

# SFX

364



**EVIL DEAD RISE**  
DIRECTOR AND CAST FACE THEIR DEMONS

**EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEWS!**

# DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

A NEW QUEST BEGINS



**STAR TREK: PICARD**  
WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?



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DRACULA RETURNS!



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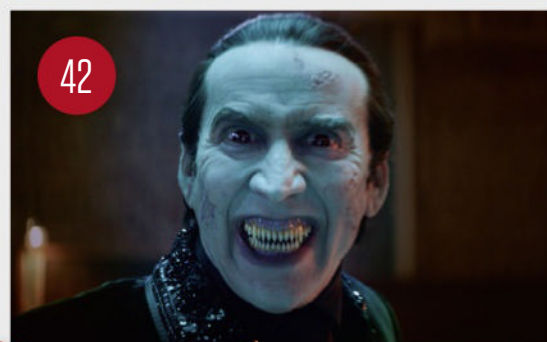




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GET IN TOUCH!

# First Contact

## Hailing Frequencies Open!



Anyone up for more Seven of Nine and Raffi Musiker?



### YOU'RE SPINNING AROUND

**Stuart Bannerman, email** With all the changes to the *Star Trek* and *Doctor Who* universes, you asked us what we'd like to see as a spin-off.

I'd like to see more from the timeline of *TNG* and *DS9*. Yes, I know we had *Picard* and whilst season one was pretty good, turning *Picard* into an android was insane, and lost me! I love *Star Trek* because of the morals of that universe. Not for the VFX and space battles, but for the glimpses of the possibility that humanity might actually sort itself out in the future.

**SFX:** Hey, does anybody here speak whale?

**Caffeine Cold, email** My idea is for a *DS9*-style spin-off featuring Seven of Nine and Raffi Musiker. Seven and Raffi use their skills, experience and Starfleet connections to continue the humanitarian work in the Neutral Zone. Conflict naturally arises when Starfleet isn't the most efficient or passionate in their assistance. The Romulans are also (rightfully) resistant to Federation interference.

Having two older, queer characters front and centre would be a big step forward for the franchise. Both characters are natural leaders and would make great mentors. Furthermore, there would be many opportunities to acknowledge the pseudo-naval structure of Starfleet and move forward into the 25th century with new outlooks.

**Tom S, email** I would love to see a Master/Missy spin-off with one or multiple Masters/Missies joining forces or battling each other. But the Doctor or Fugitive Doctor turns up to spoil the Masterly plans.

**SFX:** How about a version of *The Traitors with 22 Masters, three of whom are being sneaky with a Tissue Compression Eliminator?*



I hope they can use Doug Jones somewhere. Saru was always the best character in *Discovery*.

Pam Lupton



[*Gotham's*] David Mazouz should be the DCU

Batman.

@XanderXCIV

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# SFX

APRIL 2023 | Issue 364

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Printed in the UK by William Gibbons & Sons on behalf of Future.

Distributed by Marketforce, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London, E14 5HU  
marketforce.co.uk  
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ISSN 1358-5959

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SFX (ISSN 1358-5959) April 2023, issue 364, 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.

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"I will happily pull the lever on the guillotine"



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## Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind

**DARREN SCOTT** EDITOR

### RAVES

→ Yes, I'm just going to keep saying that *Star Trek: Picard* is brilliant.

→ Rumours of a Halloween Horror Nights movie? Yes please!

### RANTS

→ I've let my *Star Wars* comics build up for about two years and now it just seems too complicated to work out the reading order.

→ Sad to see *Star Trek: Discovery* go.

**IAN BERRIMAN** DEPUTY EDITOR

### RAVES

→ Rewatched every *Evil Dead* movie as prep for this issue's feature on *Evil Dead Rise*. Loved them all. Is there another horror franchise as consistently good?

→ The documentary about *Doctor Who* story editor David Whittaker on the season two Blu-ray box set is a lovely piece of work.

→ Twitter thread of the month: Labour politicians as *Star Trek* characters – bit.ly/labourtrek.

### RANTS

→ They've given Ncuti's Doctor an orange top too now! This is just trolling decent orange-hating people like myself.

**JONATHAN COATES** ART EDITOR

### RAVES

→ I had assumed that *65* was a future Adele album, but it's about dinosaurs. Looks exciting!

→ The new season of *The Mandalorian* has got off to a cracking start.

### RANTS

→ ...although only 37 minutes for the first episode was a wee bit disappointing.

**ED RICKETTS** PRODUCTION EDITOR

### RAVES

→ I've been playing quite a bit of *Sons Of The Forest* on PC, the follow-up to hit horror/survival game *The Forest*. Although still in Early Access, it's remarkably polished and features some very creepy monster designs.

→ Say what you want about *Dungeons & Dragons: Wrath Of The Dragon God* (and many have)... but how many films feature both a classical violinist who has presented the Proms and Laurence from *Abigail's Party*?

**NICK SETCHFIELD** EDITOR-AT-LARGE

### RAVES

→ Hugely enjoying season three of *Picard*. Feels so much of a piece with the best of *Star Trek*. Someone give Terry Matalas all the starship prefix codes!

→ Can we bring the brilliant Poker Face into *SFX*'s remit? C'mon – she has an uncanny ability to tell when someone's lying. That's a superpower! She's a mutant!

**TARA BENNETT** US EDITOR

### RAVES

→ *Yellowjackets* season two doesn't disappoint. It fully embraces its horror DNA, and starts with some great twists.

→ Saw *65* so I could interview the directors, and really enjoyed it – specially seeing Adam Driver do sci-fi and play a character so different from how he's usually cast.



## Captain's Log



The *Doctor Who* revival in 2005 opened so many doors for me: the friends I've made, the experiences I've had – the career I ended up with... Way back when I was a nipper, it was Sarah Jane Smith that made me want to be a journalist. Well, maybe I just secretly wanted to be Sarah Jane Smith.

How I loved her, and Elisabeth Sladen who played her – breaking my heart so much in 2006's "School Reunion". I was very fortunate to get to know her a little bit, and it was always a joy to chat – or drag her to the bar with a gaggle of gays after an event. I was absolutely devastated when she passed. The next morning I had to get a teary flight to LA to go on set for *Torchwood* (to see the interior of a Cardiff kitchen!)

It's still such a loss to the world that she's gone – imagine how many more brilliant adventures Sarah Jane could've gone on to – so it's always a joy to be able to look back at the absolute wonder of *The Sarah Jane Adventures*.

I once saw Samantha Bond at the theatre and told her how much I loved her in *SJA*. She looked me up and down and with a knowing grin said, "Aren't you a little old for *The Sarah Jane Adventures*?" First of all – love a shady lady. Secondly, you're never too old for *The Sarah Jane Adventures*...

Darren  
X



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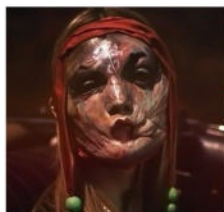


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## BONES AND ALL

Adam Driver vs dinosaurs in 65

### Highlights



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#### INFINITY POOL

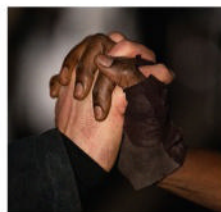
→ Goth meets Cronenberg – new divisive and shocking horror movie ensues.



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#### PLANET OF THE APES

→ Those damn stinkin' apes are back in a new Disney comic book. Not cute!



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#### THE WALKING DEAD

→ First-look images at the four series now in production. It really is dead good.





Emma Appleton (left) and Stefanie Martini.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE



# The Camera Never Lies

How David Bowie fits into **LOLA**'s Second World War-set found footage film

FOUND FOOTAGE MOVIES HAVE virtually become a genre in themselves over the past 25 years. But while most are patched together from old VHS or iPhone clips, few make use of unearthed footage from eight decades ago. That's the conceit behind *LOLA*, a low-budget but toweringly inventive feature from first-time director Andrew Legge about two sisters who, during the early days of the Second World War, create a machine that can intercept broadcasts from the future.

"I liked the idea of doing a period found footage movie," Legge tells Red Alert. "I loved the idea of these sisters outside the time they're in. And I loved the idea of doing a time travel

movie but a slightly different version, as *LOLA* isn't a time machine."

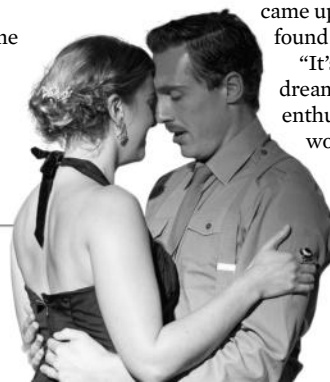
The seeds of *LOLA* lie in a 2009 short written and directed by Legge, titled "The Chronoscope". That film, presented in documentary style, told the story of a fascist group in '30s Ireland who steal a device that can see into the past.

"I like the idea of exploring time travel," explains Legge, "but in a way where you can't actually travel in time, you can just get information through it. In 'The Chronoscope' there was a plausibility, getting information

from the past – more than in *LOLA*, where it's from the future."

Filmed using vintage 16mm Bolex and Arriflex cameras (with the various newsreel scenes shot on a '30s Newman Sinclair 35mm wind-up), *LOLA* looks every bit as authentic as Legge must have hoped when he originally came up with the idea of a '40s-set found footage flick.

"It's a bit of a camera geek's dream to hold these cameras," he enthuses. "Some of them didn't work, which was hilarious. We were doing one scene when [actor] Stefanie [Martini]







The sisters get  
glammed up  
for a musical  
number.

was operating the Arriflex and the lens fell off, so we had to gaffer-tape it back on!”

As the found footage within the movie is mostly filmed by the sisters, Legge was keen for his lead actors to operate the cameras themselves. “That was, for me, a deal breaker,” he says. “When I pitched the film to the actors, particularly to Stefanie, it was like, ‘We’re going to show you how to operate them.’ She was very into that. I wouldn’t have cast her if she hadn’t been. That was always baked into it, because I wanted it to feel real. If you’ve got the cinematographer operating it’s just not as real. It’s much harder for the actors, with the eyelines.”

As the LOLA machine picks up broadcasts from the future, some of the film’s most striking and memorable images involve seeing David Bowie’s otherworldly visage glimpsed in a ’40s setting, or a Bob Dylan poster stuck to a wall in the women’s wartime home. Legge decided to limit LOLA’s forecasts to as far forward as the ’60s and ’70s, and not to include

## “I loved the idea of a time travel movie, but a different version”

footage of 21st century faces like Donald Trump or The Weeknd.

“It’s just the music that I like,” says the director. “You write about what you’re into and I love David Bowie. That was the main reason for Bowie and not a modern band. People like Bowie and Bob Dylan, they’re so iconic and also it’s 20 years ahead when you’ve got this massive cultural revolution that happened as a result of the Second World War.”

Aside from clips of the ’60s and ’70s, the film also makes use of archival footage from the ’40s, much of it digitally doctored to illustrate how some of the women’s LOLA-sourced intelligence has changed history as we know it. Legge says he and his researchers spent around three months sifting through reams of old

newsreel footage for use in the movie. “It’s all available to watch online, so you can go on to various websites like AP and ITN and Pathé and put in your keywords,” he says. “The Hitler stuff was particularly hard. I wanted him looking at LOLA and reacting, so we were going through hundreds of minutes of him. The sequence in the film is of him in a Volkswagen factory and I think he’s actually reacting to a Volkswagen Beetle.”

As proud as Legge clearly is of *LOLA*, his next movie will be a more conventionally told affair. “It’s set in the ’60s and again it’s sci-fi and about two women,” he teases. “We’re just bashing the treatment around the place at the moment, which is excruciating.” So is he planning any return to the found footage genre? “I’m never ever doing it again,” he laughs. “It’s a great experiment and it’s fun to do once, but no way, it’s too limiting.” **so**

*LOLA is in cinemas from 7 April, with a digital release on 8 May and a Blu-ray on 3 July.*

**► SCI-FACT!** Emma Appleton played Nancy Spungen in *Pistol* and Stefanie Martini was the lead in *Prime Suspect 1973*.



DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

# Send In The Clones

"I told you we should have just gone with the E45."

Brandon Cronenberg's **Infinity Pool** takes us on a terrifying holiday



BRANDON CRONENBERG DOESN'T just want *Infinity Pool* to freak you out – he wants it to make you laugh, too. "We were always chuckling to ourselves when we were developing it, we thought it was going to be funny," he tells Red Alert.

That's quite a strange admission for a director whose latest film has been widely described as "shocking" thanks to scenes of Alexander Skarsgård naked and breastfeeding, and Mia Goth wildly screaming while pointing a loaded gun at a bus full of people. It's no wonder early audiences found it a bit much.

"During our early test screenings with friends and colleagues, there was very little laughter," the director says. "I thought, 'We're fucked. We really fucked up this film, it's a

disaster because nobody's laughing.' They seemed to politely enjoy it, but it was as if the film had no sense of humour."

That changed at Sundance Film Festival when Cronenberg – son of veteran director David, and previously best known for the 2020 body horror *Possessor* – saw the audience laughing along at Skarsgård wearing nothing but a dog leash. "I was incredibly relieved, because it was always intended to be funny," he adds.

*Infinity Pool* is certainly not all laughs. The film sees Skarsgård's character James, a struggling author, and his wealthy wife Em (Cleopatra Coleman) holidaying on a remote island where the rules are a little different.

One day, another couple – Gabi, played by Goth, and Alban (Jalil Lespert) – invites the pair on a trip outside of their resort's walls.

Things soon go terribly, terribly wrong. James kills a local man and, as punishment, he faces the death penalty. However, rather than being killed, James has the option of having



Mia Goth and Alexander Skarsgård: shady.





Is Gabi leading James astray – and if so, why?

## “You start to wonder what it would be like if everyone were slathered in blood”

himself cloned, with that clone executed in his stead.

“It started with this idea of someone at an execution witnessing a double of themselves being executed,” says Cronenberg. That initial premise led to a short story, which then led to Cronenberg inventing a group of characters who are each transformed by the experience of watching their own execution. “It connected to some JG Ballard novels, like *Super Cannes*, *Cocaine Nights*,” he continues. “That ended up leading me to a resort setting.”

*Infinity Pool* is essentially the most horrifying version of *White Lotus* that you can imagine – a group of overly wealthy, snobbish people (Cronenberg calls them “adult babies”) who use the mysterious island’s cloning laws to their advantage and terrorise other guests.

“A [holiday] is supposed to be a pleasurable experience, something that normally feels safe and mundane,” he says. “I’m very uncomfortable in that context. I can’t relax.”

“Maybe it’s just because I drink too much coffee. Being in that situation seems immediately sinister to me. You start to see what’s bad about it and what’s bad about yourself, and you start to wonder what it would be like if everyone were slathered in blood instead of suntan lotion.”

### POOL OF TALENT

True to Cronenbergian form, there’s lots of blood in *Infinity Pool*, but also numerous colourful, provocative montage sequences. Were this any other director, you might believe they were created using heavy amounts of CG.

“None of the hallucinations have any VFX,” he says. “I don’t have a problem with VFX, but you can rely on them too much. To me, CGI blood doesn’t really land a lot of the time. There is a tactile quality to practical effects that I like. Those hallucination sequences feel physical in a certain way.”

Working with cinematographer Karim Hussain, Cronenberg experimented with distorting images and deforming shots using gels and layers of physical materials. “We

tended to stumble onto these happy accidents through that process, when we were trying one thing and did something else that’s interesting. That became a core aspect of the film’s aesthetic.”

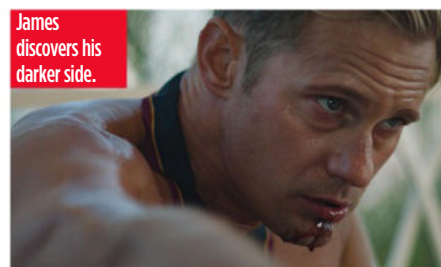
Just as important were the actors’ performances, and both Skarsgård and Goth are fantastically unhinged throughout. “I cast them assuming that they would surprise me and they did,” Cronenberg says. “There were scenes in the script which, on paper, didn’t seem quite as pivotal.”

“For instance, the scene outside the bus where Mia has the gun. She’s yelling what was written, but I wasn’t expecting that to be quite such a fantastic stand-out scene. She just went to such an incredible place with it.”

Beyond *Infinity Pool*, Cronenberg is working next on a TV adaptation of the aforementioned *Super Cannes* by JG Ballard. “There are some themes and some tonal elements that are certainly related,” he says when comparing his latest and next projects.

“But it’s a very different story. *Super Cannes* is essentially a strange detective story. It’s not a sci-fi film in a conventional way. It’s a little future-tech for the time it was written. I don’t think it’ll feel the same. I don’t want to just repeat the same approach. I’ll do something very different with it.” JS

*Infinity Pool* is in cinemas from 24 March.



James discovers his darker side.



Cleopatra Coleman as Em Foster.



## NEWS WARP

### HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

→ By Gandalf’s beard! Warner Bros and New Line teaming on new series of **The Lord Of The Rings** movies.

→ Vin Diesel reuniting with David Twohy for **Riddick: Furya**.

→ *Crank*’s Brian Taylor helming **Hellboy: The Crooked Man**, from a script by Mike Mignola.

→ James Mangold in the frame to direct **Swamp Thing**.

→ Addison Rae to star in Eli Roth’s slasher **Thanksgiving**.

→ Weta Workshop handling the giant spider effects in Australian horror **Sting**.

→ Kevin Feige promises

**Spider-Man 4** is on the way – “We have the story.”

→ Kane Parsons’s viral video **The Backrooms (Found Footage)** set for big-screen version from A24.

→ Sony to turn **I Know What You Did Last Summer** into a legacy franchise.

→ Live-action **How To Train Your Dragon** on the way from DreamWorks.

→ *The Crown*’s Emma Corrin joining **Deadpool 3** and Robert Eggers’s **Nosferatu**.

→ Disney once again delaying **The Marvels**, from a release of 28 July to 10 November.



► **SCI-FACT!** *Infinity Pool*’s US opening weekend was bigger than the run of Cronenberg Sr’s *Crimes Of The Future*.

GETTY





Adam Driver and Ariana Greenblatt in *65*.

DIRECTORS EXCLUSIVE

# Land Before Time

A *Quiet Place* writers Beck and Woods go behind the camera for dinosaur blockbuster **65**

➔ OUTSIDE OF THE *JURASSIC World* franchise, there aren't a lot of premium dinosaur movies to dazzle cinemagoers. Writers/directors Scott Beck and Bryan Woods (*A Quiet Place*) tell Red Alert that they've lamented that fact for the last 20 years. Obsessed with terrible lizards since they were both kids, they've filled that void with their recently released, original sci-fi take on a dino movie, *65*.

Essentially a two-hander, it features Adam Driver as Commander Mills, a working-class space pilot on a long-haul job to pay for his ill daughter's treatments. When his ship crashes, only he and a young girl who was in cryogenic sleep, Koa (Ariana Greenblatt), survive. They find themselves on a hostile planet that is revealed to be Earth, 65 million years ago.

When that premise came to them, Wood says, "We got really excited about writing a large- canvas, maximalist movie with a

minimalist, intimate character story that runs throughout it." With Mills and Koa, they wanted to explore an inverted version of the Ripley/Newt dynamic in *Aliens*, where he's reluctant to let another child into his life.

"What would it be like if, all of a sudden, you're forced to have to take care of another life, but what you find out in turn is they take care of you?" Beck says of the film's emotional arc. "The beauty of that two-hander and the way that they push through grief and loss and all these emotions that they're individually wrestling with, are all in the landscape of a dinosaur film."

The pair say that finding the right Mills was essential for the whole film to work, and Driver was their dream choice. "He's one of the greatest actors working, period," Beck says. "There's an authenticity that he brings, beyond just who he is as an actor. I think it's him as a person and what he prioritises and what he



"I can't be sure, but I think it might be dead."

cares about in life, which is something that had a kinship to whom Mills is."

Woods continues, "We were really grateful that Adam was interested in taking a big swing. They used to make movies like *65* all the time. So we all linked arms with this notion of, 'Let's take a big swing, and let's try something new. And let's see if we can make it a theatrical experience and do our best to pay homage to those movies that we all grew up with and loved.'"

On the dino side, *65* features a selection of familiar, yet different, terrifying creatures. "We thought this was a great opportunity that we haven't necessarily seen where you're actually





"Ten more minutes and then we swap."

**“We wanted to make sure dinosaurs felt scary again”**

transported back 65 million years ago,” Beck says. “Usually in the *Jurassic World* movies, you’re only seeing dinosaurs in the modern day. So, in our R&D phase, we were consulting a lot with different researchers and paleontologists about, what’s the latest science? What did we see towards the end of the Cretaceous period?”

They also brought in concept artist Neville Page, who helped design their version of dinosaurs, including their bespoke mega dino, the *Messorasaurus rex*. “It really became this one part scientific, one part creative process, with the mantra that no matter what, we wanted to make sure dinosaurs felt scary again, because back 65 million years ago, they would not be your best friend.”

They prove that in a sequence where two different *rex*s are attracted to Mills and Koa’s escape shuttle, while asteroids are bombarding the planet. Beck remembers, “We were trying to capture the sunrise with only a 15-minute window. You’re fighting the clock. Everybody’s trying to do their best trying to understand the physics of a dinosaur chasing you.”

Woods continues, “And Scott and I are behind camera screaming, ‘Flare! Flare!’ It was probably the most fun we had, shooting off all these flares to simulate that meteorite light that’s coming at pre-dawn.”

65 ends on a hopeful note, which prompts the question of whether this is a standalone story or a franchise. Beck says “There’s always scraps of ideas that are written down. But much like *A Quiet Place*, our expectation is this is a ‘one and done’. And yet, you never know where the future takes you.” **TB**

*65 is in cinemas now.*



Commander Mills: is pianist Mrs Mills a relation? (No)

**► SCI-FACT!** The end credit sequence showing the evolution of Earth from 65 million years to now was an early idea approved last-minute.



DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

# Magical Mooing

Francisca Alegría on her new film **The Cow Who Sang A Song Into The Future**



➔ EVER SINCE SHE WAS A CHILD, Francisca Alegría has been fascinated by the spiritual world. Growing up, she would visit her grandparents' farm, and they would tell her stories about her great-grandparents coming back from the dead and having tea with her cousins.

"Every single story that I heard, they all had comedy," the Chilean director tells Red Alert. "None of the ghosts would come and make the family suffer. They always had an element of the absurd."

## MERRY MAGDALENA

Describing Alegría's Sundance sensation *The Cow Who Sang A Song Into The Future* as a comedy or absurd would do it a disservice, but ghosts are central to its story. In fact, the first character we encounter is a phantom.

The film starts with the camera focused on a river in Chile as dead fish float along the surface. Suddenly, a woman (played by *Alias* actor Mía Maestro) emerges from the water, gasping for air. She removes her motorcycle helmet and looks around, lost and disorientated.

Her name is Magdalena and she is a woman out of time; she supposedly died decades ago, though her body was never found. She heads into the nearby town and bumps into her

former husband, now much older than her, and he faints.

Magdalena's not a malicious presence, but one who has come back to help her family reckon with their struggles. "The majority of films that deal with ghosts make us scared of them – and that's not good," Alegría says of not wanting to make a horror. "We have to have a wider umbrella of films, because we need to be more in touch with that other world. And it's not always scary."

For the filmmaker, one of the most personal aspects of the story concerns Magdalena's grandchild Tomás (newcomer Enzo Ferrada),

a transgender teenager whose mother Cecilia (Leonor Varela, best known for playing a vampire princess in *Blade II*) refuses to acknowledge her truth.

"Tomás has dialogue that I had with my mom," Alegría says. "I am not trans, but I am bisexual. The most recent conflict I had with my mother was because she would not understand why I loved the person that I loved. The character, Tomás, started in the bisexual realm, but then years passed and we ended up having someone with a dilemma that might be even more difficult for the mother to understand."

María Velasquez as Felicia: hippy at heart.





Leonor Varela as Cecilia, with an unnamed friend.

Both Tomás and Cecilia have their own complicated relationships with their newly resurrected ancestor, but it's Cecilia who first hears the cows sing. Because, yes, *The Cow Who Sang A Song Into The Future* delivers on its title (we won't spoil anything here, but the animals are not given janky CG mouths). This novel idea came from a fairly traumatic childhood experience of Alegría's.

"I was 10 years old, at my grandparents' farm, and the adults were having lunch under the vine trees," she says. "Me and my sister went to the stables where the animals were. The day before, I had seen the skull of a cow on the roof and I couldn't understand how it got there." They started climbing the stable and got onto the roof. "I was looking at the skull, right into its eyes, and then I heard a scream!"

Alegría's sister had fallen through an aged part of the stable's roof. She raced down and found her sister unconscious on the floor, and Alegría started shouting for her parents, who eventually came and helped.

"That impacted me a lot," she says. "The first time that I started writing this film, 11 years ago, I wrote about this little boy who found a

skull, and I wrote, 'The skull spoke'. And the skull said, 'Death is after your family'. And I just started following that lead."

While the story morphed into something very different, driven partly by Alegría leaving Chile and going to university in America, the idea of a cow speaking persisted. However, in the resulting film, the cows are very much alive when they sing.

"The cows were wonderful," Alegría says of her animal actors. She did a casting session with the cows and the chosen lead was named Leonor, after Leonor Varela. There was one scene, though, where she wasn't such a happy cow. "We were shooting and one of the cows, white with black spots, stole the spotlight from Leonor," Alegría says. "We started calling her 'the Envious One!'"

Thankfully, the Envious One behaved themselves and Leonor managed to complete the scene in four takes. Turns out working with animals doesn't have to be too hard – you just need to give them room to sing. **JS**

*The Cow Who Sang A Song Into The Future is in cinemas from 24 March.*



## NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

→ Amazon developing a live-action **Spider-Man Noir** show.

→ HBO Max greenlight */t* prequel series **Welcome To Derry**.

→ **The Rig** renewed for a second season on Prime Video.

→ HBO sell DC Comics adap **Dead Boy Detectives** to Netflix.

→ *Runaways* star Rhenzy Feliz joining Bat-spin-off **The Penguin**.

→ Armando Iannucci's **Avenue 5** axed by HBO.

→ Briana Middleton starring in Apple TV+'s new take on Fritz Lang classic **Metropolis**.

→ **The Peripheral**, **Velma** and **Mayfair Witches** renewed for second seasons.

→ Marvel's **Rogers: The Musical** to be staged at Disney California Adventure Park.

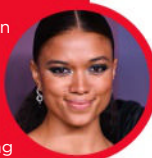
→ **Star Trek: Discovery** to finish after fifth season in 2024.

→ Nick Offerman and Megan Mullally joining **The Umbrella Academy**.

→ Roblox game **Creatures Of Sonaria** set to become a series.

→ Zach Galifianakis joins live-action **Lilo & Stitch** on Disney+.

→ Matthew McConaughey voicing the King in spy-fi toon **Agent Elvis**.



Enrique (Alfredo Castro) sees you.



Mia Maestro (Briana Middleton) as Magdalena, with a young biker.



Cecilia's gone and done herself a mischief.



Magdalena's not doing all that well, either.

► **SCI-FACT!** Leonor Varela also appeared in *Agents Of SHIELD* season one, as a Peruvian armed forces Comandante.

GETTY



WRITER EXCLUSIVE

# Shock The Monkey

After 48 years, *Planet Of The Apes* returns to Marvel Comics with **Devolution**

➔ AHEAD OF NEXT year's blockbuster *Kingdom Of The Planet Of The Apes*, Marvel is releasing the first *Planet Of The Apes* series in nearly five decades. Written by David F Walker and drawn by Dave Wachter, like the recent prequel films it takes place during humanity's last days as the deadly ALZ-112 virus spreads across the globe, although its geographic scope is considerably broader.

"We only see a very small part of the world in *Rise, Dawn and War*," Walker tells Red Alert. "So it seemed like it might be interesting to explore what's happening in other countries just after those films."

Opening arc *Devolution* centres on peacekeeper Juliana Tobin, who is determined to stop fanatics slaughtering innocent apes. "Whenever you're writing a story that is essentially a prequel to an existing property, you have to deal with the inevitability of what has already been established," says Walker.

"In the case of *Planet Of The Apes* you're dealing with not only a franchise that is more than 50 years old, but the outcome is also in the title: *Planet Of The Apes*. For me, it was all about coming up with interesting characters, and trying to show scenarios that haven't been seen before. Rather than



Cover art for the first issue, by Mike McKone.



► **SCI-FACT!** Characters Starlin created or co-created for Marvel include Thanos, Gamora, Drax the Destroyer, Nebula and Shang-Chi.

“For me, it was all about coming up with interesting characters”

dealing with a human versus ape conflict, I wanted to explore the conflict between humans that are at odds over how to deal with the apes. The reader already has an idea where everything is headed, but Juliana and our other human characters don't know the future that we know – they've never seen the 1968 movie, so they think there's still hope for humanity.”

Walker has kept the cast of characters relatively small. “Juliana is a survivor of the initial pandemic that has decimated humanity – she has lost everyone she is close to,” he explains.

“The same is true of Omatete, a young man who works in the world's largest remaining ape preserve in Africa. Both Juliana and Omatete know that apes are not the cause of the ALZ-113 retrovirus, but they also know that any hope in finding a way to treat the virus lies in the study of apes.

The problem, of course, is that there is an army of terrorists convinced that the only way to save the human race is to wipe out all apes.”

Walker's female lead is one of the few who can communicate with the apes. “Juliana is in a unique position in that she knows sign language and has been tasked with protecting a group of apes that also know sign language,” he says. “She is very protective of them, but as the story progresses, and she sees the effect of the ALZ-113 retrovirus on both apes and humans, she starts to realise that she may in fact be simply watching over the future rulers of the planet.

“In a lot of ways, she is like a surrogate mother to a group of apes that may be crucial in the downfall of humanity, and she must grapple with their role in the possible future of the planet.” **SJ**

*Planet Of The Apes* issue one is out on 5 April.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

# Opposites Attract

Thanos creator Jim Starlin on **Order And Outrage**, his new comic miniseries for Dark Horse

➔ NOT MANY STORIES start with the main character's impressive mane, but that was the case with *Order And Outrage*, Thanos creator Jim Starlin's new miniseries with artist Ralph “Rags” Morales.

“It began as a visual idea, basically the image of Outrage's massive hair,” recalls Starlin. “Pencil in hand, the rest of her was doodled in, and then I had to ask myself, ‘Who is this character?’ Once I came up with her name, I had to ask, ‘What was she so outraged about?’ and that led to thinking about female persecution and suppression and how that's nearly always been part of our collective human culture. Outrage's repeated deaths followed, and Order became the culprit. Rags then designed up Order's appearance from the loose notes I provided.”

*Order And Outrage* is essentially about the long-standing battle of the sexes. “They are the stand-ins for the eternal struggle between the masculine and the feminine, but their names in no way designate their actual roles,” explains Starlin. “Order is a tyrant, and his order is submission, not any actual order.

“Outrage is justifiably outraged by the situation she finds herself in, but this time around things may turn out differently than the myriad past conflicts between the two characters. She is our explorer, seeking to learn the truth about herself and her universe.”

Unfortunately, Outrage has always ended up on the losing side. “She's a being that has suffered through countless incarnations, her story always ending badly,” says Starlin. “Our current tale begins with her as a

child, born into a highly unjust society, which Order rules. Hers is a journey of discovery and the hope that history does not always repeat itself, while Order has been top dog for so long that he can't imagine existence being any other way. But this is also a twisted love story and there's an intimate connection between them that cannot be denied.”

In this society income determines not just status but survival, and gene manipulation is used to make individuals perfect. “Gene manipulation is something that should keep everyone up at night,” believes Starlin. “Economic advantage will turn these developments with cudgels the rich can and will use against the poor, although *Order And Outrage* is more about social struggle than gene manipulation.”

The title also has much in common with Starlin's creation Vanth Dreadstar, who is returning soon in *Dreadstar Vs The Inevitable*. “It's a science fiction setting for both series, but the current *Dreadstar* is about maintaining a just society, while *Order And Outrage* is about struggling against an unjust society,” explains Starlin.

“Order can be said to be one of Starlin's hulking big bad guys, but he's more an extension of that cliché – mostly in the backstory – than he is a repeat.”

Starlin has plans for three four-part miniseries telling this love/hate story. “With the first, we've focusing on Outrage, as she's something new and different for me: my first female main character, which I've surprisingly found more daunting than you'd think.” **SJ**

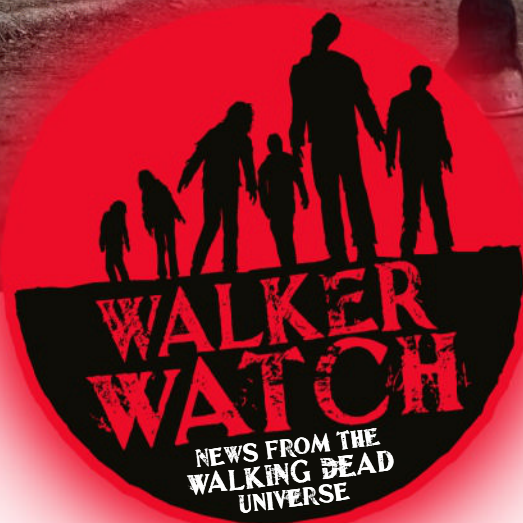
*Order and Outrage* issue one is out on 21 March.

Rags Morales's striking cover art for the first issue.





Norman Reedus in *The Walking Dead*: Daryl Dixon.



- First-look images from filming of *The Walking Dead: Daryl Dixon* have been released.
- Cast for the new six-part French-set series have also been announced: Romain Levi (*The Tunnel*), Laïka Blanc-Francard (*My Night*), Anne Charrier (*Maison Close*), Eriq Ebanouey (*Transporter 3*) and newcomer Louis Puech Scigliuzzi.
- Previously announced cast include Isabelle (Clémence Poésy), a Parisian member of a religious group with a colourful history, and Quinn (Adam Nagaitis), a Brit who trades on the black

market and owns an underground nightclub.

- Norman Reedus shared a clip on social media of himself with Greg Nicotero from the Paris set, with some fans in the background showing their appreciation.
- Eagle-eyed fans spotted the potential new title for the show on make-up boxes from an Instagram post by Reedus – could it soon be renamed *Raise The Dead*?
- Reedus said recently of the show, “We’re destroying the Louvre.”
- Jayla Walton has been cast as Dove for the final season of *Fear The Walking Dead*.
- Teaser images for the first half of the final

“Eagle-eyed fans spotted the potential new title for the show on make-up boxes”

season – which begins on 15 May – have also been released.

- Filming has begun on the untitled Rick/Michonne spin-off, with photography of Andrew Lincoln on set being shared by the official account with the caption “Dad’s back.”
- Danai Gurira also shared a new image on

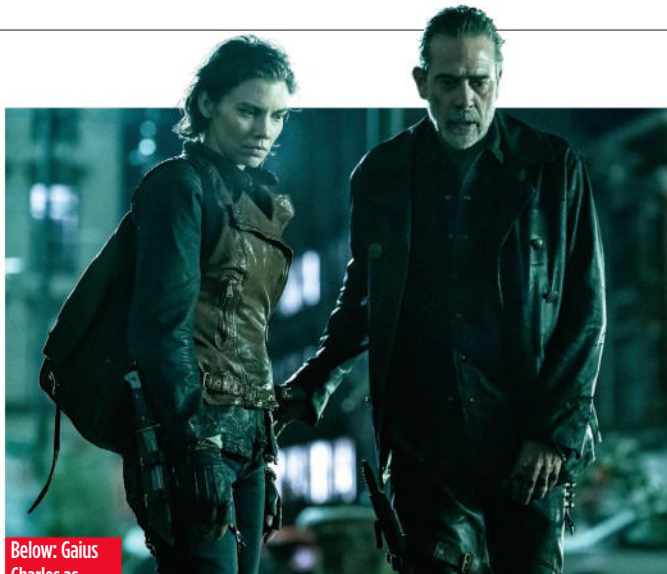
What’s Daryl doing swanning about in Paris?



The dead, they – they walk! Well, shamble.







Below: Gaius Charles as Armstrong in *Dead City*.



Jeffrey Dean Morgan and Lauren Cohan in *Dead City*.



Jenna Elfman and Lennie James: *Fear The Walking Dead*.



Rick and Michonne have just popped out for a bit.

Instagram from the set of the spin-off showing Andrew Lincoln covered in blood.

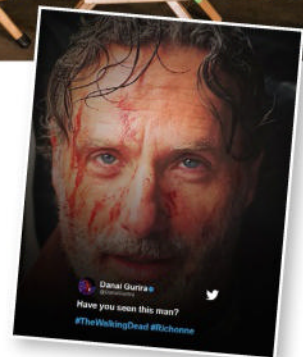
● **First footage of *The Walking Dead: Dead City*, starring Lauren Cohan as Maggie and Jeffrey Dean Morgan as Negan, was shared by official accounts.**

● Jeffrey Dean Morgan also shared a short making-of featurette on his Twitter account.

● **The pair travel to New York to rescue Maggie's son Hershel. The trailer reveals that Negan is "the key" to saving him.**

● First look images from *Dead City*, which premieres in June, have also been released.

*The Walking Dead* is on Disney+ (UK), with spin-offs on AMC and Prime Video globally.



© AMC/SKYBOUND/DANA I GURIRA

► **SCI-FACT!** *Walking Dead* creator Robert Kirkman has announced a new comic book series, *Void Rivals*, to launch in June.



