

Doug Bell returns as the ...

Unreliable Narrator



#1 - Ugly Children Slight Return

May 8, 2012

Now

20.24 The computer screen is blank. I want to write but nothing is coming.

20.25 I realise that there are only 35 minutes left till the weekly-ish *Old Jock Radio* show. I check the internet to make sure Les Bell is broadcasting tonight from sleepy downtown Arbroath. He is, I am in luck. This does not get me anywhere nearer having anything written, but it does brighten up my evening.

20.26 I decide to go and make a cup of tea, that'll surely get my mind kick-started.

20.31 I return from the kitchen and settle back down on our saggy sofa.

20.32 Still nothing.

20.33 Nope.

20.35 I pick up a discarded copy of *All-Star Western* - Jonah Hex looks mighty handsome on the cover. I flick lazily through the pages before feeling guilty. I drop the comic. It falls again into a discarded state.

2.36 A car drives past. I peer out the window, and am soon distracted by the dancing cranes down in the docks; someone is on over-time tonight. At least they're working.

20.42 A heavy downpour starts, continuing the weather theme of thundery showers that have plagued us all day. I'm thankful I'm inside and warm.

20.51 Still nothing coming through. I consider putting the PS3 on and escaping to the magical far-away land of *Skyrim*.

20.59 Web browser at the ready my Mac starts pouring forth random punk rock music, ill-informed opinion and my weekly bout of swearing from the Scottish provinces. I should really give up, as nothing can make me escape the excitement of the *Old Jock Radio's Scratch-Card Challenge*.

21.00 I start typing, one word follows another until I have a completed sentence done, and so this fanzine begins...



Doogy rev, doogy rev!

What you have here in your hands, or more likely on your screen, is the direct replacement for my previous perzine *An Fleghes Hager-Na Yu Canjeons*. After a long period of inactivity I've decided to dump those Ugly Children onto the slag-heap of history to sit alongside other forgotten nostalgic gems such as Creamola Foam, the Crimson Virus and the Adventure Game. Gronda, gronda, rangdo.

When I started pubbing *An Fleghes*, I wanted to do something quick and easy. Somewhere in the execution that concept got lost as I found myself worrying more about layout, cover photos, film/music reviews and font legibility rather than doing any actual writing. By the time I sat down to write #5 I found my enthusiasm flagging badly as I felt the format was far too rigid to let me do the things I wanted to. So here we are, stripped right back to basics. If I do develop some form of layout/house style it'll evolve through the act of publishing this zine rather than through forcing an artificial construct on it from the start. So this is it, chocks away, and hey-ho let's go...

Earlier Today

Today started with last night. You see I suffer terribly from the night terrors. While I'm fortunate that my sleep isn't interrupted by sudden screaming fits due to dark chthonian nightmares (well no more than the next reasonable man), I do suffer nightly from the realisation that my mortality coupled with an inbuilt lazy streak means that the world will probably never know the full extent of my own genius. Nightly I lie awake with my mind over-occupied by thoughts of my many still-born creative projects. Currently I'm wresting with guilt over my unwritten novel set on a recently terra-formed planet where pioneers eek out a marginal agricultural existence. (This is actually an excuse

to write a science fiction Western based loosely on the Grateful Dead song *Brown-Eyed Women*). Rubbing up against this is the unwritten British superhero comic script, where most of the action is based around the administrative staff completing risk assessments, filing travel and subsistence claims and short listing new team members for interviews.

Musically I've fared a bit better. I have at least started both my experimental electronic album inspired by early 70's Berlin school electronica, and written some lyrics for my acoustic psych-folk song-cycle. The one line pitch for that project is Animal Collective's *Campfire Songs* meets Ballard's *The Drowned World* via *Grim-Prairie Tales* with a dash of my old glaciology textbooks thrown in for good measure. I kid you not.

The guilt of not pubbing my next e-zine is one such worry, so by getting off my arse and committing words to screen that's at least one less thing keeping me awake at night, until #2 that is.

Last Night

I sorely miss fandom living down here in Cornwall, but have started making attempts to meet up with like-minded folk over the last couple of months. One such connection is *Spit Bubble* the graphic novel reading group which meets at *The Hand*, a specialist imported beer bar in Falmouth. Over the last couple of months I've been involved in passionate discussions about *Watchmen*, Charles Burn's *Black Hole* and now Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's *The Killing Joke*.

