as they struck the rocks. The snow brought visions, scenes of lost days that stole his sight, and led him back along the years.

* * *

"I do not accept it!" Braid dashed the blood-cup from the shaman's hands. For a moment the splash of crimson on the dirt floor kept his gaze.

"You have a daughter." If the old man took offence, his voice held none of it.

"I had a wife and a son." Braid's hands twisted, one against the other. Braid's skin tingled, on his back, his forearms. It crawled, as though he were too small a vessel for his outrage.

"There are no answers to your questions." The walls of the tent shook as the wind picked up outside. The shaman bent to retrieve his seeing cup.

The wind came again, and prayer-flags on the guy-ropes cracked and beat. Braid need only to close his eyes and he would see Kai, racing to fly his kite with the other boys. Kai had always loved the season of winds.

"You need sleep," the shaman said. "Then you need to go home."

"No." Braid saw too much when he slept. "I will know why they died. I will know where to seek revenge. And I will know how to undo what has been done."

"There are no—"

"There *are* answers." Braid caught the shaman by the neck as he straightened. "You speak to gods and spirits, but they don't tell you all they know." Anger tightened his grip and he heard the wheeze in the old

man's throat. Braid drew the shaman to him, eye to eye. He tilted his head, seeking his answers in the other's face. "Who can tell me?"

A cramping pain entered Braid's hand, spreading from the fingertips, lancing up past each knuckle. Against his will, his grip opened wide.

The shaman stepped back and rubbed his neck. "There is an oracle atop the highest peak in the Shrouded Mountains. It is said sometimes even the gods seek council there. The oracle asks no price, refuses no answers save those about itself."

Braid felt the shame rising in him, and beat it down with more anger.

"If you're lying, I will return." He turned and fled into the night, running to escape the thing his grief had made of him.

* * *

Braid watched the goat until its hunt took it from sight behind a shoulder of shattered rock. He lay back and studied the whiteness of the cloud. Sometimes he saw Kai's face written in swirls of mist, sometimes Anna's, wearing the smile from the day they wed.

He spat a clot of blood, coughed, and tried to move his arms. The right arm lifted a few inches, and fell back.

"What are you hiding, I wonder?" he asked the cloud. Another cough, no blood this time. "I'm the climber, I have to know."

A smile found its way to his lips. He recalled the moment when he first understood the joke the shaman played on him.

* * *

"I'm looking for the oracle." Braid directed his words at a swarthy man, wrapped with enough goatskin to clothe a herd. Of the dozen men to have emerged from the village, this one at least held a glimmer of intelligence beneath his solid brow.

"Oracle?" The man shaped his lips around the word as if it were unfamiliar.

"Yes." Braid glanced back to the doorways where the womenfolk looked out. He wondered what kind of life these people could scratch from the rocks, nestled so high, in the very throat of the gorge. He wondered what lay in the darkness of their homes, half cave, half cottage, hewn into the cliffs.

"Oracle?" the man said.

Braid had learned patience on his journey to the Shrouded Mountains. When he first saw them, across the broadness of the Axan Velt, he started to run. By the time his strength failed him, the mountains looked neither closer nor more distant. For three weeks his march ate the distance, and each morning the mountains looked the same, rising from the plains without the preamble of foothills, peaks lost in a perpetual mist that never once parted.

"Yes," Braid said. "In the mountains."

"I don't know any oracle." The man stank as bad as if all the goats whose skins he wore still lived within his house. "All you'll find above the snow line are cloud giants. Lots of cloud giants."

"It's on the tallest peak," Braid said. "Just tell me how to get there and I'll be on my way." He reached into the pouch at his hip. "I have silver for provisions."

The village men exchanged glances. The swarthy man stepped through them and stood beside Braid, pointing up toward the mountains, a serried array like teeth on a hound's jaw, reaching into the mists.

"How could a man know which is tallest?" he asked.

* * *

A laugh ripped from Braid. He felt his first stab of pain at that, the first since he'd fallen. The first in a long time. He rolled from between the rocks, gripping the mountainside to steady himself. The ledges held precious little room for goat hooves, let alone a man. Was he still a man? Braid watched the pale flesh of his

legs knit slowly, sealing the wounds he had taken. He watched his broken limbs straighten.

With the setting of the sun, the mists rolled down, a chill blanket unfolding across razored slopes, and Braid drew strength from them. He fed the cold fire at his core, and once more began to climb. Pale fingers hooked into cracks, naked toes seeking purchase on stone, eyes looking upward. Always up.

Braid climbed without thinking, from memory, without tiring, seeing only the blind whiteness of the mist. He carried no hope now. He had no recollection of spending the last of it, but hope had left him, only habit in its place.

"I had hope once." Braid spoke to the stone, an inch from his lips.

He kept moving. Always up.

And with eyes that saw nothing but enfolding cloud, he watched his first ascent so many years before.

* * *

"Will this never end?"

Braid clung to the mountainside, shivering in the fleeces he'd bought in the nameless gorge village. He'd lost all feeling in his toes long ago. For all he knew, they'd turned black and were rolling at the ends of his boots like so many marbles. His fingers hardly obeyed him, numb within supple goatskin gloves. His sword, passed from father to son for seven generations, lay a thousand feet below him, too heavy to bear. The knife at his hip was all that stood between him and whatever horrors the Shrouded Mountains might hide, its edge already dull from the work of climbing.

The wind howled and almost took Braid from the ledge. For a moment, in the voice of the gale, he heard Anna call. He closed his eyes against the sting of ice crystals, and saw her, a horror of weeping sores, dying on their bed.

Braid found new strength, and climbed beyond it. The mountain tore at him, each stumble offering his flesh to teeth of ice and rock. He climbed in cloud so thick he could see no farther than his hand. And still he climbed, until it seemed that climbing was all of him. Memory shrank, the wind became a whisper, even Anna and Kai dwindled to a distant flame. Hand, foot, heave, push. Up.

He saw the peak only when he ran out of anything to climb. For the longest time he clung to the stone, too stupid with exhaustion to understand what he saw.

"Not... this one then."

He began his descent, resolved to climb the next mountain, certain he wouldn't leave this one alive.

Braid almost missed the cave mouth. Not because it was small, it stood taller and wider than cathedral doors, but because the cloud concealed it. He staggered in, and the wind died to a moan, making slow swirls in the fog.

"Hello?" The mists ate his words.

He followed the walls, hands on the stone.

"Hello?"

He moved on. And found himself almost in the arms of the giant. It sat on the rock, knees drawn close to its face, looming as high again as Braid. Naked, whiter than alabaster, lean but promising strength. Braid raised his eyes toward the giant's face, his breath held tight.

The eyes that met his gaze were the blue of a summer sky, without pupil or iris.

Braid had no energy left for fear. "And will I find a giant on every other peak in this gods-forsaken place?"

"There are other mountains?" The cloud giant raised its brows.

Braid slumped against the cave wall. A sob convulsed him before he strangled it. The irony seemed too bitter, to climb for wisdom and find a fool.

His weakness pulled him to the floor. Hunger twisted in his stomach, sharp and hot. "What do you eat here?" There were no bones on what little of the ground he could see.

The giant spread its hands, each ivory finger as long as Braid's forearm. In a complex motion the giant wove the cloud like a widow pulling thread from a wool-ball. He pursed his lips and drew the cloud stuff in.

"Mountains come, mountains go. The skies are eternal." His voice was the wind over stone. "Go home now, son of man."

* * *

Braid's first descent had been harder than the climb, and a month was scarcely enough to restore his strength. The second climb came harder than the first descent. And the peak held no oracle.

Braid found a cave not far from the summit. He crawled in, fingers bitten black by the frost. He lay as dead, hidden from the wind, lost in cloud. In a dream of warmth, Anna came to him, as she was before the plague's kiss.

"Come to me," she said. Arms wide. The heat of her drew him.

"I can bring you back." He turned from her, stumbling in imagined grass. The day grew dark, icy, the ground hard, and he woke, lips against the cave floor.

He heaved himself, like a broken thing, a dog with its spine shattered beneath a cartwheel. A white hand took him from the ground. Cold strength ran from the fingers that wrapped him, and Braid lifted his head.

"You're not the oracle."

The giant set him on a shelf of polished stone, beside a hollowed basin where the mist distilled into a pool.

"You spoke to another. Anna," the giant said. "She is not here."

"I lost her." Braid clutched himself, shivering. "I'll bring her back though. Whatever the price."

