

The Armageddon Rag: A Novel

By George R. R. Martin

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“The best novel concerning the American pop music culture of the sixties I’ve ever read.”—Stephen King

From #1 *New York Times* bestselling author George R. R. Martin comes the ultimate novel of revolution, rock ’n’ roll, and apocalyptic murder—a stunning work of fiction that portrays not just the end of an era, but the end of the world as we know it.

Onetime underground journalist Sandy Blair has come a long way from his radical roots in the ’60s—until something unexpectedly draws him back: the bizarre and brutal murder of a rock promoter who made millions with a band called the Nazgûl. Now, as Sandy sets out to investigate the crime, he finds himself drawn back into his own past—a magical mystery tour of the pent-up passions of his generation. For a new messiah has resurrected the Nazgûl and the mad new rhythm may be more than anyone bargained for—a requiem of demonism, mind control, and death, whose apocalyptic tune only Sandy may be able to change in time . . . before everyone follows the beat.

“The wilder aspects of the ’60s . . . roar back to life in this hallucinatory story by a master of chilling suspense.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“What a story, full of nostalgia and endless excitement. . . . It’s taut, tense, and moves like lightning.”—Tony Hillerman

“Daring . . . a knowing, wistful appraisal of . . . a crucial American generation.”—*Chicago Sun-Times*

“Moving . . . comic . . . eerie . . . really and truly a walk down memory lane.”—*The Washington Post*

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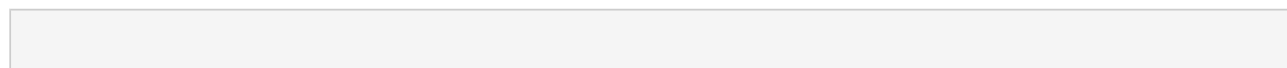
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The Armageddon Rag: A Novel By George R. R. Martin Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #240401 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Bantam
- Published on: 2007-01-30
- Released on: 2007-01-30
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.19" h x .88" w x 6.13" l,
- Binding: Paperback
- 384 pages



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Editorial Review

Review

"The wilder aspects of the 60s--the frenzied idealism, the cultism, the orgiastic rock music--roar back to life in this hallucinatory story by a master of chilling suspense."

About the Author

George R. R. Martin is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of many novels, including the acclaimed series *A Song of Ice and Fire*—*A Game of Thrones*, *A Clash of Kings*, *A Storm of Swords*, *A Feast for Crows*, and *A Dance with Dragons*—as well as *Tuf Voyaging*, *Fevre Dream*, *The Armageddon Rag*, *Dying of the Light*, *Windhaven* (with Lisa Tuttle), and *Dreamsongs Volumes I and II*. He is also the creator of *The Lands of Ice and Fire*, a collection of maps from *A Song of Ice and Fire* featuring original artwork from illustrator and cartographer Jonathan Roberts, and *The World of Ice & Fire* (with Elio M. García, Jr., and Linda Antonsson). As a writer-producer, Martin has worked on *The Twilight Zone*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and various feature films and pilots that were never made. He lives with the lovely Parris in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

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Chapter One

Those were the days, my friend/
We thought they'd never end

It was not one of Sandy Blair's all-time great days. His agent had picked up the lunch tab, to be sure, but that only partially made up for the way he'd gotten on Sandy's case about the novel deadline. The subway was full of yahoos and it seemed to take forever to get him back to Brooklyn. The three-block walk to the brownstone he called home seemed longer and colder than usual. He felt in dire need of a beer by the time he got there. He pulled one from the fridge, opened it, and ascended wearily to his third-floor office to face the stack of blank paper he was supposedly turning into a book. Once again, the elves had failed to knock off any chapters in his absence; page thirty-seven was still in his typewriter. You just couldn't get good elves anymore, Sandy thought morosely. He stared at the words with distaste, took a swig from the bottle in his hand, and looked around for a distraction.

That was when he noticed the red light on his message machine, and found that Jared Patterson had phoned.

Actually it had been Jared's secretary who made the call, which Sandy found amusing; even after seven years, and everything that had happened, Patterson was still a bit nervous about him. "Jared Patterson would like Mister Blair to contact him as soon as possible, in connection with an assignment," said the pleasant professional voice. Sandy listened to her twice before erasing the tape. "Jared Patterson," he said to himself, bemused. The name evoked a hell of a lot of memories.

Sandy knew that he really ought to ignore Patterson's message. The sonofabitch deserved no more. That was hopeless, though; he was already too curious. He picked up the phone and dialed, mildly astonished to discover that he still remembered the number, after seven years. A secretary picked up. "*Hedgehog*," she said. "Mister Patterson's office."

"This is Sander Blair," Sandy said. "Jared phoned me. Tell the poltroon that I'm returning his call."

"Yes, Mister Blair. Mister Patterson left instructions to put you through at once. Please hold."

A moment later, Patterson's familiar mock-hearty voice was ringing in Sandy's ear. "*Sandy!* It's great to hear ya, really it is. Long time, old man. How's it hanging?"

"Cut the shit, Jared," Sandy said sharply. "You're no happier to hear from me than I was to hear from you. What the hell you want? And keep it short, I'm a busy man."