I first read *The Killing Joke* shortly after it was released (my copy has a £1.99 price on the back which dates it a bit). I enjoyed it at the time, as it felt like it fitted snugly into a continuum of graphic novels such as *Watchmen*, *Dark Knight Returns* and *Batman Year One* that took superhero comics seriously. Now returning to it years later I wasn't so sure...

The Killing Joke is famous for the shooting and crippling of Barbara Gordon a.k.a Batgirl. Unlike most deaths and maimings in mainstream comics, this had long-lasting and serious effect on both the character and the DC Universe. The Joker put Babs into a wheelchair and over the last twenty-odd years it looked like she would never walk again (Barbara appears to have finally recovered in DC Comic's *The New 52* continuity launched last September). Out of this cruel event, talented writers such as Gail Simone and Chuck Dixon built around the character a world in which a disabled character could thrive, by using her intelligence, knowledge and charm as the powerful Oracle, the super-hero community's go-to hacker for obscure information. So successful has this transformation been that DC is currently under a bit of a backlash by readers with disabilities against these changes for removing one of the few highly visible wheelchair bound characters from comics .

All this good stuff though is a lot further down the line from *The Killing Joke*, which should not disguise the fact that this story has a cold, cruel misogynistic edge to it. Fair enough, the Joker is a psychopath and he would probably do those things if he existed in reality; however there is a leering sensibility about this story which makes my skin crawl. Perhaps that's the intention of the storytellers; however as a reader I do believe the same story could have been told in a less gratuitous manner, by toning down the leery nature and letting some of the story be told off-screen by implication rather than being forced into the foreground. A story of this sort needs to be shocking but by showing everything graphically it feels like lazy flawed storytelling, especially when you include a pointless song and dance routine by the Joker in the middle. No doubt this was included to show the Joker isn't just a sadistic killer but has a wacky side, but feels completely at odds with the visceral nature of the rest of the comics. That scene feels like it was left over from *V For Vendetta* and included to get the page count up to the minimum length.

There was some good stuff in there though. Bolland's artwork is still as fresh and exciting as ever. The colouring was discussed at length as we had two different versions available on the night, John Higgins's original and the re-touched Brian Bolland version. Both worked for different reasons and serve to highlight the importance of the collaborative process of comic production as Letterers and Colourists are often forgotten about when discussion sequential art¹.



Oracle

Overall our group felt that this was one of Alan Moore's lesser works and didn't have the depth of *From Hell* or *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. Next month is Scott MacLeod's legendary *Understanding Comics*, can't wait.

Last Weekend

I've spent a lot of last weekend mulling over my convention plans for next year. Until a couple of weeks ago my thinking was this - Swecon in October, Novacon in November, skip the Bradford Eastercon² and go to the San Antonio Worldcon next summer. Now though I'm not so sure...

¹ The recent internet controversy over the rights and wrongs of DC/Time Warner's plans to exploit *Watchmen* and the film adaptations of Moore's work, also has a tendency to marginalise the role and views of the artists involved in these projects. From some of the opinions expressed online you get the impression that Alan Moore wrote, pencilled, inked, coloured, lettered, edited and published all his books himself, and is therefore the only person able to have a legitimate view on what happens to these properties. I have made a point of correcting people when discussing Alan Moore's *Watchman* to point out that it is at least Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's *Watchmen*.

² From our experiences last time I really think the hotel used is just too small for the volume of fans involved in staying there. The bus service between the overflow hotels and the centre of town didn't really work the way it was supposed to either. When you couple this with the fact that it was easier for us to fly to Scotland and travel down by train than go direct from Cornwall I really don't feel like attending next year. I'd rather save my money for some other con I think.

