

**DAREDEVIL: BORN AGAIN** JESSICA JONES IS BACK!

# SPIN

**READY OR NOT 2**  
THE GAME IS ON AGAIN

**ONE PIECE**  
STRAW HATS FOREVER!

**OUTLANDER**  
TIME'S UP!

**28 YEARS LATER**  
DESIGNING THE BONE TEMPLE

**WORLDBREAKER**  
MILLA JOVOVICH FIGHTS BACK

**UNNATURAL REBORN KILLERS**

## DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE!

Maggie Gyllenhaal on resurrecting

# THE BRIDE!

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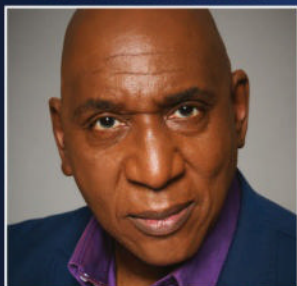
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28

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## FEATURES

### 28 THE BRIDE!

Everything we could stitch together, Frankly.

### 38 READY OR NOT 2: HERE I COME

The game is on again.

### 44 ONE PIECE

Raise the flag, boys, it's time for season two!

### 52 DAREDEVIL: BORN AGAIN

Time to go Kingpin bowling.

### 56 OUTLANDER

Claire and Jamie 2gether 4Eva?

### 60 28 YEARS LATER: THE BONE TEMPLE

Post-apocalyptic design secrets.



52



56

## RED ALERT

### 6 THE MAGIC FARAWAY TREE

Enid Blyton's taking root.

### 8 2+2=5

You do the maths.

### 11 STAR WARS: SHADOW OF MAUL

Sith's about to get real.

### 12 INVINCIBLE

On your Mark, get set...

### 19 ALIAS: RED BAND

The trouble with Jessica.

## REVIEWS

### 70 GOOD LUCK, HAVE FUN, DON'T DIE

For those about to Rockwell...

### 74 A KNIGHT OF THE SEVEN KINGDOMS

*Game Of Thrones* prequel is close to the hedge.

### 76 THUNDERBIRDS

The new HD box set is FAB.

### 82 THE LIBRARY OF TRAUMATIC MEMORY

This novel's well worth a loan.

### 90 DC KO

Is this Justice League crossover comic a knockout?

## REGULARS

### 66 BROUGHT TO BOOK

Talking to novelist Neil Jordan.

### 87 THE WRITE STUFF

Gareth L Powell takes our author questionnaire.

### 94 FLASHBACK

Crawling the walls in September 1977.

### 96 BLASTERMIND

With this quiz we thee wed.

### 98 TOTAL RECALL

*The Mothman Prophecies*.



44

## Captain's Log

"The dead have got something to say!"



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Horror still seems to be dominating screens and that isn't showing any signs of stopping soon – look at *Sinners* getting a record number of Oscar nominations! Here's hoping *The Mandalorian And Grogu* can tip the scales back in favour of blockbuster sci-fi. Oh, and someone called Spielberg seems to be dabbling in extra-terrestrials as well this year. Not sure he'll catch on... Plus – and this is *very* exciting – *Blake's 7* is coming back to the small screen! Yes, it's true. Watch these pages!

But until such times I'm always glad to see a fresh take on a horror classic, in this instance Maggie Gyllenhaal's updated *THE BRIDE!*, as well as a sequel to a modern hit, this time *Ready Or Not 2: Here I Come*. We have exclusive and, dare I say, great features for both this month that have got me so excited to see the movies.

It feels weird to say farewell to time-travelling drama *Outlander*, but not too weird knowing that *Blood Of My Blood* continues. And speaking of blood, there's plenty spilled in season two of *Daredevil: Born Again* – featuring the *long* overdue return of Jessica Jones.

Horror, you know I love you. Superheroes, you'll always ultimately have my heart despite giant climactic sky-battles. But let's get back into outer space, people! Thank goodness for *Star Trek*...

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X

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## Rants & Raves

Inside the SFX hive mind



**DARREN SCOTT** EDITOR

### RAVES

→ My backlog binge continues, and I loved *Strange New Worlds* stepping into *Walking Dead* territory in "Shuttle To Kenfori".

→ Also really enjoyed *Skeleton Crew* – it's been so long now that I can't remember if the internet was *furious* about it. Probably.

### RANTS

→ I suddenly became one of *those* internet people when I realised the 1987 *Masters Of The Universe* movie couldn't be bettered (for me, personally!).



**IAN BERRIMAN** DEPUTY EDITOR

### RAVES

→ Delighted that we're finally getting a fancy Blu-ray of Mario Bava's swinging '60s fumetti adaptation *Danger: Diabolik*. (Due for release on 20 April from Eureka Entertainment.)

→ I will never be able to afford anything in it, as the prices are *insane*, but I'm still weirdly fascinated by the latest eBay auction of David Lynch's personal effects (bit.ly/lynchebay).

→ Congratulations to Big Finish on having their licence to make *Doctor Who* audio dramas renewed for another 10 years! Can we have that Nimon box set now?



**JONATHAN COATES** ART EDITOR

### RAVES

→ Mackenzie Crook bringing his alchemical powers to the BBC once again with *Small Prophets* – loved it!



**NICK SETCHFIELD** EDITOR AT LARGE

### RAVES

→ Enjoyed *Darker Than The Sun*, a guide to all the fabulous locations in the Bond films. Perfect for a spot of armchair adventuring, without all those shark pools and SPECTRE goons getting in the way.

→ Loved the one-off revival of *The Muppet Show*. Sensational, inspirational, celebrational and, crucially, Muppetational. Can we have a full series now?



**TARA BENNETT** US EDITOR

### RAVES

→ I'm also on the "bring the Muppets back" train. Fantastic return in *The Muppet Show*, with enough changes to make me excited about what could come next.

→ Season two of *One Piece* is wacky, joyful adventure TV. Continues with its practical sets and tactile world-building, which makes this even more escapist fun.

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# Red Alert

MARCH  
2026

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22

## It's About Time!

Why *In The Blink Of An Eye* is a time travel tale with a twist

### Highlights



#### 6 THE MAGIC FARAWAY TREE

→ Enid Blyton's classic children's novels come to the big screen.



#### 12 INVINCIBLE

→ Season four takes a closer look at the villainous Viltrumites, plus Grayson's new moral standards.



#### 16 ARCO

→ An Oscar-nominated tale of time travel and rainbows – no explanation needed.



DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

The children's classic is finally making it to the big screen.

# Back At The Branch

Welcome to Blytopia... Children's classic **The Magic Faraway Tree** reaches for the screen WORDS: NICK SETCHFIELD



"I DESCRIBE THE FILM as Waitrose meets *Star Wars*," grins director Ben Gregor, bringing one of Enid Blyton's wilder flights of fancy to the big screen in *The Magic Faraway Tree*. "Because it's so wholesome at times, but it's also so mad.

"The book is very well loved, and because it's so imaginative, and hard to visualise, it's borderline unfilmable. People have got these images in their head, and I respect that so much. The illustrators couldn't illustrate it. If

you look at the illustrations in *The Magic Faraway Tree* over time, they can't really do it, because it's too crazy.

"I think people will love what we've done because we've taken a big swing and gone wholeheartedly into the scale and the joy and the Blytopia of it all. I termed it Blytopia, which was a brief for all the departments, and for the performances too. It's a sort of breezy acceptance of absolute spectacle that you don't really get in regular fantasy films. It's very English, very Blyton,

very unshow-offy. That tone of Blytopia is both spectacular and affable at the same time."

Best known for her *Noddy* tales and the perilous scrapes of the Famous Five, Blyton wrote four stories in the *Magic Faraway Tree* saga, beginning with 1939's *The Enchanted Wood*. Gregor's movie may haul it into the 21st century, but it keeps the core premise: relocating to the countryside, three kids discover a towering tree whose sprawling, seemingly infinite branches offer gateways to countless impossible kingdoms.

"It's a contemporary take, but with a very classic spine to it, and a nostalgic feel," says Gregor. "It's a timeless place they go to, when they go into the countryside. One of the kids says, 'Have we gone back in time?' They've come with trappings of the modern world, but once their wi-fi has gone and their technology has died, they are very much in a Blyton world."

For Gregor, that timelessness provides a crucial antidote to a screen-fixated modern childhood. "There's just so much energy about the benefits of what it's like to get out and have adventures, and visualising the madness and the beauty and the naturalness."

These are very much contemporary kids. "When you read *The Enchanted Wood*, it's like, 'We're going to the country!' 'Oh, goody! The country!' 'But you can't do anything until you've done your chores!' 'Oh, goody, chores!' Those



Baby Reindeer star Jessica Gunning as Dame Washalot.



“It’s a contemporary take, but with a very classic spine”



Director Ben Gregor: on the same page as his cast.

children would just look like they were in a cult if that was today! The power of the tree and the land will become apparent when you see these kids’ eyes light up. You can’t have transformation without a place to transform from.”

Former web-slinger Andrew Garfield and *The Crown*’s Claire

Foy are the parents, Tim and Polly, uprooted from their London home by enforced rural downsizing.

“What’s great about Andrew is that he really felt this. He came to this film passionately believing in the mission of his character; that he was trying to grow his children almost like tomatoes. He would

come up with ideas, sometimes really impractical ideas, but really good and beautiful ideas. And Claire shared a great vision too.”

Equally impressive names populate the tree’s dreamlike realms: Rebecca Ferguson is the antagonist, Dame Snap, while Nicola Coughlan is Silky the pixie. Meanwhile, Sir Lenny Henry, Sir Michael Palin and Jennifer Saunders provide formidable Brit comedy credentials.

“Just the generosity, the passion, with which the actors connected to the core idea of this film, the fun and the adventure and the answering of a longing, meant I could just let them do stuff,” Gregor enthuses. “We were all playing. Every day there was play.”

The script is by *Paddington 2* and *Wonka*’s Simon Farnaby. “He can make the everyday very, very funny, and he’s got a very vivid imagination. He’s also somebody

who has no interest in how I’m going to do anything! He’ll type the most unfilmable thing and you go, ‘Whoa...’ In a way that’s one of his greatest strengths, because instead of going, ‘Oh, I’ll make this easy for them’ he’ll type this crazy stuff and you think, ‘How on earth am I going to do this?’ And that gave the film ambition. We were constantly pushing the ambition.

“He’s got a big heart, which I love to film,” says Gregor, who cites *ET* as a touchstone. “I wanted to make a big classic movie that’s going to compete with the ‘80s classics, something you want to put on when you’ve got the flu or it’s raining.

“I just wanted to make that movie. ‘Let’s get under the blankets and watch *The Magic Faraway Tree!*’”

*The Magic Faraway Tree* is in cinemas from 27 March.



Silky is brought to the screen by Nicola Coughlan.



Rebecca Ferguson takes on villain duties.



Andrew Garfield (left) as dad Tim.

**SCI-FACT!** Gregor directed 2005 spoof “Blake’s Junction 7”, which starred Martin Freeman, Mark Heap and Mackenzie Crook.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

# By George!

More relevant than ever, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* forms the heart of Raoul Peck's chilling documentary **Orwell: 2+2=5**

WORDS: JAMES MOTTRAM



## BIG BROTHER.

Doublethink. Newspeak. Thought Police. Ministry of Truth. All words and phrases that will be familiar to anyone who has read George Orwell's final novel, the dystopian classic *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Published in 1949, just months before Orwell died of complications from tuberculosis, it has remained one of the towering literary achievements of the 20th century. So it's little wonder director Raoul Peck placed it at the centre of his new documentary, *Orwell: 2+2=5*.

"Timeless" might be one way of describing a book that feels more relevant than ever before. "Orwell is writing about the Trump elections, or about Gaza or about what is happening in Burma right now. That's how current it is, how precise, how efficient it is, in analysing what's going on today," Peck says, comparing Orwell to James Baldwin, the author at the heart of his 2016 Oscar-nominated documentary, *I Am Not Your Negro*. "That's why those writers are so powerful, because they had succeeded in capturing the essence of our existence and our state of the world."

Written when Orwell was living on the Scottish isle of Jura, and battling against his declining health, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* may have been Orwell's reaction against the Soviet Union and other totalitarian regimes of the time, but it feels just as pertinent in the time of Trump, Putin et al. With Orwell's words spoken by British

Director Raoul Peck says he recognises himself in Orwell.





John Hurt was Winston Smith in the 1984 film version.

modern-day Newspeak, that very Orwellian phrase that refers to language (“peacekeeping operations”) that is entirely at odds with its meaning. “I recognise myself in him [Orwell], because I dealt with Newspeak since I was born,” says the Haiti-born Peck, whose family fled the Duvalier dictatorship when he was eight. He distinctly remembers Nelson Rockefeller, then Governor of New York, meeting with Duvalier in 1969 during a tour of Latin America. “That was a shock for me. I said, ‘What the fuck is going on?’ [He is] in the same room with the dictator who killed thousands and thousands of people!”

At one point, the film features a collection of modern political euphemisms (“the choice was immense”). But Peck insists the film was finished before a list of words (including “transgender” and “LGBT”) no longer accepted in the USA under the Trump

administration came to light in March 2025. “Or I probably would have made a sequence out of that,” he adds. “Like ‘gay’. You couldn’t use gay, so the plane Enola Gay [which dropped the atomic bomb on Japan during the Second World War] was banned.”

Trump is hardly the only leader taken to task, with the rise of tech billionaires like Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos also focused on. Likewise, the manipulation of the media by those who own it. “In 2000, all the media were bought by billionaires. 2000! Not 2025!” says Peck. “Everybody became a puppet.” It all adds up to a highly personal and political film, proof that Orwell’s predictions were simply the shape of things to come. Is the world scarier now than Orwell predicted? “For me,” says Peck, “It’s been scary for the last 40 years.” ●

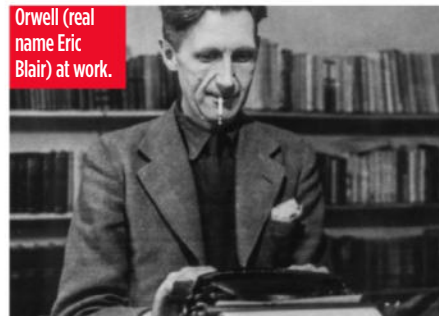
*Orwell: 2+2=5 is in cinemas from 13 March.*

actor Damian Lewis (*Homeland*), Peck’s film uses a wealth of archive material – including images of such infamous leaders as Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet and Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán – to show just how on-the-nose Orwell was.

