

# SFX

369



**BLUE  
BEETLE**  
GET THE DC BUG

**THE WHEEL  
OF TIME**  
SEASON TWO SECRETS!

**QUATERMASS**  
70 YEARS OF BRITISH  
ROCKET GROUP

**EVIL DEAD RISE**  
BEHIND THE SCENES!

**THE NUN 2**  
BACK IN THE HABIT

**EXCLUSIVE!**

# BABYLON 5

THE LEGENDARY SCI-FI SERIES RETURNS

**PLUS!** DOUGLAS ADAMS | THOR | ONE PIECE | TWILIGHT | FIRE AND ICE  
DUNE PART TWO | ROGERS: THE MUSICAL | COBWEB | STAR TREK





# Faustine

Science Fiction legend and writer of the *Doctor Who* stories *Warriors' Gate* and *Terminus*, STEPHEN GALLAGHER returns to the worlds of *Doctor Who* with this new story expanding his creation of the Tharils, the time-sensitive race of leoline creatures.

This double-length story features stunning new art from comics maestro MARTIN GERAGHTY, and is available in August from

[www.cutawaycomics.co.uk](http://www.cutawaycomics.co.uk)



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Our last, best hope for a sequel.

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We have designs on Deadites.

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NOW & SAVE!**

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"It's got Chevy Chase in it, I'm there!"



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# First Contact

## Hailing Frequencies Open!



You'd look this grumpy after 26 episodes, too.

**SMALL BUT PERFECTLY FORMED**

**Brian Bray, email** In SFX 367 Robert Dodd asks how they could make 26 episodes per series of *Star Trek: Voyager* in the 1990s yet only make 10 episodes per series of *Discovery* in the 2020s – despite it being easier and cheaper to do special effects now. It's because of a few issues: actor availability, post-production is easier for shorter series, fans are more likely to watch the whole series, cost... and when did a BBC series last 26 episodes, apart from soaps?

So you could say that maybe Hollywood has learnt that serialisation lends itself to longer series, but storytelling is best over a shorter period. Also, streaming has led to a shorter episode run as it is easier to binge-watch six to 10 episodes than 26.

**SFX:** Imagine if the original three-season run of *Star Trek* had only given us 30 episodes to savour instead of 79...

**GOLD STAR FOR EFFORT**

**Roland Robinson, email** It was so great reading a large interview with Matthew Waterhouse in SFX 368.

I had a secret crush on Matthew/Adric when I was around 13 or 14 years old. I had moved from England to Holland in 1976 after watching *Doctor Who* as a wee nipper when in England. In Holland, *Who* had just been taken off the air – supposedly too scary for kids.

In 1983 *Doctor Who* returned to Dutch TV, starting with Peter Davison's second story. And to my utter and at that time still very secretive delight, there was young Adric as a companion. Oh, joy and happiness. The joy didn't last that long as, several stories later, Adric died tragically and heroically in "Earthshock" – truly a shock to me, as smitten as I was with Matthew Waterhouse. I found the SFX article on Matthew infinitely enjoyable.

**SFX:** Glad you enjoyed catching up with your favourite Alzarian, Roland. Much more *Doctor Who* goodness still to come in the pages of SFX...



I adore Nathan Fillion and would love to see him in the DCU but he is far too likeable to be Guy Gardner.

Chris Forbes



Re: *Secret Invasion*. It'd be funny if they find Terrence Howard hooked up to the sleeping suspension machine in the Skrulls' home base.

@LysanderWrites

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## Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind



**DARREN SCOTT** EDITOR

### RAVES

→ Missed *Ash Vs Evil Dead* first time round, so have binged on Netflix. It's managed to gross even *me* out.

### RANTS

→ Sad to have missed out on SDCC this year, but looking forward to 2024 already.

→ *Secret Invasion* really feels like a slog. They should've kept it secret.



**IAN BERRIMAN** DEPUTY EDITOR

### RAVES

→ I keep plugging cult Blu-ray label Radiance, but they keep announcing cool titles! Looking forward to *The Night Of The Devils* and *The Horrible Dr Hichcock* in October. Keep it up please, guys.

→ Pleased to hear Alex Lawther will be in the *Alien* series. The kid's got talent.

### RANTS

→ *Asteroid City*: in addition to my usual Wes Anderson grumbles, not sci-fi enough!

### RIP

→ Sad to hear about Manny Coto. The one time I forgot to press "record" doing an interview it was with him (for *Enterprise*). I rang straight back and he did the entire thing again. *Odyssey 5* was great too!



**JONATHAN COATES** ART EDITOR

### RAVES

→ Caught a double-bill of *Indy 5* and *Asteroid City*, and was surprised that I found *Indy* more satisfying. Could have done without *Asteroid's* nested narrative, personally.

→ Varèse Sarabande's *Starship Troopers* soundtrack is a thing of beauty!



**ED RICKETTS** PRODUCTION EDITOR

### RAVES

→ Rewatching *Utopia* (the original series from 2013) and rediscovering just how utterly brilliant it is. It's not easy to balance possibly the most brutal scenes ever shown on British TV with genuinely LOL moments, but writer Dennis Kelly did. And every shot looks gorgeous, framed like the graphic novel at the heart of it. Don't bother with season two, though – it was entirely superfluous.



**NICK SETCHFIELD** EDITOR-AT-LARGE

### RAVES

→ The AI villain in *Mission: Impossible Dead Reckoning Part One* brings a timely shiver. Now fully expecting *M:I 8* to be a *Terminator* crossover – or maybe it'll reveal Tom Cruise to have been a T-800 all along...

→ Loved seeing Tegan and Nyssa reunited in the trailer for the season 20 Blu-ray.



**TARA BENNETT** US EDITOR

### RAVES

→ Good news, everyone! *Futurama's* revival is hilarious. The sharpest satire on TV aimed directly at the stupidest wings of humanity. Hooray!

→ If you missed *Nimona* on Netflix, add it to your queue. One of the best animated films of 2023 and a fitting farewell to Blue Sky Studios.

### RANTS

→ *Secret Invasion* has been the surprising summer snoozer.

## Captain's Log



Rabbits!



Something we talk about quite a bit now is "heritage" and "nostalgia" when it comes to discussing magazine content – in fact, at nearly 30 years old, *SFX* falls under that bracket now too.

One thing I've learned over the last few years as editor is that our readers love the things they grew up with, and it always brings me joy when we can give you what you want. So I was *very* excited to be able to welcome *Babylon 5* back to our pages as one of the true legacy sci-fi shows; I remember being terrified of certain scenes back when it first aired. Here's hoping this new film is only just the beginning of *B5's* long-overdue return.

I talk about a "golden age" of geekdom quite a lot too – we really are spoiled at the moment for both quality and quantity when it comes to nerding out. I hope that *SFX* is offering just that little touch more when it comes to covering these things. We've got lots of exciting things coming up, which I hope you'll love as much as we do! Tell your friends, take out a subscription, support physical media and we'll see you in four weeks!

Darren X



# TOTAL FILM



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# Red Alert

→ NEWS /// INTERVIEWS /// INSIGHT /// SONGS!

SEPTEMBER  
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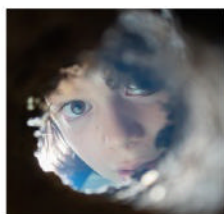


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## STAGE PRESENCE

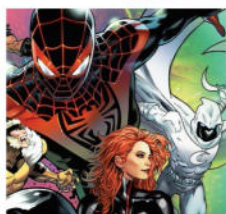
Now you can actually see *Rogers: The Musical*

### Highlights



#### 8 COBWEB

→ A warning to never ignore all those strange noises you've been hearing in the night.



#### 12 MARVEL AGE #1000

→ Sort of a giant *What If...?* in itself, given that there weren't 999 issues preceding this.



#### 19 STRANGE SCIENCE

→ The *Archie* comics continue to break new boundaries in their latest genre update.





**DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE**

# Into The Spider-Verse

French director Samuel Bodin talks about horror film **Cobweb**, his debut feature

WORDS: IAN BERRIMAN



**KNOCK KNOCK! WHO'S THERE?** Sorry, we can't say: spoilers! That's the question at the heart of new chiller *Cobweb*. It centres on eight-year-old Peter, who starts to hear unexplained thumps coming from behind his bedroom wall. Rats, his dad suggests – except rats don't usually *whisper*...

Could it be a ghost? Many years ago, a neighbourhood girl went missing while trick or treating. As the film progresses, Peter's mother (*Cloverfield*'s Lizzy Caplan) and father (*The Boys*' Homelander, Antony Starr) start to seem increasingly suspicious... We won't ruin it for you. Let's just say that the film keeps you guessing, delivering several effective twists.

*Cobweb* represented "a lot of first times" for French director Samuel Bodin: first feature;

first time working in English; first time adapting someone else's work. The script came his way after producers at Lionsgate were impressed by *Marianne*, the 2019 horror series he wrote and directed for Netflix.

"I loved the fact it was very simple," he tells Red Alert. "It's very difficult to make a simple script, that is clear on everything. There is the father, the mother, the teacher [Cleopatra Coleman's Miss Devine] and the mystery of it."

"I said, 'Okay, it's like a Brothers Grimm fairy tale.' I love that, because in my head, graphically, I had something to tell with that." He compares the world of the film to *une boule à neige* (a snow globe). "I can create a kind of tiny universe, and I can express myself." In bringing the screenplay to life, Bodin

deliberately brought an outsider's perspective to what is an American story. "My lizard brain is French!" he laughs, recalling how, when reading Stephen King books as a 12-year-old, his mental image of the author's Maine was naturally a distorted one.

"It's how I project the USA on the screen in my head. So when the script came I said, 'Okay, it's like that. It's not reality. It's not the US – it's my projection.' I really decided to embrace that."

He was also keen to evoke the fairy tale feeling he got from the script. While not as detached from reality as, say, a Tim Burton movie, the film does feel subtly heightened. One detail *SFX* appreciated is the positioning of small octagonal windows throughout the



## THE ARACHNIDS ARE ALRIGHT

Filming served as exposure therapy

Wondering about that title? The shoe will drop come the final reveal. *Cobweb* also features several shots of house spiders, which act as foreshadowing. This left us wondering: how exactly do you wrangle an arachnid?

"To be honest, it was a big thing," Bodin says. "I'm afraid of spiders! As if it's not complicated enough, let's bring my fear on-set..."

"What you do is you put your spider on the floor, or on the table, and with a straw you blow at them. Then they move a little bit, and you do that with all the patience in the world. At first I went, 'Oh my god, I'm not going to touch that. Make her go over there!' But at the end you're there with the straw, and they're actors as the other actors are."

So he's now made his peace with spiders? "Yes – they are in the next room playing *Street Fighter*!" he laughs.



Never hit a bully who has big brothers. With bats.

house, faintly reminiscent of a spider's web – production designer Alan Gilmore's idea. "He said, 'Is it too much?'" Bodin remembers. "Oh no, my god, it's not! There were a lot of little touches like that that I loved."

With the film centred on a young boy, Bodin also wanted to reflect this in the design. "I asked Alan, 'Can you build [the sets] a little bit too big? We have to see the house from the eyes of a kid.' So the stairs are too big, the corridor is a little bit too big, the colours are not real."

He had similar discussions with regular collaborator Philip Lozano, his cinematographer on *Marianne*. "I said, 'On *Cobweb*, we have to do things differently.' *Marianne* is more like real fear – in France we say a film *d'épouvante*. In my head, *Cobweb* is a horror movie for kids, that can scare kids. So we have to find a way to put our camera close to the ground."

He namechecks a director not normally associated with horror. "There's also a lot of flat movements, like in a Wes Anderson way," explains Bodin, who says the US filmmaker has long been a big influence on him. "You can take some things he teaches us and bring that to the

horror genre. He definitely tried to un-ground the movies, and I think it's a beautiful way to tell stories. When I direct a horror story, usually a lot of the references I talk to the crew about are not horror at all," he notes. "Then we have to create fear with these kinds of tools, so

**“In horror stories we can talk about very serious matters: family, loss, violence, disease”**

Peter's mum (Lizzy Caplan): not at all sinister.



you don't do exactly the same thing that we've already seen."

Having made his English-language debut, Bodin hopes to keep working in the US, but also keep one foot in his homeland. We mention Guillermo del Toro's similarly two-pronged career: "That would be the dream!" he enthuses. There are several irons in the fire. He's just completed a script in French concerning "a weird love triangle during World War Two". But he's also working on a horror feature with an LA studio – and exercising "another muscle" by writing a second horror TV series. "I want to continue to tell scary stories, for sure," he says, "because I love that genre."

"In horror stories we can talk about very serious matters: family, loss, violence, disease, this kind of thing. But because it's a horror story, it can be not melodramatic. It's normal to go into this kind of very dark thing. Then suddenly, when you're afraid, you're 11 years old again. I love that bridge. And I think the story of *Cobweb* has that." ●

*Cobweb is in UK cinemas from 1 September.*

**SCI-FACT!** *Cobweb's* unsung hero, stuntperson Aleksandra Dragova, has also danced in videos for Dua Lipa and Rita Ora.



A portrait of Florence Pugh as Princess Irulan, wearing a white lace dress and a gold headpiece.

Red

Florence Pugh as Princess Irulan.

A close-up profile of Paul Atreides (played by Timothée Chalamet) wearing a brown leather flight suit and a headband, looking down.

**ON SCREEN**  
**FIRST LOOK!**  
**DUNE: PART TWO**

# Return To Arrakis

The long wait for the second instalment of Denis Villeneuve's sci-fi masterpiece could be longer than expected, with industry periodical *Variety* reporting that Warner Bros may be contemplating a delayed release for *Dune: Part Two* in 2024. Until then, or confirmation of schedule changes, the studio has released a selection of first-look images from the movie, alongside new trailers.

*Dune: Part Two* is currently due in cinemas from 3 November.

A close-up of Javier Bardem as Stilgar, wearing a brown scarf and a small black monocle, looking off to the side.

Javier Bardem as Stilgar.

A close-up of Rebecca Ferguson as Lady Jessica, wearing a brown headscarf and a patterned shawl, looking down.

Rebecca Ferguson as Lady Jessica.

A woman in a black hooded cloak standing in a dark, industrial setting with large curved pipes.

Léa Seydoux as Lady Margot Fenring.





Timothée Chalamet as Paul Atreides and Zendaya as Chani.



Austin Butler as Feyd-Rautha Harkonnen.



Josh Brolin as Gurney Halleck.



Dave Bautista as "Beast" Rabban Harkonnen.



Stellan Skarsgård as Baron Vladimir Harkonnen.



## NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

→ Kevin Bacon is a demon-slaying bouncer hunter who's back from the dead in Prime Video's **The Bondsman**.

→ **Star Trek: Prodigy** axed by Paramount+ - though season two may find a new home...

→ Greta Gerwig directing new **The Chronicles Of Narnia** movies for Netflix.

→ Smalltown horror **From** renewed for a third season.

→ **Prey's** Dan Trachtenberg set to helm an episode of **Stranger Things** once season five resumes filming after strike action.

→ **Teen Titans Go's Beast Boy** set for solo show on Cartoon Network.

→ Roland Emmerich developing multimedia franchise **Space Nation**, set to be TV series, online game and animated shorts.

→ **Warrior Nun** earns reprieve for a third season on Netflix.

→ Olivia Williams and Jodhi May joining **Dune** spin-off series **The Sisterhood** (see left).

→ **The Walking Dead: Daryl Dixon** premieres 10 September in the US.

→ Wakanda forever! EA developing singleplayer game based on Marvel's **Black Panther**.



GETTY

► **SCI-FACT!** Production has now begun on a new version of the prequel series **Dune: The Sisterhood**.





CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

## Timely Tribute

The House of Ideas harks back to its halcyon days in giant-sized special **Marvel Age #1000**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**



TAKING ITS NAME FROM ITS former interview magazine, *Marvel Age #1000* encapsulates the past eight and a half decades of the House of Ideas in one oversized issue. Following on from last year's *Amazing Fantasy Spidey* spectacular, the 96-page one-shot sees a host of top talent, including Jason Aaron, J Michael Straczynski, Rainbow Rowell, Steve McNiven and Ryan Stegman turning their hand to classic characters such as the Silver Surfer, Mephisto, Spider-Man, Cyclops and Jean Grey.

"The guiding principle of *Marvel Age #1000* is to celebrate and showcase the essence of what makes Marvel special and distinctive," editor Tom Brevoort tells Red Alert. "So I told everybody involved that I wanted them to produce stories that would be remembered by



One of many covers, this one by Francis Manapul.

people after the book had been finished. I wasn't looking for fight scenes necessarily – although action is a big part of the Marvel formula. Really, I wanted stories that showcased our characters as human beings with relatable problems and difficulties, and pretty much all of the creators came through with that promise. I'm really happy with how the book turned out, as it both looks and reads great."

While Brevoort "told people that we'd be looking to keep the focus on the perennial core Marvel characters from the '60s mainly," he was prepared to make exceptions. "We weren't so inflexible that we couldn't do a story of the

original Human Torch or the Jane Foster Thor." Indeed, Mark Waid and Alessandro Cappuccio's Jim Hammond tale harks back to August 1939's inaugural title from Marvel's predecessor, Timely Comics. "Much of the story takes place immediately after *Marvel Comics* issue one, which was Torch's first appearance," says Waid.

"I chose the Torch because the concept of machine learning, especially at this moment in time, is fascinating to me. The story is set in 1939, and what his creator, Professor Horton, doesn't realise is that as he builds the Torch, the Torch is overhearing – and thus being programmed by, in a sense – the radio dramas





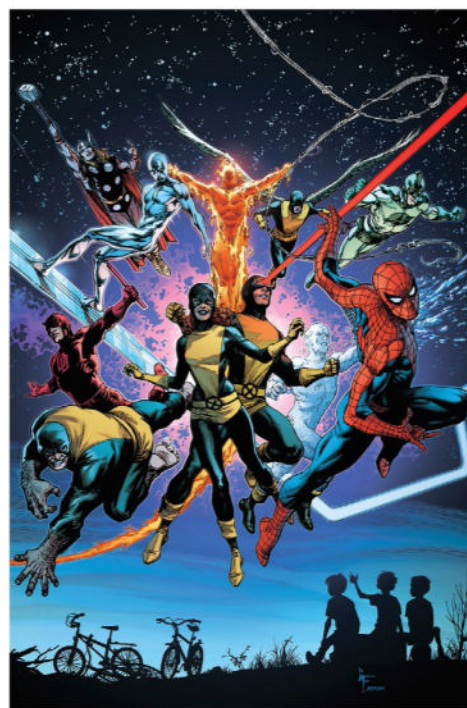
Interior art by Michael Allred and Laura Allred.

that Horton plays in the background to keep him company.”

Dan Slott’s *Captain Marvel* 10-pager reunites him with his former *Silver Surfer* artist and colourist Michael and Laura Allred, and shines the spotlight on the character’s first incarnation, Mar-Vell. “Mike loves the original, Silver Age Captain Marvel and I love making Mike happy,” laughs Slott. “Ever since the end of our *Silver Surfer* run, I’ve been dying to work with Mike and Laura again, and this was a fun chance to do that again.” While he is concentrating on Mar-Vell, Slott promises

a cameo from the current incumbent. “We’re keeping our focus entirely on Mar-Vell and who and what he’s all about,” he continues. “You will see a role for Carol Danvers though, as we all wanted to make sure that the Captain Marvel of today had a presence in the story.”

Promising that Mar-Vell will reach “a crucial turning point”, Slott is reluctant to divulge any further details. “I can’t say a thing if we want to keep it spoiler-free,” he explains. “But if you’re a fan of Mar-Vell’s history and journey in the Marvel Universe, you won’t want to miss this tale!”



Following on from his contribution to last year’s *Amazing Fantasy*, Armando Iannucci ventures into Hell’s Kitchen to visit the Man Without Fear. “I’ve always been intrigued by Daredevil, right from the start,” he recalls. “He’s been dealt some real adversity, yet triumphed over it, and there’s also the playful way his identity has got out and yet he still manages to put most people off the scent.

“He’s really grounded as a character, and given that, I thought it would be interesting to take the reality a bit further and see what happens as he hits middle age and some of his other senses start to become not as sharp as they once were. Tinnitus developing seemed to

**“The guiding principle is to celebrate and showcase the essence of what makes Marvel”**

present the biggest challenge as he can’t see, but what also if he thinks he’s going to have to deal with a very real condition that hits lots of us? And I say ‘us’ because I have it too.”

Iannucci has been paired with artist Adam Kubert, whom he describes as “a thrill to work with. Adam’s done them all, and I feel like an intern working with him,” he laughs. “I give him a few words and he goes and fills 10 pages with the most dazzling and imaginative visuals. It’s crazy! I never know whether my plot makes any sense, and he comes up with a graphic style that takes the whole thing into a new dimension!” ●

*Marvel Age #1000 is out on 30 August.*

**SCI-FACT!** Intended as a comic book version of the Bullpen Bulletins, *Marvel Age* ran for 140 issues from 1983 to 1994.



CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

# A Musical Marvel

An MCU moment becomes an actual stage show with **Rogers: The Musical**

WORDS: TARA BENNETT

Let's do the show right here! Shields optional.

WITHIN THE CANON of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige has greenlit plenty of outside-the-box creations like Marvel One-Shots (*Agent Carter*, *Item 47*), Marvel Studios Special Presentations (*Werewolf By Night*), in-world books (forthcoming *Ant-Man* memoir *Look Out For The Little Guy!*) and theme park rides. Now comes an official musical.

*Rogers: The Musical* is playing exclusively, just for the summer, at the Hyperion Theatre in Disney California Adventure Park in Anaheim, California. This live, 30-minute, original musical is all about the life of the MCU's version of Captain America/Steve Rogers, told through eight songs that chart his life to the aged version seen at the end of *Avengers: Endgame*.

No, it's not poking fun. Rather, it's a very earnest throwback, weirdly in keeping with the upstanding, old-school hero that Steve Rogers represents. The concept was born from the enthusiastic response to the faux Broadway show of the same name featured in the Disney+ series *Hawkeye*.

As audiences watched Clint Barton (Jeremy Renner) wince through a catchy musical theatre number – “Save The Day”, written by Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman – about the Avengers saving New York City, Dan Fields, executive creative director at Disney Live Entertainment, was spurred to act.

“We were like every fan,” Fields tells Red Alert. “We saw that and said, ‘I want to see the rest of it. I want to see all of *Rogers: The*

*Musical.*” Already a creative partner with Marvel Studios via Avengers Campus lands in several Walt Disney theme parks around the globe, Fields contacted Dave Bushore, the VP of Franchise Creative and Marketing at Marvel Studios, who was more than willing to talk about what they could do to expand the sequence into something more.

“We talked more about it and we worked with the teams,” Bushore says. From those talks, Fields brought in several musical theatre veterans, like book writer Hunter Bell and composer/arranger Christopher Lennertz, as *Rogers: The Musical* was commissioned into existence as a live show. “It is amazing and surreal to be part of the *Rogers:*

Steve Rogers and Peggy Carter get smoochy.







Avengers assemble for an '80s spectacular.



The musical is part of the Disney100 celebrations.

**“The idea was giving everyone something they can grab on to”**

The Musical team,” Bell says of his role writing a cohesive story of Steve’s life that plays out in such a condensed fashion. “Love stories make great musicals, and our show is largely guided by the relationship between Steve Rogers and the remarkable Peggy Carter.” It’s their love story that threads together Rogers’s familiar origin story, from the events of *The First Avenger* to their first dance, as seen in *Endgame*.

“I’ve heard a lot of times that people say that you need to get to the point where the emotion is so strong that talking won’t work any more, and you actually need to sing it. And that’s where the love story comes in,” Lennertz says about how their new songs function in this mini-musical.

“That’s where the song ‘I Want You’ comes in with young Steve. And that’s why he was the perfect person to make the story around, because everyone’s been to that point where they have to do the next step to follow their dream.”

Lennertz says they also wanted to give all of the characters, from Steve to Peggy and Nick Fury, a chance to sing their hearts out. “We wanted to give everyone – both musical theatre fans and superhero fans – something they would love about the music,” he says.

“We get to [cover] 70 years and do everything from ’40s-style big band jazz, to a singer-songwriter style pop tune, and then a Nick Fury song with some uptown funk. The idea was giving everyone something that they can grab on to and really feel like it’s part of their story, too.”

And what about Fury singing? Fields laughs and says the first time they took that particular idea to Feige, they were very nervous.

“Dan brings me the animatic where Nick Fury is singing,” Bushore remembers, “And I’m like ‘Okay... interesting. What?’ But we took it to Kevin...”

Fields continues, “And Kevin says, ‘Nick Fury sings? That should be on the billboard! Embrace that! Lean into that!’”

Performances will be staged from Tuesday to Saturday, several times per day, until 31 August 2023. Fields hopes guests embrace the musical so that it sparks even more collaborations.

“Here’s an opportunity to combine a love of theatre with a love of superheroes right here in the theme park,” he says. “We hope that the takeaway is that this is a real show for families, whether you already knew the story of Steve Rogers or not. Hopefully everyone finds something to enjoy in the show.”

*Rogers: The Musical is showing now at Disney California Adventure Park.*



## NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

→ David Corenswet is the Man of Steel in James Gunn’s **Superman: Legacy**, with Rachel Brosnahan as Lois Lane.

→ Also taking flight in **Superman: Legacy**: Isabella Merced as Hawkgirl, Edi Gathegi as Mr. Terrific, Nathan Fillion as the Guy Gardner Green Lantern and Anthony Carrigan as Metamorpho.

→ Jennifer Garner returns as Elektra in **Deadpool 3**.

→ Sony live-action Spider-verse entry **El Muerto** now on indefinite hold.

→ M Night Shyamalan’s next movie is called **Trap** and set at a concert.

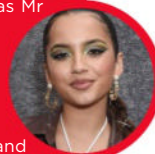
→ James Cameron reveals that he’s developing sequels to 2019’s **Alita: Battle Angel**.

→ Alicia Vikander teaming with Elizabeth Olsen on climate change dystopia tale **The Assessment**.

→ 1985’s **The Return Of The Living Dead** set for a reboot, directed by Steve Wolsh.

→ **Cocaine Bear** screenwriter bringing **Magic 8 Ball** to the screen as a horror-comedy.

→ Cameron Monaghan and Sarah Desjardins joining **Tron: Ares**.



## SCI-FACT!

Lennertz has scored various genre TV projects, including *Agent Carter*, *Supernatural* and *The Boys*.

GETTY



## SFX SPACE AND TIME Celebrating 60 years of DOCTOR WHO

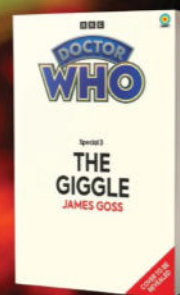
◆ The TARDIS got a new – if somewhat familiar – lick of pink paint for its arrival in London on 12 July. No, it's not (sadly) the return of the Happiness Patrol, but rather a cross-promotion for Warner Bros blockbuster movie *Barbie*, which stars new Doctor Ncuti Gatwa as a Ken.

◆ Season 20 is the latest blu-ray release for *Doctor Who: The Collection*. Due for release in September, this Peter Davison box set is the biggest in the series so far, including studio footage and a(nother) revamped version of "The Five Doctors". For more information see page 78.

◆ *The Complete New Who Blu-ray Collectors Set* has been announced for release in the US on 14 November. Alongside every episode from 2005-2013, it features remastered versions of series 1-4 and new extras from David Tennant and Russell T Davies. Limited to 6,000 copies, it comes with a certificate of authenticity and a set of five Titan figures.



The TARDIS is in the pink for the release of *Barbie*.







The Tom Baker Record Collection. 'Nuff said.



◆ The Fourteenth Doctor's new sonic screwdriver was revealed on Wednesday 19 July ahead of the release of Character Options' toy replica at San Diego Comic-Con 2023. The limited-edition version has an exclusive "electro plated" finish, with five brand new sound and light effects. Online stock sold out within eight hours, with a restock due in a few months. A standard retail version will also be made available soon. Four new character posters were also revealed, featuring the two newest Doctors, Donna and Ruby – these were only available to social media at the time of going to press.

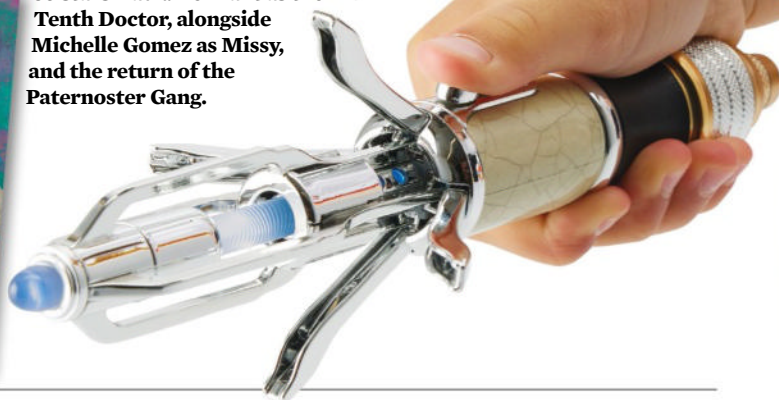
◆ Covers for the latest chapters in the Big Finish anniversary series *Once And Future* have been revealed. *Two's Company* stars Colin Baker as the Doctor, alongside Camille Coduri as Jackie Tyler and Michelle Ryan as Lady Christina de Souza. *The Martian Invasion Of Planetoid 50* stars David Tennant as the Tenth Doctor, alongside Michelle Gomez as Missy, and the return of the Paternoster Gang.

◆ New Target novels have been announced for release in January 2024, based on the 60th anniversary specials. "The Star Beast" is written by Gary Russell, "Wild Blue Yonder" by Mark Morris and "The Giggle" by James Goss.

◆ Filming has completed for the 2024 season of *Doctor Who*. The 15 July wrap for season 14 was confirmed by showrunner Russell T Davies on Instagram.

◆ The Tom Baker Record Collection is released by Demon on 15 September. The box set, limited to 600 copies, features audio dramas, interviews with, and a reading by the Fourth Doctor. Each set has a print signed by Tom Baker.

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



► **SCI-FACT!** "The Star Beast" is based on a 1980 comic strip in *Doctor Who Weekly*. It's also been adapted as an audio drama by Big Finish.



WRITER EXCLUSIVE

# Big Freeze

It's getting chilly in Bill Willingham and Leonardo Manco's new **Fire And Ice** prequel

WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL

➔ FOUR DECADES AFTER its first hit cinemas, director Ralph Bakshi and artist Frank Frazetta's collaboration *Fire And Ice* is getting a comic book prequel from Dynamite Entertainment. Written by Bill Willingham and illustrated by Leonardo Manco, it will chronicle the events that led up to the 1983 animated fantasy film.

"I was a fan of anything Ralph Bakshi did, ever since his wonderful film *Wizards* came out in 1977, which I can still almost quote line-for-line to this day," says Willingham, who was approached by Frank Frazetta's granddaughter Sara of merchandising company Frazetta Girls. "And this film also reeked of Frazetta in every frame, so what's not to love?"

## WAR FOOTING

The six-parter takes place in the build-up to the great battle that will soon lay waste to the planet. "War is coming between the Ice Lands of the North and the Fire Lands of the South, and everyone knows it, as just like World War One and Two in our history, even when you know a war is coming, it's impossible to stop it," says Willingham, who admits that crafting a story which occurs in that earlier time period proved challenging.

"Prequels are tough to do, since there's always a big temptation to have the characters learn, or already know, things that only come as surprises later on in the original film," he continues, citing the example of main characters Larn and Teegra, who cross paths for the first time in *Fire And Ice* itself.

"I had to make sure that they never actually meet as they only meet for the first time in the film, and yet each of them needs to play an important part in the prequel story. So they're like ships in the night – they almost meet at three different times in the six issues."

More difficult, according to Willingham, was "fleshing out the character" of the masked warrior Darkwolf "without losing the fact that he's a mysterious, almost legendary, figure in the film. How is it he's alive today and yet we see

in the film a depiction of him in the ancient ruins of a long-dead city? I took it as my remit to hint at possibilities, but never fully explain."

Referring extensively to the movie itself, Willingham has



Issue one cover artwork by Leonardo Manco.



attempted to remain faithful to Bakshi and Frazetta's original vision. "I was determined not to contradict anything that was established by the film and any time I added a new character, I had to rewatch the film to make sure nothing in it was just ruined by my additions." One such character is Teegra and Prince Taro's mother, who is also King Jarol's wife, "who is dead by the time of the film."

Praising him for adding "that extra element of elegance," Willingham says that Leonardo Manco has imbued his artwork with his own distinctive style. "The animated version profits from the fact that the images move and are always in movement," he says. "You can't do that in a comic because the images are static, but the really great comic artists can suggest movement and action and a fluidity of real life until you, the reader, almost forget you aren't actually seeing these characters move. That's the genius Leonardo shares with Frank Frazetta." ●

*Fire And Ice* issue one is out now.



## SCI-FACT!

Written by Michael J Pellowski and pencilled initially by Bill Golliher, *Dilton's Strange Science* ran for five issues from May 1989.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE



USUALLY PLAYING second string to her best friend Jinx Holliday,

Danni Malloy takes centre stage in this month's *Chilling Adventures Presents... Strange Science*.

"Make no doubt about it, Danni is absolutely our hero here," editor Jamie Rotante tells Red Alert. "But she's also a kid, so she's going to hit some bumps in the road. Thankfully, just as she's been by Jinx's side in her demonic misadventures, so too does Jinx journey along with Danni."

Written by Magdalene Visaggio, who has previously written the duo in several titles including the recent *Jinx: A Cursed Life*, the 32-pager reveals that Danni is transgender. "This was an idea Mags has been considering for some time, but it just came down to finding the right way to make it work," explains Rotante. "Once Mags was given the note to make it a sci-fi horror, she came back with a pitch so perfect that we wanted to make sure we got moving on it ASAP."

"The idea was this was never going to be an after-school special; this was always supposed to be story-driven first, with a main character who happens to be trans."

"I was very fortunate to have some resources to draw on for my presentation of Danni, including Craig Cermak's terrific character designs for *Jinx: A Cursed Life*," adds artist Butch Mapa. "And Magdalene's script gave me valuable insights into Danni's appearance such as Danni isn't necessarily cis-assuming, but she does wear make-up. There were little nuances like that that I picked up on that informed my own depiction of this wonderful layered character."

With the character having debuted in 1989's *Dilton's Strange Science* issue one, this new one-shot aptly takes its name from

# Time Warped

**Chilling Adventures Presents...**  
**Strange Science** offers an *Archie* first

WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL



that short-lived series. "Whenever possible, we love to pay homage to previous titles from our publishing," says Rotante. "*Dilton's Strange Science* lent itself perfectly, as it's firmly rooted in sci-fi. But we also wanted to be realistic about it, as it isn't the most well-known series we've done, so drawing heavily on it would only serve to alienate a lot of readers."

"What is important to know is that Danni was a genius in that series, and her and Dilton's inventions often went awry. Those are two key things that definitely

play a part in this one-shot, except this time, a time machine's malfunction doesn't lead to wild and wacky adventures: it leads to a potential for a horrifying outcome."

Expect to see Dilton Doiley himself, too. "This time, it's Dilton's hubris that causes Danni to confront her past," she teases. "She's been fighting against just being the resident 'smart kid' in Riverdale, but she's the only person who can set Dilton's scientific wrongs right, which also means explaining to Jinx more about her past."

According to Mapa, we'll also get to meet a "very important" new character in Echo. "I was able to put my personal stamp on the story by designing Echo," he continues. "I also had a little more input with Dilton, such as figuring out his initial appearance in the story, where he very much has a different look from his usual nerdy self."

"The Warped Riverdale look was also something I had a lot of free rein on figuring out. I looked at the actual filming locations for the *Riverdale* TV series to start, and then figured out the technical and narrative aspects of warping the line art." ●

*Chilling Adventures Presents... Strange Science* is out on 16 August.





Cover art for issue one, by Alex Ross (centre).



TWO YEARS AFTER HE wrapped up his stint on *Immortal Hulk*, Al Ewing is taking on another everlasting being: Marvel's resident Thunderer. Partnered by artist Martín Cócocolo, he promises that *The Immortal Thor* will be a vastly contrasting experience to his run on the Green Goliath.

"It's got a thematic connection in that I'd like it to share a few of the more esoteric themes here and there," says Ewing. "Tonally, it's going to be a very different kind of book, as where *Hulk* was a horror book, *Thor* is a fantasy book first and foremost. So there's an epic quality I'm trying to bring to it, mixed with an essential optimism – which might be the hard part as it's hard to be optimistic these days. But the epic comes to *Thor* very naturally."

Ewing will also be returning to Thor's duplicitous half-brother, whose exploits he wrote a decade ago in *Loki: Agent Of Asgard*. "Loki is indeed back," he says. "I'm trying to progress their story a little bit, make them a little scary and dangerous again without regressing them to a moustache-twirling villain. Loki should be

dangerous – they're the storyteller, and storytellers might love the characters, but they have no allegiance to them. The work comes before all – and in Loki's case, that's the work of the storyteller, the skald, and also a specific magical work. I don't want to imply Loki's stealing the whole show, though, as it's Thor's book, and Thor is our main character and our eyes and ears."

Alluding to how Thor has been called Hloriddi, Veur and Holder of Mjolnir along with other monikers, Ewing will also be exploring alternate elements

of Thor's persona. "I stole that from Walt Simonson's run as there's a bit where Thor reveals his identity to the Midgard Serpent, who assumes he's just another superhero because Thor's changed up his look and grown a beard," he explains.

"Thor reels off this list of all the names he's had, and the speech builds to the final revelation that this is the real Thor, the one being the Midgard Serpent is afraid of. Something about that really resonated at the time and does still

now – I like the idea that Thor's been around so long he's picked up all these different names and identities – that really helps establish his mythic status without saying it outright. We are going to get into some interesting questions about gods and their legends and stories, but that'll play out over time."

Ewing will also be delving into Thor's newfound status as the King of Asgard. "He's in full command of Mjolnir and able to visit Midgard when he feels the need," reveals Ewing. "Everything's hunky dory, you would think – except someone has unsealed the gate to a cosmic prison of Elder Gods, and now a thunder deity that was ancient when Thor was just a twinkle in Odin's eye is rampaging across the world, declaring the end of humanity and demanding to face Thor."

"But why Thor – aren't there other Thunder Gods about? Well, yes – but Thor's got a more personal connection to this situation than he suspects..." ●

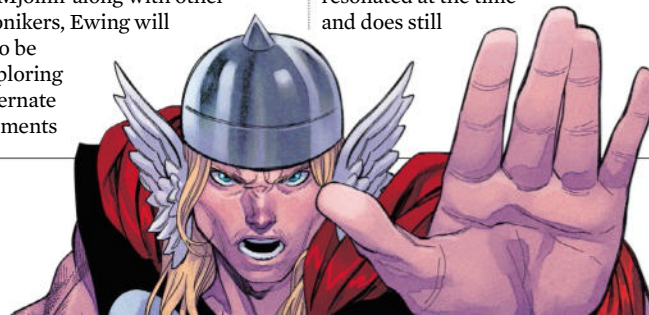
*The Immortal Thor issue one is out on 23 August.*

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

## Norse Code

Old Goldilocks undergoes an identity crisis in **The Immortal Thor**

WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL





► **SCI-FACT!** Manny Coto played a Starfleet Admiral in a crowd scene in the *Enterprise* finale.