We missed Corflu a couple of weeks back, well most of it. I did manage to watch a couple of panels online, although far less than the previous year where I spent most of the weekend hunched over my laptop watching grainy pictures and muffled sound being beamed direct from California. This year I forgot to tune in at a couple of times, and when I did I was put off by the endless adverts of the streaming service used. However what I did see, made me realise how much I miss regularly hanging out with fanzine fans. So sometime in the closing ceremony/FAAN awards I started thinking there must be an easier way to be involved with Corflu than waiting for streaming adverts to stop and swearing at the computer screen. What sprung readily to mind was saving for a long-haul flight to Portland. I have a kinda love/hate relationship with North America. I loved each time I've been there, but actually hate the process of sorting out flights, booking hotels, arranging visas, etc. It all seems like such a hassle, rather than just hopping on a short flight to Sweden or Germany. But when I think about it, I am being just damn irrational as I still have to do most of those things for European travel.

So to San Antonio or Corflu? Worldcon has a number of plus points in its favour...I've never been to a North American Worldcon, San Antonio seems nice and is near both Austin and Mexico (two places I've always wanted to visit). However it is big, expensive and traditionally at a time of year that is hard for me to get leave for.

Corflu on the other hand is in Portland, which we had to miss out on our last West Coast trip due to time constraints. I've never been to Oregon and the thought of those fanzine fans, micro-brew, Ken Kesey connections, etc make it real attractive, especially if I can fit in a trip to 'Frisco or Seattle at either end. Currently Corflu is winning out, although I am astutely aware the North America is vast and I've yet to visit anywhere that isn't east of the Pacific. Choices, choices, choices...

Last week

A confusion of Roskilly's Salt Caramel Ice Cream, house buying minutiae, The Marble Downs by the Trembling Bells and Bonnie Prince Billy, Tenzil For The Defence, hot water bottles, the Levenson Enquiry, New Model Army by Adam Roberts, boring meetings, The Tall Ships race, headaches, Terrance Malick' Badlands, damn fine sausages and the Matthew from Bristol.

Easter

Sometime over the Easter weekend Claire Brialey shuffled up next to me and muttered something into my ear along the lines of "You do know that we are both old enough to be John Coxon's parents?" I think my initial reaction was something like "Oh, fuck!" but I can't be sure. Which is fascinating as, at one point later on in a busy weekend spent at Heathrow, I did actually think about adopting John.

It was the panel on fanzines, e-fanzines and other forms of online fanac that made this thought pop into my head. Firstly the guy seemed to have all the answers on assertions about e-fanzines being a restrictive insular closed-shop at his fingertips. Watching him debate

eloquently with Lilian Edwards was just sheer entertainment - here were two intelligent fannish commentators argue passionately about something they care about without reverting to hissy fits and name-calling. The whole panel was one of the best I've seen at a convention in recent years. I think on balance it may have been a 2-2 draw, with possible John nicking a lucky decisive goal in the dying minutes of extra-time but to be fair I'm not sure...I may need to see the slow-motion replay on that one.

What really struck me though was his vision on what online fanzines should be. I found myself agreeing entirely about production methods, fanzine formats and distribution methods; some echoed thoughts I'd already had, but most looked beyond the limited scope my mind had conceived. I meant to catch him afterwards and drag him off for a pint to keep the discussion going but sadly Eastercon is such a large and busy place that it wasn't to be. Hopefully I'll rectify this at Novacon. Anyway, as others have been saying for years, I will add my voice too - John Coxon is awesome!

Earlier

Early May, 1752, Lettermore, Argyll, Scotland. Colin Roy Campbell of Glenure a.k.a. The Red Fox, the government appointed Factor is shot in the back by an un-identified marksman. The full force of the law comes down on the Stewarts of Appin who have been in dispute with the Campbells over recent years. The chief suspect, one Allan Breck Stewart flees the country. In spite of no hard evidence being available as to Breck's guilt, he is tried and found guilty in absentia. His foster-father, James of the Glens, does not fare so well; he is hung for being an accessory to murder despite both sides agreeing at his trial that he was not present at the crime scene on that fateful day. The Appin Murder later forms the historic backdrop to Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped*.

- X -

Various POVs

Herein lies the communications gratefully received from various fans of import with respect to the last issue of *An Fleghes Hager-Na Yu Canjeons*. Some of it is rather dated now, but is included for reasons of transparency and historical note. After I type that, I realise it makes me sound like I am presenting evidence to the fannish equivalent of the Leveson Enquiry...

