



The Illuminata

Delving Deep Into The Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy

Where Have All The Movie-Writers Gone?

By Bret Funk

For some time now, I have lamented the decline of the motion picture. It seems that very few quality films come out of Hollywood anymore, especially in the Science Fiction and Fantasy genres. I'll admit that there may be some selection bias on my part: very bad old movies have most likely disappeared, or at the very least, are rarely played, and so I have subjected myself to the cream of history's crop. But that alone can't account for the deluge of poorly edited, badly acted, weakly scripted 'films' I've had the pleasure of watching these past few years. The worst part is that at the core of almost every SF film is a great idea. It just isn't developed properly or is underutilized to make more room for hyper-realistic special effects and overpaid actors who do a lousy job.

To be fair, a few movies have pleasantly surprised me (the under-promoted *Equilibrium*, for one), and there has been a mini-renaissance in the SF subgenre of comic book crossovers; but for the most part, SF movies have left me wanting something more. Or at least something better. They have also left me

wondering where all of Hollywood's innovative and creative writers have gone.

Apparently, they've gone to software companies. Of the last half dozen video games I've had the pleasure of playing, all but one had a plot superior to comparable films, and the sixth's plot wasn't worse, it just wasn't better. There was action, adventure, romance, deep characterization, surprise twists, surprise endings, complex puzzles, all the blood and gore I could want, a few police chases, a number of untimely and unfortunate deaths, a stint or two in prison (or a holding

cell, depending on the game), and actual dialogue instead of campy catch-phrases and melodramatic blabber. All of this without sacrificing great computer graphics and with major motion picture stars providing the voices (and sometimes even the faces). Moreover, I got to take a front row seat in the struggle of good vs. evil (or evil vs. good... or evil vs. evil...) and ultimately it was *my* heroism that saved the day or my bloodthirsty love of violence and revenge that brought my enemies to their knees.

So my options have become:

1) Spend \$9 per ticket (usually two or more tickets required) for two to three hours of 'entertainment' (and I use that term loosely). Arrive 45 minutes early so I can get a good seat for the commercials which play before the pre-feature commercials which play before the previews which come before the actual film. If I'm hungry, I can go to the concession stand where another \$10 will buy me a small drink and medium popcorn. Once the movie starts, I'll be lucky if there are only five people in the theatre who are using their cell phones, talking loudly to their friends, pinching their babies (how else can you explain screaming THAT loud), or accidentally spilling their drinks so that they run down the stadium seating in a colored waterfall and make everyone's shoes sticky.

2) Pay \$60 for a game (and occasionally buy a new computer to support that game) for 10-30 hrs of gameplay for RPGs and an unlimited number of hours of play for first person LAN or Internet based games. If I'm lucky, the game's good enough to play again or designed with multiple outcomes (with different choices creating a different ending). I don't have to watch a single commercial. If I'm hungry, I go to the kitchen. And the only people I have to worry about are my wife and son, who like for me to spend some time with them occasionally.

With those options, it's no wonder that video games are one of the fastest growing markets in the US, despite a piracy rate that is equal to if not greater than the one the MPAA suggests will make Hollywood go bankrupt. If they can deliver more for my money on a consistent basis and back their goods

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Over the past couple years I think I've been able to demonstrate that creating a Role-Playing Game and writing are pretty similar in the broader aspects. The same terminology applies to plot and character between the two, and a lot of the same constructions that go into one are in the other. The single most notable difference in the writing process for short stories and novels and that of RPGs comes from the author's understanding of his audience. There is an understanding that the author is writing for historical fiction fans, or speculative fiction fans, or biography fans, etc, and that once written he can only hope they like it. RPG's begin that way (you don't write a western story for Players who like medieval, chivalric quests <although Steven King may take exception to that>), but while an author writes for an audience that is there only to absorb, a GM must write for an audience that will interact. Because of that there are some interesting evolutions to standard dramatic devices in RPGs. One in particular is the McGuffin.

Popularized and used to great effect by Hitchcock, (though labeled "MacGuffin" by Angus McPhail) a McGuffin is defined as a thing, person, or event which exists only to affect some kind of outcome desired by the author. The McGuffin itself is usually very poorly defined or developed, because ultimately it is unimportant or unsubstantial to the plot or to the audience's enjoyment. McGuffins might be exceptionally important to the characters of the story, but the audience may not know why, and frankly they don't really need to in order to enjoy the story. Examples from popular films are the Maltese Falcon, Marcellus Wallace's briefcase in *Pulp Fiction*, and the event that orchestrated the setting of the Road Warrior movies: all are McGuffins. Individually they have no meaning or backstory. They are only there to do something for the plot, or in the last case, provide a setting for the characters.

A passive audience can accept the existence of a McGuffin because there usually isn't a cause for them to go snooping after McGuffins. They assume (rightly so) that by the end of the story, all of the important parts will have been explained. Should a person go looking for an explanation of Wallace's briefcase, he'll be disappointed. The case and its mysterious contents are never disclosed, or even hinted at except for a tiny visual clue that may or may not actually have anything to do with the case (I speak of the band-aid on Wallace's head). The suitcase exists only to get the hitmen into the apartment, where Jules undergoes a

life-changing event, and later on, the case is the focus of the interaction between Ringo and our recently reformed hitman. Without the briefcase, Jules never would have had a reason to go to the apartment, and he would not have had a reason to speak with Ringo at the diner. The case isn't important to the movie. It could have been anything from a goldfish to a piece of dry toast. What is important is that Marcellus wanted it, Jules had to deliver it, and it was something that can be carried around. As an audience we accept that, and we don't meddle or snoop. More on meddling and snooping a bit later.

McGuffins in RPGs are so spectacularly efficient at doing their job that a lot of times, Players won't look into them. If the McGuffin has done what it was created for, the Players should be busy advancing in the plot, and not so concerned with what got them going in the first place. They may wonder about how they got caught up in all of the adventure-ness, but by that time the device is so far removed from them that there is no chance of the PCs ever dissecting it. Examples of good RPG type McGuffins are rich old uncles who get killed or kidnapped leaving the PCs to discover what happened. These uncles never appear in the story, and it's likely the PCs don't have any clue as to who this person was in the first place. All that matters is that the uncle provides the impetus to investigate. Or, the PCs can be retained to recover the contents of a particular airport locker, but arrive to find that someone already has it. The contents of the locker don't matter, the chase and uncovering who stole it in the first place does. GMs who run games for older, more seasoned Players begin to hit snags in the application of McGuffins, and it's precisely because of the above mentioned snooping.

As a rule, an experienced RPG audience (Players) meddle and snoop with an often annoying ferocity. So it can be tricky for a GM to take advantage of McGuffins and not get burned by Players' dissatisfaction with the inevitable weak explanation of something that was not designed to be explained. How to use McGuffins when the Players will not take anything at face value any more is a tough thing. The GM in this position should be congratulated for creating a rampant amount of paranoia among his Players, but will ultimately suffer for it by having to go into greater detail with seemingly mundane things. With RPGs, the author must be prepared for the PCs to eventually lay their hands on everything. GMs relying on McGuffins to advance their plot may do themselves a favor and create a dash or

Special Effect Interview (Part 5)

by Terry Crotinger/montanasings

For several months, I've been investigating special effects, specifically animated effects. Anthony Mark Viverito, a veteran animator, has been my guide while I explore this staple of science fiction movies. Anthony's most recent work was with all three *Matrix* movies, though his name can be found listed in the credits on many other films. When I first spoke to him, he had just finished work on the third movie and said he was exhausted, too tired to even go to the wrap party for the film. As he spoke of what he would be doing until his next project, I realized that staring at a computer screen, manipulating bytes in minute ways may not be so easy. The end product is the reward, but in movies like *Matrix* and *King Kong*, getting there may not have been much fun. I used to say that the "Joy is in the journey". I may have to re-think that.