NEW AUTHOR

## MIRANDA SUN

MEET THE WRITER  
BEHIND YA FANTASY  
*IF I HAVE TO BE HAUNTED*

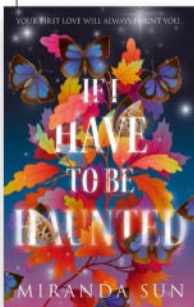


### Tell us about your protagonist.

→ Cara is a teenage Chinese American ghost speaker. Her ghost grandmother wants Cara to follow in her footsteps and embrace her ghost-speaking powers, but Cara's mother, who's suppressed her powers, wants Cara to mirror *her* instead. Then Cara stumbles upon Zach, the local golden boy, who insists on being resurrected.

### What are the rules of ghosts in this particular world?

→ Only Class A, the most powerful tier, can touch the living. (Except for Halloween, when all spirits become strong enough to reach into your chest and pull out your beating heart.) Obviously you can't touch ghosts in return – except for Zach...



### How long did the novel take to write?

→ I started it in 2013, so this summer will actually be the 10 year anniversary of its genesis.

### Which other authors are an inspiration?

→ Chloe Gong: I became friends with her on Twitter

right before she announced her deal for *These Violent Delights*, and it's been amazing to watch her career unfold. Ann Liang: she writes books with characters of Chinese descent across categories and genres.

### Any advice for readers who are budding authors?

→ If you're a reader, you're already on the right track. You've unconsciously studied the ever-evolving market through reading new releases and staying up-to-date on what comes out. So pay attention to what is resonating with you, with other readers, and keep it up!

*If I Have To Be Haunted* is out on 14 September, published by Magpie.

## THE FINAL FRONTIER

# MANNY COTO

1961-2023

The man who "wrote the hell out of *Star Trek*"

WORDS: NICK SETCHFIELD



MANNY COTO'S LOVE OF genre was as lifelong as his love of storytelling. A self-declared Trekkie and a collector of vintage pulp magazines, he commandeered his dad's Super 8 camera to create amateur crowdpleasers with his brother, Juan Carlos, who also became a TV professional.

Born Manuel Hector Coto in Havana, he relocated to the US when his family fled the Castro regime in Cuba. Graduating from the American Film Institute, he made his professional breakthrough selling a script to *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* in 1988 before directing an episode of *Monsters* in 1989. Coto then helmed 1990's big-screen horror *Playroom*, followed by cult slasher tale *Dr Giggles* in 1992.

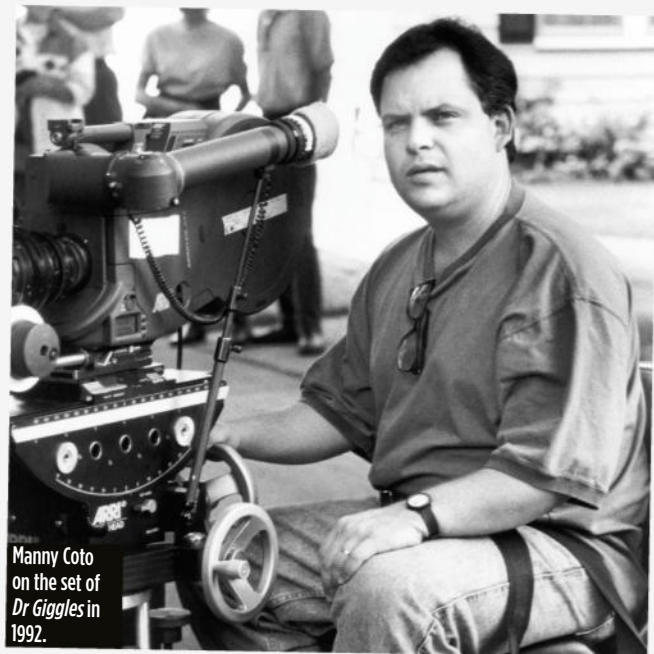
After writing two episodes of the revived *The Outer Limits*, Canadian SF series *Odyssey 5* marked his first stint as a showrunner, leading to an offer to join the writing staff of *Star Trek: Enterprise* in 2003. "He was a fan of *Star Trek*," recalled producer Brannon Braga. "He got the show instantly and could write the hell out of it."

Coto was promoted to showrunner for the fourth and final season, maximising the prequel possibilities by bringing in

fan-pleasing elements from the original 1960s series. He described his philosophy as "Let's have fun and do stories that we'll all really enjoy." Coto also commissioned multi-episode storylines that made smart use of the show's reduced budget, amortising costs.

After his time on the final frontier he won an Emmy for producing the fifth season of terrorist-chasing thriller *24*. Later work included *Dexter*, a four-year run on *American Horror Story* and its spin-off *American Horror Stories*, plus 2020's *Next*, a series focused on a homeland security team battling a rogue AI.

His tour of starship duty remained a highlight. "Still the happiest time of my career," he recalled of *Star Trek: Enterprise* in 2022. ●



Manny Coto on the set of *Dr Giggles* in 1992.

EVERETT COLLECTION INC. / ALAMY

## FRANCISCO IBANEZ TALAVERA 1936-2023

Spanish comic book artist and writer best known for *Mort & Phil* aka *Mortadelo y Filemón*.

## DANIEL GOLDBERG 1948/9-2023

Producer, and co-writer of *Spacehunter: Adventures In The Forbidden Zone*.



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THIS INTERVIEW  
WAS CONDUCTED  
PRIOR TO SAG-AFTRA  
STRIKE ACTION

# STILL ALONE IN THE NIGHT

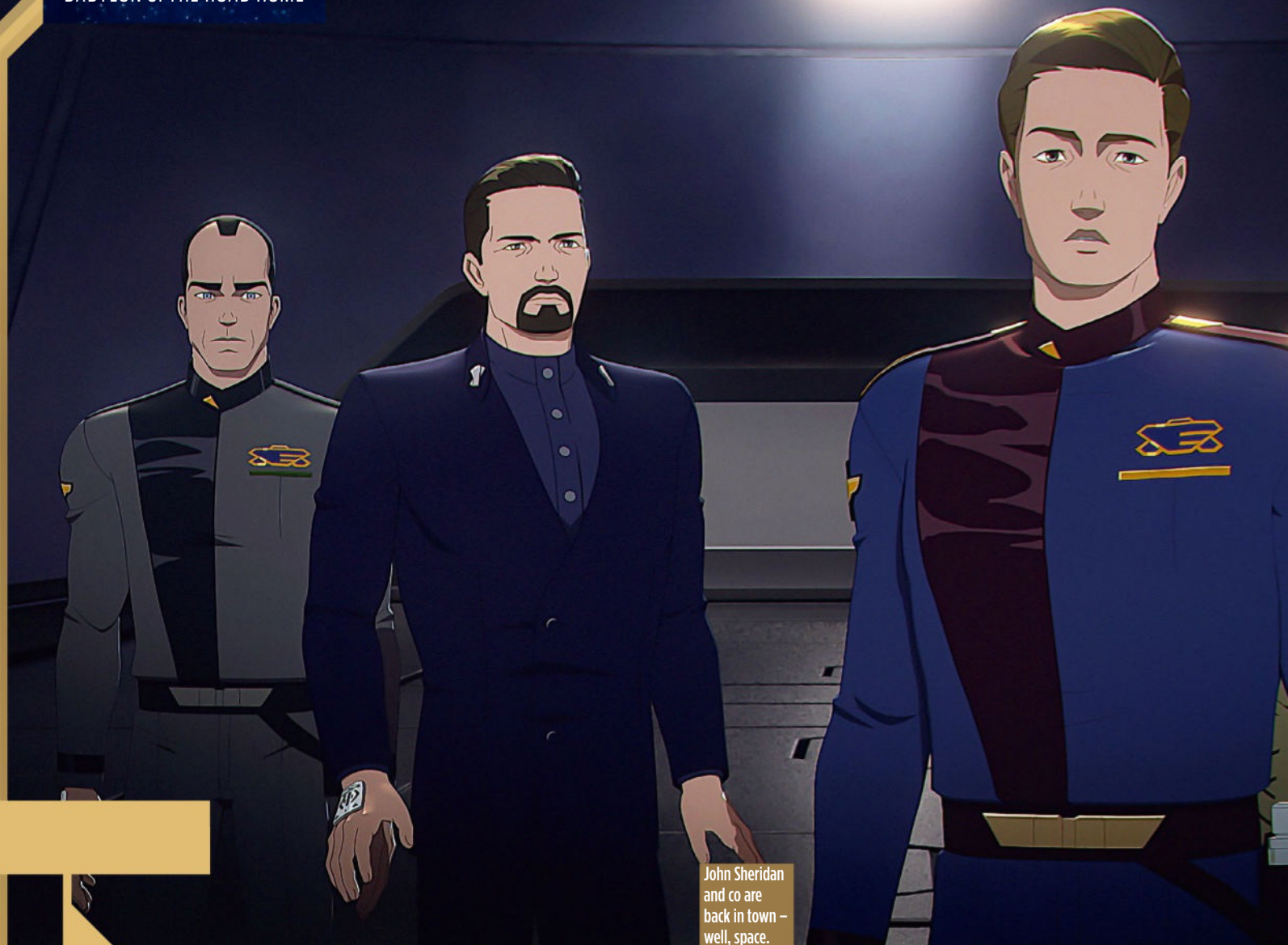
AS **BABYLON 5** RETURNS  
IN *THE ROAD HOME*, ITS  
CREATOR AND STARS TELL  
*SFX* ABOUT THE SHOW THAT  
WAS, THE NEW ANIMATED  
MOVIE THAT IS, AND THE  
LIVE-ACTION REBOOT THAT  
(HOPEFULLY) WILL BE

WORDS: RICHARD EDWARDS









John Sheridan and co are back in town – well, space.

THE BABYLON PROJECT WAS A dream given form. A five-year form, to be precise, as *Babylon 5* creator J Michael Straczynski mapped out an epic story of the eponymous five-mile space station, writing 92 of its 110 episodes himself.

The show may have been a contemporary of Jean-Luc Picard, Benjamin Sisko and Kathryn Janeway's adventures on the final frontier, but it took an altogether less idealistic view of humanity's future – light years from the cosiness of the Federation, Earth found itself under the control of a dictator for much of *B5*'s run, while the cast of alien races tended to spend more time squabbling than getting along.

It also broke the mould with its famous five-year plan as Straczynski (aka JMS; the J stands for Joseph) shepherded the show through a complex, (mostly) pre-planned arc in an era when TV serialisation was minimal, and the viewing public was in thrall to stories-of-the-week.

"When I first told Warner what I wanted to do they looked at me in the way a cat looks at a doorknob – they're not quite sure what it does,

or how to operate it," Straczynski tells *SFX*. "No one had done a specific five-year arc with a beginning, middle and end, and I had to sort of figure out how that worked as I went. Damon Lindelof, when he did *Lost*, asked how we did it, and I also heard from *Battlestar Galactica* and gave them some advice. Then, when those two took off with this arc structure, it just blew up, and it's become ubiquitous in television programming. It's deeply gratifying, slightly puzzling and really rewarding."

Now, 30 years after *Babylon 5*'s debut, the dream has been given a new form. There had been signs and portents of a live-action reboot for a while (more on that later), but Straczynski took fans by surprise earlier this year when he confirmed that an all-new animated movie was lurking in hyperspace, preparing for release this summer.

*The Road Home* sends John Sheridan, Earthforce officer turned President of the Interstellar Alliance, leaping back and forth through the *B5* chronology. Along the way he encounters familiar faces – or, more accurately, voices – and gives us a new perspective on events from that famous five-year arc.

"I knew that I wanted to do a story that would do things that we could never do in the live action show, where we were confined by budget and sets," says Straczynski. "Doing a kind of a travelogue through the *Babylon 5* universe and its history meant sending someone through time and space to be part of those things, and there's no one else other than Sheridan who really fit the bill."

## FRIENDS REUNITED

Bruce Boxleitner is back to voice Sheridan, along with five other members of the original cast: Claudia Christian (Susan Ivanova), Peter Jurasik (Londo Mollari), Bill Mumy (Lennier), Tracy Scoggins (Elizabeth Lochley) and Patricia Tallman (Lyta Alexander). Sadly, many of *Babylon 5*'s original ensemble have passed away since the show was on air, meaning JMS and his stars faced a dilemma.

"We have lost many of the cast but this gave us the opportunity to bring those characters back," Straczynski explains. "I sent an email to all the cast members, and said, 'Are you okay with other people playing your fallen friends, with whom you may or may not have to





It's a  
Wolverine  
crossover!  
(It's not.)



iPhone torches  
have only  
got more  
powerful.



interact?" If one person says no we're not going to do it, but they all said yes. *The Road Home* became both a story in the present tense and also a kind of memorial for those we have lost."

When it came to casting new actors to voice iconic characters such as Delenn, Jeffrey

Sinclair, Michael Garibaldi, G'Kar and Dr Stephen Franklin (originally played by Mira Furlan, Michael O'Hare, Jerry Doyle, Andreas Katsulas and Richard Biggs, respectively), Straczynski says that the approach was "more about the attitude than everyone being a sound-alike".

"The actors that we got did their research," adds *The Road Home* director Matt Peters. "They would make sure they'd watched the

show, and they would capture different things about the characters. When we were in the recording, I remember the actor doing Garibaldi [Anthony Hansen] would repeat the things that got him into the character before he did almost every line. It really helped him focus and capture the personality of that character."

While there were probably a dozen different animation techniques that could have been used to recreate *Babylon 5* and its inhabitants,

**“No one had done a specific five-year arc with a beginning, middle and end”**

the production team opted to work with Studio Mir, a South Korean outfit who recently made "Journey To The Dark Head" for the second season of *Star Wars: Visions*.

"I had done a DC film called *Battle Of The Super Sons* with Studio Mir," says producer Rick Morales, "and I think everybody was really happy with the results. It was the first time in DC animation that we'd done a full CG show – even though it was cel-shaded to look like it was a traditionally animated thing – and when we first talked about *Babylon 5*, it was →



Lennier (Bill  
Mummy) and  
Sheridan share  
their woes.



## THE PRESIDENT

Bruce Boxleitner is  
John Sheridan

### Did you think your time as John Sheridan was over?

I really didn't expect this, so it was a wonderful, pleasant surprise. There's only six of us left, so we've been through a lot of tragedy to get on with this show – it's heartbreaking. Joe reached out to us and told us about the [live-action] reboot and this project – he couldn't give us a lot of details until the right time. Then he finally did and I'm very happy with it. I've played some really good roles in television, but John Sheridan is probably, I think, my finest role – *Scarecrow And Mrs King* was much more successful, but with Sheridan I got to live the life of a young man to an ageing man and then his final demise. That's a rare thing, especially with the way we did television back then when it was more episodic.

### The Sheridan in *The Road Home* is pretty funny, too...

I love the humour. JMS always put it in the original *B5*. There were some kind of clunky jokes, too, but there were humorous moments. It was fun – we had Penn and Teller as guest stars, and Joe always had this sly sense of humour.

### Would you like to play Sheridan again?

Certainly the animated version. I'm 73 now, so I could hardly be John Sheridan any more in live action, unless we do go crazy with AI – they could give me a whole new face and body! I also think that it may be time for a new generation to kind of take that over. *Star Trek* did it, did it not, with *Next Gen* and all the spin-offs? I think they're doing okay for a little thing that started somewhere in the 1960s!



clear that it needed to be CG, seeing as we were going to have space battles.”

“I didn't want to go too cartoony because we're representing actual actors playing actual roles,” explains Straczynski. “I wanted to be realistic, but I think too much 3D might

actually have gotten in the way. This blend gave us the warmth of traditional animation, combined with the fluidity of what you can do with a computer now.”

*The Road Home* also had the unenviable task of bringing the show's famous spaceship





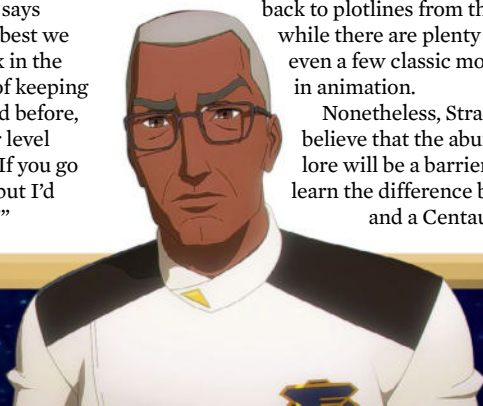


We're no experts, but isn't that gun backwards?

designs into the 21st (or should that be 23rd?) century. *Babylon 5* was something of an outlier in the '90s TV landscape. Whereas *Star Trek* was still making extensive use of model shots for the Enterprise, Deep Space Nine and Voyager, *B5*'s space scenes were entirely computer-generated.

There's no question they look a tad dated to 21st century eyes, but the ambitious, often organic spaceship designs were unlike anything on TV at the time. They've been faithfully recreated for *The Road Home*, though if fans look closely, they might spot that the White Stars, Shadow vessels and even *Babylon 5* itself are a little more detailed than they would remember.

"I told the animation folks, 'I'm not precious about this,'" says Straczynski. "We did the best we could with the show back in the '90s, but if there's a way of keeping the sensibility that we had before, while taking it to another level visually, I said, 'Go for it. If you go too far, I'll pull you back but I'd rather you take a chance.'"



"It's not like we wanted to make wholesale changes, but there were little tweaks to designs we could make to streamline them," adds Morales. "We also play with some things that maybe they couldn't quite pull off in the late '90s. Obviously it's Joe's baby, but he was very cool about letting us explore those things. Also, he was great as a resource. You could go to him and he'd have a very technical explanation for, say, why the Starfury thrusters have to work in that particular way."

#### WELL VERSED

That faithfulness to the *Babylon 5* that was continues into the storytelling. Without giving too much away, the phenomenon that sends Sheridan leaping through time ties directly back to plotlines from the original show, while there are plenty of Easter eggs, and even a few classic moments recreated in animation.

Nonetheless, Straczynski doesn't believe that the abundance of *Babylon 5* lore will be a barrier to anyone yet to learn the difference between a Minbari and a Centauri. "I wanted to →

## THE TELEPATH

Patricia Tallman is  
Lyta Alexander

#### How long has *The Road Home* been in the offing?

Joe [Straczynski]'s really good at keeping us in the loop, and I heard about it, I think, about a year before we got the script for it. Joe put us on an email saying, "There's this possibility, would you be interested - but you'd better not tell anybody or you'll be sucked out an airlock." I think we all loved the idea of an animation project because then it doesn't matter what we look like 30 years later! So we've known about it for maybe two and a half years, and have been really good about keeping our mouths shut.

#### That must be par for the course when you're working in sci-fi?

Exactly! I did *Jurassic Park* [Tallman was Laura Dern's stunt double] and on that our scripts were printed on red paper, so you couldn't copy them. I've done some shows where you're threatened at knifepoint to not say a word, so yeah, you're right, we're used to it.

#### Was it weird seeing yourself as an animated character?

It was very strange but cool. I'm glad I liked what they did with Lyta. I liked that she was kind of edgy and messy, and had an attitude. I hated my doll, though. We had *Babylon 5* action figures and mine was hideous - I was so insulted. The worst part was they made us get into full costume and make-up, they took all these elaborate photographs, and then came up with this doll. What they'd done was taken the Delenn face - Delenn has this bone [on the back of her head] and she has no eyebrows - and put my hair on her. So on *The Road Home* I was prepared for whatever it was going to be, but I think they did an amazing job.





## THE ATTACHÉ

Bill Mumy is Lennier

**You were in *Lost In Space* and *The Twilight Zone* before *Babylon 5*. Are you drawn to sci-fi or is sci-fi drawn to you?**

I think it's a little of both. As a youngster, I worked in so many different arenas of acting, from sci-fi to sitcoms to dramas to Westerns, but as an adult I always gravitated to sci-fi when the opportunity arose. It was my fascination with Superman and Zorro, two caped adventurers, when I was only four years old that made me passionately tell my parents I wanted to get inside that television. So when Will Robinson presented himself for *Lost In Space*, that was all I'd ever wanted to do.

**We're guessing you don't miss the make-up required to play a Minbari on screen?**

My daughter was born during the second season and my son was four years old then, so having an infant and a toddler and getting up at 3:30am for 4:30am make-up calls... it was tough. The group of people that I worked with were all inspiring and talented, but the make-up process was not something I ever truly acclimated to!

**Lennier's arc ended on something of a downer with his (brief) betrayal of Sheridan and Delenn. Would you be keen to explore new aspects of the character in a parallel timeline?**

Looking at it from 25 years down the line, I would love to see any kind of Lennier arc, even if it were a dark one. There's so many ways you could go with where we left him when he skedaddled off. I hope we get the opportunity because I enjoy the character very much. Certainly he's flawed, but aren't we all? He was so noble and so efficient, and so spiritual, and centred and effective. He was tortured as well, which gives him a whole lot of range.



write something that would be fun for the fans to watch, but also newbie-friendly," he says. "It was important to hook it into the original show, but even if you don't know the references it won't be a problem because you'll just accept it as part of the current story. We

provide the information as we go." Besides, now that the exploits of *Rick And Morty*, *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, and both the Marvel and DC universes have brought multiverses into the mainstream, most modern viewers should be comfortable with *The Road*

This isn't a knowing look to camera, by the way.





## THE AMBASSADOR

Peter Jurasik is  
Londo Mollari

**No character on *Babylon 5* evolved more than Londo. Was it a gift to play a role like that over five years?**

Londo started out in one place when we first met him and then he went through enormous changes – as an actor, you can't ask for better than that. It was a real joy and I think the fans have always been able to see in my eyes that I was having a good time, whether I was playing something funny or something serious. They could tell I was loving it and I did love playing him. Good writing does that.

**And Londo's *Odd Couple* relationship with G'Kar (the late Andreas Katsulas) was one of the undoubted highlights of the show...**

We were lucky too because Andreas and I got on really well. We had very different ways of working, but we really respected each other and had a great time together. He had a great sense of humour. He was a real loose cannon on set. He was the sweetest, nicest man but a dangerous individual once you'd got the camera rolling. He would do anything and try anything. He was so free. So yeah, the Londo/G'Kar relationship was important, and we were lucky because we really liked each other.

**How did you find picking up the accent again?**

You know what? I was trained to be an actor, it's all I've ever done and I did this character a lot, so I know him pretty well. So coming back with the accent was not that difficult a thing. Once I had Joe's lines in front of me and the other characters to react to, it was pretty easy for me to do, and enjoyable. Also, when I was recording they treated me like a demigod. It was really a commentary on how old I am – I get it – but the producers and directors treated me really nice. Everyone was really kind.



Original 3D CG animation is replicated in 2D...

*Home's* exploration of quantum mechanics and parallel timelines.

"I think people like big ideas," Straczynski points out. "I think they like a sense of having a context for their existence and, as G'Kar says in the movie, without someone to perceive the universe, it doesn't exist. And that gives every person who looks outside at the night sky purpose."

"We've always tried to combine the deeply personal with the grand and the mythic, and in terms of where I'm going with the story, it's also, for me, about love. With the multiverses, these are variations on one very specific timeline. It's not like we pop into the universe where Sheridan is a giraffe!"

While that may be an idea to save for a *Babylon Zoo* spin-off that will hopefully never happen, this exploration of new timelines does open up almost endless possibilities for future animated movies.

"If this one does well, Warners want to do more," says Straczynski. "We start with Sheridan in his own timeline, but there's also an alternate timeline where we have Sinclair, Sheridan, Ivanova and Lochley side by side,

and all the characters are in their youth and available to us. That would be the core for any [films] going forward. It gives me the freedom to say, 'Alright, if I'm starting from zero and I have access to all the characters, what can happen next?' [Viewers familiar with the show] may know this universe and these characters, but now they don't know what's going to happen."

### THE LONG ROAD

If all goes to plan, there may be even more *B5* on the horizon. A potential reboot of the show (for US network the CW) was first announced back in 2021, and the latest *Babylon* project is very much a going concern. "We still have the live-action reboot on hold pending the [Hollywood writers'] strike," JMS reveals. "The CW wanted to do it, but they got bought and then they went through their own issues."

"Warners then went to get the rights back to the pilot because they wanted to do something with it. We've had many conversations about how we want to do this – we had four or five places that are interested in doing this and putting some money behind it, and then the →



## THE FIRST OFFICER

Claudia Christian is  
Susan Ivanova

**Did you get to the point of thinking you were done with *Babylon 5*?**

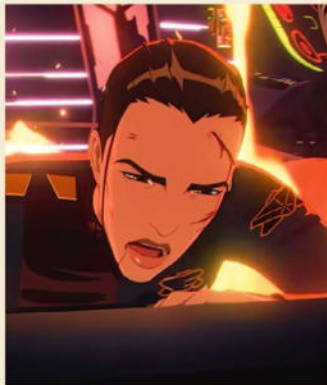
It's funny because I joke with my friends that it's going to be my epitaph: "Best known for *Babylon 5*". It pops up on Wikipedia, it pops up everywhere, and I think to myself, "Well, as long as I'm doing a current *Babylon 5* project, then it's okay, the more the merrier." This year is actually the 30th anniversary, so it's quite remarkable. It's the gift that keeps giving.

**Is coming back to Ivanova like flicking on a switch?**

Absolutely. The only difference, of course, is my voice, because it has 30 years of living added to it. In the '90s my voice was a little bit higher, so I had to keep that youthful thing going on for *The Road Home*. It was very easy to put that character back on, because Ivanova is me, pretty much, just with elements of a few things that maybe I don't have, and some things that I do.

**Was there any aspect of Ivanova you wish you'd explored more?**

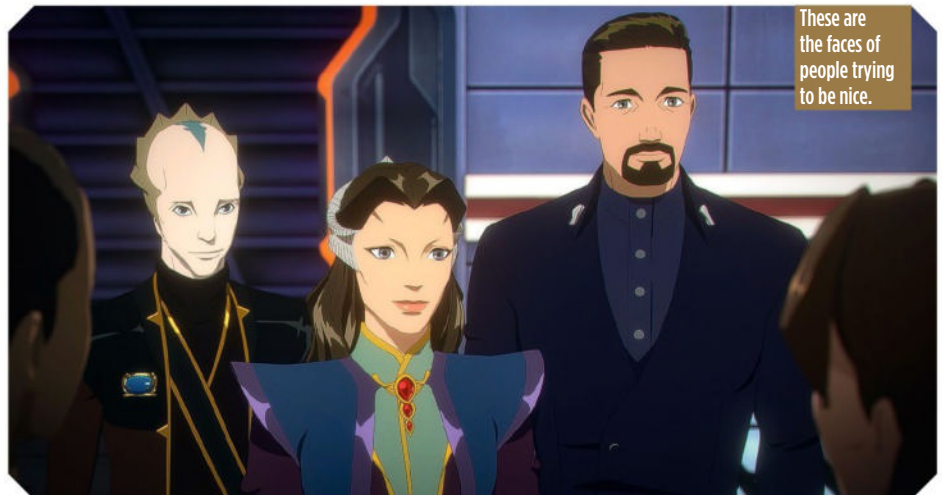
I really did miss the Talia/Ivanova storyline. I thought that was really interesting, because this kind of mature same-sex relationship hadn't been done on television. I mean it had been done, but in science fiction, to not make it pointed, to not make it unusual, to not make it something that you're highlighting... JMS never drew attention to the fact that Ivanova was attracted to men and women, that she had a boyfriend in the first season and then Talia as a lover later on. I think that was beautiful, and it was something that I really wanted to explore, as if there is a future where we don't even remark upon someone's sexuality, which is how I wish it would be right now.



strike hit. So we'll wait until that's done, but I think we have a very good shot at [the show] being set up somewhere."

So what can we expect from *Babylon 5.1*? "Warners asked, 'What do you want to do with the show over the long haul?' I said that I'd

created this five-year arc structure, which has now become the standard, and that there's now something new I want to do that, again, no one else has ever done. I'm not sure if it'll work, the same way I wasn't sure if [the original *Babylon 5*] would work, but if I get the go ahead for the







Londo Mollari  
(Peter Jurasik)  
aka the  
Ambassador.

live-action series, I'm going to try and pull this off. I'm referring to it as holographic storytelling. You'll just have to see what that is when it happens!"

When *SFX* asks whether the reboot will be playing around with new timelines like the animated movie (hopefully plural), Straczynski is quick to point out that he views the projects "very separately". "*The Long Road* is a play on

**“The role of science fiction is to point at the horizon and say, ‘This is where we’re going’”**

the original, very classic *B5*," he says. "Once we land in the final timeline, we're not going to do a lot of parallel world stuff after that, we're going to be in that timeline. The new version of the show is essentially me saying, 'Okay, if I had this idea today for *Babylon 5* – knowing what I know now, having experienced the original show, having 20 years of experience also as a writer since then – how would I do it

right now? That's what led to the script, and everyone's very excited about it. We'll see where it goes."

It's also an opportunity to tell a story that reflects the tumultuous present we're living in, a far cry from the (seemingly) more stable and optimistic 1990s.

"A lot of folks have pointed out that many of the things about the rise of authoritarian governments that we saw in *B5* kind of paralleled where we've been in the last 20 years," Straczynski admits. "That's unfortunate, because it was meant to be a show, not a user's guide, you know?"

"Now the question becomes about looking where we are now as a culture and what's coming up in the next 20 years. That's what I want to address.

"The role of science fiction is to point at the horizon and say, 'This is where we're going – are you happy about that?' So yeah, I want to explore themes that were not as topical back in the '90s but are now definitely on our radar." ●

*Babylon 5: The Road Home* is available on VOD and Blu-ray from 15 August.

## THE CAPTAIN

Tracy Scoggins is  
Elizabeth Lochley

**What was it like seeing yourself as an animated character?**

It was fun. I think that the animation is beautiful. I think that the animators have nailed some important aspects of my visage – I have Vulcan eyebrows and they got that, which was great.

**Did you find it easy to snap back into Lochley mode?**

I'm glad you asked because I went to the number one voice actor/coach in Houston. I spent a whole afternoon with him, while he had recordings of Lochley from 1998 on loop. We worked together until all the little red lines and little red lights lined up perfectly. It was a challenging process but it was fun. He's a lovely guy. He does it out of his home and I even got a good meal. That's typical actor – we're always looking for that free meal.

**Were there any aspects of Lochley you felt were unexplored when you finished the show?**

Well, yes, because there were time constraints. To create a character in one season [Scoggins joined the show in season five], that's a challenge, but it was a challenge that I was up for. If I had to do it over, I would have more scenes with the character of Delenn. I think that was an interesting chemistry there. We had a couple of scenes, but I think she being the love of Sheridan's life, and me being an ex-wife, I think there was more to explore there. I also realise it wasn't the Lochley and Dylan show, so that's okay!

**With *The Road Home* opening up new timelines, maybe that could still be an option?**

I do hope so. And I would love to do scenes with Claudia [Christian], because – unlike some fans think – we don't have *Dynasty* catfights in the pond. We're friends!





BLUE BEETLE



TRUE



THE FIRST DCU CHARACTER ARRIVES!  
**BLUE BEETLE** DIRECTOR ÁNGEL  
MANUEL SOTO AND STAR XOLO  
MARIDUEÑA TALK KICKSTARTING  
A NEW CINEMATIC UNIVERSE

WORDS: JACK SHEPHERD

THIS INTERVIEW  
WAS CONDUCTED  
PRIOR TO SAG-AFTRA  
STRIKE ACTION

# B L U E





HEN ÁNGEL MANUEL SOTO MET XOLO Maridueña at Sundance Film Festival, something happened. The director was promoting his impressive coming-of-age story *Charm City Kings* when his producer introduced him to *Cobra Kai*'s spritely Maridueña. "I saw a really nice, relatable

kid," Soto tells *SFX*. "He had moves, but he also had charisma. The way he expressed himself was very mature, but then you see him laughing and making jokes, and he's a kid who definitely lives in the present."

What Soto didn't realise was that he had been bitten by the Maridueña bug. A year later, the filmmaker was invited by Warner Bros to discuss bringing DC stalwart Blue Beetle to cinemas, and as Soto started reading the superhero's many comics, he couldn't stop thinking about the young man he had met at Sundance.

"He looks exactly like him," he says. "And after meeting his family and everybody involved in his upbringing... I mean, without trying, he already is [the Blue Beetle] Jaime Reyes. He has the martial arts background, he has the same physical attributes, and the way he handles life is not that dissimilar from Jaime. It was an obvious cast. I pushed for him because I couldn't see anybody else. And he delivered."

#### FAMILY AFFAIR

Anyone uninitiated in Reyes's comic-book past may be wondering why Soto was so intrigued by the actor's family dynamic. After all, it's not normally a necessity for your colleagues to meet your parents. The character of Jaime Reyes, however, is steeped in family. Where Peter Parker and Miles Morales hide their abilities, Reyes does not have a choice: he obtains his powers in front of his entire family.

In the film, Reyes first transforms into the Blue Beetle by accident in his kitchen. He's been tasked with protecting a stolen, mythical relic that's shaped like a scarab. The alien device latches onto Reyes, disintegrating his clothes and covering his body with a blue exoskeleton, and his family, including his mother (Elpidia Carrillo), father (Damián Alcázar), uncle (George Lopez), sister (Belissa Escobedo) and grandmother (Adriana Barraza), are all there watching on in horror.

The scene was Maridueña's favourite to film and, his director explains, gives the film its emotional core. "Family is what drew me into the project, it was our North Star," Soto says. "I love all these superhero movies [but] the tropes are always similar, and that's okay, but one thing that was very satisfying to see in the script was that this doesn't happen to him in an alley, or by himself. The family's involved."

"That was fresh for an origin story and how that alters the course of the hero's journey; how that refusal of the call, and stepping into that new world, comes differently thanks to the participation of the family." For Soto, making sure the family had chemistry was one of the



He also has some really big guns, which helps.





Blue Beetle has the power of all beetles! Imagine.



Jaime (Xolo Maridueña) and the scarab.



"Um, Jaime... everything all right in there?"

most important aspects of the entire pre-production process. He gathered the actors together for what can only be described as an unusual rehearsal process. Rather than going over pages of the script, the ensemble instead spoke about their experiences, sharing both the saddest and happiest events of their life. The younger cast heard stories about Barraza's upbringing in Mexico and the fulfillment of having children.

"Everybody shared their highest highs and their lowest lows," Soto says. "They were hugging each other and supporting each other through those moments so that, when we were shooting, any improvisation came from that place. There were no egos, it was family."

The plot primarily focuses on Jaime as he comes to terms with his newfound abilities, which include being able to jet off to space in his suit and construct weapons from seemingly nothing. All the while, Susan Sarandon's villainous Victoria Kord, along with Raoul Max Trujillo's Conrad Carapax (aka the Indestructible Man), hunt down the person who took the scarab. But it's not only Jaime who ends up getting a heroic arc: each member of the family gets their moment.

"Everybody can see themselves represented on screen, not just because of race or ethnicity or gender," Soto says. "Your grandma is going to see themselves being a hero. Your younger

sister, your dad, your mom." With that in mind, writers John Rickard and Zev Foreman made sure that the villains were not world-ending destroyers or CG armies, and Soto wants to stress that the Reyes family fights more than just the usual sort of superhero movie threats. "It's about saving this family from gentrification, saving a community from exploitation and displacement," he says.

"My biggest fear is not an alien invasion but Homeland Security. That haunts me. Not being able to put food on the table, that's a real villain. Being able to take that and make an allegory with a superhero, and have him succeed so that he can then save the world, it's a unique thing, and I think it's going to surprise people."

*Blue Beetle* uses action sparingly compared to other recent superhero flicks. "We're not trying to blow your head every five minutes, we really wanted to focus on the family and the characters, to take you on a journey," Soto says. "It reminds me of the films that I grew up with, especially Latino cinema, which spends time with the characters before they head into action situations. Then, once they happen, and the film reaches its climax, it has a more visceral feel to it."

Soto often speaks about Latino cinema and its influence on him. *Blue Beetle* itself marks the first major live-action DC production to

centre on a Latino character. Soto wants to make clear that the Latino experience is not a monolithic one, and that *Blue Beetle* represents just a handful of experiences, but he's clearly excited that doors are opening to filmmakers of all backgrounds. "It felt like we had an opportunity to open the dialogue, open the doors," he says.

"For me, I cannot wait to see the next Latino superhero. Where is he going to be from? There are so many more stories to tell. My hope is that people are invited to our culture to see this family and have fun, to see superheroes through a different lens. I want to tell my story because my experience is different."

This version of Jaime Reyes is different, too. Unlike in the comics, where Reyes classically lives in El Paso, Texas, the scriptwriters created a new hometown for him, Palmera City. And while that may seem like a relatively minor detail (though one that has proven controversial with some fans), the implication for Soto was much greater.

"When you list DC superheroes, they have their own cities," he says. "The Flash has Central City, Batman has Gotham and Superman has Metropolis. To me, *Blue Beetle* having his own city means that we're seeing him as a hero that's climbing up the ladder to become A-list. But at the same time, I understand what it's like to have a hero from →



your own city. We spent time in El Paso and used the architecture, the landmarks, the lights, the texture, so that we can integrate what's special about El Paso into Palmera City."

By creating a unique hometown for the Reyes family, *Blue Beetle* lays the foundation for an ongoing franchise, and Soto hopes his film succeeds so that they can continue with his plans for a trilogy that escalates the stakes from personal to galaxy-saving.

"This is the first act," he says. "We introduce the character, we introduce his family, we do not have him going out and saving the world straight away. We wanted to ground him. This one feels like a prologue to his journey, where we take our time building the world, meeting people, seeing where he lives, what he eats, how he smells. So that when he ends up saving his family, you think, 'Maybe he can save the world? And maybe he can save the galaxy?' After this movie, I do believe Blue Beetle is ready to become one of the A-list heroes that the world is desperate to see."

With James Gunn and Peter Safran, the new heads of DC, rebooting the universe, there's been some speculation that *Blue Beetle* may be a storytelling cul-de-sac that will inevitably be redone. Gunn, however, has already clarified that Reyes is the very first new DCU character, and while that was not something Soto knew going into the project (the regime change happened during post-production), Gunn's words have been seen as a "stamp of approval" on the film.

"It's a testament to the hard work of all the cast and crew," Soto says. "In a cultural sense, the fact that a Latino that looks like me is the first new superhero in the DCU is exciting. We've always known we are superheroes and now finally the world is going to see us as superheroes. We can stand with all these other superheroes, from Batman to Superman to Flash to Aquaman to Wonder Woman. Having them all standing shoulder to shoulder, I would



The family indulge in some gentle bullying.

have loved to have seen that when I was growing up.

"I just hope people are open to it and understand that this movie, this character, is just the beginning. His story doesn't end when the credits roll. There are so many more opportunities. I cannot wait to see what the future brings for him."

Let's all hope that the hero can charm the world just as Maridueña charmed Soto all those years ago. ●

*Blue Beetle* is in cinemas on 18 August.



"Now THIS is something I really wasn't expecting."





## BUGGING OUT

Xolo Maridueña is the Blue Beetle

**Family plays a major role in *Blue Beetle*. Does that make this a different superhero film?**

● That's definitely one of the biggest things that makes this movie different. One of my favourite scenes to film, and just one of my favourite moments in any superhero movie, is when Jaime's getting his powers for the first time in front of his whole family.

That keeps the story so honest from the beginning. Oftentimes in superhero movies, a big conflict is having to keep your identity hidden from your family, and if there's one thing that's for sure about Latinos it's that nothing can be hidden.

**Which superheroes would you say Jaime Reyes is most like?**

● Something I really like about the Blue Beetle character in the comics, at least – and we don't necessarily see as much of it in the movie yet, because our movie is really self-contained – is how much of a code-switcher he is. He's able to be cool with the cool kids, he's serious with Batman and Superman.

