



Fallen Angels/Open Minds:
An examination of Sean Kennedy's 'The Scabbed Wings of
Abaddon'

by

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Introduction

Is it possible to have forgotten something you never knew in the first place? Carl Jung says yes. That we are genetically hardwired to know on instinct when some things are right and some things are wrong. When reading Sean Kennedy's second novel, freely available for download from <http://www.rantmedia.ca> I suddenly began to understand something. I remembered something I couldn't possibly have forgotten. I remembered the true purpose of the novel.

I am a long time subscriber to the Zoetrope studios online workshop and have often preferred to gain my reading material from there to buying a blockbuster from my local bookstore. I figured it was because it made a difference to the author if I read and criticised their Zoetrope submissions and because Zoetrope stories are free. That's part of the story, but not the whole story. The whole story is all to do with edges.

When you buy a Robert Ludlum thriller whether you like it or loathe it is immaterial. Ludlum is a multi-million bestselling author. The publishing house thinks Ludlum is AOK and that's really all that matters. I read a Ludlum and, frankly, it bummed me out. A cloak of depression settled over me and for that three weeks I was a miserable bastard. His writing craft is faultless, his style has quirks which you either like or don't but you can't really take him aside and say 'Robert, your book bummed me out. Here's why. Why not try something like this...'

Why not?

Well, when Ludlum fans buy a Ludlum they want to know they're getting the same warmed over spy thriller crap they got the last fifteen times they bought a Ludlum. They want the same characters, plot twists and archetypes they've always had. They don't want their variety too various. An experimental author in the age of the publishing behemoth is often reviled and destined for obscurity. Hence, I believe, the relative obscurity of Piers Anthony.

I used to deeply dig the work of Anthony. I thought a lot of it was the fascinating theological musings of a lunatic (in a complimentary manner Mr. Anthony) but it challenged my thought processes. If I disagreed with Piers Anthony at least there was something other than a pile of homogenous mass-published crap to disagree with. Piers Anthony stolidly refused to be bullied into churning out endless sequels to his Xanth Trilogy, his thinking stretched further and in more directions, and he has ended up in disfavour with the publishers because Anthony readers didn't really know 100% what they'd be getting next.

(Anyone who's not Sean Kennedy will be wondering how this relates... Sean, you see where I'm going with this right?)

Loading up 'The Scabbed Wings Of Abaddon' I felt the fear. Everyone who's ever read a manuscript by a friend or acquaintance will know the fear. What if it sucks? How will I look this guy in the face again (luckily SK has become a recluse in Canada protected by his mighty guardian Cimmerian so that won't be a problem)? I really don't want this to suck. Please God, let it not suck.

The root of the fear comes from a culture who's literary intake is mediated by the Publishing Behemoth. If you pick up a Stephen King you either know it will suck because you don't like Stephen King or that it won't because you like Stephen King. Stephen King books are much of a muchness, as are Clive Barker books, Tad Williams books and just about every other kind of book that a publishing house chooses to publish. Books are not like, for example, music albums where the same artist can take radically new directions as their talent evolves. The Shining is to Desperation as Britney Spears first album will be to her millionth... they're more of the same for those who like the same.

The Publishing Behemoth has taught us the fear. What if we can't get our head round it? Books require an investment of money and time, they are now and have always been a prestige item. A book needs to have some sort of quality seal before you buy it, or else you will just have spent more than you can afford on something you don't really want. This

is, of course, bullshit. It may have been true in the days when only a few could afford the technology to make a novel but now anyone can load up OpenOffice and tap out 100,000 words or so if they feel the need. They can self publish (a dirty word to the Publishing Behemoth) and anyone can enjoy their words for free or for a modest fee. Now with the growing trend of POD sites offering printing services for a manuscript as a 'trade' paperback you can try before you buy.

The days of the Publishing Behemoth are numbered. This site, SKs novel, and Piers Anthony's site are all the first whispers. Why? Because 'The Scabbed Wings Of Abaddon' and 'Binary Baby 1.0' will be the second coming? Because they rule above and beyond whichever bestseller list you're looking at? No. Because they have edges and that gives the love of the literary back to the reader.

Sean Kennedy is a journeyman author. His loyal cadre of Rantmedia supporters are feeding his ego dutifully with: 'I read it all in one sitting, I will get fired because I just can't put this awesome volume down and my boss is starting to get suspicious' type comments. I like it when my three or four fans tell me I rule too. That's not the aim of the project, though. I don't believe it is the aim of SK's project either. If I succeeded in producing one perfect, life affirming, beautiful novel I would have to kill myself because what's the point of continually churning out perfection? What's the point of not being able to challenge yourself further because all the challenges have gone? There's no point in that. So SK likes the slaps on the back and the ego boosts but what he really wants, just like what I really want, is to know where it was strong and where it was weak. What, in the Scabbed Wings makes literary ambition a worthwhile goal and what sucks. This is the author's real goal, criticism.

The number of real critics I know is low. I wouldn't run out of fingers if I counted them up on my hands. A true critic shouldn't be there to blast or to kiss ass but a little of both. What a writer needs is to know they have the seed of ability and they need to know how their technique maybe strengthened and developed. With that in mind I set out to critique 'The Scabbed Wings' as a mark of respect that SK has worked fucking hard on this and I

believe that if he continues to do so then one day he will produce something even he won't later dislike as I dislike all of my early work. I am aiming to set him the challenge. I am aiming to get him to look at his work and say 'let's do something else. Let's do something different'.

Authors in the jaws of the Publishing Behemoth are scared of a new direction (what is Misery but a novel about how a new direction is something to be terrified of). I myself have been trying to find my voice and equating my voice with a homogenous body of samey work. The Scabbed Wings makes me realise that this is not an aspiration but a prison. I hope that a new era of literary endeavour in partnership with electronic media will change that. So one day no reader can smugly expect something from an author and not get slapped by that author's new chain of thought.

With that in mind let us get on with it.

Overview

The question that kept recurring in my mind reading this novel was: 'In strictest genre senses is this horror?' People expecting an early Stephen King or a James Herbert will be thrown a curve by The Scabbed Wings of Abaddon. When I set out on my first novel Shards I intended it to be a horror novel. Then Kamelea came into it.