"Clouds come, clouds go, never the same one twice." The giant shrugged. "Only the sky is forever." He took Braid's arm and pushed the hand wrist-deep into the pool. Braid had no strength to resist. The water felt freezing. It took his breath. His ruined fingers had been numb to ice and snow, yet now he shouted at the chill of the pool. He jerked to free his hand, and the giant let him. His flesh looked pale, laced with dark veins, the blackness of frostbite washed away. He moved the fingers, set them to his face and felt the stubble there.

"How?"

He thrust his other hand into the pool, and drew it clear, pale but whole.

"It's the blood of the sky," the giant said.

Braid set his two hands into the water, gritting his teeth against the shock of cold. He lifted them, cupped and brimming.

"It is not for men to drink," the giant said. The blue of his eyes was the sky Braid saw when Anna came to his dream.

Braid raised his hands to his mouth.

"It is not for men." The giant watched him, as if powerless to interfere.

Braid drank deep.

He left the cave filled with a cold fire, an ancient strength locked within his bones. The wind felt like a caress, the rocks warm beneath his fingers.

Before Braid reached the valley his speed twice caught him on an edge of stone, tearing open his jerkin on the arm and side. The flesh below looked as pale as a fish belly, and the cuts closed before his eyes.

* * *

Braid climbed at a steady pace. Free of the past for a moment. For the longest time his climbing had kept him in the now, his memories walled away, behind

exhaustion, behind purpose, behind the certainty of death should he slip. Though the past might swell around him like a rising tide, he would climb beyond it.

But the years seemed to carry him back rather than forward. His hands had learned the mountains. His ghosts kept pace at his shoulder, and the wind whispered truths he didn't want to hear.

The injuries from his fall were memories now, a slight soreness in the back, an ache in the neck. He'd thought the drop would kill him.

Maybe I can't die.

Braid could sense the peak now. Over the years he'd grown to know them. To a degree. He still rang with the shock of reaching for that handhold and finding only ice. It had felt like a betrayal, a hurt to be remembered long after the pain of the fall.

If you've seen one mountain you haven't seen them all, not even one mist-shrouded mountain.

The same didn't hold true for the cloud giants. Braid had met... he didn't know how many... hundreds? He'd spent weeks in the company of giants, months maybe, and never once learned to tell one from another. Even their names sounded the same, just wind speaking to rock.

The giants liked to dwell nowhere but in caves below the very top of the mountain. Braid had wondered if they hewed them into the rock themselves—a giant told him that the wind had carved the chambers for him.

The gale blew harder, laced with ice. Braid picked up his speed. He knew one thing about the giants: it was best not to visit them in a storm.

Braid felt at his hip for the knife he once carried. He regretted its loss, but he could have lost more than a trusty blade. He recalled the weather had been similar then, snow and a skittish wind. He'd looked for the oracle, in habit rather than hope, and called in at the local giant's cave. Braid visited each mountain's giant.

Not for wisdom—they were simple creatures—but for company. He spent little time in the mountain villages now. The men there seemed afraid of him, and he never saw the same face from one visit to the next. They called him 'the old man of the mountain' when they didn't think he heard them. Braid found that strange, for his reflection looked no older to him, only tired and drawn. And pale of course, white as fog and snow.

A rumble of thunder sounded in the distance, and Braid thought of his knife again. He'd been with a giant when he lost it. Listening to talk of mysteries revealed in the mist. A sudden squall had hit the mountainside, with the force of a battering ram. Lightning had lit the cloud, and his quiet host had struck out with no warning, as if the giant and the storm were one. The blow threw Braid against the wall, his knife had flown loose, and he'd scrambled clear, daring the descent in the jaws of the gale rather than spend another moment with the raging giant.

Braid reached for the knife again. His fingers closed on empty space. Another betrayal, as keen as the missing handhold. He climbed harder, faster, outpacing memory, escaping recollections of older, deeper losses.

Braid ran out of mountain to climb. He shook away thoughts of giants and storms, and scanned the bleak rock. He lowered his head.

*There's no oracle, no hope, nothing but the wind.
Go home old man of the mountain.*

* * *

"Hello!"

Braid found his way to the giant's cave, blind in the shroud of the mountains. He'd developed a feeling for finding cloud giants too it seemed. The giant sat close by the far wall of its cavern, as unsurprised to see him as the very first one he'd met.

"I'll never find her, will I?" Braid slumped down before the giant's feet.

"Only the sky is forever," the giant said. Giants said a lot of this kind of thing in Braid's experience.

"I'm changed. I'm not me anymore." Braid held a white hand before his face and turned it slowly. "If I brought them back, I wouldn't be Kai's father any more. Anna's husband."

"Clouds come, clouds go. You can't remake them."

Braid got to his feet, a memory of his old anger echoing through him. He stepped forward until he stood directly before the seated giant.

"Where is the oracle? I've climbed too long, too hard. I need to know." The giant held him with summer eyes.

"I've nothing left, nothing but this hunt." Braid spread his hands and looked down at himself. Rags bound him, a bare-foot beggar in the mountains. "I've nothing."

The giant held out a white fist. One by one its fingers unclasped, and on its palm lay a knife.

"You have something," it said.

Braid stared, not understanding what he saw. He reached out and took the knife.

"My knife?"

"Yes."

"Who... how did you get it?" Braid felt the outlines of the answer already.

"You brought it here," the giant said.

"I... I can't have climbed the same mountain twice. I can't"

"The wind has no memory," the giant said.

"I've never climbed this mountain."

"You've never climbed anything else."

Braid felt his certainty slip away. He forced himself to meet the giant's gaze. "Which is the tallest mountain?"

"They're all the same height."

"You're the oracle," Braid said.

"The oracle doesn't answer questions about itself."

"But you'd answer any other question I have?"

"Yes," said the giant in a voice of wind over stone.

Braid felt his lips move, writhing, trying to frame the words. He thought of his boy, dust now, flying over distant plains, borne on kite-winds. He thought of Anna, softness and strength, passed into eternity, and of Serah, cast in her mother's form, lost to him behind the wasted years.

Braid returned his knife to its scabbard. "You've already told me what I need to know, haven't you?"

"Yes."

And Braid the Climber left the mountains. **[GdM]**

Mark Lawrence was born in Champagne-Urbana, Illinois, to British parents but moved to the UK at the age of one. He went back to the US after taking a PhD in mathematics at Imperial College to work on a variety of research projects including the 'Star Wars' missile defence programme. Returning to the UK, he has worked mainly on image processing and decision/reasoning theory. He says he never had any ambition to be a writer so was very surprised when a half-hearted attempt to find an agent turned into a global publishing deal overnight. His first trilogy, *THE BROKEN EMPIRE*, has been universally acclaimed as a ground-breaking work of fantasy. Following *The Broken Empire* comes the bestselling *RED QUEEN'S WAR* trilogy. The *BOOK OF THE ANCESTOR* trilogy, in an entirely new setting, commences with *RED SISTER* in 2017. Mark is married, with four children, and lives in Bristol.

An Interview with Garth Nix

MATTHEW CROPLEY

Australian superstar author Garth Nix is the author of a great many fantastic SFF books, the most grimdark of which is the *Old Kingdom* series (or *Abhorsen* in North America). Garth was kind enough to have a chat to me about his work, grimdark, and the nature of subgenres in general.

[MC] Many of your books are noteworthy especially in the YA field, due to the fact that they aren't afraid to delve into darker themes. I just wanted to know whether you've made a conscious effort to do that, and if so why or why not?

[GN] I guess what I'm more concerned about is that I want stories to feel real and I think in order to do that you do have to you know, impress the consequences of things, and that tends to sort of lend things towards dark elements I suppose, but for me it's really all about the consequences, so, not glossing over the effects of combat or wounds or fear and so on. I think that it's all about trying to make it feel real.

[MC] With that in mind, do you think speculative fiction should be more escapist or engage with those real-world issues, and why do you think it's important that it does engage with those real-world issues if so?

[GN] I don't think it *should* be anything actually. There's such enormous variation, enormous scope, for the genre to do anything. There's a place for totally escapist, totally enjoyable stories that take you out of this world and just have fun and at the same time there's the scope for much more serious work. So, I don't think that stories ever *should* be anything at all, they should be what the authors want them to be and I think that they'll always find readers.