When I asked Anthony about his goals, he immediately said he wanted to make his own films, stories that had substance, not simply action. In short, he wanted to have his own production company and make films, "the old fashioned way."

"I want to make all kinds of films, like Ray Harryhausen. I want to make some with animation; like Mario Bava films, the Italian director who died in 1980. Bava started out as a cameraman; he did special effects and directed... he was multi-talented. He knew everything, every detail about making movies."

"He did it all, just like you did?" I asked.

"He did it all. He found ways to do things cheaply and knew how to get big results. Even Dino De Laurentis used Mario Bava because he could give them production value for very little investment. He was one of the most influential people in the Italian film industry. Mario Bava made *Diabolic*, for producer, Dino De Laurentis. *Diabolic* is based on a cartoon about a master criminal and two Italian sisters. He stole from the rich to keep it; he had a great hide away underground and cool cars. He was very hip, sinister. He dressed in black latex and only his eyes were showing. He looked like a bat. (It is a sister film to *Barbarella*.) A great movie, and he did it for very little money. Some of his effects are... and when you find out how he did the effects! Amazing.

"Bava did another movie, *Hercules and the Haunted World*. The ship they used, when you really look at it, is made out of *lasagna*. You don't notice it when you watch the movie, but when you see the texture, the exterior shots of the ship, it's convincing!"

"When miniatures are made, you put it in front of the camera and have people in the scene far away, farther back. It looks like a complete scene to the viewer. Let's say you

have a giant building in the foreground, and a space ship is in the scene. Using various focuses, it looks like the ship is very large. But these are actually very small miniatures!

"Mario Bava's son, Lumberto, has his own film company. But he just directs and writes, he doesn't do the effects like his father. I don't think he's as talented as his father. I shouldn't say that because I like Lumberto's movies, but I just think his father was a genius. Mario Bava was one of my other influences."

It was clear to me that Anthony had a passion for his art and was knowledgeable about others in the industry. I knew from many conversations that his work on the *Matrix* movies helped his career, but by the end, he was burned out. Many, many people assisted with the special effects in those movies. Anthony's time was spent on perfecting things like photo-realistic scenery—office chairs, bookcases, desks. For an artist, it was like painting the pedal of a rose for a huge movie screen-sized canvas of a queen's garden of flowers. Hundreds of animators took part in the films. How many ended up in the same shape Anthony was in?

So I knew Anthony, once recovered, was hoping to find fulfillment in personal projects. Those would include using his computer for only certain effects, not the entire film. "I don't want it to dominate what I do," he told me.

Finding those projects was his new focus. He was looking at direct-to-video release projects, since finding larger projects was more competitive. For each effect in *Matrix*, a team was assigned, so hundreds of animators are out looking for new projects to work on as well.

"Now, it's very hard for a small company or independent person to make a living. Hollywood pretty much has a monopoly on the movie theatres. It's hard to get *anything* shown theatrically, not with ten-dollar movie prices. People are expecting films that show a lot of production value. I guess that's why there is so much action in the movies. Producers feel they have to give the audience so much, even if the movie is not very good. Just give them enough production value in terms of stuff happening on the screen to justify spending the money."

Anthony and I spoke about his next projects. After a long, overdue vacation in Puerto Rico with his family, he started looking at the future of animators, his in particular. Where is Anthony now? What is he working on, and is it as satisfying as he would hope?

In the next issue of *Illuminata*, we'll touch on Anthony's future in animation and special effects. I'll also describe some of the typical techniques used in the E/FX industry, and maybe a few secrets!

The Writer's Block - A Death in the Family

by Charles Gramlich

Eventually, all writers start to lose their literary idols and influences. One of mine just died. He was Henry Kenneth Bulmer, a British writer who passed away at 12:30 AM on December 16, 2005 at the age of 84. Ken, as he preferred to be called, had been seriously disabled since a stroke in 1997, and yet, according to friends of mine who visited him, had maintained his dignity and sense of humor throughout the years. Ken's funeral was held in Tunbridge Wells, England on December 30, 2005. He is survived by his wife, Pamela, who he married in 1953, and by two daughters and a son.

Ken Bulmer was born in London in 1921 and became an early fan of science fiction. After a stint in the British Signal Corps during World War II, he returned home and began writing for and publishing SF fanzines. His first novel was a collaboration with another fan and was published in 1952 as *Space Treason*, but by 1954 he was writing independently and had turned pro. He wrote close to 170 novels and numerous short stories for British, American, and European markets. Many of his books were SF or fantasy, but many others weren't, and because he wrote under numerous pseudonyms and house names it's sometimes difficult to track down his work. Chances are you've read more than one of his books without knowing it.

Two of Bulmer's pseudonyms are of particular interest to fantasy fans. He wrote three excellent sword & sorcery novels under the name Manning Norvil, each of which got better than the one before. These featured a character named Odan: *The Half-God*, and are *Dream Chariots*, *Whetted Bronze*, and *Crown of the Sword God*. Ken also wrote fifty-two books and a novella in the Dray Prescott Sword & Planet series, which were modeled on the Martian books of Edgar Rice Burroughs. Many of the Prescott books were written under the name Alan Burt Akers, although the later ones were credited to Prescott himself, who was the hero of the series. Only the novella and thirty-seven of the Prescott books were published in English, all by DAW books. Despite the fact that they were written in English, the remaining books were printed only in Germany where there is a big Bulmer fan base.

Efforts are currently underway by fan groups to try and get the remaining Prescott books published in English, but money seems to be a sticking point with the heirs. Just recently, Mushroom Books (<http://www.mushroom-ebooks.com/>) has started republishing the early works in the series in electronic

format and are hoping to acquire the German-only ones as well. This will certainly depend on sales of their early releases.

Several of Bulmer's house names might also be of interest to fantasy fans. He wrote two novels as Neil Langholm for a series about a Viking hero, #2 *The Dark Return*, and #4 *Trail of Blood*. He also wrote two books in the Gladiator series—long before the Russell Crowe movie—under the name Andrew Quiller. These were #2 *The Land of Mist*, and #5 *Sea of Swords*. He ghost wrote two novels for Barry Sadler in the Casca series, *Panzer Soldier* and *The Mongol*, and he wrote several books in the "Slaves of the Empire" series under the name Dael Forest. These were set in Roman times and seemed designed to capitalize on the Gor phenomenon, although they were extremely mild by Gorean standards. I'm still trying to figure out exactly which ones Ken did in this series. Abebooks.com indicates that #2 through #5 were by him, but I'm not totally convinced.

Much of Ken's SF was written under the name Kenneth Bulmer, although he also wrote two decent fantasies under that name, *Kandar* and *The Diamond Contessa*. His SF would probably be defined mostly as space opera. Some of it certainly was, perhaps best exemplified by his "Ryder Hook" series under the pseudonym Tully Zetford, which were printed with the subhead "Star-Spanning Man of the Future." However, most of the SF works under Ken's own name contained generous doses of social commentary along with the adventure. Some were even social satires.

