

SFX

362



ANT-MAN AND THE WASP

MARVEL UPS THE STAKES AS PHASE 5 BEGINS

DOCTOR WHO

CELEBRATING 60 YEARS OF TRAVELS IN THE TARDIS

KNOCK AT THE CABIN

NEW HORROR FROM M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN

WINNIE THE POOH

THE BEAR GETS BLOODY, HONEY!



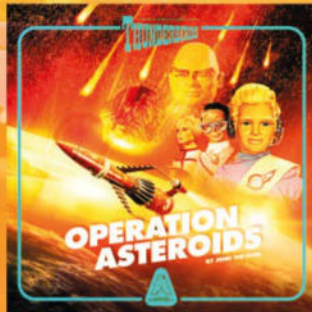
EXCLUSIVE!

STAR TREK PICARD

≡ The television event of the year is here! ≡

PLUS! TRANSFORMERS | PUSS IN BOOTS | THE WINCHESTERS | RIVERDALE | THE WATCHFUL EYE
MOON GIRL AND DEVIL DINOSAUR | SHERLOCK HOLMES | BLOOD ON SATAN'S CLAW | DAVE GIBBONS

AUDIO ADVENTURES ARE GO!



A GERRY ANDERSON PRODUCTION

THUNDERBIRDS™

FAB AUDIO DRAMAS
AVAILABLE TO DOWNLOAD FROM BIGFINISH.COM



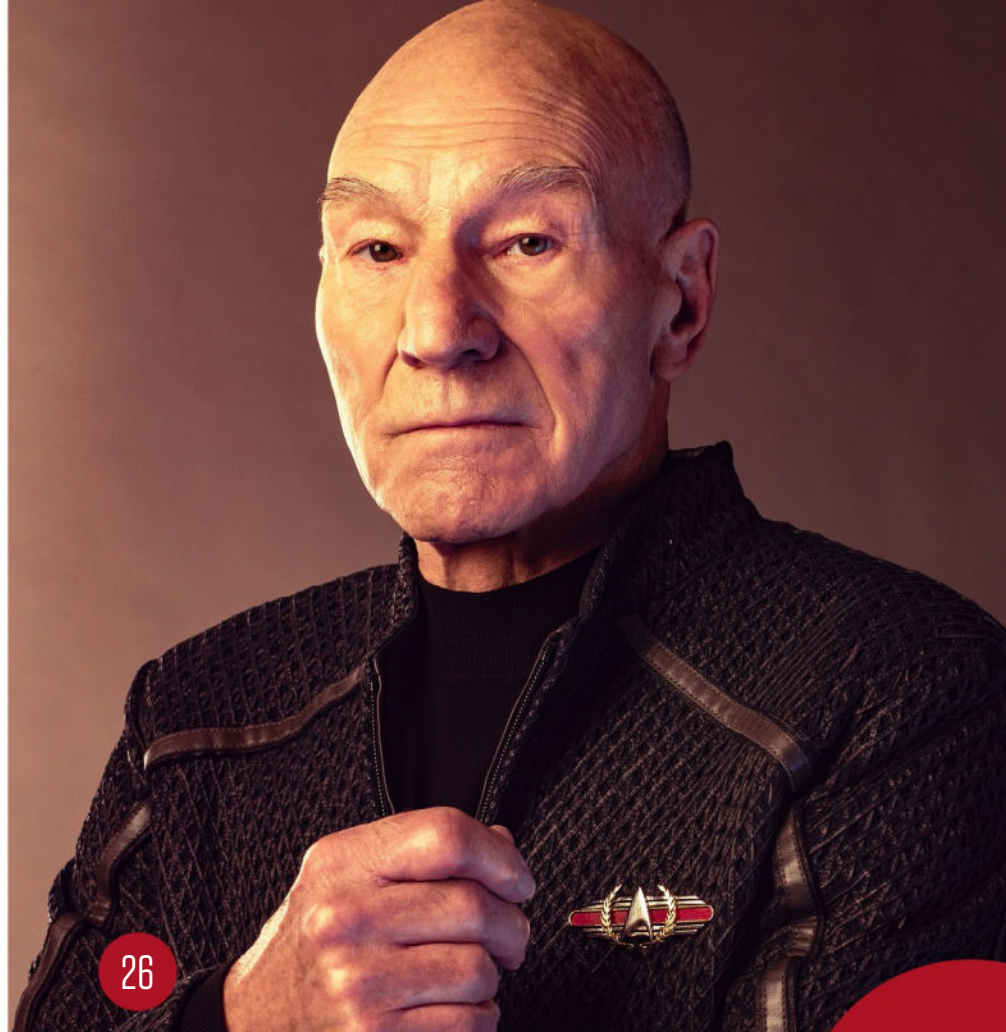
bgfn.sh/fab

[@BIGFINISH](https://twitter.com/BIGFINISH) • [f THEBIGFINISH](https://facebook.com/thebigfinish) • [@BIGFINISHPROD](https://instagram.com/bigfinishprod)

Thunderbirds™ and © 1964, 1999 and 2021 ITC Entertainment Group Limited. Licensed by ITV Ventures Limited. All rights reserved.



BIG FINISH | FOR THE LOVE OF STORIES



26

FEATURES

26 STAR TREK: PICARD

Reunited and it feels so good in season three.

36 ANT-MAN AND THE WASP: QUANTUMANIA

Sliding Marvel's latest under the microscope.

42 KNOCK AT THE CABIN

We pretended to be out, but Shyamalan saw us.

48 DAVE GIBBONS

Who watches the *Watchmen* man? We do.



42

54 DOCTOR WHO

Into the '80s time vortex with Nicola Bryant.

58 WINNIE-THE-POOH: BLOOD AND HONEY

Christopher Robin is certainly saying his prayers.

62 ALAN TUDYK

We spend quality time with Optimus Prime.

64 BLOOD ON SATAN'S CLAW

Unearthing a folk horror classic from the soil.

68 IAN MCDONALD

The sci-fi author on reasons to be cheerful.



48



54

SUBSCRIBE NOW & SAVE!

Head to page 24 for details

RED ALERT

8 PUSS IN BOOTS: THE LAST WISH

The swashbuckling feline points his tip our way.

10 DC MILESTONE

Back in Black! Celebrating 30 groundbreaking years.

12 THE WATCHFUL EYE

It's enough to make you paranoid.

18 BETTY: THE FINAL GIRL

Putting the "Aaargh!" into the Archieverse.

22 BLUE BOOK

It's not a comic, it's a weather balloon...

REVIEWS

72 M3GAN

H3r3's our r3vi3w.

74 WILLOW

Are we under the Ufgood spell?



84 HOPELAND

It's a family affair in Ian McDonald's latest.

94 THE DARK IS RISING

It's what they call the magic of radio.

REGULARS

96 BLASTERMIND

Where women glow and men plunder.

98 TOTAL RECALL

File under Z For Zachariah.

First Contact

Hailing Frequencies Open!



So when
will we see
you next,
Wednesday?



HAPPY DAYS

Rob Graham, email *Wednesday* has been surprisingly excellent, with a *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* meets *Stranger Things* and *Harry Potter* vibe. This is the best Addams Family since the classic '60s TV series, with spot-on casting. Jenna Ortega turns in a star-making performance as Wednesday, while Luis Guzmán and Catherine Zeta-Jones look like they've come straight out of the original drawings as Gomez and Morticia. I'd definitely like to see more of them. The series is a fun murder-mystery thriller and classic Tim Burton, down to the Danny Elfman score.

SFX: Yes, let's give a big, disembodied hand for *Wednesday*.

THE BIG FANG THEORY

Joel Ferrari, email I'm Joel, co-writer of *Wolf Manor* [reviewed in *SFX* 361]. I would just like to point out that it does have a story. It's a classic bodycount film, done in the style of '80s horror. I thought the title and cover of the DVD makes it clear *Wolf Manor* isn't an elevated horror! Also the film isn't whining about low-budget films. I think Sarah Dobbs is channelling her inner Sheldon, as most people viewing the film have noticed this is called humour!

ABBATAR

Robert MacDonald, email Given that we heard so much about Abba's "avatars" in the past year I was really looking forward to *Avatar: The Way Of Water*. What did I get? Some very belated sequel to a film by James what's-his-face, full of people who looked very cold, and mostly full of Mr Cameron's usual tropes too. It was okay, and looked more photorealistic than the trailers would have you believe, but still, "My my, at Waterloo Napoleon did surrender!" might have added something to the mix...

SFX: Or even "Voulez-Blue (AHA!)".



On Henry Cavill's new
Warhammer series:
is he paid in figures
straight from the factory
to his home?

Marc Hertel



Wondering which body
part to sell so I can have
the new *Outer Limits*
box set...

@JsPorter1966

Get in
touch!

Email
sfx@futurenet.com

Facebook
facebook.com/
SFXmagazine

Twitter/Instagram

Follow
@sfxmagazine
and tag us!



SFX

FEBRUARY 2023 | Issue 362

Future PLC, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA

Editor

Darren Scott (ps)

darren.scott@futurenet.com

Deputy Editor

Ian Berriman (IB)
ian.berriman@
futurenet.com

Art Editor

Jonathan Coates
jonathan.coates@
futurenet.com

Production Editor

Ed Ricketts
ed.ricketts@
futurenet.com

Editor-at-large

Nick Setchfield (NS)

US Editor

Tara Bennett (TB)

Contributors

Sam Ashurst, Kimberley Ballard,
Saxon Bullock, Sarah Dobbs,
Rhian Drinkwater, Robbie
Dunlop, Richard Edwards (RE),
Dave Golder, Stephen Jewell
(SJ), Catherine Kirkpatrick (Art
Editor), Stuart Manning, Sam
Loveridge, Jayne Nelson, Oliver
Pfeiffer, Will Salmon, Amy West,
David West, James White,
Jonathan Wright

Film Group, London

Group Editor-in-Chief

Jane Crowther

Group Art Director

Paul Breckenridge

Deputy Editor Matt Maytum

Art Editor Mike Brennan

Reviews Editor Matthew Leyland

News Editor Jordan Farley

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Star Trek: Picard © Paramount/CBS.

Advertising

Media packs available on request
Commercial Director Clare Dove
clare.dove@futurenet.com
Advertising Manager Simon Rawle
simon.rawle@futurenet.com
01225 687694
Account Manager Nick Hayes
nick.hayes@futurenet.com
01225 687236

International Licensing/Syndication

SFX is available for licensing and
syndication. To find out more contact
us at licensing@futurenet.com or
view our available content at
futurecontenthub.com.

Subscriptions

New subscribers

magazinesdirect.com

Phone orders 0330 333 1113

Email help@magazinesdirect.com

Disruption remains within UK and

international delivery networks, due to

Covid. Please allow up to seven days before

contacting us about a late delivery.

Renewal mymagazine.co.uk

Customer service 0330 333 4333

Email help@mymagazine.co.uk

Consumer Marketing Director

Craig Niven

Circulation

News Director Ben Oakden

Production

Head of Production Mark Constance

Production Project Manager

Clare Scott

Advertising Production Manager

Joanne Crosby

Digital Editions Controller

Jason Hudson

Senior Production Manager

Maaya Mistry

Management

Managing Director, Games and Ents

Matthew Pierce

Design Director

Simon Maynard

Head of Art & Design

Rodney Dive

Director of Group Finance

Oli Foster

SFX (ISSN 1358-5959) February 2023, issue 362, is published monthly with an extra issue

in December by Future Publishing, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath, BA1 1UA, UK.

The US annual subscription price is \$171.60. Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent

named World Container Inc. c/o BBT 150-15 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA.

Application to Mail at Periodicals Postage Prices is Pending at Brooklyn NY 11256.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to SFX, World Container Inc. c/o BBT 150-15 183rd St,

Jamaica, NY 11413, USA.

Subscription records are maintained at Future Publishing, c/o Air Business Subscriptions,

Rockwood House, Perryman Road, Haywards Heath, West Sussex, RH16 3DH, UK.

We are committed to only using magazine paper which is derived from responsibly managed,

certified forestry and chlorine-free manufacture. The paper in this magazine was sourced

and produced from sustainable managed forests, conforming to strict environmental and

socioeconomic standards.

All contents © 2023 Future Publishing Limited or published under licence. All rights

reserved. No part of this magazine may be used, stored, transmitted or reproduced in any way

without the prior written permission of the publisher: Future Publishing Limited (company

number 2008885) is registered in England and Wales. Registered office: Quay House, The

Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA. All information contained in this publication is for information only

and is, as far as we are aware, correct at the time of going to press. Future cannot accept

any responsibility for errors or inaccuracies in such information. You are advised to contact

manufacturers and retailers directly with regard to the price of products/services referred to in

this publication. Apps and websites mentioned in this publication are not under our control. We

are not responsible for their contents or any other changes or updates to them. This magazine

is fully independent and not affiliated in any way with the companies mentioned herein.

If you submit material to us, you warrant that you own the material and/or have the

necessary rights/permissions to supply the material and you automatically grant Future and

its licensees a licence to publish your submission in whole or in part in any/all issues and/or

editions of publications, in any format published worldwide and on associated websites, social

media channels and associated products. Any material you submit is sent at your own risk

and, although every care is taken, neither Future nor its employees, agents, subcontractors or

licensees shall be liable for loss or damage. We assume all unsolicited material is for publication

unless otherwise stated, and reserve the right to edit, amend, adapt all submissions.

"Sorry, I've got headline Tourette's"



Future plc is a
public company
quoted on the
London Stock
Exchange
(symbol: FUTR)
futureplc.com

Chief executive Zillah Byng-Thorne
Non-Executive Chairman Richard Huntingford
Chief Financial and Strategy Officer Penny Ladin-Brand

Tel +44 (0)1225 442 244

Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind

DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

- Finally caught up with *Interview With The Vampire* and *The Sandman*, both of which were wonderful and fantastically queer. J'adore!
- *Star Trek: Picard* season three. Holy HELL. Give Terry Matalas whatever he wants, now.
- *M3GAN* is absolutely brilliant. A new horror icon is born.
- *Titans* is definitely still the best DC series. Long may it continue.

RANTS

- Fuming that *The Midnight Club* isn't going to get a second season. Prime Video, can you hear my pleas?

IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

- Tentatively impressed by the trailer for *Evil Dead Rise*, though I have had to throw away my cheese grater as a result.
- Approve of Ncuti Gatwa's coat and treads. I wasn't 100% sure at first, but it has a Sherlock Holmes vibe that I like.

RANTS

- I can't bear orange though, so I'm hoping that cropped jumper gets exterminated.
- Finally caught up with *Picard*. Making Borg from car batteries and iPhones? No. Just no.

JONATHAN COATES ART EDITOR

RAVES

- Amused to hear about the *Inside No 9* office morning rituals during Steve Pemberton's appearance on *Would I Lie To You*. Can't wait to see what he and Reece Shearsmith go on to do after *No 9* takes a break next year.
- The level of detail and craft in Guillermo del Toro's *Pinocchio* was jaw-dropping.

ED RICKETTS PRODUCTION EDITOR

RAVES

- Getting quite excited for the release of Bethesda's *Starfield* now – it suddenly seems like it's not far away. It'll tide me over until *Elder Scrolls VI*, anyway.

RANTS

- I have no thoughts either way on Ncuti's costume, but I wish we didn't have to wait 10 months to see the specials. Obviously it's because of the 60th anniversary, but it's so frustrating when we know they're practically done and dusted.

NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR-AT-LARGE

RAVES

- Been enjoying *The Interruption*, a podcast investigating the "alien message" that hijacked Southern Television back in the day. An entertaining delve into some deeply '70s weirdness, from Uri Geller to UFO religions.
- I back Ncuti's jumper. Go, orange, go!

TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES

- *Mayfair Witches* is a very good next instalment in AMC's Anne Rice universe. It's feeling more and more like this world is being built out right.

RANTS

- Mad that Netflix unloaded *1899* at the end of the year with minimal marketing and fanfare, then cancelled it. What did they expect from audiences, exactly?



Captain's Log



Sci-fi, in general, makes me really happy. But there are a few specific franchises – for want of a better term – that bring me utter joy. I don't want to use the word escapism (though that definitely seems to be an acceptable frame of mind these days), but rather genuine happiness for new episodes, spin-offs, info and pretty much anything that comes from it.

Star Trek is one of those. It really just ticks every box for me. It was, oddly, one of the few sci-fi shows my mum would watch, albeit during its BBC Two popularity in the '90s. However, she always encouraged my younger brothers and I to follow our geeky passions, which means we're a bunch of nerds to this day and is arguably why I'm working on the magazine you're reading now.

My mum passed away just before Christmas. One of the few things that helped me get through December was having *SFX* to focus on and, funnily enough, having access to new episodes of *Star Trek: Picard* to watch. When I tell you that not for one second was I dragged back to reality, it's no understatement. This is probably the best *Star Trek* I've ever seen. It's massive, it's epic. There's love and loss and grief.

I don't get to tell my mum about the new shows I just know she'd love, so tap that communicator and send the subspace message you've been putting off. Love, and sci-fi, to you.

Darren X



'Theatrical magic!
A mesmerising adaptation
of Neil Gaiman's hit novel.'

The Sunday Times



The acclaimed **National Theatre** production

THE OCEAN AT THE END OF THE LANE

based on the novel by
NEIL GAIMAN

adapted by
JOEL HORWOOD

directed by
KATY RUDD

**UK & IRELAND TOUR
BEGINS 12 DECEMBER**

OceanOnStage.com



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



WATCH TRAILER

Illustration by Nicolas Delort

THE
FUTURE
FIRST!

Red Alert

FEBRUARY
2023

→ NEWS /// INTERVIEWS /// INSIGHT /// FINAL GIRLS!

8

DEATH BECOMES PURR

Puss In Boots is
almost out of lives in
The Last Wish

Highlights



12

THE WATCHFUL EYE

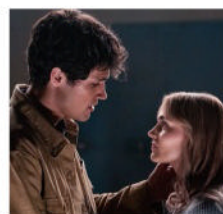
→ Welcome to the Greybourne – you'll never leave! (Well, probably not.)



14

MOON GIRL AND DEVIL DINOSAUR

→ Keep feeding us those Marvel shows, Disney+.



16

THE WINCHESTERS

→ Of course *Supernatural* wasn't really going to end... this is television!

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Whiskery Business

Shrek's swashbuckling Puss in Boots is almost out of lives in **The Last Wish**



Puss in Boots, Perrito and Kitty Softpaws.



Goldilocks and the three bears. Yikes.



Antonio Banderas is back as Puss.

IT'S EASY TO LAUGH in the face of death when you have nine lives. But what if you've carelessly used up eight of them and the metaphorical "game over" screen is looming large on your horizon? That's the dilemma facing *Shrek* franchise stalwart Puss in Boots in the dashing moggy's first movie outing since 2011.

"DreamWorks knew people love these characters and wanted them back on the big screen," director Joel Crawford tells Red Alert, "but they weren't going to settle until they found the right story. It was about finding a reason to continue Puss in Boots's next chapter, and we zeroed in on this idea that he is on the last of his nine lives. There was something magical in that because it's an absurd premise – I don't even know where this idea

that cats have nine lives came from. As human beings we're just gifted with one life, so I got really excited that we could take the absurdity and the reality, and put them next to each other to make a big, fun action-comedy with a message about appreciating life."

Antonio Banderas is back to voice the cat with those famously endearing big eyes. This time out he has a few more years on the clock, however, and is experiencing the sort of seen-better-days existential crisis you'd usually associate with Luke Skywalker in *The Last Jedi* or Wolverine in *Logan*.

"I know online the movie has been compared to *Logan!*" Crawford laughs. "And there is something in the idea that superheroes are kind of unrelatable until you know



Mama Luna makes a fuss of Puss.

Can you ever really trust a wolf?

what their weakness or flaw is. When Puss in Boots was introduced in *Shrek 2* he stole the show as this fearless and heroic assassin. In this story we get to show there's a vulnerability underneath this perfect-looking superhero. He's never felt fear before and now he's aware of his mortality for the first time. That gave us a rich tapestry of new ground to cover."

While Puss briefly contemplates settling down for a quiet, adventure-lite retirement, that wouldn't be consistent with the furry hero's outlook on life. Instead, he reluctantly teams up with old flame Kitty Softpaws (a returning Salma Hayek Pinault) and a naïve but cute dog nicknamed Perrito (voiced by

What We Do In The Shadows' Harvey Guillén) to track down the mythical wishing star he hopes can restore the eight lives he's misplaced.

Unfortunately, they're not the only ones on the trail of this fairytale MacGuffin. The star has attracted the attention of a reimagined Goldilocks (Florence Pugh) and the Three Bears (Ray Winstone, Olivia Colman and Samson Kayo) who talk like they've stepped out of a Guy Ritchie movie. They're also competing with Jack Horner (John Mulaney), no longer quite as little as he was in the nursery rhyme and now "kind of Mafia boss". Throw in the unwanted attentions of a wolf (Wagner Moura) with Grim Reaper

aspirations, and it's clear that Puss's quest isn't going to be easy.

"The co-director Januel Mercado and myself, we love Sergio Leone films and we also love Akira Kurosawa movies," Crawford explains. "The template that we set out for *The Last Wish* was *The Good, The Bad And The Ugly*. It has all these larger-than-life characters after this one treasure, and that's the premise of this story. All these ingredients mesh together to form a mash-up of the fairy tale world and a spaghetti Western."

The Last Wish also reinvents the visual style of the five previous movies in the *Shrek*-verse. Many of the backgrounds have a more hand-drawn, painterly style than we're used to, while the use of motion lines and hyper-stylised fight scenes is more traditionally associated with anime than kingdoms Far Far Away.

"I think *Spider-Man: Into The Spider-Verse* opened up the mainstream animation industry to realise that audiences don't just want a CG movie that looks totally like CG," says Crawford. "I remember on the first *Shrek* movie there was this quest for realism, and it was so impressive what computers could create – it was like, 'Wow, you can see the hairs on their arms!'"

"But audiences have grown more sophisticated over the years, and there can be different nuances to how you tell those stories. We decided to take the opportunity to use a more painterly style. One of the amazing things as artists is being able to play around with

what's CG and what's kind of hand-drawn," he adds. "It means we can get a little bit more of the artists' touch back.

The computer wants to make things perfect, but I think there's also a longing for tangibility." **RE**



Puss In Boots: The Last Wish is in cinemas from 3 February.

► SCI-FACT! The team's nicknames for Jack Horner's Bakers Dozen assassins included Nutmeg, Terror-Misu and Tommy Lee Scones.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

A Shocking Return

New Static series **Shadows Of Dakota** marks Milestone Media's 30th anniversary

➔ LAUNCHED AT DC BY a coalition of African-American creators including Denys Cowan and the late Dwayne McDuffie, Milestone Media celebrates its 30th anniversary this February with a range of new offerings, including the return of Static in new miniseries *Shadows Of Dakota*.

Originally modelled on Spider-Man, the teenage Virgil Hawkins has proved to be one of the imprint's most enduring characters, starring in the animated *Static Shock* TV show nearly 20 years before Black Panther first graced the big screen.

"It's funny, because people are always asking, 'When are we going to get a Static movie?'" says Nikolas Draper-Ivey, who is writing and drawing *Shadows Of Dakota* with co-scripter Vita Ayala. "I remember watching the cartoon when I was younger and there were a lot of mature themes in there that you didn't really expect, and then when I went back and looked at the original Milestone Static, those themes are even stronger.

"So with this new iteration, we're trying to find a way to give the audience who grew up on *Static Shock* some of that flair, while also adding some of the maturity of the original comics."

The six-parter "takes place a few months" after last year's *Season One*, and the main menace is provided by the mysterious Ebon, previously one of the lead

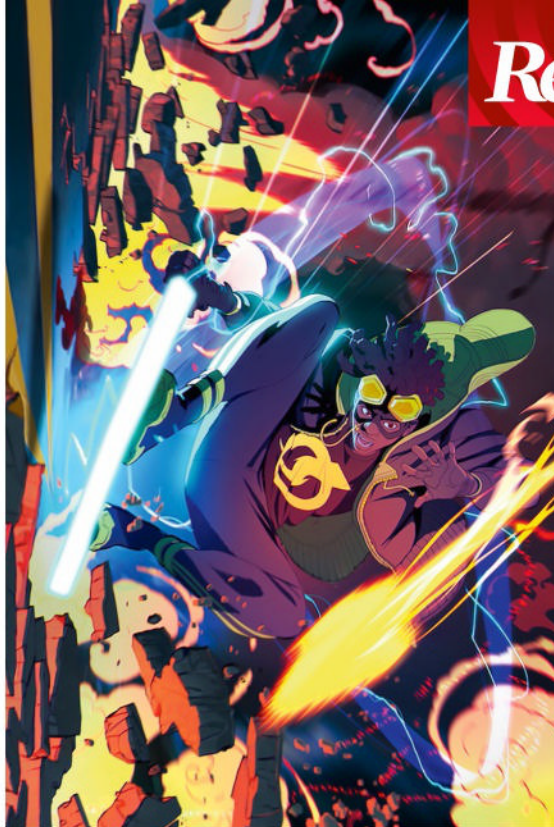


Static has no worries about the energy situation.



NEWS WARP HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

→ Blame it on the boogie! Donald Glover is '70s Spider-Man villain **Hypno-Hustler** in new Sony spin-off.
→ Henry Cavill loses the cape as James Gunn writes a **Superman** reboot movie.
→ Greg Nicotero remaking Michael Mann's 1983 horror **The Keep**.
→ Animated **Ghostbusters** movie to be co-directed by Jennifer Kluska.
→ Matthew Lillard and Josh Hutcherson starring in video game adap **Five Nights At Freddy's**.
→ New **Escape From New York** confirmed as a sequel not a remake.
→ Kevin Smith set to complete True North trilogy with **Moose Jaws**.
→ Georges Alexander Vagan's **Paul Martin And The Magic Magnifying Glass** heading to the big screen.
→ **Alien: Romulus** is the working title of Fede Álvarez's xenomorphic standalone.
→ **Venom's** Ruben Fleischer helping adaptation of Garth Ennis graphic novel **Marjorie Finnegan, Temporal Criminal**.
→ **Twister** sequel **Twisters** blowing in 19 July 2024. Chain down your cows!



villains of *Static Shock*. "There's a lot of things I like about Ebon, and I kind of see him as Virgil's scary godfather," says Draper-Ivey. "What that means is that he says a lot of things that can come off as a bit extreme, but if you listen to what he's saying, he's not wrong. He kind of has Virgil's best interests at heart, even if it doesn't seem like it, and he has a very harsh way of going about it. Ebon will definitely do the things that Virgil won't do, and he will push the envelope in ways that Virgil won't. If I can say it without spoiling things, he'll take the risks that Virgil is not willing to take."

Despite its prominence in the title, Draper-Ivey is also reluctant to expand on exactly what role Dakota City plays in the unfolding drama. "It's definitely got something to do with Ebon, but there's another element to why he is as strong as he is in this version," he continues.

"I can't wait for readers to experience it for themselves and realise, 'Oh, that's why he's like that.' It's an emotional story and a little bit darker than the first season, which was a bit tame, although there were small pockets in there that we now know was down to Ebon, as you

“It's an emotional story and a little bit darker than the first season, which was a bit tame”

got a hint of that darkness. Now this season, we're trying to shape him up to where he's like an urban legend, so to speak. Virgil's story is one of typical superhero-type stuff, but Ebon's is horror, as there's going to be a Candyman kind of vibe to him. He's really, really scary, so how is Virgil going to fight against someone like that?"

Comparing it to *Gotham* and *Metropolis*, Draper-Ivey believes that Dakota City is almost like a character in itself. "I like settings where there's a sense of community and you see everyone from the homeless to the police officers, the people who run the food trucks and all the regular working people who work in other jobs," he reasons. "I like showing Virgil as being part of a larger community."

Draper-Ivey counts *Akira* among his favourite comics, and brings a

distinctive manga feel to the full-colour artwork. "Denys Cowan picked me to draw the

series because he wanted it to have a real anime style to it, as he knew that's what kids like," he says. "I wanted it to make it feel like an animated film, like anime screenshots, so I was trying to bring that kind of flair to it."

Draper-Ivey has also contributed a 12-page *Static/Batman Beyond* story to February's *Milestone 30th Anniversary Special*. "When it comes it's going to be obvious just how much I like *Batman Beyond*," he laughs. "Gotham is much more my wheelhouse as it looks really futuristic and kind of neo-noir with just a splash of colour compared to Dakota, which is really colourful."

Wishing it had been longer than 12 pages, Draper-Ivey relishes the prospect of a longer run. "There's so much we haven't got to explore with Virgil being an adult, that we could get to, such as seeing what his family is like and what he does now for a profession," he adds.

"There's so much unexplored territory like, 'Just how strong is he?'. For a brief moment we do get to see how strong Virgil is because he's overpowered. I wonder how fans are going to take that, as it's not really all that much effort for him to dispose of an opponent." **JS**

Static: Shadows Of Dakota is out on 7 February. *The Milestone 30th Anniversary Special* is out on 21 February.



SCI-FACT! Also out in February, *Icon Vs Hardware* launches Milestone's Worlds Collide event.

SHOWRUNNER EXCLUSIVE

The Walls Have Eyes

Freeform's new mystery **The Watchful Eye** promises surprises down the halls of a creepy New York apartment building



WHO DOESN'T LOVE the idea of the stories and secrets that reside within the creepy walls of an old apartment building in New York City? Just the potential of that scenario alone was enough for writer/executive producer Emily Fox (*Zoey's Extraordinary Playlist*) to take on the showrunner duties for Freeform's new mystery *The Watchful Eye*.

The series revolves around Elena Santo (Mariel Molino), an enigmatic young woman who finagles herself into a job as the live-in nanny for Jasper (Henry Joseph Samiri), the only child of widower and wealthy architect Matthew (Warren Christie). They reside inside the Greybourne in Manhattan, and it's clear from the jump Elena isn't there just to be an altruistic soul.

"This idea started off with the ambition to tell an Alfred Hitchcock story in a contemporary setting, where the mystery provides the structure, but what it's really about is an exploration of how human beings pursue their

own sense of justice," Fox tells Red Alert in a call from her office. In particular, Fox says Elena is the audience's window into a world that represents a painful past she wants to set right, at any cost.

"We really adopted the view of someone on the outside looking in, and having one perception of what goes on inside of a building like the Greybourne, and then getting inside, seeing it up close and realising that you just didn't have the whole picture," Fox details. "We began with a character who is



Jasper (Henry Joseph Samiri) has punching lessons.





Mariel Molino as Elena (left) and Amy Acker as Tory.

very closed off, and I think we all love watching the journey of a character who is closed off to emotional connection and then find that I do have a beating heart, that I do want to connect and people want to connect with me in unexpected ways.

"It's about learning to trust people and learning to open up and learning how not to hurt people just because you have been hurt."

While in her pursuit of her secret agenda, Elena will not only get to know Matthew and Jasper, but she'll have to contend with Matthew's very suspicious sister-in-law Tory, played by beloved genre actress Amy Acker (*Angel*). And then there's other residents like nosy Mrs Ivey (Kelly Bishop) and younger resident Elliott (Lex Lumpkin), who becomes Elena's inside ally. The building's cast of characters



Lex Lumpkin plays Greybourne resident Elliott.

“We adopted the view of someone on the outside looking in”

will both help and hinder Elena's personal mission. "It's a puzzle like all good mysteries," Fox teases. "There's clues and there's misleads and there's secret hallways. Who doesn't love a secret hallway?"

As Elena prowls the halls of the Greybourne, Fox says she'll also have to confront some long-standing biases about class and wealth that will get challenged the more she connects to her new circle.

"She has a desire to seek justice for what has happened to her and her family. She's very street-smart, but there are certain things that you can't know until you learn them up close," Fox adds. "The objective was always to find a way to portray everyone as fundamentally human and grappling with their own issues. Regardless of the setting and regardless of what they'd been born with, be it a silver spoon or nothing."

And as Elena is watching, there's also the unsettling vibe that eyes are always upon her too. "We were really inspired by *Rosemary's Baby's* sense of claustrophobia," Fox says of the show's unsettling tone and almost noir aesthetic. "And not just the claustrophobia,

but also the sense that you are being watched everywhere you are. And it's not like you're being watched by surveillance cameras. It's like you're being watched by something that feels supernatural," she says.

"We all get that weird feeling, but imagine if you felt that every day?" she poses. "Honestly, I would run. But the idea that our directors and DP collaborated to give us is this sense of dread and apprehension in the camera angles and lighting. Even our score is very carefully constructed to lean into that contrast of like, 'Oh, I'm with this little kid playing with Lego in his family room but with different lighting and different music, this is not right.'"

For those willing to go on the journey of *The Watchful Eye*, Fox promises answers to the mystery, but hopefully even more questions that would grant them more seasons. "The story and the mystery, and resolution of the mystery, continues to escalate through the course of the season. Many people are drawn into the pit of lava that is the unfolding mystery.

"But our goal was to reach a point where you get some satisfaction and answers, but a whole new set of questions." She smiles and adds: "You know, it's a big building..." **TB**

The Watchful Eye is on Freeform from 30 January. UK details TBC.

► SCI-FACT! Emily Fox also previously worked on *A Series Of Unfortunate Events* and *Ghost Whisperer*.

