

SFX

368



**TEENAGE
MUTANT NINJA
TURTLES**

GET A PIZZA THE ACTION!

FUTURAMA

NEW SERIES?
TAKE OUR MONEY!

**STAR WARS:
AHSOKA**

REBELS REUNITED

MOTHER NATURE

JAMIE LEE CURTIS GETS GRAPHIC

**THE ADDAMS
FAMILY**

WEDNESDAY'S
MISSING EPISODE

EXCLUSIVE!

GOOD OMENS

**HAUNTED
MANSION**

WELCOME, FOOLISH
MORTALS!

IN THE FLESH

RESURRECTING A
ZOMBIE CLASSIC

GREMLINS

MAKING OF THE MOGWAI

ON SET WITH

THE ANGEL AND

THE DEMON

PLUS! WHAT WE DO IN THE SHADOWS | RED SONJA | MARK MILLAR | STAR TREK | MOON KNIGHT
TALK TO ME | MISHA COLLINS | MY ADVENTURES WITH SUPERMAN | CONAN | LOADS MORE!



THE NEW BI-MONTHLY BRITISH COMIC

Available from W H Smith and
newsagents throughout the UK and ROI

**ASK YOUR NEWSAGENT
TO ORDER YOUR COPY**

timebombcomics.com

**Issue 3
on sale
17th
August!**



26



32



50

FEATURES

26 GOOD OMENS
The end is nigh. What, again?

32 HAUNTED MANSION
All aboard the Doom Buggies!

38 TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES
Check out the four-for-one offer at Pizza King.

42 STAR WARS: AHSOKA
There's a Thrawn in her side...

50 STAR TREK: STRANGE NEW WORLDS
Straight in at Number One.

SUBSCRIBE NOW & SAVE!

Head to page 24 for details

54 GREMLINS: SECRETS OF THE MOGWAI

Try not to feed these pages after midnight.

70 IN THE FLESH
Exhuming the remains of BBC Three's zombiefest.

78 MISHA COLLINS
The most Two-Faced man on TV? Unlikely.

RED ALERT

8 WHAT WE DO IN THE SHADOWS
Vamping it up in season five.

10 TALK TO ME
Let's give a big hand to this Aussie horror.

14 STAR TREK: DAY OF BLOOD
Today is a good day to read.

16 BIG GAME
It is, unquestionably, Millar time.

19 RED SONJA
Never mess with a gal in chainmail smalls.

20 DOCTOR WHO
More scuttlebutt on all the latest developments.

REVIEWS

88 THE FLASH
Flash! A-ha! Saviour of the multiverse!

92 QUANTUM LEAP
The '90s favourite revived.

96 MAY
We take our scalpels to the cult horror film.

102 THE BEAST YOU ARE
Paul Tremblay supplies some short sharp shocks.

110 ALIENS: DARK DESCENT
Nuking it from orbit is cheating.

REGULARS

112 BLASTERMIND
Sharks! You're gonna need a bigger brain...

114 TOTAL RECALL
Enter Robert Sheckley's *Dimension Of Miracles*.

42

38

Editor
Darren Scott

darren.scott@futurenet.com

Deputy Editor

Ian Berriman
ian.berriman@futurenet.com

Art Editor

Jonathan Coates
jonathan.coates@futurenet.com

Production Editor

Ed Ricketts
ed.ricketts@futurenet.com

Editor-at-large
Nick Setchfield

US Editor
Tara Bennett

Contributors

Sam Ashurst, Kimberley Ballard, Calvin Baxter, Dave Bradley, Saxon Bullock, Bryan Cairns, Nicola Clarke, Hirun Cryer, Sarah Dobbs, Rhian Drinkwater, Robbie Dunlop, Richard Edwards, Dave Golder, Stephen Jewell, Luke Kemp, Jess Kinghorn, Catherine Kirkpatrick (Art Editor), Leila Latif, Stuart Manning, Jayne Nelson, Steve O'Brien, Will Salmon, Mark Samuels, Jack Shepherd, Luke Smith, Neil Smith, Jeff Spry, David West, James White, Jonathan Wright

Film Group, London**Group Editor-in-Chief**

Jane Crowther

Group Art Director

Paul Breckenridge

Deputy Editor Matt Maytun

Art Editor Mike Brennan

Reviews Editor Matthew Leyland

News Editor Jordan Farley

Cover images

Good Omens © Prime Video.

All copyrights and trademarks are recognised and respected

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
For enquiries, please email: mfccommunications@futurenet.com

ISSN 1358-5959

Advertising

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

International Licensing/Syndication

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

Subscriptions**New subscribers**

magazinesdirect.com
Phone orders 0330 333 1113
Email help@magazinesdirect.com
Renewal myfuturenet.co.uk
Customer service 0330 333 4333
Email help@myfuturenet.co.uk

Consumer Marketing Director

Craig Niven

Circulation

News Director Ben Oakden

Production

Head of Production Mark Constance

Production Project Manager

Clare Scott

Advertising Production Manager

Joanne Crosby

Digital Editions Controller

Jason Hudson

Senior Production Manager

Maaya Histry

Management

Managing Director, Games and Ents

Matthew Pierce

Design Director

Simon Maynard

Head of Art & Design

Rodney Dive

Director of Group Finance

Oli Foster

SFX (ISSN 1358-5959) August 2023, Issue 368, 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 11433, 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 11433, USA. Subscription records are maintained at Future Publishing, c/o Air Business Subscriptions, Rockwood House, Perrymount Road, Haywards Heath, West Sussex, RH16 3DH, UK.

We are committed to only using magazine paper which is derived from responsibly managed, certified forestry and chlorine-free manufacture. The paper in this magazine was sourced and produced from sustainable managed forests, conforming to strict environmental and socioeconomic standards.

All contents © 2023 Future Publishing Limited or published under licence. All rights reserved. No part of this magazine may be used, stored, transmitted or reproduced in any way without the prior written permission of the publisher. Future Publishing Limited company number 2008885 is registered in England and Wales. Registered office: Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA. All information contained in this publication is for information only and is, as far as we are aware, correct at the time of going to press. Future cannot accept any responsibility for errors or inaccuracies in such information. You are advised to contact manufacturers and retailers directly with regard to the price of products/services referred to in this publication. Apps and websites mentioned in this publication are not under our control. We are not responsible for their contents or any other changes or updates to them. This magazine is fully independent and not affiliated in any way with the companies mentioned herein. If you submit material to us, you warrant that you own the material and/or have the necessary rights/permissions to supply the material and you automatically grant Future and its licensee a licence to publish your submission in whole or in part in any/all issues and/or editions of publications, in any format published worldwide and on associated websites, social media channels and associated products. Any material you submit is sent at your own risk and, although every care is taken, neither Future nor its employees, agents, subcontractors or licensees shall be liable for loss or damage. We assume all unsolicited material is for publication unless otherwise stated, and reserve the right to edit, amend, adapt all submissions.

"I am comforting myself with the thought they'll never be able to buy a house"



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

Chief Executive Officer **Jon Steinberg**
Non-Executive Chairman **Richard Huntingford**
Chief Financial and Strategy Officer **Penny Ladkin-Brand**

Tel +44 (0)1225 442 244

First Contact

Hailing Frequencies Open!



Rebecca Ferguson in *Silo*: she wants to go outside.



ALL HIGH, NO LOW

Martin Brown, email Having just finished season one of *Silo* I felt compelled to write in to say that not only is it the best thing on TV right now, it could be the best TV series I've ever seen. Bringing Hugh Howie's brilliant *Wool* books to such stunning life, and led by an astonishing, Emmy-worthy performance from Rebecca Ferguson, book adaptations – and TV in general – just don't get any better than this.

SFX: It's a fave at SFX Towers too, Martin. How great that it's got a second season, eh?

MIXTAPE-WORTHY

Roland Robinson, email Re: *Guardians Of The Galaxy Vol 3*. What a terrific treat this film was. After quite a few less than brilliant Marvel films, this is ab fab! And it was a genuinely touching story, too. *Guardians* were always my favourite of the Marvel films in general (though *Vol 2* was lesser than *Vol 1*). I just love the wackiness/craziness/weirdness of these films. And it made me laugh, too. That is a staple of the *GotG* trilogy and it works. And the baddie of this film is a total, creepy a-hole. All in all, the best Marvel since the last Tom Holland Spider-Man, *No Way Home*.

NINE BY NINE

Keith Tudor, email I've really enjoyed the latest series of *Inside No 9*. The twists have been dark. The storytelling has been creative. I like that one episode can be a farce, such as "Paraskevidekatriaphobia", where others can be dark, like "Mother's Ruin". The game show episode, "3 By 3", reminded me of the Halloween stunt that was *Ghostwatch* in 1992 where some viewers were duped into believing they were watching something real. I look forward to the next series. It's a shame, although fitting, that it'll be the last one.

SFX: Coming next series, the chilling tale of an SFX proofreader driven to a demented kill-spree by the word *Paraskevidekatriaphobia*...



The best thing about the DCEU is the casting. Robbie, Momoa, Gadot and Cavill deserved a lot better than they got.

Bob Bobbins



Make it stop with Batman! Honestly, it's too many movies.

@yyzbwj

Get in touch!

Email
sfx@futurenet.com

Facebook
facebook.com/SFXmagazine

Twitter/Instagram
Follow
[@sfxmagazine](https://twitter.com/sfxmagazine)
and tag us!

Rants & Raves

Inside the **SFX** hive mind



DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

- *Talk To Me* is utterly disturbing – hand-to-mouth shocking. I loved it.
- Loving *Strange New Worlds*, wish each season was twice as long.
- *Asteroid City* is beautifully absurd and absurdly beautiful.

RANTS

- Where were the Wonder Women and Batgirl multiverse cameos in *The Flash*?
- I cannot believe they've cancelled *Star Trek: Prodigy*. We are living in very worrying times with all things streaming.



IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

- Relieved that *Silo* has been greenlit for another season. I'd have been gutted if we'd never got to see what Juliette finds out there...
- Delighted that bonkers 1970 horror *Scream And Scream Again* is getting a Blu-ray release from Radiance (on 18 September). I still remember what a nightmare it was tracking down a VHS copy.
- Discoveries of the month: Lush singer Miki Berenyi's mum was a regular in *Space: 1999*, and Paul from *Ever Decreasing Circles* was married to Lady Adrasta from *Doctor Who*.



JONATHAN COATES ART EDITOR

RAVES

- *Black Mirror* managed to freak me out again. Didn't mind that the tech seems to have taken a bit of a back seat for now. Particularly enjoyed "Beyond The Sea".
- So, so, so excited for new *Futurama*!



ED RICKETTS PRODUCTION EDITOR

RAVES

- *Silo* has been fantastic, and all the better because we know the entire story sequence already exists in book form. Therefore, there's no need for the writers to make things up as they go along (looking at you, *From...* I'm losing my patience, frankly).
- Finally watched *Enys Men*. Not sure how I feel about it, apart from being *incredibly* smug that I caught a very subtle audio c(l)ue that adds a whole other meaning.



NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR-AT-LARGE

RAVES

- *Indiana Jones And The Dial Of Destiny* hit the mark for me. Not *Raiders*-level – what is? – but a solid farewell to a character I love.

RANTS

- Gutted by the demise of Network, for so long an invaluable pipeline between the TV archives and my shelves. Can we all make a pact to try and preserve physical media?



TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES

- If you love innovative animation, don't miss *Nimona* on Netflix. Funny, original, with a story that really hits for everyone who doesn't feel like they fit arbitrary labels.
- Bless Matt Berry: brilliant from *Garth Marenghi's Darkplace* to the most ridiculous line readings that always delight on *What We Do In the Shadows*.

Captain's Log

Hurry back!



Saying you have a favourite theme park ride is something that only certain types of people do, and I'm absolutely one of them when it comes to my love for the Haunted Mansion. I have been known to partake many times in one day, one immediately after the other. Yes, I have the merchandise, the books, the albums and, of course, the T-shirt.

Why do I love it so much? Well, I've always been a fan of horror and fascinated by the macabre, but I've no idea where my love of haunted houses comes from. This ride feels like so much more than just another haunted house though – I remember being completely blown away by the ballroom scene, immediately desperate to see it again and fascinated to learn how they'd achieved the effect of phantoms partying in the afterlife before my very eyes.

So I was very excited to be able to speak with the team who've brought it to life in a brand new live-action movie. Sadly the ghosts from this 50-year-old franchise were so secret that we couldn't lure them from the Mansion in time for going to press, but I'm looking forward to seeing them on the big screen. This officially means that Spooky Season has begun, right?

Darren X

ENTER THE DARK, LABYRINTHINE WORLD OF THE TALENTS



THE
INSTANT
SUNDAY
TIMES
BESTSELLER

‘A DAZZLING MOUNTAIN OF WILD INVENTION ...
YOU’LL NEVER WANT TO LEAVE’ JOE HILL

BLOOMSBURY

**THE
FUTURE
FIRST!**

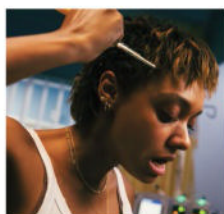
Red Alert

→ NEWS /// INTERVIEWS /// INSIGHT /// LOINCLOTHS

AUGUST
2023



Highlights



10 TALK TO ME

→ A new Australian horror movie is here to remind you to look but most definitely *not* touch.



12 MY ADVENTURES WITH SUPERMAN

→ The Man Of Steel gets a new animated adaptation.



16 MARK MILLAR

→ He's been busy world-building – and now those worlds are about to collide in a new crossover!

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

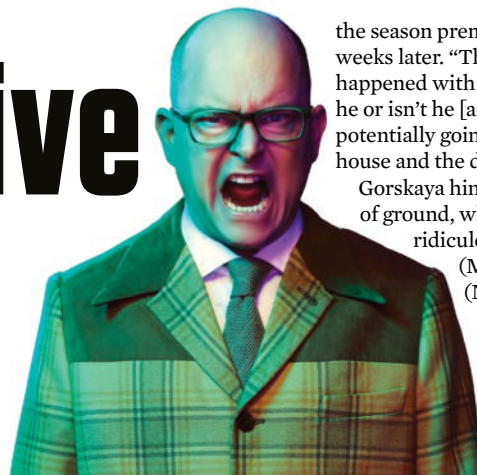
Dead Or Alive

Could **What We Do In The Shadows**' dysfunctional vampire clan grow in season five? **WORDS: TARA BENNETT**

➔ THE LAST SEASON OF *WHAT WE Do In The Shadows* was a carnival of the bizarre: vampire nightclubbing, supernatural night markets, home renovation and energy vampire Colin Robinson (Mark Proksch's) bizarre cycle of regeneration from Baby Colin back to his beige, adult self. But perhaps the craziest thing yet opens the fifth season: Nandor (Kayvan Novak's) long-suffering human familiar, Guillermo de la Cruz (Harvey Guillén), getting the spotlight.

The last we saw Guillermo, he was so fed up at being eternally fang-blocked by his housemates that he offered to pay his other vamp pal Derek (Chris Sandiford) to finally turn him. Series director and co-executive producer Yana Gorskaya tells Red Alert that

Colin Robinson (Mark Proksch): mad as hell.



the season premiere picks up the story two weeks later. "The big question is: What's happened with Guillermo?" she teases. "Is he or isn't he [a vampire]? And how is that potentially going to play out and impact the house and the dynamics?"

Gorskaya hints that the episode covers a lot of ground, which includes setting up new, ridiculous pursuits for Nandor, Laszlo (Matt Berry), Colin and Nadja (Natasia Demetriou).

"[Showrunner] Paul [Simms] and the writers are really the best in the business because they have a way of re-pairing the pairings," she says of the show's annual rotation of its

Natasia Demetriou as Nadja has doll problems.





Director Yana Gorskaya with Kayvan Novak as Nandor.

characters. “I think that’s their magic sauce for making new stories and new permutations. And also for the actors to get a new playmate and a new partner.”

Gorskaya praises the writers for not getting stuck in their own successful formulas. “In some ways, that may be tough on fans, because they love the things they love and the Easter eggs,” she says. “I mean, everybody wants Jackie Daytona to come back. But the writers are very much aware of not repeating themselves.”

With that in mind, Gorskaya says that in this season Guillermo’s situation is going to place him in Laszlo’s sights. “That was an unusual pairing that they hadn’t really had much of before,” she says. In turn, Laszlo’s new

“It’s still an ensemble show and I think the most fun is when they’re all in the room”

preoccupation means that Nandor will be left to feel like a fifth wheel, and he doesn’t like it.

Experiencing a similar vibe is Kristen Schaal’s the Guide (now a full cast member) who is feeling unsure of how to gain acceptance from the Staten Island vampire clique. “The [writers] very much put their finger on it with her as a new character in an established ensemble. Her throughline for the season is: ‘How do I fit in with this group? Do they like me?’ Probably not,” Gorskaya jokes. “So then, it’s, ‘How do I get them to like me?’ Her status as an outsider is very key to the arc of the season.”

Some of the Guide’s neediness will include trying to bond with Nadja. But that will get waylaid, as Nadja has to address some damage she did to her Nadja doll. “We have a blast of an episode where she and her doll trade bodies,” Gorskaya reveals. “For it, Natasha worked with a movement coach, and that woman is flexible! She’s doing back bends and splits with loose limbs, like what a doll would be if she got her body again. So she got to explore all of this physical comedy, which was extremely fun for her and delightful to watch.”

Last but not least is Colin Robinson, who continues to drain humanity with his dad jokes and commitment to administrative work. Gorskaya says this season is the first time she’s directed a Colin-centric episode. “I got to be with him while he was on the campaign trail, doing his energy vampire thing,” she hints.

“I just love the mundanity of his stories and how they’re very much in the real world. The other plus is that it’s one of the rare times that we get to do daylight, so it just has an all-around different vibe for us. I really enjoyed digging into that with Mark.”

As a huge fan of the cast, Gorskaya says the show still excels the most when they just riff with one another. “It’s still an ensemble show and I think the most fun is when they’re all in the room,” she says. They’ll get to do that in some ensemble-centric episodes, like a concept episode along the lines of last season’s reality TV satire, “Go Flip Yourself”. This time they tackle local news.

“We spoke to real news people and camera people to make sure that we nailed the style and language,” she says. “That’s so we could be as straight as possible against the ridiculousness of our vampires being part of something like that.” ●

What We Do In The Shadows is on FX/Hulu from 13 July. UK details are TBC.



Novak, Harvey Guillén, Demetriou and Matt Berry.



Mia (Sophie Wilde) isn't afraid to get hands-on...



TALK ABOUT preparation. Before Danny and Michael Philippou set out to make their feature debut *Talk To Me*, they took a trip to Rhode Island to the family home made famous in *The Conjuring*. “We also got haunted dolls from all over the world and brought them to the house and did a sleepover,” grins Michael. “If you bring haunted dolls to the world’s most haunted house surely something haunted happens!” Adds twin brother Danny: “We chase it so much. Every country that we go to, we always try to stay in the most haunted location!”

All this paranormal activity clearly fed into *Talk To Me*, a supernatural tale in which Aussie teens learn how to commune with the dead. To reach the other side, all anyone need do is grip a small plaster-cast of a hand – said to be the severed, embalmed hand of a psychic. “We were wondering what the [haunted] object could be,” notes Michael. “And we didn’t want it to be things that have been done before. The film was all about connections – real and false. The hand is like a physical representation of the themes of the film.”

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Talk To The Hand

YouTubers Danny and Michael Philippou get creepy in Aussie teen chiller **Talk To Me** WORDS: JAMES MOTTRAM

What happens the moment anyone holds the hand? A random ghoul appears right before their eyes. Then, when they utter the words “talk to me”, they are possessed by the spirit. The film is about more than Ouija-style hijinks, however. At its heart is high schooler Mia (Sophie Wilde), still grief-stricken following her mother’s suicide two years earlier, and now hoping this – ahem – handy way of meeting with the dead might lead her back into her late parent’s orbit.

“It’s a really personal story,” says Danny, who reveals that their

mother suffered from depression and their grandmother took her own life. “Because this happened to them [you think] it’s gonna happen to you as well. It was always really personal things that frightened us, that we tried to put on the screen.”

Visiting the house from *The Conjuring* or re-watching *The Exorcist* (a film they love) is one thing. But writing *Talk To Me*, he adds, was more about “finding the parts of yourself that are terrifying to you and putting them on the page”.

...although maybe it wasn't a good idea after all.





Riley (Joe Bird): what possessed him?

“We lost budget from casting certain people but we just knew it was worth it”

Certainly, casting newcomers Alexandra Jensen as Mia's friend Jade and Chris Alosio and Zoe Terakes as Joss and Hayley, the hosts of the house party where the “hand” is first presented, makes *Talk To Me* feel more real. “A lot of people we’ve spoken to, they relate to it,” says Michael. Shot in and around the Adelaide suburbs where they grew up, the mission was simple, adds Danny: “creating a world that felt realistic.”

It worked; the film premiered in January at the Sundance Film Festival to strong reviews. Despite this, “it was a very traumatic experience. I had my hoodie up [over my head] – fuck, man, get me out of here!” laughs Michael. “This was the moment where we’re either going to succeed or fail in making a film. It’s been something we’ve been building up towards for so long.”

Thankfully, A24 – the distributor behind *Everything Everywhere All At Once* – snapped up the American rights.

“They were pitching themselves to us,” adds Michael. “And we’re like, ‘We know who you guys are!’ Holy crap!”

With rumblings that *Talk To Me* could be the next breakout Aussie horror hit, all it needs now is a snappy marketing campaign. So what about a toy “hand”

to tie in with the movie? You can just imagine that on the shelves of Forbidden Planet. “I’d love to see it merchandised,” laughs Danny. “[I love] iconic horror stuff like the Jason mask or Freddy’s glove. We’d embrace that for sure!”

Talk To Me is in cinemas from 28 July.



Danny (left) and Michael Philippou, just chillin’.

teenage cast wasn’t exactly guilt-edged. “They were all up and comers and they were not anyone that was bringing financing to the project itself,” he says. “We lost budget from casting certain people but we just knew it was worth it. We wanted the kids to feel authentic and not have too many familiar faces.”

Prior to this, the Philippous were known for the gory and blackly comic parodies on their popular YouTube channel RackaRacka – skits like “Ronald McDonald Chicken Store Massacre”, which has racked up 64 million views. For the twins, making these shorts was about learning their craft, from stunts to special effects. “You just build up skills in all those different areas,” explains Danny. “It felt like YouTube was building up to us doing the film.”

Their cult following didn’t help with the film’s financing, though. “There’s a stigma that comes with being a YouTuber,” sighs Danny. “That doesn’t get taken seriously.” Likewise, the film’s unknown



NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

→ Whoosh! *The Flash*’s Andy Muschietti directing

Batman: The Brave And The Bold.

→ Charlie Kaufman scripting DreamWorks Animation adaptation of **Orion And The Dark.**

→ Hugh Grant in the frame for new A24 horror **Heretic.**

→ **Avatar 3** bumped a year to December 2025, **4** and **5** pushed to December 2029 and December 2031.

→ Lionsgate rebooting the **Leprechaun** franchise.

→ Kumail Nanjiani and Mandy Moore starring in

Thread: An Insidious Tale.

→ **Avengers: The Kang Dynasty** now assembling 1 May 2026.

→ Jack Quaid starring in SF thriller

Companion.

→ Anne Fletcher returning to direct **Hocus Pocus 3.**

→ **Captain America: New World Order** now **Brave New World.**

→ Untitled **Star Wars** movies claiming 22 May 2026 and 18 December 2026 release dates.

→ Matt Berry in talks to join Jason Momoa in **Minecraft** movie.

→ He’s back: James Cameron developing a new **Terminator** entry.



► **SCI-FACT!** Both Danny and Michael Philippou worked on the crew of seminal Aussie horror *The Babadook*.

SHOWRUNNER EXCLUSIVE

Press Gang

The Man Of Steel returns in **My Adventures With Superman**

WORDS: JEFF SPRY



 BILLED AS A FRESH coming-of-age tale, new animated series *My Adventures With Superman* hopes to leap competing superhero shows in a single bound with the internship trio of nerdy Clark Kent (Jack Quaid), an ambitious Lois Lane (Alice Lee) and the camera-toting Jimmy Olsen (Ishmel Sahid) teaming up to forge an investigative reporting squad at the *Daily Planet*.

"The core thing that's different all ripples out from Clark," says showrunner Jake Wyatt regarding how this series compares to previous Superman fare. "There's the famous *Kill Bill* monologue about how Clark Kent is the mask

and Superman's the real guy. We started with the inversion of that. He's Clark. He was raised by Ma and Pa. It's the name he's answered to his whole life."

This version of Clark also has less information about who he is than others: there's no Marlon Brando's Jor-El here, popping out of a crystal to deliver the suit and his name and tell him his Kryptonian origins.

"He's slower to turn into Superman, so the centre of the show is the relationship between Clark, Jimmy and Lois. Jimmy is as if Fox Mulder was on TikTok," Wyatt adds. "He loves the paranormal and wants to

believe. Clark feels safe with him, knowing that if Jimmy ever found out about his weirdness he'd think it's great. They encounter Lois Lane who's looking for the story that's going to make her career, and she finds a flying guy.

"Superman isn't ready-made here. Clark isn't confident at the show's beginning and he forms the Superman identity to square Clark Kent from Kansas with this different being inside of him that he's pushed down his whole life, and tried not to think about too hard."

Wyatt's personal journey into the Superman sphere began with a terrible Crayola drawing of Superman after a viewing of the 1978 Richard Donner film in the late '80s. "I've loved Superman my whole life," he recalls. "We came to making the show out of a conversation Brendan [Clogher, executive producer] and I had

while directing at Nickelodeon about superhero fatigue.

"Who do we still care about with all these movies and properties and newly minted superheroes every day? Superman was still great, and we realised we loved him for the same





This is actually why he's called the Man of Steel.

Lois interviews Superman. If only she knew, eh? Eh?

reasons. We loved the Clark and Lois romance, the awkward Clark Kent, the hope and the optimism, and almost that cringe earnestness of Superman."

Then, in an act of cosmic happenstance, Wyatt received an email from Audrey Diehl at Warner Bros Animation wondering if he had any ideas for a Superman pitch.

"Everything in the DC universe that gets built out in the show flows out from Superman," Wyatt explains. "Krypton had some kind of contact with Earth and they left Clark here. So all of our villains emerge out of that event. Because

this is a show about Clark, Lois and Jimmy figuring out who they are, our best villains always challenge their conception of who they are. That's really the journey, and I don't want to give too much away but there are familiar faces that are pretty heavily redesigned."

With James Gunn now revamping the entire DC Universe, fans might be worried that the project was given guidance or restrictions on where Superman could go, but that couldn't be further from the truth.

"We started well before any of that took place when we were still with AT&T [previous owners of WarnerMedia]," says Wyatt. "I've been pleased that the new regime has been very supportive. They showed James [Gunn] the opening main titles and he really liked it. So we've been allowed to do our two seasons with no interference and a lot of approval."

Star Trek and *The Boys* star Jack Quaid's involvement in the series was a pivotal casting choice and Wyatt was pleasantly surprised with the actor's vocal performance as both Clark Kent and Superman. "We were really looking for Clark ahead of Superman, and Jack was

"The centre of the show is the relationship between Clark, Jimmy and Lois"

far and away the best Clark Kent. He really inhabited the character, and had the charm and vulnerability and kindness of Clark. We didn't give him any direction. He knew it intuitively

and built a Superman off that, and really brought Clark from that anxious place where he lives to the confidence and firmness of Superman without ever getting too macho about it. A quiet confidence and a calming presence. It's amazing to see him go back and forth in the booth. Jack is a natural comedian too. He was a lot of fun." ●

My Adventures With Superman is on Adult Swim and Max now. UK details are TBC.



Jimmy, Supes and Lois share a private moment.

► SCI-FACT! Quaid told *SFX*: "When I got the part, I felt like I had to look at the email a few times, because I just did not believe it."

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Kahless Talking

Sharpen your knives as IDW's *Star Trek* crossover **Day Of Blood** arrives WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL



DESCRIBED BY *STAR TREK*:

Defiant scripter Christopher Cantwell as "our *Infinity Gauntlet*", *Star Trek*:

Day Of Blood sees the crew of Worf's stolen starship join forces with *Star Trek*'s Benjamin Sisko-led USS *Theseus* in a blockbuster comic book crossover, as they take on the mounting threat of the immortal Klingon Emperor Kahless II.

"It's at the centre of our plans for the line," says Jackson Lanzing, who co-writes *Star Trek*, IDW's flagship *Trek* title, with his regular writing partner Collin Kelly. "We set out on this path with the north star of treating *Star Trek* with the same wild storytelling, interlocking structure and epic objectives as our favourite superhero comics – and nothing allows for comics storytelling quite like a gigantic summer event.

"The thread of Kahless II and the Red Path is simply too large, too powerful and too devastating to be traded between *Star Trek* and *Defiant* forever. At some point, a reckoning would have to come, and that's what *Day Of Blood* is all about."

BLOODY KLINGONS

Beginning with an oversized one-shot by Cantwell, Kelly, Lanzing and *Star Trek* artist Ramon Rosanas, before continuing for the next two months in the pages of both *Star Trek* and *Star Trek: Defiant*, the five-part storyline has been a long time in the making. "We've been building up to *Day Of Blood* since August 2020 when *Star Trek: Year Five* 13 was released," recalls Lanzing.

"In that issue, we introduced a Klingon zealot known as 'Guide of Fire', who speaks about the 'Red Path of Kahless' and goes rogue against his own people to bring James Kirk to the justice he believes he is owed. That was deliberate – a planted seed that we hoped would grow over time into something that would let us talk about the dangerous binary at play between faith and pride, should we ever get the chance to write about Kahless."

Kelly and Lanzing laid further groundwork for *Day Of Blood* in their "Klingons" issue of IDW's *Star Trek: Aliens* series, which centred on the original Kahless the Unforgettable's legendary battle at Three Turn Bridge.

"Weaving it from the pieces we've gathered from *Deep Space Nine*, *The Next Generation*, *Voyager* and even the *Original Series*, it brought us great honour to not only craft that story but



Covers: Ramon Rosanas (top) and Daniel Johnson.

to reframe it around something much darker: personal revenge and pride," says Kelly. "We'd established that Kahless was not the man the Klingons believed him to be in 'Klingons', and showed how his lessons could lead to murderous zealotry in *Year Five*. Now we can tell the story of where all that was going."

Deemed by Lanzing to be "a populist demagogue with little interest in the high-minded ideals he hides behind", Kahless II

more closely resembles controversial real-life politicians like Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin than supervillains such as Doctor Doom or Kang the Conqueror. "The history of Kahless is quite complicated in a delicious *Star Trek* kind of way, as this Kahless is a clone of the spiritual leader who unified the Klingon Empire over 1,500 years ago," explains Cantwell. "He was installed as Emperor as a kind of spiritual reinvigoration in *Next Generation*, which Worf was instrumental in.

"But as the events of *Deep Space Nine* have shown, this man has long struggled to find his place and relevance, and there seems to be a deep well of insecurity within him. He was grown in a lab but believes he is supposed to be this great destined leader. Like all awful fascist dictators in our history, he overcompensates with this projected image of strength he is desperate to live up to. He resorts to violence, and this makes him truly dangerous."

Worf's estranged son Alexander also plays a key role in Kahless II's deadly scheme. "As long as we've known him, Alexander has been

"We'd established that Kahless was not the man the Klingons believed him to be"

searching for his identity," says Cantwell. "Worf hasn't been very helpful with that, something he'll have to own up to in a real way in this story. Like many impressionable young men, Alexander has fallen in with the wrong crowd, which just happens to be a cult under the sway of a madman, who has been more of a father to him than his own father."

While Lanzing won't talk about what happens in *Day Of Blood*'s final four chapters in *Defiant* 6-7 and *Star Trek* 11-12, he will discuss the special coda issue which will follow them, *Day Of Blood: Shaxs' Best Day*, centred on the Bajoran security chief from *Lower Decks*.

"It covers what happens to Shaxs during our insane event and tells things from his point of view in a hilarious *Lower Decks* way," says Cantwell. "People will want this issue, as Ryan North has written something bonkers and Derek Charm is drawing some of the funniest *Lower Decks* violence I've ever seen." ●

Star Trek: Day Of Blood issue one is out 19 July.



NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

- The sound of the underground: **Silo** renewed for a second season on Apple TV+.
- Christopher Lloyd, Cary Elwes and Stockard Channing joining *Sonic* spin-off **Knuckles**.
- Genndy Tartakovsky's **Primal** renewed for season three on Adult Swim.
- Linda Hamilton boarding fifth season of **Stranger Things**.
- New animated **Bewitched** series to focus on Tabitha, teenage daughter of Samantha and Darrin.
- **Superman & Lois** renewed for 10-episode fourth season.
- Yim Si-wan, Kang Ha-neul, Park Sung-hoon and Yang Dong-geun joining **Squid Game** season two.
- Selena Gomez teaming with Jordan Peele for Prime Video's adaptation of graphic novel **Coyotes**.
- **Dead Cells** game to get animated TV adap by studio Bobbypills.
- Dolph Lundgren joining the **Witcher** franchise for spin-off about the Rats.
- Production on **Daredevil: Born Again** and **The Penguin** halted due to writers' strike.
- *Scooby-Doo* prequel **Velma** renewed for second season.



GETTY



Chris Fenoglio provides a lighthearted cover.

► **SCI-FACT!** Played by Kevin Conroy, Kahless II first appeared in *Next Generation* season six episode "Rightful Heir".



WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Worlds Collide

Mark Millar is crossing over nearly all of his Millarworld characters in **Big Game**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**



TO MARK THE 20TH anniversary of his comic book company Millarworld, Mark Millar is bringing his numerous series together in this summer's crossover, *Big Game*. Drawing on almost everything from 2003's *Wanted* to this year's *Night Club* and *Nemesis Reloaded*, the five-parter is something he's had in mind for many years.

"I've wanted to do it for a long time, but it would have been a logistical nightmare as the rights to all the different properties were co-owned by all the different artists," says Millar, who sold Millarworld to Netflix in 2017. "It was going to be impossible otherwise, but it's been worth the wait because I've built up around 25 franchises in that time. It also feels like a decent amount of time because if I had done this early on, it wouldn't have felt so monumental, as several of them have since



One of the covers for issue one, by Pepe Larraz.

become live action films. So to pull it all together into one story, it just felt like a good time to do it."

As readers of *Nemesis Reloaded* have already discovered, *Wanted*'s Wesley Gibson plays a pivotal role in *Big Game*, as it's revealed that he is at the centre of a far-reaching conspiracy, which has seen supervillains secretly take control of the planet. "*Wanted* and *Big Game* are like the two bookends of this big storyline," explains Millar. "I'll continue to fill out some of the stuff in the background but they're very much the first book and the last book and they're like the alpha and omega of the whole thing, as there's a beginning, a middle and an



Things are getting off to a stirring start, it seems.



More art by
Pepe Larraz
from inside
the issue.



Wesley was perhaps a couple of years younger than me when we did *Wanted*, so he's now a middle-aged guy, which was interesting."

Just as he secured *Batman's* Jorge Jimenez for *Nemesis Reloaded*, Millar has teamed up on *Big Game* with Pepe Larraz, who is best known for his work on *X-Men*. "They're DC and Marvel's best artists, so I felt like a thief in the night," laughs Millar. "Pepe is such a natural at drawing 20-superheroes-in-one-panel kind of stories. Because of his schedule I only had him for about 125 pages, so I had to make the story work the best it could for the page count I had. That was really good because it made me be really lean."

“With Kick-Ass and Hit Girl, I pick up from where they would be in the real world”

Claiming that “this could be the last story, like *Days Of Future Past*,” Millar says that *Big Game* is the culmination of the various plot threads he has been slowly entwining in this year's various series, including *The Ambassadors*, *Nemesis Reloaded*, *Night Club* and *The Magic Order 4*. “They all tie up and head straight into *Big Game* itself,” he teases. “If *Wanted* was all about the superheroes in the world being killed off and the supervillains reigning supreme then *The Ambassadors* was like the last straw for these guys.

“They’re like, ‘Okay, we can accept Kick-Ass because he’s just a kid with a couple of sticks who’s not going to give us any trouble. We still secretly run the world and Hit-Girl is a bit worrying, but she just focuses on organised crime, so she’s okay too.

“But now we’ve started to see things like super-powered vampires like *Night Club*, who can run up walls and stuff, so they’re a little bit dangerous. Then you’ve got the Ambassadors, who are like a global rescue squad who have access to Superman-like powers, so we really need to shut these guys down.”

Big Game issue one is out on 19 July.

ending to this story. I like the idea of doing a self-contained universe, as Stan Lee once said to me that one of his great regrets was having to pass on the Marvel Universe to other writers. In his dreams, it would have just been him, which obviously would have been financially unviable for a comic book publishing company. But I’m really lucky because I can actually have that. And just as *The Lord Of The Rings* was three volumes, I like the idea of having 50/55 graphic novels that make up this whole meta-world of stories, so you can collect them all.”

With *Unfunnies* and *War Heroes* the only absentees, Millar was able to weave nearly all of his various characters into *Big Game's* labyrinthine plot, with licensing deals having been agreed with John Romita Jr and Dave Gibbons respectively for non-Netflix properties *Kick-Ass* and *Kingsmen*. “With *Kick-Ass* and *Hit Girl*, I pick up from where they would be in the real world, as Dave Lizewski was a 16-year-old boy when we did the first series in 2008 and now he’s 31,” he says. “He’s a completely different person now, as is *Hit-Girl*, who is now a young woman. And

Sneak preview
of one of the
first pages in
issue one.

► **SCI-FACT!** Issue one of the JG Jones-illustrated *Wanted* (later made into a movie starring Angelina Jolie) was published in December 2003.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Savage Tales

Conan begins a new era in comics at Titan

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

➔ "MY OLDER BROTHER GOT ME HOOKED on sword and sorcery in a big way when I was a kid – reading fantasy novels and playing *Dungeons & Dragons*," recalls Jim "Zub" Zubkavich, a childhood fan of Robert E Howard's Cimmerian. After scripting the Barbarian's exploits for both Dark Horse and Marvel, he's now taking charge of Titan Comics and Heroic Signatures' new *Conan* series, teaming up with artist Roberto De La Torre.

"Conan has always loomed large for me," he tells Red Alert. "The classic Frank Frazetta covers on those *Conan* paperbacks promised visceral adventures, and I couldn't get enough of them. The fact that Conan was splashed all over comics too, with the classic Marvel monthly series and the darker and more violent *Savage Sword Of Conan* magazine made the Hyborian Age even more exciting to me."

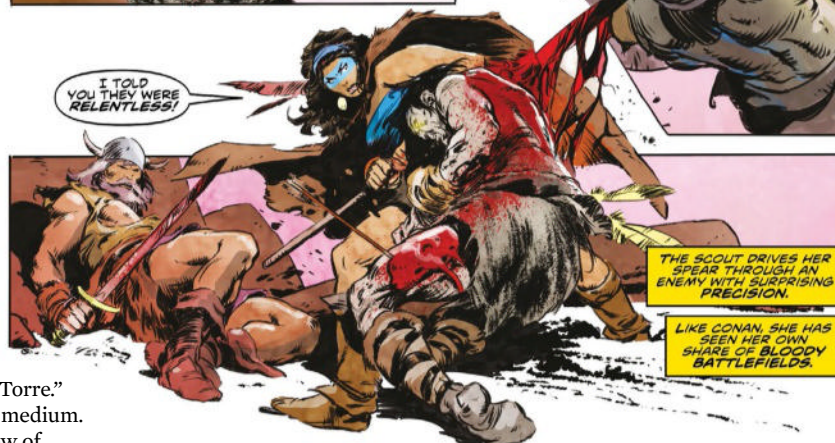
After Marvel's most recent licence expired, he stayed in touch with Fredrik Malmberg, president of Heroic Signatures, who hold the rights to Conan and many of Robert E Howard's other characters. "When Fred explained the ambitious plans they had for the character and the Hyborian Age as a whole, I jumped in with both feet," says Zub. "And when the question of who could draw the series came up, my top choice was Roberto De La Torre."

Zub believes that Conan is perfectly suited to the comics medium. "Conan has something primal at its core – an alchemical stew of intensity and violence about exploring the unknown and surviving

anything the world can throw at you," he says. "Fantasy is a very visual genre filled with incredible descriptions of vivid places and events, so comics are a natural fit to bring that splendour and action to life."

Conan The Barbarian issue one opens with him returning to his homeland several years after the infamous Sack of Venarium (as referenced by Howard himself in his 1935 short story "Beyond The Black River"), only to find it threatened by a new invasion force. "I referenced Black River, but even in the original prose, Venarium is kept pretty vague, so there's lots of room for interpretation and expansion," explains Zub.