WRITER EXCLUSIVE

# Holy Molar

Andy Diggle continues the saga of *The Expanse* in new comic book series

**Dragon Tooth**

➔ AS A LONG-TIME FAN of both the original James SA Corey novels and the Prime Video TV show, Andy Diggle was thrilled when he was asked to write Boom! Studio's new *The Expanse* maxi-series. Drawn by Rubine, *Dragon Tooth* picks up immediately after the conclusion of the sixth and final season and fills in the missing years between the books *Babylon's Ashes* and *Persepolis Rising*.

"The bottom line with good storytelling is 'What happens next?' and everything else is a bonus," Diggle tells Red Alert. "We wanted to continue the story we've already invested in, so *Dragon Tooth* isn't filler, it's the next chapter. The show has already adapted the first six novels, after which there's a 30-year time gap before the events of book seven, *Persepolis Rising*.

"With so much extant narrative momentum at the end of season six and so many compelling characters and plot threads to pull on, jumping in where we left off is a no-brainer. The time gap offers us a vast narrative landscape to explore, and without spoiling what's coming in 30 years' time."

Expect to see the entire crew of the *Rocinante* including James, Naomi, Amos, Bobbie and Clarissa. "They're all front and centre, of course, and I'm writing significant roles for Avasarala and Drummer," says Diggle. "Plus, you'll see a few familiar faces scattered



An issue one cover, by Junggeun Yoon.



throughout the story, some of whom we haven't seen in years. I love that *The Expanse* feels like a living, breathing universe, and just because we might not have seen a particular character in a long while, it doesn't mean they aren't still out there somewhere, doing their thing.

"I'm not interested in pointless cameos for their own sake, but where it's relevant in the story, I'm bringing in characters that connect the present situation to events that may have played out long ago. We also have some new characters, and one in particular – our antagonist – played a significant role in the epochal events we've witnessed since the destruction of the Canterbury. They've always hidden behind the scenes and they're still out there."

Diggie is also enjoying the expanded, 12-issue format. "I love every one of these characters and I hear them talking in my head, so

**“I love that The Expanse feels like a living, breathing universe”**

the script pretty much writes itself," he says. "The hardest part is compressing it all down into a monthly 22-page comic. You always wish you had more pages, but that's just comics. That said, 12 issues is a big canvas for a big story and this isn't just 'What the Roci crew did on their weekend off.'

"It's a sprawling epic, spanning the entire system from Earth to the Ring Space – and beyond. The secret is that we're not trying to cram every character into every issue as they wouldn't have room to breathe, so I'm taking my time to set the board, move the pieces into place and build."

However, he refuses to reveal any details about the nature of the Dragon Tooth itself. "As with the novels, the title is a classical allusion," he teases. "As to its specific relevance to *The Expanse*, I'm not going to spoil that. But all will be revealed!" **SJ**

*The Expanse: Dragon Tooth issue one is out on 5 April.*

## WRITER EXCLUSIVE

# Back To The Future War

It's a night to remember for **Rogue Trooper** in Garth Ennis and Patrick Goddard's "Blighty Valley"



FOUR DECADES AFTER he first stalked the battlefields of Nu-Earth, *Rogue Trooper* is returning to the Galaxy's Greatest Comic in "Blighty Valley", a new 13-part by writer Garth Ennis and artist Patrick Goddard.

"It's a concept I've been idly kicking around in my head for the last 10 years or so," Ennis tells Red Alert. "I've always liked the idea of writing *Rogue*, as I think he has slightly less definition to him than the rest of 2000 AD's greats, so his history isn't as intimidating."

Ennis insists that "Blighty Valley" will very much be in keeping with co-creators Gerry Finley-Day and Dave Gibbons's original stories. "It's very much *Gerry's* character and world, and

I'm just adding some things I thought would fit nicely into that particular setting," he explains. "Opportunities I spotted, things *Gerry* came up with and then didn't develop. I think if you're as creative as *Gerry* is, there are dozens of ideas that just end up as throwaways, that you never have time to revisit."

Ennis also enjoyed the often uneasy relationship between *Rogue* and his biochip buddies. "Not only is their interplay crucial and quite funny, but they give *Rogue* someone to explain himself to, which all loner strips need," explains Ennis. "It would be easy to say *Gunnar* is my favourite, in that it's hard to beat a bloke who is essentially a talking assault rifle, and a bit of

a psycho into the bargain. But they all need their time in the sun, with *Helm* being the tactical genius, and *Bagman* being the slightly doolally semi-genius."

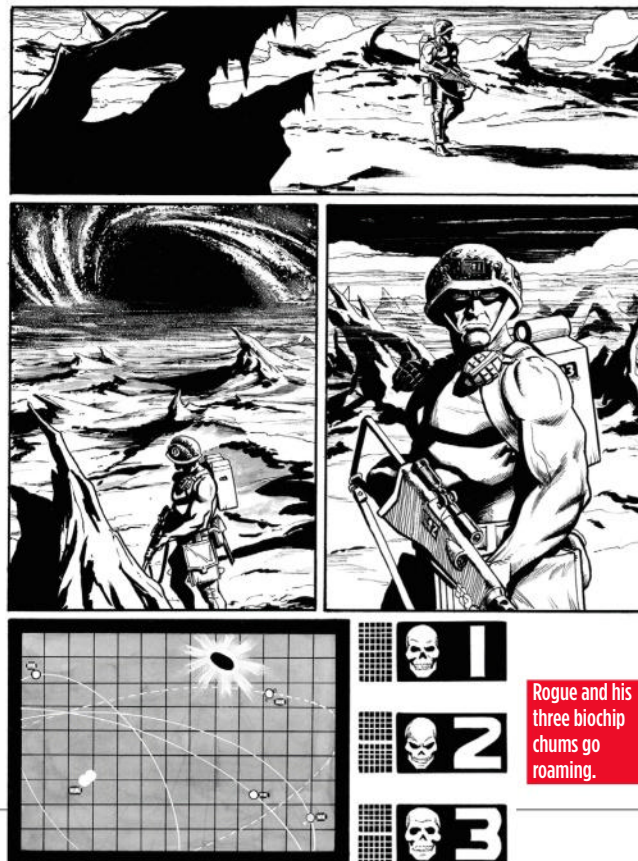
As demonstrated by the *Battle Action* special he wrote for *Rebellion* last year, Ennis has long maintained an interest in traditional war stories, but he also appreciates future war dramas like *Rogue Trooper*. "The sci-fi element does take it one step away from what I would consider a pure war story, but it's no less enjoyable for that," he reasons.

"Blighty Valley' temporarily moves *Rogue* from a fictional future war to an actual historical one. I'm normally a bit edgy about blending fantasy genres with real-world war fiction, but given *Rogue Trooper's* credentials as a war comic, I'm okay with it in this instance."

The story takes place during *Night's Horizon* – known as *Zvartchvintern* to the Norts or *Lightfall* to the first settlers – when Nu-Earth's orbit carries it near a black hole. "This is one of those things that *Gerry* would come up with and then leave lying around," says Ennis.

"Without giving too much away, I don't think you can have a planet situated near a black hole without there being certain dramatic – or even catastrophic – side effects, especially when both sides are using it as a space highway in a galaxy-wide war. *Night's Horizon* is just one nickname for the time of year when Nu-Earth's orbit carries it closer to the black hole, and according to legend, things begin to go bump in the night. That's what *Rogue* finds himself walking into at the start." **SJ**

*Rogue Trooper begins in Prog 2326, out on 7 April.*



Rogue and his three biochip chums go roaming.





Tom Baker's back for Big Finish!



And so is Jemma Redgrave!



Not to mention Ingrid Oliver as Osgood!



RTD with director Julie Anne Robinson.



# Space And Time

Celebrating 60 years of **Doctor Who**

◆ Production is well underway on a Christmas special, with Ncuti Gatwa being photographed by lots of spoiler-friendly newspapers in February. We don't do such things in SFX... That said, it's nice they still have such an interest in the show.

◆ Julie Anne Robinson has been announced as director of Block Three, while Ben Chessell will direct Block Four.

◆ Speaking at an awards ceremony, Anita Dobson revealed the name of her character and the relationship to new companion Ruby Sunday. Spoilers!

◆ Siân Reynish, the VFX co-ordinator for the new series, has revealed that drones are used for the first time while filming on the TARDIS set for the Christmas special.

◆ Guest stars for the Big Finish anniversary series *Once And Future* have been announced.

Stephen Noonan will appear as the First Doctor alongside Michael Troughton and Tim Treloar as the Second and Third respectively. The series will also include the final performance recorded by David Warner as the Unbound Doctor (something to do with Activia, possibly).

◆ Also appearing in the eight-part audio drama are Michelle Gomez (Missy), Nicola Walker (Liv Chenka), Georgia Tennant (Jenny, the Doctor's Daughter), Michelle Ryan (Lady Christina), Camille

Coduri (Jackie Tyler), Neve McIntosh (Madame Vastra), Catrin Stewart (Jenny Flint), Dan Starkey (Strax), Sadie Miller (Sarah Jane Smith) and

Christopher Naylor (Harry Sullivan). More names will be announced in the coming months.

◆ The opening adventure for *Once And Future* has been announced as "Past Lives".

Released in May, it stars Tom Baker as the Fourth Doctor, alongside Rufus Hound as the Meddling Monk, with Jemma Redgrave (Kate Stewart) and Ingrid Oliver (Osgood).

◆ Record Store Day 2023 gets in on the 60th anniversary celebrations, with a coloured vinyl release for 1976 Typhoo Tea promotional book *The Amazing World Of Doctor Who*. Limited to 3,000 copies, the gatefold set will be available on 22 April – and will sell out fast. **DS**

*Doctor Who* is on BBC One and Disney+ from November.



## SCI-FACT!

Julie Anne Robinson has previously directed *Bridgerton* and *Orange Is The New Black*.



► **SCI-FACT!** After missing out on *Thunderball*, Raquel Welch was also considered for Tiffany Case in *Diamonds Are Forever*.

NEW AUTHOR

## SARAH K JACKSON

MEET THE ECOLOGIST  
BEHIND POST-APOCALYPTIC  
THRILLER *NOT ALONE*

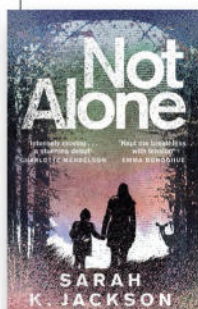


### What's your protagonist's story?

→ Katie has survived alone with her son Harry since the toxic storm that killed nearly everyone else. Her health worsening, she discovers the man she loved might still be alive and takes Harry outside into the changed, toxic yet beautiful world for the first time to try to find him.

### How did your work as an ecologist inspire or feed into the book?

→ My love of plants, their uses, ability or not to thrive or adapt, and the many adventures in rivers, woods and mountainsides fed into Katie's journey. I also often have to imagine what might survive under future scenarios. Climate change, pollution and microplastics all fed unnervingly easily into environmentally-caused apocalypse.



### How long did it take to write? Did it evolve much?

→ Three months, then editing off and on over another five years. Katie's survival alone and re-finding someone she loved evolved into a deeper,

moving tale of fierce motherly love and hope in a richer apocalyptic world.

### Do you have any advice for other budding authors?

→ Persistence! Work out your reason for writing (writing for you sustains you through knock-backs), learn as much as you can, write on the days you don't feel like writing, and find the people who support and encourage you, and whose advice resonates.

*Not Alone* is out on 6 April, published by Picador.

## THE FINAL FRONTIER

# RAQUEL WELCH 1940-2023

Queen of prehistory and innerspace

→ THE NAME RAQUEL WELCH became synonymous with the bold new sexuality of '60s cinema, but 20th Century Fox wanted her to be Debbie Welch instead; Raquel, they insisted, was too hard to pronounce. Demonstrating remarkable self-belief on the very cusp of her career, she point-blank refused and ascended to iconhood just fine.

Born Jo Raquel Tejada in Chicago, Illinois, Welch worked as a model, cocktail waitress and TV weather presenter before scoring her first film role in 1963's *A House Is Not A Home*. A frontrunner for Bond girl Domino in *Thunderball*, she ultimately found stardom as Cora Peterson in 1966's *Fantastic Voyage*. The effects may have miniaturised her but the film's success magnified her profile exponentially.

If *Fantastic Voyage* made her a star then Hammer's *One Million Years BC* (1966) enshrined her as an icon. Welch's turn as Loana of the Shell tribe is almost a silent movie

performance – she only has three lines of dialogue – but her striking presence in a doe-skin bikini sees her hold her own against Ray Harryhausen's stop-motion dinosaurs. It was a role originally earmarked for Ursula Andress and Welch was less than enthused: "I thought I'll go to London, I'll do this turkey and then everybody will forget about it." Instead, a best-selling poster made her a primeval pin-up.

1967 found her leading spy movie *Fathom*, an attempt to jump on the Bond bandwagon, and playing Lust herself in the Peter Cook and Dudley Moore comedy *Bedazzled*, which replayed the Faust legend in Swinging London. 1974's *The Three Musketeers* saw her win a Golden Globe. Later genre TV guest shots included *Mork & Mindy*, *Lois & Clark* and *Sabrina The Teenage Witch*.

Welch once compared her sex symbol status to being a convict: "They let me out on parole but they keep pullin' me back in." **NS**



Raquel Welch  
in 1966's *One  
Million Years  
BC*

© ARCHIVE/GETTY

## MELINDA DILLON 1939-2023

American actor who played Jillian Guiler in *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*.

## GERALD FRIED 1928-2023

Prolific TV composer known for the immortal fight music in *Star Trek* episode "Amok Time".



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# THE MUMMY'S CURSE

A DEMONIC FORCE HAS  
AWAKENED FROM ITS  
ANCIENT SLUMBERS FOR  
**EVIL DEAD RISE**,  
AND THIS TIME IT HAS A  
FAMILY TO TORMENT...  
DIRECTOR LEE CRONIN  
TELLS US MORE

WORDS:  
IAN BERRIMAN



It's coming home, it's coming home, it's coming, the Force is coming home. No, not *Star Wars*' Force, but the demonic entity from *The Evil Dead* – the one that zooms through the woods, toppling trees, on its way to possessing people and turning them into cackling, deformed killers known as Deadites.

And it's not coming home to its old stomping ground of Tennessee, but to Los Angeles. Because uniquely, the fifth entry in the now 42-year-old series – perhaps horror's most gleefully excessive franchise – unfolds not in the traditional setting of a cabin in the woods, but (for the most part) in an ordinary family apartment. Just because this is domestic horror, however, don't make the mistake of thinking that the Deadites have been domesticated...

### DEAD KEEN

*Evil Dead Rise* is a coming home of sorts for Lee Cronin too. The second feature for the Irish director, after 2019's *The Hole In The Ground*, it brings things full circle. Because Cronin was possessed by a love for Sam Raimi's '80s *Evil Dead* movies at an eyebrow-raisingly young age... "I saw *The Evil Dead* and *Evil Dead II* when I was about eight or nine," the director tells *SFX*, "back to back on VHS – my dad had rented them. In my household, there were no age restrictions on anything."

Though it's too late to phone social services, you may be thinking that this could have (given an abundance of bodily dismemberment) disastrously warped the little Lee's brain. Happily, it instead helped place him on the

A pic director Lee Cronin took on set.



path towards becoming a horror director. Er, if there's any distinction there...

"I had no idea what I was experiencing," Cronin recalls. "I just couldn't fathom the insanity. At that age, you don't necessarily trigger and go, 'Hey, I'm an *Evil Dead* fan.' It was probably five, six years later, in my early teenage years, when I started wanting to make movies and was very into horror and visual effects, that I would have gone back and they'd have become a big part of my cinematic language. I would revisit them quite a lot."

A Cronin's-eye view of filming: bloody mess.



"It almost sounds too perfect," he smiles. Indeed – you read this sort of thing in press releases and take it with a pinch of salt. But Cronin is unquestionably sincere. "When the 2013 *Evil Dead* [directed by Fede Álvarez] got made, I was in the infancy of my career, and I remember thinking, 'I'd love a shot at an *Evil Dead* movie' – it was definitely something I had an ambition to do. So when this one surfaced, it felt like a no-brainer to take it really seriously and see if there was a movie that I could make something special out of."

The opportunity presented itself after *The Hole In The Ground* screened at Sundance and caught the eye of a colleague of Raimi, who recommended that he take a look at it. "I was contacted by Sam: 'Hey, it'd be great to meet and talk about what you want to do next, get to know who you are.' Actually, the conversation was about a lot of different things and nothing to do with *Evil Dead* at all..."

It was Cronin who (to mix animal metaphors) grabbed the bull by the horns regarding the elephant in the room. "I said, 'By the way, what's up with *Evil Dead*? Do you want to do more?'" He was like, "Oh, absolutely – why, are you interested?" Although *The Hole In The Ground* is tonally very different to *Evil Dead*, he felt I had the appropriate skill set. One thing Sam said was he loved the precision and control in my moviemaking. He described it as





## PLAYING DEAD

### Helping Alyssa Sutherland turn to the dark side

It's not every day a director has to give notes on demonic possession. So what sort of guidance was Cronin providing Alyssa Sutherland with?

"She really grabbed what I was after very early," he says. "A lot of what we talked about was about physicality, and timing. But also what was the thought process going on with that demonic force is inside her. Because it'd be really easy to just wipe everybody out

- but not when there's a chance to wage psychological warfare on the innocent!

"So there'd be times I would have said to her, 'Don't forget, you're fucking with them'. Because something as powerful as a Deadite could walk into the room and wipe everybody out, but it's playtime for them. And I was saying also, 'Look at who your character is: strong matriarch, single mum with three kids. Now imagine, what's the inverse of that?'"



Ironically, raising hell is a serious business.

like a set of well-designed clockwork mechanics in terms of how it all unfolds."

As Cronin says, his debut, which tapped into changeling lore, has a very different vibe. "If *The Hole In The Ground* is like a whisper at the back of your neck, *Evil Dead Rise* is a full-frontal scream right in your face." But there are commonalities: like *Evil Dead*, it features something nasty in the woods, and personality changes. And Cronin seems to have carried over elements of his debut to Raimi's world. Both *Hole* and *Rise* centre on a family unit: in the former, it's a mother and her son. In the

latter it's a mother (Ellie, played by Alyssa Sutherland), her younger sister Beth (Lily Sullivan), and Ellie's three children Danny, Bridget and Kassie - all of whom are endangered once mum becomes a vessel for the demonic spirit.

So what's this film's position within what we should probably now be calling the EDU? "In my own mind, I'm very faithful to the lore," Cronin says. "So there's direct connectivity between what happens in this story and the others. They're in the same world - this is not a parallel universe in any way. It's happened after Fede's movie, and after Sam's, but in a world where those stories have taken place.

"And the book that's in this story is connected back to the past," he adds, before referring to a sequence in the third film, where Bruce Campbell's chainsaw-packing hero Ash visits a cemetery in search of the Necronomicon - the book bound in human skin containing an incantation which summons the Kandarian demon - only to find three different copies. "If we look at *Army Of Darkness*, and at the fact that there's three books: Sam used one, Fede used one, and I said, 'Y'know what, give me the third one, and let me go tell an *Evil Dead* story in that context."

Why relocate the carnage from a cabin in the woods, as seen in three of the previous four →



Another on-set shot from Lee Cronin himself.



Something might not be right with mom...



## FEELING GROOVY

Lily Sullivan (Beth) talks primal screaming and chainsaw mania



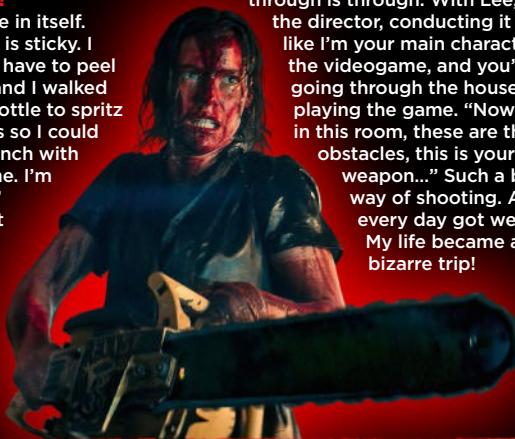
**Was it exhausting, acting a state of fear for so long?**

Yeah, it was. It was all breath work, and because the body doesn't know any different, I'd get to a point where the body would hit a wall and have the shakes. There'd be times where I'd be like, "I need to take 10, because the bathtub's full", and an uncontrollable cry would come out. It wasn't emotional, it was just the chemistry of the body. After most takes I'd hysterically laugh - it wasn't that I was laughing at anything, it was just to release the energy.

And working with a nine-year-old [Nell Fisher as Kassie], we had to find new ways to keep that stamina up - a nine-year-old couldn't put their body through that sort of stress. So doing, like, push-ups and letting out a primal scream before each take - with a little nine-year-old covered head to toe in blood next to me. They're like, "Action! Rolling!". Everyone would take their headphones off, we'd scream, and they'd put them back on. We'd gee ourselves up as though we were athletes, and make it like exercise, in a way.

**How was it spending so much time covered in fake blood?**

It was a form of torture in itself. Art department blood is sticky. I couldn't sit down - I'd have to peel my calf off my thigh, and I walked around with a water bottle to spritz and release my eyelids so I could close them. I'd have lunch with my napkins stuck to me. I'm like, "This is not okay." [Producer] Rob Tapert gave us the warning when we got to set, before shooting: "It's an *Evil Dead* film. There will be lots of blood. You're going to sometimes want to leave your body."



**For those of us who've never wielded a chainsaw in anger, is there a technique to it?**

Well, you've definitely got to get your bicep curls on before. It's one of the biggest adrenaline rushes of my life - that moment of being covered in blood, and having a chainsaw and letting out a primal scream. I felt invincible. It was like it was a part of me. It did something. In the moment it's above my head, that moment of drilling it, and the crazy eye, while it [blood] is spitting into my eyes, I'm like, "Why are my eyes not closing? Am I even there?" I think that's what the chainsaw does to one.

**Does a role like this eventually seep into your dreams?**

Definitely. I'd go home and be twitching in my sleep, or wake up with a big gasp, and there was just brutal murder in my sleep. I'd come to work and feel like I just lived a day on set at work. I just was in that energetic state. It was like I was in a videogame: "Must defeat! Must defeat!"

Because of the carnage, we shot in chronological order - with continuity and set decoration, the only way through is through. With Lee, as the director, conducting it almost like I'm your main character in the videogame, and you're going through the house playing the game. "Now we're in this room, these are the obstacles, this is your weapon..." Such a bizarre way of shooting. And every day got weirder. My life became a total bizarre trip!



Lee Cronin (centre): miraculously blood-free.

**“That’s what I love about *Evil Dead* movies, that constant refreshment of horror”**

instalments? "I wanted to do something new," Cronin says. "As much as I said I always wanted to make an *Evil Dead* movie, if the guys had put a script in front of me and said, 'Here we go: it's at the cabin, it's with Ash,' I probably would have said no, because I want to tell my own stories. But they didn't want that either."

"I'm very drawn to the horror of the domestic," he explains. "To me, it's the most beautiful cheat sheet as a filmmaker, because you're getting to tap into things that people are so familiar with. Not everybody's spent a weekend in a cabin in the woods with their friends, but at some stage everybody's had a sense of home, or had their version of a family unit around them."

"Also, being a fan of these movies, I was like, 'I want to see Deadites in downtown LA, in a family home. What does that look like?' It felt like the natural move if the goal was to take the franchise somewhere new."

While it's not exactly unknown for horror to place children in harm's way, here it's very





Cronin shares a shot of this tasty Easter egg...

much front and centre ("Mommy loves you to death" declares the poster's tagline, over an image of an evilly grinning Ellie hugging her kids.) How far was Cronin willing to take that?

"All the way!" he laughs, before adding more thoughtfully, "You've got to earn the violence, because otherwise it's just gratuitous and doesn't necessarily have any value. Without going too deep into it, the world is a challenging place. When I was approaching the story I was like: families are squeezed into smaller and smaller boxes now. Times are

harder. That was something I was thinking about. Then the horror filmmaker in me said, 'Life's already tough. What happens if something truly terrifying knocks on the door?' Then I'm like a dog with a bone. At that point, I don't think, 'Is it appropriate? Is it inappropriate?' I'm like: these are the harsh truths of the way the world is, and if I can use the Deadites to express that, we're going after the children."

And just how far does he push the violence? (Anyone who saw the trailer, quailed, and then

binned their cheese grater will have some idea...) "I definitely don't hold back," Cronin says. "My own taste is yes, you're going to see the knife going in, but it's not torture porn. To me that's not actually what *Evil Dead* should be, because what I want to happen is as soon as you've gone 'Holy shit!', guess what, something else is about to happen."

"That's what I love about *Evil Dead* movies, that constant refreshment of horror. I wanted it to be a roller coaster. So just as something's happened, and you're catching your breath, you get hit with the next thing. That's the pace of the movie. You can't tell that relentless steam train of a story if you spend too much time gazing at the gore."

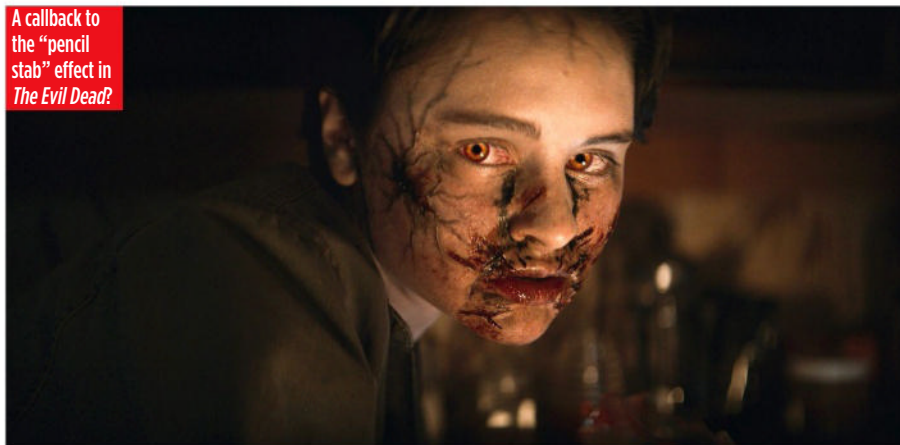
### SETTING THE TONE

When it comes to tone, the franchise has been very flexible. The first film, which earned the "video nasty" label in the UK after being placed on the Director of Public Prosecutions's list of films believed to violate the Obscene Publications Act, sold itself as... what was it now...

"The Ultimate Experience In Gruelling Terror," Cronin helpfully chips in. "I know that because it's written on the VHS copy I have."

Whereas *Evil Dead II* took a more comedic, cartoonish approach: in reality, if you had to cut a hand off and fit a chainsaw over the stump, you wouldn't say "Groovy!" – you'd be too busy bleeding to death after collapsing in shock. *Army Of Darkness* was a swashbuckling Middle Ages romp. And Fede Álvarez's 2013 revival was a grim affair, with some distressingly gnarly violence: a woman cutting her arm off with an electric carving knife; a nail gun attack. Where does this film sit? →

A callback to the "pencil stab" effect in *The Evil Dead*?





# TWISTED SISTER

Alyssa Sutherland on playing the mother of all scary Deadites



## What's Ellie like at the start of the film?

She's really under the gun. Her husband's up and left, so she's taking care of three kids on her own. The building they live in is about to be demolished, so she has to find a new place to live. Then Beth shows up on her doorstep. She hasn't answered my last few calls, and I've got a chip on my shoulder about it.

So there's some conflict between the sisters in the beginning. One thing I loved about Lee [Cronin]'s script is that it's so character-driven. We've done a good job of establishing the relationships really quickly, and I think you care about us because of it. That's new for *Evil Dead*, for The Force to be terrorising a family unit and coming into their home. It really raises the stakes.

## It's rare to see children in danger from their mother...

It's controversial, and what I love about *Evil Dead* is that they don't censor stuff like that – we really went for it. Some people probably aren't going to like the fact that a mother is terrorising her kids. I think it's a really daring thing to do. It's naughty – like, we made a *naughty* film! We all kind of got off on the fact that this will be hard for some people.

I like that they had the guts to do it, because how long ago was *The Shining*? We can watch Jack Nicholson go after his family – how much longer has it taken to see a woman doing that? Society's in a place now where we can do that, have fun, and know it's okay – it's just a film, we don't have to take it more seriously than that.

## How did you approach playing the possessed Ellie?

Finding the physicality of her really helped. I had a playlist I'd listen to – dark, bass-y things I'd found, a lot of instrumental stuff. A song by a band called Puscifer... I don't even know what the song was called. I don't know how much time I spent in my hotel room, before we started filming, listening to this playlist and just *moving*.

The thing I love about acting is finding a flow state. It's addictive, that feeling. That's what I'm aiming for every day on-set: to feel that trust in myself, be in the moment, and allow whatever happens to happen. Once I got in there and found it, it was a free for all. And Lee was so great – he made me feel comfortable to try things, and go all over the place with her.

## How physically demanding was it?

I think I got off lightly! Lily had to be scared for her life for a couple of months, and that's a huge undertaking. I come from a modelling background where I had ridiculous things done to me, and had to stand in snow in tiny dresses, near hypothermia, so I'm quite resilient physically.

I was able to have fun terrorising people.

I'm trying to fix my people-pleasing ways. Because of doing that for so long I think I have some repressed stuff where I haven't said the thing I wanted to say at the time. So I was able to draw upon that and let loose!



“I still wanted there to be a cinematic width to it – I still wanted it to feel epic”

“I would say it probably falls somewhere between *Evil Dead II* and *Evil Dead 2013*,” Cronin says. “It doesn’t take much influence from *Army Of Darkness*, but it definitely takes influence from *Evil Dead II* – in terms of its energy, but not its comedy. The way I presented the horror on-screen is quite madcap, in its own way. And there’s quite a lot of tension also, in-between those more grand, bloody set-pieces.”

Is there space for Raimi’s brand of surrealism? We’re thinking, for example, of the moment in *The Evil Dead* when Ash reaches out to touch a mirror, and finds that its surface is liquid. “It is a touch more grounded. But at the same time, one of the fun things about jumping into an *Evil Dead* movie is you need to acknowledge the rules, but you don’t need to necessarily stick to the rules.

“So there are still things that happen just because there’s evil in this world – which I found a lot of fun, because quite often when you’re developing a story you’re having to try and pin it to logic.”





No children  
were harmed  
in the making  
of this film!

What about the look of it? The Raimi movies have a distinctive style, with their Dutch angles, rapid-cut montages (a big influence on Edgar Wright), and floating Force-POV shots (infamously achieved, at first, by running along holding a plank with the camera bolted to it, as the cost of a Steadicam was out of the question). Did Cronin and his cinematographer aim to emulate or innovate?

"I'm really aware that *Evil Dead* has some iconic visual ideas," he says, "And I was very comfortable going, 'I want to do the Force'. But what I've done is subvert things in certain ways. Like, there's an element of the Force in the movie at one point where maybe it's *not* the Force at all – there's a little gag built in.

"I've taken the things that I love but remixed them through my own vision. So while it feels familiar in a lot of ways, you definitely feel like it's been interpreted by a different person.

"One thing that was important to me," he adds, "was that though it was urban, and very contained, I still wanted there to be a cinematic width to it – I still wanted it to feel epic. So that was actually our starting point, in terms of how we approached it."

And when it comes to feeling authentically part of this world, how about the details? We already know of one Easter egg, courtesy of a tweet by the director: a pizza box bearing the company name "Henrietta's Pizza" (a nod to an

## DEAD BEATS

Sam Raimi-sampling sounds to put you in an *Evil* mood

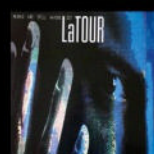
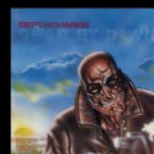
*Evil Dead* dialogue has turned up in lots of music – and not just tracks by bands called things like Goreshit and Necrophagia... Here's four of our favourites.

### COLOURBOX "HOT DOGGIE" (1987)

Martyn and Steven Young were the M and S in M|A|R|R|S, creators of 1987 smash "Pump Up The Volume". As 4AD act Colourbox, the duo sampled the possessed Cheryl saying "You will die!" and "One by one..." from *The Evil Dead* for this contribution to label compilation *Lonely Is An Eyesore*. Her demonic taunting sits alongside snippets of *Lifeforce*, *The Last Starfighter* and *Two Thousand Maniacs*!

### DEPTH CHARGE "DEAD BY DAWN" (1990)

J Saul Kane (aka Depth Charge) is better known for his Wu Tang Clan-predating sampling of kung fu movies. This trip hop track, however, is all horror: *Last House*



On The Left, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, and the titular croaky threat, uttered by a levitating Ed Getley in *Evil Dead II*.

### LATOUR "PEOPLE ARE STILL HAVING SEX" (1991)

Surely the stealthiest Deadite sample is the one tucked away in this saucy slice of electro pop, a number 15 hit for DJ William LaTour. We doubt many purchasers realised the seductive utterance "Well, hello lover!" stems from *Evil Dead II*. It's spoken by the decapitated head of Ash's girlfriend Linda as it lies in his lap – just before it bites him...

### SUBNATION "SCOTTIE" (1993)

This classic of the jungle genre combines the usual frenetic beats (utilising the endlessly sampled "Amen break") with a conversation from the first film between Ash and his pal Scottie, who hysterically cries "We're all gonna die!" Cheery.

*Evil Dead II* character) and the slogan "Come get some!" (an Ash catchphrase from *Army Of Darkness*). Will there be more? What about Sam Raimi's 1973 Oldsmobile Delta 88 – the vintage car that's cropped up in all four previous entries. Can we expect an automotive cameo from that?

"There's a couple of direct references, but also much more subtle things that people might want to dig in and find," Cronin teases. "What I looked to do was take things that are within the *Evil Dead* universe, bring them into my own little kitchen, and cook them up in a slightly different way. Although there's no Oldsmobile Delta, the chainsaw in the movie is

exactly the same colour as the Oldsmobile Delta. So there's more overt things in play, that people can grip straight onto, and really subtle things like that.

"I feel like, for the true fans, it might take two or three viewings to pick them all out – ideally at the cinema," Cronin adds, dollar signs suddenly filling his eyes. "I think three to four should get you through about 80% of the references."

Then everyone has to buy the Blu-ray to spot the last few, right?

"Yeah, exactly!"

*Evil Dead Rise* is in cinemas from 21 April.



"Stabby, stabby, stabby, oi, oi, oi!"



DUNGEONS & DRAGONS:  
HONOUR AMONG THIEVES



# HERE **BE** DRAGONS

THE GRANDDADDY OF  
ROLEPLAYING GETS AN  
IRREVERENT MAKEOVER IN  
**DUNGEONS &  
DRAGONS: HONOUR  
AMONG THIEVES.**

WRITER/DIRECTORS  
JONATHAN GOLDSTEIN  
AND JOHN FRANCIS DALEY  
AND PRODUCER JEREMY  
LATCHAM UNPACK A  
FUNNY OLD GAME...

WORDS: **STUART MANNING**







Michelle  
Rodriguez and  
Chris Pine:  
Holga/Edgin.



PRODUCER JEREMY Latcham is just back from Comic-Con with a spring in his step when *SFX* catches up with him and writer/directors Jonathan Goldstein and John Francis Daley to talk *Dungeons & Dragons: Honour Among Thieves*.

"To be back at Hall H for the first time since the pandemic and to be opening the whole thing was really, really cool," he says, sounding ever so slightly relieved. "I feel like people dug it. It was great to be back there with something new." He pauses. "I do feel there's a lot of franchises that are *mature* at this point."

"Like a cheese?" asks Goldstein.

Latchman is amused but isn't taking the bait. "It's nice to have a new franchise... a new movie that has potential to grow into something great, something new for audiences to dive into." Finally, he takes the bait. "New cheese."

*Dungeons & Dragons's* revival has been a long time coming. The original role-playing game is still going strong almost 50 years on, but big-screen success has eluded the property. *Honour Among Thieves* follows three forgettable films after a decade-long break and takes a fresh approach. Goldstein, Davey and Latcham first worked together on 2017's *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, and were looking for a shared project. When Goldstein and

"There's the dragon. Now we just find a dungeon."







## CHRIS PINE

Plays Edgin,  
the Bard

**Edgin is a somewhat unqualified action hero. Is that fun to play?**

Even with someone like Captain Kirk or Steve Trevor in *Wonder Woman*, what I enjoy is playing regular, normal guys that either think they have it all going on and don't... or in the case of Edgin, don't really have any discernible skills at all. It made me laugh - the idea that everybody has special powers, and Edgin has a non-magical lute attached to his back. I just followed what made me smile.

**Did you have to learn to play the lute and any songs for the part?**

I've played guitar for around 30 years, so I vaguely know how to make my way around a stringed instrument. The lute is only four strings, so it wasn't like they tasked me with learning a Bach Sonata or something. I learned to play a couple of songs.

**As the lead actor, is it challenging balancing the comedy with peril and moments of emotion?**

That all boils down to tone and the tone is the job of the directors. We definitely had conversations about how broad the comedy would get. The way that I like to work on set is to give them as many different options - big to small, broad to tight - because then, in the editing room, they have all sorts of colours to play with. The shorthand I got from them was like, "10% more... 10% less." They'd show it to me like a dial. That was helpful for me.



"I told you people to put a coaster down."

Doric, Simon and Holga bravely run away.



Directors John Francis Daley and Jonathan Goldstein.

Francis parted company with *The Flash*, suddenly the stars aligned.

"*Dungeons & Dragons* is having such a resurgence in popularity," explains Davey. "People are discovering it through pop culture. It is something that is now in the zeitgeist and not purely for nerds and geeks. Something that has broken through as culturally relevant."

Although *Honour* was already well into development when it happened, Goldstein credits the months of pandemic lockdown as a catalyst for renewed interest. "This was a game you could play from the safety of your home with your friends online."