The fact of the matter is that Horror - the genre - is about surviving the evil without ever really comprehending it. Pet Sematary for example doesn't give a flying one what is in the ground all that matters is that it is evil and it will consume you unless you run. Shards had that until chapter two. The Scabbed Wings had it slightly longer. In chapter two of Shards I introduced the holy knight Kamelea to take on the awesome power of the Halfbreed. He had the badass attitude, the knowledge and the kit to take the Halfbreed down. He knew what the Halfbreed was and how to kill it. (I will review the Shards trilogy and if I believe the massive amount of work required to convert it to IBM PC readable material is justified I will sling it up) From that moment my novel was not generic Horror any more. It was Dark Fantasy because although it used Horror motifs someone could control and vanquish the darkness, lending it the air of a thriller.

Scabbed Wings also has its Witch Hunter and its Houngan. They don't understand the essentials of the metaphysical universe of Scabbed Wings but they are kitted out to deal with it and not with holy water and crucifixes. These characters kick ass. That's why it's not horror. Their mission is not survival but bloody retribution. So is Scabbed Wings pure generic horror? No. Does that matter? No. Just pointing out another way in which genre writers have ghettoised their own minds. Scabbed Wings is strong stuff but although there is fear involved there is also rage and rage in a Horror story tends to be futile. Here it is anything but.

Stephen King actually pointed out in Danse Macabre that horror was a very conservative genre. It wasn't about understanding and integrating, it was about panic and segregation. The evil in horror is something to be escaped, controlled, burned, purified. What is thought

of as evil must not be suffered. Of course an evil act should be regarded in this way. To take a contemporary example 9/11 should not be countenanced, it was an act of evil. The perpetrators were they evil? They committed an atrocity and they created themselves in a model of extremist terror but had they been stopped beforehand and transported to Guantanamo Bay then they might have become broken victims. People cannot be evil. No sentient being can be evil.

The dialectic of the horror novel argues against that. It argues that evil can be flesh and bone. In many ways a story like Carpenter's Prince Of Darkness is a riff on the whole philosophy of Horror. In POD evil is, essentially, discovered in a jar and escapes into the world. What Carpenter was saying in his own tongue-in-cheek way was that the concept of pure tangible evil is strange and almost ridiculous. To accept the dialectic of pure horror is to accept that a thing can be evil and that's not where I believe SK is coming from. I think the underlying concept that the Seraphim race are amoral and that of this amoral race Abaddon is actually evil is one of the novel's main weaknesses and I shall discuss that further when talking about Abaddon later on.

Anyway. I didn't mean to start off by discussing weaknesses. I wanted to fortify the discussion by pointing to the novel's strengths before going through what didn't work so well.

In fact I had been meaning to say that its Dark Fantasy credentials are a credit to the book. The fact that our heroes are pro-active and can kick some demonic booty is a good thing. Despite the rather pessimistic reading of the concept of hope the fact of the protagonist's refusal to lay down and get shafted by the universe points to hope rather more clearly than the chapter heading's grim pronouncement that 'Hope is only a gentle lie'.

Much apart from the underlying statement that hope is alive and well in the heart of Sean Kennedy is the super sweet ending in which our loving family are reunited to go on with their lives. The message? Don't quail in the face of the demonic, kick it's ass, that is hope.

Tolkien had a name for such a turn out of events 'eucatastrophe' Scabbed Wings gives good eucatastrophe. The ending is golden.

So to summarise the general thrust of the novel is that you can find the power to fight darkness within you and if you have the courage and the fortitude to face evil down then you can be victorious. This is an excellent message to be putting across, a meme of subtle power and invention, the diametric opposite of the meek shall inherit the earth; a prayer against the controlling anaesthesia of prayer. Not only that but our lesson for today is delivered in such a manner that you soon get into the habit of wanting to read 'just one more chapter' for around 80% of the time you really want to know what happens next.

So, having given this glowing report of the overall feel of the novel what, overall wasn't so hot? What of that 20% of the novel that made you not really give a shit what happened next?

First, it is painfully obvious that SK is not yet confident in his writing. There are many filips and verbal tricks that ask us to appreciate how clever SK is at writing: similes, epigrams and homilies. Sometimes philosophy and exposition are explicit when they should be implicit. Incidents where the audience are not given the necessary information to make sense of the story are rare enough that they don't even warrant comment. This latter point is a good sign of hope for SK because it means that he has an instinct for what an audience needs to know and this will serve his literary career well. Not only that but the fact that sometimes he tells us too much can be remedied with judicious editing. I can foresee a time when reading Sean Kennedy will require no effort at all but each sentence will drip with levels of new meaning for the curious. An aspiration for all writers worth their salt.

However, we're not there yet. Sometimes the book reads like the research notes have been dressed up a little and inserted as a chapter (the fact that the voice of the research notes is, without doubt, the weakest voice in the volume is also unfortunate). At other

times you wonder if you're reading an RPG campaign sourcebook. Now as an amateur metaphysician myself I find the whole thing fascinating. However being this explicit in your exposition of the nature of things has a serious impact on your dramatic tension. At times I was skipping paragraphs once I got the gist and having to force myself to go back and read again because I knew too much about what I was reading. There is a tendency among some authors to artificially generate dramatic tension by turning their stories into puzzles of implication and inference. This is a harder habit to break because it demonstrates an instinctual lack of understanding of the audience. The reverse problem instead can be remedied by policing your manuscript carefully to tell the audience exactly what they need to know to make sense of (or at least to make them think they can make sense of) what they're reading while holding back enough to generate the tension.

A prime example that springs to mind is Sasha's encounter with the Chyldren. We have already been told a) that Sasha is a great mom and that b) the Chyldren are the souls of children who have died in want of their parents. The Chyldren seek out mother figures and if Sasha doesn't understand being a mother then who the hell else does? So even before the confrontation we know the resolution. As a result the passage, although being well written doesn't have an air of tension or wonder. We know that Sasha is going to be loved by the Chyldren and when it happens it does not catch us off guard.