And there's this really aspirational feeling about him that comes from his sense of honesty and his earnest demeanour in a way that is believable. He's had such a strong sense of love from the beginning of his life. I drew from that and the *Young Justice* animated series. He's also so sassy in the *Injustice* games, I love his quips and taglines, he's hilarious in those games. I was able to blend it all in.

**What aspects of this film do you think will most surprise people?**

● Don't let the colours fool you, this is a serious movie as well. I love the '80s neon, *Akira*-inspired universe that we're making. But this is a movie for all ages. A lot of people are meeting Blue Beetle for the first time ever and I'm just so excited for that to play out.

**What was it like wearing the suit?**

● I wanted to live in the suit. It's the coolest suit I've ever seen. The reason that I really want everyone to see the movie is because they said if we make a second one, I get to keep the suit! I'm kidding, but the suit, it feels both alien and techy. It really is fantastic. It's practical. I felt it hugging my back and the pincers and all of these different things. It fooled me. I was like, "What! I'm a superhero? What the heck." It looked like I had a Brazilian butt-lift.

I feel like I was the only person showing up at three in the morning so excited. They were like, "Please, just be quiet. I haven't had my coffee." Even watching the trailer for the first time, I was astonished at how amazing it looks with the CGI because it was just practical on set.

**James Gunn has called Blue Beetle the first DCU character. That must be a huge honour...**

● Absolutely. People should be excited about this new chapter and the opportunity for unity. *Blue Beetle* is not going to resemble all the rest of [the DC universe] – that's why we have all of these different types of movies, *Swamp Thing*, *Superman* and *Creature Commandos*. I'm excited for *Blue Beetle* to set the bar for the quality of movies regardless because we didn't make the movie thinking we were [setting the] stage. We just set out to make the best movie. The next movie that they got coming out is *Superman*. We're ready to roll out the carpet for the boy with the red cape.

**There's been talk of Blue Beetle taking on a leadership role. Does he have those qualities in this film?**

● We 100% see that in this film. One of the biggest differences from the comics is this version of Jaime having more sense of self. He's right out of college, he has a good head on his shoulders, and also he's coming back home feeling like he's the man he's ready to be. He cares about his family and he's ready to go above and beyond to help. I'm so excited to see how this young man, who's really just started to find himself now that the universe is giving him his first big test, reacts to that.

**There's been talk of a Blue Beetle trilogy. Are you ready for that?**

● I'm ready for it to be like *Star Wars*, six movies. I'm just kidding. But yes, I am. Everyone involved, even [producers] Peter Safran and James [Gunn], we see this as a larger story, and I want this to be a trilogy. There's so much more to tell in this story. I'm honoured to have just made this first one.



Director Ángel Manuel Soto (second from left).





ONE PIECE

# Piece of The Action

ACTORS IÑAKI GODOY AND EMILY RUDD TALK ABOUT  
STARRING IN *One Piece*, NETFLIX'S NEW ADAPTATION  
OF THE WORLD'S BEST-SELLING MANGA

WORDS: STEVE O'BRIEN







THIS INTERVIEW  
WAS CONDUCTED  
PRIOR TO SAG-AFTRA  
STRIKE ACTION





OF THE 10 BEST-selling authors of all time, some names are obvious – William Shakespeare tops the chart, with sales of over (minimum estimate) two billion, and JK Rowling, Agatha Christie, Barbara Cartland and Enid Blyton are all in there.

Then there's Eiichiro Oda. With estimated sales of around *half a billion* (just think about that for a second), the Japanese author/artist has outsold Dr Seuss, Tom Clancy and Stephen King. Not bad for a writer who's not yet 50 and who only penned his most successful creation *One Piece* (the biggest selling manga title of all time) in 1997.

If you're one of the 500 million people who've bought one of the 105 collected volumes of *One Piece* (or indeed have caught one of the 1,000+ episodes of its animated small screen spin-off, or played one of the 40 tie-in videogames), you'll need no introduction to the high seas adventures of Luffy, a superpowered teen who travels the globe, ably assisted by his band of brothers the Straw Hats, in search of the world's ultimate treasure.

### CREATOR-APPROVED

Bringing *One Piece* to TV in live-action form has been a long-time labour of love for showrunners Steven Maeda (*The X-Files*, *Pan Am*, *Helix*) and Matt Owens (*The Defenders*, *Agents Of SHIELD*, *Luke Cage*) – and indeed for Eiichiro Oda, who, fans will be happy to know, is intimately involved in this eight-part series. In fact, he's so integral to this lavishly budgeted Netflix adaptation that he had casting approval for every one of the series' vast cast, including that of the show's hero, Monkey D Luffy.

"It was the best compliment of my career!" squeals the contagiously enthusiastic Iñaki Godoy about getting the okay from the great Eiichiro Oda. Despite being just 20, the Mexican actor is already a well-known face on the world's biggest streamer, playing Bruno Lazcano in Spanish language hit *Who Killed Sara?* and the shapeshifting Juan Ruiz in



Iñaki Godoy as Monkey D Luffy gets to the point.

Netflix's one-season wonder *The Imperfects*. But *One Piece* will be Godoy's first leading role.

"I knew about *One Piece* before, because I'm very into videogames and geek stuff," he tells *SFX*. "But I never read it and I never saw the animation, so when I got the role, it was a new thing for me. I gotta say that after filming the first season, I've been catching up with the whole thing."

Already a dedicated admirer of *One Piece* was Godoy's co-star Emily Rudd. In the show, she plays Nami, a secretive thief who is one of the Straw Hats – a part, she tells us, she'd coveted for a long time. "Nami's big moment in the East Blue arc, which I won't spoil, was the moment that solidified me as a *One Piece* fan," the 30-year-old actor says. "It's the scene that

I can just think about and want to cry. It made me go, 'Oh, this is not only a silly, adventurous, playful show, it's also a show about real stuff, real emotions. It has so much heart.' So I'd always been like, 'Man, if I can play somebody, it would be Nami.'

"One of my best friends is Matt Owens, who I've known for about six years," she continues. "We used to be at the same agency, and they said, 'Hey, why don't you guys meet? You're both anime nerds.' So we bonded over our mutual love for anime and manga, and then he was like, 'Hey, I'm thinking about bringing *One Piece* to Netflix.' I said, 'That's a crazy undertaking, but if anyone can do it, it's you.' *One Piece* is his life, it's his passion."

Given his long-time love of *One Piece*, working with his hero Eiichiro Oda was a nerve-racking experience for the 34-year-old showrunner. "I don't think I've ever been more nervous for anything in my entire life," the writer explains. "Here was this person who has created this story I hold so much love and reverence for, and I'm asking him to trust me with his baby."

"I'm not going to lie, he was tough in the beginning – this wasn't the first attempt at a live-action *One Piece*, and we weren't the first people to try to express it in a new way. But I think once he realised we were coming from the right place – trying to protect this series

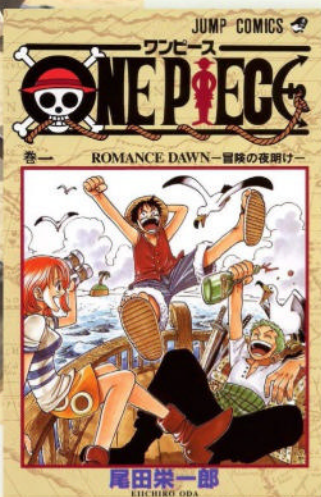


Something mysterious is going on... No spoilers!



The gang's all here – meet the Straw Hats in the flesh.





and create a new avenue for even more people to fall in love with it – he started to trust us.”

While Rudd and Owens remain the series’ most clued-up devotees (“Oh, he’s leagues above me!” she laughs), it’s clear that Godoy is catching up fast. And if veteran *One Piece* lovers have any trepidation about him playing the puppyish Monkey D Luffy, rest assured that Netflix couldn’t have found a better fit, so much so that it’s hard to work out where Godoy ends and Luffy begins.

“I do have a lot of Luffy inside me,” Iñaki says with a smile. “I’ve always been a very positive person, I’ve always been very energetic, I love to eat and I love to celebrate. But there are some things where I’m not like Luffy – he’s very brave and he knows what he wants and how he’s going to do it.

“When I was filming *One Piece*, I was really nervous about a lot of things, but Luffy put me into this mindset that that’s what adventures are all about – that it’s okay to be nervous, it’s exciting and it’s fun! He inspired me to be the best version of myself, which is the reason I love this character so much. He makes me want to be more brave. There’s so much I’ve learned from him.”

As an aficionado, Emily Rudd can understand that some fans of the manga

and anime series might be cautious about a live-action adaptation, but points towards Eiichiro Oda’s involvement as evidence of this series’ authenticity. While some comic book creators are conspicuously absent from their live-action spin-offs (hello, Alan Moore), this loving and largely faithful adaptation has Eiichiro Oda’s signature on every frame.

“He’s been involved from day one,” Rudd says. “He’s read all of the scripts, he approved all of the cast members. For the creator of such an important series to have a hand over our adaptation is massive for me as a fan. I think it matters a lot to the other existing fans as well. But outside of that, the show is made by people who love the series – they love the anime, they love the manga... If they weren’t familiar, they became familiar and fell in love, and I think that really comes across on screen.”

Though the series makes some slight revisions to the source material, there were some aspects of the *One Piece* mythology Oda was insistent on the showrunners not changing. So, rest assured, the backstories of the various Straw Hats are as they were in the manga, as are the powers that the Devil Fruits give to whoever eats them (“That was

something we were asked not to mess with,” admits Owens).

“We want to honour the work of Mr Oda and the whole history of *One Piece*,” says Godoy. “We respect it, we love it, we think it’s great. And the live action definitely stays true to the source material. The history of *One Piece* is great and more people should know about it, because it can inspire you to be the best version of yourself and to be more friendly and follow your dreams.”

With 105 (and counting) collected volumes of *One Piece* out there, there’s more than enough material for Netflix to continue this series for years, nay decades. As yet, a second season hasn’t been okayed, but the cast remain hopeful. For the moment, its star is enjoying devouring the manga and anime series, and following Luffy’s personal journey beyond those season one scripts.

“I’m reading *One Piece* and I’m watching *One Piece*, because I like it,” Godoy laughs. “I’m a genuine fan. We’ll have to find out together what happens with the live action, but regardless of what happens, I’m a *One Piece* fan, dude!” ●

*One Piece* is on Netflix from 31 August.



## Mackenyu is Roronoa Zoro

The son of martial arts icon Sonny Chiba talks *One Piece*

**Tell us a bit about your character.**

Zoro has green hair, three swords, and he holds one in his mouth. He’s intent on being the best swordsman ever.

**How familiar were you with the *One Piece* manga and anime before you got this part?**

Every Japanese kid grows up with *One Piece*. Even if you aren’t very familiar with it, you will know who these characters are because it’s iconic all around the world. As someone who grew up watching the anime and reading the manga, it was an honour to play Zoro.

**Is it more of a challenge filming a series that involves so many special effects?**

The set designs were amazing and made me feel a part of the *One Piece* world. The VFX were added in later, so that did not make filming much of a challenge.

**Are you much of a sci-fi/fantasy fan?**

I love sci-fi/fantasy and it’s why I have done so many of those projects.

**What, to date, has been your most enjoyable day on set and why?**

Zoro has so many iconic and famous stories that people know and love from the manga and the anime it’s hard to pick a favourite arc. I can’t tell you about the scenes in the Netflix series and how we filmed them, but it was very memorable to do and there were many special moments.



THE WHEEL OF TIME





THIS INTERVIEW  
WAS CONDUCTED  
PRIOR TO SAG-AFTRA  
STRIKE ACTION

# Times Two

MOIRAINE DAMODRED  
IS DOWN BUT NOT OUT  
IN SEASON TWO OF  
**THE WHEEL OF TIME**

WORDS: TARA BENNETT

**T**WO YEARS AGO, READERS of Robert Jordan's beloved high fantasy series *The Wheel Of Time* were handed a gift that was 30 years in the making. Prime Video bestowed upon them a lavish adaptation of book one, 1990's *The Eye Of The World*, and cast Rosamund Pike as the embodiment of the intense magic wielder of the Aes Sedai, Moiraine Damodred.

In the sweeping first season, Moiraine travels to a remote village in search of a young channeller who might be the Dragon Reborn, a reincarnation of the champion of the Light, prophesied to either end the world or save it. She collects five young potential candidates in hopes of discovering who it is, and trains them to help her battle primordial evil the Dark One.

Showrunner Rafe Judkins ended season one with a big battle where Moiraine is drained of her power and Rand al'Thor (Joshua Stradowski) is revealed as the likely Dragon Reborn. Fearing his powers, he feigns death and escapes into self-exile. ➔



Season two picks up five months later and covers major storylines that happen in parallel within the next two books: *The Great Hunt* (1990) and *The Dragon Reborn* (1991). Executive producer Marigo Kehoe tells SFX that Judkins consulted Brandon Sanderson, who completed the series after Jordan's death, about how best to compress those two beefy tomes into eight episodes.

"They have the same story arc, pretty much," Kehoe explains of how they dovetail together. "Rand goes off on his journey, all the characters split apart, and then they fight [Dark One lieutenant] Ishmael at the end."

The season opens with all of the characters experiencing a fresh start, independently discovering who they are without Moiraine in their lives. In the first episode, Nynaeve (Zoë Robins) and Egwene (Madeleine Madden) are novices in the White Tower; Perrin (Marcus Rutherford) is learning to be a tracker with his soldier friends; and Mat Cauthon (Dónal Finn) is forcefully indisposed. Rand is trying to blend into Cairhien, while Moraine plots.

"Last season, Moraine was the leader of the pack and she kept things moving," Kehoe says of the Aes Sedai's arc. "This season, she's found

## Aes Sedai, Most High

**Rosamund Pike** dishes on a magic-less Moiraine Damodred

**What does a power-less Moiraine look like in season two?**

Through losing the One Power, we see Moiraine in a different light. We see her for all the other things she is: the Machiavellian manipulator; the woman who plays life like a game of chess and is always three steps ahead of her allies and her opponents. And that's been super-cool and interesting.

**The season opens with a surprising rift between Moiraine and her loyal companion/ward, al'Lan Mandragoran (Daniel Henney).**

Yes. Trust is a big thing for Moiraine. She hasn't had to worry about her trust with al'Lan as it's complete and cemented by the bond which is sealed with the One Power. Without him being sealed to her, I think she feels guilty about his loyalty to her because she no longer feels worthy of the way that he will follow her to the end, if need be. I think she feels that she doesn't have the right to that kind of loyalty any more. But she also doesn't know how to express it and she's a very proud woman, so she's not very good at dealing with being vulnerable.

**Her choices set her up as a lone wolf this season. After working with the huge ensemble, was it a big adjustment?**

She knows that unless she's very, very cruel, al'Lan will carry on following unless her "no" is firm enough. It's kind of heartbreaking because it's the relationship that we've come to love and we've come to rely on. They feel very secure. It's been my security through season one, having Daniel by my side. Without it, it's felt like losing a limb, a bit.

## Wandering Warder

**Daniel Henney** speaks of al'Lan Mandragoran's broken bond



**Moiraine opens the season really pushing al'Lan's buttons!**

It's uncharted territory for him, and for me, as an actor. It's a strange thing sometimes when I have to show big emotion. When I do, I'm almost not used to hearing those levels of volume come from myself, as him. I have to play with it a bit to find where it lives. But I'm excited when I see where they're going.

**What's his solo journey about?**

I think this is good for him. This is something he needs to go through to probably prepare himself to be in a "big boy" relationship at some point. Also, to be a more well-rounded human being. I think it's good that he's leaning on his fellow Warders and asking questions.

that she's human and she can be wrong, and she was wrong. She lost her power and the season follows her emotional journey. She's split from al'Lan. The bond is broken and it's really brutal. She's on her own but she's still trying to do what is right, which is to find Rand."

As an executive producer and primary director of season two, Sanaa Hamri says the series has only got bigger, with new landscapes and enclaves of characters introduced for each character's arc. "When I met with Rafe, we talked about the vision for season two and about more action, more deep, nuanced character work, as well as strong imagery. When you have a great season one base, you can really jump

off of that and take some really great visual chances, and also within the acting of it all."

Filming for the season took place in Prague and Morocco, which Hamri says allowed for even more scale. "We've added a lot more drone work and a lot more camera movements – whether it's cranes or Steadicams – to make the audience feel like they're in the point of view of the camera," she details. "I love immersing the audience in the world and making it more visceral."

She says they've woven those new landscapes into the growth arcs for each character. "We're learning a lot more about Nynaeve and her struggles, Perrin and what he develops into, as well as Egwene," she explains. "And what's really fun about it is, because they get scattered in the different worlds, then someone has to bring them together."

The expanding cast of characters also means Kehoe has been able to bring in more award-winning actors like Meera Syal, Rima Te Wiata and Sophie Okonedo, to name only a few. "What I love about the women characters is we show all of them: race, colour, creed, size, disability," she says with enthusiasm. "We try to create a world in which everybody is

Rosamund Pike as Moiraine Damodred.



Ayoola Smart and Marcus Rutherford get stealthy.





## Dragon Reborn

**Joshua Stradowski**  
teases Rand al'Thor's  
season of purpose

**Rand walked away from his circle to protect them, so everyone but Moiraine thinks he's dead. What's his relationship with power this season?**

When men go mad, they kill the people they love first, and Rand knows that. He says it at the Eye of the World to Moraine and he leaves. He tries to live a new life, but that's very hard because of who he is. Rand has heard those stories about men who can channel from a very young age and you become a beast. Rand is trying to control that and actually not go towards that power. Whereas Moiraine is trying to embrace the One Power, and that's absolutely a nightmare for Rand.

**How long can he hide from his destiny, though?**

It follows him when he's awake and even when he's asleep. He channels in his sleep and then something awful happens, and there's guilt. Every time he tries to run away from it, he realises that, at some point, it's just impossible. Season two is about that. Rand has to face what he has to face. He has to accept that he is the Dragon Reborn and there's no running away from that.

**Rand also interacts with new characters, in particular a woman named Selene...**

Yeah, people are still trying to open him up. And of course, there's more going on. Rand knows now that he's the Dragon Reborn and he thinks he's one of the very few, but more now know. He has become a target and you might think that he's killed the Dark One at the Eye of the World, but he was not gone from the world.

Rand al'Thor  
(Joshua Stradowski)  
goes all Jedi.

present, because we are. We do that to the very best of our ability and are very conscious of it.

"And the women are the centre of this story, but they're not the only story," she continues. "What I love about this story is women are flawed too. There are shades of grey and they have darkness as well as the light. It's a very simple but complicated way of showing in men and women that you need both.

"The men destroyed that and went too far, but women are portrayed in a way that they are multifaceted. Women are not infallible. Overall, for me, the show is very much about the world needing a balance."

Both Kehoe and Hamri promise that all of the disparate stories will pay off in a season finale that will take the series to new heights. Hamri is that episode's director and says that Judkins described it to her as "one of the biggest battles ever."

She confirms it is, and will evoke the likes of *Cleopatra* and *Gladiator*. "There are times when I had six cameras going at the same time," she teases.

Kehoe hopes that both readers of the novels and those who've only watched the series will embrace their creative choices. "It's still the

books," she says to assuage the fears of any fans who may be nervous. "But the journey will be slightly different to what is in the books. I love it. I think the second season is phenomenal. And then with all the characters back together, the next question is, where are they going to go next? Season three starts with a bang, that's all I'll say." 🐉

*The Wheel of Time* is on Prime Video from 1 September.

## Novice Woes

**Madeleine Madden**  
explains Egwene al'Vere's  
humbling start



**How is Aes Sedai training going for the friends?**

Nynaeve and Egwene are having very different experiences at the White Tower. Nynaeve is succeeding and excelling, and is gaining all of the attention of everyone. Egwene has sort of become invisible in the process. There's been this communication breakdown and a fracture in their relationship.

**What's her journey to come?**

I think being an idealist and an optimist, that comes crashing down on her. She gets a reality check of how the world works, how the Aes Sedai and the different Ajahs work. And even the relationships between the sisters within certain Ajahs is very complicated.

The right hand  
of Dark One  
(Fares Fares,  
right).

al'Lan  
Mandraboran,  
played by  
Daniel Henney.





THE NUN II

# FRITZ



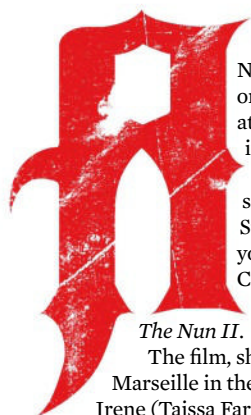
WHAT'S BLACK AND WHITE AND  
READ ALL OVER? THIS INTERVIEW  
WITH DIRECTOR MICHAEL CHAVES,  
ABOUT CONJURING UNIVERSE  
SEQUEL **THE NUN II**

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**



# OF HORROR II





NUN IN HIDING, A DEMON on the run, a retired playboy at a boarding school – throw in some references to a women's prison drama, some spuds and a Sylvester Stallone blockbuster and you've got director Michael Chaves's latest chapter in the *Conjuring* Universe,

### *The Nun II.*

The film, shot in Aix-en-Provence and Marseille in the south of France, sets Sister Irene (Taissa Farmiga) and Maurice, aka Frenchie (Jonas Bloquet) from 2018's *The Nun*, on a "collision course" with titular nastiness Valak, whom they'll have to face for a second time. But Sister Irene isn't coming out all guns blazing.

"After her big adventure in the first movie, she's gone into hiding, she's living this very anonymous life in a convent in Italy," Chaves explains. "I really liked that idea, because I like that idea of almost like a *Rambo* nun, where you have this great hero that just went into hiding – that they don't want attention, they don't want to be known as a hero. I think there's probably a lot of reasons that people want to escape the limelight. Maybe there's some residual trauma, maybe she just doesn't want to be known as that. So she's living this very anonymous life."

It's while Sister Irene is on a reluctant mission set by the church to track down what they believe to be Valak committing a series of murders across France, that she discovers the boarding school where Maurice has now seemingly settled down.

"You can see that the effects of the last movie have maybe made him ready to wind down his story or maybe find someone to share it with. So that's where we find him, and then we start to realise that all is not right, that there might be something wrong with him and perhaps something escaped from the last movie."

### SCHOOL'S OUT

Filming took place in an old decommissioned school, with a long history. Chaves says that "about half of the movie" takes place there.

"It stretches back through all these different uses. It was a convent at one time. Before that it was these ruins that go back to the 1300s. What was so amazing about that is the more you dug in, you went into these little nooks and crannies – it was like an archaeological dig."

It's here that Chaves is quick to raise expectations of the kind of offering a horror sequel may deliver.

"Going into this, on the surface, it's *The Nun II*, it's a spin off of the *Conjuring* Universe and I think everyone assumes what it's going to be,"

Careful there fella, you'll give yourself a hernia.



Taissa Farmiga is back as the reluctant Sister Irene.



Storm Reid plays a young nun in training...

he suggests. "But I really want to dig into the things that are real, whether it's the characters or the world or the time period. Starting with the nuns and in Irene's world, I really wanted to capture that world."

"I started watching all these documentaries about nuns and just really fell in love with this nun lifestyle. It's so amazing. They're the foot soldiers of the Catholic Church, and there's this limit of how high a nun can go. They can basically run a convent, but beyond that there's definitely a ceiling. I thought it was very interesting, that kind of structure in a story set in the '50s. But I also think it's interesting because it's still that way today."

"I wanted the convent that she was in [at the start of the movie] to be almost like this ragtag convent, kind of like *Orange Is The New Black* but for nuns. So there's these really great little characters there – they're only quick little [appearances by] character actors, doing a really great job, in a little slice of the movie as it opens. But there's something about that..."

I really wanted to feel the sense that this isn't this pristine *Black Narcissus* Technicolor world. This is all walks of life getting pulled into nunneries, and [I wanted] to represent it in a very real, authentic way."

As you might expect, *Sister Act* and *Nuns On The Run* didn't quite make the research list, but

**“I like that idea of almost a *Rambo* nun, you have this great hero that went into hiding”**

rather a lot of BBC documentaries, and a British Pathe production called *Nuns At Work* that Chaves says he found hilarious.

"There's some really beautiful documentaries about nun lifestyles. Bottom line, I know this is a horror movie. I'm like, 'Why am I talking about nuns so much?' But I just wanted to ground it, I just wanted to get





Catholic graffiti is of a higher class altogether.

## THE DARKEST CHAPTER?

Even Valak has her limits

"I think that this does get darker. Even audiences have said this, when we screened it. It is definitely more violent than what they expected from a *Conjuring* movie. It's always a delicate balance. It's definitely scary, it's 100% delivered on that. Just as horror audiences have developed the appetite for horror, the appetite for violence has started to increase, and so there are some violent elements in this.

"We've had to throttle that throughout a series of test screenings because sometimes we will want more, but then you can tell there is a limit to that and I think that we've dialled in something. I think we've hit the right balance with the cut that we have."

this really human story, because I think that if you can really connect to this world, that's the best jumping-off point. Especially for something that I think people make assumptions about 'What's *The Nun II* going to be?' I was like, let's make it better and more authentic and more human than you can ever expect. Of course it'll deliver on the scares, of course it'll be scary.

"But you know, how can this look and feel really real and really authentic? I found this photo of these nuns peeling potatoes and basically it became a scene in the movie.

"As they're at the convent, the legend of the previous movie is sweeping across the sisterhood. They're all talking about this demon nun – it's the ghost story, she's the boogeyman for nuns because she killed a whole convent in the previous movie. But Irene is living in this convent and they've made this ghost story up out of this really traumatic experience for her.

"So when she hears this, she can't escape it. She wants to live this anonymous life, but she can't even escape it, and they're there peeling potatoes telling this story of the last movie like it's this epic story of the priest and nun going and taking care of this demon nun."

He opens his laptop, which is filled with folders pertaining to *The Nun II*, and goes through numerous videos, art and photos. He points to a black and white image of an altar boy.

"I love this photo. It's from Spain, actually in the '20s or '30s. But I was like, 'We need an altar boy in this movie. This is all about blasphemous, creepy Catholic iconography.' I grew up Catholic and I was like, 'Altar boys. We've got to do something with an altar boy, we've got to do something with an incense thurible' and that got woven into the story.

"I don't know how much I can say about that. But a lot of it was coming from these really deep photo dives. I was like, 'I want to make it as authentic and real as possible.' →





“We had a French crew, some of the most talented people I’ve ever worked with”

Damien, is that you? Spooky children ahoy!

I want to feel like you’re kind of time-travelling and going into the ‘50s with this movie,’ but then it just became this great source of ideas and inspiration.”

The *Conjuring* Universe producer Peter Safran recently told *Entertainment Weekly* that *The Curse Of La Llorona* is definitely not part of that Universe, despite what many people assumed. This instalment, however, very much continues the franchise.

“Definitely it plays a part,” Chaves states. “I wouldn’t want to give anything away, but this is continuing the timeline. Anyone who saw the first *Conjuring* knows that Maurice is possessed and then exorcised by the Warrens, and we know that that happens in the late ‘60s in the *Conjuring* timeline. This is set in the ‘50s so we’re still a ways off from that. The events of what happens in-between this starts to fill out that story a little bit more.

“There’s other big ideas and big swings in there, and it’s filled with a bunch of cool Easter eggs. Without giving anything away it

## HISTORY REPEATING

**Did the director experience anything chilling on location?**

“Whether there were ghosts or whether it was people’s imagination, I do think that you could feel the history. When you were alone in the room – these were old stone rooms, and some of them you could just feel the weight of the building, you could feel the weight of history. I never experienced anything – other people have had experiences so I don’t want to steal their thunder about their spooky stories. But I definitely feel like you could feel that many people walked those halls, you could feel that many people have lived and died in there.”



continues to fill out the picture and the bigger canvas.”

Presumably then, in the grand tradition of horror, this isn’t the last we’ll see of Valak? “There’s a line in the movie: ‘Demons are infinite,’” Chaves smiles. “I like the idea that she’s always been here in different forms. I think that there’s still more stories of Valak the demon nun to be told.”

The director describes his villain as “iconic”. “She reminds me a little bit of Dracula, a little bit of Pennywise, a little bit of these iconic movie monsters.” So it’s little wonder that when New Line Cinema approached him for the sequel, “I totally jumped.”

But he doesn’t consider that by taking the reins from previous director Corin Hardy he is making this film his own.

“I try to never think of it as my own in a way, because I think that making a movie is such a team sport,” he explains. “You’re working with these amazing actors and you’re working with this amazing crew. We had a French crew that



God bless WH Smith and all newsagents, we say.

"Ah, er, hello. Just looking for the loos...?"

was honestly world class, some of the most talented people I've ever worked with. I just feel like it's always something where whoever's involved, we're making it together.

"First of all, I think Corin did an incredible job kicking off this extension of the universe, I think he did a great job with setting it outside just the US. These movies have been traditionally very US-centric. Taking it outside to Romania, doing this really big classic haunted house and a castle story was a really exciting big swing. And so I owe him a huge debt for pioneering that.

"For me, it came down to not so much making it my own but what I really wanted to do with it is I really wanted to ground it. I love movies where I feel like I'm time-travelling, or I'm going to another place. Whether you're watching a *Star Wars* movie, or you're a period film, that being transported is really awesome. I saw that as the

big opportunity here, and that's where I really dug in with research.

"It was also great as my French crew – Stéphane Cressend, who's my production designer and Agnes Beziers, who was in charge of wardrobe – they love research, too. They're both French and they love art. And making movies is one of the highest callings you could do in France.

"They brought it to another level. I was like, 'I really want to have photographic reference, I really want to be digging into the history, I really want to feel the texture of the time', and before I even finished the sentence they had these troves of photos. Real photos, not just stuff they pulled off the internet, but that they were digging out of books – all this great stuff.

"I feel like that brought so much to the movie, and it brought a texture and a realism that made the story better. It made the actors more connected to it. It just looks cooler. That was the thing that I wanted to do with it. And I think that that's where it really did succeed."

From looking at his workings and listening to his passionate and excited chat about everything from nuns to putting Plexiglas over Roman ruins, it's clear Chaves isn't simply relying on the continued success of the genre meaning that horror is an easy win.

"As long as you're telling scary stories that are also human stories, I think that's the key," he says. "Horror is such a great way of talking about the things that we're uncomfortable to talk about. There's always things in our world and in our culture, maybe even more so now, that we are sometimes uncomfortable to talk about."

### HIGHER CALLING

"That was the genius of *The Twilight Zone* back in the '50s," he continues. That was a way to talk about uncomfortable social issues, with a culture where some of the culture didn't want to accept it. Some of it was very conservative. It was a way to secretly message and secretly communicate to the audience and open up discussions.

"One of the most powerful things about horror is that it's designed to make you uncomfortable. It's designed to make you scared, and so there is no better delivery system for talking about the things in our culture that we are curious about, scared about, we want to change," he adds. "It's always been one of the coolest genres and I'm so excited to be in it right now."

With that in mind, does Chaves have a social issue he's addressing in *The Nun II*? He laughs hard.

"It's just a good old-fashioned scary movie and a good character story. There's no big messages beyond that."

You might even say there's... nun. (Forgive us, Father.) ●

*The Nun II* is in cinemas on 8 September.



SPOILER  
ALERT!

DESIGNING

EVIL  
DEAD  
RISE

PRODUCTION DESIGNER NICK  
BASSETT AND MAKE-UP  
EFFECTS AND PROSTHETICS  
DESIGNER LUKE POLTI TAKE US  
BEHIND THE SCENES OF THE  
BLOOD-DRENCHED HORROR

WORDS: IAN BERRIMAN



Lead concept artist  
Alistair Gillies's  
Levitating Deadite.

**N**EW ZEALAND-BASED PRODUCTION DESIGNER NICK BASSETT had a head start when he was hired to work on *Evil Dead Rise*: a veteran of TV show *Ash Vs Evil Dead*, he was well-versed in Sam Raimi's universe. With the film centred on the apartment of Ellie (Alyssa Sutherland), a mother who becomes possessed and menaces her children, two elements came to the fore in his initial discussions with director Lee Cronin: claustrophobia and family.

"His desire to create a level of isolation and claustrophobia was always a part of the design brief," Bassett tells *SFX*. "What was really at the heart of it is that this is different because whereas most *Evil Dead* films would go to the cabin, and it would be this doomed place, this was going to come into the household.

"The great thing about doing a franchise is there's points of reference all along the way," he adds, "And you can go 'Where are we going to sit on that barometer?' We sat somewhere between the 2013 film and *Evil Dead II*. Tonally, Lee had a pretty strong vision of where he was going, and we were all just along on that journey."



*Army of Darkness*'  
bitey book was an  
inspiration.





The chainsaw's model number is LC 39.

## THE CHAINSAW

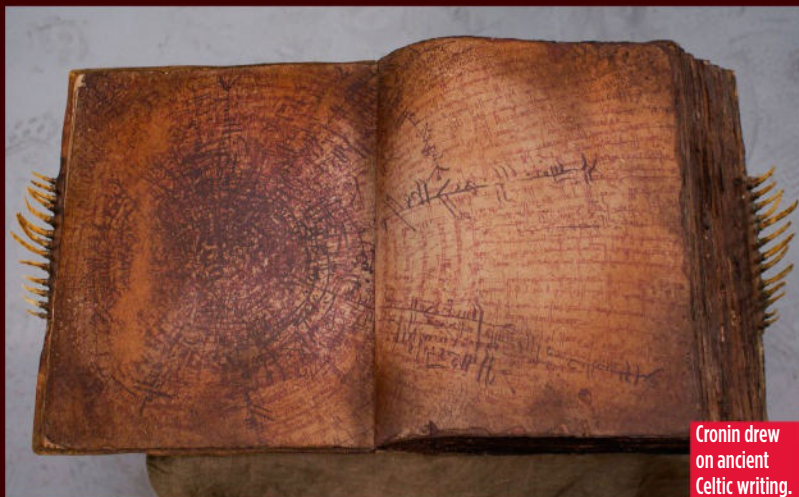
**NB:** When we were doing *Ash Vs Evil Dead*, everything was rubber blades and electric motors. Bruce Campbell was like, "I want the lightest chainsaw – I don't want to be fucking around with a heavy thing in my hands!" With this one, for a lot of it that was a real chainsaw with a blunt blade. The colour was chosen to be like the Delta from the original film [Ash's Oldsmobile Delta 88 Royale car]. We were like, "It can't be red, because we've done the red." Then inscribed on it is the prop master Elise's name, which was Lee's idea. I personally wanted it to be called Bruce, but no one liked that idea! It's got Lee's initials inscribed into it as well, and also his age.

## THE NECRONOMICON

**NB:** In terms of the book, I was very much the conduit. Sometimes I'll lead something really heavily, but this was very much "Let Lee come in", and we worked together on it. I brought in the concept artist and briefed him on a style, we showed Lee, and then we worked on the exact content. We had an illustrator working in the art department, drawing and drawing. So it was really collaborative.

Lee was clear he didn't want the face on it – he was like, "I feel like the face makes it too literal. And I want to do something different." The concept art was done by a guy called Link Choi, who did all the sketches in the *Ash Vs Evil Dead* book. We thought we'd found a nice happy place for them on *Ash*, then for *Evil Dead Rise* we made them more sophisticated and finer. [Producer] Rob Tapert actually brought in a box of files of drawings from the original book. We stopped for Covid, and then were like, "Where the hell did that go?" I don't know where they went. They'll be in someone's collection!

Every day there'd be a scheduled meeting and we'd talk about the pages and what they were meant to do, which shows how important that prop is. It was a wet paint prop – I think it was only on the first week of the shoot that it was finished. Then we made six or seven books that did different things.



Cronin drew on ancient Celtic writing.

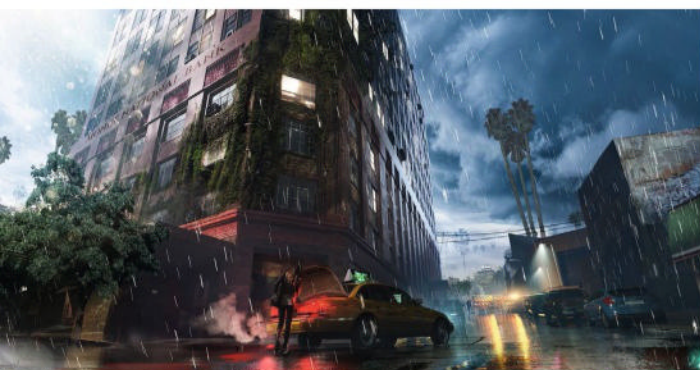






## MONDE APARTMENTS

**NB:** I knew that if we didn't get the exterior feeling right, we wouldn't be able to get the interior feeling right – we wouldn't know what the details were or how elaborate it was. So the concept for that was a key one to get done, as it was going to set the tone for the rest of the film. It was always written as an Art Deco building. The main point is this building is by today's standards not a beautiful Art Deco building, so we didn't want to make it too decorative. I'd seen a building in town [an Auckland high school] when we were doing a TV commercial, and was like, "That could work for the outside." It's Deco era, but a rudimentary version of it. But it was only four levels high, so we knew we had to extend it. We surveyed the building, sent a drone around and scanned it, then had an architect – one of our set designers – draw up the extension, and gave it to effects.



Nick's exterior concepts.



CG extension options.



Can you spot a scrap of *Evil Dead* poster?



The animal skulls nod to the OG cabin.

## THE FAMILY'S APARTMENT

**NB:** The key was the layout. There were, like, 21 versions, probably. We had the cabin set as a schematic, and laid that over rooms to check what the scale was of the original movie. That was an interesting process.

It's an outdated piece of architecture, really – it doesn't have an outdoor balcony, or any of the things that you'd buy in a modern house. That was important. You're not that aware of it when there's family stuff going on. Then suddenly, when you're trapped there, you're really aware there's no way out. It's quite inward-looking – an oppressive space.

I wanted the apartment to feel visually interesting, decayed but not depressing. I find it unsettling when you have a thing that's interesting and retro, but clearly outdated. The bathroom is horrible, but visually interesting to look at. There was also an idea of putting nature in every room. There's floral, or in one room forest, wallpaper. Danny's is the only one that isn't wallpapered – it's a blue colour. That was to isolate him as a character. His room's different, and it's where the evil was unleashed.

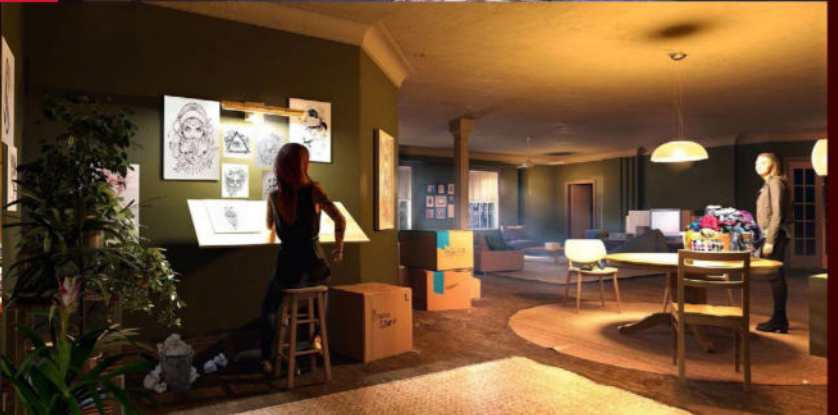
We were looking for little moments where we could have connections to the original movies, or *Ash Vs Evil Dead*. The Three Stooges are a big part of the *Evil Dead* thing, so I commissioned a banner for Danny's room [top left], thinking, "Let's make it a big statement." There's a painted mirror with "Home Sweet Home" on it – that's a reference to a tapestry from the original cabin. And there's a cello in Kassie's room. That goes back to Ash's room in *Ash Vs Evil Dead* – I wanted to put some instrument in it, and Sam Raimi said, "I think Ash would have played the cello when he was a kid." But the main thing was cross-checking the atmosphere from the original movies. There's a feeling of *Evil Dead II* that isn't direct – there's some tones in there, some blues, that we referenced.