"I also think that there is a simplicity to this world," adds Davey. "You're able to leave →



## MICHELLE RODRIGUEZ

Plays Holga,  
the Barbarian

**Had you encountered *Dungeons & Dragons* before this?**

Yeah, it was in Jersey City, playing in the basement with a bunch of my geeky friends. That was my introduction to it. We broke a lot of rules, inventing our own characters. That game is extraordinary for anybody who's trying to stretch their imagination. It's a really good writer's tool.

**Was it easy to get under Holga's skin?**

She seemed like a pretty matter-of-fact Germanic type of character. What you see is what you get, very unfiltered. You know, like all my German friends!

**She has a pretty amazing costume too.**

I was incredibly uncomfortable at first because it took me seven minutes to use the bathroom, but we got the hang of it and added some zippers. I grew out all my armpit hair, so that's real - it's not glued on. So I really felt the part, plus I gained a good 15 pounds of muscle. I'm still having a hard time losing that muscle. I've had to add a new size to my wardrobe.

**Did you enjoy immersing yourself in this world?**

There's something really inspiring about having fantastic sets with great design. These guys were next-level. It's way better than walking onto a set that's just bluescreens with a bunch of orange stickers. For me, that's just too much imagination. I'm not six years old. It's harder these days for me to sit in a cardboard box and pretend it's a rocket.





## REGÉ-JEAN PAGE

Plays Xenk,  
the Paladin

### What was your first reaction to this project?

I don't think anyone quite knew what they were getting into when they picked up a *Dungeons & Dragons* script. I was surprised at how there was a very human throughline to the story. We all put it down smiling, having laughed and cared about this world, which is quite a delicate balance to strike.

### Xenk arrives midway and throws a spanner into the group's dynamic...

He appears to be the only sensible adult and we constantly highlight the absolute hilarity of that – of him being so sensible that it's ridiculous. Jonathan Goldstein had this description that he's like the actor who's wandered in from the very serious fantasy film over on the other lot.

### Does the suit of armour give you a different demeanour?

Oh, it's great! It's hugely empowering – that moment where you walk out and go, "You know what? I'm breaking the Edna Mode rule. I'm wearing a cape and it feels great!" It was even better with a pair of Aviators, but alas, I didn't manage to get that into the movie.

### Was it fun working as part of such an eclectic cast?

I think the rapport grows and grows. We had a riotous game of *D&D* to start finding our dynamics and our chemistry. Everyone in this cast is sharp as a tack. These are very talented, very intelligent, very funny people, but also vastly different – a finely balanced orchestra of very odd instruments.



You've got to love a good portal to somewhere.

## “It's a living, breathing, evolving thing. It's not like a frozen novel”

technology, leave the contemporary world behind and go to something that is entirely new and different. For lack of a better word, there's a cosiness to a medieval landscape. When you add creatures and magic... then you have something really special.”

Despite its uncomplicated appeal, the writers insist that *Dungeons & Dragons* works as a franchise for today's audiences. “That's built into the game,” says Goldstein firmly. “It's a living, breathing, evolving thing. It's not like a novel that was frozen in 1940. It is very much of the time in which you play and we wanted to capture that spirit in the film. It's not contemporary people, per se, but the sensibilities of the characters will be familiar to the audience.”

The result is a deliberately mainstream mash-up, combining a dizzying range of tones and genres. The story includes the obligatory action-adventure trappings but mixes in flashes of buddy comedy, slapstick and nods to everything from *Time Bandits* to the high-octane set-pieces of *Mission: Impossible*.

“As a filmgoer, I like populist kinds of movies,” says Latcham, outlining the team's take. “I like movies that are made for everybody. I could watch this movie and feel like it's for me, and I can take my grandmother to it and know she's gonna have a blast.”

Davey agrees. “The one thing I've heard most from people who've seen the movie so far is, ‘I don't usually like movies like this, but...’ I'm that way too. Sometimes, when I see a movie with a medieval setting, I feel like, ‘Oh, it's gonna be sort of pompous.’”

### WORLD-BUILDING

Although the team admits to occasionally bending the stricter rules of the gameplay in the name of dramatic licence, they insist that their approach has been faithful. Brand custodians Wizards of the Coast played a part too, coming up with some new extensions of the fictional world to fit the story.

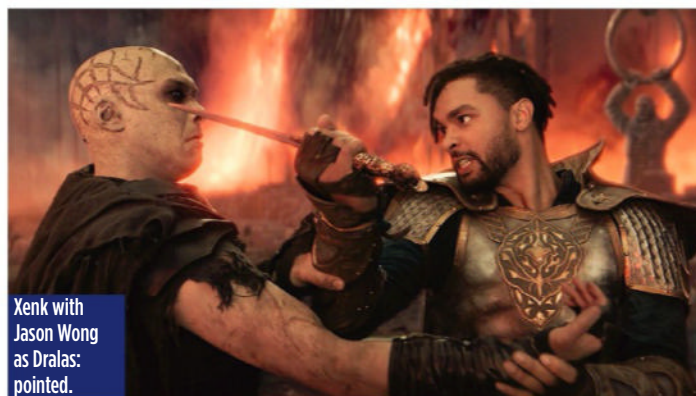
“They were incredibly helpful,” says Latcham. “We went up to Seattle when we were in the early stages of figuring out what this movie was going to be, and spent time with them. There were things that posed challenges. For example, we have a prison at the beginning of the movie. Up till then, there hadn't been a prison in the *D&D* world, so they incorporated







Regé-Jean Page (left) as Xenk the Paladin.



Xenk with Jason Wong as Dralas: pointed.

one into the lore. We worked with them on who would operate such a prison... that kind of thing. It was really nice to feel that coordination and kinship.”

Not unlike the game itself, *Dungeons & Dragons*'s on-screen world is an eclectic realm. Goldstein felt that the environments needed to tread a fine line between verisimilitude and appealing visuals. “One of the things our production designer Ray [Chan] was always saying was, ‘The world was not all brown back then. The colours were vibrant and bright.’ If you look at the design of the movie, it’s really

colourful and feels lived-in and like it’s inhabited.”

Chan’s designs incorporated real-life locations across the British Isles, along with studio sets built in Northern Ireland. Wizards of the Coast also contributed ideas. “There’s this guy, Jeremy Jarvis, who’s in charge of their art direction of the whole universe of *D&D*,” says Goldstein. “The thing he kept saying to me, over and over again, was the fact that this civilisation has been there for a while. So there’s layers to it. And you can feel that in the design of the film – things built on top of →



## JUSTICE SMITH

Plays Simon,  
the Sorcerer

### Were you familiar with *Dungeons & Dragons* beforehand?

I wasn’t, but fortunately, I got to play it before we started the film. We all played as a cast, around what the sequence of events would be for our characters after the film’s story, which was really fun and helpful to get into character. Chris is trying to get us to play again.

### Who was the most competitive?

I want to say Michelle because she has a rough and ready attitude, but she’s also the sweetest personality. But then I’m pretty competitive as well.

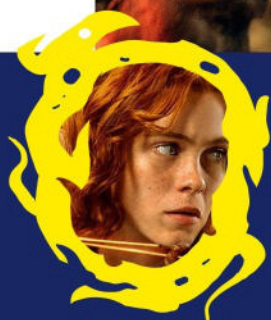
### What else did you do to prepare?

I had just met somebody in my personal life who had a real self-deprecating attitude and masked his insecurities with humour. I thought, this is awesome – I know *exactly* how to play this... a guy who makes fun of himself before anybody else can.

### How did the film’s creatures compare to acting alongside dinosaurs in *Jurassic World*?

There was some greenscreen, but they really did champion practical effects on this. I’m of the belief that practical effects read better on camera than CG. When you see a giant puppet of some fantasy creature it really feels like old-school movie-making. And I love wire work so much. It’s so much fun, feeling weightless. There was some acting, in the sense that Simon is not meant to be fine in those moments, but as soon as they cut, I’d be doing flips and having the time of my life.





## SOPHIA LILLIS

Plays Doric,  
the Tielfling Druid

**Were you familiar with the D&D world going in?**

I played *Dungeons & Dragons* in high school. Back then I also listened to a lot of D&D podcasts and whatnot. I've always thought it'd be such a good idea to make a movie out of D&D, because that's basically what you're doing when you're playing. You've got the characters, you've got the plot... you figure out how each of these characters will resolve an obstacle in their own unique way. I got this script and I immediately wanted to be a part of it.

**Doric feels like a sensible voice amid this rag-tag gang of characters.**

She's the straight man of the group. Everyone else is doing their own wild comedy. They're all outlaws and thieves and she's the only person who sticks by the rules and tries to rein everyone in. A lot of her humour is very deadpan.

**Was filming a culture shock after playing more grounded roles?**

I've never had to play something that wasn't necessarily human... at least I wasn't an alien or a robot. It wasn't that difficult, but it was something I thought about a bit when I first started. I had horns and prosthetic ears. Apparently, I had a tail somewhere, which they put in after. I was happy I didn't have to wear an actual tail when we were shooting. With Chris Pine and Michelle Rodriguez, I was around these veterans of this genre.

It made my introduction to this world a lot easier.



Time for  
another fight?  
The gang  
aren't thrilled.



Doric (Sophia  
Lillis, right)  
gets a wee  
fright.



Daisy Head  
as Sofina.  
lightning the  
mood.

things, built on top of things. It's vibrant and makes it feel different to other fantasy films."

Davey agrees: "We weren't creating this world ourselves, but we definitely helped to flesh it out so that it felt presentable for the cinematic space," he says. "I think it's gonna be really exciting for fans of the game, and also people that have no familiarity with it."

Both writers were keen to make the gameplay an active part of the film's storyline, using some lateral thinking to reinterpret the game's quest and item-gathering tasks as

complex, inventive heist moments. "There is a sequence where our gang is trying to get a portal onto an item, which they then have to get into a carriage carrying treasure," says Goldstein, explaining one particular production conundrum.

"The thing is on the move, so the physics of how the portals interact with each other was very complicated, because we could see through the portals. For shooting, it had to be broken up into stuff we did on stage, stuff we did out on location... So within 10 seconds of film, we're in four different places on four different days."





Hugh Grant  
doing what he  
does best as  
Forge.



Best not make  
a Barbarian  
angry if you  
can help it.



Those of us who grew up on after-school broadcasts of the '80s cartoon adaptation might be surprised by the absence of Eric, Diana, Presto and company from the main story.

Rather than flinging contemporary characters into the world of the game, the new film takes a more immersive approach, casting *Star Trek*'s Chris Pine and *Avatar*'s Michelle Rodriguez as new characters, leading a rag-tag bunch of personalities drawn from across the archetypes of the game. "It's funny, the UK crew and cast knew the cartoon intimately," says Davey. "The American audiences were not that familiar."

#### FROMAGE NOUVEAU

Oh well. The Dungeon Master's big-screen return will have to wait for another day, but the movie does find time for a brief cameo for the old crew. Even though it's a blink-and-you'll-miss-it aside, the world-building was still a concern.

"Their costumes are very cartoony, and we didn't want it to feel like an outlier from the rest of the design of our film," explains Latcham. "So it was a real juggling act. We didn't want to suddenly put Teletubbies in this movie."

For now, the team says *Honour Among Thieves* is a one-off, but they're clearly

## “It's funny, the UK crew and cast knew the cartoon intimately”

interested in a return visit. "We have a million plans and ideas for where this could go," says Latcham. "But first and foremost, we wanted to make a film that we were proud of and something that captured all the things that we think make a big tentpole movie like this so appealing. That was our number one agenda."

Davey takes up his point: "If audiences enjoy it as much as we do, I think people are gonna want to live in this world, want to visit these characters and get to know this place better because it's so rich and fun and singular. It's so different to everything that I've seen before. The movie's a ride and a half."

Goldstein jumps in. "We did not approach this with the intention of 'this is the first of many'. We'd love to continue because it's such a great open-ended world with so much potential. It's not mature cheese."

And with that, we're back where we started. "It's not mature cheese," deadpans Davey. "It's new." ●

*Dungeons & Dragons: Honour Among Thieves* is in cinemas from 31 March.



## HUGH GRANT

Plays Forge  
Fitzwilliam, the Rogue

**It's a departure to see you in a full-blown fantasy film...**

I suppose I was a bit surprised as well. I have occasionally been sent big blockbuster special-effects-type things, but they've never struck a chord in me. So I wasn't expecting much, but I found it completely charming and funny.

**What did you make of your co-stars?**

I'm slightly frightened of Michelle. I don't know why. I think she's gonna beat me up. No one has ever worn a costume better than she wears that costume. She's from the streets of New York and I'm from the cloisters of Oxford... So she frightens me, but she couldn't be nicer. Good huffer.

**You seem to be enjoying yourself as Forge.**

I can't remember how he was described, but it soon became clear he was a duplicitous egomaniacal, vain monster. I love those parts. I've maybe done too many.

**Forge feels like a distant cousin to *Paddington's* Phoenix Buchanan.**

Yeah, it must be me. My whole life has been a con. Everyone thought I was charming, but actually, I'm a vain monster.

**Are you looking forward to the film's release?**

I'm scared stiff of the gamers because they're very territorial about the game they love. So they may want to hate it... but they're not allowed to.

**With Russell T Davies returning to *Doctor Who*, might you make a return?**

I'm not sure I could watch *Doctor Who*, even now. It frightened me so much as a child. Even the music...



RENFIELD

# RENFIELD



TYPEDFACE AND STOCK © GETTY



RENFIELD



# OF THE N I G H T

GIVEN THAT  
HIS BOSS IS  
THE PRINCE OF  
DARKNESS,  
IT'S NO  
WONDER  
**RENFIELD**  
WANTS TO  
QUIT THE JOB

BY  
**BRYAN CAIRNS**





Nicolas Cage  
and Nicholas  
Hoult: the odd  
couple.

HRIS MCKAY adopted a simple mantra when it came to directing the upcoming action-horror-comedy *Renfield*: "Make a fucked-up Dracula movie."

At first, that colourful mission statement might sound like a departure for McKay. He had previously helmed episodes of *Robot Chicken* and the animated *The Lego Batman Movie* before transitioning to the time-travelling alien invasion blockbuster *The Tomorrow War*. But actually the king of the vampires and his minion were right up McKay's street.

"I grew up watching John Carpenter movies," McKay tells *SFX*. "I'm a huge David Cronenberg fan. Tobe Hooper... *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. *Poltergeist*. *Jaws* was a big movie for me. To this day, I gravitate towards horror. The perennial Christmas present was a Stephen King book – I grew up reading a lot of King.

"There was a neighbour kid down the block and his parents had a VCR. His parents were very permissive. I got to see *Dawn Of The Dead*. I got to see *The Howling*. I got to see all this stuff that was hard to find or not in the theatre.

"As I got older, there was *The Fly* and *Scream*," he continues. "Every kid in my high

school, on their lockers would be sports heroes or somebody from a movie. On my locker, it was pictures of George Romero, Carpenter and Cronenberg. There were images from *The Exorcist*. I was probably considered very strange..."

### RAISING THE DEAD

That weird and wacky sensibility paid off. After he'd completed *The Tomorrow War*, Universal sent McKay Ryan Ridley's *Renfield* screenplay, which was based on an idea by *The Walking Dead* creator Robert Kirkman. Charmed by the over-the-top premise, grounded characters and the story's potential, McKay didn't hesitate to sign on board.

"I love Dracula," McKay says. "I love how gothic and romantic and sympathetic he is, whether it's Bela Lugosi, Christopher Lee or

Gary Oldman. You feel for Dracula. He is one of the great misunderstood monsters. Yes, I wanted you to feel that, but it's like being in a bad relationship. You have someone who is just completely self-absorbed. They see nothing of their own faults. They are able to wrap people up in their spell, either through promises or gaslighting. Early on in the movie, we get a little history of Dracula and Renfield's relationship. We see Renfield spun around by this guy, who uses pressure, fear and intimidation. But he also uses charisma and the fact that they are friends."

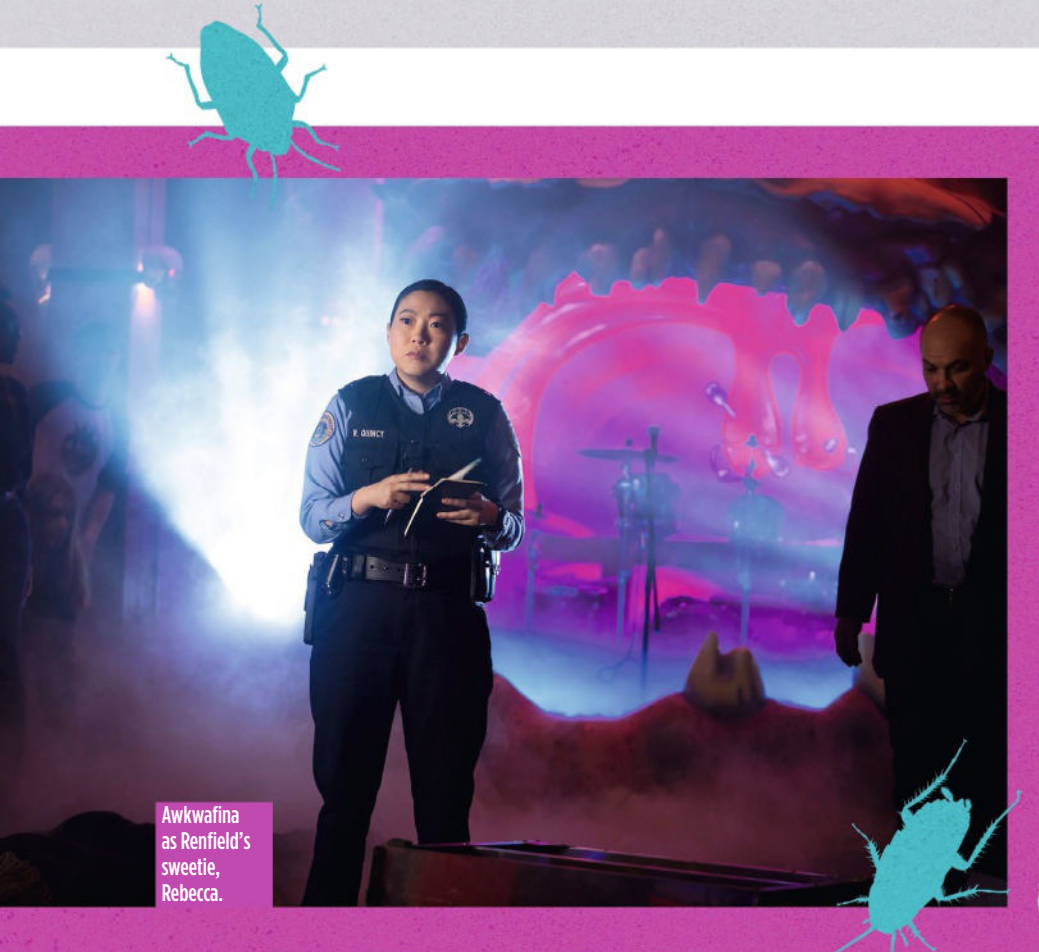
*Renfield* finds the titular henchman, played by Nicholas Hoult, enthralled by Dracula (Nicolas Cage). Over the years, Renfield's been on the hook to cherry-pick victims for his bloodsucking master and lure them to their deaths. Disillusioned with carrying out the Count's bidding and feeling guilt-ridden over every drop of blood Dracula spills, Renfield finally seeks a way out of this toxic situation.

"Renfield meets Awkwafina's Rebecca, where she's standing up to a bad guy in a hostage situation," explains McKay. "He is inspired by her: 'Wait a minute. That could be me.' Plus, he's been going to these Co-dependents Anonymous meetings.

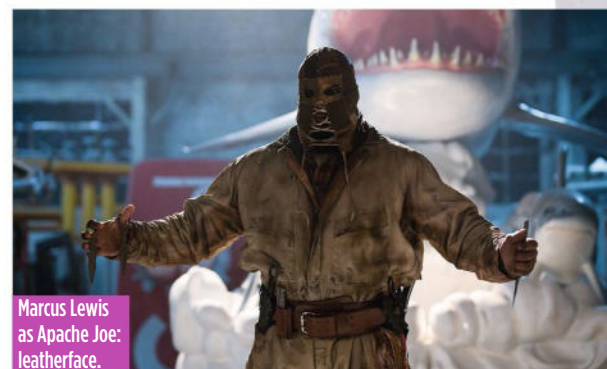
"At first, we wonder why he's there. Then we find out he is going out and picking off the abusers to the people in this co-dependent



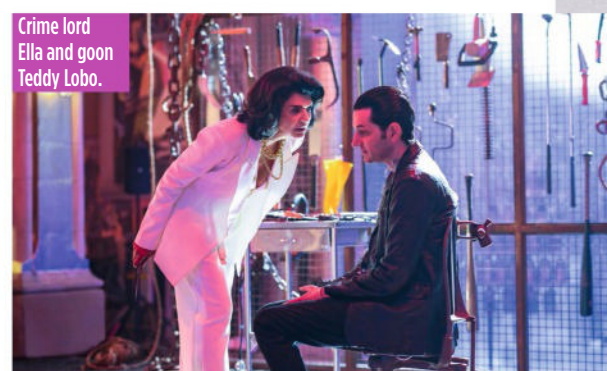




Awkwafina as Renfield's sweetie, Rebecca.



Marcus Lewis as Apache Joe: leatherface.



Crime lord Ella and goon Teddy Lobo.

anonymous meeting. He is kind of helping these people suffering these bad relationships by going out and taking out their abusers and bringing them back to Dracula. He meets Rebecca and he is sort of smitten with her and the fact that she stands up to this bully. He sees something in that and gets inspired."

Dracula, however, will tolerate none of that defiance. Feeling betrayed and lashing out, the Prince of Darkness and his servant almost come across as bitter lovers. That emotional conflict proved to be key in developing the duo's dynamic.

"There is this hurt that Dracula has, and this revenge he wants Renfield to experience," McKay says. "Once Renfield rejects him, Dracula is going to level the city in order to make Renfield feel his wrath and pain. Dracula is still funny, though. He's very Cage. He thinks he is a god and he constantly tells Renfield, 'I am a god. I can do anything. Be on my side of the equation. Don't be with the mortals. We could be gods here.'"

### LOVE SONG FOR A VAMPIRE

Whether it's designing a ferocious alien in *The Tomorrow War* or visualising a ghastly Dracula in *Renfield*, McKay understands the pressure of putting your own stamp on genre tropes. How do you make your vision stand out? He took a similar approach to Dracula as he did with *The Lego Batman Movie*. Instead of fretting over distancing his Prince of Darkness from



Renfield's not afraid to get a bit handy sometimes.

## “You feel for Dracula. He is one of the great misunderstood monsters”

previous iterations, he embraced the legacy of vampires.

"In the way that we suggested that Will Arnett's character in *Lego Batman* was every single version of Batman throughout the years – that he was 1966 Adam West as well as Christian Bale – this Dracula and Renfield are part of history," McKay says. "We have pendants on Dracula's classic costume which look just like the pendant from Bela Lugosi. However, it has an image of Cage kind of looking like Vlad the Impaler that alludes to the Francis Ford Coppola *Dracula*. We have

the teeth. I wanted to do all of his teeth super-sharp like Lon Chaney in *London After Midnight*. And giving him the red eyes, when he gets blood lust like Christopher Lee... There are pieces of all this stuff."

McKay mixes terror and tension with shots of adrenaline. That means Renfield – who gains enhanced abilities after devouring the life-force of insects – can battle it out with the bad guys or defy Dracula. McKay cites a brawl between the two lead supernatural beings, as well as Renfield and Rebecca fleeing an apartment complex, as stand-out action

segments. He credits stunt coordinator and second unit director Chris Brewster for crafting those entertaining sequences

"Obviously, we wanted Renfield to use his powers," says McKay. "I prefer things like that to be a little grounded. I don't love, especially for a movie like this, where things are suddenly going into an all-digital realm, where you have digital doubles flying around. Renfield can jump farther than other people. He can run a little faster and he can punch harder."

"Dracula is a little more extreme. He can crawl up walls and do all sorts of stuff. Renfield has a small taste of Dracula's powers. I don't want it to feel like he's Superman and invincible. You see Renfield get hurt and pay the price. I like vulnerability in a character."

"I talked a lot about Jackie Chan stuff," he continues. "I wanted there to be lots of cause and effect, and to be able to get some humour →





Tedward Lobo (Benjamin Schwartz): oops.

out of the fight scenes when we could. I wanted there to be special effects gags that we could get away with in a movie like this. We would have a practical stunt that goes into a practical special effect, that then has digital effects augmentation or digital effects take over on certain things. There were a lot of moving parts and it all started with Chris's pre-viz."

### COUNT THE DAYS

A decade ago, Universal Studios had plans for a revived cinematic universe where all their iconic monsters coexisted together. *Dracula Untold* unofficially kicked it off. Tom Cruise's *The Mummy* was set to cement this Dark Universe until it fizzled at the box office, forcing the studio to move on.

But with the success of Leigh Whannell's *The Invisible Man*, Ryan Gosling reportedly tackling *The Wolfman* and the release of *Renfield*, could a cohesive universe once again be on the table? Frankly, it seems unlikely.

"We haven't had any conversations about it," McKay says. "From the studio's perspective, this is a one-off thing. I figure they don't look at this as some kind of franchise-starter. The thing for me, personally, is I loved the relationship between Renfield and Dracula. I loved the relationship between Renfield and Rebecca. I love the idea that if Dracula is out there, are there other monsters out there, in a world where Renfield is now empowered to fight off people's monsters?"

"That's not necessarily where the movie goes," he adds. "I see more stories in Renfield and his relationship with Rebecca, Dracula and possibly other monsters out there."

Another universe McKay has been connected with is the DCEU. Warner Bros tapped him to helm *Nightwing*, a feature film centred on Dick Grayson, Batman's former sidekick. The project has been lingering in development hell for many moons – but McKay hasn't given up hope.

"Look, I am still hoping to do something with it," McKay says. "Now that James Gunn is involved... I haven't had any conversations with him or anybody over there, but I love that character. I hope I can do something with him. That would be amazing." ●

*Renfield* is in cinemas from 14 April.

# THE VAMPIRE'S ASSISTANT

Nicholas Hoult gets familiar as Renfield

**You're not a horror fan. Coming off *The Menu*, what made you say yes to *Renfield*?**

➤ I am a reluctant horror fan because I hate being scared. If something is good, it scares me and then I am uncomfortable and it plays tricks on my mind. For me, reading *Renfield*, I was like, "Wow. This is a really fun, different, original take on the Renfield story, taking this secondary or smaller character from the novels and classic films. Let's look at his life and assess it from a different angle and see what it is like when you work for the Lord of Darkness, Dracula himself, for 100 years and how that wears you down." And, then, look at the power dynamic in this co-dependent relationship within that, but under the guise of an action-comedy film.

**Most viewers recognise Renfield as Dracula's bug-eating lackey. How much did you know about the character going into this?**

➤ I knew a little bit. I had seen the classics and went back and watched them again. There are so many brilliant interpretations of Renfield, which I did try and take elements from or pay homage to. For instance, the Dwight Frye laugh [from the 1931 film] is so iconic that I wanted to try and implement that in my *Renfield*. People will hopefully see those ties and links.

But this is also a completely different tone and feel of a film compared to those. This is very much an action-comedy. Renfield, when you first meet him, has been working for Dracula for 100 years. He's gone past the insanity. He is just worn down. It's more about this power dynamic in this relationship, where he has been working for this boss and wants to get out, but is obviously struggling to do that.

**So why does he stay after being there for so long?**

➤ Over that time, his worth and his belief in himself, and even his confidence and all the things that would give him the ability to step

away, he doesn't have that in his personality any more. He has been worn down by Dracula. The wonderful thing about how Nic Cage plays him in this film is, yes, he's the Dark One and he's powerful and he drinks blood and does all these horrific things. But he is also someone who gets hurt and is someone who relies on Renfield, and feels like he is offering Renfield a way out of this disgusting life of humanity by giving him eternity.

Dracula can't understand why Renfield isn't thrilled to be alongside him and why his conscience is holding him back. That's the fun thing. It's finding those moments for Dracula to be gaslighting and breaking him apart and taking away any of Renfield's self-worth.

That was the interesting thing of plotting Renfield's journey throughout this film. He gets inspired. He thinks he finds a way to escape and start a new life, but he gradually gets drawn back in. It's whether wanting change, and actually implementing it, are two very different things.

**In what ways does Renfield's supernatural abilities level the playing field?**

➤ In this film, when Renfield eats bugs and consumes their life-force, it gives him a period of abilities in terms of speed, strength and reaction time. It doesn't level the playing field. Dracula is obviously way more powerful. But, in terms of his day-to-day job, it definitely gives him an edge and the ability to keep going and not be killed, I suppose.

**How does the action in *Renfield* compare to some of your other films such as *Mad Max: Fury Road* and *X-Men*?**

➤ Renfield isn't somebody who has ever trained. He is not like some Jason Bourne character who knows how to do all these cool moves. He is using what is around him. So, if that is kicking a table and impaling someone, or





attacking someone with a fork or ripping someone's arms from their torso and wielding those as batons, it's fun to have those moments of blood and gore. But Renfield is also hiding behind a serving tray and slicing someone's arms off with it because he is out of his depth, and people are shooting guns. Renfield is not someone who necessarily wants to hurt people. It's a means to an ends in some of these scenarios.

**Next up for you is Robert Eggers's *Nosferatu*. What distinguishes Dracula from this vampire?**

✦ We see Dracula at different stages throughout *Renfield*. That is what is fun in terms of the emotional roller coaster Cage takes us on. It is this co-dependent relationship, destructive to both in some ways.

Whereas, *Nosferatu* will be very different. In terms of where the character is at when we meet him, this is much later in the timeline. It's different in how they function and how they look and how they move. The core ideas are still similar and based on the same concepts, but the feel of the movies and the looks and everything about them is completely different.

**After portraying the Beast/Hank McCoy in the *X-Men* franchise, how open would you be to returning to the MCU in some capacity?**

✦ I would be open to it. I enjoy watching those films. If there was a role that made sense for me, I would happily jump back in. I had a great time playing Beast and making the *X-Men* movies. I don't know what Marvel is planning with the X-Men, but I'd like to see how they integrate them into that world. I don't know. I like balancing different characters and tones, but I had a really good time on those movies.

Mark (Brandon Scott Jones) has a little Renfield chat.





YELLOWJACKETS

THE SURPRISE  
HORROR HIT  
**YELLOWJACKETS**  
RETURNS WITH MORE  
TWISTS, CAST ADDITIONS  
AND DARKNESS  
INCARNATE

WORDS:  
**TARA BENNETT**

# QUEEN BEES





**I**T'S NO SECRET THAT there's an avalanche of new, scripted television coming at us every year, which makes it extra special when the weirder ones become hits.

For example, when Showtime Original series *Yellowjackets* landed in November 2021, no one expected a horror series about a team of New Jersey high school girl soccer players who survive a gruesome plane crash in the frigid northwest to become a critical and global phenomenon.

But its multiple timeline storytelling, set immediately post-crash in 1996 and also in 2021; large, mostly female ensemble cast; and frank exploration of dark issues, including hints at cannibalism, proved to be manna.

Returning for its second season this month, *Yellowjackets* picks right up in addressing its myriad of dangling cliffhangers, including the adult Shauna (Melanie Lynskey) covering up her murder of her extramarital lover; newly elected state Senator Taissa's (Tawny Cypress) emerging split personalities; and the adult Natalie (Juliette Lewis) getting kidnapped by fellow survivor Lottie (Simone Kessell). Meanwhile, in the past, the survivors were reeling after the freezing death of team captain Jackie Taylor (Ella Purnell).

#### TRUE RECKONING

Showrunner/writer Jonathan Lisco tells *SFX* during a break from post-production that the incredible reaction to the series really floored their entire creative team. "It's so rare to do something and then have it really land," he says. "And what gratifies me as well — and I speak for our entire creative team including [creators] Ashley Lyle and Bart Nickerson — is that a lot of the things that we seeded into the show, the nuance and complexity that we put there, that's exactly what people are commenting about."

"The thematic, and also the way in which we try to double-helix the horror around the comedy, and try to strike that tonal balance, is not pushing the audience away, or deflecting them. It's actually drawing them in exactly the way we anticipated, and hoped, that it would."

From the start, the *Yellowjackets* writers and their cast have not been afraid to expose the darkest hearts of their characters, from their catty teenage impulses to their questionable adult choices. All of the characters are messy and flawed to begin with, and then the plane crash puts every one of them through the most extreme of experiences. →



Simone Kessell plays adult Lottie, new to season two.



"In season one, it was about our teen characters learning to adapt to their harsh surroundings, and their adult selves trying to convince themselves that they could keep that trauma buried," Lisco explains. "Our middle-aged women were running away from what happened in the woods and trying to desperately put it behind them. But in season two, they get caught and they're forced to have a true reckoning."

"I will tell you that if you thought last season was intense, I think last season may seem sort of like a leisurely drive through wine country compared to what we have in store for you," Lisco teases. "And when I talk about more intense, I don't just mean gore. It will be emotionally and psychologically."

### SHADOW DEMONS

In 1996, Lisco confirms that the survivors are barely making do in their cabin as winter is now fully upon them. "The conditions are getting harsher. They're totally threatened by hunger, exhaustion, fear, dread and uncertainty. And there's a need to figure out rituals that will not only keep them alive physically, but more importantly, keep them from basically going insane. In a way, that's what makes this season darker."

The team is looking into the mouth of madness, and the repercussions of what they will do are still being felt, potently, 25 years later, with those who made it out alive. And Lisco says it's not just about watching these women keep secrets.

"We felt that our characters trying to, quote unquote, not face their demons, or have anyone discover what awful things they did in the past was only going to take us so far." Instead, the writers found a more "propulsive, deliciously sinister drive" in making the past more seductive than just plain awful.

"What they went through was harrowing, and even though it brought out the worst in

The teens discover fire and get quite confused.



**"It's not about an external monster in the woods who is going to eat our teens"**

them, 25 years later they're also haunted by and not necessarily ready to admit that they never felt more alive when they were out there," Lisco says. "If you've experienced that kind of just vivid living, whether it was terrible or not, there might be something built in biologically to all of us that craves it again."

Lisco says audiences will see that becoming more of a motivation for the women sorting through their pasts. "Their grown-up selves have all these stated desires. Like, in Shauna's case, it's save my marriage. In Taissa's, it's to become state senator. It's to be clean and stay that way for Natalie."

"But their primordial selves, like their shadow selves, kind of want to return to the woods and that rhapsodic space of that very dangerous and awful freedom."

Representing that in the past is Lottie (Courtney Eaton), who became a source of calm for some of the survivors, and a more unsettling presence for those disturbed by her

visions. Season two will introduce adult Lottie, a New Age practitioner who isn't the cult leader audiences have theorised she must be. Lisco says the writers think of her as a "reluctant messiah" who isn't a cliché. "She doesn't want to be the conduit for what she's feeling, but she can't but feel it. She's got all this stuff vibrating through her. She feels like she's getting messages."

Lisco says that whether these are from the darkness or the wilderness, audiences will see more of how Lottie struggles with how it uses her, and how it compels those around her.

Many viewers have theorised that Lottie is a conduit for something supernatural, tied to the mysterious sigils that keep appearing in the past and present. But Lisco warns that's not a path they are pursuing. "It's not about an external monster in the woods who is going to eat our teens," he clarifies. "And it's not exclusively about some supernatural force in the present which is making them do things."

Lauren Ambrose as Van: trouble for Tai?



Adult Misty (Christina Ricci) is still bad news.







"The question of whether or not it is imposed by some dark force — and I'm not saying that's not possible — or whether or not it is alchemically generated by the proximity of these specific women together in the world, I think that's a really interesting question to continue to mine. And we intend to continue to explore it.

"If we decide that we're leaning on one side or the other, we will not let our audience down. And we don't want to manipulate our audience. We're not playing games. We're exploring something on a deeper subconscious level, and a psychological level.

"We want it to be something that lives inside of people because they understand it on a deep, human level. And they understand that the darkness and the light exists in all of us. This is a profound excavation of that question." ●

*Yellowjackets is on Paramount+ in the UK and Showtime in the US from 24 March.*



Tawny Cypress as Taissa: it's about to kick off.

## A TALE OF TWO TAISSAS

Actress Tawny Cypress warns that adult Tai is on a very dark road in season two

**Adult Taissa's duality hit a breaking point last season with her winning the state senate seat and then making that blood altar. Did you ask the creators to give you story guidance going into season two?**

Last season, I told them I didn't want to know anything, which they loved. They were like, "Oh, that's perfect for us!" And then they started lying to me, boldface lies! I was like, "Motherfuckers!" [Laughs.] This season, I was like, "I actually want to know exactly what's happening. Let's have this conversation." We've talked about the other Tai. We've talked about where that stems from and how she comes across. Is she feral? Does she even like our Tai? Does she hate our Tai? All these sorts of questions were answered wonderfully by the creators, so I didn't go in completely blind. Although many things happen during this season where I was like, "Whoa?"

**Where is Tai at the season's start?**

We find a completely 180 [degrees] Tai than we had in the first season. It's due to the fact that she's losing sleep, because she doesn't want this other Tai to take over. She's losing her confidence and her ability to stay focused. All these things building up, leading to a pretty sad Tai. There are going to be moments where people watch the second season, see Tai and will be like, "Is this even the same character?"

**She's had 25 years of tamping down young Tai's trauma, so why is it all bursting out now?**

I don't know why everything is starting now. I do think that's going to be explained at some point. But she has held it together for decades. She built this perfect life for herself, and she just went a step too far. Got a little too greedy and things started falling apart, you know? When you put yourself out there for public scrutiny, she opened the door to let that other Tai back out.