To propose an alternative method of communicating the information about the Chyldren throughout the first couple of encounters we see these mysterious hulking creatures ripping Wolves limb from limb. We see them as predators, vicious, huge, mournfully homicidal. Then rather than just being told about the relationship between Chyldren and Harlots eventually, through a confrontation between the Chyldren and Sasha Sasha unleashes a burst of Abaddon power. The Chyld affected howls in pain and runs to a Harlot screaming 'Mommy!'. Then Sasha understands the nature of the Chyldren and against the advice of her colleagues advances on the Chyld because a mother knows. The resolution plays the same, the Chyldren become Sasha's allies. If we have not been told explicitly up until that point why this should be so we have the tension of wondering whether Sasha is right. It keeps our eyes glued to the page and although we eventually

find out the same things that SK chooses to share with us through Clarence Winker's diary we learn it in a way that preserves tempo and powers the story.

Essentially tricks like that will come from two sources. One, practice, two, taking on board criticism. The story is strong, only the craft is sometimes weak.

Before I go on to discuss specific aspects of the story I need to get this out of my system. SK you need a better proof reader. I guess there was a simple spelling error on every other page. I never realised how much that would spoil my enjoyment of a novel. The thing is every time you have to work out what a misspelled word is supposed to be it ruins the fictive dream and reminds you you are reading a book. Suspension of disbelief is easier with better spelling. This kind of criticism isn't what anyone came for though so having said it let's move on...

The Opening Chapters

I shall spare everyone a hoary repetition of the old story about the editor who read stories a sentence at a time so that some stories could be rejected after the opening sentence etc. The reason that this cliché is so well known is that the hook, as Socrates noted, is absolutely vital. If you don't usher your audience in, get their seats ass warmed and hand them a bucket of popcorn it doesn't matter how kick ass the final confrontation is, nobody will be there to see it.

A lot of importance is placed upon your opening. So what does Scabbed Wings give us:

"As a member of the Klu Klux Klan, you have certain responsibilities.'

On auto pilot I noted this and was well pleased that SK had learned the opening sentence lesson well. What a great springboard. Unfortunately although the springboard was great it sprang us into some of SK's choppiest waters. The strength of this novel is in the wholesome Canadian family who are so genuinely nice that I was wincing to think of the horror that was bound to befall them. That was a powerful hook. I care about whether Luke and Sasha and little Daphne make it through OK. I care. Do I care about the Skatman walking through a KKK slaughterhouse however cool he might look? Do I give a flying one about the murder of Clarence Winker? Not as such, no.

Don't get me wrong, the Skatman is cool. There was a visceral pleasure to the detached cool of the prologue but it wasn't a good hook. It didn't pull me in, it put me at arm's length and said 'look at this cool shit'. It reminded me of poor openings to bad gory horror movies in which you are not given a chance to engage with the film because the director is trying to hose you down with gore and flesh before you actually get to see a protagonist. It makes the opening of such movies into soulless suckfests and it has much the same effect here.

Let me be clear, if the downward slide of the Prologue and Chapter 1 had continued on

reading this novel would have been a chore. Luckily Chapter 2 pulled it out of the nose dive and from there entertainment was provided.

Why? Why is all the domesticity of Sasha Edwards rubbish day at work and subsequent back story so good when all the cool voodoo and spirit world shit was flat and tedious? That seems to be contrary to sense. If you asked me which movie I'd rather see... It seems self evident that SK would understand Canadian everyday life. It would also seem to make sense that he would know much less about being in the KKK and being a 19th Century down at heel scholar. The voodoo stuff was obviously researched and the KKK stuff too. There was no soul to it, though. I wanted to find myself empathising with the KKK guy even though I couldn't sympathise with his plight. I wanted to understand him because then his pain would have been real and not just an empty horrorshow. As for the British character... well, I shall save serious comment for later but suffice to say that these were the bits that made me wince, SKs authorial voice at it's very weakest. The only thing that preserved the reader's interest (in my case) was the fact that the diary entry chapters carried the highest information load.

What I always, without fail have found with my last three novels (being BB1.0 - 1st Person, BB1.0 - 3rd Person and Virus 1.0) is that where I started writing them was not the beginning of the story. When I went to BB1.0, took it out, had it criticised and had it hammered into shit by everyone who read it I was kind of depressed to go back to the very beginning and 'Once Upon A Time...' it all over again. Now I positively look forward to it as the four or five beginnings to Virus 1.0 attest. Because I found once I got the beginning right then the rest became so much easier to set down. If your first 30,000 words gleam in the bright sunlight with their evident quality the remaining 70,000 give you far fewer problems.

I don't believe this novel starts where it starts. I believe it starts somewhere around Chapter 2. Some darlings needed murdering in the first 4000 words or so. And I'm not talking about KKK members.

Helpers: The Skatman, Clarence Winker, Buck Wyld

It is easier to make a novel an ensemble piece than a movie. I guess that's why so many novels are ensemble pieces. The advantages of being able to circle your material with a number of different viewpoints and a number of different interpretations of the same material can support your novel and deepen its meaning. The problem comes in stage managing all those damn characters. You need to be able to step out of one character's head and into another's regularly. Inexperienced writers often find themselves drifting around their characters heads within the space of single chapters. SK is past that stage or maybe he manages viewpoint purely on instinct. Whichever, it eliminates confusion and is a definite strength.

He is also careful about who's mind you are allowed into and who's you aren't. The Skatman is always viewed from without. The only time we see anything resembling the mind of Clarence Winker is in the epistolary chapters. We are privy to Buck Wyld's inner monologue once and a cold, scary thing it proves to be.

Perhaps it is partially this fact that weakens the opening chapters. Until you are in good ol' BC you never really take up space in anyone's head. You are held at arm's length by the requirements of the narrative. We are not allowed to see the KKK member's good side. We are not allowed to know what happens in the Skatman's darkest thoughts. Winker allows his thoughts onto the page through pen and ink, however stream-of-consciousness it appears it is forced.

To deal with the characters in the order in which we encounter them we first meet the awesome, proud Houngan, the Skatman. This character is straight out of a comic book, and I mean that in a complimentary fashion. If anyone gets first dibs on the spin off it is the Skatman. He brought to mind Mike LeRoi of the ShadowMan series of computer games and, more, the force-of-nature retribution comic strip character Coffin from the long defunct British comic Toxic. When the Skatman strutted to the fore and got down to business you knew you were going to see some serious shit.