Patterson chuckled. "Is that any way to talk to an old friend? Still no social graces, I see. All right, then, however you want it. I wantcha to do a story for *Hedgehog*, how's that for straight?"

"Go suck a lemon," Sandy said. "Why the hell should I write for you? You fired me, you asshole."

"Bitter, bitter," Jared chided. "That was seven years ago, Sandy. I hardly remember it now."

"That's funny. I remember it real well. I'd lost it, you said. I was out of touch with what was happening, you said. I was too old to edit for the youth audience, you said. I was taking the *Hog* down the tubes, you said. Like shit. I was the one who *made* that paper, and you damn well know it."

"Never denied it," Jared Patterson said breezily. "But times changed, and you didn't. If I'd kept you on, we'd have gone down with the *Freep* and the *Barb* and all the rest. All that counterculture stuff had to go. I mean, who needed it? All that politics, reviewers who hated the hot new trends in music, the drug stories . . . it just didn't cut it, y'know?" He sighed. "Look, I didn't call to hash over ancient history. I was hoping you'd have more perspective by now. Hell, Sandy, firing you hurt me more than it did you."

"Oh, sure," Sandy said. "You sold out to a chain and got a nice cushy salaried job as publisher while you were firing three-quarters of your staff. You must be in *such* pain." He snorted. "Jared, you're still an asshole. We built that paper together, as a communal sort of thing. It wasn't yours to sell."

"Hey, communes were all well and good back when we were young, but you seem to forget that it was my money kept the whole show afloat."

"Your money and our talent."

"God, you haven't changed a bit, have you?" Jared said. "Well, think what you like, but our circulation is three times what it was when you were editor, and our ad revenues are out of sight. *Hedgehog* has class now. We get nominated for real journalism awards. Have you seen us lately?"

"Sure," said Sandy. "Great stuff. Restaurant reviews. Profiles of movie stars. Suzanne Somers on the cover, for God's sake. Consumer reports on video games. A dating service for lonely singles. What is it you call yourself now? The Newspaper of Alternative Lifestyles?"

"We changed that, dropped the 'alternative' part. It's just Lifestyles now. Between the two H's in the logo."

"Jesus," Sandy said. "Your music editor has *green* hair!"

"He's got a real deep understanding of pop music," Jared said defensively. "And stop shouting at me. You're

always shouting at me. I'm starting to regret calling you, y'know. Do you want to talk about this assignment or not?"

"Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn. Why do you think I need your assignment?"

"No one said you did. I'm not out of it, I know you've been doing well. How many novels have you published? Four?"

"Three," Sandy corrected.

"*Hedgehog's* run reviews on every one of them too. You oughtta be grateful. Firing you was the best thing I could have done for you. You were always a better writer than you were an editor."

"Oh, thank you, massa, thank you. I's ever so thankful. I owes it all to you."

"You could at least be civil," Jared said. "Look, you don't need us and we don't need you, but I thought it would be nice to work together again, just for old time's sake. Admit it, it'd be a kick to have your byline in the old *Hog* again, wouldn't it? And we pay better than we used to."

"I'm not hurting for money."

"Who said you were? I know all about you. Three novels and a brownstone and a sports car. What is it, a Porsche or something?"

"A Mazda RX-7," Sandy said curtly.

"Yeah, and you live with a *realtor*, so don't lecture me about selling out, Sandy old boy."

"What do you want, Jared?" Sandy said, stung. "I'm getting tired of sparring."

"We've got a story that would be perfect for you. We want to play it up big, too, and I thought maybe you'd be interested. It's a murder."

"What are you doing now, trying to turn the *Hog* into *True Detective*? Forget it, Jared, I don't do crime shit."

"Jamie Lynch was the guy that got himself murdered."

The name of the victim brought Sandy up short, and a wisecrack died in his mouth. "The promoter?"

"None other."

Sandy sat back, took a swig of beer, and mulled on that. Lynch had been out of the news for years, a has-been even before Sandy was fired from the *Hog*, but in his day he had been an important man in the rock subculture. It could be an interesting story. Lynch had always been surrounded by controversy. He'd worn two hats: promoter and manager. As a promoter, he'd organized some of the biggest tours and concerts of his day. He'd ensured their success by booking in the bands he controlled as manager, and by denying those bands to rival concerts. With hot talent like American Taco, the Fevre River Packet Company, and the Nazgûl under his thumb, he'd been a man to reckon with. At least up until 1971, when the disaster at West Mesa, the breakup of the Nazgûl, and a couple of drug busts started him on the long slide down. "What

happened to him?" Sandy asked.

"It's pretty kinky," Jared said. "Somebody busted into his place up in Maine, dragged him into his office, and offed him there. They tied him to his desk, and, like, *sacrificed* him. Cut his heart out. He had one after all. Remember the old jokes? Ah, never mind. Anyhow, the whole scene was kind of grotesque. Mansonesque, y'know? Well, that made me think of the series you did back around the time that Sharon Tate got offed, you know, that investigation of . . . what did you call it?"