**Who is on Tai's side this season?**

When you're spiralling down, you try to cling to something familiar. As we know, there might be an ex involved [played by Lauren Ambrose]. She informs who Taissa is for the rest of the season. It's because she's grasping and holding onto an old version of herself that was safe with somebody else.

**Has the huge reaction to this show been a surprise?**

It's been incredible. I've been working for over two decades in this industry and I've never been on a project that has had anywhere near this fanfare. The first season of *Heroes* was really well accepted, but this was on a whole other level. I'm doing my work, thinking, "I would watch this show. It's fun stuff." But there's just no anticipating it.

**Lastly, Tai has a new dog this season. Should we be worried?**

You don't have to worry about him too much, thank god.





THE POWER

# ST ELECTRICAL ORM

THE REVOLUTION WILL BE TELEVISED AS **THE POWER** ZAPS FROM PAGE TO SCREEN

WORDS: NICK SETCHFIELD









The mayor, Margot-Cleary Lopez, with her family.



Toni Collette living it up as the mayor.



Zrinka Cvitešić as Tatiana.



Toheeb Jimoh plays Tunde Ojo.

HEY SAY IT TAKES A SPARK TO IGNITE a revolution. In Naomi Alderman's 2016 novel *The Power* it's a genuine jolt of voltage, unleashed from the fingertips of teenage girls. Soon gifted to all women, this lethally empowering phenomenon is destined to upend society. Fried patriarchy, anyone?

"There's a rebelliousness and a wit to Naomi's work," says Raelle Tucker, showrunner of Prime Video's adaptation of Alderman's provocative, best-selling tale. "She's very daring but also imaginative. She's talking about real world issues that are difficult, but she's doing it without ever losing her sense of humour or sense of adventure. It connects on an emotional level. All those things combined with really original, distinct character work is unusual in one package."

"Naomi has been incredibly involved since the beginning of the series. She was in the writers' room with me every week, she read every draft, every outline, she gave extensive notes. We held hands on set and laughed a lot!"

### THIS WOMAN'S WORK

A veteran of *True Blood*, *Supernatural* and *Jessica Jones*, Tucker says she felt "a weird sense of destiny" bringing *The Power* to the screen. "In 2016 I was halfway through the novel when I freaked out and I called my agents and said, 'Why am I not the showrunner on this? This is everything that I want to do, because it's global and it's epic and it's ambitious and there are all these badass, strong, complex female characters, and it's about real world issues...'"

"I was passionate that I needed to run this show and at that point it was already being developed, and I thought I had missed the boat on this one. So it was the craziest phone call I got from Amazon, five years later, saying, 'Would you happen to be available to come

onboard something called *The Power*?' I immediately said yes, because it felt like the one that got away."

Spanning London to Seattle, Nigeria to Moldova, the series preserves not just the global ambition of Alderman's tale but its diverse cast of characters. There's Roxy (Ria Zmitrowicz), illegitimate daughter of a North London crime boss, seeking a place in her father's empire; Tunde (Toheeb Jimoh), a young video journalist in Lagos whose exposure of the Power goes viral; Jos (Auli'i Cravalho), the offspring of the Mayor of Seattle, addicted to the sugar-rush of social media; Tatiana (Zrinka Cvitešić), trophy wife of a president determined to restore order to his country.

Meanwhile Allie (Halle Bush) sets out across America, escaping an abusive foster father and guided by an unnerving inner voice that insists "You are going to do big, big things..."

As Tucker tells *SFX*, these seemingly scattered storylines connect as part of the show's larger narrative. "The challenge starts on the page, because you're trying to create thematic connection between these characters in a way that's propulsive and addictive but also allows them to feel really different. That's one of the hardest things I've had to do."

"In terms of how that translates to production, we had to create a feeling that you were travelling across the entire world, which you rarely see on a show of this type. So yeah, we don't have dragons and castles, but we have the challenge of making you believe that we are immersed in different cultures, and telling really authentic stories within those cultures across the world, which is hard to do."

"One of the things that attracted me to this project was the ambition of trying to

interweave all of these stories and make them feel connected, and talk about power, and how it impacts different people around the world. We're all living within some system of power. In that way it's relatable and accessible to everyone, and I think one of the cool things about the show is that people who are not usually represented on television are going to find some representation somewhere in this world."

Unusually *The Power* had an all-female writers' room, and is directed purely by women. How did that shape the creative energy? "Everyone came onboard this show because they had something to say on the topic, and felt really passionate about the storytelling," says Tucker.

"To me, gender was really not the issue. I think this show is bigger than gender, right? It's not just about a world ruled by women, and how that would be better – it's an exploration of power itself. I think the drama and the fun of the show is about watching people who historically don't have power being given that opportunity, and how it changes them."

"So I'm proud of all the people who worked on the show, men and women. I do think that in terms of some of the female characters we were able to explore some topics that we might not have been comfortable talking about in a much larger room."



“We’re not talking about a world where the women acquire the Power and are idealised”

Allie (Halle Bush) has a long road ahead.

THE POWER



John Leguizamo is Rob Lopez.



Eddie Marsan and Ria Zmitrowicz.

“I hope you feel some of that authenticity on the show,” Tucker continues. “What I like about the characters specifically is that they’re all flawed. None of them are perfect. We’re not talking about a world where the women acquire the Power and are idealised. I think it really challenges how we think about gender, and power.”

“As a showrunner it’s my job to talk about really big things that affect a lot of people, and hold a mirror up, but it’s not my job to educate anyone or convince them I’m right or make them agree with me. Sometimes a genre element allows you to invite an audience to talk about a real issue in a totally new way. I think *The Power* does that beautifully, in the novel and hopefully on the show as well.”

## EXTRA POWER

The book’s journey to the screen has been eventful. The pandemic impacted the original shoot, leading to *Hereditary*’s Toni Collette replacing Leslie Mann as Margot-Cleary Lopez, Mayor of Seattle. Tucker herself arrived as showrunner as production was underway.

“I tend to create shows from the ground up and come in at the beginning,” she tells *SFX*. “This was not my typical process! But the reason I jumped onboard is because so much incredible, epic work had already been done, and I knew that my particular skill set, having come off shows like *True Blood* and *Jessica Jones*, would be an asset to the show and help it through the finish line.”

“No matter what, this would have been one of the most ambitious things I have ever been part of, because it’s a beloved book, it is a global show, there are seven main characters with arcs that run separately but interweave across the entire world. But then you throw a pandemic into the beginning of shooting, and what that did to a show like this... Reshoots needed to be done, which we all know

happens, especially the more ambitious a project. But [production company] Sister and Amazon were willing to make really difficult decisions and invest more resources in getting this right, because everyone cares so much about making this show. I’m really proud that they gave us the resources to deliver something that we all feel really excited about now.”

The TV landscape offers viewers a bewildering choice of dystopias, but Tucker says *The Power* stands apart, for all that it takes down and rebuilds society.

“I don’t actually see *The Power* as a dystopian story. At least in season one, where we are right now in the story, this is about a shifting, changing world, but it isn’t a world that’s ending, and it’s not catastrophic. Personally I’m drawn to stories that tackle dark subjects but show us how we are going to survive those things.”

“That’s what I gravitate toward as an artist, but I think sometimes staring into the darkness is tantalising. I’m excited to tell stories that live in that world, but I’m always focusing on how we ultimately take that to a hopeful place.”

And Tucker is suitably optimistic that this won’t be the only season of *The Power*. “Having worked on six seasons of *True Blood*, which had 13 books to draw from, and where we still moved way beyond the books, I would say yes, hopefully there will be future seasons and yes, we will always need to expand beyond the world of the book, with Naomi’s blessing.”

“I would never adapt something unless I was absolutely in love with the source material. It would be heartbreaking to me if I was not holding hands with the author on some level, and making something that they felt represented their work, with at least emotional accuracy.”

*The Power* is on Prime Video from 31 March.

## SPARK LIFE

Auli’i Cravalho is Jos

### Have you had a chance to meet Naomi Alderman yet?

■ I met her at the table reads. I remember hearing her laugh at certain things, because the characters were finally coming to life, and to hear her words spoken aloud. For all of us it was pretty thrilling but for her especially she was really proud, and she should be. It’s a fantastic book.

### What appeals to you about your character?

■ Part of the joy of playing Jos is because so much of her is unknown, and that’s just part of being a teenager. You’ve only been alive for, like, 17 years and there’s so much more ahead, and so much more to learn. She’s in high school, trying to navigate the hallways, and that is hard enough, but add now this sparking, this feeling of power that needs to be released...

### How do you act the Power itself?

■ We had this amazing movement coach. It was really interesting going to rehearsals because what is the Power? It’s something that is so personal to every woman, every girl. So it wasn’t that we wanted it to look like a superpower in any way. You won’t see like “Zzzzt!” and shocking someone across the room. That’s not what it is. For me it starts like this [rubs hands] and you do this for three minutes and then you slowly pull your hands away and you feel this tingling, this sensation in your palms and in your arms and in your shoulders as well, like some kind of charge. And that’s what the Power feels like to me.





# KNOCK

TOM HOLT'S **THE PORTABLE DOOR** HAS FINALLY MADE THE MOVE TO THE BIG SCREEN.

WORDS:  
STEVE O'BRIEN

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HEN TOM HOLT'S *THE PORTABLE DOOR* first landed on bookshelves in 2003, it seemed obvious this was a feature film just waiting to happen. Reviewing the novel in *The Guardian*, *Red Dwarf*'s Rob Grant even wrote: "If you're listening, Hollywood, here's the pitch: *The Devil's Advocate* meets *Harry Potter*."

Twenty years on, here we are, finally. This adaptation of the first of Holt's JW Wells & Co series (since that first book, he's penned six more, the last being 2011's *Life, Liberty And The*

*Pursuit Of Sausages*) has been a long time coming. First optioned by the Jim Henson Company just under a decade ago, things really started moving in 2016 when Aussie director Jeffrey Walker came on board.

"Blanca Lista [Henson's VP of feature film production] is a complete cinephile and has seen every movie in the world twice," Walker tells us from his home in Queensland. "She was very keen to make the film in Australia, and had a great radar for trying to find Australian





# KNOCK

DIRECTOR JEFFREY WALKER TALKS ABOUT BRINGING THIS CRAZY COMIC FANTASY TO LIFE

filmmakers who might fit this world." Walker was, and is, he says, "a big Jim Henson Company fan", citing movies like *The Dark Crystal* and *Labyrinth* as the reason he became a filmmaker.

"As a kid, I was obsessed with the film business," he enthuses. "I was a child actor for 10 years, and all of that came out of watching films like *The Goonies* and *The NeverEnding Story* and those adventure movies that were about at the time."

There's definitely something of those '80s fantasy faves in the DNA of *The Portable Door*. And if you're a diehard fan of the original novel, rest assured its distinctly British flavour hasn't been diluted by the decision to produce it Down Under. The mysterious firm of JW Wells & Co is still London-based, and the characters of Paul Carpenter and Sophie Pettingel, the two interns who attempt to discover the truth about their new employers, are still resolutely, unapologetically British;

despite Patrick Gibson being Irish and Sophie Wilde being Australian, both deliver tiptop English accents.

"Lisa Henson [daughter of Jim, and current CEO of the company her father set up in 1958] has spent so much time in the UK, she definitely called us out on a few things," Walker laughs. "Like we had a few too many cobblestoned *Harry Potter* lanes. She'd say, 'Hold on a minute, let's make sure it's grounded.' One of the themes of the film is →





Patrick Gibson  
as Paul, with  
Christoph  
Waltz.



Sophie  
Pettingel  
(Sophie  
Wilde).

finding the extraordinary in the ordinary, and the ordinary needed to feel like a real London street. So she certainly kept us honest. Because of Covid [the movie started filming in mid-2021] we couldn't travel and go and scout or shoot second unit in Britain, which we'd planned to. But we used a lot of Google Street View, and we had a person on the ground [in the UK] who went and filmed corners and areas and buildings.

"So when that footage started to come back, we had a bit more of a grounding for the whole thing. We built an enormous amount of sets here in Australia, and we did shoot some of Brisbane for London. We found a handful of buildings that fitted beautifully with some other material that we were able to source from the UK."

## MONSTERS AND ANGELS

Of course, those London settings are only the foundation for a movie that, once inside the walls of JW Wells & Co, becomes increasingly fantastic. That titular "portable door" is a device that can take anyone anywhere. Utter the words "knock knock" and it magically appears, ready to take you wherever you want in the world, leading to some glorious lunch trips for Paul and Sophie.

Then there are the creatures that live within JW Wells & Co. This being a Henson production, it was never on the cards that the various goblins, dragons and assorted critters that we meet along the way were going to be realised through CG.

"The initial pitch that I had for the film was to try to make it as much of an in-camera experience as possible," says Walker. "Given that it's about magic, the fact that the film would be a magic trick in itself would be a great coup if we could pull it off. With big films it's a given you're going to see spectacular CGI, but I think with in-camera films, with that level of creativity, and prosthetics and puppetry and

creature creation and big physical sets, there's a magic that leaps off the screen. I thought that if we could create a more visceral reaction from the audience that might give our film a unique edge."

Walker says that *The Dark Crystal* and *Labyrinth* were his tonal touchstones, not just for their Henson connections but because they were part of a cluster of fantasy flicks in the '80s which were aimed at a family audience but didn't hold back on scares.

"In my very first meeting," Walker explains, "I told Blanca about how with those films, when I was a kid, I was so scared by them but I couldn't look away. She said that there was a philosophy that she's encountered at Henson, which is that you can certainly show a young audience something that might be scary, but then you arm them with the tools to be able to deal with that."



Miranda Otto  
(left) plays  
Countess Judy.



Sam Neill as  
Dennis Tanner:  
stern stuff.

**“It would be great to be able to continue to explore these characters in future films”**

"I rewatched *Labyrinth* recently with my eight-year-old and there's some extremely cute little creatures that he laughed at, but there's also some really dark stuff that was scary and I could see him shrinking back into his seat, which is exactly the experience I had. With our film I did want it to be a family movie, but I would chart the moments – like a younger audience should be really scared at this point in the film, and then you find ways to undercut that."

Though Walker insists that *The Portable Door* is "an independent film in every way," the Henson Co haven't scrimped on star talent. Assuming top billing as JW Wells's CEO Humphrey Wells is double Oscar winner Christoph Waltz, while his crotchety underling Dennis Tanner is the always brilliant Sam Neill.

"Christoph was the linchpin, in that he was a trigger for us to make the film," says Walker. "Not only his attachment to it, but his enthusiasm for the script and the character. He even told Lisa [Henson] that he'd written to Jim Henson as a young performer in the '80s. He really loves it."

"On an independent film, the cast attachment is huge and it's usually that that triggers other people to come on board. As regards Sam Neill, he and I had worked together before and we know each other socially a bit, so he felt a trust that it would be





a fun experience. I think the opportunity to be in a film that was so strange and unusual and had so much wonderment to it was extremely appealing."

Though Waltz and Neill are the marquee names, it's relative newbies Patrick Gibson and Sophie Wilde who operate as the film's leads. "I feel so grateful that we had Patrick and Sophie Wilde join us," smiles Walker, "because they had to find the comedy and the voice and the heart of the film."

"Everyone else can go and play almost in their own movies, but those two needed to really anchor the film in a truth, and they just did such a beautiful job for us."

Paul practises his catalogue poses.



Of course, *The Portable Door* is, in print form, the first of a seven-novel run. Should audiences embrace this movie version, surely there are – whisper it – franchise plans?

"Yes, if we have a bit of luck and people like this film..." Walker laughs. "The actors all had a great time filming it and Sam Neill in particular, he did say, 'I really want to make more of these, so you make sure you do a great job in the edit!' It would be a great thing to be able to continue to explore these characters in future films, like Tom has in the books."

There's certainly scope for more big-screen JW Wells adventures. Holt's series gets bigger, bolder and more bonkers with each novel. If Walker is blessed with luck, we'll be seeing second book *In Your Dreams* before too long. 🍷

*The Portable Door* is on Sky Cinema from 7 April.



"Did... did he just call me an orc? The very cheek of it."

Paul gets roped in to a bad situation.



Yes, this seems quite appropriate.



## Wilde Thing

Sophie Wilde is Sophie Pettingal

**Is this the first time you've played a Sophie, Sophie?**

It is actually, which was very exciting. She reminds me a bit of myself when I was in high school – overly ambitious, and slightly intense at times.

**This is the first big special effects film you've done. How was it?**

I remember when we had our read-through and I was like, "Oh, I'm meant to be looking at this wonderful landscape and it's a greenscreen!" But that's an amazing part of the job. As an actor, you get to imagine these realities.

**Did Sam Neill offer any advice on how to act alongside things that aren't there? With the *Jurassic Park* films, he's been doing this for 30 years.**

You know what, he didn't! But working with him was great – he's so down to earth. Christoph Waltz too. It was an amazing learning experience to observe and watch such amazing actors.

**What about Jeffrey Walker? Obviously he used to be an actor. Presumably that makes a difference when you're working with a director who has been in your shoes.**

Yeah, he's 100% an actor's director, which is always amazing. Jeffrey is such a legend. Everyone loves him because he's just the most down to earth guy and so incredibly talented and has such a strong and unique vision. I think that always makes an actor's job easier when your director really knows what they want.

**Would you be up for more films, should there be sequels?**

Absolutely – 100%! I've got my fingers crossed. I hope that it happens. It would be an absolute dream to come back and work with this team.

Everyone's so amazing.



HOW THE WORLD –  
AND UNDERWORLD – OF  
**LOCKWOOD & CO**  
ARE BROUGHT TO LIFE

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

# GRAVEYARD SHIFT

Need something strange in your neighbourhood? Who ya gonna call? Well, production designer Marcus Rowland and visual effects supervisor Sean Mathiesen, as it happens. They talk us through bringing the dead back to life and building the world of *Lockwood & Co*.

## PORTLAND ROW HOUSE

**MR:** This was done partly to demonstrate the direction of the look of the show. So it's a sort of cross-section of the house. It's got a lot of the elements that we take forward. In terms of layout, it's not massively dissimilar to our end result. We just don't have that room at the end on the second floor, which is the sister's room. It was just to show the world that they inhabited in a visual.







## EARLY CONCEPT ART

MR: Romek [Delimata, concept artist] did that. With discussions with Joe [Cornish, showrunner] super early on, we did this visual with Romek before the series was commissioned, I think it was two weeks into the first lockdown [2020]. We did a few images of key frames to get the ball rolling and get an indication of the direction it should go into. Then Framestore did some 3D modelling of how those component pieces would fit together, but the visual and the process changed along the way.

SM: You can see the rapier is leaving a trail. That comes from Jonathan Stroud's books. It's something that we also spent quite a bit of time on. It ended up if you were to take a sword and slice through the water in the Mediterranean, the way that your sword would interact with the bioluminescence and activate it, that was kind of the look that we were going for - which is different from the smoke and the way that we treated the ghosts. We tried applying the smoke from the ghosts to the swords, and that wasn't right.

Also the interactive lighting, you can see that that was a part of it. So we knew we had to come up with this idea of [a dummy] or a LED suit to create an effect and that I think also comes from Jonathan Stroud's books originally - that the ghosts create an impact on their environment, and it makes for better visual effects. If you have just a glowing ghost, but you don't have any effects in the environment you become separated, it doesn't make any sense and it doesn't feel like it has any presence or sense in the story. Whereas we have a much much better sense of presence that goes on because of the LED suit.



## OUTSIDE PORTLAND ROW

MR: We're based in London, so we wanted to capture that character. We built the whole of the interior and this facade of the exterior. So a lot of the transitions going in and out are done on this set piece here. If you went through the door there, there's the lounge and the library bit at the back. Then you go down some steps to the kitchen, which is on the next stage and then there's various different floors. We interconnected the staircases but it's sort of working out where you break the set up. So it feels convenient that you're not having to do too much, or any VFX really. [Set build is] probably six to eight weeks. But on top of that, you've then got some more dressing.

It was written as a house in Marylebone which would have been a bit too grand. We did look at quite a few places and agonised about it. We ended up in a place between King's Cross and Islington where it's not particularly done up, which worked very well. That gave us a steer for the house even though we were roughly moving in that direction. It was a Georgian, early Victorian house in the books.



## INTERNAL HOUSE SHOTS

MR: Because you want to have all this stuff for so long [during a shoot], it's actually generally purchased. It came from a multitude of auctions and junk fairs. Certainly, it's described that it's full of his parents' belongings and travel souvenirs - there was reference to masks. So we did incorporate the details that were in the books as much as we could and then obviously we expanded on it.



## A GRISLY DISCOVERY

MR: The wonder of the internet: however macabre it might be, you can find some pretty good reference of what a decayed body might look like. It's that balance between what's real and what something would look like in your expectations. That's a practical piece. They might have done a little bit of VFX on it slightly to bed her into that chimney a little bit, but basically, it's a practical model make and prosthetic.

## VILLAGE PEOPLE

SM: From the initial set-up, and all the pre-production that was done at [visual effects company] Framestore, then all the way up, I guess maybe 350-400 people in total worked on it from head to toe for the visual effects side of it. Not every one of those people is on for the duration - I was on it for nearly two years - but all of them touched it in some way and their work is represented in the final product. It takes a village.



Storyboard  
development  
panels for the  
show.



## BLENDING REALITY

MR: This is the Barbican - we dressed a bit of it and we were using the Barbican [generally]. But on the day we struggled with people falling foul of Covid. So we had to shoot our way round that, really by breaking it into pieces. So we did build a bit of the Barbican in studio as well, we built our own column and did a certain section, which was the reverse of one of the characters.







## GRAVEYARD GOINGS-ON

**MR:** This is actually true to the books – we were in Kensal Green Cemetery, which is actually, surprisingly, a very good location. We built things but it was within those compounds. We took over a chunk of it for quite a long period of time and we used it as our own little graveyard backlot.

Most of it was filmed at night in the location, that chapel. We'd go inside, you'll see the catafalque – we built another catafalque of our own which we took to St Martin-in-the-Fields and used it as it arrived and then we had that CG element of the catafalque going down. But to be perfectly frank, apart from building our own graves and dressing our own headstones to put where we felt was the right place for them, we could operate around them. It's on location, basically.



## ROOM WITH A VIEW

**MR:** This is actually the viewing gallery at the Tate Modern, which of course we probably wouldn't have been able to get if it wasn't for lockdown. It was completely empty and you're only seeing one angle. We were looking for a more unusual space that wasn't too conventional and had a dramatic view.



## MENTMORE TOWERS

**MR:** It's an empty huge house, which allows you the run of the place. In this particular shot, I would say all the furniture is ours; that screen is something we added to make it a little more sinister and actually make it feel a little more period.





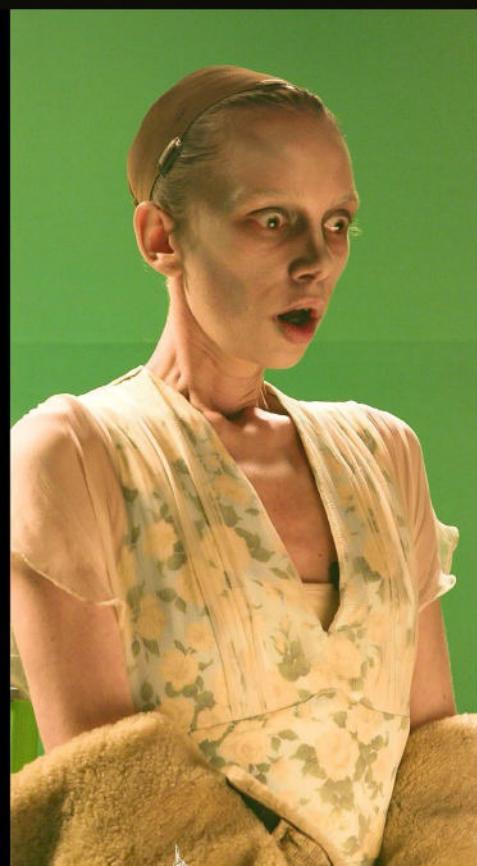
## MAKING GHOSTS

SM: We spent quite a long time trying to decide how we were going to represent our ghosts. We looked at *Ghostbusters* and didn't want to go with the colourful semi-transparent humans. We looked at *The Frighteners*, we looked at every ghost story that we could and thought, these all have interesting things but none of them are exactly the world of *Lockwood & Co*. Then we went through a visual development phase exploring different ideas, and eventually we came across the use of smoke that was our final treatment.

The other thing that we looked through was Victorian spirit photography tricks, because photography was very early in its lifespan. People were playing around with tricks and double exposures and Pepper's Ghost and all those kinds of physical camera tricks. We knew we were going to be doing it through a digital visual effects process, but we wanted to look backwards to find out how those tricks were originally done. How were people fooled originally? And then how would we be able to incorporate that into a modern visual effects process? So that became a Houdini [VFX software] smoke simulation treatment.







## THE GHOST OF ANNABEL WARD

SM: We shot the show in three different blocks. At the end of each block we would set up a facial capture for each of the VFX elements. We needed to have Annabel in both her beautiful state and a semi-decayed state. We would go and capture the various scenes that were necessary and then we would mix between the in-key tools and comp at the end of the post-production process. Annabel was the only ghost that we did facial capture for.

SM: You start with the Shmoo on a set so you're getting interactive lighting. You need to make sure that you have a location or a set that has a presence, a sense that there is a ghost in that environment. So we've accomplished that by creating this thing we call the Shmoo. We created this LED suit, this costume - we had versions of it that a human could wear and create interactive light on the environment, or we had a puppeteer version, because sometimes our ghosts have to fly. So we did that with a puppeteer in a green suit.

MR: Joe had this idea of the ghosts being interactive with the environment in a way, and having an element that could be reflected in the set itself. We ended up building a set that accommodated the action, but also accommodated the sense that you had some bounce off the walls with the reflection. So she's coming down the corridor. So you instantly have the ability of integrating the CG element into the background, by having the Shmoo move down the corridor. Like all these things in film, it's a combination of everybody's input, really, that ends up as the result. We made the wall slightly shiny to pick up light.

MR: The Shmoo figure is completely removed from that sequence and the actress on wires - you've got a dancer/stunt performer doing the physical side of it - and then her head was replaced as well, just to make it even more complicated!



Lockwood & Co is on Netflix now.







# MAKE



**STAR TREK**  
SHOWRUNNER ALEX  
KURTZMAN ON BRINGING  
*THE NEXT GENERATION*  
BACK AND WHAT THE  
FUTURE HOLDS

# IT SO

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**



**A** REUNION THAT WAS decades in the making, the cast of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* are back and breaking the internet with season three of *Star Trek: Picard*. “It was very clear, when we talked about Terry [Matalas] taking over the show, that what he really wanted to build to was the *Next Gen* movie he had never seen,” *Star Trek*’s big boss Alex Kurtzman tells *SFX*. “The minute he said that I was like, ‘Amazing. Let’s do that.’”

“What’s great about that is we can do that in 10 hours instead of two. That means that we can really marinate in each character and get to know each character before we bring them all together. That’s the way to make it a satisfying reunion.”

*SFX* has to get serious for a minute, and put in a formal request: can Kurtzman please keep Matalas on staff forever? He laughs loudly. “I love Terry. If it’s up to me, he’s not going anywhere.” He says that he’s feeling “extraordinary relief and gratitude” about the response to the third and final season of *Picard*.

“We all knew that in tackling this particular beast, the bar was so high because expectations were so impossibly high. The last thing any of us wanted to do was screw up what people love so much about that cast and the promise of what it means to return them to the screen together. There were literally years and years’ worth of conversations about it.”

“Our first instinct was to slowly bring the cast back together in season one,” he reveals. “Actually, Patrick really deserves a lot of credit for saying that if we did that in season one, without reestablishing the world of *Picard* and the universe as it exists now, we actually run a bigger chance of, I guess you could call it, hitting fan service in the wrong way, that people did not have time to sort of re-acclimate to the world.”

“Just throwing all the characters at the audience again, after all this time, might have felt like something we had not earned. The great genius of his urging was, ‘Let’s get there in season three, and what a pay-off that will be.’ We’re just so unbelievably glad that fans feel the same way.”

### CHANGING SEASONS

It was never always a guaranteed pay-off, Kurtzman explains – harking back to Sir Patrick Stewart’s initial reservations about returning to the role, least of all repeating the formula of *TNG*.

“It was not a definitive plan, but it was an aspiration,” he says. “Even though Patrick had said no in the first season, it did feel like if we could get to a place where *he* bought it, where *he* believed that we had earned it based on the storytelling, that would be the ultimate



Worf, Riker and Raffi have a pensive moment.

outcome. In many ways, Patrick came to it all by himself, we didn’t really push it. He was the one who began saying, around the middle of season two, ‘You know, it feels like what we should probably do is bring everybody back together.’ Obviously, that was music to our ears. But I think we had planted the seeds early and it took them time to grow. But we all got there in our own way.”

Kurtzman laughs when asked if there was a plan B if a *Next Generation* reunion hadn’t come to pass. “Honestly, no. Of course, we have many ideas...” He says that production changes during filming of season two during the pandemic meant “reconfiguring story plans”. So would any of those ideas see life in a different form? “I think it’s possible,” he considers. “I’m often surprised, given how

large the universe has become now, and how many different eras we’re dealing with, by how ideas in one writers’ room will have come up in another writers’ room without the writers of each of their shows ever having spoken about them. So it is possible.”

If it is their final mission – more on that shortly – you might as well go out on a high. But why go out at all?

“The best compliment we could get is, ‘Why the hell are you ending on season three of *Picard*?’” Kurtzman laughs. “That was always the intention. We always wanted to do three seasons, Patrick was really clear that he only wanted to do three seasons. Then we all fell in love with it. Could it continue? It’s certainly possible. Is there a way in which storylines will continue? I’m not saying no to anything, but it



Picard (Patrick Stewart) chills out.



Picard with Ed Speleers as Jack Crusher.





"...and she comes out like this and starts singing!"

was always designed to be a three-season show. The fact that fans want us to keep going is the ultimate compliment."

The cast, of course, have openly requested Paramount make another movie, if not carry on in some way. "We talk about that all the time. Is there a movie version? Doing a movie is different – it's two hours right? So it's different than doing 10. You know, anything is possible, truly."

What was important for characterisation and setting up future options that the showrunner wanted to bring to season three?

"Pairings," he answers quickly. "I think you see some incredible pairings over the course of the season. And some of the characters could go on in different ways to have stories continue about just those pairings even if we didn't end up doing..." He trails off. "By the way, even individual characters – I think we could absolutely continue to tell stories about individual characters that are set up on the show in other contexts."

"That's the beauty of having a universe now is that, in a perfect world, we're not just doing

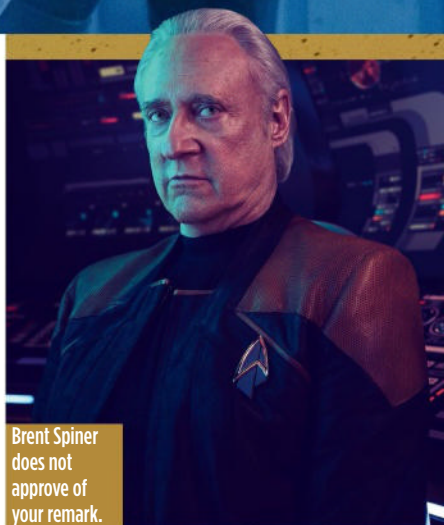
seasons of television, we're doing event series, we're doing single events that could be two, three hours long. I think that we are now at a place where that's really possible."

This brings us neatly to a different corner of the sci-fi universe, and the showrunner of another long-running juggernaut, *Doctor Who*, recently telling *GQ* magazine how he eyed Kurtzman's empire with "vast envy".

**“The best compliment we could get is, ‘Why the hell are you ending on season three?’”**

"I know very well who Russell T Davies is," Kurtzman laughs loudly. "We heard. I bow at his feet!"

He says, however, that he didn't set out to have 52 episodes of *Star Trek* making it a yearly show. "I think it's organically happened that way. We certainly set out to do a lot of *Star Trek*, but, I've said this before, and I'll say it →



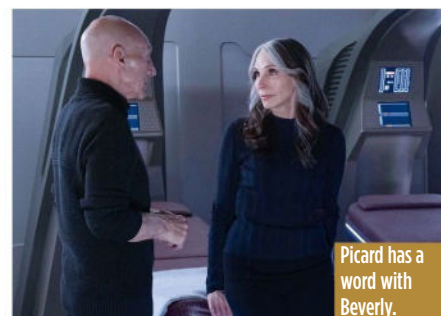
Brent Spiner does not approve of your remark.



Seven of Nine (Jeri Ryan) isn't too keen, either.



Jonathan Frakes and Michelle Hurd.



Picard has a word with Beverly.



here: we are not aiming to be in the volume business. I don't think that serves *Star Trek* at all. Obviously, we're in a moment in the consumption of streaming culture where more is more, and the faster you can turn shows around, the more you can hold an audience. Obviously, we have to play that game because that's the game that franchises play.

"That being said, the worst way to play that game is just to churn things out. To churn them out, not because we have a reason to turn them out. We will never let a show go forward that we don't all... where we can't all look at each other and say we're ready to hold hands and dive into this together because we know this is a great story that's worth telling."

It does feel, *SFX* suggests, that *Star Trek* is certainly leading in terms of properly "world-building" a franchise.

"There are no corporate mandates with *Star Trek*," Kurtzman counters. "We don't get told, 'This is what we need from your *Star Trek*' and that makes a big difference. Because when we sit down with showrunners, the first question I ask them is, 'Why do you love *Trek*? And what *Trek* story do you want to tell?'"

"It's very, very clear to me with all of our showrunners that they love *Star Trek* because it means something to them personally, and they understand how much it means to the world.

"When you're coming from that place, and you're building from that place, you get a product that is born out of love, affection, dedication to all the values of *Star Trek*, not, 'Oh, we need to turn something around fast because we need more content out in the universe.'"

## GALAXY CLASS

It's been suggested that events in *Picard* might tie into those in *Prodigy*, but Kurtzman dispels the rumours.

"Not exactly. There are crossover elements. You'll see that in all the shows, that the shows are now beginning to reference things that happen in different timelines so that we have a cohesive universe – but again, I only believe in bringing things together if there's just an incredibly great story reason to do it. So you'll see references."

Seven of Nine – or 77%, if you prefer.



Titus (Thomas Dekker) gets a bit of a grilling.



Picard and Riker aren't too old to get smashed.



Patrick Stewart and Gates McFadden.



Does this mean he has other live-action plans for Admiral Janeway that he can allude to? "I can't," he says flatly. "But yes, what I can tell you is we do have plans..."

For Admiral Janeway?

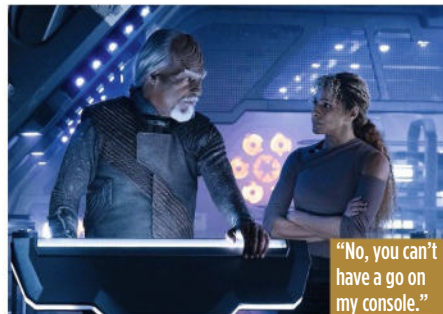
"No, we have plans for new things. I'm not speaking specifically about anything. But yes, there's quite a few plans, and you'll hear about them soon. We will continue to expand the

*Star Trek* universe, absolutely." Including the long-promised *Section 31* series starring Michelle Yeoh? "I can tell you that we're still very excited about *Section 31*. And that's all I will say."

Hey, you can't blame *SFX* for fan-boying. We're speaking with one of our own kind here, he's got one of the few ultimate geek jobs in the world. How does he even begin to process that?

"I thank my lucky stars every day," he says without hesitation. "That is the honest answer. That we get to play in this universe, that we get to bring something to the world that's not just made from the perspective of, 'Oh my god, I was a fan and now I get to play with the toys in my own amazing way.' But that I think we're genuinely bringing something to the world that's making it a little better."

"That's what's beautiful about *Trek*. The messages of *Trek*, the ethos of *Trek*. I can't tell you how many times people say, your shows give me courage or your shows give me hope or



"No, you can't have a go on my console."







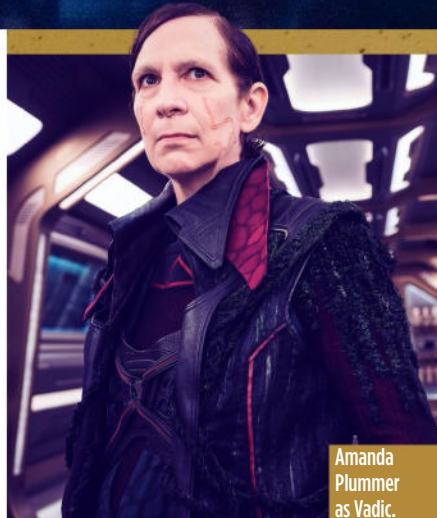
Captain Picard and the main crew makes it so.

## “It’s very, very clear to me with all of our showrunners that they love Star Trek”

your shows made me do something I was afraid to do. If you talk to people who were inspired by *Star Trek* all the way back to *TOS*, you will hear the same story. To me, that’s a great gift. We’re not just making entertainment, which in and of itself is so wonderful, but I think we’re giving people something to hold on to that affirms why we’re here, and that’s a very special privilege.”

Another special privilege – perhaps even the ultimate perk of the job – was getting to watch sci-fi legends reunite after many years of their being apart.

“Seeing that cast back together and watching them fall into the old rhythms of the way they



Amanda Plummer as Vadic.



Raffi loses patience with Titus.

used to behave and tease each other on set in *TNG*, seeing them default back to the camaraderie and the revelry, the way they would poke fun and play with each other and love each other was really an extraordinary thing for us to watch,” Kurtzman reveals.

“There’s so much history between everybody and you could feel that they were so excited to be back together and that they were so excited with the material because I think they felt that the material was what they wanted to do, if they were all going to come back together. Every day there were a million versions of that.”

