

The Rhesus Chart: Edinburgh author's new novel



Charlie Stross is jet-lagged, or so he says. No-one would know it; even after several long-haul flights this man is a powerhouse of energy (one does wonder what he's like when he's not tired...) The prolific and multi-award winning author of numerous sci-fi books, Stross is launching *The Rhesus Chart*, the fifth novel in his *Laundry Files* series; an avid audience at Blackwell's can hardly wait to hear him read from it.

Stross explains that the series (and there are many other series, so please concentrate...) was originally loosely based on British spy thrillers. He's used the Bond books (or rather the film franchise), Anthony Price, even Modesty Blaise. Not feeling up to pastiching Le Carre (who would?) he decided to go off in a different direction: his new *Laundry Files* novella *Equoid* is about unicorns and takes its inspiration from HP Lovecraft. Unicorns may be friendly little creatures in children's fiction, but in Stross's hands they are nothing but. The book has already been shortlisted for a Hugo award (Hugos are to science fiction what the Daggers are to crime.)

The Rhesus Chart meanwhile focuses on vampires, and Stross gives an animated reading from the first chapter.



Bob is a civil servant. Not any old civil servant though: Bob works for The Laundry, a secret department set up to protect the population from occult powers. In a Google-esque attempt to raise morale he and his colleagues have been told to devote 10% of their time to following their own 'creative, innovative research ideas' – but they're far too busy to find space in their working days to regain their va-va-voom, so they have to

develop their projects at night.

One night Bob returns to his office to find a colleague, Andy, conducting a 'hello spirit world' experiment. He's intending to summon a demon, a 'class one manifestation', but whatever he's called up, it's not that. Everything is feeling rather cold. Bob drags Andy from the room and shuts the door, but soon realises that;

'elephant size termites appear to be chewing on the edges of reality.'

Andy has used his own code instead of the regulation issue;

'there's nothing worse than an IT manager who's getting creative...'

Bob's boss Angleton is soon on the scene; an old school presence 'as chilly and powerful as the thing behind the door', he instructs Bob to call the Night Watch. The Night Watch appears 'in classic Bela Lugosi style', its members being zombies or, as the civil service now requires them to be designed, 'Residual Human Resources.' It becomes clear to a horrified Bob that Angleton's intention is to send one of them into the room;

'I've gotten used to dealing with the metabolically challenged, butyou can't just go using the Night Watch as meat probes'

Bob sees that even the zombies are uneasy about this one, but Angleton is determined. The poor zombie's bony hand ends up frozen to the door knob, but eventually the door is opened, to reveal;

'tentacles and lobster claws, eyes the size of my head....total sensory overload...voices like telemarketers in hell...'

And to find out what happens next, you need to buy the book – which many of the audience already have.

Asked how many books he still has to write, Stross says that *The Atrocity Archives* (the first in the series) began as a one-off; he realised it needed a sequel, then he planned **nine** – now he's about to 'go off at a tangent' so he really has no idea when the series will end. He's full of ideas, although sometimes events intervene – he's not writing any more books set in Edinburgh (another series) until he 'finds out which country I'm writing about.' Although he was once offered a film option it did not come to fruition, but he's certainly open to approaches.



Stross finds that the readers who come to his events are well able to keep up with his various genres. In some ways he'd like to slow down, but he's already planned so many books in so many series that this seems unlikely. There is, he says, renewed interest in novellas – the form was all but dead until ebooks came along, but now they sell well. At the moment however, he's writing an enormous Cold War spy thriller, 'my post-Snowden book', set in the future: it's part of his *Merchant Princes* series and will be split into three volumes. He's a very busy man.

Portals, basilisk firmware, wards, necromancy, paper clips (it is the civil service...) – science fiction is a different world, indeed many different worlds, and its fanbase shows no sign of shrinking. Charles Stross clearly loves his work; he's a brilliant and witty reader whose enthusiasm comes across in every sentence. Even this die-hard Barbara Pym addict was a little bit fascinated, and hugely entertained. Plot idea: 1950s social comedy meets sci-fi – what do you think Charlie?

The Rhesus Chart by Charles Stross is published by Orbit and available from all good book shops.