Bulmer's other pseudonyms included Frank Brandon, Rupert Clinton, Ernest Corley, Peter Green, Adam Hardy, Philip Kent, Bruno Krauss, Karl Maras, Chesman Scot, Nelson Sherwood, Richard Silver, H. Philip Stratford, and Ken Blake. Adam Hardy is probably the best known of these. Bulmer used it on fourteen books in the "Fox" series, about a kind of Horatio Hornblower character, and then wrote another six under that name in a series about the Falklands War. Many of the other pseudonyms were also used for series of war novels, but Ken Blake was a house name for some TV tie-in novels for the British series, *The Professionals*, a long-running crime show. Bulmer even wrote a western novel in the Jubal Cade series under the name Charles R. Pike. His was #11, *Brand of Revenge*.

Bulmer served as president of the first amateur press

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KeyCOMMENTary: Beam Me Up, Scotty

by garrie keyman

Prophecy, a Quantum Couch Potato, and The End of Time as We Know It

Prophecy? Mere fodder for fantasy – *right?* – one plot device amid many in any fiction writer’s toolbox. Indeed we may think so, but elsewhere prophecies loom as a far more serious matter with far more serious consequences than landing Caldecott metals or rating bargaining muscle with would-be producers. In some circles, prophecy is real: the *Where’s Waldo* of the religious right, wherein God has painted a picture in whose canvas the saving grace of precognition is hidden. If we can decipher messages couched in knotted language and unveil a cloaked *Waldo* in time, we’ll be spared.

Several years ago, before I understood man’s greatest fantasy is religion, one of the so-called “real-life” prophecies I was privy to went like this:

“Time, as we know it, will cease to exist in the year 2012.”

Scary stuff, eh? For several years this particular prophecy troubled me greatly, the plethora of end-time prophecies throughout the ages (all of which had proven to be wrong) notwithstanding. Back then my worry was mitigated only by the sure knowledge Y2K would bring about the cessation of time as we knew it *long* before 2012 rolled around.

By January 2nd I embraced atheism.

In the fresh light of my newly acquired enlightenment I revisited the prophecy that several years earlier had driven me to wear out four rosaries and take to spraying holy water around my house more often than Lysol and Pledge put together. That’s when I recalled one of the primary rules of prophecy is this: *“Above all else, be ye cryptic.”*

I read that in *Writing The Breakout Prophecy* by Donald Maass – *panic*; I think he was a cousin of Nostradamus.

What, then – I asked myself – could this terrifying prophecy *really* mean, if not to imply the end of time? After all, the prophecy does say, *“Time...will cease to exist in 2012,”* right? Visions of sugar plums were rapidly being replaced with notions of World War III and Armageddon. *That*, leastwise, was how the movers and shakers of my old religious circles were interpreting things. Funny, though: they were leaving out the most important part. Which part is that, you ask? Why, the very clearly stated part that *not* Time itself, rather *Time as we know it* would cease.

And how is it we know *Time*? We know it linearly: relentlessly forward in motion, irretrievable in its past.

So, what if it were not *Time*, itself, but our current *perception* of *Time*, which stands on the cusp of destruction? If *Time as we know it* ceases to exist, could it be because in 2012 humankind propels its first traveller beyond the speed of light, or through a wormhole, or from one laboratory chamber to another via molecular de- and re-composition ala *Star Trek*? Wouldn’t *Time as we know it* take on startling new meaning if travelling suddenly became not a matter of hours or days in a car or plane, but moments in a beam of light?

Our over-reliance on fossil fuels would be abolished, pollution reduced, global warming reversed. On a small scale, we’d be travelling through time, the starting pistol of breathtaking possibilities echoing in our ears: *It’s seven o’clock in Pennsylvania and you’ve still got plenty of time to make that five o’clock dinner date with the boss’s daughter. How? She’s a grad student at Berlkey, that’s how! Now, straighten that tie, splash on that aftershave and get on over to your local transport station to catch the Saturday Night Express beam to California. Oh, and don’t forget to stop by Marshall Fields in Chicago; she just loves those Frango Mints, dude.*

Meanwhile, patiently awaiting the year 2012 and the cessation of *Time as we know it*, I’ll just go right on enjoying that *current* mode of time travel already made possible courtesy the profitable advent of re-runs on DVD. On a single night my husband and I can travel to 1959 (*Bonanza*) by way of the 1970’s (*Starsky and Hutch*), and then beam on over to the 90’s to hang with Mr. Renaissance Man himself – that quantum-physicist-concert-pianist-judo-whiz-genious – Dr. Sam Becket (*Quantum Leap*).

I have, in fact, re-discovered an old friend in the TV re-run DVD craze: my long-lost youth. Hey, if *that* ain’t time travellin’, baby, *what is?* Even Santa got into the act, leaving my sooty stocking stuffed with the first two seasons of the ever-campy, ever-beloved show that introduced me to the speculative fiction genre I love best (space opera): *Lost In Space* (Okay, so I was *seven* when it premiered – give me a break! What about the grown-ups that actually *wrote* that tripe, eh? Laugh at them!). Oh, yes, it’s a regular sci-fi smorgasbord out there, these days, as I snarf up episodes of *Time Tunnel* from eBay and *SeaQuest*’s debut season at the mall.

Gee, golly, Dr. Smith, now if Alpha Control would only dig up those old episodes of that terrific ‘70’s show only *I* seem to recall – *Search* – then I could lounge on this couch with this remote control in my hand until... well... at least until *Time as we know it* ceases to exist!

Reviews

Pseudo-City

D. Harlan Wilson

June 2005, Raw Dog Screaming Press

ISBN: 19933293101

Review by Terry Crotinger

D. Harlan Wilson has written a colorful, quirky book of vignettes. They aren't short stories, and yet they are. It's not a novel, and I'm pretty sure of that one. What I'm unsure of is the plot. Pseudo-City is 224 pages of strange thoughts, words, ideas and some disturbing, though convincing, description of human nature. Or follicles. Again, I'm unsure.

Pseudo-City drips of iconoclast-ism (Wilson makes up words, I followed his example). The symbols and blasts on human nature bypass *South Park* and morph to *Twilight Zone*. I wonder; is this Wilson's personal commentary on culture? I had to have another opinion so I read a short chapter to my colleagues at the mental health clinic I work at—they agreed—this was more descriptive of what our clients report when they shoot up. So, based on this quasi-survey, I reflected on my readings in Pseudo-City.

From the viewpoint of Pseudo-City's (PC) inhabitants, human-like beings that walk, crawl, sometimes jet-pack to and fro, Pseudo-City's culture defies definition—yet, they must adhere to the LAW. PC's inhabitants are subjected to face slaps, backbiting, heads that explode, and no reason for their existence. Besides having unconventional punctuation, there is also little resemblance of a plot. If there is a "point" to Pseudo-City, I missed it. There are souls living in the bodies of actors, who are actually actors living in someone else's body but look like actors. They eat sandwiches. They have day-long meetings for the sole purpose of deciding what their meeting should be about the next day. PC people are paranoid, aggressive. They walk down the street and blow people's heads off. Few regard this and even fewer notice the person emerging from invisible trapdoors in the floor or the manhole covers who scoop up the remains and disappear

One piece focuses on a university professor who hugs his students because he loves them. After being told not to do that anymore, he goes back to being a normal professor who calmly takes out his gun and shoots a minimum of two students a day. Often the only offense is that the student doesn't know the answer or is just sitting in class. The purpose of this book still mystifies me because...

I belly-laughed through the first section, Pseudofolliculitis City, looking forward to an enjoyable poke at my own humanity. Thirty pages later, I was merely confused and amused, waiting for the punch line. By the end, I was disgusted with the content, wondering if I had wasted my time reading the entire book because there is no plot, no punch line, in short—no point. This book is not fantasy, horror or science fiction; it is, however, consistent with mental illness.

