

FARLANDER

Aged assassin takes on an apprentice – and his toughest job yet

Author: **Col Buchanan**
 Publisher: **Tor** • 387 pages • £17.99
 ISBN: **978-0-230-74481-3** • OUT NOW!

★★★★

Maps: sometimes it'd be best if they just let us imagine them. Many fantasy maps are geographically unbelievable horrors, poorly adapted from our own world, that undermine the carefully produced word-portrait the author strives for. *Farlander* suffers from this.

Further to this point: language. Middle-earth grew from Tolkien's linguistic play, lending it a solidity few others have managed. *Farlander* co-opts real names and history from all over the place. Rule Five of the Turkey City Lexicon ("Call a rabbit a smeerp") is also widely flouted – Pica birds (magpies), Zels (zebra-horses), Chee (tea) and so on. Worse, it's done with *no consistency*.

All this is likely to rile the finickity fan. Which is a shame, because Col Buchanan's debut novel is gripping. Protagonist Ash is the best of a group of ninja-like assassins. To those who can afford their services, they offer vendetta as an insurance against murder. Ash is dying, so reluctantly agrees to take an apprentice. This sounds like a clichéd "potboy to hero" tale, but Buchanan takes a braver road with all the clichés he employs, delightfully undermining expectation. As the story progresses, you realise his world is not so poorly thought-out after all. There are some well-integrated early industrial flourishes, and the baddies, the Cult of Mann, are a workable synthesis of the Thuggees and Aleister Crowley-esque "Do What Thou Wilt" hedonism.

It's a four-star story with five-star characters, set in a three-star world. The result is like a slightly less accomplished Joe Abercrombie, but more real for its dourness. If Buchanan's handling of detail grows to match his ability with character, he's going to be really good. **Guy Haley**



i You can read two extracts from the book online, at colbuchanan.com/excerpt1.html and colbuchanan.com/excerpt2.html



THE MIDNIGHT MAYOR

Sorcerer Swift is back for some more metropolitan mayhem

Author: **Kate Griffin**
 Publisher: **Orbit** • 432 pages • £7.99
 ISBN: **978-1841-49734-1** • OUT NOW!

★★★★★



If you read last year's urban folktale *A Madness Of Angels*, you'll no doubt already be drooling at the prospect of this thankfully speedy follow-up. If you haven't read it yet, you really should. You're missing out on what's becoming one of the best fantasy sagas in years, a series set not in the sprawling castles and valleys of a fictional world but in the streets of our very own capital. London is – quite literally, in this case – a living, breathing entity in Kate Griffin's books, but you don't have to live there to appreciate how rich and detailed her scenery is. You can practically taste the city on the pages of *The Midnight Mayor*, all ozone, bus exhaust fumes and late-night kebabs. Despite how it sounds, it's delicious.

An intricate, compelling plotline

Last time round we got to meet murdered sorcerer Matthew Swift and the peculiar blue angels who had reanimated his body and taken up residence inside him. This time a slightly better-adjusted but rather reluctant Swift is on a mission to discover who murdered the mysterious Midnight Mayor of London (no, not Boris – he's the daytime one). It's a compelling, intricate plot containing some truly gorgeous notions: hoodie spectres with no faces bobbing their heads to their ghostly iPods; grease monsters oozing from the sewers outside fish and chip shops; the wording of an ASBO being used as a spell of defence. This is the world we know, but given a terrifyingly clever magical twist. Swift's a charismatic hero and the final setpiece is a breathless, fulfilling climax to a book that's even better than its predecessor.

If *SFX* handed out six starred-reviews, this would get one. If you don't read it... well, it's your loss. **Jayne Nelson**

i Kate Griffin's real name is Catherine Webb. Her dad is Nick Webb, author of *Wish You Were Here*, the official biog of Douglas Adams.

THE DIARY OF A DR WHO ADDICT

Growing pains

Author: **Paul Magrs**
 Publisher: **Simon & Schuster** • 266 pages • £6.99
 ISBN: **978-1-84738-412-6** • OUT NOW!

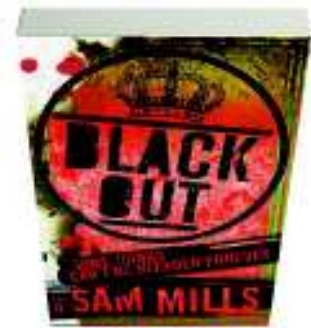
★★★★★

Surprisingly, this kids' book focuses not on a modern-day *Who* fan, but a bookish lad growing up in the north-east in the early '80s. At first you wonder whether the target audience will be baffled and alienated. Then it strikes you: perhaps this obsolete era of audio cassettes and *proper letters* is as fascinating to the iPlayer-and-SMS generation as the privations of the Blitz were to '80s kids.

As 12-year-old David grows more reserved and quietly realises that he *doesn't like girls*, regeneration turns out to be an excellent metaphor for teenage transformation. There are no major incidents in this touching, understated tale, only the low-key drama of ordinary life in a northern town. Thirtysomethings will smile at references to Breville sandwich toasters and Tudor crisps. Fans will chuckle at David's vocabulary of words-learn't-from-*Who* (like "chitinous", "unearthly" and "voluminous"). Teens, meanwhile, will be reassured that it's okay to be different – and realise that a previous generation experienced exactly the same uncertainty. **Ian Berriman**



i The book is set in Newton Aycliffe, County Durham (where Magrs grew up), before and during Peter Davison's first season as the Doctor.



BLACK OUT

Nothing to hide?

Author: **Sam Mills**
 Publisher: **Faber and Faber** • 295 pages • £6.99
 ISBN: **978-0-571-23941-2** • OUT NOW!

★★★★★

ID cards to be compulsory, non-violent groups outlawed, innocent people stopped and searched... 1984? Nope, this is the real world. Britain, 2010. But that's all fine, right? If you've nothing to hide, you've nothing to fear.

There's a similar premise behind *Black Out*, set in a near-future Britain in which books are banned or rewritten, and a once-free society has moved inch by inch towards a police state. It's fiction, it's ridiculous, it's fantastical – but read a paper after you've finished and prepare to be disturbed by the parallels.

The story's told by Stefan Burns, "your typical indoctrinated teenager". He believes that the state works for everyone's good, and that book-banning is completely necessary to protect against terrorism. His father, however, is a bookseller with other ideas...

It's important stuff, and for the most part dealt with well. Some parts can jar – it's always a little strange when a book references so many of its influences – but minor quibbles aside, this is a thought-provoking read that will leave you more than a little nervous about where our society is heading. **Rhian Drinkwater**

i The American Library Association holds an annual Banned Books Week to celebrate freedom of speech.

BULLET TIME! A book in bullet points

DESTINATION MOONBASE ALPHA

Author: **Robert Wood** • Publisher: **Telos** • 488 pages • £12.99 • ISBN: **978-1-84583-034-2**



- An unauthorised guide to *Space: 1999*, crammed with candid speaking from cast and crew.
- Robert Wood's reviews are rather dry, and he's a generous marker – five and a half for the episode about the living rocks?!
- Writer Johnny Byrne contributes a couple of pages of analysis on each of his episodes.
- Nick Tate (Alan Carter) calls season two

producer Fred Freiberger "a strange piece of work".

- Martin Landau doesn't come across well – he made sure no other regulars upstaged him by getting strong storylines.
- The book also lifts the lid on the shabby treatment of Barry Morse (dumped for the second series).
- All this gossip is far more interesting than the actual show...