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER EXCLUSIVE

Double Trouble

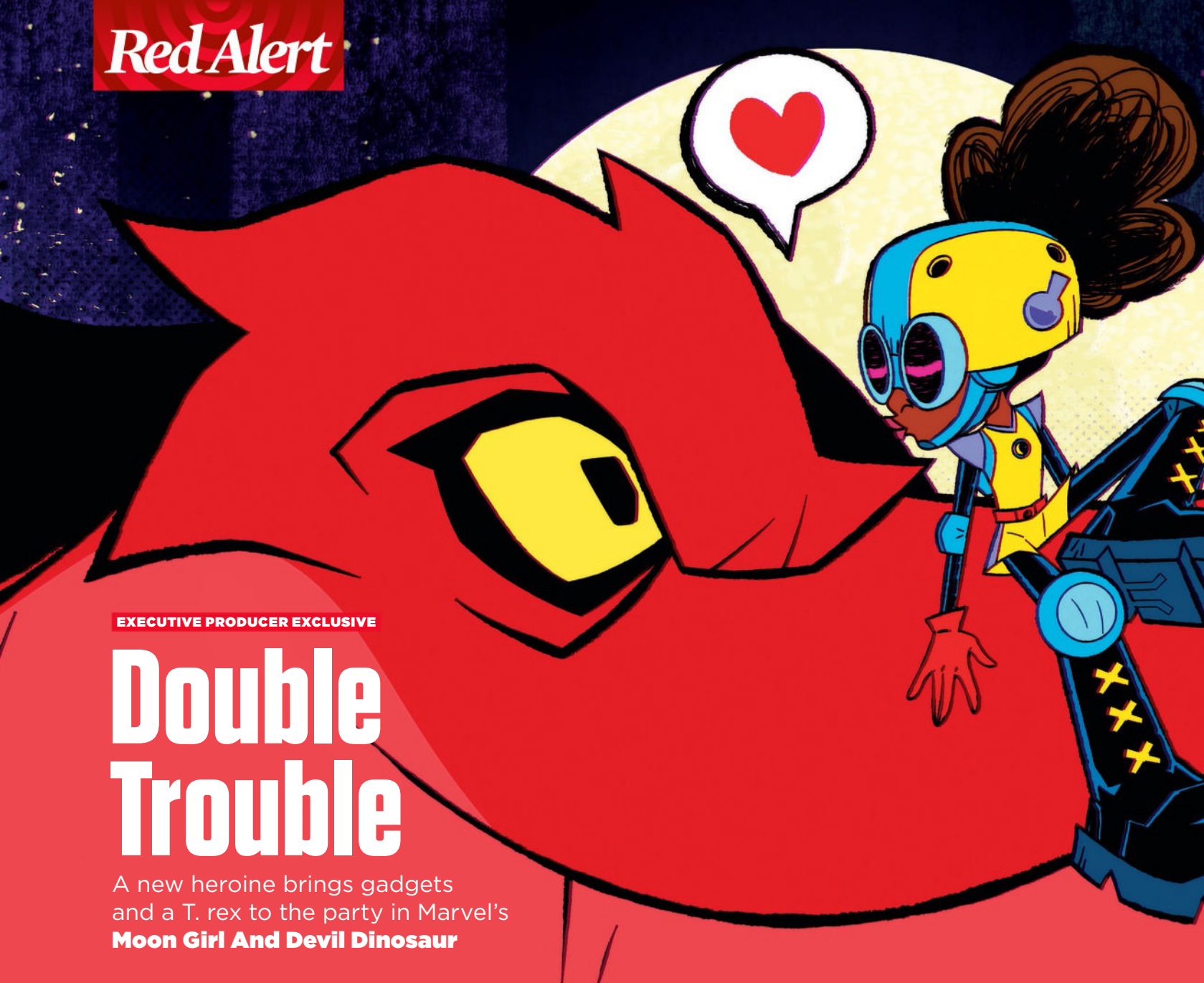
A new heroine brings gadgets and a T. rex to the party in Marvel's **Moon Girl And Devil Dinosaur**

➔ IN ACTOR LAURENCE FISHBURNE'S LONG and esteemed stage and screen career, there are plenty of roles he's taken just because he's a lifelong comic book geek. He's voiced the Silver Surfer, run the *Daily Planet* as editor Perry White and as Dr Bill Foster he scrapped against Ant-Man and the Wasp. But now he's finally getting to steer some comic book adventures as executive producer of Disney Animation's *Marvel's Moon Girl And Devil Dinosaur* series.

As an avid comic book reader and part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe family, Fishburne tells Red Alert that he's had an ongoing conversation with Marvel executives about doing something inside their universe with his Cinema Gypsy Productions partner, Helen Sugland. "I was presented with the *Moon Girl And Devil Dinosaur* comic, and I was like, 'Wow, this is perfect for our time and for what's going on right now.' And the opportunity to jump into the animation space for me was a welcome one."

Fishburne says their company developed the comic for almost two years until they connected with animator/director Steve Loter (*The Penguins Of Madagascar*), who really shaped the comic story of the strange superhero

duo of teen and T. rex into the series audiences will see. "I had to get involved with this amazing show," Loter enthuses. "This series is about Lunella Lafayette, aka Moon Girl, who's the first African-American teen girl superhero, who also happens to be one of the smartest people in the Marvel Universe, who partners with a giant T. rex to defend the Lower East Side of New York City. How can you say no to that?" he laughs.





NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

→ Henry Cavill bringing **Warhammer 40,000** to Amazon as star and executive producer.
 → Netflix developing animated spin-off **Stranger Things Tokyo**.
 → Bryce Dallas Howard leading **Witch Mountain** reboot for Disney+.
 → Amazon turning game **God Of War** into a series, showrun by *The Wheel Of Time*'s Rafe Judkins.
 → Broadway legend Patti LaPone joining **Agatha: Coven Of Chaos** for Marvel.
 → James Wan developing a series based on Robert McCammon's SF horror **Stinger**.
 → Apple's *Mythic Quest* spawning spin-off series **Mere Mortals**.
 → **1899** and **The Bastard Son & The Devil Himself** axed after one season.
 → Nick Cutter's near-future thriller **The Deep** set for adaptation.
 → New **Avatar: The Last Airbender** series on the way from Avatar Studios.
 → David Tennant and Glenn Close voicing animated angel comedy **Standing By**.
 → Disney+ marking **Stan Lee**'s centenary with major new documentary. 'Nuff said, true believers!



Moon Girl makes her landing on Earth.

screen. Loter says, "One of the things that's really important for our show is a deep commitment to have inclusive storytelling, to be authentic, and to have an extremely diverse voice cast and creative team to be telling these stories." Fishburne concurs, adding, "Our team is over 50% female, in our writers' room in particular, all of whom have been 13-year-old girls and who are of a variety of backgrounds and races."

"They're really diverse, but they have a sensibility. They have a reality. They have an experience that they're bringing to our show, and it really is reflected in what you're seeing."

“The chance to jump into the animation space for me was a welcome one”

The show also benefits from the input of Fishburne, who is voicing a character called The Beyonder. "One of my great loves is voice acting," Fishburne says with genuine glee. "Mel Blanc was one of my heroes. Daws Butler was one of my heroes."

Not wanting to spoil too much about the specifics of his role, the actor confirms he's recurring and will come in and out of the story. "It was an interesting process trying to figure him out," he teases. "I wanted to make sure that I was having fun,

that it wasn't just me doing a voice that people recognise – as I have been working so long that my voice is quite recognisable. So, for me, it was really just about, how do I have fun? How do I make this lighter than perhaps the stuff that I'm known for in movies and what have you?"

He adds that he definitely wanted to make sure he was rising to the occasion of the show's real superhero, Moon Girl. "The opportunity to do something like this... we haven't seen a hero like Lunella Lafayette before, and I think it's time we did." **TB**

Marvel's Moon Girl And Devil Dinosaur is on the Disney Channel and Disney+ from 10 February.

A New York City native, Loter says the series even pulls from the aesthetics of the city during the '80s and '90s. "We were greatly inspired by New York when it was a really super-creative environment with a lot of music and a lot of art," he says of the unique look of Lunella Lafayette's (voiced by Diamond White) back yard. "You see Andy Warhol screen-print sensibilities on a lot of the art. You see a lot of colourful street murals. And graffiti was a big inspiration for the characters and the animation, and how it moves."

Citing recent animation projects featuring Marvel characters as their benchmarks of quality – including *Into The Spider-Verse* and *What If...?* – Loter says they also wanted to use those examples to forge their own visual path. "We wanted to do something that had its own identity and feeling, so we went to a very traditional hand-drawn look, a very pen and ink sensibility for the characters in a 2D animation way. It has a kind of a unique identity even among all the other kind of superhero offerings." The series also has a creative team that reflects the characters on the

SCI-FACT! Devil Dinosaur is the creation of Jack Kirby and first appeared in *Devil Dinosaur* issue one, April 1978.

SHOWRUNNER EXCLUSIVE

Family Matters

The Winchesters

returns with a burgeoning romance, more Tom Welling and the promise of a crazy finale



➔ WHEN WE LAST SAW Mary Campbell (Meg Donnelly), John Winchester (Drake Rodger) and their Monster Club of demon hunters in *The Winchesters* midseason finale “Reflections”, those two crazy kids had a big personal moment with their first kiss, and Mary’s father Samuel (Tom Welling) was able to hold back the attacking Akrida.

But what all the humans don’t know is that the Akrida Queen is off licking her wounds, being fed monster essences by her servants so she can come back stronger than ever.

In the first episode of the season’s second half, “Hang On To Your Life”, we see Meg, John and Samuel spend some quality time together as the old man heals,

while that simmering romance continues to blossom. Executive producer/showrunner Robbie Thompson tells Red Alert that the rest of the season will continue to deal with the repercussions of those two big storylines.

Thompson says diving into the romance between Sam and Dean Winchester’s future parents was always going to happen sooner rather than later. “When we started talking about the longer form of the season, and the series, we didn’t want to be afraid to let them get together,” he explains.

“We always see the meet and the break-up in traditional stories, but this was about that middle. And canonically in the show, it’s not like John and Mary had this incredible, successful romance. There was a hint that there was

Tom Welling as Samuel Campbell: big daddy.



Drake Rodger as John Winchester, with Mary.





Mary, Carlos and Millie Winchester in "Reflections."



Meg Donnelly as Mary and JoJo Fleites as Carlos.

something problematic there," he says of the history of their fraught marriage in *Supernatural* lore. "That felt exciting. How do we bring them together so that the audience is surprised that they're together so quickly? And then how do we push them apart?"

As for Mary's father Samuel, Thompson says he's delighted with what actor Tom Welling (*Smallville*) has already brought to the show in this important role. "All the credit in the world for that [casting] belongs with [executive producers] Jensen and Danneel Ackles," he says with appreciation. "They obviously know him personally."

Thompson says Welling taking on the character came up during

the shooting of *The Winchesters* pilot, when they were starting to talk about characters that they wanted to bring into the first season. "Samuel was one of them," he says. Because of Welling's friendship with the Ackles and his long association with The CW, he said yes to Thompson's "dream casting" of the part, and the two collaborated on how best to create the family Campbell patriarch.

"From the first conversation I had with Tom, he so got it from the beginning," Thompson remembers. "He understood who this character was and who our version of that character would be. From that first moment of seeing him in the make-up trailer with the hair and the facial hair, discussing what we wanted him to look like, it was just the perfect fit and the perfect guy. I love working with Tom, and we'd love to see a whole lot more of Samuel."

As to just how much we'll see of Samuel after episode eight, Thompson teases, "We'll see him again before the end of the season." And we'll also see several "monster of the week" episodes that will have the Monster Club on its toes before the Akrida story ramps up once more.

"They're going to find out that there is someone they need to find pretty quickly," he says, "and that person is a big thrust of our second half. And then at the end of episode 10, I wouldn't say we get more serialised, but shit hits the fan for our characters pretty hardcore at the end of that and they're going to have to deal with that. The Akrida really turn up the heat, as the

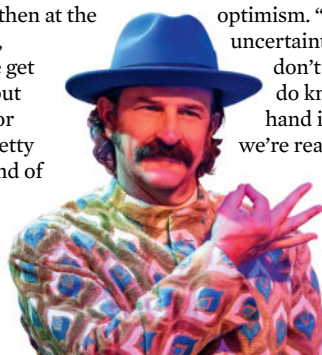
"We'd love to see a whole lot more of Samuel in the show"

expression goes. They're really going to have to go from being in a place of being reactive to being proactive."

Thompson also promises a finale that will answer a lot of fan questions about the mythology and placement of the show in the *Supernatural* canon. "We always wanted to unpack what we've been doing as a prequel because I know there are a lot of questions about continuity and continuity changes, and how things are different. The plan still remains that all of those questions will be answered in 13."

As for the long-term future of *The Winchesters* with the big changes happening at The CW, Thompson says right now he has no idea and is just focused on finishing season one. "I'll say that both our partners at the studio and network have been focused on the same," he shares, with some optimism. "It is a time of uncertainty for all of us. We don't know. But what we do know is the task at hand in front of us and we're really focused on putting forth the best story that we can." **TB**

The Winchesters is on The CW. UK details TBC.



SCI-FACT! Actor Richard Speight Jr, who played the Trickster/Gabriel/Loki on *Supernatural*, directed the midseason finale episode.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Sole Survivor

Archie celebrates the dark side of Valentine's Day with **Betty: The Final Girl**

➔ THE FINAL GIRL IS traditionally the last person standing (usually female) in slasher films, and Betty Cooper will be stepping into the archetypal role in the latest *Archie Horror Presents: Chilling Adventures* anthology. Describing her as “the can-do girl of the Riverdale crew,” writer Micol Ostow can't help but compare her to a certain '90s vampire slayer.

“Not to be too reductive, but it's hard for me not to draw a line straight from Betty to Buffy – and vice versa – which meant that in any incarnation I envisioned, she would be the hunter/survivor, not the monster or victim,” explains Ostow, who was also inspired by Grady Hendrix's 2021 novel *The Final Girl Support Group*. “I read that book and loved it, and it just clicked that the trope could be a perfect vehicle for Betty.”

Following on from last Halloween's *Month Of Mayhem*, *Betty: The Final Girl* arrives around the time of the most romantic day of the year. “*Archie Horror* exists all year long, and the timing of it made sense to have tips to Valentine's Day as that's a holiday *Archie* typically goes all-in on,” says editor Jamie Rotante. “However, this isn't a horror riff on a standard Valentine's story, so don't expect any of the ladies to be fighting over Archie here!”

With Betty spending Valentine's night in a remote cabin in the woods by watching movies like *When A Stranger Calls*, *I Know*

Just your typical Valentine's Day...



What You Did Last Summer and Scream, expect plenty of metafictional references. "Archie's been known for our parodies of pop culture and media trends," continues Rotante. "So it makes sense that a horror comic would have some nods to famous horror films too."

With its title neatly alluding to Roman Polanski's 1968 classic *Rosemary's Baby*, Ostow teams up with artist Laura Braga on "Rosemary's Babysitter", while the 32-pager also features contributions by Casey Gilly and Natalie Mendoza and Sam Maggs and Carola Borelli. "The idea for this one-shot was originally pitched to me by Micol, so I had no doubt that she'd not only be involved, but would be the person leading the charge," admits Rotante. "Sam Maggs's Melody story was perfect for this title, and I'd worked with Casey Gilly on a

“It makes sense that a horror comic would have nods to famous horror films”

story for *Return Of Chilling Adventures In Sorcery*, and right from the start, I knew that I wanted to have her back on another horror story. She too was all-in on the idea and loved being able to riff on Valentine's Day as a part of it as well. As for the artists, Laura Braga draws the characters so beautifully and can blend that so well into horror, while Natalie Mendoza and Carola Borelli are both new to the Archie world."

While Archie and the other men of Riverdale play minimal roles in what unfolds, you can still expect to see plenty of familiar faces. "The title may make it seem like Betty is the only girl in this story," says Rotante. "But actually, *The Final Girl* spotlights a number of female characters from the Archie universe, including Brigitte Reilly, Ginger Lopez, Melody Valentine – and where there's Betty, there's usually Veronica!" **SJ**

Betty: The Final Girl is out on 15 February.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Blade Runner

Stakes are high in **Bloodline: Daughter Of Blade**



AS A LONG-TIME FAN of Wesley Snipes's big-screen vampire hunter, being asked to write *Bloodline: Daughter Of Blade* was a childhood dream come true for Danny Lore.

"I've been a fan of Blade for longer than I've even known he was a Marvel Comics character – seriously!" laughs Lore. "I first saw the movie as a kid and had somehow ignored or missed the opening title card, and it was only a little while afterwards that I learned his origins.

"In addition, Blade has a lot of emotional connections for me with my father, the person who introduced me to most comic characters. For me, getting the chance to create a character in the Marvel universe, let alone a legacy character, is such an honour. My goal is to do the

Daywalker legacy justice, as well as creating, in Brielle, a character folks can see themselves in."

As a high school student, Blade's daughter has a lot to learn when she initially begins to develop vampiric superpowers. "Brielle is figuring things out pretty early in the series, but fortunately she's not going to be alone when she does so," says Lore. "It was important for me to give her the kind of support that I want for girls like Brielle, as well as giving her the freedom to explore like teenagers need to.

"Her mom is, after all, Blade's iconic and wonderful old flame, so she's got someone at home happy to help her. And when things get too much, maybe there's someone else out there as well..."

With Lore admitting that "it would be really rude to tease



Daddy Daywalker on the cover and not deliver, wouldn't it?", Brielle's hometown also plays a vital role. "I enjoy writing Brielle's friends and interactions in school, but for me the heart of it is that wherever she is, she's in Atlanta," explains Lore. "The city is this amazing location with a creative and exciting presence, while also having a long history of supernatural occurrences and superstition."

Brielle debuted in Marvel's 2022 Free Comic Book Day title *Avengers/X-Men* issue one, and also appeared in last Halloween's *Crypt Of Shadows* one-shot, but this new monthly will start afresh. "We wanted the Free Comic Book Day and *Crypt Of Shadows* stories to stand on their own, so we're getting a new antagonist in the main series," explains Lore. "Very quickly, Brielle will be thrown into not just being a supernatural badass, but we'll also find out what that means when the outside world makes assumptions about what she'd do with that power."

Lore has formed a strong partnership with artist Karen S. Darboe. "Karen brings the heat and the style!" he says. "Seriously, Karen has such a great sense of flair and fashion, so we could have a cool aesthetic from the jump. In addition, she's great at all these delightful expressions of comedy and tenderness that always delight me when I get back her pages!" **SJ**

Bloodline: Daughter Of Blade issue one is out on 1 February.



CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Hyde And Seek

Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson face off against Mr Hyde in a new Titan Comics series

WRITTEN BY FRED DUVAL AND JEAN-PIERRE Pécau, drawn by Stevan Subic, and originally published in France by Delcourt, Titan Comics' new four-issue series *MORIARTY: Clockwork Empire* transplants Arthur Conan Doyle's detective duo into a steampunk-style Victorian London.

"We were both great readers of Doyle, so we discussed the story and started to build the project together," Duval tells Red Alert. "I've read *The Hound Of The Baskervilles* quite a number of times in my life, and it's such a timeless and brilliantly constructed tale, so adapting it into an alternate history almost felt like a natural thing to do."

As the title indicates, Holmes's notorious arch-enemy is a more pervasive presence than usual. "Rather than transporting a Holmes investigation into a steampunk universe, it seemed original to us to confront him with the evil genius of the series, Professor Moriarty," explains Pécau, while Duval adds: "The idea that Moriarty was actually an organisation like SPECTRE in James Bond was interesting, so *MORIARTY* dies but always comes back."

With Duval noting that "the reflection of the body, on transhumanism in reality, that is built up around Mr Hyde by Robert Louis Stevenson went perfectly with *MORIARTY*'s super-soldier plans," Holmes and Watson are pitted against Dr Jekyll's monstrous dark side. "At first, we wanted it to be a bit like *The League Of Extraordinary Gentlemen* and to connect the Holmes myth to all the great authors of the time," says Pécau. "Not just Stevenson, but also Bram Stoker and even *Fantomas*."

Subic is currently illustrating the Paul Dano-penned *The Riddler: Year One* for DC Comics, and bringing a steampunk Victorian London to life was a very different challenge to depicting the modern-day metropolis of Gotham. "*The Riddler* is not that common a comic as it's rare that Hollywood and the comics industry will come together this tightly," he says. "Working with Paul Dano has been a once in a lifetime experience, as he's such a wonderful person, intellectual and an amazing actor, and we communicate on a daily basis."

"I've just started work on issue three, and can say that *The Riddler: Year One* is similar to nothing

"I've always loved steampunk and horror as well as Sherlock"

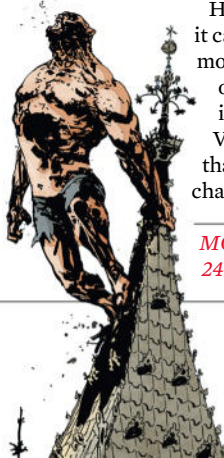
I've done before. It's a comic for itself and I'm enjoying it on every level. Working with Paul and DC is something that will stay with me as a really special period."



Stating that "they left me an empty space and complete freedom," Subic explains that he was given carte blanche when it came to designing *MORIARTY*'s retro-futuristic locale. "I've always loved steampunk and horror as well as Sherlock, so it wasn't hard for me to sink into this unusual, fantastical world that we built very quickly and easily," says Subic.

He didn't have any particular individuals in mind when it came to Holmes and Watson themselves. "Although most cartoonists rely on references, I don't do that very often. On the contrary, everything given on the pages is the fruit of how I see that mysterious world of Victorian London, the iconic Sherlock and everything that surrounds him and makes him such a beloved character." SJ

MORIARTY: Clockwork Empire issue one is out on 24 February.





Ncuti Gatwa shows off his new Doctor duds.



It's only blummin' Neil Patrick Harris!



David Tennant is the Fourteenth...



Donna can't believe the news either.



Gatwa with Millie Gibson as Ruby.



Space And Time

Celebrating 60 years of **Doctor Who**

◆ On Saturday 17 December, the costumes for the Fifteenth Doctor and Ruby Sunday were revealed on *Doctor Who* social media accounts. Fan art quickly followed, of course!

◆ Ncuti Gatwa also took to Instagram to reveal some images from the costume trailer, including – if you squint as only fans can – a guide as to how his Gallifreyan nails would look...

◆ On Christmas Eve the official *Doctor Who* social media accounts teased that something was coming on the following day, leading fans to speculate wildly (*Who* fans speculating? Never!) that it could be a mini episode or indeed a “Beyoncé” release of a Christmas special. It was, as many suspected, the first proper trailer for the three 60th anniversary specials.

◆ The 60th anniversary trailer



was viewed over one million times within 24 hours!

◆ The cast was announced for the 60th anniversary specials. Alongside the previously revealed David Tennant (as the Fourteenth Doctor), Catherine Tate as Donna Noble and Neil Patrick Harris – previously described by showrunner Russell T Davies as “the greatest enemy the Doctor has ever faced,” – there are Jacqueline King as Sylvia Noble,

Karl Collins as Shaun Temple and Ruth Madeley as Shirley Anne Bingham. Madeley will also appear as Hebe in a new *Sixth Doctor Adventures* box set



Sylvia, Shaun and Ruth from the trailer.

from Big Finish in May. Fans also got their first glimpse of Yasmin Finney as Rose.

◆ Some familiar faces to long-time readers of *Doctor Who Weekly* also appeared in the trailer, in the form of what looks like – though we have to stress it has not been officially confirmed! – Beep the Meep and Wrarth Warriors.

These characters first appeared in comic book story “The Star Beast”, which was published from 14 February to 3 April 1980. The story – which was originally rejected by the BBC before becoming a comic strip – has been reprinted several times over the years and was also adapted by Big Finish.



► **SCI-FACT!** Beep the Meep and the Wrarth Warriors were originally designed by comic artist Dave Gibbons.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Close Encounter

James Tynion IV and Michael Avon Oeming open real life X-Files in **Blue Book**

➔ REFERRING TO IT AS “TRUE WEIRD,” JAMES Tynion IV and Michael Avon Oeming prove that truth is often stranger than fiction in their new Dark Horse series *Blue Book*, which chronicles real people’s alleged experiences with extraterrestrial spacecraft.

“When I was a kid, my school library had a whole paranormal section with ‘non-fiction’ stories of UFO and cryptid encounters, but when I started working on *Department Of Truth*, I was shocked to see that the sorts of books I used to gobble up as a kid didn’t seem to exist any more,” recalls Tynion, referring to his Image series which explores various occult phenomena.

“It planted a seed in my head that the young weirdos of today aren’t getting these foundational stories, this deep folklore, that so much pop culture is built on. You go back to early Marvel, and you can see immediately that Stan Lee and Jack Kirby must have eaten up all of the weird Fortean magazines when they were kids, with stories of hollow Earths, UFO encounters and lost civilisations.”

TAKING TO THE HILLS

Taking its lead from US Air Force study Project Blue Book, the series starts with the famous case of Betty and Barney Hill, who were apparently abducted by aliens during a long drive home in 1961. “When UFO sightings started happening in the late 1960s, people had no context for what they were seeing and it was thrilling and frightening,” explains Tynion. “You can feel the strangeness in those original first-hand accounts of sightings. I wanted to tap into those emotionally, because I find them incredibly valuable creative fuel. What fascinated me about Betty and Barney’s story was that every story of UFO abduction, in fiction or otherwise, that came after their encounter, was built from the raw pieces of the encounter they talked about in the papers.”

Oeming also attempted to keep his depiction of the aliens as close to Betty and Barney’s descriptions as possible. “We did our best to base them on the witness accounts, and I did my best not to fill in the blanks or add anything,” he says. “I got them right in a few shots but ended up making them much larger along the way because that iconography is so set.”

He also adopted a distinctive black, white and blue palette. “I loved the process of putting parameters on art like ‘only limited shades of blues,’” he continues. “It actually opens up the possibilities of what can be

done and how to drive the imagination more than a wide open ‘anything goes’ approach. Less is always more.”

Each issue will also include a back-up strip, “True Weird”; issue one’s sees Tynion (known for his acclaimed stint on *Batman*) teaming up with *The Dark Knight Returns* artist Klaus Janson. “I wanted to do something that defied simple classification, so I crafted a story that would draw together many strange-but-true events in Coney Island in our hometown of New York City into a single narrative,” he explains. “It hinges on the true story of the sighting of a figure that let me cheekily announce the short as James Tynion IV and Klaus Janson team up for a Bat Man comic!” **SJ**

Blue Book issue one is out on 20 February.



Betty and Barney Hill, later of *The Flintstones*.



NEW AUTHOR

RAY NAYLER

MEET THE FOREIGN SERVICE OFFICER BEHIND ECO-THRILLER *THE MOUNTAIN IN THE SEA*



ANNA KUZNETSOVA

Tell us about your protagonist.

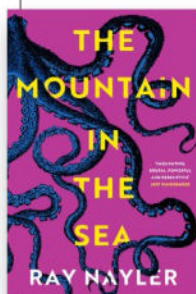
→ Dr Ha Nguyen is a marine biologist specialised in cephalopod communication given a dream opportunity: to study a species of octopus that may have achieved symbolic communication and complex culture. But there's a lot more to the job, and the corporation that hired her, than she may have bargained for...

Was there an inspiration for the book?

→ I spent a lot of time working on environmental projects in Vietnam's Con Dao Archipelago. It left an indelible stamp on my consciousness. I had to set a book there.

How far removed from today's reality are the book's AI developments?

→ There are some that are almost here, and some that will probably never happen. But prediction isn't the business: SF writers turn reality's dials and use the new settings to ask questions about the world we live in, and the world we *might* live in.



Did you do much research?

→ I probably did a doctorate level of research for it, ranging from marine biology to semiotics to esoteric subjects like paleopoetics and biosemiotics. It's all fascinating – especially the unsolved mystery of consciousness.

Any advice for budding authors?

→ Read more widely than you think you need to – as a writer your main job is to learn as much as possible, not to be a loyal fan of any genre. And write as much as you can. Writing well is more about experience than talent.

The Mountain In The Sea is out on 16 February, published by W&N.

THE FINAL FRONTIER



CHRIS BOUCHER 1943-2022

Remembering a key voice in Brit SF TV



"I PREFER MY HEROES and villains a little more nuanced," said writer and script editor Chris Boucher, whose taste for moral ambiguity and gift for acid banter found a perfect showcase in *Blake's 7*.

Born in Maldon, Essex, Boucher was an only child whose imagination was stoked by such pulp magazines as *Astounding Science Fiction*. Raising a family while working for Calor Gas, he took to scriptwriting to earn extra cash, selling a "three-line quickie" to BBC consumer affairs show *Braden's Week* in 1969.

Boucher broke into TV SF with three *Doctor Who* commissions in the late '70s. "The Robots Of Death" and "The Face Of Evil" demonstrated a knack for world-building along with a fascination for artificial intelligence, while the spooky "Image Of The Fendahl" evoked *Quatermass* with its tale of an ancient skull influencing human civilisation.

"The Face Of Evil" saw Boucher create one of the show's classic companions in Leela, a



knife-wielding alien savage inspired by Palestinian terrorist Leila Khaled and played by Louise Jameson. "The character was originally conceived as a reaction against the little screaming companion type," he recalled.

Boucher served as script editor on all four seasons of *Blake's 7* and wrote nine episodes, including "Blake", the memorable 1981 finale that saw the mismatched heroes massacred. Originally shadowing series creator Terry Nation, Boucher became the show's key creative voice, shifting it from "Robin Hood in space" to "Che Guevara and *The Dirty Dozen*".

Star Cops followed in 1987, a near-future police procedural that spliced Boucher's love of crime drama – he was script editor on *Shoestring*, *Bergerac* and *The Bill* – with SF. *Blake's 7* remained perhaps his proudest achievement: "At its worst it was awful, at its best it was as good as almost anything around," he reflected in 2008. "And from worst to best I loved every bloody minute of it." **NS**



Tom Baker with Louise Jameson as Leela.

ANGELO BADALAMENTI 1937-2022

Composer of the soundtracks to *Twin Peaks* and *The City Of Lost Children*.

STEPHEN GREIF 1944-2022

British actor who was the first to play Federation heavy Travis in *Blake's 7*.

SFX EXCLUSIVE
SUBSCRIPTION OFFER!

SFX



SUBSCRIBE TODAY AND ENJOY GREAT SAVINGS!

Terms and conditions: Offer closes 28/2/2023. Offer open to new UK subscribers only. Pricing is guaranteed for the first 12 months and we will notify you in advance of any price changes. Please allow up to six weeks for delivery of your first subscription issue (up to eight weeks overseas). The full subscription rate is for 12 months and includes postage and packaging. If the magazine ordered changes frequency per annum, we will honour the number of issues paid for, not the term of the subscription. For full terms and conditions, visit www.magazinesdirect.com/terms. For enquiries please telephone: +44(0)330 333 1113 (open Monday-Friday 8:30am-7pm, and Saturday 10am-3pm GMT, or email help@magazinesdirect.com. Calls to 0330 numbers will be charged at no more than a national landline call, and may be included in your phone provider's call bundle.

EXCLUSIVE SUBSCRIBER-ONLY BENEFITS

SUBSCRIBER-ONLY COVER EVERY ISSUE
SFX DELIVERED DIRECTLY TO YOUR DOOR
SAVE 50% ON THE COVER PRICE



OUR SIMPLE 3-MONTH BEST OFFER BREAKS UP THE ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION
INTO FOUR EASILY MANAGEABLE PAYMENTS OVER THE COURSE OF THE YEAR

Annual Print Edition

**£8.93 EVERY
3 MONTHS**

13 issues of *SFX* in
print over 12 months
and save 50%

Annual Print + Digital Edition

**£15.18 EVERY
3 MONTHS**

13 issues of *SFX* over 12
months in print and
digital, and save 50%

Digital Edition

**£6.48 EVERY
3 MONTHS**

13 issues of *SFX* in digital
over the course of the
year, and save 50%

SUBSCRIBE TODAY AT
MAGAZINESDIRECT.COM/SFX/B23S
OR CALL 0330 333 1113 AND QUOTE B23S

B R A C E F O R I M P A C T

SEASON THREE OF **STAR TREK: PICARD** MAY JUST DO THE IMPOSSIBLE AND SILENCE KEYBOARD WARRIORS GLOBALLY. YES, IT'S REALLY THAT GOOD

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

THIS IS IT, TREKKERS. THIS IS THE Big One. Twenty years since we last saw the *Next Generation* cast together in *Star Trek: Nemesis*, the original crew are back for one final hurrah. But is it final and will you be saying hurrah? The answers, in turn, are “hopefully not” and “most definitely yes.”

This is *Star Trek* on a scale that you’ve never seen before – to a point where showrunner and writer Terry Matalas has previously stated that perhaps he would’ve actually called it *Star Trek: Legacy* rather than *Picard*. That particular legacy spans not only *The Next Generation* and *Voyager*, but also *Deep Space Nine*, such is the scope of what Matalas and his team bring to screens globally in February.

Long before spin-off series *Picard* was even announced, the creative discussion was always that it would not be a continuation or direct sequel to *The Next Generation*. So when the returning cast were announced in April 2022, it’s fair to say people were a little bit excited. However, Matalas soon shuts down the idea that *Picard* was always heading towards a reunion of the Enterprise-E crew in its third and final season.

“No, it wasn’t,” he reveals. “There wasn’t really a plan. When I came aboard on season two, Alex [Kurtzman] and Akiva [Goldsman, executive producers], were always thinking about each one of these seasons being a different story.

“So while we were working on season two, we weren’t thinking ahead, aside from maybe some starship sets, to season three. So about halfway through shooting season two, when it was time for me to split off and do season three, the question became, ‘What is it exactly we’re doing for the last hurrah?’

“I had certainly always wanted to do one final *Star Trek: The Next Generation* adventure, but wasn’t certain that Patrick would be up for it. So I sat down with Patrick at his dining room table and took him through what I thought was the final story of *Picard*, and some arcs that I felt needed to be paid off for his character and some relationships and some storylines and, after a bottle of wine, we were off to the races.”

Those hoping for an elaborate explanation of what might have been in store if Sir Patrick had other ideas, we’re sorry to disappoint. ➔



"There wasn't a plan B. So I have no idea," Matalas laughs. "It was this, this was always what I wanted to do. So my only option was to passionately convince all parties involved. And it wasn't that hard. Certainly, Alex and Akiva were on board, and Patrick was quickly on board, but then we had to go to the studio, the network. It's a different financial commitment to bring everybody back too, so we had to figure all that out as well. But there wasn't a plan B. This was it."

Does this mean that Matalas has great persuasive skills, or was it a particularly good bottle of wine?

"I think it was that everyone felt we had earned it," he reasons. "When they had set out to make the first season of the show, I wasn't there, but the mission statement was that it wasn't going to be a *Next Gen* story. So we kind of had to build up to it. Certainly, when I came on in season two, I tried to push for as much of that as I could with Q and Guinan and things like that. It was a different kind of show. So season three, you can feel the difference for sure in the kind of story it is, versus seasons one and two."