Bill Burns

I enjoyed your ramblings around Cornwall - Mary and I have managed only one visit so far (in 2003, to Porthcurno, of course, for the telegraph museum) and greatly enjoyed it. We stopped at Lostwithiel Castle on the way, but no sign of Peter Roberts.

We also got to Goonhilly (now sadly closed), Poldhu for the Marconi site, the Lizard lighthouse and Kynance Cove. Must get back one day.

Still not been to Lostwithiel Castle, but love spending time on the Lizard - a magical and beautiful place. If you do get back, please let Christina and I know, we get so few fannish visitors and would love to see you.

Eric Mayer

I'm trying to resist saying thanks for the Ugly Children which sounds wrong on several levels.

Great news about you turning that lost job into a better position. A very rare occurrence, although my own job loss back in the nineties turned out to be a blessing in disguise also since being self-employed -- albeit not as well paid as regular employment -- suits me better than going in to an office.

I love downloading new and/or weird fonts and trying them out. Unfortunately from a design standpoint it usually isn't a good idea to employ too many fonts in one publication. As for hard to read fonts, they are more fun to contemplate than they are useful. I found what struck me as a fairly easy to read font to emulate typewriting in my own zine. There are fonts I have seen that look a lot more like what my worn-out elite manual typewriter actually produced when I was doing a dittoed zine in the seventies and eighties but I don't think readers would put up with such eye-watering illegibility in a pdf zine. As for that Legion of Superheroes font, I presume one super power is the ability to decipher unreadable fonts.

I suppose I ought to look up the Trembling Bells. I am afraid my musical tastes mostly begin with the sixties and the so-called (over here) British Invasion and end with the demise of the original punk/new wave in the early eighties. I saw "original" because my nephew is always playing me bands from the nineties and on which sound exactly like bands from the seventies to me. My musical interests are kind of like my science fictional interests, which ran from the fifties to the seventies, then stopped.

I see you bemoan Cameron in the loccol I don't blame you. But, hey, if the UK is going to hell, all of us from the USA will at least be waiting to greet you.

The Legion font, Interlac (also a name of a long-running and influential Legion zine) was I think invented by Keith Giffen. It is actually quite easy once you see enough of it to start picking up words without resorting to a key. It is also the name of one of my current music projects. More on this in some future zine.

I'm still bemoaning Cameron. To keep it short I'll just say don't get me started on Pastygate, Petrolgate, Horsegate, Hackgate, Huntgate, etc. What a hopeless twat that guy is...

Gary Wilkinson

Had similar thoughts regarding Never Let Me Go myself. I think it thought it was this big tragedy but I just came away feeling a bit depressed and unsatisfied. I think the feeling is not uncommon as it seems to have been entirely overlooked awards-wise and I don't think it had much impact at the box office.

However, there is an attempt at a clever idea going on here, based on a particular sharp review and hints in an interview with Ishiguro. Almost all narratives of dystopia are about the idea of escape - even if it ultimately doesn't work like in 1984. Ishiguro's idea is that most people in that situation don't escape; most don't even try - they just meekly get on the cattle trucks he wanted to write about them. Well that's as may be and it's a valid point however passivity doesn't make for good drama. It might work in a literary novel - but outside of experimental cinema it's not going to work on screen. The passive wimpish whiny 'protagonists' accepting their fate with a shrug end up completely un-engaging. And even the knowledge of their fate is doled out in a boring school lesson and isn't the shocking discovery it could / should have been. By the time the slight plot kicks in you don't care about the love triangles or attempts to prove they have a soul. Michael Bay's film The Island has almost exactly the same set up - but because it follows the 'escape' narrative it's much more satisfying, even if it's not exactly major cinema.

I got the impression via reviews when the book came out (which I haven't looked at) that this was yet another attempt of a literary writer putting on the silver jump suit of sf because obviously that stuff is easy and not really getting it. I really can't see the society as presented evolving from the premise. Even if it gives the non-cloned people a few more years I can't see there being no objections to it somewhere - if from the church or the greens if nothing else - and some sort of Underground Railroad set up. Or perhaps I'm just too optimistic about human nature.