With that, we have to let Kurtzman get back to his day job – presumably doing something fantastically nerdy that he can’t divulge, no matter how much *SFX* cajoles. “That’s exactly what I’m doing!” he laughs. 🍷

*Star Trek: Picard* is on Paramount+ in the UK and US, plus Prime Video in the UK.



# "WE HAD A LOT OF FUN SPINNING IN THE CHAIR!"

## JERI RYAN'S JOURNEY AS SEVEN OF NINE REACHES NEW HEIGHTS

### There aren't many actors who return to a role over 25 years...

▲ [Laughs] It's very surreal. But it has been, truly, just absolutely delightful to revisit this character. It's something I certainly never ever expected to do. I was positive that I had said goodbye to her many, many years ago. [Laughs] She's come as a delightful surprise.

### Was there anything you wanted to bring or change for Seven in this final season?

▲ No. There was nothing that I wanted to change, or do. I trust Terry implicitly, I've known him since I started on *Voyager* – he was a PA, delivering the scripts to the make-up trailer the year that I started. So we were both the new kids together and we became good friends. He is truly such a fan of *Star Trek* and loves it so deeply and respects all of these characters so much that I never had a doubt that we were in good hands.

I knew how respectfully Seven was going to be treated and with what love she was going to be treated by him. I just sat there and listened to what his idea was and I loved it. I still love it. I think Terry's a genius. I think he's exactly what *Star Trek* needed.

### Are you happy where things are left with Seven by the end of season three?

▲ I am thrilled with how we leave this character and all of these characters. It's such a beautiful send-off, I think, for all of them. Seven, she's been through so much and she struggled so much. She's shown such strength and resilience through all of it. I love where we leave her. It's very satisfying and I think it'll be very satisfying for the fans as well.

### Would you like to see her story continue in some way?

▲ I love this character. I love what

she's become and who she's become, and I loved her journey. If there's one thing that this experience has taught me, it's never say never. You think you're done and you think you're saying goodbye? You never really know if that's the end...

### Well, *Star Trek* never really leaves you.

▲ When I was on *Voyager*, I think it was our DP Marvin who made T-shirts for everybody. It was the little *Star Trek* combadge behind bars and it said "Lifer". Because it's true, once you're in the *Star Trek* family, you're in it for life.

### The scale of this season is huge – did it feel different to make?

▲ The experience of actually shooting, it wasn't any different for us. Except the stage – the ship was *spectacular*. That bridge that they built, this entire ship, the set, was incredibly beautiful, in person as beautiful as it looks on camera. It was stunning and huge and really impressive.

We were all aware of what a big deal it was that all of these characters are together. At one point because, you know, I'm a mom, and Levar's real daughter was playing his daughter... So the first shot on the bridge together, and he looked at me and we just both teared up. I was like, "That's your daughter!" It was just so cool. It was really cute to share that emotion with him.

### What's it like taking the captain's seat?

▲ [Laughs] It was pretty cool. All the people who weren't typically on set, they were down there standing around the bridge to see because it was such an epic shot with Patrick and Frakesy and Seven. We were definitely all aware, especially with all the people standing around watching.

### Aren't those chairs quite delicate, usually?

▲ One of the chairs got broken. I don't think it was the captain's chair, I think it might be the first officer's, the arm broke off. It was the whole thing. So they're delicate, but it's a very, very spinny captain's chair.

Me and Todd, who played Shaw, who's fantastic, we had a lot of fun spinning in the chair. We also discovered at one point that you know, there's consoles, little screens on the armrests? At one point between shots, they had to change out because the battery was running low and we realised that they were just iPhones.

So he pulls the magnetic cover up, lifts that off and swaps out the phone. That was it, then it was game on for us. So between shots, somewhere there's a huge stash of selfies and videos of us spinning around in the chair and making goofy faces. We had a good time!

### Everyone seems to want a Seven and Raffi spin-off. Would you be interested in that?

▲ I get that a lot. I would love nothing more than to work with Michelle. I love her beyond words. We have such great chemistry and a great relationship. I just love her. She's a beautiful human being. I would do anything with her, *Star Trek* or not. I think it would be a welcome addition to the universe.

### At what point in your *Star Trek* journey did you realise this would be with you forever?

▲ When I first started on *Voyager* – I hadn't started shooting yet, I think I was there for maybe costume fittings on the Paramount lot. Rick Berman or Jonathan Frakes said to me, "You're getting on a moving freight train and you have no idea how fast it's moving until you're on it." That was such an accurate description. ●









## SARAH MICHELLE GELLAR

The genre icon returns to supernatural television in *Wolf Pack*

Words by Bryan Cairns

**A**udiences can't get enough of Sarah Michelle Gellar. The 45-year-old actor first began developing a following in *Swans Crossing* before moving on to *All My Children*. It was Gellar's role as Buffy Summers in the TV series of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, however, that cemented her as a genre icon. She went on to star in films such as *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, *Cruel Intentions*, *Scream 2*, *The Grudge* and *Scooby-Doo*. After a bit of a break from acting, Gellar is back as arson investigator Kristin Ramsey in the supernatural TV series *Wolf Pack*.

### What themes did you gravitate towards in *Wolf Pack*?

➔ Everyone went through this shared experience of two or three years of being isolated from their friends or family, and what it does to you mentally. We talk a lot about mental health now and how our anxiety levels are so different than they were five or 10 years ago.

That was a metaphor creator Jeff Davis was using with these monsters, to explore what it is like for those people searching for their pack, how we communicate so differently, and how much our survival really depends on having your pack. For me, when you look at the pandemic, if it wasn't for my pack, I would not have made it through. I would have felt so lonely and isolated.

The other lens he was talking about through the wildfire [in the series] is what we are doing to our planet. As someone who was evacuated in the last fires in Los Angeles for over a week, not knowing if my house burned to the ground, it's obviously something that is extremely close to my heart and my experience. Those things combined really made me think.

### Audiences still rave about *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*. Does it ever get old hearing that praise?

➔ Oh my gosh, no. As an actor, all you ever want to do is a show that affects people, that they love and holds up. That is your legacy. I am so proud of what we created. It's been a tumultuous couple of years, and understanding the show and its legacy, there is good and bad to all of it. I have gotten to a place now where we can really appreciate the show for what we created. I am so proud that during the pandemic, the show reached a whole new generation of people that

still felt that it spoke to them, that it was still timely and it still meant something to them.

### Your chase scene in *I Know What You Did Last Summer* ranks as one of the best in the horror genre. What do you recall about shooting that?

➔ I remember that there is a vintage elevator and she has to use a rope. When we did it the first time, it was the actual elevator and the rope was tense. I got over 1,000 splinters in my hand. They decided to stop that sequence and do it towards the end. They changed out the rope for a new rope. I also remember the first time we did it, it was freezing. The second time was warmer, but I was barefoot. I remember them having to try to figure out something to put on the bottom of my feet so I could run barefoot on the street.

### You subsequently embraced horror in various films. What speaks to you about the genre?

➔ Horror takes you to a totally different place. It's also about the roles for women. Traditionally, there were only a few genres where women really could lead. I remember when *The Grudge* came out, and I am sure it's been surpassed, but at the time it was the second-highest, female [fronted] opening ever. I am sure it's still in the top 10 because they just don't make movies with women up front in the lead. Horror is one of the few genres where you get to do that. Having a character like Buffy, who is so three-dimensional and hits all those notes... you don't just want to be the wife or the girlfriend.

### *Scooby-Doo* was the gateway into horror for a lot of youngsters. Was it fun stepping into that universe?

➔ That wasn't the experience any of us wanted. It wasn't the movie we signed on for. There was some general disappointment for Freddie [Prinze Jr] and I in terms of the movie we set out to make and the movie we actually made. Again, distance is a big eye-opener and it helps you look at things differently. Now, I am just so proud of that movie because it meant so much to so many people, bringing those characters to life. And in *Scooby-Doo 2*, I got to work with Seth Green. Aside from Freddie, he's my favourite co-star of all time. ●

*Wolf Pack* is on Paramount+ now.

### BIODATA

From  
Long Island,  
New York

Greatest Hits  
Buffy in *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*,  
Helen Shivers in  
*I Know What You Did Last Summer*,  
Karen Davis in *The Grudge*, Daphne  
Blake in  
*Scooby-Doo*,  
Teela in *Masters Of The Universe: Revelation*.

Random Fact  
A collector of first  
edition books,  
Gellar owns all of  
*Peter Pan*  
illustrator Arthur  
Rackham's work.



“As an actor, all you ever want to do is a show that affects people, that they love and holds up”











# FIVE CHILDREN AND SMITH

WITH *DOCTOR WHO* SPIN-OFF **THE SARAH JANE ADVENTURES** STREAMING AGAIN AND A NEW AUDIO SERIES IMMINENT, WE RETURN TO BANNERMAN ROAD WITH RUSSELL T DAVIES

WORDS: IAN BERRIMAN

**W**ANT TO FEEL OLD? CONSIDER this: if *The Sarah Jane Adventures* were somehow personified as a human being (bear with us, this is a sci-fi mag), it would now legally be able to have sex, join the armed forces, drive a moped, and (best of all) purchase liqueur confectionery. Yes, terrifyingly, more than 16 years have passed since the spin-off show centred on *Doctor Who*'s most beloved companion debuted, on 1 January 2007. The brainchild of Russell T Davies (now once more ensconced in his throne as overlord of the Whoniverse), it's still the apple of his eye.

The initial spark came on 8 September 2005, the day after Elisabeth Sladen shot her farewell scene for "School Reunion", the *Doctor Who* episode which (31 years on from Sarah Jane Smith's debut) saw her returning to the role alongside David Tennant's Doctor. "I went to her hotel the next morning to say goodbye," Davies tells *SFX*, "and her bedroom was full of gifts and cards and flowers. She said so many friends had been in touch. I thought, 'Oh, you can't let this go. There's no way we're just doing one episode. That would be mad!'"

"When we put the episode together, she walked away at the end, and I thought that was a beautiful ending," Davies continues, "But I also thought it was a bit sad. After all that emotional catharsis of life

with the Doctor, she ends up with a tin dog [K-9] – that's not much! So then I thought, 'Right, we'll bring her back every year.' That was my original plan: every year, we'll have a Sarah Jane adventure. Sarah Jane will call him to Earth saying, 'There's something mysterious happening in this factory, let's investigate.' And I thought then, 'We'll give her a family – we'll build her life.'"

Enter the BBC Children's department, who had an idea of their own. "They said, 'We want to do *Young Doctor Who* – the Doctor on Gallifrey, having his first adventures,'" Davies recalls. "I was like, 'You're not doing that in a million years. No chance! But if you want content, let's think of a show for you.' So I thought, 'Right, we'll do Sarah Jane and K-9, and pitched that to them.'"

The final format teamed Sarah Jane with an adopted son, Luke (Tommy Knight) – a boy genius created by the alien Bane – plus a series of other kids: neighbours Maria (Yasmin Paige) and Rani (Anjali Mohindra), the wisecracking Clyde (Daniel Anthony), and finally "Fleshkind" bioweapon Sky (Sinead Michael). With K-9 mostly unavailable, Mr Smith (Alexander Armstrong), a talking supercomputer in the attic of her house at 13 Bannerman Road, plugged the gap.

In her autobiography, Sladen wrote about having doubts over spending →





several months of the year in Cardiff, away from her family, when she was essentially retired. Davies recalls another cause for hesitancy. "She was worried about whether it was sticking your head too far above the parapet," he explains. "She loved fandom so much, she was worried some fans would think it'd look like she was replacing the Doctor in some way."

"She'd had a lifetime of knowing fans very well, going to conventions and being appreciative of the whole thing, and sometimes I think prolonged contact with fandom teaches you only to be modest. But sometimes you have to lift your head up and say, 'There's a bigger horizon, you've got to look towards that.' So we had long

talks about that. It's one of those moments where the absolute love of fandom can hold you back. And there's no way I was going to let that happen!"

Davies co-wrote the pilot "Invasion Of The Bane" (with Gareth Roberts). And as executive producer, he was across every aspect of the series, writing notes on every script draft, watching every day's rushes, checking every edit.

However, unlike *Doctor Who*, where Davies would routinely do a final pass on the script, rewrites were largely left to head writer Phil Ford (a veteran of the CG revival of *Captain Scarlet*), who from series two onwards was credited as co-producer.

"It was much more writer-led by the original writers than *Doctor Who*," Davies says, explaining that *SJA* was "a simpler show" – and not as high profile. "With *Doctor Who* you've got to get every line as hard as a diamond, because you're in a fierce marketplace." He'd still get involved on occasion, though. "Sometimes if they were big ones I'd have a go."

Having progressed to adult drama via *Why Don't You...?* and CBBC dramas *Dark Season* and *Century Falls*, Davies had a

**“There was a natural youngness to it, but we were very keen that that wasn't softness”**

good understanding of how to pitch things at the right level. "But that modulation of a voice is terribly simple," he says. "If you walk into a room and there's a five-year-old there, you talk in a certain tone of voice."

That said, there were story ideas deemed inappropriate for *SJA*. "Matt Jones [writer of *Who*'s "The Impossible Planet"] once pitched a Cyberman invasion of Bannerman Road, and I sat there thinking, 'What the Cybermen do is remove your brains and put them into metal – that's horrible!'"

"I don't think Cybermen fit five o'clock in the afternoon. I don't think Daleks do. We were always dying to get the Daleks in there, but if Sarah Jane and a bunch of kids could defeat a Dalek that makes the Daleks pretty soft!"

"You wanted great big villains, you wanted the end of the world," he continues, "but she's not the Doctor, so you have to temper that by saying they're brilliant, brave amateurs. That's why in [alternate-timeline *Who* episode] 'Turn Left' you saw that Sarah Jane and the kids had tried to stop Florence the Plasmavore [from "Smith And Jones"] and been killed.

## DOG GONE

K-9 only made occasional appearances

Though pitched as "Sarah Jane and K-9", the series didn't quite turn out that way, with the tin dog written out because co-creator Bob Baker was developing a K-9 cartoon for Jetix. That never came to fruition, though an Australian-made live-action show eventually did. Given the practical challenges of filming with the prop, however, was it a bit of a relief? "Oh no, I love K-9!" Davies enthuses. "I would have had K-9 rushing about in that attic every single episode."

"Once we brought K-9 back, the way he became a best-selling toy proves there's something so magic in classic *Doctor Who*," he says. "When they got it right, they got it so right. You saw in that Australian series, where they redesigned K-9. It just didn't work."

"It was a shame, but we very quickly modulated it. And every year we increased our use of K-9 and would make another phone call. 'Can we have two episodes? Three?'"

Davies also treasures the bitchy dynamic between Mr Smith and K-9 (voiced, as in the '70s, by John Leeson). "I remember reading the story where we worked out that they'd be disapproving of each other. Oh my god, we laughed! They were so snipey with each other. Gay boxes, two artificial boxes! Oh, I loved it."



© BBC



Bradley Walsh appeared in "The Day Of The Clown".



"Mate, why is your tie a normal size?"



Sky (middle), a girl with a secret...

"There was a natural youngness to it, but we were very keen that that wasn't softness. There are obvious rules – no blood, no swearing. But within that it was absolutely the full emotional range."

And Davies would cheerfully break any series-specific rules he'd laid down anyway. "I remember when I came in and wrote 'Death Of The Doctor', Phil Ford turned round and said, 'But you told us no alien planets, and no killing the monsters.' Which is exactly what I did on that!"

## LIFE STORIES

Prior to "School Reunion", biographical data on Sarah Jane was pretty sparse. Freelance journalist, aunt called Lavinia, South Croydon... that was about it. Was fleshing out the character a key ambition? "Absolutely, to give her a full emotional life and a full history. We saw her as a baby. We saw her mum and dad. We saw what happened with Andrea Yates [a





You can expect about five big hugs every episode.



The promo pic for pilot "Invasion Of The Bane".



Russ Abbot guested in "Secrets Of The Stars".

schoolfriend who died falling from a pier], because it changed the course of her life. I loved filling in all those gaps in her life. Not only that, but giving her a child, giving her responsibilities.

"And always keeping Sarah Jane's spikiness as well," Davies adds. "You'd still have scenes where she'd be a bit frosty, because she was once very lonely and that could have left an echo inside her. I think by the end of that show she must have the most realised history of any Doctor Who companion – and I'm talking *real* television canon. We did it to her, and I love that! I'm so proud of it."

Not every plan they devised came off. One that fell through was bringing in Freema Agyeman's Martha Jones for series two closer "Enemy Of The Bane". "She was going to be the

companion who was in all the shows – she'd cross over into *Torchwood*, then *The Sarah Jane Adventures*. Then Chris Chibnall came along and offered her *Law And Order UK*, and you can't argue with that," Davies laughs.

Martha's loss was the Brigadier's gain, with old soldier Nicholas Courtney hurriedly recalled to active duty for a reworked script. "Because of Nicholas Courtney's age, he wasn't in that story very much. Martha would have been sitting in that car with Sarah Jane, driving around solving crimes together."

Other familiar faces were David Tennant and Matt Smith as the Doctor, and Katy Manning as Jo Jones (née Grant).

*SJA* also attracted impressive guest stars for a humble



children's show: Russ Abbot, Jane Asher, Samantha Bond, Nigel Havers, Suranne Jones, Phyllida Law, Eddie Marsan, Bradley Walsh... How did they manage it?

"When I came in and wrote 'Death Of The Doctor', I literally halved my fee, because sometimes you have to do that for children's [television]," Davies says. "I think sometimes actors would do that too. They'd come and do it knowing they'd have a good time, and I suspect their fees weren't as big as they'd normally be... And there's always a little pot of money for a guest star somewhere."

### CASH IN THE ATTIC

"It's worth saying that now and again we had a bit of extra funding from BBC Drama," he continues. "Jane Tranter [Head of Fiction] loved *The Sarah Jane Adventures* – we could never have set it up without a boost of money from outside Children's. BBC Drama gave us a lump sum to build the standing set of Sarah Jane's attic, otherwise we could never have afforded it. My god, money is tight in children's TV. That's why we used a lot of *Doctor Who* monsters – we used the Sontarans when *Doctor Who* had just finished with them. Literally to save money."

Budgets got even tighter around 2008, after the financial crisis hit. With series three, filming time for the series was reduced from 15 weeks to 12 weeks. "So one episode had to be shot in five days," Davies says. "That's a lot for a 25-minute show."

The opening teaser introduced in that series was one money-saving trick. "You know that little scene at the beginning, where Clyde says, '13 Bannerman Road is where Sarah Jane Smith lives...?' That was literally put in to expand the running time!"

How tight are we talking? Did they have to make say, five 25-minute *SJA* episodes for the cost of one 45-minute *Doctor Who* episode? "Not quite that. But more or less. It was very, very short of money. Every single year, Children's was saying, 'We don't know about this...' – and it was their number one show."

"But that's how poor the BBC is. People don't realise. It's tremendously cash-strapped. And it was getting trickier and trickier. It's nice to imagine that had we not lost *Lis* the show would have carried on forever, but I'm not sure it would have, because money was so tight by the end."

Which brings us to the sad subject of Elisabeth Sladen's diagnosis of cancer, in February 2011. It speaks volumes that the first person she told, in a phone call on her way back from the doctors, was Davies. →



## TRIVIA

In part one of "The Last Sontaran", Mr Smith emits a sound effect of the Book from *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy*.

"Secrets Of The Stars" was devised as a sequel to 1976 *Doctor Who* story "The Masque Of Mandragora", but it was later decided to swap in a new alien entity.

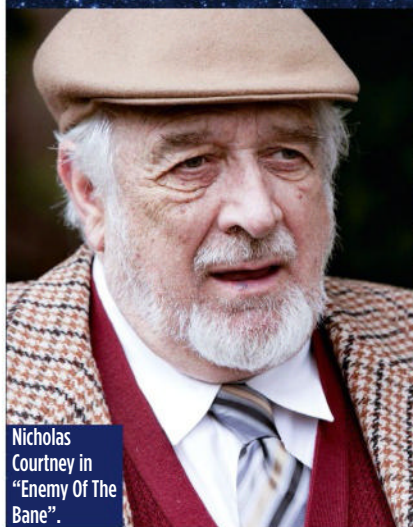
"The Mad Woman In The Attic" features Elisabeth Sladen's husband, Brian Miller, as the caretaker of a pleasure park.

David Tennant's final day of filming as the Tenth Doctor was on "The Wedding Of Sarah Jane". His last line: "You two - with me, spit-spot!"

The venue used for Sarah Jane's wedding (Court Colman Manor, Pen-y-fai, Bridgend) was also used for Gwen Cooper's nuptials in *Torchwood*.



David Tennant pops by for a visit in series three.



Nicholas Courtney in "Enemy Of The Bane".



Exploding Slitheen goo: a regular SJA hazard.

"I adored her," he says. "We had such a lovely relationship. It was beyond the working relationship. I wouldn't see her that often, but we'd text every day.

"It also shows how diligent she was," Davies adds, concerning that call. "She was also phoning me as a matter of work. She was very much aware of an entire crew of people waiting for her. She imagined them being unemployed as a result of her illness. I know she carried that with her as a worry all the time."

With production on pause after the shooting of six stories for series four had run on into three additional ones for a fifth series, Sladen - a very private woman - was able to keep her illness out of the public eye. In the early hours of Tuesday 19 April 2011, she passed away at Meadow House hospice in Southall. She was 65.

"I sent her a text on, I think, the last Sunday, but she didn't reply because she was very ill by then," Davies recalls. "One

of the things she said to her husband was, 'Tell Russell I'm sorry I didn't reply to his text.'"

Davies takes a deep breath. "What a woman. She never quite told us how bad it was, bless her. That was absolutely private between her and her family, and I completely understand. I will never forget the shock of that day. We had no idea it was that bad, or that close.

"I had to go live on BBC News 24, and it was still hitting me - 'Oh my god, she's dead'. They'd rushed me to some studio in LA, and I sat there thinking, 'Don't cry on the news. Don't upstage her, because then the story becomes about me. Sitting there realising that children would have to be told that their hero had died. Terrible situation, so sad.'"

The three stories in the can were broadcast in October as an abbreviated fifth series. Aborted storylines for the series' second half included a first-draft script by

**“We need money from outside because the BBC can't afford to make anything”**

Gareth Roberts and Clayton Hickman in which supercomputer Mr Smith took bowler-hatted, John Steed-esque human form. Rani and Clyde would have entered Narnia-like realm The Neverside via a newspaper offices' lift in "The Thirteenth Floor"; Phil Ford's third-draft script was later reworked for *Wizards vs Aliens*, a CBBC show devised by Davies and Ford to keep the *SJA* crew in work.

The final story would have seen Sky revealed as the daughter of recurring Big Bad the Trickster. It *might* have also concluded with Rani and Clyde leaving (Mohindra and Anthony having decided to move on), perhaps as a couple - and





Matt Smith and Katy Manning visit the attic.



Floella Benjamin as Professor Rivers.

# SIX OF THE BEST

Never seen *The Sarah Jane Adventures*? Here's a starter kit!



## 2.1/2.2: "THE LAST SONTARAN"

Tied into *Who*'s "The Sontaran Stratagem", Sarah Jane's third tangle with the spudheads (written by Phil Ford) sees one crash-landing near a radio telescope, then plotting to drop satellites on nuclear power stations to avenge the Sontaran fleet's destruction. At the end they let him fly off because, hey, children's show.

◆ **Neat bit:** Commander Kaagh going Predator by cloaking device.



## 2.9/2.10: "THE TEMPTATION OF SARAH JANE SMITH"

After a time fissure opens to the village of Foxgrove in 1951, Sarah Jane meets the parents she never knew. Will she prevent them dying in a car crash? Of course she bloody will. It's all a plot by chaos agent the Trickster. Responsible for a key chunk of the character's wiki page, Gareth Roberts's story is a real tearjerker.

◆ **Neat bit:** Barbara and Eddie Smith drive off to their fate. Gulp.



## 3.5/3.6: "THE WEDDING OF SARAH JANE SMITH"

Gareth Roberts gives Sarah Jane a romantic life, as she gets engaged to Peter Dalton (Nigel Havers). Slight issue: he's actually dead (another Trickster scheme), so a skinny bloke in plimsolls crashes the wedding to do the "just impediment" bit. Cue much dashing about by David Tennant.

◆ **Neat bit:** Rani tells the Doctor off for calling Sarah Jane "Sarah". Er, Tom Baker wants a word.



## 3.7/3.8: "THE ETERNITY TRAP"

This Phil Ford spookfest is set in a manor house menaced by 17th century alchemist Erasmus Darkening (Donald Sumpter). There's a scientific explanation (a malfunctioning transdimensional portal), but this is classic ghost story fare, with poltergeist activity and cobwebbed secret passages.

◆ **Neat bit:** A voice saying "Sarah Jane, help me!" from a gramophone record. Creepy.



## 4.5/4.6: "DEATH OF THE DOCTOR"

Russell T Davies writes for Matt Smith! After being told the Doctor's dead, Sarah Jane attends a funeral in a UNIT base. He's not, of course – it's a plot by alien vultures to pinch the TARDIS. Seeing Elisabeth Sladen and Third Doctor companion Katy Manning together is a delight. Equally nostalgic: all the shuffling through ventilation ducts.

◆ **Neat bit:** The Doctor to Jo: "It's like someone baked you."



## 5.3/5.4: "THE CURSE OF CLYDE LANGER"

A good vehicle for Daniel Anthony, Phil Ford's Clyde-focused tale uses a fantasy conceit to make homelessness understandable for young viewers, as a totem pole's curse causes him to be kicked out by his mum and rejected by all his friends. On the plus side, he acquires a cute love interest in the shape of Ellie (Skins) Lily Loveless).

◆ **Neat bit:** Clyde gets a kiss! Get in there, son.

possibly even the destruction of 13 Bannerman Road. But all this was up in the air.

Davies also had general plans to maintain the tradition of ratings-boosting crossovers. "Had *The Sarah Jane Adventures* continued I would have done that with every new Doctor – I'd have said, 'Please can we have Peter? Please can we have Jodie?'"

"Ah," he gasps, transported by the thought, "Can you imagine Jodie Whittaker and Lis Sladen on-screen together? What a story that would have been! What a shame."

## GOLDEN YEARS

Looking back, 2007-2011 was a golden era for *Doctor Who*, with three different shows – *Who*, *Torchwood* and *SJA* – in production around the same time.

The MCU pinched the idea from the DWU, we suggest. "I think so!" Davies

laughs. "About 2008 the squeeze on the BBC came along. Sometimes people think, 'Oh, Steven [Moffat] and Chris [Chibnall] didn't keep that going' – you couldn't, there's not a penny to spare any more. That's why you need to supersize *Doctor Who*, like we're doing now. We need money from outside because the BBC can't afford to make anything."

With the Beeb now partnering with Disney on *Who*, speculation has naturally turned to potential spin-offs. As someone passionate about children's TV, is a kids' show a long-term ambition for Davies? "It's an ideal, but we're coming back to a world in which money in children's is in even shorter supply," Davies says. "Even with all the good will in the world, we'd find it

very hard to do now, unfortunately. There *are* fantasy shows – they do do stuff. But our stuff is expensive. You also have to keep the spin-offs looking as good as the main show, in order to maintain the entire brand – that's part of the problem as well. So it's genuinely tricky. There is no plan at the moment for children's, and I'm sad about that, but just affording it would be hard.

"Hopefully!" he adds. "We'll get there, give us time."

Fingers crossed, because there are so many options. *Nyssa And The Lazars? Peripugilliam Of The Brown: Warrior Princess? Mel's Megabyte Modems? As SJA's final caption put it, "The story goes on – forever" ...*

All five series of *The Sarah Jane Adventures* are available on BBC iPlayer now.







Daniel Anthony and Anjali Mohindra then and now.



# RANI AND CLYDE

THE SCHOOLGIRL INVESTIGATOR AND THE PUN-  
PERPETRATOR ARE BACK!

**L**AST SUMMER, 11 YEARS after filming wrapped on *The Sarah Jane Adventures*, Anjali Mohindra and Daniel Anthony were reunited for recording on an audio series for Big Finish: *Rani Takes On The World*. Volume one, *Beyond Bannerman Road*, sees an older Rani (who now has a successful podcast) investigating a flying saucer, a luxury island resort, and a haunted restaurant – with Clyde and mum Gita (Mina Anwar) in tow.

“She’s a freelance journalist who can’t quite help but keep being led on a trail to discovering alien meddling and having to sort it, basically,” Mohindra tells *SFX*.

Meanwhile, the boy who loved sketching superhero The Silver Bullet has made a career from it. “He’s matured – for the

most part,” Anthony says. “His art is still a big factor in his life, and he’s doing well.”

It was a happy reunion – and a seamless one. “I was like, ‘Oh god, what does Rani sound like 10 years later? What’s her interaction with Clyde going to be like?’” Mohindra says. “Then we started doing a scene and it was like that decade in-between hadn’t happened.”

“It was like no time had passed,” Anthony concurs. “The chemistry was back – we just bounced off each other.”

Looking back, Mohindra recalls having doubts when she first won the role. “At the time, because I was 18, I’d just graduated from watching children’s telly to watching *Skins*,” she explains. “I felt, ‘Oh, but I’m doing kids’ TV’. That felt strange for a teenager – not necessarily very cool.

I felt I was way too old for it.”

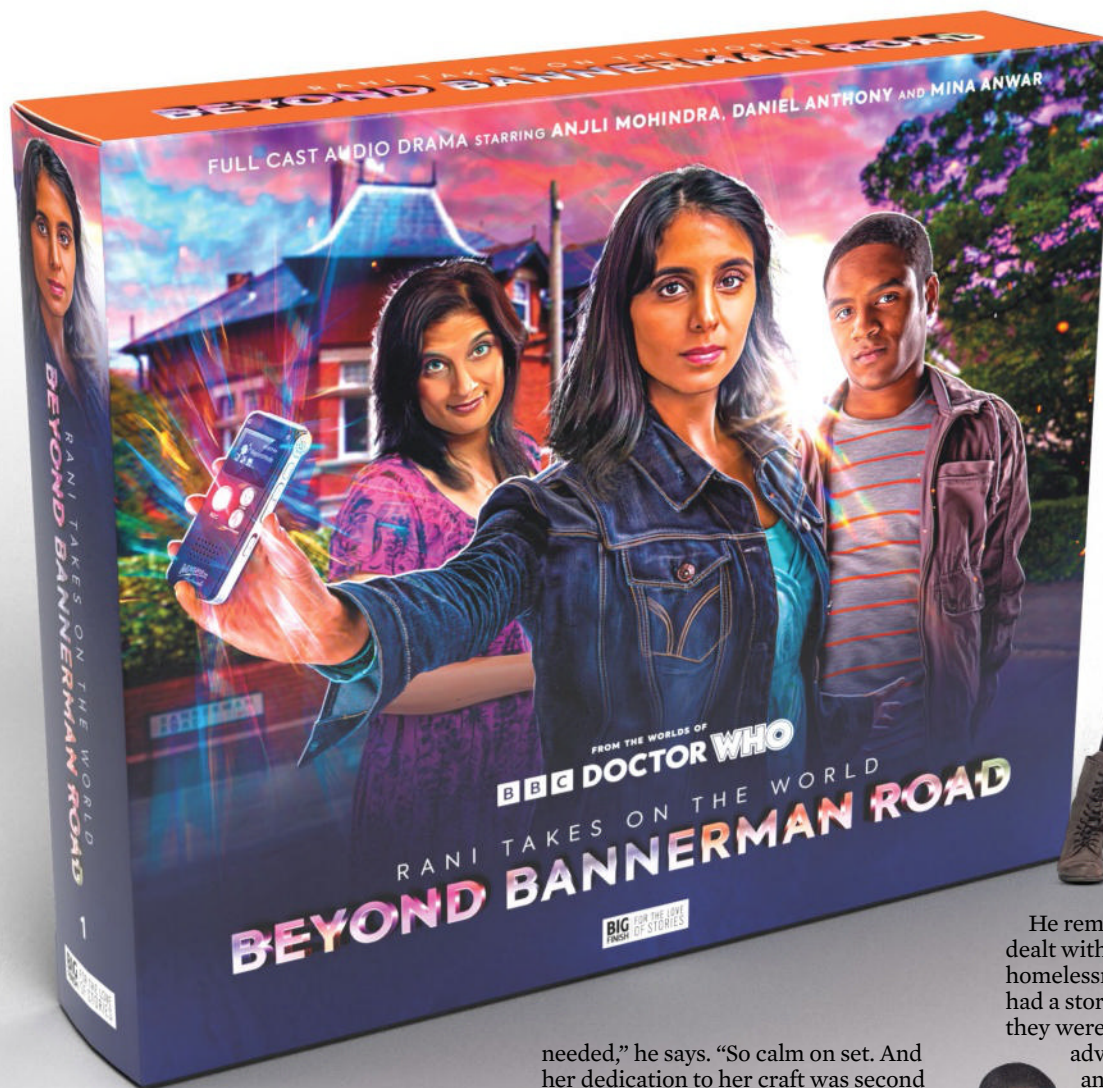
But her hesitancy melted away once the cameras started rolling. “The production values of that show, and the

actors we’d get in as guest stars... These massive people would come in. So it never felt like you were doing a kids’ show.”

Anthony was older still when cast. Was it weird to be 19, playing a boy of 14? “I’d played roles before that were a bit younger, so I was used to it. And I’m a bit of a big kid anyway, so I guess it came naturally.”

*SFX* recalls stepping outside during a set visit and finding Tommy Knight (Luke) playing with a remote-control car... then double-taking upon seeing Anthony





## “We started doing a scene and it was like that decade in-between hadn’t happened”

smoking a quick fag. He laughs. “To be honest, I probably put it out then joined Tommy with his remote-control car. The age gap was never really a thing that any of us thought about.”

It’s a cliché for actors to say “we were like a family”, but here it really seems to have been true. “You’d have a day off here and there, and I’d be sat in my flat and want to be with everyone,” Anthony recalls.

“I remember once me and Anjali had the day off. We knew where they were shooting, and we drove down, bought some ice lollies – it was a really hot day – and just hung out on set. We all loved being around each other.”

The “mother hen”, as Anthony puts it, was Elisabeth Sladen. “You’d always go to Lis and she’d give you all the advice you

needed,” he says. “So calm on set. And her dedication to her craft was second to none.”

Asked what in particular they learned from her, Mohindra says, “Just to not take it so seriously. She was so disciplined and dedicated, but she’d be the first person to corpse in a scene and have us all in stitches. She had a cheeky sense of humour as well – she’d be the ringleader of the pranks, which I loved.”

Her death came as a huge shock. “It was heartbreaking,” says Anthony. “It was out of the blue. None of us knew. I think she had something with her knee or her hip – I remember it was bothering her a bit. So when we went on this break I assumed she was just resting up and getting ready to come back and shoot the second half of series five.”

“We loved her, absolutely adored her, and were so sad that it ended the way it did. But, y’know, we all worked really hard on something, and I know she’d be proud of how it turned out.”



He remains proud of that work. “We dealt with really important issues: homelessness, separation of parents, we had a story that involved dementia. But they were wrapped up in beautiful

adventures. I did a signing last week and one guy, who is in his thirties now, said that one in particular really helped him when his parents were divorcing. He was like, ‘I really appreciate *The Sarah Jane Adventures*. It helped me through a lot of hard times.’ So when people belittle children’s TV, it doesn’t sit right with me.”

It’s only with hindsight that Mohindra fully appreciates how special her first TV job was. “I wish I’d realised how lucky I was at the time. I was like, ‘Oh, this is happening. Cool.’ I thought, ‘It’ll all be this great from here. I’ll always have this good a time. The scripts will always be this tight. People will care as much on the next jobs that I do.’ And it hasn’t always been like that. As the years go by, I go, ‘Wow, that was an incredible thing to get to do at the beginning of my career.’”

*Rani Takes On The World: Beyond Bannerman Road* is out on CD and download in April. Visit [bigfinish.com](http://bigfinish.com).





# OWEN KING

Gallery of wonders: the American writer tells us about his new novel

Words by Jonathan Wright // Portrait by Anne Raft Photography

**T**HERE ARE CHARACTERS THAT NOVELISTS create and then find they adore. Dora, the protagonist of Owen King's new novel *The Curator*, is one such figure. "She's so smart," he says. "She's so composed and she's so much more than the people around her think she is. I find that to be an extraordinarily appealing point of view, and I loved writing a story about somebody who everybody underestimates, an underdog."

Dora, a domestic turned museum worker (hence the book's title) is one of the most vividly drawn characters in a novel set against the backdrop of "a revolution that turns out to be not what it appears to be". Though it began life as a short story, it's an intricate and fascinating book, especially in the way it riffs on the 19th century novel.

Indeed, one way to read the novel is to say it was Charles Dickens who made King do it. Amy Dorrit, the heroine of *Little Dorrit*, someone born and raised in Marshalsea debtors' prison, was "at least a distant model for Dora". Perhaps more importantly, there's a sense that he seems to be trying to show us as much of society as possible in *The Curator*, an idea he likes when SFX puts it to him.

"I love that about Dickens's novels," he says, discussing *Little Dorrit*'s sheer sweep. "He was a master of that. You go from the people in the debtors' prison, then you stop in the middle [of society] where you have these weird law clerks. I don't think they're living that well, but they do have these positions of authority where they can waylay your legal documents indefinitely. And then you keep going up to somebody like [successful businessman] Arthur Clennam."

## BOX CLEVER

But where Dickens, for all his occasional dalliances with the supernatural, is a novelist who fits squarely in the realist tradition, King's fiction is far more fantastical. Though we recognise the world Dora moves through, and there are places in common, it's not our own Earth. The sense of displacement, even of not quite knowing what's going on, is heightened by the book's structure, which King likens to "a kind of box within a box within a box" and which works by "hooking together big narrative loops".