This is the understatement of the year, and it's only January. A word you now often hear thrown around about television shows is "cinematic". *Star Trek: Picard* season three truly earns the right to be called cinematic. It's fair to assume that Matalas has made things much, much bigger.

"It's very fair," he laughs. "It is gigantic. I still cannot believe we got away with it."

MOVIE MAGIC

The Next Generation was born in 1987 of a specific cultural moment, just as *The Original Series* reflected the '60s. But fans shouldn't worry that it doesn't keep the original spirit of the previous 178 episodes intact. Nor should new viewers think that these 10 new instalments don't reimagine the format.

"It's both," Matalas counters. "It honours what came before, it honours the spirit of the characters, but also takes into account that it's been over 20 years since we'd last seen many of them."

"Storytelling and serialised television has changed since then, so we do both. If you're looking to feel like these are the *Next Gen* characters that you grew up with, you will see them everywhere. If you're looking for something a little new, well, you get to catch up with them in unexpected ways as well. But you will get those *Next Gen* feels back for sure. But it's the next step in their journey. It feels like a feature film, a final feature film."

Describing these 10 hours as being like a film is something else fans can expect to hear a lot – and no, it's not hyperbole. In fact, it felt so much like a feature film that the cast practically threw down the gauntlet to Paramount at last

Michelle Hurd
as Raffaella
"Raffi"
Musiker.



"Worf!"
"Bless you."
"Ah, you've
still got it."



Jeri Ryan,
Patrick
Stewart and
Mr Frakes.

year's New York Comic Con to make another movie featuring them.

Matalas laughs hard. "Yeah, they did, didn't they? They certainly did have a great time and they certainly all would love to do this again. I think there are ways of seeing these characters again, in a kind of *Next, Next Generation* story. Not all these characters – I'm not gonna say they all necessarily make it out safely of season three. But I will say that in science fiction, there are always ways of seeing people again. So of course, who wouldn't want to do this forever?"

So much, then, for "The Final Voyage" touted in the epic trailer, also revealed at NYCC. And that, off the back of this third season, is a bloody good thing indeed.

"One wonders why there haven't been six *Next Generation* movies or specials in the time that has passed since *Nemesis* [2002],"

Matalas continues. "But that's the way of the world, whether that be *Indiana Jones* or *Ghostbusters* or anything else, you don't always get to see more of those kinds of stories. It's hard to get everyone back together, to convince the studio and network that they should spend money and invest in it."

"You get everybody in a room, of course you're gonna say, 'Let's do another movie.'"

I'm the first person to say these stories, in this time period, particularly this *Picard* timeline, in a post-Berman [producer Rick] universe, could continue. That's certainly where I'm the most passionate at the moment."

That, of course, is the million dollar question – one that readers of *SFX* will be only too aware that showrunners and producers can never really answer without giving too much away. But you know we're going to ask about the



Amanda Plummer as Vadic: the big bad? Maybe.

“It’s the next step in their journey. It feels like a feature film, a final feature film”

possibility of more anyway. “This season is very much a passing of the torch to the *next* generation,” Matalas states. “So it will really be up to the fans to decide if they want to see more. *Star Trek* has always been up to the fans. The fans brought back the original series characters into feature films and conventions and kept it alive, it will have to be the same here. So we’ll see.”

You heard the man. If anyone messes this up, words will be had.

When asked if there’s anything he’d like to work on in the *Star Trek* Universe, Matalas replies in the affirmative. “I’ve always wanted to see more of this particular cast. I’ve wanted to see more of Janeway, particularly what her relationship would be with Seven of Nine and Starfleet.

“I’ve always wanted to see more of what happened with those *Deep Space Nine* characters. I would die to see Quark again. I’d love to see the Doctor again from *Voyager*. So

Get your fix of juicy starship porn.



The visuals are truly epic, like a film...



But you don’t need to pay £15 to see it.



there’s a lot of that. But ultimately it’s not up to me. It’s up to the *Star Trek* gods, if you will, if there will be more in that time period.”

With the show being on this scale – did we mention how epic it is? – it’s pretty obvious that events of *Picard* season three are going to have a wider impact on the *Star Trek* Universe. In fact, Matalas himself has previously stated that this season would be “game-changing”. You may ask how. We certainly did.

“You’ll have to see,” he says in full showrunner mode. “I use game-changing by meaning it is definitely, how do I say this... There is definitely a major event in the *Star Trek* universe. But not in a way that undoes it in any way.

“People hear game-changing like, oh god, we’re gonna undo some of *Star Trek* so it no longer feels like that. That’s certainly not what it is. But it will feel like an event in *Star Trek* history. For instance, in *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*...”

Continued on page 34...



"I'M NOT SURE IT'S THE END OF THE NEXT GENERATION STORY"

JONATHAN FRAKES IS RIKER

This feels like the biggest *Star Trek* yet.

▲ It's amazing, isn't it? It's spectacular. It's very filmic, but it has a little *First Contact* vibe. I'm thrilled with it. Terry has revitalised the whole franchise.

What was it like to revisit Riker in such a prominent way?

▲ I was thrilled, Terry really got him. But also I was nervous because I'd been primarily directing. I was anxious, in a positive way. I knew it was gonna be essentially a blast, because these are my friends. Frankly I didn't know it was gonna be this high quality, the story and the filmmaking. I [directed] episodes three and four. It was a really exciting stretch of time to be doing this show again and to be with Patrick and be in conflict. To have Riker in conflict with Picard was delicious.

Was there anything about Riker that you wanted to change?

▲ Terry did that for me. He created a conflict. Roddenberry, for some reason that is beyond me, believed that on the Enterprise the family should virtually be conflict-free. Which, as we all know, is the exact opposite of what drama needs. As we've progressed down the *Star Trek* canon, conflict has become less forbidden. The idea that Picard and Riker have two different points of view on how things should be handled, it creates better drama. Terry really did that work – that's why I was so excited about the new Riker.

Where do you think the road leads for you and the cast?

▲ I hope the road leads to another series. The setup is there clearly, as you'll see, by the end of the season. It all seems to me that the characters in this final season of *Picard*, should it work out, are primed for another journey. I'm certainly optimistic. I think it may

be the end of the Picard story, but I'm not sure it's the end of the *Next Generation* story. That's the vibe. I'm an eternal optimist. I'm sure it's what Terry would like!

Would you consider a movie?

▲ Movies are tough! Even JJ [Abrams] can't get this fourth movie off the ground. All those wonderful rumours? Noah Hawley was attached to a *Star Trek* movie, and Quentin [Tarantino] was toying with people's emotions about doing a movie. If those two names can't get a fucking movie made, I don't know. TV is the future, it seems to me.

At what point did you realise this would be with you forever?

▲ It probably happened in season three or four of *Next Gen* when the audience from the old show, the hardcore TOS Trekkers who wanted nothing to do with the bald English Captain with a French name, gradually let us into their world. I didn't know how big a deal *Star Trek* was. 35 years later, I could not be more grateful.

There aren't many actors who return to a role over 35 years.

▲ The idea that the show is filled with old people! Patrick's over 80, all the rest of us are in our seventies. Levar's the youngest guy in the cast and he's 65. It's nuts. We're all so fucking old, it's bizarre. The levity levels on this series, it's very easy together, the characters know each other, they take the piss out of each other.

Audiences know... that's why *Deadpool* I think is such a success. It's sort of the Marvel model; they wink at each other and they allow humour in and I think the audience are sophisticated enough that levity is part of our world. God knows it helps not to take yourself too seriously. It's a fucking science fiction show set in the 29th century, or whatever it is.

What can you tease for the *Strange New Worlds/Lower Decks* crossover you directed?

▲ Oh god, it's so good. I have Jack Quaid and Tawny Newsome, who are both amazing. It was such a treat for me because it is a flat-out comedy. Full on. And they're fearless over there, they take some really big swings on *Strange New*

Worlds. They're animated at the beginning and at the end. It's a clever and simple product. It's not really *Roger Rabbit* because what happens is these guys come over and they're humans and you accept them as soon as they're on the Enterprise. God, the two of them have got great energy, and it freed up the acting company on *Strange New Worlds* to play more broadly. Anson's a wonderful comedian, very dry, but so's Rebecca. It encouraged Ethan and everyone, there were just a lot of positives that came out of them having the guts to do a full-on comedy, let alone a crossover with an animated show.

What's the strangest piece of Riker merchandise you've seen?

▲ The Pez dispenser is the most absurd [laughs] but I also find it bizarre that I meet people who roll up their sleeves and they have a Riker on their bicep or on their thigh. It's beyond amazing. But the Pez dispenser has such a sense of absurdity. I also find it funny that I get pictures every year of people hanging their Christmas ornaments of the Enterprise or Riker. It's pretty wild.



"SHE'S HAD TO BECOME A WARRIOR"

GATES MCFADDEN IS CRUSHER

There aren't many actors who return to a role over 35 years...

▲ It felt absolutely sensational. I can't think of a better gift. We all love each other, we really are a family. Then to have a really great script... I loved what Terry Matalas did with the story. He's really fantastic. It was almost indescribable, because on the one hand it was just like normal. We were used to being together, we socialise together. On the other hand, he allowed us to have evolved in those characters, and certainly Crusher evolved. So it was really a tremendous gift.

Everyone's got really substantial roles in this season.

▲ It's true. That's thanks to Terry, who really wanted to honour all of our characters. That doesn't happen that often. It felt terrific. We talked about it, and he really allowed input. I had talked with the writers, because otherwise I think some of us weren't interested in doing it just to put in a fast appearance. We wanted it to be interesting to us as a role for an actor. And they came up with a storyline that really, really worked.

What I liked was that our characters were not just black and white. All of the characters have strengths and weaknesses. What is so very *Star Trek: The Next Generation* is that ultimately, no matter how we disagree about something initially, we come together for the betterment of the large group. And that is *Star Trek*. We want to do for the greater good, what needs to be done.

To me, what was really different in this iteration is that you saw that we had aged, in particular. Crusher had not been in Starfleet, like the others had stayed in Starfleet much longer. So that's interesting in and of itself. She's had to become a warrior in a different way. She was really exploring places that had not been explored and planets that

didn't have medical help. So that was fascinating. And I like any kind of action, I've always loved that. And I love the fact that I start the whole third season. [Laughs] It's like out of the blue.

How did this differ from your previous experiences?

▲ It was very different for me. I would say working on this was my best experience working with the *TNG* cast, for me personally, because I felt that the character that I was originally hired to play really came into being in this season, very beautifully. I love that. I think everybody has such strong storylines and they do them so well, I was just in awe of how much I love our cast and their choices as actors and in the scenes.

It's fantastic. I think one feels our genuine rapport. That's something that can't be manufactured, that really is there. When you're playing the scene with someone who you've known for so many years, and we've laughed and cried as human

beings. What can I say? I think everybody does a really terrific job. The other new characters were so well-cast, there are so many terrific performances. Also the look of it. When we were shooting it I was like, "It's so dark, can they even see us?" Well, I think it looks beautiful. I really went, "Okay, technology has moved on" [laughs] and it is terrific. It looks like a film – I mean, it really does look like a movie.

Where do you think the road leads for you and the cast?

▲ I know where I would love it to lead. I actually would love to continue working with the actors on the series. I think there still is a series there. Yes, of course, it would be great to do a film, as long as it doesn't become something where there's really only one lead character, because I wouldn't be interested in that. I really feel we are an ensemble. That's what makes us wonderful. Patrick has been our leader, and he will

continue to be, but I feel that we really are a family and the family should shine. I think I'm not the only one probably on that. If the stories are good, I'm there. I don't think any of us have even a glimmer of feeling we're out to pasture. [Laughs]

At what point did you realise this would be with you forever?

▲ The first time I realised the power of it was when I had thousands of letters when I was let go from the show [in 1988]. The outpouring of the fans, that was the first time I even understood that fans kind of were there, what fans were, and that they really cared and they were very articulate about why they felt this way. That was my first glimmer of it.

What's the strangest piece of Crusher merch you've seen?

▲ The ugliest one has to be the Pez. Marina [Sirtis] and I got the ugliest faces on that. Sometimes they just said, "Oh well, let's just forget Crusher," and they wouldn't even put me in it, they put a spaceship or the world or something. I didn't understand Comic Cons and all of that. Now I do. It's a community that has joined together a lot of people in a way that is positive, not negative.



"My lad's done very well for himself, you know."



Undiscovered Country, you know what I mean? That would be a moment in *Star Trek* history that everyone would remember. And that's certainly true here."

Speaking of *Undiscovered Country*, there is a link, albeit familial, with *Picard*; Amanda Plummer, the daughter of Christopher Plummer (who played Chang), appears as Vadica. But Matalas is quick to question her being referred to as one of three villains in this season.

"They are certainly villains in the way that you would know them as villains," he considers, "but they're not *traditional* villains, meaning I don't know that they will all fulfil that specific role. Without spoiling anything.

"We really wanted a major villain for Vadica that she should be a larger than life, classic *Star Trek* villain who had her own reasons for doing what she does. And when you heard them, you'd say, 'You know, she might have a point.'

"In the writers' room as we were creating her character I always referenced Amanda Plummer. I love that certain unhinged quality that she would give in her performances but incredible sympathetic ones, sympathetic qualities as well. There's a vulnerability to her as well, that was what made her perfect for Vadica. We were lucky that she said yes.

"And then as far as the other two, [Daniel Davis as Professor Moriarty and Brent Spiner as Lore] you kind of have to wait and see how those play out to understand how organically they fit into the story."

Elsewhere, Matalas has shot down fan theories that Doctor Pulaski puts in an appearance, or that the Enterprise E appears. Here he's also ready to debunk rumours that Denise Crosby will return.

"There's definitely a reference to Tasha Yar. But it's not beyond that."

BRAND NEW VISION

As someone who grew up with *The Next Generation* – and clearly knows the characters well – Matalas would also later go on to work on both *Voyager* and *Enterprise*. Getting to write for another iconic cast, as well as characters who have legendary status in sci-fi history, brought a whole new level to his *Star Trek* experience.

"It was surreal," he says, "and there was tremendous pressure to get it right. The first thing I said was that I didn't want to do anything that any of these actors didn't feel strongly for. So I looped them into the conversation from minute one and took them through the story as I saw it.

"I was very fortunate that everyone saw it mostly the same way. So crafting where these characters have been for 25 years, and where we meet them *with* these actors, was an incredible collaboration, and it made for a richer portrayal of where they are now."



"Right, first one to pass out gets the next bottle."



Boldly going... where, exactly?



Final frontier ahoy! Yes, another one.



The engines cannae take it! (etc)

He says that the cast did have firm ideas of where they wanted their characters to be all these years later.

"But we had the same firm ideas. So there was never a disagreement. When I called LeVar and I'm like, 'Here's who I think Geordi is. Here's where I think Geordi is and here's who he is now and the story that we will be telling,' once I took him through the beginning, middle and end, he was in tears, which then put me in tears. He was like, 'I absolutely want to do this. I want to do this so bad.' Those are beyond meaningful experiences to do right by them, and to be on the same page is extraordinary."

Never mind just being on the same page as sci-fi legends – we enquire with obvious fanboy glee just what it's like being on set with *The Next Generation* cast.

"I get asked this a lot," he says, "and the truth is there was such a pressure to get it right, and we didn't have a lot of time, that there was rarely a moment where – and it did happen!"

© PARAMOUNT



“I didn’t want to do anything that any of these actors didn’t feel strongly for”

– but there was rarely a moment where you can take a breath and be like, ‘Oh my god, look at what we’re doing.’ There was such a drive for perfection with all of us to get this right. We were working, we were on the job,” he laughs.

“So it would be little, little tiny moments where I would turn to another writer, or I would turn to Jonathan, who I was fortunate enough to have to hang out with me at video village [the area around the monitor on set] for the entire two-hour shoot that I did of the finale,” he says of his stint directing the final two episodes.

“The last two, he was there for every second. He’s a good friend. It’s those moments you would turn and say, ‘Look at what we’re doing. How cool is this?’ But mostly the pressure of the job doesn’t allow you too much of that. It’s not really until post and it comes together with music that you can be like, ‘Oh my god, look at what we did.’ But in the moment, there’s just too much adrenaline.”

CREW MANIFEST

Terry Matalas sets the scene for where we find the Enterprise crew



CRUSHER

Her life didn’t quite play out the way we saw it in “All Good Things”. She has remained a doctor, but not within Starfleet. She’s a kind of a doctor without borders, tending to worlds that Starfleet may have forgotten – that’s sort of where her adventure begins.



WORF

He’s not a captain within Starfleet as someone on a starship, I will say – but may, in fact, still have ties with Starfleet and is on his own journey.



RIKER

He, of course, is in active reserve and still a captain within Starfleet.



TROI

Deanna is, of course, retired at home with her daughter and Riker. We may learn more about how she feels about that.



GEORDI

He is within Starfleet, with a family, two daughters.

And Brent Spiner... you’ll have to see!

STAR TREK: PICARD



Star Trek demands only the finest chair acting.



Riker contemplates another sax solo.

He takes a long, unexpected pause when asked if that means he didn’t do a “silent scream” when walking onto the set of any starship.

“It’s a really tough question,” he eventually says. “Because yes, of course, any time your job is ‘first thing in the morning, get a fresh coffee and walk onto a starship’, you know you are blessed. But I think that the second that’s all it becomes – without the real, genuine fear that you’re going to fuck this up – it becomes dangerous. At least for me.

“For others, I’m sure there’s a healthier way to work. But for me, I knew we had one shot at this. And every second was an opportunity to make it better. So that sort of colours your ability to stop and smell the roses.”

Next up for Matalas is a pilot for Disney+, a reimagining of their *Witch Mountain* film franchise based on the 1968 novel. The project, which he’s co-writing and executive-producing alongside *12 Monkeys* colleague Travis Fickett, stars Bryce Dallas Howard. In terms of *Star Trek*, however, there’s nothing on the immediate horizon.

“I think it would depend quite a bit on how season three does,” he says, humbly. “At the moment there are early discussions of ideas, but nothing specific in mind. I know that certainly, as I said, there are things I would love to do in this time period, in this world, very much.

“But not at the moment, no. But they know where to find me. I’m ready and willing to return to *Star Trek* at any time!” 📡

Star Trek: Picard season three is on Prime Video in the UK and Paramount+ in the US from 16 February.

ANT-MAN AND THE WASP:
QUANTUMANIA

Q U A N T U M

A full-page background image featuring Ant-Man in his red and silver suit, crouching in a futuristic, metallic cityscape. The environment is filled with complex machinery, glowing blue lights, and several flying drones. The scene is set at night, with a city skyline visible in the background.

ANT-MAN AND THE WASP:
QUANTUMANIA

IT'S KANG
WARFARE AS
**ANT-MAN AND
THE WASP:
QUANTUMANIA**
UNLEASHES THE
NEW BIG BAD OF
THE MARVEL
UNIVERSE

WORDS: NICK SETCHFIELD

OF MENACE



NO ONE EXPECTED Ant-Man to even have a trilogy,” smiles screenwriter Jeff

Loveness. “So let’s triple-down and make it the most climactic trilogy-capper you can imagine for a guy who shrinks to the size of a penny!”

That’s the inverse ratio at the heart of *Ant-Man And The Wasp: Quantumania*. It not only pits Marvel’s miniscule hero against Kang, the new, reality-shaking Big Bad of the MCU, but tasks him with launching nothing less than Phase Five of the studio’s cinematic battleplan. Judge him by his size, do you? Think again.

“In the beginning we talked about what tone we wanted,” says Loveness, whose stint on *Rick And Morty* traded in the kind of interdimensional shenanigans the threequel demanded. “The first two movies are pretty light on their feet, pretty comedic. Talking about it with Peyton [Reed, director], it was almost a joke at first – ‘What if we just made this *Return Of The King*?’ – but we leaned into it. ‘What if, all of a sudden, Ant-Man is accidentally in this massive *Lord Of The Rings*, *Avengers*-scale movie, basically by himself – though obviously the Wasp and his family are in there too.

“There’s this deep family story that goes with it, so I also wanted to pay off all the dynamics between Hope and her family, Hank and Janet, Scott and Cassie and Scott and Hope as well. Luckily [Paul] Rudd and Evangeline [Lilly] and all those guys, they’ve got such warm personalities that you can lean on their charm. People like the characters and they’re along for the ride.”

SERIOUSLY FUNNY

“I was watching *Fellowship Of The Ring* the other day and was struck by how quickly the tone shifts from being light-hearted and comedic to intense apocalyptic stakes,” he continues. “Sometimes we like to peg movies down, so they can only be one thing. But that’s the charm of old adventure movies for me. And that was the joy of Marvel comics as a kid.

“Spider-Man does that better than anyone. He has such personal problems and such horrible things happening to him, but the basic drumbeat is always upbeat and funny and the character’s charming, so you kind of stumble along with him. I used that as a blueprint, to try to embody those Marvel comics I loved as a kid, which were able to balance both.”

As Loveness tells *SFX*, the epic stakes of *Quantumania* reveal new colours in Scott Lang, the man beneath the helmet. “Rudd does some pretty incredible acting. There’s a shift that happens. Once Kang shows up, once Scott realises just who he’s dealing with, the movie starts to pivot. You see it in Rudd’s eyes. Scott’s a goofy, playful guy, but he’s been in jail twice, he’s fought in these big *Avengers* things, and



Ant-Man (Paul Rudd) meets Jonathan Majors’s Kang.



Kathryn Newton and Peyton Reed.



“Cassie” Lang and Ant-Man survey things.

you can see his eyes slowly change – ‘Oh, I’m not dealing with Walter Goggin from the last movie, this is something else!’

“You start to see that come over him. ‘These are real stakes. I’m not here with Captain America and Thor. I’m here with my family. And I am completely out of my depth.’ So what starts as a fun, playful adventure pivots into this kind of unlikely rivalry. It’s kind of fun to have Ant-Man and Kang be nemeses together.”

It’s the Quantum Realm that gives the movie both its mouthful of a title and its epic stakes. We’ve glimpsed this sub-atomic kingdom before – Scott was trapped there in *Avengers: Infinity War* while Janet van Dyne (Michelle Pfeiffer) survived 30 years of microversal exile. *Quantumania*, however, is a full-bore exploration of the “secret universe beneath ours”. Buckle up for a high-concept ride.

“It’s like this completely open canvas,” enthuses Loveness. “We’ve seen outer space so many times – *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, things like that. ‘Just do the opposite of outer space’ is the



Evangeline Lilly (right) returns as the Wasp.

dumb pitch! What is on that sub-atomic level? What creatures would you find? What are the evolutionary differences? Even just the concept of spaceships flying around. In space there's no atmosphere. The Quantum Realm is pure atmosphere. So what does that dynamic look like? Is it more like an old naval vessel that would go through the ocean... and the ocean is the sky? It gives you a whole different ecological backdrop. And then you can have random creatures, in that fun *Star Wars* way. We have our version of the *Star Wars* cantina scene, albeit in a different setting and kind of a different vibe."

The depiction of the Quantum Realm pulls inspiration from a fistful of sources: the work of French comic book artist Moebius, back copies of *Heavy Metal* magazine, electron microscope photography – and the cracked spines, yellowing pages and uncharted universes of your local secondhand bookshop. "Peyton and I talked about 1970s sci-fi paperback artwork, from, like, Arthur C Clarke or Ray Bradbury novels. It's always got this orange hue and there's this spaceman in a crashed ship with red rocks in the background..."

"It was fun to just dream up our own landscape that hasn't really been seen before. Peyton's a big nerd from an era before me. He was pulling references from his childhood and I was throwing in some from mine. I think he was really enjoying the exponential level-up in visuals from *Ant-Man And The Wasp* to this one. He really just let loose."

And that's saying something, *SFX* suggests, given the eye-popping visuals Reed delivered in the previous two films. "Yeah, it was a big challenge. The charm of *Ant-Man* is like that [miniature] train fight in the first movie. You put *Ant-Man* in that human world. And so the challenge of this one was, like, well what happens to *Ant-Man* when it's on a more metaphysical level, where you're actually looking at quantum physics and these complex theories like Schrödinger's Cat, and building a sequence out of that? We've seen *Ant-Man* →

HEAD GAMES Make Mine MODOK!

"MODOK is maybe my single favourite thing that I got in the movie!" laughs Jeff Loveness of *Quantumania*'s appearance by the grotesque fan fave. One of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's most utterly out-there creations, he's essentially a malevolent giant head in a flying chair – a Mental/Mobile/Mechanised Organism Designed Only for Killing.

"Obviously we are very faithful to the comics with the design and the look, but then there is a little bit of extra we put into him. Maybe I'll get fired off *The Kang Dynasty* when people see it, but some of my favourite moments come from MODOK and the dynamics there!



"I'll just say he was inspired by Kevin Kline in *A Fish Called Wanda* and Frank Grimes in an old *Simpsons* episode – this really put-upon, selfish, entitled but then also deeply sad, insecure man who knows that he got a shit deal in life and is trying to make the best of it.

"His ego will crumble the second he's challenged but then also like Kevin Kline in *A Fish Called Wanda*, he's pretty good at killing people! He's a real loose cannon character and I had a great amount of fun with him. That was almost day one in the room – we cracked MODOK as a character and the movie just became so fun."



fight on a train, fall into a bathtub. What happens when he's trapped on a sub-atomic level where physics start to break down? We've seen hints of that in the first two movies but to have a whole adventure down there gave us a lot of visual freedom."

It's in the Quantum Realm that Scott and his shrink-to-fit family confront Kang – or Kang the Conqueror as he styles himself in the comics. The prime threat for the next arc of Marvel movies, Kang was teased in season one of *Loki* – but that was only a multiversal variant, a warm-up act for the real deal, a menace big enough and deadly enough to trigger the cry "Avengers assemble!". So just how do you follow Thanos?

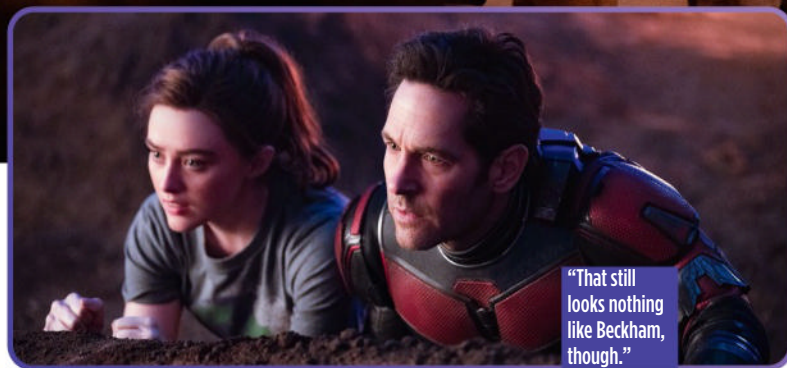
"To me it's all about the humanity," says Loveness. "Obviously Thanos is a great, iconic villain, but he's also a big purple CGI guy. He's an alien from outer space. The thing I really wanted to lean into is that Kang is a human being. He's an explorer, he's a traveller, he's a scientist, he's obviously a conqueror – but what does a conqueror mean in the historical sense?"

"Julius Caesar, William the Conqueror, Genghis Khan, those Spanish conquistadors who came to the New World... They're bad guys, historically, but they're bad guys with a crusade, a purpose. You've got to have a pretty strong conviction if you're going to come to a world that isn't yours and impose your will."

"Kang's also a very lonely character. We're going to be seeing a lot of him in a lot of



"Madame Tussauds has got a whole lot better..."



"That still looks nothing like Beckham, though."

different ways going forward, but I really wanted to introduce the humanity and even the vulnerability of this character before he gets to such apocalyptic, Avengers-scale heights.

"I thought we had a really good opportunity to almost show Napoleon in exile, or Stalin trapped in Siberia, or Julius Caesar on the outskirts of Gaul, deciding whether he wants to cross the Rubicon or not. To catch the supervillain before everything kicks into gear and have that almost *The Lion In Winter* quality to it. Obviously he's terrifying as well, and very imposing, but you get to have just a bit more character time with him than I think you would in a more standard *Avengers* movie

where he's supposed to be firing on all cylinders. I welcome the Kang vs Thanos debate because I think we're going to get to know Kang a lot better as we go forward."

Formally introduced in issue eight of *The Avengers*, way back in 1964, Kang has one of the more timey-wimey chronologies in Marvel history. In fact his first appearance was really *Fantastic Four* 19, a year earlier, under his guise as Egyptian ruler Rama-Tut. Other alternate selves include Immortus, Iron Lad, Victor Timely and the Scarlet Centurion. And probably a background pretzel seller in an early issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man*. Did Loveness take a deep dive into this backstory?

"Too deep, too deep!" he laughs. "I got way into the Rama-Tut and Scarlet Centurion stuff, trying to read my way through that, and the Celestial Madonna with Mantis! That's the joy of the character. He is just this infinite snake eating infinite tails, a man literally at war against himself."

"I haven't seen a time-travelling character done with such intricacy and exploration. I'm a little bummed because *Endgame* did so much time travel, so you almost need to broaden him out a little bit too, maybe broaden out into the multiverse a little more, the dimensionality of the character, the limitless freedom he has while also being completely uprooted from his



Michael Douglas is Hank Pym, with Wasp.

time and himself. Is it just going to all fall apart again because another version of him can destroy it as well? What's the purpose of building Rome if you are going to burn it down the next day, because they want to have their own Rome?

"I certainly took a ton from the comics but the joy of these movies is you also get to put some of yourself into it, you get to put a completely new spin, because if you just do a 100% comic book adaptation people know all the tricks and what to expect. You have to use that as a foundation and then throw a curveball. I've tried to lean into him being a more interesting character than people expect, hopefully."

Loveness is quick to praise Jonathan Majors, who brings Kang to life on the screen. "He's everything I could have wanted. He just fleshes out the character. One could say Kang the Conqueror is pretty one-note in the comic books. He loves to conquer. He's on this little beanbag chair, talking about how he's going to

conquer people. I was worried when I was writing it – is this going to come off too rote? Is it going to feel like any Imperial officer in *Star Wars* or something? But Jonathan took that language that could be considered rote or weird or like some Old Testament type character, and he just gave it such pathos that you really believed it. He really elevated the writing in a way I can't imagine anyone else playing this guy."

Loveness is writing the next *Avengers* movie, *The Kang Dynasty*, set for release in 2025 as Phase Six builds to a doubtlessly showstopping climax. But let's not jump ahead of ourselves in our race towards universal armageddon. There's Phase Five to devour first. So what can we expect from the next wave of Marvel-branded movies and TV?

"Phase Four was almost this period of rebuilding, the calm after the storm of what happened in *Endgame*," Loveness tells *SFX*. "Now it's almost a time of relative peace. But just talking for myself here, there's maybe this feeling in the world today... it's like elections are crumbling around the world, we're not doing enough on climate change, World War III could break out any minute. Things are

“Kang is a human. He's an explorer, he's a traveller, he's a scientist, he's a conqueror”

relatively okay right now but we all feel like it could go real bad, real fast, a hundred different ways. And we're all kind of paralysed by that because we have the feeling that maybe we're not ready for it.

"To me, if we're in this new phase of the *Avengers*, it's this feeling of, 'Can we live up to the generation before us? What is *our* generational struggle that's coming?' And for me that is Kang. Kang is a top-tier, A-list *Avengers* villain. What do you do when you feel you're not enough against that? How do you step up to face the challenge of this generation, who is Thanos on an exponential level? He's almost this infinite Thanos.

"I think we're setting things up for a pretty dynamic story. As I'm building to *Avengers* I want it to feel like a generational struggle. Phase Four felt like the birth of new characters. You're giving everyone a little bit of a breath, you're broadening out the universe, you have fun Disney+ shows that are elevating characters. And now I think it's time to put the pedal to the gas again, and really take all these new characters that we like and throw them into the fire." ●

Ant-Man And The Wasp: Quantumania is out on 17 February.

Katy O'Brian is the alien Jentorra.



Michelle Pfeiffer (Janet van Dyne).



M NIGHT SHYAMALAN
IS OFF ON A FAMILY
HOLIDAY IN HIS
NEW THRILLER

KNOCK AT THE CABIN.

THERE'S JUST ONE
SNAG... THE WORLD
MIGHT BE ABOUT
TO END

WORDS: **STUART MANNING**

“**T**HE PREMISE OF THE book is so strong. I remember thinking, ‘I wish I had come up with this idea.’”

When M Night Shyamalan talks about his film *Knock At The Cabin*, he makes the project sound like a perfect confluence of events. He was first asked to produce an adaptation of the source novel, Paul Tremblay’s *The Cabin At The End Of The World*, but ended up being so taken with the concept and Steve Desmond and Michael Sherman’s draft screenplay that he found himself taking on the director’s reins and re-developing it as a passion project.

“It was like a lightning bolt – love at first sight,” he says enthusiastically. “I read the book and it was the same thing again. It speaks to all the things that ignite me: the moral dilemma with a kind of larger philosophical thing at work, heart-pounding stakes throughout, and then the family at the centre. I thought, ‘Actually, maybe I could do it myself.’ And so that’s how we got here. It was very beautiful and organic.”

Tremblay’s novel tells the story of a picture-perfect modern family – two husbands and their young adopted daughter – taking a holiday to a remote woodland cabin. Their happy stay is disturbed by the arrival of a group of threatening strangers, convinced that the apocalypse is imminent and that it can only be averted by one member of the family making the ultimate sacrifice.

Shyamalan rewrote the screenplay and is keen to underline that his film is only loosely adapted from the novel. According to him, the book’s cinematic potential leapt off the page. “I read all the time, but it’s rare that I get that kind of lightning-bolt feeling. Whatever I’m reading, my mind starts turning it into a movie immediately.

“It’s funny, as you and I are speaking, I’m reading *The Shining*, Stephen King’s book, just for fun, and it’s so cinematic. I can’t stand it! Stephen is so good at evoking cinematic moments, so good at character moments... I’m making the movie in my head already, even though Kubrick’s is one of my favourite movies. It’s a part of my brain that just immediately starts working.”

CABIN CREW

With a new screenplay in hand, production began at the end of 2021. In keeping with Shyamalan’s trademark secrecy, the casting of actors was conducted on a need-to-know basis. “It was just the sides [individual pages], not the script, because that was highly protected,” recalls actor Ben Aldridge, best known for his role in *Fleabag* and for playing Thomas Wayne in *Pennyworth*. He read for the part of Eric, one of the two fathers at the heart of the story.