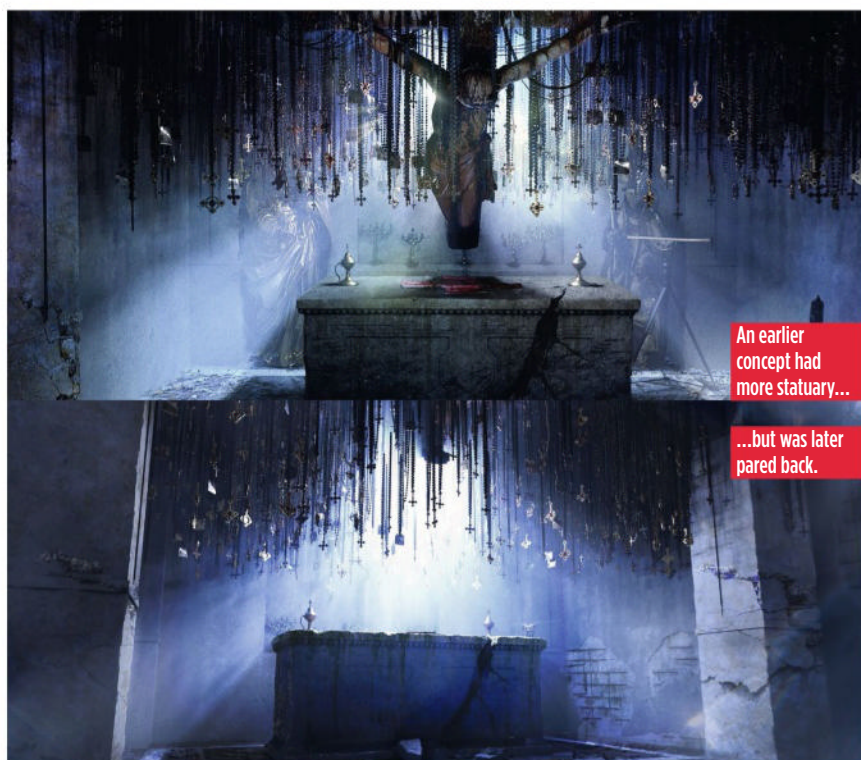
Nick's interior concepts.







Patterns on the sarcophagus echo Ellie's door.



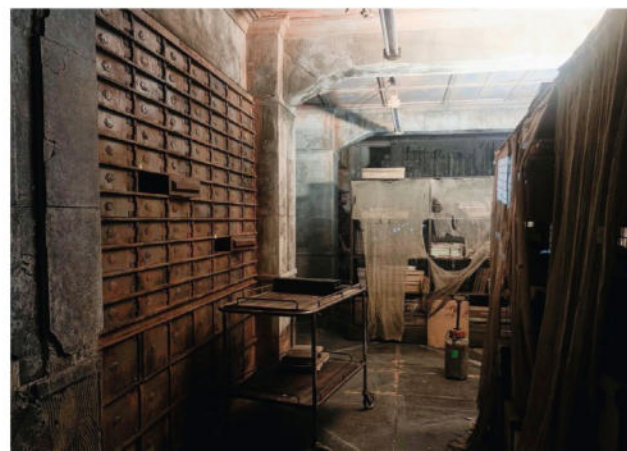
An earlier concept had more statuary...

...but was later pared back.

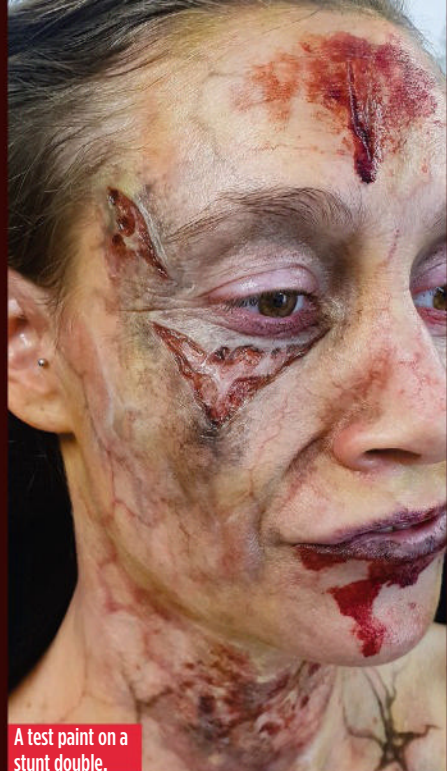
## THE BANK VAULT

**NB:** The practical side of it was one thing: an earthquake faultline reveals a bank vault, so it made sense to build the parking lot, and a bank vault Danny can climb into. There's a lack of logic in one way: why are there bank vaults below the parking lot? One theory was that the bank was built to house the book. The other was that this just happened to be a convenient place to stash it safely. I quite like the idea that the bank was built with a purpose in mind.

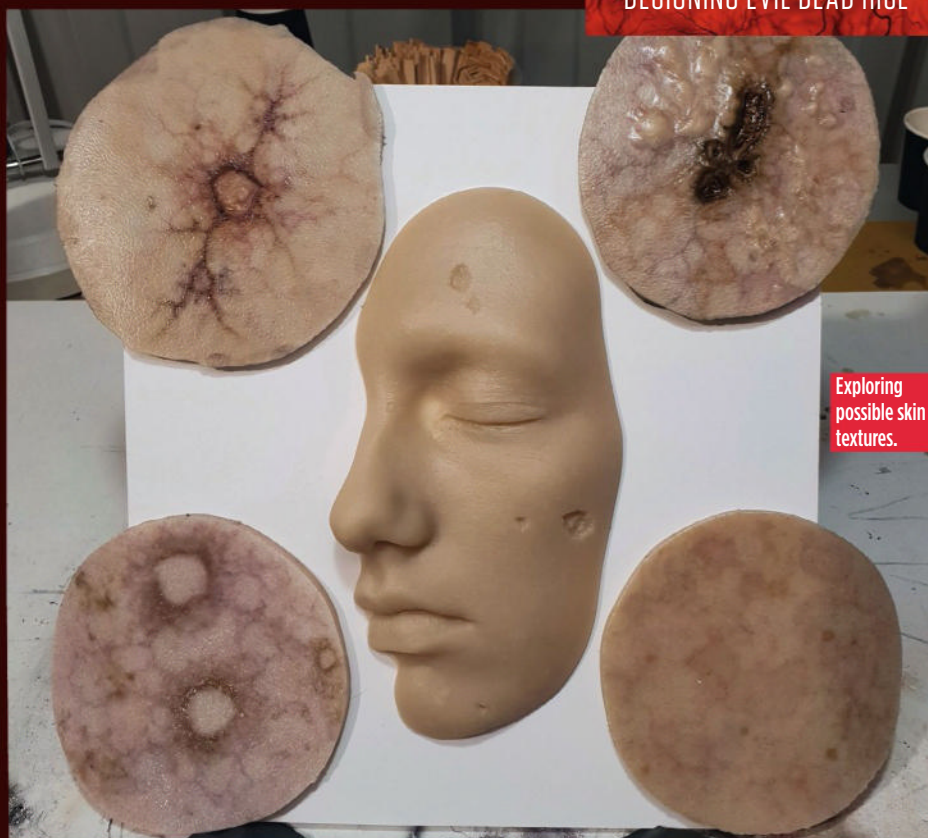
We referenced real bank vaults, and tried to make it feel as real as we could, and as interesting as we could. So it's very typical: this big vault door, the little safe areas. Then there's this strange sarcophagus that holds the book. There are details, architecturally, that we tied in to the apartment – the door of the apartment has very similar details. Then we put these messages on the walls in Latin. Lee had the idea of the Saint Benedict talisman. I liked the idea of having many of them, like someone had obsessively tied them all up and gone "This is the best I can do". I was really happy with the way it looked. It looked quite beautiful, in its own way.







A test paint on a stunt double.



Exploring possible skin textures.



## THE DEADITES

**LP:** With the Deadites, we didn't go too extreme. We didn't want to cover the actors up with artificial prosthetics, we wanted to use their faces and adjust their skin, so it's like the evil's coming out from inside them. I painted a half base that had this creeping vein pattern, just as an idea, and Lee quite liked that. We then brought that into a lot of the design - almost like the evil's travelling underneath their skin the whole time. With Alyssa, we had quite an involved make-up originally, that we kept paring back to very minimalistic because of her performance. It had three layers. We had actually anatomical veins - it's a little hard to see, but there are shots where you can see the natural veins under there. Then the blackening veins were designed to break the look of what veins actually do - so intentionally they're meant to look like something under the skin that's creeping through, that is additional. She went through about five different stages, and they're all quite subtle and blend in, but it gives that underlying feeling of rot - you can see the yellowing starting to show through. So it got more and more intense.

Neighbour Jake grows this neck eye!



Deadite concepts by Paul Gerrard.





## THE MARAUDER

**LP:** We had a team managing the Marauder, because Odd Studio [the Sydney-based effects company who designed it] couldn't make it over because of Covid restrictions - I think Sydney had locked down by that point, and New Zealand had closed their borders. So they shipped it over.

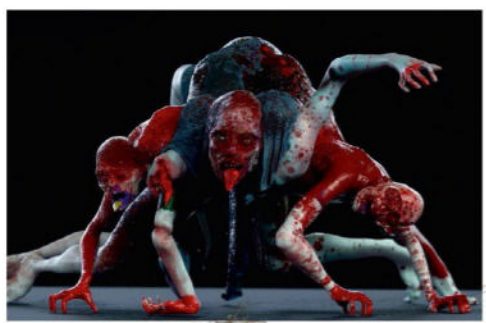
The Marauder was a full body with a fake Alyssa head, that we had two stunt people sitting inside, both wearing masks to match Bridget and Danny. Then we had Alyssa's fake head in the middle, half-puppeteered by one of their hands, just for the wide shots. That was the main one that you see clambering over stuff. It was a big hulking suit, but it worked really nicely - the stunt performers did a great job of manoeuvring that thing around.

Then we had a lighter, thinner version that we used with the actual actors - with Morgan [Danny] and Gabrielle [Bridget]. We tried to get Alyssa in there too for one shot, but it was a bit of a tight squeeze to have all three of them in there.

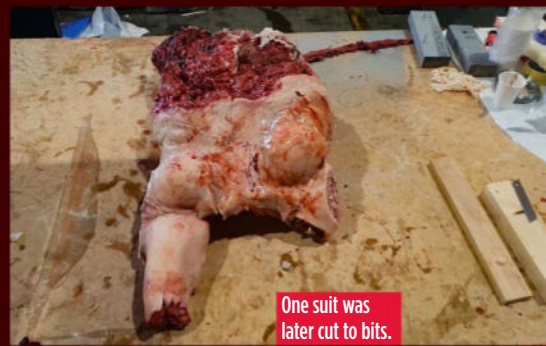
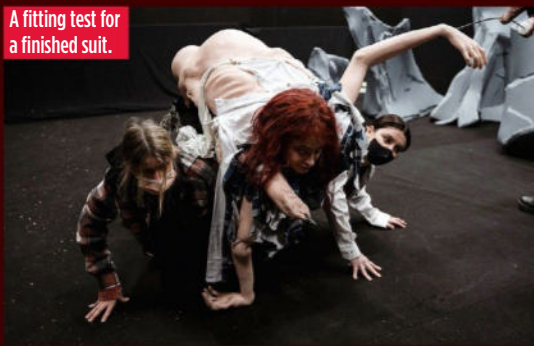
It's about 95% practical. There are a couple of bits of CGI - little elements that were done just to tie stuff together - but if you can't see them I don't want to give them away!

That lighter rig is actually what I used to make the torn-apart body at the end - it was pretty much the Marauder rig, empty. I had to cut it all up. I had a guy inside the mulcher being hosed in blood, pulling each part out on cue as each one in sequence stretches and starts to separate, and gets ripped into the mulcher. That whole end sequence was pretty crazy!

Odd Studio's Adam Johansen designed the Marauder.



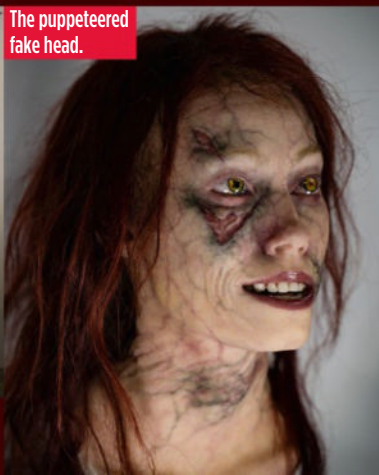
A fitting test for a finished suit.



One suit was later cut to bits.



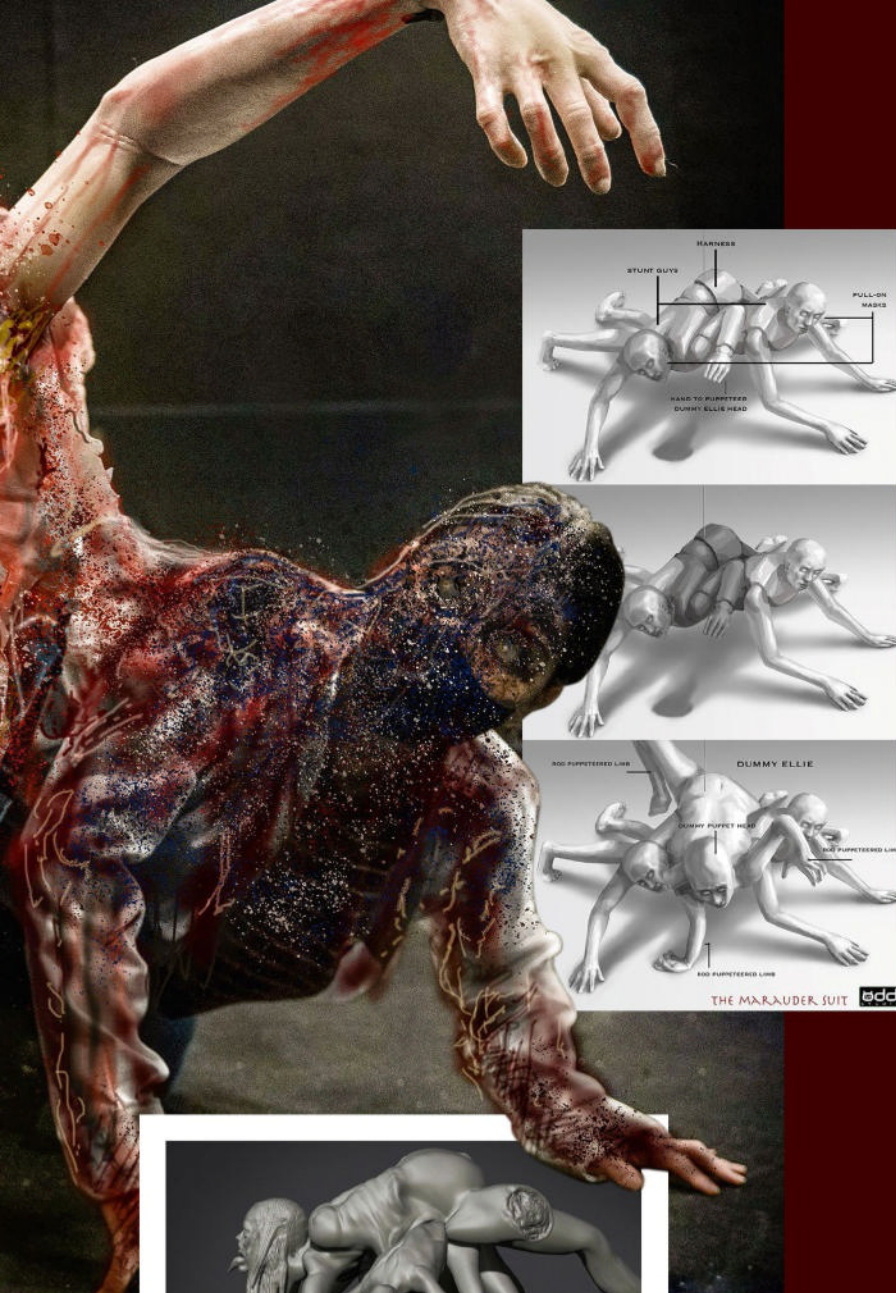
The puppeteered fake head.



Masks for the stunt performers.







## THE THROAT RIP

**LP:** The old Tom Savini trick would be to build a big fake throat and then have the actor with this large piece on him. We stripped back the idea so Jayden [Daniels, as neighbour Gabriel] wasn't restricted too much. It's basically three layers of silicone. We've got a meat layer that gets applied first. Then we've got his neck skin that covers it, and a pre-removed wound, already opened with the neck exposed. Then we have a skin that covers that, that can be ripped off. It actually had an oesophagus that flopped out, and the blood tubing that the guys rigged up would bleed from all these different spots, including the oesophagus. Because it's quite shadowy, you don't realise how much came out of there, but it was quite brilliant on set!

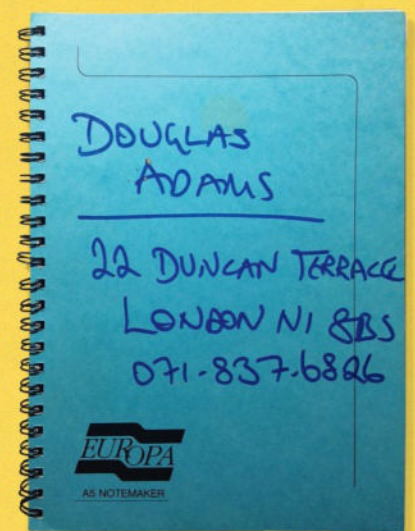
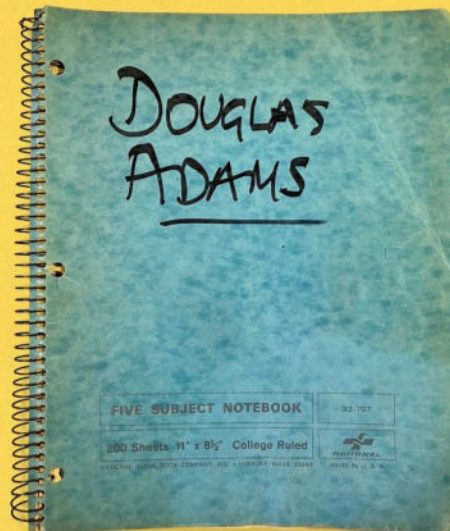
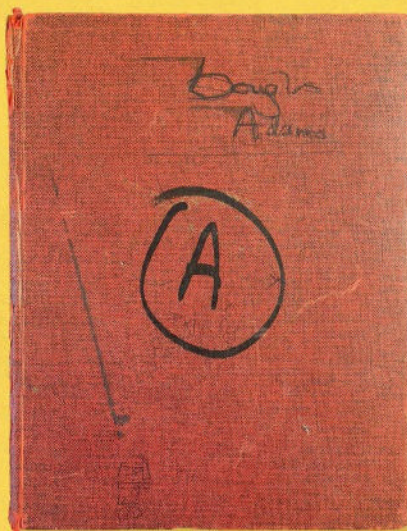
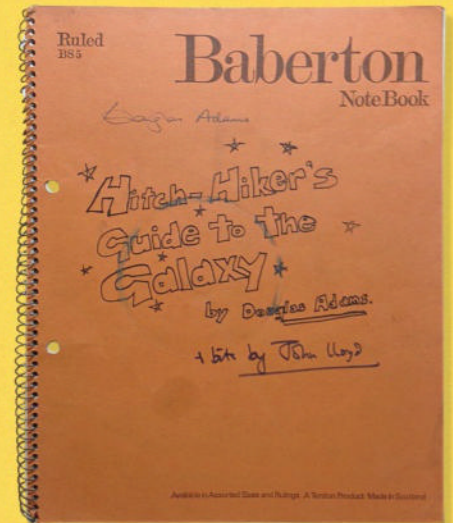
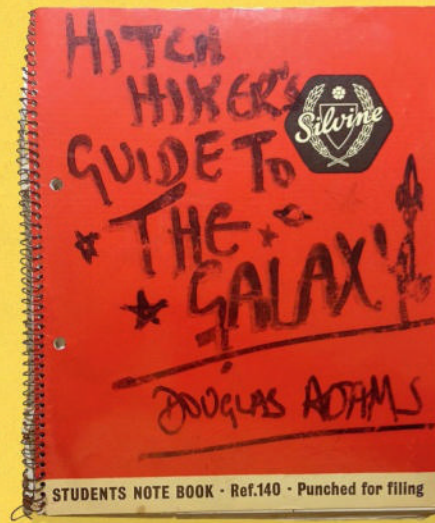
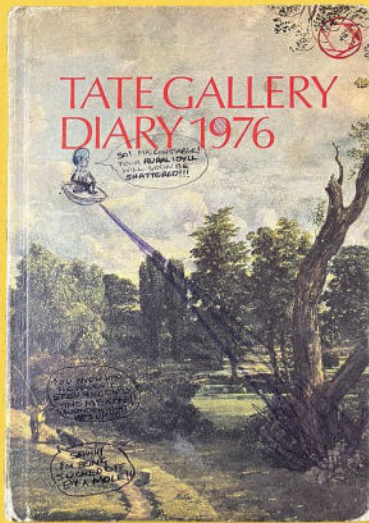
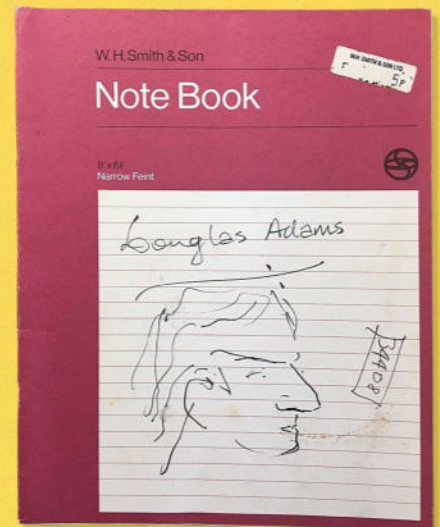
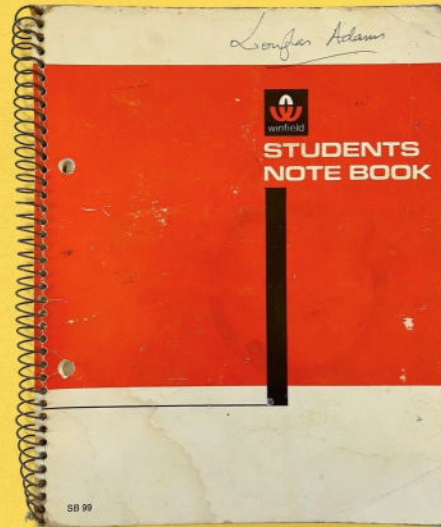
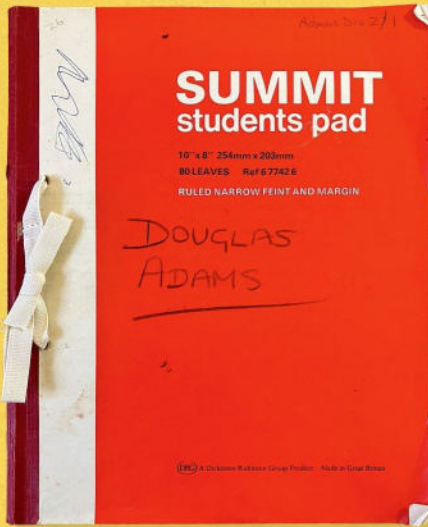


## SCISSORS IN THE FACE

**LP:** That was quite a cumbersome piece. It's a pair of scissors with one end cut short, that was rigged and sat on her face. Then there was a thin bit of wire that held the top there, and trace lines going across. Once you put it in, she basically had something sitting inside her nose. So it just sort of sits and floats. It's not the most comfortable thing to wear! Then when it was being pulled out it was unlocked and pulled off the face. There was no real room to put a retractable in there, so obviously there was a bit of CGI blade extension for that scene. Quite full on, that one! ●

*Evil Dead Rise is now available to buy on 4K Blu-ray, Blu-ray and DVD, from Studiocanal.*







# Life, The Universe And Everything

A NEW BOOK ABOUT **DOUGLAS ADAMS** PRESENTS TREASURES FROM THE *HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY* CREATOR'S ARCHIVE. EDITOR KEVIN JON DAVIES GIVES US A PREVIEW

WORDS: IAN BERRIMAN

**T**HE SPECIAL COLLECTIONS OF St John's College, Cambridge are a prestigious place in which to have your life documented. Correspondence from poets such as William Wordsworth and Stéphane Mallarmé is housed here, as are the personal papers of former students like Samuel Butler (author of *Erewhon*) and photographer Sir Cecil Beaton. Since 2012, after the death of his widow prompted the sale of their former home, another alumnus has been filed alongside them: Douglas Adams. Now treasures from his archive have been collected in a new book, *42: The Wildly Improbable Ideas Of Douglas Adams*.

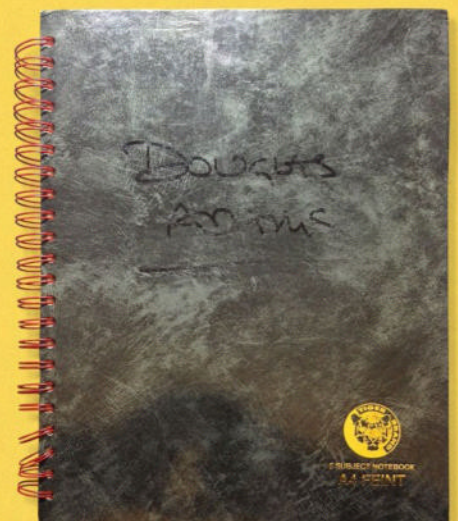
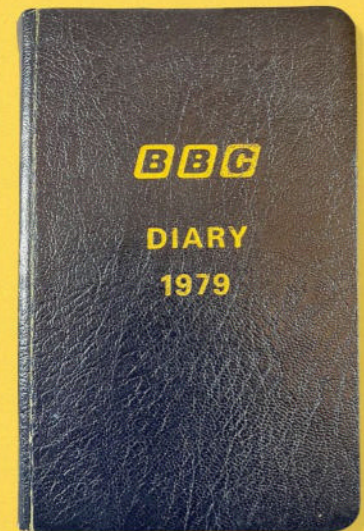
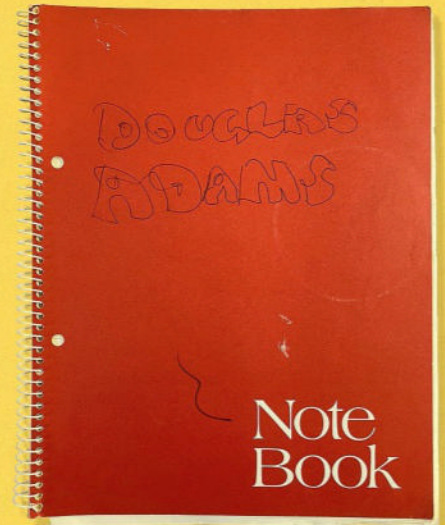
Its editor has a long history with *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy*. Kevin Jon Davies helped animate the Book sequences for the TV show, and directed 1993 documentary *The Making Of The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy*. More recently, he scoured the archive for "odd scraps" of *HHGTTG* which could be stirred into the radio production of Eoin

Colfer's *Hitchhiker's* novel *And Another Thing...* This led to publisher Unbound approaching him about a book.

With 67 boxes of materials (of which Davies reckons he viewed "well over 85%"), he had to make some tough choices. "It was a case of trying to find the best, and something that would be nicely self-contained," he explains, "because a lot of stuff was too long." So for example, a lengthy speech on mobile phones is represented via Adams's crib notes.

"I tried to get something from across his whole life," Davies continues. "We start with the school days. We've got his university work, all his Footlights [the Cambridge University revue] and amateur dramatic stuff – there's some posters he did himself for his comedy troupe. Then all the famous stuff that we know. There's a big section on *Hitchhiker's* of course, *Doctor Who*, *Dirk Gently...* everything's covered, right up to the very end."

This isn't the first time material from the archive has seen print. Jem Roberts's 2014 →





biography *The Froid* transcribed about 50 pages of material. The big difference here is the format: not unlike Unbound's popular *Letters Of Note* books, 42 reproduces original documents, handwritten or typed by Adams – all of which Davies painstakingly went through on-site.

"The main body of the library is a 400-year-old, church-like building with stained glass windows and great heavy wooden oak bookshelves," Davies says. "It looks like the Hogwarts library." The modern-day library which is in everyday use by students is less *Harry Potter*, but still "really sumptuous", he adds. "The Special Collections reading room is by appointment only – the family still very much control the papers. You have to have written permission.

"It was great to sit there. What I hope people get from the book is that it's like looking over my shoulder, down at the desk, at his terrible scribbly handwriting. In the book, the handwriting might be on one page with a

**“You can struggle through his handwriting like I did if you want – and his terrible typing”**

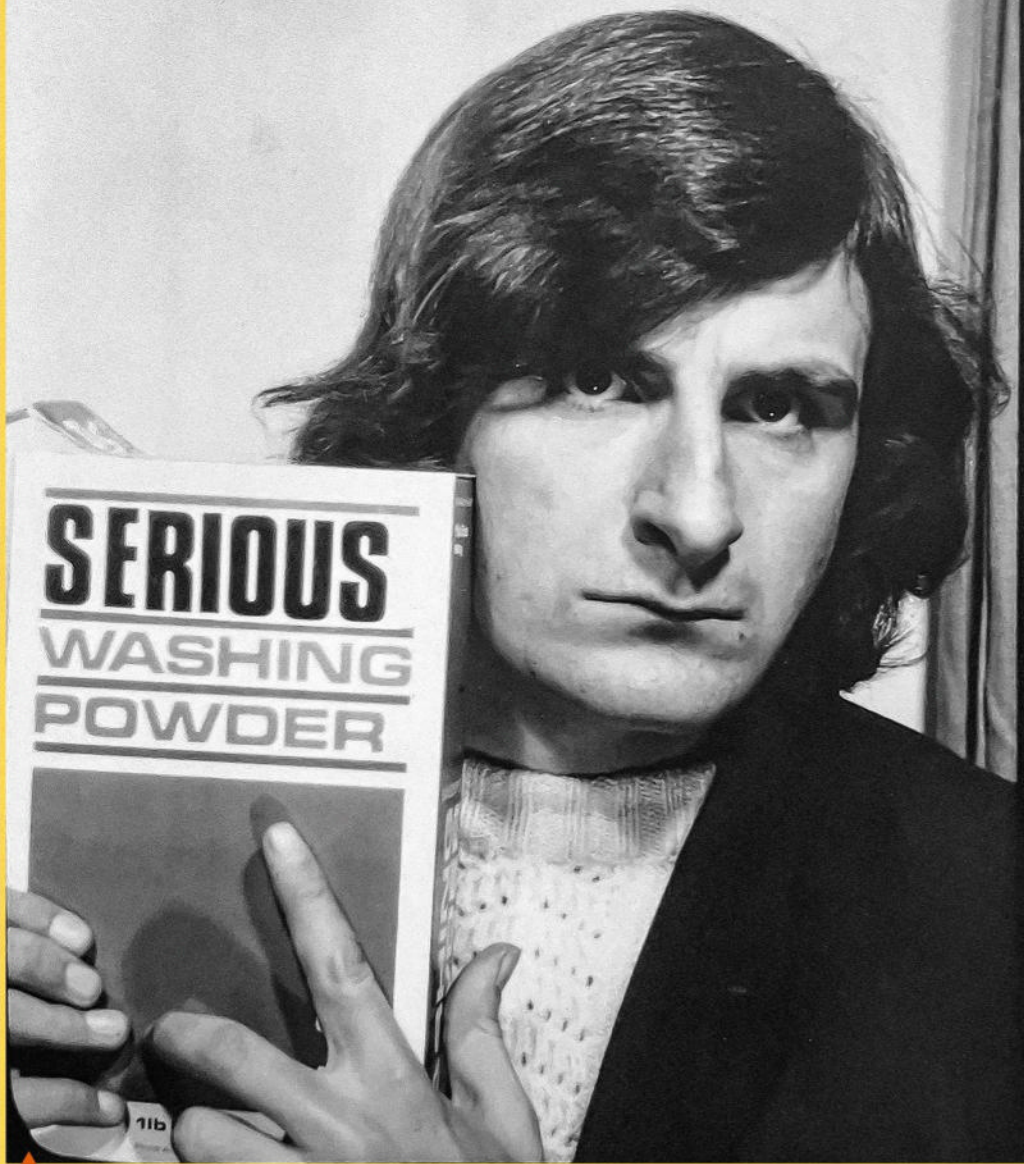
transcript following it. But you can struggle through his handwriting like I did if you want – and his terrible typing, covered in Tipp-Ex blobs and lots of XXXXXX where he's deleted a whole section."

Not *everything* in the archive strikes you as something the writer would have chosen to be preserved for posterity – though he'd surely have been amused that they're now housed in the same facility as medieval manuscripts. We assume Kevin didn't bother checking out Adams's exercise bike manual, or his copy of the 1974 *Penthouse* calendar.

Other random artefacts include belts, ties and socks (but no towel), a Russian doll penguin and what's meticulously itemised in the catalogue as "R3 condom in its packet". One relic which has now been photographed is rather more poignant: "Right at the end of the book is Douglas's teddy bear," Davies reveals.

A discovery which might particularly excite *Hitchhiker's* fans is the handwritten notes for a scene featuring Arthur Dent and depressive robot Marvin, previously miscatalogued with →

**KJD:** Early sketch-writing examples in the book include this item about parcel bombs, written for one of the "smoker concerts", a regular music and comedy revue by the students. This reminder of the political landscape of the time was performed with his room-mate Keith Jeffery in a show called *LSO In Flames* in November 1972.



Adams as a student at Cambridge. He later named his first company Serious Productions.

#### POST OFFICES PREFER BOMBS

by Douglas Adams

Enter 1, goes up to counter, 2 serving.

1 Excuse me, how much does it cost to send a bomb to Weston Super Mare?

2 First or second class?

1 Oh, very good class of bomb it is sir, twenty megaton job.

2 Well, that wâl probably have ~~to~~ go parcel post sâr, let me look it up.

Umm Um um um here it is, twenty megatons, well sorry sir, it seems to be a bit out of our class. It'll have to go BRS or British Rail.

1 But I thought you ~~xxxx~~ could send bombs through the post.

2 You're probably thinking of letter bombs sir. You can send those first class for the price of a threepenny stamp.

1 What's a letter bomb?

2 It's a letter that explodes. Very effective they are. Makes a bit of a mess of breakfast, but that usually doesn't worry them, – by comparison.

1 Well, that's right, I wouldn't want to give him indigestion. How do I get a letter bomb?

2 Well there are several types you can buy. There's the Basildon Bomb, the Bombe Surprise, a classier model, or you can even get a Post Card bomb. You know the sort of thing, 'Weather's lovely, wish you were here, BANG' ~~and the guy's gone to that great holiday resort in the sky, along with his breakfast.~~ The advantage of the Basildon Bomb is that it's Post Office Preferred. On the other hand, you may find it cheaper to make your own.

1 Isn't that difficult?

2 Oh no not, I've got a friend who's a scriptwriter, he's making a bomb.

**BLACKOUT**



POEM - "AMOEBAE"

He would sit and watch beside the busy street  
 A And examine the world as from the outside ~~xxxxxxxx~~  
 Looking in  
 Abstractly removed,  
 those who saw him cast not a second glance  
 at him, his shabby attire or little cracked spectacles.  
 But their faces were an open book to him  
 and he would study, reaching into their  
 Unwary Minds, to see what was written ~~xxxxxxxx~~  
 and read between the lines.  
 Sometimes, Someone would stop ~~xxx~~ and  
 And weary with just passing by would  
 sit beside the old man.  
 Who would immediately start to talk  
 to the street dropout, pleased with his new  
 Specimen for Examination.  
 for a  
 Few words would provide Fresh Premise for  
 Psychosyllogism  
 Fresh Data for Psychoanalysis  
 And from his lofty pinnacle  
 Isolated Removed Detached Estranged  
 Objectively despising subjectivity.  
 He ~~xxxxxxxx~~  
 He could view the complete form  
 of a human mosaic, a Masterpiece of flaws  
 in which the Coloured Stones were  
 Emotions ~~xxxx~~ Prejudices Fears  
 the Patterns of the Stones  
 Mentalities.

P.T.O.

ROYAL SOCIETY FOR THE PREVENTION OF CRUELTY TO ANIMALS  
MID-ESSEX-BRENTWOOD, CHELMSFORD AND ROMFORD DISTRICT BRANCH

*Hon. Secretary—*  
Mrs. E. DONOVAN,  
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BRENTWOOD AUXILIARY BRANCH

*Senior Inspector—*  
D. R. HARRISON,  
22 Falmouth Road,  
Chelmsford, Essex.  
Tel. Chelmsford 58520

This we would examine  
as an amoeba viewing  
Amoeba through a microscope  
With the sterile detachment of ~~an~~  
a Scientist  
Unsympathetic.

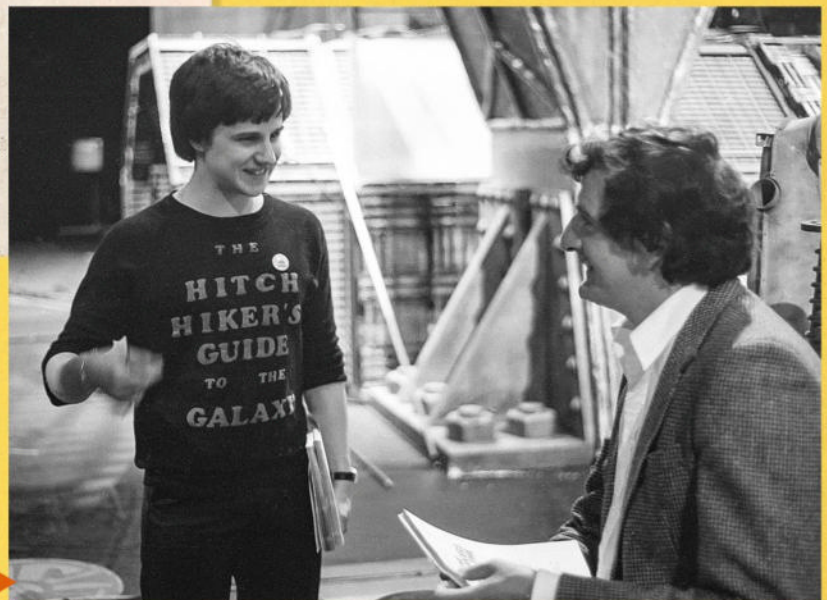
XXXXXXXXXX<sup>00</sup>XX<sup>00</sup>XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

**KJD:** Douglas Adams's early poems as a child belie his young age. He clearly started typing on the back of this notepaper and ran out of space, concluding on the letterhead side, which belonged to his maternal grandmother Mrs E Donovan, secretary of her local RSPCA.