“There are magic moments,” Peck explains, noting just how opportunities presented themselves as he was deep-diving into Orwell’s letters, essays and novels. “The first page of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston is writing in his journal for the first time: ‘And I went to the flicks yesterday and there was a film about refugees in the Mediterranean.’” Needless to say, with the frequent images we see of illegal immigrants making perilous crossings in boats, it immediately lent itself to the film. “The image comes in your head right away.”

Peck’s film also uses clips from the myriad screen versions of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, including the one starring John Hurt and directed by Michael Radford that hit cinemas in, yes, 1984. Also featured is the 1956 version, starring Edmond O’Brien as

Orwell (real name Eric Blair) at work.



protagonist Winston Smith, the ordinary citizen who tries to rebel against Big Brother, the all-seeing face of The Party, where even television screens in your own home are watching you. But Peck also dug into some very unusual versions of the film. “I discovered that there were many versions of the ending, depending on the countries,” he says. “Some wanted a happy ending... like Julia [the Party member Winston has an affair with] and Winston coming together again. Some did not want the real Orwell ending!”

Dealing with both Orwell’s life and the creation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Orwell: 2+2=5* is compelling when it deals with

“For me, the world has been scary for the last 40 years”

RAUL PECK PORTRAIT © MATTHEW AVIGNONE, 1984: EXPRESS/ARCHIVE PHOTO © GETTY

**SCI-FACT!** Alex Gibney, the Oscar-winner who has made films on Lance Armstrong, Julian Assange and Paul Simon, is producer on the film.

**SCI-FACT!** Dan Abnett is one of the writers included in *Carnage Unending*, a new *Warhammer 40,000* anthology due for release in April.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

# Rogue Troopers

Dan Abnett on returning to Marvel to launch the **Imperial Guardians Of The Galaxy** WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL

WHILE THE GUARDIANS OF THE Galaxy originally debuted in 1969, Dan Abnett famously reinvented the team in 2008, establishing the classic line-up that later appeared in James Gunn's cinematic trilogy. Now, along with artist Marcelo Ferreira, he is returning to Marvel's premier super-space-farers with *Imperial Guardians*, which spins out of last year's interstellar crossover, *Imperial*.

"This is like the noughties series, except back then it was a left-field experiment – based on a love of all things Marvel Cosmic – that led to unexpected results," Abnett tells Red Alert. "This is a much more specific brief for a new take on the team and its function, so it's a little tighter because I can't just replicate what we did before. This has to be different, even if it shares the same sense of fun and sci-fi scale."

Gamora is the only survivor from the previous iteration, with her current teammates including Captain Marvel, Darkhawk, Cosmic Ghost Rider and Amadeus Cho. "Some have technically been Guardians before, but the remit of this team is entirely different," explains Abnett. "Gamora is there for some continuity, but also because she's cool and makes sense in the role. This is her version of the team, and it's harder-edged and more serious in intent and packs some heavy hitters."

Remarking that "I'm not about the spoilers", Abnett insists her former colleagues won't turn up any time soon, although Star-Lord has now succeeded his late father as ruler of the Spartax Empire. "But I can promise some pretty great guest stars," he teases. "Often the sort of



as his black-ops outfit. "That's exactly what they are, whether they like it or not," explains Abnett. "The original Guardians were misfits trying to save the galaxy from the outside, whereas this is a Guardians team with an official remit, trying to save the galaxy from the inside. Maximus and his sly schemes provide a



Meet the line-up of the Imperial Guardians.

unexpected, beloved, but less high-profile cosmic characters that made the original series such a blast to work out."

With Inhuman Maximus having been behind *Imperial*'s insidious machinations, the Guardians now act

worrying background to the series, and are a constant concern for the team as they try to figure out if they are doing the right thing or not. The initial run of issues are self-contained, high-octane missions against very big problems, including major space races like the Kree and the Shi'ar, which push the Guardians to their limits, and yet remain totally secret."

While Drax, Rocket Raccoon and Groot are all absent, Abnett confirms that there will still be plenty of humour. "The core characters all have big personalities, so there will be friction and sharp interplay," he says. "If you can't laugh in the face of certain doom, why are you even on the team? The characters – Darkhawk is a good example – have some pretty big personal problems of their own to deal with, while Cosmic Ghost Rider is nothing is not a totally chaotic maniac in the middle of it all." ●

*Imperial Guardians* is out on 11 March.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

➔ WHILE THE FORMIDABLE SITH master is finally taking centre stage in Disney+'s upcoming *Star Wars: Maul – Shadow Lord*, Marvel Comics are first exploring his past in miniseries *Shadow Of Maul*, which leads directly into the animated series.

"It's fun as hell, as the comic book takes place right before the TV show begins," says writer Benjamin Percy, who first wrote the character for 2024's *Darth Maul: Black, White & Red* anthology series, which was his first ever experience of scripting a *Star Wars* tale.

"It truly was such a thrill and a delight to be able to put a small dent in a universe that has been so fundamental to my storytelling DNA," he continues. "I was born in 1979 and my dad is a giant sci-fi nerd, so *Star Wars* was there from the very beginning."

At Marvel, Percy has tended to take on the more aggressive, ultra-violent characters such as Wolverine and currently the Punisher and Deadpool.

"Everybody already knows this about me, but I'm kind of evil," he laughs. "I get to write all the hairy psychopaths in the 616 [Marvel's prime universe], so if I'm writing *Star Wars*, my literary toolbox is suited to someone as badass and terrifying as Maul."

Centring on Maul's attempts to rebuild his criminal organisation on the planet of Janix, the five-parter has been described as a crime story, which is keeping with Percy's favourite contemporary *Star Wars* on both the big and small screen. "Outside of the original trilogy, I like *Andor* and *Rogue One* the best," he says. "They're science fiction, but they're also spy thrillers and are gritty and grounded. *Shadow Of Maul* is also gritty and grounded, but our sci-fi story is Trojan-horsed inside of a police procedural."

The story is told from the perspective of Captain Brander Lawson, who is partnered by the droid

# Maul Cop

Disney's upcoming *Star Wars* series gets its own Marvel prequel comic, **Shadow Of Maul**

WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL

Two-Boots. "He's a former bounty hunter who is now a cop," explains Percy. "He's not a rule follower – far from it – but he's doing his best to keep the peace in a lawless city. In contrast, Two-Boots is a by-the-books and deeply loyal droid, so they're a classic buddy-cop pairing. There are also several other crime syndicates

who rule Janix, as well as some corruption inside of their own squad."

A lawless, suitably shadowy maze of a planet that lies outside of the influence of the Empire, Janix makes for an interesting backdrop. "There's neon lights, dark alleys, vents belching steam, underground nightclubs and backroom deals," teases Percy. "This is neo-noir to the core, and Janix is a character in this story as well as a location."

Having previously illustrated Marvel's *Jedi Knights* series, artist Madibek Musabekov has plenty of experience in the *Star Wars* universe. "Madibek has already proved himself with *Jedi Knights*," says Percy. "The guy is a visionary and a fan, so he gets the aesthetic. His settings are fully realised, his action is dynamic, and his characters are alive and brilliantly acted. You're going to love what you see." 🗨️

*Star Wars: Shadow Of Maul* is out on 4 March.



Shadow Of Maul leads into the upcoming Disney+ series.

See what Maul did between Clone Wars and Rebels.

➔ **SCI-FACT!** Darth Maul only appeared for around seven minutes in *The Phantom Menace*.

# Red Alert



Mark's philosophy has taken a turn for the violent.



Atom Eve's powers have evolved to a new level.

SHOWRUNNER EXCLUSIVE



# Darkness Falls

**Invincible's** executive producers pull back the curtain on the Viltrumites and Hell WORDS: TARA BENNETT

SEASON THREE OF Prime Video's animated series *Invincible* ended with the brutal quelling of Conquest, the massively powerful Viltrumite warrior (Jeffrey Dean Morgan) who arrives to assess Earth on behalf of the Viltrum Empire. It takes Atom Eve (Gillian Jacobs) flaying the skin from Conquest's body with her pink laser powers and a headbutt of death assist from damaged boyfriend Mark Grayson/Invincible (Steven Yeun) to bring him down. In the wake of the

destruction and near death of those he loves, Grayson makes it clear: going forward he will kill anyone who puts his family at risk. Creator Robert Kirkman and showrunner Simon Racioppa tell Red Alert that season four picks up not long after with the repercussions of that battle and Grayson's new morally questionable standards. "That's the defining statement, at least early in the season," Kirkman says of Grayson's mandate. "We'll see how long that lasts, but it's definitely a radical change in him.

It's something that's a lot of fun to explore, and it's something that Steven Yeun has been *really* enjoying this season." Kirkman says they're labelling this one the Viltrumite War season. "More than any prior season, this is the Viltrumites'. That doesn't just mean that the Viltrumites are showing up and doing cool or devastating stuff. It's learning more about

the Viltrumites than we ever really knew, to a certain extent, from reading the comics. Simon did a lot of excellent work figuring out little intricacies of their civilisation, which was great because there's been a portion of the audience every season that's like, 'When are we getting more Viltrumites?' I think those people are going to be very happy with this season." Racioppa says that he was particularly interested in finding where humans and Viltrumites connect. "They don't form relationships the way humans do. They don't love the way humans



Omni-Man and Allen's bromance will continue,



The Guardians' roster continues to evolve.

do," he explains. "But there's still things that connect us to them and let the audience know that they have plans and want certain things. They're real individuals, and we want to make sure they felt that way, making sure that their civilisation and their desires made sense, at least to them. That's something we explore through the season."

Much of that will be expressed through the character of Thragg (Lee Pace), the Grand Regent of the Viltrum Empire. "Thragg has a plan," Racioppa says. "He has an idea, and he has a reason he thinks the way he does. We're going to get into why that is the case, and why Viltrumites have this desire, and why they are the boogeyman of the universe."

Meanwhile, Global Defence Agency (GDA) chief Cecil

## “More than any prior season, this is the Viltrumites’”

Stedman (Walton Goggins) and his right-hand man Donald (Chris Diamantopoulos) have gone to their own secret extremes to meet the threat, keeping a comatose Conquest alive six levels under Earth for future interrogation about his kind's plans.

"For all Cecil knows, there's an entire race of these Viltrumites coming to Earth," Racioppa says of their reasoning. "This is the one bit of access he has to what their strategies are, what their weaknesses are. It makes sense for him to be like, 'No, we're keeping this guy.' So something is going to

happen. Essentially he's got a nuclear bomb in the basement in the shape of a very large, very strong Viltrumite."

This season will also return to the post-Viltrumite prison break pairing of Omni-Man (JK Simmons) and Allen the Alien (Seth Rogen) as they plan their next steps. "Allen the Alien and Omni-Man are very much a duo for this season," Kirkman says. "Omni-Man and Allen's interaction is a big part of what is going to be pulling Invincible into this conflict and drawing him out into space and shaking up what's going on in this season."

Plus, there will be a side quest to Hell that Kirkman never did in the *Invincible* comics. "I had always wanted to do it," Kirkman says. But he never sat down to figure out how Damien Darkblood

(Clancy Brown) worked within the story until this season.

"What was going on in Hell, and what Hell is in the *Invincible* universe, I think will come as a surprise to some people," he teases. "There wasn't anything from the comics used in that storyline. It was all just stuff we came up with for the show." Expect the repercussions to spill out for seasons to come. "I can't help but leave dangling threads that hopefully will come back in the future. There's probably three or four long-running subplots that are set up or hinted at in that episode. To what level we address them as the future goes on remains to be seen." ●

*Invincible* is on Prime Video from 18 March.

► **SCI-FACT!** Bruce Campbell voices Satan. "When I knew that Satan was coming up," the actor says, "I was like, 'That's a good fit!'"

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

# Phone Trap

David Barnett's *Withered Hill* universe moves into immersive audio experiences with **The Devil's Sound**

WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL

▶ WHILE *SCRATCH MOSS* – the third in David Barnett's quartet of folk horror novels – is published in March, the so-called Barnettverse is expanding into audio with the launch of immersive experience *The Devil's Sound*. Following on from 2024's *Roads To Withered Hill*, an extension of Barnett's first novel in the sequence, *Withered Hill*, subscribers can listen on their phones to the six-part drama, which according to developer Tom Abba is entirely self-contained.

“We've taken themes from the series, of old beliefs rising again, or that never went away, and the impact human society has had on those worlds, but *The Devil's Sound* is a different beast to the novels,” Abba tells Red Alert. “That you as an audience member are present within the story, and it's happening to you – rather than to a character in a book – changes the way a story is told and how it feels to be a part of it.”

While 2025's second offering *Scuttler's Cove* was set in Cornwall, the other three instalments are based around Barnett's native north of England. *The Devil's Sound*, however, doesn't take place in a specific location. “We talked about what might be common to anywhere in the UK – or the world – and water came up fairly quickly,” says Abba. “Whether as a river, stream, canal or the sea, our society has used

water as a foundation for any kind of settlement, meaning that hopefully, wherever each reader is in has resonance with that.”

Abba suggests checking out the website teaser for *The Devil's Sound* “to get a sense of how your device itself is complicit in your experience”; as in tech horrors such as *The Ring*, your mobile plays a significant role in what unfolds. “All of the things I make come from making your phone do things you didn't realise it could do,” he explains. “*The Devil's Sound* is an audio experience and headphones enclose you in that experience. But there's also 360-degree immersion in that the world is there around you, but we're in charge of what you hear.”

