

PISCES fears an army of puppets.

Scenario

This shotgun scenario takes place in the UK, at any point from 2007 onwards. The player characters are a team of PISCES and MI5 field agents. The team can easily include a talent (with a PISCES handler), one or more soldiers, or experts in anthropology or medicine.

Background: Berlinget's ticket

Professor Herman Berlinget (named NPCs are described below) has sent a letter from Bristol in the UK to the Paragon Foundation in Toronto, Canada. PISCES reads it, because Berlinget is known to have made a disturbing discovery in the past, and because the Canadian front organization flagged the letter as a warning. It concerns the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children, a project better known as ALSPAC.

In 1990, researchers started to collect tissues from more than 14,500 pregnant women in and around Bristol. After birth, researchers tracked the children's development through surveys, clinical examinations and biological samples. As one of the researchers, Berlinget has access to the archives. In the basement of his building, boxes full of teeth from more than 4,000 children line the shelves. Next door are about 15,000 nail clippings, 20,000 locks of hair, and so on.

In 77 pages, the professor profiles the major contributors to the project and maps out the system of freezers housing bar-coded samples of blood, urine, saliva and chunks of umbilical cord, over one million entries in all. This is all intertwined with another description, concerning magical traditions within a branch of the Yorùbá religion in Bida, Nigeria.

The Bida sect is radicalized by the local dominance of a different ethnic group, the Nupe, and has become associated with violence against Muslims. Its version of the Yorùbá belief system is somewhat similar to the New World offshoot known as Santería. Sorcerers and demigods gain power over others through the tissues and bodily fluids of their victims. Residue from a person's birth is the most powerful instrument of such control. Though physically separated from the living participants of ALSPAC, the project's million samples would be broadband links to their souls.

Berlinget makes no reference to Appendix I, which ends his letter. The appendix is an anonymized list of 196 incidents of crime, including location, date, and the offences committed. The vast majority are thefts and robberies, many of them violent. They took place in Somerset, the area around Bristol, starting 18 months ago. The intervals shrink dramatically up to the present. The obvious, unstated conclusion is exponential growth in the criminality of ALSPAC participants.

Briefing

The PCs are the team assembled to "sort this one out right". They are briefed by Paul Brown, who believes Berlinget is wisely withholding the final piece of evidence that there is a powerful talent of some kind taking control of the ALSPAC cohort, and possibly its parents. The goal of the operation is to recruit this talent if possible. If not, they are to hand him in for secure containment at Magonia.

Brown supposes the talent is a recent immigrant, and may already have a force of perfectly loyal servants close to or within ALSPAC facilities, prepared for violence of any kind. Brown specifically orders the PCs not to trust anyone who looks as if he or she had children in, was born in, or could be the child of anyone born in, the early 1990s.

Investigation

Berlinget wants to be recruited to the powerful organization he sensed behind his first brush with the Mythos: a purge in Canada in 1981. He was pressured to cover that up, relinquishing what would have been a major scientific discovery. He believes the organization is international, part of the UN or NATO. If the PCs contact him, he will demand to be let in as a medical expert. Brown can clear the application with his superiors in an hour. Only if the PCs say a deal is made, Berlinget fingers a research nurse named Kholiwe Dugdale as the “possible practitioner” at the university.

Dugdale has access to the biological archives, but has not received any loot from the various crimes in the appendix to Berlinget’s letter. There is no secret army of puppets. This being the Mythos, textbook Frazerian magic does not work. The appendix is just a bit of misdirection. The professor devised a research project within ALSPAC to study criminal tendencies. He then sieved out the majority of the participants’ arrests in proportion to their age, and added public reports of similar crimes in the region, for which no-one had yet been arrested. The bait was good enough for Brown’s preliminary investigation.

Berlinget is unstable, but difficult to intimidate. If the PCs express doubt and do not recruit him, he lures Dugdale to the garage, claiming he needs her help carrying samples. After hours, he drives her car out to a secure storage barn on the outskirts of Bristol, using her card to open the gate. She regains consciousness in the trunk. Berlinget defrosts one of the facility’s 9,000 placentas in its bucket of formaldehyde. At night, he drags Dugdale inside and stages an occult ritual gone wrong, by forcing her to eat the placenta at gunpoint. She is poisoned by the formaldehyde, dying within minutes, unless the PCs intervene.