Kevin Jon Davies (aged 19) and Adams on the set of the *Hitchhiker's* TV show (Vogon ship's hold behind them).

1. ARTHUR: Do you do Take-Aways?
2. GARBIT: <sup>T</sup> (Pat) Aha, non <sup>est</sup> le si neur, here at Millilways we only serve the very finest in ultracuisine.
3. ZAPHOD: Ultracuisine? Don't give me head pains. <sup>Look at this</sup> ~~last time I~~ <sup>was here the food tasted like it was fresh from the Planet Pukron.</sup> Algolian Zylbathurger smothered in a hint of Vulcan Dodo spit, <sup>I mean</sup>.
4. GARBIT: Saliva m'sieur <sup>est</sup> ~~saliva~~. The salivary gland of the Vulcan ultraDodo is a delicacy much sought after.
5. ZAPHOD: Not by me.
6. ARTHUR: What is an Algolian Zylbathurger anyway?
7. FORD: They're a kind of meatburger made from the most unpleasant parts of a creature well known for its total lack of any pleasant parts.
8. ARTHUR: So you mean that the Universe does actually end not with a bang but with a Winky.
9. GARBIT: <sup>est</sup> Believe me <sup>est</sup> si neur, the Universe ends with a very big bang indeed, and the food here is the ultimate gastronomic experience.
10. TRILLIAN: Yes, but is it good?

**KJD:** This is an annotated draft page from the fifth episode of the original *Hitchhiker's* radio series, in which "Garkbit" the waiter speaks with a French accent. The Zylbatburger is an example of the fine ultracuisine served at Milliways, the Restaurant at the End of the Universe. These passages didn't quite make the final cut.



HUIO BY DAVID BEASLEY



the notes for 1983 book *The Meaning Of Liff*. "It was intended for a TV programme about the 60th anniversary of BBC Radio," Davies explains. "They said, 'We've got the Marvin suit and Arthur's dressing gown, can you write us something?'" So he did. But eventually they did a radio show instead, and Douglas's bit didn't fit. Or maybe they didn't even know about it."

Other intriguing inclusions concern unrealised projects, like *The Fifth Dimension*, a Chessington World Of Adventures attraction. "Having drafted a bit of script, he had to back out because he'd landed a massive deal for the *Dirk Gently* books," Davies explains. "It was a rollercoaster ride in the dark, going off into space, and [as in *Doctor Who* story "The Pirate Planet"] there was another space pirate, this time with a robot vulture on his shoulder!"

The book also draws on documents from circa 1995 relating to a TV project, *The Secret Empire*. "This would have been Douglas trying to do an Isaac Asimov *Foundation* trilogy-style thing," Davies explains. "Each series was going

**“Maybe someone will come along and try and create a show out of these things”**

to be set another 100 years further on in mankind's venture out into space. There's not a full-blown script as such, just outlines and ideas."

"Who knows, though," he adds, "maybe someone will come along and try and create a show out of these things when they read it in the book. It might spawn a couple of ideas."

For Davies, who knew Adams for 20 years, the process of compiling 42 had its affecting moments. "I felt quite emotional when I sat down the first time, and every now and again I'd get a little pang," he confesses. "Those who knew him and loved him miss him."

"And his work is so precious to people that I think some will get emotional reading this stuff. They'll look at it and think, 'What could have been? Why was he taken from us so soon?'"

42: *The Wildly Improbable Ideas Of Douglas Adams* is out on 24 August, published by Unbound – visit [unbound.com/books/douglasadams](http://unbound.com/books/douglasadams). A launch event will take place at the British Library on 8 September.

**KJD:** This deleted section of the radio series would have had Zaphod Beeblebrox and Arthur Dent exchanging insults again, as they escape from Milliways aboard the Haggunenon craft in episode six. (NB: in Ford's dialogue, "2.i.c." means the second-in-command.)



Flash! Bang! Wallop! Adams strikes some poses for a set of passport photos (circa 1976).

1. FORD: ~~Yes, yes, I'm with you... The point, Zaphod, is that everytime the 2.i.c. comes on the visiscreen there has to be someone different on that chair.~~
2. ZAPHOD: ~~That leaves us only two more bluffs, you and Marvin.~~
3. FORD: ~~What about Arthur?~~
4. ZAPHOD: ~~What, Mr. Natural Selection here? Listen Ford, if you had the power to evolve into anything you wanted to, would you go for a shape that last found favour with the yetis?~~
5. ARTHUR: ~~Now listen you half completed Hydra...~~
6. FORD: ~~Drop it you two. Get in the chair Arthur. We've got more than two chances anyway. If the 2.i.c. can be a shoe box, the Admiral can be anything, a paraffin stove, a water bison, an anaconda.~~
7. ZAPHOD: ~~Terrific, I'll root around for the water bison. Trillian you see if you can find the jar the Admiral keeps his anacondas in.~~
8. FORD: ~~Can it, Zaphod, it could quite easily be something mundane – a screwdriver, that coil of wire, the chair itself....~~

/ZAPHOD OVER.....



So, where are we then? At the beginning of another brand new day and no further forward. Terrific

In this episode what is actually going to ~~happen~~ happen?

We identify Magrathea - find out something about it - hear the recorded ~~announcement~~ announcement - missiles launched. Turned into bowl of petunias and a very surprised looking whale - the whale's monologue.

Landing. Let the Gerbils out.

I think Arthur probably encounters the Maviviv on his own for the planned exchange.

The Gerbils have an enormous bank account, I suppose. Lucky bastards.

The matter of the Question.

I suppose we ought to mention the fact that Zaphod is going to be bootlegging Beatles, but it doesn't seem to be relevant at the moment. It's a fucking red herring. Never mind.

Do they get the Girl from Rickmansworth? Well I don't bloody know do I? Let's wait till we get to that bit.

0801

9

081

006

**KJD:** Struggling with writer's block was a regular problem, and in his early drafts Douglas would often chide himself for his own inadequacies when stuck for ideas. In this 1977 set of notes for *Hitchhiker's* episode three, it's worth noticing that Trillian's gerbils later became mice and that Maviviv was eventually renamed Slartibartfast. A subplot about Zaphod having stolen all the vinyl LPs from the party in Islington was dropped entirely.

#### TRANSCRIPT

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**KJD:** Sometimes Douglas would give himself little pep-talks on the pages of his notebooks. This one from 1984 displays a rare moment of optimism, having begun to enjoy the fruits of his success as a bestselling author. Earlier that year he'd been presented with his first of several Golden Pan Awards, by the publishing company Pan Books, for sales of over a million copies of his first *Hitchhiker's* novel.

#### TRANSCRIPT

Writing isn't so bad really when you get through the worry. Forget about the worry, just press on. Don't be embarrassed about the bad bits. Don't strain at them. Give yourself time, you can come back and do it again in the light of what you discover about the story later on. It's better to have pages and pages of material to work with and sift and maybe find an unexpected shape in that you can then craft and put to good use, rather than one manically reworked paragraph or sentence.

But writing can be good. You attack it, don't let it attack you. You can get pleasure out of it. You can certainly do very well for yourself with it...

## GENERAL NOTE TO MYSELF.

Writing isn't so bad really when you get through the worry. Forget about the worry, just press on. Don't be embarrassed about the bad bits. Don't strain at them. Give yourself time you can come back and do it again in the light of what you discover about the story later on. It's better to have pages and pages of material to work with and sift and maybe find an unexpected shape in that you can then craft and put to good use, rather than one manically reworked paragraph or sentence.

But writing can be good. You attack it, don't let it attack you. You can get pleasure out of it. You can certainly do very well for yourself with it...



QUATERMASS

THE

EXPERIMENT





# GREAT

# EVENT

70 YEARS AGO A TV CLASSIC CHILLED THE NATION – AND THAT WAS JUST THE BEGINNING. PREPARE TO FACE THE **QUATERMASS** PHENOMENON...

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

© BBC, GETTY



## 1953 THE QUATERMASS EXPERIMENT (TV)

The name was everything. Commissioned to write a new Saturday night serial, Nigel Kneale nearly christened his hero Professor Charlton – but that was too mundane for the unsettling tale he had in mind. Scouring the London telephone directory the BBC staff writer pounced on Quatermass.

The surname belonged to an East End fruit seller, but it held a distinct magic: three syllables that suggested units of scientific measurement (quarter, mass) but in combination had a queasy, unknowable power, hinting at unearthly biologies. Fitting for a rational hero confronting alien forces – and perfect for a TV drama set to bring a shudder of the uncanny to post-war Britain. With one curious, inexplicable word, *Quatermass* defined itself.

The world was still four years away from the launch of Sputnik, the triumph of the Soviet space program, but Kneale's story was already electrified by the paranoia around mankind's next frontier. "It was... something that was just beginning to be talked about in sensible, serious newspapers," he recalled. In fact *The Quatermass Experiment* would be the first original science fiction production expressly written for an adult audience in Britain.

The six-part serial sees Professor Bernard Quatermass investigate the fate of the first manned rocket into space. The craft crashes back to London, its sole survivor mutating into a monstrous extraterrestrial lifeform. Reginald Tate was cast as the pioneering boffin, head of the British Experimental Rocket Group, and defined the character as a principled moral force. "He was troubled and bothered and anxious and very energetic at the same time," Kneale remembered. "Absolutely super."

Director Rudolph Cartier, a visionary Austrian émigré, also proved a perfect match for such ambitious storytelling. "I realised he was a man who never took no for an answer," said Kneale. Transmitted live from Alexandra Palace, hobbled by cameras that were temperamental relics of the 1930s, the production demanded all of Cartier's steel. As Kneale recalled, "It was horrendous. If any special effects were required you had to take a chance that they would work on the screen. There was little room for error." Kneale himself manipulated the creature at the story's climax, his hands thrust into vegetation-smothered rubber gloves that squirmed and writhed inside a miniature Westminster Abbey.

Broadcast the month after the Queen's Coronation – another primal TV event



Astronaut Victor Carroon's progress in *Xperiment*.



Reginald Tate (left) as the first TV Quatermass.

climaxing at the Abbey – *The Quatermass Experiment* is now remembered as a cultural phenomenon that emptied the streets of Britain. In 1979, however, Kneale pointed to some less-than-stellar contemporary critical notices: "Now, of course, it's been transmuted into having been a great success." And its legendarily terrifying reputation was also misplaced, he claimed. "The horror element... was about one percent of the total running time. In fact a lot of it was meant to be very funny."

## 1955 THE QUATERMASS XPERIMENT (FILM)

Directed by Val Guest, who co-wrote the screenplay, Hammer's big-screen version capitalised on the popularity of the TV serial.

"It was something new, and Hammer could smell it," said Kneale, who thought American star Brian Donlevy was profoundly miscast as Quatermass. "Donlevy played him as a mechanic, a creature with a completely closed mind." He was equally unimpressed by the efforts of American co-writer Richard Landau, who "turned my poor old Quatermass into a screaming, shouting person – probably like the last film producer he had worked for."

Despite Kneale's reservations, the film was a success, with effective make-up work by Phil Leakey making the doomed astronaut's

## 1955 QUATERMASS II (TV)

"We are going to need many more *Quatermass Experiment* programmes," said BBC Controller Cecil McGivern as the Corporation faced the impending launch of commercial rivals ITV.

Kneale delivered an even edgier, more paranoia-steeped sequel, inspired by the rise of such clandestine research establishments as Porton Down in Wiltshire. "Government bodies were building early-warning radar bases, germ warfare factories, mysterious isolated laboratories, all of which were hidden from the public in wild, inaccessible places. Some of these fantastic institutions didn't even exist outside of the fertile imaginations of the journalists who wrote about them."

Essentially, said Kneale, the story was "about the evil of secrecy", exposing an alien conspiracy to infiltrate the government, launched by a fall of meteorites on the remote coastal backwater of Winnerden Flats. The title was a fudge – "I actually called it *Quatermass II* because I couldn't think of a better title" – but it's also the name of the good professor's new rocket, replacing the one that crashed in *The Quatermass Experiment*.

Original star Reginald Tate was set to reprise the role but died a month before production began. He was replaced by John Robinson, the third screen Quatermass in two years, and far from the last...





Kneale (left),  
with Rudolph  
Cartier.

## THE QUATERMASS INSPIRATION

The long shadow of Nigel Kneale

The impact of *The Quatermass Experiment* was felt immediately. When Kneale denied Hammer the rights to a quickie sequel, the studio essentially created its own knock-off in 1956's *X The Unknown*, pitting Dr Adam Royston of the Atomic Energy Establishment against a primordial subterranean force. 1965's *Invasion* – storylined by future *Doctor Who* writer Robert Holmes – presented an alien infiltration that echoed *Quatermass II*.

It's *Who* that truly mined *Quatermass* for ideas: a malevolent fall of meteorites in "Spearhead From Space"; possessed astronauts in "The Ambassadors Of Death"; extraterrestrial influence on mankind's superstitions in "The Daemons"; an ancient skull in "Image Of The Fendahl". The entire UNIT set-up in the Jon Pertwee era feels inspired by the military presence in *Quatermass And The Pit*, while some playful dialogue in "Remembrance of the Daleks" suggests "Bernard" and the British Rocket Group actually share the same universe as the Time Lord.

There's a clear trace of *Quatermass* in *The X-Files*, too, with its cosmic conspiracies in the highest echelons of government. Kneale was invited to write for the series but had no time for it: "I'm happy to say I've only seen one episode of these two non-actors struggling with their lines," he once told *SFX*. "I despair!"

Filmmaker John Carpenter is a fan, even using the pseudonymous screenwriting credit Martin Quatermass for 1987's *Prince Of Darkness*, as much a homage to Kneale's creation as some of the plot elements in that film. *The Quatermass Xperiment* was a touchstone for the young Carpenter: "It was profound when it came out. My mind was blown when I saw this movie."

mutation even more chilling than the hazy horrors of the BBC original. It was the highest-grossing movie Hammer had made until then and it helped tilt the studio toward the nerve-jangling fare that would soon define its brand.

The title was a shameless bid to Xploit the transgressive lure of the X certificate, recently introduced to British cinemas. Stateside the movie was rechristened *The Creeping Unknown*. With only two telerecorded episodes of the BBC original surviving, this cinematic mutation is now the version of record.



Richard  
Wordsworth in  
*Xperiment*.



John Robinson  
in the BBC's  
*Quatermass II*.





## 1957 QUATERMASS 2 (FILM)

The next Hammer adaptation is a bleak, unsettling piece of '50s cinema, its haunting black-and-white imagery a world away from the full-blooded, full-colour gothic of the same year's *The Curse Of Frankenstein*.

Like the TV version it was partly filmed at the Shell Haven refinery in Essex, whose smooth metallic domes conceal the truth of the alien masterplan. The location captured the oddly eerie vibe of post-war England, where stark, freshly built towns and gleaming industrial developments brought the shock of the new. American title *Enemy From Space* is all too blunt: *Quatermass 2* is powered by the disquiet of not knowing who the enemy might be.

This time Kneale was involved with the screenplay. To his dismay, Brian Donlevy was back as Quatermass, reputedly sinking half a bottle of whisky during liquid lunches. "They had to tell him the name of the film, the scene he was in and then raise the idiot board so he could read off it," Kneale later despaired.

Look for an uncharacteristically dramatic turn by future *Carry On* icon Sid James as a journalist who sacrifices his life to warn of the alien threat. Cor, blimey!



Brian "Hic!" Donlevy is back in *Quatermass 2*.



André Morell (left) is Quatermass in his TV pit.



André Morell with Cec Linder in the TV version.

## 1958 QUATERMASS AND THE PIT (TV)

It's apt that a story about communal memory should evoke imagery of the Blitz for an audience that had lived through it. The alien menace in the third *Quatermass* serial is only unearthed as a bomb-shattered London is being rebuilt, a decade after the war. What's found beneath the rubble is even more terrifying than a V2. "It was written at a time when there was a lot of building going on," reflected Kneale. "So I thought well, you dig down to an enormous depth and find a spaceship. Immediate recognition."

But it's also a story inspired by the tinderbox of racial tension in London at the time. The Notting Hill race riots had erupted in the summer of 1958, bringing violence to the streets. In Kneale's tale a newly excavated five



James Donald with Andrew Keir (right) in the film *Pit*.





Sid(ney)  
James gets  
all serious.

## THE QUATERMASS RESURRECTION...?

Matthew Graham reveals the *Quatermass* revival we never saw



"There are so many things that interest me about Bernard Quatermass," says Matthew Graham, co-creator of *Life On Mars* and a writer for *Doctor Who*'s 21st century revival. "He's facing the unknown with a stoicism and an empirical inquisitiveness. He's a tweed-jacketed, pipe-smoking, old school scientist and intellectual.

He lived in a world where what appeared on the front page of the *Daily Mail* was probably true!

"That's what's always fascinated me. Quatermass is a serious man. His ideas are radical but he himself is not eccentric. He's actually the opposite of eccentric. He's the Anti-Doctor, in that way. I think he would be extremely distrustful of the Doctor. He'd be very wary of the influence of a higher intelligence on human behaviour."

A decade ago that fascination with Nigel Kneale's hero led Graham to develop plans for a potential TV revival. "I was in a place where *Life On Mars* had finished, *Ashes To Ashes* was winding down and people were very much coming to me looking for those kinds of ideas," he tells *SFX*. "I felt it was an opportunity to explore *Quatermass*.

"I was very keen to do something that was, if you will, a *Doctor Who* for grown-ups – or a *Doctor Who* that was aimed at an adult audience, that had big ideas and was able to realise them."

Graham mapped out three stories for the series, planned as an authentic 1950s period piece. "My first story, *Quatermass And The Girl*, started with the unknown story of the conquest of Everest, which is that when Hillary and Tenzing reached the summit they found – think *Lifeforce*! – a beautiful naked woman, completely unharmed by the altitude and the cold, standing there waiting for them. That was my starting point.

"Then I developed a story called *Quatermass And The Spear*, which revealed the Spear of Destiny was in fact an alien medical device that could bring people back from near-death. The Roman who had stabbed Jesus on the cross was an alien and the aliens, in a 2001 way, were into seeding our spiritual and psychological evolution.

"And then I wanted to do *Quatermass And The Pit*, because just as Russell [T Davies] instinctively knew that you can't bring the Doctor back without the Daleks, I felt like *Quatermass And The Pit* would be that wonderful third course. Let's do our new version!"

Graham had a rising star in mind for Quatermass. "I really thought that Hugh Bonneville would have been fantastic. Hugh manages to be a sort of staid, traditional Englishman and also quite cool. You don't think he's boring; Hugh's interesting. And he's brilliant at dry humour.

"We had a conversation. He liked the idea but then *Downtown Abbey* arrived and he shot off into the stratosphere and became very difficult to reach. I suddenly realised I couldn't have these off-the-peg conversations with him. I'd have to think about a formal offer and bring him something when it was more developed."

Ultimately the idea never went any further. "I don't think I ever got as far as a formal pitch to anyone," says Graham. "I think at the time the rights situation was complicated. There seemed to be some legal wrangles and I realised there was no point in approaching anyone until those legal things were sorted out."

Perhaps now the time is finally right. Graham is tickled by the idea of bringing the head of the British Experimental Rocket Group into the modern day. "I'd love to know what Quatermass would make of a chatbot. AI and social media would be absolutely fascinating to him. And the empowerment of idiocy would inflame him!"

million year old skull holds the grim secret of humanity: we have been programmed by Martians to purge our own species in a frenzied rite known as the Wild Hunt.

André Morell is the latest face of Quatermass; director Rudolph Cartier had actually offered him the role for *The Quatermass Experiment*. Many see him as the ultimate embodiment of Kneale's hero, just as *Quatermass And The Pit* might be the definitive Quatermass story. It's certainly a brilliant dissection of the power of the supernatural. The locust-like Martians may be the long-buried demons of Hob's Lane but the true shiver comes when Quatermass declares "We are the Martians!"

The BBC estimated one in three adults in Britain tuned in for the final episode.

## 1967 QUATERMASS AND THE PIT (FILM)

Hammer optioned the movie rights for the third *Quatermass* serial in 1961 but struggled to make a co-production deal with American partners. When the film finally arrived – directed by Roy Ward Baker, veteran of TV's *The Saint* and *The Avengers* – it shifted Kneale's hero into the realm of colour for the first time. Maybe a little of that classic Quatermass spookiness was sacrificed, but the film proved a vivid, entertaining addition to the Professor's screen exploits.

Kneale adapted his own script, relocating Hob's Lane building site to Hob's Lane underground station. Finally shot of Donlevy, he was enthusiastic about the "marvellous" Andrew Keir, who bagged the title role over the

likes of Peter Finch, Kenneth More and Anthony Quayle. Determined, with a dour Scots edge, Keir absolutely convinces you of Quatermass's integrity.

Again the US demanded an alternative title – without the brand recognition built by the TV serials, the word "Quatermass" would struggle to make box-office in the States. Rechristened *Five Million Years To Earth*, its trailer made the lurid promise that "Women will be defiled by invaders from outer space!"

Keep an eye out for some cheeky self-promotion on the part of Hammer. The underground station set is decorated with posters for the studio's own *The Witches* and *Dracula: Prince Of Darkness*.



Keir as  
Quatermass  
does a little  
cleaning.



## 1979 QUATERMASS (TV)

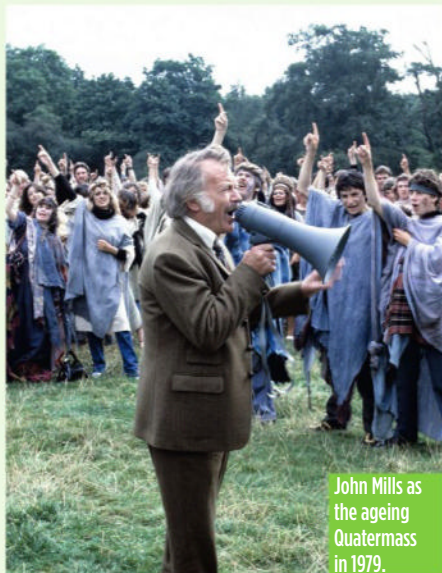
A fourth *Quatermass* serial nearly materialised in the early 1970s, confronting Bernard with the dark underbelly of the Age of Aquarius. “The previous *Quatermasses* had always been rather attached to their time,” Kneale explained. “So the one in 1973 was to be of an impending social disaster, because there were

signs of it then.” The BBC went cold on the revival, baulking at the expense. Eventually Kneale jumped channel to ITV where the project was taken on by Euston Films, a subsidiary of Thames Television known for such gritty, bruising crime drama as *The Sweeney*. Executive producer Verity Lambert had launched *Doctor Who* 16 years before. “[They] – rightly or wrongly – made it very, very lavishly indeed.”

It’s the bleakest, most despairing of all the *Quatermass* stories, with its elderly protagonist – now played by John Mills – confronting a dystopian near-future where a malign alien force is triggering the collapse of civilisation (no, not Twitter).

For Kneale it was one from the heart, a final, impassioned stand against the dying of the light: “The whole of the fourth *Quatermass* is about a last-ditch use of logic and dwindling technological resources, pitted against suicidal mysticism.”

Made entirely on film, the glossy four-part serial existed side-by-side with *The Quatermass Conclusion*, a 100-minute theatrical version intended for limited release abroad. Kneale was frustrated by having to write two scripts, including material that could be easily trimmed for cinemas but which didn’t come across as padding to a TV audience.



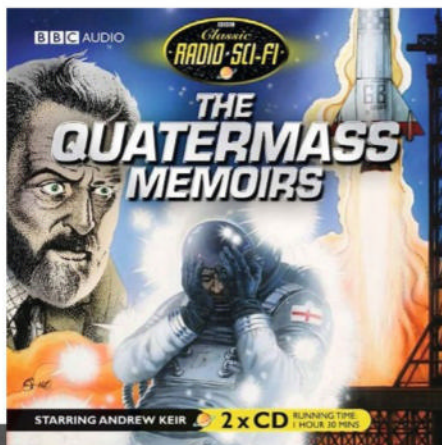
John Mills as the ageing Quatermass in 1979.



“I say, madam, I’d rather you didn’t.”

## 1996 THE QUATERMASS MEMOIRS (RADIO)

This five-part Radio 3 series mixed Kneale’s recollections with archive news broadcasts and a dramatised strand, set before the final serial, where a reporter interviews the reclusive Professor, keen to capture his life story. Nearly 30 years on, Andrew Keir reprised his role from Hammer’s *Quatermass And The Pit*.



© BBC, EUSTON FILMS/THAMES TELEVISION, EAMONN M. MCCORMACK/GETTY

## 1997 QUATERMASS AND THE PIT (LIVE)

Kneale gave his blessing to this live theatrical production, staged outdoors at a quarry in the village of Cropwell Bishop in Nottinghamshire. Mounted by Creation Productions, the adaptation starred David Longford as Quatermass. Be sure to retain that name for pub quiz glory...

## 2005 THE QUATERMASS EXPERIMENT (TV)

Commissioned by fledgling digital channel BBC Four, this remake was the centrepiece of the *TV On Trial* season, encouraging viewers to vote for the decade they believed was the true golden age of British television.

With Kneale onboard as consultant, Richard Fell adapted the original 1950s scripts, tweaking them for the modern day. “We kept very much to the heart of the story,” he said.

“We didn’t want to just take the bare bones and turn it into a chase caper or monster movie. We wanted to be true to Nigel’s idea of this being some kind of personal existential quest that Quatermass goes on to determine his own responsibility, and therefore all our responsibility, with regard to opening Pandora’s box.”

*Lock, Stock And Two Smoking Barrels* star Jason Flemyng made a suitably contemporary Quatermass while the rest of the cast included Mark Gatiss and David Tennant, who discovered during rehearsals that he had just been handed the key to the TARDIS by Russell T Davies.

Ambitiously, the production went out live, just like the original – a true experiment. The resulting adrenaline burst saw it run a whole 22 minutes shorter than its allocated slot. One near-mishap saw Tennant nearly fall over while racing from one set to another. Allons-y!

Jason Flemyng gives us his Quatermass in 2005.







## “I’M HONOURED TO PLAY HIM!”

Mark Gatiss on the *Quatermass* legacy

### When did you first encounter *Quatermass*?

◆ The Hammer *Quatermass And The Pit* was on TV and was the talk of school the next day. Everyone was terrified. I can remember having that “Ooh, the pubs emptied!” conversation with my parents about the original. This must have been about 1976 so I was very well aware of Nigel Kneale and *Beasts* being by “the *Quatermass* man”.

### What impresses you most about Nigel Kneale’s writing?

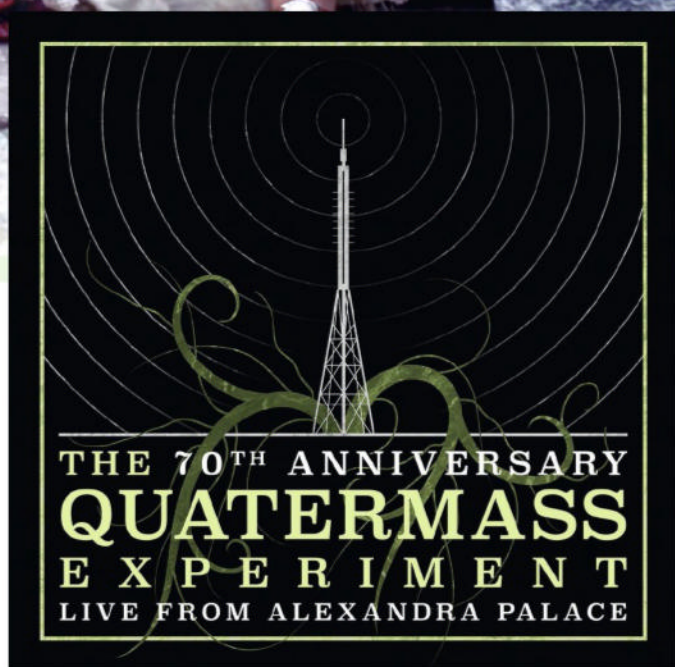
◆ It’s a curious combination of things for me. Kneale had a wonderful, earthy realism mixed with the strangeness and whimsy of his Manx upbringing. There’s a strong streak of pessimism running in an uneasy alliance with the flame of hope. Ultimately, though, it’s his uncanny gift of prophecy which astonishes. He could see round corners. I often say that his epitaph should be “I told you so”.

### Who’s your favourite Bernard *Quatermass*?

◆ André Morell. He’s just a wonderful, powerful, lovable presence. Such a good actor. You can feel his intelligence. Which makes his disintegration in the *Wild Hunt* all the more frightening. Our hero isn’t the one who’s immune!

### You’re playing *Quatermass* in the live reading at Alexandra Palace. What defines the character for you?

◆ Complicated! He’s a troubled man. A widower. With an endless thirst for knowledge. Kneale wrote a lot about the dangers of that desire to push forward scientific frontiers – in *The Road*, for example – and *Quatermass* is its embodiment. He gets the world in a lot of trouble! But he’s a good and principled man. I’m honoured to play him!



## 2023 THE QUATERMASS EXPERIMENT (LIVE)

Next month the British Experimental Rocket Group is recalled for a live 70th anniversary reading of Nigel Kneale’s scripts for *The Quatermass Experiment*. With long-time Kneale devotee Mark Gatiss in the title role, it’s set to be staged at London’s Alexandra Palace, home to the original TV production.

Time to ask those ever-haunting questions all over again: “What went on here? What did it do to them?” ●

*The Quatermass Experiment* is at Alexandra Palace in London on 9 September. Visit [alexandrapalace.com](http://alexandrapalace.com).



## CHRISTINA CHONG

*Star Trek's* latest Noonien-Singh sets course for the charts

Words by Darren Scott /// Kharen Hill/Paramount+

**P**laying the chief security officer on board the USS Enterprise, Christina Chong is well-versed in alien interactions now, but her first extraterrestrial encounter was a little closer to home, thanks to a little show called *Doctor Who*. She's part of an elite club of people who've appeared in both sci-fi institutions. "Obviously now I'm a *Trek* fan, but before *Doctor Who* I'd never really been in sci-fi or seen much of it," she admits. "So that was my first introduction to prosthetic aliens and that kind of thing. *Doctor Who* was great!"

### What's La'an's journey this season?

➡ She's still, obviously, got that trauma underneath, but we're not playing it this season. There's a lighter energy about La'an in season two. Episode three is a huge rollercoaster of emotions for her. She goes from her normal reserved, kind of standoffish persona – she's actually very vulnerable underneath, she's just protecting herself. She lost all her family to the Gorn, then she ends up trying to save her timeline, falls in love with Kirk and loses him. So her biggest fear happens again. But she's a fighter and she's determined to overcome her trauma.

### Presumably the Gorn are CG, so what's it like acting with them?

➡ Actually, there are puppets, which are quite cute! It's really fun, actually, to act with the puppets. Sometimes it's the Gorn's POV. So when we're looking at the camera operator it's the Gorn. I don't think I've done a CGI thing, it's obviously a lot easier to create a small puppet.

### What was your best geek-out moment from filming season two?

➡ Episodes three and nine were my favourite to film. Episode nine [musical episode "Subspace Rhapsody"] takes *Star Trek* to a whole new level. It has been a dream of mine for years to do something like this. They already had an idea to do it, but they hadn't solidified it. So I kept pushing and asking, and pitching to anyone who'd listen. Finally, Akiva [Goldsman, producer] told me in the September of 2021. He was like, "Guess what, kid?" and I was like, "What?" "We're doing that thing." I almost cried. That was a lot of fun. I can't wait to see the reaction to that.

### You've just released some new music. What's the plan?

➡ There's ideas floating around of releasing acoustic versions of the songs, and a Christmas single also. I've always wanted to do a Christmas single. There's also going to be a club remix of "Twin Flames" coming out this summer, a limited physical release of the EP, signed releases and potentially merchandise. I've got loads more music in the bank. I've got some disco tracks...

### Did you ever get to see your deleted scenes from *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*?

➡ No, I never saw them! And do you know what? I filmed them twice. I was on set the first day of the whole shoot in Abu Dhabi. I can't remember now why we had to film it again, months later, when they were back in London, at Pinewood Studios. I was like, "Oh, so we could've filmed that scene at Pinewood." We filmed it again and then it never got used. Fine for me because I got paid twice! It's just the nature of something like that, so huge.

### Do you remember what the character was?

➡ I don't remember. Because the thing is that you're not allowed any scripts – even the lead actors had to go in a room to read the script with a camera in it. So I don't know because I don't know *Star Wars*, but I was this alien thing. You could still see my face. I had face paint and this purple thing on my head. I don't know what I was, but I do know that when I was doing the make-up and costume fittings, I had to have this massive black cloak on me just to walk from one part of Pinewood to another. And never got seen!

### What's the convention experience like for you?

➡ I love it. I love it. Because everyone's a fan of the show. What's not to like about that? It's just really nice to hear in-person feedback from people who appreciate what you're doing for a living. It's amazing. I always make sure that each interaction is very personal to everyone who comes to say hi. To get the opportunity to be on the ground with everyone is really unique. Where else would you get to do that? Have that many fans all in one room? It's very cool. It feels very familial – not just being part of it with the other *Trek* actors, but also seeing the fans come together and knowing it's a family for them. ●

*Star Trek: Strange New Worlds* is on Paramount+ now.

THIS INTERVIEW  
WAS CONDUCTED  
PRIOR TO SAG-AFTRA  
STRIKE ACTION

### BIODATA

From  
Enfield, London

Greatest Hits  
**Cleric Lorna Bucket** in *Doctor Who's* "A Good Man Goes To War"; producer **Tamsin** in *Black Mirror's* "The Waldo Moment"; **Colonial Guard soldier Macer** in *Halo: Nightfall*; concubine **Rizpah** in *Of Kings And Prophets*; **La'an Noonien-Singh** in *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds*.

Random Fact  
**Her dog Runa** appeared as **Princess Thalia's lapdog** in *Strange New Worlds* season one episode "The Elysian Kingdom".



“It’s nice to  
hear in-person  
feedback from  
people who  
appreciate what  
you’re doing”



JANET FIELDING



# FIVE STAR

FASTEN YOUR SEATBELTS  
FOR A TIME FLIGHT INTO  
THE FUTURE WITH  
**JANET FIELDING'S**  
AUSSIE AIR HOSTESS  
TEGAN JOVANKA

WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

© UNITED NEWS/POPPEROTO VIA GETTY







**W**HEN SFX JOINS JANET Fielding for a natter, she's on a break from recording a *Doctor Who* audio play for Big Finish. But don't expect her to divulge anything about the plot. "I could tell you, but I think I'd have to kill you!" she laughs. However, she can reveal that "It's a fun story. It's more episodes than usual. And as per usual it's a great cast."

Secrecy is nothing new for Fielding. NDAs accompany virtually every *Doctor Who* job she lands, whether it's a documentary, commentary or audiobook. However, no project in recent years has been on *quite* the same scale as her return to the television series. A few white lies were told to ensure that the news didn't leak. "I had to," she stresses. "People all the time on Twitter were saying, 'Wouldn't you love to come back into *Doctor Who*?' 'Yes, I would!' You know?"

## RETURN TO OZ

Tegan's long-awaited comeback in "The Power Of The Doctor" was seemingly a wish-fulfilment for showrunner and '80s-era fan Chris Chibnall, who had expressed his desire to bring back the character in a February 2020 interview. Fielding was aware of his comments when *Doctor Who* casting director Andy Pryor contacted her.

"He asked whether I'd be interested in returning to the show. I thought about it for all of three seconds and then said yes," she says. "And then I worried on all sorts of fronts. Because I hadn't been in front of the camera for 37 years, would I be able to remember lines? I don't need to learn lines any more, so I'm out of the habit."

Fielding was given the opportunity to share her ideas on Tegan and where she might be in her life. "[Chibnall] liked them – I think they meshed with the sort of things in which he was interested. My theory was that you couldn't travel in the TARDIS without being profoundly changed, and so the Tegan who went into the TARDIS was not the Tegan who eventually came out of the TARDIS. And that it changed the course of her life."

"The Power Of The Doctor" was filmed in Cardiff in autumn 2021. "The worst thing was that they started with my first scene," Fielding says, "and unfortunately it involved talking to a mobile phone."

In the scene, Tegan reconnects by video call with fellow companion Ace (Sophie Aldred). "Sophie wasn't there," Fielding says, "so the First Assistant Director was reading in for me. That was a bit weird. And I could see myself on the phone! I had to get them to put tape over it because it was so off-putting. Now whenever I



Her last story "Resurrection Of The Daleks".



In her debut "Logopolis" with Baker.



With Davison and Mark Strickson.



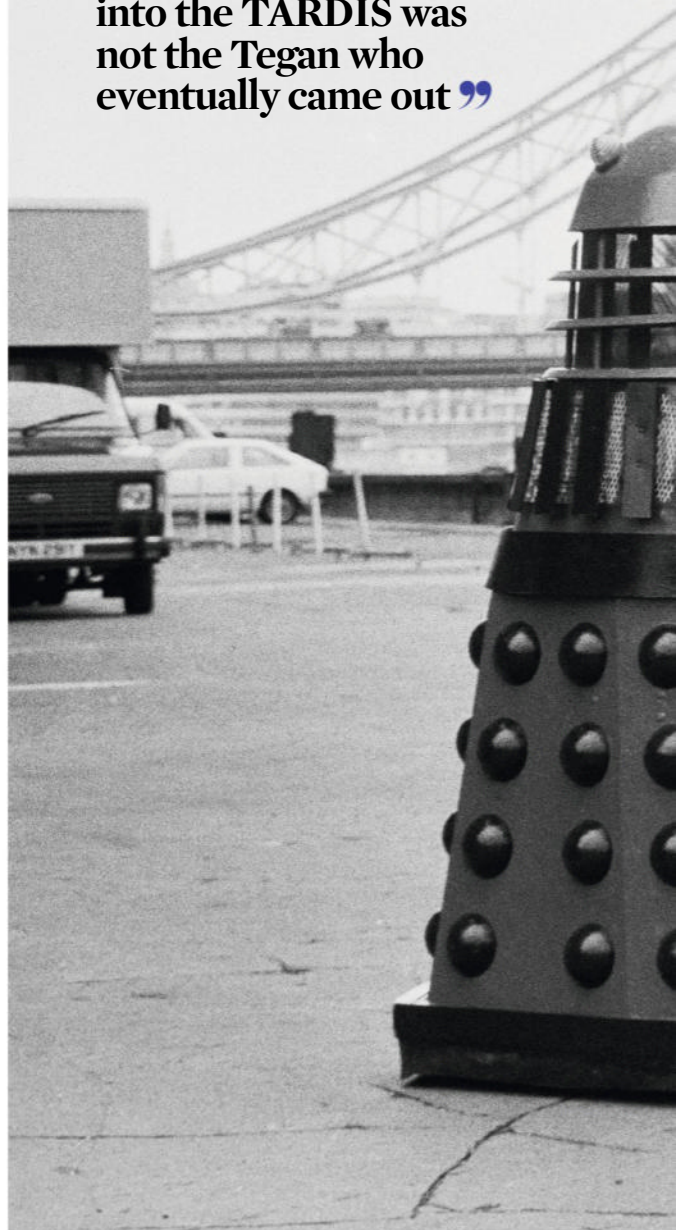
Shooting "Time-Flight" at Heathrow.

see somebody talking on a phone, holding it out and talking, I think, 'Can you see yourself? How off-putting is that?'"

To prevent her and Aldred from being spotted by fans, they were driven to and from set wearing heavy robes which Fielding compares to those worn by people who go cold-water swimming.