“With our relaunch, it’s Conan’s first battle”



LIKE CONAN, SHE HAS SEEN HER OWN SHARE OF BLOODY BATTLEFIELDS.



"With our relaunch, it's Conan's first major battle, and it acts as a foundation for the wanderlust that will make him an adventurer, so it seemed extra appropriate for our first issue out of the gate. What he finds there shocks him into action to try and save Cimmeria, and it's sword and sorcery adventure with links to other Robert E Howard stories and larger worldbuilding yet to come."

Titan Books is also publishing a new series of *Conan* novels, which began with last year's *Blood Of The Serpent* by SM Stirling. "I won't be specifically referencing *Blood Of The Serpent* in my comic run as the monthly comic has a different trajectory and mission in mind," says Zub, however. "The team at Heroic Signatures are encouraging us to tell the stories we're passionate about, and as long as those ring true with the 90-year-old spirit of *Conan*, that's the most important part." ●

Conan The Barbarian issue one is out on 26 July.

► **SCI-FACT!** Created by Roy Thomas and Barry Windsor-Smith, *Red Sonja* is based on *Conan* author Robert E Howard's *Red Sonya of Rogatino*.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

A Study In Scarlet

Torunn Grønbekk celebrates **Red Sonja's** 50th anniversary

WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL

➔ FIVE DECADES AFTER her first appearance in 1973's *Conan The*

Barbarian 23, Dynamite Entertainment is sending Red Sonja in a bold new direction, as the She-Devil becomes an outlaw from justice when she faces off against the menace of the sinister His Master's Voice.

"Dynamite wanted to go big and back to basics for the 50th anniversary, and that's just what we've done," writer Torunn Grønbekk tells *Red Alert*. "Red Sonja is being hunted through the realm, suspected of a murder she didn't commit, and pursued by a mysterious presence that seemingly wants to kill her. She doesn't know how it is connected to the dark plague spreading from Vestfold, but she soon realises that unless she takes action, more people will die."

"This is a deeply personal quest for Sonja, not only because she is close to several of the victims, but also because she suspects that she will have to sacrifice something more precious than her own life to succeed."

Like Conan himself, Sonja works best as a lone operator. "She's always been a bit of an outsider," says Grønbekk. "I suppose most warrior characters need to be like that to a certain extent, but Sonja feels like she is very much in her comfort zone when she is on her own. But turning her into a fugitive is more about creating tension in the story, as I wanted to inject some urgency into the narrative."



Four of the many variant covers for issue one.

We start with a bang – or a swish of a sword – and it never really slows down from there. This adds to the confusion and the many hard choices Sonja needs to make before the truth of it is revealed."

Sonja's journey will see her venturing to different parts of Robert E Howard's ancient world. "I have a Hyborian Age bucket list that I hope I get to explore with Sonja," says Grønbekk. "In our first arc, we travel from Aquilonia and up to the Border Kingdom. We don't get all the way to Aesgaard but that would certainly be interesting to visit later on."

Hailing from Norway, Grønbekk has previously tapped into her Scandinavian heritage for her work on Marvel's *Thor*, and is promising to do the same for *Red Sonja*. "I don't think it's a coincidence that I'm taking Sonja up to the very highest point of the Border Kingdom for the eventual climax of the story," she says. "Writing about surly, cold miserable Norsemen is something that comes easy to me, considering I am a surly, cold, miserable Norseman."

"It's always hard to figure out which part of your history has influenced you, and in what way, but I did spend much of my childhood roaming around the woods, playing with swords and bows and arrows, and I'm sure it has played a part in how I approach the genre."

Describing him as "a damn joy to work with," Grønbekk says she has loved working with artist Walter Geovani. "He has, at this point, drawn more issues of *Red Sonja* than anyone else, and it shows – both in his depiction of Sonja herself and also in the world she inhabits," Grønbekk explains. "He's also great at comedy – something I appreciate a lot as I tend to go quite dark in my stories." ●

Red Sonja issue one is out on 19 July.



SFX SPACE AND TIME Celebrating 60 years of DOCTOR WHO

◆ Showrunner Russell T Davies has reported that all eight episodes of series 14, plus the four specials, are in various stages of preparation to complete – the new title sequence has not yet been finalised. Script work is also underway on four episodes for 2025's series 15.

◆ Bonnie Langford is returning to *Doctor Who*, alongside Ncuti Gatwa's Fifteenth Doctor, in 2024's series 14. She will reprise her role as Melanie Bush, who last appeared in a cameo role in "The Power Of The Doctor".

◆ Langford said: "I am absolutely thrilled to be bringing Melanie Bush back. To be part of the exceptional cast, crew and production team led by the force of nature that is Russell T Davies is a career highlight. I'm so privileged and proud to have been a member of the *Doctor Who* family since the classic era and to be included in the new generation is phenomenal."

◆ Russell T Davies said: "Open those TARDIS doors wide, because Bonnie's back! What an honour, delight and hoot to welcome back the character of Melanie, after too long away. And this isn't just a cameo, Bonnie is right in the thick of the action, battling monsters and chaos and cliffhangers, right at the Doctor's side, just like the old days."

◆ BAFTA-winner Lenny Rush joins the *Doctor Who* cast for the 2024 series, in the role of Morris.

◆ Rush, star of *Am I Being Unreasonable?* and *A Christmas Carol* said: "It's an absolute honour to be part of *Doctor Who*, one of the most iconic shows on television and wow what a dream come true!"

◆ Russell T Davies said: "This is what *Doctor Who*'s all about, brand new talent from the next generation, and no one's more talented than Lenny! He joins the TARDIS team

Bonnie Langford bounces back as Mel Bush.



just in time for the Doctor's greatest nightmare, so hold on tight!"

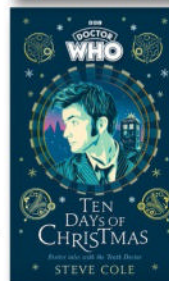
◆ *Whotopia: The Ultimate Guide To The Whoniverse* will be published by Penguin Books on 16 November.

◆ Co-written by Simon Guerrier, Una McCormack and Jonathan Morris, it promises a new take on the world of *Doctor Who*, as well as brand new photos.

◆ *Ten Days Of Christmas* by Steve Cole will be published on 12 October. Its festive tales will feature the Tenth Doctor.

◆ There are also six novels due for release on 26 October, featuring different Doctors and set in the last six decades. The titles, *Imaginary Friends* by Jacqueline Rayner, *The Cradle* by Tasha Suri, *The Self-Made Man* by Mark Griffiths, *Wannabes* by Dave Rudden, *The Monster In The Cupboard* by Kalynn Bayron and *The Angel Of Redemption* by Nikita Gill, are now available to pre-order. Treat yourself to an early Christmas... 🎄

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



Witch, Please ➡

The *Hocus Pocus* franchise continues its belated move into the world of merchandising, with a Lego set based on the original 1993 movie making a long-overdue debut this month. The Sanderson Sisters' Cottage clocks in at 2,316 pieces and six minifigures. It even includes Winifred's book of spells in a tiny "glass" case. Camp!

Available now, £199.99, [lego.com](https://www.lego.com).



Homecoming

Babylon 5 is back! But it's not *that* project, a potential new CW series which is still under development. This is a surprise *other* project – an animated movie from J Michael Straczynski and the original cast. *Babylon 5: The Road Home* will be available on Blu-ray, 4K and VOD, with various extras, from 15 August – more details next issue!



Monster Mash ⬆

Art by Graham Humphreys has been revealed for the launch of FrightFest 2023 – showcasing the FrightFest ghoul surrounded by Mad Doctors, which is also the theme of the festival's latest annual book.

The Bank Holiday event takes place at Cineworld Leicester Square in London from 24-28 August. You can check out the full line-up and grab tickets at frightfest.co.uk.

➤ **SCI-FACT!** *The Road Home* is the seventh *Babylon 5* movie, but the first one to be animated.



➔ AFTER APPEARING IN last year's *Moon Knight* TV show, Layla El-Faouly makes her comic book debut in this month's *Moon Knight* 25, before assuming her role as the latest Scarlet Scarab in writer David Pepose and artist Marcelo Ferreira's new miniseries *Moon Knight: City Of The Dead*.

"*Moon Knight* 25 tees up the events of *City Of The Dead* nicely," says Pepose, who came up with the idea of featuring Layla at the same time as *Moon Knight* scribe Jed MacKay, before editor Tom Brevoort encouraged them to dovetail their stories together. "Jed and I went back and forth about elements of each other's stories, and I think they really strengthen one another in a profound way."

Pepose says that the character of Layla El-Faouly was "one of the highlights of the Disney+ series" and he relished the challenge of creating the comic book incarnation of a character that had only previously existed on the small screen. "When she was revealed as the all-new Scarlet Scarab, I thought it was such a clever and welcome addition to *Moon Knight*'s canon," he adds. "To me, Layla's banter with Marc feels like a cornerstone of their dynamic, and their shared past really gives them a *Mr & Mrs Smith* edge when they're facing bad guys side by side. Ultimately,



Scarlet Scarab on *City Of The Dead*'s cover, by Davi Go.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Beetle Juice

Scarlet Scarab comes to comics in ***Moon Knight: City Of The Dead***

WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL

our goal is to not only bring the same spark and warmth that May Calamawy brought to the role on Disney+ but to also establish a brand new status quo for anyone discovering the Scarlet Scarab for the first time."

Moon Knight 25 contains a reprint of one of the Fist of Khonshu's classic tales, and Pepose is drawing inspiration from Doug Moench and Bill Sienkiewicz's seminal '80s run. "*City Of The Dead* is a love letter to Marc Spector's wide-ranging

history, particularly the early world-building Doug and Bill put together," he says. "I love the origin that they created for Marc, a story about redemption and reinvention that we're going to be returning to in some big ways."

The five-parter sees Moon Knight



descending into the titular, mind-bending underworld. "The City of the Dead is the place where departed souls go to await final judgement, and when a young runaway's soul winds up caught between life and death, Moon Knight must undergo an ancient ritual in order to stage what can only be described as a metaphysical rescue mission," explains Pepose.

"The City of the Dead is a realm that's purely psychoactive, and as someone hailing from the land of the living, Marc's mental state is going to play an even more outsized role in this unfamiliar territory. Take equal parts the dreamscape from *Inception* and the simulations of *The Matrix*, and blend them with *Moon Knight*'s unique mythology, and you've got yourself the City of the Dead."

Also expect to see some of the Crescent Crusader's deceased adversaries. "Both as a superhero and a former mercenary, Moon Knight has generated more than his share of a body count over the years," notes Pepose.

"Some of these deaths have weighed heavier on Marc's conscience than others – and some of them have been dying for a taste of payback..."

Moon Knight 25 is out 12 July. *Moon Knight: City Of The Dead* is out 19 July.



NEW AUTHOR

EHIGBOR OKOSUN

MEET THE WRITER BEHIND
EPIC FANTASY *FORGED BY
BLOOD*

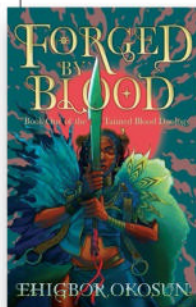


Tell us about your protagonist.

→ Demi grew up in hiding, hearing ancestral stories about the forbidden blood magic both she and her mother wield. Trusting the wrong person costs her mother's life. So she's ready to do anything to protect her loved ones, even kidnap the sole heir of the genocidal King who hunts her people.

How does magic work in this world?

→ Magic is tied to spirit bonds that can only be broken by committing acts of murder. Once Oluso (those born with magic) violate this sacred rule, they become Aje (spirit broken) and lose their sanity, and their descendants are born magic-less.



How does this world relate to the real-world Nigeria?

→ Many of the creatures are tied to Nigerian mythology that even pre-dates Nigeria's existence as a country. The beliefs the Oluso hold, that sacrifice governs power, and the spiritual is tied to the physical, are mores of Nigerian

traditional religions.

Does it have any political themes?

→ The main one is the impact of colonialism: beyond death, unrest and chaos, what other ills does it spawn? Appearance-based hierarchies, the way conquerors work to erase the conquered... is it possible to overcome these?

Any advice for budding authors?

→ The industry can feel like a maze, but form communities with people who'll pass through every door with you.

Forged By Blood is out on 17 August, published by HarperVoyager.

THE FINAL FRONTIER

JOHN ROMITA SR 1930-2023

The artist who made Spider-Man a star

→ "I ALWAYS WANTED TO draw and comic books were the only things I saw," recalled Brooklyn-born artist John Romita. "My mother never had any magazines around the house because we couldn't afford them."

Inspired by such classic adventure strip illustrators as Milton Caniff, he first found work at Marvel's forerunner Timely in 1949, crossing paths with editor-in-chief Stan Lee. As Timely transitioned into Atlas, Romita proved his versatility, jumping genres between war, romance and horror titles as well as a brief revival of *Captain America*.

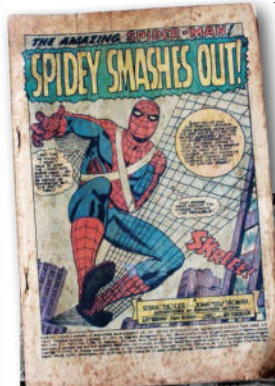
Signing an exclusive contract with DC in 1958, he specialised in love stories, demonstrating a gift for conjuring swoon-worthy women on the page. These tales of heartbreak honed his craftsmanship in other

ways: "I learned how to make a scene look exciting even though nothing was happening in it." Lee enticed

Romita to Marvel in 1965, initially on *Daredevil* and then *The Amazing Spider-Man*, where he replaced co-creator Steve Ditko. Romita redefined the web-slinger's world, bringing a glossier, more mainstream aesthetic that helped the character ascend to a true global icon. Even Peter Parker had a studly makeover. "I tried like crazy to make Peter look skinny and narrow-shouldered but I just couldn't do it," Romita remembered.

Romita's reign saw the introduction of such essential supporting players as Mary Jane Watson, the Rhino and the Kingpin. Promoted to Marvel's art director in 1973, he went on to establish the company's Bronze Age house style as well as designing fan-faves the Punisher, Wolverine and Luke Cage. Taking on the *Spider-Man* newspaper strip in 1977, Romita continued working into the 21st century. His son John followed the family trade to great acclaim.

"My mission as a storyteller is to make readers forget that they're holding a comic book," Romita once said. "I want to get them into the story right away and start caring about the characters." **NICK SETCHFIELD**



John Romita Sr (right) with Stan Lee in 1978.

GETTY, ALAMY

CORMAC MCCARTHY 1933-2023

American writer who won a Pulitzer Prize for post-apocalyptic novel *The Road*.

TREAT WILLIAMS 1951-2023

American actor who played an undead cop in *Dead Heat* and Xander Drax in *The Phantom*.

SFX EXCLUSIVE
SUBSCRIPTION OFFER!

SFX

SUBSCRIBE TODAY AND GET AN ALEXA
PORTABLE SPEAKER WORTH £49.99

ALEXA YOU CAN TAKE EVERYWHERE, ALL INCLUDED
WITH EVERY PRINT AND BUNDLE SUBSCRIPTION



Amazon Alexa-approved product

★
Tough multilayered construction with a built-in
microphone

★
Call functionality including play and pause

★
Alexa can be used at a touch by connecting to
the Boompods app

★
A host of attachment options

★
Fully drop-tested and waterproof
to suit all conditions

SUBSCRIBE TODAY AT
[MAGAZINESDIRECT.COM/SFX/B93E](https://magazinesdirect.com/SFX/B93E)
OR CALL 0330 333 1113 AND QUOTE B93E

EXCLUSIVE SUBSCRIBER-ONLY BENEFITS

SUBSCRIBER-ONLY COVER EVERY ISSUE
SFX DELIVERED DIRECTLY TO YOUR DOOR
SAVE UP TO 42% ON THE COVER PRICE



A YEAR'S WORTH OF ISSUES. 1 PAYMENT EVERY 6 MONTHS. SIMPLE.

Annual Print Edition

**£22.99 EVERY
6 MONTHS**

**13 issues of SFX in
print over 12 months,
and save 35%!**

Annual Print + Digital Edition

**£35.49 EVERY
6 MONTHS**

**13 issues of SFX over 12
months in print and digital,
and save 42%!**

Digital Edition

**£14.99 EVERY
6 MONTHS**

**13 issues of SFX in digital
over the course of the year,
and save 42%**

*Terms and conditions: Offer closes 31/08/2023. Offer open to new UK subscribers only. Pricing is guaranteed for the first 12 months and we will notify you in advance of any price changes. Please allow up to six weeks for delivery of your first subscription issue (up to eight weeks overseas). Your gift will be delivered separately within 60 days after your first payment has cleared. Gifts only available to subscribers on the UK mainland. Gift not available with a digital subscription. Gift only available in the colour black. The full subscription rate is for 12 months (13 issues) and includes postage and packaging. If the magazine ordered changes frequency per annum, we will honour the number of issues paid for, not the term of the subscription. For full terms and conditions, visit www.magazinesdirect.com/terms. For enquiries please call: +44 (0) 330 333 1113. Lines are open Monday-Friday 9am-5pm BST or email: help@magazinesdirect.com. Calls to 0330 numbers will be charged at no more than a national landline call, and may be included in your phone provider's call bundle.

GOOD OMENS

Miracle Workers

THEY'RE BACK – AND THIS TIME THEY'RE IN ALL-NEW TERRITORY. NEIL GAIMAN TALKS RETURNING FOR SEASON TWO OF **GOOD OMENS** WORDS: **BRYAN CAIRNS**



THE RASCALLY DEMON Crowley (David Tennant) and the neurotic angel Aziraphale (Michael Sheen) put aside their differences to pull off one doozy of a Hail Mary and prevent an impending Apocalypse in *Good Omens*' first season. The task cemented the pair's unconventional friendship. So what are divine beings, who have fallen out of grace with both Heaven and Hell, to do for an encore?

The answer lies with archangel Gabriel (Jon Hamm), who shows up unannounced on the doorstep of Aziraphale's London bookshop. Suddenly, Aziraphale and Crowley are caught up in a caper of biblical proportions – but also a more intimate tale.

"It's a mystery," showrunner Neil Gaiman tells *SFX*. "It kicks off a story that doesn't have giant consequences for the universe, even if it does have consequences for Aziraphale and Crowley. We have a lot of the marvellous Jon Hamm, who is the angel Gabriel and turns up at the beginning stark naked, carrying a cardboard box with no memory of who he is. In the same way, it is about Aziraphale and Crowley having to get involved with humanity in a way that they haven't before.

"They get dragged in slightly against their will to try to sort out the love life of Aziraphale's tenant," he continues. "Her name is Maggie [Maggie Service] and she runs the record shop next to the bookshop. You'll see the coffee shop over the road, which is Nina's [Nina Sosanya]. The relationship between Maggie and Nina is one that Crowley and Aziraphale try to fix, and mess up, because they are not good at human relationships, even if they can do miracles."

Truth be told, Gaiman never originally intended this arc to serve as *Good Omens*'

second instalment. The TV series was based on Gaiman and Terry Pratchett's 1990 novel. The two collaborators had partially hashed out the details for a sequel to the fantasy comedy, late one night in a hotel room. This, however, is not it. Gaiman instead plotted a new narrative that could provide the connective tissue between the first season and a theoretical season three, if it happens.

"Because the hypothetical season three exists, there is a story that is there, and I didn't feel that we could drive straight from season one into that," Gaiman explains. "I knew what the stakes were. I knew what the parameters were. I also knew that I had David and Michael. I had the angels from plot number

"I knew I was going to have a new demon replacing Crowley as Hell's representative"

one. I had demons from plot number one. And with anybody that I wanted to bring back, but didn't have room for right now, I did not have to bring them back as themselves.

"I had absolutely nothing for Madame Tracy to do in this plot, but I would be damned if Miranda Richardson wasn't going to be in this. She is one of my favourite people in the world. She is hilarious and is so good. And I knew I was going to have a new demon replacing Crowley as Hell's representative in London/the UK. Miranda's demon Shax is the best demon you could want."

It's late February 2022 and *SFX* is in Edinburgh for a set visit. A soundstage in Pyramids Studios has been transformed into a →

Jon Hamm as the rather confused angel Gabriel.



The Odd Couple

David Tennant and Michael Sheen talk character and sets for season two

Crowley and Aziraphale come off as the best of frenemies at times. Where do they stand with one other now?

DT: They are indeed. What's different in season two is because of what happened at the end of season one, they no longer have head offices that they have to report to. They are in a very different position. Whereas before they were trying to get away with things, now they are kind of free agents.

MS: Although sort of fugitives as well. They are sort of in-between.



Crowley and Aziraphale having a lovely time.

But this amazing life they have created over a millennia, they are now able to enjoy in a slightly different way. They are not having to put on a front for their respective teams. There is a different kind of freedom.

DT: While at the same time being cut off, so they are also strangers in a strange land.

MS: That kind of connects them in a slightly different way. They have always been the only two beings who could understand each other's position. Now they are

pushed even closer together.

Now that they have the run of the place with no obligations, does that bring its own set of problems, being cut off?

DT: They have this sort of uneasy relationship. They are not entirely cut off from their head offices.



"No, I won't show you my seven-inch."

Indeed, their head offices are quite keen to exploit that sort of adjacent connection, as we will see as the story unfolds. They exist in this grey area, neither the supernatural nor of the Earth.

MS: By the time we pick up their story in this series, they have appeared in time where they were kind of let alone a bit more. When we pick the story up, they are being bothered again.

The depth and the richness and the detail of what we are seeing on set here in Edinburgh is

mind-blowing. How is it for you having it all in one place now, rather than having filming scattered around the UK?

MS: It's completely changed the experience of doing it. Just being indoors... The Soho set on the first season was freezing cold.

DT: I was in a car park. Even inside the bookshop I was exposed to the elements! There's a greater percentage of the show set here. There was a practical imperative to making it a manageable environment. If we had been in a car park, the elements might have impinged our ability to film.

Hellraiser

David Tennant is Crowley



You and Michael know these characters inside out. Do you have a shorthand?

It's a hard thing to be objective about. Although I didn't know Michael that well before we shot season one, it was always easy and exciting working together. It's well-oiled now, for sure. It's certainly fun to come to work. We enjoy bouncing off each other.

How comfortable are they about becoming involved with Gabriel?

I suppose Aziraphale is a much more enthusiastic detective. We are very much voting for the spin-off called *The Aziraphiles*, which will follow this! As with most things, Crowley is reluctant to get involved or to exhibit any kind of energy or enthusiasm about very much. He is dragged kicking and screaming into this. Necessity forces him to get involved, whereas Aziraphale rather likes it.

Where does Crowley hang out these days?

He spends a lot of time in the book shop. He only has one friend. He can only have one friend. That is the great liberation, and also the great prison, that they find themselves in. They have no one else. They have come to rely on each other more than they ever did. And more than they care to admit.

Crowley is a rock star, in a way. Were there any particular musicians that inspired you?

Not consciously, no. The look was assembled accidentally during the first costume sessions. The Crowley of the book is of the mode when the book was written. He is more kind of Wall Street, the way he is described. We just decided that Crowley should always be of the moment he's in. We were just trying to find a look that we felt fitted.



Miranda Richardson now plays Shax.

street in Soho. The visible local stores include the aforementioned book, coffee and record shops, as well as a magic establishment. In the middle of them all stand Aziraphale and Crowley, the latter in close proximity to his classic Bentley. It's close to the end of the

six-episode season, so exactly what the duo is discussing constitutes a spoiler. We can say, however, that Aziraphale has picked up the pace. Time is of the essence as Shax marshals her forces to descend on Aziraphale's store and retrieve Gabriel.

"This is really Shax's first time out on Earth," Gaiman explains. "She is working very diligently and very hard in Hell for a long time. Now she is on Earth, trying to figure it all out. She's just discovering what Crowley has known for 6,000 years, which is that if you're a demon and come up with a brilliant plan to screw up the lives of humanity, people will get there first and do worse than anything you could have imagined! She's coming to terms with that."

"She is having to deal with the first crisis on her watch, as well, which is the disappearance of the archangel Gabriel from Heaven. It would be fair to say that by the end of the story, she is leading as much as she can get from Hell's requisition department – a legion of Hell – in an attack on a Soho bookshop."

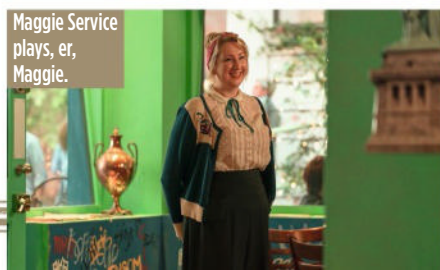
When audiences catch up with Aziraphale again, he's enjoying his time among humans. He owns most of the block in a Soho neighbourhood, and he's meddling in Nina's love life. Meanwhile, Crowley has been living in his car, with his plants sitting on the back seat. He's grumpy about his current status quo, but frequently hangs out at Aziraphale's. The duo began as antagonists, but their history and



Nina Sosanya is bookshop owner Nina.



Shax is a demon, y'know.



Maggie Service plays, er, Maggie.

Divine Being

Michael Sheen is Aziraphale



How has knowing your characters better informed this series?

The first series was the first time we really properly worked together. It feels like we haven't stopped working together since. Everything that has happened in-between plays into coming back to these characters. I am sure it is all feeding into it. It's very difficult for us to know how that is informing the characters and their relationships.

With the flashbacks to various points in Earth's history, is there a period of time Aziraphale enjoys the most?

One of the most enjoyable things for the audience and us is moving through different historical periods. It's a great source of joy, and people thoroughly enjoyed that episode in the first series, so that has been expanded on in season two. But in terms of which Aziraphale enjoys the most, I think it's not actually a period of time that we've seen him in on this series.

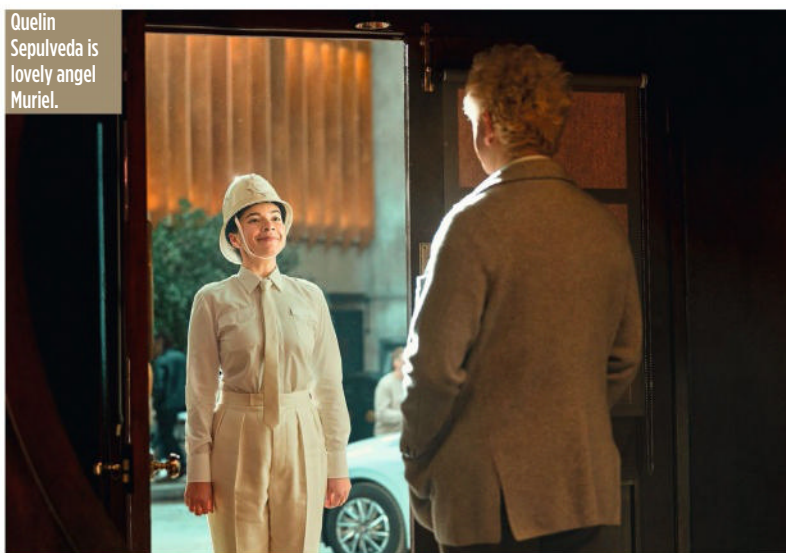
He would have been happiest at the end of the 19th century, in the Victorian era, which is considered the golden age of magic. He would have loved being with the greats like Harry Houdini. He loved the Victorian period. It was a great period of time for philanthropy and doing good works in a municipal way.

How has it been going from something dark like *The Prodigal Son* to a more whimsical show?

That's the nature of an actor's job. You go from one thing to another. In some ways, it's even more useful to have big differences between the characters. What tends to happen, and I think most actors feel this way, is if you are playing one character for a long time, part of you yearns to play the bits the character doesn't have. There's a naivety and an innocence about Aziraphale. But at the same time, underneath that, there is eons of knowledge and experience.



Beelzebub (Shelley Conn) has seen better days.



Quelin Sepulveda is lovely angel Muriel.

blossoming relationship will be fleshed out in flashbacks.

"One of the enormously fun things I came up with is the idea of minisodes," Gaiman explains. "They are 25-minute-long episodes within the episode. We have three of them over our six episodes. Each of them is like one of those chunks of episode three [in season one]. Whereas the longest one of those was four or five minutes, if that, these are full stories.

"You get to have the story of [put-upon Biblical figure] Job, and you learn Aziraphale

“One of the enormously fun things I came up with is the idea of minisodes”

and Crowley's part in the story. Then writer Cat Clarke takes us to Edinburgh in the 1820s for a tale of body-snatching and attempted murder that the boys get involved in," he adds.

"Finally, Jeremy Dyson and Andy Nyman reunite the League Of Gentlemen in a Nazi-period story that takes place very shortly after the episode in the church. That one was the only one I said had to be there, because I fell in love with our Nazi spies in the church. I kept thinking, 'What would happen if they essentially came back as zombies, with a

mission from Hell to try and investigate whether or not Crowley and Aziraphale were actually fraternising?"

Gaiman admits that one of the greatest challenges has been filming *Good Omens* simultaneously with his upcoming show *Anansi Boys*. The two shoot within throwing distance of each other, but are both time-consuming endeavours.

"If I could go back in time, I would go back to 16 September 2020, when Douglas Mackinnon [co-producer] and I got the phone call from the Amazon bigwigs to say, 'We have good news for you and interesting news for you,'" Gaiman recalls. "The good news is we are greenlighting both *Good Omens* and *Anansi Boys*. The interesting news is you are going to have to do them both at the same time."

"I would go back to then and I would throw myself on the call and say, 'Neil, don't! This is unwise.' That we are doing them both together is great. The amount of sleep I am not getting is monumental and monstrous.

"It's a little bit like childbirth, in that I managed to forget all the things that drove me nuts about the first one. Having said that, I managed to fix all the things that really drove me nuts making season one, which is great. We just have a whole new set of problems making season two..."

Good Omens is on Prime Video from 28 July.

DISNEY'S GREATEST
ATTRACTION BECOMES
THEIR LATEST
BLOCKBUSTER AS
HAUNTED MANSION
BIDS YOU WELCOME...

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**



THE PHANTOM

MENACES



Harriet, Gabbie, Ben and Bruce meddle.

DIRECTOR JUSTIN Simien has a history steeped in Disney, he tells *SFX*. The films he grew up with – *Beauty And The Beast*, *Oliver And Company* and *The Little Mermaid* – were, he says, “a big deal in me figuring out I even wanted to be a filmmaker”.

Visiting Disney World “all the time” as a kid – before later working at the theme park (a ride operator at Grizzly River Run in Disneyland, fact fans) while studying at film school – it was Haunted Mansion that was his favourite attraction. Specifically, he was intrigued by the trickery of it all: “When the hitchhiking ghosts are on your arm at the end of the ride, that used to really fuck me up as a kid.”

Fortunately, it didn’t put him off when reading the script for a new live action movie. “I felt that there was a cultural specificity that I could bring to it that I just always felt was missing from the attraction at Disneyland,” he recalls. “You really don’t get a sense of the

place, but New Orleans in the 1800s is a very specific place. A lot of my ancestors come from that time period; I just had this oddly personal connection to this big blockbuster-y movie.

“The story at its core, it’s about moving through this rephase of life. It’s about leaning into something dark and finding something on the other side. I was like, ‘Wow, I can say all of that in a movie that’s fun and entertaining? That’s kind of wild.’”

As if he already wasn’t one of us, Simien also grew up fanboying for Marvel, Nintendo and *Star Wars* – so he gets the hardcore fanbase that Haunted Mansion has. It was them – and a ride “Bible” he was given by Disney – that became what he calls a “constant source”.

“I feel like it doesn’t take a lot,” he begins to explain. “It just takes attention to detail, and leaning in to what their conversations are to

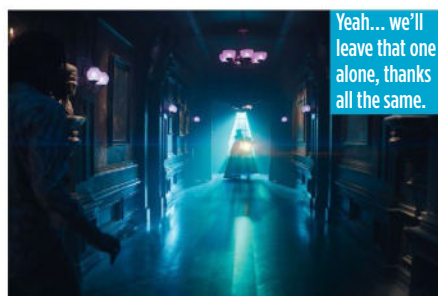
make the fans happy. I just truly felt like that had to be one of my primary goals.

“There were certain things I felt protective about already – what the Mansion specifically looks like, its architecture, visually how we meet the Mansion, the point of view, the angle on to [it],” he says of when we encounter the famous building.

“There’s no excuse for not having the doorknobs right, having the wallpaper just so, having the ghost paintings that you expect to be there, there. You have all those little Easter eggs. To me, that’s part of the joy of doing something like this.”

Obviously, making a movie about a theme park ride meant visits to the actual attraction, which Simien gets visibly excited about.

“You really get to see things I did in the ride hundreds of times and never saw before. We could really inspect the attic and watch how the Pepper’s Ghost effect was done, the dancing Waltzers and really get into the nitty gritty of it. That’s the thing that I love so much about that ride and that I wanted to somehow →



Yeah... we'll leave that one alone, thanks all the same.



Chase Dillon as Travis gets the fright of his life.



HAUNTED MANSION



Lindsay Lamb as the Ghost Bride, forever jilted.



The Haunted Mansion: clue's in the name.

What can you tell us about Ben?

He's a man who's going through a transition in his life. The transition is spiritual, I think, in nature; he's trying to find himself. This is a journey that is often continuous for us, as humans, and he is struggling with the loss of his wife, mourning the loss of someone that was really close to him, and trying to medicate that the best he can. Sometimes we don't have the tools to do that. His tool seems to be trying to dull the pain by drinking it away and finding ways to distract himself, and not really deal with the issues in front of him.

How does he join the action?

He's an astrophysicist, so he's interested in tools that can help us view the heavens. This comes together with his mourning because he tries to use his specialisation in this particular field to find an apparatus to see into worlds beyond, and regions beyond. He feels in himself that it doesn't work in that way, he will never be able to see his wife again.

So he gives up on it. And we meet him at the story when he's given up. He's giving these [haunted] tours, kind of just moving through life letting things happen, and not really taking charge of his life. He finds this opportunity through Father Kent, who comes and meets him, to change the course of his life and do

GHOST HOST

LaKeith Stanfield is Ben



LaKeith Stanfield as Ben (centre): facing fears.

something different and be a hero, by helping these people who Father Kent has found are trapped in their house because of ghosts that have haunted it.

What attracted you to the role?

It was actually a story about fatherhood, about growing, about facing your fears, and facing your grief and overcoming them, and how we interface and interact with death and mortality in life. So there were actually some really cool deep themes there that I thought were worth exploring.

What were your special effects like?

There were some sequences where I would have to be put into the ghost realm, which meant that I had to fly, which meant that I was hooked up to things that allowed me to float and fly. And these things were controlled by humans! That can be kind of scary sometimes because of the thing called human error. So you're literally in the hands of other humans who are allowing you to fly around.

What's the scariest part of the movie?

Probably being chased by the Hatbox Ghost. The actor playing the Hatbox Ghost was just so good at his body movements and making it feel like he was a creepy menacing essence and force around me. And the lighting of the set made it feel extra creepy. I actually had convinced myself that I was running from the scary monster ghosts. I was genuinely scared in those moments – that isn't fake!

adapt into the movie – you know there’s a trick being played on you, you know it’s not really happening. But because it’s so physically there, that candelabra is literally floating in front of you. It’s literally using smoke and literal mirrors to hide the things that are holding it up. It just has this charm where you just buy into it.

“It reminded me of *Beetlejuice* and *Little Shop Of Horrors* and those late ’80s, early ’90s fantasy films where again, this is unbelievable what’s happening in front of you. But because it feels like it’s physically there, you just go with it. And I wanted to try to bring that into the movie very much.”

That practicality certainly shows itself in the physical set build for the movie, he explains. “This is my first studio movie and there were folk walking around that set that have been working on these kinds of movies for decades. I heard the phrase that this was the biggest practical set they had ever seen so many times from so many different people. But it was kind of the mantra.

“Obviously we’re gonna use CG, we’re going to use state of the art technology. But wherever possible, I wanted things to be practical.”

“This is a movie about leaning into death and darkness and the things that scare us”

Simien explains that the famous ride vehicles, known as Doom Buggies, start as chairs which then begin moving and zipping around the house. “That was done with a track and, like, 100 guys yanking a rope. We tried to get as much of that stuff done in camera as possible. Even the ghosts, which of course are there, but not there.

“We had people on ropes and incredible make-up effects and really wanted to actually physically capture something, even if we were going to digitally alter it later. So the sets were absolutely phenomenal. They were huge. You start to really feel like you’re there, like you live there,” he laughs.

He says he got to “lean into the source material, but take it to a new place”, explaining that they expanded the mythos “carefully. We certainly get into the lore of the 999 haunts and particularly what brings these ghosts to this particular place – why this place versus other places. ‘Can stuff like this happen?’, we get into that a great deal.

“It was really just about expanding what we know and what we can see around the story just a bit further, but not filling in every blank. Certainly Hatbox Ghost, that was a big one. We’re pulling from what has been established, what really has been rumoured, and tried to



Owen Wilson
as Father Kent,
with director
Justin Simien.



Jamie Lee
Curtis as
Madame
Leota.



Danny DeVito with Hasan Minhaj: "Like this?"

Danny DeVito's face lights up, remembering something. "I have something you're gonna really like, just stay right where you are. Don't move," he says before getting up, stepping to his right and off camera from our Zoom conversation. "Don't move!" his voice floats from somewhere nearby. "Stay where you are. Now - concentrate on the screen. Ready?"

A black and white-patterned spinning umbrella appears in shot, filling the screen. "Do you know what that is?" the disconnected voice asks from behind.

What else could it be? "That is the original Penguin's umbrella," DeVito says proudly, emerging from behind it. "Ladies and gentlemen, watch his mind be blown..."

It is, we delight in saying, incredible that not only does he own it, but it's right to hand. DeVito immediately adopts his Oswald Cobblepot voice and peers into the camera.

"Yeah, it's here. It's here! It's mine! What? You got a problem with that?"

Conversation, of course, has turned to his stellar performance as the Penguin in 1992's *Batman Returns* and whether or not he'd be up for returning to a multiverse somewhere.

"I would definitely consider doing it, yeah," he says, the umbrella returned to "the precious place it belongs. It's a treasure of mine!". He talks fondly, and highly, of director Tim Burton.

HISTORY REPEATING

Danny DeVito is Bruce

"*Batman Returns* was a great part, it was operatic. You could just pull out all the stops. There were so many motivating things, so many things churning up inside of him. Being the odd man out - the odd *bird* out - brought the character out of me. It was an emotional experience for me because I felt it was an opportunity of a lifetime to play Oswald Cobblepot with Tim's vision and design. Tim is a genius to me."

Justin Simien, his latest director, is also a joy to DeVito. "Justin is a *dream* to work with. It's always good to have a good guy at the helm, or woman."

DeVito plays Bruce, a university professor who's "very much into the occult" and called in to offer his expertise. "The only way to solve

the problem is to know exactly the history of the mansion."

He's being tight-lipped about the "dilemma" the new occupants face, but suggests that Alistair Crump - aka the Hatbox Ghost - may play a large part. "Who is this guy who was cruel to everybody? His whole story is told in this movie, but he was lavish. His whole thing was, he was way into the occult..."

The occult? Sounds quite spooky... "It is scary," he agrees, "but it's for kids and for adults. Okay, it's made by Walt Disney, but they really concentrated on making it scary and rich-looking."

The costumes, he says, are "off the charts", the sets "massive" and the details something he was delighted with.

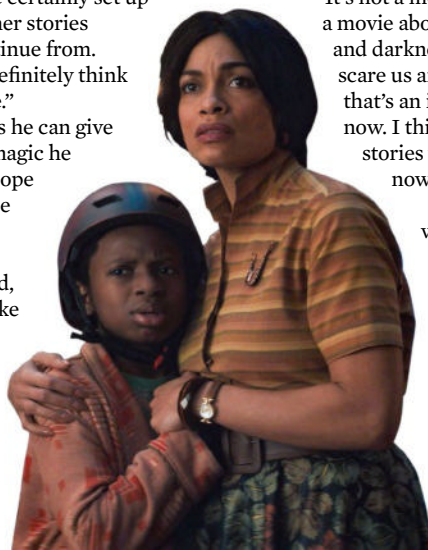
"When it came to dealing with the Mansion itself, I think Justin did a great job of delivering the feeling. Because for me *feeling* was the first time when that room starts expanding - that's the kicker, that kicks you off into the optical illusion of it. Even with all the modern technology, that was the one I thought that if they could pull that off..."

"I think Justin nailed that, really big time. So that was very pleasing to me." He says that "all the other stuff was really cool" but that he was sat waiting to see the ride really come to life. "I was looking for that moment, and I got it."

flesh him out and flesh that story out too. I think it's really satisfying. But it also leaves the door open for a lot more."

Could this then be the start of a wider Haunted Mansion Universe? "It's definitely in the realm of possibility. I sort of get my rocks off on worldbuilding, so we certainly set up a lot that I think a lot of other stories could derive from and continue from. Not really up to me, but I definitely think there are possibilities there."