“American Gothic” looks a lot different these days.



Ben Aldridge, Kristen Cui and Jonathan Groff.



Shyamalan and Aldridge plan their big number.

“About three days later, Night phoned me and said, ‘I want to make this movie with you. You have 24 hours to read the script. It’s on a timed link. Once you start, it expires in six hours.’ So it was all very much the M Night way, as you would expect.”

As a gay actor, Aldridge was particularly drawn to the project as an opportunity to play a lead gay role in a mainstream movie. “I’m really proud to be riding a wave of progress, long overdue progress,” he says. “It’s great that more projects are investing in queer characters, and

not those being made just for queer audiences. But neither are they over-explained to non-queer audiences. I think this film manages to do that. The characters just are who they are.”

While keen to not give anything away, Aldridge believes that *Knock At The Cabin*’s gay characters go beyond simple representation. “This film does something unique with the single-sex parent couple at the centre of it,” he says, choosing his words carefully. “Their sexuality is integral to the story, and it handles



“I don’t shoot coverage and the shots are all very designed, so it’s about the preparation”

longest I’ve ever spent on anything,” says Aldridge. “Me and Jonathan spent a lot of time with Kristen and her mum. We did things like playing *Just Dance* on the PlayStation a lot and she took me ice skating... just hanging out and becoming friends. She called us Daddy Andrew and Daddy Eric, our character names, for the entire run. She still does – we have a text group chat with her.”

PlayStation aside, the rehearsals were also there to interrogate the screenplay and prepare in detail. “The script is sacred, that’s the way Night works,” says Aldridge. “You’re there to bring his singular vision alive.” All this might sound rather dictatorial, but Shyamalan believes in making the workplace inclusive.

“Each of the actors sees me talking to the other actors,” he explains. They’re learning about the movie. They’re learning about the DNA of what this means – what this movie is about. It’s a very fruitful thing. They watch it come to life right in front of them... they’re awed at each other’s ability to be present and vulnerable, and they start to inspire each other. Then we get to the set, it’s super-healthy. No one’s insecure.”

“It’s more like working on a play text – like a David Mamet play or something like that,” adds Aldridge. “You wouldn’t try and change a line. Night’s written it exactly. Every hesitation, every comma, everything – you hit what’s there, and that’s what he wants you to do. He’s extremely precise. He breaks things down into micro-beats and micro-moments, even within a scene. It’s a really unusual way to work.”

Shyamalan concurs with Aldridge’s theatre analogy: “So many of the movies that I make could be plays – confined spaces, and the things you learn about people in an extreme situation in a confined space. I find that very intriguing. How does the mom react to a supernatural event versus the dad, versus the child, versus the neighbour?”

“These are all wonderful differences that come out in us. One denies it, one is terrified of it, one goes towards it. That’s how you learn about characters. And in this case, with our family, our beautiful family unit, you see the differences between the two husbands as the event starts unfolding.”

That focus on the idea of family has been a constant throughout Shyamalan’s work and *Knock At The Cabin* is no exception.

“Night was really interested in the family and in love,” says Aldridge. “He’d often remind us before takes, ‘This is about love. This is about →

that really sensitively. Night’s interested in asking questions. It feels like this queer family is the perfect setting for a lot of the questions he’s asking.”

Establishing a convincing family dynamic was crucial when assembling the cast. *The Matrix Resurrections* and *Looking* actor Jonathan Groff plays Eric’s husband Andrew, with eight-year-old Kristen Cui as their adopted daughter, in her first screen role. “Casting isn’t just picking a big star – it’s about the alchemy between the actors,” says Shyamalan, explaining his philosophy. “I’m looking for the right actor at the right time in their life.

“The casting is very much a group dynamic thing... If you don’t get Jonathan, then maybe Ben isn’t the right person. That particular child, with these particular men, is what makes this family unit so unique. If you came to the set and saw the three of them, they *were* a family. The mom came over to me one time and was just staring at them. She said, ‘Sometimes I look at them and I think, am I the real mom?’ But does that mean that six months from now, they would be doing these roles the same? Probably not.”

The shoot took place on location in Burlington County, New Jersey, largely confined to the cabin location and shot chronologically, following two weeks of rehearsal. “That’s my standard approach,” says Shyamalan. “I don’t shoot coverage and the shots are all very designed, so it’s about the preparation. You’re aiming at a target and hoping that when you turn on the camera, that an organic one-time-only event happens. There are many, many ways to get to that, but for me, it’s prep, prep, prep. So we rehearse, we talk through the intention of everything.”

These weeks allowed Aldridge and Groff space to develop their family dynamic ahead of filming. “It was a long rehearsal time, the



protection. This is about your family.' He always kept bringing us back to that."

Art imitated life with the late arrival of Dave Bautista on set, fresh from filming the latest instalment of *Guardians Of The Galaxy*. He plays Leonard, the enigmatic leader of the group which invades the family sanctuary, accompanied by Rupert Grint, Nikki Amuka-Bird and Abby Quinn as Redmond, Adriene and Sabrina.

"I think we shot a week and a half without Dave," remembers Aldridge. "He came directly from *Guardians*. I think he had, like, one day off or something. We'd been in the cabin for a bit and then this energy of Leonard came in. Suddenly you had this Hollywood mega-action hero walking into this domestic setting and playing this very complex, tortured, gentle character. It was disarming to have him there."

According to Shyamalan, Dave Bautista came onto his radar after reaching out to the director with a fan message: "I said, 'You know what, I'd love to meet you. Let's talk.' And I was like, God, this guy is *exactly* the lead character. I mean, he *is* Leonard. He's amazing."

"And it's Dave, at this moment in his life, in his fifties, that makes him perfect for this. So you add Dave with these people, and Rupert on top of it... and then Nikki and Abby as well. This particular cast was the director's dream – having talent that is in the right headspace and ready to be vulnerable."

HELLO DAVE

"It's quite a mixed bag of actors," adds Aldridge, praising the eclectic casting. "Without giving too much away, they are meant to represent a hotchpotch of society. It was an interesting thing, having all those energies come together in one room, but that's exactly what the script wants to deal with."

The enclosed location and relentless emotional pitch of the material made for an intense atmosphere on set. "Everyone was so committed to this extreme version of reality," says Aldridge. "There were definitely elements of cabin fever – I spent five weeks tied to a chair. We did one scene where Jonathan is weeping profusely and I remember turning to

Dave Bautista, Abby Quinn and Nikki Amuka-Bird.

the props guy and asking to be untied – and that taking about five minutes – just so I could go to the bathroom to get Jonathan some tissues and help him blow his nose." He laughs. "I don't know why, but that sums it all up. It's such an emotional roller coaster."

Aldridge saw the finished film a few weeks ago while recording ADR in New York. "The really interesting thing is that, because of the

way Night films, you don't follow the traditional format. You don't always get a full run at a scene, because he will break things down into pieces. So it's really interesting to watch it come together. Yes, it did represent what I felt we were making, but he moves the camera in such an interesting way, these expertly plotted camera moves that you're not always aware of whilst inside the scene. It was always going to be a surprise watching it. As to whether we pulled off the thing that we were going for, I think he has. I think we've made a great film."

Shyamalan is a keen advocate for the cinema viewing experience. His last film *Old* suffered from pandemic delays and disappointing box office, but he insists that *Knock At The Cabin* is a piece best enjoyed in the company of fellow cinema-goers.

"Let me be super-clear, audiences are dying to come to movie theatres to see great movies," he says firmly. "That's all there is to it. If you released *Home Alone* today, it would still be a gigantic hit. If you released *Back To The Future*

"Suddenly you had this Hollywood mega-action hero walking into this domestic setting"



Rupert Grint makes a sneaky entrance.



Just what does Leonard have in mind for them all?

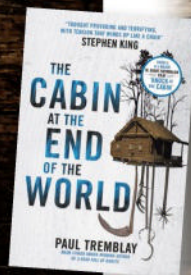


ADAPT TO SURVIVE

It's not the same old story...

Knock At The Cabin is adapted from Paul Tremblay's bestselling 2018 novel *The Cabin At The End Of The World*. Given M Night Shyamalan's devotion to secrecy when making his films, was it a challenge having the story widely available in a different form?

"It's been a tricky relationship," the director admits. "It's based on the book, but we go in a very different direction with the story, and so it's more inspired by the book. I tried to be very careful, and to give signals that would indicate that. We weren't trying to sell tickets based on the IP, so I changed the title intentionally because of that. If you want to go read the source material after the fact and see what the author did differently... that's great," he adds. "But reading it before seeing the movie is a tricky one because it's not what you're gonna see."



today, it'd be gigantic. And I think the industry is starting to see this, after getting distracted by the streamers and the pandemic. There's nothing like it – a bunch of 500 strangers coming together to watch a story together, to not multitask and commit themselves. It's just a deeper experience."

Ben Aldridge echoes this sentiment. "This is an extremely thought-provoking popcorn film, and I don't think you get many of them," he says. "When I watched it I thought this is a blockbuster, but it's also asking deep and terrifying questions about truth versus belief. Does believing in something make it real? It's about the state of world politics, the far-right and conspiracy groups, and the fact that none of us believes the same things. I think it plays upon all those things."

Shyamalan sums it up: "Do I want you watching *Knock At The Cabin* on a treadmill with your iPad? No, I don't." 🍷

Knock At The Cabin is in cinemas from 3 February.



Shyamalan lines up another camera move.





DAVE GIBBONS

the illustrated man

COMICS LEGEND
DAVE GIBBONS
BROWSES THE BACK
ISSUES OF HIS LIFE IN
A REVEALING NEW
AUTOBIOGRAPHY
WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

PORTRAIT BY DANIEL LEWIS

“If you repeat stories you actually make them into better stories,” says writer and artist Dave Gibbons, justifying the title of *Confabulation*, his autobiography. “You edit them, because real life is quite messy and random. Confabulation is what people do who think they’re telling the truth, who have absolutely no intention to deceive, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that what they say is what happened, and I was very aware of that writing this.”

“Having said that, I’ve tried to be as accurate as possible with the facts and the players in these various stories. But I am aware that maybe things didn’t happen in quite the order that makes the best dramatic sense...”

Bursting with gems and rarities from his own archive, many previously unseen, *Confabulation* reminds you that Gibbons is one of the prime movers in the British comics industry. A rugged reboot of *Dan Dare* for 2000 AD rode the *Star Wars* zeitgeist, while a spectacular *Doctor Who* strip for Marvel UK felt like a dream of the show unshackled from a BBC budget. *Watchmen*, his mid-’80s collaboration with Alan Moore, took a loving but merciless scalpel to superhero mythology while also exploding the possibilities of the comics medium itself. More recently, *The Secret Service* spawned the *Kingsman* movie franchise.

Gibbons revisits this stellar career in a moreish, anecdote-packed A-Z format, from *Aliens* to *Zarga* – *Man Of Mystery*, his professional breakthrough in 1973. There’s even an entry on his own brief stint as a caped avenger on the newsstands of Britain.

“You can dip into it or if you have the time you can read it cover to cover,” he tells *SFX* from his Hertfordshire studio, surrounded by shelves and boxes crammed with a life’s work. “I love books like that, that you flip through, and something catches your eye and before you know it you’ve gone down a rabbit hole for 20 minutes!”

How long have you had the itch to write an autobiography?

■ I do love a good autobiography, and I absolutely devour ones that have anything to do with comics. I’ve been really lucky in my career. I started off as a fan, copying comics when I was six or seven years old and then making up my own characters. I managed to break into professional comics on a fairly low level by doing balloon lettering and any old job that came along. Then I was lucky enough to get elevated to the higher echelons with *Watchmen* and 2000 AD.

I’ve worked on so many characters and worked with so many publishers and got to know so many of my peers who were producing great work at the time. And I thought, you know, if I was to detach myself from it being my story, that’s the sort of autobiography that I’d actually quite like to read.

For many people you’re defined by *Watchmen*. Is this book making a case for a broader appraisal of your career?

■ I would hope so. Obviously *Watchmen* was a pivotal thing and I’m really grateful that it fell to me to be Alan’s collaborator on it. I’m very proud of it but for the general reader it does tend to be the only thing I’ve done. After *Watchmen* I went on to *Give Me Liberty*, and that’s actually almost twice as many pages as *Watchmen*. I was in 2000 AD every week for a

couple of years, so in sheer volume, in sheer weight, other things outweigh *Watchmen*. It’s quite a big body of work. I hope the book gives some context to readers who haven’t seen much beyond *Watchmen*. I also hope it shows aspiring artists that my early stuff was either very amateurish – because I was an amateur – or was borderline professional, and that to get to the heady heights of *Watchmen* I went through quite a trail. Not a struggle, but you don’t just get there overnight.

How much of your original art have you managed to keep over the years?

■ Very little. When I was able to sell my own artwork, when the publishers started giving it back to me, trying to get through life with a family meant that I wanted every cent I could get at that point. With *Watchmen*, for instance, it was actually all sold before I’d even drawn the last issue.

Over the years I’ve sold practically everything. I’ve kept a few items because they’re particularly iconic, or they’re particular turning points. But the stuff I have hoarded is really the ephemeral stuff, the sketches, the rough layouts, the thumbnails and things like that, which are in a way more interesting because they definitely haven’t been seen before. And personally speaking I always prefer to see artists’ roughs and early thoughts rather than the finished thing, which takes on a kind of bulletproof quality. →



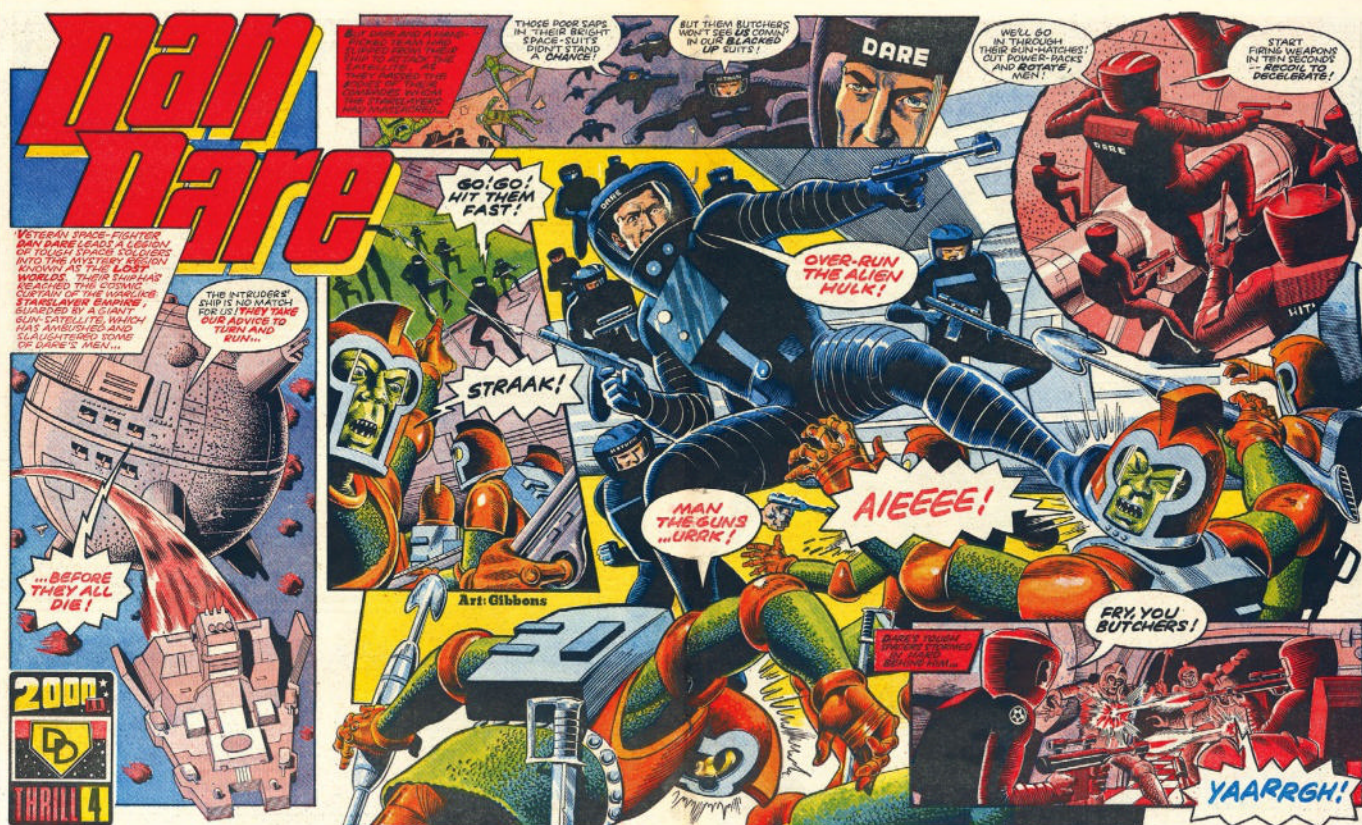
The Man of Steel by the boy Gibbons.



See, practice does pay off...



Up, up and away for Superman's 50th in 1988.



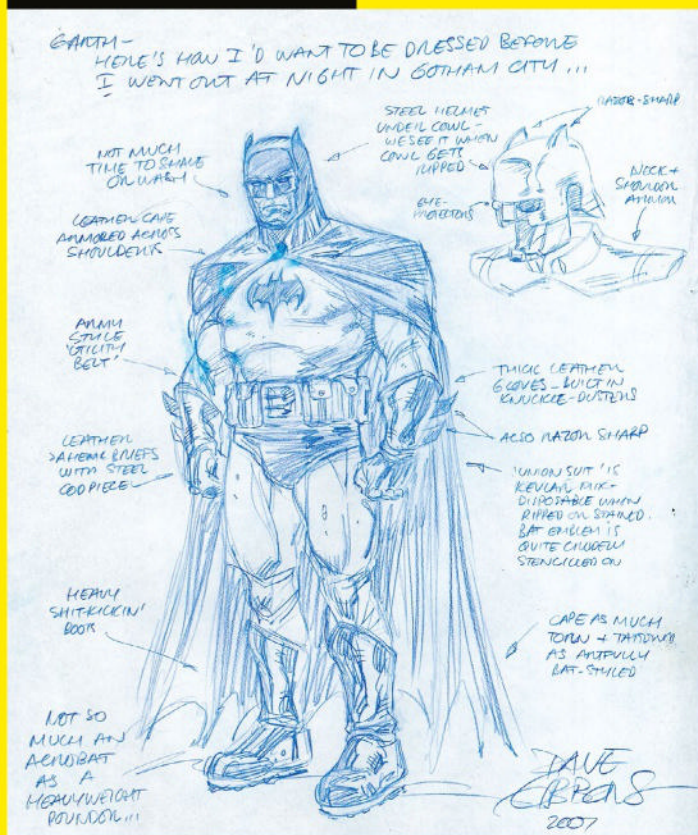
Dan Dare gets a kick-ass makeover in 2000 AD.



You're watching the Watchmen.

Charlie says...
Classic 2000
AD action.





Bat-suit you, sir!

A Give Me Liberty trading card.



Gibbons appears as "the Big E" in Tornado.



The Doctor and comic strip companion Sharon.



The iconic "smiley face" from *Watchmen* was a staple of late '80s culture, particularly the rave scene.



Give Me Liberty's Martha Washington.



Martha's gunning for you on this trading card.

What's the earliest comic you still have from your childhood?

■ I have a *Superman* comic that my paternal grandfather bought me when we were in the local Woolworths. I was probably about seven years old. It's Superman, in a cave, with a treasure trove, and Lois Lane going, "I cannot believe it! Superman is a miser!" And I must have thought "That's great – to be handsome and strong and also have a fortune in a cave!" That's quite an aspirational thing. And I've still got that very comic. That was my ground zero for comics. Somehow it's survived. It's tatty, but it's survived.

How candid did you feel you could be discussing your collaborators? You address a falling out with Alan Moore...

■ When I decided I wanted to write an autobiography, I thought, well, I'm going to have to touch all the major points in my career, and I'm going to have to be truthful about it, because otherwise there's no point if I'm prettying things up or making things look worse than they were.

And so of course I was aware that to have an entry on Alan would be a little bit problematical, because we famously haven't spoken for 10 years or more. We stopped quite abruptly. It was quite civil, there wasn't any swearing or banging of the desk or anything like that, but we quite definitively finished. I got into the details of what the particular points were that led to that.

I'm not trying to say somebody was right or somebody was wrong but Alan's spoken about his perspective on it at some length on the internet. I was very tempted to chip in then and I thought, "No, I don't really want to do that." I didn't want to get entangled in endless online disputes. I thought at some point I will give my perspective on it, and I have done that in this autobiography.

It's a small part of my career, it's a small part of the autobiography, but I have at least tried to give my perspective on it, whilst being very mindful that I don't want to go out of my way to upset Alan. But I think it's important that we get different views of things, and then we can make up our minds as to what rationalises what went on the best.

I did have a very good relationship with Alan. The whole sorry mess for me – and I think for Alan as well, really – was much more in sorrow than in anger. We just got to the point where it couldn't be sustained any longer. So it is in the book, but it's a particular episode amongst very, very many.

You drew *Doctor Who* for Marvel. What did you enjoy about playing in that universe?

■ I was attracted to *Doctor Who* because obviously it's a very high profile character. And he was a great character to draw, particularly

the Tom Baker one, because he was so exuberant and so emotional and funny and scary at the same time. I had slightly more problems when it came to drawing Peter Davison. In his day he was an averagely good looking chap but he had blond hair, blond eyebrows, very pale skin and he wore a kind of white cricket costume, so he was hard to work on until I hit on the idea of working in a lot of dark backgrounds, and then he popped out!

Was there ever any pressure to make it look more like the low-budget BBC TV show it was at the time, instead of you going crazy with your imagination?

■ You mean dumb it down so everything looked like it was made of cardboard? [laughs] No... It was a chance to embed the Doctor in a much more believable and much more extravagant science fiction universe.

In a way, with comics, it's easier to draw things that don't exist in the real world. One of the very first professional things I did under pressure was draw somebody outside New Scotland Yard getting out of a taxi. And I quickly realised that although I was great at drawing alien space fleets and muscly supermen, I had no idea what a taxi looked like, and certainly no idea what New Scotland Yard looked like.

I found it tremendously liberating with *Doctor Who*. I only had to keep *him* consistent and then I could just go crazy. It's interesting that a lot of people who've gone on to work on *Doctor Who*, like Russell T Davies and so on, actually grew up reading that strip and they were inspired by it, so in a weird way it's fed some of those sensibilities back into it – which is not me taking credit for what they've done, but it's interesting how things build.

In 1979 you posed as the Big E, superhero editor of boys' weekly *Tornado*. Did any kids ever recognise you in the street?

■ Not in the street, mercifully, but people slide up to me at comic conventions, thinking that it's something I'm somehow deeply ashamed of, and go, "It's Big E, isn't it?" and show me a copy like I'm going to say, "Oh God, don't show that to anybody!"

But I'm completely at peace with my inner superhero. It was just a good lark. It looks absurd but they were going to pay me a page rate for the photo shoot, so instead of being sat down at a drawing board I was running around in a stupid costume, showing off. It's easy money as far as I'm concerned.

Though everybody who knows me knows that I do actually have superpowers. I just like to keep it quiet because evildoers would threaten my family... ●

Confabulation: An Anecdotal Autobiography is released in bookshops on 21 February.





A

PERI PECULIAR PRACTICE

IN 1984, **NICOLA BRYANT** BOARDED THE TARDIS TO PLAY **DOCTOR WHO'S** ORIGINAL ALL-AMERICAN GIRL, PERPUGILLIAM BROWN

WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

IT'S UNUSUAL FOR AN ACTOR TO JUMP FROM drama school straight into a high-profile television series, but Nicola Bryant did just that when she joined *Doctor Who* as Perpugilliam – Peri to her friends! – Brown. “Everyone was expected to get a job in rep and then build up their CV,” she tells *SFX*. “You might get a little role in telly. You just didn’t think that you’d get a lead role in something.”

Was she thrown into the deep end? “Definitely. Drama school was predominantly stage work, and we’d done a tiny bit of radio. The year before I’d volunteered, in my summer holidays, to hold the boom for the year above me who were doing one week’s worth of television. We never had that.”

We might venture that Bryant had jumped from the proverbial frying pan into the fire – a Planet Of Fire if you will – but she took it all in her stride. “I was so excited the whole time to be working on *Doctor Who* that nothing bothered me. You’re young and you’re constantly in that learning phase. You roll with it.”

NOT DROWNING BUT WAVING

And so, she did. One of the very first scenes that Bryant filmed – Peri struggling in the clear waters of Lanzarote – was disrupted by an unexpected arrival. “I was way out at sea – further than I was comfortable,” she explains. “Our director Fiona [Cumming] was over on shore with a megaphone. She would shout ‘Drown!’ and I would drown for as long as I could.”

But the crew was unaware that sunbathers lurked on a next-door beach. “I was busy drowning and this poor man heard me shouting ‘help’! He ran over volcanic rock and swam out. I do feel sorry for him really. He stopped right in front of me, and I looked at

him and he looked at me, and he said something in German. Then I realised: ‘Oh my goodness, he’s come to save me!’ I’m like, ‘I’m so sorry, we’re filming!’ He saw the cameras, gave them a little gesture, and then swam off.”

Back to a local nudist beach, as it turns out. “I didn’t know he was naked, but they all saw that when he got out of the water,” Bryant laughs.

The following adventure, “The Caves Of Androzani”, was particularly significant for being the story in which Fifth Doctor Peter Davison regenerated into his sixth incarnation, Colin Baker. “When I read the script, I was very excited,” Bryant enthuses. “I thought, ‘Will all my scripts be this fabulous?’”

HALF MAN HALF SUIT

The fan favourite was directed by Graeme Harper, who went on to helm the following season’s stand-out “Revelation Of The Daleks”. What qualities did he bring to the series? “Graeme had youth and spontaneity and all of that excitement,” says Bryant. “He likes to be hands-on and involved. Other directors are up in the gallery. They’ll pass a message down to the floor assistant and you’ll get a note, but he’s right there with you half of the time. He had an eye for beautiful shots. He made it look like we were making a movie.

“When you look at both his stories, they have an immediacy, a sense of urgency. Yes, you’ve got the dodgy monster issue, but if you just ignore that 10 seconds of film, they stand the test of time.”

The dodgy monster Bryant refers to is the planet Androzani Minor’s cave-dwelling Magma Beast. “I just thought, like so many monsters of that time, it looks like a person in a monster suit. That very →



much was often the case in *Doctor Who*. They didn't have the budget to build some kind of mechanical thing for each story. But I could see that someone had painstakingly and lovingly worked very hard on the monster. A lot of the magic in *Doctor Who* is how they managed to build all these things on a budget that, certainly by the time I was doing it, was 20 years out of date."

SFX tentatively broaches "The Twin Dilemma", a 1984 adventure which – sorry, gastropod lovers – usually lurks at the bottom of polls. Mention of these fan undertakings strikes a nerve with Bryant. "Why do we have to do this? You don't do it with your children, you don't do it with your animals: 'Oh, this is my favourite.' Can't we give them *all* some love? Every one of these shows had a lot of hard work and a lot of love and a lot of blood, sweat and tears. For every season there's the one that didn't get the budget or the time."

Bryant doesn't like "to be unkind" about "The Twin Dilemma" but concedes "there's something about the pace that feels a little lacking." She stresses how working with children (like the story's titular twins, child geniuses Romulus and Remus) isn't always easy. "It's very difficult to get the performances that you imagine. That can have a huge impact on how the show is held together."

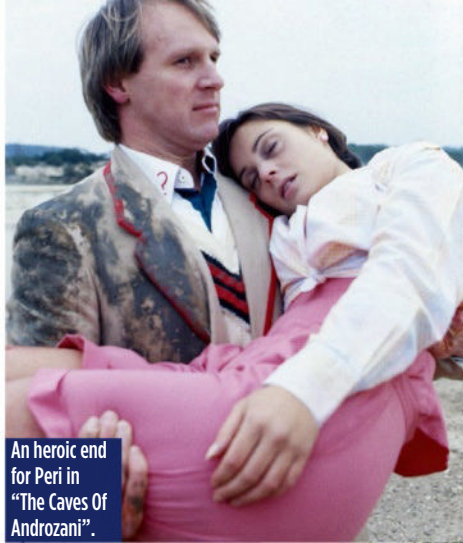
Peri encountered three Doctors, the third being his second incarnation. While in sunny Seville shooting "The Two Doctors", Bryant joined Patrick Troughton and Colin Baker for games in their hotel's pool. "We played some kind of volleyball in the water. Pat had to have his [on screen] companion Frazer [Hines] on his shoulders, and Colin had me on his," she laughs. She was fond of Troughton. "We had some great conversations and great dinners. Wonderful times together."

FAMILY TIES

In centenary special "The Power of the Doctor", a cavalcade of companions gathered together in a support group. According to Bryant, the scenario mirrors real life – she gets the opportunity to catch up with her fellow time travellers in green rooms at conventions. Some she knows well.

"I chat to Colin fairly regularly. I've bumped into Louise [Jameson] in town. Katy [Manning] has been to stay with me. It really is like old friends and it's lovely. We'd probably see more of each other, but we are all incredibly busy. That's just the way the world is."

There is an instant camaraderie between the actors playing the companions. "We've all been cold or hot or running after the Doctor. We've all been in the



An heroic end for Peri in "The Caves Of Androzani".



Back on Earth again in "Attack Of The Cybermen".



Peri and Number Six – no, not that one.

same situation with costumes; we're going, 'This is impossible to work in – I'd never pick it myself'. We've all been there. When I met Karen Gillan [who played Amy Pond], she was like, 'Woahhh! I love you!' I was like, wow. You just don't expect it."

The commonality extends to latter-day Doctors including Peter Capaldi, who Bryant met at a convention. "What's weird is, he was a fan of my era. I was expecting to introduce myself to someone who I thought isn't going to know me, thinking I'd have to explain who I was. 'Hello, I'm Nicola Bryant and I played this companion with Colin Baker'. Peter was like, 'Oh hello!' I was like, 'Oh okay!' And they all say lovely things. You're part of a huge family. Russell T Davies says it all the time, and it's completely true."

Bryant keeps an eye out for cosplayers at fan

events. "I love the women dressing as the male Doctors and the fact that there's female versions of the male characters – and vice versa. I want to see male versions of Jodie [Whittaker]'s costume. I think that the costumes should be fluid."

And as for those who turn out as Peri, she feels they're the most daring of the lot. "I utterly applaud them. I see a few; I think it's because mostly she spent a lot of time in shorts and leotards."

Peri left the TARDIS for a new life with Brian Blessed's King Yrcanos, but her story didn't end there. Almost 40 years later, Bryant was "thrilled" to play the newly branded "warrior queen" in a short film promoting *Doctor Who – The Collection: Season 22* on Blu-ray. "There was so much response. It was extraordinary. People saying, 'I cried.'"



Brian Blessed as King Yrcanos.

Peri in "The Mysterious Planet".



“I’m wondering how Russell is doing this. We’re all intrigued, aren’t we?”

She divulges that Colin Baker was among those reduced to tears. “He saw it at the BFI. He said, ‘I was so moved by the music, and you, and the lovely script by Pete [McTighe].’ It was really beautifully put together,” she continues, “and it was so nice to see Peri strong and surviving. And then passing it on; she’s behaving like the Doctor, taking the centurion [Rex] on board saying, ‘Come on, you can be my companion now.’”

SFX puts it to Bryant that a door is now open for a potential spin-off series. “That would be

fun!” she says, keenly. But would she seriously consider it? “I’d certainly be interested, especially if Russell T Davies was writing because I think he’s fabulous. He gets the heart of the show.”

Doctor Who celebrates its diamond anniversary this year, with Davies returning as showrunner and David Tennant as a brand new incarnation of the Doctor. And Bryant will be watching. “I think it’s brilliant, very clever,” she says. “I’m wondering how Russell is doing this. What’s the plot, the story? We’re all intrigued, aren’t we? We want to know what’s happened to the Doctor.”

In November 2022 the BBC revealed the identity of the Doctor’s latest companion: Millie Gibson is playing Ruby Sunday. Bryant’s advice for Millie is simply “Have fun. Just have fun. I’m sure Millie’s going to be brilliant,”

she adds. “She’s going to have a fabulous time. And I love her outfit. I look forward to seeing her and Ncuti [Gatwa].”

Bryant acknowledges that while “in the grand scheme of things”, playing Peri was just three years of her life, it was “the most important three years. I feel so blessed to have gone through two Doctors. I had a regeneration and I got to work with Pat Troughton. I feel like, in terms of the lucky dip, I did well.”

Away from the series and other acting work, the opportunity to act as ambassador for various charities has been particularly rewarding for her. Close to her heart is Dogs On The Streets, which provides aid for homeless people.

“Most of them can’t get a hostel for themselves,” she says, “because they won’t accept the dogs. DOTS do tremendous stuff. They go to court to find accommodation for the homeless and fight for their rights to keep their animals. They’re out with a defibrillator and foil blankets while we’re sitting inside feeling warm.

“And they now run their own sanctuary so when people are ill or in hospital, the dogs will be taken care of. I don’t know how they manage to run entirely on charity and volunteers. That to me is extraordinary.”

Doctor Who – The Collection Season 22 and 23 are out on Blu-ray now. Visit nicolabryant.net.



The Doctor does his best Rick Wakeman impression.



Sil and the Chief Officer in “Vengeance On Varos”.



Peri with the Cryons, Rost and Threst.

Sharaz Jek, the Doctor and Peri.



HONEY MONSTER

IF YOU GO DOWN TO THE
WOODS TODAY YOU'RE SURE OF
A BIG SURPRISE... LIKE A KILLER
REIMAGINING OF AA MILNE'S
CLASSIC CHARACTERS. DIRECTOR
RHYS WATERFIELD TALKS

WINNIE-THE-POOH: BLOOD AND HONEY

WORDS: WILL SALMON



ARK THINGS ARE AFOOT IN the Hundred Acre Wood. Once a place of innocent fun and childhood adventures, it's now taken on a more sinister aspect. When a grown-up Christopher Robin returns, intending to introduce new fiancée Mary to his old pals Winnie-the-Pooh, Piglet and Eeyore, he finds only desolation and a bloody grave...