In all fairness, Mr. Wilson is published in several anthologies I generally respect, so I would read another of his works. Are they all this unique (subconscious thought: twisted)? I looked at Amazon.com's reviews of this book and found them to be almost favorable, but I could not agree. (Though, thank you Mr. Wilson for sending an autographed copy and asking for my opinion!) Innovated description and word pictures almost smother the point, but they are accurate—too accurate. The cover art intriguing... Whether imaginary or personal commentary, Pseudo-City is disturbing. Did I mention the inhabitants are hair follicles?

Beacons of Tomorrow

We're happy to announce that *Beacons of Tomorrow*, the anthology produced by Tyrannosaurus Press and the editorial staff of the *Illuminata*, is available for ordering. This anthology consists of thirteen stories spanning and length and breadth of SF, with something sure to please every reader. Ever-increasing-in-fame author Bret Funk calls it, "One of the best things I've seen come out of Tyrannosaurus Press!"

To order your own copy, please send a check or money order for \$10.00 per copy (20% off the cover price) + \$3.00 for shipping and handling to:

Tyrannosaurus Press
5624 Fairway Drive
Zachary, LA 70791

(Residents of LA, please add appropriate sales tax)

Remember, this anthology's purpose was to help new and/or unknown authors get some exposure for their work, and that will only happen if you help. If you're a fan of speculative fiction, for the price of four cups of coffee (at Starbucks rates), you can help sponsor an author in need. <Insert picture of sad-looking author here>. I couldn't turn my back on them, can you?

Reviews

The Dragon's Revenge

Irene Radford

Daw, Nov 2005

\$6.99, Mass market, 432 pp.

ISBN 0756403170

Review by Harriet Klausner

The three O'Hare brothers (Kim, Konner, and Loki) are wanted criminals by the Galactic Terran Empire and the Terran Imperial Military Police (IMP's) were chasing their ship when it went through an unknown jump-point and landed on a world where magic works and dragons exist. The brothers became known as the Stargods to the primitive humans because of their ability to cure a bioengineered plague. Kim and Konner married local women but their way of life is endangered when a group of IMPs land.

The O'Hare siblings disable their enemy's ship, forcing them to work with the natives if they want to survive. Their sister Kat, who wants to bring her brothers to justice for abandoning her twenty years ago, gets used to this strange world and when her protégées are in trouble, she saves them and destroys her own career with the IMP. Konner is determined to get off planet and find his son Martin who is with his mother, an amoral criminal. He doesn't realize Martin has escaped her control and is coming to him until they have to fight Hanassa, the dragon who has taken over the human body and mind of the leader of the IMPs; a being who hates dragons and humans so much that he plans to destroy the planet. Martin and the O'Hare siblings, including Kat, fight to stop him.

The third book in the Stargod series is just as exciting and action packed as the other two books in the series. The focus of this novel is on Kat who goes from hating her family to understanding how she got separated from them two decades ago. The planet she first thought strange now hold a place in her heart and if she has any say in the matter, she will one day retire there. The brothers feel like they have a new home on the planet and plan to keep "civilization" away. Irene Radford shows readers once again why her books are so popular.

The Silver Lake

Fiona Patton

Daw, Nov 2005

\$23.95, Hardcover, 400 pp.

ISBN 0756401852

Review by Harriet Klausner

The God-Wall protects the city of Anavatan, the Silver Lake known as Gol-Beyaz where the six Gods live, and twelve outlying villages. The power and richness of the city is a magnet to the barbarian tribes like the Yuruk who each year unsuccessfully try to breach the wall. The spirits (essences of prophecy) want form and to have that they need to drine from the lake and eat the people unsworn to any God; neither the tribes nor the spirits have managed to breach the wall except this year during theevent known as Havo's Dance.

During the second night of the event, the spirits attack teens Brax, his younger friend Spar, and the malevolent Graize. Brax calls on the God of Battle Estavia for help and she makes him and Spar her own. Graize wakes up spirit filled in the plains where he meets up with a Yuruk tribe who takes him in and prophecies that this year they will be able to breach the God walls because the spirits who want substance will help him. Brax becomes Estavia's champion and is destined to meet Graize in battle, while Spar is trying to find a place for himself without giving in to a seer that speaks to him telepathically and wants to use him in his plans for conquest.

The first book in *The Warriors of Estavia* is a fantastic fantasy filled with action, intrigue and refreshingly original and realistic characters. The bond between Brax and Spar is beautiful to behold and the pair change over the cycle of the book in a realistic manner as they are shown love combined with discipline. An expert world builder, Fiona Patton actually has her audience believing in Gods who commonly manifest themselves to their people in a physical form.

Original Fiction

Night of the Verogoth Demon by Erik Goodwyn

It was said the first thing men saw before it killed them was its tragic eyes, glowing with cruel blood. With burnt talons it would tear out and devour their hearts, leaving the rest to the scavengers. Then, as quick as shadow, it fled into the fog of the wooded night.

The last sighting had been in the lonely mountain village of Grimval, on the borders of the great accursed Londruin, kingdom to the north from whence the demon had come. Londruin, where men dared not tread—a forsaken and ruined kingdom that sprawled in crumbled grey past the north hills. There even the gods had decayed and were forgotten wraiths of their former selves.

Young Ress had journeyed with his father Kurlon Von Ruul, a night-hunter of strong limbs and a spectral frown who had vowed vengeance on the beast many years ago. He could barely remember the time when the hunt began, and with each passing year, each passing hill village and each passing dark wild-land, Ress saw his father's hard-faced obsession growing.

Kurlon came to Grimval as the autumn storms tore across the night terrain, on the heels of the beasts' rumored wake of death, and as always he took Ress to a local he had befriended. By midnight they had made it to the cabins on the gnarled slopes. Rumors abounded that one man had been killed already, his heart torn from his chest beneath a dead willow.

Ress had complained before—he was fourteen, now, and almost a man. When would his father let him join the hunt?

'To the God and Goddess I pray you never follow in my footsteps son,' he always replied.

'I remember, father.'

The storm had not abated by the time they arrived at Petrov's doorstep. The wizened furrier held his lantern toward the dripping oaks that swept into the darkness. Kurlon urged his son forward.

'Come on, young man,' said Petrov, 'your father told me all about you. You can hide with us tonight.'

'I am sorry I could not give you more notice, Petrov,' said Kurlon.

'You've done right enough by my thinking, Mr. Von Ruul, you just get to Emit's place and warn him . . . there's still a lot of people that don't know the danger.'

'How far is the sawyer from here?' asked Kurlon.

'It's mighty far—maybe you should stay with us.'

Kurlon scowled. 'If I do that, Petrov, more will die before the sun rises. There are still several hours left. We cannot risk it. I know the beast better than anyone—and I must go forth.' He gave his son a brisk hug, and Ress felt the pangs of fear again. He would need to tell himself a hundred times that his father would return before the terror would abate this time. Kurlon disappeared into the rainy wind.

Petrov patted Ress on the shoulder. 'Your father is a brave man,' he said as the furrier's wife and three small children watched the night with them.

'You don't know him,' said Ress. 'His courage is fueled by something deeper. Something that burns with hate for the beast that stalks this night.'

'Aye, I believe it,' said Petrov.

Together they stood on the edge of the doorstep. Rain pattered the eaves of the hut, bringing in the musty autumn. Suddenly a howl rose from the depths, like a yearning wolf, lashed with pain and bloodlust. It was far too close! 'Father,' Ress whispered, his heart leaping into his throat.

'Come on,' said Petrov, 'into the cellar! All of you!'