As for now, Simien hopes he can give back a little of the Disney magic he experienced as a child. "I hope people laugh and cry. I hope people are moved. I want people to enjoy this bit of escapism that we've created, but at the same time, feel like they really got something from it."



"I want people to feel the way I felt watching those classic Disney movies where it's like, 'Yes, I was entertained and yes, I was taken from my regular life, but also that had something for me, that had something to help me get through something I'm going through.'"

"It's not a message movie. But this is a movie about leaning into death and darkness and the things that scare us and I actually feel like that's an important message right now. I think those are the kind of stories we kind of need right now."

Ah yes, those scares - we wouldn't want to leave you thinking you're getting out lightly just because it's a comedy... things do get hair-raising.

"I went as far as I could, I'll say that. And I gotta say the Disney folks are pretty brave in letting me go pretty far," he laughs. "But of course, we know our fan base - kids have to enjoy the movie."

"But look, as a kid I was watching *Nightmare On Elm Street*. So my understanding of what's appropriate in a family movie might be a little skewed, but I'll say that they definitely let me get away with a lot," he adds.

Does that mean there might be an R-rated cut somewhere in the Mansion vaults? Don't hold your breath. "I doubt it very much," Simien says. "If there were, I'm sure it's someone's job to delete that. No, but it's definitely got some bite to it, man. I think it's going to surprise a lot of people."

Hurry back - and be sure to bring your death certificate... ☠

Haunted Mansion is in cinemas from 11 August.

TURTLES

W

HENEVER A NEW version of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles comes along, Leonardo, Michelangelo, Donatello and Raphael are always three

things: they are mutants; they are ninjas; and they are turtles. They are, however, very rarely actually teenagers, and that's something Jeff Rowe – the director behind the half-shell heroes' next big-screen animated outing *Mutant Mayhem* – wanted to correct.

“We wanted a teenager to watch the movie and feel seen by it and understood,” he tells *SFX*. “That was our cornerstone for everything, like making the Turtles not hulking, ripped versions of themselves, but lanky and awkward. That carried through into casting actual teenagers. It's insane that it had never been done before.”

“Insane” may be a good way to describe a lot of *Mutant Mayhem*. Rowe – along with screenwriting duos Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg (*Superbad*, *Sausage Party*) and Dan Hernandez and Benji Samit (*Pokémon Detective Pikachu*, *The Addams Family 2*) – has created a film that plays into our general →

POWERS

MUTANT MAYHEM DIRECTOR
JEFF ROWE TAKES US INTO THE
SEWERS TO MEET THE NEWEST
VERSION OF THE TEENAGE
MUTANT NINJA TURTLES

WORDS: JACK SHEPHERD



nostalgia for the pizza-loving brothers while also defying our expectations of who the Ninja Turtles are. A prominent example of that is the way the Turtles' backstory has been changed. While Rowe won't go into exact details – and the first trailer includes a reference to the “ooze” the Turtles normally fall into – the filmmaker calls it a “significant” change to the characters.

“It totally makes sense for the story,” he says. “If you read about it, and you’re a fan, you’d be like, ‘Wait a minute!’ [But we made] little canon changes because we put so much work into trying to make the movie feel like it could exist within our real world, and trying to ascribe logic to a lot of things that were made up by a toy company in the ’80s to sell toys and don’t necessarily make sense.

“I can see people not liking it, but also, hopefully, they embrace it and when they watch the film, they’re like, ‘Yeah, that makes sense.’”

PLASTIC FANTASTIC

Reinvention is not entirely new for *TMNT*. We’ve seen these anthropomorphic turtles as fun-loving Saturday morning cartoon characters, CG monsters (Michael Bay’s movies), and avenging renegades (*The Last Ronin* comics). This time around, they’re simply mutant teenagers wanting to one day be able to mix with the surface world.

“The Turtles mean something different to each different generation of fans, so there’s room for reinvention,” Rowe says. “We’re fans first and foremost.

We want to make people have that dose of nostalgia and remember what it felt like to watch those characters. The thing that has always stayed the same is those characters. Mikey is the funny one, Donnie is the smart one, Leo is the leader, and Raph is cool but rude. We used those archetypes and developed them. That’s what people love about the Ninja Turtles.”

So how do you go about playing with the past yet pushing into the future? The key was to take inspiration from the film’s four leads. Newcomers Micah Abbey, Shamon Brown Jr and Nicolas Cantu, along with *Diary Of A Wimpy Kid*’s Brady Noon, voice the Turtles. Although initial recording sessions were done separately, the atmosphere turned electric when the actors were brought together.

Rowe encouraged them to improvise and bounce off each other. “We would get to the record and then we would immediately throw out the script, just because any time I tried to take a joke of a 36-year-old man and put it through the mouth of an actual 16-year-old, it’s

just not funny. It completely changed the way that we wrote the movie because of the way they interacted with each other, talking over each other. We were like, ‘Oh, this is the film. This is what we need to capture.’”

For the character designs, rather than look back at other comics and cartoons Rowe was heavily inspired by the Ninja Turtle toys of yesteryear. Tasking himself with looking back at the iteration of the heroes that inspired him as a kid, he watched and rewatched the shows and movies, but it was an episode of the documentary series *The Toys That Made Us* that made everything click into place.

“It just opened up my mind,” he says. “I was like, ‘Oh my god, I remember the little pizza disc that came with the pizza shooter.’ And I remembered what that felt like and how much love was put into those character designs. It was just a little plastic toy but there were jokes sculpted onto the characters. Each one told a little story. It invited imagination and creativity.

“There were several times when we had a design element and we could either go the Christopher Nolan route, where we make everything dark and tactical, or we go the route of Varner Studios, who sculpted all of those original toys, where things are just silly and wacky. And we always made [the Varner] choice. Then we’re like, ‘How do we make these wacky things feel like they exist in the real world?’ And that’s when the sparks started flying.”

Being guided by what befitted the world and the story, rather than squeezing the Turtles’ tale into already-established lore, led to the creation of *Mutant Mayhem*’s villain, Superfly. Voiced by Ice Cube, Superfly leads a rogue pack of mutants – including established names like Rocksteady (John Cena), Bebop (Rogen), Leatherhead (Rose Byrne) and Genghis Frog (Hannibal Buress) – who are vengeful towards the human world for making them outsiders.

“He is a wounded character who experienced a tragedy when he was younger

April O’Neil
reads a
bedtime story.
Maybe.

Bebop and
Rocksteady
are up to no
good.

Donatello,
Leonardo,
Raphael and
Michelangelo.

and has an axe to grind,” Rowe says of Superfly. When *SFX* draws a comparison to *X-Men*’s Magneto, the director calls the observation “astute” and adds that Splinter, the mutated fighting rat and father figure to the Ninja Turtles, could therefore be seen as Professor X. “[Superfly] has a lot more in common with Splinter than either of them would care to admit. They both essentially raised families. They both have a hatred of humans. The important emotional conflict in the film comes down to their different methods of wanting to deal with that pain and that trauma.”

Splinter is voiced by “living legend” Jackie Chan, a piece of casting that was a dream come true for Rowe. “Ice Cube is also amazing,” he adds. “I was personally intimidated by him. He essentially created gangsta rap. He is Ice Cube. But when he got on the microphone he was so hilarious, funny and excited. To me, it’s one of the great animated vocal performances, it is so delightful and makes Superfly likeable and charming. He’s incredible.”

With Superfly taking centre stage, iconic arch-nemesis Shredder has taken a backseat. “We had Shredder for a while,” Rowe says. “He is such a special character in the lore. As a character, he takes up a lot of space in the story. And in this movie, it felt like we needed the villain to be another mutant, we needed it to be someone that could relate to the Turtles, and that the Turtles could also relate to and be somewhat tempted by. They needed to have more of a parallel story. And that’s what Superfly gave us.”

That “saves Shredder for future movies,” says Rowe: “We’ll *Dark Knight* it.” And although there are no follow-ups to *Mutant Mayhem* confirmed just yet, Rowe (who would “100%” love to make another) has certainly thought about the implications of bringing Shredder aboard at a later date. “When you’ve grown and you’ve become confident as a teenager, to then go up against a foe that is three times scarier than anything you’ve ever seen before, that’s interesting and dramatic,” he says of a potential showdown between the Turtles and their biggest adversary.

For any sequel to happen, *Mutant Mayhem* must be a box-office success. Luckily, recent history is on Rowe’s side: the film’s animation style has been compared to the *Spider-Verse* movies, both of which have done

exceptionally well in cinemas. “*Spider-Verse* was a watershed moment in American animation, proving to studios it was not a financial or critical risk to be different,” he says. “It really opened a lot of doors for other filmmakers and studios to do more things.”

“Every time a trailer drops on this film, we get a ton of *Spider-Verse* comparisons. I will take as many comparisons to one of the great works of art of the 21st century as possible, but our film looks nothing like *Spider-Verse*. It’s so different. But audiences don’t have the vocabulary yet to describe it.”

Rowe brings up another animation that has drawn comparisons to *Spider-Verse*. “At one point when we were making this, the trailer came out for *Bad Guys* from DreamWorks, which looks amazing. Then a couple of people who aren’t animators were like, ‘Oh, it doesn’t look different.’

“The subtleties were lost on them. And we were like, ‘We can’t let that happen with this film.’ We have to make it undeniable to any person on the planet who watches this that this movie looks different from everything that came before it.”

That meant deploying a bunch of different animation techniques, including playing with

“We put so much work into trying to make the movie feel like it could exist within our world”

depth of field and having final drawings appear like sketches, without elegant lines and more crude in appearance. “Everything feels deconstructed and sketchy and like it’s being made up as you’re seeing it,” Rowe says. “I don’t think I’ve really seen that.”

Underpinning the whole process – the chance to experiment with animation, character and story – was the support of a team and a studio that encouraged Rowe to take chances. “We were handed the keys to this nice, expensive, lovely franchise, and they could have said, ‘Be really careful. Don’t mess it up. Just make it fan service.’

“We care about that and we want that, but they were like, ‘Just make it good.’ We want to make this special and unique. We want to make this the best iteration of these characters ever.”

Considering that the Turtles are finally teenagers, this may end up being the definitive version of their story. ●

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Mutant Mayhem is in cinemas from 4 August.





WHEN IT COMES TO transferring fan-favourite animated characters to live action, the Walt Disney Company effectively wrote the rulebook.

Over the last decade the studio has developed an extremely lucrative sideline making the likes of *Beauty And The Beast*, *Aladdin* and most recently *The Little Mermaid* part of our world, so it's hardly an earth-shattering revelation that the interstellar division of the Mouse empire is following suit.

Ahsoka, the latest *Star Wars* TV show to land on Disney+, is a spin-off from *The Mandalorian*, but it's also built around characters who made their names one digitally rendered frame at a time. Title character Ahsoka Tano was Anakin Skywalker's Jedi apprentice during the CG adventures of *The Clone Wars*, while the supporting cast is packed with heroes she met while they were collectively striking back against the Empire in *Star Wars Rebels*.

But there's one key factor that distinguishes Ahsoka from those aforementioned Disney reboots. While those films were mostly faithful to the originals – aside from the odd new song, reinvented comedy sidekicks and efforts to address the political incorrectness of the past – *Ahsoka* is a continuation of existing canon.

In other words, the new cast – led by Rosario Dawson, back as Ahsoka after cameos in *The Mandalorian* and *The Book Of Boba Fett* – are picking up where the animators and voice actors left off.

GHOST PROTOCOL

"I loved Tiya Sircar's Sabine!" says Natasha Liu Bordizzo, the Australian actor donning the highly customised armour of *Rebels'* graffiti-loving Mando Sabine Wren in *Ahsoka*. "I loved the energy, the sarcasm and playfulness that really made Sabine Sabine, but obviously it's a delicate balance because I never want to try to copy someone. I want to be inspired by the energy they put into the character, and then make the role my own."

"And of course, I watched *everything*," she confirms, "including the original films, *The Mandalorian* and, of course, *Rebels*. But I didn't watch anything after we started filming because otherwise it gets too much."

"You want to have space, take all the experiences and memories and inspirations from everything you've watched, and then let the live action you're creating find its own truth, its own journey."

While Bordizzo assures us you don't need to have seen *Rebels* to enjoy *Ahsoka* – "it will add more weight to everything that's going on, but it's fine if you haven't" – a quick briefing isn't going to hurt. The show ran between 2014 and 2018, featured production design influenced by →





AHSOKA REUNITES HEROES FROM ANIMATED SHOW STAR WARS REBELS. AS SHE PREPARES TO TAKE MANDALORIAN SABINE WREN INTO LIVE-ACTION, STAR NATASHA LIU BORDIZZO TEASES WHAT'S IN STORE

WORDS:
RICHARD
EDWARDS



Ralph McQuarrie's concept art for the original trilogy, and followed the crew of a freighter named the Ghost during the early days of the Rebel Alliance. Over the course of four seasons, ace pilot Hera Syndulla, fugitive Jedi Kanan Jarrus, his Padawan learner Ezra Bridger, Lasat muscle Garazeb "Zeb" Orrelios, chippy astromech droid C1-10P (Chopper to his friends) and, of course, Sabine became a tight-knit found family as they battled to liberate the Outer Rim world of Lothal from Imperial occupation.

That hard-earned freedom came at a cost, however, as Kanan sacrificed himself to save his friends, and Ezra wound up missing in action when his ship disappeared into the so-called Unknown Regions of the galaxy. The final shot of the series – a mural of the "Spectres" in their pomp – was so poignant that the artwork has been recreated for the new show.

Sabine herself had moments that would reverberate through the franchise, as she invented a weapon of mass destruction that was subsequently turned on the Mandalorians by the Empire, and willingly gifted the ceremonial darksaber to Bo-Katan Kryze – an act of kindness that may have cursed the Mandalorian people.

“There’s a deep level of respect Sabine has for Ahsoka, as someone to learn from”

Ahsoka picks up their story around a decade later, and while we don't know much about what Sabine's been up to in the interim – “I don't think we're going to go into huge detail, but breadcrumbs have been left,” Bordizzo teases – we do know she still feels significant regret about Ezra's disappearance.

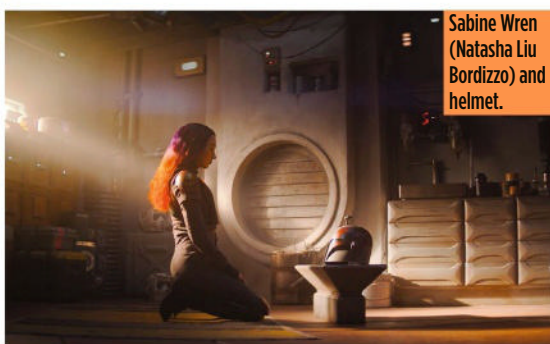
“At the end of *Rebels* we found Sabine at this specific point where they'd liberated Lothal and she'd just lost her friend,” Bordizzo explains. “Even though a lot of time has passed at the start of our show, the same things are at the top of her mind.”

“I don't know if [what happened with the darksaber] really weighs on her – if anything weighed on her, it was accidentally creating that weapon that was used against Mandalorians in the war – but [finding Ezra] is definitely one of her biggest driving forces. That crew was the only family she had left and obviously she and Ezra had shared a special bond since the start of it all. It's something that's both a strength and a weakness for her.”

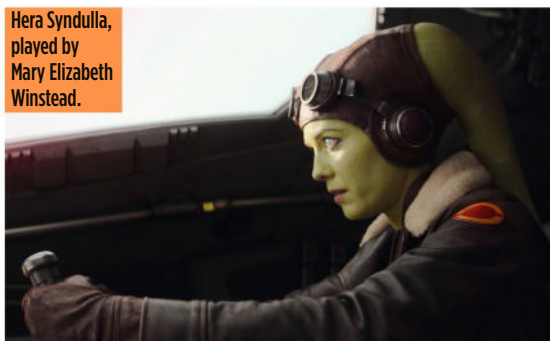
Given that Ezra will be played by Eman Esfandi in *Ahsoka*, it looks like Sabine's search will be successful. And with Hera and Chopper also confirmed to return (the former played by



Remember when double-sided 'sabers were new?



Sabine Wren (Natalia Liu Borda) and helmet.



Hera Syndulla, played by Mary Elizabeth Winstead.



The late Ray Stevenson is baddie Baylan Skoll.



Ahsoka (Rosario Dawson) with Sabine.

Mary Elizabeth Winstead, the latter by, well, himself), a full-on Ghost reunion may just be on the Sabacc cards – especially as Zeb has already been sighted propping up a bar in *The Mandalorian*'s recent third season.

But of all Sabine's former associates, the eponymous Ms Tano is poised to be the most crucial. She's genuinely seen it all, having fought in the Clone Wars, quit the Jedi Order in sensational style, survived the Emperor's Order 66 purge and become pivotal to the birth of the Rebel Alliance as mysterious operative Fulcrum. By the time she reunited with Sabine in the *Rebels* epilogue, she'd also had an extended stay in the wibbly-wobbly, timey-wimey World Between Worlds.

"I think there's a deep level of respect that Sabine has for Ahsoka, as someone to learn from," says Bordizzo when *SFX* asks about their relationship. "In the show they've been through a lot in the time that has passed, some of which we know about, some of which we don't. Their quests kind of end up overlapping, bringing them back together, and there's tension and there's things they've been through that they need to work out. Their reunion's interesting!"

ABSENT FRIENDS

They'll also have a Thrawn in their side in the form of an infamous Chiss commander last seen blasting off to the Unknown Regions with Ezra. And Grand Admiral Thrawn won't be the only antagonist in the new show, because the rogues' gallery of that galaxy far, far away is about to be expanded to the tune of a pair of Dark Side Force-wielders, Baylan Skoll (played by Ray Stevenson) and Shin Hati (Ivanna Sakhno).

Stevenson (who had *Star Wars* previous, as Mandalorian commander Gar Saxon in *Rebels*) sadly passed away in May, and Bordizzo is full of praise for her late co-star. "I had a lot of great, great scenes with him and he was just such a larger than life person," she says.

"It really comes through in the character, who's really intriguing, complex and not what you expect. I obviously feel really sad but grateful that we got to spend that whole year with him last year, creating so many memories and shooting such amazing stuff."

For all the returning characters, however, the biggest throughline to the animated shows is Dave Filoni, who co-created Ahsoka Tano (with George Lucas) and was showrunner on both *The Clone Wars* and *Rebels*. So while destiny is an overused word in the context of *Star Wars*, it certainly applies to Filoni's role as the overlord of *Ahsoka*.

"Just to have the creator around every day is a luxury," says Bordizzo. "He's like this bottomless pit of knowledge, and the guardian of the story and the characters. Also, he really just trusted us – while we'd go to him for



Shin Hati (Ivanna Sakhno) is also trouble.

guidance, he'd also say, 'You are Sabine, so whatever you instinctually feel is right is right.'"

Although *Ahsoka* is set in the same period as *The Mandalorian*, *The Book of Boba Fett* and the upcoming *Goonies-in-space Skeleton Crew*, Bordizzo tells us that the series will have its own distinct feel, inspired – perhaps appropriately, given Lucas's original inspirations for *Star Wars* – by the works of Akira Kurosawa.

"Dave is such a huge fan of Kurosawa and Japanese filmmaking and – while I don't think we're trying to emulate anything specific – it does feel in that realm," she says. "There's a samurai influence, with a lot of discipline and a lot of honour, but it would be wrong to say the influences are just Japanese – there's also a Chinese influence with wuxia and that whole martial arts world. So if *The Mandalorian* was a Western and *Boba Fett* was a crime/mob thing, I'd say those Eastern influences are what this is leaning towards."

But does Bordizzo ever get the sense that *Ahsoka* is simply a chapter in the wider story of this increasingly crowded sector of the *Star Wars* timeline? "I think it's hard not to feel part of something bigger," she admits. "*Ahsoka* runs along the same timeline as *The Mandalorian* season three, and the shows are all connected. There's just so many parallels."

The Disney+ shows are also building up to a "climactic" movie directed by Filoni. Given the writer/director's well-publicised phobia of spoilers, we're not expecting plot specifics any time soon, but surely the cast are lobbying to be part of what we're guessing will be an *Avengers*-style event?

"When I heard they were doing the movie, at Celebration in London [in April], I was like, 'Maybe one day I'll find out whether I'm a part of that!'" she laughs. "This is one of those times when I can so happily tell you I have no idea what's going on with that. I'm happy not to, because that way I don't have to lie to you!"

Star Wars: Ahsoka is on Disney+ from 23 August.

BLUE MEANIE

Ol' Red Eyes is back! Here's everything you need to know about *Ahsoka* big bad Grand Admiral Thrawn



Grand Admiral Thrawn first appeared in 1991 novel *Heir To The Empire*, the first in a trilogy by author Timothy Zahn. Although no longer considered canon, the books – set in the aftermath of *Return Of The Jedi* – helped keep *Star Wars*' fire alive during the dark times between the original and prequel movie trilogies.

Thrawn made his canonical debut in *Star Wars Rebels*. Zahn has also written three new novels set in the new continuity.

Thrawn is a Chiss hailing from Rentr, a world within the Chiss Ascendancy. His full name is Mitth'raw'nuruodo.

One of the few non-humans to rise to the upper echelons of the Galactic Empire, he became renowned as a master tactician. He was subsequently assigned to eliminate the Rebel threat on Lothal, and proved a difficult enemy until wannabe Jedi Ezra Bridger dispatched him to the Unknown Regions.

Dubbed the "heir to the Empire" in the *Ahsoka* trailer, Thrawn will be played by Lars Mikkelsen who, like Katee Sackhoff in *The Mandalorian*, reprises his voice role from the animated shows. Mikkelsen's CV also includes another memorable baddie in the form of *Sherlock* foe Charles Augustus Magnusson.

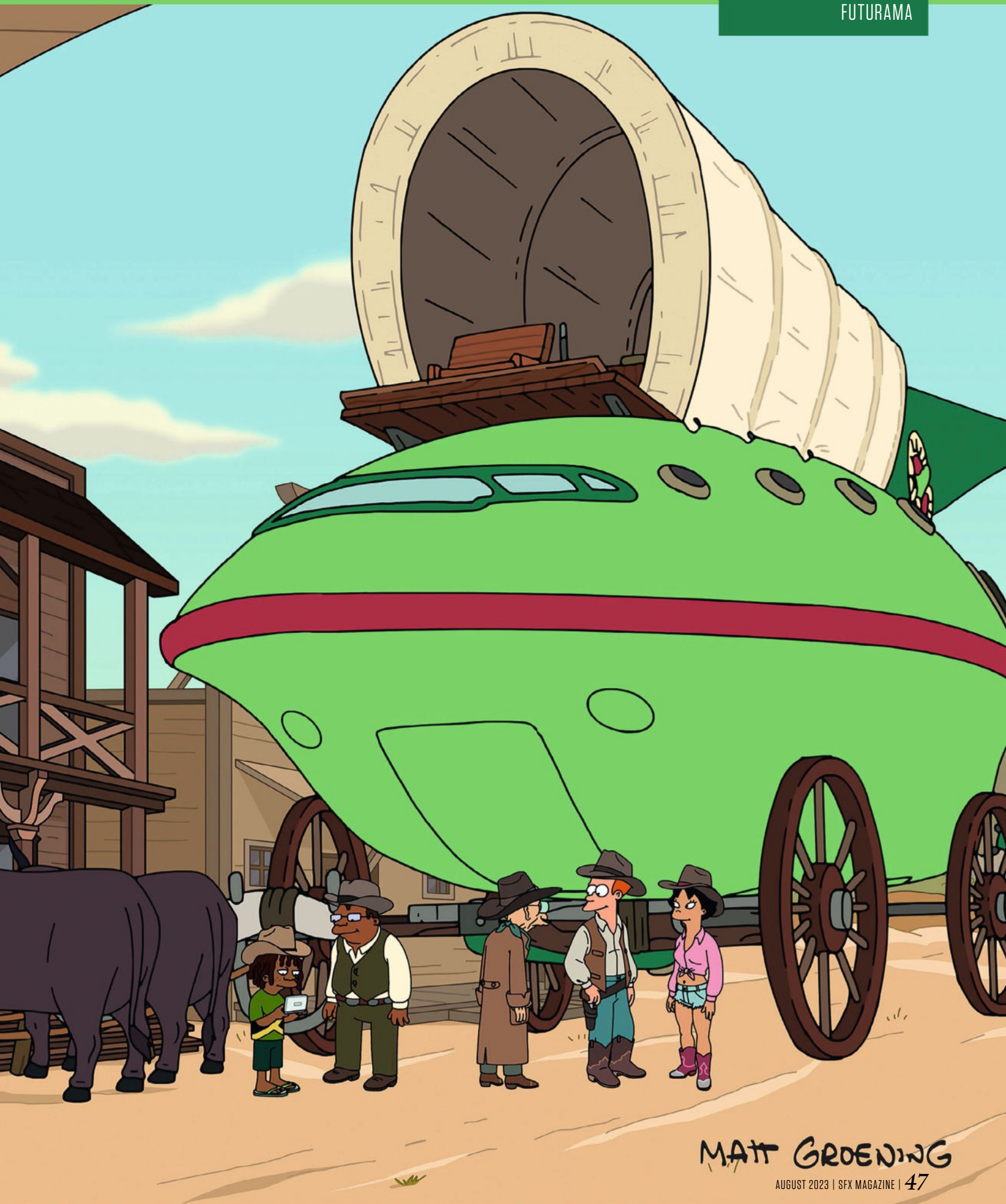


RETURN TO BENDER

FUTURAMA
RISES FROM THE
GRAVE AGAIN TO
LAND THE
PLANET EXPRESS
CREW AT HULU

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**





MATT GROENING

W

HEN IT COMES TO AMERICAN television, if a new series makes it on air and manages to last a season, that's almost a miracle. If that series becomes a hit and lives on for multiple seasons, the creators have truly beaten the odds. And then sometimes you get a unicorn like *Futurama*.

The animated series created by Matt Groening (*The Simpsons*) and David X Cohen premiered in 1999 on the Fox Network, where it aired for four seasons before it was cancelled. Based on the strengths of its reruns, *Futurama* was revived by Comedy Central in 2008, where it lived for three more seasons. Ten years later, in an unprecedented turn of events for any TV series, *Futurama* is again back from the dead with two new seasons made for the streaming network Hulu.

Everyone from the creative team is back, including Groening, Cohen and the entire original voice cast including Billy West, Katey Sagal and John DiMaggio. It's not lost on anyone that *Futurama*'s resurrections parallel the series' premise, which had Philip J Fry (West), a pizza delivery boy from 1999, fall into a cryogenic pod and wake up in 2999. The only difference is the series keeps repeating its trips into the cancellation pod and waking up years later to start again.

"This is really pure joy for us," Claudia Katz, an original producer and the executive vice president of Rough Draft Studios, tells *SFX* with a touch of awe. "We were always hopeful that someday we would return."

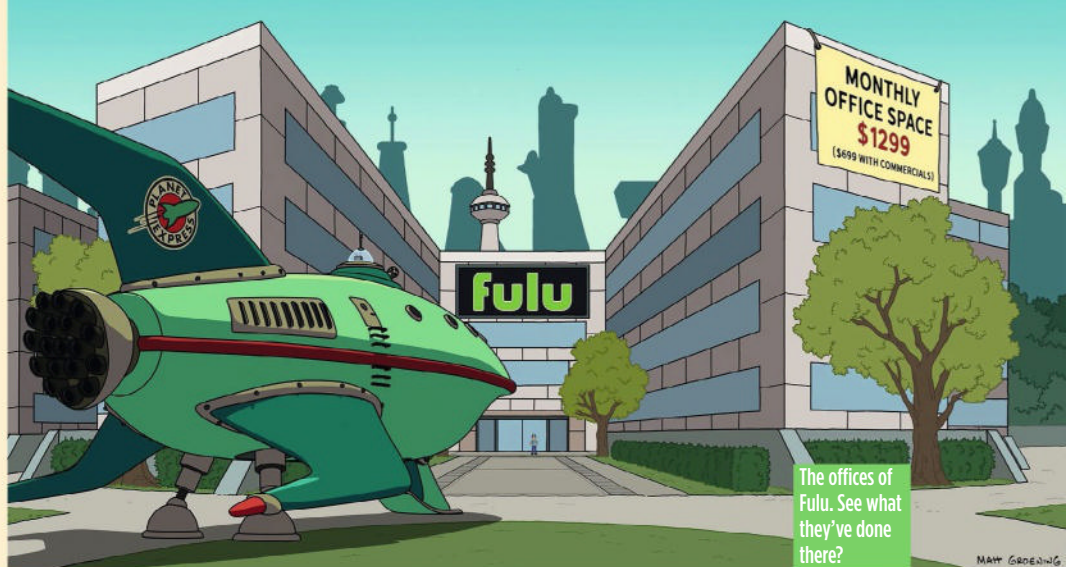
Katz helped establish *Futurama*'s signature mix of 2D and 3D animation in 1999, and then never left the show. With every renewal, she's helped update the show's look and production process, working in tandem with Groening and Cohen. As a fan herself, she watched it grow from a sleeper gem to one of the most critically lauded animated shows ever, with an especially dedicated fanbase in the science fields.

REANIMATED

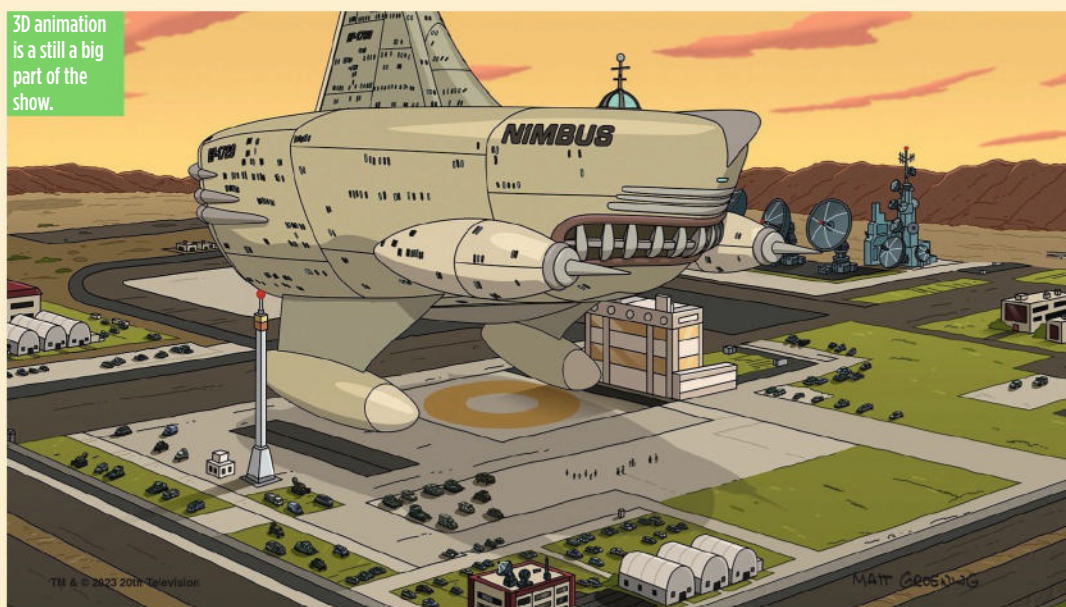
Katz tells the story of how, not that long ago, she welcomed some scientists/fans who work at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) for a studio tour. In exchange, JPL welcomed Katz, Cohen and others from *Futurama* to tour where they made the Mars Rover.

"Walking around that campus, we're seeing [cubicles] with Benders in them. It was pretty awesome," Katz remembers. "To them, we're like the biggest stars ever. And to us – who all have our own science or sci-fi nerdery – we got to talk to Jim McClure, who's been the head of Mission Control! He sat and chatted with us for half an hour, which was one of those 'once in a lifetime' experiences."

Not exactly surprising when you consider that Cohen and his writers developed their own Alienese language for *Futurama*, and



3D animation is a still a big part of the show.



weaved mathematics and physics principles into their time travel or quantum physics storylines. Total egghead stuff – plus it's a damn funny show, with some of the most biting satire you'll find on television.

Katz says this latest revival comes from the championing of 20th Television Animation head Marci Proietto. Her ongoing conversations with Groening and Cohen opened the door in 2021 for an order of two seasons with 10 new episodes each. "We started production early the following year," Katz says. "We were pretty excited even just at the possibility. I remember that I was driving when Matt called me and I was like, 'Hold on, I have to pull over!'"

Looking back at their shared journey, Katz says she remembers when the series was originally on Fox. "We weren't even really cancelled, as much as they just stopped returning some people's calls," she laughs. "Eventually, I think someone called them and was like, 'What's going on?'"

"Then we had the privilege of doing 52 episodes for Comedy Central, which was fantastic. These days, you can't assume that you're going to be able to finish on your own terms. So that led to the writers being very conscientious about always doing a season

finale, and not taking anything for granted. And that is still true to this day. We're doing these 20 episodes and I think everybody is really hopeful and optimistic that we'll get to do more. But in the same way, each season has a season and (hopefully not) series finale."

Speaking of which, in the 2013 seventh season finale "Meanwhile", Planet Express co-workers Leela (Sagal) and Fry were frozen



Everyone loves death by laser beam.





Leela and Bender: not impressed.



"Could you do my back as well?"

FUTURAMA



WEST WORLD

Veteran voice actor Billy West is thrilled to return to his favourite character

The *Futurama* season seven finale

"Meanwhile" was very well-regarded. Did that 2013 episode feel like a true ending to you?

● I think when you're in the middle of anything, no matter what's going on, you feel like that's the last time you're ever gonna work. I thought our show had beautiful endings. But then the writers always have a surprise up their sleeve when it comes time for revival. I feel the same way this time.

How did you get told it was renewed again?

● I got a phone call from Matt Groening. He started off by going, "Good news, everyone!" I said, "No, really? I can still do the voices!"

After a 10-year hiatus, how was it slipping back into the world again?

● I don't feel like anything is any different doing *Futurama* again. I feel more fortunate than anything. I'm thrilled to death because it was my favourite thing that I ever did. It's full circle.

Did the cast get to have a day where you recorded in person again?

● We did. At first, we'd see one or two people, and then it got to be some more people. Then one day, Katey Sagal! She has always been a star and she's always been busy, so to see her at a studio record is a delight. It's a treat because she has to work independently a lot of times. I saw her and I just hugged her. I was so happy to see her. She's a light.

Season seven left us with a married Leela and Fry choosing to follow Dr Farnsworth into a reboot. Any hints to how they all start again?

● I think the hint is that the professor showed up at the end of that and that tells you that's a wildcard. It might look like the end, but when somebody like the professor shows up at the end, it's like *Back To The Future*. So you can sort of imagine everybody finding their way back to square one, if that's what you can call it. When I read the stories, I feel so good that the material is so beautiful.

Have you added more characters to your repertoire?

● There's a couple of new-ish things that I was asked to do. Everybody was. But I favour the return of the President of Earth; the return of Richard Nixon is a favourite of mine.

in time as the last two people left in the universe. They marry and have a wonderful existence until Professor Farnsworth finds them, and they choose to have their memories wiped to return with him back to their old lives with Bender (DiMaggio), Hermes (Phil LaMarr), Amy (Lauren Tom) and Zoidberg (West).

Katz says season premiere "The Impossible Stream" is a "very thoughtful, fun reset" that will explain everything that's happened since that long-ago episode. "With Matt and David, you don't have to wonder. They always figure out a brilliant way to accomplish whatever is necessary. We had that 'Reincarnation' episode [in 2011] and I think this is as fitting a reintroduction as we've had in the past."

The writers continue to satirise our current times, with stories set 1,000 years into the future that feel very familiar, Katz says. "We have a vaccine episode," she laughs. "We've finally conquered Covid-19 in 3023, so that's a very fun exploration of the science, vaccines and just a commentary on that whole situation."

"There's a fun Bitcoin episode. And we have an NFT episode which, of course, no one understands, which is sort of the joke. And one of my favourite episodes of the season involves one of our cast members being cancelled for their behaviour, so that's pretty fantastic."

Katz says audiences will see all kinds of familiar faces from prior seasons, like Zapp, Kif, Nibbler, Robot Santa and even the Head of Richard Nixon, who remains the President of Earth. "I think there's something kind of fantastic about Nixon and [Nixon's vice president] Agnew still roaming around," she laughs. "They haven't really been relevant even here for 50 years, so there's something great and timeless about that."

As an aside, she mentions that the actual Nixon Presidential Library contacted them years ago to enquire about acquiring *Futurama's* Nixon designs and models for

their collection. "First of all, I was impressed," she jokes. "It's not the most flattering depiction ever. I mean, it's not terrible. But inherently you have to have a sense of humour about the situation. So that was pretty cool but unexpected that they would ask for that."

Katz also reveals that the new seasons will resume the three-parter storylines that allow them to do mini-arcs. "We have one per season, and they're really a fun way to spin our characters and take on different universes," she says. "I think those are both really, really fun."

Asked if the series will differ in look, Katz says they had some conversations about ageing the characters, but decided against it. "We want to produce *Futurama* in a way where it looks great, or better than the last time you saw it, but we don't want it to feel in any way

"I think everybody is really hopeful and optimistic that we'll get to do more"

unfamiliar," she says. "We're producing this batch in 4K, which is a little different. But really, the challenges are episode-based. There's much bigger, more ambitious episodes in these new batches. There's not a lot of everybody sitting around the conference room table. I'm hoping fans will be really, really pleased with that."

Now they just have to wait for the audience to find them again. "Some are not aware the show is coming back, and when we say that we're doing new episodes, they're like, 'What? Oh my god! That's awesome.' We'll see what happens and if we can break Hulu in the best possible way." ●

Futurama is on Hulu in the US and Disney+ in the UK, from 24 July.



Nice to see the *Star Trek* canyons still existing.

MATT GROENING
TM & © 2023 20th Television

SAY I'M YOUR NUMBER ONE

REBECCA ROMIJN IS,
LIKE HER CHARACTER IN
*STAR TREK: STRANGE
NEW WORLDS*
LIVING HER BEST LIFE

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**





"THAT'S ME!" REBECCA ROMIJN says excitedly when she sees herself on the cover of *SFX* magazine. "I'm in *Star Trek*," she beams and greets us with a Vulcan salute.

"I got in trouble because I was doing it this way," she whispers, pulling her thumb to her hand. "Ethan said, 'That's not how you do it!' He told me you have to separate the thumb, which I wasn't aware of. He *shamed* me. He *LLAP*-shamed me. And then it started making me nervous every time I did it. I was like, 'Am I doing it right?'"

Romijn is in London to celebrate the launch of *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds* season two and is in high spirits. Make no mistake, she loves being part of *Star Trek*. Which is great, because we love talking about *Star Trek*...

How do you feel that season two ups the ante from season one?

I think we gained a lot of trust from the network to give us freedom to take some chances. We had a great first season, it was fantastic and we were thrilled with how the show was received. I think the network let us start doing bigger and better things. So there's a lot of collaboration when it comes to genre.

We're a little all over the place this season. After [episode] six there are a few others that are just like, pretty major genre-wise, pretty epic. Now the producers and the writers, it's kind of an open door policy where they're like, "If you've got ideas, we're open", because we're having a blast coming up with ideas. So I've pitched a few ideas.

Akiva Goldsman always says, "*Star Trek* can be a lot of things". We get to use all these different genres to figure out how to get there and solve the mission of the week. So we're having even more fun this season than we did the first season. We weren't sure how the first season was. The first season was interesting, because we did it during the lockdown. We all had to socially distance from each other as a cast. So we weren't seeing each other on the weekends, we were 10 feet away from each other whenever we were on set.

The producers weren't coming to visit us on set, the writers weren't allowed to come to visit us on set, it was really just us and the crew, sort of hoping that it was going to work out. We weren't sure what we were making. And somehow we still managed to gel as a cast. So here we are, and it's somehow worked out, it came together.

Would you ever be tempted to write an episode?

No, but I've pitched a few things which have come to fruition. Everybody involved with this show is a Trekkie, from the cast to behind the camera to wardrobe department, hair and make-up department, set design. Everyone just



All crew to the bridge! Well, the important crew, anyway.



Rebecca Romijn gets applause just for standing.

pours their heart and soul into it, because we all genuinely love the franchise and our show that we're working on. So it ends up being a real labour of love for all of us. So no, I don't think I would want to write one per se. I think our writers are so talented, I would never dare try and fill those shoes. But I love coming up with ideas and throwing them their way and seeing what they say.

How does Carol Kane change the dynamic of the ensemble?

She's unlike any other *Star Trek* character you've ever seen. She's so funny. I was very starstruck when I first met her. I've been a fan of hers for so long. And she's lovely. She has this really interesting way about her.