That's the eye-opening premise behind *Winnie-The-Pooh: Blood And Honey*. Directed by Rhys Waterfield, this immaculately titled slasher recasts AA Milne's classic characters as feral savages out for revenge on the boy that once abandoned them (plus a party of young women just looking for a weekend away from the city). Disney, this is not.

"I knew it was strong when we first came up with the idea," Waterfield tells *SFX*. "It instantly felt like it had that X-factor to it.

We've made a few films now and whenever we make them, we always look for something which has quite a strong hook to it. Because obviously, when you're making films on a micro-budget, you're still competing with the large studios. So you need something that will really stand out."

That's certainly not a problem for a film that mixes the brutal, grimy horror of the original *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and *Wrong Turn* with some of the most widely beloved characters in all of fiction. But hold on a second – just why is Pooh suddenly out for blood (and honey, of course)?

"It's a reimagining of the original 1926 book," Waterfield explains. "But rather than Pooh and Piglet being cute, two-foot-tall animals of the forest, we've made them these feral six-foot hybrid monsters." Hence the scenes from the trailer where characters are →

"It wasn't me who wanted to go down to the woods."



stalked, slashed and whacked with a sledgehammer by a hulking, abhuman figure in a lumberjack shirt.

"In this version Christopher Robin initially met them [the animals] when they were kind of adolescent monsters. He eventually had to leave them because of college and other life pressures and in the years that he's been gone, they've grown up and become significantly more ferocious. They still have a degree of intelligence behind them, but they also have a lot of bitterness and resentment towards him."

That resentment, it seems, comes from the desperate measures that Pooh and Piglet were forced to take in the absence of their human pal and provider. "When Christopher left them they had to resort to some pretty brutal methods to survive," he says. "One winter it became so cold and barren there was no food, so they had to eat Eeyore..." Oh bother!

THE BEAR NECESSITIES

Pooh and Piglet are played by actors Craig Dowsett and Chris Cordell, both veterans of other productions by Jagged Edge, the low-budget horror house responsible for a string of titles such as *The Area 51 Incident*, *Easter Bunny Massacre*, *Dragon Fury* and now *Blood And Honey*.

"I wanted Craig's Pooh to be tall, so that he's really intimidating," Waterfield continues. "And I wanted him to have a ridiculously big stomach – not that Craig has! We had to pad his costume with loads of pillows."

Piglet, on the other hand, was designed to be shorter and sturdier, lending the pair an "odd couple" dynamic. "They fit together well. Winnie-the-Pooh is the boss, the alpha of the pack. He's the one who's calling the shots. Piglet is more of a henchman. He gets a lot of the grunt work." Or should that be oink-work?

"They were both amazing. Some of the stuff we were doing was crazy, but they never once complained despite the masks. Those masks get unbelievably hot. You end up dripping in sweat."



Winnie investigates what may be a honey trap.

The film was shot in Ashdown Forest in East Sussex, the real-world inspiration for the setting of Milne's stories. "That's basically where the Hundred Acre Wood is, so we thought shooting there would be a nice little link to the original stories," says Waterfield. Principal shooting was very short, just "seven or eight days", but the team reconvened later for several days of additional reshoots to extend and improve certain scenes.

Waterfield says the experience was nothing but positive. "It went very, very well. There were a lot of funny moments, as you can probably imagine. We were all in hysterics at different points. When you're blocking out a scene and then you look to the left and there's a massive Winnie-the-Pooh standing there, it's just bizarre."



"Hey, look what I found! Can I keep it? Please?"

"I was obsessed with trying to get as much honey in the film as I possibly could"

Despite these laughs – certainly an intentional aspect of the film – it was important that these two woodland warriors were still scary. "There were a lot of tweaks needed for that," says Waterfield. "You'd see Pooh running around sometimes and it was a bit too goofy or funny."

"So on the day we might adjust the lighting, or alter their movements to make them a bit more heavy-footed or intimidating. It all came together and it was a really entertaining shoot to do. I wish we'd had another film crew there watching us make the film!"

One aspect of the shoot that Waterfield was insistent on was that the film live up to its title. No, not in terms of blood, though there is certainly plenty of that, but the other part. "I was obsessed with trying to get as much honey in the film as I possibly could," he laughs. "We had loads of jars of it on hand. We'd be shooting and I would pause and run

Should we be calling him Poohface? Maybe not.



"He's just one bear, we can take him! Probably."





Piglet has clearly been through some tough times.



ON THE EDGE

Low-budget thrills and spills

So who are Jagged Edge Productions? The hugely prolific horror house is run by Waterfield and co-producer Scott Jeffrey (himself a director of several features). In the last couple of years they've produced a vast number of low-budget films with daft titles.

These include *The Killing Tree* (about an evil Christmas tree); *The Curse Of Humpty Dumpty* (about a killer Humpty Dumpty doll); *Croc* and its sequel *Crocodile Vengeance* (which relocate the big reptile subgenre to the UK) and *Dinosaur Hotel* (contestants in an underground game show are stalked by raptors, of course). IMDb - admittedly not the most reliable resource - lists *Pomzilla* (about a giant Pomeranian trashing a city) as being currently in production.

"We always want to have something which really stands out," says Waterfield of the unique premises behind their output. "If someone wanted to go and watch a slasher film then they'll mostly be drawn to the new *Halloween* or whatever. So we always try and go very unique and different to all of these other options."

"There's loads of other nursery rhyme horrors out there, things like *Cinderella* or *Sleeping Beauty* or *Little Mermaid*, but they don't have the same pull to me." But a Winnie-the-Pooh horror movie? "That instantly hits home. As a horror fan, I'd love to see that!"

up to Craig and just throw honey onto his face, so it was dribbling off him and gave the impression that he's drooling it. It made it look cooler!"

All of this is, of course, about as far away from the traditional image of Winnie-the-Pooh as it's possible to get, and there's a practical reason for that. While AA Milne's original 1926 novel is now in the public domain (meaning that it's now open season on further Pooh adaptations and reimaginings), the most recognisable version of the character, as popularised by Disney, is very much *not*. Waterfield says that making their killers as visibly distinct from the Mouse House's IP as possible was vitally important to avoid both confusion and legal issues.

"When we were coming up with this we knew that we would have to be really careful about what elements we used," he says. "We couldn't be influenced by the Disney version at all, so I consciously didn't watch anything by them. I went through the book and I purposefully tried to make our Pooh and Piglet as distinct as I could."

"Pooh [in this film] is a six-foot-two, half-man/half-bear hybrid who wears pants and has a long sleeve shirt. And ours doesn't talk anywhere near as much as theirs."



Pretty sensible advice, if we're being honest.

Does this also explain why some of the more famous secondary characters from the series are entirely absent? "Yeah. Tigger, for example, isn't in the public domain so he wasn't allowed to be used in the story."

Something that *did* influence the film were a string of classic slasher films. "The main franchises I was thinking of while making this were *Halloween*, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Wrong Turn*," says Waterfield, himself a huge genre fan. "I really like *Wrong Turn*. It's not as big as the other ones, but the first one is in my little list of horror movies that I love. And as we're going into the sequel soon, *Terrifier 2* is going to be one of my key reference points. I want to make sure I go as big and epic as they went with that. I want to try and push it even more."

Yes, a second spoonful of *Blood And Honey* is already in the works, though still a way off. "It's in the back of my mind at the moment. We're coming up with various ideas, but we're not rushing too far ahead yet because this is about to go into cinemas. You don't want to push out a sequel too close to the first one."

"So we're going to let that come out and hopefully get a gauge on what people like and what they don't like. Then we can take all of that criticism, and everyone else's opinions and steer the sequel into a direction which everyone will be kind of happy with."

The further gruesome adventures of Pooh and Piglet aren't the only projects that Waterfield and Jagged Edge are working on. "There's also *Peter Pan's Neverland Nightmare* and *Bambi: The Reckoning*," he says. "*Bambi* is probably the first to be filmed. We've taglined it as 'Bambi on rabies!' Have you seen *The Ritual*?" he asks, referring to David Bruckner's 2017 adaptation of the Adam Nevill novel.

"The monster in that is this weird, moose-looking thing. We were quite inspired by that. We want it to be this monstrous bipedal deer, just killing lots of people. We want Bambi to be able to stomp on people's heads!"

Winnie-The-Pooh: Blood And Honey is in US cinemas from 15 February and on disc 24 April.



ALAN TUDYK

Why the latest Optimus Prime is the proudest

Words by Darren Scott

Every *SFX* year should start with an Alan Tudyk interview, that's just how steeped in sci-fi and genre productions he is. Even if you're not actually seeing him on screen – or if he's behind a prosthetic on *Resident Alien* – his voice pops up in more films, shows and games than we have space to list.

He's certainly not a stranger to the world of *Transformers*, as both a fan and as an actor, but voicing this latest character, well, even Tudyk himself didn't quite believe he was going to play the actual Optimus Prime in reboot series *Transformers: EarthSpark*. Aside from that, you should know he likes to make jokes. Lots of jokes.

What was your first life experience of *Transformers*?

➔ Mine was mid-'80s when it came on as a cartoon. That was the greatest. My brother and I watched it and then our good friends, our neighbours, we all watched it. And then we went to go see the movie [1986's *Transformers: The Movie*] when it came out and that was so huge. The first movie was an animated film. And Shia LaBeouf and I dated for, like, two years. I'm kidding.

What goes through your head when you learn that you're going to be part of such a well-known franchise?

➔ I got an email asking if I wanted to do it. I read it and my brain rejected the idea that I would even be asked to play Optimus Prime. I read it as Prime. I saw Prime and I was like, "Oh, right. There are other Primes." Because I did [2011 live action film] *Transformers: Dark Of The Moon*, and there was another Prime [Sentinel]. There was Optimus and then this other guy showed up.

It was like one of the original Primes and so I thought I was like Optometrist Prime or some other, you know, Amazon Prime. I was like, "Cool. I'll be talking about Transformers. I'll probably have like two lines an episode and I get to do this cool thing." It wasn't until just a few days before I ever had to record that I started working on it and saw that all the lines in the script that were highlighted were Optimus, and I freaked out.

Why?

➔ Like, there's no way! [Laughs] What are you talking about? I'm more like Uncomfortable Prime, I shouldn't be... That's usually my characters that I play: Indecision Prime, left or right? We really had a blast, I came in and worked on

it, and we had a really good time. The first time I got to say "Autobots, roll out," I got chills, literally chills. And then they turned up the heat. And then we continued the session.

What's been your main take-away for your character?

➔ No more hauling pigs. No more livestock. That is, Optimus Prime as an 18-wheeler has the opportunity to haul a lot of different things than livestock. That is not good. You don't want to cross state lines on an expired licence. That's another thing.

Practical Prime, there.

➔ To answer the original question, I would say it's just so much fun. I love this new iteration; there's areas of grey here because it's now after the war, and Megatron and Optimus Prime are working together, but it's not clean-cut. Some of the Decepticons are still fighting this war, so they'll capture them and it's like, "Are they your enemies? Are they your friends? You're all part of the same species. So what is it?" There's a question there. It's about looking after ourselves as a species, which is a good message at any time in history, but working together for the common good.

I also took away how cool the animation has become. From when you first watched it to now, this big animation is so cool, it looks really, really good. It's very entertaining, there's a lot to it. There's a story family, a lot of that part of the story, but then there's also some really great action.

What is it like being part of things that have such passionate fanbases?

➔ There's a lot of responsibility that goes with it, like playing any iconic character. Like, "Oh, you're the Joker." Oh, but Optimus Prime. I mean, that is... It is so iconic.

What's it like seeing yourself as an action figure?

➔ I collect a lot of Hess Big Rigs from Hassan, you know, from gas stations? So this will be cool, to have a big rig that is me. I mean, I can't even. There's gonna have to be some kind of transference because these characters existed before – we're legacy characters so there's gonna have to be some transfer. I still see it as not me! At a certain point I'm hoping that will change, I guess once I get one in my house. There's one on order. And I do, from time to time, say "Autobots roll out" now in my everyday life. ●

Transformers: EarthSpark is on Paramount+ and Nickelodeon now.

BIODATA

From
El Paso, Texas

Greatest Hits
The Joker in
Harley Quinn,
Harry
Vanderspeigle
in **Resident Alien**,
Arcade in
MODOK, **Scroll** in
Disenchanted,
Duffie in **Strange**
World.

Random Fact
Tudyk's wife
choreographed
the Peacemaker
dance routine. He
stood in for John
Cena.

“My brain rejected the idea that I would even be asked to play Optimus Prime”



FOLK IN HELL

WRITER ROBERT WYNNE-SIMMONS REVEALS THE STORY BEHIND CONTROVERSIAL 1971 FOLK HORROR CLASSIC **BLOOD ON SATAN'S CLAW**

WORDS: OLIVER PFEIFFER

FOLK HORROR FILMS ARE often characterised by deceptively idyllic landscapes, superstitions connected to ancient pagan mythologies, and the unnerving influences that these traditions can impose on people. It's a terror that literally seeps from the soil in Piers Haggard's *Blood On Satan's Claw*, aka *Satan's Skin*.

The 1971 cult classic shocker, set in 17th century England, hinges on the unearthing of a centuries-old, deformed and demonic skull in an isolated rural community, which turns its adolescent population murderous.

"I'd seen at school how cruel children could be to one another," the film's screenwriter Robert Wynne-Simmons tells *SFX*. "I came to realise this idea that children could actually be villains [hadn't] been looked at. They were always depicted as innocent. They are innocent in a way; however, it was this idea that they could be more easily corrupted into doing something dreadful."

After sending letters to numerous film companies, the then-budding writer received a response from Chilton Films (which was being fostered at the time by Tigon British Film

Productions) who wanted to produce a horror film and asked whether he had any suggestions. "I had written some ghost stories when I was at school but I had to bluff my way into telling them I had more than I had," he reveals. "I had just five days, but sent ideas from three different short stories."

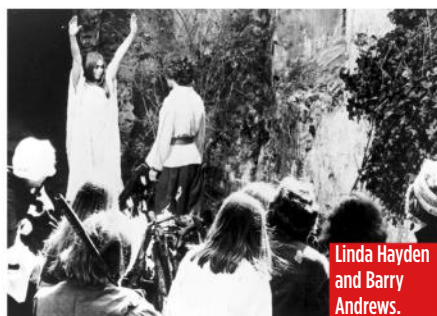
Those stories concerned, respectively, a man attacked by a hand, children finding a claw in the ground and placing a curse on one another, and a rural judge that does battle with the Devil. "That was the fight between the new knowledge and the old superstitions, and the two [characters] became almost equal in the

end – where you didn't quite know who the villain was," Wynne-Simmons elaborates, on what was then titled "The Devil's Touch". "It was that idea of the Devil coming alive through people that holds the entire thing together."

"The Devil's Touch" was originally envisioned by Tigon as an anthology film – a format made famous in Amicus films like *Dr Terror's House Of Horrors* and *From Beyond The Grave*, where several unrelated short stories of terror were connected by an overarching narrative.

"It was very popular to do a portmanteau film in those days and that was what they wanted to do, as I'd given them more than one idea at that time," continues the writer. "However, I interconnected the stories so that the characters overlapped and it could be a continuous thing. The central idea was the Devil's skin and the idea of ancient gods coming alive in the countryside."

One part of the appeal of *Blood On Satan's Claw* is its authentic depiction of this British rural landscape, where the grassy fields and ancient woods of Bix Bottom in the Chiltern Hills of Henley stands in for the idyllic yet isolated township. Piers Haggard, who grew →



up on a farm, helped to give the film its authenticity. However, it's the predominantly low camera angles used by cinematographer Dick Bush and otherworldly score by Marc Wilkinson that lend the film its chilling edge.

"Because the Devil is half-buried at the beginning, they took that as the theme and used low camera angles as if it was the Devil coming through, which was quite powerful, I think," says Wynne-Simmons. "Also, the slippery, slidey music has a folksy edge to it that is very atmospheric."

DEVIL'S IN THE DETAILS

Nevertheless, nearly half a century on, the most eye-opening aspect of *Blood On Satan's Claw* remains its provocative rape scene. It depicts the brutal seduction and murder of an innocent local girl (played by former *Doctor Who* companion Wendy Padbury) at a ruined church, witnessed by an audience of aroused Devil-worshippers.

Originally, Wynne-Simmons had written the scene to be more suggestive than explicit. "It almost happened off-stage... you didn't actually see every detail in the script of what happened, but Piers decided to go through with it," he recalls. "It made the film terribly visceral – you could feel, 'My god – there's a person really suffering here!' Piers was very adventurous [but] he's always had a slightly ambivalent attitude to it and whether he should have [depicted] it."

A teenage Linda Hayden (of controversial 1969 drama *Baby Love* fame) portrays Angel Blake, the sensual leader of the clan. However, it's British character actor Patrick Wymark (who sadly died before the film's release) that steals the show as the Judge whose strategy toward dealing with the demonic threat is to, as he puts it, "Let it grow!"

"When it was three stories the Judge wasn't in the middle one, so we had to make it that he went away and left [the villagers] in the lurch,



Wendy Padbury: sacrifice.

“Patrick Wymark was a strongly realistic actor – he’s not some sort of spectral villain”

which was interesting because he was using them as a kind of experiment: 'Okay, we'll see what happens. I'll go away and this will get worse and then it will be very clear who's involved in this Devil power.'"

Originally, Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing were considered for the part; however, the casting of Wymark arguably gave it a level of gravitas. "The Judge was not a simple character at all under the hands of Patrick Wymark, which it might have been had it been a conventional Lee or Cushing character," Wynne-Simmons suggests.

"We couldn't afford those two but I think Patrick is far better. He was a strongly realistic actor – you feel like you've known him and he frightens you, but he's not some sort of spectral villain, he's actually down to earth."

The film climaxes with a showdown between the sword-wielding Judge and a rather feeble-looking dancing Devil. Wynne-Simmons had envisioned a much more apocalyptic dénouement that involved the military wiping out the entire population of the village. However, this was significantly scaled down on the insistence of Tigon, who considered it too bleak.

"I had that aspect about the Judge's methods being quite extreme; it was his intention to just stamp this out altogether, which almost made him equal to the Devil and the two of them are sort of well matched," he says.

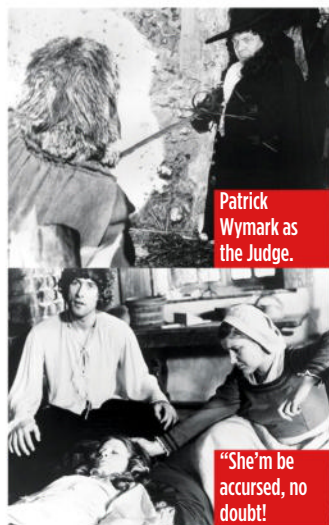
"Incidentally, in this fight with the Devil, when he destroys it, there was an enigmatic shot of him looking through the flames which suggests that he himself is now possessed. It puts a question in people's minds, which is what I always wanted to put there. So it was a piece of good fortune that Piers was able to find that particular frame, as you can't guarantee a still frame within a moving sequence."

While attracting controversy for its scenes of violence, *Blood On Satan's Claw* made a modest impact at the time of its release in 1971.

However, like its antagonistic threat, interest in it slowly grew over the decades. Mark Gatiss shared his appreciation for its dark, nihilistic power in the "Home Counties Horror" episode of 2010 BBC documentary series *A History Of Horror*, where he tied it together with other folk horrors *Witchfinder General* and *The Wicker Man* as part of an "unholy trinity".

"I find it quite gratifying that it has happened that way," Wynne-Simmons says, reflecting on the film's influence. "Nobody expected much from it at the time – it was a first attempt by producers who wanted to do a horror film. It wasn't quite what people expected. It wasn't like other horror films, which were carefully worked out, and it was sort of alive in an alarming kind of way." ●

Blood On Satan's Claw is available on Prime Video, Blu-ray and DVD.



Patrick Wymark as the Judge.

"She'm be accursed, no doubt!"



A curiously friendly-looking Devil.

ALAMY



What do you think spiked people's interest in particular?

The idea, which you eventually get in films like *Alien* and so on, was of things being inside your body and coming out like an illness. They were thinking that perhaps this was a bit unusual, despite the title. It took a long time, and then I thought, "Well, I want to actually go back to it." I know it's 50 years, but it was time to tidy up the loose ends and revisit the characters and actually think, "Why did they do what they did?"

What was it like returning to these characters after that time?

It was quite interesting to explore the motivation for why characters behaved in certain ways. To see there was a world there that was still alive. Those characters hadn't gone – they were real people in a way. It was a strange feeling to go back into that world after all that time but I enjoyed it very much.

How did the opportunity to revisit the story come about?

Well, there were a lot of things happening at the time. An audio drama based on the film was released [produced by Bafflegab Productions in 2018, and starring Mark Gatiss, Reece Shearsmith and Linda Hayden], and then there was talk about a possible TV series based on the film. So I thought the time was right to go back and look at it and come out with my version and to say what was on my mind when I conceived it in the first place.

Of course, when I wrote the novel, the film and how Piers shot it affected it. I don't want to go against that but to say this is how the story evolved and try and include as much as possible from the film, so people can see it hasn't changed but has been looked into in more depth.

Blood On Satan's Claw: Or, The Devil's Skin is out now, published by Unbound.

WRITTEN IN BLOOD

Robert Wynne-Simmons revisits his 50-year-old folk horror story for a new novelisation

What was your approach to the novelisation of *Blood On Satan's Claw*?

Because the story in the film was never quite complete, I've always wanted to go back. I wanted to go back because what happened to the film was a bit strange. The title *Blood On Satan's Claw* does it a disservice because it sounds pretty trashy. That's what people thought and it took an awfully long time to redeem itself from that. However, people eventually wrote articles [realising] there's an interesting story there.

Brought



To Book

IAN MCDONALD

Hope springs eternal: the SF luminary tells us about his new novel

Words by Jonathan Wright // Portrait by Lawrie Photography

OVER THE PAST FEW MONTHS, FOLLOWING the loss of his wife Enid, Ian McDonald has been deep within the grieving process. “I’m the Wile E Coyote who’s run over the cliff,” he says. “My feet are still going, they’re still moving forwards. Things are changing, but I have a long way to go to build a new life – I’m not even sure what it would look like or how different it would be.”

Enid, who McDonald first met more than 20 years ago, had been receiving treatment for ovarian cancer, including surgery. When the couple contracted Covid-19 – “the real stuff, not your pissy Omicron variant” – Enid struggled to recover. “The operation had taken too much out of her, and she had a heart attack and died. She didn’t even see the end of the pandemic.”

The pain is still raw but one thing that’s certain is that writing will be central to McDonald’s new life. Because, well, that’s what Ian McDonald does, as his new book *Hopeland* proves so triumphantly. Initially imagined as “a love story of the early Anthropocene”, it’s a novel that mixes elements of mundane SF, urban fantasy and magical realism, to magnificent effect.

McDonald was partly inspired by “a page I ripped out of EasyJet’s inflight magazine back in 2003, where someone was writing about what she called her ‘constellation family’”. Look at such a family and you initially see just individuals, like single stars in the sky. Yet they are all part of “a larger shape, a larger form”.

“I liked the idea of an alternative family structure,” says McDonald. Accordingly, the Hopeland family to which McDonald’s heroine, Raisa, belongs is far removed from the Western nuclear family. Instead, it’s a kind of extended-clan-cum-small-nation “that’s constantly growing”, where “you can travel from relation to relation, from node to node and never come to the end”.

PARKOUR LIFE

The novel begins in 2011, against the backdrop of the riots that hit English cities. We first meet Raisa as she hares across London, travelling parkour style, in a race to become the city’s next “electromancer”. In the midst of the race – and here’s the love story – she encounters tweed-suited Amon Brightbourne, a curiously otherworldly musician.

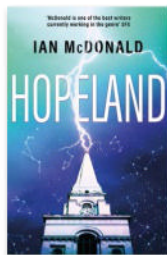
If these sound like characters living off to the side of our own world, that’s not coincidental. “[The Hopelands] form what [SF critic] John Clute calls a wainscot society,” says McDonald. “It’s a world that exists inside our contemporary

BIODATA

From Manchester

Greatest Hits
McDonald won the British Science Fiction Association Award for *River of Gods* (2004), *Brasyl* (2007) and *The Dervish House* (2010), books set respectively in the emerging economies of India, Brazil and Turkey.

Random Fact
McDonald wrote five episodes of *Sesame Tree*, an adaptation of *Sesame Street* produced in Northern Ireland.



modern world and you could join it, you never have to leave it. It exists within and in parallel with our world; it interacts with our world, but it’s a world [in itself] as well.”

The book rarely goes where you expect it to. In this, it nods back to McDonald’s earliest work, the eerie sense that anything might happen present in *Desolation Road* (1988), his dreamtime cyberpunk novel of a terraformed Mars. Yet it’s also a book written by a vastly experienced novelist able to balance multiple plotlines, characters and themes.

At its heart lies not just a love story, but a meditation on how we are to face the next few years. Climate change gradually emerges as one of the central concerns. Getting back to family, the question of how we raise our children is also central. And it’s here that Enid had a direct influence on the book.

TEAM TALK

Well-travelled, she spent time in Tonga in the South Pacific. There she encountered the fakaleiti community, those assigned male at birth but who express themselves in ways that are feminine.

“It’s a totally different way of looking at gender from the way we do it in the West,” he says. This plays into the way the novel deals with how the Hopeland clan raises its offspring: “They have their own attitude towards gender, which is that kids don’t have a gender until they decide they want one, and even then it’s not fixed.” Hopeland children are also kids until “they decide not to be kids – and that can be whether they’re two or when they’re 15”.

McDonald decided he needed to get “a gender-sensitive read” done, undertaken by transgender SF critic, publisher and sports fan Cheryl Morgan. “She said, ‘Ian, how long have you known me? I am very disappointed indeed. Do you not know there are 15 people on a rugby team and not 11?’”

At which point he bursts out laughing. Which, it’s worth mentioning, is something McDonald does a lot. Despite everything he’s been through recently, he comes across as someone keenly aware of how important it is to be connected to life’s glorious messiness.

And of course, while making sure he doesn’t get so isolated he becomes “that weird guy at number 16”, he’s writing a new novel, one that deals with “a rewilding project that brings back something much older and wilder than anyone was anticipating”. It’s going well. “The work keeps me honest,” he says. ●

Hopeland is published by Gollancz on 16 February.

“It’s a totally different way of looking at gender from the way we do it in the West”

DISCOVER THE UNIVERSE

www.spaceanswers.com

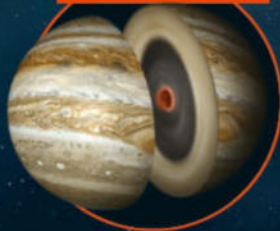


New issue on sale now!

EXPLORATION



SOLAR SYSTEM



DEEP SPACE



FUTURE TECH



ASTRONOMY



Print and digital subscriptions available at
www.magazinesdirect.com/know3for3



/AllAboutSpaceMagazine



@spaceanswers



space@spaceanswers.com

FEB
2023

edited by Ian Berriman

Reviews

CINEMA 72

TV 74

HOME ENTERTAINMENT 78

BOOKS 84

COMICS 92

GAMES & STUFF 94

THIS ISSUE
48
REVIEWS

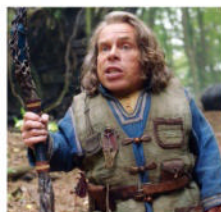
72

M3GAN

A girl's best friend



Highlights



74

WILLOW

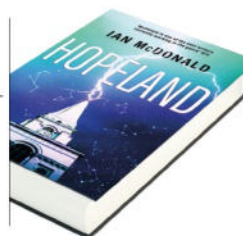
→ Warwick Davis's Nelwyn sorcerer gets a sequel series. Alyson Hannigan continues to wait.



78

BLACK ADAM

→ Invite the ancient antihero into your living room as the *Shazam!* spin-off hits shiny disc.



84

HOPELAND

→ Ian McDonald's novel visits London, Iceland and Polynesia to tell a picaresque love story.

→ RATINGS EXPLAINED ★★★★★ SUPERB ★★★★★ GOOD ★★★★★ AVERAGE ★★★★★ POOR ★★★★★ TERRIBLE

CINEMA



"Honestly, this Alice sounds like a bit of a loser."

M3GAN

Bad Babysitter



▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

15 | 102 minutes

▶ Director Gerard Johnstone

▶ Cast Allison Williams, Violet McGraw, Amie Donald, Jenna Davis

❖ **Akela Cooper and James Wan's** *Black Mirror*-style follow-up to *Malignant* has an antagonist equally deserving of being an instant genre hit. Where Gabriel was mute, explosive and clad in black, M3GAN (dubbed "Annabelle meets the Terminator" by Wan) is pristine, calculated and sassy, which makes it all the more delicious when the robotic doll turns murderous.

More than just an "AI gone wrong" story", à la the *Child's Play* reboot, the film plays out like a

tongue-in-cheek fable, poking fun at our dependency on technology, the dangers of distracting ourselves with gadgets, and how devices can create distance between us just as easily as they can connect.

M3GAN, the titular droid, is essentially the monster to Allison Williams's Frankenstein-esque Gemma, a talented roboticist who invents and then gifts the walking, talking machine to her niece Cady (*Doctor Sleep*'s perfectly morose-looking Violet McGraw) following the sudden death of her sister and brother-in-law. Spooked by the idea of having to parent the freshly orphaned youngster, Gemma programmes M3GAN to "keep Cady from harm" – an order she winds up taking far too literally...

Making the most of the modest runtime, Cooper and director Gerard Johnstone build M3GAN's menace gradually to brilliant effect. Every time Gemma takes the bot into her office for updates, it's clear that she's becoming more

autonomous; first, she turns off when instructed, next she asks "Are you sure?", and then, well, she just doesn't listen at all. It's a tension-filled treat to see the subtle changes being highlighted while the characters remain oblivious ahead of a super-satisfying conclusion.

The film's less gonzo than some may hope for – *Malignant* set that bar high – and at times, it does feel diluted by the limits of its age rating. But this makes for a surprisingly clever movie. The slow-burn leaves space to flesh out Gemma and Cady, who are more complex than the cookie-cutter "heroes" you'd expect in a film like this.

The former is prickly and work-obsessed; the latter can be angry and spiteful. Both are tricky to root for at times, as M3GAN dares to offer up uncomfortable, realistic depictions of grief inside the campy chaos.

Tonally, it could have been a disaster were it not in the capable

hands of Johnstone, who first proved how adept he is at blending jokes and jump scares in his acclaimed dark comedy *Housebound*. M3GAN is laugh-out-loud funny and genuinely creepy, largely due to the filmmaker's eye for unsettling visuals. In close-ups, Jenna Davis's

“Plays out like a tongue-in-cheek fable, poking fun at dependency on technology”

perky voice doesn't quite match up to the animatronics of M3GAN's face, and Johnstone cleverly uses shadows and smart framing to sinister-up the 4' 7" antagonist.

A new horror icon is here... cache horror.

Amy West

i Akela Cooper's big childhood fear was ventriloquist's dummies, after she saw the 1978 Anthony Hopkins movie *Magic*.

PUSS IN BOOTS: THE LAST WISH

Mog life crisis



▶ **RELEASED 3 FEBRUARY**

U | 100 minutes

▶ Directors Joel Crawford,
Januel Mercado

▶ Cast Antonio Banderas, Salma Hayek,
Harvey Guillén, Florence Pugh

▶ **Sequels to spin-offs used to be** the sort of thing that'd show up on home video. But DreamWorks Animation's need for franchises means this second solo outing for Antonio Banderas's swashbuckling feline is headed to cinemas. And it's mostly worth enjoying on the big screen.

The concept that the recklessly heroic main character has almost used up his nine lives is the spur for a quest to find a magic star that... look, the title spells it out. It's just an excuse for a high joke ratio, some new comic characters (the likes of Florence Pugh's Goldilocks and John Mulaney's

"C'mon, hand over the Dreamies, will you?"



Jack Horner are also after the shiny MacGuffin), and the return of on-off love interest Kitty Softpaws (Salma Hayek). Wagner Moura, meanwhile, shows up to threaten Puss as this universe's version of Death; quite the concept for a lightweight, kiddie-friendly adventure, but never too scary for tiny tots.

The best new addition is Harvey Guillén's overenthusiastic stray

pooch Perro, and the banter between Puss and Kitty is entertaining. It's also interesting to see how other DreamWorks movies have incorporated the fluid animation of *The Bad Guys*, itself borrowed from *Spider-Man: Into The Spiderverse*. Diverting enough.

James White

i Joel Crawford storyboarded a Puss backstory for *Shrek Forever After*'s alternate universe, but the scene was cut.

ALSO+OUT



There were no screenings of Irish goblin horror **UNWELCOME** (out on 27 January) before we went to press. M Night Shyamalan's latest, **KNOCK AT THE CABIN**, is released on 10 February – see page 42 for more on that. Also hitting cinemas the same day: **DISTANT**, a sci-fi comedy about an asteroid miner who crash-lands on an alien planet, and **EPIC TAILS**, an animated film which sees mouse and cat pals embarking on a quest in Ancient Greece. Finally, the month's big release, **ANT-MAN AND THE WASP: QUANTUMANIA** arrives on 17 February. Or should that be teeny-tiny release?

**BIG
ISSUE
RECRUIT**

OUR WORK IS CHANGING LIVES

Big Issue Recruit is a specialist recruitment service dedicated to supporting people facing barriers to work, into sustainable employment.

We match employers committed to recruiting a diverse workforce with candidates looking for rewarding careers.

We work with candidates from a range of diverse backgrounds - supporting them to build the confidence, skills and resilience they need to overcome barriers.

Our support, both for organisations and candidates, is ongoing throughout - pre, during and post employment.



Scan to visit jobs.bigissue.com

Sign up as a candidate or employer.
Email us at jobs@bigissue.com
Call us on 0207 526 3200

Part of the
Big Issue Group





"I just don't see the point in redesigning it, that's all."

DRINKING GAME

Knock back a beverage of your choice every time...