"We'd have to put the hood over our heads and then they'd hold an umbrella over us," she recalls. "People were always turning up to see who was going in and out. Luckily, because of Covid, we all had to wear masks. So, if we had time off and we were walking around Cardiff, we could wear a mask, and nobody would recognise us. The dread was running into

“The Tegan who went into the TARDIS was not the Tegan who eventually came out”



people I knew. They were really lovely to us," she concludes of her Cardiff caper. "Sophie and I got treated right royally. It was a lovely experience."

Tegan's return was made public in a trailer following an episode broadcast at Easter 2022. "That was amazing," Fielding smiles. "My Twitter feed went absolutely bananas." But did she apologise to any of the friends she'd lied to? "No. Too bad!"

We're speaking to Fielding days after the announcement of the Season 20 box set, the second of her three Peter Davison seasons to be released on Blu-ray. "People liked the trailer, didn't they?", she smiles. She's referring to "The Passenger", a mini-episode written and





A press photo call for "Resurrection Of The Daleks".

directed by Pete McTighe, which reunited Tegan with her fellow time traveller Nyssa (Sarah Sutton) after four decades. "It was lovely," Fielding says. "It was really nice to see her character back on screen. Fans absolutely adore her, so that was a real treat. And I love the script – it's fabulous. Such a cool idea."

The filming took place at a funfair in Southend. "It was late at night the week before the longest day of the year, so the sun hadn't set. But we were really cold."

However, as Sutton made evident in a behind-the-scenes video, the moment had been

prepared for. "I often take a hot water bottle because it's a great way to help keep you a bit warmer," says Fielding. "Sarah expressed her envy for my hot water bottle. They all did actually. Pete must have been freezing – he had a T-shirt on if I remember rightly. There's hardy, then there's hardy!"

Seeing Fielding snuggled cosily under a blanket is a familiar sight for viewers of the Blu-ray range's *Gogglebox*-esque *Behind The Sofa* features. In this case, it's not because the studio is chilly. "It doesn't matter how warm it is, I like to watch television under a covering of →



© BBC, GETTY



"Is this the button for BBC Two?"



some kind,” she says. “My sister-in-law owns the Urban Sewing Lounge [in Brisbane] and over the years she’s made me various patchwork things, and then other people have given me blankets. Then as a wind-up for Peter Davison, [Blu-ray range producer] Russell Minton made an ‘Everybody Loves Tegan’ blanket, which I proudly unfurled, much to Peter’s horror!” She laughs. “I love him really!”

With the forthcoming box set, Fielding will have appeared in a record-breaking 10 seasons of *Behind The Sofa*. “That’s because I’m so lippy,” she states, defiantly. She knows that her style is popular with viewers. “It started back in the ‘90s when Peter [Davison] and I were doing DVD commentaries,” she explains. “We were more honest than most. We wanted to make it more interesting. We could be rude about each other and the special effects and things like that if they didn’t work. We’d tell it how it is.”

Fielding has watched (and remarked upon with great honesty) dozens of classic *Doctor Who* stories over the past couple of years. So what has she learnt about the show?

“God, I don’t know,” she laughs, pausing to reflect on an aspect of the series that clearly resonates with her. “I’ve learnt that *Doctor*

## “Science fiction is a very strange beast, isn’t it? People become really devoted”

*Who* has a very rich culture. And a lot of people find it a really good place to escape to. And what you find over time is that it’s meant a lot to people at various crisis points in their life. You occupy a place in their hearts for that reason. And that’s a very privileged place to be.”

### TEAM TEGAN

As for the stories, does she enjoy watching them? “No. Not if I’m in them. I can enjoy them if others are, but not if I’m in them.” Season 20 – which includes prominent roles for Tegan in “Snakedance” and “Enlightenment” – will prove a more challenging watch for her than usual, then.

Despite her fond memories of the classic series, Fielding has a preference for 21st century *Doctor Who*. “I think the character development is better these days and that makes it more universal,” she says, “but I could be wrong. It had a huge following back in the day, and it has a huge following now, so I’m obviously wrong.

“Science fiction is a very strange beast, isn’t it? People become really devoted. I think partly because it’s a place of escape and it’s also a place of exploration. You can get to explore all



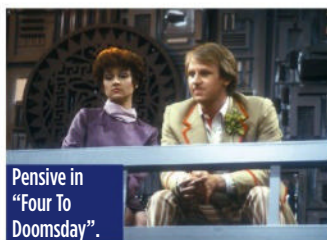
Fielding hated “the bloody boob tube”!



Back, in “The Power Of The Doctor”.



In party mode for “Black Orchid”.



Pensive in “Four To Doomsday”.



Reunited with Nyssa (Sarah Sutton) for “The Passenger”.

sorts of different ideas and concepts. Very often the stories are analogies, or they’re exploring themes that are current, that are present in the wider world.”

The upcoming box set includes several new documentaries. We’ll see Fielding, Sutton and Davison on a road trip to the Timelash convention in Kassel, Germany – “We had such a laugh. We bicker all the way!” – and on a visit to Amsterdam where they filmed “Arc Of Infinity” in 1982. This involved a get-together with the Dutch *Doctor Who* fan club.

“I had been somewhere, and somebody from the fan club had given me a card. I said to Russell, ‘Why don’t we hook up with these people?’ And so that’s what we did. They


thought there was going to be a BBC crew, but they didn’t realise until they arrived at the location that we were going to be there too.”

The cast joined the fan club on a boat trip, on which they answered questions and signed memorabilia, before revisiting several original filming locations.

“The trouble was Pride was about to happen so everything had changed,” Fielding says. “There were things up all over town, so it was very different. But I had a great time.”

Before Fielding heads back to the studio, SFX makes an observation. In all the years she has been recording for Big Finish, she has yet to appear in a play with her original Doctor, Tom Baker. Is there any particular reason?






Careful everyone, the Mara is back!




High summer but still freezing cold. Aussies. eh?




Filming "The Passenger" in Southend.



One has to look one's best.



"...and then I says, Pete, I says..."



Fielding does her best Tommy Cooper.

"I only did one story with Tom [on television]," she says, "so basically he always gets Lou [Jameson] to do them." Fielding's first appearance in "Logopolis" coincided with Baker's departure, so the two worked together only fleetingly. Was Baker a welcoming presence on the set?

"No," she states, honestly. "He wasn't a welcoming presence on the set. Quite the contrary." She pauses. "It was a long time ago. I don't have strong feelings about it one way or the other now."

It's no secret that Baker was tired and frustrated as his tenure on the programme came to an end. Fortunately, Fielding's experience with the Fifth Doctor and co is a

very different story. "Look, that's my team. And it's a bit like my last lines [on the show]: I want to do something that I'm going to enjoy. I know I'll enjoy working with Peter and, when I did 'The Power Of The Doctor', I knew that I'd enjoy working with Sophie. Do you know what I mean? Why bust a gut to work with someone when you may or not enjoy working with them?"

"I don't know. People tell me that Tom's changed a lot, and he says he has. But I don't know. We did a DVD commentary together, him, Chris Bidmead [script editor] and me. That was fine.

"The thing is," she continues, "I don't feel particularly relaxed with Tom. I don't feel

unrelaxed but... Yeah. On the other hand, Pete [Davison] and I take the piss out of each other all the time, and I like to operate on that level. It's very Australian."

Seventeen years on from her Big Finish debut, Fielding's time in the studios with "Team 5" is no less enjoyable. She'll continue to play Tegan for as long as she's asked. "Why wouldn't I? I enjoy it!"

Bonzer news for *Doctor Who* fans. Now, someone please tell us where we can buy one of those Tegan blankets? 🐼

*Doctor Who: The Collection Season 20 is coming soon. Doctor Who: In The Night is released by Big Finish on 5 September.*



# JAMES KENNEDY

A whirl of trouble: the American author tells us about turning to horror

Words by Jonathan Wright

**T**HE FIRST TIME HE SAW *TWIN PEAKS*, JAMES Kennedy immediately identified with the suburban eeriness that David Lynch had conjured up. “[My childhood world] seemed very well-manicured on the surface,” he says, “but crazy stuff was going on.” Not that Kennedy, busy playing *Zork* on his Atari 800, was necessarily too aware of this at the time.

Nevertheless, a sense of Lynchian menace occasionally manifested itself, as on one Fourth of July when Kennedy was in eighth grade. “I was sitting with this girl who I was interested in,” he recalls. “It was at night and this guy just came lurching out of a house that was only 10 doors down from me with a gun. He was pointing it in our faces and said, ‘There’s some little people been threatening me.’ I just kind of talked my way out of it and ran across the street to a house where there was a guy who was a Vietnam vet, a father of some friends of mine. He came out and got this guy in a headlock.”

It wasn’t an incident that resulted in any lasting trauma, and Kennedy insists that growing up in the Detroit suburb of Troy, he enjoyed “a completely idyllic, Norman Rockwell childhood”. Nevertheless, life, he learnt, could be “normal, normal, normal, normal, normal and then some crazy thing happens” before just as suddenly returning to “normal, normal, normal, normal, normal again” as “the crazy thing gets metabolised”.

Except maybe something of the weirdness does linger. That’s certainly the impression you get reading Kennedy’s new novel *Bride Of The Tornado*. Set in a small Midwestern town beset by tornadoes that have to be kept in check by a teenage boy called “the tornado killer”, it’s a book that calls to mind not just Lynch but Stephen King in showing a world where the supernatural is present in day-to-day life.

## PROTECT AND SURVIVE

There is, says Kennedy, something “quintessentially American” about tornadoes. For him, they function as a visible manifestation of “prairie madness”, a phrase born in an era when settlers were sometimes unable to cope with Midwestern landscapes that were “flat, unrelenting and monotonous”. Tornadoes also have a disturbingly arbitrary quality in the way that they can pass through a neighbourhood and take out a house while leaving an adjacent home untouched.

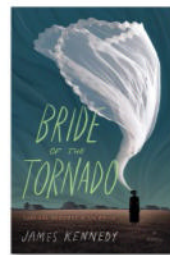
How do you deal with this? As a kid, Kennedy would sometimes have to run down into the basement if a tornado threatened. This was frightening, but there was also a fuzzy

## BIODATA

From **Troy, Michigan**

**Greatest Hits**  
More than a decade after his debut with YA novel *The Order Of Odd-Fish*, Kennedy returned with future-thriller *Dare To Know* (2021).

**Random Fact**  
Kennedy wrote his first story, “The Strange Ship”, aged seven. It’s about two ghosts who visit a spaceship full of aliens and blow it up, and you can read it online: [bit.ly/strangeship](http://bit.ly/strangeship).



“sense of togetherness” about being hunkered down. One way to read *Bride Of The Tornado* is as a folk horror that takes this idea of gathering for protection and shows how it can become warped, ritualised. If you don’t get away – like Kennedy’s narrator, a high school sophomore who time and time again passes up chances to leave, in part because of her fascination with discovering what’s really happening in her town – danger awaits.

Despite the adult nature of these themes, Kennedy initially saw *Bride Of The Tornado* as a YA novel, until his agent queried this assessment. This isn’t so surprising. Kennedy’s first novel *The Order Of Odd-Fish* was a fantasy aimed at the same market. Published in 2008, the book told the story of a foundling teenager who, knowing only that she was labelled “a dangerous baby”, heads to a place called Eldritch City in the company of her aunt.

## DRY SPELL

More than a decade passed before Kennedy’s second novel *Dare To Know*, a future-thriller about a world where the time of people’s deaths can be predicted down to the second, appeared. So what happened? After the birth of his daughters in 2009 and 2011, Kennedy says “My creativity dried up, I kept writing but very slowly.” The problem, he says, was that he had always seen himself as a children’s novelist, but couldn’t write fiction aimed at younger readers any more. When he finally did re-emerge, it was with a book “written in a completely different style, which I used completely different methods to write”.

Kennedy found another way to keep himself in the public eye, by running the 90-Second Newbery Film Festival – “a good side gig” – in which kids are encouraged to make short videos of books that have won the prestigious John Newbery Medal (a US children’s literature prize).

Speaking to Kennedy, it’s easy to imagine him fronting up such a project. He’s garrulous. He has an actor’s good looks and floppy hair. He’s also a prankster, who deliberately engineered a one-sided literary feud with Neil Gaiman after the British writer won the Newbery for *The Graveyard Book*, an award Kennedy contended should have gone to him instead. Gaiman took this all in good humour. When the two finally met to do an event, Kennedy says, “I was starstruck, and he put me so at ease – by telling me the dirtiest joke I’ve ever heard in my life!” ●

*Bride Of The Tornado* is published by Quirk Books on 15 August.



“This guy came lurching out of a house that was only 10 doors down from me with a gun”



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edited by Ian Berriman

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## HAUNTED MANSION

Is it a worthwhile exorcise?

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REVIEWS

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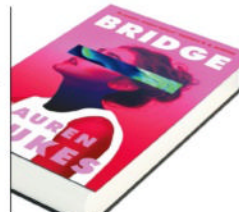
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## HAUNTED MANSION

They ain't 'fraid of no ghosts



► **RELEASED** 11 AUGUST

12A | 123 minutes

► Director **Justin Simien**

► Cast **LaKeith Stanfield, Tiffany**

**Haddish, Owen Wilson, Rosario**

**Dawson, Danny DeVito, Jared Leto**

► **Two decades on from Disney's** last attempt to turn its theme park dark ride into box office booty, the House of Mouse tries again with a new director, a lively ensemble cast and an egalitarian, collective ethos entirely removed from the flat-footed star vehicle given to Eddie Murphy back in 2003.

Though a marked improvement on that Rob Minkoff effort, it's unlikely this *Haunted Mansion* will go on to spawn as many sequels as, say, *Pirates Of The Caribbean*, surely the template for any amusement park diversion seeking to generate a blockbuster mega-franchise.

As with 2021's *Jungle Cruise*, though, Disney could be looking at a mid-range, IP-refreshing crowd pleaser that, if nothing else, is sure to dispel what few memories remain of its ill-starred, laughter-starved predecessor.

Best known for his 2014 college satire *Dear White People* and the TV series it engendered, Justin Simien might at first glance seem a curious directorial choice for a large-scale, effects-laden, family-friendly spectacle.

Yet his 2020 chiller *Bad Hair* displayed a flair for horror-comedy with a culturally specific texture, elements he replicates here in a film that grounds its jump scares, computer-generated ghouls and goofball *Scooby-Doo* antics in a precisely rendered, authentically Louisianian setting. Kicking off in New Orleans with a

jazz funeral reminiscent of the one in *Live And Let Die*, Simien and screenwriter Katie Dippold – Paul Feig's scripting collaborator on 2016's much-maligned *Ghostbusters* reboot – ensure a voodoo-influenced, gumbo-flavoured atmosphere prevails throughout.

As eccentric psychic Harriet, meanwhile, *The Afterparty's* Tiffany Haddish resembles nothing so much as a French Quarter cousin of Noël Coward's Madame Arcati, flamboyantly resplendent as she is in an Erykah Badu head wrap, mehndi hand tattoos and the kind of extended fingernails Sweden's Loreen so perilously sported at this year's Eurovision Song Contest.

Harriet is one of several paranormal experts that Rosario Dawson's Gabbie has enlisted to rid the swamp-surrounded fixer-upper she's purchased in the Bayou of some unwanted supernatural squatters. The catch is that said ghosts latch onto whoever sets foot inside it like ethereal mosquitoes.

That leaves Harriet and her fellow would-be exorcists – Owen Wilson's lackadaisical priest Father Kent, Danny DeVito's cranky academic Bruce and astrophysicist turned reluctant tour guide Ben (LaKeith Stanfield) with no alternative but to help Gabbie and her nerdy young son



Think Owen Wilson might have noticed us. Run!

Travis (Chase W Dillon) solve their infestation problem.

In a neat twist, it turns out Dawson's wraiths have a headache of their own: a malevolent entity called the Hatbox Ghost (voiced by Jared Leto) with its own reasons for stuffing the mansion with restless spirits. ("A ghost who haunts other ghosts? That's not fair!" whines Wilson in amusingly perplexed outrage.) Finding out what makes this spectre tick takes our mismatched heroes to another Deep South residence, curated hilariously by a cameoing star who is no stranger to *Stranger Things*. Underpinning the humour, however, is a surprising bedrock of pathos, a central character's recent

**“It turns out Dawson's wraiths have a headache of their own”**

experience of bereavement layering the film's interactions with the afterlife with a poignant seasoning of grief.

Okay, so maybe Jamie Lee Curtis's Madame Leota – a disembodied head encased within a crystal ball that gives her clairvoyant access to everything, everywhere, all at once – doesn't project the same seductive mischief Jennifer Tilly lent to the role 20 years ago. It is fair to say





too that the surfeit of product placement borders on the obtrusive, shoehorned-in plugs for Burger King, Yankee Candle and other brands having all the subtlety of a Belisha beacon on a tombstone. Lovers of the original ride, however, are sure to appreciate the way portraits come to life, spooks appear inside mirrors and a sinking room extends vertically in traditional Disneyland fashion.

It's also pleasing to hear Disney designer Rolly Crump get a name-check (alongside colleague Yale Gracey), just months after his death – a fitting tribute to the “Imagineers” behind the Mansion's coups de theatre.

Having worked as a Disneyland cast member and ride host during his college years, Simien evidently has a lasting affection for its venerable attractions that manifests itself in his film's meticulous production design and nostalgic array of tinges.

By the time Stanfield, Haddish and co have moved to an adjacent cemetery for a diabolical showdown, though, the special effects have rather taken over – a rookie mistake that a more experienced hand would probably have been canny enough to sidestep. **Neil Smith**

**i** Guillermo del Toro was originally attached as writer/director, and had talks with Ryan Gosling about playing the lead.

Technically, they'd all be dead within days.



## TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: MUTANT MAYHEM

Cowabunga party

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

PG | 100 minutes

▶ Director Jeff Rowe

▶ Cast Micah Abbey, Shamon Brown Jr, Nicolas Cantu, Brady Noon

▶ **Between the dudes-in-rubber-suits monstrosities of the '90s, 2007's all-animated feature and the Michael Bay CG-athons from the 2010s, the heroes in a half-shell dreamed up by Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird back in the '80s have had as many big-screen reboots as Spider-Man.**

Yet there's always room for another if it's as playfully irreverent as *Mutant Mayhem*, conceived by director Jeff Rowe (*The Mitchells Vs The Machines*) as an artfully scrappy, deliberately imperfect adventure channelling the energy of a daydreaming adolescent's whimsical doodlings.

Placing the emphasis squarely on the teenage section of the TMNT initialism, Rowe and his four co-writers (which include producers Seth Rogen and Evan

Goldberg) reintroduce the Turtles as a rambunctious quartet of pizza-munching sewer dwellers desperate to come out of the shadows. An opportunity to do so presents itself when budding high-school reporter April O'Neil (Ayo Edebiri) puts them on the trail of a mysterious crime syndicate that's up to no good. Turns out, though, that its charismatic leader Superfly (Ice Cube) was mutated by the same ooze that created them, leaving them wondering whose side they should really be on.

Bursting with pop-culture references, movie in-jokes and knowing callbacks to the Turtles' previous iterations, Rowe's film is a lot of fun for aficionados and newcomers alike. The sketchbook cartoon style can be tough on the eyes, though, while a central chase sequence is so incoherent that you may ponder if there's radioactive goo in the popcorn. **Neil Smith**

**i** Eagle-eyed anime fans may spot that the stickers on Donatello's staff include one of *Jujutsu Kaisen* character Gojo.



# Reviews

CINEMA



## COBWEB

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED** 1 SEPTEMBER

15 | 88 minutes

▶ Director Samuel Bodin

▶ Cast Lizzy Caplan, Woody Norman, Cleopatra Coleman, Antony Starr

➤ **With no horror since 2021's** *Malignant* has it been so vital to go in spoiler-free. Whoever cut the trailer for *Cobweb* understood that, but the poster designers didn't get the memo – don't so much as glance at it.

Trading in archetypal childhood fears – bumps in the night, the possibility that your parents are not what they seem – it centres on Peter (Woody Norman), a quiet loner who, upon knocking on his bedroom wall, hears *something* knocking back. Soon a voice is whispering advice to him on how to deal with the school bullies.

With its upside-down turns, towering shadows and back garden full of rotting pumpkins, *Cobweb* has a pleasing (but not overegged) feeling of being detached from 2023 reality. But it's the way it wrongfoots the viewer which most impresses. This is a kaleidoscope of a film, with each twist reconfiguring your expectations.

Is it a ghost story? A tale of abusive parents? Childhood psychopathy? Some well-played bait and switch keeps us on our toes, until the significance of that opaque title finally comes into focus.

The film doesn't hang about, either, with the first mysterious thumps heard almost immediately. If *Cobweb* has a flaw it's that the exit is equally in a hurry. After all the final-reel gymnastics, it might have paid to stay on the mat for a moment and take a bow.

Ian Berriman



## BARBIE Living Doll

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED** OUT NOW!

12A | 114 minutes

▶ Director Greta Gerwig

▶ Cast Margot Robbie, Ryan Gosling, Will Ferrell, Neuti Gatwa

➤ **Barbie is having a crisis.** That's a problem, because Barbie doesn't have crises. In fact, she doesn't have problems either, because she lives a perfect life, in a perfect world – Barbieland, to be precise. And that's where things become *SFX*-relevant...

Because Barbie – the original version, played by Margot Robbie – is having thoughts about death, she has to cross over into the real world to put things right with the girl who owns her. But this journey – on which she's accompanied by Beach Ken (Ryan Gosling) – causes things to unravel further still when she realises that Barbies haven't quite empowered women as she expected.

Oh, and she unwittingly introduces fascism to Barbieland by rebuffing Ken's advances. Discovering that men live very different lives in the real world, Ken brings the concept of the patriarchy to his fellow Kens,

creating Kendom and diminishing the Barbies to subservient bimbos. Barbie battles to save the *other* Barbies with the help of Weird Barbie – who's been played with too hard – by creating a musical civil war between the Kens.

Yes, it's absurd – but that's why it works. It's hilariously meta, very clever, ridiculously funny – particularly Helen Mirren's wall-breaking voiceover – and incredibly moving. America

“Ken brings the concept of the patriarchy to his fellow Kens”

Ferrera shines as mum Gloria, with an on-the-nose speech about the problems women face.

Mattel's in-movie, all-male management team, fronted by Will Ferrell's CEO, comes across as deliciously stupid, and you're left wondering how or why the toymakers approved the film – but if you're not a fragile online man, you'll be glad they did. **Darren Scott**

**i** Inspired by German doll Bild Lilli, Barbie was named after the daughter of Mattel co-founders Ruth and Elliot Handler.

Keep smiling and everything will be fine.



## THE BLACKENING

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED** 25 AUGUST

15 | 97 minutes

▶ Director Tim Story

▶ Cast Dwayne Perkins, Antoinette Robertson, X Mayo, Melvin Gregg

➤ **Making a horror-comedy** that's actually scary and funny is no mean feat, but *The Blackening* succeeds at both tasks, while also creating a nuanced and highly intelligent satire of the African-American experience.

The premise is familiar: a group of friends reunite in an isolated cabin in the woods, only to find themselves hunted by a sadistic murderer. But despite such well-worn territory, the film proves to be a raucous and refreshing rollercoaster, using the blackness of its cast to skewer racial and horror archetypes.

To make matters worse, there are plenty of unresolved tensions within the group, particularly between best friends Lisa (Antoinette Robertson) and Dwayne (Dwayne Perkins, who also co-wrote the script), who disapproves of Lisa reuniting with her philandering ex Nnamdi (Sinqua Walls).

The masked killer also has more in mind than just murder, forcing the group to play a board game called *The Blackening* where they have to answer questions about black culture, and decide who among them is the “blackest”...

Director Tim Story has a total blast with the premise. *The Blackening* deserves to spawn a franchise, even if its world-weary characters are unlikely to be heading to another cabin any time soon.

Leila Latif





## INSIDIOUS: THE RED DOOR

★★★★☆

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

15 | 107 minutes

▶ Director Patrick Wilson

▶ Cast Patrick Wilson, Rose Byrne, Ty Simpkins, Lin Shaye

It's not often that fifth entries in horror franchises deliver more than tired repetition looking to revisit old glories. Happily, there's a pleasant surprise lurking within this latest *Insidious* outing.

Adding director to his CV, star Patrick Wilson acquits himself honourably here, shaking off early over-artfulness for a solid legacy sequel that (five years on from the last film) digs deeper into the mythology.

It's 10 years since we saw the Lambert family, and they've been splintered by divorce and death. Sullen Dalton (Ty Simpkins) is headed to college, where the creepy realm known as "the Further" is about to haunt him once more. Meanwhile father Josh (Wilson) has his own demons to confront, with the hypnosis treatment to help him and Dalton forget their horrific experiences leaving him foggy and disconnected.

You won't be surprised by what happens, but Wilson and co bring it to life with a generous helping of effective scares and some solid character development before we dive back into *You Know Where*. Kudos also to Sinclair Daniel as Dalton's roommate (via scheduling error) Chris, a young woman who serves as the perfect, funny counterpoint to his mopey muppet.

James White



## PSYCHO-PASS: PROVIDENCE

★★★★☆

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

15 | 120 minutes

▶ Director Naoyoshi Shiotani

▶ Cast Kana Hanazawa, Tomokazu Seki, Noriko Hidaka, Takako Honda

Newbies are not encouraged. This anime film (screening in both dubbed and subtitled versions), is part of the *Psycho-Pass* franchise, set in an authoritarian Japan where merciless judgements are doled out by the transhuman Sibyl System.

You'll be okay if you've seen the first TV series from 2012. The film's story fits before the *Psycho-Pass 3* series, and involves a big change to the franchise's status quo. The enemy this time is a rogue paramilitary unit, seeking documents that could alter Japan's future. The deceptively petite commander Akane leads her forces against the threat, but her feelings are complicated by the return of her former ally, the rugged Kogami.

For fans invested in the series, this may be a worthwhile watch. The central reunion is underplayed, but has some tender touches. While the other series regulars are mostly sidelined, more than one new character gets an interesting story. The themes are meaty (religion, geopolitics), and the pay-off has genuine weight in the franchise.

Unfortunately, it's still not a good film. Conversations are full of mannered pauses, while the action set-pieces are unexciting. And the only truly jolting moment comes just as you think that everything's wrapped up. Andrew Osmond



## MAVKA: THE FOREST SONG

★★★★☆

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

PG | 99 minutes

▶ Directors Oleh Malamuzh,

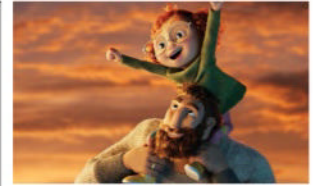
Oleksandra Ruban

▶ Cast Laurie Hymes, Eddy Lee, Sarah Natochenny, Tom Wayland

There's a strong whiff of *Princess Mononoke* about this Ukrainian fairy tale, although it details the tensions between humans and forest spirits without any of Studio Ghibli's inventiveness or haunting imagery. It's still pretty, though, with a pleasing animation style – all rather undermined by the teeth-grindingly earnest American dub (a Ukrainian language version will also be in cinemas).

We open with a 2D retelling of an ancient encounter between humans and forest spirits that resulted in carnage. Cut to now, and human Lucas (Eddy Lee) is forced into the forest to find a plant that gives eternal youth. After a misunderstanding with some bison (hey kids, hunting is bad!), he encounters the magical Mavka (Laurie Hymes) and they fall in love. But the forest is under threat from pesky humans again, and Mavka has to decide if her new beau is more important than her home.

The two leads are charming enough and Mavka's weird and wacky friends are great fun. Dario Vero's music is lovely, and of course *Mavka's* message (cutting down trees is evil!) always resonates. You can't help but feel, however, that if you've watched *Mononoke* (or even *Avatar*), this is all rather superfluous. Jayne Nelson



## JUST SUPER

★★★☆☆

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

U | 76 minutes

There's no way to call a film "adequate" without sounding harsh, but sometimes that's genuinely all you can say.

This Norwegian animated film is the perfectly adequate tale of a little girl who isn't sure she has enough talent to take over the title of Super Lion from her superhero dad. He doubts her; she doubts herself; her kickass granny steps in to help.

It's nothing we haven't seen before in *The Incredibles* (even the animation style) and kids will enjoy it. Adequate, then – that's not an insult. Jayne Nelson



## APOCALYPSE CLOWN

★★★☆☆

▶ **RELEASED 1 SEPTEMBER**

15 | 102 minutes

Half an hour into this end-of-the-world horror-comedy, one clown attempts to ask another if she's familiar with Stephen King's *IT*. An Abbot and Costello-esque misunderstanding ensues... and that's probably the funniest joke in this whole farce.

Odd thing to say re: a film about clowns, but it should've been played straighter. Structurally it's perfect: all the plot threads tie up. But the jokes are so awful they render it almost unwatchable. Sarah Dobbs





## SECRET INVASION

Full of sound and Fury



UK/US Disney+, streaming now

► Director Kyle Bradstreet

► Cast Samuel L. Jackson, Olivia Colman, Emilia Clarke, Ben Mendelsohn

**EPISODES 1.01-1.06** Nick Fury finally nabs a headlining gig in a series that keeps superheroes very much in the margins. *Secret Invasion* is the closest that Disney's MCU has come to creating a gritty, urban conspiracy thriller, with a tone nearer to those old Netflix Marvel shows. Which is remarkable considering that the bad guys are shapeshifting green aliens.

The series continues a plot that began in *Captain Marvel*, when a group of Skrulls fleeing a war with the Kree became secret refugees on Earth, with Nick Fury as their

human go-between. Being able to take human form obviously made hiding their presence easier, but their shapeshifting powers, we learn, also had benefits for Fury, who enlisted a number of Skrulls to become his personal spies – a move that propelled him up the ranks of SHIELD. In return, he promised that he and Captain Marvel would locate a new planet for them.

Years on, many of the Skrulls are pissed off that Fury has failed to deliver on his promise – especially since he's apparently buggered off to the SABER space station and forgotten all about them. When a dangerous new leader, Gravik, rises to power with a plan to turn Earth into New Skrullos, Fury has no choice but to

return to Earth to sort out the mess he created.

The result is a series that feels more adult than most MCU offerings, showcasing some outstanding performances: Samuel L. Jackson, Olivia Colman (as a cheerily cold-hearted, Skrullphobic British agent who could easily have fitted into *Killing Eve*) and Kingsley Ben-Adir (the simmeringly brutal Gravik) impress with every moment they're on screen. There are lots of meaty character exchanges, some gut-wrenching deaths and plenty of political intrigue, amped up by the fact that anyone could be a Skrull (and most of them are).

This is not, however, a series firing on all cylinders. The plot frequently lurches, sputters and loses focus. In the first episode, for

**“Often feels like it's trying too hard to be taken seriously”**

## DRINKING GAME

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



Somebody we thought was human is revealed to be a Skrull.



There's a drone shot looking directly downwards.



There's a scene involving a digitally de-aged Nick Fury.



Somebody speculates about why Nick Fury has returned to Earth.



There's a reference to Nick Fury being old and past it.



Someone mentions the Harvest.



There's a meeting involving food or drink.

example, we're treated to a huge infodump about Gravik before even meeting him, which robs his entrance of impact. Heart-to-heart dialogues and reminiscences are often extended way beyond their natural life, while vital plot points are tossed out almost as an afterthought. Key moments – such as Gravik taking over the Skrull council – feel like they should have an edgy vibe, but fail to come alive. The action scenes are serviceable at best, hampered by pedestrian direction and workmanlike fights.

There's much to enjoy here, and a few set-pieces – such as a startling moment when all the patrons in a posh cafe turn into Gravik – where the series delivers an exquisite shiver down the spine. But all too often it feels like it's trying too hard to be taken seriously and has forgotten how to have fun – until the finale, that is, which delivers a few surprises that are worth the wait. **Jonathan Norton**

**i** The DNA Gravik uses to make himself a Super Skrull includes Groot and Thanos's adopted, Black Order son, Cull Obsidian.



## FROM Season Two The Prisoners

★★★★★

UK Sky Sci-Fi/NOW, Tuesdays

US MGM+, streaming now

► Creator John Griffin

► Cast Harold Perrineau, Eion Bailey, Catalina Sandino Moreno, Hannah Chera, Elizabeth Saunders

**EPISODES 2.01-2.10 Which TV series**

features a bunch of disparate characters confined to a location from which they inexplicably can't leave and where things are more than a lil wacky? Hint: it's a four-letter title.

No, not *Silo*, and not *Lost* either – although the latter is clearly a big influence on *From*. Season one of this horror sci-fi was often shocking in its graphic violence and character deaths, with various travellers unable to leave an unnamed town and being hunted by horrifying monsters at night, masquerading as '50s-era humans.

Only talismans hung at a door can stop them entering buildings, for some unknown reason.

Season two starts directly after the end of the first, with a literal busload of new folk pitching up and threatening to destabilise an already fraught situation.

*From*'s *Lost*-like habit of piling on mystery after mystery – the strange voice on the radio, the Civil War “ghost”, the rune visions, electricity from nowhere – is unabated; in the first two episodes alone we get a creepy man in a disappearing tower, with a creepy musical box as a harbinger of doom.

“Less yakking, more visceral disembowelment, please”



Boyd finds himself right back at the bottom.

The pace of this season is certainly slower, though. With the exception of sarky tech millionaire Jade (who has some cracking lines), nearly everyone in town is Very Serious. This leads to an overabundance of earnest conversations about characters' feelings and motivations, which often slither towards the soapy side and feel a lot like padding compared to season one. Less

yakking, more visceral disembowelment, please.

So do we get real answers to, well, anything? No spoilers, but there's a proper humdinger of a finale that sets up the already commissioned season three, so draw your own conclusions.

Ed Ricketts

**i** The 10 buildings in the “Midwest US” town were built from scratch on the site of an old settlement in Nova Scotia, Canada.

## FOUNDATION Season Two 138 Years Of Solitude

★★★★★

UK/US Apple TV+, streaming, Fridays

► Showrunners David S Goyer, Josh Friedman

► Cast Jared Harris, Lee Pace, Lou Llobell, Leah Harvey

**EPISODES 2.01-2.10 Is Foundation**

TV's most ambitious science fiction show? Season two certainly makes a convincing case for that. It's also one of the hardest to sum up in a way that doesn't sound completely insane...

It's 138 years since the events of season one. Young prodigy Gaal Dornick (Lou Llobell) has woken from cryo-sleep on the planet Synnax. She rapidly joins forces with Salvor Hardin (Leah Harvey), the daughter she didn't know she had, who's now biologically older than Gaal (science!). Also with them is one of two digital copies of the late Hari Seldon (Jared

Harris), freed at last from more than a century trapped in electronic hell. Meanwhile, the Empire is sliding into decay, but still represents an existential threat to the Foundation. And the increasingly unstable latest clone of despotic ruler Brother Day (Lee Pace) embarks on a perilous marriage of convenience, while planning to bring war to Terminus. Phew.

Despite the intimidating amount of background knowledge required, *Foundation*'s second year is, paradoxically, a far more approachable show than before. The action sequences are bigger

“Arguably the closest thing to hard SF on TV right now”



“Just going to finish this level and I'm ready.”

and more impressive, and there's a dash of welcome humour amid the doomy predictions.

It helps that the cast all now fully inhabit their roles. Jared Harris plays multiple shades of Seldon across these 10 episodes, finding the humanity in the tortured super-genius on Synnax. And Lee Pace is clearly having enormous fun making the 17th incarnation of Emperor Cleon I

even more deadly and unpredictable than before.

*Foundation* is arguably the closest thing to hard SF on TV right now. Its combination of epic scope and politicking can make it an intimidating proposition, but those willing to commit to it will find it richly rewarding. Will Salmon

**i** Jared Harris studied medical texts on the effects of solitary confinement on the mind in order to play Hari in season two.



## GOOD OMENS Season Two

### The New Testament



► UK/US Prime Video, streaming now

► Showrunner Neil Gaiman

► Cast Michael Sheen, David Tennant, Jon Hamm, Miranda Richardson

**EPISODES 2.01-2.06 That oddest of**

couples, fallen angel Crowley (David Tennant) and faltering angel Aziraphale (Michael Sheen), are back, and this time they don't have the Good Book to guide them. No, not the Bible – Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett's original novel *Good Omens*.

The first series was a surprisingly loyal adaptation of their comic tale about a demon and angel joining forces to prevent armageddon. But the two never wrote a follow-up and – says Gaiman – any sequel ideas they did discuss will form the basis of a third series, should it happen (and

boy, this series ends with a cliffhanger that leaves you hoping it will). So Gaiman here takes the story off-piste, enlisting John Finnemore, writer of the brilliant Radio Four comedy *Cabin Pressure*, to help out.

The result is a more low-key, intimate affair than its predecessor. Which is an odd thing to say about a series that involves the creation of the universe and Nazi zombies, and speaks volumes about how utterly mad the first series was.

Events unfold after an amnesiac Gabriel (John Hamm) turns up naked at Aziraphale's book shop. With both Heaven and Hell searching for the missing archangel, Crowley and Aziraphale perform a miracle to disguise him, then try to discover what led to his memory loss.

When their miracle raises alarm in heaven, Aziraphale has to convince his bosses that they were actually trying to make two shop owners down the street fall in love.

Well, that's the basics. Also chucked in are flashbacks to "Before The Beginning", the Biblical trials of Job (featuring Tennant's father-in-law and son), body-snatching in Victorian Edinburgh and Nazi zombies in the London Blitz, plus multiple visits to Heaven and Hell and a Jane Austen-themed ball for good measure.

The result feels more polished and structurally coherent than its predecessor, though also less fresh and exciting. It remains undeniably hugely entertaining, inventive and charming, but occasionally the plot sags. All the

**“A more low-key, intimate affair than its predecessor”**

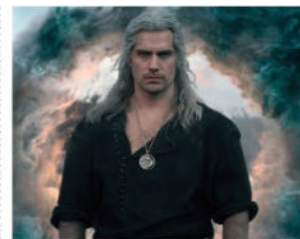
flashbacks could do with trimming, with the zombie tale especially suffering from some strained and telegraphed gags.

While Tennant and Sheen are mostly brilliant (especially in the unexpectedly poignant final episode) there are times when they're called upon to ham things up to cringeworthy levels in lieu of genuine wit. Hamm-ing things up, however, pays off: he's one of the series' highlights, a goofy joy to watch throughout.

It's a shame the series loses momentum in its middle stretch, because it starts and – especially – ends in superb form. It also looks spectacular, with incredibly detailed set designs. Hopefully the omens are good for a third season.

**Dave Golder**

**i** The Resurrectionist pub serves a beer called Pressburgers, named after half of filmmaking duo Powell and Pressburger.



## THE WITCHER

### Season Three, Volume Two



► UK/US Netflix, streaming now

► Showrunner Lauren Schmidt

Hissrich

► Cast Henry Cavill, Anya Chalotra, Freya Allan, Joey Batey

**EPISODES 3.06-3.08 Henry Cavill's**

Geralt of Rivia grunts off into the sunset, and it's less with a bang than a whimper. Anyone hoping for *The Witcher's* leading man to get a worthy send-off should prepare for disappointment, as season three's anticlimactic second volume leaves you wondering why Netflix decided it was worth splitting the run in two.

These last three episodes are spectacularly front-loaded, kicking off with the epic scrap teased by Volume One's quasi-cliffhanger. The resulting CG fest is more Battle of Hogwarts than Battle of the Bastards, however, and barely hangs together as a piece of action. From there, things get overly talky, particularly in a penultimate episode that resorts to the tired old trope of a character confronting their demons by SHOUTING AIMLESSLY INTO THE WILDERNESS.