As in the novels, the passing of time is also an important factor. “How the past impacts on the present is recurrent in folk horror, and I'm also interested in how we can displace you within the story itself,” explains Abba. “How and why you can become unmoored from the here and now and how we can make you suspend your disbelief. But how we do that is going to have to wait until the series is out.”





WRITER EXCLUSIVE

# Strange Tales

Skybound's **Super Creepshow** brings out the dark side of heroes **WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL**

SPINNING OUT OF LAST YEAR'S *Super Creepshow Special* one-shot, Skybound Entertainment are now releasing a five-issue miniseries, featuring superheroic flavoured scary strips inspired by Greg Nicotero's small-screen revival of the 1982 anthology film, starting in issue one with horror riffs on two of Marvel and DC's most iconic characters.

Admitting that he had "a lot of fun writing the bookends, he's a fun guy" (referring to *Creepshow* host *The Creep*), Kieron Gillen describes his 10-pager as "a lovely, creepy little story that was born of me waking up and thinking, 'I wonder what would happen if [*Children Of Time* author] Adrian Tchaikovsky got asked to reboot Spider-Man and was in a particularly bad mood?'"

Pitching it as "Spider-Man meets David Cronenberg's *The Fly*", Gillen is tapping into the deep-seated fear of creepy crawlies. "There's a panel in Steve Ditko's original *Spider-Man* where he's moving up a wall and a woman says how disgusting she finds him and how he moves," he says. "That made me think of how you can't really ever get Spider-Man working in a still medium in that mode because, like spiders, so much of what triggers arachnophobia is movement. We can never understand why people in New York find Spider-Man creepy."

In Gillen's words, "the vibe is very different, as this is very 1970s, *Dazed & Confused*, realistic, messy, drug-taking teens and our lead is a loser, bunking off school to take drugs with his crush", and he says artist Rossi Gifford expertly captures the dramatic shift in tone. "One half is like a seedy Archie with all the filters, and then the horror erupts and there's a disruption to reality."

Insisting that it's "an incredible coincidence," Ryan North's "Speed Freak" demonstrates the consequences of super-speed and is published the same month that he takes over scripting DC's *Fastest Man Alive*. "It was conceived and written before I'd even been asked to write *Flash*," he says. "So for a while, I had a

lot of thinking to do about super-speed, but luckily, *Flash* isn't a horror comic, so the ideas I had for this comic didn't conflict with the ideas I might want to use there. Rest assured 'Speed Freak' is definitely horror, and it's also completely disgusting!"

According to North "like all the best horror stories, it has a definite ending", and is self-contained. "A little taste of a power fantasy gone horribly wrong," he adds. "The story is about a heavily bullied young man who discovers one day he has speed powers and how he uses them to make the world a better place. But it's very hard to resist the chance for a little comeuppance while he's at it..."

Having previously collaborated with him on *Star Trek: Lower Decks*, North specifically requested artist Derek Charm. "He has a style that's very clean and classic - almost animated in simplicity, which really suits a story like this," he says. "It puts you at ease, situating you in a tidy universe where nothing could possibly go wrong - until it does." ●

*Super Creepshow* is out on 18 March.



Derek Charm's variant cover art for issue one.



If fairy tales are maps to the imagination, and our memories really our own,

are you sure you've never walked this way before?



'Eerie, erotic and engrossing. A masterpiece of folkloric horror' Kealan Patrick Burke

With *The Devil's Sound* occurring between *Scratch Moss* and *Twisted Pike*, the latter book ominously returns to the village of Withered Hill itself. "Twisted Pike sort of brings things together," says Barnett. "Each book is a standalone novel, but there are clues in each one that tell the reader they're all connected. *Twisted Pike* is kind of a reward for people who've stuck with the series, as it ties everything together and is an ending of sorts. But what does it mean to blow the whole world wide open? We shall see..." ●

*The Devil's Sound* is on [Kickstarter](#) now and will be released in July. *Scratch Moss* is out 5 March and *Twisted Pike* is out 1 October.

Let's all have a good squint at David Barnett's book shelves!

**SCI-FACT!** Future contributors include Gerry Duggan, Marv Wolfman, James Harren, Michele Rubini, Brandon Thomas and Juann Cabal.



Arco crash-lands from the future and is rescued by Iris.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

# Rainbow Connection

Director Ugo Bienvenu on his Oscar-nominated time-travel animation **Arco** WORDS: MATT MAYTUM

➔ “HONESTLY, I WAS LIKE, ‘OH FUCK, it’s a time-travel movie,’” says Ugo Bienvenu, the director and co-writer of Oscar-nominated animated feature *Arco*. “It’s the worst scenario ever for a script writer. First of all, I thought I was writing a science-fiction movie but in fact, it appeared to me that I was also doing a fantasy movie and that I could use fantasy vocabulary, too.”

The French filmmaker and polymath is telling Red Alert about the rainbow road to *Arco*, his ambitious yet delightful feature debut. “Then [I realised] that I was doing an adventure movie too, and that I was doing a

romcom too, and a comedy sometimes,” he adds. “So I could play with all these genres.”

If it’s starting to sound overly complex, there’s an elegant simplicity to this family-friendly story, which sees Arco, a 10-year-old boy from the far-flung future, travelling back to 2075, where he befriends a young girl named Iris, and finds humanity in peril. He also has to avoid a group of conspiracy theorists determined to prove that time travellers are arriving through rainbow arcs.

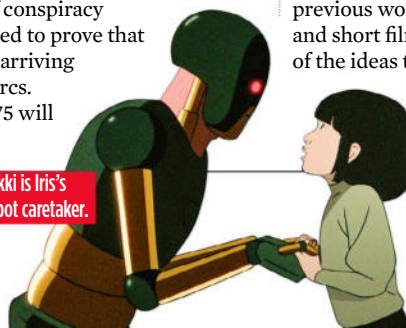
Though this 2075 will be recognisable to

present-day viewers, there have been some technological advances, including hologram video calls, hover-scooters, and robot nannies such as Iris’s primary guardian, Mikki.

“I hate the movies that lie to me since I was a kid, and I didn’t want to lie to the kids today and to their parents,” explains Bienvenu. “Let’s be honest, we live in Iris’s world [now]. I just made things a little bit bigger than they are now, but I took the embryos that are in our reality.” Though this is – remarkably – Bienvenu’s first feature, he has dabbled in science fiction in his previous work, which includes comic books and short films. He found that, worryingly, all of the ideas that he put into his books were coming true in reality.

“In a way, since the ‘50s, science fiction [has] produced

Mikki is Iris’s robot caretaker.





Arco travels back to 2075.



The film tells of a world impacted by climate change.



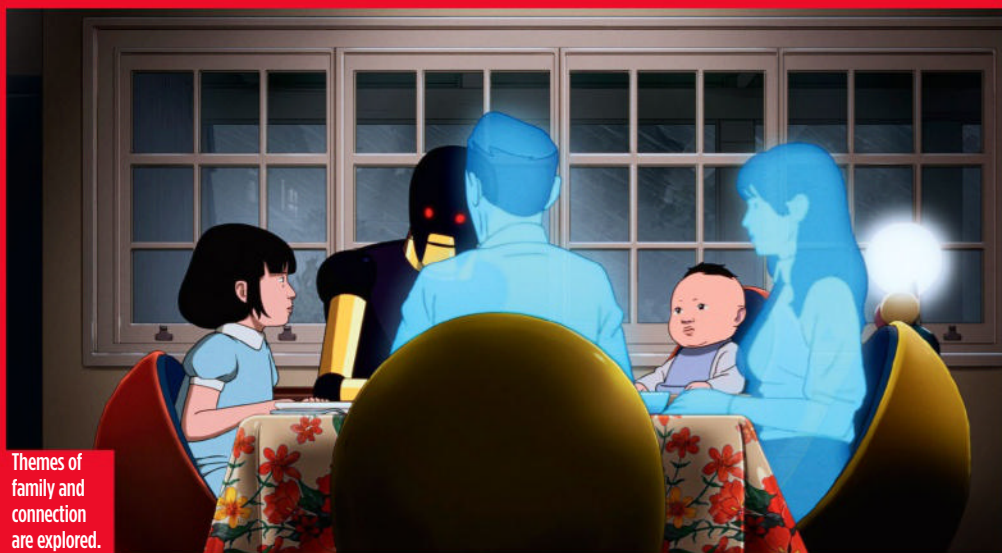
Director and co-writer Ogu Bienvenu.

Rainbow suits allow people to time travel.

# Red Alert



“In a way, since the '50s, science fiction has produced the world we live in right now”



Themes of family and connection are explored.

the world we live in right now,” he says. “I said, ‘Maybe it’s our responsibility now, if you want better things to happen, to imagine them first.’” One of Bienvenu’s gateways to sci-fi was Philip K Dick, but he now finds that he can no longer handle the anxiety levels in Dick’s books. “One of the best authors ever, not just in science fiction, is Clifford D Simak,” he says. “That’s why I called the friend of Iris ‘Clifford’... I love this author so much because he’s the only one who writes with nature.”

In Bienvenu’s fantasy-inflected vision, Arco’s family can time travel by flying through the air in billowing rainbow capes. There’s not a flux capacitor or quantum theory in sight, to the initial chagrin of at least one financier, who wanted the film to explain its method. Not wanting a boring exposition dump, Bienvenu told this person, “If you can explain to me right now how your phone works, I will explain to you how the time travelling works,”

so he was like, ‘Okay, I give up.’ But it was intense fighting for this.”

Arco initially sprang from sketches Bienvenu did while his producing partner and co-writer Félix de Givry began writing the screenplay in tandem. Eventually, a rough animatic – approximately 45 minutes of animated storyboards – was created to try to convince investors of the film’s potential. It was thanks to the involvement of Natalie Portman (with whom Bienvenu shares an agent) and her production company MountainA that the animatic could continue to be fleshed out into what would eventually become the finished feature. Portman’s involvement also helped secure a knockout voice cast for the English-language dub, which includes Mark Ruffalo, Will Ferrell and Andy Samberg, as well as Portman herself.

The 2D animation is visually stunning, and Bienvenu is justly proud that it has all been

created by hand, including painstaking work on the multicolour capes. “It’s all hand drawn,” he says. “Every frame in the movie is hand drawn.” Though they’d sometimes use 3D sculpted statues to help see characters from all angles, “that’s what [has been done] in animation since the ‘50s or the ‘30s even,” he asserts. “In fact, we really used the basics of the craft. I was telling my animators all the time, ‘If we couldn’t have done this in the ‘70s, we don’t do it.’”

Moving away from machine-honed soullessness actually ties to a core theme of the film. “The movie also speaks about [stopping] relying on numbers, because we are not concepts: we are bodies living in an actual world, in a reality. Let’s think like this and let’s build things that are made for our bodies and souls and not for things that we are not.”

Arco is in cinemas from 20 March.

**SCI-FACT!** The main characters’ names come from the Spanish for rainbow: arcoiris. “I was so happy... it gave us the two parts,” says Bienvenu.

**AUTHOR EXCLUSIVE**

# Sans Comics

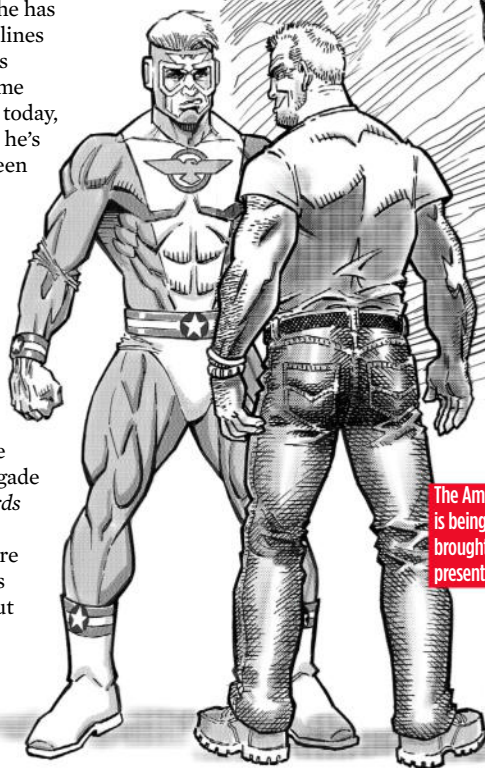
**Legends Of Indie Comics: Words Only** adds Walt Simonson and Mark Wheatley for its second volume **WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL**

**AFTER LAST YEAR'S DEBUT** volume, *Legends Of Indie Comics: Words Only* is back for a second instalment, combining returning creators such as Mike Baron and Joe Staton – albeit with different characters in Nexus and E-Man respectively – with newcomers including Howard Chaykin and *Faust's* David Quinn.

Having previously focused on ninja warrior Whisper, Steven Grant this time turns to 1989's more obscure Twilight Man, although he has resisted expanding on any leftover plotlines about the magic warrior Mick Kincaid's mission to defend humanity against some warlike gods. "I've written him as he is today, in roughly real time and the challenges he's facing now, hinting at the things he's been through in the meantime," explains Grant. "I've realised that I can't really envisage returning to the character again after this, so it's become the final Twilight Man story. In the first *Words Only*, I resurrected a much better known character, Whisper, and used the opportunity to fill in a blank area of her history, and this time I've used it to end a story."

With his exploits seeming even more topical in the 12 months since the renegade super-soldier appeared in the first *Words Only*, Mark Verheiden is continuing to chronicle *The American's* life in the here and now. "The last *American* series was around 1992, so it's been challenging but fun bringing that character, aged appropriately, into the present day," he says. "Both my stories involve a reawakening of a long dormant heroism, which is very different to the original comics as they were all about losing his faith in blind patriotism. I loved all the artists who contributed to *The American* back in the day, especially Chris Warner, who created the look of the characters, but this new incarnation goes without the costume or pyrotechnics and so I felt comfortable doing them in prose."

Admitting that he "tends to think visually", Walt Simonson struggled to capture space mercenaries Star Slammers without the aid of



The American is being brought into present day.

any pictures. "Even though I included one character I'd written and drawn before, I found it difficult to grab hold of a central idea that I could make into a prose story, although I finally managed it with a great deal of help from Weezie," he says, referring to his wife, the writer Louise Simonson,

"My characters are with me always, like the voices of old friends," adds Mark Wheatley,



A Frankenstein Mobster illo by Mark Wheatley.

