



Gunpowder

Joe Hill

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Because he didn't have The Talent - because of his random, pointless, terrible, irrevocable difference - Charley's brothers could be brutal to him, if they could get him alone. Even Jake could be cruel, could be talked into cruelty, if it was presented properly. Or no, that wasn't right. No one could talk Jake into anything. He was serenely above the persuasive force of social pressure. And yet it was Jake's weakness, that he could talk himself into doing terrible things, if he felt some greater, probably illusory, good might be served.

So it happened one day when she went with Jake and Niles and Charley to service the core, which wasn't its good old self these days. Every few months it would get stuck, just when it was shifting into an automated maintenance cycle, so that it couldn't restore software or optimize the system... or shut down the rods to dump heat. Which meant the cycle had to be completed manually.

"What happens if the rods overheat?" Jake asked Elaine once.

"About a third of the planet would go up in a flash of light bright enough to blind God," she told him.

Welcome to Gunpowder, a 22,600-word novella from Joe Hill... set in the far reaches of space on a small planet that serves as a home for a very special band of children.

Gunpowder Details

Date : Published December 2008 by PS Publishing (first published 2008)

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Author : Joe Hill

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From Reader Review Gunpowder for online ebook

Rachel says

This book is a lot of fun. It tells the story of a group of boys and their guardian, Elaine, who live on a distant planet. Their job is to take the essentially blank canvas of the unformed planet and create a world that can sustain life. I really liked this idea and was happy to read a book again where I could see the images in my head. I think that's what Hill does really well in all his books. Even in the most chaotic scenes, I have a clear picture of what is going on. Hill doesn't get tripped up on a fancy way of telling the story, he just tells a good story. This book is rather short and the only one of Hill's works that is difficult to find but I would say it is worth the search. I only hope he comes back to these characters in the future. I'd like to hear more about them as they "grow" from being teenage boys.

Kandice says

This is not at all what I was expecting. That's not to say I didn't enjoy it.

On some unidentified planet, at some unidentified date, there are thirty young boys and a mother figure of sorts, with the task of readying this hostile place for habitation. These boys are capable of amazing things using only their minds. We come to understand this "talent" as psyforming. The mother figure, Elaine, is the only adult, and in reality, the only actual human, on the planet and she is there to raise and steer these young men into what they have been bred to be. They have a seemingly calm, albeit boisterous, existence until someone, Jackson, shows up to relieve Elaine of her duty.

It's very, very obvious that this is only the beginning of a long story. Since this was released in 2008, it's equally obvious we may never get the rest, but I have to hope so. Much like his father, Hill shows us he is capable of not only setting a scene, but building a world in relatively few words. He makes us care about this band of boys in a way that seems impossible with so little.

Hill sets up this world so he can imagine out of this world things and creatures so fantastical that I wish I could see them. I absolutely love Hill's Locke & Key series and feel this would lend itself well to a graphic format, perhaps with an illustrator other than Gabriel since the heart of this story is the organic as opposed to the architectural. Jae Lee comes to mind.

I've pined over this book for years and am thrilled to own it, but it will be an empty thrill if I never get more of the story. If I do, I will probably add that extra star it deserves and I have possibly held out for sheer frustration.

David says

Welcome to R2, a hostile planet where the deserts where at least a third sulphur and sodium nitrate, the ingredients of Gunpowder. It is home to thirty special boys and Elaine, their handler, who they call Mom. All the boys, apart from Charley, have a Talent for changing the world so it can provide food for worlds. It is what they're created for, so what happens when they have ideas of their own, or the military want them to

create a weapons supply planet because of a terror attack?

In Gunpowder, Joe Hill has created a lean, fat-free, entertaining story with themes that echoes the 9/11 attacks, and growing up with the notion that you can create anything with your life – an idea instilled from a young age –this time literally:

“Jackson said the skyboats had been hijacked by solar extremists... They had grievances. They said what had happened to Killian was holy and just and was only the beginning.”

“Their powers were engineered to burnout in their twenties, a harrowing passage that would kill several of them...”

There are more subtle musings on the nature of love, bonds between people, as well as cruelty, and destructiveness.

At age fourteen, the boys are starting to come into their own. Their creations are wondrous, but dangerous too. Jake has just created grass in the desert, with each blade literally being blades sharp enough to cut through leather.