I mean, she's had this crazy impressive career that spans over five decades, but she does this thing when she comes on to set [laughs] where she almost acts like she doesn't understand what's going on. Like she's never been there before, but it sort of gives her this very kind of fresh naiveté. This innocence in her performance that is so her and so funny. I adore her. I just adore her. I have such a soft spot for Carol Kane. I'm so happy that she's a part of our world.

Can you talk a little bit about the journey of Una this season?

The end of season one ended on this cliffhanger with Una getting carted off to prison for coming out as Illyrian and wanting to live



authentically. In episode two, we see the courtroom drama to see how it plays out and how Una gets back onto the Enterprise. She's been obviously shouldered with this burden of this secret and she's ashamed of that for putting Captain Pike at risk for giving her asylum and covering for her.

She's not ashamed of being an Illyrian. But she's ashamed of lying and having lied to Starfleet because no one loves Starfleet more than Una. So I'm hoping that after season two she's released from this burden and she's freed up.

Do you feel more ownership of the character now?

Oh yeah. It's interesting taking on a role originated by Majel Barrett Roddenberry, and not having that much to go on. She'd only had, I think, 13 minutes of screen time. So we just knew she was a stickler for protocol, a real taskmaster. But other than that, obviously, as an actor, we have to take liberties and the writers take liberties.

I imagine that Ethan Peck feels a lot more pressure than I felt – I know that for sure – to get that right. Obviously, following Leonard Nimoy and the other Spocks is a lot more pressure on him than I had.

What's been your best geek-out moment on set?

There are two. The first one was my first fitting in my gold uniform – brought tears to my eyes. I have had pinch-me moments over and over and over again in this experience. The first time when we were on season two of *Discovery* and we walked onto the set of the bridge of the Enterprise the first time. That was unbelievable. That was a real out of body experience, walking onto that set.

Anson and Ethan were there too and we were all looking at each other going, "What is happening? Is this a set that they just built for this one episode, and they're just gonna strike it at the end of the week? Is there a possibility this could continue? Could we possibly be on the Enterprise in the future?" So that was a big moment. Every time I walk into the bridge set it's a big moment.

What was it like working with the *Lower Decks* cast? Did you get to play things more comedically?

Yes. Especially because Jonathan Frakes is there. It was imperative having him there to figure out how to meld the two tones of our show. It's sometimes very intimidating to guest star on somebody else's show.

Obviously, Jack Quaid and Tawny Newsom are incredible comedians, they've got this huge background in improv. They're on the animated show, which is a totally different tone than the *Strange New Worlds* tone. Having



Romijn with
Yetide Badaki
as Neera
(seated).



Perfect the
Una stance by
studying this
image.

“As far as how long I would like this to continue, I am living a dream right now”



You should
have heard
the punchline.
Filthy.



Una and La'an
(Christina
Chong) mess
around.

Jonathan there to figure out how to meld those tones was really important. He's also so encouraging with everyone and so generous as an actor's director, telling people to try different things. It's like a sandbox where he really encourages everyone to play.

Tawny and Jack took our material and just took it off the page and did something totally different. They never did the same take twice. They were so funny to watch. They always brought something different to every single take. It was great having them on set. It's a fun episode.

What was your animation process like?

I don't think I'm allowed to talk about that! It was so funny. Anson thought, when they first mentioned it to us, that it was gonna be like a *Roger Rabbit* episode where we were going to be interacting with cartoons. We didn't get it at first!

What else would you like to see *Strange New Worlds* crossover with in the *Star Trek* universe?

I guess a time travel crossover with the original series. But like further down the timeline? I don't know, I'm stuck on our *Lower Decks* crossover. I'm particularly attached to it because I know those actors – my husband's [Jerry O'Connell] on the show. So to me that was the fantasy we got to do.

Who's the biggest *Star Trek* nerd at home?

Me. Well, Jerry and I are very competitive. [Laughs] We really are. Like, we bet on everything. We play a lot of badminton. I always win. I beat him in badminton all the time, but he still plays. We now get competitive about who's the bigger Trekkie in our household. Everything's a competition.

Season three is confirmed – where would you like it to take Una?

I would really like to do an origin story on Pike and Una and figure out where their relationship started, which Anson and I think started at the Starfleet Academy. We think we go all the way back there. So I would love to do that episode. They're going to have to either hire a younger actress or make me younger!

But yeah, I think we would both really like to know what that story is. As far as how long I would like this to continue, I am living a dream right now. Everything so far since I've been a part of this show has been just pinch-me moments left and right. And it just keeps being a very, very dreamy show to be a part of.

So I would like to continue for a long time. I'd like to stay with it. It's a fantastic franchise to be a part of it. It's a real honour. 🌟

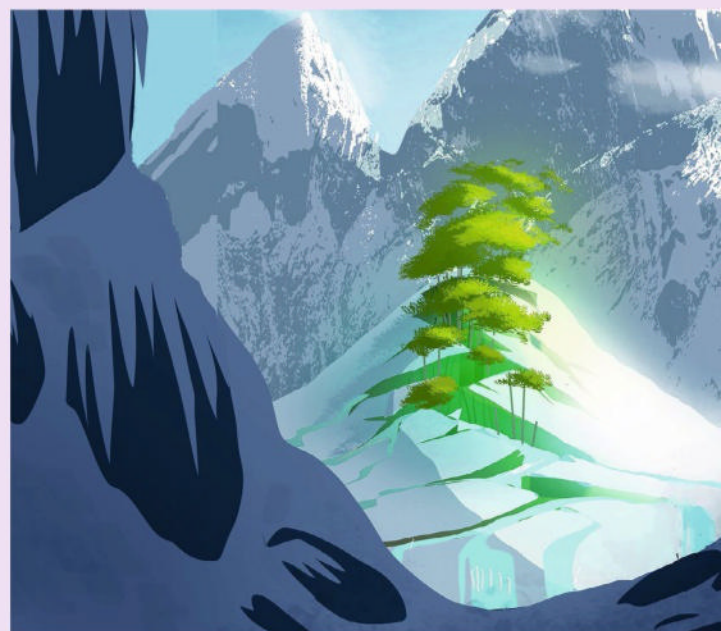
Star Trek: Strange New Worlds is on Paramount+.

DESIGNING GREMLINS: SECRETS OF THE MOGWAI

SUPERVISING PRODUCER DAN KRALL AND ART
DIRECTOR TARA RUEPING SHARE THEIR SECRETS
OF THE MOGWAI AS THEY BRING THE WORLD OF
GREMLINS BACK TO LIFE **WORDS: DARREN SCOTT**



▲ **DAN:** This is the statue of Fuxi who, originally, was going to be the brother of the Creator twins who was involved in the Mogwai mythology. We ended up later on swapping it out for his sister Nüwa. There's a statue that resides in the heart of Jade Valley where he holds this magic carving knife that is all the power.





JADE VALLEY: HOME OF THE MOGWAI

DAN: We knew the very bare bones of the story were that Mr Wing was 10 years old in Shanghai in 1920. He meets Gizmo and takes him across China to his ancestral home, which is in the Himalayas. So it's going to be sort of a *Journey To The West* story. We knew that we started in Shanghai and ended up in the Himalayas. So just trying to find what an ancestral home for a Mogwai seems like and make a visual contrast. They follow the river, the Yangtze River, from the foothills of the Himalayas to Shanghai. So this is supposed to be the source of those waters.

TARA: The actual final [show] image, we decided to elevate it. It's almost like an egg shape that rises above. We wanted to keep that kind of marker where it's a little bit more tropical and warm and almost like a nest, so the idea was building off what Dan did here, and continuing that further.

We knew that Mogwai, of course, don't like bright light. So in the final image, we also graded elements inside the Jade valley that had bioluminescence, so there was a little bit of glowing and stuff. So they weren't necessarily in a cave, but it was like a paradise.

We made rock peaks where - very abstractly, we didn't want to be too on the nose - if you look at it from a particular angle, it kind of makes a Mogwai paw.

DAN: One of the things that Amblin wanted out of the series was to expand on the mythology. So one of the things that was added was that the Mogwai are these prehistoric, ancient, actually immortal creatures that have been around since the dawn of time, and they've almost destroyed the world a couple of times through people not obeying the rules. The Chinese mythology creator gods Nüwa and Fuxi are a brother and sister team. Nüwa, the female one, created a safe space for them deep in the mountains so nobody could ever find them and risk destroying the world again - that was the story underneath why there's a Jade Valley.

TARA: For the interior spaces of Jade Valley we went with a little less palm tree, but we definitely kept it very lush with lots of plant life and we started putting some bioluminescent plant life that are like these buds that kind of glow throughout the Jade Valley. Again, to make it not seem like dark space - we wanted to make it a warm and inviting magical paradise for Mogwai.





SHANGHAI

DAN: There was a massive, massive amount of research that went into Shanghai. Nobody would ever believe the amount of research that everybody on the crew did. We had hundreds of antique photos from that time period that everybody studied meticulously. We hired a calligrapher to do the signage. We learned in the research that in that period in China, Mandarin was written in the traditional characters instead of the simplified characters and also were written right to left instead of left to right, because that was a change that came later. So we hired a calligrapher to do a bunch of the signage that we then pasted all over the city, as well as having multiple people in the crew who were able to write in Mandarin, and would also add signage and details.

TARA: I wouldn't say it's one to one to what Shanghai is - it is the *Gremlins* version of Shanghai, because we pushed a little bit more of what you'd find in the old district of China. We had a lot of really older, traditional structures. There was a movement to push a lot of that in Shanghai. Even though we were doing the *Gremlins* version of Shanghai, we wanted to make it really have that element of authenticity to it.

DAN: We were always extremely time- and cost-conscious and we could really only make one set of downtown Shanghai. So there was a lot of trying to squeeze every possible detail we could into this one set that would work from a lot of different angles. I think everybody would have loved to have every shot, every camera angle, to get in and add all these crazy details that everybody had picked up and knew about, but it just wasn't possible. So we did the very best we could on the schedule that we had.



LIGHTING CONCEPTS

TARA: Doing the show was different from any show that I've ever been on, because we did 3D environments, but we also did 2D backgrounds. Being a TV production, we really had to orchestrate and figure out the full picture, because with shows that are just CG, you can push lighting down to the end of the pipeline of creating a show. But because we're also doing digital 2D paintings that we used for environment backgrounds, we had to figure out lighting way in advance to orchestrate the whole thing. We had to have the artists painting a lot of the 2D backgrounds while sets were even being made.

DAN: These were incredibly important to make the show work in tone. We knew from the first day that lighting was going to be very important to keep it feeling very cinematic and kind of moody. With the raw footage where nothing's lit, they really have to have extremely specific information on what direction, how strong, what colour, especially with the exaggerated lighting style we went with. So these were absolutely crucial in getting the lighting right.



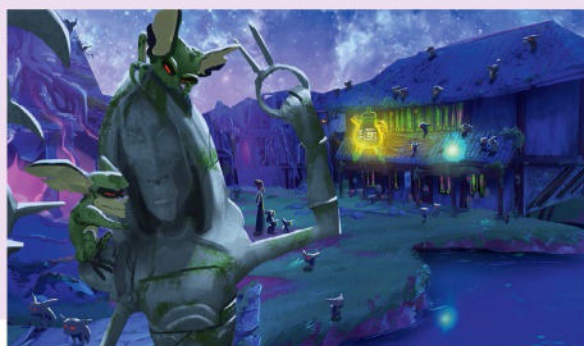




SPIRIT MARKET

TARA: We knew that this was going to be a real magical moment for the show, of wanting it to feel really colourful. It's almost like a crescendo for one of the environments, so we really wanted to make a sense of awe for the space. The idea was to really push colour. We wanted to have the spirit creatures feel really unique, something that we haven't seen before. But we also wanted to have a lot of elements of spotty, indirect lighting, like there's glowing bits inside the buildings and stuff like that. We wanted the sky itself to feel bright and colourful, like it's a celestial sphere of bright colours spinning around. We also wanted to make the spirit creatures somewhat transparent.

DAN: The idea of the Spirit Market is that it's kind of like the underworld and crammed full of all types of weird, magical creatures, like a crowded city. But we were only able to do a small handful. So we made a mix and match of a couple of different types that you could scale up, scale down, swap heads around, change colours, to try to make it feel like there were more assets than there actually were.



DAN: This is a super-rough concept I did for Claw, who was the evil leader Gremlin of this series. I had an idea where she's kind of all about asymmetry; one eye is squinty and she was supposed to have a limp and drag her claws. I think a lot of that stuff didn't actually end up happening, but her general design came through. I really liked the way she came out.



DAN: These are concepts I did for Gremlins when they get fed after midnight. There were physical descriptions of them in the script, so I just did a quick rough of what they might look like. The finals ended up changing a lot from these and being really, really great.



DAN: This is a weird offspring of Gizmo when he gets wet. The copies that are made are a little off.



DAN: This is from the pitch deck, but when the god that was involved in the story was still the brother Fuxi, before we switched to Nüwa. This is at the end of the series after everything's all wrapped up, and Fuxi is escorting all the Gremlins back to the valley, and Grandpa is hitching a ride because he's always wanted to see the Valley of Jade.





DAN: This is a concept piece from the pitch deck that didn't exactly end up happening. Green does get overwhelmed by the Gremlins at the end, but it isn't quite on the scale of this, in a different location.

GREMLIN MATRIARCH

DAN: That's a funny one that I did early on before the story was written. There was an idea that in the Jade Valley there would be a matriarch Gremlin that was kind of the big boss. But that fell by the wayside.

DAN: These are some rough concepts I did pretty much as soon as I started on the project, just to get used to drawing Gizmo.

DAN: These are some poses – somebody else did have the Claw character, we would send these as part of the character design packet.



Dan Krall



DAN: These are some expressions I did over Tara's painting of the Gizmo model. I did the facial expressions really as inspiration for the animation director and overseas. Just to see how much and where you can kind of push the expressions.

TARA: For each of the main important characters we'd do expressions. We provided that to the animators, so they knew how to do particular shapes of the mouth, and what we were hoping to get from the character once it was brought into animation.

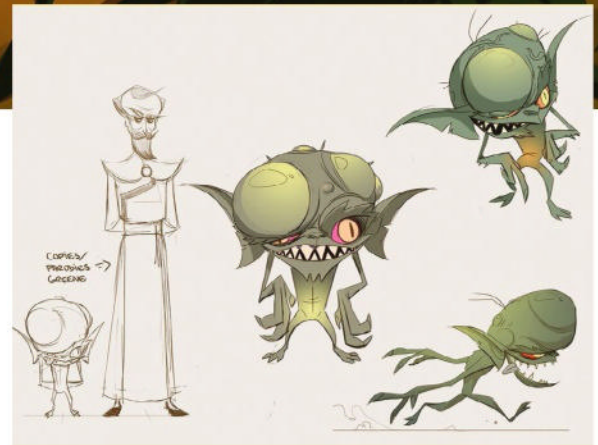




NOGGIN CONCEPTS ▶

TARA: These are early-on concept art. We first started out with rough drawings like this to get the inspiration of how the characters were written. We really leaned into what was written, we embraced those names, so that's why Noggin has a huge noggin, Claw has massive claws... I think embracing that's very true to the *Gremlins* IP, with the character Stripe in the original film.

Once we have the rough drawing, people can go in this direction and it gets more refined. So Noggin from the actual show is a little different from this early sketch. But once we nailed down the character design, what we did for particular characters that are important is we had an assets team on the project internally. They would actually build a model of that character and make it into 3D.



◀ **TARA:** Gizmo being Gizmo, we wanted to make sure that we were true to his design, how he was in the films. So we looked at a lot of photographs and how he was portrayed in the films with the mouth shape, the pattern of his fur, the shape of his ear. Of course it's a stylised version of Gizmo, but we wanted to make sure that we were very true to Gizmo's design.

This was to show some of the movements that we're expecting from Gizmo, how we want the ears to go down and bend, that kind of thing. We did that for every particular character. We not only did full turns of every character, texture breakdown, but we did expressions and poses. If there was an *Art Of Gremlins* book, it would be a pretty thick book! ●

Gremlins: Secrets Of The Mogwai is on Max. UK details are TBC.

MOTHER NATURE

HOLLYWOOD ROYALTY
JAMIE LEE CURTIS IS
BREAKING NEW
BOUNDARIES WITH
HORROR GRAPHIC NOVEL
MOTHER NATURE

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**



FRICK



FRICK

CONGRATULATIONS ARE IN ORDER. When *SFX* sits down to chat with bona fide legend Jamie Lee Curtis it's only been days since she won her – long-overdue – Academy Award.

Everything Everywhere All At Once scooped a whopping seven wins, including Best Picture. Even better, Curtis picked up her Oscar for a role in a sci-fi film. “A sci-fi drama

really,” she considers, “but a sci-fi film with a dildo fight, a butt plug martial arts fight and deep emotion. I’m thrilled that something as diverse as the movie was recognised in such a beautiful way.”

When she puts it like that, it must’ve been interesting when she first read the script... “I didn’t really understand it,” she admits. “But I also understood that it wasn’t my job to understand the script. My job is to understand who the character is that they’re asking me to play. I did understand her very well. And in understanding her then I was able to interpret her, and what was going on in the movie itself is sort of none of my business, to be honest.”

She says the outpouring of love online that followed her win made her happy, but adds, “I’m just not following it because it’s honestly just too much. It’s just been... it’s overwhelming.”

NOVEL APPROACH

As much as we’d love to chat sex toys in sci-fi with Curtis, she has another project to, er, plug that also ticks all our boxes – an eco-horror tale called *Mother Nature*, which marks her graphic novel debut.

“Of course, I was aware of graphic novels,” she says. “*Maus* was probably the first and only graphic novel that I read like a graphic novel. That’s not a form that is my jam. I am a John Steinbeck reader. I’m a reader of historical fiction. I love a big fat fucking novel. I love them. And I love good non-fiction. So I’m not drawn to graphic novels. But Karl Stevens sent me his graphic novel *Penny*, which is extraordinary...”

But we’re jumping ahead of ourselves here – an entire career to date and embracing of an artform yet to come. Curtis explains that she now also has an appreciation for anime. “I didn’t really understand all of the pointy hair and very exaggerated stuff until my daughter introduced me to shows like *One Piece* and *Black Butler*, which are dark and beautiful. I mean, *One Piece* isn’t so dark. But *Black Butler* is out there a little. And I really enjoyed those.”

She says she grew up on *Archie* comic books from the drugstore and was never really a fan of the likes of Batman or Spider-Man. So why comics and why now? It turns out this seed has been growing longer than you think.



A hint of *Mother Nature* before things turn to hell.

Curtis says she had the idea for *Mother Nature* as a screenplay in her late teens, mentioning it over the years with it never taking form. It was working with director David Gordon Green on 2018’s *Halloween* that gave her the idea to resurrect it, with a little gentle persuasion from her husband that she could, indeed, write one herself.

“I took index cards and, like movie people do, I put them all over my office, scene by scene. I kind of connected the dots between the character and the manner in which they were going to die,” she laughs, “and by the end of it, I had a very clear idea of what the story was. I dictated it into my iPhone like an essay. When I printed it, it was 38 pages and I didn’t know what to do with it. I’ve not written the screenplay. I know there’s something called Final Draft...”

Curtis is someone you wish there were infinite magazine pages for; as with her debut graphic novel, she’s a consummate storyteller in real life, with everything thought through and linking together. In short, she’s hard to edit. Step up a friend, asking Curtis to keep her son in mind should anyone have a need for a graduate from Wesleyan Film School: Russell Goldman. “Russell ended up becoming my scribe, because I’m a shitty typer.”

This original screenplay was “very vast and expensive”, she recalls. New versions followed, which she says took it into “the sci-fi aspect of it. And I’m not a big sci-fi fan.” [We’re skating

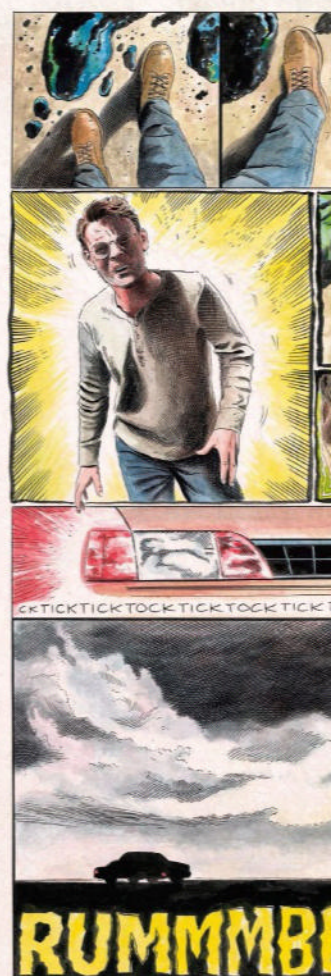
“It had to be as gruesome, as visceral, as viscous, as bloody, as grisly as possible”

on thin ice here, but she’s a living legend and we love her]. Work and travel took over for Curtis, and Goldman later asked if he could take another swing at the script.

“All of a sudden, it was about two mothers and two daughters and the name of the movie, *Mother Nature*, made complete sense. Because it now was about a lot more than just the sci-fi/eco aspect, it also now had this deep emotional resonance of mothering.

“So all of a sudden, the new *Mother Nature* had a whole new perspective. That is what Russell Goldman did and I give him 100% of credit for that adjustment. In that moment, the script became both of ours. It was no longer written by me. It was now written by me and Russell, because that’s what he brought to it. Inherently the same story, but now with a complete new lens.”

As a collector of original cartoon art from *The New Yorker* – with a 38-year tradition of gifting them to her husband on their anniversary – Curtis contacted artist Karl Stevens to purchase a piece of his work. Communication followed where, eventually, Stevens asked what Curtis was working on and





"If you had read my original draft, it was *brutal*. In fact, Russell tried to cut some brutality," she notes. So why is it there? Simple. "Because the universe doesn't give a fuck. The universe is just going to be harsh to set the

Those hoping for this to be intensified on the big screen eventually needn't worry. "Oh, absolutely," she replies when asked if this will play a larger part in real life. "Oh, it will be brutal. There will be blood. It will be grotesque. Because it must be in order to make your point."

Next up is the “super fun” Haunted Mansion movie. Not liking frights, has she been on the original ride? “A billion times. Are you kidding? I’m a real old-school Disneyland aficionado.”

Just as well, considering how much more Curtis has yet to conquer – from battling the bogeyman to the elements, this mother is a force of nature to contend with. ●

A comic book illustration of a man with glasses and a wide-eyed, screaming expression, with red motion lines radiating from his head.

THE LOST ADDAMS FAMILY!

IT'S TV'S FIRST FAMILY OF GHOULS AS YOU'VE NEVER SEEN THEM BEFORE, IN A '70S VARIETY SHOW CAR CRASH UNSEEN FOR ALMOST 50 YEARS. SFX ENTERS **THE ADDAMS FAMILY FUN HOUSE**

WORDS: **STUART MANNING**

THE '70S WAS THE DECADE OF THE musical variety show in the US, with everyone from Johnny Cash to the Brady Bunch filling the airwaves with light entertainment sketches and a sprinkling of camp comedy. But before the Brady Bunch returned, another offbeat family tried – and failed – to make a variety show comeback.

The Addams Family had only lasted two years as a '60s sitcom, but became a TV mainstay in syndicated repeats, giving the ghoulish characters a healthy afterlife. In 1972, Hanna-Barbera animated the Addams characters with the voice talents of most of the original cast for a CBS Scooby-Doo crossover

special. Scooby may have put the Addams Family in CBS' sights, as the following year the network's distribution arm Viacom spearheaded a variety pilot titled *The Addams Family Fun House*. The revived show was aimed at the US syndication market – made up of hundreds of independent local stations – rather than traditional network TV.

HISTORY REPEATING

The origins of the project are lost to time – it doesn't even warrant a footnote in creator Charles Addams's official biography – but all roads to the Fun House seem to lead to Pat McCormick. Standing at 6' 7" with a round face

and walrus moustache, McCormick was an imposing stand-up and writer-performer whose no-holds-barred antics made him a legend among the LA comedy fraternity (Google "Pat McCormick helicopter story" for a typical NSFW example). While writing for Johnny Carson's *The Tonight Show*, he acquired infamy for dressing up as a giant napped baby and, during one taping, streaking naked across the studio floor; a tasteful black bar was added for broadcast.

McCormick's 1968 comedy album *Pat McCormick Tells It Like It Is* teamed him with Canadian writer/producer John Aylesworth and Frank Peppiatt, along with



The cast of
*The Addams
Family Fun
House.*

actor-writer Jack Riley, later to become a regular on *The Bob Newhart Show*. All three were key contributors to *Fun House*. Peppiatt and Aylesworth's forte was variety shows. During the '60s, they had scored a major success creating the corny country music sketch show *Hee Haw* and written for the ill-fated *The Judy Garland Show*. Working with McCormick, they cooked up an *Addams Family* script and set about casting the characters.

McCormick would play the towering butler Lurch, with Riley stepping into Addams paterfamilias Gomez's shoes. *Guys And Dolls* actor Stubby Kaye (known best to SF viewers for later appearing with Sylvester McCoy on *Doctor Who*) was cast as a jolly Uncle Fester.

McCormick found his goth leading lady Morticia while working on *The Tonight Show*, in 25-year-old singer and comedian Liz Torres – placing a Latin American actor in an Addams role decades before Jenna Ortega's *Wednesday*. Torres is now best known for playing brassy senior Miss Patty in *Gilmore Girls*.

Asked today what she remembers about Pat McCormick, Liz Torres is succinct: "He was a great fuck." Suffice to say, she didn't have to audition. "He was the head writer when I went on *The Tonight Show*, and he had a crush on me," Torres explains. "He turned up on my doorstep the next morning. And I adored Jack Riley. We used to run into each other on the cabaret circuit when I used to play the piano."

The Addams kids Wednesday and Pugsley, now teenagers, were played by Noelle North (then acting as Noelle Von Sonn, and later a voice artist on *The Smurfs* and *Adventures Of The Gummi Bears*) and Butch Patrick, who had been little Eddie in *The Munsters* and become a minor teen pin-up in the years since.

"I remember we did it at the CBS Studio Centre, which was where I shot my screen test for *The Munsters*," says Patrick. "So that was kind of ironic. The Addams thing was a bit hokey, but it was work. Back in those days, everybody wanted to stay busy."

SONG AND DANCE

Viacom funded the *Fun House* project using an unusual business model, with the pilot's \$100,000 budget underwritten by a loose coalition of 42 local TV stations, all chipping in. Unlike typical syndicated shows, the investors would own a stake in the finished programme and receive a cut of any profits.

Crunched down from a planned hour-long episode, the 30-minute pilot for *The Addams Family Fun House* was videotaped in Los Angeles in early 1973. Unusually for a variety show, the cast worked without an audience, relying on canned laughter and applause dubbed in afterwards. "The set was a very scaled-down version of the Addams look," recalls Butch Patrick. "The one thing I remember about the show was it was all about

budget – a very limited budget. It was much more like a regular living room, which they added a few props to."

The one surviving photo of the full cast shows that some liberties were taken with the characters. Grandmama and the disembodied hand Thing didn't make an appearance, and the character designs were only loosely retained. McCormick kept his moustache, Liz Torres's Morticia had a feathered fringe, and Stubby Kaye, though balding, didn't shave his head and played Fester wearing a dapper suit and trilby. Butch Patrick's Pugsley had on-trend flowing hair and a leather waistcoat, looking more Manson Family than Addams Family.

"It was very hippie-ish... an abstract take on the whole *Addams Family* thing," Patrick says, diplomatically. "Liz was the best fit of the whole group though Jack Riley was not bad. He did a lot of facial expressions and was funny. As Gomez and Morticia, they were the two most fitting actors to their counterpart characters. Everybody else was pretty much a square peg in a round hole."

Although Liz Torres enjoyed playing the vampy Addams matriarch, she also questioned the casting: "I knew I could never look like [original TV Morticia] Carolyn Jones. She was so beautiful and I was just a little Puerto Rican girl from Hell's Kitchen in New York. I didn't think I was pretty. I said, 'Are you kidding me? I'm brown! I'm of the brown persuasion!'"

She placed her faith in the make-up artist to transform her. "He was a lovely gay man," she remembers. "We all had to go to his house in the valley at four o'clock in the morning to get made up and he'd only just got in – he'd been out partying all night. He was trying to put make-up on my eyes and his hands were shaking."

The show's format combined quick-fire sketches and musical numbers, complete with *Monkees*-style swish pans. According to one press release, the family "scream, dance and crash through walls to entertain." Aside from the obligatory musical sequences, the other main attraction was "Special Guest Star" Jim Nabors, a folksy comic actor who had starred



Pat McCormick (right) on *The Tonight Show* in 1975.



Guest star Jim Nabors with Liz Torres as Morticia.

in the military sitcom *Gomer Pyle, U.S.C.* "Jim Nabors was the only real bona fide singer in the group," says Butch Patrick. "He could actually sing. The funny thing was, around that time I had a Metromedia recording contract, even though I couldn't sing at all. That fact didn't seem to bother them." Nabors's visit road-tested what would have been the series' other regular strand, where a different celebrity dropped by to visit the Addamses each week.

Musical director Bob Alberti handled the score. "The synthesiser craze was just beginning to enter the music scene and the producers wanted some 'eerie' sounds within the music cues," he remembers. "I used a reverb module in a continuing decrescendo [decreasing volume] to create some effects. My experience with electronic music was pretty limited at the time – and still is."

ITT LIVES

One link to the original sitcom was actor Felix Silla, who had played the diminutive Cousin Itt under mounds of synthetic hair. In the *Fun House*, he swapped locks for leaves, pressed into service to play a pet houseplant that escapes and runs amok. For this segment, the cast briefly ventured outside the studio to film on location at the nearby Echo Park. "I remember us doing a chase and me running and bumping into a tree and doing a roll



Butch Patrick
as Eddie
Munster in
The Munsters.

"The Addams Family Fun House"

8:00 PM

Charles Addams' frightfully funny cartoon characters cavort in a comedy/variety special that offers an inside look at life in a haunted house.

Jim Nabors is the Addams' guest.



backwards," says Butch Patrick. "It was a *Keystone Cops* kinda thing. Very silent comedy, very predictable."

The special effects were perfunctory, with bluescreen chromakey used to key in surreal stock footage behind doors. The closing number saw the Addams Family literally bring the house down while performing The Doors' hit "Light My Fire". "We were just sort of circling around the front foyer as the set was so small," Patrick recalls. "We sang together, but it was more of a group crowd noise. It wasn't true singing. Things were being thrown at us and smoke was going off. It was a very low-budget effect."

The pilot now completed, local station investors gathered for a screening and were asked to "vote on whether they felt it was a good enough series for their stations and others", wrote showbiz reporters Buck Biggers and Chet Stover in their *Television Tinderbox* column at the time. "Viacom won't release the voting results, but suffice to say that this is the last anyone ever heard of the project."

"The one thing I remember about the show was it was all about a very limited budget"

With no series to come, the local TV stations burned off their investment by showing the pilot as a one-off special later that year. The few newspaper reviews weren't kind. One critic described the show as a "crop-bound parakeet that flew into your TV screen". Another cut to the chase: "It couldn't have been worse if they'd done it in blackface."

FINAL RESTING PLACE

Butch Patrick remembers watching the finished show: "It was a weird format, almost vaudevillian," he says incredulously. "As an actor, sometimes you do good stuff... and sometimes you do stuff that's not so good. I mean, it was *bad*, but I got a kick out of it. I was Eddie Munster and I also got to be Pugsley Addams for a few days."

The final verified broadcast of *The Addams Family Fun House* was a repeat screening in Canada for Halloween 1974. Five decades later, the pilot has never surfaced, with only a couple of grainy newspaper press photos as physical evidence that it ever existed. It's the only piece of Addams Family media never to be re-released and that seems unlikely to change.

For now, *The Addams Family Fun House* remains closed. As revivals go, viewed today it would probably be crappy rather than creepy but it seems destined to stay locked away in the vaults with its mysteries intact. Or should that be interred? ●

The original
TV Addams
Family in
1965.



IN THE FLESH

LIFE IN A NO

TO MARK THE TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF **IN THE FLESH**, WE LOOK BACK AT THE KITCHEN-SINK ZOMBIE

IN THE FLESH

R T H E R N T O W N

SHOW WITH CREATOR DOMINIC MITCHELL – AND PREVIEW A NEW “FANTASY SERIES THREE” SCRIPT

WORDS: IAN BERRIMAN

A DECADE SINCE ZOMBIE SHOW *IN THE Flesh* debuted on BBC Three, the series still stands out as a uniquely sensitive take on the undead – one whose themes have arguably become even more topical in this post-Covid era of proliferating conspiracy theories. The story behind it is equally remarkable: a TV fairy tale of a rookie striking gold and winning critical acclaim and prestigious awards, only for his creation to be cut down in its prime.

Set in the fictional small Lancashire town of Roarton, the series takes a kitchen sink approach to the aftermath of a zombie outbreak. It's centred on Kieren Walker (Luke Newberry), a young man whose return home is greeted with suspicion and hostility – with good reason, because four years ago he was one of those who emerged from their graves on the night of The Rising, to feast upon the brains of the living.

Now, thanks to Neurotriptyline, a drug which prevents them going “rabid”, Kieren is one of thousands of undead (euphemistically termed Partially Deceased Syndrome sufferers) who've regained their memories and are being reunited with their loved ones.

The show was the brainchild of Dominic Mitchell, a playwright whose love of horror was sparked by Stephen King's *Pet Sematary*, aged 12. “My friend gave me a copy to read,” he tells *SFX*. “I was never a big reader, because I suffer from dyslexia, but he said, ‘You've got to read this book. From the first page I was totally hooked. I read it in a weekend, then went rampaging through his back catalogue.’”

Mitchell also became a “massive fan” of George Romero's *Dead* movies, in part due to their social themes. “They really commented on society, and I think that's what the zombie genre is so great for – using the zombies as a metaphor.”

SCHEME TEAM

He was less impressed, however, by more mindless entries in the genre, like the “really bad, cheap zombie movie” he watched one night in 2007. “All the main characters were so macho and horrible that I was on the zombies' side,” he remembers. “I was like, ‘Yeah, kill them! Eat their brains! They deserve to die!’”

Gradually, an idea began to form. “The lead character shot this young zombie guy in the face, and I was like, ‘Surely you could shoot him in the leg and trap him? And surely remnants of the government would be underground looking for a cure, or a way to manage it?’”

Bubbling away in his brain at the same time was another piece, about a young man who had a psychotic episode, did something terrible in his community, and then, after treatment, returned home. “It felt a bit preachy, a bit on the nose, and I couldn't find a lot of story in it. So when I saw this zombie movie, I was like,



“I'm afraid it's bad news: you are definitely still dead.”

‘Maybe I can clash the two ideas together? Maybe he hasn't had a psychotic episode but has been a zombie, done these horrible things, then been treated.’ Then I was like, ‘What would the UK really do in that situation? Well, with funding for the NHS, they'd try and be quite cheap about it...’”

The fundamentals of the concept were now in place: a “care in the community” take on the undead. But what to do with it? Mitchell couldn't see it working as theatre, but had no TV industry contacts. Then he read about Northern Voices, a BBC Writersroom scheme offering 12 months' mentoring to successful applicants, plus a little money to sustain them while they devised an hour-long drama. Mitchell applied, got in, and spent the next year writing *In The Flesh's* pilot under the guidance of *Coronation Street* veteran John Fay (one of Russell T Davies's co-writers on *Torchwood: Children Of Earth*).

“I was like, ‘I'm going to put in everything I'm interested in: the horror genre, the sci-fi genre, but also Shane Meadows and stuff like that,’” Mitchell recalls. “My mantra was always, ‘What if Ken Loach and Alan Bennett made a



Kieren keeps an eye out for torch-wielding mobs...

zombie show?” The writer set his expectations appropriately low, thinking of the script as just a calling card. “In my dream scenario I thought I could maybe go on to write an episode of *Being Human*. I never thought it'd go into production.”

But Head of Drama Commissioning Ben Stephenson loved the pilot, and had him go away and produce a series bible. “I wrote a ton – about 70 pages – and worked with a really talented graphic designer [Ben Turner] to make it more visual. We made up these fake patient information leaflets, which explained the concept. I think that's what got us the green

BBC



The PDS treatment centre in Norfolk.



PDS sufferers don't eat, but Kieren plays along.

light. I got a phone call when I was catching a bus home. They said they wanted to do it, and I was like, 'Oh my god!' It was a total dream come true."

Mitchell is keen to give credit to the colleagues who shepherded him through the process. "The BBC surrounded me with really experienced, talented people." He also bigs-up his leading man. "I visited the set the first day they were shooting. It was a conversation between a doctor and Kieren in the treatment centre – the beginning scene – and I was taken aback by Luke's performance. 'Wow, he's saying my words better than I imagined them in my head!'"

In particular, he praises the rigour of series one director Jonny Campbell. "We'd have these big meetings about what the show should look like, what tone we're going for, and he was quite a taskmaster. I'd go into them going, 'Oh god, Jonny is going to have 100 questions on this

draft...' And he always did, but I'm glad he did, because he was just trying to understand me, and understand the world and the characters."

"I call it a mind meld", he says of the resulting mutual understanding. "He knew instinctively what I would want from the scene. It was great to have the same director for all of series one. We thought of it as just doing a long independent film."

As a little BBC Three show produced out of Salford, they were mostly left to their own devices. "It wasn't *Line Of Duty* or something, that was going to be on BBC One, so there weren't a lot of notes from the head honchos. We had a lot of freedom."

That said, there were some. "When I did episode two, I kind of freaked out and was like, 'This is my big opportunity, so I'm just going to put the kitchen sink into it,'" he recalls. "I was putting stuff about the ULA and Victus – all the stuff that came in the second series – into the second episode."

Stephenson advised him to take a step back: "Just concentrate on →



Kieren's sister Jem (Harriet Cains).

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The character list includes several in-jokes

Kieren's surname is Walker. Given that *The Walking Dead* was on its third season by the time *In The Flesh* aired, we have to ask: was that a cheeky nod to the undead in Robert Kirkman's show being referred to as "Walkers"?

"No, a complete coincidence!" laughs Mitchell. "I didn't know about *The Walking Dead* when I was writing *In The Flesh*. I knew that there was a comic book, but the TV show hadn't come out then. I called him Walker because my mother was adopted, and her real surname was Walker."

Many of the other names were deliberate references, however. "The director of *White Zombie*, which is the first zombie movie ever, was Victor Halperin," Mitchell explains, "and the writer was Garnett Weston. So [pharmaceutical company] Halperin & Weston is all tied into *White Zombie*."

"Also, the surnames in series one are named after villages or towns surrounding my little village," he adds. "I'm from a place called Yealand Redmayne, a little village just next to Lancaster. So there's Lisa Lancaster [the HVF girl Kieren killed], and [B&B owners] the Furnesses, after Barrow-in-Furness, and [HVF member] Gary Kendal – that's from the town of Kendal, which is about five miles from me."

"So if anyone wants to know where I'm at, they can kind of deduce where I am," Mitchell jokes. "I can imagine a superfan having all these red strings [on a chart], looking at the place names and going, 'Oh, *that's* where he lives!'"



GETTY

the Walker family – you can get to all that mythos stuff in the second series.’ That was a fantastic note. I went back and wrote an episode two much more focussed on Kieren and his family’s journey. And I remember Johnny coming up with the idea that there were still Rabids in the woods, which wasn’t in the pilot, and really helped us.

“Those kind of notes helped me really drill deep into what the show was about: this family that had had a dramatic event – Kieren’s death – and how they’re all handling it. As a British, Northern family, no one talks about those events – they don’t go to therapy, they talk about the weather! I come from that kind of background myself, where things are not said, but everything’s churning on the underside.”

Central among the issues being tiptoed around was the reason Kieren came to be in his coffin in the first place. Across series one, we slowly discover that he committed suicide, distraught at the death of his best friend Rick, killed while serving with the army in

BRING ME BAFTA

In The Flesh picked up two awards

A year after series one aired, Dominic Mitchell found himself accepting an award from *EastEnders*’ Patsy Palmer (below) at the BAFTAs for Television Craft, having beaten Chris Chibnall (*Broadchurch*), Sally Wainwright (*Last Tango In Halifax*) and Dennis Kelly (*Utopia*) for Writer – Drama. (“Everyone told me I’d never win, so I got this really cheap suit!”, he recently tweeted). Three weeks later he was back on-stage, as the series won Best Mini-Series. “It was really shocking,” Mitchell says, “because I’d thought this was just going to be an example script. I didn’t think this was going to be a BAFTA-winning show. If someone had told me that I’d have been like, ‘You’re out of your mind!’”

“I was in America when we got the nominations,” he remembers, “and I was jumping for joy. I went out and got a six-pack and just, like, danced around my hotel room. Then to win two BAFTAs from this very little show was just amazing.”