"The dark side of the counterculture," Sandy said dryly. "We won awards for that series, Jared."

"Yeah, right. I remembered it was good. So I thought of you. This is right up your alley. Real Sixties, y'know? What we're thinking of is a long meaty piece, like those in-depth things you used to go for. We'll use the murder as a news peg, see, and you could investigate it a bit, see maybe if you could kick up something the police miss, y'know, but mostly use it as a springboard for a sort of retrospective on Jamie Lynch and his promotions, all his groups and his concerts and his times and like that. Maybe you could look up some of the guys from his old groups, the Fevre River gang and the Nazgûl and all, interview 'em and work in some where-are-they-now kind of stuff. It would be sort of a nostalgia piece, I figure."

"Your readership thinks the Beatles were the band Paul McCartney was with before he got Wings," Sandy said. "They won't even know who Jamie Lynch *was*, for Chrissakes."

"That's where you're wrong. We still have lots of our old readers. The kind of feature I see on this Lynch business will be real popular. Now, can you write it or not?"

"Of course I can write it. The question is, why should I?"

"We'll pay expenses, and our top rate. That ain't nothing to sneeze at, either. You won't have to sell the paper on street-corners afterward. We're beyond that."

"Terrific," Sandy said. He wanted to tell Jared to go get stuffed, but much as he hated to admit it, the assignment had a certain perverse attractiveness. It *would* be nice to be in the *Hog* again. The paper was his baby, after all; it had turned into a pretty wayward and superficial kid, but it was his, nonetheless, and still had a lingering hold on his loyalties. Besides, if he did this Lynch piece, it would help restore some of the old *Hog* quality, if only for an instant. If he passed, someone else would write the article, and it would be more trash. "I tell you what," Sandy said. "You guarantee me that I'll get cover billing with this, and you put it in writing that the piece will be printed just the way I write it, not one word changed, no cuts, nothing, and maybe I'll consider it."

"Sandy, you want it, you got it. I wouldn't think of messing around with your stuff. Can you have the piece in by Tuesday?"

Sandy laughed raucously. "Shit, no. In-depth, you said. I want as much time as I need on this. Maybe I'll have it in within a month. Maybe not."

"The news peg will go stale," Jared whined.

"So what? A short piece in your news section will do for now. If I'm going to do this, I'm going to do it right. Those are the conditions, take 'em or leave 'em."

"Anybody but you, I'd tell 'em to get shoved," Patterson replied. "But hell, why not? We go way back. You got it, Sandy."

"My agent will call and get everything in writing."

"Hey!" Jared said. "After all we been through, you want things in writing? How many times did I bail you out of jail? How many times did we share a joint?"

"Lots," Sandy said. "Only they were always *my* joints, as I recall. Jared, seven years ago, you gave me three hours' notice and bus fare in lieu of severance pay. So this time we'll get a written contract. My agent will call." He hung up before Patterson had a chance to argue, turned on the answering machine to catch any attempted call-backs, and leaned back in his chair with his hands behind his head and a faintly bemused smile on his face. He wondered just what the hell he was getting himself into this time.

Sharon wasn't going to like this, he thought. His agent wasn't going to like it, either. But *he* liked it, somehow. No doubt running off to Maine to muck around in a murder was a silly thing to do; the more rational side of Sandy Blair knew that, knew that his deadlines and mortgage obligations ought to come first, that he could hardly afford the time he'd have to expend on this for the relative pittance that *Hedgehog* would pay. Still, he'd been restless and moody lately, and he had to get away from that damned page thirty-seven for a while, and it had been entirely too long since he had done anything silly, anything spontaneous or new or even a tad adventurous. In the old days, he'd been just wild enough to drive Jared crazy. Sandy missed the old days. He remembered the time that he and Maggie had driven to Philly at two in the morning because he wanted a cheese steak. And the time Lark and Bambi and he had gone to Cuba to harvest sugarcane. And his attempt to join the French Foreign Legion, and Froggy's search for the ultimate pizza, and the week they'd spent exploring the sewers. The marches, the rallies, the concerts, the rock stars and underground heroes and dopesters he knew, all the off-the-wall stories that had fattened his clipbook and broadened his horizons. He missed all that. He'd had good days and bad days, but it was all a lot more exciting than sitting in his office and rereading page thirty-seven over and over again.

Sandy began to rummage through the lower drawers of his desk. Way in the back he kept souvenirs, things he had no earthly use for but couldn't bear to throw away—handbills he'd written, snapshots he'd never gotten around to sticking in a photo album, his collection of old campaign buttons. Underneath it all, he found the box with his old business cards. He snapped off the rubber band and extracted a few.

There were two different kinds. One, printed in deep black ink on crisp white cardboard, identified him as Sander Blair, accredited correspondent of the National Metropolitan News Network, Inc. It was legit too; that was the real name of the corporation that published *Hedgehog*, or at least it had been until Jared sold out to the chain. Sandy had come up with the corporate name himself, reasoning—quite accurately, as hindsight demonstrated—that there would be occasions when a reporter for the National Metropolitan News Network, Inc., would have a much easier time getting press credentials than a reporter for something called *Hedgehog*.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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