The only problem with this is, of course, that you can't see anything. This is a novel. The prose attempted to bludgeon the images into your head but prose is prose and a picture is a hell of a lot more than the sum of 1000 words. I always found this problem when describing fights or action sequences. There is really no remedy to the problem of 'one for the screenplay'. There are ways to limit the damage. One is to keep your writing tight and factual to an obsessive degree. I often apply that remedy to car chases. That way an audience gets to read a passage like it was happening in a screenplay, which is the next best thing to seeing it on the screen. The second I apply to physical confrontations and fight sequences. In those I try to synthesise the spiritual dimension out of the physical realm. I make a physical fight the tangible outcome of a battle of wills. That way people think they are seeing a fight but really I am giving an extended dialogue on the soul during conflict. I am not proposing that these are the only solutions to this problem, but what I am saying is that a solution must be applied to the show piece scenes to make them more spectacular, just in a literary fashion.

As it turned out although I was absolutely in love with the concept of the Skatman the reality left something to be desired. He seemed a little more faded than he should have been, somewhat like half an idea. Not a terrible thing by any stretch of the imagination but I think SK will, upon reflection, believe he could have done better. Save it for the spin off.

Now. This is the unpleasant bit. Clarence Winker.

Clarence. Winker.

Fucking Clarence. Fucking Winker.

Now, maybe it's because I'm a Brit. And maybe it's because I trained as an actor and learned the 19th century cadence. And maybe it's because my novels are set in London and I obsessively research my streets with an AZ and the occasional day trip (the BB 1.0 tour of London was a crazy day, any one who believes London is one city should take that

journey). So CW got off to a bad start with me. His voice was like Dick Van Dyke doing posh London instead of Cheekee Cokkerneee: "Gor Blaaamee Mehhhree Porpins". The sound of it in my head was like nails on chalkboard. In addition he was only there for one real reason. He was THE INFODUMP MADE FLESH!

All speculative or fantastic authors have a biiiiiiiiig problem. That problem is that they have a responsibility to communicate to an audience, who may or may not be familiar with them, a number of concepts and keep the story from dying on its bony ass. In Hollywood they have a term for the ideal resolution to this problem: 'Turn your exposition into ammunition'. Basically, somehow you've got to have the audience in a position where they are begging you for the explanation even if they know what it is.

It's so tricky a task that it is never ever entirely successful. I know people, normals mostly, who just don't get The Matrix (the first one, nobody gets the other two properly without taking evening classes in Matrix Theology). That's not the fault of the Wachowskis, it's just that some normal brains are just not ready for the truth that life is just a VR hallucination perpetrated by evil robots (you knew The Matrix was a documentary right? Just checking.). So trying to make your theological, philosophical and scientific concepts 'fun' will always be an uphill struggle (my solution for an SF thriller routed deeply in quantum mechanics? Make it a 24 book epic.).

Of all the solutions inexperienced authors apply the infodump made flesh is a fairly harmless one. By far the worst is the improperly applied scientist to layman dialogue:

LAYMAN: So what you're saying, essentially, doctor is that in the centre of the black hole everything turns into inter-dimensional spaghetti and I end up siring my own father in an eighth dimensional encounter with my own grandmother?

SCIENTIST: (Chuckles.) That's all your feeble brain will ever be able to comprehend so, if that's how you prefer to think of it... (Feeds Layman a dog treat.)

I have only just been brave enough to try infodump through conversation and I'm not entirely happy with it even now. Anyway, there's no point in fighting it, at some point there will always be a point where you have to write "Agatha opened the book and began to read..."

In fact the only thing that saved Winker for me was that he provided so much darn handy information. And it nearly didn't occur to me to ask HOW it was Clarence had managed to glean so much information about deformed monsters who wanted to kill him. Expertly fudged. Nearly.

I have already mentioned the problem with exposition being this complete so I shall move on now. My final words, don't do this again... please, not again. Exposition is hard work and this was somewhat the easy way out.

Finally we come to my personal favourite among the helpers, John 'Buck' Buchanan Wyld.

To call a character Buck Wyld is, perhaps the book's boldest move. The fact that Wyld is anything but Wyld except deep in that cold stone soul of his is also a master stroke. One of my favourite passages in the entire novel was the 'Buck kits up' section with the obsessive description of the guns and knives that made up Wyld's kit. Having listened to much of SKs discourse on being obsessed with his own 'kit' (including the outrageous incident where he forced his poor wife to go and look for something in the car live on his show just to see a label or a model number or something) I could just see him digging everything about writing that scene.

Buck Wyld was so much fun that even listening to him expound his philosophy was a rewarding experience, and that character development shit can be so dull... A whole book written at this pitch would be an achievement, something to aim for. The book barely shone as bright as when Wyld was on stage. Bravo.

The only times that the pitch managed to sustain at that level (and this is lucky) is when

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www.leostableford.com - home of the BB/V Chronicles

we're up close and intimate with the thoughts of our two protagonists, the lovely Sasha and the slightly less lovely Luke. Which seems as good a segue as any.

The Edwards Family

If there was going to be a big problem with heroes then it has to be that an author can make them kind of bland. You only have to look at any Stephen King novel with a nice guy hero in it to see that. Anti-heroes tend to get all the glory. People identify with Peter Parker far more readily than Clark Kent. Writing heroes, particularly when you start out, is all about a personal investment. You know, as an author, that your hero is going to walk off with the big prize, they're going to come out of the whole thing smelling of roses. From a hero's inception the author knows that they're going to be rewarded, one of life's chosen.

So you don't want to make your hero suck too bad. If your hero is too whingey, or too abrupt, or too much of an asshole all round then you are going to leave your audience feeling unsatisfied. Why does that asshole get the big prize? Why are they going to get so much when I'm just as good as them and I don't got shit?

The solutions to this are two fold. The first and probably the best is to plan your hero's fall and rise. Campbell's 'Hero With A Thousand Faces' describes this by opening the monomyth with the hero in his everyday world. Further anthropological myth commentators have talked about a story being the discovery of something wrong with the everyday world which the hero will fix with their heroism. The rest of the hero myth describes, basically, how you shovel the hero into so much shit that when they overcome it the reader is pumping the air and hollering support for the hero. Why the sudden sympathy from the audience? Because, well, if that asshole could beat all the odds and triumph against evil then, hey, maybe there's hope for you too. So, if you're going to give your hero hell then at the outset they can be as flawed as you like. Flaws make for relief, at the outset they allow the reader to identify with the hero and then you can tell them that they transcend assholeness through struggle.