[MC] Do you think that speculative fiction provides anything that more 'normal', real-world fiction doesn't? So, you know, why write fantasy or science fiction in the first place?

[GN] I'm not sure that it does to be honest, because it's all in the execution. I think there are, you know, contemporary, realist stories that provide whatever you want from the story in the same way that genre fiction can. I guess the main difference, particularly in science fiction for the writer, and probably the reader as well, is that you can explore your own boundaries. You can make stuff up that isn't part of the contemporary, real world, and you can make it work in the story. I think that's attractive to writers and readers. Maybe that's part of the appeal, the lasting appeal of science fiction and fantasy.

[MC] So, you were talking about going for realism even in secondary worlds. How do you go about making your characters realistically flawed and complex?

[GN] Well, I just think of them as people to be honest. Think of them as a real person. I typically know very little about my characters when I start, I discover who they are over the course of the story. If you're thinking of them as a real person, everything else comes from that. So, it's not that difficult to make them feel real. A

lot of it is in the small details of course; it's all of the small details that go together to create, you know, the illusion of reality.

[MC] Do you tend to get those details from real people that you actually know, or do you just think them up?

[GN] Sometimes I do, I take elements of people that I know or even just people that I've seen sometimes. I'll take some element of how they behave, or what they look like, or how they move, and I'll give that to one of my characters. But, I don't base my characters on any one person. I tend to add extra bits from different people to create a kind of Frankenstein monster. Each of the pieces slot together to create a new characters. But I don't take whole characters, I just take bits and pieces and join them together.

[MC] Can you talk a bit about the antagonists in your books? What do you think makes a good one? Where do you draw inspiration for antagonists from?

[GN] That's a good question. With antagonists I always try and give them a motivation that isn't just being evil, not just evil for the sake of it. They always have a very strong motivation. They're always driven by things that are of great importance to them. Often that can be power, or say fear. Even if they're a monster, what is their motivation? Is it a hatred of people? Is it hunger? Is it fear of death? A way to stay alive, a way to stay in life, and the only way to do that is to consume other people's? I always try to think of what is driving them and not simply that they are evil and that's the way it is. I try to make them more interesting and complex because of that.

[MC] So who are some of your favourite characters that other people have written?

[GN] I tend not to think about characters in particular, there are many writers that I really admire and I love, but it's sort of the whole thing not just that I'm fascinated by particular characters. It's the whole story, the whole work. There aren't really any particular single characters that I can think of. There are certainly many authors where I'll read everything they write or have written. A lot of my favourites I re-read often.

[MC] Moving away from characters for a moment, the worlds you create are incredibly diverse and creative. From the House in *Keys to the Kingdom*, to the dual-worlds of the *Old Kingdom* series, everything is unique. How do you go about making them feel real and grounded when they're such interesting, unusual places?

[GN] As it was talking about before, it is in the small details. I try to visualise them as if they are real and I'm observing them, and I try and convey that to the reader. I think that if you can make it feel real to yourself then it has a high chance of feeling real to the reader. But, a lot of creating that illusion is actually just putting together all of those small details. I'm very strong on visualising things as I write. I might not write down everything that I've imagined. There can be so many details that I'll never use, but you just need to give enough details to see the reader's imagination going.

[MC] Are there any particular worlds or works that have really influenced the ones you've created, or how have you gone about creating those places?

[GN] Sure, certainly I think that all of the major works you'd expect have influenced me, particularly the books I read growing up. *The Lord of the Rings* was a huge influence, but also many other fantasy writers,

and also writers of history. I draw on history and real places a lot. Sometimes they're places I've read about and sometimes they're places I've actually visited, but usually both. So, I do draw on real-world stuff and just take it a step further. I might begin with something real and take it a bit further. I have many, many influences, and I think it's really just curiosity. I might be inspired by something from history like the cisterns under Istanbul, or Constantinople, were inspirations for the reservoirs under the city of Belisaere the *Old Kingdom* books. I guess I might take something historical or real and expand upon that.

[MC] So your approach to magic and how it works is also pretty unique across your books, from the bells of the Abhorsen or the weirdness of the House or the shadows of the Seventh Tower. Do you set out to build those magic systems before you start writing or do they evolve as you tell the story?

[GN] Yeah they just evolve to be honest. I very much discover the world through story and that includes the magic. Typically I'll sort of throw myself into a story and I'll start writing it and get a certain distance into the magical world and then I'll have to pause and think or make notes and try to see how I can make sense of it and carry on. I've also had false starts where I've continued writing and I've thought 'this is how the magic works' but I've got it wrong. I've had to ditch chapters that had to go because they were wrong. So, it's a process that I go through. I work things out as I go and if you're writing lots of books, as I've done in *The Old Kingdom* for example, each book I discover more about how everything works, but of course there's also the body of work that comes before that sets everything out. So, it kind of gets easier in a way because there's less working out how everything works together. The more I do, the clearer it gets.

[MC] I wanted to ask how being Australian has affected your writing career, especially in speculative fiction. Has that been an interesting career path, or do you think it is very different to people in Australia writing non-genre fiction?

[GN] It's a good question. Genre fiction is a worldwide thing. Of course the greatest markets are in the United States, or North America in general, and in the United Kingdom just because there are more people than in Australia and New Zealand. So, you have an advantage in genre writing because of the access to those markets. If you're Australian you might find yourself just working in Australia or you might not, it just depends. You have to know how it might travel and what could happen, but certainly I think that with writing genre fiction it's a little bit easier. But things have changed enormously since I started writing my first novel, *The Rag Witch*, and the internet was just getting started. It all changed in about the mid nineties with the internet and email, and everything just got easier. Contacting agents in New York or London, contacting publishers, etc. and not long after that, actually working with publishers, with manuscripts going back and forth. The editorial process, which once met actually mailing manuscripts back and forth, could then be sent as pdfs etc. The technology change has certainly made it easier for a writer on the far side of the world. I've also been fortunate that I connected with a very good agent in New York very early on and published out of the US very early on. It's like the song, 'If You Can Make it in New York, You Can Make it Anywhere', as it were. It's just such a big market, that just flows on everywhere else. It influences what goes on back here as well, just because of the cultural and commercial clout of the United States. It's always difficult to know how my career might have gone if I hadn't been published in

those places. I probably would have kept writing but I just would have kept my day job.

[MC] How has working in the publishing industry, not as a writer, influenced your approach to being a writer?

[GN] It helped me understand why things happen and how to make the best of things particularly when things aren't going right or there's a problem. It's actually very helpful to understand what might actually be going on. The better informed you are, the better able to are to make decisions and make the best of your writing. But in a way I've always had a slightly separate brain in some ways, because I tend to write what I'm personally invested in. I could have sat down and thought 'okay, what has the best economic chances?' but I've never done that to be honest. Partly that's because I've always believed that if you write what you love, that will ultimately give you the best chance of being successful, even though you might take a short-term hit. It's the sure path, in as much as anything can be a sure path in publishing (nothing is), it probably gives you a better chance of success than if you just keep repeating what worked last time. It's probably not very good for a writer to just keep doing that, in terms of creative satisfaction and probably mental health. I've always written what I've most wanted to write, but going into it very open-eyed and knowing that 'okay this probably isn't the best thing to do next in a strictly commercial sense, but in the long term, I think it's always better to do.

[MC] Following on from the success of people like Joe Abercrombie, in recent years there's been a big swing in the fantasy community, or at least in the circles that *Grimdark Magazine* is involved with, towards moral ambiguity and gritty realism. That's been reflected with things like the success of *Game of Thrones* as a TV

show. Do you think there's any reason that currently people are gravitating towards that more realistic flavour of fantasy at the moment?