If there is something I wonder about, it is how the boys learned swear words, or even think of dangerous things, but I suppose a full education is the best way to fuel imagination.

Verdict: The main cast of characters had distinct natures, and behaved believably like children, and their mother, and the novella has some of the best action sequences, and imagery I've imagined (probably helped along by the wonderful cover, even though the Gunpowder in my mind looked different). The length of the story ensured that it doesn't have any excess, but runs a wide spectrum, and lives up to the maxim: Always leave them wanting more.

mark monday says

WHEN WILL THIS BE WIDELY AVAILABLE?

for less than \$50, that is.

come on, Joe Hill. I want to read this! let me, just let me.

Josh says

this should've been a full lenght - great premise.

Stephen Theaker says

I read a lot of horror in my early teens, when I was still dependent for reading material on the adults around me and the library. So that meant lots of James Herbert and Stephen King, and unfortunately some Shaun Hutson. Once I got to the point that I could buy more books for myself than I could possibly read, horror fell to the wayside - I'd enjoyed Herbert and King, but my favourites were Vance, Moorcock, Asimov, Farmer, Dick.

Which is all by way of explanation for why this was the first book I'd read by Joe Hill. I'd taken Heart-Shaped Box and 20th Century Ghosts out from the library, but never got around to reading them.

But now science fiction fans can find out what all the fuss is about. This superb novella took hold of my attention from the very first page and never released it. If I didn't read it in a single sitting, I've no memory of what else I was doing that day! It's a familiar scenario - gifted kids and the military that wants to exploit them - but the writing is so wonderful, the character touches so exquisite, the narrative so brilliantly focused.

The story starts out small - the relationships between the boys and their handler/mother - but opens out to so much more. I won't say what, because it should all come as a surprise - but it's all cool stuff. It's tragic, moving, epic and glorious, and all in a mere eighty pages.

It may still take me a while to read Joe Hill's horror works, but if he continues to write science fiction he'll very quickly become one of my favourite authors. If Stephen King had been an out-and-out science fiction writer, would he have been writing science fiction as wonderful as this for the last twenty years? It doesn't bear thinking about! I'll just look forward to the books I'll be reading for the next twenty years!

Standback says

What happens when you give a pack of children a planet?

That's where Joe Hill's novella, *Gunpowder*, starts out. Not having children rule, of course, they're not meant to lead or administer. Besides, they're pretty much the only living things on the planet. That is, in fact, why they're there: to create all the living things. These children are psyformers, able to create life out of thin air, to weave DNA to their whims and rewrite reality. Their job is to terraform the planet, turning it from a desolate sulphurous wasteland into a world they would want to live in.

Yet Elaine, their sole guardian, teacher, and de facto mother, is painfully aware that these are only children. Their decisions now, exuberant and fiercely competitive, will shape this world—and what kind of world will that be? The novella begins with Jack, the charismatic leader among the children, unveiling the colony's first lasting creation—grass in the desert. It's beautiful, charming, and extremely dangerous—Jack names it “knifegrass,” since he's chosen for its blades to be hard and sharp. “Don't touch it,” he tells Elaine, “It's nice to look at, but anyone goes for a walk in it is coming back in ribbons.” And so Elaine worries about the children she loves.

Gunpowder is a superb novella. It's gripping and eminently readable; this is one of those great stories that has you racing through it to see what comes next, and enjoying every moment. It's also virtually flawless; not once did I run into something that distracted or annoyed me. For this reviewer, that's a rare experience, and one to be appreciated. Perhaps the most helpful, indicative comment I can make is that this is an SF novella I can sincerely recommend to anyone. I'd be hard pressed to find a reader who wouldn't enjoy following Elaine's devotion, the odd character of the children's misfit, Charley, the casually rich writing, and the exciting plot that follows.

One of the things Hill does best here is make promises—setting them up, and paying them back. It's that little click you feel when something comes together, when something suddenly makes sense, or you realize you were subconsciously expecting what just surprised you. *Gunpowder* has many of these, some subtle, some less so, and each adds to the immersion and the excitement of reading it.