The second solution is to make the hero so blandly inoffensive that no one cares either way what happens to them allowing you to concentrate on the cool helpers and villains. The example that springs instantly to mind is Labyrinth. There was some murmuring in all

the making of stuff about Jennifer Connelly's character being 'selfish' at the outset or 'childish' but essentially that was just smoke. No. What you watch Labyrinth for is all the muppets. In fact any cinematic story, or literary adventure, that has a mind-stretching supporting cast tends to have a hero who is the very epitome of bland, so as not to put someone too vibrant into such a vibrant setting and avoid clashes. This does work particularly well in children's fiction where a child can imprint themselves on a bland child character so it is like they are having the adventure in the child's place cf. Alice, and Norton Juster's supremely entertaining The Phantom Tollbooth.

The major problem with the bland route is that if we like to receive stories about people who are definitely not you but the author has handed you the bland then you feel a bit cheated. You feel you can't engage with the hero character and hence the story is kind of unsatisfying.

Scabbed Wings has a good mixture of strengths and weaknesses in this regard. To start with the strengths: Sasha is indeed put through hell (literally) and when she ascends to the throne of heroism it is a true reward. She has examined her own strengths and weaknesses, she has over come trials and troubles, she has fought her way through to the end with tooth and claw and when she gets out of hell we are with her. Ra ra Sasha! If you want to probe into the less effective parts of Sasha's journey then you need only reference the monomyth the stages of the myth are followed in the main and the bits that SK didn't really plan to include, as usual, crowbar their way into the story anyway because the monomyth is part of humanity. To break it down:

The Everyday World: Sasha comes home from work, a bit of back story, and then her hubby, Luke, shows up and introduces the Ouija board segueing into...

The Call To Action: This sequence runs from the Ouija Board scene right through to Sasha's sacrifice on the altar. It reveals Sasha's flaw, something we can all identify with in some measure; Saha is complacent and willing to be submissive to her husband to preserve equilibrium because she loves him. Her life seems to be okay. It seems to need

no adjustment or change. It seems to be all rosy from point A. This is, in fact, one of the strongest things about the novel and the application of the horror heroes journey handled deftly. In horror the journey of the hero is imposed, not sought out. In Scabbed Wings there are characters who seek out the evil (see Helpers) but for our core protagonists the evil comes from outside and forces itself into their life. Sasha has a destiny and it is this destiny that cannot be ignored. It is interesting that the discussion is intimately tied in to the process of planning for a second child. It becomes clear that Sasha could not have borne a second child until her destiny was fulfilled. This means that there was a fly in the ointment from square one. Sasha just didn't know that fly existed.

Crossing The First Threshold: Sasha's sacrifice.

The Gate Guardian: The Thespian Sasha dispatches upon crossing into Abaddon, mixed with her encounter with Winker, the first time she sees the Wolves and her slow realisation that she is dead, bracketed nicely by the device of 'The Madness' although this merges with...

The Path of Trials: Essentially the rest of the time in Abaddon up until the final confrontation.

Nadir-Symbolic Death/The Meeting With The Goddess: Sasha discovers, of course, that she is the goddess, mother, in her encounter with the Chyldren. At that time she undergoes a symbolic transformation from the weak, accepting woman she was at the beginning to inherit the warrior spirit she exhibits in the remainder of the novel.

Apotheosis/Father Battle/The World Navel - The confrontation with Abaddon. This takes place at the ultimate narrative junction. All the characters are united at one location at one time separated only by a barrier of life/death. The Apotheosis allows the dissolving of this barrier.

Refusal of Return - Throughout the Sasha in Abaddon section it is made clear she is

dead, there is no return to the world of the living. In becoming the Goddess (and saving Skatman's familiar) she inherits the true power to return to the world unharmed. So her refusal to return is the refusal of her destiny described in the path of trials.

Flight - The Skatman assumes the responsibility for flight, the prologue details his own escape to Abaddon, his return and Sasha's return are one and it is Skatman's return that holds the symbolic weight as the Skatman returns, a primal force of justice.

Master of Two Worlds - Cunningly the Skatman represents, therefore, the supernatural end of Sasha's journey. Sasha returns to her normal life with wisdom of the worlds beyond. Although this presents further problems I will examine later.

The Freedom to Live - Sasha's battle wins the Edwards family this luxury.

So as we can see Sasha undergoes the journey and therefore qualifies as a card carrying hero. Luke, on the other hand, ah, Luke. The flawed anti-hero of the piece. Luke cannot really lay claim to that title although he does have his own hero's journey. The problem is that Sasha's journey is physical, her battles are physical and physical confrontation is an effective device for a visceral understanding of the trials. The Matrix fell down in this respect. As the trilogy continued the physical aspects of the battle became more like symbolic representation of spiritual conflict in an overt way. In the original Matrix Neo's journey could be read on a symbolic level (and has been ad nauseam) but essentially you could just watch it to see people beating seven shades of shit out of each other. By *Revolutions* you were kindly informed by the Wachowskis that you should be watching a lecture on world religion and the battles were like a visual aid in the outlining of some kind of mythical manifesto.

In the same way Luke's journey is not a journey of physical confrontation in the violent sense but more a morose examination of a battle with the inner sensual world of self-doubt and self-pity. Luke is the weaker partner and this is explicit in the text. Luke cannot survive without Sasha. Indeed when Sasha leaves he descends into a morass of self-pity.

Eventually he rouses himself to fight the cults and his helper summons the witch hunter. From which point Buck Wyld is there to take care of the physical side of things leaving Luke to stand in Wyld's shadow going 'Hey, cool!'.

But that's not the whole story. In order to cover a short gap in time of Sasha's journey Luke falls into the evil clutches of Genaya. Genaya actually fulfills a role in Sasha's story. She becomes a synthesis of all of Sasha's early weaknesses. The way she ensnares Luke is to prostrate herself before Luke and convince him she needs Luke as much as Luke needs some kind of emotional ego massage. It is only when Luke realises that this is a manipulation that Buck Wyld shows up and torches her. This mirrors Sasha's sudden realisation of her own independence, power and beauty.