'No!' said Ress, 'father will never get to Emit's. The beast is out there, just beyond those trees! Can you not hear it?'

Petrov's thick arm pulled him back into the cabin. He looked Ress in the eyes. 'You've got to protect the women and children, young man. Your father is a skilled hunter. You should know that better than anyone.'

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Ress gathered himself and nodded. Petrov bolted the door and picked up an axe.

'That will not help,' said Ress. 'The axe, Petrov--mere steel cannot harm it.'

'What do you mean?'

'Only weapons of torgonite can pierce the beast's hide.'

His expression became grave. 'Hmf,' he grunted, 'just the same, I am keeping it.'

Understanding his feelings, Ress took the furrier's wife and children down into the cellar, where they waited. Time passed and the rain stopped. They expected another howl, but none came. The children were huddled around their mother—two older girls and a small boy. They were shaking.

'W-what is that creature out there?' asked the furrier's wife.

Ress crawled up to the trapdoor and sat on the topmost step. 'It is a living nightmare,' he said. 'Hailing from the dreaded lands to the north.'

'Londruin?' she asked, 'how is that possible? The elders have always said that Londruin was the land of the Dead—but the ghostly denizens could not brave the light of the outlying realms.'

'Your Elders know not all of the horrors the lie hidden beneath the veil of this world. My father has hunted this beast for many years, from one small hamlet to another throughout these realms. It is wise and cruel—cunning beyond any prey known.'

Just then Ress thought he heard a snort over the wind outside. Petrov shifted about upstairs, the lantern light flickering in through the slats of the trapdoor. Ress gripped the iron handle—nothing was going to come down those stairs without a fight!

Then the light went out—the children gasped at the sudden pitch darkness. Had Petrov done that on purpose? Ress pressed his ear to the damp wood, focusing furiously on anything but the grasping terrors the sudden darkness invoked. But it was far worse, for he knew the Verogoth was near, and it heeded not the shadow.

The only sounds were the howling wind and Petrov's ragged breathing. He strained until the blood pounding in his ears thundered like drums. But where was the beast?

Bam! Something hit the door. Petrov's wife gasped, and Ress surmised she had covered the mouth of one of the children to keep them from screaming. The girls were shushing each other softly. Ress redoubled his grip on the handle.

There was scuffling above, and Ress thought he heard the footsteps of the furrier, but then there arose a decrepit hiss, like the boiling of rain on hot iron. Ress could no longer hear Petrov's breathing—dreadful silence filled the void. Ress instinctively gripped the Sylmaran Sunsymbol beneath his tunic. He was safe, he told himself over and over.

Never had the demon been so close. Part of him wanted to peek out from under the door—just see a silhouette perhaps in the moonlight! Just a peek, he thought, a brief glimpse, to satisfy the curiosity that warred with his fear. But he put the thought out of his mind—Sunsymbol or no, he did not wish to see it. Just then he heard a voice.

But it was not Petrov's.

'Where are they?' it said, 'do I smell the hearts of more?'

The voice drew all warmth from Ress's blood.

The creature hissed again, then seemed to be sniffing, but Ress could not tell from where. Suddenly the creature let out a sickening gurgle, and there was a thump. Dust came down from the door.

Several moments passed in silence. The rain picked up again, and distant thunder rumbled. Ress could hear the muffled whimpering of the children over the wind outside . . . it seemed the demon had gone. Perhaps the Sunsymbol had protected them.

They did not move for many agonizing moments, and seconds passed as if hours. Darkness and fear descended upon them like cold mist. If the creature was still up there, Ress knew it might lurk quietly in the

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shadows and await their emergence from the cellar. How long would they have to wait down there before knowing it was safe? Until dawn, thought Ress—that would be the only way to know for sure.

Still they waited, afraid to call for Petrov, for fear of revealing their hiding place. But Ress had a bad feeling about it. For if the beast was gone, Petrov would surely have told them. But there was no sound save the storm. Finally torchlight came down through the slats again.

'Ress!' his father called, 'are you down there?'

Tearfully relieved, Ress burst upstairs into his father's arms. At last he had returned! They were safe again. Kurlon held him close for several moments, but he seemed stiffened for some reason. Something was wrong. Ress looked down and noticed his father's boot was stained with blood.

'Kurlon, are you hurt?' asked Petrov, climbing out from under a trestle table.

'No, but I fear I was too late.'

'What do you mean?' asked Ress.

'I found another dead out by the high pastures, just north of here.'

A sinking feeling descended upon Ress's heart, and he looked at the furrier's wife. She was ashen. 'Hurry, children,' she whispered suddenly, herding them out the front door amidst questions.

Ress turned and his father walked solemnly to Petrov.

'That's Hedford the swineherd's little brother,' said the furrier. 'He loved him.'

'It has to stop,' whispered Kurlon, peering into the darkness. 'It must stop!' repeated Kurlon, pounding the door frame. Ress went to him, knowing if he didn't, his father would only get worse. 'There is no word to describe my hatred for that accursed beast,' said Kurlon, his brow narrowed.

'Come, father,' said Ress, 'there are others who need us. There will be time for hatred later. We must bury the swineherd's young brother.'

But Kurlon's chin was quivering. Ress knew. His father's hatred was turning inward. He had failed again. 'Father!' he said, turning Kurlon to him, 'the wife, and the children. Please.'

Suddenly it passed from his father's expression, and he nodded. Standing tall again, he placed his torch in a sconce on the wall. 'Anon, Ress,' he said, joining Petrov's family. They were rocking back and forth together, the mother kissing the heads of the children.

Ress scanned the darkness for any sign of the demon.

'You must get inside ma'am,' said Kurlon, 'it is still not safe.'

'I don't know what drives you, Mr. Von Ruul,' she said, 'you are a very brave man.'

'I have but one driving passion now,' he said, 'since the eight years since the demon took my wife from me. That is why I have sworn vengeance upon it these long years.'

Petrov's wife stared at him for several moments, then took her children inside.

Dawn eventually came, and word had spread throughout the hillside community of the dark events that had come to pass. Kurlon wasted no time summoning as many as could come to the clearing before the great hall. All the men and their families were gathered in a circle near the well. By midday they were all there.

Ress was sitting on a stump outside the circle as Kurlon paced the center.

'We cannot simply comb the night for it as a large group,' he said to one of the mountain men, 'it would be of no avail to you. The Verogoth is not a quarry you can simply round up with axes and pitchforks. At night, when it comes forth to feed, are its powers in full, and mere steel cannot harm it.'

'If what you say is true, it is neither beast nor man,' said a grizzled woodsman.

'Aye.'

'Then what is it?' asked another.

'Something in between. Years ago I happened upon the mysterious hermit of the Vanave forest, and he told me many things of the Verogoth. It has the blood of a man, but it is also a creation of dark sorcery. For it was summoned from a long dead warlock—a member of an accursed bloodline of men who dabbled

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in strange paths of witchcraft. The Verogoth is doomed to a half-life of bloodlust—it must feed upon the hearts of men, or perish. Like a hungry wolf it prowls, its blood igniting like in the night, when its vile magic comes to the fore.'

'Just how long have you been hunting this creature?' asked a sneering man, reddened with grief. It was the swineherd named Hedford, whose brother had been killed the night before.

Kurlon turned slowly to the man. 'I have tracked the beast for nearly nine years.'

'And you've not caught it yet?'

'Do not speak of things you know little of.'

Hedford spat. 'What is so tough about tracking this thing and killing it in its lair?'