Willow admonishes one of his companions for not taking the quest seriously enough.

A burst of James Horner's original theme plays on the soundtrack.

Madmartigan gets namechecked.



Kit and Jade nearly kiss – but not quite!

Elora completely mangles the pronunciation of a magic word.

The Crone and the Gales hang out in their lair, being evil.

Graydon plays his flute – or uses it for magic.

WILLOW Season One

Quest in show



UK/US: Disney+, streaming now

► Showrunner Jonathan Kasdan

► Cast Warwick Davis, Ellie Bamber,

Ruby Cruz, Erin Kellyman,

Tony Revolori, Amar Chadha-Patel

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 If audiences

were crying out for a sequel to Lucasfilm's 1988 swords-and-sorcery adventure *Willow*, it would surely have been made three decades ago. The existence of this belated Disney+ follow-up is therefore something of an anomaly, but it's also a welcome one – this fun (if flawed) TV series is an entertaining YA alternative to the harder-edged *The Rings Of Power* and *House Of The Dragon*.

On most levels *Willow* is epic fantasy by numbers, a ticklist of

familiar tropes in which a mismatched bunch of heroes embark on a quest to vanquish evil. While the show bears the name of Nelwyn sorcerer Willow Ufgood (a returning Warwick Davis), however, it really isn't about him.

In the decades since he saved the chosen one, Elora Danan, he's become even more disillusioned than Luke Skywalker in *The Last Jedi*. So, with the fate of existence in the balance, he's forced to play chaperone when a group of bickering teens set out to rescue the son of Queen Sorsha (Joanne Whalley, also returning from the original) from the clutches of the hideous Crone.

Showrunner Jonathan Kasdan (who co-wrote *Solo: A Star Wars*

Story) has cited *The Breakfast Club* as an influence, and there's an undeniable John Hughes vibe to the show. Each of the adventurers fits neatly into a jock/nerd/(literal) princess pigeonhole, while they also carry enough emotional baggage to sustain an eight-episode run. At its best, *Willow* plays like a smart high-school comedy powered by magic, monsters and a rock soundtrack; the gags are frequent and sharp, and the dialogue rarely slips into the po-faced cadence of Middle-earth.

Unfortunately, by the second half of the run, that lightness of touch starts to become a hindrance. The tone veers into the self-aware territory of *The Princess Bride*, and you start to wonder if the mission really is as

“Plays like a smart high-school comedy powered by magic”

important as Willow makes out. The show also struggles to maintain the impressive momentum of its early episodes as the plot gets bogged down in contrivance – what are you doing here? – and some shameless recycling of classic moments from *Willow*'s more illustrious Lucasfilm stablemates.

The season finale brings everything back on course, however, and makes good on the show's clever and faithful expansion of the movie's limited mythology. At time of going to press, a second season is yet to be confirmed, though it would be a shame if this was the end of the journey. There are still plenty of questions deserving answers – not least the whereabouts of Madmartigan, the rogue swordsman – and even in a crowded TV fantasy landscape, *Willow* brings its own brand of magic to the party. **Richard Edwards**

i X-Men comics writer Chris Claremont (*Days Of Future Past*) authored a series of *Willow* tie-in novels in the '90s.

LITTLE DEMON Season One To the Devil A Stropky Teen



UK/US Disney+, streaming now
(Originally broadcast in the US on FXX)
► Showrunners Darcy Fowler,
Seth Kirschner, Kieran Valla
► Cast Aubrey Plaza, Lucy DeVito,
Danny DeVito, Lennon Parham

EPISODES 1.01-1.10 **Imagine if Adult Swim** had made a *Rosemary's Baby* sequel as a 10-part grindhouse cartoon series, with the baby now a teenager and recast as a girl, and you've pretty much got *Little Demon*. Except it's not on Adult Swim – it's on Disney+. Walt must be spinning in his grave (except, as everyone "knows", he was frozen).

There are some heavy hitters behind this series. It's part-

produced by the production company of Dan Harmon (*Community/Rick And Morty*) and boasts voice talents such as Danny De Vito and Audrey Plaza in regular roles, and Arnold Schwarzenegger, Mel Brooks, Michael Shannon, Dave Bautista and Mark Ruffalo (as a horned bulldog) as guest stars.

It's a high concept show: 13-year-old Chrissy Feinberg discovers that the reason why her mother has dragged her back and forth across the US all her life is because she's on the run from Chrissy's dad, who happens to be Satan. Now, with puberty hitting, her diabolical inheritance is bubbling to the surface, and dad feels it's time to entice her to Hell.



A hothead with hot hands: recipe for trouble.

This is bloody, swearly, grossapalooza stuff with a real "let's throw everything at the wall and see what sticks" approach to humour. For every great, edgy gag there are a couple of clunkers (honestly, on what level is a demonic quiz show audience repeatedly baying "F**k a corpse!" funny?). There are plenty of amusingly bat's-arse images and concepts, but also far too many

laboured and overly-desperate-to-shock ones.

Some spirited vocal performances help to keep things watchable, and an arc plot of sorts adds a bit of depth to later episodes. But for the most part it's a hell of a mess.

Dave Golder

i Episode three features a cameo by a faun that looks like Philoctetes, who was voiced by Danny DeVito in Disney's *Hercules*.

REGINALD THE VAMPIRE Season One The XL-Files



UK Sky Sci Fi, Tuesdays
US Syfy, finished airing
► Showrunner Harley Peyton
► Cast Jacob Batalon, Mandela Van Peebles, Em Haine, Savannah Basley

EPISODES 1.01-1.10 **Vampires aren't** just bloodsucking killers in this TV take on a series of YA books, they're something even worse: body fascists. Which is bad news for plus-sized slushie-bar employee Reginald when soft-hearted vampire Maurice breaks the rules and turns him rather than letting him die.

Now Reginald (*Spider-Man* sidekick Jacob Batalon) must try to balance his burgeoning love life

with his bloodlust, while avoiding being killed by the local vampire bigwigs appalled at this porky abomination. Things are further complicated when Reginald starts using his bullying boss as a personal blood bank, which reveals glamouring abilities (hypnotising victims) far beyond those of most vampires.

Sure, it sounds like something *Buffy* would have knocked off in a season one episode (if body shaming had been a hot issue back then), but *Reginald The Vampire* precariously navigates a thin line between finding the humour in obesity and also highlighting body prejudice for a whole season. Largely it succeeds through its



Jacob faces up to some very mean girls indeed.

warmth, endearingly quirky characters and self-effacing wit.

Sadly, obesity issues aside, originality is in short supply. Take away Jacob Batalon's charismatic central performance and there's not much else that's memorable here among the pick 'n' mix of teen vampire romcom staples, although the side effects of glamouring receive a more thorough work-out than usual.

Gaudy production design and garish lighting don't help, feeling at odds with the show's darker themes. That said, the show's probably done its job if it's convinced us that using "Fat's Entertainment" as a strap line would be a little crass.

Dave Golder

i Todd's clearly a *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* fan – at one point in episode nine he refers to a stake as "Mr Pointy".

EXTRAORDINARY Series One

Finding your power



UK/US Disney+, streaming now

► Creator Emma Moran

► Cast Máiréad Tyers, Sofia Oxenham, Bilal Hasna, Luke Rollason

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **Watching this** super-powered comedy, at first it's difficult to wrap your head around the fact that it's a Disney show; E4 or BBC Three feel more like its natural home. Creator Emma Moran's first instinct seems to be to reach for cringe comedy, or taboo subjects.

The list of Things Considered Intrinsically Hilarious includes wanking, tampons, tit-flashing, the IRA and the clitoris (well, men's inability to locate it). Though the series calms down a bit later, it initially seems – like a rebellious teen – so anxious to be edgy that it ends up looking juvenile.

Then there's its vague similarity to an E4 classic. It's set in a world (a very everyday Britain) where on passing 18 you can expect to develop a power. Some are classics (flying, super-strength). Others are more outlandish (a 3D-printing arse). To the frustration of 25-year-old Jen (Máiréad Tyers), her power still hasn't emerged.

There is a faint whiff of *Misfits* here. As in that show, the consequences of such fantastic developments are local and inconsequential, when they could be global and far-reaching. Take Kash (Bilal Hasna), partner of Jen's BFF Carrie (Sofia Oxenham), who can rewind time, but rarely uses the power for anything more serious than undoing arguments.

To Moran's credit, she plays with such concepts ingeniously; Carrie's ability to channel the

dead, for example, allows her to both mock Hitler and be chatted up by Charles II. There are clever background details to enjoy too: a riff on Stonewall posters reading "Some people can see through walls..."; a graffiti artist doing a Spider-Man. If you can maintain concentration long enough to spot them, that is – the score's needle-drops are cool (the likes of Devo, Wet Leg and The Magnetic Fields all feature) but so incessant that your brain may switch to auto-Shazam mode.

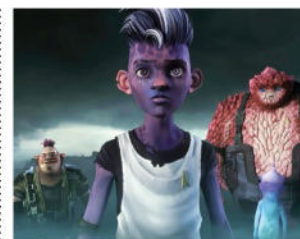
Where the series really succeeds is in its relationships. For all her flaws, Jen is very likeable, and scenes where she falls out with Carrie, or talks to her dead dad, are quite affecting. The major triumph is an oddball romance

“The major triumph is an oddball romance subplot”

subplot, which sees Jen gradually developing feelings for her cat. Y'see, Jizzlord (Luke Rollason, all Tom Baker eyes and perpetual bed-hair) is actually a shapeshifter who got stuck in feline form; essentially an amnesiac, he must now re-learn how to be human. Cat-lovers in particular will be charmed by this Mork-esque naif, who remains very keen on milk, chewing cables and being brushed.

The more elements like these come to the fore, the more you reconsider whether the show *did* find an appropriate home. Beneath its scabrous exterior *Extraordinary* is, at heart, about learning to accept yourself, realising the value of friendship, and being open to finding love in the strangest places. What could be more Disney than that? **Ian Berriman**

i Máiréad Tyers says if she could have a superpower, it would be to “always have better internet connection”.



STAR TREK PRODIGY Season One (Part Two)



UK/US Paramount+, streaming now

► Showrunners Kevin and Dan Hageman

► Cast Kate Mulgrew, Brett Gray, Ella Purnell, Rylee Alazraqui But

EPISODES 1.11-1.20 Nickelodeon's adrenalinised, teen-targeted *Trek* toon is back, and it's brought Chakotay with it! But don't worry – the franchise's character most likely to win in a Giant Redwood impersonation contest only features in a few flashbacks, serving as a plot device to bring the real Janeway into the mix.

While the first part of season one was more planet-of-the-week in format, this second half is driven by its arc plot. The motley bunch of alien kids who've commandeered the abandoned USS Protostar now know they cannot contact Star Fleet, as the ship has an alien weapon on-board that will catastrophically infect all of Starfleet's systems if they do.

But the real Janeway is on the hunt for the USS Protostar, and in the process she unwittingly “rescues” the Diviner, the alien who created the weapon. The result feels less *Star Trek* and more *Star Wars*, with some spectacular action and lots of twists.

The animation is utterly glorious, there's some interesting experimentation with the storytelling, and the quirky characters are as fun as ever. But among all this sound and fury, the show loses some of the charm and sense of wonder at exploring the unknown. **Dave Golder**



PENNYWORTH Season Three That Alt-universe '70s Show



UK Lionsgate+, streaming now

US HBO Max, streaming now

► Showrunner Bruno Heller

► Cast Jack Bannon, Paloma Faith,

Harriet Slater, Ryan Fletcher

EPISODES 1.01-1.10 With its move to HBO Max in the States, *Pennyworth* sees a few changes for its third season. Chief among these are a five-year time jump taking the show into the '70s, and a new, on-the-nose subtitle: *The Origin Of Batman's Butler*.

Presumably the show's new network overlords were keen to ram home the point, since if you didn't already know who the show's lead character is destined to become, you wouldn't guess it from watching this bizarre, very

sweary alternate history based in a England ravaged by civil war, and filled with metahumans, mad scientists and psychos.

While Jack Bannon's Pennyworth remains more Michael Caine's Alfie than Michael Caine's Alfred, there are some subtle tonal changes. The show is still weird and stylised, but *slightly less* weird and stylised. The '70s setting is as full of anachronisms as its '60s setting was, but not quite as much. The plot arcs – mind-controlling drugs that turn Londoners into murderous mobs, meta-human

“It remains an entertaining, offbeat show”



“Teach you to cut me up on the roundabout.”

equality, CIA conspiracies – remain outlandish, but somehow not quite as delightfully unhinged as before.

It's doesn't help that Paloma Faith's demented Bet Sykes is sidelined for much of the series, while there's way too much time spent listening to Martha and Thomas Wayne bickering. There also seems to have been a budget cut – some of the mob scenes look

suspiciously light on bodies, and the production design feels less ambitious.

But it remains an entertaining, offbeat show, with memorable set-pieces and a magnificent central performance from Bannon. Plus the end-of-season cliffhanger is a beauty. **Dave Golder**

i Captain Blighty's armour bears the same “lion rampant” insignia as the original costume of Marvel's Captain Britain.

LET THE RIGHT ONE IN Season One Strange Little Girl



UK/US Paramount+, streaming now

► Creator Andrew Hinderaker

► Cast Demián Bichir, Anika Noni Rose,

Madison Taylor Baez, Grace Gummer

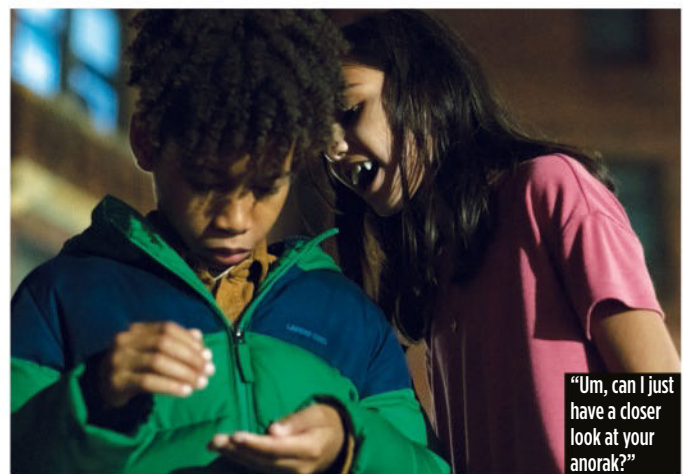
EPISODES 1.01-1.10 Does a TV show protagonist have to be likeable? Not necessarily. But it can be an obstacle if nearly all the main characters are morally repugnant.

“Inspired by” John Ajvide Lindqvist's 2004 novel, this series deviates significantly from the source. The core is the same: a 12-year-old girl (Ellie), actually an older vampire, is befriended by a bullied boy (Isaiah); her guardian (father Mark) supplies the blood she needs. The kids' relationship remains touching; young actors

Madison Taylor Baez and Ian Foreman are excellent. But the show builds new structures on top, like a second vamp (“15-year-old” Peter) and his support network.

The guardian (Demián Bichir) is much more the focus here than in the film versions – and he's killed over 100 people. Peter's sister Claire (Grace Gummer) becomes complicit in not only murders but dealing a drug which causes users to claw people's faces off, and kidnapping people to use as test subjects. The rationale is that people will do anything for love, but we're pretty sure all the above would be on Meat Loaf's “... but I won't do that” list.

Most appalling of all, somehow: after slitting a guy's throat, Mark



“Um, can I just have a closer look at your anorak?”

discovers he was the ex-husband of Isaiah's mother... and still ends up wooing her. The capper on the pile of coincidences: she's a homicide cop working the case. The show has more than its fair share of such inedible concepts, from a laughable work-around on the “vampires must be invited in” rule, to Claire's handy expertise in everything from DNA sequencing to brain surgery.

In the stand-out episode, a protracted flashback to the time when Ellie was first infected with the vampire virus, you do feel some sympathy for Mark. Positioned earlier, it might have made a world of difference. Placed seventh in the run, it comes rather too late. **Ian Berriman**

i In the original novel (spoilers ahead!), Eli's guardian is a paedophile... and “she” is actually a castrated boy.



"I done blew up a thing, hurr hurr hurr."

BLACK ADAM

A wizard did it

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2022 | 12 | Blu-ray (4K/regular)/DVD/download

▶ Director **Jaume Collet-Serra**

▶ Cast **Dwayne Johnson, Aldis Hodge, Pierce Brosnan, Noah Centineo**

❖ **When this latest DCEU movie** was on the way, star/producer Dwayne Johnson's constant social media mantra was that "the hierarchy of power in the DC universe is about to change". That may be true, but shame about the hierarchy of quality.

Somewhat fittingly for a story about a man out of time, the movie – directed by Jaume Collet Serra, who made a career out of Liam Neeson geriatric vehicles and other thrifty thrillers before he

and Johnson collaborated on *Jungle Cruise* – has the lingering impression of something made much earlier in the pantheon of superheroic outings. Here, the former slave turned hero turned power-hungry villain is released from a long imprisonment and swears to protect the people of an extremely fake (for political and cultural reasons) country, these days struggling against the rule of terrorist organisation Intergang.

Johnson is largely monosyllabic and has little chance to employ his trademark charisma, though he does well enough. Pierce Brosnan is seemingly having fun as future-seeing Dr Fate (hold off on the "impressive helmet" jokes, please, even if he is a former James Bond), while Noah Centineo (as

the size-changing Atom Smasher) and Quintessa Swindell (as air-weaponiser Cyclone) are an appealing duo. Aldis Hodge is better than plodding do-gooder Hawkman, though he does what he can with the role.

It's loud, it's violent (incredibly so, in places), but for the most part it's sound and fury signifying very, very little; *Shazam!*, to whose appealing lead Adam is the dark mirror image, is also more fun. And given that this film has yet to reach profitable status, its impact probably won't be as powerful as The Rock might have hoped.

❖ **Extras** For a film that feels like it came out of the late '90s or early '00s, the extras are similarly basic, with lots of to-camera presentations from the cast about various elements. "The History Of Black Adam" (10 minutes) looks at the character's comic book history (including some culturally dodgy early elven-eared looks), while "Black Adam: A Flawed Hero" (five minutes) explores his anti-hero side.

"Soul To Screen" (six minutes) has Johnson and co charting their journey to make the movie. "Who Is The Justice Society?" (14 minutes), meanwhile, is a self-explanatory piece about the superhero team.

A group of even more standard Making Of pieces, including "Black Adam: Taking Flight" (three minutes), "Kahndaq: Designing A Nation" (six minutes), "Black Adam: A New Type of Action" (seven minutes), "The Rock Of Eternity" (six minutes), "Costumes Make The Hero" (three minutes) and "Black Adam: New Tech In An Old World" (five minutes) gush about the robotic tech used to make him fly, the super-suits, ships and set-pieces, and how they came up with the fictional country used in the film.

There's nothing particularly controversial or ground-breaking here, it's all strictly for fans.

James White

i Johnson has said that he rejected the muscle suit they first built for him. It's not like he needs the help, anyway.



CRIMES OF THE FUTURE

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2022 | 18 | DVD

▶ Director David Cronenberg

▶ Cast Viggo Mortensen, Léa Seydoux, Scott Speedman, Kristen Stewart

David Cronenberg's return to genre filmmaking is as queasy, unsettling and darkly comic as you might imagine from the master of body horror. It's also short on new tricks.

It's the future, and humanity is changing in some very peculiar ways. Body modification has become widespread, while some, like performance artist Saul Tenser (Viggo Mortensen), have evolved bizarre biological conditions. Tenser constantly grows new organs, which his partner Caprice (Léa Seydoux) then proceeds to extract on-stage to the delight of their audience. When an enticing opportunity comes their way, however, the pair find themselves in danger.

This is familiar territory for Cronenberg, to the point where *Crimes Of The Future* almost feels comfortably retro. Faces are sliced open, people munch on toxic waste bars and various innards are poked, prodded and played with while characters moan in ecstasy.

With its ponderous pacing and oddly drab aesthetic, this doesn't touch the best of the director's early work. Still, there's no one making films quite like David Cronenberg and in an era where filmmaking has arguably grown more drably conservative, it's good to have him back.

▶ **Extras** A trailer. **Will Salmon**



"I knew I shouldn't have had that burrito..."

HALLOWEEN ENDS

The Shape Of Slaughter

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2022 | 18 | Blu-ray/DVD/download

▶ Director David Gordon Green

▶ Cast Jamie Lee Curtis, Andi Matichak, Rohan Campbell, James Jude Courtney

▶ **All credit to David Gordon**

Green for not just taking the easy route... *Halloween Ends* wraps up the story of Laurie Strode and Michael Myers' big tiff in suitably bloody fashion. Before that, however, it shifts focus to new character Corey (Rohan Campbell), a babysitter implicated in the accidental death of a young boy. Laurie is initially sympathetic to a fellow outcast, but there's something very wrong with Corey.

Sidelining Myers in favour of a new villain is a bold decision and Campbell impresses as Haddonfield's latest threat. Unfortunately, his story fizzles out when the Shape is wheeled back out for a final throw-down. It's

“Sidelining Myers in favour of a new villain is a bold decision”

good to see Laurie get some closure, but *Ends* is a muted and ultimately slightly tame finale.

▶ **Extras** Six deleted scenes are the biggest draw here. While most are inessential, the one of Michael stalking Corey's mother is brilliantly tense and well-edited.

The rest of the features are boilerplate promo stuff, though Curtis's enthusiasm shines through. In “Final Girl” (five minutes) she reflects on the end of her time playing Laurie. “No Place Like Haddonfield” (eight minutes) is an unfocused set of short interviews with various members of the cast.

“Ending Halloween” (eight minutes) concentrates on the final battle. “A Different Threat” (six minutes) focusses on Corey. “Visions Of Terror” (six minutes) gets into the design process, while “Twisted Deaths” (five minutes) explores the many well-realised gore effects.

And as ever, the gag reel (three minutes) is probably highly entertaining for the cast and crew, less so for viewers. **Will Salmon**

i An early draft incorporated Silver Shamrock, the evil corporation from *Halloween III: Season Of The Witch*.



HATCHING

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2022 | 15 | Blu-ray/DVD

▶ Director Hanna Bergholm

▶ Cast Siiri Solalinna, Sophia

Heikkilä, Jani Volanen, Reino Nordin

▶ **A doll's house. A teddy bear.**

A wallpaper pattern of pretty pink flowers. In her debut feature, Hanna Bergholm displays all the sacred objects of girlhood and then smashes them one by one.

In fairy tale fashion, this Finnish film introduces us to Tinja: a 12-year-old girl from a seemingly perfect family who spends her afternoons fine-tuning her adolescent body in gruelling gym classes. Except Tinja has been secretly incubating an orphaned crow's egg in her bedroom, nourishing it on her own blood and tears, and watching as it grows to a monstrous size.

Part lullaby, part body horror, part psychosexual coming-of-age drama, *Hatching* is arresting and genuinely shocking. It's also a razor-sharp depiction of the tempestuous relationship between a young girl and her fame-hungry mother, who quashes Tinja's own personality and desires to mould her into a perfect mini version of herself.

Like so many groundbreaking horror films that have come before it, *Hatching* shows us that the most effective monsters are the ones spawned in the family home.

▶ **Extras** A pair of Making Of pieces on the creature effects (six minutes) and the make-up (six minutes); short on-set conversations with the director, her co-writer, and the two leads (totalling 14 minutes).

Kimberley Ballard

THE ADVENTURES OF BARON MUNCHAUSEN

Lie Hard

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 30 JANUARY**

1988 | 12 | Blu-ray

▶ Director Terry Gilliam

▶ Cast John Neville, Sarah Polley, Eric Idle, Oliver Reed

❖ **It's fitting that a film about a legendary fabulist should spawn its own movieland myth:** Terry Gilliam's overreaching folly, all undisciplined vision and two fingers to studio bean-counters. *Heaven's Gate* with elephants, knickers and cannonballs.

Three decades on from the tabloid roasting that accompanied its troubled production – and blessed with a new 4K restoration that allows its hand-crafted

spectacle to truly shine – this salute to the power of fantasy is revealed more than ever as the ex-Python's unsung masterpiece.

Yes, it's episodic, tumbling from peril to peril, but then the original adventures of the Baron (as detailed by German writer Rudolf Erich Raspe in his 1785 novel) were just as rambling.

Ranging from the Moon to the belly of a monster fish, it's a witty, inventive ride, energised by star turns – Robin Williams, Oliver Reed, a nascent Uma Thurman – and dripping with Gilliam's love of cinema itself as he homages everything from Georges Méliès's fin de siècle lunar landscapes to classic

Arabian fantasias like *The Thief Of Bagdad*. A truly unnerving Angel of Death, all animatronic bones and hungry scythe, provides gothic seasoning. If it's a folly, it's a grand one.

❖ **Extras** A three-part 2008 documentary (72 minutes) is electrifyingly candid; from Eric Idle saying it was “a truly horrible experience” to an accusation that the master negative was actually kidnapped, it's a compelling examination of creative faultlines and duelling egos.

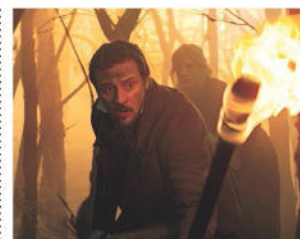
Gilliam provides an equally engaging commentary alongside co-writer Charles McKeown, and introduces the storyboards for scenes sacrificed to the money gods (30 minutes) as well as some fairly inconsequential deleted scenes (four minutes). A set

of features on the film's marketing campaign (30 minutes) has him reading out not only dreadful attempts at taglines but audience comments from catastrophic test screenings (“It blue dead dogs!”).

Gilliam's on hilariously snitty form, but you sense the bitterness. A behind-the-scenes look at the effects (16 minutes) is genuinely revelatory. Critic David Cairns provides a fascinating video essay on the Baron's lineage, including tantalising glimpses of earlier productions (17 minutes).

Also included: an illuminating *South Bank Show* retrospective on Gilliam (47 minutes); “Miracle Of Flight”, a characteristically whimsical Gilliam animated short from 1974 (five minutes); an essay by critic Michael Koresky; original trailer and production featurette (eight minutes). **Nick Setchfield**

i Peter O'Toole and Jon Pertwee were reportedly in the frame for the role of the Baron, eventually played by John Neville.



EIGHT FOR SILVER

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 30 JANUARY**

2022 | 18 | Blu-ray/DVD

▶ Director Sean Ellis

▶ Cast Boyd Holbrook, Kelly Reilly, Alistair Petrie, Roxanne Duran

❖ **Forget the *Treasure Island* vibes suggested by the title.** Also released as *The Cursed*, this sombre, mood-drenched horror aims instead for a fresh riff on werewolf mythology.

At first it feels just a little tropey, despite an intriguing cold open on the battlefields of the First World War. Rewinding 35 years to the French countryside, an old gypsy woman delivers the obligatory curse and there are mutterings that “a storm is coming”.

But as Boyd Holbrook's pathologist hero investigates a spate of mysterious killings, the story expands and twists lycanthropic lore in intriguing ways, injecting a Biblical backstory and a touch of body horror that nods to Cronenberg at his most gruesomely organic. The design of the creature itself also moves beyond standard issue iconography, more HR Giger than Lon Chaney Jr in its disquieting worminess.

It's written, directed and exquisitely photographed by *Anthropoid*'s Sean Ellis, who captures a sense of bleak, rain-haunted rural beauty along with an authentic folk horror shudder. The formal framing can make the film feel stiff – an elevated Hammer – but the dread is tangible, and a frenzied, hand-held creature attack will be along any moment to shatter the stillness.

❖ **Extras** A frustratingly brief behind-the-scenes featurette (five minutes); trailer.

Nick Setchfield



“Take my crypto course and earn millions!”





Just one of the film's many baleful moments.

THE PALE BLUE EYE

The Kill-Trail Heart



▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2022 | 15 | SVOD

▶ Director Scott Cooper

▶ Cast Christian Bale, Harry Melling, Gillian Anderson, Lucy Boynton

NETFLIX Honestly, you wait ages for a film about Edgar Allan Poe's time in the military, and then two come along at once. Well, almost.

Back in September, Shudder brought us *Raven's Hollow*. Now *The Pale Blue Eye* adapts Louis Bayard's 2003 murder mystery of the same name. It centres on West Point military academy, where a cadet is first found hanged, then has his body mutilated – the heart removed. Commissioned to investigate, detective Augustus Landor (Christopher Bale) discovers occult elements to the crime, and enlists young classman Poe, a rum cove, to assist him.

It's an attractively gothic piece of work, heavy on gloomy, candle-lit interiors, wind howl and symmetrical framing. Bale – the apex of an impressive cast list – underplays things nicely as the still waters Landor, while Harry Melling brings a praying mantis physicality to the morbid and peculiarly mannered Poe. Aficionados will appreciate the nods to works like "Lenore" (and, of course, his short story "Landor's Cottage").

It's an investigation that seems to conclude in indecently abrupt fashion, but there's a twist in the tale which would make a second viewing productive. Although it may also make you question the detective's methods...

Ian Berriman

i Pennsylvania Senator John Fetterman is an extra in a tavern scene. Bale suggested it, reasoning that his face "fits in the 1830s".



THE LAIR



▶ **RELEASED 26 JANUARY**
2022 | TBC | SVOD

SHUDDER Neil Marshall returns to his roots with this action-horror – essentially *Dog Soldiers* meets *Resident Evil*, in Afghanistan. After an RAF pilot downed in the desert stumbles upon a Soviet "black site" full of Lickers... sorry, *genetic experiments*, she's rescued by a nearby US unit.

The plot beats hold few surprises, and (unlike Marshall's stilt-walking werewolves) the monsters never look like anything but men in suits, but it's an efficient, well-paced affair with lashings of lovely gore. Ian Berriman



SORRY ABOUT THE DEMON



▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**
2023 | TBC | SVOD

SHUDDER In this tiresome horror-comedy from Emily Hagins (perhaps best known for making a zombie film at the age of 12), a dumped man-child finds that his cheap new accommodation has a catch: a resident demon. Said demon a) possesses ghosts which b) seem to be corporeal, and c) bakes creepy cakes. Riiiiiiight.

The explanatory prologue means there's little to discover, and Will is an unlikeably idiotic, thoughtless character. A sorry affair. Ian Berriman



SHADOW MASTER

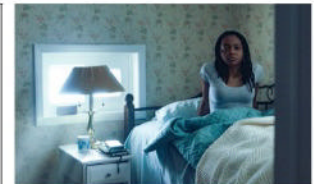


▶ **RELEASED 30 JANUARY**
2022 | 18 | Blu-ray/DVD/download

▶ **To get good at martial arts**, you need focus, discipline and the ability to withstand pain. You need the same qualities to make it to *Shadow Master's* end credits, with its brown colour palette, patience-testing plot and dull-eyed protagonist's bored line delivery.

The story's some nonsense about demons kidnapping kids from a post-apocalyptic warehouse, with the new night watchman forced to sell his soul for the skills to save them. The fights are fine, but you'll find better elsewhere.

▶ **Extras** None. Sam Ashurst



THE HARBINGER



▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**
2022 | TBC | Download

▶ **Halfway through this** claustrophobic Covid-era creepfest, two women use Zoom to contact a demonologist, who warns them to keep their tone upbeat because her kids are around and she doesn't want to scare them. Maybe when the pandemic's far behind us, this scene will be funny.

Themes stack on themes here, as both the coronavirus and a pass-it-along demon run rampant, so there's plenty to chew on. Mostly, it works because it's so painfully well-observed. Sarah Dobbs



.COM FOR MURDER

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 6 FEBRUARY**

2002 | 18 | Blu-ray

▶ Director Nico Mastorakis

▶ Cast Nastassja Kinski, Nicollette Sheridan, Jeffery Dean, Huey Lewis

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Arrow Video's** mission to scrape right through the barrel of Nico Mastorakis's filmography continues with this risible dawn-of-the-net riff on Alfred Hitchcock.

Dial M for Murder isn't the only title referenced: it begins with a shower stabbing, and at one point the bad guy exclaims, "I've seen *Rear Window* too!" Aptly, as the core story – a woman with a broken leg (one-time Golden Globe winner Nastassja Kinski, poor love) is menaced by a killer in an ugly concrete-and-glass mansion – is a homage to the 1954 classic.

Remember when characters used to vocalise what they were typing? This is that kind of film. It feels as dated as, say, a *Friday* *The 13th* movie where Jason keeps playing tunes on his digital watch. But its Goethe-quoting hacker/psycho, with his sinister light-up keyboard, would have inspired hoots of derision on release.

▶ **Extras** A new featurette (28 minutes) presents extended shower scene and stripper footage – a boon for any hairy-palmed viewers who have yet to discover Pornhub.

Mastorakis then spends five minutes whingeing that IMDb's rating system is corrupt, and admits buying positive ratings to balance the scales! It's possibly the least professional thing we've ever seen.

Plus: period Making Of; extended versions of two interviews shot for it; gallery; trailer. **Ian Berriman**



Fathers 4 Justice were back with a bang.

ENTER SANTO

Cuban Wrestle Crises

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 13 FEBRUARY**

1961 | 12 | Blu-ray

▶ Director Joselito Rodríguez

▶ Cast Joaquín Cordero, Norma Suárez, Gina Romand, Santo

BLU-RAY DEBUT **You're probably** aware of iconic Mexican wrestler Santo, but did you know that his first two films were shot in Cuba? The Silver-Masked Man plays second fiddle in both, and while he would later tangle with vampires, mummies and zombies, there's only a slender fantastical element to this double-bill. In *Santo vs The Evil Brain*, he's mind-controlled by a megalomaniacal scientist. In *Santo vs The Infernal Men*, the latter are simply petty smugglers.

Both films make for frustrating viewing, bad at explaining basics like who the characters are and what the villain's plan is. Expect interminable footage of vehicles driving, jump cuts so crude they border on avant garde, and fisticuffs which make *Blake's 7's* fight choreography look convincing. Filming took place during the revolution, and the crew had to skedaddle before it was completed. You can tell.

Of the two, *Infernal Men* edges it thanks to a chase around an amusement park, all Dutch angles and frenetic jazz. Both are mainly of interest for their historical significance, and glimpses of a soon-to-be-lost Cuba of casinos and swish beach-front clubs. ▶ **Extras** 2011 documentary *Perdida* (96 minutes) tells the Mexican film industry's rise and fall from a personal angle: director Viviana García-Besné's family were cinema owners/distributors/producers. Fascinating and at times moving, it serves as a reminder to document your elders' life stories while there's time.