[GN] It's a tricky question because you tend to notice what's happening in your particular part of the field, and it's easy to think of it as more important than, perhaps, it is. I'm not saying that grimdark isn't important, I think that there have been some very significant writers who identify as grimdark and who are writing grimdark fantasy. I guess people always like to identify things and be part of a movement, or invent a category that they feel describes things that they like to read or write. But often those categories and movements aren't actually that obvious to other people, and I think that they're not as significant as they might like them to be either, in the sense that fantasy has always included all kinds of different writing. You can go way back and there is very gritty, realistic fiction with moral ambiguity. You can go way, way back. Was there more of it or less of it? I think it's very hard to tell unless you've read everything that's going on in any given year, which of course is absolutely impossible these days. So, I'm not sure that there is in fact more of it in general, or maybe there is but it's part of the natural ebb and flow of these things. Certainly what happens in general with book publishing is that you'll get some really, really good books, like Joe's books, which tend to sort of look like a banner, and other people join that banner, I suppose. It makes other books more noticeable. There are certain high visibility books which elevate other books that have some characteristics like them, and only *some* characteristics. Most grimdark books, you could probably look at any of them and say that they're in another category too. It all depends on what you want to focus on and what you think the most important characteristic is. Naturally if you're interested in a

particular kind of book, you want to say 'okay, it's that kind of book', but another reader might actually be finding something else in it that they particularly like. You might, for example, say that Joe, to a degree, is writing comic fantasy, because they're very funny, as well as being gritty and filled with moral ambiguity. They're also very funny. You could say that Terry Pratchett wrote elements of grimdark in his books, as well. You know? I guess it depends on what you're looking for and how you want to identify things. It's a natural human thing to do, to try and quantify and list things, and put them in groups, and so on, it's why we have genres and categories in bookshops and so on. I think most things exist in multiple categories, and at different times people will think that they're in different categories. Another example of this is the Young Adult genre. Many books which weren't considered Young Adult at the time would now be shelved in that category, but they were never written for it as such. The whole categorisation thing, I think, can be useful, but it's always good not to get too hung up on whether a book is a particular genre, or subgenre or not. Does that make sense?

[MC] Yeah, it seems that those sort of subgenres are more useful for readers, as community-building banners, as you were saying, to rally around. I know for a fact that, as you were saying, many 'grimdark' writers didn't intentionally set out to write grimdark.

[GN] Yeah, and you'll also find authors who don't like how their books are identified. For example, there are some authors who don't want their books identified as fantasy even though the characteristics of what they are writing would normally be accepted as fantasy. I'm sure that there are some fantasy writers who don't like being identified as writing grimdark. As you say, these categories are useful for people trying to find certain

kinds of books. They're useful labels. But yeah, I'm not sure whether there really is more. Grimdark fantasy is a subgenre, it's a label that's been identified, and it's a good one. People basically know what it means, so it's a good descriptive label, but I'm not sure that there's more of it now, it's just that compared to say, ten years ago, things that might not have been called that are now called that, and in another ten years they might not. There's always an ebb and flow in this sort of thing.

[MC] I think that's completely right. It seems that there can be a tendency to bring more things under the grimdark banner until it starts to sort of lose all meaning, and just describe good fantasy books. Especially applying it to things written in the past, for example your *Old Kingdom* books have been described in that vein. It can really just start to mean good fantasy with realistic characters. It's interesting how that works.

[GN] Yeah, and it's not really how the descriptive term started off either. It's like the question of what is dark fantasy and what is horror? It's very hard to differentiate between them. There are ballpark tests like 'does everybody die at the end?' which means that it's probably horror rather than dark fantasy, but dark fantasy may mean grimdark as well. If everyone flails uselessly and dies, and there are no heroes, is that horror or dark fantasy? Grimdark overlaps horror and dark fantasy to some degree. With all of this genre stuff, things massively overlap and move around depending on the perceptions of the readers, or the cataloguers.

[MC] Thanks, that's really interesting. It's interesting to think about how some people try to really lock down clear borders between these things, and have

arguments over which categories things fit in to, but it's probably not that important when you think about it.

[GN] It's probably not, it's more like a discussion between friends after a couple of beers. There are always going to be disagreements. I don't pay too much attention to these things, because it's very limiting as a reader and as a writer to start thinking of genre as being restrictive. There are things you *can't* do if you want it to be X, or there are things I *can't* write if it's going to be grimdark fantasy. Write what you want and then let other people figure out how it's going to be published and shelved. Ultimately, to a large degree, categorisation is really only about how to sell a book. It's about how to get the book to the biggest core of readers that it can spread from later, the ones most likely to connect with it, and then also to sell it to others. Readers passing books on to each other, that word of mouth, is still probably the most potent tool for book sales. However it's done, whether it's in person or online or whatever. So, category is important, but I guess as you're saying, and I haven't really thought about this much, there's an emotional component, where readers want to think that their definition of say grimdark is the right one, and that when publishers and others start saying that something is grimdark but it doesn't fit your definition, that's when you get annoyed. There's an emotional level where your genre definitions are important.

[MC] Thanks! That's been a really interesting discussion actually, and there's a lot I haven't thought about before. I think that it's really important in a subgenre magazine like ours that it doesn't just become about enforcing or prescribing what a genre should be. Before we finish up, I just wanted to know what's on the horizon with you. Are you working on anything exciting?

[GN] That's a leading question! Well, I hope so. I'm working on a new, big fantasy, which is in a new world, not any of the existing worlds I've used before. That's coming along. It's kind of a 17th Century European world, kind of a Three Musketeers with angelic magic, is my shorthand way of describing it. That probably won't be out until early 2019, hopefully. I've always got a few things cooking at any one time, my various pots and pans with things going on.

[MC] That sounds really cool, and thanks for taking the time to talk to me!**[GdM]**

Writing Multiple Points of View

PETER ORULLIAN

One of the decisions a writer makes early on in a piece of fiction is how many points-of-view, or POVs, the work will have. For now, let's set aside the discussion about architects and gardeners (plotting vs. pantsing), and assume, for the purpose of this article, that a piece of fiction is going to have more than one POV and the writer knows it.

Before diving too deep, I should note that certain genres either lend themselves better to multiple POV storytelling or nearly require it, while other genres practically necessitate a *single* POV. While exceptions will always exist, for the most part, epic fantasy (as one example) has multiple POVs. By contrast, a lot of thrillers and mysteries will not, often choosing not to take the POV of the “bad guy,” which could disclose too much of the surprise, or excessively humanize a killer.

As I said, exceptions abound. So, I will state the obvious: There are no rules. Though, there's one caveat: be entertaining.

With that out of the way, let's talk about how to write multiple POVs.

The first thing to do is to carefully consider what value a POV is bringing to the overall narrative. Fiction, unlike life, has to make some sense. In other words, if you have a POV, the reader should understand—even if it comes late in the book as part of the climax or some revelation—why they're reading a particular POV.

Ideally, the plot or subplot that moves a POV has some bearing on the outcome of the story.

Most readers find it satisfying to have a POV character's actions inform, complicate, or assist the overall narrative. On the other hand, a POV—though interesting in its own right—that doesn't have bearing on the story will usually be seen by the reader as a distraction or nuisance.

So, your multiple POVs need to matter. And they do so by advancing the novel in any number of ways. Let me share a few: They can each help to accomplish the same goal; they can be in conflict, frustrating each other's attempts to accomplish separate goals; they can have interdependent goals, making individual success a necessary condition for mutual success.

Consider this. I could write a battle in which multiple characters on one side of the conflict are each fighting on different fronts to take a hill. I could write the same battle showing characters on each side of the conflict battling against each other to simultaneously keep or take the hill, depending on their objective. And finally, I could write that same battle, showing some characters fighting, but others tending to the wounded, radioing for air support, or I could even show politicians arguing over committing sufficient troops to take the hill.

The result is often subplots for these multiple POVs, each having a unique and compelling motivation. In sum, they may all be trying to take the hill, but the foot soldier could be struggling with the morality of his cause while needing to remain loyal to his military brothers; the medic could be making life-and-death decisions he's uncomfortable making, trading time for lives to optimize the ground forces; the politician could be lobbying for an increase in foot soldiers in order to avert a nuclear solution.

If you give your multiple POVs compelling motivations, challenges, and a rich backstory, your readers will be eager to return to them as you shift POV

throughout the fiction. And giving them enough information that they can understand how one relates to the other keeps them grounded and trusting you, the writer, to deliver a satisfying conclusion.

Now, all that is nice story theory. It works, but it's strategy, not tactics. Tactically, there are some things you can and should do to make POV transitions seamless for your readers.

Again, while you don't need to be slavish to these kinds of techniques, on the whole, they're helpful in books where there are many characters and you're shifting POV from chapter to chapter.

First, anchor your reader early in a chapter with who they're reading about, and where they're at. Sometimes, this dovetails off the last scene or chapter you wrote from that character's POV. Sometimes though, your character is in an entirely new place with new people, and doing something different. If you wait too long to introduce who is speaking and where they're speaking from, the reader grapples to know where they are. In other words, they become aware they're reading, and what's more, they're confused. This is a cardinal sin for writers.