'Have you not been listening? It is not some wild dog—or a wounded panther slinking off to a cave. The Verogoth is unnatural and wholly evil. Its wolf-like arms and a blooded maw remain unharmed by steel by night. And most treacherous of all . . . it can assume the form of a man. Any man it wishes. This is how it escapes detection by day. It can take the form of small children, nobles, even women. It is therefore impossible to track. And it has the cunning of the tiger. Only during the day is it vulnerable to your weapons, and in this time is when it hides among people like you, often walking about with none the wiser.'

A silence fell upon them. Ress had heard this tale before, and with each telling Kurlon had become more urgent. More desperate. He looked upon his father's wearied brow. Many lines had appeared there since they began this journey. But as he matured he often wondered what drove his father. His vengeful hatred seemed to know no bounds. It was as if he were bound to the Verogoth by it. No longer did his father appear the towering god to his young eyes. Gradually he was beginning to see the oddities of his father's obsession, and it made him wonder.

Nonetheless, he felt also the desire to join him on the night hunt. He was stronger and faster than ever. He even had one of his father's torgonite swords—the only two he had knowledge of. They could pierce the demon's hide, for they were enchanted blades. He could kill the beast as easily as his father could! Why did he not let him join in the hunt?

'What do you suggest then, Von Ruul?' asked a woodsman.

'All you can do is hide and barricade your house as best you can by night, and keep your wits about you by day. Have there been any strangers about lately? Newcomers to the area? Or perhaps anyone not acting like himself? These you must watch with vigilance, for it could be the Verogoth in human guise.'

'Like you?' said Hedford, planting himself before Kurlon.

'Do not be preposterous,' he replied. 'If I were the demon would I be standing here telling you its weaknesses?'

'Perhaps too cunning by half,' said the swineherd, his nose nearly touching Kurlon's. 'What say you?'

There was a murmur among the families.

Ress glanced at Kurlon, whose veins were pulsing in his temples. The tension was chilling the air like northerly winds.

'Come, Hedford,' said Petrov, pulling the swineherd away and trying to reassure him of Kurlon's innocence.

'Where's Emit the sawyer?' asked someone.

'He's been holed up in his house for days,' said another. 'No one's seen nor heard of him—some said he was sick, but what if he isn't? What if the demon's killed him and taken his place?'

'What about the traveling peddler, Zurin?'

'That silly gimp?'

'Do not be fooled,' warned Kurlon in a soft voice. The sudden change in tone caused Ress to study his father's face carefully. He seemed somehow relieved that Hedford had relented his accusation and was fuming with Petrov in a corner of the clearing. 'The demon can assume any guise,' he continued. 'It can

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even meld its clothing into its form. It may assume the form of a frail old woman if need warrants. Be vigilant.'

The villagers were stirring even more now. Hedford tore himself away from Petrov.

'That's it,' he said, 'I am going up to Emit's to see what he is up to. Someone is going to pay for my brother's murder! Who is with me?' Several men arose in agreement. Rugged faces steeled their brows. Men grabbed their tools and weapons. Hatred and fear spread.

'I'm going after that trinket peddler!' said a trapper. 'I knew there was something I didn't like about that one!'

There were some protests at the sudden uproar.

'But Emit *has* fallen ill,' said one woman, 'he's no demon.'

'The peddler's been visiting us for years,' complained another.

'Were not going to hurt them,' said Hedford, 'at least not right away!'

Something about all this struck Ress as being odd. Kurlon stood brooding in silence as the two groups of impulsive men were gathering and heading off into the forest. Ress watched his father closely. He did not stop them, but for the first time Ress wondered if perhaps he should. It had happened before that innocents suffered because of these hunts. His father had always said it is to be blamed on the demon. If it led to the Verogoth's demise, the end would justify the means. And despite the ugliness, Ress reasoned, it might be the only way to smoke out the demon from its current hiding place. Perhaps this time, Ress thought, they may actually have a good chance of revealing the creature.

'Bring them to me,' said Kurlon, 'there are ways to prove their innocence.'

The men agreed before marching off while there was still daylight.

Hours passed, and the sunset was looming. The impetuous Hedford and his followers had succeeded in rounding up Emit and Zurin, without much difficulty, and with only slight reservations among them they handed the two men over to them. Kurlon looked at them grimly, and told Hedford to gather everyone in the great hall and leave Emit and Zurin with him. Hedford eyed Ress suspiciously and then headed up the hillside toward the well clearing.

As the sunlight waned, Ress looked at the churning sky as he and his father prepared a trap for the demon at the mouth of a great cave in the deep woods. A trap involving Emit the sawyer, and Zurin the peddler. Kurlon had roped them to a post outside the misty cave, bruised and forlorn. Kurlon and Ress had ignored the pleas of the poor men for quite a while, as now the full moon was rising against the sunset and scattered rains could be heard throughout the woods.

Kurlon was slumped forward on a rock just inside the wood line beyond the clearing where the men were bound. As always before a confrontation with the beast, the affliction had struck him. He leaned against a tree, sweat upon his haggard brow, pallid with nausea. He gripped his stomach.

Ress patted his father's forehead with a cloth.

'Thank you son,' he said, 'as always you are a good son. It seems my years of vengeful hunting are weighing upon my nerves.'

'Thank you, father. Do you think you will get it this time?'

For the first time since he could remember, Kurlon did not answer right away. 'Honestly, my son, I don't know. The hatred I have for the beast has only grown in all this time since your mother died. After so many years of fruitless hunting . . . I feel that accursed thing may get the better of me. This time, I hope, will be different.'

'Then mother will be able to rest in peace.'

He nodded. 'Yes, she may at that. Gods bless her soul. No one could infuriate me like she could,' he said staring at the ground distantly, 'but I loved her nonetheless. More than any before or after. Any.'

'So did I, father, that which I remember of her.'

'She did not deserve to die,' said Kurlon. 'None deserves what she endured.'

There was an awkward pause.

'Father?' asked Ress.

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Kurlon snapped out of the trancelike state he had been in. 'Hm? Yes?'

'If you do kill it, will we return home then?'

'Home . . .' he said, wincing as the stomach pains returned, 'can we ever go home?'

'I would like to. Remember the house high in the Ulisov mountains? We could go home and live in peace. I would very much like to do that with you. Just the two of us. We could fish at Evigen's lake, and take up goat herding, just as you said you always wanted.'

Kurlon managed a smile. It seemed alien to his face. He stroked his son's cheek. 'That does sound good, my son. I hope we can achieve that when our task is done.'

'Father,' said Ress, mustering his courage.

'Yes?'

'Can we make this the last night? For good or ill—whether we catch it or not. Let us go home after tonight.'

Kurlon was not used to Ress speaking so plainly to him. His face darkened, and he stood, apparently besting the nerves and sickness. 'I have sworn a vow, son. The beast must die. And I will be its slayer. I would not wish this fate upon another, and if I do not kill it, next time you may be the one faced with a home threatened. I do not want you to walk in my footsteps. The Verogoth will walk the Earth until it is slain. It's blood fever will not abate until it is stopped once and for all.'

'But—'

'Silence. That is final. Take this,' he said, handing him the horn he was to take to the great hall where the men hid with their families. 'Tonight the Verogoth will come again, to feed on the sawyer and the peddler . . . unless one of them is the demon. Either way I will face it!'

Ress took the horn. 'Yes, sir,' he said, turning hesitantly.

He emerged from the trees as his father prepared his crossbow of torgonite-tipped bolts, and unsheathed his enchanted sword. With a skilled step, Kurlon crept into the thicket and blended into the surroundings, becoming nearly invisible. Ress walked past the two hapless villagers.