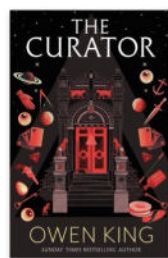
It's the work of a writer who is confident in his craft and able to control big narratives – as you might expect considering it's King's third novel. So how did he get to this point? Let's deal with the surname first. The son of novelists Stephen and Tabitha King, and the brother of Joe Hill, King works in the family business.

## BIODATA

From Bangor, Maine, USA

Greatest Hits *Sleeping Beauties* (2017), co-written with father Stephen King, made the bestseller lists. His other books include (as co-editor with John McNally) the superhero anthology *Who Can Save Us Now?* (2008).

Random Fact When Stephen King's children were young, he had them record books on tape for him to listen to in his car. One Owen had to recite was Dean Koontz's *Watchers*.



As a child, he says, he was keenly aware that writing was tough. His parents would disappear into their respective offices and "be there for hours on end". The clattering of typewriters and "large early word processors" could be heard. "To me as a young person, I think what was daunting was how clear it was that it was a real job, and maybe a pretty boring one," he remembers.

Nonetheless, the young King was captivated by stories. Through his twenties, he gradually learnt how to sit each day and write, an occupation he likens to "long distance running" in that it requires training and practice to be able to do it at all. "I pushed myself for a long time to get into a place where it was second nature," he says.

## PAPPY TALK

His first collection *We're All In This Together* arrived in 2005. His debut novel *Double Feature* followed in 2013. In 2017 *Sleeping Beauties*, a spooky tale involving a sleeping sickness and an alternate reality (co-written with Stephen) was a bestseller. Written around the time he was turning 40, it was a chance for King to connect with his father.

"It was just really cool to be able to talk about stories and spend that kind of quality time with your dad when you're my age," he says. "I can't compare that to anything else. It's not something I ever really expected would happen. I mean, we're close, but you know, you don't talk for hours every day with your dad very often. That was unusual and special to me. I loved that."

King has also worked in comics, co-writing the affectionately genre-spoofing *Intro To Alien Invasion* (2015) with Mark Jude Poirier; and in television, notably as a writer and producer on *The Stand*, a 2020 adaptation of Stephen King's post-apocalyptic novel. He likes the writers' room, he says, but never wants to go into a sitcom meeting where every scriptwriter is trying to place a favourite joke. "I would just crawl under the table and die – I don't have that kind of ambition," he says.

Besides, he's busy. There's a new comic due later this year. Television projects are bubbling, "but nothing feels imminent". And of course there's *The Curator* to promote – a good pay-off, he says, for the risk of committing time to the project.

"I'm thrilled with the way the book has turned out," he adds, and doesn't sound boastful, but honest and pleased – and perhaps just ever so slightly relieved. ●

*The Curator* is out now, published by Hodder & Stoughton.



“I loved writing  
a story about  
somebody who  
everybody  
underestimates,  
an underdog”





## 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

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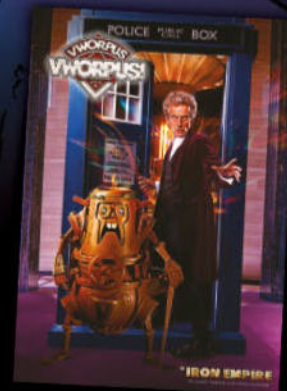
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2023

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# Reviews

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## SCREAM VI

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#### KINDRED

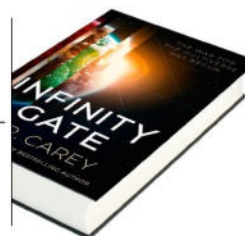
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## SCREAM VI

Having another stab at it



▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

18 | 123 minutes

▶ Directors **Matt Bettinelli-Olpin, Tyler Gillet**

▶ Cast **Melissa Barrera, Jenna Ortega, Jasmin Savoy Brown, Mason Gooding, Courtney Cox, Dermot Mulroney, Hayden Panettiere**

● **Of all the horror franchises** that keep coming back for one last kill, *Scream* has been among the most consistent. While quality has not always been entirely assured, no instalment has been entirely devoid of merit.

The original film was a stone cold classic, skewering the slasher movie template with genuinely terrifying sequences and clever metatextual snark. *Scream 2* took on the sequel, and showed gory aplomb by unexpectedly dispatching fan favourite Randy.

*Scream 3* had its moments, particularly in its skewering of Hollywood, but was a little lacking because of its references to “the final instalment in a horror trilogy” – not actually much of a thing, really. Still, by getting the old Woodsboro gang back together it had plenty to recommend it.

The unfairly maligned *Scream 4* had some brilliant meta references to the horror reboot phenomenon

dominating the multiplexes around the time of its release in 2011, and managed to breath new life into even the most familiar of set-pieces, with a fantastically brutal murder of a publicist played by Alison Brie and a new fan favourite emerging in the form of Hayden Panettiere’s hard-as-nails horror nerd Kirby. That was the last of Wes Craven’s contributions, as the director sadly passed away in 2015.

But IP being precious in today’s movie market, the franchise was to be resurrected. And last year’s fifth entry *Scream* actually impressed, with a gross, funny, albeit not particularly scary look at the “requel”. As well as bringing back the beloved cohort of Sidney (Neve Campbell), Gale (Courtney Cox) and Dewey (David Arquette), it introduced original killer Billy Loomis’s daughter Sam (Melissa Barrera), her sister Tara (Jenna Ortega), and Randy’s niece and nephew Chad (Mason Gooding) and Mindy (Jasmin Savoy Brown).

Now the series is back, just a year later. Having refused to pay Neve Campbell what she is worth, we are lumbered with the next gen (save a couple of brief appearances from Courtney Cox). This time the high concept is looking at the “franchise”, which according to



“If you lot do the ‘long face’ gag one more time...”



“Ever get the feeling you’ve been here before?”

this film is something that only happens when you reach your sixth instalment. While spending so much of a review recapping the cinematic path by which a film has emerged may seem strange, in this case it’s worthwhile, because beyond referencing the far superior movies that came before it, this entry has not a solitary salient thing to say.

We meet the survivors of the fifth film now living in New York, with Tara, Chad and Mindy attending college and Sam heavily into therapy. The Ghostface killings start again and, shock

“The cast are doing their best with woeful material”

horror, this time (apparently unlike literally every previous time) “no one is safe” and “the killer could be any one of us”.

While it’s a particularly painful thing to watch a horror franchise you love being drained of all that you loved about it, it’s nearly as painful to watch a talented actor like Jasmin Savoy Brown try and





explain the “new rules” of “being a franchise”, as if sixth entries in long-standing horror properties somehow have their own famously distinct identity.

There are hints at some actual ideas, with references to true crime and streaming’s effects on the horror genre, but they’re brushed aside in favour of some of the most stunningly uninventive set-pieces and motives imaginable. The trailer promised a gun-toting Ghostface, and the scene teased where a rifle shoots through cans in the aisles of a bodega is the film’s best. But it doesn’t expand

upon the thrilling potential of a more heavily armed antagonist.

The cast are, to give them credit, doing their best with woeful material. Bringing back Hayden Panettiere’s Kirby, now an FBI agent, helps to lift the film briefly, but even she gets beaten down to a sad, two-dimensional approximation of her former glory. The film’s biggest (only?) idea comes from looking back on the franchise, reflecting on the nine prior Ghostfaces and playing with a few surprising bits of trivia – like the fact that Gail has, until now, never spoken on the phone

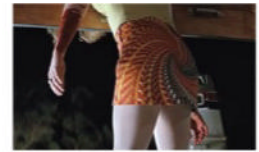
to the gravelly-voiced killer. But ultimately *Scream VI* learned all the worst lessons from its predecessors. The absence of Neve Campbell is glaring, and this entry not only undervalues the iconic actress but fails to appreciate how inventive the prior entries had to be in order to succeed.

Instead of creating a worthy successor to what Wes Craven started, it leaves us with a bloody mess of a horse, well and truly flogged to death. **Leila Latif**

**i** If you think Hayden Panettiere’s character died in *Scream 4*, you’re technically correct. But it was only “for four minutes”.

## KNIVES OUT

Four more times  
Ghostface killers  
used other weapons



### SCREAM: GARAGE DOOR

After Tatum Riley tries to escape from Ghostface by climbing through the pet door in a garage, she gets stuck – allowing Billy (or is it Stu?) to activate it and snap her neck. Ouch.



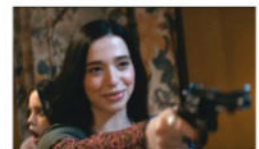
### SCREAM 2: GUN

Tied to part of the set for a production of Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon* by fellow frat boys, Derek Feldman then becomes Mickey Altieri’s final kill when he shoots him in the heart.



### SCREAM 4: GUN

Shortly after revealing herself as the killer, Jill Roberts shoots her ex Trevor Sheldon – first in the groin, then in the head – as part of her plot to frame him. Er, you go, girl?



### SCREAM: GUN

This killer reveal from the 2022 movie is a doozy: as friends throw accusations at one another, Amber Freeman pulls out a gun and shoots Liv McKenzie through the head. “Welcome to act three!”





## SUZUME

### Love Is In The Chair



▶ **RELEASED 14 APRIL**

TBC | 122 minutes

▶ Director Makoto Shinkai

▶ Cast Nanoka Hara, Hokuto Matsumura, Eri Fukatsu, Shota Sometani

◆ **The anime films of Makoto Shinkai** – best known for 2016's *Your Name*, a mega hit in Japan – are as big-hearted and romantic as they are playful and offbeat. His latest is perhaps his quirkiest yet.

It follows the titular Suzume (Nanoka Hara), an orphaned high school girl who falls into the orbit of Sōta (Hokuto Matsumura), a young man with a secret mission: to guard a series of magical doors that, when opened, unleash a giant worm-like creature that causes devastating earthquakes. The twist? Thanks to a curse from a cat, Sōta has been turned into

a chair. A walking, talking, three-legged chair.

It is a premise that requires a delicate touch. Fortunately Shinkai is able to balance the inherent silliness (he has a lot of fun with the chair's absurd, hobbled movements) with an absorbingly sincere, if slightly predictable tale of love and grief; not to mention the anxieties of a nation under the threat of ecological disaster.

The melodramatic final third drags a tad, and the animation, while gorgeously lavish, often relies too heavily on jarring digital effects (the worm creature proving the biggest offender). But these are petty complaints in the face of *Suzume*'s boundless charm.

**Stephen Kelly**

**i** *Suzume* was inspired by the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami that struck Japan – the finale is even set in Tōhoku.

## INFINITY POOL

### Holiday from Hell



▶ **RELEASED 24 MARCH**

18 | 118 minutes

▶ Director Brandon Cronenberg

▶ Cast Alexander Skarsgård, Mia Goth, Cleopatra Coleman, Dunja Sepčić

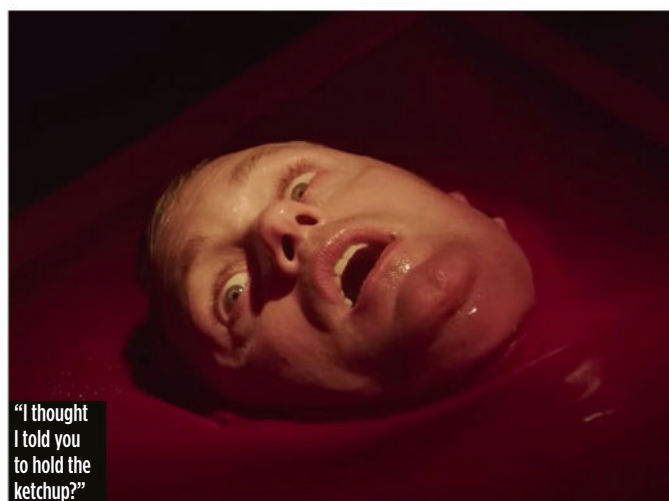
◆ **When unsuccessful novelist James** (Alexander Skarsgård) and his heiress wife Em (Cleopatra Coleman) start their opulent holiday at a luxury resort, *White Lotus*-style “eat the rich” satirical antics seem assured. But Brandon Cronenberg's follow-up to *Possessor* has more unhinged intentions towards his cast.

After a meeting with Gabi (Mia Goth, further proving herself as one of the greatest contemporary horror actors), and an ill-fated drive back from a night on the town, James finds himself facing the death penalty. But it transpires that for the wealthy elite, there are

ways around even the most authoritarian justice systems.

Cronenberg's casting is perfect, tapping into the alluring creepiness of Goth, and Skarsgård's often underutilised ability to make you look past his towering Viking physique and convince as a snivelling loser.

The film delivers so much more than just a dark look at privilege, building to huge existential questions about the nature of mortality and evil itself. But Cronenberg never lets messaging overshadow his filmmaking, and *Infinity Pool* has all the hallucinatory flair and gnarly gore of *Possessor* and *Antiviral*. Unlike his prior work, however, it embraces the humour of its ridiculous premise, and individual scenes vacillate between near-unwatchably violent to absurdly comic.



While that approach creates an ending that will likely prove divisive, it's clear that Cronenberg Jr has gained confidence as a filmmaker. The self-seriousness of earlier entries has given way to something a little more fun.

Once the central conceit, and the double meaning of the film's title, are revealed, it's unclear quite how it will sustain the nearly

two-hour run-time, but Cronenberg has more tricks up his sleeve. His characters' descent into hell takes compelling twists and turns, and the possibilities of the titular infinity pool are taken to captivating and gloriously debauched conclusions. **Leila Latif**

**i** Alexander Skarsgård attended the Sundance premiere of *Infinity Pool* wearing a lead, led around by Mia Goth.





## LOLA



▶ **RELEASED 7 APRIL**

TBC | 79 minutes

▶ Director Andrew Legge

▶ Cast Emma Appleton, Stefanie

Martini, Rory Fleck Byrne,

Aaron Monaghan

❖ **Found footage can feel as** tired a trope as counter-factual stories of Britain succumbing to the Nazi jackboot. Remarkably, Andrew Legge's debut feature combines these well-worn genre staples to create something truly inventive and absorbing.

Sold to us as a cache of antique film unearthed in the cellar of a country house, it's the tale of two sisters in the '40s who build a device capable of receiving broadcasts from the future. At first it's a culture-clashing hoot – David Bowie emerges from the ether like a glam rock angel summoned by Dr John Dee – but soon this mechanical Nostradamus is engaged in the war effort, and warping history as we know it...

Shot with period-accurate tech, the film is energised by its mismatched scraps of footage, with a restless visual aesthetic that veers from spirit photography to propaganda reel. Authentic newsreel footage is slyly, persuasively tweaked: one of the stand-out sequences finds the Kinks' "You Really Got Me" remade (premade?) as a victory anthem for a defiant wartime London.

The Divine Comedy's Neil Hannon supplies a score that matches the movie's emotional trajectory. At first a spot-on pastiche of teutonic '70s pop strikes you as a neat piss-take; by the end it's nothing less than chilling. **Nick Setchfield**



## BLIND WILLOW, SLEEPING WOMAN



▶ **RELEASED 31 MARCH**

TBC | 112 minutes

▶ Director Pierre Földes

▶ Cast Ryan Bommarito, Shoshana

Wilder, Marcelo Arroyo,

Scott Humphrey

❖ **Of all the contemporary** Japanese writers, Haruki Murakami is one of the most widely read in the West. This meandering French animation interprets stories from three different anthologies of his whimsical magical realism. Rather than take a straight anthology approach, it blurs the lines between them, merging different protagonists and having characters from one story recounting the events of another.

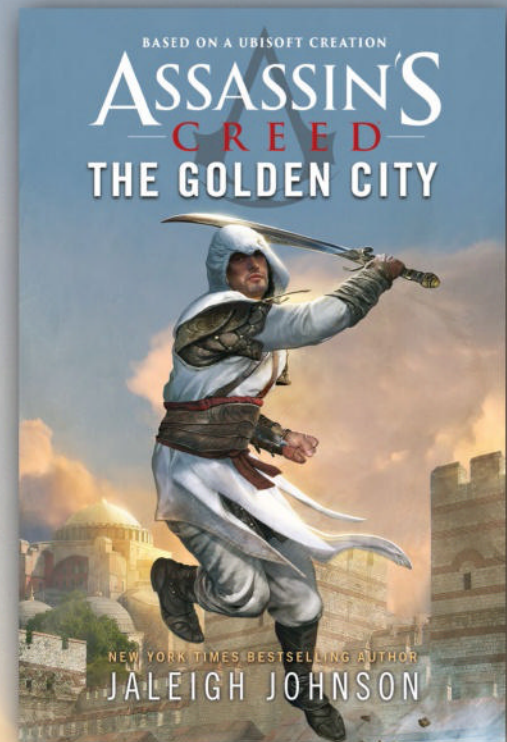
Of the six stories credited, it's a struggle to detect any traces of one of them. Of the remaining five, the most fantastical is "Super-Frog Saves Tokyo", in which a put-upon middle-aged salaryman is visited by a man-sized talking frog, who asks him to help defeat a giant worm. It's lazily paced, and much of the running time consists of characters having conversations – in a bar, across a kitchen table, over a fence.

This and the animation style, which makes extensive use of video reference – allowing the animators to capture the nuances of small gestures (like a woman pushing hair behind her ear) – rather bring to mind Richard Linklater's *Waking Life*. The result is soothingly somnolent. If you manage to catch one of the limited UK screenings, be sure to go in suitably caffeinated.

**Ian Berriman**



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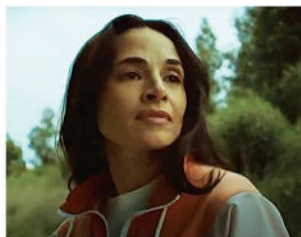


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## THE COW WHO SANG A SONG INTO THE FUTURE

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 24 MARCH**

15 | 99 minutes

▶ Director Francisca Alegría  
▶ Cast Mía Maestro, Enzo Ferrada, Leonor Varela, Alfredo Castro

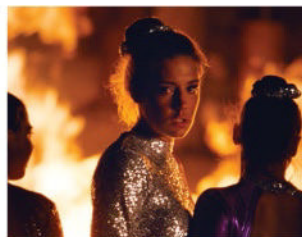
Our planet is sick; the rivers are poisoned and the bees are disappearing. Chilean filmmaker Francisca Alegría's inscrutable first feature is aware of all this, but still finds room for hope and healing.

It opens in a forest, the camera on some fly agaric mushrooms – a clear indicator that we're about to enter the realm of the weird. Out of the river rises a woman, Magdalena (Mía Maestro), fully clothed and disorientated – no surprise given that she died by her own hand some years previously. Silently, she walks back to the town and to her family, now fractured and still devastated by her loss.

Precisely how Magdalena has returned doesn't matter. Instead, it's concerned with how her reappearance impacts her family, and our own troubled relationship with the natural world. There's also a subplot about Magdalena's trans granddaughter, and a moment where some cows do indeed have a sing.

There's a lot going on, and sometimes the film skirts close to incoherence – you wish it'd explore some of these ideas in more detail. Still, it's handsomely shot, the performances are strong, and there are even a few good gags. A bold and bizarre debut.

Will Salmon



## THE FIVE DEVILS

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 24 MARCH**

15 | 96 minutes

▶ Director Léa Mysius  
▶ Cast Adèle Exarchopoulos, Sally Dramé, Swala Emati, Moustapha Mbengue

It's such a shame that all the intriguing little elements in this modern French fable don't add up to anything that feels powerful or mythic.

Léa Mysius's coming-of-age debut *Avà* was a favourite at Cannes in 2017. Her follow-up takes us into the world of an introverted little girl. At school, Vicky's the victim of racist bullying, frequently called "toilet brush" because of the texture of her hair.

Meanwhile, at home, her mother is adrift and depressed. Every morning Vicky watches as she goes swimming in an ice-cold lake, and can't help but notice how rattled she is when her father's younger sister comes to stay with them.

There's a voyeuristic thrill in watching the domestic drama unfold, with the smallest interactions between characters highly charged and hinting at a shared history that can't be talked about.

Where the film really starts to judder is in its sci-fi elements. When Vicky gains the ability to travel back into her mother's past, she slowly uncovers the domino spill of events that led to her birth and the current tensions within the family.

Unfortunately, later twists are heavily signposted, while the use of time travel undermines the emotional complexity that makes the first part of the film so alluring.

Kimberley Ballard



## COCAINE BEAR

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

15 | 95 minutes

▶ Director Elizabeth Banks  
▶ Cast Alden Ehrenreich, O'Shea Jackson Jr, Keri Russell, Ray Liotta

Cocaine Bear is certainly up there in terms of delivering what the title promises. Fortunately, in the capable hands of director Elizabeth Banks and producers Phil Lord and Chris Miller, it's also more than just a gimmick.

Mind you, not *much* more: springboarded by the true story of a drug smuggler chucking bricks of cocaine out of a plane, and a dead bear in Georgia that had consumed some of the drugs, this is a wild and gory romp that throws park rangers, drug dealers and a single mother into the mix along with the intoxicated ursine.

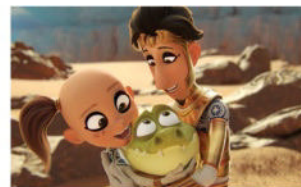
Banks, taking inspiration from the likes of John Carpenter and Sam Raimi, largely goes the in-camera horror-comedy route: gnawed prosthetic limbs, bloody wounds and practical stunts are the order of the day.

The bear, however, is entirely digital, leading to an effect that swings between BBC nature documentary quality and the sort of schlocky renderings found in *Sharknado* movies – which truthfully only adds to the comedy.

It's not quite as funny as you might have hoped for given these creators' pedigree, but still has memorable moments, including a *Fast & Furious*-inspired chase scene involving an ambulance.

One to make you chuckle and clap your paws rather than roar with laughter, then.

James White



## MUMMIES

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

PG | 88 minutes

Ancient mummies leave their subterranean "afterworld" in pursuit of a stolen gem and prove surprisingly adaptable to modern London in this Spanish-made animation.

Much like an "ancient" Egyptian treasure picked up at a market stall, *Mummies* is a cheap knock-off of the sort of films Disney, DreamWorks and co made about 20 years ago. Cultural insensitivity, lapses in internal logic and predictable gags don't help. And yes, they needle-drop "Walk Like An Egyptian". Embarrassing.

James White

## ALSO+OUT



There were no UK review screenings for Adam Driver's dinosaur-era tale **65** (out now) – see page 12. They also came too late for **SHAZAM! FURY OF THE GODS** (out now). Russell Crowe is a Vatican priest in **THE POPE'S EXORCIST** (7 April), while CG animation **THE SUPER MARIO BROS MOVIE** (7 April) sees the Italian-American plumber transported to a different dimension. In **LEONOR WILL NEVER DIE** (7 April) fantasy and reality blur for a veteran Filipino actress when she enters a coma. And as part of Warner Bros' 100th anniversary, **SUPERMAN: THE MOVIE** (7 April) gets a reissue.

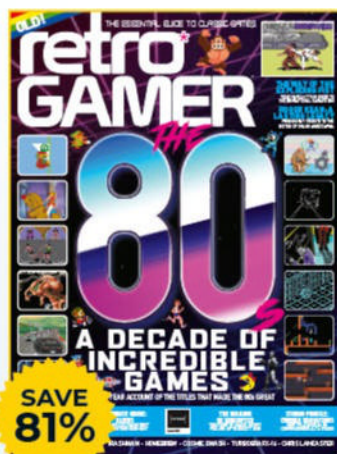
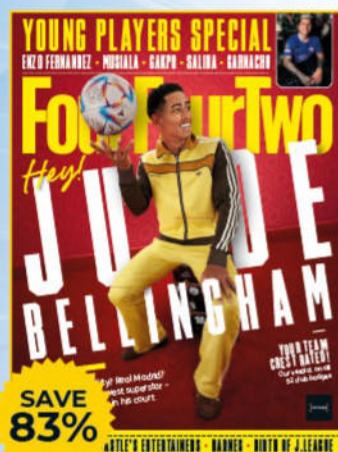




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## KINDRED

### The Time-Travellers' Strife

★★★★★

UK Disney+, 29 March

US Hulu, streaming now

► Showrunners **Branden Jacobs-Jenkins**

► Cast **Mallori Johnson, Micah Stock, Ryan Kwanten, Gayle Rankin**

**EPISODES 1.01-1.08** A word of

warning: *Kindred's* eighth episode ends on a cliffhanger. It's also the last one, as FX decided not to commission a second season; whether the show can be sold elsewhere remains to be seen.

So is it worth watching, knowing it may never be resolved? Well, if you find yourself really invested you can always delve into the novel that started it all: Octavia Butler's 1979 classic, which wraps up the overall plot – the TV series has only made a few changes along the way. Phew.

One major change from the original book is that the story

starts in 2016 instead of the '70s. This is where we meet Dana (Mallori Johnson). An aspiring TV writer, we see her studying '80s soap opera *Dynasty* for writing pointers – cheeky foreshadowing, because soon she's mysteriously time-travelling into her black ancestors' past, landing on a plantation in the early 19th century. Understandably freaked out, she later accidentally grabs one-night-stand Kevin (Micah Stock) and takes him back too; as Kevin is white, he ends up having to pretend that he owns her.

Most of *Kindred* rests on Johnson's shoulders, and she

**“Worthy, non-preachy television that tells a bloody good story”**



“So just what is it you hate about chairs so much?”

doesn't disappoint, by turns likeable and defiant while trying to ensure that two of her ancestors get together, thus creating her in the future. And here's a tiny quibble: it's very odd that neither she nor Kevin discuss the butterfly effect or *Back To The Future* (you would, wouldn't you?).

Elsewhere, a 2016 subplot involving nosy neighbours is farcical, undermining the show's

commitment to serious drama. But that commitment is the reason to watch *Kindred*: in detailing the lives of enslaved people and contrasting them to today's America, this is worthy, non-preachy television that tells a bloody good story.

**Jayne Nelson**

**i** Aged nine, Octavia Butler saw 1954's *Devil Girl From Mars* and knew she could do better, so she decided to be a writer.

## TALES OF THE WALKING DEAD

### The Dead Zone

★★★★★

UK AMC Global (via BT), Mondays

US AMC, finished

► Creator **Channing Powell**

► Cast **Terry Crews, Allison Munn, Parker Posey, Jessie T Usher**

**EPISODES 1.01-1.06** This belated

spin-off is an anthology series focusing on small casts of mostly new characters. It plays with genre in a way *The Walking Dead* never could, but can't escape its shortcomings.

The first two episodes are both comedies. “Evie/Joe” follows a survivalist (Terry Crews) on a road trip to find love in the apocalypse. *Brooklyn 99* star Crews is an innately funny presence, but it's hard to reconcile the episode's

goofiness with the grimness of the *Dead* universe. Likewise “Blair/Gina” introduces a *Russian Doll*-style time loop – a jarringly weird choice for this setting. Parker Posey is good value as the narcissistic Blair, but the script is only so-so.

The middle episodes are on surer ground. “Dee” is an origin story for Alpha (Samantha Morton), leader of the Whisperers. It's relentlessly bleak, but offers insight into the origins of this character, and its riverboat setting is distinctive. “Amy/Dr. Everett”, meanwhile, follows the meeting of a young woman and a naturalist who has been studying “Homo mortuus”, as he calls the zombies. The episode flirts with mad



The spa day turned out to be very disappointing.

scientist cliché, but takes a more interesting route as it digs into the flaws of the central characters.

“Davon” is a noir-tinged mystery with a touch of *Memento* as an amnesiac (Jessie T Usher) is accused of murdering children in a small township. There are some nice stylistic touches, but the plot is a muddle. Finally, “La Doña” ends the series with an episode that touches on haunted house

horror, as survivors Eric and Idalia seize a house and are seemingly beset by the spirit of its owner.

What a weird show! For the most part these stories could take place in any zombie apocalypse, and the attempts at lightening this world are only partially successful.

**Will Salmon**

**i** The original conception of “Blair/Gina” was that the episode would take place in real time over the course of 42 minutes.





## A GIRL AND AN ASTRONAUT Season One

★★★★★

▶ UK/US Netflix, streaming now

▶ Creator Agata Malesinska

▶ Cast Vanessa Aleksander, Jędrzej Hycnar, Jakub Sasak, Magdalena Cielecka

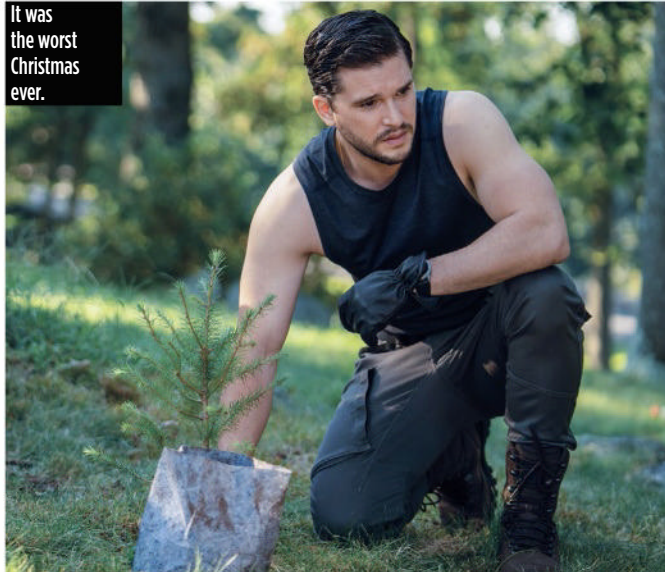
**EPISODES 1.01-1.06** This Polish drama has lofty aims for its limited budget: fusing *Top Gun* aeronautics with *Blade Runner* futurism while also trying to reinvent *The Time Traveler's Wife* as a love triangle.

Astronaut Niko (Jędrzej Hycnar) wakes up in his spaceship in 2052 after 30 years orbiting the Earth in accidental suspended animation. While he snored, his 2022 girlfriend Marta (Vanessa Aleksander) married his best friend Bogdan (Jakub Sasak). With both those roles recast for the future scenes – with actors who do a damn fine job of recreating their younger counterparts – and sinister Russians refusing to release the still-sleepy Niko back to his country, the stage is set for angst across the decades.

The performances are undoubtedly excellent, while the technology of Future-Poland is wonderfully inventive and, cheekily, raises more questions than it answers; we never find out why there's a mysterious laser "net" in the sky, for example.

Sadly, while the SF elements work well, the main characters' love triangle and the men's testosterone-fuelled fighter-pilot hijinks are overly familiar. The script's insistence that Marta is a great DJ is odd, too, given her sludgy "dancefloor bangers"... **Jayne Nelson**

It was the worst Christmas ever.



## EXTRAPOLATIONS Global warning

★★★★★

▶ UK/US Apple TV+, Fridays

▶ Showrunner Scott Z Burns

▶ Cast Kit Harington, Sienna Miller, Edward Norton, Daveed Diggs

**EPISODES 1.01-1.08** It's the end of the world as we know it, and it seems Scott Z Burns (writer of *The Bourne Ultimatum*) does not feel fine. Venturing into the sort of speculative fiction territory the writer explored in 2011 pandemic drama *Contagion*, his new eight-part anthology series imagines what the next 50 years could look like if global warming goes unchecked. It's no spoiler to say that humanity's future isn't looking too bright.

Unfolding across four eventful decades, *Extrapolations* explores multiple aspects of impending climate catastrophe, from the widespread destruction of ecosystems to the plight of people dealing with rapidly rising sea levels. While a smattering of recurring characters give the series a loose throughline, each episode can be viewed as an individual vignette. Indeed, with its eerily dystopian visions and imaginative deployment of future

tech, it plays out like a cross between *Years And Years* and *Black Mirror* – albeit lacking the emotional heft of the former and the smart satire of the latter.

The quality is as varied as the topics, with the thriller-based episodes eclipsing their more melodramatic counterparts. And despite a high concentration of A-listers in the cast, many of the protagonists are too broadly drawn to convince – Kit Harington's morally dubious tech boss, for example, wouldn't look out of place as a Bond villain.

That said, you have to applaud the show's efforts to make a difference in the ongoing climate debate. *Extrapolations* is unafraid to call out corporations and governments who'd rather make half-hearted compromises than risk profits or votes.

Even if Burns's vision turns out to be a worst-case scenario, you can't help feeling that the series should be required viewing ahead of the next COP conference.

**Richard Edwards**

**i** Scott Burns was also one of the producers of the 2006 Al Gore climate change documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*.



## MY DAD THE BOUNTY HUNTER Season One

★★★★★

▶ UK/US Netflix, streaming now

▶ Creators Everett Downing Jr, Patrick Harpin

Cast Laz Alonso, Priah Ferguson, JeCobi Swain, Yvette Nicole Brown

**EPISODES 1.01-1.10** Nope, this isn't a *Mandalorian* spin-off centred on Baby Yoda. But don't feel too disappointed. *My Dad the Bounty Hunter* is a frothy CG comedy space opera aimed at kids, but – as with Pixar movies – has enough sophistication and wit to keep parents entertained too. And not just because it quotes *Blade Runner*, although that helps.

Two Earth kids, Lisa and Sean, discover that their dad Terry is an intergalactic bounty hunter when they stowaway in his car – which is actually a shuttlecraft – and are accidentally whisked into space. He wants to get them home before his wife finds out, but Lisa and Sean are well up for helping dad rid the universe of scum and villainy.

It's fast-paced, action-packed and visually sumptuous, and while conceptually there's little here that hasn't been seen and done before many times (comedy AI, cars in space, cute critters who turn out to be kickass) there's an appealing energy and vitality that keeps it bubbling along.

The fact that the core characters are all black, and it's all very modern (Terry and his wife are separated) is, of course, commendable and gives the show some of its vibe, but these progressive elements are never laboured. **Dave Golder**





"Go on, let me touch those luscious locks..."

## DRINKING GAME

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



An unusual example of '70s transportation turns up on screen.



Jon Pertwee thoughtfully puts a finger to his chin.



The Master puts the 'fluence on someone.



Three Dalek props are doing their best to look like a horde.



A radiophonic burble sounds alarmingly gastric.



Queen Galleia's cat in "The Time Monster" clearly wants a word with its agent.



The Doctor uses his Venusian aikido. Hai!

# DOCTOR WHO Season Nine

## Velvet Goldmine

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1972 | PG | Blu-ray

▶ Producer Barry Letts

▶ Cast Jon Pertwee, Katy Manning, Nicholas Courtney, Roger Delgado

**BLU-RAY DEBUT** **Fittingly, Jon**

Pertwee's middle season finds the Third Doctor not just in his dandy pomp but perfectly caught between his past and future. Still exiled to Earth and mixing it with the military, he's also sneaking away to other worlds a whole year before the Time Lords officially lift his travel restrictions.

The classics are frontloaded: "Day Of The Daleks" is powered by the kind of time-bending paradox you suspect may have imprinted on a young Steven

Moffat, while "The Curse Of Peladon" proves a deliciously atmospheric piece of studio-bound world-building. "The Sea Devils", meanwhile, delivers one of the show's touchstone monsters and a briny whiff of seaside location work.

If "The Mutants" is a plod it's a nobly intentioned one, aiming for a *Star Trek*-like parable about the iniquities of apartheid. "The Time Monster" has no such ambitions – other than clunky commentary on Women's Lib – but for all its production shortcomings it's a breezy, giddy romp.

▶ **Extras** The eternally ebullient Katy Manning (Jo Grant) revisits key locations from the season (43 minutes) in the company of old co-stars, finding magic in a

decaying railway bridge in Middlesex and discovering the iconic orifice known as "Jon Pertwee's Hole".

There's an engaging profile on prolific director Michael E Briant (52 minutes), who shares insights into his time on *Who* and beyond; elsewhere, affable veteran stunt artist and monster man Stuart Fell is revealed as one of telly's true unsung heroes in an illuminating look at his career (26 minutes).

"The Time Monster" gets an overdue retrospective (51 minutes) – "It was a polyester life," John Levene memorably reflects on the '70s – that also covers the overlooked craft of film editing in the days when *Who* was assembled with Stone Age tools like tape and chinagraph pencils.

Each story receives its own Behind The Sofa session featuring Whominaries including Manning, Peter Davison and Sophie Aldred, while archive convention footage pairs script editor Terrance Dicks and "The Time Monster"'s Ingrid Pitt (43 minutes), and UNIT mainstays Nicholas Courtney and Richard Franklin (42 minutes).

You feel the absence of Matthew Sweet's candid In Conversation interviews, but he's represented by a thoughtful episode of Radio 3's *Free Thinking* focused on the Daleks (43 minutes). You also get splendid snippets of archive media coverage (look out for Pertwee, in character, on the psychiatrist's couch in 1989), an authentically retro 60-minute omnibus of "Day Of The Daleks", and much more – like 3,643 pages of production paperwork PDFs. A glut of extras have also been transferred from the DVD releases. **Nick Setchfield**

**i** John Byrne said that the *X-Men* storyline "Days Of Future Past" was unconsciously inspired by "Day Of The Daleks".





## THE HOUSE THAT SCREAMED

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1969 | 15 | Blu-ray

▶ Director Narciso Ibáñez Serrador

▶ Cast Lilli Palmer, Cristina Galbó, Mary Maude, John Moulder-Brown

**BLU-RAY DEBUT** The man

ultimately responsible for Dusty Bin is behind this Spanish horror. Narciso Ibáñez Serrador also helmed killer-kids classic *Who Can Kill A Child?*, but his great success came devising the gameshow translated as 3-2-1.

It's set in a French boarding school, whose headmistress believes in taking a firm hand with impudent girls (whip crack). Don't expect anything too kinky, mind: '60s Spain's censorship regime results in a shower scene where the girls all wear nightgowns. Serrador has a flair for witty editing, intercutting between a girl taking a tumble in the hay and classmates threading needles...

