

A FAREWELL TO

HELLBLAZER

By OWEN WILLIAMS

A look back at the DC comic that Hellblazed new trails over the last four decades.

It's better for the long-term health of the book to reinvent it periodically," said comics writer Warren Ellis in 1999, as he took over the reins of DC Comics' flagship horror title *Hellblazer*.

Fast-forward 14 years, and his words have a particular resonance, since *Hellblazer* has undergone the most radical and controversial shakeup in its history.

In fact, while its central character—

the cynical, manipulative, trenchcoated, chain-smoking magician John Constantine—will remain part of the DC Universe, both in his own rebooted series and as part of Justice League Dark, *Hellblazer* itself has ended. Issue #300, released in late February, marked the climax of the comic's extraordinary 25-year run. Constantine lives, but *Hellblazer*, sadly, is no more. Fango held a wake, and former *Hellblazer* writers Jamie Delano, Brian Azzarello, Mike Carey and Peter Milligan, along with new Constantine scribe Ray Fawkes, were happy to attend.

John Con-

stantine was created by the legendary Alan Moore in 1985, and first appeared in issue #37 of Moore's famous *Swamp Thing* run as a supporting character. His unremarkable first words were, "He's coming back, Judith." Later in the same issue, though, comes a speech bubble that now reads like a mission statement: "If you want answers, you'll have to keep up with me. Maybe I'll give you the answers. Maybe I won't." He introduces himself to *Swamp Thing*'s squeeze Abby as "a nasty piece of work."

His initial story arc saw him basically puppeteering the *Swamp Thing*—telling the creature to think of him as his manager—in a crusade against the Brujeria, an insidious black-magic chaos cult who have quietly taken over the world and are embarking on the destruction of heaven. It was *Swamp Thing*'s title, but the scene-stealing Constantine immediately became the story's engine. "It was a great moment," Carey remembers. "I was like,

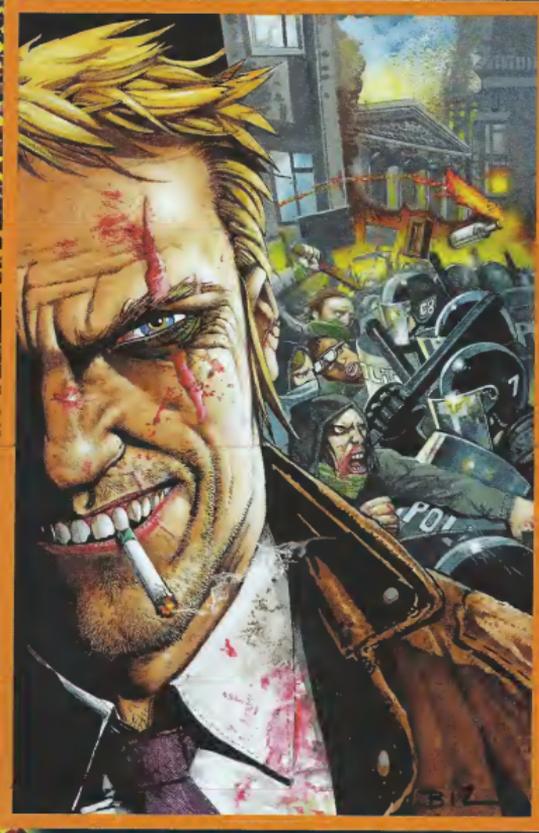


This year, Constantine walked away from his own series, but not out of the DC realm.

"Wow, who's this guy?" I was completely sold on Constantine, and when they gave him his own title, I was right there."

"My first reaction was that he looked like Sting!" laughs Azzarello, pointing up what these days seems a slightly embarrassing part of Constantine's origin: Moore claims the character arose from a request by *Swamp Thing* artists Stephen Bissette and John Totleben to write them a Sting-like character to draw (maybe they were big Police fans). "How could I fit Sting into *Swamp Thing*?" Moore mused in 1993. "I have an idea that most of the mystics in comics are generally older people, very austere, very proper in a lot of ways. They are not at all functional on the street. It struck me that it might be interesting for once to do an almost blue-collar warlock: somebody who was streetwise. Constantine started

He's usually only smiling on the outside: *Hellblazer*'s John Constantine.



to grow out of that."