Unfortunately the net effect of this conflict is that Luke doesn't really grow at all. Buck Wyld is like his kick ass alter ego. Buck will do things that Luke won't so Luke never really gets to grips with his own nature. Luke does not undergo a baptism by fire in the world of the dead so he remains pretty much unchanged by the experience of the novel's events.

This leaves us with a big problem at the end. Sasha has outgrown Luke. Of course the narrative would have us believe, as is required, that happiness was achieved and the quest was fulfilled. The subliminal cues are there. In the last chapter Sasha is near to her daughter and her role as all powerful goddess mother is restated and where is Luke? Out at work. Not part of the happy picture. Luke is now not necessary to Sasha. Not that necessity is the strongest basis of a relationship but the true resolution would have been to have Luke also undergo the hero's trials, for SK to shovel him deeper and deeper into the shit as the novel continued (yeah his wife died big deal, Sasha actually DID die now that's worse) until at the end they became to coin a phrase the uberfamily. This did not resolve. So we get to experience the strength of the hero's journey and a less effective counterpart to that journey in our two protagonists.

The final two chapters of the review cover the underlying subtext of the book. Essentially what the book is 'about' from a foundational philosophical standpoint. The two parts of this

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subtext deal with SK's well publicised attitudes towards authority and the cult of authority and the scabbed serpahim Abaddon, the metaphysical core of the novel.

Authority & The Cults

I guess the majority of the readers of 'Scabbed Wings' will know what SK thinks of the authorities. So there are few surprises in the depiction of authority in the novel.

The questions raised here are about the nature of true authority and power and the contrast with idols and false gods. The rather pessimistic view of reality in TSWOA is that our universe is ruled over by amoral creatures known as seraphim and that the seraphim Abaddon is not just amoral but actually evil.

The metaphor employed in the book reads the human race as livestock of the order of poultry and that the seraphim are like chicken farmers. Abaddon is a particularly twisted chicken farmer who has brainwashed his chickens into killing other chickens in his name. Absent from this picture is the benevolent chicken farmer, the animal activist, who wishes to guard the chickens purely off some inner sense of chicken rights. No white knight will protect the chickens from the machinations of Abaddon, if the chickens want to protect themselves they need to tool up.

As I said earlier I cannot believe in absolutes of good and evil when applied to tangible things. No person is evil but all people are capable of evil. Rationalisation is the enemy of good. If you can rationalise an act then you can perform that act. This is also reflected in the book's ethic when applied to the rule of the cult. Cults, the book states, pre-package and serve rationalisations to their members so the members do not have to wrestle with issues for themselves. I myself am sympathetic to the view that such practices are reprehensible but I have to accept that I am a big old cognition addict. I analyse everything and when I draw up my plans it is always having analysed the situation into the ground.

The problem comes when you meet someone who regards thought as a chore the way I regard exercise as a chore. I will only exercise if I can fit it into some sort of context where it becomes acceptable to exercise. For example, I was a hell of a lot fitter when I was an actor than I am now because I thought so much about my roles that I didn't notice the

exercise that is part and parcel of the preparation for that role. I eat less now because I spend so much of my time thinking that I barely have time to eat. If I can tie something into thinking then I can do it but otherwise I find it more difficult.

So the problem for those people who are life's analysts, who react to situations on the basis of prolonged and sometimes painful personal thought is how to deal with people who can't go the analytic distance. Philosophy introduces us to the concept of the meme. A meme is a unit of thought, an idea that is so widespread and distinct that it seems to have a life outside the heads of the people who think it. A prime example is the Messiah meme. All cultures, and people, are born with the idea of a messianic figure hardwired into them. It is a meme. The idea of God is a meme, even an atheist has to have a God to not believe in. A genetic atheist would be someone who can't even really comprehend the idea of God someone to whom you could not explain God. That seems like a ridiculous concept, even people who disagree that God exists have some kind of idea of what it is they don't believe in. If they didn't then they couldn't not believe in it.

Strangely the idea of Satan is not a meme in the genetic sense. It is conceivable that a sentient being could not really understand the concept of tangible evil. This is because Satan is a reaction to God, Satan comes from the hebrew STN or 'adversary/barrier'. Therefore the existence of Satan is pretty much contingent on the existence (at least in thought) of God.

In the same way Abaddon is here depicted as the tangible form of evil that is opposed to the works of a God who doesn't exist. I shall discuss this further in the next chapter. Having formed this basis it is possible to examine the human faces of good and evil in the novel.

In the previous chapter I discussed our heroes, in any sensible discussion of heroism heroes must have the authority of a hero. It is up to the author to define what that authority is. One of the contributing factors to the novels weaknesses is that this authority is derived reactively rather than proactively. The heroes authority in TSWOA is a reaction against the

idols and false gods of the world's authorities.

Increasingly the police forces of the world in fantastic fiction are regarded as ineffectual in the application of authority. Evil grows and the police maintain order. This is because the public face of the police force is indeed involved purely with the maintenance of public order. The danger of the police system is the notion of a police state where the definition of public order is so narrow that any form of free speech and so forth is prohibited under law and the police become a tool of overarching oppression. There are those who would argue that the world is now on the brink of becoming a totalitarian one world police state. I would contend that the world has forever been teetering on this brink. The fight is important.

The fact remains that in the UK, North America, most of Europe and Canada the rights that grant freedom slightly outweigh the laws that shut it down and the voices, like SK, that pronounce doom are vital to maintain that benevolent balance. The hope is that with time human nature will evolve to a point where that brink recedes and we are all free in some meaningful sense. The fear is that we will topple over that brink and become no more than battery hens or batteries in some gigantic machine.

Regardless, in relatively liberal societies the advance guard of legal authority, the police force, are seen as little more than an active beauracracy. When it comes to the important battles it must be left to a higher authority, like the Scabbed Wings ironically named GOD.

The cults, on the other hand, are seen as a tangible face of evil. Evil organisations peopled with brainwashed zombies who are wiling to perpetrate atrocities in the name of... memes. A cult is a collective based around a faulty meme. Memes that have, perhaps, been constructed 'my country, right or wrong', 'a man who disagrees with the party cannot be right', 'me first and everyone else can go to hell', 'we serve a higher power'.