So, instead, don't be afraid to be explicit very early, even in the first sentence, to make clear which POV you're in, and set the scene. One or two concrete details will go a long way to helping ground the reader in your setting. And this is just as important when you're coming off a cliffhanger for that character from his or her last chapter.

There are related tactics, like repeating the last line of the POV's last scene. I've seen this be effective, but don't overuse it. Similarly, you might lean on the voice of the character to indicate who's on stage, so to speak. Again, it can work. But unless your character's voice is very distinctive—maybe even with an oft-used phrase—you run the risk of losing the reader until you explicitly tell them who's speaking.

Beyond chapter or scene transitions, the larger and more important requirement of multiple POV stories is creating distinctive characters. If the characters don't have their own voices, unique motivations, and backstories, then your multiple POVs will tend to blend together. When this happens, it not only gives the narrative a stilted feeling, but it's a huge missed opportunity. The power of multiple POV narratives is the opportunity to draw these different characters and put them in play. The strength of the milieu is, in itself, interesting to read. You've likely read a book where some of the multiple POVs fell flat for you. That could be because they just don't appeal to you personally. But more often it's because the writer hasn't done a sufficient job in giving them their own life, voice, and rationale.

So, some of the most important work a writer will do, if he or she is writing a multiple POV story, is to really define distinctive characters. And for the purposes of work, much of what makes them distinct will be their separate but related motivations to your story's question and resolution.

Once you have all this in place, you can then begin advanced techniques, such as having your POV characters interact, and pass in and out of one another's subplots. These intertwinings present opportunities to show the relationship of the subplots, cause friction and frustration between them, and/or tighten the focus on the narrative goal.

To illustrate what I mean, imagine the characters in the battle for the hill example I gave above coming into dialogue. The politician visits the front lines to understand the ramifications of his actions. The foot soldier nearly attacks him for sending him to fight an immoral war. The medic chastises the politician for sending green troops and not doing what was necessary to bring a swift end to the war. The politician softly replies that a nuclear response would have

claimed three times as many human lives and likely escalated to a global nuclear conflict that might end life on earth as we know it.

I'm being dramatic, but you can see the power of bringing these POVs into the same scene to interact once you've begun to establish who they are, what they're trying to accomplish, and what motivates them.

The topic of multiple POVs is a big one. Far too big for this one little article. In large part, I've merely laid out a few approaches and techniques. The work and fun come when you begin drilling into the interior lives of the characters and fashioning them in a way that gives them some grit while keeping your story focused on delivering a satisfying conclusion.

So, most importantly, be entertaining. One way to do that with multiple POVs is to ensure that each one is relevant to the larger story you're telling. And be sure each of your characters feels like a living, breathing creature. Do these things, and your reader will be invested. **[GdM]**

Peter Orullian has worked at Xbox for over a decade, which is good, because he's a gamer. He's toured internationally with various bands and been a featured vocalist at major rock and metal festivals, which is good, because he's a musician. He's also learned when to hold his tongue, which is good, because he's a contrarian.

Peter has published several short stories, which he thinks are good. *The Unremembered* and *Trial of Intentions* are his first novels, which he hopes you will think are good. He lives in Seattle, where it rains all the damn time. He has nothing to say about that. Visit Peter at: www.orullian.com

An Interview R.J. Barker

TOM SMITH

Greetings Grimdarkians! I'm writing today from the Wounded Kingdom where I caught up with the extremely elusive rogue RJ Barker. RJ is the author of the fantastic *Age of Assassins* and *Blood of Assassins*. I was so obsessed with those two books I zipped through them like they were empty. If you haven't read them—check them out now!

RJ's next book *King of Assassins* due out in August.

[TS] RJ, thanks for stopping by!

[RJB] Hi *Grimdark Magazine*! Thank you for having me. It is very kind of you.

[TS] I'll jump right into what I think is one of the more fascinating elements of your *Wounded Kingdom* series—Girton and his clubfoot. After reading Abercrombie's *First Law* and finding a soft spot for Glokta, I instantly loved Girton. Granted, Glokta was tortured into his crippled state and then mostly wallowed in it while Girton was born that way, but that just made it even better for me because he was born with a handicap and chose to rise above it. What inspired you to create Girton Clubfoot?

[RJB] It was a number of things really. I always say he sprang into my mind fully formed—and that's true, but when I think about it with hindsight I can quite clearly see where Girton came from. I wanted a character who could be an outsider as I've always felt that way myself,

you know, just a little bit odd. Not in a bad way, I've always got on with and loved people but I've never really felt like I fitted in and people have always thought I was a little odd (in an amusing way, not a scary way, thankfully). And Girton is partly that, and he had to be an outsider so I could use him to introduce the world to us. I'm also chronically ill myself, and sometimes it attacks my joints so the constant low-level pain Girton is dealing with is a very familiar thing to me, as is the way people often react to someone who 'isn't like them.'

Lastly being born disabled is very culturally different to having 'won' a disability. We have a long-standing stigma against people who are somehow 'not right' and that's come, to some degree, from religion and seeing it as being an outward manifestation of sin. Glotka was tortured into disability, and like losing fingers or a leg in battle, that's an honourable wound. Girton doesn't have that, his is more a mark of shame in his society. Though hopefully the reader never sees it that way. Girton most definitely doesn't.

[TS] I considered Girton's rash impulsiveness of youth and poor decision-making skills to be his Achilles' heel and at times wanted to reach into the book and throttle him. What is it about Girton do you think that makes him so skilled physically but not a great critical thinker?

[RJB] He's never known other people. He's immensely skilled when it comes to his martial arts but his last experience of people his own age was when he was six. From there he's been raised by Merela and she's been teaching him to be an assassin. So, within the framework of that he's really good, he knows how to react to adults because that is what she has trained him for, to pass unseen or be a jester—which is basically being a smart arse, something he excels at, unfortunately—but so many other things we take for

granted are a mystery to him. Dealing with his peers is the biggest one, and in *Age of Assassins* when he's forced among them he just doesn't understand them, this is a world he has no experience of, he doesn't know the rules. Then in *Blood of Assassins* he's been away and when he comes back he is looking for solace and comfort, but it isn't there. Everyone he knows has moved on and changed and grown where in a lot of ways he's not had that opportunity, he's stayed the same. He's still an emotionally immature boy and he is frustrated. I think in a lot of ways he feels, though he would probably never admit it, like something has been stolen from him. So he's angry.

Thankfully, in *King of Assassins* he's more comfortable in his skin, which was nice, writing a book where I didn't want to slap him half the time.

[TS] You created a great female character in Merela Karn, Girton's master. She reminds me more of a classic old western male "strong and silent" archetype. She definitely doesn't remind me of any fantasy characters I can think of. Was there a real-life inspiration for Merela?

[RJB] YES! I sort of imagine her as a high plains drifter type character. But she's more than that. And my Mum, who is a very gentle woman, always used to say 'no matter what or where you are we will always love you.' Now I'm a parent I understand that fierce parental love so much more. And I sort of think of Merela as the avatar of that. I mean, there's loads of other stuff mixed up in her but that idea of this fierce and implacable love: quiet, unstinting and always there for Girton, that's what I see her as. She's not soft or easy, but she is always there.

She is also, of course, incredibly dangerous and there is more than a little Sherlock Holmes in her.

[TS] The magic in your *Wounded Kingdom* setting pretty much just sucks the life out of the surrounding environment in a very parasitic way causing the land to go barren and in some cases even kills people too close by sucking out their life force. To me this is reminiscent of some of the Sith lords in the *Star Wars* setting stealing others' life force and definitely adds to the darkness of your setting. What steered you in such a dark direction when creating your magic system?

[RJB] Well, the trouble with magic is it's the ultimate get out of jail free card if you're not careful. So it can't be easy, and there has to be consequences for its use or people just end up throwing fireballs left right and centre; which is good for sensation and spectacle but very bad for tension. If the worst thing faced for using magic is needing a nap then there's no reason for them not to use magic. So, I wanted there to be a lot of tension, reasons why Girton wouldn't want to use magic and it being this sort of anti-life force worked really well for that. And the other thing was it's a sort of environmental allegory, there's a definite oily feeling to the magic in the *Wounded Kingdom*.

[TS] Let's talk religion for a minute. There are many religions mentioned in your series, but no real (what most of us would refer to as clerical magic or gods walking among them) tangible proof. Unless you count Girton's visions of Xus that is. Was the desire not to let the gods overshadow the characters in this series? And is there any chance we will see any confirmations of whether the gods exist in the *Wounded Kingdom's* future?