'Boy!' cried the unkempt and ill-appearing sawyer Emit, 'please, untie us!' he said as he flexed his muscles against the ropes.

'Please, sir,' said the long-haired peddler in a strange accent, 'we are innocent! We have been accused unjustly. Have you no mercy?'

Ress kept walking, trying to ignore them.

'Boy, please,' said Emit, 'we are not demons—the real beast is out there. It is coming for us, and we are helpless, please, have mercy upon us.'

Ress turned. Something about this wasn't right. Emotions churned within him as the thunder rolled. He knew his father was watching him from the forest's edge, and he could feel Kurlon's anger, though he could not see him. And yet—he glanced at the pitiful peddler, and the desperate sawyer. Which one of them was the demon impersonating? There was nothing in their eyes to suggest either of them was the creature. But then again, Kurlon had told him that stranger disguises had the beast used before. Just then in the back of his mind Ress wondered just how his father had known so much about the Verogoth. A wizard had told him, so he had said. But now... Ress was not so sure. He looked at the two pitiful captives.

If they were not the monster, then that meant the Verogoth still lurked somewhere in the wilds, waiting to strike them down. It was swift and cunning—it may kill these men, and they were innocent.

'Please,' begged the peddler, virtually in tears, 'free us, young man, I beseech you.'

Suddenly Ress saw the shrubs part, and his father's hard face slowly appeared from within. He indicated in no uncertain terms to get moving. Ress cast an uncertain glance at the two helpless men and ran for the great hall, and both the prisoners cried out for him to come back, the peddler shrieking, the sawyer angrily wrestling with the ropes.

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Ress made haste up the slopes through the trees. He had to make haste—the two Mytherian suns had nearly set. Finally he made it to the hall, out of breath. He entered and joined the families gathered there around the burning hearth.

The air was uneasy. Eyes glanced here and there, and women clutched their children close, while the men stood with grim faces and crossed arms by their families.

Hedford the swineherd strode forth. 'What news, boy? What is Von Ruul's plan?'

He showed them the horn. 'If the beast comes, we shall sound the horn and he will come to our aid. He is the only one with weapons that can harm the Verogoth. He will come for us.'

'But what of Emit and Zurin?' asked a sympathetic young woman, 'what if they are innocent?'

'What if they're not?' asked Hedford.

'That is why they are being used as bait,' explained Ress. 'When the sunset falls, the demon will not be vulnerable to steel weapons. My father will watch and wait for the beast. If it comes, he will ambush and slay it! If it does not . . .'

'Then that means one of Emit or Zurin is really the Verogoth in disguise,' said Hedford.

'Yes,' said Ress.

'How will he know which one it is?' asked the woman.

Ress searched for the right words to describe the rather grim, but effective, way his father planned to do that. The pause was enough for the swineherd.

'He'll run them through with a steel blade before the suns rise,' he sneered. 'If it kills them, they are innocent. If not, he will use the ensorcelled blade.'

Gasps arose at this.

'Hmf,' said Hedford, 'well? It is the only way to ensure our safety! I do not regret it.'

'It is horrible,' said a young woman. 'And it will not work.'

'Let him alone, woman,' said the swineherd, 'why, have you forgotten already? How many more must die before we decide half measures are not enough? I agree with Von Ruul. Besides . . . if the beast can disguise itself . . . it could be anywhere. Indeed it could be in this room right now.'

Silence suddenly fell upon the families in the hall. Ress glanced at Hedford. He had a point. He knew as Kurlon did, that it was just such a thing the Verogoth would be capable of. It would not have been the first time it had outwitted his father. Kurlon had told him of many such narrow escapes and double-crosses the beast had gotten away with. Ress walked among them, gazing into their eyes. Some looked away. Others stared hard back at him.

No one talked for a while after that. Ress settled into a corner of the hall and watched as uneasiness crept into the room like a sinister fog. Time crept by, and suspicion was mounting: glances were cast among them, and families began stirring in disquietude as night fell. Finally the darkness came, and the rain began.

'Well if no one's going to say it, I will,' said Hedford suddenly standing. 'We're all asking ourselves the same question . . . if Von Ruul has the wrong men, then that means the demon *is* in this very hall tonight.'

Ress regarded him intently, wondering where he was going with this.

The swineherd began looking accusingly at the men. Then the women—even the children were not above his suspicion. Perhaps he was right, Ress thought. He began to watch the expressions of those so accused. Then a sneaky wariness dawned on the young man. What if it was Hedford? He inched his hand toward the enchanted sword under his coat. One false move, he thought.

But could he do it? Did he have the courage to kill?

'What?' asked Hedford, noticing the others staring at Ress. 'Eh, what's this? Why of course . . . why did not I think of it? What if it is you!'

'Me?' asked Ress, incredulously. Thunder growled from the night and rain drops began to fall. 'Don't be ridiculous. My father would have killed me already.'

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'Ridiculous, he says,' spat the swineherd, 'we'll just see about it. Perhaps he would, and perhaps he wouldn't, kill his own son.' He grabbed a spear from behind one of the wooden beams, as murmurs arose among the families. 'What if I test this on your hide? If it guts you, you're innocent. If not . . .'

Suddenly Ress felt anger well up within him. He stood and faced the swineherd squarely. 'Aye,' said Ress, 'then what? If I'm the demon and you fail to prick my skin with that, what then? I have the horn. You will all be at my mercy. My father will not come.'

Hedford scowled, his eyes virtually pulsing with anger. He put the tip at his chest anyway. Ress failed to suppress a gulp. Tense moments passed. Finally he lifted up the horn. 'Here,' he said, 'to prove my good faith. There's no need for this madness. Take the horn as a token of my innocence!'

Hedford snatched it out of his hands as several other men joined him, their suspicious eyes upon him. Ress stood fast, however, his every sinew tense with a fear he refused to let get the best of him. He glanced through the approaching men at the on looking families. He knew the woodsmen and trappers were only doing what they felt was necessary, but things were getting completely out of hand. Hedford inched the spear closer. Petrov was muscling his way toward them.

'Hedford!' he shouted, 'don't do it, you've got the wrong man . . . listen to reason!'

Hedford glanced at Petrov, the desperation rising in the swineherd's quivering jaw. 'Someone has to pay for my brother's life,' he said, his eyes wild, 'that Von Ruul brought the demon down on us! A life paid for a life taken!'

'Hedford!' yelled Petrov.

Ress was nearly trembling, but something inside told him Hedford would not actually do it. He simply knew it.

He was wrong.

Hedford plunged forward with a crazed yell, piercing the boy's chest before Petrov could stop him. Ress was stunned. He looked around at the horrified faces staring back at him and the swineherd withdrew the spear and backed away, agape with horror at what he had done. His gaze slowly ascended to the bloody tip, and he cast the weapon aside as if it burned him.

All color was fading from the world before Ress, and everything seemed unreal now. Curious, he thought, unable to speak the words. It does not even hurt. He took in a labored wheeze, and staggered back into the wall, clutching his bloodied tunic. Shaking, he stared down at his drenched palm . . . then collapsed in a corner.

Dead.

Petrov rushed to his side, but it was too late. 'Hedford you fool!' he rasped, 'what have you done?'

Far down the slope Kurlon heard horn calling across the dark forest from the great hall. His heart leapt, and he charged from his hiding place past the captives and up the mountainside. He scrambled through the pines into the hollow, running across a shallow creek bed and climbing a short bluff before hearing another sound—the gruesome howl of the demon. But it was behind him. A chill flew up his spine. The villagers had called for help with the horn. But the demon was clearly behind him. What was happening? He froze in place, gripped by indecision. Perhaps the past was finally catching up with him, he thought darkly.