Good point about *Never Let Me Go*. I might have to re-visit it sometime, but I expect I will still find it beautiful to watch but lacking any real substance.

Mark Plummer

I remember John Purcell tried to shorten your name back in #2 and now Eric Mayer wants to anglicise it. We have another solution: 'round these parts we just call your fanzine 'Doug's Perzine' and that seems to cover it. Copy-and-paste, though, allows me to be all formal in the subject line.

Right from the start, I admired your title choice for its commendable lack of ambition. Imagine the scene: it is Novacon, and it is Saturday night, shortly before the witching hour. You have been in the hotel for slightly over twenty-four hours although frankly if somebody had told you it was twenty-four days you would be prepared to believe them. Nothing has passed your lips since your arrival apart from a few

pieces of dripping red-rare carvery breakfast sausage, seventeen pints of Old Sprogett's Sheepdip and a small sherry that somebody bought for you as part of an ordering miscommunication. Just before you start in on pint number eighteen, and as you wonder whether another small sherry might even be a good idea at this stage, you try to clear the haze from your eyes. It is not haze, it is Steve Green looming. He thrusts a piece of paper under your nose and you attempt to process the words he is saying: Nova ballot... top three British fanzines, fan writers and fan artists... list at least six British fanzines you've seen in the last year... deadline midnight... act now... act without thinking... He hands you a pen and you attempt to bring it into juxtaposition with the piece of paper. What was the question again?

*Now I ask you, in these circumstances could *you* write An Fleghes Hager-Na Yu Canjeons? So what chance do you think the rest of us have?*

Although, thinking about it some more, under those circumstances I think I'd be as likely to write An Fleghes Hager-Na Yu Canjeons as anything else so perhaps that was your plan all along. You sly dog.

I love the ambiguity of Lloyd Penney's claim that 'At the Las Vegas Corflu, I met Graham Charnock, and for TAFF, I have voted accordingly.' I am assuming, of course, that as one of his nominators Lloyd voted for Liam Proven. If he didn't, and as Liam was eliminated by dint of being one vote short of the required 20% in North America, that would be... unfortunate.

Thanks Mark. Hopefully all the wranglings over my zine's name have been sorted with this new title. You paint a surprisingly accurate picture of Novacon there...Interesting comments on the TAFF results from a while ago, wish I'd got around to printing it more recently. Speaking of Lloyd...

Lloyd Penney

Thanks for An Fleghes Hager-Na Yu Canjeons 4 or 2.1, whichever comes first. I prefer whole numbers... I have to love the cover! I wondered where I'd left my signal station...that's why I wrote my name so big on it. And I still lost it!

Employment has been quite the concern for me...I do have short-term employment in the daytime (about a month of it left), and part-time employment in the evening, but the hunt is still ever onwards. I had a great interview last week, but I have learned that even the best interview still isn't enough to secure you the job. Right now, I am working for the Ontario Association of Architects, working in a unique building in Toronto.

I have the Asimov font at home. I've used it a few times, but it is best for titles, and short ones at that. I've gone through my own font collecting stage, and some of them are fun, but definitely have limited use. Still, they look interesting.

Just saw this weekend Paul Albright, a very silly entertainer who goes under the name of Professor Elemental. If you have liking of hip hop (I don't, but I didn't let it stop me), the Professor provides his version of it, which he calls chap hop. Found out that he's from Brighton, and a very energetic entertainer.

I have been wanting to get a copy of The City and the City, but I wish hardcover books weren't so expensive. I am not sure it's out in paperback yet. And, while I was a Scout in my childhood and did some camping, I can't even go to a convention and enjoy a hotel bed these days for sleep. I simply have to have my own bed. I am spoiled that way.

Eastercon came and let everyone know who's on the Hugo ballot this year, and William and Kate got married, and got the best ratings. Let's hope having royalty for in-laws won't take away Kate Middleton's common sense. Thanks again, and see you later this month.

Hadn't even thought of it being your signal station Lloyd!

This has been Unreliable Narrator #1, published from the kitchen of a rickety old stone town-cottage somewhere in darkest Kernow.

Letters of comment, abuse, opinions on Corflu v. Worldcon etc to doug_bell@tiscali.co.uk - I'm outta here...