In a newer featurette (37 minutes), García-Besné travels to Havana in search of locations (the producer was her grandfather), aided by historians and random locals; her delight at their discoveries is infectious.

Plus: an instructive talking head on Mexican wrestling movies (33 minutes); a 2010 interview with actor Joaquín Cordero (12 minutes); galleries for *Perdida*; an 80-page book; a poster. **Ian Berriman**

i After running out of money, the producers had to steal the footage. They then got it out of the country hidden in a coffin!

(ROUND UP)



The Catholic church gets a little Bond-ified in **PREY FOR THE DEVIL** (out now, Blu-ray/DVD/download), in which a relatable young nun strives to save a possessed young girl. We said: "Colin Salmon provides gravitas, and there's one half-decent twist... Otherwise, it's a yawn-inducingly rote affair." Having said that there are some decent extras here, including director's commentary and 55 minutes of featurettes, plus (on Blu-ray only) an hour-long discussion of possession and a two-hour reading of the first-draft screenplay, featuring cast members and conducted via Zoom. Owen Wilson completists who refuse to sign up to streaming services will be delighted to see **SECRET HEADQUARTERS** (out now, DVD) hit shiny disc. Wilson plays Iron Man-esque superhero the Guard, but is mostly absent, with the focus on Charlie, the son who discovers his pop's hidden lair full of cool shit. We said: "Plays as a mash-up of *Spy Kids* and *Home Alone* when it could have been *Unbreakable Jr...* From the aesthetics to the action it feels all too underpowered, not helped by Wilson's boilerplate superhero." When it came out on DVD in 2012 we were very impressed by epic *Nightmare On Elm Street* documentary **NEVER SLEEP AGAIN** (6 February, Blu-ray). Now it's available in HD. Over four hours long (with another four hours of bonuses), it tackles each entry in the franchise in turn, securing anecdotes and candid opinions from over 100 different members of cast and crew. We said: "Freddy fans should immediately add it to their collection."

TOTAL
FILM

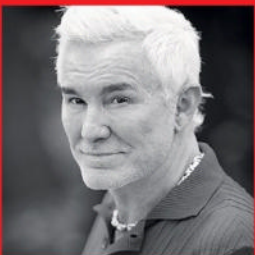
THE LAST PICTURE SHOW

PODCAST

IT'S YOUR **LAST TIME**
AT THE CINEMA

WHICH FOUR MOVIES ARE YOU PROGRAMMING? AND WHY?

JOIN OUR CELEBRITY PROJECTIONISTS...



Baz Luhrmann



Noomi Rapace



Robert Eggers



Aimee Lou Wood



Joe Wright



HOPELAND

Into a bright tomorrow



★★★★★

► **RELEASED 16 FEBRUARY**

656 pages | Hardback/ebook

► Author Ian McDonald

► Publisher Gollancz

◉ **In the middle of July**, temperatures in the UK hit 40°C. At the end of the year, the Met Office announced that 2022 had been the warmest ever year in the UK. Forget the idea of statistical outliers; we live in the Anthropocene, when human activity is reshaping the world – has already done so, and will continue to do so with potentially disastrous consequences.

How are we to live in such a world? On one level, it's a practical question that takes us into the realm of grand geoengineering schemes. But to reframe the question: who might we be in such a world? Ian McDonald's new novel may offer some clues. A story of the near future, it starts out as an urban fantasy love story before twisting to become a magical realism-tinged tale and a show-don't-tell philosophical novel that's also a rollicking sea-based adventure.

At *Hopeland*'s centre lie two vividly realised characters: Raisa

Hopeland and Amon Brightbourne. She's a member of a family that's akin to a small nation, albeit one that doesn't exist within geographical boundaries. He's a dapper, tweed-fixated musician blessed and cursed with "the Grace", which gives him a charmed life but also means that his own good luck is balanced out by misfortune affecting those around him.

Raisa and Amon fall in love after meeting in London during one of the riots that gripped Britain's cities in the summer of 2011. It's an event that was linked to the police shooting of 29-year-old Mark Duggan in Tottenham, yet can also be seen as a harbinger of trouble ahead – in short, the perfect starting point for a novel of the near future.

There's the sense of a world falling apart, witnessed by two people who can't be together because – to quote Amy Winehouse, who died in July 2011 but whose spectral presence recurs through *Hopeland* – "Love Is A Losing Game". But if that's the backdrop for what plays out, it's worth focusing on the title.

Hopeland is a profoundly optimistic novel, even one tinged

with utopianism. Indeed, it often has a vibe similar to the work of another great optimist, Iain Banks – most specifically, the Banks of *The Business* and *Transition*, novels where The Big Beard conjured up a sense of hugely significant events playing out just off to one side of our own world.

Although Raisa and Amon can't be in proximity, the way they are drawn to each other shapes *Hopeland*. Following events in London, Raisa heads north to Iceland, where she accidentally founds an energy company: PBV or Powered By Volcanoes. McDonald, incidentally, doesn't eschew grand geoengineering schemes here, he's just not that interested in detailed descriptions of how they might work.

As for Amon, he finds his way to Ava'u in the South Pacific, "a small archipelago of coral atolls". There's a sense of a life spent drifting, but which suddenly comes into the sharpest focus

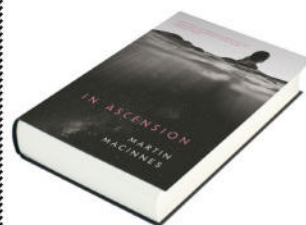
“A profoundly optimistic novel, even tinged with utopianism”

when his adopted nation faces an existential threat – a crisis to which Raisa may have a solution.

Running through the plot only reveals so much about *Hopeland*, though. To return to the idea of a novel of who we might be, it also touches beautifully and deftly on gender, the limitations of chasing-the-money crypto bros, human connection, the nature of family and how we perceive time. Also, indeed, how art can help to shape our perception of time and our sense of what we should do with the limited days we have upon this sacred and awe-inspiring Earth.

By some distance Ian McDonald's best novel – which is saying something, considering how good so many of his other books have been – this is the work of a writer at the peak of his powers. **Jonathan Wright**

i *Hopeland* had a very long gestation. It grew out of an article McDonald saw in 2000, and he had it outlined back in 2012.



IN ASCENSION

★★★★★

► **RELEASED 2 FEBRUARY**

512 pages | Hardback/ebook

► Author Martin MacInnes

► Publisher Atlantic Books

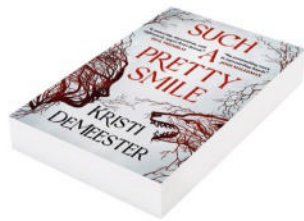
◉ **A recurring complaint** science fiction/fantasy readers and writers have about lit-fic authors is that too many of our posh cousins appear blithely unaware that their fantastic scenarios are hackneyed when they turn out slipstream fiction.

That's no longer true. Think of those who have won the Clarke Award in recent years. The likes of Laura Jean McKay, Colson Whitehead and Emily St John Mandel, serious novelists producing uncompromising work, have crafted extraordinary and original speculative fiction.

To that list add Martin MacInness, whose new novel tackles the notion that, rather than being somehow, as MacInnes himself puts it, "outside the (Earth) system" as all too many people assume, human beings are part of it.

Humans who include his heroine Leigh, a researcher into ancient algae and someone in love with the sea, who joins a research ship heading to investigate a vent that has appeared in the middle of the Atlantic. What the expedition discovers is deeply weird. It also changes Leigh's life forever, and helps to set in motion a chain of events that sees her heading into the solar system.

Though written in economical, even terse prose, and often focussing on the minutiae of human interaction, it's a widescreen novel that grapples with life and death in an era of accelerating climate change. **Jonathan Wright**



SUCH A PRETTY SMILE

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

352 pages | Paperback/ebook

► Author Kristi DeMeester

► Publisher Titan Books

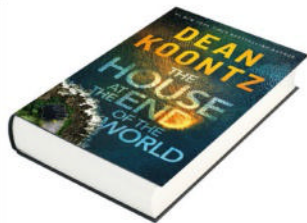
◆ Don't walk home alone

after dark. Don't draw attention to yourself. Don't make a scene. Kristi DeMeester's brilliant and biting supernatural mystery takes aim at all of those too-familiar rules that women and girls are supposed to follow for their own good, exposing them for the constricting lies they really are.

Thirteen-year-old Lila is struggling with all the usual teenage problems: coming to terms with her sexuality, pushing against her parents' rules, and generally figuring out who she is. When a brutal killer starts preying on girls in her town, Lila discovers a horrifying connection to her mother's past – but the only thing Caroline will tell her is that it all happened at Jazzland, a now-abandoned New Orleans theme park.

Both Lila and Caroline are potentially unreliable narrators; they're both accused of lying or being irrational so many times that they barely trust themselves, but both of them are so fully realised that it's impossible not to root for them. DeMeester layers horror upon horror, visceral on psychological on sociological, all in vivid Technicolor.

Somehow, it always comes back to the derelict rollercoasters and tarnished joy of Jazzland. This is smart, scary stuff, infused with the kind of righteous anger that'll stay with you. **Sarah Dobbs**



THE HOUSE AT THE END OF THE WORLD

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

416 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

► Author Dean Koontz

► Publisher Thomas & Mercer

◆ **Dean Koontz is famously a** “semi-libertarian”, one whose mistrust of Those In Power has a tendency to manifest in his novels as a finger-wagging didacticism of Glasgow-kiss subtlety. Which is fine when he's writing exciting, pacy thrillers full of great ideas and likeable characters, as he often does. Not so great when he churns out derivative tosh like *The House At The End Of The World*, which feels like The Koontz Manifesto stapled to a horror B-movie template.

It starts well. Katie is a reclusive artist with a tragic past who lives alone on an island in a lake. One night she witnesses some suspicious activity on a nearby island, which she suspects is housing some secret government project. Then something arrives on her island, with men in black in hot pursuit.

So far, so atmospheric and intriguing. But it rapidly deteriorates into a corny monster romp, full of laughably arch evil scientists, morally bankrupt security forces, conspiracies that QAnon would find outlandish and gore imagery swiped from multiple '80s body horror flicks.

At one point Koontz editorialises that it's not *really* a book about an alien monster at all. But that's no excuse for relying on a bunch of reheated genre clichés, no matter how skilful the prose. **Dave Golder**

MARVEL

ELECTRIFYING TRANS-DIMENSIONAL X-MEN ADVENTURES!



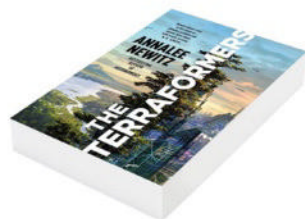
Dazzler, rock 'n' roll, and the children of Cyclops and Magneto launch into space and beyond in this original Super Hero novel

**OUT NOW AT ALL GOOD BOOKSHOPS,
& ONLINE IN PAPERBACK & EBOOK**



ACONYTEBOOKS.COM // @ACONYTEBOOKS

© 2022 MARVEL



THE TERRAFORMERS

★★★★☆

► **RELEASED 2 FEBRUARY**

368 pages | Paperback/ebook/
audiobook

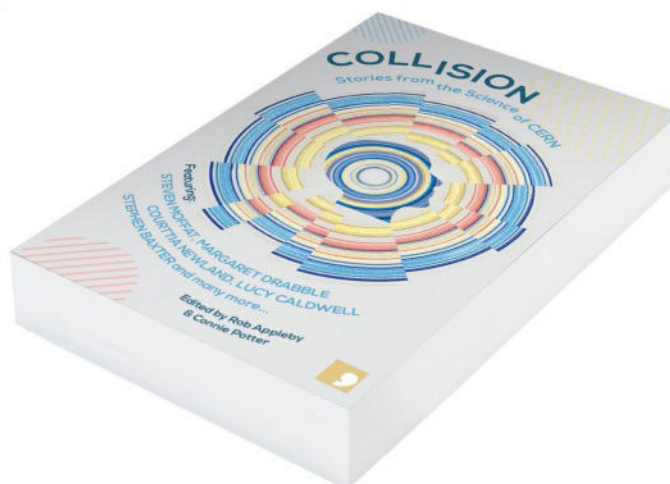
► Author **Annalee Newitz**
► Publisher **Orbit Books**

❖ **Terraforming takes a while.** And so do revolutions, as IO9 founder Annalee Newitz details in this sprawling multigenerational saga, set 6,000 centuries into the future and spanning 1,600 years.

This is a future of humans with bioengineered bodies, artificially created animals with human intelligence, biolimits on cognitive thinking and fully AI robots. The story follows the terraforming of Planet Sask-E, destined to become a holiday planet for rich “H Sapiens” who want a genuine Earth Pleistocene experience. But a group of early terraformers, engineered to die out after their usefulness has ended, decide instead to head underground and create their own society.

The Terraformers is full of intriguing world-building details (though you can’t help thinking that texting might be a thing of the past in the year 60,000) as it explores themes such as indigenous futurism and self-determination. This is real “book club” stuff, with lots of interesting issues to mull over and discuss.

Sadly, it’s also rather plodding and linear, with characters who don’t live beyond the page and vanish from the plot once their usefulness has come to an end. “The revolution is actually happening in the boring details,” says one character, and that’s certainly true. **Dave Golder**



COLLISION In The Loop

★★★★☆

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

320 pages | Paperback

► Editors **Rob Appleby, Connie Potter**
► Publisher **Comma Press**

❖ **This anthology of shorts** – subtitled *Stories From The Science Of CERN* – contains as much fiction about science as traditional science fiction. CERN (Conseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucléaire) is the vast, circular particle accelerator on the French/Swiss border where scientists smash sub-atomic particles together to help improve our understanding of the universe. *Collision* explores the implications of that research, on both academic and personal levels.

The 13 stories here had an unconventional genesis, with CERN scientists and engineers invited to suggest elements of their research that could be a starting point for new works of fiction. Authors were then asked to riff on the themes that appealed to them the most.

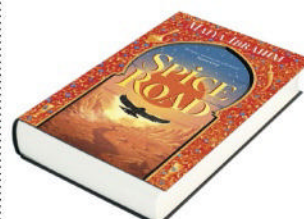
The results cover a remarkable range of topics and genres, from the mind-bending hard SF of Steven Moffat’s “Going Dark” to the more grounded, family dramas of Luan Goldie’s “Marble Run” and Lucy Caldwell’s “Dark

Matters”. Cutting-edge ideas about supersymmetry, gravitons and dark matter sit alongside topical themes such as Covid-19 and Putin’s war in Ukraine, and explorations of mortality and parenthood. The book’s trump card, however, comes courtesy of afterwords from the scientists, which give real-world context to the intriguing concepts at the heart of each tale. This is one place where the old adage that reality is stranger than fiction rings true.

If there’s a flaw, it’s that not enough of the stories explore the weirder extremes of physics, as Moffat does brilliantly in his quantum mechanics-inspired tale. Even so, the satisfying contrast with stories like the elegant, literary future history of Margaret Drabble’s “The Ogre, The Monk And The Maiden” justifies things.

In providing a glimpse at the scientific process – lots of data-crunching punctuated by moments of inspiration – the book proves a truly illuminating read. In fact, it makes you keen to learn more about a research institution that’s been bringing the world’s finest minds together for more than 60 years. **Richard Edwards**

i Dan Brown’s *Angels And Demons* visits CERN, though *Collision* assures us that “Antimatter is of no danger to anyone!”



SPICE ROAD

★★★★☆

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

496 pages | Hardback/ebook/
audiobook

► Author **Maiya Ibrahim**
► Publisher **Hodder & Stoughton**

❖ **Maiya Ibrahim packs a lot** into her debut YA novel, tackling colonialism, the clash between duty to country and family, and ideas about isolation versus internationalism.

Her heroine is Imani, a 17-year-old member of the Shields, magic-wielding warriors who protect the insular desert city of Qalia from the creatures that prowl the dunes. The plot pulls Imani away from home in pursuit of her older brother Ameer, who is accused of breaking his oath to the Shields by sharing the secrets of their magic with outsiders in Alqibah.

Ibrahim surrounds Imani with characters whose motivations she cannot trust. Taha, leader of the mission to find Ameer, has his own agenda, alongside Qayn, a djinni who may be trying to manipulate Imani for his own ends. The relationship with Taha is particularly compelling, as Imani is caught between attraction and fear, although Ibrahim struggles to resolve his character arc by the tale’s end.

There’s a lot to enjoy here, from a thrilling battle against a rampaging giant to a desperate prison break, yet the climactic confrontation seems lightweight by comparison, settled too quickly and easily. Despite that hiccup, Ibrahim effectively communicates the intense, unfiltered emotions of her teenage heroine and crafts a richly detailed world around her. **David West**



THE LUMINARIES

★★★★★

► **RELEASED 26 JANUARY**

352 pages | Paperback/ebook/
audiobook

► Author Susan Dennard

► Publisher Daphne Press

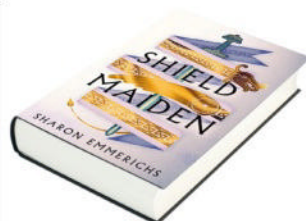
❖ **Winnie Wednesday** is your typical teenage girl. A little moody and misunderstood. Spunky and insecure. Oh, and she's the descendant of a long line of Luminaries (a fancy name for demon hunters) who wants to prove she's worthy of the mantle too.

There are a lot of tried and tested YA tropes at play here. There's a dash of *Supernatural* in the way Winnie dons her leather jacket and drives her truck around looking for monster corpses. A little *Chilling Adventures Of Sabrina* in the misty setting of Hemlock Falls and its uncannily cool teenagers. And a whole dollop of *The Hunger Games* in its depiction of cruel physical trials that teens have to pass in order to become Hunters.

The building blocks are there for what should be a rich and darkly magical story (the depiction of grotesque walking nightmares does induce a chill), but the characterisation is paper-thin, and there's so much exposition it often feels like reading a manual.

The book is the first instalment in a planned trilogy and it suffers because of that, more preoccupied with introducing the convoluted history of the Luminaries than telling its own story. A shame, as teenagers fighting monsters never goes out of fashion. But like some of the demon corpses Winnie uncovers, it lacks a backbone and teeth.

Kimberley Ballard



SHIELD MAIDEN

★★★★★

► **RELEASED 2 FEBRUARY**

416 pages | Hardback/ebook
audiobook

► Author Sharon Emmerichs

► Publisher Head Of Zeus

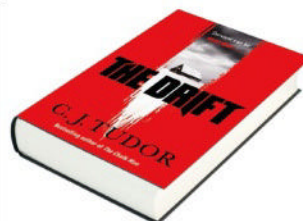
❖ **For her debut novel**, Sharon Emmerichs crafts an addendum to *Beowulf*, told from the perspective of Freyda, teenage daughter of Weohstan, lord of the fortified town of Eceweall. The tale encompasses cursed treasure, legendary swords and a slumbering dragon, while Fryda contends with her emotionally distant father, ne'er-do-well brother Wiglaf, and her feelings for a slave called Theow.

Emmerichs sets a lively pace with her bright and breezy prose. Her storytelling is strong, but the characters are drawn too distinctly in terms of good and evil. *Beowulf*'s nickname for Fryda is "sweet girl", and she's such an angel of kindness and good intentions that the character would benefit from at least one flaw in her personality. The same is true for Theow, and their romance feels like a cliché – can the lowly slave ever be worthy of the Lord's daughter? Let's take a wild guess, shall we...

The plot suffers similar shortcomings; despite events bouncing along, surprises are thin on the ground and Fryda is too often reactive rather than active. Wiglaf adds some darkness to the tale, but he's such a familiar figure as the spoiled child grown into a vain, petulant man.

Shield Maiden is certainly well written, but the lack of depth or moral ambiguity makes it feel more suitable for Young Adult readers.

David West



THE DRIFT

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

400 pages | Hardback/ebook/
audiobook

► Author CJ Tudor

► Publisher Michael Joseph

❖ **Where would you rather be** trapped: an overturned bus in a snowdrift? A dangling cable car? Or a mysterious abandoned research facility?

In CJ Tudor's latest, a snowy survival horror, you don't have to pick just one. Through three narrators, she explores the various crises faced by survivors facing all of the above situations. Every time, it slowly becomes clear that their continued survival is being threatened by more than just the obvious...

Reading about a world ravaged by disease in 2023 feels less, er, fictional than it might have a few years back. Tudor leans into Covid paranoia, imagining a world where infection lurks around every corner, where disease-ravaged "Whistlers" are banished, and where symptoms mean a death sentence – or worse. And yes, there are worse things.

All of that, though, is really just the vividly drawn backdrop to a revenge story. Slowly, Tudor shows her hand, guiding the reader to tie each story to the next, all in service of asking the question: whose fault is it when the world ends?

Maybe the beginning feels a little repetitive – especially as narrators Hannah and Meg are both deeply traumatised yet incredibly competent women adept at turning off their emotions in emergency situations – but by the end, the cumulative effect of all that horror is chilling. *Sarah Dobbs*

REISSUES

Pick of the paperbacks:
Edward Ashton's MICKEY7 (★★★★★, 2 February, Solaris), which is lined up to become a



Bong Joon-Ho movie. Set in a future where you can have your memories downloaded into a new body when you die, it follows the titular "expendable" during a colonising expedition. Surviving an encounter with killer insects, Mickey7 returns to base to find his eighth incarnation has already been created. We said: "A lot of fun... part '50s B-movie, part farce, with the kind of world-weary, blue-collar characters you'd expect in an '80s sci-fi flick."

One Thousand and One Nights was an inspiration for Chelsea Abdullah's **THE STARDUST THIEF**, (★★★★★, 26 January, Orbit). It centres on Loulie,



a merchant who collects and sells magical relics with the aid of her bodyguard Qadir, a jinn.

Blackmailed by the Sultan into retrieving an ancient lamp, she's accompanied by his bookish younger brother; en route they face ghouls, bandits, and a vengeful jinn queen.

We said: "The sun-baked sands of Abdullah's imagination teem with colour, danger, and excitement." Finally, in TJ Klune's **UNDER THE WHISPERING DOOR** (★★★★★, 2 February, Tor), a work-obsessed lawyer drops dead, then finds himself in a halfway house (or to be precise, a



teahouse) between life and afterlife. We said: "An uneven yet good-hearted hybrid of *Dead Like Me* and *The Good Place*...

Some parts are tear-inducing, but at times the humour is heavy-handed."



THE SLEEPING STONES

★★★★★

► **RELEASED 2 FEBRUARY**

224 pages | Paperback/ebook

► Author Beatrice Wallbank

► Publisher Firefly Press

❖ **Children's fantasy has a** rich and magical heritage, from *The Hobbit* and Narnia through to *The Snow Spider*, *Harry Potter* and more. Very few novels will reach those heady heights, of course, but this debut gives it a very good try.

Eleven-year-old Gruff lives on a small Welsh island, spending much of his time helping on his family's sheep farm. When the Polish Mat and her family move in next door, he quickly finds a friend – but he can't always conceal his jealousy at her arrival, as the farm's financial troubles mean he may soon be forced to leave.

Oceanography-loving Mat looks forward to exploring the sea around the island, despite Gruff's warnings of the dangers of the water and the Sleeping Stones – six large stepping stones leading out to sea, long rumoured to lure people out to their deaths.

There's so much this book gets right that it's a delight to read. Gruff and Mat's developing friendship, full of conflicting emotions, is wonderfully drawn, as is the constant slipping between English and Welsh by Gruff and others, giving a beautiful sense of a very particular place in Britain. And it's telling that despite Gruff's jealousy there's never any question of Mat and her family being welcomed into the community. A magical tale of friendship, home and acceptance. **Rhian Drinkwater**



HOW TO SELL A HAUNTED HOUSE

Night Of The Living Doll

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

400 pages | Hardback/ebook

► Author Grady Hendrix

► Publisher Titan Books

❖ **You're pretty much**

guaranteed three things when you pick up a Grady Hendrix novel: a tightly plotted supernatural mystery; a couple of moments of unforgettable visceral horror; and a honking great blast of nostalgia. Sure enough, *How To Sell A Haunted House* packs in all three, but this time round even the nostalgia is tinged with terror.

The supernatural mystery bit concerns thirtysomething Louise and her estranged younger brother Mark. After their parents die in a horrific car crash, the two of them are forced to come together to deal with selling their childhood home. The problem is, it's full of their mum's creepy old home-made puppets... including her favourite, Pupkin, who's possibly possessed.

The visceral bits: let's just say bad things happen with a circular saw. It's slam-the-book-shut grim. And the nostalgia, well, that brings us back to the dolls. Louise and

Mark's mother was a Tammy Faye Bakker-style preacher, using her stable of puppets to tell kids Bible stories – though she may have just succeeded in putting the fear of God into them. Making a creepy puppet terrifying through the written word is no small feat, but Hendrix succeeds; there won't be many readers who'd fancy spending a night in this house.

Beyond the horror, this is really a story about families and the lies they tell one another. There's intergenerational trauma to spare, with one *Ring*-style rug pull that works with ruthless efficiency. The ending does offer a little hope, but there's no sentimentality here; Hendrix refuses to sand down his characters' sharp edges, and the book is realistic about the chances of a happily-ever-after.

Notably this book, unlike much of Hendrix's earlier work, requires no previous knowledge (of horror movies, rock music or furniture shops) to enjoy it. And if you don't have a doll phobia, don't worry – you'll develop one. **Sarah Dobbs**

i This is the third Hendrix book in a row set where he grew up: Charleston, South Carolina. He promises that it's also his last.

ALSO OUT

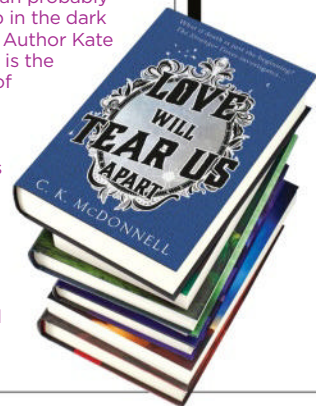
There are plenty more books that we couldn't quite fit in. New anthology **AT MIDNIGHT** (7 February, Titan) includes 15 reimagined versions of fairy tales such as "Rumplestiltskin", "Puss In Boots" and "Sleeping Beauty" by a diverse group of YA authors. HM Long's epic fantasy

BARROW OF WINTER (out now, Titan) is set in the same world as 2021's *Hall Of Smoke*, which we rather liked. This time the story follows the half-immortal Thray, who must weather assassinations, conspiracies and icy wasteland as she visits the northern realm where her demi-god siblings rule. There's also a third entry in CK McDonnell's *The Stranger Times* series, centred on a weekly newspaper in Manchester that's dedicated to the unexplained. In **LOVE**

WILL TEAR US APART (9 February, Bantam) the editor reunites with his wife (despite the fact that she's dead...), while the assistant editor visits a new-age retreat run by a celebrity cult. Boardgame fans should be entertained by coffee table book **EVERYBODY WINS** (out now, Aconyte).

It charts the winners of influential German award Spiel des Jahres, from 1979's *Hare And Tortoise* to 2022's *Cascadia*, discussing mechanics and themes and also trends in the industry. Finally, **THE**

CREATOR OF THE WOMBLES (30 January, White Owl) recounts... well, you can probably take a stab in the dark can't you? Author Kate Robertson is the daughter of Elisabeth Beresford, which means this biography has the benefit of access to private diaries, letters and family photos.





Ramsey Campbell

The veteran horror author can see the upside of book burning...



OLLY CURTIS

What is your daily writing routine like?

While I stumble through making a cup of tea I'll be composing sentences and developing today's scene in my head. By the time I reach my desk (six o'clock or earlier) I'll have at least the opening sentence. A basic Parker pen and an exercise book are the other tools of the job.

Describe the room in which you typically write.

My desk is at the top of a three-storey Victorian bay, which gives me a view of the Mersey in all its moods and the dawn as the lengthening days move it from Liverpool to Bootle. Behind me are bookshelves full of author copies, which have taken over much of the landing outside as well.

Which of your books are you the most proud of?

Maybe the Brichester Mythos trilogy [*The Searching Dead*, *Born To The Dark*, *The Way Of The Worm*]. I was trying to develop some of the Lovecraftian notions from my first book, and I do think the three books touch both the human and the cosmic.

Which of your books was the most difficult to write?

Fellstones. It was only when

I grasped that some elements should be historical, not happening in the narrative's present time, that I fixed the problem.

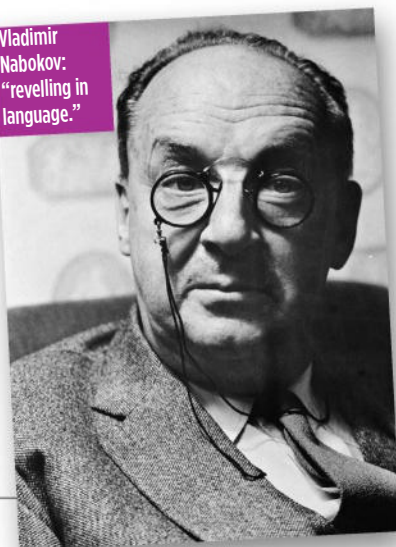
Is there anything about one of your books which you wish you could travel back in time and "fix"?

The clumsy prose of many – novels and stories too. I used to try and salvage as much of the first draft in the rewrite as I could, and it shows. Now I ruthlessly improve everything I can.

Were you a keen reader as a child? Which books were your favourites?

At six *Fifty Years Of Ghost Stories*

Vladimir Nabokov: "revelling in language."



"A basic Parker pen and an exercise book are the other tools of the job"

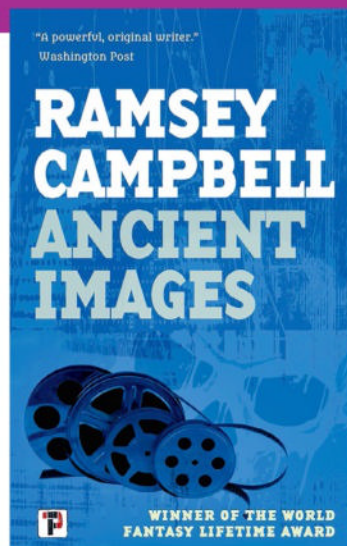
introduced me to my field, from Edith Wharton (whose prose gave me no trouble) to MR James. Clifford D Simak's *City* when I was eight, Doyle's *The Lost World*, and Keir Cross's *Best Horror Stories*, not least for "Bartleby".

Is there any particular author whose writing ability makes you envious?

Nabokov. *Lolita* for the revelling in language, the oblique approach to the subject, the employment of humour in a serious context. I found *Pale Fire* equally radical, *Bend Sinister* profoundly disturbing (the description of the son's fate in clinical prose is pure horror), *Laughter In The Dark* unputdownably compelling.

If you could recommend one book that you love, but that's not very well known, what would it be?

The Deadly Percheron by John Franklin Bardin, a mystery novel that turns into paranoid nightmare.



Where's the oddest place you've seen one of your books?

On a fundamentalist pyre shown on American television – *The Doll Who Ate His Mother*. I was grateful for the free ad.

What's the best piece of writing advice you've either received or read?

From August Derleth when I was 15: "Don't depend on writing alone to make you a living... When you're out of school get yourself a decent, not too harrowing job, and write as much as possible." ●

Campbell's 1989 novel *Ancient Images* is reissued on 21 February, published by Flame Tree Press.

First Read

AN EXTRACT FROM A NEW BOOK

Dark Dweller

by Gareth Worthington

FANS OF ANDY WEIR WILL LOVE THIS “SCIENCE FICTION” NOVEL THAT PAIRS QUANTUM PHYSICS WITH THE GREEK PANTHEON

Told through various eyes, *Dark Dweller* follows a young girl who claims she has seen all of time and must save everyone from disaster.

The ship’s shrink, Dallas, scrawls again. The nib squeaks and taps on the sapphire screen. Her eyes are greedy, and a conceited little smile crests her lips. She’s enjoying this. To her, I’m the find of a lifetime. A case study for which all psychiatrists wish. A trophy to laud in hopes of some academic prize. She thinks her work, her life, important. It isn’t. My life is, though. Too important to end up in this damn box. This wasn’t part of the vision. The Fulcrum approaches, and I only get one shot. Humanity only gets one shot.

None of us has time for this shit.

Dallas raises her eyebrows and waits, though she hasn’t asked a question in the last five minutes. Does this waif think I’ll just blurt out everything in my head to her? Start gabbing like a gossip teenager? It’s been so long since I was truly an adolescent. Easy to forget how your opinions and needs are pushed aside for those who consider themselves adult. My chest swells hot. In my day, spaceflight was a privilege – a reward for years of hard work and training.

Who the hell is this woman?

My gaze roves over her auburn hair, which glows in the manufactured white light of the medical bay. The careless tumble of hair scattered over a woman’s shoulders, down her back, might attract some teenage boy. I’m sure the batting of surgical lashes got her this gig. But to my eyes, which have looked across the fabric of space and time,

The Author



→ Dr Gareth Worthington is an award-winning author of science fiction, fantasy and thrillers. Also a scientist, he currently works in the pharma industry. Gareth is an authority in ancient history, has hand-tagged sharks in California, and trained in various martial arts. Born in England, he has lived around the world, and now resides in Switzerland with his family and extensive Lego collection.

creation and death, she’s no lovelier than some silicate asteroid rolling through the void. A trifling thing when you have witnessed galaxies born into existence.

“It must have been frightening, out here all alone,” Dallas pipes up. “I’m afraid of the dark, too.”

My lip curls into a snarl. “You think you know *darkness*? You don’t. Not real darkness. That moment at night when you wake from a terrible dream and lie in the gloom, afraid and soaked in sweat? That’s not darkness, and certainly not fear. Shapes still emerge from that gloom, sounds still echo from some deep crevice.” I pace back and forth, fingers glancing the glass barrier. “For you, these gremlins may make the skin crawl and your heart beat faster,” I continue, “but for me, they would have been welcome in that void. Old friends to embrace and never let go.”

Dallas eyes me, stylus resting on her bottom lip.