**"I've written him as he is today, hinting at things he's been through"**

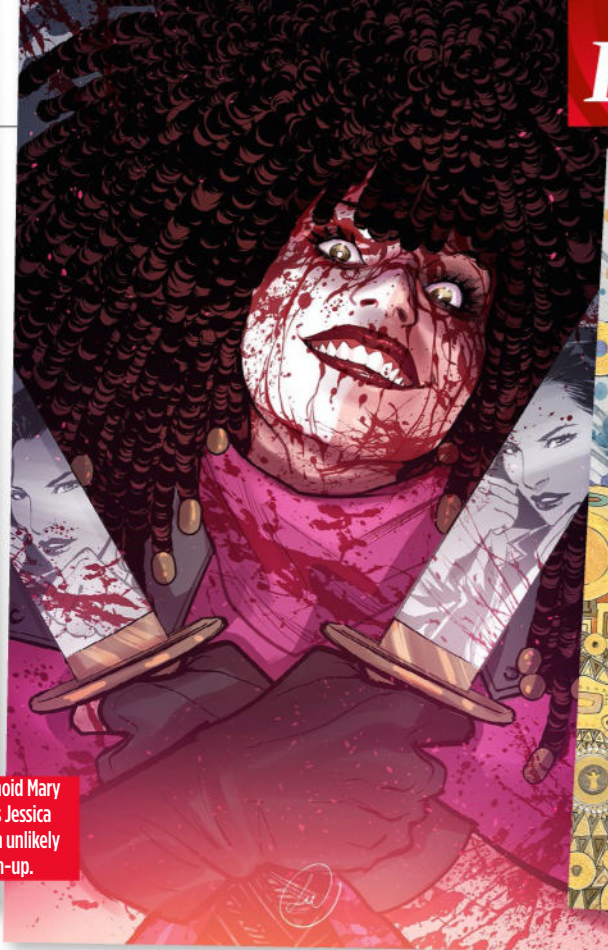
who is also working on a *Frankenstein Mobster* novel. "Prose allows for more of an inner voice, so we are deeper into the heads of the characters."

Meanwhile, Jan Strnad took advantage of Dennis Fujitake's absence to play with readers' expectations, allowing you to form your own visuals. "For a few sentences, the writer appears to inform while actually misleading," he teases. "The deception will be uncovered sooner or later, hopefully to the delight of the reader. It's only a paragraph, but it propels the emotional journey that Dal undertakes in the ensuing pages. It could have been a comic story but *Words Only* is the perfect form." ●

*Legends Of Indie Comics: Words Only Volume 2 is out on 31 March.*



Typhoid Mary joins Jessica in an unlikely team-up.



# Red Alert

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

# Jones Jubilee

Jessica Jones celebrates her 25th anniversary with her bloodiest case yet in **Alias: Red Band**

WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL

WITH 2026 MARKING two and a half decades since Brian Michael Bendis and Michael Gaydos first introduced Jessica Jones in 2001's *Alias* issue one, the failed superhero turned private investigator is returning in a new five-parter. Emulating the original title's publication under Marvel's long-defunct mature readers Max imprint, it will be polybagged as part of the similarly graphic Red Band line.

"The words 'Red Band' are on the cover and suddenly there's blood everywhere she turns," laughs writer Sam Humphries, who is marking Jessica's 25th anniversary by throwing her into her darkest case yet.

"I'm commemorating that milestone with something that harks back to her origins, but with a few surprise twists," he continues. "We've never seen Jessica in a horror-inflected story, and we've never seen her engage with a hallmark of crime stories – a partner."

With a sequence of grisly murders in Hell's Kitchen, Jessica forms an unholy pact with Daredevil's arch-enemy Typhoid Mary as she attempts to track the killer down. "Jessica is one of the coolest characters in the Marvel Universe as she's controlled, sharp and cutting, while Mary is none of those things," teases Humphries. "She's uncontrollable, prone to violence, and loves to laugh at her own jokes. They're like oil and water, and I'm having a blast writing them

together and trying to keep them from killing each other."

You can also expect Jessica's husband Luke Cage, sometime Power Man and current mayor of New York, to make an appearance, setting the stage for them both to play a pivotal role in some unspecified future events. "This book explores the difficulties Jessica faces trying to fit into the model of a 'first lady,'" continues Humphries. "That conflict pushes Jess and Luke apart, and Jess finds herself straying – quite dramatically – from the straight and narrow, with big consequences for both of them."

As for other familiar faces, Humphries confirms, "We absolutely do see some, but to say anything more would be spoilers," before adding, "Do you have a guess?" – perhaps alluding to a certain horn-headed resident of that neighbourhood.

Jessica Jones has headlined her own Netflix show, been the subject of Lisa Jewell's 2025 Marvel

Crime novel *Breaking Dark*, and is now guest-starring in *Daredevil: Born Again* season two, and the 48-year-old Humphries credits her as one of the few iconic Marvel characters that have been created in his lifetime. "If you get the chance to write them, you say, 'Hell yeah!'" he says. "She and I both look as young as we did 25 years ago, so this is a natural fit!"

Stating that "this is the first Marvel book I've ever worked on where me and the artist get to nerd out about José Muñoz," – referring to the legendary Argentinian illustrator who influenced Frank Miller – Humphries is enjoying working with Geraldo Borges. "Geraldo is also a huge fan of the Bendis/Gaydos run and we're having fun playing with that vibe and adding our own takes," he adds. "He's got a great sense of character emotions, dark shadows and unsettling scenes." ●

*Alias: Red Band* is out on 11 March.



25 years on from her comic debut, Jessica Jones is back.

**SCI-FACT!** Bendis first developed her as Jessica Drew returning to her detective roots, before turning her into an original character.



DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

# Beaver Fever

Director Daniel Chong on why you should give a dam about Pixar's **Hoppers** WORDS: MATT MAYTUM



put these robot animals into nature. They have cameras in their eyes and it's their way of getting close to animals. It's funny too, because there's so much tension watching them because you're wondering, when is the animal gonna figure it out? When are they going to kick it over or rip it apart?"

→ WHEN DIRECTOR Daniel Chong was invited to pitch at Pixar, he knew he had to bring three potential ideas to the table (he'd previously worked at the animation studio as a story artist before going off to create Cartoon Network's *We Bare Bears* and its spin-off movie). His third idea was the least developed. "I knew it was gonna get a laugh, but I wasn't taking it seriously myself," he tells Red Alert. "I remember the people running development [saying], 'Do not pitch it if you don't want to do this

movie!' I was like, 'They're not gonna pick it.' Then, here we are, six years later, they actually picked it!"

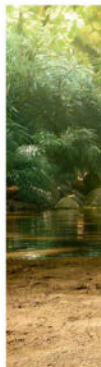
The premise of Pixar's latest original – the studio's 30th feature, which arrives 30 years after *Toy Story* landed in the UK – is a doozy. Rebellious animal lover Mabel (voiced by Piper Curda) gets her hand on tech that allows her consciousness to pilot a robotic beaver. You can see why *Avatar* was used as a reference point, but it wasn't where the original idea sprung from. "We

definitely weren't chasing anything else within the movie other than the idea that you go into a synthetic body," explains Chong. "That is probably the most obvious thing. But everything else around it was different influences and different movies and different trajectories that we wanted the movie to have. But [*Avatar*] became a really nice shorthand, though, to get people to understand the concept."

Instead, the kernel of the idea first came to Chong from "these nature documentaries where they

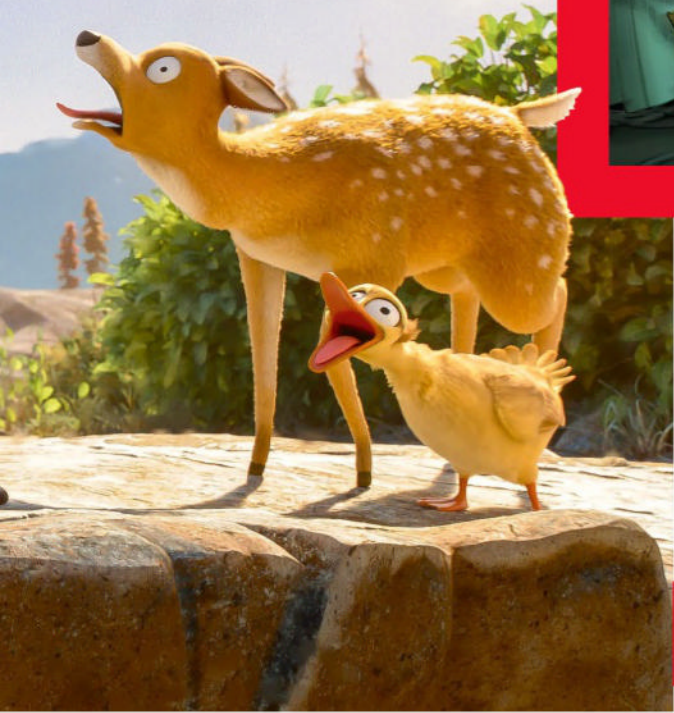
In *Hoppers*, Mabel gets to know Beaver King (Bobby Moynihan), the leader of a pond where all manner of species live in relative harmony ("When you gotta eat, eat"). However, an arrogant mayor (Jon Hamm) looks set to destroy their habitat with his plans to build a highway. From there, the film takes on another unexpected influence – *Mission: Impossible*.

"To me, the fun deviation [after the *Avatar* parallel] is that it is kind of like a spy movie where you're going into the animal world



“If it helps people learn to love nature a bit more, then great”

Avatar meets Mission: Impossible? We're in.



Hoppers contains quite the ensemble cast.

undercover,” smiles Chong. “So it felt like that was the nice, interesting pivot. We play in all these kinds of *Mission: Impossible* spy movie tropes, but in ways that you weren’t expecting... There’s a lot of feelings of a spy movie that we recognise, but in a totally refabricated way.”

Researching the film involved a trip to Yellowstone and studying beavers via Zoom calls with a zoo (production began during the pandemic), which fed into the film itself. “They slap the water to get rid of predators, that’s in the movie,” says Chong. “The way that they chew and build the dam and

the placement of the logs, our sets team and our animators and our story artists were very particular about that. Hopefully, the beaver experts will agree.”

But despite being grounded in that way, the animation style has a uniquely cute look all of its own. “It didn’t come easy,” explains Chong. “A lot of it stems from my aesthetic for certain levels of charm and earnestness in design. The second thing is, working in CG for the first time, I wanted the audience to be able to reach out and hug these characters and to feel their textures and to feel the depth within the space in the movie.”

Chong and the team didn’t want hyperreal fur and instead developed “this kind of felt, kind of pseudo fur-ish look... It almost feels like stop-motion, almost”. From there, the world was built around it so that it would match. “The trees can’t be photorealistic trees, but we can find ways to

texture the trees so it feels like a tree, but there are different things going on with it.”

To return to *Avatar*, James Cameron’s films are often interpreted as having a strong environmental message, but Chong doesn’t see that at the forefront of *Hoppers*. “If it helps people learn to love animals and nature a little bit more, that’s great. But really, first and foremost, this movie is a fun action comedy that people are going to hopefully laugh at.” He also points to themes of connection and coexistence that he hopes will be felt by audiences laughing along together in the communal space of the cinema. Anything else is a bonus. “If it makes us also be a little kinder to each other as people, because we’re all connected in that ecosystem? Yeah, I’ll take that.” ●

*Hoppers is in cinemas from 6 March.*



Beaver Mabel (left) with Loaf (Eduardo Franco).



Piper Curda’s Mabel is a very Pixar-esque heroine.



Nature meets future tech – and then the fur flies.

**SCI-FACT!** Originally, *Hoppers* was going to be about penguins, until Pixar CCO Peter Docter encouraged Chong to go in a different direction.

Kate McKinnon's lone pilot, Coakley.



“I loved how rebelliously positive the script was”

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

# Time After Time

Pixar legend Andrew Stanton dips back into live action with **In The Blink Of An Eye** WORDS: TARA BENNETT



ANDREW STANTON MIGHT BE best known for writing and directing Pixar classics like *Finding Nemo*, *WALL-E* and *Finding Dory*, or this summer's *Toy Story 5*, but he's also got a robust live action resume, too. He has directed episodes of *Stranger Things*, *Legion* and *For All Mankind* and his first feature was 2012's *John Carter*. He's finally made a second, *In The Blink Of An Eye*, an original sci-fi epic about the threads that connect humanity across eons.

Based on writer Colby Day's (*Spaceman*) 2016 The Black List ranked script, Stanton tells Red Alert that after his Beatles film *Revolver*

got no traction during years of development, his agent sent him a pile of scripts in 2019, including *In The Blink Of An Eye*.

"I couldn't put it down," Stanton remembers.

"The thing that I loved about his script is how rebelliously positive it was. It's like, 'What if [humans] did everything just right? What if we're stumbling through, making a lot of mistakes, but we're doing just enough right that we're still here, and we keep doing that?' That's what came across to me reading it, and what I wanted in the film to come across.

"I immediately called up Colby," Stanton continues. "I sensed it needed a couple more

rewrites, and we collaborated really well." Searchlight funded it in 2022 for a streaming release, and it went into production summer 2023, bumping right into Stanton directing *Toy Story 5*, with both features releasing in 2026.

Structured around a trio of familial stories, one depicts a nomadic Neanderthal family in 46,000 BCE, another is about a prickly doctorate student (Rashida Jones) balancing new love and grief, while the last is set in 2417 CE with a lone human pilot (Kate McKinnon) travelling on a mission with only her AI voice assistant, Rosco (Rhona Rees).

Greg and Claire celebrate New Year's Eve in the year 2030.





Four different actors play V (left) as she ages.



Jones's Claire: working hard or hardly working?



Director Andrew Stanton shares his vision.



Jones with Daveed Diggs as couple Claire and Greg.



The film's first act focuses on a Neanderthal family.