After carefully arranging the crime scene so as to make his letter appear relevant, Berlinget takes a taxi to his house, gets an hour of sleep, goes back to work, and waits for the PCs to acknowledge his greatness. If the PCs have already dismissed the case at that point, Brown orders them to cover up Dugdale’s death, on the assumption that Berlinget was right about her. Unless the PCs redeem themselves, Berlinget soon becomes the star of the medical team at Magonia. It is the closest thing to happiness a man like him can achieve.

NPCs

Paul Brown

Brown ascended through MI5. He is highly effective, but secretly frightened of talents. Having no grasp of the larger context, he consistently misinterprets Mythos activity as magical. When he got Berlinget's report on ALSPAC, Brown did a quick search for crimes from Appendix I. Suspects were arrested in five of the first cases he could unambiguously identify in police records. All of these would have been candidates for ALSPAC, as parents or children. In four of the five cases, there had been no prior arrests. PISCES does not have easy access to the list of actual ALSPAC participants for cross-reference.

Paul Brown

Agent Wrangler, age 53

Race: Caucasian

Education: M.A. Political Science, University of Essex

Occupation: PISCES Senior Field Operations Supervisor

STR	13	CON	13	SIZ	14	INT	14
POW	8	DEX	11	APP	11	EDU	16
SAN	26	HP	14				

Physical Description: Working late, he keeps his shirt rolled up to his elbows, because he thinks the ladies like his hairy arms.

Herman Berlinget

Professor Berlinget is of distant French descent. His relationship with the Section dates back to 1981, when he discovered an indestructible and carcinogenic parasite in a Canadian town, apparently ingested from a local population of Northern Pintail ducks. He rightly intuited that the parasite exerted a calming influence on the household of its host, with no physical mechanism he could detect. He went to the Paragon Foundation, where he'd gotten himself tested for psychic abilities while a student in Toronto. The test was negative.

PISCES decided not to induct the doctor in 1981, judging him to be hypomaniacal and therefore a liability. He got a hunting license in 1982, but found no more parasites. He moved from Edmonton to Bristol in 1991, then sent two "reports" on mundane medical anomalies to Toronto. They have been met with discreet independent investigations and silence. The professor has been working on his latest report for three years. Airline records show him taking a business trip to Nigeria two years ago. He still hunts, mainly pheasant.

The same energy for research that makes the professor brilliant also makes him difficult. His social skills have deteriorated with age. He is routinely reprimanded for his abusive behaviour toward his perceived rivals. Both of his marriages failed. He no longer teaches. The Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry has relegated him to research with minimal patient contact, mainly in perinatal epidemiology and ALSPAC offshoots. After repeated warnings, he expects his tenure to be revoked. Even so, he believes he is on his way up.

Herman Berlinget

The University of Bristol's Man of Destiny, age 60

Race: Caucasian

Education: M.D.C.M., University of Toronto

Occupation: Professor

STR	11	CON	11	SIZ	13	INT	17
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POW	10	DEX	14	APP	12	EDU	21
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SAN	8	HP	12
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Physical Description: Precisely 6' tall, Berlinget was once in good shape. His frame has withered in the last few years. His new glasses are tasteful and very expensive.

Indefinite Insanity: Antisocial personality disorder

Kholiwe Dugdale

Dugdale was born in South Africa, going to the UK to study. She now has three children with William Dugdale, once a fellow student. English is her second language; she speaks it with a slight accent. When her youngest was born, Berlinget gave Dugdale a puppy. It was a collie, because this is his nickname for the nurse. She feels the "joke" was in bad taste. There have been many others like it from the professor, along with punitive busywork.

Kholiwe Dugdale

Ostensible Witch, age 37

Race: African

Education: B.Sc. Neonatal Nursing, University of Bristol

Occupation: Research nurse

STR	11	CON	13	SIZ	16	INT	12
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POW	11	DEX	11	APP	9	EDU	16
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SAN	51	HP	15
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Physical Description: Dugdale has been putting on weight over the last five years and dresses conservatively to hide it. She is also unhappy with her deep-set eyes.