So the fight against cults in TSWOA is essentially a fight against certain thought patterns, unhealthy thought patterns that sicken, pervert or weaken the human spirit. The police are

a shadow, making sure that only the Buck Wyld's of our world can tote a firearm with relative impunity. Ironically, as we have seen, SK polices his own real world character in the same way. It is a perennial problem of the modern novel, if you want a hero to be Joe Blow one moment and the messiah the next you have to make some believable route for the transition. If you are not going to lionise the authorities by making your hero an officer of the law then they need to be something like a Private Investigator, but even this seems wildly romantic, so if your guy's going to be, say and electrician then you're in trouble. How you transform your everyday schmuck into a hero is more tortuous now than it has ever been. Perhaps this is why heroic fantasy where an honest blacksmith can just pick up a sword and cleave their way to greatness is so popular.

We cannot fight today's evil with a sword or a gun unless we are Buck Wyld. So this very conception of the patterns of authority seems to place us in a position which leads to Luke Edwards inevitably stunted hero's journey. The fact of the matter is that if Luke had been constructed in such a way that he was allowed to turn into a cult-killin' super warrior in the real world then that eventuality could have been side stepped. If some of the reasoning might have been a little far fetched SK actually built himself an escape hatch. His wife, his love, mother of his child had a destiny and maybe that destiny extended to having a guardian in the shape of her husband. It's a popular dynamic and I have used it myself and plan to use it again. Luke derives, therefore the same authority as his wife, the authority of birthright. This could have resolved the 'ineffectual male lead' problem nicely.

An alternative to this could have been to make the real world mirror to the Abaddon adventures take place on a real world stage. Luke chooses the way of the political manipulator to bring down the cult. He chooses to camouflage himself as an Abaddon cultist and manipulates the organisation audaciously from the inside. That route, however, adds a heavy freight of plotting and exposition into the structure of the novel. Besides it would be the work of a genius far in excession of my talent to manipulate two such different stories effectively side by side. The only time I have ever encountered something even vaguely reminiscent of such a structure is Iain M. Banks's patchy Inversions and even that cheats somewhat in the application of this method.

I point to all these possible 'solutions' to 'problems' in the narrative to illustrate that a closer examination of the authors own political philosophy is demanded in the construction of a book that will deal with the fundamental issues of good and evil, chaos and order. No doubt SK's own political belief system did come under scrutiny as the novel evolved, had it not then the allegorical elements of the novel could have been ridiculous rather than fascinating. If you see political philosophy as the most complex end of a spectrum of philosophical issues that begins with the problems of good and evil then you can see that the discussion of the novel's features must end with an examination of its moral philosophy and the big bad: Abaddon itself.

Abaddon - The Land Of The Dead & The Fallen Angel

In the last chapter I touched on the problem of Abaddon. To examine the problem of Abaddon it is necessary to look at the whole concept of Abaddon and hence the metaphysics of the book itself.

In the extensive detailing of the world of Abaddon it becomes clear that the moral framework of this universe is open and easily interpreted. Abaddon is a mirror of the real world. Abaddon himself serves as a mirror to Sasha because they share his power. The power manifests through the existence of objects and their mirrors, mirrors created in Abaddon through love or desire.

All objects in the universe, we are told, are ultimately composed of energy. A mere handful of decades ago such a concept would have been viciously attacked by the scientific community. Energy, they would argue, is a physical concept that represents a definite thing. There is nothing spiritual about energy. To say that everything is made of energy is an unhelpful and confusing definition of reality.

With advances in quantum physics and the advent of M-Theory the position that the universe is made out of energy is, perhaps, the least outrageous claim made about the nature of reality. Our previous position is, it turned out, that everything is made out of nothing that the universe is the way it is by dumb chance. So we can safely say that, yes, everything is made out of energy. The question, then, is what do we mean by energy?

In the universe of TSWOA energy is some kind of pagan life force and morality either serves or reviles that life force. The abominations of the Abaddon mirror world are those who have warped or perverted the purpose of the life force, procreation, being a mother or a father. A very Catholic interpretation of morality. A full rundown ensues of abominations; who used the life force to build their own ego, the Thespians; who squandered it on becoming an object of fantasy, the Harlots; who were cut off before their life force was organised for the perpetuation of the species, the Chyldren and indeed the Wraiths; or

who denied the natural urges of the life force itself, the Hallows. The worst thing that it seems possible to do with life force is to waste it and those who deny life force are condemned to the streets of Abaddon the world of the dead but not departed.

We also see the only alternatives left to Abaddon creatures, a grey immortality or consumption by evil beasts who utterly destroy some sort of individual essence in the process of consumption. In common with many posthumous/metaphysical fantasies the question of what happens when you 'really' die is left alone save to say that you slip into some Nirvanic intangible state your life energy well spent.

Now I cannot say that this is not the truth. The joy of a stoutly constructed metaphysical fantasy is that it challenges you to disagree that this is not the way things are. It challenges you to say that this does not adequately account for reality in the way that unproven scientific theories also do. In many ways TSWOA succeeds in this mission. However, the important thing is where it fails.

The fact is that the land of Abaddon is a pure anarchy, evil surrounds and enfolds. Life is hard and its termination never less than grim. Abaddon is a land without hope whose creator and engine is a rotten seraphic corpse. Hope, at least in Abaddon, is indeed a gentle lie. Bummer. Let's all go slash our wrists.

Into this bleak landscape is inserted the antidote to Abaddon. Sasha, the saviour, the warrior mother, whose life force is the light counterpart to Abaddon's own power of darkness. Then there's a problem. The intuitive solution to the Abaddon problem is for the Goddess to lead a full on attack against the forces of Abaddon, big Lord of The Rings style confrontational battle the forces of evil are vanquished and the hobbits get knighted at the end (so to speak).

The problem is that Lord of The Rings is feudal in its political philosophy and SWoA tends towards something a little more libertarian and anarchic. The police become a new problem because when one is so averse to the forces of public order and the forces of

military might how can you legitimate turning your libertarian, pagan, anarchic goddess into a military leader sending troops into battle? The answer: you can't. The solution to this problem?