In terms of idea or theme, Hill does a surprisingly good job of shifting focus slightly every couple of chapters, yet keeping all the threads alive, tightly connected, and building up into a unified whole. I liked this because I think dwelling on any one element for too long—Jack’s leadership, Charley as an outcast, Elaine’s task of guiding the children in the terraforming project—would probably become repetitive quickly. Instead, he introduces each subject for long enough to interest us, doesn’t overstay his welcome, then moves on to the next thing—always weaving in what we’ve already seen, and offering some foreshadowing of what’s to come. It’s very effective, and by the time we reach the crisis point, the tension is immense, coming from every direction at once. There’s a certain dialogue going on here with William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, returning to the theme of children’s natural enthusiasm, cruelty, and carelessness. In *Gunpowder*, though, both children and adult are more aware of this effect, and actively choose to encourage or discourage it.

In conclusion, I’ll repeat what I said earlier: I’d recommend *Gunpowder* to any reader. Kudos to Mr. Hill, and here’s hoping this novella finds the audience it deserves.

Noah Soudrette says

My hat’s off to Joe Hill once again. Here he manages to create both a heart warming and frightening look at a strange group of children and their sometimes unwilling mother. Hill slides deftly into his science fiction shoes just as easily as he does his horror shoes. I’ve liked his novel, his short story collection, and his comic. Now add to that his novella and the man is unstoppable.

Jeffrey Keeten says

”Beyond Jake, the ground was blown into sandy hillocks and dunes, a crescent of rolling beach, stretching down toward what should’ve been a sea. Of course there was no sea, and never had been. Instead there were only miles of hardpan, yawning away toward the faraway scarp of the crater rim.”

The planet is officially called R2, but the boys call it Gunpowder. They are there to turn this desolate planet into a breadbasket. They are psyformers. Their existence, though met with hard resistance from religious groups nurtured by fear, is considered the crowning achievement of mankind. There are thirty of them, all with emerging gifts except one, Charley.

*”None of the boys knew what she was looking at when she pointed an ultraviolet into their eyes...that there were informational codes projected there that could only be read under diffuse UV. These codes changed from time-to-time, there were thousands of them, and it was necessary to consult a vast diagnostic program to make sense of them. But Charley’s optical displays were always the same, and required no interpretation. It was **VOID** now and it had been **VOID** since he was eighteen months old.”*

Elaine is their caretaker, a woman that has raised them, named them, and surprisingly did not go bat shit crazy trapped on a planet with thirty boys for fourteen years. They call her mom.

Jake is the most gifted, the one the boys emulate. Instead of building a core of the most promising boys around him he has chosen Charley and a sullen boy named Nils to be his friends. This creates strife born out

of jealousy, an upheaval in the natural order of things, but it keeps the social dynamic from evolving out of the control of Elaine. If Jake had brought the most powerful of his brothers together she would have lost control even though the boys love her.

"But the dunes--the dunes. That morning they had been only mounds of bare sand, shifting every time the wind sighed. Now they bristled with clumps of high grass, tall dark stalks that hissed and seethed, sounding for all the world like whispering voices. The sound made Elaine think of a classroom of boys, her boys, and how sometimes, when they were taking a test, she would walk out into the hall, but then pause to listen, and the room behind her would fill up with a feverish whispering just like this. Jake had made grass grow where grass could not grow, could never grow. In the acre of sand before her, the world was no longer as it should be, as it had always been, but as Jake wanted it. Reality was a manuscript, recorded in rocks, gasses, DNA. Jake had just rewritten a few lines.

War breaks out between the people who created the boys and a disgruntled group of transplanted colonists. The creators decide they need to boys for something other than terraforming. They want them to start psyforming weapons. I was wondering why all of the psyformers are boys, but then when the woman arrives to take over their studies and has a "nice arse" I can see how distracting having young women around would be to a group of fourteen year old boys. It would be hard to keep them focused on creating with hormones swimming through the air.

Joseph Hillstrom King

Joe Hill had me hooked from the beginning and still has me hooked. There are three projected books in the Gunpowder series. This one was published in 2008 so he has obviously been distracted by other projects. If you have not read Joe Hill he is certainly someone to watch. He is a chip off the old block and has a chance to leave as deep a mark on publishing as his father. This book was published by a small publisher out of England called PS Publishing. The print run was 500 of which I have #56. The book is long sold out and copies available on the second hand market are fetching \$195 to \$255. Another testament to how collector's are looking at Joe Hill's future. Hopefully after the other editions are published, a collected version will be made available to the general public. It is a story arc that should be read by more people.