“Fear is the absence of everything. No light, not even the pixelated colors when you squeeze your eyes tight. An onyx nothingness, forever. No sound, not even your breathing or heartbeat. Open your mouth to scream? Nothing comes. To swim in oblivion – the void – to be neither alive nor dead, that is to experience fear.”

“In the void,” Dallas says, ignoring the obvious pain in my voice. “You told Commander Chau,” she searches for the sentence, “that you *floated in nothing, the void, for an eternity*. What does that mean?”

“I’m not entirely sure how more precise I can be,” I snap back. “Which part of that isn’t clear?”

“Well, a void could be literal or metaphysical,” Dallas replies. “Perhaps

a mental void. Not to mention a human existing for eternity is impossible.”

“Clearly it is possible, considering what they did to me.” It still isn’t clear what they – Gaia, specifically, the last of the Six – did. I was forty-three Solar Earth Years, SEYs, old when I arrived at Jupiter and she found me. Chau said I’ve been missing for more than one hundred and twenty SEYs. As Dallas understands the universe, I should be long since deceased. Instead, I sit here in a body – my body – only it’s now fifteen SEYs old at a push. Kilkenny, the ship’s physician, hasn’t figured out what happened, and even floated the idea that I’d been cloned, that I’m not the real me.

Not sure I completely understand it myself.

I had not imagined I’d return like this. No matter how old I appear, though, it has no real relevance given the gargantuan epochs I have endured. The love and hate and loneliness I’ve experienced, on a scale known to no other human. But it was necessary. Vital, even. To comprehend it all.

“Who are *they*?” Dallas asks.

“They?” I’ve drifted off again.

“You said existing for millennia is possible, with what *they* did to you.”

“The Titans. At least one of them. It’s all in the debrief,” I say, leaning back in the molded chair and pulling my bare feet into a lotus position. “When can I get out of here?” I motion to the glass barrier that separates us.

“Soon, I’m sure,” Dallas says, scrawling yet another note. “Once we’re sure you pose no contamination risk. Or a physical threat to the crew.”

She thinks me violent? Maybe. Though it’s hard to determine if my lust to be free, and to murder, if need be, stems from human evolution – warring apes who survived on

“An onyx nothingness, forever. No sound, not even your breathing”

the credo of *kill or be killed* – or if it is a consequence of the monster I have become, forged over the eternity of the universe in a hellish crucible of pain. So yes, I may well be violent. To achieve my goal, blood may have to be spilled, and this crew may have to sacrifice their lives.

“The *Titans*, the *Six*,” Dallas presses, oblivious to the running commentary in my head. “You mention them, and say it’s all in the report, but it isn’t really, is it? There are bare bones here.” Her finger flicks across the luminous screen, scrolling through the testimony. “In fact, it seems like you’ve been purposefully cryptic.”

Yes, I have been. Dallas is eager, and young. Maybe she would believe me. Maybe she’d help me. Maybe she wouldn’t. Empathy and comprehension of complex matters are usually derived through suffering. One look at this woman is all it takes to know she’s known no suffering in her privileged life.

“So, why be cryptic?” Dallas asks.

“Because what you understand is not important. What I have to do *is*.” I stand again, and the soles of my feet slap the hard metallic floor. Harsh white light presses down from an unspecific source above, penetrating my skull to make my brain ache.

“Kara... can I call you Kara?” Dallas says, but doesn’t wait for my consent. “You need to calm down.”

“What I need is to get out of this glass box.”

She shakes her head. “That just won’t happen, unless you co-operate, Kara.”

I stop dead and bore a hateful stare through the barrier and into the insufferable woman. Don’t like being called Kara. Only Father called me that. Everyone else just calls me Psomas. Or did. Didn’t they? My memories are jumbled. A horrible, churned mess of fragments. Some of it

comes so clearly to me, some in short stabbing bursts. Across the expanse of time, I have seen pockets of the universe, moments to which my attention was directed. My old life, before the Six, is less than a distant recollection that surfaces like dirty foam on the sea, only to be wiped away by a crashing wave. I had to sacrifice myself and who I was to do what must be done.

“Kara?” she says again.

My jaw clenches, and I force a measured breath through my nose. Answer the questions, give her enough that she might help. Must get out. Before the Fulcrum. Before it’s too late.

“Psomas, just call me Psomas,” I sit, and again clamp my shaking hands together.

“Do I need to prove myself?” Dallas asks. “Before you’ll trust me.” She gives a practiced smile.

Her wiles are lost on me, and likely she’s wise enough to know it, even at the tender age of twenty-eight – a guess, of course, a stab in the proverbial dark, but likely accurate. Wisdom is meant to come with age. I don’t feel wise, but if there is any truth to the idiom, then it would make me the wisest woman on this freighter, hell, the wisest being in this solar system, for sure – if not this galaxy, or even universe.

“Do you believe you need to prove yourself, Dr Dallas?”

“Sarah, please.”

And there it is. Her given name. The foundation of trust, or so she believes.

Pain radiates from my insides and pulses through my limbs into my fingers and toes. Sharp and cold, the very fabric of me comes undone. I clutch at my midriff and screw my eyes closed.

“Are you okay? Should we call Dr Killkenny?” Dallas asks, eyes full of concern as she watches her prize crumble. Fear, not for my life, but her career.

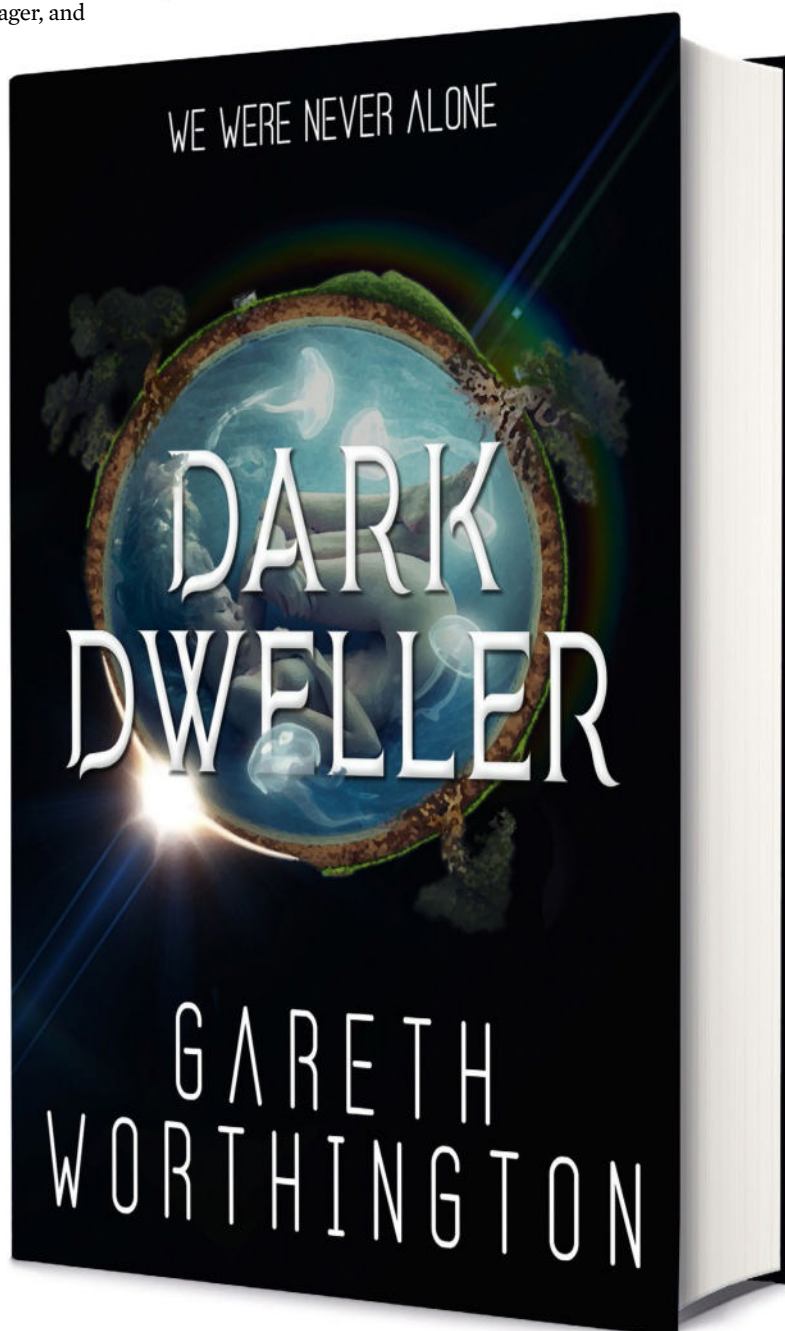
“I’ll be fine. All things end.” I climb back to my seat.

“End?” Dallas repeats, settling back into her shrink pose – leg over knee, fake smile.

“Of course.”

“You believe you’re dying?” she asks.

“We are all dying, young lady.”



Dark Dweller by Gareth Worthington is released worldwide on 28 February by Dropship Publishing. The exclusive hardback edition contains colour illustrations by Bona Chang. It's published alongside a trade hardback, paperback and ebook.

WONDER WOMAN: HISTORIA – THE AMAZONS

Gods of war

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher **DC Comics/Black Label**

► Writer **Kelly Sue DeConnick**

► Artists **Phil Jimenez, Gene Ha,**

Nicola Scott

ISSUES 1-3 DC's **Black Label** imprint has always put heavy emphasis on the visuals of its comics – especially those with “Prestige Format” oversized pages – but few of their series have pulled off the kind of impact that *Wonder Woman: Historia – The Amazons* delivers.

A sweeping saga from writer Kelly Sue DeConnick, this three-volume series is a dazzlingly crafted and thrillingly weird tale

of gods, monsters and mythic heroines. It's a story that takes us back to ancient Greece, and a confrontation between the goddesses and gods of Olympus. When Zeus refuses to alter man's dominance over women, Hera and her compatriots rebel, secretly creating the Amazons – a race of female warriors – to correct this imbalance of power.

This decision has massive consequences, and results in a bloody conflict between the Olympian gods and the Amazons. While these three volumes eventually tie in with DC continuity, *Historia* has more in



common with sagas like *The Odyssey* or *The Iliad* than traditional superhero action.

It's no surprise that DeConnick is viewing history and myth through an explicitly feminist lens here, but what's truly impressive is the emotional weight she brings to the story. It's an often brutal portrait of the era, told with intelligence and sensitivity, and the mix of gritty detail, bloody violence and mythic wonder is frequently reminiscent of the best issues of *The Sandman*.

This is helped by the incredible visuals, with a different artist handling each 60-page volume.

“A thrillingly weird tale of gods, monsters and mythic heroines”

The level of collaboration between DeConnick and each artist is clearly huge, with results that are never less than sensational. Gene Ha gives volume two plenty of atmosphere, and Nicola Scott crafts a strong emotional climax in volume three – but neither of them can quite top the energy and vibrancy of *Historia*'s first volume. Here, artist Phil Jimenez goes for broke on every level.

Only time (and sales figures) will tell whether DeConnick gets the opportunity to finish this saga – she has a further six volumes planned – but for now, *Historia* stands as a bold example of the level of ambition that more mainstream superhero comics should be aiming for. **Saxon Bullock**

i DeConnick uses her middle name Sue for comics so that it's always clear her work was written by a woman.



DAMN THEM ALL

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher **BOOM! Studios**

► Writer **Simon Spurrier**

► Artist **Charlie Adlard**

ISSUES 1-3 *Gangland London* is one of those settings that rarely seems to go out of style, and the latest comic to explore London's mean and brutal streets also throws a healthy amount of demonic weirdness into the mix.

Damn Them All follows occultist and junkie Ellie Hawthorne as the death of her uncle sets off an explosion of supernatural gang violence. Someone has unleashed 72 demons on the world, and the hammer-wielding Ellie might be the only person capable of stopping the rapidly escalating body-count.

Pitched by writer Simon Spurrier as “*Get Carter* meets *The Exorcist*”, this is a rollicking ride that showcases a fresh and interesting approach to demons and the occult, and packs plenty of twists into its first three issues. While Spurrier keeps the story fast-paced and engaging, he also adds a dark political subtext alongside the action and violence, making this a bleak and discomforting portrait of modern-day Britain.

The Walking Dead artist Charlie Adlard gives the story weight and realism with his art, while also pulling off some luridly imaginative details when it comes to magic and the arcane.

Gritty, gory and unpredictable, *Damn Them All* is a propulsive supernatural thriller that's already heading in some very intriguing directions.

Saxon Bullock





WAKANDA

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher Marvel Comics
► Writers Evan Narcisse, Stephanie Williams, Ho Che Anderson
► Artists Paco Medina, Ibrahim Robertson, Sean Hill, Natacha Bustos

ISSUES 1-3 After the recent blockbuster sequel, it makes sense to release this five-parter focusing on the Black Panther's wider world. Each issue begins with a main feature centring on a different character, which so far frustratingly have revealed little about how they're tied together. The comic book T'Challa is also conspicuous by his absence, having been sent into exile in his core series.

Written by Stephanie Williams and drawn by Paco Medina, issue one opens bright and breezily as Shuri and Ramonda confront the Rhino, who has smuggled himself into the legendary African nation in an animal sanctuary van. Set in the Intergalactic Empire of Wakanda, issue two's M-Baku-starring "Reverberations" features some solid art from Ibrahim Robertson, but Evan Narcisse and Adam Service's script is weighed down by an overly dense narrative and too many connections to the larger Marvel Universe.

Best so far is Ho Che Anderson and Sean Hill's tense "Colour Of Death" from issue three, which sees Killmonger leading a band of squabbling climbers up a mountain. Each issue also includes Evan Narcisse's "History Of The Black Panthers"; featuring some endearing artwork from Natacha Bustos, this expertly charts the various individuals to don the mantle. **Stephen Jewell**



FANTASTIC FOUR

Fractured family

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher Marvel Comics
► Writer Ryan North
► Artist Iban Coello

ISSUES 1-3 Superhero comics often thrive on familiarity – and if there's one thing that's been true since the Fantastic Four's first appearance in 1962, it's that they've always called New York their home.

All that has changed, however, in this latest reboot for Marvel's First Family. After a mysterious incident that destroyed the Baxter Building, the Fantastic Four have finally gone their separate ways. While Johnny Storm is desperately holding on to a life in Manhattan (via a secret identity), the rest of the FF are adrift in small-town America.

These first three issues have yet to explain the cause of all this, but

“Telling largely self-contained, done-in-one stories”

what's most surprising is that writer Ryan North is also telling largely self-contained, done-in-one stories in each instalment.

A highlight of this old-fashioned approach is issue two's oddly sweet tale of Reed and Susan Richards encountering a town entirely populated by Doombots. While not every issue is a slam dunk, it's still a pleasing change to get a regular beginning, middle and end, rather than just a tiny fragment of a much larger saga.

Backed up by expressive, energetic art from Iban Coello, North also shows a confident hand with the characters, giving plenty of dimension to each of the Four (especially in issue three's Johnny Storm adventure) without lapsing into cliché.

It's hard to tell how long the done-in-one approach will last, and there's a degree of earnest cheesiness here that won't be for everyone, but otherwise this new take on the Fantastic Four is off to a promising start.

Saxon Bullock

i Ryan North started out as a programmer, and made several tools to help webcomic authors manage their material.



STAR TREK

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher IDW
► Writer Collin Kelly, Jackson Lanzing
► Artist Ramon Rosanas, Oleg Chudakov, Joe Eisma

ISSUES 1-3 A kind of *United Federation Of Planets' Mightiest Heroes*, the central idea behind this new monthly is so ingeniously simple, you wonder why it hasn't been done before. Having been missing in action for the past three years after being abducted by mysterious Bajoran Prophets, Benjamin Sisko assembles a crew drawn from all across the various *Star Trek* TV shows, including Montgomery Scott, Data, Beverly Crusher and Tom Paris.

They're tasked with discovering who is killing godlike beings across the universe. Collin Kelly and Jackson Lanzing's fast-paced script deftly pulls all the disparate elements together, visiting the Klingons – including Kahless and Worf – in issue two, before Q creates havoc in issue three.

Combining fluid figurework with dynamic storytelling, the title's real strength comes from artist Ramon Rosanas; his various full-page spreads are breathtaking. So it's disappointing when he only illustrates a few pages of the following two issues. Oleg Chudakov makes for a fine replacement on issue two, though. It takes some adjusting to appreciate Joe Eisma's looser lines on issue three.

Still, with Rosanas set to return with issue four, it's definitely worth committing to this series for the whole voyage.

Stephen Jewell

THE DARK IS RISING

Signs of the times



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► 214 minutes | Radio

► Broadcaster BBC World Service

AUDIO DRAMA Susan Cooper's 1973

fantasy novel is a timeless classic beloved by generations of readers for its coming-of-age drama and heightened sense of the folkloric weird. This seasonal adaptation by the BBC World Service is co-written by Robert Macfarlane, whose books of modern nature writing share a similar shiver of the uncanny to Cooper's book.

All Will Stanton (Noah Alexander) wants for Christmas is for it to snow. His wish is granted on his eleventh birthday when he wakes to find the world around him whited out and populated with odd characters – the Hunter, the Old Lady and the Rider, among

others. Will discovers that he is one of the Old Ones (thankfully different to HP Lovecraft's), an ancient race of immortals. He has powers, but mastering those will take time – and that he doesn't have, for the evil forces of the Dark are on the move, and Will must unite the six Signs of the Light if he is to stop them.

Macfarlane and Simon McBurney's script is solidly faithful to Cooper's original text and does a fine job of capturing the book's ominous spirit. *The Dark Is Rising* may be aimed primarily at children, but there's always been something of the pagan about it, and the magic that Will encounters is every bit as cruel and dangerous as it is enchanting. The series also draws a direct line between the villagers huddling together to stay warm in

a bitter winter and our own present fear of switching the heating on.

The cast are all strong, mostly notably Toby Jones, who does his trademark sympathetic/sinister thing as the time-displaced Hawkin. Spreading the story across 12 parts (for the days of Christmas) is a cute idea, but it does mean that the early episodes are a little on the slow side.

As the story progresses, however, it's hard not to get swept up in the music, the evocative soundscape and co-writer McBurney's honeyed narration, which adds additional context. An impressive new version of a story that, like its hero, has become unexpectedly immortal. **Will Salmon**

i Macfarlane got involved after he hosted a reading of the book on Twitter in 2017, using the hashtag #TheDarkIsReading.



DOCTOR WHO: CASS



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► 279 minutes | CD/download

► Publisher Big Finish

AUDIO DRAMA The concept of

a Time War is ideal for those wanting to mix up continuity – as discussed in the extras here, it means you don't have to explain how the Eighth Doctor meets Cass before 2013 mini-episode "The Night Of The Doctor" without her subsequently recognising him, as timelines keep changing!

It's a cheat used to good effect in Big Finish's fifth *Time War* set, which replaces previous companion Bliss with Cass (Emma Campbell-Jones) and Alex Campbell, the Doctor's great-grandson (Jake McGann, son of Paul).

Set opener "Meanwhile, Elsewhere" (written by Tim Foley) is a nice introduction to Cass herself, as she begins her first day's work on an errand-class ship that has unexpected passengers on board.

"Vespertine" (Lou Morgan) sees the new TARDIS crew encountering the long-lost ship of famed explorer Hudson Sage, Cass's childhood hero.

Third entry "Previously, Next Time" by James Moran (a two-parter) is the stand-out, though. As the Doctor, Alex and Cass work to thwart an attempt by the Daleks to re-write their losses in the Time War, a whole new civilisation which wasn't there before appears around them. It's a clever SF concept, executed with ingenuity. The dialogue is also spot-on, capturing the Doctor with brilliant humour. A treat for McGann fans. **Rhian Drinkwater**



This is how the SFX editor gets to work every day.

HIGH ON LIFE

Weapon of voice



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Reviewed on Xbox Series X

► Also on Xbox One, PC

► Publisher Squanch Games

VIDEOGAME *High On Life* is a first-person shooter unlike any other, something which shouldn't come as much of a surprise once you discover that it's a game that sprang from the mind of Justin Roiland, the co-creator of *Rick And Morty*.

In this space-trotting adventure, your every move is narrated to you by talking living weapons known as Gatlians. From Knifey, the knife that craves blood to Creature, the launcher that uses its own offspring as ammunition, they provide more than a few unexpected, and hilarious, lines of dialogue.

A lot of the game's comedy comes from the off-hand comments your weapons make as observations, or even when you just hit pause. Sometimes you'll find yourself wanting a bit of peace, but the quality of Roiland's writing always shines through.

You'll need this bizarre arsenal to save the entire human race – including your parents – from becoming Hyperbong fuel for the intergalactic Mafia. It turns out that humans are an amazing drug, and unless you systematically take down the G3 cartel, that's going to be your destiny.

“The quality of Roiland's writing always shines through”



Yes, the guns talk. A lot. ALL THE TIME, in fact.

The story unfolds with some brilliant moments, both in terms of core story beats and character development, and there are some seriously memorable enemy encounters.

However, despite the excellent writing and fun combat, you can be left wanting a little more. The game has a shorter duration than you might expect, and although the planets you visit along the way

(such as jungle world Zephyr Paradise) are vibrant and detailed, they lack more than surface-level reasons to explore further than is absolutely necessary.

Still, this is a weird, wonderful and colourful adventure that you certainly won't forget in a hurry.

Sam Loveridge

i For some reason, you can watch the entirety of 1994's *Tammy And The T-Rex* on the TV in your house.

TOTAL FILM



SUBSCRIBE TODAY

magazinesdirect.com/tof



AUSTRALIA

G'day, cobber! As Aussies mark Australia Day (26 January), we test your knowledge of the land down under

Quizmaster Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor

QUESTION 1

What was the original occupation of Australian *Doctor Who* companion Tegan Jovanka?

QUESTION 2

In *Mad Max*, what is the surname of the titular character?

QUESTION 3

In *Eternals*, which of the immortal beings is seen living in seclusion in Australia?

QUESTION 4 Picture Question

Supply the title missing from this horror movie poster.

QUESTION 5

Name the spaceship on which Khan Noonien Singh and his followers escaped from Earth. (Clue: it's named after an Australian penal colony...)

QUESTION 6

Who directed *Razorback*, the 1984 film about a giant wild boar on the rampage in the outback?

QUESTION 7

What's the name of the mutated kangaroo in *Tank Girl*?

QUESTION 8 Picture Question

In which Australian film would you find this little lad?

QUESTION 9

In *Farscape*, which was the only member of the crew of Moya not played by an Australian actor?

QUESTION 10

Name the eerie 1967 novel by Joan Lindsay which was later turned into a film by Peter Weir.

QUESTION 11

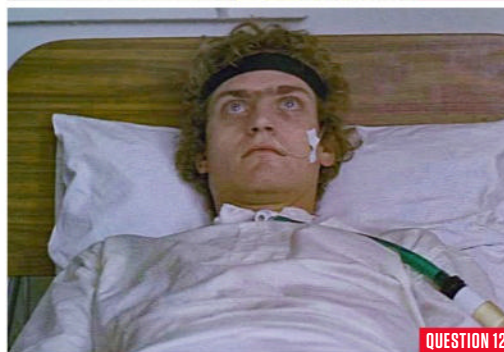
In *Superman II*, who does General Zod declare the Ruler of Australia?



QUESTION 4



QUESTION 8



QUESTION 12



QUESTION 16

QUESTION 12 Picture Question

Identify this Aussie horror film from its titular character.

QUESTION 13

Name the 1978 film in which nature strikes back against an environmentally destructive couple on a camping trip.

QUESTION 14

Which Aussie composed the theme tunes for *Blake's 7* and *The Tomorrow People*?

QUESTION 15

By what alternate title was the dystopian movie *Turkey Shoot* known in the UK?

QUESTION 16 Picture Question

Which Australian film features this unusual vehicle?

QUESTION 17

What do *Dark City*, *The Matrix*, *Superman Returns*, *Alien: Covenant*, *Pacific Rim: Uprising* and *Thor: Love And Thunder* all have in common?

QUESTION 18

Name the Tina Turner song from the *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* soundtrack which was a number three hit in the UK singles chart.

QUESTION 19

Which author wrote the Melbourne-based apocalyptic novel *On The Beach*?

QUESTION 20

Name the *Doctor Who* spin-off TV series which was produced entirely in Australia.

Answers: 1 *Alf Stewart* 2 *Rockatansky* 3 *Thena* 4 *Wolf Creek* 5 *SS Botany Bay* 6 *Russell Mulcahy* 7 *Booga* 8 *The Babadook* 9 *John Crichton* 10 *Picnic At Hanging Rock* 11 *Lex Luther* 12 *Patrick* 13 *Long Weekend* 14 *Dudley Simpson* 15 *Blood Camp* 16 *The Cars That Ate Paris* 17 *Thatcher* 18 *The Cars That Ate Paris* 19 *Thena* 20 *Neve Shute*

How did you do?

Which Australian icon are you?

0-5

Hat with corks on

6-10

Vegemite

11-15

Paul Hogan

16-19

Kylie Minogue

20

Sydney Opera House

IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF SFX

DC FILM RELEASE SHOCKER

SHAZAM: FURY OF THE GODS

BRING ON THE DAUGHTERS OF ATLAS!

SCREAM 6

New York, new rules

THE MANDALORIAN

TV's saviour returns, along with Din Djarin

YELLOWJACKETS

Don't go down to the woods today

THE ARK

Humanity's last chance

COCAINE BEAR

He's just a giant coked-up bear

PLUS!

Star Trek: Picard! Doctor Who!
Gotham Knights!

SFX 363
ON SALE
22 FEB

Sign up to our monthly newsletter to receive a sneak preview! bit.ly/SFXnewsletter



ALL CONTENTS ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE - YES, IT ANNOYS US TOO

Z For Zachariah

Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor



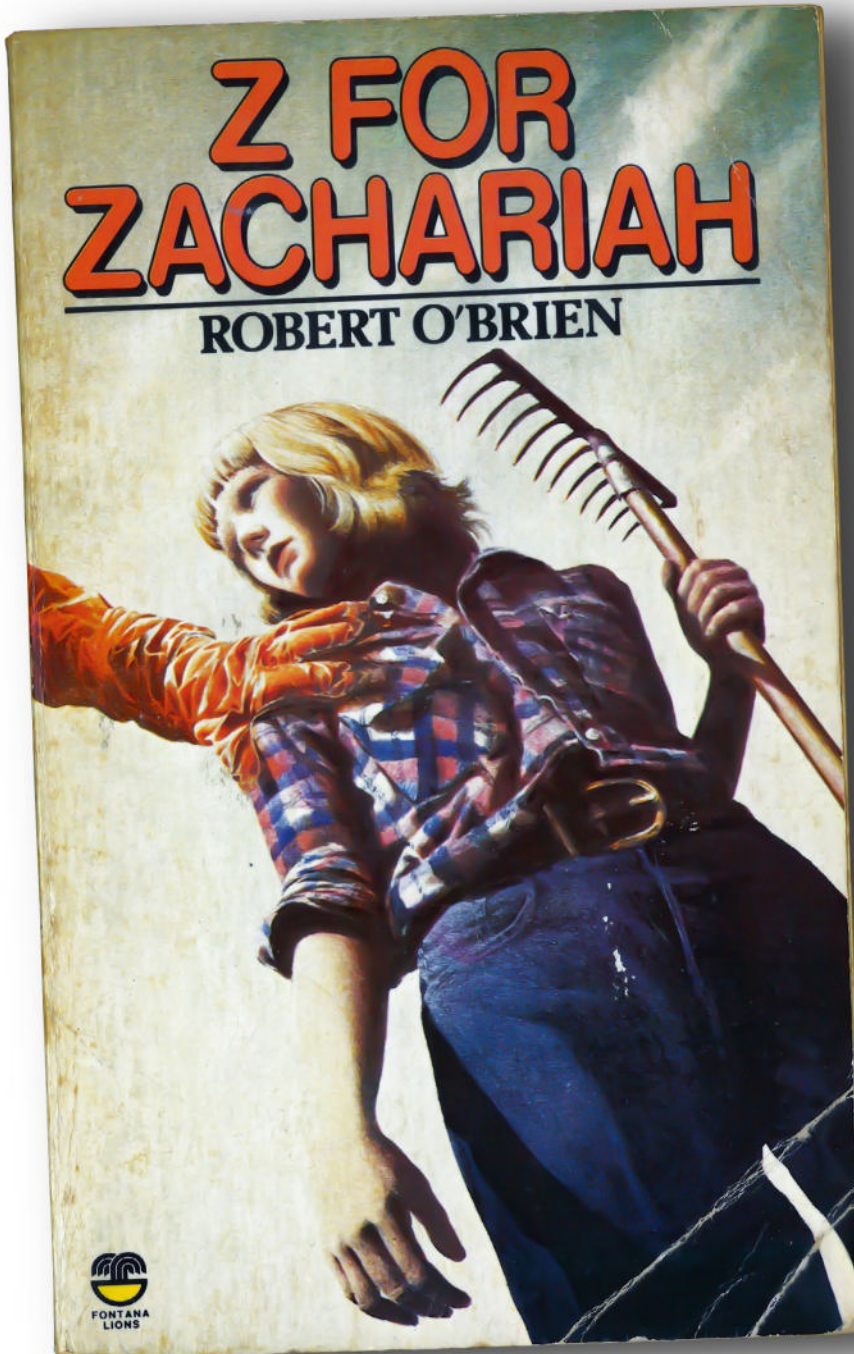
Being of, ahem, a certain age I find it almost *quaint* when fears of nuclear apocalypse will flare up and then just as quickly fade away. Because in the early '80s, such concerns were a constant background hum. The threat of mutual annihilation permeated the culture. It was in pop songs by everyone from Frankie Goes To Hollywood and Nena to Captain Sensible and Strawberry Switchblade. It was in documentaries like *QED* and dramas like *Threads*. And it was in children's fiction, too.

First published in 1974, Robert C O'Brien's *Z For Zachariah* was a favourite of mine. I bought this 1982 Fontana Lions edition from a school book fair. It's set in a remote valley which has miraculously survived nuclear war. Since her parents went looking for other survivors and never returned, Ann Burden (who turns 16 during the course of the story) has lived there alone. When a man in a radiation-proof "safe suit" arrives, she hides at first, then emerges to nurse him when he falls sick. This visitor (chemist John Loomis) gradually becomes more controlling. One night he enters her bedroom, performing what's at least sexual assault, and most likely an attempted rape. Anne escapes with just a torn shirt. A game of cat and mouse ensues.

Re-reading the book recently, I was reminded of what made it so appealing. Though never needlessly explicit, it deals with some pretty adult subject matter. It's told via Ann's diary entries, and the way they skip forward can be quite dramatic: at one point, she begins by recording that Loomis has shot her! I seemed to have a penchant for outdoorsy protagonists at this point – Roald Dahl's *Danny The Champion Of The World* was another favourite – and Ann, who can drive a tractor and handle a gun, is extremely resourceful. But she's susceptible to childish fantasies too, like daydreaming about marrying this newly arrived stranger. It's mildly educational too: did you know you can make a salad from dandelion leaves, or that 16 breaths a minute is normal? I didn't.

I watched the BBC's February 1984 *Play For Today* adaptation (starring *Brideshead Revisited*'s Anthony Andrews as Loomis) too. Other than switching the setting from the USA to Wales, it was pretty faithful. But I haven't bothered with the 2015 movie, which ages up Ann and transforms the story into a love triangle. The power imbalance which leads Ann to fear being chained up like a dog is the source of page-turning tension. Why on earth would you throw that out? ●

Ian can report that dandelion leaves taste bitter, like kale.



Fact Attack!

→ Novel writing was a sideline for O'Brien. His main job was as an editor for *National Geographic* – from 1951 until his death in 1973.

→ O'Brien was a pen name, adopted because the *Geographic* frowned on outside writing. His real surname was Conly.

→ For several years, O'Brien and his family lived on a farm near the Potomac River. They raised chickens and ducks, and kept horses and a cow.

→ The family also had a pet sparrow called Jenny, raised from a fledgling by one of the children. It lived in a cage in the dining room.

→ O'Brien died before finishing the book; daughter Jane completed it. She later wrote sequels to *Mrs Frisby And The Rats Of Nimh* too.

EPIC AUDIO NOVELS FROM BIG FINISH



BBC

DOCTOR WHO

THE DEAD STAR

WRITTEN BY **KATE ORMAN** READ BY **MICHAEL TROUGHTON**



OVER SIX HOURS OF ADVENTURE PER DOWNLOAD

BBC
STUDIOS

[@BIGFINISH](https://twitter.com/BIGFINISH) • [f THEBIGFINISH](https://facebook.com/thebigfinish) • [@BIGFINISHPROD](https://instagram.com/bigfinishprod)

BBC, DOCTOR WHO, TARDIS, CYBERMAN and DALEK (word marks and logos) are trade marks of the British Broadcasting Corporation and are used under licence.
BBC logo © BBC 1996. Doctor Who logo © BBC 1973/2018. Dalek image © BBC/Terry Nation 1963. Cyberman image © BBC/Kit Pedler/Gerry Davis 1966. Licensed by BBC Studios.



 bgfn.sh/novel

BIG FINISH FOR THE LOVE
OF STORIES



VWORP VWORP! 5

Script and production details revealed of the unmade Nelvana Doctor Who animated series (and similar projects!)

Brand new comic strips, including *The Iron Empire* by Lance Parkin

Legendary comics artist John Ridgway interviewed

The Curse of the Daleks stage play

Abslom Daak – Dalek Killer

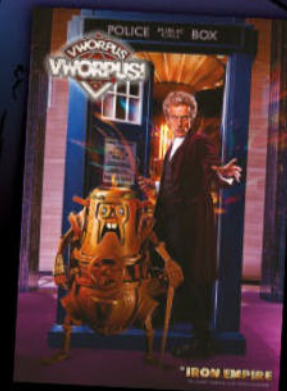
and much more...

Choose from three covers!

vworpvworp.co.uk

WITH
FREE CD
AUDIO
PLAY*

148
PAGES



*When ordered online from vworpvworp.co.uk only

Vworp Vworp! is an unofficial, not-for-profit fanzine, published by fans for fans, where the cover price goes to pay for printing and distribution. All illustrations reproduced remain the property of their respective copyright holders and are used within reasonable fair use boundaries