It turns out Kieren killed local girl Lisa while “rabid”.



Kieren still holds a torch for his friend Rick.



Fan favourite Amy (Emily Bevan) has a unique style.



Nurse Shirley (Sandra Huggett) offers advice.



Rick’s dad Bill (Steve Evets): not a fan of PDS sufferers.

Afghanistan – and with whom Kieren had fallen in love.

“I don’t really know why I decided to make him homosexual,” Mitchell says regarding Kieren’s sexuality, a subject tackled with a lightness of touch. “I think it just fitted the story and the character. I always say he’s kind of pansexual, though the relationships that he’s found himself in have always been gay relationships.

“At the time,” he continues, “if you were going to have a character who was gay in a TV show, that was their trope – they’re gay, that’s it. I was like, ‘Well, I’m heterosexual, but I don’t shout it from the rooftops every five seconds.’ So I wanted it to be just part of his personality. I think people from the LGBT community have really loved that about Kieren, that he’s not always pronouncing his queerness. It’s just a part of him, not the whole of him.”

Mitchell never felt unqualified to write about Kieren’s life, feeling a sense of kinship with Roarton’s black sheep. “As a teen, I was the black sheep of my village, just because I liked Nirvana, had long hair and used to wear cardigans – everyone thought I was a weirdo! I grew up in quite a narrow-minded Northern

“I come from that kind of background, where everything’s churning on the underside”

village. Kieren is like me, except I’m heterosexual. But I always thought that love is love – if you get heartbroken, that’s a universal thing. So I never worried, ‘I can’t write a gay character because I’m the heterosexual guy.’”

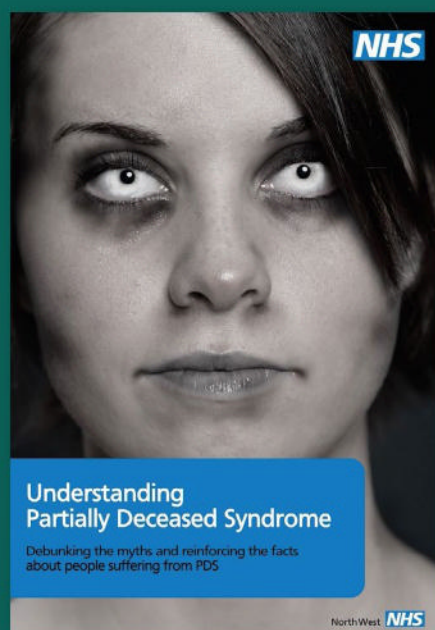
There was “quite a long process” while the BBC dithered over greenlighting a second series, during which time Mitchell nearly had to take up another offer. “I’d interviewed to be the second writer on [Channel 4 show] *Utopia* season two, and got the job,” he reveals, “so I actually phoned the BBC and said, ‘Look, I’m going to take this job unless you tell me I’ve got a second series.’”

“When they got pushed into a corner, that’s when they said yes. Then we had about six months to write six episodes. It was a crazy pre-production period, because it was really short.” Two other writers – Fintan Ryan (later to create Channel 4’s *The Aliens*) and *Being Human* veteran John Jackson – were enlisted to help.

In series one, Kieren’s vivacious PDSBFF Amy (Emily Bevan) heads off to join the mysterious “Undead Prophet” seen in online videos – an example of Mitchell “putting chess pieces in place”. In series two she returns, nine months later, with a new beau in tow (soon →

BIBLE STUDIES

These designs were included in Dominic Mitchell's series bible



An authentic-looking NHS leaflet.

Introduction

This leaflet is for anyone who has Partially Deceased Syndrome (PDS), their friends, relatives or any person who is interested in knowing more about PDS.

The information contained in this leaflet describes the syndrome, what the symptoms are, how it is treated, and debunks some of the myths associated with PDS.

What is PDS?

PDS stands for Partially Deceased Syndrome. A person with PDS has, at one time in their lives, died and come back to life.

They must have experienced the four stages of death (pallor mortis, livor mortis, algor mortis and rigor mortis) to be to be classed as having Partially Deceased Syndrome.

What Causes PDS?

What caused people to come back to life after they died is still open for debate. There are many theories why this phenomenon (commonly referred to as The Rising) happened, but none of these theories have been recognised as fact by the scientific community. All we know for sure is that five years ago all the people that died in 2015 were reanimated during the month of January 2016. They returned in a very aggressive primitive state (officially called an Untreated State) and took part in acts of

cannibalism to survive. That is, until they were treated with a chemical compound called Glutamine (known by the brand name Neurolox) which took away their need for human brain cells and restored the balance of neurotransmitters in their brains.

Who can get PDS?

The only people who suffer from PDS are the people that died during the year 2015. There have been no documented cases of a human being dying and coming back to life after the period known as The Rising (January 2016).

If you die now, you are dead, and you will not contract PDS. Likewise you cannot "catch" PDS like you would catch a common cold. Contrary to popular belief you cannot "burn into" a PDS sufferer if you are touched, get bitten by, or exchange bodily fluids with a Partially Deceased person.

How many people suffer from PDS in the UK?

812,541 people in the UK suffer from Partially Deceased Syndrome.

How is PDS Treated?

PDS sufferers are legally required to take a medication known as Neurolox. Neurolox takes away the need for glial cells. It also restores various neurotransmitters required for normal brain function.

More information on Neurolox can be found in the Patient Information Leaflet included.

After the PDS sufferer has come out of their acute Untreated State, the patient goes through various therapies at the NHS Treatment Centre in Norfolk. When they are better they are discharged into the care of their families, friends or a Community Care Officer.

They continue to be treated with their medication and must attend outpatient therapy sessions at their nearest hospital. They are also given Dermo Cover Up kits to disguise their pale appearance and 'hideways' contact lenses to make their eyes seem more like.

Can a PDS sufferer heal from wounds?

No. PDS sufferers' bodies are technically decomposed and the normal physiologic process of healing does not happen. PDS sufferers' bodies cannot manufacture new skin tissue. PDS sufferers must be careful not sustain wounds in the outside world.

Can PDS sufferers feel pain?

Because of the decomposition of pain receptors during death, PDS sufferers do not feel physical pain. It is similar to the condition known as congenital analgesia.

Do PDS sufferers experience emotions?

Yes. People with PDS experience the full range of emotions just like any other human being. In their Untreated State the parts of the brain that controlled emotion shut down. However the medication PDS sufferers take not only takes away the patients need for glial cells, it also restores the amygdala, which is the place in the brain that processes emotions and memories.

Can PDS sufferers die?

A PDS sufferer cannot die of natural causes. They are in a state of suspended animation. They do not age like other living organisms. The only way a PDS sufferer can permanently lose consciousness is by removing or destroying the area of the brain known as the cerebellum (see figure 1. below).



Figure 1.

Do Partially Deceased people have special powers?

No. There have been reports of Partially Deceased people being able to move objects with their mind (telekinesis) or reading other people's thoughts (telepathy), however these claims have not been backed up by concrete evidence.

PDS Sufferers in their Untreated State were stronger than average human beings. But that surge in strength is neutralised when a patient takes Neurolox.

What are Partially Deceased people like in their Untreated State?

When a PDS sufferer is not treated with Neurolox they digress into a condition known as their natural Untreated State. When Partially Deceased people are in this condition they are very dangerous and should not be approached. When they are in their Untreated State their brains are working in a very primitive fashion. They cannot be reasoned with and they function on a very basic level. Fortunately, all people suffering from PDS are required by law to be treated with Neurolox, which restores them to a normal state of being.

In the UK all PDS sufferers must take Neurolox.

We hope this leaflet has answered some of the questions you may have had regarding PDS. If you would like further information please contact these national organisations:

Department of Partially Deceased Affairs helpline: 0208 567 875
A.L.I.V.E. (After Life Initiative Voluntary Enquiries): 0161 615 777
N.P.F. (National Partially Deceased Fellowship): 0161 615 6666

© NorthWest Healthcare Foundation.



P017703

What you should know about Neurolox

The information in this leaflet applies only to Neurolox. Read all of this leaflet carefully before you or someone you know uses this medication. Keep this leaflet. You may need to read it again. This medication is for Partially Deceased patients only. Do not give it to anyone else as it may be harmful to them. Giving Neurolox to anyone not suffering from Partially Deceased Syndrome (PDS) can cause seizures, convulsions or death. If you have any further questions, please ask your doctor or PDS community care officer.

1. What is Neurolox and what is it for?

Neurolox is the brand name for a synthesized chemical compound called Glutamine Hydrochloride™. This compound helps restore damaged or decayed glial cells in the brain. Glial cells are vital for proper brain function. Patients with Partially Deceased Syndrome cannot manufacture glial cells by themselves and thus have an urgent need for these cells, which are found in non-partially deceased people. Before the synthesis of Glutamine Hydrochloride™ PDS sufferers were forced to acquire these cells naturally. Neurolox artificially mimics the neurogenesis of glial cells thus taking away the PDS sufferer's need to acquire them naturally. Neurolox has also been found to work on the pre frontal cortex area of the brain, restoring the balance of chemicals and inhibiting violent aggressive behaviour prone to PDS sufferers in their Untreated State.

2. How to administer Neurolox?

A trained professional in Partially Deceased Syndrome (A doctor, nurse or PDS Community Care Officer) should ideally be the one to administer Neurolox. If for some reason a professional is unavailable a parent or family member is advised to administer Neurolox.

3. How is Neurolox given?

Neurolox is given to the patient via injection. A small amount of Neurolox (please see section 4: Neurolox doses) is drawn into a jet injector and then injected into base of the skull or temporal lobe.

PDS sufferers legally must be administered Neurolox once weekly, either at an outpatient facility or at home under the supervision of a PDS community care officer.

4. Neurolox doses.

Depending on the amount of time the PDS sufferer was in an Untreated State will determine how much Neurolox is prescribed.

• Adults

The usual dose lies between 50mg to 300mg if the PDS sufferer was in an Untreated State for less than a year.

If the PDS sufferer was in an Untreated State for more than a year the dose is increased to 500mg.

• Elderly Patients

Because of natural degradation of the brain during living period, elderly patients suffering from Partially Deceased Syndrome may be given more of the medication. 500mg – 800mg depending on the time they spent in an Untreated State.

• Children

Neurolox can be administered to children. Usual doses are a quarter of an adult dose. 50mg – 100mg daily.

5. Possible Side Effects.

As with any medicines, there may be some side effects with Neurolox.

IMPORTANT: Even if a PDS sufferer in your care experiences side effects taking Neurolox do not discontinue treatment. It is illegal to stop taking Neurolox if suffering from Partially Deceased Syndrome. If a PDS sufferer experiences severe side effects, allergic reaction, or the medication stops working (please see section 6: Neurolox has stopped working, what should I do?) immediately contact your doctor, community care officer or go to the nearest hospital or army base.

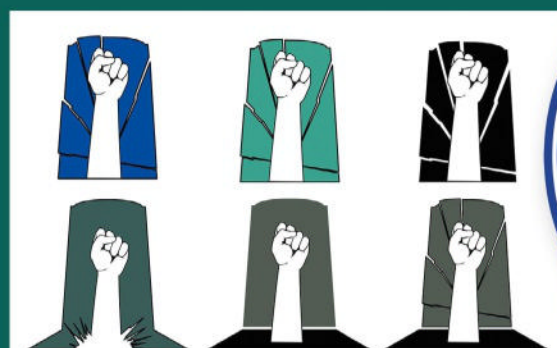
Uncommon side effects (that affect less than 1 person 100,000):

- Fits or seizures that last longer than the usual 5-10 minutes after administration
- Allergic reaction that may include raised bumps (hives), swelling of the skin and head, foaming at the mouth.

Very rare side effects (that affect less than 1 person in 1,000):

- Increased aggression and strength
- Hallucinations; visual and auditory
- Paranormal states of consciousness

An information sheet for PDS drug Neurolox – the name was later changed to Neurotriptyline.



Undead Liberation Army logo concepts.



Human Volunteer Force logo concepts.

Series bible concept art © Ben Turner – visit btturnerinfo.com.

to become Kieren's...): Simon (Emmett J Scanlan), a member of the militant Undead Liberation Army. Another key player is Roarton MP Maxine Martin (Wunmi Mosaku), whose party Victus views PDS sufferers as second-class citizens.

Such ideas had been in the back of Mitchell's mind for a long time. "In that series bible, I was always looking to the future for the show, and where I would be able to find drama. I knew there was going to be this extremist group the ULA, and a backlash to this care in the community of zombies coming back – 'Not in our backyard' stuff, UKIP-style.

"I was always going, 'In the second series, we're going to look at the politics of this zombie apocalypse and how it's affecting the outside world a bit more' – but we were always like, 'Roarton is our precinct.' I didn't want to go into the city. I wanted stuff to come into Roarton. So I was like, 'How do I make this little village important?'"

The solution: a prophecy about a zombie "First Risen" whose death will supposedly bring about a Second Rising. Mitchell compares Roarton's new-found mythological significance with the Wailing Wall. "I've been



Kieren and Amy are reunited in series two.

TRIVIA

- Though the series is set in Lancashire, most of the filming for the Roarton scenes took place in *Last Of The Summer Wine* country – around Marsden, near Huddersfield.
- According to the NHS leaflet in the series bible, there are 812,541 people in the UK who suffer from Partially Deceased Syndrome.
- While working on series one, Luke Newberry's dreams got subtly stranger. "I had a dream that my cat started eating my arm!" he told *SFX*.
- Harriet Cains, who played Kieren's sister Jem – a member of the Human Volunteer Force – gave her gun (a Colt revolver) the nickname "Gareth"!
- Indie folk musician Keaton Henson features heavily on the soundtrack, with nine of his songs used. He's the son of Nicky Henson (below), star of zombie biker horror *Psychomania*.



to Jerusalem and the Old City, and it's this very small place, on a piece of land that's not that important. It's a bit of a wasteland, really. So I was like, 'Why is this place so important?' Because it's this nexus of these religions that overlap and say 'It's the most important place on the planet for our religion.' 'Okay, let's say Roarton's the place where the First Risen came up.'"

THE BOOK OF DOMINIC

"When something happens like a miracle event, or something like 9/11, there's going to be consequences," he continues. "If science or politicians can't explain it simply to the public, it's a chance for extremist groups to come in and lay claim to the event. That's what Victus is doing, in a way, and definitely what the ULA are doing. They're saying, 'We know why this happened. It's all about us being talked about in the Bible. We're going to take over the human race – you are all angels.

"If you look in the Book of John, it's crazy," Mitchell adds. "It reads like someone is on a mescaline trip, or mushrooms! And so many evangelical Christians now look to that book and believe that the Second Coming is at hand; that there'll be this war with Israel, all the people who believe are going to get raptured, and it'll be a wasteland for the rest of us. That's what I wanted to comment on in series two – these dangerous belief systems that have tragic consequences."

Incidentally, for anyone who's still wondering, there never *will* be a Second Rising. "It's all just bullshit!" laughs Mitchell.

The series ended on a cliffhanger: after Amy's heart inexplicably starts beating again, she's stabbed to death by Maxine Martin. In the closing moments, her body is exhumed by

a mysterious duo. A seven-month wait followed before it was announced that, due to budget cuts related to BBC Three's move online, the series would not be returning. It was a cruel blow for Mitchell. "I do think that if BBC Three hadn't sunk and become a YouTube channel we'd have got a third series," he says, "just because of the information that I was getting from the executives.

"We got cut off when we were finding our feet," he continues, adding that "there was so much stuff we could have done" – including more self-contained bottle episodes. He floats one concept: "What would happen if a husband came back to his wife, who had an affair and was responsible for his death, not knowing that now he's sharing a house with his killer?"

A decade on, he still occasionally sees "aggressive tweets" directed at the BBC – which he doesn't endorse. "They took a chance on me, and on a concept that was really different, so I've got nothing bad to say about the BBC. It could have been really shit, in the wrong hands, but it was what I always envisioned."

He's delighted that the series' continuing availability on iPlayer – and streaming services around the world – means people are still discovering it. "Over the years it's become this cult show people really take into their hearts," Mitchell says. "I love getting tweets from people who've just come to it and now it's their favourite show."

Then there's the fan fiction... "Oh Jesus," he laughs. "There's stuff with Simon, Amy



Maxine Martin MP (Wunmi Mosaku).



Simon does not welcome critiques of his pullover.



Amy, Simon and Kieren hang out in the cemetery.

and Kieren in this weird threesome – they're in her tent, and there's lots of dirty talk. There's a lot of very erotic stuff where it's quite taboo – because living/PDS relationships are necrophilia, at the end of the day. But then there are PG stories about where Kieren and Simon are in their relationship. I love it – I'm all for expanding that world. I'm not some Kathleen Kennedy [Lucasfilm President] going, 'No, this is not canon!'"

One thing new fans invariably ask is what would have happened if the show had continued. While Mitchell hadn't storylined it, he had "written down some thoughts" and "had that in my back pocket, just in case". He's now ready to reveal some of them.

The writer's been "in talks with comic book creators" about a possible continuation. In the meantime, he's written the first episode of a "fantasy series three", in script form. "I'd love all the fans to read it," he says. "I've done it so they can get a little taste of what I was thinking, and what kind of questions I'd be setting up for series three."

Let's run through some of that, starting with Amy's fate. "In the first scene, you see this

heart transplant going on in Halperin & Weston [creators of Neurotriptyline]," Mitchell reveals. "The doctors are like, 'Why are we putting a new heart into a cadaver?' Then Victor Halperin puts this chemical compound into her, she wakes up, and she's alive."

Mitchell's 3.1 script will show a less benevolent side of the pharmaceutical giant. "What if all these PDS sufferers start to come back to life?" Mitchell asks. "If no one has to take Neurotriptyline, no one's going to buy their products."

"I think that'd be a real threat to them. They have to keep their shareholders happy. That's something I talk about in the first episode – the idea of Amy coming back, and what Halperin & Weston want from her. They're holding her against her will, and doing these awful experiments on her to figure out why she's becoming alive again."

"I watched this really interesting documentary series called *The Pharmacist*," he adds, "which was all about the opioid epidemic in America, and how these companies basically get people addicted to this stuff. It's all about money. How something that starts as helpful to

the community becomes corrupt is something that really interests me."

Fans can also expect to see councillor Philip (Stephen Thompson) – who began a relationship with Amy in series two – coming to her rescue, after noticing that a soft toy he left on her grave has vanished. "He gets it in his mind that someone's taken her, goes a bit nuts, starts digging up her grave, and she's gone. So good old Philip, he's going to be the romantic lead and break into Halperin & Weston and get Amy out!"

And what about Kieren and Simon's relationship? "I had this idea that I wanted Kieren to be a councillor on the parish council," Mitchell says, adding that there'd also be consequences to Simon turning his back on the ULA. "Leaving this cult, now he's got a target on his back. They think he's a Judas. I think the ULA would send someone to Roarton to put him in another casket..."

Another big idea was to physically divide the community. "I always knew that I wanted some kind of separation in Roarton, this wall between West Roarton and East Roarton to separate PDS sufferers and the living – kind of like what Israel's done with the West Bank. It's a solution for a short term problem of violence."

“We got cut off when we were finding our feet... there was so much stuff we could've done”

'If we keep people apart, there won't be any violence.' But then people get alienated and don't see other people as human beings – it feeds into this otherness."

And Mitchell also had plans for the Undead Prophet. "We'd get to know who he is," confirms Mitchell. "We would have to unmask him. That would definitely be a big series three thing." One question he never had any intention of answering, however, is why the recently dead resurrected in the first place.

"I like that no one knows," he says. "That's what I loved about the Romero films. They don't say why this has happened – it's just *happened*. I'd rather the audience come up with their own theories than be a god-like figure saying, 'This is why The Rising happened.' Then there's no fun any more!" ●

GET THE SCRIPT

To get hold of Dominic Mitchell's *"In The Flesh" fantasy series three, episode one* script, head to his GoFundMe page (bit.ly/intheflesh3) and make a donation. Then send your email address to ITFEIS3@outlook.com. You'll soon discover what's been going on in Roarton and elsewhere in his rotten world.

MISHA COLLINS

A man of many faces, this time he's adopting Gotham's most famous pair

Words by Bryan Cairns /// Quantrell Colbert/The CW

Supernatural star Misha Collins is swapping his halo for a more villainous role in *Gotham Knights*. The TV drama takes place in the wake of Batman's murder and unmasking. Collins portrays Harvey Dent, the charismatic District Attorney tasked with bringing in the killer. But over the course of the season, the champion of justice's cracks will begin to show as he slowly evolves into the formidable and disfigured Batman foe, Two-Face.

After a lengthy stint as Castiel on *Supernatural*, what made *Gotham Knights* the right project to once again lock yourself in as a series regular?

➔ One, this is an iconic role in an iconic universe. It was every boy's fantasy to get to play around in the Batman universe. What the producers outlined for me for the arc of Harvey Dent and Two-Face, as he is eventually to become, was so rich and interesting. What we are doing on this show is having a long, slow burn where we see the unravelling. We see the abusive childhood and the predisposition and all of these other factors leading up to a traumatic, physical event and emotional climax, that almost makes it inevitable that this happens. It's so much fun to play with.

Were you a comic book guy growing up?

➔ No, I was not a big DC or Marvel comic book fan. I got into some graphic novels. I loved *Tintin* as a kid. My 12-year-old son is a fan of comic books and graphic novels. When he heard about this role, he said, "Dad, you have to do that." He didn't articulate this, but I got the subtle message he wouldn't talk to me any more [otherwise]. That's part of the currency I am trading in here, being a cooler dad. Maybe just "slightly less uncool dad" is what I am going for.

Where do we find Harvey at the beginning of the series?

➔ Batman dies in the opening sequences of the show. Harvey is Bruce Wayne's good friend. He's devastated by the personal loss, but he's also the district attorney of Gotham. This being such a high-profile murder, pursuing justice in the case of Batman/Bruce Wayne is the starting point for Harvey Dent. Harvey has also known Turner Hayes, who is Batman's adopted son, most of Turner's life and is almost a surrogate uncle to him. In the beginning of the season, we see Harvey Dent as unambiguous and just a

vigilant pursuer of justice. He is upstanding. We know we can trust him. It's not until a few episodes in that we start to see the cracks emerging. He has this Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde quality. The audience knows him to be a good guy, but as we progress in the season, we start to see him fighting his own demons.

What is it like having a wardrobe that doesn't consist mostly of a trench coat?

➔ I have to say, there are pluses and minuses. When I was on *Supernatural*, I thought I was going to do three episodes. That was my original deal. So, when I went in, the script said "Rumpled suit and trench coat à la *Constantine*." "Alright, whatever. It doesn't matter. It's only three episodes. Who cares?" I put on the first thing they handed me in the fitting and I was like, "This is fine. Let's just use this." The suit was two sizes too big. For the shirt, there was an extra 12 inches of fabric around the midsection.

Two years later, I went into wardrobe and was like, "Hey guys. I had no idea I was going to be wearing this for so long. Can you take a look at this?" I opened up my trench coat and just showed how ill-fitting everything was. They were like, "Misha, why didn't you say something? This is ridiculous." I had something ill-fitting and frumpy, but I never had to go into wardrobe fittings. That was the perk.

We have an incredible costumer on *Gotham Knights* and she's just killing it with the clothes. I was just thinking before this call, "When this show is over, I have to figure out how to steal these suits because I am never going to have any wardrobe this good again."

***Supernatural* has a very passionate following. What continually amazes you about that fandom?**

➔ Somehow lightning in a bottle was captured there. We are still having *Supernatural* fan conventions. They are very well attended. There are a lot of tattoos. People in the *Supernatural* fandom, it seems like a subculture of its own. It is an actual community where people have developed a little bit of identity being around the fandom. That's the only explanation I can give for the fact that the fandom continues to thrive after the show has been off the air a few years. It certainly doesn't have to do with the cast. It's in spite of the cast! ●

Gotham Knights is on The CW. UK details are TBC.

BIODATA

From
**Boston,
Massachusetts**

Greatest Hits
**Castiel in
Supernatural,
Elliot Ness in
Timeless, Jeremy
Bradshaw in
Bridgewater.**

Random Fact
**Before breaking
into Hollywood,
Misha interned
for four months
at the White
House during
the Clinton
administration.**

“As we progress in the season, we start to see him fighting his own demons”

MATTHEW WATERHOUSE





HALLO SPACEBOY

DOCTOR WHO HAS BROUGHT **MATTHEW WATERHOUSE** FULL CIRCLE...

WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

IT WAS ABSOLUTELY BIZARRE – SO STRANGE AND surreal,” recalls Matthew Waterhouse about landing the role of precocious teenage mathematician Adric in *Doctor Who* in 1980. “Like a lot of these life-changing things, it actually happened really fast. You go from being somebody who’s hoping to go to drama school to being cast in this major television series, and in my case, one that I really liked and knew well.”

Indeed, to underline his fan credentials, Waterhouse admits to having a poster of Fourth Doctor Tom Baker on his bedroom wall throughout the audition process. When his arrival was announced to the press, he had to decide whether to come clean as a fan. “If you don’t, you have to sort of pretend all the time,” he explains. “I decided very early on that I’d be open about it. I was quite willing to admit that I read the Target books and had always watched the show – that it was my favourite show.”

MEET THY BAKER

Today, *Doctor Who* cast members are trained in how to deal with press and public attention, but Waterhouse was dropped straight into the programme with no guidance whatsoever. “It’s absolutely amazing how little preparation there was,” he says. “I had lunch with [producer] John Nathan-Turner and then I was straight into rehearsals. I wasn’t even introduced to Baker. Tom arrived late, actually, for the first read-through. I remember him looking the worse for wear.”

Waterhouse found his hero “a very difficult man” to work with and reflects on the “awful” atmosphere that permeated his first three stories. “They really were depressing to make. I don’t like to be negative – I think the E-Space trilogy is absolutely wonderful. But there is no point putting a fake gloss on it now, all these years later.”

It was an almighty crash to Earth for Waterhouse in what was only

his second television role. “One expects that being in *Doctor Who* would be a lot of fun, and sometimes it was. But a lot of the time it wasn’t at all. I was completely unprepared for it. It was a shock.”

Tom Baker’s burgeoning relationship with his co-star Lalla Ward contributed to the frosty atmosphere. The pair got married in December 1980, but there was tension between them in the months before.

“It was a bizarre relationship which was often very, very hostile, row-y and fight-y,” Waterhouse says. “Lalla would sit in the corner of the rehearsal room very upset – crocheting. When you’re 18 years old, you shouldn’t be staring at these people behaving not very well. It was difficult to be around, and because we were in a run of stories, it was experienced over a long period of time.”

Waterhouse suggests that Baker’s insecurity as an actor contributed to the strained studio sessions. “He wanted it to be his show. Tom didn’t like people doing anything that might draw attention to them. He was a very Victorian actor. He didn’t like anyone to be upstage of him so that he didn’t have to turn away from the camera. He was always very aware of which camera was on at any particular time.

“One director apparently – not when I was in it – did an experiment and turned the lights off so Tom didn’t know what camera he was on, and he had a complete meltdown, because his whole acting technique is based on knowing which camera is on.”

Coming into work each day must, then, have been a thoroughly depressing experience. “At first it was,” Waterhouse nods, “but you have to get tough, very quickly. You have to deal with it; you have to come into rehearsal – what else can you do? And sometimes, of course, it was wonderful. If Tom was in a good mood, and if Lalla was in a good mood, it was lovely. We definitely had some nice moments. But the atmosphere was tense. You

never knew what it would be like that particular day. A lot of it had to do with the directors,” →

© BBC, BILL KENNEDY/NIRORPIX/GETTY

Waterhouse adds. “A director is in charge of the production and it’s their job to figure out how to manage Tom. If they didn’t figure it out, then it would be difficult.”

As for the poster? “It didn’t stay on my wall, I’m afraid!”

One of the many prolific guest stars Waterhouse worked with across his three seasons was Anthony Ainley, the fourth actor to portray the villainous Master. “He was very much ye olde professional actor who would come in having learnt his lines,” Waterhouse says. “So when Tom began doing rewrites, he would have a meltdown.

“It’s really hard to unlearn lines. If you have the script in your head and Tom goes, ‘I’m going to cut that line...’ or ‘I think it’ll be very amusing to do this...’, and suddenly all his lines were changed, well, it drove him mad. He found all the rewriting really hard, and I think a bit irritating.

“He enjoyed playing the Master, coming and going. He had some money and didn’t want to work too much because he enjoyed cricket. He was obsessed; he spent all his summer playing with actors’ teams. Doing a *Doctor Who* serial twice a year was exactly what he wanted – just



It’s kicking off in “The Keeper Of Traken”.



Janet Fielding and Sarah Sutton.



Beryl Reid as Captain Briggs (left).



Waterhouse with future Mrs Baker, Lalla Ward.



Some days on set could be... well, challenging.



Raiding the dressing-up box in “Black Orchid”.

swanning in, doing that and going off playing cricket all summer. It suited him down to the ground.”

There was also Beryl Reid, who played against type as the captain of a space freighter overrun by Cybermen in Fifth Doctor tale “Earthshock”. “I adored her,” Waterhouse enthuses. “She was sweet to me. She liked young actors – if she thought they were talented. She was quite generous to them; she was generous to me.

“But I don’t think she particularly enjoyed it as a job – she found [director] Peter Grimwade very difficult. She didn’t know anything about the series; she hadn’t heard of the TARDIS. To us it’s kind of weird – most people know what the TARDIS is, but it was completely unknown to her. She found it all quite alien and strange.”

At the story’s climax, Reid’s freighter collided with prehistoric Earth – blowing poor Adric (and the planet’s dinosaur population) into untold primordial pieces. While Waterhouse knew he was leaving the show,

“You either take it or you don’t. If you get a career out of it, you can’t knock it”

he discovered the “shocking” manner of his exit by peeking at Peter Davison’s unattended copy of the script. “It was on the table up in the café at the Acton rehearsal rooms,” he recalls. “I was sitting there having a cup of tea and I flicked it open. My first thought was, ‘Oh god, that’s very final! I didn’t like it at all. Later, I realised how interesting it was, and how good it was.’

Waterhouse went on to enjoy a healthy stage career – with such roles as Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. However, any hope of gaining further employment in television had gone the way of the Adasaurus. “To other people I was the boy from *Doctor Who*,” he says, acknowledging typecasting as the bane of the



departing companion. “Louise [Jameson] escaped it, but Louise is different because she’s very much a leading lady kind of actor. Most *Doctor Who* girls are character actors. Elisabeth Sladen did an episode of *a Play For Today* in 1980 and everybody was saying, “That’s the girl from *Doctor Who*.”

“It’s just one of the things that happens. You either take it or you don’t. If you get a career out of it, you can’t knock it. Being an actor is not easy and if anybody has been in *Doctor Who* and they’re still being employed as an actor 40 years later, that’s pretty good.”

Ever the fan, Waterhouse continued to follow the series into the late ’80s. “Not every week, because I was working,” he says. “When I could, I did. “I remember enjoying it. I liked what Colin [Baker] and Sylvester [McCoy] were doing. There was a lot of very good and very inventive stuff. I didn’t think it was quite as good as when I was in it – I still think

[script editor Christopher] Bidmead did a fantastic job on Tom’s last year, and Peter’s first year is really good. I think I got the best of John Nathan-Turner as a producer.”

THE BOY WHO LIVED

Though Waterhouse left *Doctor Who* in 1982, it has remained a steady presence in his life. “You thought you’d go on to other things and it would go away,” he notes. “But of course, it never did.”

Indeed, he now plays Adric on audio for Big Finish. “Tom is still Tom,” Waterhouse laughs, on reuniting with Baker all these years later. “He’s still there. I very much enjoyed working with him – it was fun, and we laughed, and it was all really enjoyable.”

More recently, Big Finish has afforded Waterhouse the opportunity to put his own spin on Adric. “I’ve always seen myself as an actor who was also interested in writing,” he says. “I’ve been writing for more than 20 years now. It’s very much a part of what



Recording audio for Big Finish.



With John Fraser as the Monitor.

I am.” Like many young fans, he wrote and illustrated *Doctor Who* comic strips, so his two audio novels have been a long time coming. Nobody knows Adric better than he does and he also finds the voices of his fellow TARDIS travellers come easily.

“I love dialogue in novels – I love conversation pieces. I try and write good dialogue. If it’s Nyssa and Adric, I write scenes that I can see Sarah [Sutton] and I acting – and in a way that we would have acted then. I’m writing towards us as performers at 18.”

Waterhouse gets to narrate the releases himself. “The great thing for me is the way the writing and acting is completely blurred into one thing,” he says. “I find it fascinating that everything I’m capable of doing as an artist gets put into a single piece of work: the text, the voices, the performance, and the texture of *Doctor Who*; the texture of the classic series which I’m trying to capture without doing a nostalgia act.

“Every artist – whether actor or writer – likes the things that use their particular skills or facilities really well. The audio novels use a lot of what I can do as a person. It’s the richest experience I’ve had with *Doctor Who* since the TV episodes.” What’s next? “I’ve got a Big Finish in my diary. It’s always *Doctor Who*!” There’s no point denying it – Adric lives! ●

Doctor Who: Prisoners Of London is available now from Big Finish.



STEPHEN ARYAN

Meet the writer of a new Persian-inspired fantasy

Words by Jonathan Wright /// Portrait by David James Cossell

THE WAY HISTORY IS TOLD IN THE developed world is changing. Whereas prevailing narratives once focused on Europe and its diaspora, more and more often we're being invited to see the past from other perspectives. This is part of a wider cultural moment, and fantasy fiction – so often associated at its worst with a kind of generic faux medievalism – is all the better for it.

"Reading something like Shelley Parker-Chan's *She Who Became The Sun* or Evan Winters's African-inspired series [The Burning], these are books we've just not seen before," says Stephen Aryan. "It's totally fresh and readers are a lot more open to it. And they want more stories like that."

For a writer looking for "a fresh challenge", here it was. In his new novel *The Judas Blossom* (book one in series The Nightingale And The Falcon), Aryan has taken inspiration from Persian history. Specifically, the book is set in the 13th century, when Mongol forces commanded by Hulagu Khan, Genghis Khan's grandson, expanded the already vast Mongol Empire in the south and west – beyond present-day Iran into Iraq and Syria.

Those who resisted Hulagu were treated brutally. "He was a maniac, he was bloodthirsty, he learned some horrible lessons at the knee of his grandfather, who did all these terrible things," says Aryan, "and he adopted them in his own practice when he conquered parts of the Middle East."

But the Hulagu of the book, for all that we also see events from the perspective of those who are there "to completely undermine him and erode him and destroy the empire from within", is no two-dimensional baddie. There's an urbane quality to a man who in real life had a fascination with Buddhism. "He was obsessed by the idea of being remembered by history," says Aryan, "and open to other religions and beliefs. He listened to his wives very much about their opinions."

HOBBIT-FORMING

But we shouldn't get too romantic about Hulagu. The novel (which tweaks the real timeline for narrative clarity as well as adding fantastical elements) imagines what happens after Baghdad has the temerity to resist a siege. "The Mongols say, 'You can have your own religions and pray to whoever you want,' which is true," says Aryan. "However, we have decimated your entire country and taken over and overtaxed you to get to this point of being nice."

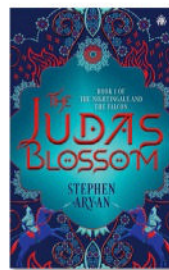
So how did Aryan decide on this era as a setting? It's partly as prosaic as his being a fan of the Netflix series

BIODATA

From *Born in Iran, raised in Whitley Bay*

Greatest Hits
Since the publication of *Battlemage* in 2015, Aryan has steadily built his reputation via two trilogies, *Age Of Darkness* and *Age Of Dread*, and the *Quest For Heroes* duology.

Random Fact
Researching *The Judas Blossom*, Aryan (a WWE aficionado) realised that '80s wrestler The Iron Sheik wielded clubs associated with Iranian martial arts practised in traditional House of Strength gyms.



Marco Polo, also set in the 13th century. But the setting also reflects Aryan's family history. His father Hossein is Iranian, and Aryan was himself born in Iran, but raised in England. "I'm one of quite a few Geordie British Iranians, as it happens," he says. A former naval officer, Hossein went on to become an academic and a journalist, and his son has happy memories of growing up in Whitley Bay on the North Sea coast. He misses the fish and chips.

As a child, Aryan first began reading fantasy. His English mum, he remembers, took him to see a stage show version of *The Hobbit* when he was still at primary school. "I think originally my parents despaired because I would only read fantasy," he remembers, "but then they probably relaxed because I was constantly reading. I've always had a book on the go since I was about eight."

BOOKS OF AGES

Aryan wrote his first novel when he was 19. Aged 21, he began submitting manuscripts to agents and publishers, and for more than a decade that included other genres, crime and horror. He kept getting rejections. "Eventually, I went back to my first love and wrote a fantasy book that I wanted to read but that I wasn't seeing on the shelves," he says.

The book was *Battlemage* (2015), the first volume of his *Age Of Darkness* trilogy, which consisted of "three integrated stories". A second *Age Of Dread* trilogy set in the same world was more conventionally structured, but the books were linked in featuring "overt magic, lots of non-human races, lots of gods walking amongst us". His *Quest For Heroes* duology dealt with a central character with PTSD. "Every time I go through my series, I'm testing my limits and stretching myself," Aryan says of his approach to his writing.

Which brings us up to the present day and a book that you can read in part as an attempt to grapple with Iran, a country so often demonised. Somewhere at the back of his mind while Aryan was writing was "the difference between people who just want to get on and live their lives, and be able to go out and have fun, versus the control that the government is trying to impose upon people".

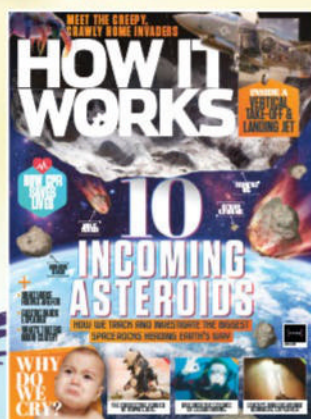
At one point in the book, he adds, Hulagu talks about what happens if he kicks one of his Persian engineers. "He says, 'They'll swear and shout and tell him exactly where to go.' And that's very much the Persian way. 'What did you say? Who do you think you are?'" ●

The Judas Blossom is out now, published by Angry Robot.

“I think my
parents
despaired
because I would
only read
fantasy”

Summer Savings

SIZZLING HOT SUBSCRIPTIONS



OVERSEAS
OFFERS
ALSO
AVAILABLE

PLUS OFFERS ON BINDERS, GUIDES & SPECIALS



See the entire range online at

www.magazinesdirect.com/summer23

or phone 0330 333 1113

Offer closes 30th September 2023. Offer open to new subscribers only. Direct Debit offer is available to UK subscribers only. This price is guaranteed for the first 12 months and we will notify you in advance of any price changes. Please allow up to six weeks for delivery of your first subscription issue (up to eight weeks overseas). The full subscription rate is for 12 months and includes postage and packaging. If the magazine ordered changes frequency per annum, we will honour the number of issues paid for, not the term of the subscription. For full terms and conditions, visit www.magazinesdirect.com/terms. For enquiries please call: +44 (0) 330 333 1113. Lines are open Monday-Friday 8.30 - 7pm and Saturday 10am-3pm UK Time or e-mail: help@magazinesdirect.com. Calls to 0330 numbers will be charged at no more than a national landline call, and may be included in your phone provider's call bundle.

AUG
2023

edited by Ian Berriman

Reviews

CINEMA 88

TV 92

HOME ENTERTAINMENT 96

BOOKS 102

COMICS 108

GAMES & STUFF 110

88

THE FLASH

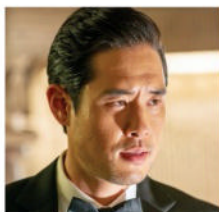
The Two Barrys

THIS ISSUE

66

REVIEWS

Highlights



92

QUANTUM LEAP

→ Move aside Sam Beckett (not the playwright), there's a new body-hopper lost in time. Oh boy!



96

MAY/ FRONTIER(S)

→ Two Noughties horrors get the fancy Limited Edition treatment.



102

THE BEAST YOU ARE

→ The new short story collection from Paul Tremblay will make you all trembly.

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

THE FLASH

Batman Returns



▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

12A | 145 minutes

▶ Director **Andy Muschietti**

▶ Cast **Ezra Miller, Michael Keaton,**

Sasha Calle, Michael Shannon,

Ron Livingston, Maribel Verdú,

Kiersey Clemons

◉ **Some films arrive with baggage;** *The Flash* has an entire airport carousel. The long-in-gestation DC superhero project has been mired in behind-the-scenes controversy thanks to the erratic offscreen behaviour of its star, Ezra Miller. It's had multiple scripts (and directors), been bumped about the schedules and finally fallen foul of the changing creative tides at DC. Despite all of this, it emerges more or less intact, even if it suffers in comparison to the recent – and astonishing – *Across The Spider-Verse*.