[RJB] *King of Assassins* is probably the most 'mystical' of the three books. Girton is older and his relationship with Xus The Unseen is different in that book. However, he's not the only one who believes they have

a connection to the last living god. And we also visit Ceadoc, the capital of the Tired Lands, and that is a much older place than Maniyadoc, and there's a real feeling there of what has been. But I don't particularly go that far into the ideas of gods. Girton doesn't really understand his world and as we see the books through his eyes we don't either. The past of the Tired lands is the background for present events to unfold in front of. And I kind of always feel a bit disappointed when books explain everything, I like mystery. There's a huge temptation as a writer to explain everything to say 'look at this world I have created,' and it's something I've actively avoided. In fact, it's something we actively edited out of *Age of Assassins*. There were 'dances' that gave a lot more information to the mythology of the world but they were toned down quite a lot and I think the book is better for it. The three books are written so each one tells a complete story but the 'arc' going on in the background is all about Merela and Girton, and there was a conscious decision to not try and do too much.

So, TL/DR a bit more but no concrete answers.

[TS] What is your opinion on the grimdark sub-genre? Why do you think that so many people have trouble defining it or agreeing on a definition?

[RJB] I didn't actually know what Grimdark was until after *Age of Assassins* had sold to Orbit. To me, Grimdark was part of the tagline of the Dawn of War (Warhammer 40k) PC Games and I was reading mostly crime and historical novels at the time. But I'm a huge fan of mythology and I sort of think of grimdark as the truth behind the myth—if we imagine High-Fantasy as the myth. But it's also become synonymous for gritty which the *Wounded Kingdom* books definitely are. Though there's a good argument for 'pure' grimdark being about amoral people doing amoral

things and in that case I don't think my work really does come under the Grimdark purview; in that Girton may do bad things but he is trying to do the right thing. He just gets it very wrong sometimes.

It's sort of become a marketing term now and I think, like most artists, I kind of don't want to be put in a box with a label on it because that becomes limiting. No one puts RJ in a corner...

[TS] RJ, you are a full-time writer now. What kind of work were you doing prior to doing that?

[RJB] I was professionally ill. Doing the odd bit of scriptwork for historical actors but I am ill enough that any sort of standard job with hard deadlines was an impossibility. So I wasn't working at all, unless you count being a stay at home Dad working. I'm not sure it is really though, mostly it seemed to be quite fun.

[TS] Are you going to stick to books for now or do you have aspirations to translate your work to other mediums like maybe a graphic novel or TV show?

[RJB] I don't have any great desire to do anything but books. But then again I do get bored very quickly and I like trying new things so you never know. The truth is that if I took on too much I'd just end up making myself very ill but you can never tell. If I thought I would enjoy something I would probably do it.

[TS] Are there any current authors out there that you would like to write in a shared world with? If so, who?

[RJB] Oh gosh no. I do not play well with others so I'd be a very bad collaborator. There are some things that work though, the @Hooklandguide on twitter is run by the hugely Talented David Southwell and it's the folklore of an England-that-might-just-be. David

curates it as a resource for people to write in and I've done a few short stories based there. So given a setting and allowed to do what I want, yes. Given a set of rules or a collaboration probably not.

[TS] What are the best books you have read in recent years?

[RJB] *Slow Horses* by Mick Herron. It's a spy thriller set in London and I love it with a huge passion. I've also just finished *Priest of Bones* by Peter McLean and it's a great book, I think lovers of gritty fantasy fiction will go mad for it. Pete has done an amazing job.

[TS] And finally, you have *King of Assassins* set to drop in August of this year, do you have any other projects you want to tell your readers about?

[RJB] I can't really say very much. What I'm playing with is very different to the *Wounded Kingdom*. Ships. I like ships, so I'm doing ships.

[TS] RJ, thanks so much for stopping by! Now how do I get out of here?

[RJB] You can never get out, Tom. You're destined to become another stuffed head on our wall... But thank you for the interview, it's been really fun having to think about why I do things. I generally just do things. :)

[GdM]

Just a Little Murder

ANNA STEPHENS

The oily waters of the Patient Sea lapped against the jetty of Tallanest, sullen beneath its shroud of smoke, when Syl Stoneheart, famed mercenary captain of the Iron Blades, limped off the slave ship with a hole in her belly.

She stank as much as the ship, and it wasn't just her clothes or the lack of a bath on board. The wound stank, and the world swayed and flipped with fever. Syl put her hand on the rail, missed and staggered, hauled herself upright and tried not to breathe too deeply.

The bandages reeked, crusted with old blood and fresh pus, and she had neither the coin nor the weaponry—nor, if she was honest, the ability to hold said weaponry—to procure treatment. In short, Syl was fucked.

It'd taken everything she owned to get a berth on that ship and enough rum to dull the pain, and still she'd worried they might chain her in the hold with the poor bastards destined for the flesh markets.

Seemed there was still a rusty sort of honour among slavers, thieves and mercenaries though, and she'd made it back only marginally closer to death than when she'd boarded.

The bottle was nearly empty. Syl swilled a small mouthful of rum around her teeth and swallowed. It burnt its way into her stomach, warming and soothing the agony for a few heartbeats, enough to get her moving, anyway. She needed surgery. What she had was half a bottle of rum.

‘Hello there, pretty. Want to earn a coin or two, sweetheart?’

Syl had never been pretty, so this inhabitant of Tallanest’s underbelly must be drunker than she was. Lucky bastard. She squinted at him. ‘How much?’

He fished a money pouch off his belt and shook it. Coins jingled.

‘Thanks,’ she said and thumped him in the temple with the bottle, caught the pouch as it fell, and shoulder-barged him over the dockside rail and into the water. He vanished with a wail and Syl dropped the pouch inside her shirt and staggered for the nearest docklands exit.

The sudden scuffle had torn something, and the stink of infection rising from her own body made her gag. Something—blood or pus or both—leaked out of the bandages and slid warm and sticky into the filthy waistband of her trousers.

Tallanest’s docks at night were not the place to be if you were wounded, weaponless or drunk, and Syl Stoneheart was all three.

Best not drink anymore, she thought as she swigged from the bottle. *Damn*. Her hand came away from the wound and she rubbed her fingertips together and then smelt them. Her lip curled and she snorted like a horse. *Hospital. Healer. Apothecary. Failing that, a fuckload more rum and somewhere quiet to die.*

She reached the nearest alley and limped into it, straining eyes and ears into the darkness and trying to control her breathing. She was almost at the other end and into the city proper when a hand fell on her shoulder and hot breath wafted across the back of her neck.

She spun, trying the bottle-to-the-head trick again, only to have it twisted from her hand and a fist bury itself in her gut. Her assailant clearly didn’t expect the reaction he got as his fist slammed into her wound and

knocked breath, life and a tearing, guttural scream from Syl's throat.

She crumpled, unable to suck in air, to move, to defend herself. She lay in the mud, hoping to die, but the bastard robbing her didn't even have the common fucking decency to slit her throat.

'Oi! That little whore's mine,' a voice yelled. A familiar voice. The voice of a man she'd pushed into the harbour not so long ago. *Tonight is just getting better and better.*

Her attacker pulled the purse out of her shirt and straightened up. The soggy man made a grab for it. Amid the shouting and cursing and inevitable slide of steel from sheath, Syl made it to her hands and knees and crawled deeper into the shadows.

No weapons. No coin. A torn wound. And no rum. 'Bastards,' she whimpered.

One of the qualities people admired most about the Stoneheart—or so Syl liked to believe—was her stubbornness. Syl didn't give up at anything. Right now, she wasn't giving up on a quiet death. She collapsed facedown in a puddle and lay there, drunk and bubbling agony, determined to die.

And because life—and death—in Tallanest is nothing if not unpredictable, Syl didn't die. She was arrested.

It was much, much worse.

* * *

'Syl Stoneheart, captain of the Iron Blades, scourge of the Relic Peninsula. You look like shit.'

Syl knew that voice. Syl hated that voice, honeyed and contrived and oh so pleasant right up until the owner of it carves the flesh off your face to feed her dogs.

She played dead, which lasted until the speaker poked her in the belly. Roaring, Syl opened her eyes, expecting steel and shit and a rusty drain in the floor so the torturer didn't slip in the blood.