He grew to the extent that, in 1988, he was given his own series (initially to be called *Hellraiser* until a certain Clive Barker film forced a rethink). With Moore disinclined to write it himself, the job fell to Delano, a fellow resident of Northampton, England.

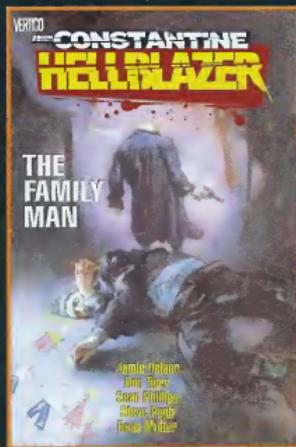
"Alan had already given me an introduction at Marvel UK in the early '80s, where I succeeded him in writing *Night Raven* and *Captain Britain*," Delano recalls. "But if, as I suspect, he put in a word in my favor when [editor] Karen Berger was looking for a British writer to develop John Constantine at DC, he was gracious enough not to mention the fact. Karen Berger has never been a pushover, so I assume she saw at least enough merit in my outline to give me a shot at it."

"I used to show those early issues to my friends who didn't read comics, and say, 'This is what you're missing!' "
--Mike Carey, writer

Constantine, as embellished by Delano, took on the small bits of background that Moore had sketched—in particular a disastrous episode in Newcastle involving a magical ritual, a demon and the death of an abused child, which causes the young magician to suffer a nervous breakdown and spend time in a mental institution. But it was Delano who revealed that Constantine was born in Liverpool; that his mother died in childbirth and his twin brother perished in the womb; that he had a fractious relationship with his father; that he pursued his sorcerous education in London and San Francisco in the 1960s; and that in the '70s, he had been part of a punk band called Mucous Membrane. "Alan gave me invaluable advice and insight," Delano says, "but Constantine pretty soon took over those mentoring duties himself, and from then on, I just wrote down what that bastard told me."

Delano's run was viciously satirical, deeply rooted in Margaret Thatcher's Britain of the 1980s and taking in neo-Nazis, demon city-boys in London's financial district—topical again today!—and evil freemasons in Parliament. Constantine also goes on the road with a group of traveling environmental activists, the so-called "New Age Travellers" vilified by the British tabloid press in the late '80s and early '90s.

"I write through a desire to explore and reflect—in a weird, distorting mirror—the world I inhabit," Delano says. "Humanity is benighted by religion and political ideology. That makes me angry.



Anger provokes the energy I require to write." Subsequent *Hellblazer* writers Garth Ennis and Azzarello would touch on, respectively, the Troubles in Northern Ireland and neo-Nazis in the States, but the comic was rarely as political again.

"Those early issues were utterly f***ing glorious," says Carey. "There was one that ended with John hanging upside down watching Margaret Thatcher romp to another election victory. I used to show that book to my friends who didn't read comics, and say, 'This is what you're missing!' But that run particularly, and even a lot of Garth's stuff, is so much of its time that you kind of need CliffsNotes now to get all the references unless you lived through it. I am a political animal, but I deliberately did not go topical with *Hellblazer*. I wanted the stories to be free enough of context that people could come back to them in 10 or 20 years!"

John Constantine then trod more fantastical ground under the aegis of Delano's successors. He fought vampires and butted heads with the devilish First of the Fallen during Ennis' run (it would have been Lucifer, but a clash with Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*, running at the same time, meant another devil had to be substituted). Paul Jenkins delved into English history and mythology, using Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Arthurian legend. Warren Ellis' brief run involved an Aleister Crowley-like magician, and he quit when a story about a school shooting was pulled in the wake of Columbine (he will no longer talk about *Hellblazer* and politely declined Fango's invitation to take part in this feature). And Carey's epic stint—essentially one story that required four years to tell—took in mystical artifacts, a beast seeking to control the consciousness of the whole of mankind, a psychic serial killer and a demon who bargains with Constantine for control of 24 hours of his life. That doesn't work out so well...

The only real divergence from the supernatural thrust came courtesy of Azzarello, whose hundred-issue "100 Bullets" series perhaps provides a clue that he was more interested in crime writing and real-life horror. Constantine had spent time in hell, and even visited a space station in his *Swamp Thing* days, but Azzarello kept his feet firmly on the ground. "Demons and monsters...yawn," he explains. "Human beings are the most horrific things on the planet! Real horror comes from the idea that these terrible characters can be just like you and me. They have beliefs, and they love their families. That's what's scary."