While the film opens with a beautiful, animated prologue depicting evolution created by Wētā FX, *Blink* is distinctly low-fi while encompassing familiar Stanton themes such as space, love, lush music (Thomas Newton here) and tissue-worthy interactions.

"I did this show in 2019 called *Tales From The Loop* and we literally were like, 'We're gonna try and do slow cinema. We're gonna try and do Tarkovsky,'" Stanton explains. "I never thought into my wildest dreams that I would get to do something so erudite and educated and cinematic and slow – and I loved it. So when I read *In The Blink Of An Eye*, it just felt similar. It felt like a tone poem. It read like an aria to me. It didn't follow a three-act structure. It followed the structure of life. I just got it. I said, 'I would love to see something like this, and I don't care if anybody else doesn't.'"

As *Blink* unfolds across time, Stanton and his editor Mollie Goldstein (*Hot Water*) connect the stories not through events, but through

emotional beats that parallel to what's happening in the lives of the characters investing the audience in all three stories. As such, Stanton says casting was key, and he started with the space-set story and the pilot Coakley.

"You do the armchair casting forever," Stanton says. "We said, 'Kate as Claire?' which is Rashida's character. I said, 'I don't see it.' Then I suddenly went, 'Wait a minute. It would be so against instinct casting-wise to give her this Coakley role.' It suddenly hit me that she could be my Chauncey Gardner," he says, referencing Peter Sellers' classic role in *Being There*. "I basically explained it to her that way; that was my pitch."

From there, they cast Jones, Daveed Diggs and Jorge Vargas. "We wanted it to feel very universal. We didn't want it to lean in any direction," Stanton explains. "Even in the Neanderthal casting, we made sure that we

were playing off the strengths of the original ethnicity of the people that we cast."

The result is a film that Stanton says was worth the wait to make. "I felt the same way about *John Carter* and *WALL-E*, which just shows that you can't predict how it's going to be received," he chuckles. "But I wouldn't change a thing. I felt like I had a tree house club of people that I would work again with in a heartbeat. Hopefully I can because this matched as close as anything else what my mind's eye pictured when I read the script, and that's really all you're trying to do, in the same way that you have a tune in your head and you just need to get it out. I'm very lucky that I've had the opportunity to do that several times, and I hopefully I'll get to do it again in live action." ●

*In The Blink Of An Eye* is on Hulu and Disney+ worldwide from 27 February.

**▶ SCI-FACT!** Rosco, the AI voice, was performed live on set by Rhona Rees so she could riff and improv in real time with Kate McKinnon.

→ Sigourney Weaver, Jason Isaacs and Paterson Joseph join Prime Video's new **Tomb Raider** series, showrun by Phoebe Waller-Bridge. Sophie Turner heads the cast as Lara Croft, rocking a look indebted to the relic-hunting icon's classic '90s design.



Your first look at Sophie Turner as the new Lara Croft.



God Of War is one step closer to TV.

→ Mandy Patinkin is Odin in Prime Video's **Gods Of War** series. Joining him in Ronald D Moore's live-action videogame adaptation are Ólafur Darri Ólafsson as Thor and Alastair Duncan as Mimir.

→ Diane Lane joins Mike Flanagan's new entry in **The Exorcist** saga, joining Scarlett Johansson and Jacobi Jupe. Heads will spin 12 March 2027.

→ Scoob and Shaggy get an anime makeover in new 'toon series **Scooby-Doo! Gokko**.

→ Léa Seydoux joins Mikey Madison in a new adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe's **The Masque Of The Red Death**. Reportedly a darkly comic take, it's directed by *The Plague's* Charlie Polinger.

→ The eighth instalment of the **Paranormal Activity** franchise arrives 21 May 2027.

→ Teagan Croft is Rapunzel and Milo Manheim is Flynn Rider in Disney's live-action **Tangled** remake, directed by *The Greatest Showman's* Michael Gracey from a script by *I Know What You Did Last Summer's* Jennifer Kaytin Robinson.

→ Sam Raimi confirms that there's a new **Darkman** movie in development at Ghost House Pictures, set to be helmed by Brian Netto and Adam Schindler. "We've got a screenplay and two great directors, but we're still having a little difficulty with the financing," shares Sam the Man. "It's always the same in the movie business."

→ The coin has officially flipped! Sebastian Stan is confirmed to play Harvey Dent – Gotham City DA turned disfigured supervillain Two-Face – in **The Batman: Part II**. He joins Robert Pattinson and Scarlett Johansson in the Matt Reeves-helmed sequel.

→ Netflix has renewed Charlie Brooker's **Black Mirror** for an eighth season of technological shudders.

→ *Doctor Who* and *The Last Of Us* director Peter Hoar is teaming with *Being Human* producer Matthew Bouch on a proposed reboot of **Blake's 7**.

→ *Springsteen: Deliver Me From Nowhere's* Scott Cooper is set to

write and direct a movie based on the alleged 1947 UFO crash in **Roswell**, New Mexico. No word on whether it's titled *Weather Balloon, My Ass!*

→ *Birds Of Prey* and *Bumblebee* writer Christina Hodson will script **The Brave And The Bold**, introducing Batman and the Damian Wayne incarnation of Robin to James Gunn's DCU. *The Flash's* Andy Muschietti remains attached to direct.

→ **Godzilla Minus Zero** roars into cinemas on 6 November.

→ *KPop Demon Hunters'* screenwriting tag-team Danya Jimenez and Hannah McMechan will pen **Attack Of The Fifty Foot**

**Woman** for Tim Burton, reimagining 1958's drive-in classic.

→ **The Conjuring: First Communion** opens in cinemas on 10 September 2027.

→ There's a seventh **Evil Dead** movie on its way, directed by Francis Galluppi and starring Charlotte Hope and Zach Gilford.

→ Apple TV is set to bring Brandon Sanderson's **Cosmere** novels to the screen. The Mistborn series will receive the big-screen treatment; *The Stormlight Archive* is earmarked for TV. Sanderson himself will reportedly write, produce, consult and doubtless throw fistfuls of dollar bills into the air.



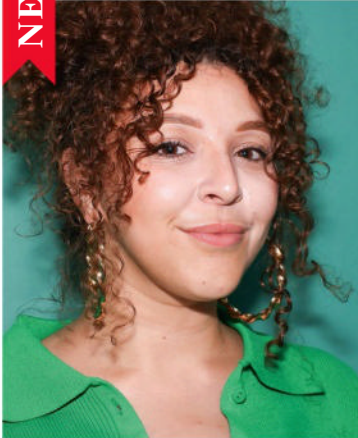
Get ready for **Godzilla Minus Zero**.

**SCI-FACT!** Janet Fielding played Tegan on-screen again in 1985 and 2022, and acted against Sylvester McCoy in his audition for the Doctor.

NEW AUTHOR

## SORAYA BOUAZZAQUI

MEET THE COMMISSIONING EDITOR BEHIND "FEMALE RAGE FANTASY" AICHA



CAROLINE BAPTISTA

### Tell us about your protagonist.

→ Aicha is inspired by the old myth of Aicha Qandicha; a succubus and boogeyman in Morocco. Her origin dates back to the Portuguese colonisation of the Moroccan coast, when she was a rebel. In my book, Aicha's story is of what her life is like leading up to the moment she becomes a succubus.

### How does the setting compare to the real-world Morocco?

→ The citadel Aicha lives in is inspired by the port city El Jadida, which was a Portuguese territory. Some of the walls of the port city are still intact, and visitors can still visit the cistern at its heart.



### How long did it take to write?

→ Around two years! The first draft was very short. I was a bit stuck in keeping to the myth, which is very short and orally told. The world-building expanded, then so did the subplots of espionage and Aicha's family.

### Is there a social/political theme?

→ Morocco's history is steeped in violent resistance against several colonial powers; Portugal, France, Spain and even the Umayyad Caliphate. It's an integral piece of our history that has preserved elements of our culture.

### Got any advice for would-be authors?

→ The first book you write doesn't have to be the first you publish! Let yourself write a book, then shelve it, scrap the idea and salvage elements for a new one. Writing doesn't have to be linear.

*Aicha is out on 24 March, from Orbit.*

## Thames Terror ↗

It's only taken 45 years - yes, just think about that! - but there's finally an action figure of TARDIS traveller Tegan Jovanka and she's looking happier than we've ever seen her. Maybe it's the destroyed Dalek she's packaged with, maybe it's the large gun. Classic Mel next, please! **Visit [character-online.com](http://character-online.com)**



## ↖ For The Record

As part of the restoration of *The Curse Of Frankenstein*, Hammer Films has curated 13 minutes of original music from the movie (with the original session recordings being long lost). This new EP marks the first time for the score on vinyl worldwide, and the first in a new series of soundtracks from Hammer. **Visit [hammerfilms.com](http://hammerfilms.com)**

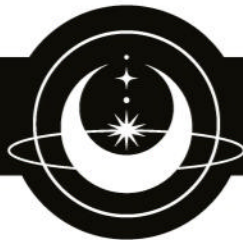


## The Book Of Life ↗

Good news if you're a fan of films like *El Topo* and *Santa Sangre* and are absolutely loaded. Taschen's latest lavish Collector's Edition, *Alejandro Jodorowsky: Art Sin Fin*, celebrates the maverick Chilean director in two volumes, presented in a plexiglass box. One features collages, drawings and rare archival photos; the other collects his reflections and confessions. Price? £1,250! More affordable editions will hopefully follow... **Visit [taschen.com](http://taschen.com)**



## THE FINAL



## FRONTIER

# SAL BUSCEMA 1936-2026

## Remembering one of the Marvel greats

WORDS: NICK SETCHFIELD



Buscema has left his mark on the Marvel Universe.



“I WAS THE BIG GUY ON the block because my brother drew comic books,” recalled Brooklyn-born Sal Buscema, who would himself become one of the defining artists of the Bronze Age of comics.

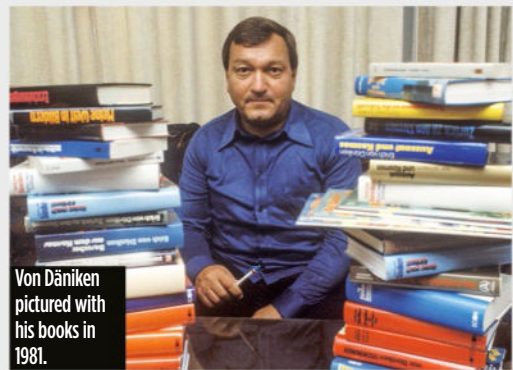
Brother John was eight years senior and not only an influence on Sal’s future calling, but a gateway into the industry. The younger Buscema made his professional debut finishing John’s backgrounds on an issue of *Roy Rogers* for Dell Publications. Graduating from New York’s High School of Music and Art in 1955, he pursued a career in advertising before returning to his “first love”, comics, in the late ‘60s, inspired by John’s success at Marvel.

Two inking jobs – a Western, “The Coming Of Gunhawk”, and *Silver Surfer* issue four, drawn by his brother – were followed by pencilling on *The Avengers*. Stan Lee championed his clean, kinetic style, but Buscema found the transition from commercial

illustration tricky, feeling he had to relearn comic book technique. “It took me another five years before I really felt comfortable with what I was doing,” he remembered.

One of the true Marvel workhorses, Buscema went on to tackle just about every major player in the company’s colourful pantheon. He enjoyed lengthy stints on *The Spectacular Spider-Man* and *The Incredible Hulk*, considering the latter some of his best work: “I never tired of the character. I never tired of the possibilities.” Other notable titles included *The Defenders*, *Marvel Team-Up* and toy tie-in *Rom: Spaceknight*. Buscema jumped to rival DC in the late ‘90s, pencilling *Batman*, *Superman* and *Superboy*, but returned to Marvel to ink *Spider-Girl* in the ‘00s.

Modestly considering himself “at best a decent storyteller”, he still took pride in his accomplishments. “Comic books are not usually hung in museums but my work is in the Smithsonian thanks to *Spider-Man*.” ●



Von Däniken pictured with his books in 1981.

RDB/DUKAS/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP VIA GETTY

### ERICH VON DÄNIKEN 1935-2026

⦿ Straddling the fine line between pseudoscience and science fiction, Swiss author Eric von Däniken popularised the Ancient Astronaut theory, arguing that human civilisation has been shaped by extraterrestrial visitation.

Raised as a Roman Catholic, von Däniken rejected his upbringing to pursue an interest in UFOs. He sold a feature on paleo-contact to *Der Nord-Westen* magazine in 1964, then expanded that premise in 1968’s bestselling *Chariots Of The Gods?*, written while managing a hotel in Switzerland.

Feeding the paranormal fascination of the ‘70s, von Däniken mined a profitable seam of woo-woo with such further titles as *Gods From Outer Space* and *The Gold Of The Gods*. William Shatner narrated 1976 documentary *Mysteries Of The Gods*, while a comics series launched in 1978.

A controversial figure who did jail time for fraud and embezzlement, von Däniken nevertheless made a mark on the world of SF, his influence felt in everything from *The Eternals* to *Stargate* and *Prometheus*.

### ROGER ALLERS 1949-2026

⦿ Co-director of *The Lion King*, Roger Allers was one of the key figures in the renaissance of Disney’s animation division in the ‘90s.

Born in Rye in New York, but raised in Prescott, Arizona, Allers was inspired by seeing *Peter Pan* at the age of five. Joining Lisberger Studios, he worked on *Animlympics* and created pre-production art for *Tron*. He was also an animator on *Rock & Rule*.

Contributing to *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty And The Beast* and *Aladdin*, he graduated to co-director with Rob Minkoff on *The Lion King*, bringing emotional depth to the story. He went on to co-write the libretto for the Broadway version.

Later credits include Oscar-nominated short “The Little Matchgirl” and Sony’s *Open Season*, both released in 2006.

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THE BRIDE!