She was in a brightly-lit room under clean yellow sheets, swathed in snowy-white bandages and not nearly drunk enough for her liking.

This is bad.

'Lady Dagger,' Syl croaked. Her belly hurt, but not the down-to-the-bone, hot, rotting hurt from before. A clean hurt. A treated, washed and stitched hurt.

This is really bad.

'Syl,' the woman said with a frown. 'We're old friends, aren't we? Call me Reba.'

'What do you want, Reba?' Syl asked, dreading the answer but needing to know the worst up front. Reba toyed with a ringlet of dyed black hair, the colour too severe for her face.

'Want? Why would I want anything?'

'You always want something, Reba. That's what makes you so... interesting to be around.'

'Is it not possible I could want simply to heal an old friend?'

Syl would have snorted her derision, if not for the pain it would cause and the fact that Reba's Name, given to her back when she was a merc, was Lady Dagger. Syl liked her nose still attached to her face. Come to think of it, she liked her face still attached to her face. So she gave a half-smile of gratitude and closed her eyes, waiting.

'Of course, now you mention it...'

Syl opened her eyes.

'I could use the services of the Iron Blades. Half a dozen of your best should do it.'

Now Syl did snort. 'You're not the only one. Our last job went belly-up and we ended up facing off against the Bleeding Eyes.'

'Your mother's crew?' Reba asked, suddenly interested.

Syl's lip curled and she realised her fists were clenched in the expensive sheets. 'Yes, Etta's crew. She's the one gave me this over... well, over some old

shit that doesn't matter anymore. So I killed her. Anyway, my Second, Renn, he takes one look at the pair of us, assumes I'm done for and takes over the Blades. Ungrateful little fuck. Then the surviving Eyes side with him, too, and they head off to Tinker's hideout with the cargo.'

'Off to Arctun, then?' Reba asked, leaning forward, and Syl couldn't help but notice the knife in her hand. 'That's unhelpful, Stoneheart. For us both. See, saving your life was expensive, and I did it in part-payment up front for a job you and your Blades are going to do for me. Now you're telling me you don't run them anymore.'

Syl pushed herself up onto one elbow, a strangled groan easing past her teeth. 'Reba, I can get your coin. Easy.'

Reba pursed her lips and tapped the tip of the knife against them. 'But that won't see the job fulfilled, will it? No, Stoneheart, I'm afraid you'll just have to complete the contract on your own. It's only three deaths.'

Syl's scalp prickled with sudden dread. 'I'm not killing three of your rivals on my own,' she squeaked. 'They'll have more men around them than a fresh whore.'

Reba tossed the knife from one hand to the other, her eyes on Syl. 'Oh my dear,' she said softly. 'Either you kill those three marks, or I kill you.'

* * *

It wasn't that Syl couldn't kill three people; it wasn't that she had a conscience—well, not much of one. It was why Reba wanted them dead that worried her.

Lady Dagger ran Tallanest's underground, and some said her influence spread farther than anyone realised. Syl reckoned she knew how far now: the trio she wanted offed were all in the running for city governor. The current ruler, Ancel, was clearly not above a little murder to secure himself another three-

year term to skim off the top of deals made and cargo sold.

He'd purchased Reba to eliminate his rivals, and Reba had purchased Syl by means of saving her life and providing her with food, weapons and a map of her targets' homes.

Every day that Syl ate Reba's food, took Reba's medicine, was another day that reduced the pitiful sum she was being paid. Much longer and she'd owe Reba money for the privilege of killing for her. The sooner she could ghost these bastards, the better.

Syl stared out at the Patient Sea from a promontory a few miles from Tallanest. Word had come that Renn and the Iron Blades—or the fucking Bleeding Blades as they now called themselves—*wankers*—were strutting through Arctun like they owned it, claiming the kills of both Syl Stoneheart and Etta Scarlet as their own.

It'd be a surprise for them then, once this job was done and Syl arrived in Arctun to strangle Renn with his own entrails and take back her company.

Once this job was done.

What Syl's birth city needed was a good leader. What it had was Ancel and, shortly, three more corpses rolling pale, bloated and embarrassingly naked in the breakers of the Patient Sea.

Syl coughed, and her hand went reflexively to her belly, but aside from an internal sort of tugging and a deep ache, she was whole. Even better, nothing stank of rot except the seaweed and the occasional corpse on the beach below. Tallanest was a shithole, and she was well on her way to making it even shittier. She could feel bad about that, or she could focus on the job at hand. The fact that it was the only thing between her and a messy death provided a certain clarity of thought.

Two men and a woman, all city officials. Three kills. Easy.

Unless one of them kills me.

Syl checked her belt for knives, garrotte and poison, her boot tops for throwing blades and her pouch for the brass knuckles, then she settled the slender line and collapsible grapnel over her shoulder and headed into the heart of old Tallanest, where all the rich fucks lived.

* * *

The rich fucks' mansions were within shouting distance of the biggest of the flesh markets, stinking of desperation in the last of the wan evening. Slavers reducing their prices to coppers just to offload the last of their produce. The worth of a man measured by another's impatience to get rid of him.

A tall lad caught Syl's eye, muscular, looked healthy enough, should've been bought hours before. She tarried that second too long, that hesitation a seller could spot with a bag over his head.

'Milady, looking for a new—he took in her appearance and expression—recruit into your company? Belor here is a fine addition to any fighting unit—'

'Then why unsold?'

'No one here has your discerning eye. The pleasure houses wouldn't take him—too rough-natured—and no other soldiers have been through today.'

Syl looked at Belor again and then waved her hand. 'I have no coin.'

The slaver pursed his lips and looked Syl up and down as he idly stroked Belor's arm. The slave's lip curled, but he'd learnt enough not to pull away. 'Milady, perhaps we can come to some... arrangement? Let me be frank.'

Syl sighed and folded her arms, one foot tapping impatience.

'You are clearly a warrior of renown fallen on hard times...'

'You could say that. Like I said, I have no coin.'

‘You’re the Stoneheart,’ Belor blurted, lunging forward so fast Syl cracked him in the jaw and swept his feet. Hands bound before him, he could do nothing but fall. Syl stood over him snarling. She wanted as few people as possible to know she lived. Easier to string Renn up by his ears if he didn’t know she was coming.

But now the slaver was examining her and light was dawning in his face. He knew her. ‘Milady Stoneheart,’ he said, one hand up half in supplication, half in defence.

Syl glared at Belor. ‘I have business,’ she grated and stepped around the pair.

‘Milady, please,’ the slaver called, low and urgent but too canny to lay a hand on her and risk losing it. Syl kept walking. ‘You saved my son!’

That stopped her. She turned, slow as sunset. Syl wasn’t in the habit of saving anyone if there wasn’t coin in it. ‘I’ve no idea what you mean.’

The slaver dragged Belor towards her and leant close. ‘My boy Tet. He was one of the children you saved from Dyran,’ and the name was a slap. ‘Bastard must’ve thought I’d have the coin for the ransom, but I’d lost a ship full of cargo to storms, didn’t have so much as a copper. Tet was in Dyran’s cellar for seven weeks. The things that man did to my boy, to all of them...’

Syl swallowed hard. She knew exactly what that twisted fuck had done. It’s why she’d spent three days killing him.

The slaver was untying Belor’s hands. ‘Here, take him, he’s yours. Please, lady, with my thanks eternal.’

He shoved Belor in the back so that he stumbled forward and Syl took an instinctive step away, but the slaver pressed three silver coins into her hand and then retreated, still gushing like a severed artery.

Syl stared until he was gone, then looked at Belor. ‘Still here?’

Belor’s brow wrinkled. ‘I belong to you,’ he said.

'Oh good, a clever one,' she muttered. She shooed him away. 'Go on, silly bollocks. Fuck off.'

Belor shook his head. 'If I'm free, then I pledge you my, my, myself. I'll be your most loyal soldier.'

'Why?'

Belor frowned again. 'You're the Stoneheart,' he said, like that explained everything, and Syl couldn't help but feel a shiver of satisfaction.

'Well, I can't use you tonight, so you'll have to just fend for yourself. Meet me outside the Salty Dog at dawn.'

'I can be your lookout, or I'm handy with a blade, whatever you need. Surely you're not handling this alone?'

Syl's eyes narrowed and she put space between them again. 'Handling what, exactly?'