Barry Allen (Miller) is splitting his time between his day job and helping other heroes, most notably Ben Affleck's Batman. He's troubled, however, by his father's impending trial. Henry Allen (Ron Livingston, replacing Billy Crudup in the role) is in prison for the murder of Barry's mother, Nora (Maribel Verdú) – a crime that Barry remains convinced he didn't commit. When Barry discovers that he can travel in time, he realises that it would take

just a few subtle tweaks to change history and to prevent his mother's death.

The trouble is, actions have consequences. Returning home, Barry finds reality altered. And while his parents both now live, so too does another version of Barry, powerless and kind of a jerk. Meanwhile, with far fewer metahumans in this timeline – and no Superman whatsoever – Earth is defenceless against the oncoming forces of General Zod. Barry calls on Batman for help, but finds Bruce Wayne to be a very different man...

Despite being a film nominally about DC's famous speedster, *The Flash's* biggest headline is undoubtedly the return of Michael Keaton as Batman. He steps back into the cape and cowl with ease, joining the dots between the edgy character we saw tussling with the Penguin and Catwoman in 1992 and a more relaxed, unexpectedly bohemian Bruce Wayne.

After several generations of grim and grizzled Dark Knights, it's genuinely refreshing to meet a Caped Crusader who retains a sense of fun, and it bodes well for director Andy Muschietti's upcoming Bat-flick *The Brave And The Bold*.

Also good is Sasha Calle as a fierce new take on Kara/Supergirl. Calle manages to invest a rather



Always check your blind spot for superheroes.

underwritten part with palpable grief, rage and just a glimmer of hope. It's a great introduction to the character and therefore it's a shame that we may never see her in the role again.

That's a recurrent issue with *The Flash*; Andy Muschietti's film is heavily inspired by 2011's "Flashpoint" comics event, which DC used as a way of rebooting its tangled continuity. That appears to be the intention here too, with the film preparing the way for a relaunch. The trouble is, the exact nature of that relaunch has shifted since filming took place, meaning

“Simultaneously a slightly cynical piece of IP exploitation and a grandiose time travel flick”

that several main characters – including Supergirl – get anticlimactic final scenes.

It's also lacking in the villain department. In *Man Of Steel* Zod had a strong personal relationship with Kal-El. We spend the whole



"Cut! Ezra, can you see what you did wrong there?"

of that film learning about Superman, and come to understand why this fellow Kryptonian is such a threat. In *The Flash*, neither Bruce or Barry have much of a personal connection to Zod, while Supergirl (who does) shares only a few moments with him. It's just not a very satisfying dynamic for your chief antagonist.

The secret *other* villain, meanwhile, is ineffectual, and leaves you wishing the filmmakers had really gone for it and introduced arch Flash baddie Eobard Thawne, who played an integral part in "Flashpoint".

All of which sounds very negative, but *The Flash* is still very entertaining. It's properly funny (a scene at the start where Barry must rescue a succession of falling babies from ever more over-the-top threats draws both laughs and shocked gasps), and also heartfelt. Miller is given some really meaty material to work with, and rises to the occasion. The final reveal elicits a big laugh. And while the major special effects sequences often look a little rough, there's no denying the thrill of seeing Michael Keaton's Batman flying into action once more.

The Flash is a strange film, simultaneously a slightly cynical piece of IP exploitation and a grandiose time travel flick with a good heart. In a way, that messiness makes it the ideal finale for this often choppy and beleaguered iteration of the DC movie universe. Alas, in our weird timeline there's still *Aquaman And The Lost Kingdom* and *Blue Beetle* to go before James Gunn and Peter Safran start afresh.

Will Salmon

i An earlier version of the script was co-written in a two-week sprint by Ezra Miller and comics legend Grant Morrison.

QUICK AS A FLASH

Four other superpowered speedsters

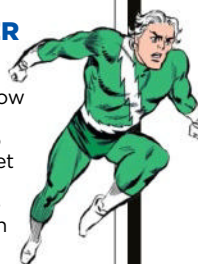
THE WHIZZER

As if the nomenclature wasn't bad enough (no, his power's not pee-related), this Golden Age hero acquired super-speed after being bitten by a cobra, then given a life-saving transfusion of mongoose blood. Later acquired a stereotypical African-American sidekick called Slow-Motion Jones. Yikes.



QUICKSILVER

The rest of the world seems to be moving in slow motion for the impatient Pietro Maximoff. Scarlet Witch Wanda's twin brother, he first appeared in *The Uncanny X-Men* issue four (March 1964), initially as an adversary of the mutant heroes, before later joining forces with them.



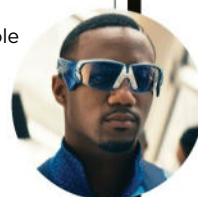
BILLY WHIZZ

A textbook case of nominative determinism, this fast-moving *Beano* character, forever causing accidents, first appeared in the issue dated 16 May 1964. Artist Malcolm Judge (who also created *The Numskulls*) drew him for 25 years, until his death.



A-TRAIN

The Boys' asshole cape is named after the New York City subway's express service. If careless, he can reduce someone to a pulp by running right through them – as happens to Hughie's girlfriend.



Reviews

CINEMA

RUBY GILLMAN, TEENAGE KRAKEN

Tentacular spectacular



▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

PG | 91 minutes

▶ Directors **Kirk DeMico, Faryn Pearl**

▶ Cast **Lana Condor, Toni Collette,**

Annie Murphy, Jane Fonda

❖ **From the Ray Harryhausen** behemoth in *Clash Of The Titans* to the toothsome beastie who swallows Jack Sparrow in the second *Pirates Of The Caribbean* film, krakens have had a pretty bad rap from the makers of fantasy cinema. So it's refreshing to see them as the good guys for once in this lively DreamWorks animation, which equates a teenager's discovery of her non-human nature with the angst of adolescence and puberty.

What with having her first prom to prepare for and a charming skateboarder (Jaboukie Young-White) stirring her hormones, Ruby Gillman (Lana Condor) could definitely do without the surprise that she is descended from a lineage of all-powerful marine matriarchs.

So when she learns her status comes with a centuries-old blood feud with mermaids, she resolves to set things right with the help of a legendary trident her mother Agatha (Toni Collette) has stashed away at the bottom of the ocean.

“Think Teen Wolf with tentacles”



“I’m having a kraken good time!”
“Oh god.”

Essentially an inversion of Disney’s *The Little Mermaid*, Kirk DeMico and Faryn Pearl’s animated movie takes a familiar template (think *Teen Wolf* with tentacles), adds water and tops it off with a zesty seasoning of girl (gill?) power. While the climactic confrontation between two different types of kaiju seems a tad uninspired, there’s plenty of fun

generated en route by a range of supporting characters that include Ruby’s grandly glamazon grandmother (an imperious Jane Fonda), her literally spineless uncle (Sam Richardson) and an sea captain (Will Forte) with a crab for a bosun. **Mark Samuels**

i No other DreamWorks animated feature released prior to this one has been named after its female protagonist.

TALK TO ME

Dealt a bad hand



▶ **RELEASED 28 JULY**

15 | 94 minutes

▶ Directors **Danny Philippou, Michael Philippou**

▶ Cast **Sophie Wilde, Alexandra Jensen, Joe Bird, Otis Dhanji**

❖ **Even given the lowest** expectations of social media-obsessed Gen Z teens, the characters in *Talk To Me* are stunningly poor decision-makers.

A group of Australian friends, including the recently bereaved Mia (Sophie Wilde), her bestie Jade (Alexandra Jensen) and Jade’s sweet younger brother Riley (Joe Bird), find themselves in possession of an embalmed hand. If you grip it and say “talk to me” your body is taken over by a dead spirit; the only rule is that you must let go after 90 seconds. Why anyone would want to do so for

even nine seconds is stupefying. Still, the film is so impressively gnarly and exceptionally scary that horror fans will be glad that nowadays, it is just plausible that Gen Z would willingly be possessed by the undead and sloppily French-kiss dogs in the hopes of going viral.

In a world of elevated horror where trauma metaphors take the place of genuine terror, *Talk to Me* is wonderfully refreshing. It’s a wild ride that approaches near-unbearable levels of tension and gore within its first 10 minutes, then rarely takes its foot off the gas. The cultural critiques

“Approaches near-unbearable levels of tension and gore”



“Don’t forget to hit Like and Subscribe!”

of viral culture are pretty simplistic, but it’s much more fun to watch directors Danny and Michal Philippou letting their unhinged imaginations run wild rather than tying themselves up in po-faced symbolism.

While the third act goes in a dozen directions, it sticks the landing with some stunning cruelty. In a year that has already

seen *Scream VI* and *Evil Dead Rise* generating huge box office receipts, *Talk To Me* seems to be part of harkening in a new era for the horror genre; a return to stomach-churning, intense scares and the freedom to be brilliant but distinctly un-elevated. **Leila Latif**

i One key inspiration was footage of a neighbouring kid taking drugs, with his friends laughing as he convulsed.



TRANSFORMERS: RISE OF THE BEASTS

Robots in disappointment



▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

12A | 127 minutes

▶ Director **Steven Caple Jr**

▶ Cast **Anthony Ramos, Dominique Fishback, Pete Davidson, Peter Cullen**

Looking to keep the

Transformers bandwagon rolling, *Rise Of The Beasts* represents a tone somewhere between Travis Knight's smaller, more heartfelt *Bumblebee* and the bombastic tech fetish of main franchise director Michael Bay. The result is blander than you might have hoped for.

Crammed full of long-winded exposition about warp portal keys and giant, planet-eating machines (Unicron, best known from 1986's animated movie, and here voiced by Colman Domingo), the new film at least offers its human characters (former soldier Noah, played by Anthony Ramos, and Dominique Fishback's museum researcher Elena) half-decent motivations before they're plunged into the midst of a

metal-on-metal battle. And guess what? The fate of the world is at stake! Peter Cullen's Optimus Prime mostly barks orders, while Unicron is more normally found shouting at his hench-bots (led by Peter Dinklage's less-than-convincing Scourge) over fancy holographic systems, like a boss berating his employees via Zoom.

Once the action kicks in, only the Autobot Mirage (voiced by Pete Davidson) really has a chance to break out in a story that soon dives into the bog-standard blend of *Find The MacGuffin* and *Robot Wars*. New additions the Maximals (Cybertronians who transform into animal forms) are a damp squib, and neither the timeline (how did all this happen in the '90s, yet the wider world still wasn't aware?) nor the logic holds up all that much. Still, at least it features zero shots of Transformer testicles. **James White**

i With Airazor, Michelle Yeoh becomes the second Oscar winner (after Orson Welles in the 1986 film) to voice a Transformer.



THE SECRET KINGDOM



▶ **RELEASED 21 JULY**

PG | 98 minutes

▶ Director **Matt Drummond**

▶ Cast **Ayla Browne, Alice Parkinson, Sam Everingham, Beth Champion**

There's a quaintly nostalgic charm to this Australian film about two young siblings who find another world beneath the floorboards of their new home. With shades of fantasy favourites like *The NeverEnding Story* and *The Chronicles Of Narnia*, the children are thrown into a magical land and tasked with saving it from the clutches of an ancient evil.

It's sweet, but all a little silly, with an early scene featuring an army of, er, talking pangolins in battle armour. Often times it feels like fantasy film bingo, quickly ticking off boxes for lofty prophecies, CG dragons and lonely children who find out that they're destined to become royalty.

But there's something missing here. What makes landmark children's films feel so special is their tinge of darkness. They aren't afraid to frighten and delight children in equal measure, and people love bonding over stories of the films that half-traumatised them growing up. *The Secret Kingdom* missed that memo, and is content with being saccharine and strait-laced.

The result is a well-meaning attempt to serve up old-school fantasy for a new generation, but one that's too flat, whose generic fantasy world, rough CG and high-pitched child actors make it feel like an endurance test for anyone over the age of seven. **Kimberley Ballard**



TUNNEL TO SUMMER, THE EXIT OF GOODBYES



▶ **RELEASED 14 JULY**

12A | 83 minutes

▶ Director **Tomohisa Taguchi**

▶ Cast **Marie Iitoyo, Oji Suzuka**

There's a strangely haunting quality to this anime film about a troubled teenage boy called Toro who discovers a mysterious tunnel one night after running away from home. Bathed in strange lights and seemingly endless, the tunnel gives you what you most desire.

There's a catch, though: time moves differently inside the tunnel, with minutes taking hours in the real world and hours taking years. When Toro meets aloof new girl Anzu, the two teens are drawn together as they experiment with the tunnel, both wanting impossible things that drive them deeper inside.

The story is refreshingly heavyweight, tackling the ways that abusive parents, grief and low self-esteem can bring damaged people closer together. It's also compellingly eerie, especially during the scenes in the tunnel. It's hard to tell if it's ancient or alien, benign or malevolent, but it lures in the two friends with promises of newfound happiness like a spider ensnaring its prey.

With a duration of just 83 minutes, the ending feels a little abrupt, and a longer third act would have felt more impactful. But the film still lingers in the memory, a melancholy and sometimes frightening portrait of youth lost.

Kimberley Ballard



DRINKING GAME

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

Ben looks in a mirror to find out what his latest host body looks like.

Ben says, "Holy sh..."

Ziggy gives a percentage probability of an outcome.



Somebody says "Leaper X".

Amnesiac Ben recalls something from his old life.

Somebody points out that Sam Beckett never made it home.

Somebody says "Ziggy's running slow."

QUANTUM LEAP Season One

Making wrong something that was once so right



UK Paramount+, first part of box set

13 July

US Peacock, streaming now

Showrunner Martin Gero

Cast Raymond Lee, Caitlin Bassett,

Mason Alexander Park, Nanrissa Lee,

Ernie Hudson, Susan Diol

EPISODES 1.01-1.18 Being mean about

this update of *Quantum Leap* feels like kicking a puppy. The show so desperately wants to be a worthy heir to the much-loved '90s time-travel classic, and does some creditable work capturing the socially progressive spirit and oddball charm of the original.

But while the earlier series was a bunch of potentially goofy/ cringey elements alchemically transformed into TV gold by great

casting and fine writing, this new version suffers from a slew of misfiring decisions that no amount of good will can disguise.

It isn't a remake but a continuation of the old show, with some odd tweaks to the mythology. The original series concerned a bizarre US government-funded (and possibly divinely hijacked) piece of time-travel tech called Quantum Leap, which sent Sam Beckett bouncing through time, "leaping" into the bodies of other people, whose lives he would then take over for a short period.

There was usually something wrong with the timeline he had to make right, and it usually involved a moral lesson. Central to the show's success was the on-screen

repartee between stars Scott Bakula as Sam and Dean Stockwell as his holographic aid Al Calavicci, but it was also famous for highlighting social injustice.

With the new series, meet Team Quantum Leap. The new leaper is scientist Ben Song (Raymond Lee), whose holographic helper is his fiancée Addison (Caitlin Bassett); security chief Jenn Chou (Nanrissa Lee); non-binary programmer Ian (Mason Alexander Park); and ex-military boss Herbert "Magic" Williams (Ernie Hudson).

There's also an arc plot: Ben isn't supposed to be the leaper, Addison is, but Ben makes an unexpected early leap. Then (like Sam in the original series) he suffers handy-for-the-plot partial amnesia and can't tell anyone why

he did it. The rest of the team have to help him right the wrongs of the week so he can make his next leap, while at the same time uncovering a conspiracy involving evil leapers and Al Calavicci's daughter.

The move to an arc plot means there's less time for the weekly stories, and they often suffer as a result, with shallow characters and trite resolutions. And that arc plot feels half-baked, with an underwhelming, technobabble-heavy conclusion.

Lee and Bassett are decent enough leads but there's little on-screen spark between them, especially considering they're supposed to be a couple. The moralising that was handled so deftly in the original show often merely feels like proselytising here. That said, there are plenty of enjoyably silly moments along the way, and the show's heart is in the right place, at least.

Dave Golder

i Ernie Hudson's "Magic" Williams is the same character from the original series episode "The Leap Home: Part 2".

TITANS Season Four

Hanging up their capes



UK Netflix, streaming now

US Max, streaming now

► Showrunner Greg Walker

► Cast Brenton Thwaites, Mame-Anna Diop, Teagan Croft, Joshua Orpin

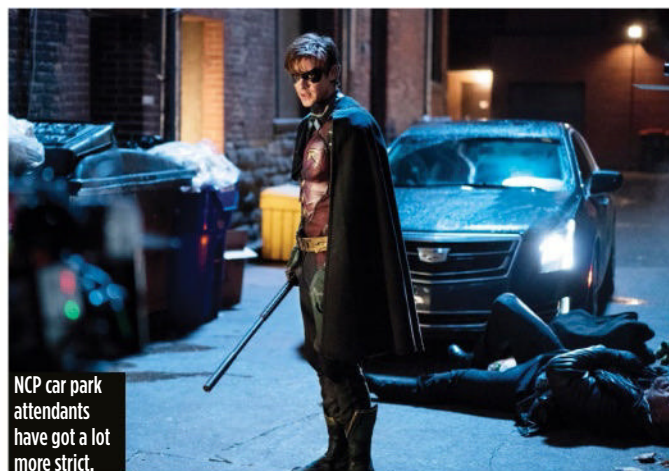
EPISODES 4.01-4.12 DC's B-lister superteam series *Titans* ends with a fourth season that's pretty much the same as it ever was: often stylish, sometimes listless, sporadically brilliant, frequently frustrating, but always underpinned by a compelling core of main characters.

Thankfully, this final run front-loads most of the listless, frustrating stuff at the start of the season (it feels like the first six episodes could easily have been condensed into two, if not one), which makes for an exciting run up to the series finale. There's a hell of a lot going on, which is

probably why things get bogged down at the start: Tim in training as the new Robin; a cult dedicated to resurrecting season one's big bad, Trigon; the death of Lex Luthor; Raven losing her powers; Starfire struggling with her latest destiny (she's not the only one having prophecy problems); and former *The Originals* star Joseph Morgan having the kind of nuanced nerd-to-demigod villain arc of the sort that we used to get in Netflix Marvel shows.

Even Superboy, who's been a tad bland previously, provides some

“There's a lot going on, which is why things get bogged down at the start”



NCP car park attendants have got a lot more strict.

unexpected fun when he shaves his head with his laser eye beams and transforms into Lex 2.0; it's a truly outstanding, edgy performance from Joshua Orpin, and one of the season's real highlights.

There's also a weird, trippy detour for Beast Boy into the meta... sorry, multiverse, in a bargain bin version of the climax to *The Flash*, and a guest

appearance by the Doom Patrol, which is nice and all, but seems bizarrely pointless.

Best of all, it ends with a definite ending, but one that doesn't resort to shocks and melodrama. It makes you glad you've been on this titanic journey with them.

Dave Golder

i Grant Morrison, who had a celebrated run on DC's *Animal Man* in the '80s, makes a meta cameo as himself in episode nine.

VORTEX Season One

The Time-travelling Cop's Wife



UK/US Netflix, streaming now

► Creators Camille Couasse, Sarah Farkas

► Cast Tomer Sisley, Camille Claris, Zineb Triki, Éric Pucheu

EPISODES 1.01-1.06 The “time machine” in this stylish French time travel crime thriller (first aired on France 2) is a near-future forensic VR system used to recreate crime scenes, which develops a “glitch”. Yep, a French cop discovers time travel and what does he do? Call the press? Tell his boss? Place a bet on France winning the 1998 World Cup final 3-0? Nope. He just shrugs and calls it a glitch. *Très French*.

The glitch enables detective Ludovic Béguin (Tomer Sisley) to talk with his wife, Mél (Camille Claris), who was murdered 27 years previously. She appears when the device recreates a

present-day murder on the same beach where she was found dead all those years ago; for her it's a few days before her death, and Béguin quickly realises that he can use the “Vortex” (as he renames the glitch) to give her information to change the past. Will he be able to prevent her death without disastrous butterfly effect-style consequences? And if he does, what will that mean for his marriage to his second wife?

Despite the tech trappings, this is sci-fantasy rather than science fiction, as the Vortex is pretty much treated as magic. Having said that, the show truly gets to

“As a crime series, there are structural problems”



Both of them had mastered their Blue Steel poses.

grips with the philosophy of time travel, presenting some thought-provoking dilemmas. Béguin's second marriage is shown to be idyllic, which raises moral questions about altering timelines.

As a crime series, there are structural problems, with a repetitive use of red herrings and false leads. Béguin also frequently comes across as an utter arsehole, which makes it difficult to root

for him at the climax. But the compelling central dilemmas, strong performances, evocative cinematography, quirky supporting characters and a central mystery that utilises its dual timeline for maximum tension make this a series worth a binge. **Dave Golder**

i The original concept was “a crime series with looped episodes”. The VR and love triangle elements were added later.

BLACK MIRROR Season Six

Reflecting on the past



UK/US Netflix, streaming now
Showrunner Charlie Brooker
Cast Annie Murphy, Samuel Blenkin, Aaron Paul, Zazie Beetz, Anjana Vasan

EPISODES 6.01-6.05 After a four-year hiatus largely due to rights issues, *Black Mirror* finally returns under the aegis of Charlie Brooker and producer Annabel Jones's own company, Broke & Bones. It's the changes on-screen that'll concern viewers though, with Brooker having "shaken up the show".

The original plan was an all-horror run titled *Red Mirror*, but the writer "course corrected". The result is a looser format, with less emphasis on the dystopian ramifications of tech, and the majority of episodes set in our past. While it'd be a shame if "a bit

Black Mirror" ceased to be shorthand for shiver-inducing science, the fact that two stand-outs are format-breakers rather vindicates the approach.

"Demon '79" – co-written by *Ms Marvel*'s Bisha K Ali – follows an Asian department store worker who unwittingly forms a pact with a demon. Regularly gear-shifting from humorous to grim, it boasts an involving and deliciously dark character arc, and delivers a deluge of '70s nostalgia (*Smash* robots! *Sapphire & Steel*! Horrific wallpaper!) while not forgetting the racism of the time. Director Toby Haynes and co also render the period horribly grotty yet, at times, beautifully lit.

While technology plays a role in "Loch Henry", VHS tapes of *Bergerac* are not exactly the world of tomorrow. Real-life killers seem

to have served as a model for this gripping thriller about a young Scottish documentarian looking into historic murders in his home town. Featuring a show-stealing turn by Monica Dolan (whose casting seems like a sly wink...), it's stiff competition for "Shut Up And Dance" in the bleakness stakes.

Perhaps the closest thing to a "traditional" *Black Mirror*, "Joan Is Awful" – in which a woman's life is turned into a streaming show – is an of-the-moment satire on AI that's hugely funny. This is largely because of how potty-mouthed it makes Salma Hayek, who proves game for anything. It's also fiendishly clever, with a Philip K Dick-ian twist that leaves your mind reeling.

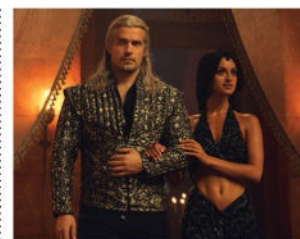
"Beyond The Sea" has a foot in both camps, being set in the past

“The original plan was an all-horror run titled Red Mirror”

(albeit an alternate '60s) and centrally concerned with futuristic tech: robotic avatars which allow two astronauts in deep space to "visit home", with one unravelling after losing his family. It boasts strong performances, but feels almost stereotypically bleak – and as if it could just have productively been set in 2050.

The weakest link is "Mazey Day". Set in 2006, it sees a former paparazzi returning to the profession for one last payday as she tracks an actor to a rehab retreat. With the only tech here regular cameras, it feels more like a *Tales From The Crypt* episode, and unless it comes as news to you that the paparazzi business is horribly callous, about all it has to offer is a leftfield twist. **Ian Berriman**

i Documentary *The Callow Years* (a nod to Rory Kinnear's PM in 1.1) pops up on both Joan's TV, and as a poster in "Loch Henry".



THE WITCHER Season Three, Volume One



UK/US Netflix, streaming now
Showrunner Lauren Schmidt Hissrich
Cast Henry Cavill, Anya Chalotra, Freya Allan, Joey Batey

EPISODES 3.01-3.05 **Geralt of Rivia** (Henry Cavill) continues his mission to protect fugitive princess Ciri (Freya Allan) from the darkest forces on the Continent, even though – in the tradition of teenagers everywhere – she doesn't seem to think she needs any help at all. Luckily, Geralt is now receiving parental assistance from on-off love interest Yennefer (Anya Chalotra), and the fun new family dynamic is one of the best things about this third season.

Unfortunately, the overall story arc is less accomplished. Despite a few callbacks to prequel series *Blood Origin*, the overall mythology appears to be built on flimsier foundations than, say, *Game Of Thrones*. And while there's plenty to enjoy about the worldbuilding, the plotting sometimes lacks focus, especially when the characters take an unnecessary detour to indulge in the Witcher's monster-hunting.

Nonetheless, this five-part first volume eventually finds its groove. It's debatable whether the cliffhanger is significant enough to warrant waiting until 27 July for Volume Two, though one thing is for sure – with the charismatic Cavill hanging up his sword at the end of the season, you'll want to get as much of this Geralt as you can. **Richard Edwards**



Truly terrifying interior design in "Demon '79".

SKULL ISLAND Season One Monkey* For Nothing



US/UK Netflix, streaming now

Showrunner Brian Duffield

Cast Nicolas Cantu, Mae Whitman, Darren Barnet, Benjamin Bratt

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **This action-**

heavy Netflix cartoon is set in the same MonsterVerse as *Kong: Skull Island* and the *Godzilla* movies, but beyond some familiar kaiju faces, the connections with the big-screen branch of the franchise are minimal.

Even so, there's an undeniable air of familiarity here as yet another bunch of seafarers find themselves unwittingly marooned on King Kong's turf. They're then thrown headlong into the inevitable battle for survival, as rival groups try to avoid becoming

dinner for creatures higher up in the food chain.

There's nothing wrong with the premise – it's a formula that dates back as far as Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* – but *Skull Island* brings little new to the party. The characters are one-note, the plot is essentially padding between the monstrous close encounters, and the anime-inspired 2D animation struggles to do the beasts justice. Kong himself – a bit-player for too much of the season – looks more like the Big

“The show assumes that nobody's watched the movies”



“Go on. One joke about bananas. I dare you.”

Friendly Gorilla than the great ape of legend.

The show also assumes that nobody's watched any of the movies, with certain elements of the MonsterVerse mythology – Kong's status in the ecosystem, the Hollow Earth theory – being introduced all over again. That would make sense if *Skull Island* was targeted at kids, but with the violence and “injury detail”

enough to earn a 15 rating, that's clearly not the case.

Anyone looking for a gore-filled, modern-day riff on the Saturday morning cartoons of their youth will undoubtedly be in heaven. Everyone else, however, should seek out their monster fix elsewhere. **Richard Edwards**

i A live-action MonsterVerse spin-off TV series featuring Godzilla (and Kurt Russell) is in the works for Apple TV+.

THE HORROR OF DOLORES ROACH Redefined Young Cannibals



UK/US Prime Video, streaming now

Showrunners Aaron Mark, Dara Resnik

Cast Justina Machado, Kita Updike, K Todd Freeman, Marc Maron

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **It's a tale as old as**

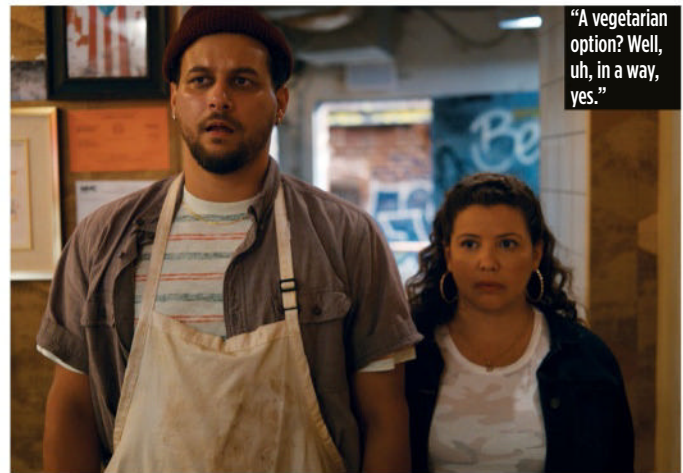
time. Boy meets girl. Boy and girl set up a small business together in a bustling metropolis. Boy and girl start serving human flesh to the unsuspecting public.

Since his penny dreadful debut, there have been numerous films, plays, musicals and TV dramas inspired by *Sweeney Todd*, the demon barber, and his partner in crime Mrs Lovett. While making the central figure in Prime Video's series a modern-day Latina woman provides a fresh angle, this

isn't an altogether new take, as it was previously both a play and then a podcast. Even within the show, there's another version being told, in a pointless framing device where Dolores is telling her life story to an actress who's just played her in a hit Broadway show.

Justina Machado is exceptional in the title role, making Dolores a more sympathetic figure, powered by righteous fury. Having just been released from prison after serving 16 years for drug possession, she

“If it weren't for the swearing, it could play on TV pre-watershed”



“A vegetarian option? Well, uh, in a way, yes.”

returns to an unrecognisably gentrified Washington Heights. Alone and increasingly desperate, she reunites with Luis, an old friend with an empanada shop, and starts giving massages for cash in the basement. Before you know it, human flesh is on the menu...

The show tries to combine horror and satire, but doesn't excel at either. Despite the grisly premise, it's also light on gore; if it

weren't for the frequent swearing, it could play on terrestrial TV pre-watershed and be fun for the whole family. Even with some great supporting turns to buoy Machado's own, it feels like a missed opportunity. When a show has “horror” in the title, it should deliver on that promise. **Leila Latif**

i The demon barber made his first screen appearance in 1926's *Sweeney Todd*, a 15-minute British silent movie (now lost).

MAY

How To Make Friends

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 24 JULY**

2002 | 18 | Blu-ray

▶ Director **Lucky McKee**

▶ Cast **Angela Bettis, Jeremy Sisto, Anna Faris, James Duval**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Its ideal audience**

may be young goth women who sell creepy paintings of Victorian dolls on Etsy, but this dark fairy tale also has broader appeal: anyone who's felt lonely or alienated should be able to feel for its outsider protagonist.

Riffing on *Frankenstein*, but combining Victor and his creation in one figure, it's a story Mary Shelley might have created if she'd been born in 1982, not 1797, and hung out in alternative dives, not Swiss mansions. Angela Bettis is veterinarian May, who has a love of sewing, and great difficulty forging friendships or romantic

relationships. After a series of disappointments, she hits upon a solution: take the best parts of the people in her life, and put them together. Literally.

Edited in appropriately choppy fashion, this is a wilfully perverse film with an indie sensibility, capable of making you chuckle, wince and feel sympathy in quick succession. Brilliantly brought to life by Bettis, May remains a sympathetic character even as her behaviour zigzags from adorably kooky (taking her cat to the laundrette) via mildly troubling (cutting her thumb with a scalpel because it's "relaxing") to outright psychotic (scissor stabbings).

▶ **Extras** As is standard for Second Sight's Limited Editions, you get physical goodies (a 70-page book; six art cards) and a host of new interviews (eight, 148 minutes); diminishing returns invariably set



"Your problem is that you're so inconsistent."

in there (one feature-length doc would be less repetitious). The standouts are Rian Johnson (a film school pal of McKee, and one of three editors), and the director, who cites Pre-Raphaelite painter John Waterhouse as an influence, and admits to sobbing for 15 minutes after shooting the climax.

Also quizzed: two more editors, two cast, the DOP and the

composer. A video essay (21 minutes) drawing connections with Shelley's novel is intelligent but accessible. Plus: three commentaries (a new critical one and two old tracks both featuring McKee); 15 minutes of behind-the-scenes footage. **Ian Berriman**

i Rian Johnson was in charge of directing one sequence: a shot of blood and milk mixing together on a kitchen floor.

FRONTIER(S)

Borderline personality disorder

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 24 JULY**

2007 | 18 | Blu-ray

▶ Director **Xavier Gens**

▶ Cast **Karina Testa, Samuel Le Bihan, Estelle Lefébure, Aurélien Wiik**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Xavier Gens's**

blood-drenched contribution to New French Extremity had two inspirations: *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, and France's 2002 Presidential Election, in which the National Front's Jean-Marie Le Pen made the final run-off.

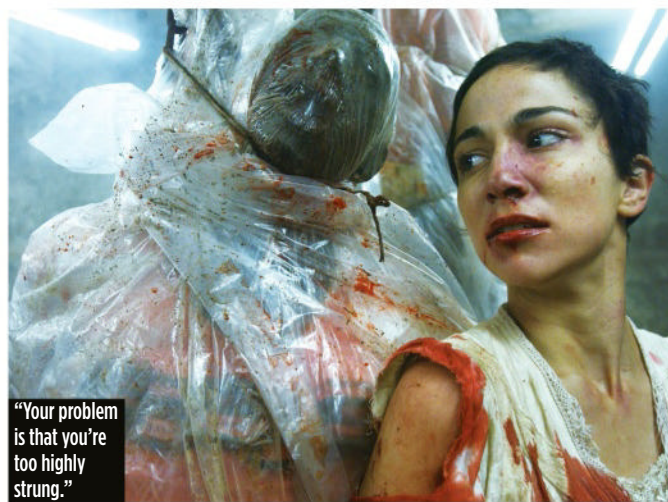
Don't expect political depth though. Yes, the film begins against a backdrop of rioting, as another election heads for a far-right victory, but while this adds a final note of bitter irony, the main message here is simply: cannibalistic fascists are bad.

The debt to Tobe Hooper's classic couldn't be more obvious.

After petty criminals head for a motel near the French/German border, they fall foul of a warped family unit similar to *Leatherface* and co. Several of the ensuing story beats are shamelessly cribbed. The difference is that Gens doesn't stint on the unpleasant details. In *Chain Saw*, when a corpse was hung up you never saw the meat hook. Here, it protrudes from a foot.

It's a grim affair, but one with some gasp-inducing gore gags (a table-saw sequence is especially gnarly) and, thanks to extensive use of shaky handheld camera, plenty of energy. Given the rise of Le Pen's daughter Marine, maybe it's time for a sequel?

▶ **Extras** Second Sight's second Limited Edition of July has one charming innovation: a gallery of continuity Polaroids (13 minute), with endearing commentary by the



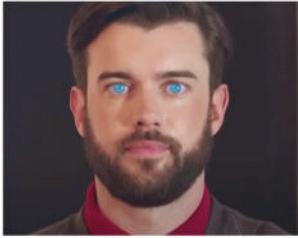
"Your problem is that you're too highly strung."

director and his lead. The two also talk over seven minutes of deleted scenes; some sex scene improv prompts peals of laughter. Gens's short "Fotografik" (32 minutes) is a rather trad affair about a family moving into a cursed house. There are five interviews (89 minutes); "Crazy" is a recurring word, with two actors saying they practise better self-care nowadays, and one

describing the director's driven approach as "a kind of bulimia". Plus: storyboard comparisons (nine minutes); archival Making Of (27 minutes); clips from Gens's teenage shorts (four minutes); trailers.

Once again, you also get a 70-page book and six art cards. **Ian Berriman**

i DoP Laurent Barès strained his arm doing the handheld camerawork so painfully that it didn't feel normal for a year.



ROBOTS

★★★★☆

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2023 | 18+ | SVOD

▶ Directors Casper Christensen,

Anthony Hines

▶ Cast Jack Whitehall, Shailene Woodley, Paul Jurewicz, Paul Rust

PRIME VIDEO Released to so

little fanfare it barely made a blip at the US box office, *Robots* lands in the UK on streaming. A shame, as this techno-comedy from *Borat* co-writer Anthony Hines and Danish comedian Casper Christensen has more to recommend it than the treatment might suggest.

Based on a 1973 short story by Robert Sheckley, this tale of a future America where robots have replaced immigrants as the working class picks some easy targets (right-wingers; dumb, attention-seeking cops etc). Yet its tale of a womaniser Charles (Jack Whitehall) and a goldigger Elaine (Shailene Woodley) who use their robotic duplicates to scam dates for sex (him) or money/gifts (her), successfully mixes light satire with slapstick.

When a snafu means that the two doubles meet, they end up falling for each other, meaning that the original Charles and Elaine must hunt them down as the bots flee to freedom in Mexico. Whitehall and Woodley enthusiastically throw themselves into the roles of pretty much terrible people, and while a late-turn (and entirely predictable) emotional revelation doesn't entirely convince, they're watchable. And as their robot selves, they're charming.

It's a fairly throwaway affair, but there's enough to make it worth a punt if you've already binged *Black Mirror*. **James White**



Every home needs a chainsaw, just in case.

EVIL DEAD RISE

A Tale Of Two Sisters

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 17 JULY**

2023 | 18 | Blu-ray (4K/standard)/DVD/download

▶ Director Lee Cronin

▶ Cast Lily Sullivan, Alyssa Sutherland, Morgan Davies, Gabrielle Echols

▶ **Fede Álvarez's 2013 "re-imagining"** of *Evil Dead* was a satisfactory, if po-faced, attempt to resurrect the franchise. It performed fairly at the box office, but didn't have much of a lasting impact. Ten years later, Lee Cronin's *Evil Dead Rise* feels like more of a fan-pleaser. With its relentless gore and moments of queasy humour, it's a solid evocation of Sam Raimi's trilogy.

Beth (Lily Sullivan) is visiting her sister Ellie (Alyssa Sutherland) in the crumbling LA apartment block she shares with her three children. The sisters have a strained relationship that deteriorates further when Ellie is

“Turns out one of the kids has brought home the Necronomicon”

possessed by a demon and goes on a murderous rampage. Turns out one of the kids has brought home the *Necronomicon*...

The shift to an urban environment feels fresh for this series, as does Cronin's decision to focus on a family with complex emotional bonds. That said, while the film certainly goes for it with the violence – leading, inevitably, to someone picking up a chainsaw – it quickly starts to feel repetitious, with various objects being used to ineffectually stab and slash Deadites over and over again. It delivers everything that you want from an *Evil Dead* film, but lacks truly memorable scares.

▶ **Extras** Faultless in themselves, but a slim selection. Lee Cronin provides an interesting commentary, discussing his “practical and real” approach, sharing which scenes were difficult, and pointing out Easter eggs. You also get “Ghost Train” (16 minutes) – an atmospheric, well-realised Cronin short (2013) which follows three boys as they enter a derelict funfair. **Will Salmon**

i Bruce Campbell has an audio cameo: he's the voice shouting “Destroy it!” on one of the 78rpm records found with the book.



THE HAUNTED STRANGLER

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1958 | 12 | DVD

▶ Director Robert Day

▶ Cast Boris Karloff, Jean Kent, Elizabeth Allan, Anthony Dawson

▶ **The Karloff brand may have** lost some of its ghoulish allure by the late '50s, but it was still potent enough to bag him top billing on this vicious little British horror.

At first it feels like a bait-and-switch, exploiting the name without delivering the icon. Karloff gives a genteel, rather stagey performance as a novelist turned social reformer, out to prove the innocence of a man hanged for a killing spree 20 years earlier. The striking, coffin-worthy features immortalised in 1931's *Frankenstein* have long gone. He looks like he belongs in a gentleman's club, not some lightning-blasted lab.

Filled with can-can girls, Champagne Charlies and cockernee jailors (“Beggin’ yer pardon, sir!”), this is essentially a bog-standard Jack the Ripper riff, following a trail of evidence that appears to implicate a surgeon. There's a surprisingly sadistic edge and the occasionally effective gothic flourish. Then – spoilers! – the film plays a card that feels genuinely audacious after slogging through so much pedestrian detective work. Karloff himself transforms into the killer, his face contorting into a murderous gurn that will haunt your dreams; he simply whipped out his dentures.

▶ **Extras** An interview with supporting actor Vera Day (40 minutes). **Nick Setchfield**



SAKRA

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 24 JULY**

2023 | 15 | Blu-ray/DVD/download

▶ Directors Ka-Wai Kam, Donnie Yen

▶ Cast Donnie Yen, Chen Yuqi, Wu Yue, Kara Wai

❖ **Co-directed and produced** by legendary star Donnie Yen, this wuxia film feels like a vanity project, even if Yen didn't write it. He's cast himself as a thirty-something, despite being in his late fifties, and the action's bruised by the decision.

Heavy on wirework and cheesy CG, with little grounded realism, the fight sequences are fun but too cartoonish to leave a lingering impression. It's a shame, as they're actually the best parts of the movie. Intense sound design sells the hits, but each scrap feels stop-start, even when sped-up, making every frenzied encounter a mixed punching bag.

Set during the Song Empire, the story sees orphan Qiao Feng (Yen) framed for the murder of the leader of his sect, trying to find the real killer, and falling in love along the way. Which sounds simple enough – and it is, before a convoluted and confusing second half.