IT'S TAKEN OVER 90 YEARS, BUT FINALLY HERE COMES **'THE BRIDE!**, AS MAGGIE GYLLENHAAL GIVES NEW LIFE – AND A VOICE – TO ONE OF UNIVERSAL HORROR'S MOST ICONIC CREATIONS FOR A FEMINIST, PUNK ROCK TALE OF AMOUR FOU

WORDS:  
IAN BERRIMAN

# SHIVERS

THE BRIDE!

# ANNIVERSARY!



Ida's corpse is revived in Dr Euphronius's laboratory.

EVERY OCCASIONALLY, THE alchemy of cinema can create an icon for the ages in just a few fleeting moments of screen time. That's certainly what happened back in 1935, when Universal released James Whale's sequel to his take on *Frankenstein*, which sees the over-reaching scientist's mentor, Dr Pretorius, encouraging him to create a mate for the Monster (Boris Karloff).

From the moment their creation (played by Elsa Lanchester) is unveiled in full, resplendent in her white dress and electric-shock hairdo, to the moment she perishes in a deluge of masonry as – having been rejected by his would-be “Bride” – the Monster blows up Henry Frankenstein's laboratory, only around two minutes and 50 seconds pass. Yet the best part of a century later she's still an instantly recognisable piece of pop culture; still an off-the-peg Halloween costume. Now, in her second outing as a writer/director, Maggie

Gyllenhaal is throwing a giant knife switch to bring the Bride shuddering back to life.

In her take on the story, set in 1936, the undying Frankenstein (played by Christian Bale) has walked the Earth alone for over a century, and ended up in Chicago. (Yes, *Frankenstein* – early on, in an elegantly simple fix, the Monster explains: “It's my father's name”. So don't write in...) Now he approaches Annette Bening's “mad scientist” Dr Euphronius to create the partner he yearns for. Together they dig up and revive the corpse of Ida, a dead escort played by Jessie Buckley.

At first, all goes swimmingly, with the amnesiac Ida accepting the deception that they're a loving couple whose relationship was only temporarily interrupted

by death. Then, after the two are set-up in the street, Frankenstein snaps, unleashing terrible violence – and is caught in the act by a photographer. What follows is a gothic riff on lovers-on-the-lam classics such as *Gun Crazy*, *Bonnie And Clyde* and *Badlands*, in which the casualties stack up as our heroes desperately struggle to stay out of the clutches of the law. It's a film possessed of tremendous brio and joie de vivre. At the same time, it is – unlike Lanchester's original Bride, mute save for an angry hiss – a film which has plenty to say.

After making her directorial debut with her 2021 Netflix movie *The Lost Daughter* (a more intimate piece), Gyllenhaal was looking for a story that would warrant “going big”. “People had been pitching





Gyllenhaal and her leads discuss a cinema scene.



Christian Bale plays "Frank"; Jessie Buckley is the Bride.

me different ideas, and nothing was sticking." Then the lightning bolt of inspiration struck. "I was at a party, and I saw a man with a tattoo on his whole forearm of the Bride of Frankenstein. And I was like... huh! It just hooked me. I saw this tattoo, and I was like, 'Have I even seen that movie? I know the image.' I was doing press in LA, and I went back to my hotel room and looked her up online. Then I watched the movie."

The fact that she hadn't seen *Bride Of Frankenstein* before gave her a fresh perspective, she thinks. "Throughout this process, the feeling of coming to something

**“Both of my monsters have violence, rage... at the same time, their needs are very human”**

new and fresh has been a part of my experience," the director says. "I came to her very open and curious, without much history attached, aside from the general way that she exists in our cultural mythology."

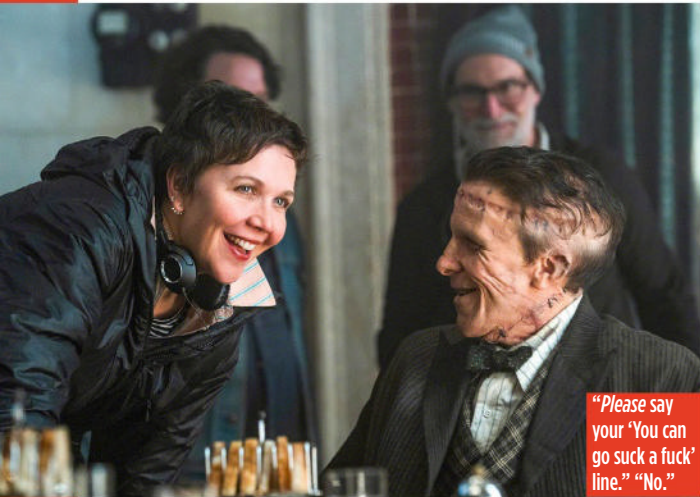
What did she find particularly striking about it? "Well, Elsa Lanchester doesn't speak, which

I found really interesting, especially when she's the titular character," she notes. "You're kind of expecting that the movie is going to be about her, and it just isn't. But then when she does come on screen, she's undeniable. She has very few actual minutes of screen time as the Bride, and yet somehow she makes this lasting impact. I think it has to do with her so clearly being disobedient and not willing to fit in a box. Like, she's just saying 'No!' from the moment she wakes up to this pretty fucked-up situation that she finds herself in."

#### EVER SO LONELY

Gyllenhaal also responded to Karloff's monster – who, in that 1935 sequel, acquires the ability to speak (albeit not with the high-flown articulacy of his counterpart in Mary Shelley's 1818 source novel). "You feel his gentleness, you feel his need," she says. "Maybe you don't feel his intelligence in quite the same way that you feel in the book. But he has such a strong need, and I think you empathise with that. I did."

Although Frankenstein acts disgracefully in deceiving Ida (whom he rechristens "Penny"), the film maintains sympathy for both of its monstrous outsiders to the bitter end. In that, Gyllenhaal is faithful to Shelley's treatment of her Creature, who's arguably more victim than villain, and shown to be capable of gentleness and love – if he could only find someone who wouldn't scream and grab a pitchfork the →



"Please say your 'You can go suck a fuck' line." "No."



Buckley was in Gyllenhaal's directorial debut too.

moment they clap eyes on him... "He's so empathetic in the book, and at the same time does terrible things," notes Gyllenhaal, whose script likewise resists passing judgement on the character. "That's the thing I'm interested in, in terms of monsters: if we are brave enough to look at ourselves, and look at the things that feel monstrous inside of us? None of us are pure monsters, but there are monstrous aspects inside of us. Both of my monsters have violence, have rage, do things that are definitely questionable, and at the same time, I think their needs are very human, and very much like ours. They want love and connection and to be understood, which I think most people can relate to – alongside the uncontrollable rage and violence that exists in all of us."

When you think about it, we suggest, this Frankenstein – who's spent over a century alone, yearning for companionship, and confesses to Dr Euphronius (after she shakes his hand) that she is the first person he's ever



Frankenstein yearns to experience a relationship.



Frankenstein and Dr Euphronius dig up Ida's body.

touched – is sort of... well, the ultimate incel? "Totally!" Gyllenhaal laughs. "I mean, in a way, yes." Not that she had said self-pitying subculture in mind when she was writing the script. But the fact there's any parallel speaks to how this classic story maintains its topicality. "That's the thing that I found interesting: here is this story that has stayed in our cultures, all over the world, for so long. We understand him, and we're meant to at least sometimes be on his side, to empathise with his need. We get it: of course he wants a mate, of course he wants a friend, of course he wants a lover. How can you possibly expect any creature to survive so alone?"

But unlike James Whale's film, Gyllenhaal's take explicitly poses the question which follows on from that. "My movie really asks, 'What about her?' That's the main question of the movie: okay, we understand your loneliness, we understand your need. But what about the woman without any agency, without any choice in the matter, and without any

## WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Why, in life, the Bride is called Ida.

For cinephiles, the first famous Ida is British-born Ida Lupino, who, as well as acting in films like *They Drive By Night* (1940) and *While The City Sleeps* (1956), was a writer, producer and director, with credits including the 1953 film noir *The Hitch-Hiker*. (She was also the only woman to helm an episode of *The Twilight Zone*.) Given that she was a trailblazer in a time when there were vanishingly few women behind the camera, was this a deliberate tribute? (The fact that the film also includes a crime lord character called Lupino certainly suggests as much...)

"To be honest with you, years ago, I had wanted to name one of my daughters Ida," Gyllenhaal confesses, "and my husband [Peter Sarsgaard, who plays a police detective in the film], when I was pushing that name, just said to me, 'Yeah, Ida rather been called something else.' I just thought it was so funny, and I laughed so hard!"

The very same gag crops up in *THE BRIDE!* "I started not even remembering that and just loving the name Ida. Then I got to the place where she needs to find her name and here's that line, which totally came from Peter, like, 20 years ago. Then Lupino being Lupino... I think unconsciously, yes, I was thinking about Ida Lupino, but it wasn't conscious."



JOHN SPRINGER COLLECTION/CORBIS/CORBIS VIA GETTY

Frank gets "Penelope"'s name tattooed on his chest.

a collection of gruesome souvenirs: jars containing tongues cut from the mouths of young women. Watching his scenes, it's hard not to think of the NDAs weaponised by creeps like Harvey Weinstein. With this in mind, we casually suggest that *THE BRIDE!* is "a #MeToo film". Gyllenhaal politely but firmly shuts that down. "I don't think it's a #MeToo film, I think that's not accurate. I think that's reductive and not correct."

For one thing, as she points out, the silencing of women's voices is not exactly a new phenomenon. "If you think about Mary Shelley, how many women – even if they were, y'know, writing under their sewing, like the Brontës or something – could get published in the 19th century? Like, five?! I know there were more than five, but very, very few. That's also the motivation for me to make this, right? I have a lot of things to say, and so does the Bride, so does Jessie, so does Annette."

We accept the point, and we certainly wouldn't want anyone to think that the words "A #MeToo Movie!" should be emblazoned above the title on the poster. But *THE BRIDE!* remains a political (with a small p) movie – at the same time as being exuberant fun. (With the two sometimes existing cheek by jowl. For example: the film's most righteous, raised fist salute-inspiring speech is immediately →

knowledge of what happened to her? That's fucked up! That's really not okay, and yet that's what happens. But with all of that brokenness, with all of that as the basis for their relationship, there's still love between them."

### SPEAK EASY

As Gyllenhaal observed, Elsa Lanchester's Bride never uttered a word. Jessie Buckley's version more than makes up for that. For reasons we can't divulge, she has a surprisingly broad vocabulary, and she regularly spits out rapid-fire streams of associated verbiage. The best way we can describe it is as a sort of Roget's Thesaurus Tourette syndrome... Gyllenhaal laughs. "I love that description, actually. That's really funny." It must have made the character enormous fun to write. How did she hit upon that voice?

"To be honest, I have someone in my life quite close to me who has Tourette's," Gyllenhaal reveals, "It's a lot of things, but I was thinking about Tourette's, because

I was hanging out with someone who has Tourette's and curious about it.

"Then I was thinking simultaneously about female expression: that if you've not been able to express yourself openly, freely, clearly, it's almost like putting a top on a geyser, when the geyser blows. Because the Bride is someone who was absolutely silenced before she was dead. She's someone who was shut up. So then when you come back to life, the geyser of all the things that have been kept down kind of blows with extra energy."

The reason *why* Ida was silenced is that she was publicly railing against Lupino (played by Zlatko Burić), a gangster who owns

“My movie really asks, ‘What about her? What about the woman without any agency?’”

## “It’s always pretty exciting trying to push the edges of what you know about the world”

preceded by a song-and-dance number.) How did she approach walking that line of having important things to say, but wrapping them in entertainment?

“I think if we’re just alive and awake in the world – maybe especially right now – and paying attention, there’s an aspect of the political in everything,” Gyllenhaal notes. “How do I balance the fun with the things that I also want to say? I think they go hand in hand, honestly. I didn’t feel like it was a push and pull.”

In the film, the Bride’s notoriety inspires female followers, described in the end credits (after one of her catchphrases) as “Brain Attack Girls”; a newspaper headline about their activities screams “Grrrl Riot” – an obvious nod to the Riot Grrrl movement of the early-’90s, an explosion of female-led punk bands. At the start of the interview, we wondered aloud whether a teenage Gyllenhaal pogoed in her bedroom to the likes of Bikini Kill’s “Rebel Girl”. She confirmed she was “always into the aesthetic”, but “maybe a little young for it”. Gyllenhaal returns to the subject now.

“It’s like you were talking about riot grrrls – they’ve got a lot to say, but it’s a fucking party, you know? It doesn’t have to be like going to school and your history class; it doesn’t have to be like reading a dry essay. I think it’s exciting and fun to explore all the things that are on my mind, while bouncing off the minds of the other artists that I’m collaborating with. To really be on the edge of what’s on your mind, or your heart, to be exploring the very edges of it, will always be pretty exciting. It can be terrifying, it can be scary, but it’s always pretty exciting if you’re trying to push the edges of what you know about the world. That’s what we were all trying to do, and I think the film does have a kind of roller coaster vibe, just naturally.”

### PERIOD PIECE

“Pushing the edges” is a phrase that could aptly be applied to Gyllenhaal’s world-building too. If you’re expecting a rigorously realistic depiction of the ’30s, then you’re in for a shock. This is a deliberately heightened version of the decade. When Frank and the Bride visit a nightclub, for example, they hear music which wouldn’t seem out of place in 2026.

Interestingly, when Gyllenhaal first conceived the idea, the story was going to unfold maybe 60-70 years earlier. “I had originally wanted to set the movie in post-Civil War America,” she explains. “I’d been reading



In pursuit: Penélope Cruz and Peter Sarsgaard.



Euphronius’s lab is the work of designer Karen Murphy.



Dr Euphronius (Annette Bening) reads all about it.



In prep, Bale sent Maggie photos of Sid Vicious.

about how there were, at the time, what we call spiritualists – who were almost always women – who you could hire to speak to the dead. Because there were so many men who’d been killed in the Civil War, and so many women had lost children at that time, culturally there was this idea that there was a thin veil between the dead and the living. So, almost as common as having a therapist now, you could hire a spiritualist to speak to your dead loved ones.