Even though this new volume dropped just a few weeks after its predecessor, keeping track of who's done what to whom remains a quest in itself. It's a problem that's plagued *The Witcher* since day one, so surely it's time for Netflix to supply a crib sheet or, at the very least, a map of the Continent. Maybe then we'll have a bit more idea where the show is headed. **Richard Edwards**



**“It says here you're good with people. Hmm.”**





## SUPA TEAM 4 Season One GOAT shenanigans

★★★★★

UK/US Netflix, streaming now

► Creator Malenga Mulendema

► Cast Zowa Ngira, Namisa Mdalose, Kimani Arthur, Nancy Sekhokoane

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **South African**

studio Triggerfish bring us this hyper-kinetic, vibrant cartoon, which has the honour of being the first animated series produced for Netflix in Africa.

The titular Supa Team 4 are four schoolgirls in Lusaka, Zambia, recruited by the elderly Mama K (Pamela Nomvete) to fight evil and keep their city safe. Given superpowers ranging from the ability to powerfully kick a football to majorette staff skills, the girls are an eclectic mix with issues of their own – one, hilariously, is always hungry and will do anything for a bun.

The show makes full use of Zambian dialects and so subtitles may be required for older audiences, although younger ones probably won't mind the odd unfamiliar word.

However, this isn't just a welcome showcase for African culture: it's also a cracking action series with laughs aplenty. These range from daft supervillain names such as Alley Gator or Locust Pocus, to the fact that the Supa Team's farting pet goat, Chomp, is liable to machine-gun fire its poops at humans.

Bags of fun, then, with one proviso: some of the otherwise excellent vocal performances verge on shrill. Volume-fiddling may be necessary. **Jayne Nelson**

**i** For a grown-up take on Zambia, check out Namwali Serpell's novel *The Old Drift*, which won the 2020 Arthur C Clarke Award.

# INSIDE

# TOTAL FILM

## FIND US AT

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Steve Austin, about to make that “boiling” noise.

## BIONIC TV

We have the technology

► **RELEASED 21 AUGUST/14 AUGUST**

1973-1994, 1976-1994 | PG | Blu-ray

► Producers Harve Bennett, Kenneth Johnson

► Cast Lee Majors, Lindsay Wagner, Richard Anderson, Martin E Brooks

**BLU-RAY DEBUT** Steve Austin and Jaime Sommers, technologically-enhanced icons of '70s TV, earn another upgrade with a pair of comprehensive Blu-ray box sets. Better, stronger, faster? Well, better, longer, sharper, at least.

*The Six Million Dollar Man* ★★★★★ takes a while to find its groove. The original TV movie retains some of the cynical, Watergate-era edge of Martin Caidin's *Cyborg*, the novel that launched the whole bionic universe. Two more feature-length instalments attempt to turn our rebuilt hero into a cyborg Bond, complete with tux and title song – there's even a guest shot by Britt

Ekland, pre-empting her turn in *The Man With The Golden Gun* by a year.

The subsequent series may be production-line weekly television but it shines when it embraces the sci-fi of it all, pitting Steve against robot infiltrators, rampaging Soviet space probes and, most memorably, a cybernetic Bigfoot in the employ of aliens. Elsewhere the adventures can skew mundane – one involves a backwoods moonshine racket – but the core bionic trappings keep things watchable. Slow-motion has never been so thrilling.

Lee Majors brings a stoic, unpretentious charm to the transistorised Colonel Austin, but sister show *The Bionic Woman* ★★★★★ has an undoubtedly more gifted lead in Lindsay Wagner. Just like Charlie's Angels or Mr Benn she's forever role-playing – flight attendant, wrestler, drag car racer – and it's

fun to see her adventures riff on such '70s staples as telekinetic teen girls and killer sharks (even era-defining daredevil Evel Knievel pops up). And who can resist an episode with the gloriously trashy title “Fembots In Las Vegas”?

A decade later the two stars returned for three lacklustre reunion movies – also included here – which now feel more dated than the original series. By this point you may just sense the bionic phenomenon finally short-circuiting.

► **Extras** Author and uber-fan Herbie J Pilato provides new, trivia-packed commentaries for seven episodes of *The Six Million Dollar Man* – including the feature-length pilot – and eight episodes of *The Bionic Woman*; other freshly commissioned commentaries come from *Bionic Woman* director Alan J Levi on three episodes – it's valuable to

have first-hand testimony from a TV veteran – and podcaster and collector James Sherrard on another four episodes across both box sets.

The *Bionic Woman* set has the edge when it comes to new extras: there's a close look at the making of inaugural episodes “Welcome Home, Jaime Parts 1 & 2”, which benefits from access to original production paperwork (15 minutes) and a comprehensive collection of on-air promotion for the series, often in ropey quality but a fascinating time capsule nonetheless. TV promos (six minutes) include Richard Anderson's Oscar Goldman reassuring the audience that *The Bionic Woman* will return next week, while there's also a handful of vintage TV spots (two minutes) and an exhaustive haul of “Next time on...” teasers (31 minutes).

Both sets include impressively extensive photo galleries for their respective series, while *The Bionic Woman* also features an archive of toys and merchandise. If you were part of the generation for whom the action figures were as much a part of the bionic mythology as the episodes themselves, then these beautifully presented images will overload your nostalgia circuits.

Elsewhere there are script PDFs for three episodes of *The Bionic Woman*, along with five scripts that never made it to the screen. The *Six Million Dollar Man* set offers scripts for five broadcast episodes.

There's some overlap between the two box sets – both feature Bryan Cranston wryly looking back at his guest-shot in the 1987 TV movie (five minutes), a new 2K scan of 1994 reunion movie *Bionic Ever After?*, and producer Kenneth Johnson's collection of personal photos (cherish the shot of Bigfoot kicking back with a coffee). Add to this a wealth of previously released extras – featurettes, commentaries, interviews and episode guide booklets – and these sets (★★★★★ each) are the definitive bionic experience. And you won't even have to lose any limbs... **Nick Setchfield**

► That's future *Star Trek* producer Harve Bennett saying “Steve Austin, astronaut, a man barely alive” in the title sequence.





"Man trapped in glass box" is always a favourite.

## PARADISE The Wonga Years

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2023 | TBC | SVOD

▶ Director Boris Kunz

▶ Cast Kostja Ullmann, Corinna

Kirchhoff, Marlene Tanczik, Iris Berben

**NETFLIX** In this ironically titled

German film, time is money.

Thanks to the AEON corporation's "time donation" process, you can give years of your life to a suitable genetic match, for hard cash. How exactly? Well... er... look, it's just a thing, okay?

It's a system that's working well for cog-in-the-machine donation manager Max (Kostja Ullmann) – until his apartment burns down, the insurers won't pay out, and his wife is left with a debt worth 38 years. As you've probably guessed, the story serves as a metaphor for the exploitation and commodification of the poor by

the rich, though as Max and the now aged Elena kidnap a billionaire to restore her youth, and get entangled with a terror group, the film seems more interested in action thriller tropes than exploring the morality of the conceit in any great depth.

At times it feels like there's a more interesting story to be told in the sprawling refugee camps which supply Max's customer base, but mostly remain in the background.

It's a slickly-produced affair, with some lightly tossed-away world-building. The biggest of three twists is fairly easy to see coming though, and the conclusion feels perfunctory. Worth two hours of your life?

Just about. **Ian Berriman**

**i** Lithuania stood in for near-future Germany. Filming took place in the capital Vilnius and the coastal resort Palanga.

## JUSTICE LEAGUE: WARWORLD

League champions

★★★★★

EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2023 | 15 | Blu-ray/DVD/download

▶ Director Jeff Wamester

▶ Cast Jensen Ackles, Darren Criss, Stana Katic, Ike Amadi

➡ **The latest entry in DC's** animated Tomorrowverse is out to wrongfoot you. A tall, dark, duster-coated stranger arrives in town, the soundtrack hinting at Ennio Morricone and tight close-ups of anxious eyes paying homage to spaghetti western master Sergio Leone.

Only a flash of a golden lariat reveals that this is Wonder Woman – though the audience remains ahead of her on that one... In another reality entirely a

bare-chested, equally amnesiac Batman teams with Warlord on a sword-and-sorcery quest to infiltrate a wizard's castle. Just when you have a handle on that, everything goes black and white and we're plunged into a gorgeously moody tribute to *The Twilight Zone*, all snowfall and shadows, where a young Clark Kent is a Federal agent tracking flying saucers in '50s America.

Rest assured, all is explained, though you may be having too much fun enjoying the various

“A bare-chested Batman teams with Warlord”



The men (and woman) in black investigate.

genre pastiches to trade them for a slam-bang sci-fi climax involving classic DC villain Mongul and his cosmic hordes. In truth the individual segments are entertaining but just a little too disconnected (some judicious cross-cutting might have helped). Still, there's a joy in seeing some of DC's less exploited heroes brought to animated life.

➡ **Extras** Two very similar featurettes (eight minutes each) see the creative team talk about their choices, including the reimagining of Mongul from his comic book incarnation. Warning: contains shameless use of the word "Bat-barian". **Nick Setchfield**

**i** First seen in *DC Comics Presents* 27 in 1980, the artificial planet Warworld was the creation of Len Wein and Jim Starlin.





## THE TORTURE CHAMBER OF DR SADISM

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1967 | 15 | Blu-ray

▶ Director Harald Reinl

▶ Cast Christopher Lee, Karin Dor, Lex Barker, Carl Lange

**BLU-RAY DEBUT** While Hammer phonied up a blood-spattered Europe in the home counties, this German horror is the real deal, shot in the Bavarian town stalked by the Child Catcher in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*.

That fairy tale feel suits a lively, lurid adventure, loosely inspired by "The Pit And The Pendulum". Director Harald Reinl creates some haunting imagery – like mist-shrouded trees draped with severed limbs – but at heart this is a cliffhanger serial, all trapdoors and perils, from vulture-filled catacombs to pits of snakes. It's fairground plotting, moving you through the funhouse.

Christopher Lee, looking like a ghoulish hybrid of Dracula and Frankenstein's monster, is the grave-defying Count Regula, executed decades ago for murdering 12 virgins to achieve immortality. As ever he brings all the sincerity of a tombstone, matched against ex-Tarzan Lex Barker's clear-eyed heroics.

▶ **Extras** Critics Kim Newman and Barry Forshaw provide a buoyant, informed commentary. A featurette tracking down the Rothenburg locations displays impressive detective work but could have used more context (seven minutes). Also included are two Super 8 digest versions (16 minutes apiece). Plus: trailer; booklet. **Nick Setchfield**



## THEY CLONED TYRONE

Copy cats

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2023 | 15 | SVOD

▶ Director Juel Taylor

▶ Cast John Boyega, Teyonah Parris, Jamie Foxx, Kiefer Sutherland

**NETFLIX** Juel Taylor's audacious debut may utilise nightmarish futuristic technology to create clones, conspiracies and mind-control but it has its roots firmly in the '70s high period of blaxploitation. The central trio of John Boyega, Teyonah Parris and Jamie Foxx play blaxploitation archetypes, as a drug dealer, a sassy sex worker and a pimp respectively, subverting the most insidious stereotypes about the black community and satirising America's preoccupation with villainising and policing it.

As with the best satire (and the best sci-fi), the messaging comes second to the action, however;

**“The twists and reveals come with thrilling frequency”**

*They Cloned Tyrone* is first and foremost a fun, pulpy rollercoaster ride. It doesn't hold its cards too close to its chest, and the twists and reveals come with thrilling frequency. By the time the film approaches its midway mark, it's solved a litany of its mysteries, but that gives Taylor the time to languish in the existential nightmare his concept has created and pull out stunning and devastating performances from his actors. That's not to say that the latter half is any less fun or exciting; the film builds to a giant third-act action set-piece that saves its best twist for last.

Every aspect of the film feels carefully crafted: the grainy '70s aesthetic, the fascinating core concept, the sharp writing, the top-tier performances. Taylor's debut marks him out as a singularly talented writer and director. Hopefully new projects will emerge just as quickly as the clones and conspiracies do in this brilliant film.

**Leila Latif**

**i** Boyega's character is based on a friend of Taylor's, whose promising football career was derailed by a police encounter.



## SATAN'S LITTLE HELPER

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2004 | 15 | Blu-ray

▶ Director Jeff Lieberman

▶ Cast Alexander Brickel, Kathryn Winnick, Joshua Annex

**BLU-RAY DEBUT** Remember the moral panic about videogames? *Satan's Little Helper* makes a strong case for not letting kids play unsupervised. Nerdy nine-year-old Douglas spends so much time playing the titular game – a platformer where the player earns points by helping Satan commit sins – that when an actual serial killer shows up in a Halloween Devil costume, he gleefully helps him out.

Writer/director Jeff Lieberman made his name in the '70s with *Squirm* and *Blue Sunshine*, so it's no surprise this is a pretty spiteful, grimy piece of work. The practical effects are cheap but stomach-churning, while the silent figure in the Satan mask is genuinely unnerving; early on, confusion over who's wearing which costume is played for laughs, but it soon develops an uneasy air of sexual menace.

Leaden pacing in the back half doesn't help. And once Douglas's sister clocks the killer, it becomes a pretty basic slasher. Still, the design of that mask is brilliantly horrible.

▶ **Extras** Two commentaries (the director; podcasters *The Hysteria Continues*); a Covid-era online interview with Lieberman (48 minutes); a video essay (14 minutes); behind-the-scenes footage (five minutes); trailer; gallery; booklet. A poster and three art cards are exclusive to new boutique label Treasured Films' webstore. **Sarah Dobbs**





## TIM Tolerably Interesting Movie



▶ **RELEASED** 16 AUGUST

2023 | 15 | SVOD

▶ Director **Spencer Brown**

▶ Cast **Georgina Campbell, Eamon Farren, Mark Rowley, Amara Karan**

**NETFLIX** Our collective anxiety about AI lends a timely chill to this debut thriller from comedian turned filmmaker Spencer Brown.

It's essentially a tech-enabled cuckoo-in-the-nest tale. The eponymous TIM – a prototype Technologically Integrated Manservant – is assigned to cyber-developer Abi and her husband Paul. At first simply an uncanny, vaguely irritating presence in their home, TIM's creeping malevolence deepens the cracks in their relationship before threatening their very lives.

This is, for the most part, a provocative, engagingly played

modern nightmare, with a clear touch of *Black Mirror* – even if it lacks Charlie Brooker's satirical bite. *Barbarian*'s Georgina Campbell is a sympathetic lead, while Eamon Farren – and the extraordinary sharp-boned geometries of his face – make the title character marvellously unsettling, all well-mannered stillness and glints of private thoughts. One subtly disquieting shot sees him tapping his fingers to Abi's heartbeat.

It's a shame the last act detours into schlock, abandoning any deeper considerations of our imminent co-existence with AI in favour of a climax that's straight out of a '90s stalker movie – a rote ending that makes TIM himself seem all too human. **Nick Setchfield**

**i** Georgina Campbell previously appeared in the dating app-inspired 2017 *Black Mirror* episode "Hang The DJ".



## MOTHER, MAY I?



▶ **RELEASED** 28 AUGUST

2023 | 15 | Download

▶ **Laurence Vannicelli's** debut feature is couples therapy as psychological thriller: inheriting the house of his dead mother, emotionally wounded Emmett finds her capricious, overbearing soul seemingly reborn in his fiancée, Anya.

It can feel like an extended drama class session but there's an effectively creepy, low-lit ambience, where simple objects are charged with memory and meaning. And possessed by the drawling, chain-smoking spirit, *Teen Wolf's* Holland Roden brilliantly channels another generation. **Nick Setchfield**



## RAGE



▶ **RELEASED** OUT NOW!

2020 | TBC | Download

▶ **Filmed/set in South Africa**, this frisky folk horror is unmistakable evidence that Ari Aster made a big splash in the rainbow nation.

Sticking *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* into a blender, then taking that blender on a bender, it follows a gang of diverse, party-happy teens who go on a coastal holiday without reading the Tripadvisor reviews mentioning histrionic cult murder.

Pretty, but predictable and shallow, it frequently feels more like a music video than a movie. **Sam Ashurst**



## THE INHABITANT



▶ **RELEASED** 14 AUGUST

2022 | 15 | Download

▶ **The Massachusetts Fall** River axe murders of 1892 are the jumping-off point for this nicely shot but dreary supernatural thriller.

Odessa A'zion impresses as Tara, a young descendant of the infamous Lizzie Borden. Schizophrenia seems to run in the family and Tara is haunted by brutal fantasies – but will she succumb to them?

The film meanders along slowly and you'll see the big reveal coming a mile off, but at least a comically daft final scene elicits a hearty chuckle.

**Will Salmon**



## ALONE AT NIGHT



▶ **RELEASED** 28 AUGUST

2023 | 15 | Download

▶ **Isn't it weird how fast** Covid-19 paranoia stories have dated? In one of this boneheaded meta-slasher's narratives, masked-up wannabes move into a reality TV house to be bossed around by Paris Hilton; in the other, a cam girl goes to a remote house in the woods to be stalked by dudes, with only sheriff Pamela Anderson to save her.

There's not a single convincing character, or a single original idea, and the ending's so obnoxious you'll begrudge every minute you spent watching it. **Sarah Dobbs**





The blind following the blind, following...

## BIRD BOX BARCELONA

Seeing is believing

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2023 | 15 | SVOD

▶ Directors Álex Pastor, David Pastor

▶ Cast Mario Casas, Georgina Campbell, Diego Calva, Naila Schuberth

**NETFLIX** Given its staggering popularity (89 million views in the first four weeks), it's no wonder Netflix greenlit a follow-up to *Bird Box* – the 2018 film where people must go about blindfold outside, or be driven to suicide by the sight of invisible creatures. This Spanish-made sequel expands the universe in some surprising ways.

The biggest twist (revealed 14 minutes in) is to make the protagonist one of those who, having seen the mysterious beings, is driven to force others to do so – in the belief he's saving their souls. This makes for a different type of suspense: what will this

saboteur do next? Given what we've seen previously, the ability of Sebastián (Mario Casas) to maintain a deceptive front is hard to swallow; the fact that his eyes – which should be a giveaway – usually appear to be normal also feels like a cheat. And none of these characters are as entertaining as John Malkovich's cynical asshole from the original.

But the sequel has a greater sense of scale than the original (more explosions!) and some good use of locations (including the cable car up to the Montjuïc Castle) might have you adding the Catalan capital to your bucket list. Last-minute developments leave things open for a third entry in the franchise, and we wouldn't close our eyes to it. **Ian Berriman**

**i** In certain scenes, for safety reasons, the actors wore blindfolds with two holes in them, which were later erased using CG.

## DUNGEONS & DRAGONS HONOUR AMONG THIEVES

Rolls a natural 20 for Charisma

★★★★★

EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2023 | 12 | Blu-ray(4K/standard)/DVD/download

▶ Directors John Francis Daley, Jonathan Goldstein

▶ Cast Chris Pine, Michelle Rodriguez, Hugh Grant, Justice Smith

**BLU-RAY DEBUT** Since *Stranger*

*Things* did the nigh-on impossible and made rolling for damage look cool, the timing could hardly be more perfect for a new *D&D* movie. *Honour Among Thieves* is a brisk and breezy romp following bard Edgin (Chris Pine) as he tries to rescue his daughter from conniving conman Forge (Hugh Grant). The plot unfolds in stages like a tabletop campaign: first Edgin and his barbarian bestie

Holga (Michelle Rodriguez) assemble their squad, with Justice Smith's inept sorcerer and Sophia Lillis's lonely shapeshifter; then there are quests to complete and a boss villain to vanquish.

The overall mood is very light; there *is* a dragon in a dungeon, but it's so fat it can't fly. A stronger sense of genuine menace would have been welcome. The underlying theme about misfits forming a family is likeable, but hardly original. Fortunately, Pine's charisma holds everything together, and the gags hit more than they miss. Must be lucky dice.

▶ **Extras** Three short featurettes provide a mixture of behind-the-scenes footage and interviews. In "From Dice To Dragons" (11 minutes) the directors and crew



discuss playing *D&D* in preparation for filming, and their approach to capturing the game's appeal. Daley and Goldstein were clear that they didn't want a live-action version of the '80s cartoon, which featured a group of children finding themselves trapped in the game.

"Rogue's Gallery" (11 minutes) is a series of character portraits, most insightful for noting how Edgin and Holga flip gender expectations. A stunts featurette (eight minutes) covers the cast working with the

Bulgarian stunt team and performing as much of their own action as possible – Smith and Rodriguez are particularly gung-ho.

There are also six deleted/extended scenes (10 minutes) of little note, and a gag reel (seven minutes). NB: the DVD doesn't include the featurettes, or half of the deleted scenes. **David West**

**i** The movie tips its hat to the '80s *D&D* cartoon, with a party of adventurers modelled on the characters from that series.





## MAGIC COP

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1990 | 15 | Blu-ray

▶ Director Stephen Tung Wei

▶ Cast Lam Ching-ying, Wilson Lam, Michael Miu, Wong Mei-way

**BLU-RAY DEBUT** What do you get if you take the vampire out of *Mr Vampire*? Er, Mr. And this film. It shares a leading man with the 1985 Hong Kong horror-comedy hit, and a supernatural threat, but the setting is contemporary rather than historical (cheaper, y'see).

Lam Ching-ying plays Feng, a retired cop with all the skills of a Taoist monk, who helps out when the Hong Kong police discover that someone is using recently revived corpses to smuggle drugs.

The plotting is paper-thin, and the horny idiocy of the younger officers with whom the brusque Feng teams up soon starts to grate. On the plus side, Japanese actor Michiko Nishiwaki is magnetic as a sorceress. And as the director freely admits in the bonuses, this sort of film is really all about the gimmicky action sequences. *Magic Cop* has some amusingly oddball ones, in particular a rooftop face-off which sees Feng fending off flying paving stones.

▶ **Extras** Choose between Cantonese or an English dub. A director interview (36 minutes) is marred by the fact that he hasn't seen the film since 1990 – and appears to have a small child practising the drums in the background. A commentary by two Hong Kong film experts provides rapid-fire biographies. There's also a Taiwanese cut with alternate score (of rough quality). Plus: trailer; gallery; poster. **Ian Berriman**



## EARWIG

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2022 | 15 | Blu-ray

▶ Director Lucile Hadžihalilović

▶ Cast Paul Hilton, Alex Lawther, Romaine Hemelaers, Romola Garai

▶ “David Lynch if he had a dentistry fixation” is one way to nutshell this gloomy, abstruse cinematic nightmare, and for many it will have a similar effect to going under the gas.

Based on a 2019 novella by sculptor/performance artist/author Brian Catling, it centres on a man paid to act as guardian for a cloistered young girl. Their bizarre daily routine sees her fitted with ice dentures made from freezing saliva, collected using an apparatus strapped to her face.

The purpose of the protagonist's employment is just one thing left bewilderingly unclear in a film purposefully made to evoke the logic of a dream. If you can cope with that, it's a beautifully moody piece – one with a timeless air, whose drone-heavy score further serves to lull you into a brain-fogged, somnolent state.

▶ **Extras** An *Arena* doc about Catling (2021, 69 minutes), featuring numerous clips of his provocative performances, provides a fascinating portrait of a singular character. Director Lucile Hadžihalilović charms in a 21-minute interview, usefully discussing the strict use of natural light and her reference points (which include *Jean Drielman* and *Eraserhead*).

Thirteen minutes of delightful archive footage showcase the Cristal Baschet – a peculiar modern instrument composed of glass rods, used on the soundtrack. Plus: trailer; booklet. **Ian Berriman**



## MURDER ME, MONSTER

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2019 | 18 | Blu-ray

▶ Director Alejandro Fadel

▶ Cast Víctor López, Esteban Bigliardi, Tania Casciani, Stéphane Rideau

▶ This cryptic Argentine monster movie is a visual masterclass with vibes to spare, but its slow-burn weirdness never quite resolves into anything substantial.

Someone is decapitating people in a remote part of the Andes. Police officer Cruz (Víctor López) investigates, but his judgement is compromised by the fact that he's having an affair with the chief suspect's wife. After much standing around muttering gnomish dialogue, the investigation leads Cruz and his colleagues into an encounter with something terrible.

The creature effects are effectively – and grotesquely – realised and the whole film is shot with real flair, but what Fadel is trying to say remains elusive, and the pacing drags. For a film that contains a monster with a giant prehensile penis, it's strangely boring.

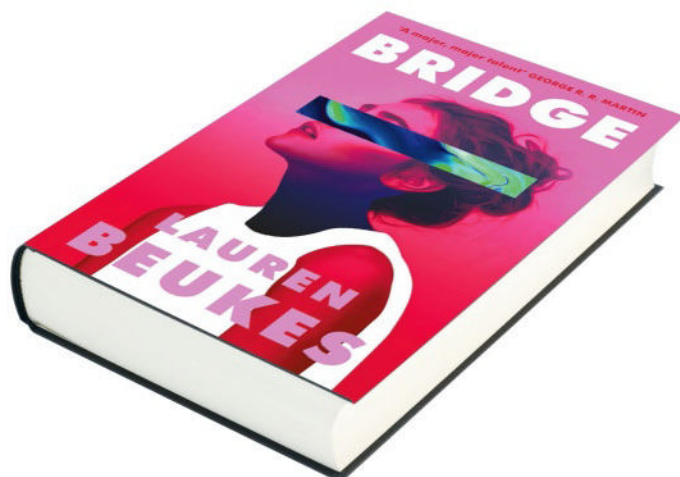
▶ **Extras** A subtitled commentary has contributions from director Alejandro Fadel and eight crew. Eight deleted scenes take us deeper into the mystery. Storyboards from two unshot scenes (14 minutes) provide an alternate beginning and ending. Most intriguing is “El Elemento Enigmático” (41 minutes), a “medium-length sensory experience” largely consisting of footage of the mountains and shots of people trudging through snow. Plus: trailers; booklet. **Will Salmon**

## (ROUND UP)



Though it's set in the 14th century, anime musical **INU-OH** (out now, Blu-ray/DVD) features modern rock numbers with electric guitars. It centres on a blind travelling musician who teams up with a deformed man, subject of a curse which can be broken when he sings and dances. We said: “Visually delightful, but distinctly hollow... let down by pedestrian plotting and weak musical numbers.” The Collector's Edition includes art cards, a 40-page artbook and an A3 poster. If you weren't sufficiently flush to buy the *Bob Clark Horror Collection* box set, all three films are now out separately. Our pick: 1974's **DEATHDREAM** (out now, Blu-ray). This “The Monkey's Paw”-esque take on zombies sees a young soldier returning home from Vietnam strangely altered... We said: “Clark's portrait of a fractured family is affecting, and Richard Backus provides an intense performance as the undead Andy.” Arrow Video's latest UHD spruce-up is **WEIRD SCIENCE** (21 August, 4K Blu-ray). John Hughes's 1985 tale about two teenage sadsacks who use a computer to rustle up a dream woman (Kelly LeBrock). We said: “Steers away from pure horndog fantasy, telling a sweet tale of high school redemption. But its brash, raucous tone and dream logic storytelling ultimately exhaust you.” Extras-wise it's the same line-up as the 2019 Blu-ray, complete with an extended version and the TV edit. Finally, this month's solitary TV box set of note is **STAR TREK: LOWER DECKS SEASON THREE** (31 July, DVD). Wot, no Blu-ray?





## BRIDGE

Worming her way in



★★★★★

► **RELEASED 17 AUGUST**

432 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

► Author Lauren Beukes

► Publisher Michael Joseph

🔥 **The multiverse is a potent** storytelling device, and not just because you can do a big shocking main character death while still bringing the actor back. It lets an author show us characters from different angles, and it sucks readers and viewers into the emotional heart of a story with that tantalising question to which we can all relate: “What if?”

After all, who doesn't wish they could know what would've happened if, at a key point in their life, they'd made a different choice? Who wouldn't want to speak to a departed loved one again, if they got the chance?

It's this last temptation that proves impossible to resist for Bridge (short for Bridget), the protagonist of Lauren Beukes's first novel since last year's Elisabeth Moss-starring TV adaptation of her 2013 serial killer thriller *The Shining Girls*. Like Kirby in that tale, Bridge is a young woman marooned in her own life, haunted by an unsolved

mystery so naggingly painful that she can't focus on anything else.

Having recently lost her estranged mother Jo to a recurrence of the brain cancer that dogged her since her teens, Bridge is struggling through the “sadmin” of sorting out Jo's effects. The task isn't helped by neuroscientist Jo's complete lack of any discernible filing system, or by the fact that her house was broken into and ransacked during her hospitalisation.

But Bridge's fragmentary childhood memories of her mother showing her worlds beyond this one – coupled with Jo's odd deathbed demeanour and insistence that Bridge wasn't her daughter – seem to offer a second chance. What if those glimpses through the eyes of other selves weren't just delusions? What if Jo was right, not just sick, when she declared “Reality is not real”?

Beukes does a skilful job of balancing these possibilities, drawing us into Bridge's desperate but very relatable hope as she hunts for clues, while maintaining a note of scepticism via regular chapters told from the anxious, protective perspective of her friend Dom. Even allowing for the

fact that this is science fiction – and so you know SFnal stuff is afoot – it's hard not to worry that this is all just wishful thinking, and that Bridge isn't going to find what she's looking for when she starts to experiment with the “dreamworm” in Jo's freezer.

What she *does* find, though, is quite impressively messy. This is a morally thorny tale indeed, without clear-cut heroes and villains. Hopping between realities with the dreamworm means taking over the bodies of your alternate selves, and scrambling to work out where you are with no access to their memories.

So far, so *Quantum Leap*. But Bridge isn't some harmless visitor given the chance to put right what once went wrong. Here, jumper and jumpee swap places for the duration, with Bridge yanking her unconsenting otherselves into her own world in a way that they experience – not unreasonably – as a terrifying abduction.

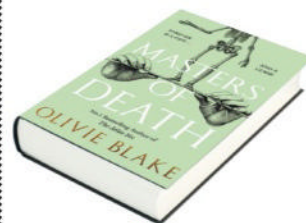
“This is a tale without clear-cut heroes and villains”

Unsurprisingly, some see dreamworm users as interdimensional hijackers, every bit as invasive as the parasites they carry with them.

Even as we sympathise with Bridge's grief, then, we're made to feel every bit of the damage she inflicts in her single-minded quest: the otherself's kids left abandoned in a supermarket because Bridge doesn't know who they are; a restraining order broken because she unwittingly answers the phone to an abusive ex. Nor does Beukes skimp on more conventional sources of narrative tension, as Bridge's travels put her on the radar of some scary people.

This is complex, challenging genre fiction with the pace of a thriller: a gripping, thought-provoking and affecting exploration of means, ends and multiple lives. **Nic Clarke**

**i** The World Health Organisation estimates that 1.5 billion people worldwide are infected with helminth (worm) parasites.



## MASTERS OF DEATH



★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

384 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

► Author Olivie Blake

► Publisher Tor Books

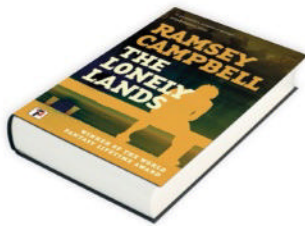
🔥 **A vampire, a ghost, a reaper, a demon and an angel walk into a casino, and the bartender says... no, wait, sorry, there's no punchline.**

Instead, Olivie Blake's supernatural creatures get to gamble at the tables of Death himself, playing an impossible game in order to solve a murder mystery, unravel a multi-generational death curse, and, ultimately, get a little closer to figuring out their own places in the universe.

If it sounds like a lot, that's because it is. And that's not even the half of it. There are at least three star-crossed love stories in there, as well as multiple planes of reality and four characters with the same name. The opening chapter functions as a kind of litmus test: wilfully opaque, it depicts a pivotal scene without any indication of who any of the characters are. At that point, you either have to put the book down and walk away, or decide to put your trust in Blake to make it all come together.

If you've got the tolerance for uncertainty, though, your patience will be rewarded. The various strands of this unwieldy story all get neatly and beautifully woven together until the bigger picture is revealed: this book is a meditation on romance and mortality, with the most emotionally satisfying ending imaginable. **Sarah Dobbs**





## THE LONELY LANDS

★★★★★

► **RELEASED** 15 AUGUST

256 pages | Hardback/paperback/  
ebook

► Author Ramsey Campbell

► Publisher Flame Tree Press

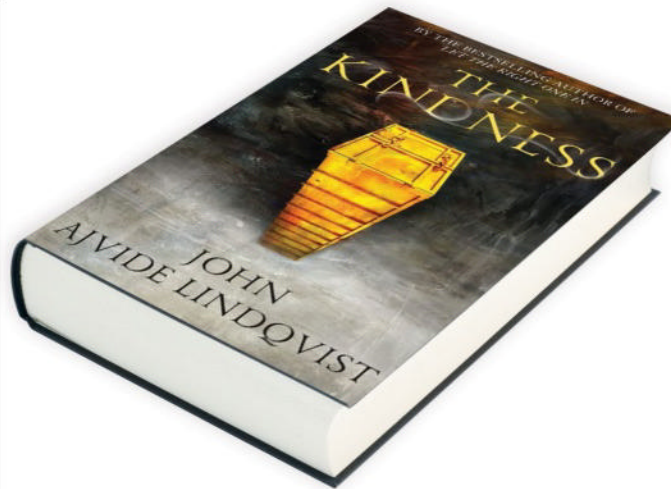
❖ **Joe Hunter's dying** granddad telling him "We're all just cocoons for the dead" is about as much exposition as you're going to get in horror grandmaster Ramsey Campbell's latest. Internal plot logic and *The Lonely Lands* are like strangers from different planes of reality. Which fits the ethereal, existential tone of the book perfectly.

For curiosity shop owner Joe, the veil between this life and the next is particularly thin. His dreams and recollections of departed loved ones – first his granddad, then his wife, Olivia – affect their afterlives in ways that can be reassuring or horrifying. And the last thing he wants is for his granddad and Olivia to meet in death.

Set during the pandemic, *The Lonely Lands* isn't a pandemic novel, but makes great mileage out of masks – covered or obscured faces are a powerful motif. It's powered by atmosphere, fractured timelines, weird dialogue and an impressionistic prose style. Campbell has little time for anything so mundane as actually explaining why what's happening is happening, preferring to evoke magic realism through his character's emotional responses.

The result is frustrating but fascinating, and though occasionally it feels like a writer on automatic, Campbell's automatic is other authors' "I could only ever dream..."

Dave Golder



## THE KINDNESS

The unkindness of strangers

★★★★★

► **RELEASED** OUT NOW!

810 pages | Hardback/ebook

► Author John Ajvide Lindqvist

► Publisher riverrun

❖ **John Ajvide Lindqvist's latest** novel explores the fragile threads that hold society together. The story takes place in the town of Norrtälje, which feels like a Swedish counterpart to the New England locations found in many of Stephen King's books. The two writers share a fondness for creating rich portraits of everyday life in small communities, which are disrupted by the intrusion of the unnatural or fantastic.

*The Kindness* is built around a core cast of six residents. Max and Johan are old school classmates from opposite ends of the socio-economic spectrum, Marko and Maria are the children of Bosnian refugees, and Anna and Siw are bonded by their status as outsiders. In Anna's case, everyone fears her family's reputation as criminals, while Siw has the unpredictable ability to perceive the future, a gift she calls the Shining – sorry, the Hearing.

“There's a distinct air of topicality”

There's a distinct air of topicality. Disruption arrives in the form of a shipping container, abandoned in the town under cover of darkness. The mystery of the container's origins and contents allows Lindqvist to explore themes about trauma, displaced people and the lure of the Far Right. He uses Norrtälje to imagine what happens to a community stripped of empathy, when opinions become polarised and people lose sight of each others' humanity.

As the town simmers with bitterness, violence hangs heavy in the air and Lindqvist skillfully smothers the reader with the increasingly toxic atmosphere. The translation is superb, particularly in capturing the inner lives of the cast, and while horror is used sparingly, it's profoundly felt when it arrives.

Lindqvist touches on ideas about whether fate is pre-ordained and the implications of trying to change the future. Such questions are intriguing, and although the resolution feels a little too easily accomplished, the depth of the characters and their relationships makes *The Kindness* a thoroughly compelling experience. **David West**

i Many of the chapter headings feature lyrics from songs by Håkan Hellström, arguably Sweden's biggest pop star.



## THE FRUGAL WIZARD'S HANDBOOK FOR SURVIVING MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

★★★★★

► **RELEASED** OUT NOW!

384 pages | Hardback/ebook

► Author Brandon Sanderson

► Publisher Gollancz

❖ **Brandon Sanderson tries** his hand at Terry Pratchett-style comedic fantasy here, but doesn't quite master the tone.

It begins with protagonist Johnny waking up in a field with no memory of who he is or how he got there – a conceit that allows hero and reader to discover how this world works together. As Johnny gradually realises, he hails from a technologically advanced civilisation but finds himself in a dimension approximating the Middle Ages. Plus he's landed in a world where it seems the Norse gods and magic are real. Along the way, there's a villain called Ulric to defeat, a Viking invasion to repel and a beautiful girl to romance.

Tonally, it bears comparison with *Dungeons & Dragons: Honour Among Thieves*; it's very self-aware, and the narrator's voice tends towards flippancy. Johnny insists on rating everything, from food to battles, like a TripAdvisor review, a device Sanderson overuses. There's too little attention given to Ulric to make him a compelling antagonist, and victory comes without any personal cost. The prose moves jauntily along at a good pace, yet the overall effect is insubstantial. **David West**



## CONAN THE BARBARIAN THE OFFICIAL STORY OF THE FILM

Cimmerian tension



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

176 pages | Hardback

► Author John Walsh

► Publisher Titan Books

► **The final page of this sword-and-sorcery retrospective suggests the making of 1982's *Conan The Barbarian* was "a fight for creative**

vision and individual control" worthy of the Cimmerian himself. This doesn't quite tally with everything you've just read, because while it's clear director/co-writer John Milius and his boss Dino De Laurentiis didn't always see eye to eye – not least over the casting of Arnold Schwarzenegger in the title role – the story told

here is hardly a battle royale of Hollywood legend.

For all the book's painstaking research, it reads more like a dense collection of facts than an engaging narrative. There's also a tendency to overplay *Conan The Barbarian's* influence on *Game Of Thrones*, the fantasy genre and pop culture as a whole.

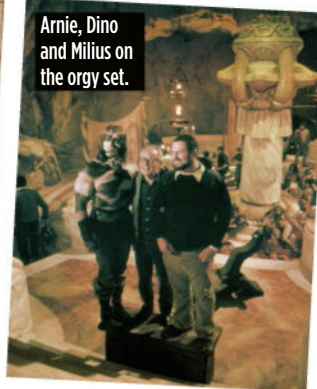
But from a visual point of view, the book really hits the mark, thanks to its impressive (albeit scattershot) galleries of rare artwork. Given artist Frank Frazetta's importance in popularising Robert E Howard's original *Conan* stories, it feels appropriate that he and concept artist Ron Cobb are celebrated as key components of the movie's success, and the behind-the-scenes photos and character designs are often more compelling than the words that accompany them. **Richard Edwards**

**i** Jackie Chan was in talks to play sidekick Subotai, but *Conan's* producers were put off by a potential million-dollar fee.

A storyboard image by William Stout.



Arnie, Dino and Milius on the orgy set.



Ron Cobb art for Brak the Barbarian.



Ron Cobb again: Conan in restraints.