He gnashed his teeth and peered back through the numb columns of the forest into the cave clearing.

Emit's body was torn and bloodied at the foot of the post. Zurin's bonds were torn. It had been the crippled peddler this time. And it would escape again unless he started after it now. But why had the villagers sounded the horn?

In a cruel and empty corner of his soul, he knew he had to go to the great hall. Something had happened. He had to go. So he did.

And when he arrived, he looked on in disbelief at Petrov, rocking back and forth amid the cold silence, holding the body of his son. No, he thought, it . . . it could not be. The sky rumbled from somewhere, the night clouds battling indifferently far above them all.

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Kurlon was stunned. And a part of him was breaking inside. For he saw Ressa not from the dripping doorway before the ashen faced women, and the down-looking men, or the crumpled form of Hedford, driven mad with grief and shame. He saw them as if from a great distance. Nothing was real, and all feeling left him. He drew his blade, making Hedford cringe, and the men draw back, shielding their wives and children.

But Kurlon did not enter. Drained of soul, he turned toward the night. He could not bear to look upon his son now. Not again, could he stand the horror that lurked below the emptiness within his heart. The loathing.

The guilt at what he had done so long ago welled within his heart.

He walked steadily into the darkness, and within a matter of moments he realized he was not alone. With every footstep he heard the snapping of twigs and the rustling of thickets in the darkness approaching him. The beast was stalking him just out of sight. But he could hear it panting, as a circling wolf. Kurlon stopped in a small rocky clearing where the diffuse moonlight pierced the rain.

And finally out of the shadows came the Verogoth demon.

It stooped with long black arms, and a pelt that looked as if scorched by hellfire, and beneath the long black hair were the eyes—petrifying slits of crimson, curdling the blood with their sheer lust for death. Its fanged maw dripped gore, smiling at its new prey. Now it stalked forward, poised viper-like, with steady and hypnotic movements. As the demon closed in, its steely sinews like ropes upon the black muscle, it gurgled hideously.

'At last you have me,' said the demon, *'but what is that I sense in you, Kurlon Von Ruul? I no longer smell your hatred.'*

'My hatred and obsession have been my curse for long enough,' he replied, tossing aside his crossbow.

The Verogoth and he circled each other in the moonlit waves of rain.

'You cannot kill me,' it said, *'can it be that have you finally realized this? Oh, so long have you tried.'*

'Far too long. And I can take no more of it. The people I have sworn to protect have turned upon me. They have killed my son,' he said, the words bulging in his throat unexpectedly. *'My quest for vengeance has ended in the ruination of my life.'*

'Is that regret I sense? What a horrid fate, indeed, Kurlon. To have lost your wife, then your child. And so many years of searching ended in failure.'

'Taunt me no longer. I have reached the end.'

The Verogoth neared Kurlon, grinning drool. *'Will you not seek to strike me down then with your ensorcelled blade?'*

Kurlon looked up the hill at the gloomy lights emanating from the great hall.

'No,' he said. *'I will do now what I should have done long ago.'* Then he turned the sword upon its hilt and planted it in the ground, then turned his back upon the demon.

And as he knew it would, the demon charged into him from behind. Daggerlike talons pierced him, and he fell forward into the mud. He would have cried out in pain, had he not already relinquished all claim upon his life.

The Verogoth then turned him around and towered over him, the unholy red of its eyes enshrouded by the darkness of its silhouette. It then raised its bloody claw.

'And now shall I slay you . . . Master. Will you beg for your life?'

Kurlon shook his head weakly. *'I am no longer your master,'* he rasped.

'You shall always be my master. It is in your blood. When you summoned me to kill your unfaithful wife, Von Ruul, you knew you could not take it back. And now see what your rash deeds and vengeful quest have borne.'

And in the haze that arose from the corners of the world now, Kurlon could see the truth of the demon's words. He could escape it no more.

Kurlon's last thoughts were of bitterest regret.

RPG Corner (con't)

two of plausibility around them, just in case the PCs won't swallow it unseasoned. While this added detail means that you don't really have a true McGuffin anymore, it will also save you the headache and frankly embarrassing look of a deer in the headlights when the PCs start asking careful and deliberate questions about something you barely spent two seconds thinking up. Remember that Players don't have any idea what is important and what isn't when they encounter something in your games. This goes doubly so for PCs who are into immersive games and enjoy tinkering with things, and for PCs that have already been burned by dismissing the wrong plot device.

Still, McGuffins are extremely useful in another way for GameMasters that an author can never know. A GM who creates and uses a McGuffin with barely a second thought will sometimes be surprised when the Players begin creating a history and back-story for the device on their own. I have often seen PCs begin creating histories and details for McGuffins in an attempt to reason or puzzle out how the McGuffin ties into the larger plot. Occasionally they will come up with something so creative or simple that the GM can secretly decide that the Player's created background is perfect for the device, and adopt that explanation or connection to the plot, or take the McGuffin and continue to expand upon it using the PCs suppositions as a base from which to proceed. While some GMs may take all of the credit, when a PC adopts a McGuffin and places meaning and purpose beyond its original mandate into it, I will fess up and congratulate the Player. It might take some of the mystique behind the game away, but it also rewards the Player for his creativity, and reinforces the concept that the Player has a large contribution to the story as a whole. The PCs (at least in my games) have many opportunities to contribute to the story, and the McGuffin is one of the secret ways. By the time you've been running a game for several years without a break, having the PCs do some of the thinking and grunt-work can be a welcome relief.

To insult someone we call him "bestial." For deliberate cruelty and nature, "human" might be the greater insult.

— Issac Asimov

Writer's Block (con't)

association in Great Britain and remained active in SF/Fantasy fandom throughout much of his life. He was definitely a fan's writer and happily attended cons where he was a popular draw. In 1974 he was made a lifetime member of the British SF Association, a well deserved honor.

How good of a writer was Kenneth Bulmer? Well, I've come to realize over the years the truth of the saying, "one man's trash is another man's treasure." I have friends who consider Bulmer a hack. I can't agree. I tend to like his fantasy and historical work quite a bit more than his SF, but some of his fantasies are truly excellent. His Dray Prescott series was also an influence on my own Sword & Planet writing, although he had little affect on my horror and SF work. And I'm certainly not the only one Bulmer has influenced. I personally know at least six writers from Europe and America who have written pastiches of the Prescott series.

I'll not make the claim here that Bulmer was a great writer in the sense of transcending his subject matter. I do know that I like him enough to systematically collect his work, and I think of him as a solid professional who consistently turned out interesting and imaginative stories. He even had a good dose of poetry in his soul, and he never forgot his roots among the fans.

For more about Bulmer, see his entry on Wikipedia, which lists most of his works. There's also a yahoo group dedicated to him. It's called Kregen (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Kregen/>), and I'm a member of it. Kregen was the name of the world where Bulmer's most famous character, Dray Prescott, had his adventures.

Movie-Writers (con't)

up with a quality unmatched by all but the best feature films, they get a tip of my hat and access to my wallet. If they can afford to pay their writers more because they don't have to shell out hundreds of millions of dollars to pay for their six main characters (in fact, their main character is the one coughing up \$60 for the right to play!) and their special effects continue to improve at their current rate, then they might be on track to create a new industry of interactive cinema. The day they do is the day Hollywood dies.

Next month, we will use a case study to emphasize the point made in this article, comparing LucasArts' three latest video game releases to Lucas' prequel episodes of the *Star Wars* saga.