“Originally I’d made Ida a spiritualist,” she reveals. “But simultaneously I had the idea that with Frankenstein, who’s so lonely, maybe his primary relationship is with someone in the movies, because you can feel that you’re so close to [an actor], and of course they don’t know you at all.” We see Frank (face carefully covered) enjoying the sanctuary of a darkened cinema several times, becoming further entranced into a parasocial relationship with a star called Ronnie Reed. “I thought, ‘Alright, well I definitely need to set it at a time where there were movies.’ And the ’30s is such →



Could the film make callipers fashionable? Er, no.

Given how iconic Elsa Lanchester's Bride is, you'd have thought it would be a tad intimidating to set about cracking the look of a new riff on the theme, but it doesn't seem to have been. "Jessie and I were involved together for a long time," Gyllenhaal recalls of her initial back-and-forth with the actor, whom she calls a kindred spirit. "Before the Actors' Strike [in the summer of 2023], we were working, thinking, sharing images and poems and songs. Then we have this big break where we can't work, and we're just gathering information alone.

"We really felt no responsibility to imitate the original *Bride of Frankenstein*," she continues, namechecking key members of the design team (if you're a betting person, stick a tenner on Nadia Stacey and Kay Georgiou bagging an Oscar nomination for Best Makeup and Hairstyling *right now*.) "We didn't think of it that

## FIERCE LOOK

### Designing the Bride

way at all. But by the time we got the look finished, she does have that little bit of a wink to the Bride's hair. We loved the idea that electricity dyed all of her hair white: the hair on her head, her lashes, her brows."

Then there's what Gyllenhaal has referred to elsewhere as "the splat" – surely destined to feature

in a thousand cosplays. It looks a little like the Bride has been absent-mindedly sucking on the end of a biro, and had an embarrassing accident. "The black was kind of major," Gyllenhaal continues. "In the script, she has this black stuff go into her veins [described as a "crystalloid solution"], then spits it out when

she first comes back to life. So we started to imagine: where would it go? What would it do to the dress? What would it do to her face?"

Then there's the Bride's outfit, a boldly clashing ensemble of red leather boots, turquoise stockings and orange dress – all conceived by lauded British costume designer Sandy Powell, a three-time Oscar winner whose many credits include *Orlando*, *Shakespeare In Love* and *Velvet Goldmine*. "It's so interesting to have one costume throughout an entire movie," Gyllenhaal observes. "Only someone like Sandy would be able to give it so much variation and make it change throughout the whole thing. I remember being a little bit nervous about how bright it was, and Sandy saying to me, 'Go with me. It's gonna be amazing.' Then when I saw it lit at night, I thought, 'Oh man, this woman is a genius!'"

Sandy Powell designed the Bride's vivid costume.



## THE BRIDE!

an amazing time for movies as fantasy, movies as a kind of imaginary world – as opposed to, say, the '70s, where the movies were very much trying to hold the reality of being human. In the '30s, it was like, 'Oh my god, look at those dresses, look how these people live – there's never any dirt on them!' And my movie started to also become about the difference between fantasy love and real love; fantasy living and really living.

"I love the aesthetic of the '30s," Gyllenhaal continues. "The hair, the dresses, the cars, everything. But I let myself be very loose about it. It's a fantasy world. It's my imagination, and I wanted it to hold, at the same time, a kind of early '80s New York punk, along with the aesthetic of right now – I wanted it to hold all of those things."

### THE BIG PICTURE

Gyllenhaal's cinematographer was Lawrence Sher, who also worked on *Joker* and *Joker: Folie à Deux* – something which should immediately make sense when you see the film. "We had an incredible collaboration," Gyllenhaal says. "I love him! I hired him because I could tell immediately that we were simpatico."

Asked how they built the visual language of the movie, she says, "One thing we really wanted was for it to feel *cinematic* in a classic sense, and then have these punk, weird, strange misfits at the centre of it. I loved the idea of using a language that traditionally is reserved for the perfect-looking hero and heroine, with these monsters at the centre. I also wanted a combination of that cinematic, beautiful quality mixed with a very real, intimate language that would humanise these monsters. I think it's got both things hand in hand. So we're saying the scope is big, this is a roller coaster, and yet on the roller coaster, part of the ride, and part of what's going to make you feel empathy, is your human connection to these characters."

*THE BRIDE!* will also be released in IMAX cinemas. "I went on a massive deep dive about that," Gyllenhaal enthuses. "It's part of the storytelling." For her, there needed to be a rationale behind why the film periodically opens up from its "native" 2.39:1 widescreen aspect ratio to the taller IMAX ratios of 1.90:1 or 1.43:1. "I'm a huge Denis Villeneuve fan, and I think that [on the *Dune* films] he was like, 'Alright, let's just grow for exteriors.' That's a formula, that's a way of doing it. For me, I was like, 'Okay, well, what's the emotional reason?' The movie has a lot of magic in it, as you can

**“The movie has a lot of magic in it, as you can imagine... we're bringing people back to life”**



On location for a scene where the pair go to the movies.

The song-and-dance number features scores of extras.



# A WHALE OF A TIME

The making of *Bride Of Frankenstein*



The Bride, about to reject her gruesome suitor.

The box office success of 1931's *Frankenstein* meant Universal was always keen on a sequel. The main stumbling block was securing the involvement of director James Whale, who initially resisted returning to the subject. (*The Fly's* Kurt Neumann was briefly attached.)

Eventually Whale relented, to be reunited with original stars Colin Clive (Henry Frankenstein) and Boris Karloff (the Monster). Production began on 2 January 1935, and wrapped on 7 March. Credited to playwright William Hurlbut, the script (originally titled *The Return Of Frankenstein*) amalgamated numerous earlier efforts. It was one of those, by John L. Balderston, which introduced the idea of the Monster seeking a mate.

This echoes a brief subplot from Mary Shelley's novel, where it demands Frankenstein create "a creature of another sex, but as hideous as myself", arguing that "my vices are the children of a forced solitude". Frankenstein consents, making a hut on a remote Orkney island his laboratory. But then, imagining how "a race of devils would be propagated" if he completes his work, he

tears it to pieces.

In the sequel, the Monster can speak, having learned basic vocabulary from a blind hermit – another borrowing from the book, where the Creature spends a year observing a family. Karloff believed this was a stupid mistake: "My argument was that if the Monster had any impact or charm, it was because he was inarticulate – this great, lumbering, inarticulate creature." But he was overruled.

Whale had total creative control, and the results are idiosyncratic, often descending into what we nowadays term camp. That applies particularly to scenes featuring Dr Pretorius (Ernest Thesiger), a waspish mad scientist who, on discovering that the Monster's still alive, enlists him to menace Frankenstein into helping him create a woman.

British actor Elsa Lanchester (wife of Charles Laughton) was cast as both the Bride and Mary Shelley, who appears in a prologue to explain that the first film's climax "wasn't the end at all".

Speaking to film historian Gregory Mank in 1979, the actor revealed that she drew on visits to Regent's Park to feed the swans for the sounds the Bride makes on seeing her would-be husband. "Swans get very, very

angry... if you walk too near to them, and they've got their young around them, they hiss. It's like a noise through the nose, as if you're going to blow your nose and there's nothing in it." And she suffered for her art. "I did get a very sore throat, what with the long shots, medium shots, retakes and so forth. With the hisses and the screams, I lost my voice... It hurt very much, and I had codeine."

The Bride's iconic 'do wasn't a wig, but Lanchester's own (flame red) hair. "I had it lifted up from my face, all the way around. Then they placed a cage on my head and combed my own hair over that cage. Then they put the grey-streak hairpieces in afterwards." It's claimed that Universal make-up man Jack Pierce was inspired by a bust of Egyptian queen Nefertiti (wearing a tall crown).

One final story, which Whale was fond of telling, was recounted by his pal Curtis Harrington (director of *Night Tide*) to *Films In Review's* David Del Valle in 1996. Whether you actually believe it is up to you... "I was very curious about what it was like working with her," Harrington recalled. "[Whale] said, 'Well, you know, she wore absolutely nothing underneath that rubber sheet as the Bride. To get attention she would raise the sheet and stand there for all the crew to see her totally nude.'"



imagine, because we're bringing people back to life – it's a mythological concept. So when we went into someone's dream life, when we'd go into someone's mind, when we hit the magic, we would grow."

Usually, Gyllenhaal notes, directors try to change aspect ratio without the audience really noticing. This was not her approach. "I went to IMAX and asked if I could see examples of where instead of just jumping vertically, you grew it. They told me that it's never been done like this before, in the way that we animate it. What's cool to me about that is that by coming at it as a real beginner, my imagining of what IMAX could offer ended up being something that's never been done before.

"I came out of the making of this movie really thinking completely differently about film and about world-building," she muses. "I actually think that when more women have access to that kind of scope and that kind of filmmaking, movies are going to change – I really do."

Who knows: perhaps by finally speaking loud and clear, this Bride might help to make it possible for more female directors to express their unique voices. ●

*THE BRIDE!* is in cinemas from 6 March.



READY OR NOT 2:  
HERE I COME



# Game, Set

THE DIRECTORS OF READY OR NOT SET THE RULES

READY OR NOT 2:  
HERE I COME



# And Murder

FOR ANOTHER ROUND OF BLOOD-SOAKED MAYHEM WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**



Proof that blondes don't always have more fun.

**F**OR DIRECTORS MATT BETTINELLI-OLPIN and Tyler Gillett, there was never any question of making *Ready Or Not 2: Here I Come* unless it outdid the original. “Our mantra going in was, if it’s not better, there’s no reason to make it,” Gillett emphasises to *SFX*. “And it was very full stop. That was the bar.”

A breakout horror-comedy hit on its release in 2019, *Ready Or Not* introduced audiences to Grace (Samara Weaving), a bride whose wedding day unexpectedly turns into a brutal fight for survival when her wealthy new in-laws, the Le Domas family, subject her to a lethal game of hide-and-seek across their vast country estate. She soon discovers that it’s all part of a ritual tied to a generations-old family pact with the Devil.

Best known as part of the Radio Silence collective, Bettinelli-Olpin and Gillett have carved out a formidable horror track record over the past decade, with the two most recent *Scream* sequels among their highest-profile releases. *Ready Or Not 2: Here I Come*, however, marks the first time they’ve returned to a world entirely of their own creation. “We love the first movie. It’s so special to us,” says Bettinelli-Olpin, with Gillett adding that it’s “wildly, wildly personal”. “It’s a movie that we made with a very specific team of people,” Gillett continues, “and the opportunity to make a sequel came with a lot of excitement and pressure that we maybe didn’t feel in the same way with *Scream*. Six movies in, that franchise very clearly is what it is.”

From the outset, the duo were keen to avoid the familiar sequel trap of simply repeating what had worked before.

“It was like, how do we really challenge the material and make something that gives you all of the flavour and fun of the first movie, but feels very different, and very much its own thing?” explains Gillett of their approach. Crucially, there was no prescribed idea of what the sequel *had* to be, a freedom that, for Bettinelli-Olpin, made the prospect of returning all the more appealing. “It meant starting over, which can be a really wonderful place to create from, because it forces you to look at everything in a completely original way,” he says.

One of the elements of *Ready Or Not* that audiences responded to most, Bettinelli-Olpin believes, was “the absolute hell” they put Grace through as a character. “Everyone had this collective sigh of relief and exhaustion when she finally makes it out of the house,” he says. “For us, we just loved the idea of, okay, what if the character didn’t get the rest that she has earned and deserves? What if we threw her back to the wolves immediately? Knowing Samara as well – and knowing what she could do with that as a very basic setup – was just a really exciting opportunity and challenge for us.”

#### FAMILY TIES

Picking up moments after the original ends, the sequel finds the blood-spattered bride exactly where audiences left her: cigarette in hand, on the steps outside the burning Le Domas mansion. One deeply inconvenient showdown later, the final girl finds herself in hospital, detained on suspicion of murder.



Scream queen Sarah Michelle Gellar and Shawn Hatosy.



Directors Matt Bettinelli-Olpin and Tyler Gillett.

Elsewhere, Grace's survival triggers what Bettinelli-Olpin calls "a new clause in the lore and mythology of the *Ready Or Not* world". The most dangerous game intensifies, as four rival families – powerful figures operating at the highest levels across the globe – take up the hunt. "The winner-takes-all idea in this concept is that whoever wins this game gets to run the High Council," Bettinelli-Olpin explains, "an organisation of six that basically pull all the levers of power." At the forefront are the Danforths, with legendary body horror filmmaker David Cronenberg playing patriarch Chester.

"He's the most powerful man in the world, naturally," Gillett smiles – and indeed, the film wastes no time in underlining it. Watching live television footage of a war, he picks up a phone and authorises a ceasefire; a split second later, it's breaking news.

The tycoon's twin children, Ursula and Titus, are played by Sarah Michelle Gellar and Shawn Hatosy. "They've grown up with their dad basically running the world in a very literal way," says Gillett. "This movie finds them at a pivot where they have to step into his shoes. There's a lot of fun conflict between them and –" "Some Shakespearean drama," Bettinelli-Olpin cuts in. "Shakespeare's one of our big influences." "This is a very Shakespearean movie," Gillett confirms.

Among the pressures the directors touched on earlier was the challenge of following *Ready Or Not's* acclaimed ensemble cast with a new one capable of making the same impact. →

# Blood Relative

Shawn Hatosy is Titus Danforth

**Ready Or Not 2 marks your first return to the horror genre since *The Faculty* in 1998. What drew you back?**

Kevin Williamson wrote that, around the time of the first *Scream*. We were really in the pocket there in the late '90s, exploring the genre and its success. I've received a couple of scripts over the years that I thought about, but this was the first one that felt real and happening. I knew Tyler and Matt's work and was excited.

**Were you familiar with *Ready Or Not*?**

I wasn't, but when this came to me, I watched it right away and loved it. I have a son who was 18 at the time, and I mentioned it to him and he was like, "Are you kidding? That's, like, my favourite movie." It has such a strong audience.

**Tell us about Titus.**

He's kind of petulant. He has his fair share of temper tantrums.