'No idea. But I can see three knives and I'm pretty sure there are more in your boots. That's a climbing rope, so you're on the sort of business you're famous for. And I'm offering my aid. That's all. You said you had no coin; if you're off to practice a little light burglary, I can definitely be of help. Something of a speciality of mine.'

Syl chewed her lip. 'A little light murder, actually.'

Belor's eyes lit up and he rubbed his hands together. 'Yeah? Who's the mark?'

'Sod off. I know nothing about you and, despite your romantic view of what it takes to get into a mercenary company, I'm not hiring you. Meet me at the Dog at dawn, and maybe I'll change my mind. Go.'

She didn't give him time to protest, slipping into the dispersing crowd and down an alley. Three left turns later convinced her she was alone, and she struck out in the true direction of her first mark, the woman Trix.

Now, with three silvers from the slaver and whatever she could nab on the way out after each job, plus whatever was left that Reba owed her after deductions for a week's worth of food, she'd have

enough to put Tallanest in her wake, preferably forever. She'd never have come back at all, it was up to her, but the ship had one destination and this was it.

Trix's guards were competent enough, but Syl had... experience of entering buildings unannounced. Not a skill she'd needed much when running with the Iron Blades, but something you never really forgot.

She slipped up the wall just left of Trix's gate and its guards to a low window, clung with toes and one hand while she worked the latch. Pausing with held breath and pricked ears, Syl waited for the cries of alarm, the barking of a dog. Silence.

Headfirst, knife clenched tight, squeezing sideways so she could get a leg through at the same time. It was a bedroom, and it was empty.

Light blazed as a hooded lamp was uncovered and a heavysset figure threw itself at Syl.

Shit. Not empty.

She caught the liquid gold glint of lamplight on a knife edge and ducked, stabbing with her left, grappling around a waist with her right. A gasp and the soft yield of flesh and muscle, and the knife came out and went back in, the right hand coming up to slap over the mouth, because Syl knew all about gut wounds and the screaming was going to start very, very soon.

The slap became a shove and the figure went over backwards, the heavy thud of impact no doubt alerting the rest of the house. Lamplight spilt over them as Syl straddled her opponent and she saw it was Trix herself.

'Ancel sends his regards,' Syl gasped and punched the knife into Trix's throat, sawed it sideways to open up the big vein, then pushed off her and back to the window as the sound of hurrying footsteps echoed along the corridor.

She flung the silken rope and grapnel upwards; it caught on the second attempt, which was fucking lucky because someone was pounding on Trix's bedroom

door. She swung out and began to climb as the lock splintered.

Too close, she thought as she rolled onto the roof and began to run. She had probably a minute before they followed her. She sprinted its length and threw herself off the other side at a very precise point, twisting as she jumped to grab the rope she'd hung the previous night.

She missed.

'Fu-' she began and a flailing fingertip caught a ledge in the brickwork. The finger snapped.

'-ck!' she finished when her other hand caught the rope and brought her headlong rush to a messy death into something resembling a controlled fall.

Her gloves were hot with friction by the time she hit the flagstones with enough force to twist an ankle. Which, because it was that sort of night, she did.

'Mother-shitting bastard,' she grunted with quiet venom. She dragged the rope sideways and yanked, and the knot came free. It hissed to the ground and she gathered it in swift loops. 'Ghost one,' she murmured, checked the gardens for sentries or dogs, and began to run.

The second murder was smooth as a bald man's head. Cannic was one of those idiots so blinded by wealth that he actually believed the stories he paid to have told about him, and, convinced that Tallanest's people, rich and poor, worshipped him, he walked openly through the streets with only six slave-guards as protection.

Didn't work. Syl used her throwing knives, one into the chest, the second in the notch between his collarbones. Reba would probably take their loss out of her payment, but it was quick and it was safe. Even before Cannic fell, she was a street away and still accelerating.

Two ghosts. And that one was so easy, Ancel himself could've managed it.

Syl slowed abruptly. *Ancel could've got anyone to do this. So could Reba. So why me? And why specify a particular order to the kills, when logically Cannic could've been first?*

Syl was intimately familiar with the stink of corruption, and something about this whole set up was rotten.

Set up. There's an interesting choice of words.

She stopped a mile from the final target's house. It was just past midnight, and this late in the year, she'd have cover of darkness for hours. She also had three silvers Reba didn't know about. One would get her a place on a slaver as crew, two would get her a berth as a passenger.

Endo, her third victim, was a good man according to everything she'd learnt in the past days of surveillance. Genuine ideas to improve the city, so of course Ancel wanted him dead. Might actually win otherwise.

A thought that was guaranteed to get her killed floated like a corpse to the front of her mind. *I could ghost Ancel.*

Syl might've escaped Tallanest but she was one of the lucky ones. If she was rigging the results anyway, why not do it properly? She squinted at her map, found Endo's house. Found Ancel's house.

No harm in just wandering past, she thought, humming under her breath.

The number of guards Ancel had was truly ridiculous, but the poison Syl had with her was a potent sedative if diluted enough. She spent half a silver on a jug of wine, poured in the poison and scurried up to the front gate with an offering for Governor Ancel and a petition that he would see her. The guards took the jug, of course they did, night watch was a bastard and if this little bitch thought a bribe that paltry would get her in to see the governor, then she was... they slept.

The Stoneheart slid through the gates and into the mansion, stole from room to room, stole from a couple of rooms, and found Ancel giving his lover an energetic seeing to.

It'd be rude to interrupt... fuck it.

No throwing knives left, so she snuffed the nearest candle and crept through the shadows, garrotte in her hands. The lover didn't know anything was amiss until the wire was cutting into Ancel's windpipe and hauling him back off the bed and her. Then she looked over her shoulder, face bleary with lust that rapidly slid into confusion and then fear.

She opened her mouth to scream. 'Don't,' Syl warned, 'or you're next.'

The woman screamed anyway, and Syl was too busy getting her knee between Ancel's shoulder blades to stop her. The wire was sharp, but she should've just gone for a knife – this was taking too long. Syl yanked the garrotte from side to side, sawing open the governor's throat until the rush of blood confirmed she'd finally hit an artery. She let him slump, bubbling, cocked an ear for guards, and then leapt for the woman and knocked her out.

Panting, coated in blood and not exactly incon-fucking-spicious, Syl scarpered back through the mansion, skipping over the groggy guards, and into the streets.

Three ghosts.

* * *

'Hello, Stoneheart.'

Syl yelped and spun, drawing a knife. Belor leant against the ship's rail, arms folded and a faint smile on his rugged face.

'How did you get on this ship?' Syl demanded. Three days they'd been at sea. She'd thought herself safe. Free.

'I boarded just after you, Stoneheart. I'm surprised you didn't see me, the way you kept looking back. Guilty, almost.'

'Just wondering if you'd follow,' Syl lied. 'Test of initiative.'

'The governor of Tallanest has a message for you.'

That stopped her. 'What governor?'

'Well, not Ancel of course. Nor Endo, sorry to say. I had to deal with *him* myself. No, it's Governor Reba, Lady Dagger herself, who'd like to... talk with you.' His folded arms parted and she saw the knife tucked along his forearm. 'Well, when I say talk, what I really mean is die.'

Syl scurried towards the ladder belowdecks and her weapons cache and four more men appeared. They wore smiles as sharp as their knives.

'I heard the Stoneheart never ran from a fight,' Belor said.

'You heard wrong.' Syl sprinted across the deck, her reputation be fucked. Belor's thrown knife opened the flesh of her upper arm and another man got a fistful of her shirt before she flung herself overboard and into the Patient Sea.

Belor was laughing when she surfaced. 'Swim hard, Stoneheart,' he called. 'You might even make it a few miles before the sharks get you.' **[GdM]**

Anna Stephens is the UK author of gritty epic fantasy, the Godblind Trilogy. Book 1, Godblind, is available in the UK and Commonwealth, North America, France and Germany. Book 2, Darksoul, is due for publication in 2018.

She is represented by Harry Illingworth in the UK and sub-agented by Cameron McClure in North America. Along with the territories mentioned above, further publishing deals have been struck in Poland, the Czech Republic and the Netherlands.

A literature graduate from the Open University, Anna loves all things speculative, from books to film to TV, including classic Hammer and Universal horror films, as well as the chameleon genius of David Bowie.

As a second Dan black belt in Shotokan Karate, she's no stranger to the feeling of being punched in the face, which is more help than you would expect when writing fight scenes.

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