If you wish to see more of my most recent book and movie reviews, visit <http://www.jeffreykeeten.com>
I also have a Facebook blogger page at:<https://www.facebook.com/JeffreyKeeten>

Nick Cato says

Seven bio-engineered children (each with special powers) live on a desert planet. Their mission is to create an environment capable of growing food. Hope sparks when young Jake manages to create the planet's first field of grass---although it's razor-sharp texture is not to be touched.

The children develop their powers overseen by the fully-human adult Elaine, who has been stationed here with this unique group. The children are so close that they refer to her as "mom." After several years on "Gunpowder" (the name the children have given to their dusty planet), Officer Jackson (who has been sent to replace Elaine) arrives and informs the children that (not only) will they now be using their powers to create

advanced military weapons, but that she'll be replacing Elaine.

What follows in this brief scifi novella is a study of adoption, motherhood, siblings and how mankind's own creations can sometimes be more human than themselves.

Joe Hill fans are sure to enjoy this, despite it being a departure from the ghost stories that put him on the map. PS Publishing--as usual--has done a beautiful job with slick wrap-around cover art by Vincent Chong and paper of the highest quality, i.e. collectors will want this.

Tom Mueller says

I missed this one, but have ordered. From what I've read so far, I don't want to miss ANY Joe Hill works. Just arrived today, in mint, unread condition!

Hill is GOOD!

*****SPOILERS FOLLOW*****

It is very apparent in Gunpowder that Hill learned the lesson well from his father, that lesson being READ. In this short novella, Hill conjures Shakespeare, naming a distant and future world's moons after characters in The Tempest. That naming also forewarns the reader of the coming storm.

He quotes Arthur Clarke's 'Third Law'; "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.", in describing "The LeGuin Project", thereby bring A Wizard of Earthsea to mind. Implicit of course, is that the use of magic always has consequences that are very often extremely undesirable.

Highly recommended, if you're lucky enough to find a copy.

*****SPOILER ABOVE*****

Becky says

Yet another wonderful story from Joe Hill. I hope that he continues this story, because even in 81 short pages, he's managed to perfectly create these characters and make me care for them, and this novella is more like a prelude to a larger story. One that I absolutely want to read.

The world (or I should say universe) that Hill has created is fascinating, and brutal. Militaristic, scientific, political, but on this little world, nicknamed "Gunpowder" by these special boys, they have a job to do and a safe haven to do it in, with their guardian Elaine to watch over them.

When Elaine finds out that her orders have changed, and she's got to leave these boys, whom she raised from babies, in the hands of those who would seek to use them as weapon manufacturers and weapons themselves, well... all hell kinda breaks loose.

I really enjoyed this one... I wish there was more. I'll cross my fingers for another installment!

PS. The cover art is gorgeous! Wouldn't mind a graphic novel for this story... it would translate beautifully to that style. :)

Andrew says

Gunpowder is excellence from Joe Hill. This foray into science fiction has more than a few touches of fantasy. It isn't hard sci-fi by any means, but that isn't why you should read this. You should read this because in 81 pages Hill manages to give the reader some intensely human moments. I would say he does a better job in his novels and comics but it really is hard to care. I got chills when the title of the book was explained. That and the final scene will find your heart, break it, and make you say thank you.

Robert says

Excellent novella - I'm looking forward to more from this author

Lincoln says

I've read discussions about this book on Joe's blog from fall of last year, but it somehow slipped under my radar until last month. My heart leapt for joy when I discovered Joe had written a science fiction novella, and soared even higher when I found out it hadn't sold out.

Joe's latest prose book is a mere 80 pages long, but tells a great story of several genetically augmented children and their 'mother' sent to terraform a barren world for later colonization. They've spent the last fourteen years of their lives together and were just learning to make some pretty crazy stuff, like blades of grass that were really blades. This is Joe Hill, after all. Anyhow, when the military comes to send their mother away and take over the operation, the kids don't really take it all that well.

Joe once again produces excellent work here that not only entertained me but inspired me as a writer just as he did with 20th Century Ghosts. I've definitely learned something about the craft of writing novellas and I've only read it once. If I had to find the one chink in this book's wall, it's that there wasn't enough space to get into what the kids did for free time (except screw with Charlie), or if they had any aspirations behind being tools of mankind, or what drew Elaine to leave Earth and be the boys' 'mother'.

I honestly don't know if I'd have done anything different, though. Gunpowder would translate well to a graphic novel, and I hope it makes it into Joe's next collection of short work.