A 19th century splice of Alfred Hitchcock and *Mean Girls*, it's a real psychosexual stew, with incestuous and lesbian undercurrents bubbling beneath its pouty bitch-offs and slow-mo stabbings.

▶ **Extras** Pick the US version or an extended cut. Child star John Moulder-Brown (24 minutes) recalls his crush on the female lead. Co-star Mary Maude (12 minutes) calls the director "a bit peculiar". The author of the story it was based on talks inspirations (nine minutes). The director's son (14 minutes) argues that he was influential. A Spanish horror expert (20 minutes) places the film in context. Plus: critical commentary; trailers; TV spots; gallery; booklet. **Ian Berriman**



"Okay, okay, you win! We'll watch *Love Island*."

## FRANKENSTEIN: THE TRUE STORY

Mary, quite contrary

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 27 MARCH**

1973 | 12 | Blu-ray

▶ Director Jack Smight

▶ Cast James Mason, Leonard Whiting, David McCallum, Jane Seymour

**BLU-RAY DEBUT** The title card of

this miniseries features a pink carnation. It should have been green, as viewers with even the most rudimentary gaydar should detect a homoerotic subtext.

The creature (Michael Sarrazin) is a dish: Victor (Leonard Whiting) greets it by gasping "You are beautiful!". And after spurning his creation when it later grows ugly, Frankenstein returns from honeymoon having – as someone notes – "grown a beard". Ahem.

The title misleadingly suggests fidelity to Mary Shelley's novel – though elements like its Arctic conclusion are drawn upon. Other additions include a competing Promethean overreacher, Dr Polidori (James Mason), and Prima (Jane Seymour), a wickedly seductive female creature.

Not all the innovations are a success: solar energy and bubbling vats of liquid lack the drama of James Whale's arcing electricity. But they're always diverting. And though an odd fit with the Grand Guignol moments (crawling arm, acid bath, ballroom decapitation), location work at Buckinghamshire mansion Cliveden lends the whole affair a classy period drama sheen.

▶ **Extras** An interview with co-writer Don Bachardy (41 minutes) is illuminating: he's still sore that the possibility of John Boorman helming a film was nixed by producer Hunt Stromberg Jr, reluctant to hire someone who he couldn't control. Leonard Whiting (18 minutes) likewise recalls him "putting his fingers in the pie".

Jane Seymour (24 minutes) cheerily discusses every aspect of her role. Interviewer Sam Irvin also provides expert commentary. Plus: a corny intro by Mason; a cover art poster. **Ian Berriman**

**i** When John Boorman was interested in directing, he had in mind Jon Voight as Frankenstein and Julie Christie as Prima.



## CHILDREN'S FILM FOUNDATION BUMPER BOX FOUR

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1953-1984 | PG | DVD

▶ Directors Various

▶ Cast Various humans, Dormantus the dragon

▶ **Of the nine films in this BFI** box set, three (all around 50 minutes long) are fantastical.

*The Selkie* (1979) (★★★★★) sees a seal taking human form (a middle-aged bloke in jeans and bobble hat) to protest against a town council's plans for seafront development. Featuring much seal-out-of-water humour (he can't resist a goldfish...), it's charmingly whimsical, with a worthy ecological message.

A dumpy, fire-breathing dragon that looks suspiciously like it moves on hidden wheels is the main draw of 1973's *The Flying Sorcerer* (★★★★★), in which a time machine accidentally brings it back from ye olden days. It's daffy stuff, with some amusing *Beano* logic – like the idea that walking across a field holding a branch is effective camouflage.

In *Gabrielle And The Doodlemans* (1984) (★★★★★), Matthew Kelly's wish-granter enters a sad little girl's world via her BBC Micro computer, giving her dreams of the circus, jousting knights and Cinderella. Quite how this is meant to help Gabrielle accept being paraplegic is unclear. Eric Sykes and Windsor Davies are wasted in such cringeworthy stuff.

▶ **Extras** (★★★★★) Four drama shorts (66 minutes); a magazine programme (10 minutes); a London locations featurette (14 minutes); booklet. **Ian Berriman**





## BATMAN: THE DOOM THAT CAME TO GOTHAM

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 27 MARCH**

2023 | 12 | Blu-ray/DVD/download

▶ Directors Christopher Berkeley, Sam Liu

▶ Cast David Giuntoli, Tati Gabrielle, David Dastmalchian, Patrick Fabian

DC's animated superhero movies continue their recent trend of bold, unexpected swings with this pulpy outing that melds Batman's world with the Cthulhu Mythos of HP Lovecraft. Adapted from a 2000/2001 miniseries co-written by *Hellboy* creator Mike Mignola, it's an alternate universe tale set in '20s Gotham, pitching Bruce Wayne against a lethal cult that's trying to release an ancient Elder God to wreak havoc on the world.

We're soon getting lots of madness and tentacles, alongside direct homages to Lovecraft and thematically weird takes on Batman villains like Poison Ivy and Two-Face. The enjoyable plot delivers satisfying twists and turns, making this better paced than a lot of DC animations, while the gothic visuals deliver some nicely atmospheric moments.

Unfortunately, the decision to crank up the fight sequences and throw a bunch of creaky gags into the first half hobbles any genuine sense of creepiness, and the bombastic soundtrack doesn't help either.

▶ **Extras** "Shadows Of Gotham", a featurette exploring the film's links to Lovecraft and gothic horror, along with a director's commentary and two classic episodes of *Batman: The Animated Series*. **Saxon Bullock**



## DARK PLACES

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1973 | 15 | Blu-ray

▶ Director Don Sharp

▶ Cast Robert Hardy, Joan Collins, Christopher Lee, Jane Birkin

**BLU-RAY DEBUT** One of the less celebrated '70s chillers, *Dark Places* is barely a blip on Christopher Lee's CV. And no wonder – he may earn top billing on the poster but he's wasted in a low-key role, conspiring to bring about the downfall of the true lead, Robert Hardy, who's just inherited a stately pile with some restless spirits thrown in.

Helmer Don Sharp injects as much contemporary, crash-zoom energy as he can and there's a tangible atmosphere in the derelict rooms littered with creepy broken dolls. But it's a creaky, muddled tale that ends up playing like an overextended *Hammer House Of Horror*.

▶ **Extras** Film historian Jonathan Rigby presents some valuable background (60 minutes), placing the movie in the wider context of the early '70s boom in British horror. He also supplies a more personal piece on his relationship with Christopher Lee (24 minutes), and teams with Kevin Lyons on a new commentary, one of two – fellow horror experts Nathaniel Thompson and Troy Howarth provide the other one.

Along with the original UK and Brazilian trailers there's also an entertaining compilation of promos for Don Sharp's oeuvre, showing his range as a journeyman (37 minutes), a gallery, and a glimpse of the European credits, notable for giving "Je T'Aime" saucepot Jane Birkin top billing... mais oui! **Nick Setchfield**



## WE HAVE A GHOST

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2023 | 12 | SVOD

▶ Director Christopher Landon

▶ Cast David Harbour, Anthony Mackie, Jahlil Aspinwall, Tig Notaro

**NETFLIX** If you've caught

Christopher Landon's previous movies, including *Happy Death Day* and *Freaky*, you'll know he's the master of the horror-comedy. But in his latest film, there's not as much comedy and barely a hint of horror. *We Have A Ghost* is, instead, something of a throwback to the family fantasy flicks of the '80s, specifically *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial* and *Beetlejuice*.

Wearing its Amblin influences proudly on its sleeve, it tells the story of a ghost (played by David Harbour, with the cruellest of combovers) who becomes a cause célèbre after teenager Fulton (a winning Jahlil Aspinwall) uploads footage of him to YouTube. Certainly there are moments here where Landon can't resist going for the laughs, but it's the film's dramatic scenes that linger longest.

Harbour is heartbreaking as the amnesiac ghost who can't even remember how he died. Despite having zero dialogue, he builds up a rich and poignant character that, in many ways, has more substance than his corporeal co-stars; Anthony Mackie has very little to do as Fulton's father, and Jennifer Coolidge's role as a kooky medium is little more than a cameo.

It's derivative of course, but unlike its titular character, *We Have A Ghost* finds its own voice in the end.

**Steve O'Brien**



## THE WHIP AND THE BODY

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 27 MARCH**

1963 | 15 | Blu-ray

▶ Director Mario Bava

▶ Cast Christopher Lee, Daliah Lavi, Tony Kendall, Ida Galli

▶ **Exacting revenge from his** habitual haunt of beyond the grave, Christopher Lee cuts a darkly romantic figure in this sumptuous, S&M flavoured Euro-gothic from Mario Bava.

It's an entertainingly torrid piece that makes a full-blooded virtue of every cliché of the genre: secret passages, silhouetted turrets, bloodied daggers, spectres at windows. Bava brings his trademark delight in colour to the dark deeds, and drenches it all in howling wind and Rachmaninoff-style piano flourishes. The potboiler story is very much secondary to the visuals, but the whip-cracking kinkiness ensures there's a bite.

▶ **Extras** Subtitled interviews with Bava's son Lamberto (25 minutes), second assistant director Sergio Martino (24 minutes) and screenwriter Ernesto Gastaldi (24 minutes) provide precious insight into not just the movie and the maestro but the glory days of the Italian film industry itself.

Supplanting the one by Tim Lucas included on Screenbound's 2014 Blu-ray, Kim Newman and Sean Hogan provide a buoyant, knowledgeable commentary; there's also another by Italian cinema experts Troy Howarth and Nathaniel Thompson. Plus: original French, German and Italian trailers; booklet; A3 poster with new artwork and the French poster. **Nick Setchfield**





## THE PORTABLE DOOR

Odd job man

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED** 7 APRIL

2023 | TBC | SVOD

▶ Director Jeffrey Walker

▶ Cast Patrick Gibson, Sophie Wilde, Sam Neill, Christoph Waltz

**SKY CINEMA** When hapless Paul

Carpenter almost accidentally finds himself employed by venerable London institution JW Wells, his main question on his first day is: what the hell does this company actually do? Especially as some of his co-workers seem to be trolls, and he's set the task of locating a door which apparently moves around the building. His search soon uncovers a larger conspiracy, though...

Adapted from a novel by prolific fantasy humorist Tom Holt, produced by The Jim Henson company and featuring spirited supporting performances

from a number of esteemed thespians as company bigwigs who all look like they moonlight as Hogwarts professors, *The Portable Door* is an amiable but aimless magical mystery that keeps threatening to be great but never quite gets there.

There are some fantastic ideas, with some Terry Gilliam-esque visuals to match. It's mildly amusing throughout, although rarely laugh-out-loud funny. And the growing romance between the two young leads is sweet.

But there's way too much going on here – too many mysteries, too many backstories, too many goofy concepts – and the film fails to take full advantage of its more memorable elements. It's all so good-natured it's a shame to knock it, though. **Dave Golder**

**i** Tom Holt named JW Wells & Co after the titular character in Gilbert and Sullivan's 1877 comic opera *The Sorcerer*.



## THE UNHEARD

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED** 31 MARCH

2023 | TBC | SVOD

**SHUDDER** Remember *The Eye*?

In that, a blind woman had eye surgery and started seeing ghosts. *The Unheard* is like that, but for deafness: a young woman undergoes an experimental procedure to restore her hearing, only to find she's hearing things that aren't there... or are they?

Impeccable sound design makes the first hour play like a drama about a woman adapting to changing senses. It's a shame about the horror elements, which range from predictable to unlikely, without ever being properly scary. **Sarah Dobbs**



## THE CURSE OF ROSALIE

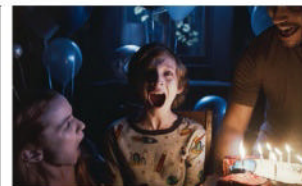
★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED** OUT NOW!

2022 | 15 | SVOD

**ICON** Rosalie is a creepy little girl, prone to pushing kids out of treehouses and saying weird stuff about Hell. Turns out she's the least of anyone's worries in this silly supernatural horror.

It has the production values of a noughties soap, and the dialogue might have been generated by ChatGPT, but the way it piles on plot twists and horror tropes – possession, ghosts, curses – is perversely compelling. If nothing else, you won't have seen another film like it. **Sarah Dobbs**



## SPOONFUL OF SUGAR

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED** OUT NOW!

2022 | TBC | SVOD

**SHUDDER** The title nods to Mary Poppins, but she never gave a kid microdoses of LSD – or a knife to stab mummy with. After bonding with Johnny, a lad with multiple allergies who's never spoken, loopy babysitter Millicent does.

Imagine a Hallmark movie where everyone's homicidal or horny. It's played *relatively* straight; going full-on John Waters might have been better. And sadly the trippy aspects consist of little more than the odd blurry sequence. **Ian Berriman**



## HELL OF THE LIVING DEAD

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED** OUT NOW!

1980 | 18 | 4K Blu-ray

➡ **Released on Blu-ray as** *Zombie Creeping Flesh*, this Italian horror is no less shoddy in 4K. Ripping off *Dawn Of The Dead*, it recycles *Goblin*'s score.

After a promising action-packed opening, commandos incapable of remembering to "shoot them in the head" are relocated to the Papuan jungle on a bafflingly aimless mission. Expect butcher's bin gore and endless wildlife stock footage.

➡ **Extras** Commentary, four interviews, an appreciation, trailer, poster. **Ian Berriman**



## THE HOUSE ON THE EDGE OF THE PARK

Party animals

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1980 | 18 | 4K Blu-ray

▶ Director **Ruggero Deodato**

▶ Cast **David Hess, Annie Belle,**

**Christian Borromeo, Giovanni**

**Lombardo Radice**

**BLU-RAY DEBUT** In their day, sleazy exploitation movies like this were dismissed as irredeemable trash. Nowadays horror aficionados bend over backwards to find value in them. The truth lies somewhere in-between.

This home-invasion shocker sees razor-wielding rapist Alex (*Last House On The Left*'s David Hess) and dimbulb sidekick Ricky (Giovanni Lombardo Radice) invited into a rich couple's groovy

pad, then terrorising them and their friends. After decades of BBFC trims (back in 2002, almost 12 minutes' worth), it's now finally totally uncut. It's a polished production, the class warfare subtext is interesting, and Hess is a powerful presence. Some of the initial teasing interplay is also undeniably erotic.

However, only in Bizarro World is this a feminist film. Yes, Alex gets his just desserts, thanks to an implausible twist. But two separate sex scenes where women warm up to the sadists who've been brutalising them leave an unpleasant taste.

▶ **Extras** A Ruggero Deodato interview (13 minutes) starts off likeably self-deprecating, then



"Hey, you wanna come join my crypto scheme?"

descends into an ugly rant about "Islam-fuelled propaganda" suitable for followers of Britain First. Sergio D'Offizi (17 minutes) provides general cinematography chat. Production designer Massimo Antonello Geleng (19 minutes) is so articulate he *almost* convinces you the film's a "socially aware condemnation of sexual violence"; he also charmingly talks through

props in his studio (nine minutes). Another half-hour piece cuts between a rambling Deodato and Radice, who confesses to snorting cocaine throughout filming! Plus: two commentaries (one fact-packed, the other observational); trailer; booklet; poster. **Ian Berriman**

**i** According to Deodato, David Hess was disruptive on set – so much so that at one point he slapped him across the face!

## SŌGO ISHII

Danger! High Voltage

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2001/2018 | 12/15 | Blu-ray/Blu-ray and download

▶ Director **Sōgo Ishii**

▶ Cast **Tadanobu Asano, Masatoshi**

**Nagase, Gō Ayano, Keiko Kitagawa**

**BLU-RAY DEBUT** Sōgo Ishii's 1982 dystopia *Burst City* has been cited as a precursor to the cyberpunk movement typified by films like *Tetsuo. Electric Dragon 80000v* (★★★★★) shares its mad energy. Almost wordless, it centres on a man who, after climbing a pylon as a child, is now able to conduct electricity. There's a second electric freak in town, though: a chap in a half-Buddha's face mask. Cue an epic scrap.

Well, eventually, after much time spent watching star Tadanobu Asano prowling garbage-strewn alleyways in snakeskin trousers or thrashing

away at a guitar, sparks flying. To be fair, the crisp black and white photography is pretty stylish. However, even in a film this short (54 minutes), having a story helps. Ishii has described it as essentially a presentation – "We'd like to make a movie sort of like this" – and it feels like that.

The self-consciously oddball *Punk Samurai* (★★★★★) sees the rivalry between a feudal lord's retainers leading one to revive the Bellyshakers, a cult who believe that our world exists inside a tapeworm, and the only way to be ejected from its anus is by a lot of stupid dancing. Soon thousands of followers are trashing the region.

Featuring a surf guitar score, a very modern demotic (there's even a hashtag gag), and some bizarre characters (a guru who speaks through masked acolytes; an idiot with telekinetic powers; a



You like punk? You like samurai? Well...

man-sized talking monkey), it's over-long, and not as funny as it thinks it is – unless the idea of a combat move called "balls on balls" has you wetting yourself.

▶ **Extras** *Electric Dragon* (★★★★★) has interviews with the producer (nine minutes) and scorer (21 minutes), plus a screening Q&A (14 minutes). You also get 22 minutes of footage

relating to the electrical effects, more bits of screening chat (18 minutes), and a few storyboards. *Punk Samurai* (★★★★★) comes with an hour-long Making Of, a six-minute interview with the lead, 16 minutes of screening Q&A, and the trailer. **Ian Berriman**

**i** *Punk Samurai* is based on a 2004 novel by Ko Machida, formerly the singer in '70s punk rock band Inu (it means dog).



## MARTIN

On the razor's edge

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 27 MARCH**

1977 | 18 | Blu-ray (4K/standard)

▶ Director **George Romero**

▶ Cast **John Amplas, Lincoln Maazel, Christine Forrest, Elyane Nadeau**

**BLU-RAY DEBUT** **George Romero's**

third horror feature – now handsomely restored from a 35mm print – is very different from those either side of it in his filmography, but equally compelling in its way, a low-key psychological profile of a disturbed loner.

John Amplas brings a magnetic, penetrating glare to the titular 19-year-old, a painfully shy young man who comes to stay with his elderly cousin. Tateh Cuda (Lincoln Maazel), a Lithuanian Catholic, firmly believes he is (points crucifix) “Nosferatu!”

His granddaughter Christina (Christine Forrest) is having none of it – and Cuda's garlands of garlic have no effect. But Martin is a serial killer, whose MO involves injecting women with a drug, cutting them with a razor blade, drinking their blood, then letting them die. There's clearly a sexual component to this compulsion.

Sequences like an attack on a woman on a sleeper train, and another where he invades a housewife's home only to find her in bed with a lover, are horribly tense, their chaotic messiness feeling authentic. Location work in Braddock, a decaying Pennsylvania steel town, further imbues a sense of realism.

Ably assisted by composer Donald Rubinstein, whose sensitive score underlines Martin's doomed loneliness, Amplas and

Romero keep him at least intermittently sympathetic. His calls to a talk radio station frame him as a pathetic figure. We're encouraged to see him as also a victim – of his upbringing.

This doesn't quite fly. Martin's relatives believe he carries “the family curse”, and he claims to be 84 years old. But something as simple as a birth certificate – or someone remembering Martin being a child only a few years ago – would surely put that to bed? The ending also feels anticlimactically abrupt. Still, these are petty quibbles regarding a film that's both wince-inducing and hauntingly melancholic.

▶ **Extras** The main draw is an excellent 69-minute documentary. Although top-heavy with “How I met Romero” stories, it provides a strong sense of the production's all-for-one, guerilla filmmaking approach. Delightfully, it also takes three cast and crew (Amplas, DOP Michael Gornick and cameraman Tom Dubensky) back to a rainy

“Both wince-inducing and hauntingly melancholic”

Braddock to visit key locations.

An 11-minute short by sound recordist Tony Buba (who sourced key locations) offers a slice of life in Braddock. It centres on the owner of a used furniture store – who has a role in *Martin*. Suddenly the fact his lines include the word “furnish” is clearly an in-joke!

A frustratingly vague composer interview (17 minutes) will leave you dying for someone to ask basics questions like “What instruments did you use?” If two archive commentaries featuring Romero aren't enough for you, there are also two new ones, by critics Travis Crawford and Kat Ellinger. Plus: a 2004 Making Of (nine minutes); trailer; TV/radio spots. Buy the Limited Edition box set and you get more goodies: a 108-page book, a soundtrack CD, and five art cards. **Ian Berriman**

Soft Cell wrote a song inspired by the film. “Martin” came on a bonus 12” bundled with their 1983 LP *The Art Of Falling Apart*.

## (ROUND UP)

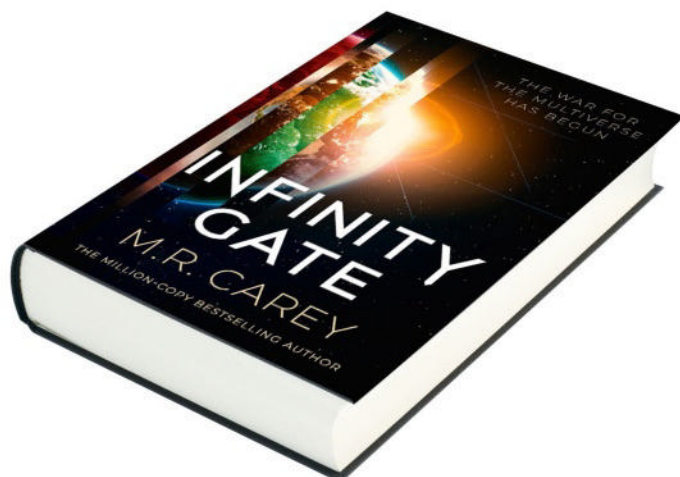


**STAR TREK: STRANGE NEW WORLDS** SEASON ONE (4K/Blu-ray/DVD) is the big TV release this month. We said: “the best first season of live-action *Star Trek* since the original run in 1965.” Bonuses include pieces on Anson Mount's portrayal of Pike (featuring “intimate footage” – steady on, dear) and the production design tech, and what sounds like a season overview. We'd love to tell you if they're much cop, but apparently it's beyond the wit of one of the world's largest studios to supply any advance materials. There's also been a peculiarly unseasonal release for Christmas fantasy comedy **VIOLENT NIGHT** (out now, Blu-ray/DVD), in which David Harbour's Santa Claus gets caught up in the crossfire as a dysfunctional family come under siege from a team of mercenaries. We said: “Each kill gets gorier and more inventive... Outrageously funny.” Extras include behind-the-scenes featurettes and deleted scenes. Pinhead gets gender-swapped in David Bruckner's new take on **HELLRAISER** (27 March, DVD), which you may recall sneaking out on Prime Video last Halloween. Now you can buy it on shiny disc. Why you'd actually bother is unclear though, since there are absolutely zero bonus features. Nada. Finally, more TV box set releases for you Luddites and physical media hoarders include **THE BOYS** SEASON THREE (Blu-ray/DVD, out now) and **WRECK** SERIES ONE (Blu-ray/DVD, out now). It's all getting chucked straight in a skip when you croak, you know...



And Americans say British teeth are bad...





## INFINITY GATE

Stepping into danger



► **RELEASED 30 MARCH**

512 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

► Author **MR Carey**

► Publisher **Orbit Books**

◉ **If there was a moment when** Mike Carey, comics writer, morphed into MR Carey, novelist, it came in 2014. This was the year his mycologically driven (sort-of) zombie apocalypse novel *The Girl With All The Gifts*, written concurrently with his screenplay to the 2016 movie, gathered the kinds of reviews that suggested Carey had (should there have previously been any doubt) definitely arrived as a creator of long-form fiction.

Accordingly, there's now a real sense of anticipation when Carey's latest hits bookshops, especially when, as with *Infinity Gate*, he's trying something new. This is the opening volume in a duology where Carey takes on a subgenre that's made its way to the centre of SF in recent years, the multiverse story. Just what would it be like if we could jump between different versions of Earth?

Scientist Hadiz Tambuwal is about to find out. On an Earth where environmental collapse is

an everyday reality, she accidentally discovers inter-dimensional travel. Cautiously, she begins to explore other versions of her home planet.

She's right to be cautious. because when you're dealing with infinite worlds, there are infinite dangers. Not the least of these is the Pandominion, a political and trading alliance that encompasses a million different realities, "a league of worlds". It takes a dim view of freelancers using "Step technology". Not good news for Tambuwal considering that the troops of the Cielo, crack soldiers who are also expendable, protect the Pandominion's interests.

It's not just through Tambuwal's eyes that we see events unfold. The novel crosses between several perspectives as we also meet Essien Nkanika, a hustler and a gigolo struggling to get by in Lagos; complacent official Orso Emmet; disillusioned soldier Moon Sostensi, who rightly suspects she's drawing "all the shittiest assignments"; and Topaz Tourmaline FiveHills, a schoolgirl with a best friend who's about to change her life.

Gradually, we learn how their fates are intertwined, even as we

also learn that a machine intelligence poses an existential threat to the Pandominion – especially as the rulers of the Pandominion insist on sending waves of troops against an AI that's as adaptable as it is implacable. In this context, while it's of course tempting to compare *Infinity Gate* to *The Long Earth*, Terry Pratchett and Stephen Baxter's take on multiverse fiction, Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War* is an equally apt comparison.

In short, there's a lot going on in *Infinity Gate* and, if we have a main criticism of the book, it's that perhaps sometimes Carey doesn't move as deftly between viewpoints and subplots as he might.

Nevertheless, there's more than enough here to keep you reading. Essien's backstory, for example, is vividly realised as Carey conjures up a day-to-day reality of scavenging, sweat, the over-sweet smell of garbage and, most of all, the ever-present anxiety that tomorrow might be your last day.

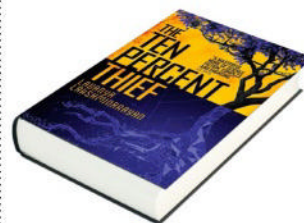
Equally impressive is the way the novel imagines how evolution might take different paths on different Earths. Topaz, or "Paz",

**“When dealing with infinite worlds, there are infinite dangers”**

for instance is essentially a rabbit. Faced with trouble, her instinct is to run, but if she does turn to fight, she packs a powerful kick. There's a neat moment too when Carey points out that, should you be from a version of Earth where herbivores rule the roost, your first contact with an omnivore might be something of an eye-opener.

And for all that you occasionally wonder where the story may be headed, maybe that's no bad thing. When the book's different subplots converge, they do so in a brilliantly realised set-piece that combines balletic über-violence with real emotional heft – which only makes you impatient to open the next volume. **Jonathan Wright**

**i** Fellow author Tade Thompson gave "invaluable notes" on *Infinity Gate*'s Nigerian scenes and characters.



## THE TEN PERCENT THIEF



► **RELEASED 30 MARCH**

352 pages | Hardback/ebook

► Author **Lavanya Lakshminarayan**

► Publisher **Solaris Books**

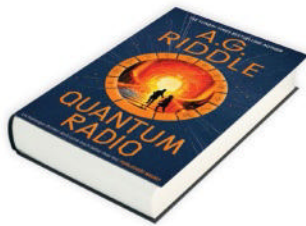
◉ **Part thought experiment,** part cautionary tale, *The Ten Percent Thief* evokes a chillingly plausible vision of the future. Lavanya Lakshminarayan's debut novel keeps the spotlight shifting between a huge cast of point-of-view characters, and the result is an impressive tapestry of vignettes in the style of *Short Cuts* or *Magnolia*.

It's also a smart satire of contemporary ideas about economics, the class system and our reliance on technology. In Lakshminarayan's Bangalore of tomorrow (rebranded here as Apex City), your life is defined by your status on a statistical Bell Curve. The lives of the top 20% (Virtuals) are shaped by sophisticated AI to maximise their never-ending pursuit of productivity, while the bottom 10% (Analogues) scrape by with cassette tapes and Walkmans. It's nominally a meritocracy, but it turns out the haves will do anything they can to keep the have-nots in their place.

The world-building is the book's biggest strength, as Lakshminarayan uses believable scenarios to explore various aspects of society – everything from designer babies on one side of the divide to the birth of a rebellion on the other. Cutting a few of the story strands would arguably have brought much-needed focus to a sprawling narrative, but there's no faulting *The Ten Percent Thief* for ambition.

**Richard Edwards**





## QUANTUM RADIO

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

512 pages | Hardback/ebook/  
audiobook

► Author AG Riddle

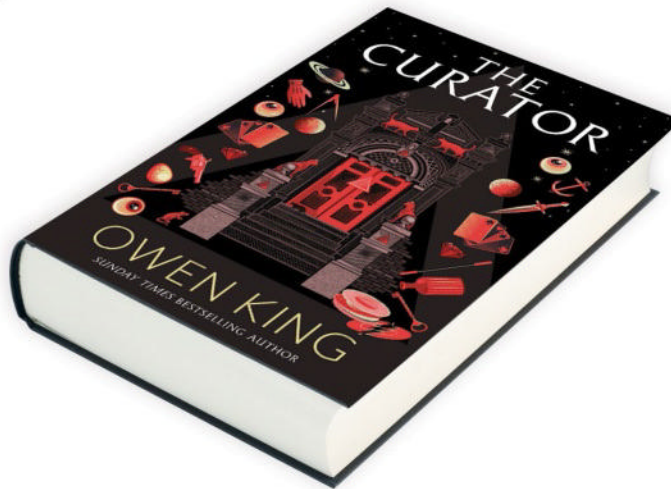
► Publisher Head Of Zeus

❖ **While it sounds like it** should be a local radio station, this ambitious tale is actually a satisfying mix of quantum physics, alternative history and good old-fashioned espionage.

When CERN physicist Dr Tyson Klein identifies a mysterious code hidden in his data, he becomes the target of sinister forces who'll do anything to keep the earth-shattering discovery quiet. Despite its hard SF foundations, however – not to mention some clever riffs on real-life physics – *Quantum Radio's* carefully researched ruminations on grand unification theories turn out to be a Trojan horse for unashamed thriller action.

Ty and his companions – though assembled from familiar building blocks – are likeable enough to make you care about their fates when they get a crash course in multiverse science. Meanwhile, AG Riddle's fast plotting is cleverly engineered to keep you hooked even through some massive narrative swerves.

Unfortunately, the big reveals struggle to justify the journey – in hindsight, the first half of the story feels like it could have been compressed into a prologue without sacrificing too much. The novel's tendency towards lengthy info-dumps eventually becomes frustrating. And for all Klein's assertions that he doesn't like coincidences, the contrivances are starting to add up by the closing chapters. **Richard Edwards**



## THE CURATOR

*Dora The Explorer*

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

470 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

► Author Owen King

► Publisher Hodder & Stoughton

❖ **Anyone who shares a home** with a cat – whether adorable fluffball, aloof demigod or cranky little bugger – knows, deep down, that such feline companions spend a non-trivial portion of their time idly plotting our downfall. They could take you at any time; they're just choosing not to. It's the bargain we make: we give them food, they express contentment by sitting on our laps.

In the Dickensian city of *The Curator*, cats are revered and placated by the traditionally minded and the vulnerable alike. The educated and forward-thinking, however, shun such superstitions. There is a bold, rational new age of trams and factories. Just as the novel opens, a largely bloodless revolution has turned the world (or the city, at least) upside down. Everything is possible.

“His city is a panoramic creation, lively and grimy”

New ages aren't born so easily, of course. Through the eyes of a variety of characters – chiefly watchful, guarded Dora, a former maid turned impromptu caretaker of a dusty, abandoned and frankly rather eerie city-centre museum – Owen King shows us a fledgling regime floundering in victory. His city is a panoramic creation, lively and grimy and teeming with secrets; without getting bogged down in info-dumping, he gives us a clear sense of how things operate at all levels of society, and what happens when the works get gummed up. There are many stories beneath the one we think we're reading.

King's approach to storytelling is a curious mixture of whimsy and grimdark: charmingly quirky details and oddball characters enliven a world of blood-drenched violence with a strong streak of moral murkiness from which no one emerges unscathed. The tonal shifts don't always work – one, early on, is particularly jarring – and the plotting occasionally cheats by jumping about in time to create slightly strained cliffhangers. But this is, all told, an impressive balancing act of hope amid despair. **Nic Clarke**

**i** The *Curator* grew out of an Owen King short story of the same name, published in 2016 anthology *Detours*.



## FLUX

★★★★★

► **RELEASED 23 MARCH**

352 pages | Hardback/ebook

► Author Jinwoo Chong

► Publisher Melville House Publishing

❖ **Jinwoo Chong's debut** novel is an impressive satirical head-scratcher about loss, identity and the lingering power of old TV shows.

*Flux* centres on three distinct voices. Bo is eight years old and dealing with the sudden death of his mother; Brandon is a young professional, living his best life and working in publishing, until his magazine closes and he's suddenly let go; Blue is a middle-aged man, mute, but offered access to an expensive technology that will enable him to talk once more – for a limited time only.

Brandon's story dominates in the first half of the novel, as he's courted by a shadowy tech startup and agrees to take part in a series of brain scans, at which point his obsession with '80s cop show *Raider* (which, as the first time he saw a fellow Asian-American in a prominent role on-screen, left a lasting impression) bleeds into reality and the lines between fact, fiction and the book's multiple timeframes begin to blur.

There's a lot going on in *Flux*, and it's initially quite hard to parse how the three strands are connected. Accept that you'll spend the first half in a state of pleasurable bewilderment, though, and it all comes together nicely, with the author delivering some satisfying and emotional reveals.

A beautiful and strange book, with a sardonic wit and a biting cynical view of corporate culture. **Will Salmon**





## BLAKE'S 7: ORIGINS

Non-standard by seven



► **RELEASED 27 MARCH**

124-163 pages | Hardback box set

► Authors Steve Cole, Paul Cornell, James Goss, Una McCormack, Marc Platt, Jacqueline Rayner, Gary Russell  
► Publisher Big Finish

🔴 **Terry Nation's '70s space** opera about a bunch of freedom fighters fighting the tyrannical Federation gets novelised. Wait, hasn't that been done before? Well, yes: in 1977 and 1979 Trevor Hoyle wrote two books which adapted nine series one episodes, squeezing some of them down and skipping others entirely. A third book later adapted three from series four. In this box set, a host of writers tackle the first 14 episodes, all scripted by Nation. Each slim volume tackles two, usually giving them around 65 pages each.

Back in the pre-VHS heyday of TV novelisations, their ability to faithfully reproduce episodes the viewer probably only saw once

was of great value. Nowadays it's of less interest: why plough through passages of transcript with added "he said, she said" when you could pop a DVD in the drive? These days it's the additions that are most appealing, and *Origins* has plenty of them.

Sometimes it's more fleshed-out characterisation, as we learn what the crew think of one another. Paul Cornell and James Goss use shifting perspectives to put us inside the head of a different character in every chapter; even a monstrous Phibian, barely glimpsed in "Orac" before being dispatched by eyepatched baddie Travis (who's given a forename here – Cral), is dignified with interiority. The writers also take pains to address, for example, each crew member's feelings on killing for the first time.

Then there are numerous clever little fixes of script problems. In "Cygnus Alpha", for example, Jenna and Avon discover a room crammed with treasures on their

newly-acquired spaceship the Liberator – prompting them to consider ditching Blake. After he returns safely, it's never mentioned again! Here the room disappears, framed as a test posed by the ship, which has also acquired other powers – like the ability to alter its airlock to fit a Federation vessel's, or quietly tidy away corpses.

The most fascinating additions draw on a cache of Nation's scripts – early drafts amended en route to the transmitted versions. Some of the tweaks are subtle – an expanded line of dialogue here, a new one there. Others are more obvious, like a radically altered first encounter with Cally.

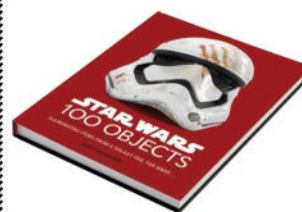
On-screen, Blake and co meet the telepath a considerable time after her fellow insurgents have been killed. Here, we see that happening – meeting new characters like the amusingly named Quillbane – and Blake bumps into her shortly afterwards.

It can be difficult to tell if an addition is drawn from Nation's scripts, or is an innovation of the adapter. Sometimes it's obvious: approaching moments in "The Way Back" where the testimony of children accusing Blake of abuse is questioned (the memories were implanted), Cornell takes pains to underline that the default should be to believe victims – obviously a 2023 perspective.

At other times, it's less clear: in "Project Avalon", a rebel character is switched into an underground-dwelling Subterron, given oversized eyes – easily done in print, a prosthetics challenge for TV. Is that the writer's idea, or Nation's original intention, drawn from his script directions?

When Goss drew on earlier drafts in novelising Douglas Adams's *Doctor Who* story "The Pirate Planet", he included a 17-page afterword discussing some of the differences, and the thinking behind adopting some of them but not others. They could have easily done the same here – the audience for these books is, after all, just the sort of hardcore fans who'd be interested. This seems like a missed opportunity. **Ian Berriman**

**i** It's confirmed that the Liberator has toilets! The ship also makes clothes and lock-picking equipment for the crew.



## STAR WARS: 100 OBJECTS



► **RELEASED 6 APRIL**

256 pages | Hardback/ebook

► Author Kristin Bayer

► Publisher Dorling Kindersley

🔴 **The Star Wars galaxy** provides rich pickings for this riff on the "100 Objects" format popularised by the likes of Radio 4 and the British Museum. StarWars.com associate editor Kristin Bayer curates a broad selection of artefacts stretching from the Old Republic through to the First Order era, in a book that's sufficiently up-to-date to include entries from last year's *The Book Of Boba Fett*, *Obi-Wan Kenobi* and *Andor*.