Constantine under Ennis, Jenkins and Ellis had also built up something of a support network: a kind of "Hellblazer family" of recurring characters, including his own sister and niece, and long-suffering

cab driver Chase and his family. Despite the fact that people close to him tended to regularly and inevitably get killed (and, on more than one occasion, doomed to eternal suffering and damnation!), he even had love interests, like Ennis' feisty Kit.

"I wanted to bring the mystery back to him as a person," Azzarello says, "and some of the moral ambivalence. After being around for such a long time, I think he kind of became a hero, for want of a better word, and I don't think he ever should have been that. He's not somebody you should like. Even if he's your friend, he's still the kind of guy where you go, 'Oh, shit' when he shows up, and start looking at your watch. What was so effective about him in *Swamp Thing* was that he always knew more than everybody else, and we didn't know what he knew. Prior to me in his own book, we were privy to his internal monologues. A con man's only effective if you don't know what he's thinking."

Carey agrees—to a point. "I've always loved John as a kind of 'laughing magician,'" he says, "the smartest guy in the room who wins not by magic—although he can do that if he needs to—but by bluff, and inspired improvisation. There was a scene in 'Freezes Over' [issues #158-161], which is my favorite moment in Brian's run, where John persuades a guy to bleed to death, and it's psychology as much as it's magic. Having said that, I did want to put magic back in the book, and bring him back among people. I wanted to restate this version of John as the con man: the plausible, ruthless, charming anthro. He is a social animal. He uses people, but does like to be around them. He forms fairly intense relationships, even though he can turn his back on them when he needs to, and I think he's most interesting in the context of those relationships."

After shorter runs by Denise Mina and Andy Diggle, Milligan was left on Constantine's chair as the music stopped, and his approach to the character was to smooth off even more of the rough edges. Over the series' two and a half decades, Constantine has aged in more-or-less real time—and age, it seems, has softened him even to the point where marriage doesn't seem unthinkable. "I wanted to explore that emotional area," Milligan says. "His growing relationship with Epiphany

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**—Jamie Delano,
writer**

Greaves was part of that. A lot of people see Constantine as a real bastard, but the more I thought about that, the less I agreed with it. He can be selfish and thoughtless and pretty immoral, but I never quite saw him as an out-and-out bastard. I've known a few bastards in my time, and it struck me that Constantine was more nuanced than that."

John Constantine, then, has always meant slightly different things to different writers, but Milligan doesn't believe that's a problem. "The trick is to make him your own, while maintaining a continuity," he explains. "He has inconsistencies, yet he's always managed to feel like the same person."

That will be key to Constantine's future. Fans greeted the news that the character is to be taken out of DC's more "mature" Vertigo strand and absorbed

into the wider DC Universe—where the superheroes live—with disappointment and hostility. Carey sees no reason why the two versions couldn't have continued to co-exist, and he, Delano, Azzarello and Milligan all agree that, with the right creative teams, there's no reason why the character should suffer unduly.

"I've worked Vertigo and I've worked DCU, and I honestly don't change my approach," Azzarello says. "For DCU, the language has to be less coarse, and some of the violence has to be off-panel or implied. But do blood, guts and swearing make it 'adult'? I think they make it juvenile." He laughs: "I've got a couple more stories I'd like to tell, but they'd have to be Vertigo. They're much too juvenile!"

"My initial response, which I tweeted, was, 'The pricks could at least let Constantine drop dead coughing his heart up between drags on a ciggie, not reduce him to some anemic rebrand,'" Delano says. "In the long run, though, the huge creative energy invested in Moore's intriguing character by numerous fine artists and writers still exists."

Fawkes' reboot will, the writer promises, "essentially reformulate the character, but bits and pieces of his Vertigo history will remain or be reimagined. We have to choose carefully, because this version of John is much younger than the current one in *Hellblazer*, and it wouldn't be wise to overpack his life, but long-term fans will recognize some of his oldest allies and rivals."

The dark and sometimes extreme nature of *Hellblazer* will also, Fawkes promises, not entirely disappear. "I'm surprised how much latitude I have," he says. "There are certain considerations, but there's certainly nothing stopping me from weaving very adult themes and narratives into the adventures."