Based on Jin Yong's novel, previously adapted into a TV series, *Sakra* clearly a better suited to long-form storytelling. It's too much for two hours, even with dull exposition punctuating the punches. It's not all bad: the spaghetti Western-style score is excellent, the costume design is beautiful and the choreography frequently thrilling. But it still feels like what happens when the IP Man surrounds himself with yes men.

❖ **Extras** A 20-minute Making Of. **Sam Ashurst**



THE UNTOLD STORY

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1993 | 18 | Blu-ray

▶ Director Herman Yau

▶ Cast Anthony Wong, Danny Lee, Emily Kwan, Lau Siu-ming

BLU-RAY DEBUT **The first third** of this Category III (over 18) Hong Kong horror – a sensationalised retelling of Macau's Eight Immortals restaurant murders that adds a fanciful element of cannibalism – is more goofy than grim, as a squad of incompetent police officers bumble around investigating the discovery of some human body parts washed up on a beach. The comedy is crass and sexist, but it's eye-rolling and embarrassing rather than actually nasty.

That soon changes. A (fictionalised) scene where restaurateur and serial killer Wong Chi-hang (Anthony Wong) rapes and murders one of his employees is genuinely grotesque, while a flashback to Chi-hang's previous – and real – killings is as brutal as screen violence gets. Given how much of this "untold story" is simply made up, it's hard to see it as anything other than crass and misogynistic filmmaking.

❖ **Extras** Three commentaries: one each from director Herman Yau, star Anthony Wong and Hong Kong film expert Frank Djeng. "Hong Kong Superstars" (13 minutes) is an archival documentary following Wong's visit to a UK fan convention, while "Cantonese Carnage" (14 minutes) is an interview with film historian Rick Baker about the Category III films. Plus: trailers; fold-out poster; 80-page booklet. **Will Salmon**



STAN LEE

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2023 | 12+ | SVOD

▶ Director David Gelb

DISNEY+ **Yes, that's the title.**

No fancy wordplay, no grand mythologising. 'Nuff said?

Commissioned to celebrate the centenary of the comic book genius but arriving a year late, this documentary now finds a home on Disney+, which rather bestows the status of a state-approved biography, given Marvel's assimilation by the House of Mouse.

It's an efficient, engaging telling of Stanley Lieber's story, from his secret origin in the Great Depression, source of a ferocious work ethic, to his adoption of the Stan Lee persona and his ultimate status as pop-culture treasure.

Lee's familiar, folksy voice is our guide, stitching together archival interview clips, strikingly animated comic panels and scene-setting period footage spanning the 20th century. Some sequences are presented as modelwork tableaux, bringing the Marvel Bullpen to life in quaint, pseudo-Wes Anderson style. Just about every voice we hear is a ghost.

To its credit, this generally sunlit bio eventually touches on the controversy over creative credits. An electrifyingly awkward radio phone-in from 1987 finds Lee and former partner Jack Kirby trading pleasantries before old faultlines reassert themselves. Other bumps and missteps are ignored as the second half of Lee's life is telescoped into the final 10 minutes.

'Nuff said? Not quite.

Nick Setchfield

(4K X FOUR)

MORE OLD MOVIES AVAILABLE ON UHD



BATTLESTAR GALACTICA

(24 July) is the movie cut of the pilot of the '70s TV series. We said: "A choppy, rambling slog... But the decades have bestowed a retro halo; wallow in the flash, shallow '70s space opera joy of it all." Bonus-wise there's frack all, but it does come in "all over gloss" Steelbook packaging. The physical goodies are the main draw of the 30th Anniversary Collector's Edition of

JURASSIC PARK (out now), comprising a film cell replica, four art cards, a 44-page booklet and a certificate of authenticity. Gosh, you might need to update the will. We said: "Spielberg at his summer blockbuster best, this is thrill cinema at its very best... It's barely dated at all." Arguably the high point of Jim Carrey's CV, Peter Weir's **THE TRUMAN SHOW** (out now) casts

the rubber-faced mugger as a man unaware that his entire existence is just a reality TV show. We said: "proves you can be funny, philosophical and exhilarating at the same time without sacrificing your integrity". Sadly, the bonuses all date back to 2005. Zero marks for effort, Paramount. Finally, Kevin Costner plays a web-footed Mariner in a flooded future Earth in **WATERWORLD** (out now), a scenario which feels increasingly plausible. We said: "The story's a little soggy, a predictable cat-and-mouse affair... It is, however, a triumph of world-building." The bonus offer is the same as Arrow's 2018 Blu-ray, including two additional cuts with extra footage, and an exhaustive (not exhausting) documentary (102 minutes).



NIMONA Smells Like Protean Spirit

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2023 | PG | SVOD

▶ Directors Nick Bruno, Troy Quane

▶ Cast Riz Ahmed, Chloë Grace Moretz, Eugene Lee Yang, Frances Conroy

NETFLIX Shapeshifting punk

Nimona, created by *She-Ra* showrunner ND Stevenson, should have hit the big screen in 2020. A casualty of Blue Sky Studios' brutal closure, the film was mercifully revived by Annapurna Pictures and has now landed on Netflix, still defiant.

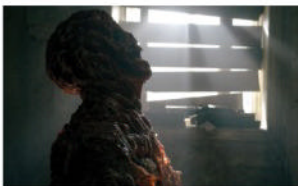
And rightly so. It's not often an animated movie proudly showcases a gay lead: Riz Ahmed's soulful Ballister Boldheart, who's in a relationship with the cheekily named Ambrosius Goldenloin (Eugene Lee Yang). In a city under threat from a monster, they're knights trained to defend its walls.

After being framed for murder, however, Ballister goes on the run to clear his name, which involves actually *befriending* a monster: the hyperactive, shape-changing Nimona (Chloë Grace Moretz). Nimona is sometimes female, sometimes male – a trans character, basically – but so much more, too, including a rhinoceros or a Godzilla-sized city-stomper.

An extremely likeable tornado of metal attitude, zippy quips and unexpected vulnerability, *Nimona's* central performance is bolstered by a witty script and slick production design that references everything from high fantasy to *Akira*. The end result is an inclusive, queer-friendly piece of art that will entertain an audience of any age. **Jayne Nelson**

i ND Stevenson's original comic doubled as a college thesis. Nimona was inspired by Joan of Arc.

"I'm practising my evil glare. Any good?"



THE BREACH

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2023 | 15 | Download

❖ **Ever misremembered a brand name?** Blame a physicist! According to *The Breach*, CERN has been messing with black magic, opening portals to other dimensions, and causing reality glitches. Pesky boffins.

Glimmers of something interesting occasionally shine through the dull relationship drama of this Lovecraftian cosmic horror, but the pacing's off; it feels like a six-part series crunched into 92 minutes. Some gooey effects in the final reel end things on a high note, but overall it's aggressively mediocre. **Sarah Dobbs**



THE BLACK DEMON

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 17 JULY**

2023 | 15 | Blu-ray/DVD/download

❖ **Making a killer shark movie** in a world where *The Meg* and *Deep Blue Sea* already exist is not the greatest of ideas, especially when your film's hobbled by a meagre budget.

Adrian Grünberg gets round this by focusing more on the family at the centre of the action than the titular megalodon (which is menacing an oil rig off the Mexican coast). This would be fine if the family weren't so irritating. The results are so tortuous, they make *Sharknado* look like *Jaws*.

❖ **Extras** A two-minute featurette. **Steve O'Brien**



THE BLOODY JUDGE

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1970 | 18 | Blu-ray

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Jess Franco's** 17th century shocker rides the coat-tails of *Witchfinder General* by portraying infamous "Hanging Judge" George Jeffreys. Christopher Lee perma-scowls in a variety of wigs; anonymous hands fill in to grope a nubile's breasts. Expect vocabulary like "coxcomb" and "lumpkin", and much leering sadism as pretty young witches are whipped and stretched on the rack. Bruno Nicolai's pretty theme adds a touch of class.

❖ **Extras** Two commentaries; producer featurette; deleted scenes; more. **Ian Berriman**



LOLA

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2023 | 15 | Blu-ray/download

❖ **This economical tale sees** two sisters in 1941 using a machine to view transmissions from the future. On teaming up with military intelligence, their hubris has dire consequences.

The found-footage formatting is often strained, but it's an ingenious effort, which tweaks newsreel footage to create effects an indie forebear took years to achieve... What sticks with you is the music – both a jazzy '40s take on "You Really Got Me", and disturbing pop from a dark future timeline.

❖ **Extras** Director/producer commentary. **Ian Berriman**

SCREAM VI

Slicing up the Big Apple

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW**

2023 | 18 | Blu-ray (4K/standard)/DVD/download

▶ Directors Matt Bettinelli-Olpin, Tyler Gillet

▶ Cast Courteney Cox, Melissa Barrera, Jenna Ortega, Jasmin Savoy Brown

❖ After 2022's witty requel, this follow-up represents a dip in quality, despite being the work of the same writer/director quartet.

Its big idea is to relocate the slashing from Woodsboro to New York City as 2022's "core four" survivors go to university. While the radical nature of this shake-up was oversold in the promo, the film certainly makes better use of the Big Apple than, say, *Jason Takes Manhattan*, with sequences where Ghostface wreaks havoc in a busy bodega and a packed subway train feeling fresh for the

franchise. There are other clever ideas, like an early Ghostface unmasking, and a conspiracy theory that heroine Sam was responsible for the 2022 killings.

However, the film feels overly cluttered with Easter eggs: every previous killer is referenced, with the trail leading to a museum of Woodsboro relics. The Ghostface reveal is hard to swallow, relying on Sam not knowing someone's true identity in circumstances where that would seem impossible, and leaving multiple kills with little motivation.

And while the film has several tense set-pieces, they're undercut by the fact that victims keep surviving. *Scream* felt like a film with consequences and sound internal logic; *Scream VI* does not.

❖ **Extras** The writers, directors and a producer provide a first rate commentary, pointing out in-jokes



and Easter eggs and giving insights into the script's evolution. Of the seven featurettes (totalling 62 minutes) on the Blu-ray (NB: the DVD only gets two), the three with a production design focus are fascinating, showing how they dressed a cinema for the Ghostface shrine, recreated an exterior for the "ladder escape" sequence and built both a station and a subway

car. The latter is a stunning piece of work. Fans will also appreciate the chance to get a proper look at artefacts like Stu Macher's party robe. There are also pieces on the switch to NYC, the characters, the Bodega sequence, and the meta touches. **Ian Berriman**

i When the first victim is called by her date, the photo shown on her phone is actor Samara Weaving's real-life husband.

TENTACLES

Jaws dropping

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1977 | 12 | Blu-ray

▶ Director Ovidio G Assonitis

▶ Cast John Huston, Shelley Winters, Bo Hopkins, Henry Fonda

BLU-RAY DEBUT It seems doubtful that Steven Spielberg has ever seen this Italian-made *Jaws* knock-off, but it might have left him thinking of his mechanical Great White and declaring, "Come back, Bruce, all is forgiven."

In deciding to make his aquatic menace a giant octopus, director Ovidio G Assonitis bit off more than he could chew (much like Bruce). Various represented by fake tentacles, a prop head poking out of the water or a real octopus wrapped around a tiny model boat, it's risible in every form.

In-between octo-attacks the film spins its wheels, seemingly

unclear who the protagonist is. How underwater tunnelling has so infuriated an octopus, or why it's capable of sucking the marrow out of bones, is unclear; at times the film feels like a '50s monster movies homage, but it lacks their "radioactive mutation" rationale.

Ageing Oscar winners are wasted in unrewarding roles: John Huston as a newspaperman with the apparent ability to teleport to any event; Shelley Winters as his sister; Peter Fonda as a construction company president.

It's not a total disaster – there are a few well-shot sequences, like a doomed yacht race, and Stelvio Cipriani's score has its groovily propulsive passages – but overall *Tentacles* is strictly for suckers.

❖ **Extras** Across four interviews, a shambolic picture emerges. Assonitis (28 minutes) details disasters with underwater filming



and effects; "How not make a sea-based film" is cinematographer Roberto D'Ettorre Piazzoli's amused verdict (22 minutes). Costume designer Nicoletta Ercole (15 minutes) was so overwhelmed by inexperience that she burst into tears in front of Ford.

An hour-long piece on effects man Alvaro Passeri showcases a charming character; having moved

into animatronics, we see him conducting an all-animal band! Cult director Luigi Cozzi (20 minutes) also discusses the whole phenomenon of Italian rip-offs. Plus: commentary by a trio of experts; US titles; trailer; gallery; poster. **Ian Berriman**

i According to Ovidio G Assonitis, a young Susan Sarandon was responsible for translating the script into English.

ALAMY



MEDUSA

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2022 | 15 | VOD

▶ Director Anita Rocha da Silveira

▶ Cast Mari Oliveria, Lara Tremouroux, Joana Medeiros

◀ **Dually inspired by the** Greek myth of Medusa (made monstrous as punishment for an affair) and news stories of girl gangs beating up women deemed promiscuous, Anita Rocha da Silveira's film imagines a day-in-the-future Brazil where masked evangelicals patrol the streets terrorising "sluts".

After having her face slashed by a victim who fought back, Mari (Mari Oliveira) becomes fascinated by an actress who was set on fire years ago, taking a job nursing coma patients in the hope of tracking her down. What she finds leads her to fear she's become possessed...

Although the film never takes flight into fully fledged fantasy, da Silveira employs familiar genre tactics: Dario Argento-esque green and red lighting, and stretches of John Carpenter-style one-fingered synths. Those blank white masks recall *Eyes Without A Face*. There's also clever use of disorientating pullbacks where the scene we're watching turns out to be a video on a smartphone. The result is a film which walks the line between realism and surrealism.

Some of its most effective moments are those which parody ultra-conservative YouTubers. A sequence where a perky influencer extolling the virtues of domesticity wipes off her make-up to reveal the livid bruises inflicted by her boyfriend is quietly devastating.

Ian Berriman



RUN RABBIT RUN

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2023 | 15 | SVOD

▶ Director Daina Reid

▶ Cast Sarah Snook, Lily LaTorre, Damon Herriman, Greta Scacchi

▶ **NETFLIX** Though this Aussie chiller also centres on the relationship between a mother and a child, it isn't in the same league as *The Babadook*.

With its sombre tone and focus on familial dysfunction, it's very much elevated horror. Sarah Snook is Sarah, mother to little Mia (Lily LaTorre). After her seventh birthday, Mia begins acting strangely, developing an obsessive interest in meeting Sarah's estranged mother (now in a care home), and insisting that she is a girl in old photos – Sarah's sister Alice, who went missing in childhood.

The kid who claims they're actually a dead person is a well-worn horror trope, stretching back to 1977's *Audrey Rose*, and *Run Rabbit Run* doesn't do anything especially novel with it. The central twist is eminently guessable well before it finally arrives. And the use of hoary old tropes like flickering lights is tiresome.

Still, Daina Reid and her DoP Bonnie Elliott conjure some arresting visuals once the film ventures to Sarah's childhood home, which is surrounded by breathtaking natural vistas. They also render a cuddly bunny (whose arrival coincides with the onset of the trouble) unnervingly sinister.

The soundscape – all cello bowing and portentous wind howl – is effectively ominous. And Snook impresses as Sarah, whose unravelling eventually threatens to reach *Repulsion*-esque proportions. Ian Berriman



BURIAL GROUND

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1981 | 18 | Blu-ray (4K/standard)

▶ Director Andrea Bianchi

▶ Cast Karin Well, Gianluigi Chirizzi, Simone Mattioli, Antonella Antinori

◀ **An Italian zombie film not** overly concerned with niceties like exposition, *Burial Ground* gets straight down to it: horny couples fumbling within nine minutes, zombies attacking within another eight.

It has five things going for it. Firstly, the zombies' surprising aptitudes. This lot can climb, wield a scythe, make a battering ram and even operate a circular saw! The undead masks, though crude, are all individualised – gotta love the guy with worms permanently dangling from one eye socket. It's set in a 17th century villa, whose frescos and velvet drapes (not often does a zombie film have a credit for *curtains*) make for a striking backdrop. The score layers strings, electronic warbling and percussive elements to create a gloriously unholy racket.

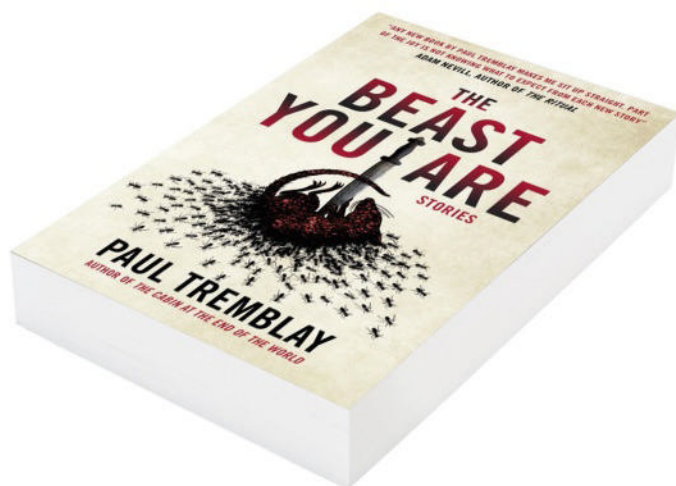
Plus it's just so *messed up*, the peak being a scene where a zombified, breast-fixated child (played by a 25-year-old midget) bites off his mother's nipple, adding a troubling Freudian aspect to the general nightmarish air.

▶ **Extras** Carried over from the 2016 Blu-ray: a featurette on the director (27 minutes); a grotty "Grindhouse" print; expert commentary; deleted scenes; trailer. New: another critical commentary, an interview with breast-biting actor Peter Bark (14 minutes); contextualising talking heads on the Italian film industry and the composers (22/28 minutes). Plus: A3 poster. Ian Berriman

(ROUND UP)



More recent movies coming to disc include horror-comedy **RENFIELD** (17 July, Blu-ray/DVD), in which Nicolas Cage plays Dracula and Nicholas Hoult the long-suffering underling who's had enough. We said: "A four-course banquet of gory splatstick... A rare film that might have benefited from being a little longer." Bonuses include a commentary, 17 minutes of deleted scenes, a look at a trimmed dance sequence and five more featurettes. A family's move to a spooky abbey is the spark for demonic doings in **THE POPE'S EXORCIST** (out now, DVD); Russell Crowe waves the crucifix as real-life priest Father Gabriel Amorth. We said: "Throws every demonic trick at the screen... Silly but not entirely unwatchable." Extras: two featurettes, totalling 11 minutes. Earthlings return to pillage Pandora in **AVATAR: THE WAY OF WATER** (out now, 3D/4K/Blu-ray/DVD), plotting to subdue rebellion by killing human-turned-Na'vi Jake Sully. The film is now streaming on Disney+, and the bonus offer (including three hours' worth of "Inside Pandora's Box" featurettes) was available with April's digital release. But if you simply *must* file a copy on your shelf, here it is. We said: "Structurally it feels more akin to a TV show than a film... James Cameron does some sublime world-building." Finally, the latest TV box sets are **THE LAST OF US** Season One (17 July, Blu-ray/DVD), **STAR TREK: LOWER DECKS** Season Three (31 July, Blu-ray/DVD) and **THE WALKING DEAD** Season 11 (out now, Blu-ray/DVD).



THE BEAST YOU ARE



Free night terror with every copy



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

368 pages | Paperback/ebook/
audiobook

► Author **Paul Tremblay**

► Publisher **Titan Books**

◉ **There's a monster out there**, and it's coming to get you. That's the main take-away from almost all of the 15 stories in this new collection by Paul Tremblay. Yes, the monster might take different forms, but it's definitely out there, and it's definitely coming to get you.

A sense of inevitability permeates the whole collection; Tremblay mostly eschews quick scares in favour of an uncanny atmosphere of creeping and inescapable dread. (If you caught *Knock At The Cabin*, M Night Shyamalan's adaptation of *The Cabin At The End Of The World*, you'll have some idea of the vibe. Though Tremblay's not to blame for the awful ending of the movie.)

In the opening story, "Ice Cold Lemonade 25¢ Haunted House

Tour: 1 Per Person", Tremblay makes himself the main character, a man haunted by an unforgivable childhood offence; in "I Know You're There", the spectre of a former lover never quite disappears; and in "Red Eyes", a girl watches helplessly as her sister embraces a creature that'll destroy their family. Over and over, Tremblay tells stories that refuse to wrap up neatly. Instead, he drops his readers into nightmare worlds and leaves them there, alongside his characters, to shiver in the dark and wait for their fate.

That sense that things might keep happening even after we've stopped reading is magnified by the way Tremblay often revisits characters and situations from his earlier works. The main characters from *A Head Full Of Ghosts*, his novel about the televised exorcism of a teenage girl, pop up more than once; while these stories are technically all standalone, if you're new to Tremblay's work you'd be better off starting with that book rather

than jumping in here. You get the impression that if you asked him, Tremblay would be able to tell you what those girls are up to today, as if maybe they've never stopped haunting him.

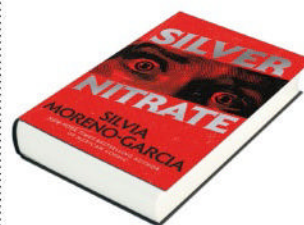
The other thing that haunts the narrative? Covid-19. Two stories, "The Last Conversation" and "The Blog At The End Of The World", talk explicitly about a pandemic; it's hard to believe the latter, at least, was written pre-2020 given how precisely it captures the mid-Covid mood of irrational fear. Presented as a series of reverse-chronological blog posts and comments, it'd be a contender for the most formally daring story in the book – except then there's "The Beast You Are".

The story that gives the collection its title is by far the longest and the strangest. Like *Watership Down* meets Shirley Jackson by way of Rupi Kaur, this is a novella about a community of anthropomorphic animals performing a ritual sacrifice, and it's all written in free verse. Yep, all 205 pages of it.

Putting out something so unrepentantly unconventional and trusting your readers to get on board is the kind of move only a writer truly confident in his powers would attempt. And it works. Oddly, this may also be the most cinematic of the stories in this collection, though it's hard to imagine any director wanting to step up to adapt these scenes – cats, dogs and toads awaiting the whims of a giant moss monster; city halls full of stuffy animal politicians fleeing the blade of a slasher – for the big screen.

Even without the visuals, this is a difficult story to forget, once read. This whole collection has its own perverse logic, one that doesn't belong to the sensible daytime world. It feels trite to say, but there is something truly nightmarish about these stories. We'd wager Paul Tremblay has never slept with his foot sticking out from under the covers – because who knows when the monster under the bed might reach out to grab it? **Sarah Dobbs**

i The creepy pencil drawing of a ghost in the first story was actually something Tremblay's daughter Emma drew.



SILVER NITRATE



► **RELEASED 18 JULY**

336 pages | Hardback/ebook/
audiobook

► Author **Silvia Moreno-Garcia**

► Publisher **Jo Fletcher Books**

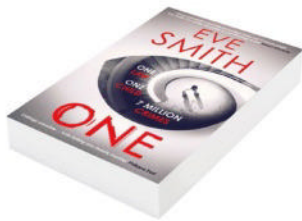
◉ **There's just something** compelling about the idea of stumbling across a long-lost film. Admit it: if you came across a copy of *London After Midnight*, there's no way you'd be able to resist hitting play. But sometimes, maybe films get lost for a reason...

In '90s Mexico City, cult horror-loving sound editor Montserrat runs into the director of a legendarily cursed lost film and, inevitably, finds herself helping him with his scheme to recover the stolen film reels and finally finish the movie. Unfortunately, embedded in the highly combustible film stock is an occult ritual, and by re-editing in a new audio track, Montserrat unwittingly unleashes something horrible.

Appropriately for a novel about the power of film, *Silver Nitrate* is such a deeply cinematic book that you can almost hear the whirring of the projector while you read. Moreno-Garcia's prose is rich and evocative, her characters vividly drawn and endearing, and her take on black magic insidiously seductive. When the horror kicks in, it makes an impact – she even sneaks in a couple of decent jump scares.

The resolution feels a little too easy, given how successfully the horrors of the situation had been conjured up. But this is a story about closure and the possibility of joy after trauma, so maybe we'll let it off.

Sarah Dobbs



ONE

★★★★★

► **RELEASED 20 JULY**
300 pages | Paperback/ebook
► Author Eve Smith
► Publisher Orenda Books

✦ **With global warming** causing worldwide eco-chaos, an ultra-radical political party called ONE comes to power in the UK. Its ideology is based on controlling ever-decreasing resources, and its main policy is the one-child law.

Kai works in the Ministry of Population and Family Planning as what is known as a “baby reaper”, rigorously making sure that no one spawns a second child. She’s convinced the party knows best – until she discovers the horrifying truth about her own family.

Eve Smith has been building a reputation as the new Michael Crichton, with a brace of well-received techno-thrillers under her belt. *One* is another solid, sci-fi conspiracy nailbiter, with nods to such current real world issues as the migrant crisis, anti-vaxxers, the anti-abortion movement and, of course, environmental crises. It’s a pacy, plot-driven page-turner, which gives you a lot to think about and has plenty of twists.

But while it engages the brain, it never really connects on an emotional level. Few of the supporting characters feel like they live outside of the page, and potentially harrowing or poignant moments fall a little flat. Some of the plotting also feels a little formulaic, with Kai continually bouncing between characters who reveal just a little bit more backstory each time. But overall, Eve Smith remains, ahem, one to watch.

Dave Golder



THE JUDAS BLOSSOM

The Path Of Khan

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**
450 pages | Paperback/ebook
► Author Stephen Aryan
► Publisher Angry Robot

✦ **At first glance, *The Judas Blossom*** appears to be a work of historical fiction akin to Bernard Cornwell, rooted in a real time and place. In this case, it’s Persia circa 1260 as the voracious Mongol Empire expands ever westward.

The tale unfolds through four distinct voices; Hulagu is the leader of the military campaign but discontent stirs within the Ilkhanate over the selection of the next Great Khan, threatening to unleash civil war.

Kokochin is Hulagu’s newest bride, the last survivor of her tribe, spared for her beauty. Kaivon is a Persian warrior seeking revenge against the Mongols for conquering his people. Lastly, Temujin is Hulagu’s son, whose lack of bloodthirstiness is a constant source of disappointment to his bellicose father.

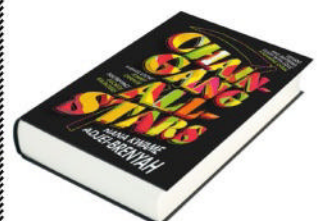
It’s Temujin who brings the fantasy element to the fore as he slowly taps into a power lying dormant within, becoming both thrilled by and terrified of the possibilities afforded by his strange talents. However, much

of the suspense and excitement comes from Kaivon and Kokochin, as they separately plot against the Empire from the inside. Halagu wants to realise his grandfather Genghis Khan’s dream of uniting the world under Mongol rule, yet holding a fractious empire together is far more complicated than slaughtering a routed foe. He must juggle competing factions within the Empire alongside religious conflicts between paganism, Islam and Christianity.

“Colourful prose and intertwining plotlines”

The battle scenes are viscerally thrilling, particularly a vividly chaotic account of assaulting the walls of a city under siege. The attention to detail in the world-building is also impressive. Our only quibble is with Kokochin, whose modern, progressive values seem at odds with the cultural landscape that surrounds her. But the colourful prose and intertwining plotlines should pull readers back for the next volume of the series. **David West**

i Stephen Aryan will be a guest at this year’s FantasyCon, taking place in Birmingham (15-17 September) – bit.ly/fantcon.



CHAIN-GANG ALL-STARS

★★★★★

► **RELEASED 13 JULY**
400 pages | Hardback/ebook/
audiobook
► Author Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah
► Publisher Harvill Secker

✦ **Suzanne Collins claimed** she was inspired to write *The Hunger Games* after channel-surfing between reality TV and news about the Iraq War. You wouldn’t be surprised if Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah was up late flipping between a documentary on the Innocence Project and professional wrestling when he got the idea for *Chain-Gang All-Stars*.

In this near-future dystopian version of the US, prison inmates compete in televised death matches. Competitors get new names (“Hurricane Staxxx”), personalised weapons and theme music; fans cheer for their favourites and lap up the violence. The most famous All-Star is Loretta Thurwar, a hammer-wielding terror who’s only a few matches away from freedom... until the powers-that-be change the rules.

You can probably guess the rest of the plot. Storywise, there are few surprises. What makes it compelling is how complicit Adjei-Brenyah makes the reader: it’s hard not to get sucked into the drama of the games, in spite of everything. The range of different narrators provides a smart 360-degree perspective of the too-familiar society that demands murder for entertainment, while footnotes include horrifying statistics about the injustices of the real-life US penal system. Stirring, upsetting stuff all round. **Sarah Dobbs**



DOCTOR WHO NOVELISATIONS

Targets acquired

► **RELEASED 13 JULY**

186/167/160/183/249 pages | Paperback/ebook/audiobook

► Authors Phil Ford, Keith Temple, Pete McTighe, Peter Harness, Stephen Gallagher

► Publisher BBC Books

◉ **Prepare to rearrange your** bookshelves, *Who* fans, as the latest batch of additions to the classic Target range is here.

The Waters Of Mars (★★★★★) is a briskly-paced “base under siege” tale, complicated by the fact that the destruction of a Mars base due to a water-based parasite is a “fixed point in time” the Doctor’s not supposed to meddle with. Adapting the 2009 episode he co-wrote with Russell T Davies, Phil Ford makes sensible tweaks (the infected humans’ bodies now reabsorb the water constantly flowing out of them). The addition of an ancient warning from the Ice Warriors is also a neat touch. Most pleasing of all is a much-expanded childhood flashback for base

commander Adelaide Brooke, just the sort of thing Malcolm Hulke would pen for the ‘70s Targets.

Keith Temple’s *Planet Of The Ood* (★★★★★) benefits from the ability to switch to Donna Noble’s down-to-earth perspective, as she compares TARDIS travel to a Margate roller coaster, or the Ood to the PG Tips chimps. While the 2008 episode won plaudits for its new perspective on the Ood (alien servants of humanity who are here revealed as slaves), our heroes did feel a little like observers.

Temple now gives them a slightly more active role, as they blow up an Ood conversion centre. Other neat additions include Ood climbing the walls Spidey-style using suckers on their hands and feet (take note, Russell). There’s still no explanation of how a 30’ by 20’ brain can survive *sans body*, but it’s a glorious pulp sci-fi image, so who cares, eh?

Left-leaning viewers had steam coming out of their ears when 2018’s “Kerblam!” turned out *not*

to be anti-Amazon invective. Pete McTighe’s book (★★★★★) may mollify some a little: due to his tinkering, it no longer ends with the Doctor’s fam enthusing about a corporation with a bullying manager, run by a homicidal AI. He also at least gestures towards explaining *how* exactly you weaponise bubble wrap – though why anyone would leave the liquified remains from tests sitting about in a vat remains a mystery...

McTighe generously sprinkles fan-pleasing continuity references throughout, including flashback cameos for the Seventh Doctor and Ace – appropriately, as the original story has a season 25 vibe.

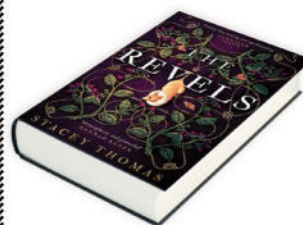
Having two episodes to work with, Peter Harness’s adaptation of globe-hopping thriller *The Zygon Invasion* (★★★★★) is the least expansive entry here, but he does provide further insight into the resentment driving Bonnie, leader of a terrorist Zygon faction, cleverly drawing on Clara’s feelings for late love Danny Pink. The fact that Harness dwells on Bonnie’s first experience, ahem, expelling waste does suggest a lavatorial fixation, though...

Otherwise, this is essentially the story as transmitted, with the odd wry aside: we learn that Jimi Hendrix travelled with the Doctor, and that UNIT’s Black Archive collection includes an Ice Warrior pencil sharpener.

Finally, *Warriors’ Gate And Beyond* collects an expanded novelisation of Stephen Gallagher’s 1981 Tom Baker tale (first released on audio in 2019), 2021 follow-up *The Kairos Ring* and new 18-page short story “The Little Book Of Fate”. All feature Time Lord companion Romana and the time-sensitive Tharils.

The latter, which sees the Eighth Doctor visiting a travelling fair in post-WWI Cumberland, is little more than a Doctor/companion reunion vignette. Still, the setting is an apt one given the Tharils’ use of mirrors and freak show physiognomy, and the *Who* veteran shows his prose writing is superior to those new series whippersnappers. **Calvin Baxter**

i *The Zygon Invasion* reveals where the Doctor got his question mark collar shirts from: a stage magician called Maskelyne.



THE REVELS

★★★★★

► **RELEASED 20 JULY**

352 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

► Author Stacey Thomas

► Publisher HQ

◉ **Historical fiction can be hit** or miss. Some authors can bore the reader with infodumps about the era, while others introduce modern-day anachronisms and lose authenticity. Stacey Thomas has managed to avoid both faults in her debut novel, which is set during the English Civil War, and that’s commendable. Unfortunately, however, *The Revels*’ plot could fit on the back of a postage stamp.

Nicholas Pearce is apprenticed to a former witch-hunter turned judge who must decide whether a string of women accused of witchcraft are guilty. Awkwardly, Nicholas is a witch himself: he can hear the dead singing. It’s a fascinating scenario, but little actually happens except for endless repetitive conversations, and the book’s prose style is sometimes so disjointed that it’s easy to lose track of who’s speaking (re-reading of paragraphs is often required).

Big reveals plop onto the page with no drama attached, and there’s also an emotional disconnect between the action and Nicholas as its narrator. He recites what’s happening with a coldness that’s particularly troubling when he’s watching accused women being tortured for confessions; he doesn’t care, so you don’t either. The book – and Nicholas – do stir into life for the final act, but by then any spell on the reader has long since been broken. **Jayne Nelson**



AFTER DEATH

★★★★★

► RELEASED 18 JULY

382 pages | Hardback/ebook/
audiobook

► Author Dean Koontz

► Publisher Thomas & Mercer

❖ **What would you do if you died, but were resurrected** – through a combination of nanobots and luck – with the ability to connect to all the digital data flying around the world? Probably not what protagonist Michael Mace does for most of *After Death*, which is pretty much sod all.

What initially promises to be a black twist on the superhero genre turns into a watered-down Tarantino-esque crime romp with quipping gangsters, a psycho-killer rogue agent and conspiracy theories, all wrapped up in a chase/road movie narrative.

There are some bravura passages here when Dean Koontz effectively ramps up the tension or surprises you by inverting clichés or inventing amusing bizarre backstories for minor characters. The main problem, however, is that the book seems to want to be a satire – or, at least, funny – but Koontz is no Tarantino when it comes to snappy dialogue.

As a result, a whole bunch of convenient plot devices that you might have forgiven in a wittier book instead come as across as contrived and ludicrous. And when Mace does finally make full use of his powers to change the world at the climax, it's a tad neat and fairytale-ish. Koontz drops a big hint that this is his intention (note the names used) but it still feels like a wasted opportunity.

Dave Golder



THE OTHERS OF EDENWELL

★★★★★

► RELEASED OUT NOW!

448 pages | Paperback/ebook

► Author Verity M Holloway

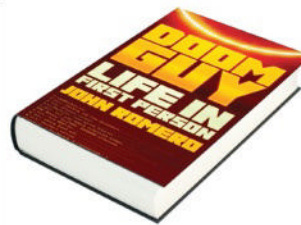
► Publisher Titan Books

❖ **The spectre of the Great War** looms over this historical novel, both figuratively and literally. It's 1917, and most of England's young men have been sent off to the front in France. Most, but not all.

At a Norfolk wellness retreat, bird-loving groundskeeper Freddie meets troubled rich kid Eustace, and the two of them become close. But as the retreat fills up with injured soldiers, Freddie and Eustace find the war has come to them – most terrifyingly, in the shape of an undead creature lurking beyond Edenwell's walls.

There's no shortage of stories about the horrors of war, but this feels like a completely original take. The enforced isolation of Edenwell means that its residents have to rely on censored postcards and scraps of hysterical newspaper coverage for their news; as a result, the fighting often feels less urgent than the folk stories about the magic well that gave the retreat its name.

The remote setting allows debut novelist Verity M Holloway to craft a claustrophobic atmosphere of gothic madness, where doctors prescribe treatments as likely to kill as to cure. Yet at its heart, this is a love story – an impossible one, built on mutual understanding, yearning and far too much horror for anyone to bear alone. Tender, unsettling, and oddly beautiful, this book is a real heartbreaker. Sarah Dobbs



DOOM GUY

★★★★★

► RELEASED 20 JULY

288 pages | Hardback/ebook/
audiobook

► Author John Romero

► Publisher Abrams Press

❖ **John Romero is the** co-creator of the most influential modern videogames franchise, *Doom*. But his story has a gritty start. He grew up in a young part-Mexican, part-Yaqui family with a violent father and uncles who ran drugs. His precocious talent gave him an escape route into computing, and by the age of 15, he was coding for the USAF in Cambridgeshire.

The bulk of this autobiography details the three significant incidents fans want to hear about: id Software blowing everyone's mind with *Doom*; the troubled launch of *Quake* leading to Romero's split from id; and the subsequent humiliation of Romero's 2000 mega-flop *Daikatana*.

Doom Guy is not gossipy. Romero puts his side across but simultaneously tries to mend fences, stressing how he remains friends with former teammates. The prose is straightforward and unadorned, but the love of sci-fi and games is heartfelt.

The author's at his happiest when describing days of programming and nights of *Dungeons & Dragons*, devoid of middle-aged cynicism. He bigs up his achievements but also blames himself for management failures. Given nostalgia for the '90s, this memoir may have a broad audience, but it will be most interesting to those who fondly remember scouring magazines for news of his next big thing. Dave Bradley

REISSUES

Our reviewer was deeply impressed by Mariana Enriquez's **OUR SHARE OF NIGHT** (★★★★★, out now, Granta). First



published in Argentina in 2019, it's set during the brutal decades of the country's military dictatorship (and its aftermath), and centres on a rich family with a penchant for human sacrifice. Expect occult rituals, family secrets, political oppression and grisly violence. We said: "Using fantasy and horror tropes to tackle difficult history isn't a new idea, but Enriquez makes it feel fresh and unsettling, and keeps the pages turning. Outstanding." The Statue of Liberty forms the spine of Lidia Yuknavitch's **THRUST** (★★★★★, out now, Canongate), which

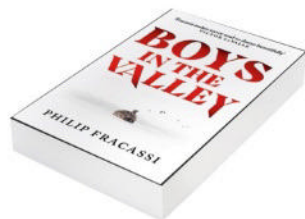


flits back and forth between multiple times and places, employing a variety of narrative forms.

Elements include a girl who travels in time by swimming, a murderer who feverishly draws imaginary cities in his own blood, and a kinky correspondence between the designer of the statue and his muse. We said: "A challenging, wrongfooting and quite bonkers read." Finally, popular TikTokker Stacey McEwan's **LEDGE** (★★★★★, out now, Angry Robot) is centred on an ice-bound society whose people are brought rations by the winged Glacians –



in return for a periodic sacrifice. The latest victim selected is Dawsyn; when a half-Galacian offers to help them both escape, a romance develops... We said: "The heroes are compelling, rugged but likeable, and there's a confident immediacy to the prose."



BOYS IN THE VALLEY

★★★★★

► RELEASED 13 JULY

352 pages | Paperback/ebook/
audiobook

► Author Philip Fracassi
► Publisher Orbit

◉ **This chilly supernatural** novel is not lacking in horror clichés, but Philip Fracassi's assured writing and a somewhat vicious streak make for a compelling read.

Following the death of his parents, young Peter Barlow is sent to St Vincent's Orphanage for Boys in rural Pennsylvania. It's a harsh place, freezing cold and ruled over by the cruel Father Poole and his enforcer, Brother Johnson. Into this hotbed of bullying and abuse comes the local sheriff, bringing with him a sickly stranger. The man doesn't survive the night, but his arrival changes something in the orphanage, and in the boys. Soon, Peter and a handful of others are forced to fight for their survival.

Boys In The Valley opens with a murder-suicide and only gets bleaker from there. Fracassi depicts the harsh nature of life in the orphanage with a clear-eyed fury, particularly in the novel's first half, while also setting up a growing supernatural threat.

The nature of that evil means that Fracassi pulls his punches when it comes to Catholicism itself – arguably the real villain here. Then again, perhaps it's hard to be too critical of the Church when the monsters in your book are literal demons! Regardless of your religious views, this is an atmospheric and bracingly violent novel.

Will Salmon



THE JASAD HEIR

★★★★★

► RELEASED 18 JULY

523 pages | Hardback/ebook/
audiobook

► Author Sara Hashem
► Publisher Orbit

◉ **That feeling when you're**

20 pages from the end of a novel and you realise the story isn't going to end in this volume... as genre readers, we've all been there, although it never makes "To be continued" sting any less, especially when the beginning of the story is as compelling as Sara Hashem's debut.