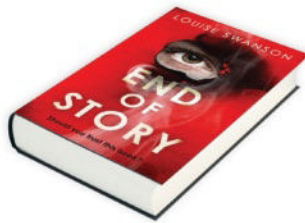
The photography is the winner here, with every object – ranging from household names (Darth Vader's helmet) to the impressively obscure (a mummified hand from *Solo*) – given the chance to shine. Even items that had blink-and-you'll-miss-it cameos on-screen are showcased as the masterpieces of production design they are.

Unfortunately, *100 Objects* fails to capitalise on its enviable access to the Lucasfilm archives. Bayer gives plenty of in-universe context to each object, but the book's failure to discuss the real-life origins of the various props feels like a colossal misstep.

Revealing those inspirations – for example, how Han Solo's blaster was constructed from antique firearms – could have turned this into an essential addition to your bookshelf. As it is, it's just yet another *Star Wars* encyclopedia.

**Richard Edwards**





## END OF STORY

★★★★★

► **RELEASED 23 MARCH**

320 pages | Hardback/ebook/  
audiobook

► Author Louise Swanson

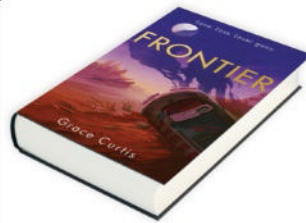
► Publisher Hodder & Stoughton

❖ *End Of Story* is one of those books you engage with like a cryptic crossword rather than merely read. It's a vast, playful, ingenious piece of literary legerdemain, that invites you to question, and to interpret. But few cryptic crosswords put your emotions through such a wringer too.

A near-future dystopian tale set in a Britain where fiction has been banned and would-be narrative authors are treated like potential terrorists, it's told in a series of "secret" journal entries by former award-winning author Fern Dostoy. Now working as a cleaner in a hospital, she illicitly moonlights as a book reader to help children sleep at night. Then elements of her old novels start start turning up in Fern's new proletarian life.

It's a book as much about writing as about loss and hope. Things do become very meta, and the ultimate revelations might be familiar from multiple episodes of genre TV and films based on a similar conceit. But Louise Swanson takes that idea to audacious extremes, finding real soul amongst the dream logic and textural trickery.

Ultimately, it's the kind of book that you need to grapple with in a book club to discuss its merits and flaws, because a review can't really address those things without straying into spoiler territory. Bottom line: read it and make your own mind up, because the ride is certainly fun. **Dave Golder**



## FRONTIER

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

256 pages | Hardback/ebook/  
audiobook

► Author Grace Curtis

► Publisher Hodder & Stoughton

❖ *Think of Westerns and SF* and you may well think of *Firefly* – and that is just how *Frontier* is being marketed. But it's actually a very different kind of story, an episodic tale of one woman's journey through a foreign landscape.

After the devastation of climate change, most people left Earth in pursuit of a better life elsewhere. But some chose to stay – religious devotees who worship Gaia and believe those who left were evil sinners. Onto this world crashes an unnamed woman, searching for her lover who is also lost somewhere on the planet.

The law here considers her a criminal, and as she moves from town to town, she takes on different identities – the Stranger, the Courier, the Stowaway – accepting what help she can find in her quest, while we gradually learn more about the mission that brought them both to Earth.

Despite occasional clunky writing and an overly neat ending, this is an intriguing set-up with some genuinely interesting ideas, and a central character and journey that slowly grip you. The progression of the Stranger through a society struggling to survive works well, and there's resonance in setting it on an Earth destroyed by the very real disasters we're currently bringing upon ourselves. A neat twist on Western tropes with an SF edge.

**Rhian Drinkwater**



## BEAUTIFUL SHINING PEOPLE

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

384 pages | Paperback/ebook/  
audiobook

► Author Michael Grothaus

► Publisher Orenda Books

❖ *In describing Michael* Grothaus's second book, there's a distinct risk of making it sound like a by-the-numbers slipstream novel. For a start, there's the setting: a near-future Japan where teenage maths and tech prodigy John is awaiting a big payday for his quantum computing insights.

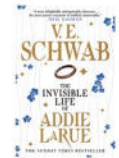
In Tokyo, suffering jet lag and culture shock, John heads late at night for Mr Happy Café, where he receives a "relaxing ear cleaning" from an initially enigmatic waitress, Neotnia. The two, who share a deep-seated sense of being outsiders, are drawn to each other and, oh so gradually, a tentative love begins to blossom.

That *Beautiful Shining People* isn't just a slipstream novel with pretensions to being literature is in great part down to the deftness and tenderness with which Grothaus draws these characters that draw on familiar tropes – the awkward nerd learning about the world and the Manic Pixie Dream Girl – but they're never defined by these archetypes.

Instead, Grothaus uses their relationship to let us explore a world of robots and deepfakes that's just unfamiliar enough to be exotic. The plot, while slow to build, does pay off and, most importantly, this is a book that has much to say about how we forge real-world connections in a digital world. **Jonathan Wright**

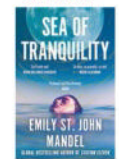
## REISSUES

Pick of the paperbacks:  
VE Schwab's **THE INVISIBLE LIFE OF ADDIE LARUE** (★★★★★, out now, Titan). It centres on a



French village girl whose pact with the Devil for immortality comes with a catch: cursed to be

forgotten by everyone, she wanders through the world like a ghost, leaving no mark. Then three centuries later, in Manhattan, she meets a melancholic young bookseller who *doesn't* forget her. We said: "It's 'The Rime Of The Ancient Mariner' by way of Wes Anderson... a beautifully drawn tale of yearnings for freedom and for connection." *Station Eleven* author Emily St John Mandel's latest is **SEA OF TRANQUILITY** (★★★★★, 6 April, Picador).



Structurally, it's similar to David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, with a series of nested stories

playing out across time. Linking the characters: the idea of a glitch in reality, a shared moment that hints we might all be living in a simulation. We said: "A lucid dream of a book... crisp and unfussy prose."

Finally, Alastair Reynolds's **EVERSION** (★★★★★, 30 March, Gollancz) works



rather like a Christopher Nolan movie, returning to the same central story and retelling it from a

slightly different angle. Its central figure is a 19th century doctor on a sailing ship looking for a mysterious artefact. But then the story shifts and he's aboard a steamship... then an airship – and things only get weirder. We said: "Structurally experimental, and at points confusing, yet lands quite beautifully as its central story concludes."





## WHITE CAT, BLACK DOG

★★★★★

► **RELEASED 30 MARCH**

272 pages | Hardback/ebook

► Author Kelly Link

► Publisher Head Of Zeus

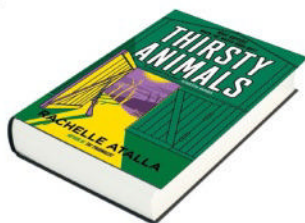
❖ **There's no version of *Little Red Riding Hood* in this volume of Kelly Link's reinvented fairy tales, but a wolf disguised in grandmother's clothing seems like a good metaphor for the stories themselves. They're sort of the same shape as fairy tales, but underneath something else entirely. Something sharper.**

Here, instead of an insecure king sending his sons on impossible missions, we get a youth-obsessed billionaire. Instead of an unfortunate traveller getting lost in the woods, a grad student takes an ill-advised house-sitting gig. Link uses the language of fairy tales to tell contemporary and futuristic stories in her deadpan style; it's deliberately jarring and wilfully challenging.

All the stories can be loosely categorised as magic realism, but each has its own rules, and Link doesn't offer much in the way of guidance. It's down to the reader to puzzle out exactly what flavour of supernatural shenanigans are going on. Ghosts? Gods? Death himself? Nothing's too far-fetched, even if Link's protagonists aren't always immediately willing to accept it, and there's a distinct pleasure in discovering what kind of monster is waiting to be encountered next.

Fans, take note: most of these stories have been published previously. New readers, well, just be aware that sometimes Grandma has really big teeth...

Sarah Dobbs



## THIRSTY ANIMALS

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

368 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

► Author Rachelle Atalla

► Publisher Hodder & Stoughton

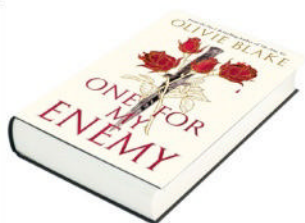
❖ **What if society doesn't end with an asteroid strike, or a zombie plague, but with slowly rising prices and livestock quotas? Rachelle Atalla's second novel envisions a grimly plausible future where humanity – or at least England and Scotland – starts to run out of drinkable water. The results are not pretty.**

Our guide through this slow sort-of-apocalypse is 21-year-old Aida, a student forced to give up her university career and return to her parents' farm in Scotland. It's an unhappy reunion. She has a fractious relationship with her mother, one that only gets worse when a van full of strangers arrives seeking aide.

There are shades of '70s telefantasy classic *Survivors* to *Thirsty Animals*. This is a small scale view of a big topic, set in a world where people guard every drop of water zealously. Perhaps inevitably the spectre of the pandemic also hangs over the book, both in its consciously mundane depiction of disaster – chemical toilets and bottled water selling for £15 – and in its portrait of young people having their lives suddenly upended by forces beyond their control.

It might not reinvent the genre, but *Thirsty Animals* is well-written and believable, especially in its indictments of people reverting to their worst instincts when backed into a corner. A disturbing and compelling book.

Will Salmon



## ONE FOR MY ENEMY

★★★★★

► **RELEASED 6 APRIL**

416 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

► Author Olivie Blake

► Publisher Tor

❖ ***One For My Enemy* joins the ranks of fantasy novels inspired by Shakespeare and, like Chloe Gong's *These Violent Delights*, the starting point here is *Romeo And Juliet*.**

Olivie Blake swaps Verona for New York City and two feuding families of Russian witches: the Antonovas, led by matriarch Baba Yaga, and the Fedorovs, headed by patriarch Koschei The Deathless.

The prose is overwritten, dragging heavily on the pace, and the plot is cluttered and untidy. Meanwhile Blake can't seem to decide whose story she is telling – is the book about the forbidden love between Sasha Antonova and Lev Fedorov, or about their elder siblings Marya and Dimitri?

At the outset, it seems to be the former, but by the end of the story they've become entirely passive in the narrative and become almost like an afterthought.

Blake lets the plot drive the characters, not the other way around. Similarly, magic is used to solve story problems when the author's written herself into a corner, including bringing people back from the dead.

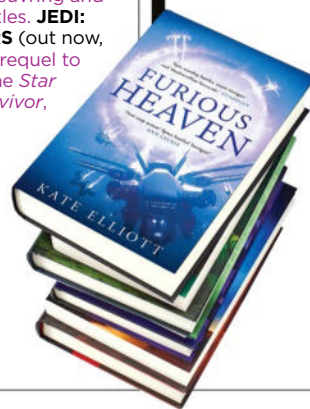
There's a motif from Russian folklore about Koschei The Deathless when Marya literally gives Dimitri her heart, but it's such a blunt way to express their bond.

The result feels like a misfire compared to Blake's impressive 2021 release *The Atlas Six*.

David West

## ALSO OUT

There's lots more books we couldn't fit in. Hannah Whitten's gothic epic fantasy **THE FOXGLOVE KING** (out now, Orbit) follows Lore, a young woman whose secret ability to raise the dead leads to her being captured by warrior-monks, then tasked by the Sainted King with finding out why entire villages have been dying overnight. Originally self-published in 2021, Jane Hennigan's dystopian thriller **MOTHS** (out now, Angry Robot) has been "remastered". Featuring a protagonist in her seventies, it's set 40 years after toxic threads produced by mutated moths caused men and boys to die or turn into crazed killers; now they must be kept in special dust-free facilities. New additions to ongoing series include **BEYOND THE REACH OF EARTH** (out now, Orbit), the second in Ken MacLeod's Lightspeed trilogy. Opener *Beyond The Hallowed Sky* explored the ramifications of the discovery of faster-than-light travel; we called it "MacLeod's best book to date". In the follow-up, mysterious beings the Fermi are awakening, and aren't pleased to find humans in their midst... Also getting a follow-up: *Unconquerable Sun*, Kate Elliott's gender-swapped space opera based on the life of Alexander the Great. **FURIOUS HEAVEN** (out now, Head Of Zeus) picks up where volume one left off, offering more devious manoeuvring and spaceship battles. **JEDI: BATTLE SCARS** (out now, Del Rey) is a prequel to new videogame *Star Wars: Jedi Survivor*, centred on Cal Kestis. Finally, the latest High Republic title, **CATAclysm** (3 April, Del Rey), sees violence reigniting between the planets Eiram and E'ronoh.







# Garth Nix

**If you hear Led Zep blasting from a high window, it could be the Old Kingdom author...**



## Describe the room in which you typically write.

▶ I have an office about 10 minutes walk from home, on the top floor of a small art deco building that was for most of its life a bank. It's a large room with lots of windows and a skylight, and I have a standing desk and a sitting desk which I alternate between, and a lounge to lie on and think up stories. One wall is lined with bookshelves containing both books and whisky.

## Do you find it helpful to listen to music?

▶ Only occasionally when I'm actually writing. But sometimes when I'm preparing to write something I will listen to music to help generate the kind of mood I hope to establish. So if I'm thinking through an action scene I might listen to Led Zeppelin; if it's something melancholy, perhaps Purcell's "Music For The Funeral Of Queen Mary".

## How do you deal with writers' block or procrastination?

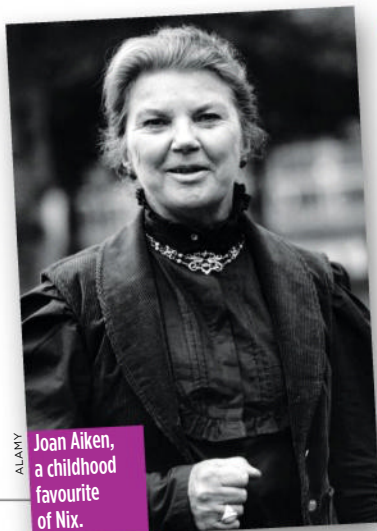
▶ Sometimes I force myself to simply write something, whether it's related to a current work or not, and then I switch back to what I'm supposed to be writing. Sometimes I go for a walk and keep walking, and somewhere along the way I'll work out whatever is holding me up.

## Is there anything about one of your books which you wish you could go back and "fix"?

▶ No. Once they're published, to my mind they have gone off to have an independent life. For better or worse the books are what they are. I've never been inclined to go back to do a "director's cut".

## Were you a keen reader as a child?

▶ I was. I didn't know it, but in many ways I was equipping myself to become an author, by reading very widely. I have numerous favourites, and I still re-read most of them. A sample would include Susan Cooper, Alan Garner, Diana Wynne Jones, Joan Aiken, Rosemary Sutcliff, Andre Norton,



ALAMY

Joan Aiken, a childhood favourite of Nix.

## “One wall is lined with bookshelves containing books and whisky”

John Masefield, JRR Tolkien, Jack Vance, Ursula Le Guin...

## What's your desert island book?

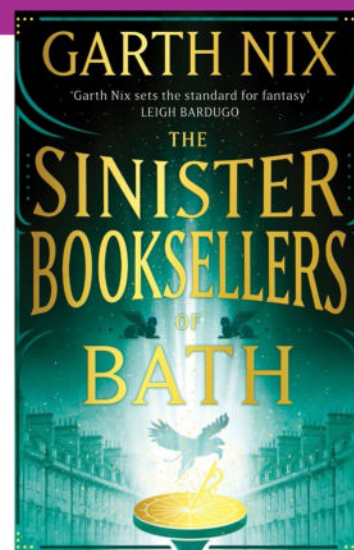
▶ Something very long that could be re-read many times. *The Lord Of The Rings* would fit this bill, or a giant omnibus of Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey and Maturin novels.

## Where's the oddest place you've seen your books?

▶ About 15 years ago I started seeing my books occasionally on TV shows, often just casually being read by a character. I've seen *Sabriel* a few times, and *Mister Monday*. Usually a reader notices and tweets about it, or family members let me know.

## What's the biggest misconception people have about being an author?

▶ That coming up with ideas is the difficult part. It's the easiest. While the idea is the seed, it is nothing without the careful cultivation and hours,



days, weeks, years of work required for it to germinate and actually grow into something.

## What's the best piece of writing advice you've read/received?

▶ When your writing is out on submission, don't just wait for feedback or acceptance. Immediately start writing something new. That way, you don't get fixated on what might or might not be happening and how long it's taking. Your mind is in the new work, so rejection will sting less, and if accepted you'll have something to follow up with. ●

*The Sinister Booksellers Of Bath is out on 23 March, from Gollancz.*



## THE RIDDLER: YEAR ONE

A questioning mind



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher **DC Black Label**

► Writer **Paul Dano**

► Artist **Stevan Subic**

**ISSUES 1-3** If there's one comic subgenre that rarely feels in any way essential, it's the movie spin-off. They've been happening for decades, but a lot of them can't help but feel like quick cash-grabs, with many recent efforts often seeming to exist only to paste over pesky continuity holes in the original material.

Surprisingly, despite seeming like a prime candidate, six-issue miniseries *The Riddler: Year One* doesn't fall into this category. For a start, it's focusing on a character from Matt Reeves's doomy

blockbuster *The Batman* who remains a deliberate mystery for most of the film's three-hour runtime, meaning there's plenty of territory to explore. And, unlike most spin-off comics, it's actually written by the man who played the title character, actor Paul Dano.

A prequel where you really need to have seen *The Batman* to get the full effect, it charts the descent of nervy forensic accountant Edward Nashton from quiet resentment to murderous, riddle-obsessed madness as he uncovers the financial corruption lurking at the heart of Gotham.

A serious-minded performer best known for challenging roles in films like *There Will Be Blood*, Dano's involvement here is unexpected – plus, unlike some

star-driven comic projects (like the Keanu Reeves comic *BRZRKR*), there isn't a more experienced co-writer clearly doing most of the real work.

Dano acquits himself well in these first three issues, giving us a slow burn of claustrophobic tension as the story follows Edward's rising frustrations and his growing fixation with the Batman's unique campaign of vigilante justice.

The series explores the radicalisation of Edward in much more depth than the movie, and it's helped a great deal by the grimy, atmospheric visuals from artist Stevan Subic. While there are clear influences on display in Subic's work – particularly artists like Bill Sienkiewicz and Ben



## SUPERMAN: SPACE AGE



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher **DC Comics**

► Writer **Mark Russell**

► Artist **Mike Allred**

**ISSUES 1-3** How would

Superman deal with the end of the world? Pitching the character's innate optimism against an unchangeable fate isn't a new concept, but DC's latest three-issue miniseries at least finds some new twists in the idea.

*Superman: Space Age* pitches Kal-El into the political realities of '60s America, and then follows him across the years until the Earth faces inevitable destruction from the events of 1985 crossover *Crisis On Infinite Earths*. It's a similar conceit to writer Mark Russell's previous Marvel series *Fantastic Four: Life Story*, with each 90-page issue tackling a different decade. There are also unavoidable similarities to previous DC classics like *The New Frontier* and *All-Star Superman* – and the comparison doesn't do *Space Age* many favours.

When it works, this is a seriously charming tale, with Russell giving us a nuanced take on Superman, and typically excellent visuals from Mike Allred, who brings a brightly nostalgic pop sensibility to the Man of Steel.

Unfortunately, the series is also overlong and unfocused, while certain comic-book storytelling elements feel awkward set against real-world events. *Space Age* is frequently a very good Superman story – it just would have been better at half the length. **Saxon Bullock**



“So far this is a strong companion piece to Reeves's movie, expanding the themes”

TempleSmith – he also brings a mood all of his own to the series, especially in the sequences where Edward's paranoid thoughts bleed through into reality.

The result has occasional rough edges in terms of execution, but so far this is a strong companion piece to Reeves's movie, expanding the themes and adding welcome depth to Dano's already unsettling performance.

It's going to be interesting to see how the remaining issues fill in the gaps in *The Batman*'s narrative, and the series looks likely to stand not only as an effective movie spin-off, but a worthy piece of comic storytelling in its own right.

**Saxon Bullock**

**i** Dano does have previous writing experience – he co-wrote the script for the 2018 film *Wildlife*, which he also directed.





## DANGER STREET

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher **DC Black Label**

► Writer **Tom King**

► Artist **Jorge Fornés**

**ISSUES 1-3** **Tom King** has frequently delved into the weirder edges of DC's back catalogue with miniseries like *Strange Adventures* and *The Human Target*, but his latest effort sees him going further than ever before.

*Danger Street* collects a number of mostly forgotten DC characters for a dark 12-issue thriller. These first three give us the set-up, as an attempt by two down-on-their-luck heroes to boost their reputation goes horribly wrong, accidentally killing one of the pre-teen members of the "Dingbats of Danger Street" gang. We also get subplots involving nearly a dozen other characters, including a female cop, a group of evil child billionaires, and mythic Jack Kirby creations the New Gods.

The over-complication seems to be the point, with King aiming for a sprawling ensemble drama bound together by fairy tale-style narration (from a sentient Dr Fate helmet), but so far the sprawl is getting the better of him.

The dialogue is sharp and there are plenty of expertly crafted sequences – aided by Jorge Fornés's controlled, moodily stylish art – but the narrative hook isn't strong enough yet to bind all these disparate strands together. With nine issues to go, *Danger Street* may still find its feet, but so far it's stuck somewhere between fascinating and frustrating. **Saxon Bullock**



## DOCTOR STRANGE: FALL SUNRISE

Magical Mystery Tour

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher **Marvel Comics**

► Writer/artist **Tradd Moore**

**ISSUES 1-4** **There are distinctive** comic-book artists – and then there are people like Tradd Moore, who feel like they're operating by their own set of lurid, sense-defying rules. Best known for Image's hyper-violent series *Luther Strobe*, he's netted a serious showcase in *Doctor Strange: Fall Sunrise*, a four-issue miniseries that's undoubtedly one of the most experimental comics Marvel has ever published.

The multilayered, deeply abstract story follows Doctor Strange as an attempt to aid the birth of a god-like being sends him on a bewildering odyssey into another dimension. Here, Strange faces mind-bending magical terrors, while writer/artist Moore bends the limits of the comic page almost to breaking point with hyper-intricate panel layouts and dazzling art nouveau visuals.

This is the absolute definition of a "love it or hate it" comic, but it's surprising how much of an emotional throughline Moore has embedded into the story. Even when the visual abstraction gets challenging to keep up with, the narrative journey of Strange holds everything in focus and contributes to the overall impact of the series.

There's little in mainstream comics that has gone this weird since Brandon Graham's bonkers sci-fi reboot of Image superhero *Prophet*; *Fall Sunrise* goes to some extremely odd places (especially when Strange has to survive a journey through the digestive tract of a monstrous entity). At every stage, however, Moore's wildly experimental art keeps this hallucinatory saga compelling and impossible to put down. A remarkable, thrilling and defiantly unique comic-book experience. **Saxon Bullock**

**i** Potential movie adaptations for Moore's comics *Luther Strobe* and *The New World* are currently being developed.



## NIGHT CLUB

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher **Image Comics**

► Writer **Mark Millar**

► Artist **Juanan Ramirez**

**ISSUES 1-3** "With great power comes no responsibility" is the theme of Mark Millar's boisterously irreverent take on vampires. Turned to the dark side after being critically injured in a reckless parkour accident, Philadelphia teen Danny Garcia embraces his newfound powers with bloody relish. Like Spider-Man bitten by Morbius, he restyles himself as a superhero, swinging from rooftop to rooftop.

After converting his best friends Amy and Sam, they form the titular bloodsucking super-team, decked out in colourful wrestling costumes. Millar also puts his own wry touch on the rules of the genre, from transforming into mist to summoning rats and not being able to cross water. Juanan Ramirez's fluid linework compliments Millar's typically brisk script, and is further enhanced by Fabiana Mascolo's evocative colours.

With the trio beating up school bullies and preventing car accidents, the momentum initially appears to drift. But such chaos cannot go unnoticed, and the tension shifts up several gears in issue three, as they come to the attention of police detective Nick Laskaras – who recruited Danny in the first place and is assembling an army for some nefarious purpose.

If Millar can pull all the disparate plot threads together in the final three issues, *Night Club* could become a claret-soaked classic. **Stephen Jewell**



## HORIZON: CALL OF THE MOUNTAIN

Reaching the peak of PSVR2

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Format PlayStation 5 (PSVR2 required)

► Publisher Sony

**VIDEOGAME** What better way to get to grips with Sony's new PlayStation VR2 headset (an add-on for PS5) than with their own first-party showstopper? And when we say get to grips we mean it, as you'll be clambering all over its lush post-apocalypse with eye-widening tactility.

It's set between the first and second main *Horizon* games. You play as new hero Ryas. While familiar faces cameo, it can largely be experienced standalone – you'll quickly ease into its world of robo-dinosaurs.

If your only previous experience with VR gaming was PlayStation's first offering, this new version is a substantial step up. Blurry visuals are no more, and stylised though the immersive realms on offer may be, you really do feel like you've stepped into another world.

*Horizon's* is a great one to explore as you journey through green jungles, blizzard-swept peaks, and ruined military bases (you'll feel like you need a tetanus jab for your fingertips) on the trail of your missing brother.

But it's the new Sense controllers that are the star of the show. Orb-shaped, with buttons all over, they mean you can now mimic how your actual hand moves one to one. The movement

tracking is phenomenal, and reaching out, squeezing a trigger, and grabbing a handhold feels as good to do in hour one as it does when you reach the more thrilling action set-pieces towards the end. Thanks to constant variation in what you're climbing, each new bit of cliff face or crumbled structure feels fresh. New tools add to this, like climbing picks that feel weighty when you strike them into rock, thanks to controller haptics. Although the more that gets added, the clunkier item management does begin to get.

Bow and arrow combat also features. While locking you to a fixed pathway in clearly telegraphed arenas seems a bit basic, knocking arrows by grabbing them from over your shoulder does feel effortlessly cool. Tussles break up the constant climbing, but do also put your arms to work. *Call Of The Mountain* is best when it's all about the climbing, though, and that's mostly what it delivers.

Oscar Taylor-Kent

**i** Rather just chill out in VR? Machine Safari mode is all about taking in the *Horizon* vibes without any climbing pressure.



## ATOMIC HEART

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Reviewed on PC

► Also on Xbox Series X|S, Xbox One, PlayStation 5, PlayStation 4

► Publisher Focus Entertainment

**VIDEOGAME** Never has a game wanted to be a spiritual successor to *BioShock* (not necessarily a bad thing) more than *Atomic Heart*.

It has the same "what if" approach to history as *BioShock's* underwater city, proposing an alternate timeline where Russia becomes a global utopian superpower built on advanced robotics, AI and a magical liquid called polymer that gives you superpowers. It follows a similar template too, as you fight biological and mechanical threats using, basically, magic in one hand and weapons in the other.

It almost pulls it off too, presenting a beautiful '50s-feeling "world of tomorrow", with bots that alternate between creepy Bakelite doll faces and industrial tractor engineering functionality. It's fantastic to look at, with some wonderful alt-history imagining.

The more focused start is full of excitement and potential, but moving into more open world sections can feel a little frustrating, built on stealth that doesn't quite work and leading to occasionally messy combat when you fail.

For something so visually well-realised, the writing is also surprisingly low quality; corny one minute, with overlaboured but confusing exposition the next. There's a lot to like about *Atomic Heart*, but it can sometimes feel like a struggle to enjoy. **Leon Hurley**



"It's £7.50 for the whole ride. Cough up."





## DOCTOR WHO: THE RETURN OF JO JONES

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► 222 minutes | CD/download

► Publisher Big Finish

**AUDIO DRAMA** A long time

ago the Third Doctor bade a melancholy farewell to his companion, Jo Grant (Katy Manning). Now, many decades later – for Jo, at least – the two are reunited.

In “Supernature” the Doctor and Jo stumble upon a secret military operation on the Isle of Wight and come under attack from the local wildlife. It’s a slight story, but this is very much about exploring Jo’s headspace in the wake of a personal tragedy.

“The Conservitors” is set in a sci-fi dystopia ruled over by machines. It’s clichéd stuff, but also in keeping with the set’s MO as a series of Pertwee-era pastiches. Finally “The Iron Shore” is an atmospheric tale of curses and sea monsters, set on the ocean planet Mercator. After a slow start it gets into gear with the introduction of an intimidating new villain.

This isn’t the first time that Manning and Tim Treloar – who continues to offer a very creditable take on Jon Pertwee’s Time Lord – have recorded episodes together, but there’s something comforting about the thought of the Doctor returning to Jo when she needs him the most.

Some may roll their eyes at the set’s placement (squeezed in-between “The Green Death” and “The Time Warrior”) but for fans of the era this is a nostalgic treat. **Will Salmon**



Ever get the feeling that you’re being trolled?

## WILD HEARTS

Big Beasts

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Reviewed on PlayStation 5

► Also on PC, Xbox Series X/S

► Publisher Electronic Arts

**VIDEOGAME** Set in a fantasy world

inspired by feudal Japan, this hunting game is brimming with fantastical foes the size of houses to topple, with a rapid and satisfying hack-and-slash combat system, and an absorbingly creative building feature.

Electronic Arts and *Dynasty Warriors* developer Koei Tecmo’s new partnership has produced brilliant results in a genre that’s typically been dominated by Capcom’s weighty *Monster Hunter* series.

The Karakuri are wacky contraptions like huge cannons and hammers that can be put together in the blink of an eye,

“A battle system that feels responsive no matter how you’re armed”

using a simple, intuitive method of building blocks. The game’s stand-out feature, it also provides the most fun, resulting in a system that’s as entertaining as it is easy to use, and makes every brawl feeling unique and attention-grabbing.

Hunting games live and die on their towering creatures, and this one soars on the back of its eclectic bunch. An ice wolf the size of a bus and a bloated, poison-infused raven are just two stand-outs in a great cast of beasts. *Wild Hearts’* fights are tough, but incredibly rewarding once the job is done.

Koei Tecmo refines their typical approach for horde-based combat to one huge enemy at a time, producing a battle system that feels responsive no matter how you’re armed. *Wild Hearts’* camera might really test your patience when it puts you in precarious positions in the heat of combat, but a stellar array of weapons, like staffs and gleaming swords, are incredibly fun to use.

**Hirun Cryer**

**i** Karakuri puppets are Japanese automata, made from the 17th to 19th century. The word has also come to mean “trick”.

## RECORD STORE DAY

The vinyl-geek event returns on 22 April. Here are some highlights worth queuing up for.

### THE AMAZING WORLD OF DOCTOR WHO



A Typhoo Tea promotion, this book combined reprints of

stories and comic strips from the 1976 annual with two new tales, plus factual features. The double LP has readings by Geoffrey Beevers (The Master), Louise Jameson (Leela) and Dan Starkey (Strax). Expect to pay: £30-£32.

### THE DEVIL RIDES OUT



Silva Screen released a soundtrack LP for the 1968

adaptation of Dennis Wheatley’s *Satanism* novel in October, but Hammer completists may still desire this 7” picture disc. Shaped like a pentagram, it features four cues from James Bernard’s score. Expect to pay: £24-25.

### GOBLIN: RARITIES



Italian prog-rockers Goblin need no

introduction to fans of Dario Argento – they produced operatic scores for the likes of *Tenebrae* and *Suspiria*, as well as George Romero’s *Dawn Of The Dead*. This release collects alternative versions of cues from 1975-1982, drawn from their archives.

Expect to pay: £42-48.

### MR BENN: THE MUSIC



As you’ll know if you read the feature in *SFX* 337, the session

musicians for this children’s cartoon were seasoned stalwarts of the British jazz scene. This first release for the original cues (plus those for a 2004 gladiator episode made for Nickelodeon) comes on coloured vinyl based on the wheel in the opening titles, with sleeve notes supplied by producer Clive Juster. Expect to pay: £29.





# DOCTOR WHO COMPANIONS

How well do you know your TARDIS travellers?  
Don't twist an ankle, now!

Quizmaster Nick Setchfield, Agent of the Black Guardian

## QUESTION 1

Who is the first companion the camera actually shows us in *Doctor Who*?

## QUESTION 2

Which actress has written crime novels including *Deadly Reflection* and *Mask Of Betrayal*?

## QUESTION 3

In which story did the Doctor recite the names of his companions as a psychic defence?

## QUESTION 4 Picture Question

Name this companion – and yes, we want both names!

## QUESTION 5

What links the actors who played Steven, Sara Kingdom, Harry, Romana II, Martha and Amy?

## QUESTION 6

Which companion was posing as her Aunt Lavinia when she first encountered the Doctor?

## QUESTION 7

Which actor attempted to launch a pop career with 1968 single "Who's Dr Who?"

## QUESTION 8 Picture Question

Which companion did this object belong to?

## QUESTION 9

Which actress was once married to Michael Gough, who played the Celestial Toymaker?

## QUESTION 10

The Doctor kept a framed picture of which companion on his desk at St Luke's University?

## QUESTION 11

Which companion wore a Fanderson badge on her jacket?



QUESTION 4



QUESTION 12



QUESTION 8



QUESTION 16

## QUESTION 12 Picture Question

Name this companion, created especially for the *New Adventures* spin-off novels.

## QUESTION 13

Leela was a member of which savage tribe, who turned out to be descended from Earth explorers?

## QUESTION 14

Which '60s companion was once described as "Much prettier than a computer"?

## QUESTION 15

In the 1966 film *Daleks' Invasion Earth 2150 AD*, what relation is Louise to the Doctor?

## QUESTION 16 Picture Question

Who's this companion actor, popping up as another character?

## QUESTION 17

What position did Billie Piper's debut single "Because We Want To" reach in the UK chart – and how was she credited on it?

## QUESTION 18

Which companion comes from a 54th century human colony on the planet Mendorax Dellora?

## QUESTION 19

"Romana" is an abbreviation of something considerably longer. What's her full mouthful of a Time Lord name?

## QUESTION 20

Which companion was missing from 1985 team-up story "The Two Doctors" because, we were told, she was busy studying graphology?

Answers  
1 Barbara 2 Maureen O'Brien  
3 "The Curse Of Fenric" 4 Vislor  
Turlogh 5 All of them previously  
appeared in *Who* in other roles  
6 Sarah Jane 7 Frazer Hines 8 Adric  
9 Anke Wills 10 Susan 11 Ace  
12 Bernice Summerfield 13 The  
Sevateem 14 Zoe 15 Niece 16 John  
Leeson, voice of K-9 17 One, Billie  
Piper 18 Romana 19 Victoria

## How did you do?

Which companion are you as smart as?

0-5

Jamie

6-10

Harry

11-15

Peri

16-19

Romana

20

K-9



# IN THE NEXT ISSUE



## WE'RE MIXTAPE-READY! GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY 3 THE FINAL COUNTDOWN!

### FEAR THE WALKING DEAD

Will the Walkers win the last battle?

### CITADEL

The Russo Brothers launch a new universe

### STAR TREK

We're the gift that keeps on giving, Trekkers

### THE DARK CRYSTAL

This time it's a ballet. No, really!

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All contents are subject to change, like a DC line-up



# Total Recall

Personal recollections of cherished sci-fi and fantasy



Emu comes off as the least unhinged of these three...

## Grotbags

### Darren Scott, Editor



My one big regret from a 20-year career in journalism is not failing to topple corrupt governments or right cruel injustice – it's having just missed out on the chance to reunite Grotbags and Croc for a career-spanning interview. Hey, we all have our roles in life.

Grotbags, aka Carol Lee Scott, was a witch who sought to capture Rod Hull's Emu to use his special powers (attacking people, presumably) to "control all brats" (aka children). Like I said, we all have our roles, and this one seems perfectly aspirational in a pre-TikTok age.

The characters were created by Scott and Hull for a live summer show in 1979. They

joined forces on television shortly after in a reign that would last over a decade, spanning eight different shows. Take that, MCU!

Over 114 live-action *Emu* episodes, 13 animated adventures and 29 solo spin-off instalments, Grotbags was accompanied in her pursuit of the magical Emu by the very camp Croc, Robot Redford and latterly manservant Grovel. When not screaming at brats, she'd often break into song. Well, why not?

A singing witch belting out musical numbers every week probably doesn't surprise anyone who grew up in the '80s, but it came about because Scott previously had a career touring in cabaret – recording two albums along the way. Both albums (signed) now sit in my collection, alongside promotional memorabilia for her later solo series. Someone's grot to.

I've no idea why I was obsessed with her – as she would likely reply, "That's very personal!" An evil woman who lived in Gloomy Fortress, surrounded by oddballs, hating children... I just don't see a connection at all.

Somehow I tracked Scott down, thanks to her applying to trademark her Bezazer/bazazz (an enormous metal stick with a pointed finger that she'd use to hit people) and Hovergrot (a sort of flying seat), but received no reply. A plea on social media saw a former Croc, who was then working in London's West End, try to facilitate contact. Alas, she passed away in 2017 and my Pulitzer Prize was never to be seen. ●

*Darren thinks it's very personal that you ask how he remembers shows from the '80s.*

### Fact Attack!

→ Originally Grotbags was going to be orange, but the make-up wasn't successful so Scott changed it to green. An icon was born.

→ Grotbags appeared in eight different incarnations of Emu-inspired shows, including an animated series called *Rod 'n' Emu*.

→ There were also 29 episodes of solo spin-off show *Grotbags*, which ran on ITV in the children's slot from 1991-1993.

→ A Carol Lee Scott single, "That Little Bit Of Love", was released in 2005, 31 years after appearing on the album *In Time*.

→ You can, should you wish, listen to a curated collection of Grotbags numbers here: [bit.ly/grotbagsings](http://bit.ly/grotbagsings). Come on, you know you want to...



EPIC AUDIO NOVELS FROM BIG FINISH



BBC

# DOCTOR WHO

## THE DEAD STAR

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# SUPER HEROES AND SUPER VILLAINS IN EPIC ENCOUNTERS



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