Hellblazer is dead. Long live John Constantine? 



REMEMBERING CONSTANTINE

You might not have cast Keonu Reeves as John Constantine. You probably wouldn't have gotten Shio LaBeouf to play Chas. You certainly wouldn't have cast Gavin Rossdale as any body. But Constantine's reputation as a Hollywood bastardized version of *Hellblazer* is kind of undeserved. Not everything in it works, but there is as much right with Francis Lawrence's 2005 film as there is wrong.

"I thought it was fine for what it was," says Brian Azzorello, writer of *Hellblazer* #146-174. "The fans were screaming that John wasn't even British, but I was like, show me the British actor who can put as many asses in the seats as Keonu!"

"It was curious to see elements I'd thought up in another life, peering at a green Amstrad screen through clouds of hosh smoke, co-opted for Hollywood's purpose," muses Jamie Delono (*Hellblazer* #1-40). "But the Constantine of the comics and the Constantine of the film are just two totally different characters shoring a name."

Is that true? To a great extent, it is. The film's Constantine even pronounces his surname differently (in the comics, we're explicitly told early on that it's "tyme," whereas in the film it's "teen"). Reeves' onlihero is a dark-haired American, as opposed to the blond Scouser (that's Britishese for someone from the city of Liverpool) of the comics. And there are changes to his origins and agendas: Like the Constantine of the page, this one has spent time in a mental institution, but for different reasons than the tragic Newcastle events that tipped him temporarily into madness. And where *Hellblazer*'s Constantine is "simply" a mage adept at finding serious trouble, in the film he's pursuing redemption. He has dedicated his life to battling demons in an attempt to eventually earn his way into heaven, since a previous suicide attempt means his soul is damned to hell.

However... Partly thanks to a screenplay (by Kevin Brodbin and Frank Coppola) that gives him some appropriately smarts dialogue, and partly due to a strong performance that gives him something approaching the correct arrogance and swagger, Reeves' Constantine is more recognizable as the bastard from the comics than he's generally given credit for.



Whoa! Some fans were mad as blazes over the casting of Keonu Reeves as John Constantine.

There are other elements derived straight from the source too, albeit heavily adapted and reworked. Obviously, there's Chas, egregiously transformed from a long-suffering taxi driver into LaBeouf's teen sidekick (though he still drives a cab). Better is Djimon Hounsou as immortal shaman Papa Midnight, a Delono chorodeer introduced in *Hellblazer* #1 and subsequently revived by Mot Johnson (*Hellblazer* Special: Papa Midnight #1-5). Father Hennessy (Pruitt Taylor Vince) seems to be an amalgom of Rick and Fleader

from the comics, and suffers a similar fate. Reeves has a line about ghosts following him around, which seems to be a direct nod to the reproachful Newcastle crew who hound him in print.

But it's Gorth Ennis' run (*Hellblazer* #41-83) that the film most plunders. His succubus Chontinelle (a.k.a. Ellie, introduced in issue #43) was turned into a love interest for the film's Constantine, but ended up on the cutting room floor (you can find Michelle Monaghan's performance in the disc extras). Other scenes from the classic "Dangerous Habits" arc (#41-46) remain intact to give us Tilda Swinton's eerie angel Gabriel. That story is also the source for Constantine's lung cancer and its resolution, although those details, again, are altered. In the comics, the tricky Constantine sells his soul to three separate demons, forcing the First of the Fallen to preserve John's life if he wants to avoid a war over who owns him when he dies. In the film, Peter Stormare's twitchy Lucifer cures the just-redemmed John to prevent his entry into heaven, reasoning that John's revival will afford him the time to damn himself once more.

These are all forgivable transgressions to *Hellblazer* fans with open minds, though. The one element that is unforgivable is Constantine giving up smoking at the end. "That was the studio; that was Werner all the way," growls Azzorello. "[Editor] Koren Berger really fought that. Constantine's got brand new, invincible lungs; why would he quit smoking?! He's the kind of guy who, if he got a liver transplant, would stop at a bar on the way home from the hospital to break that baby in."

—Owen Williams

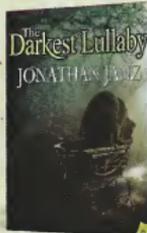
There were a hell of a lot of changes in the journey from the comics to the big screen.



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