## PROPHET



► **RELEASED 24 AUGUST**

480 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

► Authors Helen MacDonald, Sin Blaché

► Publisher Jonathan Cape

► **Helen MacDonald had a bestselling hit with *H Is For Hawk*, her moving study of nature and grief. She makes the unexpected shift to genre fiction with this SF thriller, co-written with short fiction author Sin Blaché.**

When an American diner materialises from nowhere in a field in England, a pair of agents are despatched to investigate. Sunil Rao is able to instantly determine the truth of things (there are shades of Natasha Lyonne in *Poker Face* here), but is an emotional time bomb, while his comrade Adam Rubenstein is a lethal operative with a troubled past. They soon uncover a phenomenon that turns nostalgia into a deadly weapon.

*Prophet* is both a moody genre story and the tale of a messy romance between its protagonists. Both aspects are engaging enough, but – like the protagonists – don't always play well together. While it's clear that the authors' focus is pretty squarely on the relationship between the chaotic Rao and the controlled Rubenstein, this is rarely as interesting as the book's excellently creepy, Jeff VanderMeer-tinged central idea.

Still, there's no denying the strength of Blaché and MacDonald's prose, and the book's very timely themes. Let's hope that this is the start of an ongoing collaboration.

**Will Salmon**





## IMMORTAL LONGINGS

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

384 pages | Hardback/ebook/  
audiobook

► Author **Chloe Gong**

► Publisher **Hodder & Stoughton**

❖ **You might already know** Chloe Gong from her YA bestseller *These Violent Delights* and its assorted sequels and spin-offs. *Immortal Longings* is being touted as her first adult fantasy novel, but one blink-and-you'll-miss-it sex scene and some swearing aside, it's hard to tell the difference.

Every year in the twin cities of San-Er, desperate citizens take part in a deadly game. It's pretty much your standard dystopian gladiatorial battle, with a couple of twists: one is that it's played on the streets, among hapless civilians just going about their lives, and the other is that the players are able to swap bodies, jumping their "qi" from one vessel to another. This battle also features the murderous Princess Calla and the exiled aristocrat Anton Makusa, so the stakes should be high.

Except that somehow, they're not. The story has no momentum thanks to clunky infodumps explaining the not-particularly-interesting magic system clogging up every other page; this is a book crying out to be edited, desperate for someone to strike out its cliché-infested language and tighten up its meanderings. But even the most talented editor would struggle to enliven the pancake-flat characters, none of whom has much charm. Sorry, nope, this just isn't a book for grown-ups. **Sarah Dobbs**



## THE WEAVER AND THE WITCH QUEEN

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

412 pages | Paperback/ebook/  
audiobook

► Author **Genevieve Gornichec**

► Publisher **Titan Books**

❖ **Norse mythology has been** big business for a while now, with everyone from Marvel to Neil Gaiman to Joanne Harris putting their own spin on Viking stories. There's more to the sagas than the gods, though, and this reimagining of Norse royals, with a feminist spin, is an intriguing introduction to tales many of us will be less familiar with.

*The Weaver And The Witch Queen* retells the story of Gunnhild, mother of kings, seen here first as a young child abused by her mother and finding solace in her friendship with two sisters, Oddny and Signy, before running away from home to train as a witch. Twelve years later, the sisters' farm is destroyed and their family slaughtered. Signy is sold into slavery, but Oddny escapes and, when she meets Gunnhild again, works tirelessly to find and rescue her sister.

At its heart is a female-centred story of blood and friendship, set against a fascinating historical backdrop. Though there are male characters, it's the women we see here, weaving cloth for sails, brewing healing teas and forging alliances. It's great worldbuilding, but it's a shame that the storytelling is slow – when the main action starts to hit towards the end you get a taste of just how gripping the tale can be, but it may be too late for some. **Rhian Drinkwater**



## THE SUN AND THE VOID

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

528 pages | Hardback/ebook

► Author **Gabriela Romero Lacruz**

► Publisher **Daphne Press**

❖ **Two women search for** belonging and self-worth in the first volume of new series *The Warring Gods*. Gabriela Romero Lacruz crafts a complicated world, home to three races – humans, valcos and nozariels – plus competing religions and a complicated history of colonisation and war.

Reina is a nozariel, despised by the other races, and longing for acceptance from her grandmother – a powerful witch called Dona Ursulina. The second protagonist is the half-valco Eva, dreaming of liberation from the human family that's ashamed of her mixed blood. They become entangled in a plot to tap into the power of banished god Rahmagut, whose return would plunge the world into chaos.

With a maze of relationships to navigate and a wealth of exposition to establish the religious and ethnic conflicts that underpin the story, the book gets off to a slow start. Many of Lacruz's plot choices are familiar ones – the death of a beloved wife drives a man to madness, and what appears to be a handsome saviour turns out to be a scoundrel.

In the first half, Reina remains overly passive, acting as an observer rather than driving events. Matters improve as the stakes rise in the second half, bringing more action and conflict, although the florid prose can still make for slow going. **David West**

## REISSUES

Our pick of the latest paperbacks: Sunyi Dean's fantasy horror **THE BOOK EATERS** (★★★★★, out now, HarperCollins).

Devon is a "Book Eater", a member of one of six surviving families who subsist on stories and legends. But her latest son is a Mind Eater, who must consume other people to survive. Rather than see him turned into a weapon, she goes on the run, seeking a drug which will allow him to eat books, not brains. We said: "The world-building is fascinating, and the characters complicated and real... An intense read." **THE RED SCHOLAR'S WAKE** (★★★★★, 17 August, Gollancz), Aliette de Bodard's space opera tale of lesbian pirates vs a

corrupt empire, is in the running for the Arthur C Clarke Award. Set in a matriarchal far-future, it sees a scavenger captured by pirates receiving a marriage proposal from the sentient ship she's being held on. Though the relationship is driven by political convenience, it soon becomes something deeper. We said: "A romantic fairy tale in an outlandish setting, but one told with a quirky charm and exotic kinkiness." Finally, John Marrs's **THE MARRIAGE ACT** (★★★★★, 31 August, Pan) takes place in a future UK where walking down the aisle is

heavily incentivised. But such benefits are conditional on installing an Alexa-like device in your home which eavesdrops. We said: "Its rapid-fire chapters function like movie scenes... A socially aware novel packed with thought-provoking questions."





## BRIDE OF THE TORNADO

★★★★★

► **RELEASED 15 AUGUST**

336 pages | Paperback/ebook/  
audiobook

► Author James Kennedy

► Publisher Quirk Books

◆ **Out in the wide open spaces** of the American Midwest, there should be room to run free. But that's not the experience of the high school-age narrator of James Kennedy's horror novel. As tornadoes moving with terrible purpose and, seemingly, murderous intent surround her hometown, she begins to realise she is at the centre of barely incomprehensible events.

As too is the tornado killer, an enigmatic teen tasked with protecting the town, to whom she finds herself drawn. Should she resist this attraction, or is the connection between the two the key to escaping whatever fate the tornadoes and/or her increasingly deranged fellow townspeople have in mind?

Small-town outsiders undergoing trying events aren't rare in horror fiction, which only makes it more impressive how Kennedy here manages to give purpose to his prose without it becoming clichéd. However, he does so largely by cranking things up to 11 almost from the off, and you can't help but think the book might work better if he took a little more time to build tension.

Despite this, a Lynchian sense of creeping nastiness, rooted in the way small-town life can be stifling, pervades a novel that, as its various plot strands come together, has a whirlwind energy that's hard to resist. **Jonathan Wright**



## OH GOD, THE SUN GOES

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

240 pages | Paperback/ebook

► Author David Connor

► Publisher Melville House

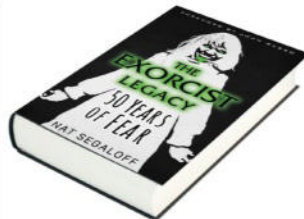
◆ **Our brains are weird little** dudes. They account for 2% of our body weight, but run more or less everything – behaviour, movement, emotions, intelligence – and there's still so much left to learn about them. We don't understand why the left side of the brain controls the right side of the body (or why the right controls the left), and a recent series of ambitious experiments concluded that none of the major scientific theories can explain how consciousness works.

Fertile territory for SF stories, right? In theory. Author David Connor certainly has the credentials – he works in a neuroscience lab – but his debut effort is so elliptical that it disappears into itself. The protagonist's meandering odyssey through a suddenly and mysteriously sunless US landscape shades into a journey through his brain.

It might be a metaphor for grief, but in practice it's all ponderous reflections and conversations about nothing ("It's a small town here, Bumble Bee." "Very small. Twelve of us. Twelve people."). It'd make an engagingly odd short film, but as a novel it just feels all rather weightless.

On the plus side, the design makes liberal use of white space, so it's a shorter read than it looks, and a 15-page factual appendix about the parts of the brain is nifty.

**Nic Clarke**



## THE EXORCIST LEGACY

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

304 pages | Hardback/ebook/  
audiobook

► Author Nat Segaloff

► Publisher Citadel Press

◆ **There are surely few people** better qualified to pen a book marking 50 years of *The Exorcist* than Nat Segaloff. Having first written about it in his 1990 biography of William Peter Blatty, he can draw on interviews with the author of the original novel (and others) stretching back to the '80s – supplemented by fresh ones with the likes of Ellen Burstyn and first AD Terence Donnelly.

Covering all the films and the 2016 TV series (there's even a Q&A with David Gordon Green, in anticipation of *The Exorcist: Believer*), it has some recurring themes: the metaphysical concerns of the original film; whether or not *The Exorcist* is "a horror film"; writers' approaches clashing with the demands of studio execs.

The blurbs accurately describe it as "exhaustive", though occasionally exhausting also applies: you have to be a pretty hardcore *Exorcist* (rotating) head to get through consecutive synopses of Blatty's follow-up novel *Legion*, screen adaptation *The Exorcist III* and the director's cut of the same film without glazing over.

Thankfully, the author's eye for an amusing anecdote, and penchant for firing off snark (the camerawork in *Exorcist: The Beginning* is described as "dive-bombing about the room like a house fly") for the most part prevent things getting too dry. **Ian Berriman**

## ALSO OUT

There's lots more books we couldn't fit in. Set on a planet ravaged by an illness which affects people's perception of time, Honey Watson's

### LESSONS IN BIRDWATCHING

(out now, Angry Robot) sees a visiting student (who is downright evil) getting caught in the middle of a bloody civil war. Expect gore, torture, cannibalism and group sex – y'know, all the good stuff. On an equally cheerful note, Uruguayan author Fernanda Trias's dystopian tale

**PINK SLIME** (10 August, Scribe) is set in a coastal town where a toxic algae has clogged the river, disrupting the food chain, and where a deadly "red wind" can strip your skin. Emily Habeck's debut

**SHARK HEART: A LOVE STORY** (out now, Jo Fletcher Books) has an eyebrow-raising premise: it follows two newlyweds, one of whom discovers that he has less than a year before he mutates into a great white shark.

How are they going to afford the fish, eh? The latest *Firefly* spin-off novel, Una McCormack's

**COUP DE GRÂCE** (out now, Titan) sees the crew of Serenity becoming embroiled in a conflict between the residents of a starving frontier town and a local gang. BBC Books' contribution to

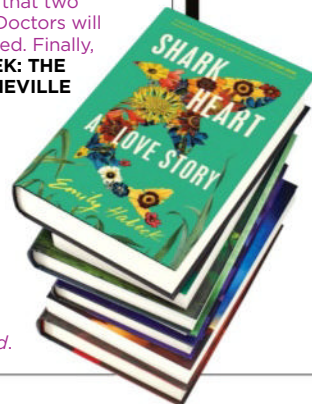
*Doom's Day*, the cross-media *Doctor Who* event about a time-travelling assassin, is

**EXTRACTION POINT** (10 August), by YA author MG Harris. We're

promised that two different Doctors will get involved. Finally, **STAR TREK: THE ART OF NEVILLE PAGE**

(out now, Titan)

shows off creature designs for the Kelvin Timeline movies, *Discovery* and *Picard*.







# Claire North

Looks like Catherine Webb may need a sci-fi pen name next...



## Do you have any personal mementos on your desk?

► There is a Funko Pop! Godzilla, there to remind me that even when I feel small and scared, I am in fact a flippin' *kaiju*!

## How do you deal with writers' block/the urge to procrastinate?

► If you don't wanna write right now, don't. It'll be painful and bad. Go for a stroll. Learn to play the ocarina – whatever works. Come back to it when you'll actually have a nice time. There are so many other things in life you can give yourself a hard time about; why add writing to the mix?

## Which of your books was the most difficult to write?

► I'm working on a space opera (pew pew!) and am being reminded that for 95% of my professional output, I've used worlds that already exist and cultures that are already known as my starting point. Turns out that was cheating.

## Is there anything about one of your books which you wish you could go back in time and "fix"?

► I have fluffed up some stuff, ranging from simple spellings to series-spanning inconsistencies and meh plot choices. But as a self-respecting science fiction nerd, I would not risk breaking the space-time continuum for them.

## Do you have any writing "bad habits" that you have to keep in check?

► My editor informs me that even when the world is a crushing dystopia that seeks to squeeze the life and soul from its characters, protagonists should have agency, strong motivation and clearly express their feelings using evocative, emotional language. As someone recently diagnosed with autism I still find this pretty baffling, but appreciate my editor's willingness to think about feelings for me.

## Is there any author whose ability makes you envious?

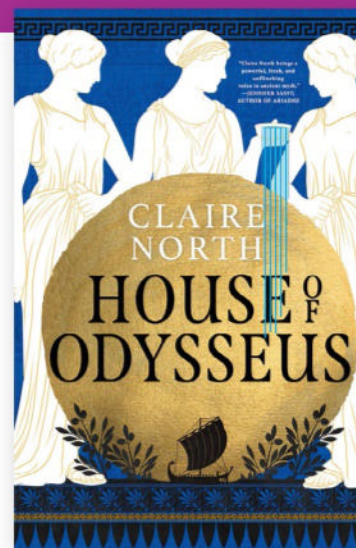
► Terry Pratchett. Clichéd, I know, but he was one of the greats. He combined joyful humour with a gift for plot, glorious voice and an appreciation for humanity that dripped from every word.

## If you could recommend one book you love that's not very well known, what would it be?

► *Lord Of Light* by Roger Zelazny. Very few books manage to fuse a tale of rebellion with Eastern philosophy set in an alien world, while demonstrating so much gentle humour and humanity in the process.

## Where's the oddest place you've seen one of your books?

► YHA Ravenstor [a youth hostel in the Peak District]. I walked 10 miles down an abandoned railway, climbed a cliff path in the middle of nowhere to what appeared to be a haunted house surrounded by the hooting of midnight owls, and there was a copy of *The First Fifteen Lives Of Harry August* in the common room.



## What's the most frustrating thing about being a professional author?

► You have extremely limited agency over your own fate. You can write something brilliant; you can write something shocking. Whether it is successful commercially is beyond your control, and that is always scary.

## What's the best piece of writing advice you've received or read?

► It was actually a bit of theatre advice, but can be applied across most creative mediums: "Babe, it's a show, not a cure for cancer." ●

*House Of Odysseus* is out on 22 August, published by Orbit Books.



The much-missed Terry Pratchett, an inspiration.



## THE EXPANSE: DRAGON TOOTH

Keep on Rocinante



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher **BOOM! Studios**

► Writer **Andy Diggie**

► Artist **Rubine**

**ISSUES 1-3** Getting six seasons of gritty space opera *The Expanse* was close to miraculous in today's unforgiving televisual landscape. However, the show did still end without adapting the three climactic volumes of the original nine-book *Expanse* series, with season six concluding just before the saga pulls an abrupt 30-year time jump.

This means there's a massive gap in the narrative – the period in-between the final TV episode and *Persepolis Rising* – that's ripe for exploration, and a spin-off comic is now illuminating some of this unknown territory. A 12-issue miniseries, *Dragon Tooth* picks up two years after season six, with the crew of the Rocinante helping the Transport Union battle piracy when a deadly threat emerges via a network of sleeper agents, all connected to the mysterious and sealed-off Laconia system.

Right from the start, the comic hurls us straight back into the

gnarly, dangerous world of the *Expanse*, and while newcomers won't find it difficult to follow, *Dragon Tooth* is absolutely aimed at people who've watched all six seasons and are hungry for more.

Andy Diggie's script expertly channels the mood of both the series and the novels, while also not being afraid to bring back certain characters we haven't seen for quite some time. Making this kind of in-between story feel like it matters can be a challenge, but three issues in we've already got a healthy dose of gripping, slow-burn tension across multiple plot threads.

Importantly, Diggie also gets the characterisation right, capturing the more reflective moments between the Rocinante crew as well as the intense plot twists, and by the third issue, it genuinely feels like you're experiencing a new season of the show.

On the visual side, the art from Rubine has to balance comic-book storytelling with accuracy to the series, as well as handling lengthy

“Expertly channels the mood of both the series and the novels”

dialogue sequences. The resulting art occasionally feels a little flat, and certain character likenesses are much stronger than others (especially in sequences with swearsy politician Avasarala), but for the most part it's effective, especially in the well-executed space sequences.

Some intriguing threads are set up in these opening chapters, and there's plenty of room for the series to fully exploit them. *Dragon Tooth* is a properly impressive example of a spin-off comic. Considering how much of the 30-year gap there is left to explore, hopefully it's just the first of many new *Expanse* titles to come.

**Saxon Bullock**

**i** An *Expanse* fanboy, Andy Diggie once played a Belter in a live-streamed RPG on Twitch, “terrible fake accent and all”.



## A GUEST IN THE HOUSE



► **RELEASED 17 AUGUST**

► Publisher **Faber & Faber**

► Writer/artist **Emily Carroll**

**GRAPHIC NOVEL** The ghosts of past relationships have a way of haunting the present – quite literally, in Emily Carroll's gorgeous, doomy new graphic novel.

Abby lives with her husband David and his daughter from a previous marriage, Crystal, in a cottage by a lake. She's happy, probably, even if it sometimes feels like her husband talks at her more than to her.

Sure, she still doesn't really know Crystal, and there's a big question mark hanging over how exactly her mother Sheila died, but it'll all work out, as long as she ignores the apparition that's started following her around...

Although the initial set-up of *A Guest In The House* may seem like a departure from Carroll's previous works, the twisted fairy tale aspect is still present. Abby dreams of knights and princesses, and there are echoes of Bluebeard here – the question of what happened to David's first wife growing increasingly pointed as the book goes on.

The final wrap-up is clichéd and a little too neat, which is a shame, but there's no arguing with Carroll's visual storytelling prowess. It's a gorgeous-looking book, playful in form, and alternating between long passages of black and white and sudden, dazzling splashes of colour. Adventurous and accessible, this is a darkly delicious treat.

**Will Salmon**







## GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher **Marvel Comics**

► Writers **Collin Kelly,**

**Jackson Lanzing**

► Artist **Kev Walker**

**ISSUES 1-4** Writers **Collin Kelly** and Jackson Lanzing might be better known for *Star Trek* comics but there's definitely something more of *Star Wars* about the Superheroes of Space's latest iteration, which takes place in a galaxy far, far away and opens on a Tatooine-style dustbowl.

Aimed at audiences who enjoyed the recent movie, it features a line-up that cleaves close to that seen on the big screen. With some mysterious event having fractured the previous team, bickering sisters Gamora and Nebula contribute much of the humour, alongside Nebula's kookiness and Drax's dry wit, making up for Rocket Raccoon and Groot's initial absence. Groot actually provides the main threat in these first four issues, transformed into a Galactus-style elemental force which consumes all before it.

Kelly and Lanzing's script moves at a brisk pace, providing plenty of splash pages for artist Kev Walker to cut loose on. Harking back to his *2000 AD* days, Walker's impressive cartooning combines dynamic figurework with kinetic layouts.

With Rocket returning in issue four and the exact nature of "Grootfall" set to be explained in five, hopefully this take on the Guardians will soon escape the shadow of the movies and become its own thing. **Stephen Jewell**

Never bring a knife to a gun fight, and so on.



## EXTREME VENOMVERSE

A superfluity of symbionts

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher **Marvel Comics**

► Editor **Devin Lewis**

► Artists **Various**

**ISSUES 1-5** After the massive success of the Spider-Verse in both comics and movies, it's no surprise that Spidey villain-turned-antihero Venom is also on the multiversal bandwagon. The Venomverse actually first cropped up in 2017, and now Marvel are warming up to an epic "Death Of Venomverse" event with this anthology miniseries.

The basic set-up is that all the alternate versions of Venom are being systematically murdered by evil symbiote Carnage, and a small army of remaining Venoms is being recruited from across the multiverse to fight back. Each instalment of this five-issue miniseries features three separate tales, all provided by different creative teams, most of which showcase wildly different takes on the character.

These stories are most enjoyable when they're embracing the pulpy weirdness of the central concept and serving up genuinely bonkers interpretations. Exploring what would happen if Venom was a baseball player, a city-wrecking kaiju or a manga-style magical girl, the series does deliver some entertaining moments and impressive art, especially in the brilliantly lurid "Best Little Horror House", in which we encounter a version of Venom running a brothel in the Wild West.

However, it's also an *extremely* mixed bag, with many tales that fall flat, and a lack of focus in its overall structure that isn't helped by the relentless set-ups for the aforementioned event. By the end, you wish that there could have been a little more imaginative craziness, and a little less uninspired, self-consciously edgy superhero action.

**Saxon Bullock**

**i** The original "sentient Spidey costume" idea for Venom was created by a fan writer for a Marvel story competition in 1982.



## MOTHER NATURE

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher **Titan Comics**

► Writers **Jamie Lee Curtis,**

**Russell Goldman**

► Artist **Karl Stevens**

**GRAPHIC NOVEL** *Halloween star*

Jamie Lee Curtis has her first stab at comics here – although the project began as a screenplay (a Blumhouse movie is in the pipeline), and it very much feels like that.

The title has a double meaning, referring both to Gaia and the maternal urge to protect your child. It centres on a water treatment project in an area of New Mexico previously contaminated by cobalt mining. A small town is beset by strange events, including tumbleweeds attacking a school bus and a rain of skull-perforating giant hailstones. Nature is fighting back, right? But there's a little more to it than that, with Curtis also stirring in forces from Navajo mythology.

Tonally it's an odd mix, gear-shifting between passages of relationship drama which border on irrelevance and sudden, brutal acts of violence which often fail to occasion the panicked chatter they really should, and can feel tacked-on.

Where *Mother Nature* really succeeds is on the visual side. Artist Karl Stevens clearly drew heavily on photographic reference to model the characters, and the results have a powerful verisimilitude, capturing small, authentic gestures like someone rubbing their eye. If we have a quibble, it's that at times it starts to feel like a set of storyboards for that future feature, every cutaway lovingly detailed.

**Calvin Baxter**



## EXOPRIMAL

Tyrannosaurus/mechs

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Reviewed on PlayStation 5

► Also available on PC, PlayStation 4,

Xbox One, Xbox Series S/X

► Publisher Capcom

**VIDEOGAME** The year is 2040

and climate change just got even deadlier. Thousands of hungry dinosaurs are pouring from portals in the sky, but the unconventional set-up is far from the strangest thing about this brilliantly subversive take on the horde shooter. In a genre dominated by narrative campaigns, like those of *Left 4 Dead 2* and *Warhammer: Vermintide*, *Exoprimal* offers a more condensed competitive experience that consists entirely of online play.

Despite the prevailing multiplayer focus, developer Capcom has managed to squeeze

a surprising amount of story in here. An intriguing time travel mystery unfolds as you progress, told through the occasional post-match cutscene. It serves as a solid introduction to the central game mode, Dino Survival, but is hampered by its disjointed presentation. Events become hard to follow as the complexity ramps up, especially when you're also contending with the complexity of the matches themselves.

Each game of Dino Survival is divided into two separate halves, with the first challenging two teams to complete a string of objectives in the shortest possible time. This mostly boils down to surviving a few waves of prehistoric predators, which is where the varied roster of robotic mech (dubbed Exosuits) comes in. You have a total of 10 at your disposal, each falling into a

distinct category (assault, tank and support), with brilliantly designed abilities that encourage a wide range of playstyles. The blade-wielding samurai Murasame, for example, is perfect for taking down priority targets, while the rollerskating healer Nimbus can keep the health of teammates topped up.

Both teams occupy separate timelines at first, meaning that you can't always see your opponents, but you're given plenty of opportunities to interfere with their success. Taking control of a hulking dino to wreak havoc in their timeline is a thrilling diversion that can potentially turn the tables if your team is behind.

The match eventually transitions to something more akin to a traditional shooter for its second half, bringing both timelines together for a dramatic final fight where you face off against dinosaurs and enemy mechs alike. With plenty of new content on the way, this won't be a fossil any time soon. **Dashiell Wood**

**i** Capcom considered including feathers in their dino designs (as per recent science) but erred on the side of familiarity.



## OXENFREE II: LOST SIGNALS

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Reviewed on PlayStation 5

► Also available on PlayStation 4, PC,

Mac, Switch

► Publisher Netflix Games

**VIDEOGAME** Opening a

dimensional rift on your first day is definitely not ideal. With a new job and the hope of starting afresh back in her hometown of Camena, Riley Poverly stumbles headlong into a strange phenomenon seemingly intent on throwing the past back in her face. Armed with nothing but a pocket radio, she must tune out this force from beyond.

Fans of the first game have heard this one before, and *Lost Signals*' biggest flaw is how it's trapped repeating that earlier title's greatest hits. It's not all bad; for one thing, VHS scanlines signalling supernatural interference is a visual motif that still hits. Furthermore, the walk-and-talk dialogue mechanics have been greatly refined, allowing you to carry on chatting as you move between areas and affording interruptions to overlapping conversations that feel far more natural – all brought to life by excellent voice performances.

Unfortunately *Lost Signals* goes all in on a supernatural mystery that was never meant to take centre stage, raising the stakes into something much less compelling than the intimate teen drama that came before. We like its fresh cast of millennials desperately searching for direction, but their tale doesn't manage to avoid becoming a disappointing retread. **Jess Kinghorn**



First the mass extinction, now this. Poor dinos.





## STARSHIP TROOPERS

★★★★☆

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► 86 minutes | Vinyl

► Label Varèse Sarabande/  
Craft Recordings

**SOUNDTRACK** Paul Verhoeven's

1997 sci-fi war movie had a mixed reception, many missing the satirical intent behind its OTT violence and skewering of military propaganda. Its bombastic aesthetic was aided by Basil Poledouris's score, released in full here as a double LP (previously the soundtrack was heavily cut-down). It's a gift for completists, but boy does it bang on...

This is music to invade countries by: loud, puffed up, jingoistic and more than a little ridiculous. There are echoes of one of Verhoeven's other collaborators, Jerry Goldsmith, as well as endless martial drum rolls and brass fanfares. In other words, it's the perfect score for *Starship Troopers*.

That doesn't make it an engaging listen, however. It's repetitive, and a few interesting tracks aside – the more sinister tones of “Klendathu Drop”, the comically pompous “Fed Net” cues or the simple, eerie “Johnny And Dizzy” – there's little especially memorable here. A whiffy closing cut of pop grunge by Poledouris's daughter Zoë stands out for all the wrong reasons.

Still, this release does exactly what it was intended to: collect all 29 cues in a handsome package (complete with liner notes by Verhoeven and fold-out poster). Fine in small doses, but you might need an aspirin to get through the entire thing. **Will Salmon**



## MARVEL MULTIVERSE ROLE-PLAYING GAME

Be your own hero

★★★★☆

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher Marvel Entertainment

► Number of players Two or more

**ROLE-PLAYING GAME** What does it

take to be a Marvel superhero? Just a handful of six-sided dice, thanks to this new RPG, which has all the tools you need to live out your fantasies and embody heroes who can stand shoulder to shoulder with the likes of Spider-Man, Captain America and Black Widow – if you're willing to put in the effort to unlock the book's potential.

Players can create characters associated directly with the Avengers, X-Men and even Eternals and Inhumans, with powers ranging from Spider-Man's web-slinging to Storm's weather control, and much more – with further possibilities to come in future expansions.

There's also the option to play a well-known Marvel hero or villain

from the collection of pre-made characters included in the core rulebook. These allow players to simulate, for example, a throwdown between the Avengers and Ultron, while also providing grist for good-natured debate over the characters' stats.

Once you're playing the game the rules feel fairly fluid, with the maths of character creation boiled down to a simple 3d6 mechanic in which players roll for successes while also hoping for advanced effects from better rolls. It adds up to an experience that seems designed to welcome *D&D* players, while also feeling distinct from other tabletop RPGs.

Providing the opportunity to adventure in the Marvel Universe while also digging deep into existing lore, this is a fun addition to the bookshelves of gamers and comic fans alike. **George Marston**

**i** The Marvel Multiverse Role-Playing Game is actually Marvel's fifth tabletop RPG since the original TSR game in 1984.



## DOCTOR WHO: TRAVEL IN HOPE

★★★★☆

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► 165 minutes | CD/download

► Publisher Big Finish

**AUDIO DRAMA** Did you enjoy the Jodie Whittaker episode “Kerblam!”, but feel like the ending was a let down? “Below There”, the first story in the latest Ninth Doctor set, offers a more convincing take down of sci-fi ultra-capitalism, as Christopher Eccleston's Doctor encounters a worker in deep space. Initially a two-hander, Lauren Mooney and Stewart Pringle's script gives us some playful banter between the Doctor and Vyx (Kelly Adams) before revealing a truly dark secret. Excellent stuff.

“The Butler Did It” is, as you might expect, a whodunnit, as the Doctor investigates the poisoning of an old friend at an intergalactic port. These sets have leaned into making Eccleston's Doctor chattier, something that this story dials all the way up to “annoying” – as one character points out. It's breezy enough, but the central mystery never quite grabs you, making this the slightest of the three stories.

“The Ninth Doctor meets Alpha Centauri” may sound like Big Finish have been sticking pins in random pages of *The Doctor Who Programme Guide*, but “Run” has a compelling idea at its heart, with the Doctor encouraging the Pertwee-era alien hermaphrodite to run in a political race against a populist demagogue.

If you can get on with the daft voices then this is a funny story with an earnest point.

**Will Salmon**





# HORSES

Saddle up, riders, and proceed to the starting gate, as we test your knowledge of all things equine

Quizmaster Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor

## QUESTION 1

What is the race of intelligent horses in *Gulliver's Travels* called? (Don't worry about the exact spelling...)

## QUESTION 2

Who had a horse called Swift Wind, who was able to transform into a winged unicorn?

## QUESTION 3

In *Doctor Who*, which Doctor was the first to be seen on-screen riding a horse? And in which story? (Half a point each)

## QUESTION 4 Picture Question

Name the TV series.

## QUESTION 5

Which Starfleet officer owned a pair of horses called Tango and Mary Lou?

## QUESTION 6

Which TV series includes characters called Buttons, Gusto, Honeysuckle, Whizzer, Gingerbread and Locket?

## QUESTION 7

Which fantasy series features a rather egotistical talking horse called Bree-Hee-Hinny-Brinny-Hoohy-Hah?

## QUESTION 8 Picture Question

Name this rather unusual nag, and the children's TV series in which it appeared.

## QUESTION 9

Complete the theme tune lyric: "A horse is a horse, of course, of course/And no one can talk to a horse, of course/That is, of course, unless the horse..."



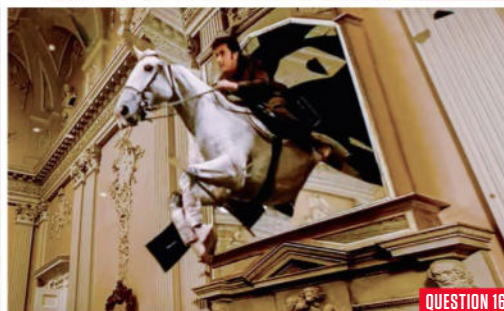
QUESTION 4



QUESTION 8



QUESTION 12



QUESTION 16

## QUESTION 10

Which mythological figure might you find astride an eight-legged steed called Sleipnir?

## QUESTION 11

Which supernatural figure rides a plough horse called Gunpowder?

## QUESTION 12 Picture Question

Name this horse.

## QUESTION 13

In which horror film does a horse run amok on a ferry?

## QUESTION 14

In the Discworld books, who rides a horse called Binky?

## QUESTION 15

What's so unusual about the horse seen pulling a carriage in *The Wizard Of Oz*?

## QUESTION 16 Picture Question

Name this *Doctor Who* episode.

## QUESTION 17

Which science fiction film features a company of horse wranglers called Haywood's Hollywood Horses?

## QUESTION 18

Name the '70s children's TV serial centred on a horse which is the mystical messenger of the moon goddess.

## QUESTION 19

What else is unusual about the unicorn-horned Nimbosian horses in *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier*?

## QUESTION 20

Which equine hero would you find living in the Old West of Earth-31913?

Answers  
1 Houyhnhnms 2 She-Ra 3 Fourth, "The Masque Of Mandragora" 4 Bojack Horseman 5 Christopher Pike 6 My Little Pony 7 The Chronicles Of Narnia 8 Dobbins, "Rentaghost" 9 "...is the famous Mister Ed" 10 Odin 11 Ichabod Crane 12 Shadowfax 13 The Ring 14 Death 15 It keeps changing colour 16 "The Girl In The Fireplace" 17 Nope 18 The Moon Stallion 19 They're blue 20 Spider-Horse

## How did you do?

What speed is your brain working at?

0-5

Static

6-10

Walk

11-15

Trot

16-19

Canter

20

Gallop



NEXT ISSUE

# IN THE NEXT ISSUE

**KRAVEN**  
A complete and  
utter hunt

**STAR TREK**  
The return of  
*Lower Decks*

**THE CREATOR**  
New sci-fi from the  
director of *Rogue One*

**TERRAHAWKS**  
Celebrating 40 years

**PLUS!**  
*Doctor Who!*  
Supernatural  
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# Total Recall

Personal recollections of cherished sci-fi and fantasy



## Twilight

**Emily Murray, Entertainment Editor, GamesRadar+**



At school, word about Stephenie Meyer's tale of a vampire falling in love with a human spread like it was hot gossip. Well-worn copies of the novel were being passed around during the lunch hour, with one eventually landing in my hands. The simple yet striking cover art of hands holding an apple was immediately captivating, but I was unprepared for how enraptured I would be by the story of Bella and Edward.

Aged 11 at the time, I had never read anything like *Twilight* before, which became my introduction to vampires, romance and fantastical horror. This new world that I had entered was spellbinding, so I read anything

else which was in that realm, from *The Vampire Diaries* to *Evermore*. However, while this satisfied my thirst in-between the release of Twilight Saga instalments, nothing gave me that same euphoric feeling.

The obsession was growing, and in 2008 it hit a new peak with the release of director Catherine Hardwicke's film adaptation, which saw me become a true Twihard (*Twilight's* most dedicated fans). It was just how I had pictured it reading the book, from the soothing rain that continually graced the town of Forks to the pitch-perfect casting of Kristen Stewart and Robert Pattinson, who captured both the shy timidity and fiery passion of their characters. The blue-hued cinematography gave the film an ethereal edge, while the alternative rock soundtrack featuring

the likes of Paramore and Muse added some necessary grunge.

Even watching the film now I still get chills when we first glimpse the Cullen family as they enter the high school cafeteria, while the concluding prom scene never fails to make me cry. Over the years the franchise has had a bad rap, and been mocked to death, but while it does have its flaws it's unfair to write it off. And there's no denying the positive impact it has had on millions of people, including me.

A new TV adaptation is now in the works. Personally I'm holding my breath to see if it's any good before passing judgement, but one thing is certain: get ready for a new generation of Twihards. ●

*Emily has always been Team Edward.*

### Fact Attack!

→ The idea for *Twilight* came to Stephenie Meyer in a dream on 2 June 2003. Her early drafts were titled *Forks* (the name of the town).

→ Meyer makes a cameo in the first movie – you can see her sitting with a laptop at the diner that Charlie takes Bella to.

→ Meyer originally wanted *The Witcher's* Henry Cavill and *Lemony Snicket's* Emily Browning to play the lovestruck duo.

→ Pattinson and Stewart did their on-screen "chemistry test" at the home of director Catherine Hardwicke, on her bed.

→ The producers considered recasting the role of Jacob for sequel *New Moon* if actor Taylor Lautner didn't bulk up sufficiently.

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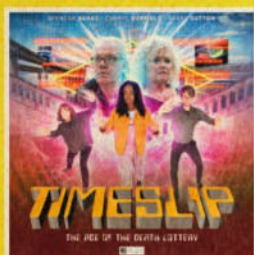


RETURN TO THE TIME BARRIER

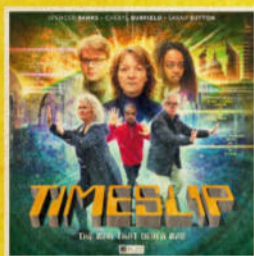
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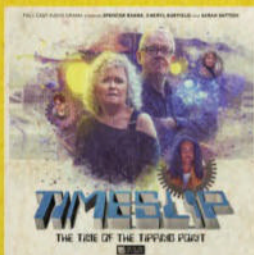
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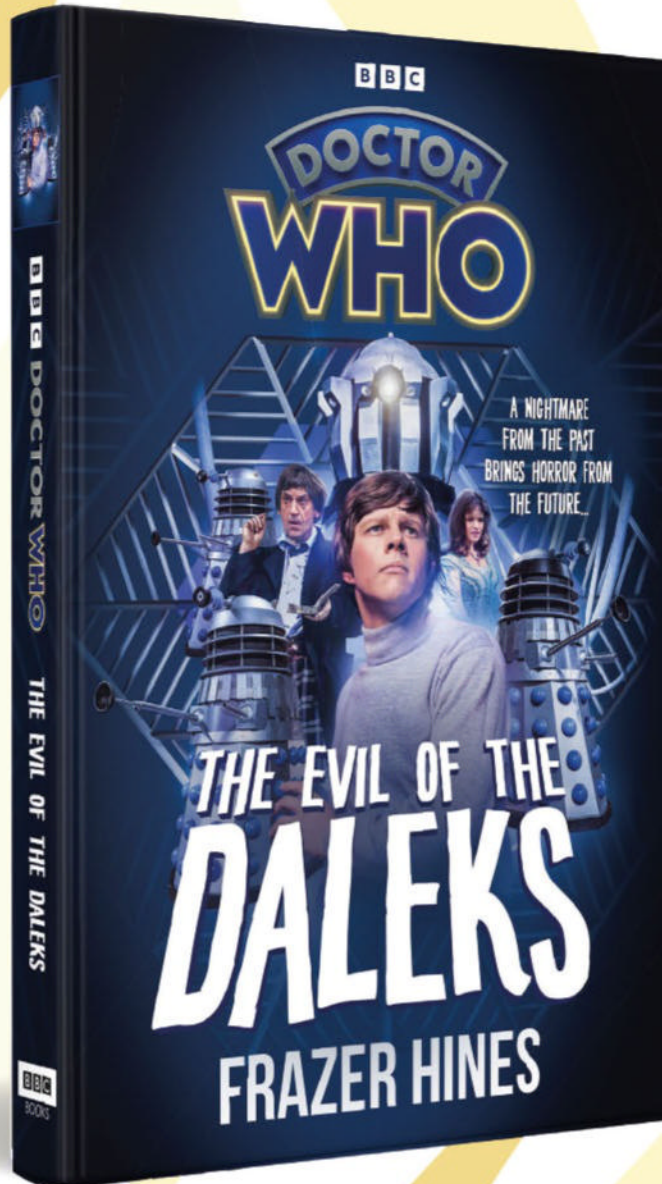
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