Well, in the novel this is fudged. Abaddon becomes a figurehead, a power centre that Sasha has the power to destroy and that pretty much resolves the Abaddon issue, the Chyldren make their own choice to aid her in her quest. So everything is sidestepped neatly. Perhaps this is why the end confrontation is rapid and slips into vagueness at times. It is the paper that covers the cracks. In the real world the forces of authority on the edge, represented by Buck Wyld, Agent of GOD are dealt with by making Wyld a kind of outlaw agency. He is given mandate to fight the cults but the public order police know nothing about him. He is a fugitive and a warrior for right. Wyld is a cell.

it is indeed a very tricky problem for the anti-authority writer. Police procedural has to create secret covens of the law of the land such as the agency in Joe Ahearn's Ultraviolet or the battling Vatican of Van Helsing. Private Eyes were a standard for many years but people rarely pay to have murders investigated privately and when they do it is often cold cases. The killer can just deny everything to a PIs face and the PI has no power. If, as in the novels, the villain handily admitted everything to the PI and then tried to kill the PI then the PI would be able to return fire as they do in the stories. Stories, however are not real life and the PI novel is a set of conventions that allow a heroic fantasy to play out in the real world.

There are no solid solutions to this problem as it is borne out of the author's personal politics. I myself have taken to a partisan personal politics that operates on a system of independent cells who are franchised to a belief system. The only problem with this is that cells can oppose one another (as I believe SK has found from personal experience) and this would mean that the belief system can breed personal war. This is one of those problems to which there is no simple narrative solution. So the only advice is to provide the intuitive solution. We have to live with the fact that reality is not a story. So rather than embarrassedly try to marry your story solutions to your own personal politics in some half-

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assed unsatisfactory conclusion go for the politics of fantasy. Battles are cool. Allegory is comforting and aspirational. Throw off the trappings of political debate and just go for the thrill. In the resolution the audience demand their gentle lie so there's no point only half baking it.

With all of this in mind let us review and consolidate the view of SWoA I have painted and see, therefore, what I made of Sean Kennedy's fascinating metaphysical fantasy.

Conclusion

In concluding I have to return to my reason for this mammoth deconstruction of 'The Scabbed Wings of Abaddon' in the first place. The purpose of fiction.

The Publishing Behemoth has almost killed printed media by acting as some kind of quality control on literary works. The accepted wisdom is that we, as readers, must be protected from flawed novels, we must be protected from works that have not passed the test of the Publishing Behemoth. It is true that if you watch a movie that sucks you have only lost two hours and if you listen to a song that sucks five minutes, you can look at a painting that sucks for ten seconds or less. The problem is that a novel represents a significant investment of time.

The fact is I like to invest my time in something worthwhile. I just got through watching 18 hours of Alias, no less shoddy than any bad novel in its resolution.

So is this a paean to a novel I think is bad?

Of course not.

This book did not touch me deeply with its subject matter, its characters, its philosophy, morality or metaphysics. It was entertaining but it didn't in and of itself get me where it hurt. Importantly though, I could see that Sean Kennedy is a new author with the power to do all these things and the e-publishing arena is an active, organic forum for that talent to develop and strengthen to pure literary soul food. The paper publishing industry, conversely, is a stagnant arena where homogeneity and repetition are rewarded and experimentation a foolish and expensive crime.

If the novel is about affecting the soul with some deep arrangement of thoughts presented to you as an entertaining literary structure The Scabbed Wings of Abaddon failed. But then, so has every fiction book I've ever read, without exception. The difference is that the

very fact of The Scabbed Wings of Abaddon and its existence did touch something inside me. It opened up my eyes to the novel's potential to do that. A novel could be exciting, a novel could be something that affects you, a novel could change a reader's life. I think the mission of the author is to have that very effect. Like I said at the beginning Sean Kennedy is treading a new road. A road I decided to join him on. A road where the author is a part of his or her audience, writing for them without 'professional editors' creating a barrier inbetween. It is a brave move because you have to take the criticism on the chin. But it is the only way an author can be more than a slave to the money machine.

A novel should empower, a novel should set off thought, a novel should open questions, a novel should be more than something to read on an airplane or while on holiday. A novel should speak to us on a level that no other media can. No book produced by the Publishing Behemoth can succeed in this because by the time you hand over the money to the assistant in the bookstore that novel has been beaten into a pleasing homogenous lump of fiction that is guaranteed not to be arguable with. I can't argue, as I already stated, with a published novel. The amount of difficulty for that author to get published in the first place and for them to become a bestseller demands and requires some sort of respect.

At least it does at present.

I can't take a best selling author aside and give him editorial comment. He can wipe away my issues with his work in a nanosecond by just saying: 'Yeah, but it got published and it's a best seller'. SK can't do that. The job of an editor or agent for the traditional Publishing Behemoth would be to put the boot in to The Scabbed Wings of Abaddon because it might not be a couple of hundred thousand reader's cup of tea. That's not my agenda.

I have done my very best to deconstruct the tale for further discussion. That's the exciting thing about the novel. I haven't said half, quarter, a tenth of what I could say about this novel. Sean Kennedy has put something of his most noble thoughts, aspirations and beliefs into literary form and offered it to be given away.

If I were Sean Kennedy I would seriously consider getting his galley proof .pdf off to an e-publisher and making Scabbed Wings Publish On Demand. I would happily toss out every paperback I own, buy a copy of Scabbed Wings and have it alone on my shelf. Why? Because this book has changed my life by the fact of its existence. This is what I want writing to be about. I hope someone writes a thesis on one of my novels when it is published. I hope that one person is as inspired by the fact of its existence as I am by 'The Scabbed Wings of Abaddon'.

This is the way to approach a novel. The reader has to be ready to read critically and the writer has to be ready to receive the criticism. The edges, the failures, the weaknesses, make the novel more than mass produced paperback slush. I enjoyed the process of reading, examining and reviewing this work more than any other book. The real vindication of my views will be if Sean Kennedy reads, considers and attempts to integrate these views into his next novel. That way at least myself and Sean K are starting to reform the publishing industry into what it should be, in my opinion, a forum where the debate is too deep for the soundbite media of our current generation.

Being able to read works like Scabbed Wings and critiques like this could reform the capabilities of our minds. There has been much complaint that MTV had withered the attention spans of our generation. This kind of publishing and criticism has the potential to increase that concentration span again.

Here's hoping.

Excellent work Sean, as usual you rule.