Sylvia is a chemist's apprentice in a backwater village. She's also, secretly and very reluctantly, Essiya, last surviving heir to a neighbouring kingdom, Jasad, that was destroyed 10 years ago. Brutalised and bitter, Sylvia wants nothing more than a quiet life with no ties to anyone or anything, but before you can say, "Oops, I accidentally murdered a guard", she's been pressganged into a sort of intra-kingdom Hunger Games.

Most of this first volume focuses on Sylvia training for the contest, under the supervision of Arin, the unsettlingly smart and self-controlled heir to the kingdom she's representing. The fact that said kingdom's enormous army led the invasion of her homeland complicates the dynamic between the two, as do the many, many secrets everyone's keeping.

The writing is sometimes wobbly – the dialogue in particular – but the plotting is razor-sharp, the mysteries intriguing and the character development deeply satisfying.

Roll on book two. Nic Clarke



THE POMEGRANATE GATE

★★★★★

► RELEASED 20 JULY

509 pages | Hardback

► Author Ariel Kaplan
► Publisher Solaris

◉ **Creating a fantasy world** that draws on the mythology of our own is nothing new – but Jewish mythology is underexplored, and this novel entwines it with one of the darker periods of Jewish history.

Set during the days of the Inquisition, when Jews across Iberia were told to convert or leave – without their possessions – *The Pomegranate Gate* tells the stories of Naftaly Cresques and Toba Peres, who are attempting to flee when they stumble across two strange-eyed men in woodland. Toba follows them through a gate to another world, where she learns more about the magical Mazik people and her own family's history with them – and about the "mirror effect" which means things that happen in our world are echoed in theirs. Naftaly is left behind, joining with Toba's worried grandmother to plan her safe return in a land that is increasingly unfriendly to them.

This is an impressive piece of fantasy storytelling with two fully realised worlds, peopled with flawed characters making good and bad decisions for entirely understandable reasons. It's the first of a trilogy, so unfortunately you won't get a full resolution, but the unfolding mysteries here are satisfyingly explored, with a lyrical writing style that's a pleasure to sink into.

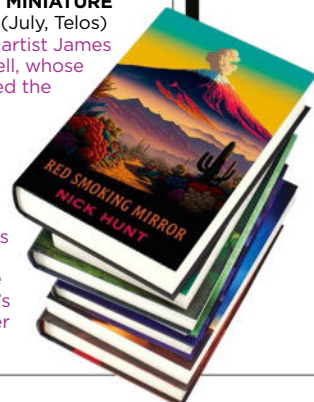
Rhian Drinkwater

ALSO OUT

There's plenty more titles we couldn't fit in. Juhani Karila's **SUMMER FISHING IN LAPLAND** (out now, Pushkin Press) concerns a woman visiting her remote family farm; she has three days to catch the pike in a pond, or she and the love of her life will die!

Blending fantasy, thriller, romance and comedy, it also includes magical creatures from Finnish mythology. After an ebook debut, books one and two of Leia Stone's YA quadrilogy *Kings Of Avalier* have now come to paperback: **THE LAST DRAGON KING** and **THE BROKEN ELF KING** (out now, HQ).

This fantasy romance centres on the relationship between Drae, a widower Dragon King, and Arwen, an 18-year-old suitably magical to produce the heir that can save his line. Described as "the love child of JG Ballard and Ursula K Le Guin", Nick Hunt's debut **RED SMOKING MIRROR** (out now, Swift) is set in 16th century Mexico. In this alternate history, the Reconquista (where Christian forces ended Muslim rule in what's now southern Spain) didn't happen, and the first ships that crossed the Atlantic were crewed by Moors, not Spaniards. Samira Ahmed is one of the editors of teen anthology **MAGIC HAS NO BORDERS** (out now, HarperCollins), which sees ancient tales featuring folkloric beings like chudails, peris and jinn reimagined by 14 authors from the South Asian diaspora. Finally, coffee table book **MINIATURE MARVELS** (July, Telos) celebrates artist James E McConnell, whose work graced the covers of Western, crime and romance pulps, as well as sci-fi novels like Edgar Rice Burroughs's *John Carter* books.





Silvia Moreno-Garcia

The Mexican-Canadian novelist is warmed by her fan response...



MARTIN DEE

Describe the room in which you typically write.

It varies. These days I'm trying to write standing up, using a tripod desk.

Do you find it helpful to listen to music while writing?

I've made playlists for several of my novels to share for promotional purposes. For *Silver Nitrate*, I picked a mix of heavy metal and electropop songs which I think reflected the '90s and supernatural vibe of the novel. You can find the playlist by going to the Penguin Random House Spotify channel.

Which of your books was the most difficult to write?

Anything that is historical requires more research. For *Silver Nitrate*, I had to learn about early 20th century occultism and film editing.

Is there anything about one of your books which you wish you could travel back in time and "fix"?

New editions of several of my older novels have been recently released. Most of them have corrections or small changes. In the case of *Untamed Shore*, the original publisher was a small press and they let several typos slip into the book, so I was glad to go back and fix them.

Do you have any writing "bad habits" that you have to watch?

There are certain words I like to use repeatedly, and I have to do a find and replace through the manuscript to make sure I don't overuse them.

Have you ever come up with a good plot idea in a dream?

Sure. I normally write them down. I write all my ideas down, whether it's fully formed or just a mental image.

What would be your desert island book?

Maybe *Moby-Dick*. Something chunky and meaty. Or the complete stories of Ray Bradbury.

Is there any author whose writing ability you envy?

Lavie Tidhar. He's my good friend, but I'm so jealous of his mastery of the written word. I also

“Writers cobble together income from different sources”

love Tim Powers. I was thrilled when he blurbbed *Silver Nitrate*.

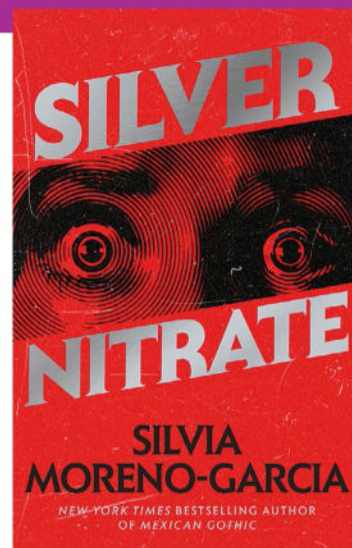
Where's the oddest place you've seen one of your books?

A friend sent me a photo of my book in Japan. So I guess I'm big in Japan now, like the song says.

What's the best gift you've ever received from a reader?

Someone gave me a very long, hand-knitted scarf and it's very useful in the winter.

What's the biggest misconception people have



about being a professional author?

Everyone lives in a mansion and gets to write whatever they want whenever they want. Writers are freelancers and they generally cobble together an income from different sources. It's also not an upward trajectory. You are only as good as your last book. I've met several writers who were big names back in the day and through a combination of factors are barely remembered or don't work any more. It takes a certain type of savviness to be a writer and to remain beyond a book or two. ●

Silver Nitrate is out on 18 July, published by Jo Fletcher Books.



DOCTOR STRANGE

Carry On Doctor



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher **Marvel Comics**

► Writer **Jed MacKay**

► Artists **Pasqual Ferry, Andy MacDonald**

ISSUES 1-4 **Coming back from**

the dead is rarely a problem in superhero comics; what's more important is what comes next, and the latest Marvel hero to conveniently return to the land of the living is Dr Stephen Strange.

Having solved his own murder and reclaimed the title of Sorcerer Supreme, Strange is now back in action, and this latest relaunch for his ongoing monthly title sees him facing off against a typical array of magical weirdness. At the same time, he's having to figure out the ups and downs of his marriage to

interdimensional warrior Clea (who briefly took over his role while he was deceased) – and also somehow solve the mystery of who's launched a campaign of brutal violence against all of his worst enemies.

The shadow of Stan Lee and Steve Ditko's original '60s run on the character hangs over every *Doctor Strange* run, and writer Jed MacKay certainly isn't trying to reinvent the wheel or upend expectations here. Much of the action in these first four issues is devoted to re-establishing the typical status quo of Strange's world, both in New York and the magical realms beyond. While there are plenty of references to current Marvel continuity, they never become incomprehensible,

and this relaunch is surprisingly accessible for new readers.

It helps that each issue so far is built around a roughly self-contained adventure (in a similar way to Marvel's recent *Fantastic Four* relaunch), bringing a more satisfying feel to the storytelling – especially in issue three, where Strange encounters long-time adversary Dormammu.

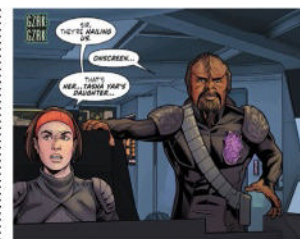
There's also an enjoyable focus on the relationship between Strange and Clea, with typical marriage issues being magnified to epic proportions (and long-term secrets lurking in the background). MacKay throws in some fun cameos from a selection of Marvel heroes including Spider-Man and Moon Knight too, emphasising Strange's status as the Marvel

“Each issue so far is built around a roughly self-contained adventure”

Universe's magical problem-solver. The result is a comic that's well-crafted, slickly produced and eminently comfortable, aided by stylish and elegant art from Pasqual Ferry. The visuals frequently showcase some eye-catching design and pull off impressive set-pieces, although there aren't any moments that truly push the envelope or get close to the genuine weirdness of the best *Doctor Strange* comics.

However, while this new take on the Sorcerer Supreme isn't yet an absolute must-read, it is a satisfying mystical superhero romp that looks to be taking Stephen Strange in some intriguing and entertaining directions. **Saxon Bullock**

i Stan Lee's original inspiration for *Doctor Strange* was '30s supernatural radio serial Chandu The Magician.



STAR TREK: DEFIANT



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher **IDW**

► Writer **Christopher Cantwell**

► Artist **Angel Unzueta**

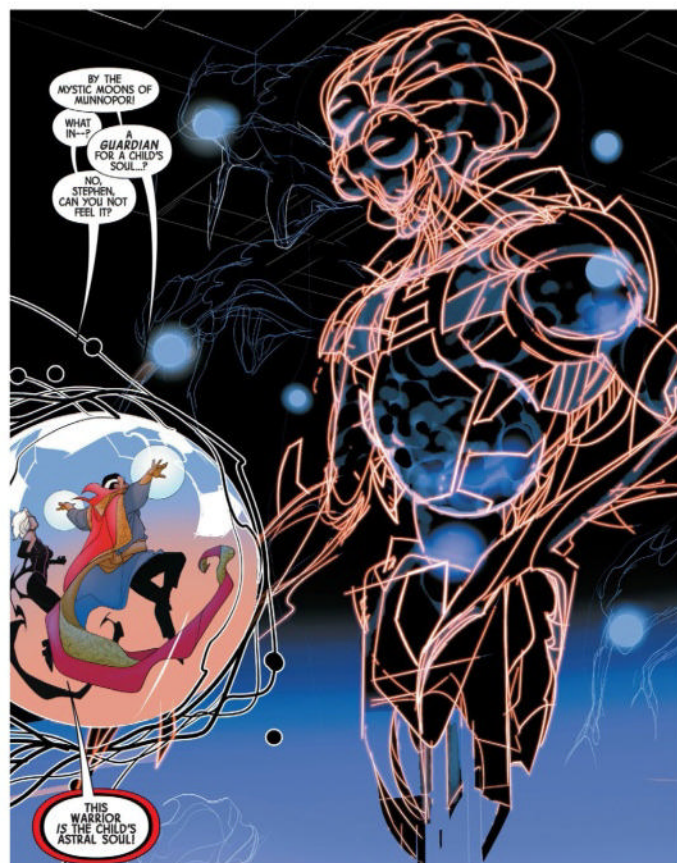
ISSUES 1-4 **If *Star Trek* – IDW's**

team book – is the Federation's Earth's Mightiest Heroes, then *Defiant* is its Dark Avengers. Stemming from a disagreement between Worf and Sisko, it opens with the Klingon stealing the titular starship and assembling a band of confederates including Spock, B'Elanna Torres, Ro Laren and Data's malevolent twin Lore.

Drawing heavily on events in the flagship title, the four issues to date can prove confusing if you're not familiar with that series – a situation exacerbated by its setting up of this month's *Day Of Blood* crossover, which pits both Sisko and Worf's crews against the cloned Klingon Emperor Kahless II. With Christopher Cantwell conveying much of what unfolds through dialogue rather than pictures, it can make for a wordy read, especially as text pieces are interspersed throughout each issue.

Cantwell at least provides artist Angel Unzueta with the opportunity to cut loose on the occasional splash page of a space battle. And while Unzueta's work doesn't boast the clean lines of *Star Trek's* Ramon Rosanas, he depicts the numerous likenesses with impressive accuracy. *Defiant* is currently a worthwhile but inessential companion to *Star Trek*; it will be interesting to see it boldly go in its own direction once *Day Of Blood* concludes.

Stephen Jewell





INDIGO CHILDREN

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher Image Comics

► Writer Rockwell White

► Artists Curt Pires

ISSUES 1-5 This gripping sci-fi thriller is one of the year's most engaging new comics.

Donovan Price is a journalist investigating a very strange story. He's heard tales of people with special powers – rumours which he has good reason to believe.

His journey takes him to Russia, where he meets Alexei, one of four such "Indigos", now an adult. Setting out to locate the others (including a pair rather unfortunately called Fred and Rose... does no one English work at Image?), they draw the attention of some very dangerous enemies indeed.

Indigo Children isn't breaking any new ground. Despite its adult themes and language, this is still basically a superhero story, albeit one that feels as indebted to things like *Homeland* as it does the X-Men.

Still, that real-world grounding makes for a tense and exciting read. With the action moving between the USA, Russia, Kabul and Cairo, Curt Pires's cinematic art (shadowy and atmospheric) gives a real sense of the globetrotting scale of the story, while Rockwell White's scripting is economical, always moving the story briskly along.

Of course, there isn't exactly a shortage of comics about people discovering they have superpowers, but *Indigo Children* cuts through the noise thanks to the confidence of its execution. You've read this story before, but it's rarely been this well told. **Will Salmon**



PLANET OF THE APES

Going viral

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher Marvel Comics

► Writer David F Walker

► Artist David Wachter

ISSUES 1-3 The side-effects of Disney's acquisition of 20th Century Fox continue to reverberate through the world of comics, and the latest Fox property to fall into Marvel's hands is Pierre Boulle's classic sci-fi allegory *Planet Of The Apes*.

This isn't Marvel's first try at the franchise – they produced a run of tie-in comics back in the '70s – but this five-issue miniseries is a different proposition, exploring the world of the 2011-17 reboot trilogy, and acting as a potential launchpad for a long-term *Apes* comics saga.

The story is set in the wake of 2011's *Rise Of The Planet Of The*

“Understands the powerful allegory at the heart of *Planet Of The Apes*”

Apes, as the “Simian Flu” is in the process of wiping out 90% of humanity. While a terrorist group called Exercitus Viri is trying to destroy all apes (and any humans who are helping them), other groups are desperately searching for a cure, and the newly intelligent primates are learning more about their own place in the world.

Three issues in, while David F Walker's script goes a little too heavy on a non-linear story structure, this is a surprisingly strong effort which understands the powerful allegory at the heart of *Planet Of The Apes*, while also knowing that ape vs human fights are inherently cool.

David Wachter's art is both atmospheric and expressive (especially when dealing with apes using sign language), and there's a genuine emotional weight to the story that makes this a compulsive read. Fingers crossed that there's plenty more *Apes*-related comics shenanigans of this standard to come from Marvel.

Saxon Bullock

i David F Walker's previous *Apes* comics include the crossover title *Tarzan On The Planet Of The Apes*.



THE AMBASSADORS

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

(collection out 9 August)

► Publisher Image Comics

► Writer Mark Millar

► Artists Various

ISSUES 1-6 Like *Thunderbirds* crossed with *Dial H For Hero*, *The Ambassadors'* core idea of a global taskforce of superheroes who draw their powers from a central database has endless potential, and it's one that's adeptly executed across this six-parter.

With the first five issues concentrating on heroes from Korea, Brazil, India, France and Australia respectively, the stories are mostly self-contained as they focus on a specific character's induction into the ranks of the Ambassadors; issue three's French Batman and Robin-esque mother and son team and issue five's reformed right-wing Aussie politician are highlights.

A subplot involving Ambassadors founder Choon-He's ongoing battle with her corrupt husband builds up gradually, before coming to a bombastic head in issue six – one which can't help but feel slightly anticlimactic after the shocking revelations of *Nemesis Reloaded's* finale. There's also an outrageous twist about one of the protagonists that's deeply cynical, even for Mark Millar.

He has, though, recruited some top illustrators, with Frank Quitely's art on issue one and rare interiors from Travis Charest on issue three standing out. And as they play a role in crossover title *Big Game*, this isn't the last we'll see of the Ambassadors. **Stephen Jewell**

ALIENS: DARK DESCENT

Lethe Weapons



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Reviewed on PC

► Also available on PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X|S, Xbox One

► Publisher Focus Entertainment

VIDEOGAME *Aliens: Dark Descent*

is a surprisingly smart take on the horror series, bringing real-time tactical battles to bear against the terrifying xenomorphs. Developer Tindalos Entertainment makes every step forward for your squad on the mining planet Lethe feel like a life or death roll of the die, as untold horrors potentially wait just around the corner.

You'll need to use mines, flamethrowers and pulse rifles to

keep the xenomorphs at bay, as well as iconic *Aliens* weaponry like the smart gun and sentry turrets, directing your marines in the heat of battle. Rapidly adapting to new threats like swarms of the creatures as you make your way through derelict buildings and homes is pulse-pounding stuff, but boss fights sadly alleviate the pressure, warning you before a fight and throwing tension out of the window.

Dark Descent takes a page out of *X-COM*'s book by managing your squad after battle – you'll need to treat wounds that can take your marines out of subsequent missions, and even manage sustained trauma. Marines' stress

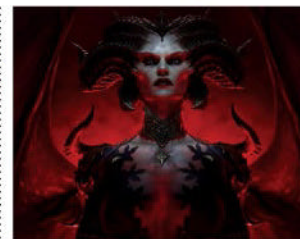
levels also need to be managed during missions. Too many encounters can take a toll, so you'll need to weld doors shut to create a safe room so your squad can take a breather, a refreshing take on the strategy genre.

Sadly there's zero depth in terms of the characters or writing. *Aliens* brilliantly skewered Vietnam War-era US soldiers, but there's no such insight in *Dark Descent* – everyone's just a caricature of a tough soldier, treating every conversation as a battle to be won and a foe to be conquered.

There's an irrational idiot in every horror movie, and in *Dark Descent* we're them. Administrator Hayes bombs every orbital ship after a single xenomorph escapes in an attempt to contain the outbreak, destroying the marines' ship (the USS Otago) in the process. This provides instant strife by positioning us as the offender, but nothing else in the story can match this clever set-up.

Hirun Cryer

i Otago is a region of New Zealand. A Māori term, Otago is translated as "isolated village" or "place of red earth".



DIABLO IV



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Reviewed on PlayStation 5

► Also available on PC, Xbox One, Xbox Series X|S

► Publisher Blizzard Entertainment

VIDEOGAME *Wave goodbye to*

your spare time, because *Diablo* is back. Don't think you get to escape if you're unfamiliar with the series, as it's perfectly welcoming to newbies. All you really need to know is that the slightly miserable fantasy land of Sanctuary is in danger yet again. The demonic Lillith created Sanctuary, but now threatens it. Enter... you!

What form "you" takes is very much up to you. Begin by selecting a class (Barbarian, Necromancer, Sorcerer, Rogue, Druid), and unlock and upgrade abilities to your liking as you level up. As obsessed with loot as the series ever has been, nabbing armour and weapons from chests and fallen enemies is crucial to survival.

Again, however, customising your character comes into play here. That new helmet offers a bit more armour than your current one, but doesn't hold the life regeneration perk you've been relying on. Do you swap or not?

It's the level of control over your character build that largely carries you through the enjoyable campaign, and well beyond into the postgame which holds new difficulties, challenges, and dungeons.

You can even refund skill points (for a price). There's always something new to aim for, making loot chasing a delight rather than a punishment. It really is – ahem – devilishly good.

Luke Kemp

"Would it kill someone to run a hoover round?"



FINAL FANTASY XVI

Clive And Dangerous



★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

▶ Format **PlayStation 5**

▶ Publisher **Square Enix**

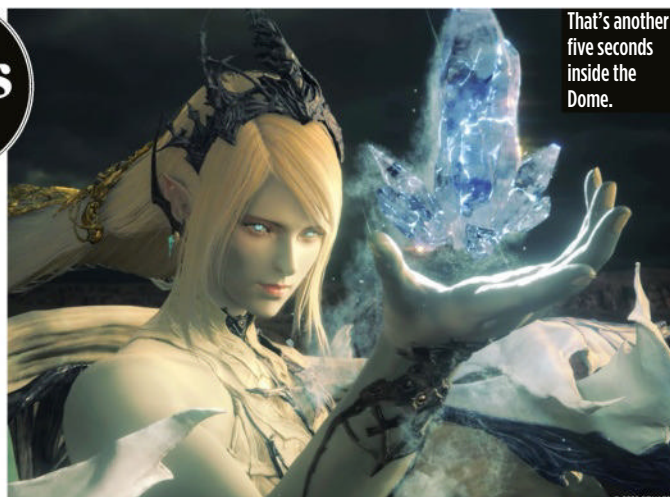
VIDEOGAME It all comes back to the crystals. Seven years after the lukewarm launch of the last mainline *Final Fantasy* game, there's been a crushing sense of expectation surrounding this latest role-playing release – thankfully *XVI* smashes it in more ways than one.

As protagonist Clive (yes, really), you embark on a decade-spanning quest for revenge. The engrossing story combines *Game Of Thrones*-esque politicking with *Tokusatsu*-style powering up and smacking down. An unlikely blend perhaps, but it absolutely works. This is in no small part thanks to both the beautifully presented

performance capture of the talented cast (*GOT* alumni among them), and a committed, sincere tone throughout.

Returning to more traditionally high fantasy trappings, crystal-seamed setting Valisthea presents the series' grandest vision to date. Though not a true open world, its disconnected vistas are all the better for it, with no shortage of stop-and-stare details that'll see you eager to either get lost in the weeds or tumble down the photo mode rabbit hole.

“Crystal-seamed setting Valisthea presents the series' grandest vision to date”



That's another five seconds inside the Dome.

The most obvious change is combat, with turn-based fights left behind in favour of more action-focused fisticuffs. Deftly dodging between attacks before letting rip with a particle effect-laden special move makes for fun dust-ups no matter the scale of the opposition, and boss battles range from magic-fuelled duels to kaiju clashes. These latter

bouts are not too far removed from supersized pro-wrestling matches, and have to be played to be believed.

Luxurious in its presentation and often larger than life, this is, make no mistake, a focused return to form for the series. **Jess Kinghorn**

i Until 19 July, the Tower of London is displaying a replica of Clive's sword, near the Royal Armouries collection.

STAR WARS: SHATTERPOINT

The Struggle is real

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

▶ Number of players **Two**

▶ Publisher **Atomic Mass Games**

TABLETOP GAME This new skirmish game offers a more intimate experience than the large scale battles of *Star Wars: Legion*. In many ways it feels like an equivalent to Atomic Mass Games' *Marvel Crisis Protocol*.

As in that game, players assemble small teams of heroes to do battle across a 36" x 36" play space, with various pieces of terrain dotted about. Victory is determined by each player winning Struggles. To do that you must take Objectives, and that

usually involves combat. Players take it in turns to activate a character (though precisely which character activates each turn is usually random – a mechanic that adds a pleasing tension when you can't get back to a figure in peril). As it's such a low model count game (most Strike Teams comprise around five miniatures) all of your units are pretty tough.

Indeed, just taking out the enemy is not as simple as in other games, with *Shatterpoint*'s rules including an intimidating Combat Tree. Get past the initial impenetrability of this system and it reveals a complex but elegant combat mechanic that allows for different combat effects, such as being



Be careful not to get stuck up that Combat Tree, now.

shoved or disarmed as well as wounded.

The core set includes everything you need to get started except, perplexingly, assembly instructions for the models, which you have to download. The 16 miniatures included are at 40mm – a considerable scale difference to *Star Wars: Legion* and *Warhammer*. While the game's art

style is cartoony, the miniatures have a more realistic look, and are well detailed. *Shatterpoint* is undoubtedly expensive to get started with, but there's a lot in the box and – an occasionally obtuse rulebook aside – very little to quibble with. **Will Salmon**

i Also available: additional boxes featuring Clone Wars-era Obi-Wan Kenobi, Count Dooku, and other supporting characters.



SHARKS

Shark! Shark! As *Meg 2: The Trench* surfaces, here's a quiz to clear the beaches...

Quizmaster Nick Setchfield, Editor At Large

QUESTION 1

Name the two-part *The Six Million Dollar Man* adventure that pitted Steve Austin against trained sharks.

QUESTION 2

What was the name of the toothless shark "worse than its bite" who appeared in the pages of *Monster Fun*?

QUESTION 3

In *Deep Blue Sea*, the mako sharks are being genetically engineered in a bid to cure which ailment?

QUESTION 4 Picture Question

Name this Marvel supervillain.

QUESTION 5

Which legendary SF author pitched a *Jaws 2* storyline involving a giant squid?

QUESTION 6

The voices of Will Smith, Robert De Niro and Renée Zellweger feature in which animated movie from 2004?

QUESTION 7

What was Dr Evil's "one simple request" in *Austin Powers: International Man Of Mystery*?

QUESTION 8 Picture Question

In which TV series would you find this character?

QUESTION 9

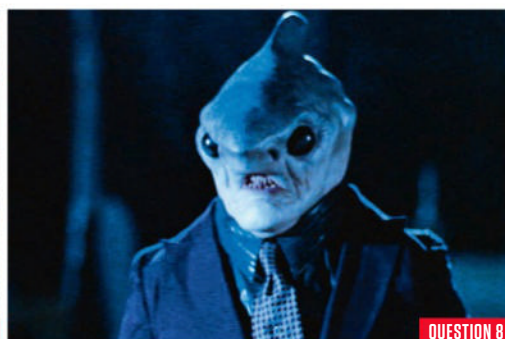
Who voiced DC Comics supervillain King Shark in 2021's *The Suicide Squad*?

QUESTION 10

Which of these James Bond films does *not* feature sharks: a) *Thunderball* b) *Licence To Kill* c) *Goldfinger*.



QUESTION 4



QUESTION 8



QUESTION 12



QUESTION 15

QUESTION 11

Which 1981 Italian *Jaws* knock-off was pulled from American cinemas after a federal court ruling?

QUESTION 12 Picture Question

Identify this rock 'n' rollin' Great White.

QUESTION 13

Which 1976 adventure (first released on LP) found Tom Baker's Fourth Doctor battling shark-like aliens out to conquer Earth?

QUESTION 14

Primal Waters, *Hell's Aquarium*, *Origins*, *Nightstalkers*, *Generations* and *Purgatory* are all entries in which book franchise of shark-fuelled horror?

QUESTION 15 Picture Question

Name this *Doctor Who* story.

QUESTION 16

Which X-Men-affiliated were-shark has the real name lara dos Santos?

QUESTION 17

Which group of 22nd century Starfleet personnel wore a uniform patch featuring a shark?

QUESTION 18

Which unmade James Bond script had SPECTRE unleashing robot sharks on New York?

QUESTION 19

The novelisation of *Jaws: The Revenge* provides what supernatural explanation for the shark's behaviour?

QUESTION 20

Which low-budget 2022 movie mixes killer sharks with Dracula? Go on, take a wild guess...

Answers
1 "Sharks" 2 Gums 3 Alzheimer's disease 4 Tiger Shark 5 Arthur C Clarke 6 Shark Tale 7 "Sharks with frickin' laser beams attached to their heads!" 8 Buffy The Vampire Slayer 9 Sylvester Stallone 10 c) Goldfinger 11 Great White (aka The Last Shark) 12 Jabberjaw 13 The Pescators 14 The Meg 15 "A Christmas Carol" 16 Shark-Girl 17 Enterprise's MACOS 18 Warhead 19 It's a voodoo curse 20 Sharkula

How did you do?

Which apex predator are you?

0-5

Lanternshark

6-10

Basking

11-15

Hammerhead

16-19

Great White

20

Megalodon

IN THE NEXT ISSUE



THE LAST VOYAGE OF THE DEMETER
Vampires take longer to reach Britain, apparently

THE NUN 2
Back in the habit

STAR TREK
One last flyover for the USS Enterprise

THE WHEEL OF TIME
More woodland-based fantasies

PLUS!
Doctor Who!
Supernatural forces! Art!

SFX 369
ON SALE
9 AUGUST

THIS ONE'S GOT JUICE! **BLUE BEETLE**

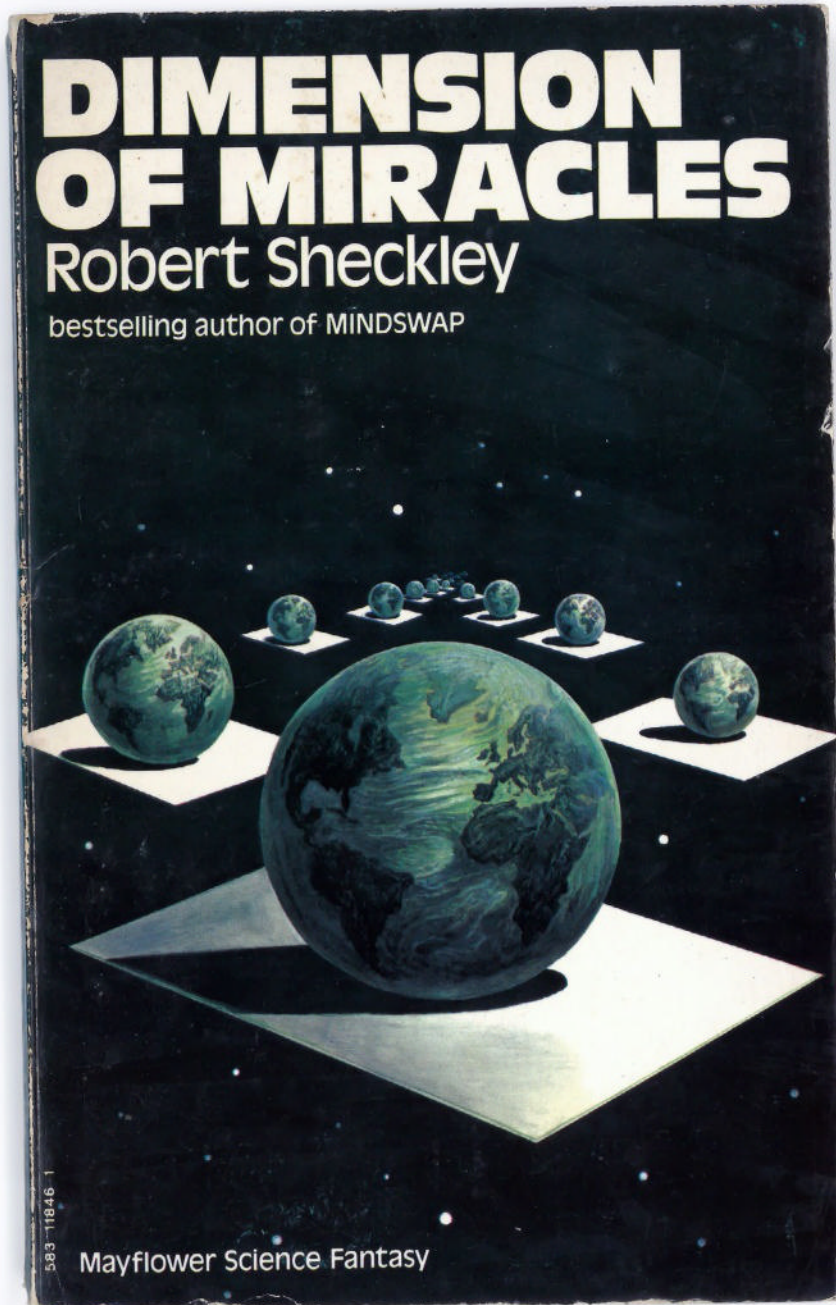
Not actually a beetle, probably not technically blue



Sign up to our monthly newsletter to receive a sneak preview! bit.ly/SFXnewsletter

All contents are subject to change, or sudden cancellation for tax purposes

Dimension Of Miracles



Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor



Did you try that vocabulary test that circulated on social media recently? I can claim the dubious achievement of placing “in the top 0.01%”. Given that one of my childhood pleasures was reading the dictionary, this came as no great surprise, but I suspect I also owe a debt to Robert Sheckley.

Sheckley’s 1968 novel *Dimension Of Miracles* is a slim volume, and a talky one, largely taken up with conversations in which it’s not unusual for people to chatter on for 150-word chunks, in an elevated register. Within its pages, the 13-year-old Ian was exposed to words like unctuous, autochthonous and inapropos; cyclothymic, hortatory and concomitant; supernal, dithyramb and paradigm. It’s best read with a dictionary close at hand. Sounds unpalatably dry? Well, it’s not. The fact that people (and aliens) express themselves with such superfluous verbosity is one of the characteristic ways in which Sheckley’s work is ripe with absurdity.

He’s often compared to Douglas Adams, and *Dimension Of Miracles* provides particularly good reasons for doing so. Its freewheeling plot sees a hapless everyman – the faintly Arthur Dent-ish Thomas Carmody – transported to Galactic Centre after being selected as the winner of an intergalactic sweepstake, then striving to return home. Trouble is, Carmody doesn’t know Earth’s coordinates – or *which* of the countless “probability-Earths” he belongs on.

It’s a book as protean as a Haggunenon, constantly switching setting, with a protagonist aided by a sentient Prize whose shifting forms include a snake, a talking flute and a Dick Tracy watch, and pursued by a personalised predator which attempts to lure him into its maw by transforming into a spaceship or a subway station. Carmody’s episodic adventures see him meeting an unfulfilled god and talking T. rexes, visiting a world where everyone talks in ad slogans, and encountering the engineer who built the Earth – remind you of anything? Other *Hitchhiker*-ish elements include a fusspot talking city (very Genuine People Personalities), and a flair for proper nouns like “the Haganicht Proparium”.

Adams swore blind that he only became aware of his predecessor once people began drawing comparisons, later saying that he found the similarities “quite creepy”. Either way, if you like *Hitchhiker*’s it’s odds-on you’ll dig this book. And if you love the English language, reading it is a delightful way to increase your word power. ●

Like Carmody, Ian’s posture is bad, but his intentions are good.

Fact Attack!

→ Circa 2000, Sheckley self-published a sequel, *Dimension Of Miracles Revisited*. Fewer than 100 hard copies of it were produced.

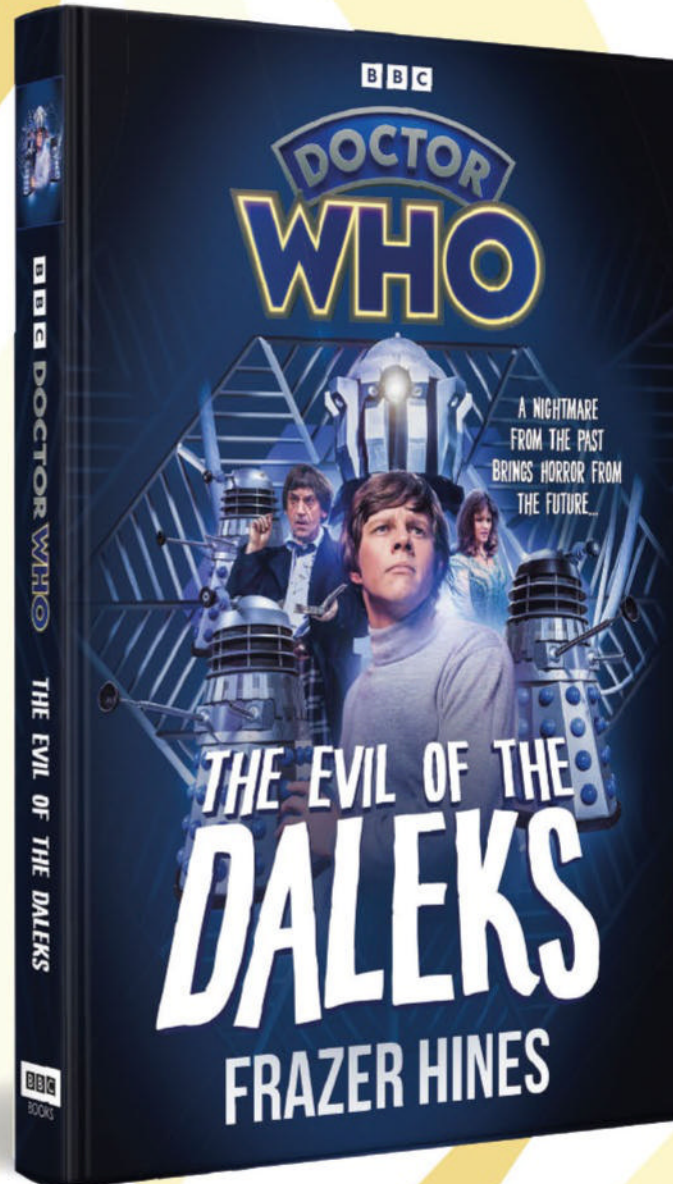
→ Sheckley was one of many SF novelists who wrote scripts for pioneering ’50s sci-fi TV show *Captain Video And His Video Rangers*.

→ Sheckley’s story “Seventh Victim” was adapted as the 1965 film *The 10th Victim*, while *Immortality, Inc* inspired 1992’s *Freejack*.

→ The author also penned several media tie-in titles, including DS9 book *The Laertian Gamble* and *Babylon 5* novelisation *A Call To Arms*.

→ Sheckley quipped that the difference between him and Adams was that “He makes a lot more out of his books” – and “He’s bigger than I am”.

A NIGHTMARE FROM
THE PAST BRINGS HORROR
FROM THE FUTURE...

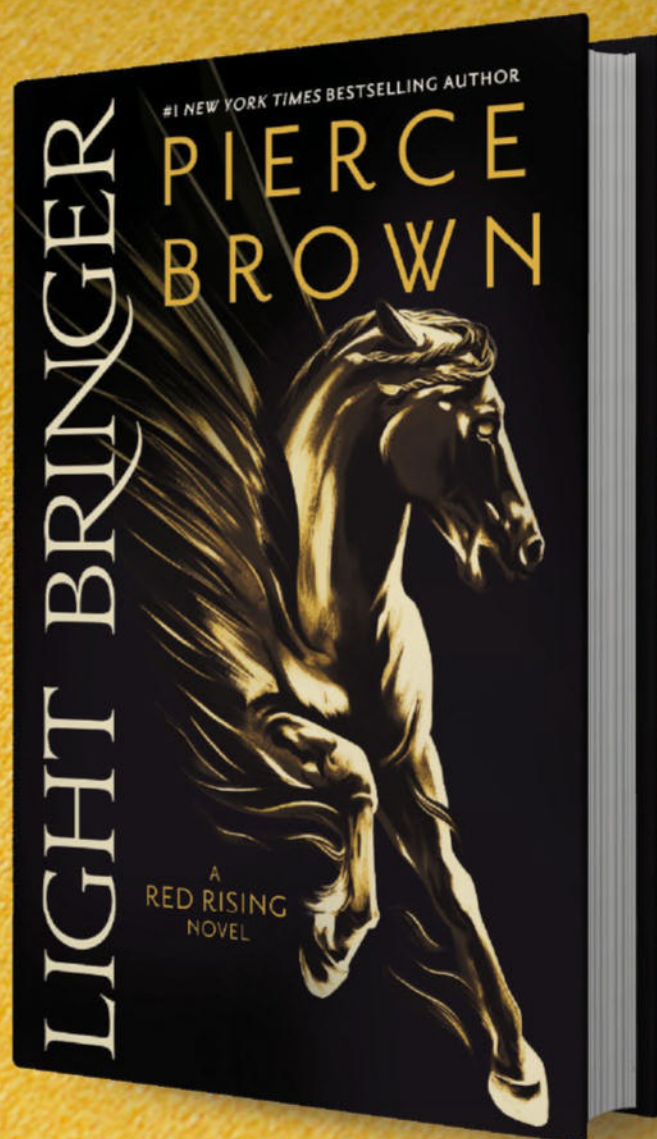


THE EVIL OF THE DALEKS

A NOVEL BY
FRAZER HINES



DARROW RETURNS IN *LIGHT BRINGER*



The *New York Times* bestselling Red Rising series continues in the thrilling sequel to *Dark Age* – publishing July 2023 and available now for pre-order.