He's the product of privilege and wealth, in a society that rewards those things – the kind of human being who's easy to despise because he expects everything and takes what he wants. He's a broken guy, having grown up in a family where his dad has control over him and his twin sister, Ursula. As the story unfolds, when the things he's tethered to start to fall away, we get to see this monster emerge.

**How was it working alongside Elijah Wood again?**

It's funny, because we were talking about *The Faculty*, and when we worked on that Elijah was 16. I reminded Elijah that I, at the time, had never been online before. The internet was just starting to happen. And Elijah was like, "You need to get a computer – you have some money now." So I went and got a computer, and he taught me how to plug it in and sign up at AOL, which we had a good laugh about. Elijah's career has been wonderful to watch, and just being able to catch up with him all these years later was a delight.

**Was there a scene you found particularly challenging to film?**

There's one near the end where Titus needs to make a decision and be almost vulnerable in a moment that's not within his character. So that was a bit challenging, accepting that. But I loved it. And then there's a big fight scene that we did over a couple days. It was nights, and it was pretty hard. But he's a very physical character, and being able to step in and do the fighting helped me feel what it's like to be in his shoes.

**What can you say about the intensity of the scares?**

For Matt and Tyler, it was like there was no ceiling. There was never enough blood. I'm so thrilled to be involved, what these guys have created is disturbing and funny and hilarious, and it has so much style. There's tension, and... I don't know what's wrong with them. I really don't. But I'm very happy to be a part of their disorder, and I cannot wait to see it with an audience.



The hunting party: suited up and ready to rock.

“There was the feeling of having won the lottery with the first film,” Gillett says. “Approaching this one, we realised, like, we’d set the bar at a high level. It felt like we were at the bottom of a very tall mountain, because of the number of characters in this – the largest we’ve ever worked with.”

New faces include Elijah Wood as the enigmatic Lawyer, a shadowy figure introduced calmly informing Chester that the Le Domases are no more – and who appears to be pulling strings of his own. “Without giving too much away, there’s something very bureaucratic about this world,” Bettinelli-Olpin says. “Presenting that in a horror movie is so fun and exciting because it’s unexpected and it’s bizarre and it’s weird. A lot of that falls on Elijah’s shoulders. He does such an incredible job of baking that world into his character.”

Also joining the fray is Kathryn Newton – previously seen in the directors’ own *Abigail* – as Faith MacCaullay, Grace’s estranged sister (and, awkwardly, still her emergency contact), who, as Bettinelli-Olpin reveals, “enters the picture at a really inopportune moment and finds herself part of this very fucked-up game.”

Every new character, Gillett stresses, plays a pivotal role in the story. “They’re all super specific – all very different from each other.” As with all their films, Bettinelli-Olpin says the aim was to ensure no character felt like a filler, “where you can just pull them out and it wouldn’t matter. Making sure they all have a moment that, in the best-case scenario, we don’t mess up – you leave the movie and you remember something they did in a very special way.”

Those moments, Gillett tells *SFX*, range from “wonderful” to “quirky”; from “bizarre” to “scary”. Ultimately, he hopes audiences find themselves unable to imagine anyone else in the roles. “The cast just showed up,” he adds. “They really understood the assignment and the quirky corner of the story that they had to occupy. Everyone’s going to be floored by the level of performance.”

### DEAL WITH THE DEVIL

Gore, spectacle and, as Bettinelli-Olpin puts it, “really wild set-pieces” are very much on the menu, but it was the film’s more intimate interludes that proved most gratifying to shoot. “There are a handful of scenes where it’s just Samara and Kathryn talking to each other, and there is so much warmth, and so much love,” the co-director says. “After shooting blood cannons at people and doing big crazy chases, you realise that, oh, wait – *this* is what it’s actually about. It’s about these two characters connecting.

“Knowing that the glowing ember at the centre of your story is *that* bright is just really refreshing. It grounds you throughout the process when you hit a scene like that. You go, ‘Oh, *this* is why it matters.’ This is why all of the stuff around it is fun. Because you have this beating heart at the centre of the movie.”

For Gillett, the sequel builds directly on one of *Ready Or Not*’s central questions: “Is the pact real – is the Devil real? Who is this Le Bail character [who made the original deal]?” he says. “By the end, we’re very declarative that it *is* real, and that Le Bail exists. That’s the truth of our universe,” he continues. “Entering the sequel knowing that, it was fun to be like, ‘Okay, well, what next? What’s the new twist, the new reveal?’ That is a really exciting place to design a story from.”



Newton and Weaving in action as Faith and Grace.



David Cronenberg is tycoon Chester Danforth.

“Shakespeare is one of our big influences, and this is a very Shakespearean movie”

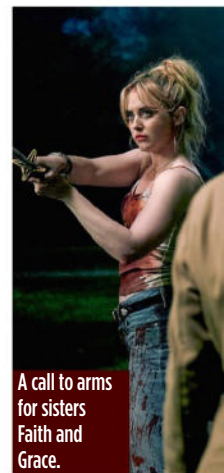
At the same time, the directors were careful not to undermine what they had already established. “We held our feet to the fire to make sure that everything that happens here, when you go back to the first movie, it heightens it,” Bettinelli-Olpin says. “The two movies are in conversation with each other. There’s a handshake between them.”

He credits writers Guy Busick and Ryan Christopher Murphy with expanding the lore “in a very fun way”. “But it’s not doing it for the sake of it,” Gillett asserts. “It’s doing it because that’s what the movie needs.”

With the *Ready Or Not* universe now feeling, in Bettinelli-Olpin’s words, like it has “a very rich off-screen story”, both directors are already thinking ahead. “It’s just been the best fucking experience,” says Gillett. “We’ll make them until they tell us to stop,” Bettinelli-Olpin concludes.

Ready or not... You can’t hide. ●

*Ready Or Not 2: Here I Come* is in cinemas worldwide from 20 March.



A call to arms for sisters Faith and Grace.



Elijah Wood turns up the smarm as The Lawyer.



The team-up we didn't know we needed.

## Blood Is Thicker

Samara Weaving and Kathryn Newton are sister act Grace and Faith

**Samara, what's it like to return as Grace?**

**SW** We didn't know that this would even be a possibility, so it's really exciting. We had such a fun cast. Kathryn was alright. No - she was the best. In the first one, it was just me alone, running around like a lunatic. So, it was fun to have -

**KN** - another lunatic.

**SW** Another lunatic next to me. And Grace is more badass this time. She's learned a few lessons and levelled up.

**Kathryn, introduce us to Faith.**

**KN** She's a little sister who wants to be rescued - and it's unfortunate that Grace also needs help being rescued. It's an inconvenience for her. But they go on this journey that helps them bond again. They say that's the root of a great friendship - shared experiences - and they're having one they're definitely not going to forget.

**Grace's wedding dress became instantly iconic in the first film. Does it make a return?**

**SW** I don't know if I can say *how* without spoiling it, but it definitely does - and it was fun. Putting the dress back on was surprisingly emotional. It was the same costume designer, Avery [Plewes].

**KN** Hey, I fought for the dress, too.

**SW** You did?

**KN** Yeah, I did. I remember when they were like, "We don't know

[if it would be featured again]" and I was like, "It's gotta be in the movie!"

**What were the toughest or most physically demanding sequences to shoot?**

**SW** We were handcuffed together a lot. So running and, well, doing *anything*, really.

**KN** We did a *lot* of running.

**SW** I'd nearly broken my back right before shooting. We were all so nervous. Two days before we started, the swelling on my spinal cord went down and I was able to walk again - but it was an actual nightmare. I swear your body knows when you're about to work and it's like, "You know what? You gotta go. Up, up." The fact that I could move - I was so happy. We wouldn't have been able to do it otherwise.

**KN** The hardest sequence for me was the first one - the first kill in the hospital.

**SW** That was the first day, too, wasn't it? Finding our feet. Luckily, in the first week, I was just lying there - so that was good.

**KN** That scene just jumped me right into the movie. We shot pretty much in order, and it was intense from day one.

**How does the sequel deepen the mythology?**

**SW** They touched on it in the first one - the history of the families and the deals they made with the Devil. This one gets into that

a bit more. The world-building is really cool.

**KN** I know it's not *Harry Potter*, but it has that kind of mythology. It feels like there's more to it. I have a lot of questions now, after watching it. I'm like, "What does this mean? Where's this guy? Like, the Le Bail dude. What is he doing?"

**Do you have a favourite kill in the film?**

**SW** The one in the laundry. That was fun.

**KN** Oh my gosh. That had the best line of the movie.

**SW** I can't believe they kept it in. **KN** You were like, "No, I don't want it." It's the *best* line in the movie. [Laughs] She actually made the wrap gifts that line - and we can't tell you what it is yet.

**SW** [Laughs uproariously] It's very short. To the point. Grace is really a woman of few words. Heavy impact. You'll see. You'll know.

**KN** My favourite is the end, because the blood cannon gave me a crown. I don't know how.

**SW** The blood cannon! Also, just that casual turn of phrase.

**KN** Blood cannon! I love the FX guys. They were really good. It takes a lot of people to make this dream come true.

**Is there a particular scene that you can't wait to watch with audiences in cinemas?**

**KN** The opening.

**SW** Yeah - that scene is cool. There are a few moments with great callbacks to the first one, as well as some really fun introductions to new characters. Like when you see Sarah, and when you see Elijah. Then there are just the iconic action sequences where people are gonna go, "Yeah!"

**KN** It's definitely more intense.

**SW** We were screaming and giggling while watching it.

**If the door opened again, would you jump back into the *Ready Or Not* universe?**

**SW** Hell yeah, it's such a fun time. It really feels like camp - especially because we'd all worked together before. Everything felt familiar and easy. We all work in a similar way. We want to have fun and be silly, but we're also professional - we know our lines. We show up!

**KN** We do take our jobs very seriously! [Laughs] I would give anything to do another *Ready Or Not*, or anything with Sam and Matt and Tyler again.

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# GRAND LINE

ONE PIECE SHOWRUNNER JOE TRACZ SPINS A YARN ABOUT SEASON TWO'S ADVENTURES

# RAHOOY!

WORDS: TARA BENNETT





**W**HEN IT WAS ANNOUNCED in 2020 that Netflix was adapting Eiichiro Oda's *One Piece* – the best-selling manga in history – into a live-action series, the news was met with nervous apprehension. Loved because it's a heightened celebration of bizarre misfits and weirdos, it seemed nigh impossible to imagine *One Piece* translating into the real world. But then Oda officially endorsed season one, and audiences made it the second most-watched Netflix show of 2023.

Season two is finally entering the harbour, adapting the manga's Alabasta Saga, which puts fledgling Captain Monkey D Luffy (Iñaki Godoy) of the Going Merry and his Straw Hat crew, Nami (Emily Rudd), Zoro (Mackenyu), Usopp (Jacob Romero) and Sanji (Taz Skylar), on the infamous Grand Line ocean route.

Co-showrunner Joe Tracz (*Dash & Lily*) tells *SFX* that he knows the anticipation for this season is massive, and they've done everything they can to "do it right".

"We wanted to take the time to tell that story so that the payoffs, surprises and character growth all feel earned, and we knew that it would take two seasons," Tracz says of how they've plotted it across seasons two and three. "The Alabasta Saga starts with the Straw Hats entering the Grand Line, getting into these crazy adventures on these new →



## AYE AYE, CAPTAIN

IÑAKI GODOY'S MONKEY D LUFFY GETS HIS GRAND LINE ON

### How did the season one experience of *One Piece* affect your season two?

For season two, I had a lot of time to really connect with *One Piece* as a franchise and connect with people that love *One Piece*. I learned how to speak Japanese between season one and season two. I was able to bring more of what Luffy is in the manga into season two. I had a deeper understanding thanks to the time I was able to have and I'm excited for people to see this new season. I think they will notice things that are new.

### Did the cast's rapport influence how you played Luffy in season two?

Season two is a lot about the Straw Hats. They're now a team. It's them going on an adventure, instead of them coming together. It's similar to our own real-life journey in that sense of we got to know each other in season one. We got to bond, and now we are ready to take on the world together. The trust that we were able to build in our real life will definitely translate on screen.

### What's your favourite set-piece in season two?

There's this [Whisky Peak] bakery, and there were a lot of cakes in that bakery. It was the best set. Shout-out to my sister, she helped to design that place. If you notice some really local slang there, that's her. So the bakery, the taco place, and definitely the cupcake car. For me personally, that took my breath away. It's so weird. It's so *One Piece* and I love that. It's what our show is.



David Dastmalchian plays new villain Mr 3.



Killer otters The Unluckies feature in season two.



Reindeer doctor Tony Tony Chopper joins the crew.



Miss All Sunday (Lera Abova), centre, gives the orders.

islands. It's a travel show. It's an adventure season. Every one to three episodes, you're gonna go to a new place, and you're gonna get swept up in whatever mystery and intrigue is in that place. They're gonna come out of it changed in some way."

### HAT'S LIFE

Because the series is so Straw Hats ensemble-driven, Tracz says he and the writers focused on connecting the plot arcs to their character growth. "For the Reverse Mountain Arc, when the characters first enter the Grand Line, it's a navigation story," he explains. "In the Grand Line, your compass doesn't work the same way. You actually can't even use a compass. You have to use something called the Log Pose. Nami is a navigator and she doesn't know any of this, so we're with her as she's saying, 'This thing that's been intuitive to me my whole life no longer functions. What do I do?' It becomes a story about her overcoming that adversity. By the end of the season, we see each of these characters level-up to their dreams in a new way."

Because Luffy hasn't exactly been quiet about wanting the title of "King of Pirates," he's collected plenty of enemies and curious peers ready to make him test his mettle. Big pirate personalities like Buggy the Clown (Jeff Ward) and Alvida (Ilia Isorely's Paulino) will return, and a whole slew of new faces will debut, including the infamous criminal assassins of the Baroque Works.

"I think you're only as good as your villain, so Baroque Works is the thing I was most excited about this season because they're like Tarantino-style *Kill Bill* assassins with crazy superpowers," Tracz says of the gaggle of antagonists. "They don't just do bad; they look

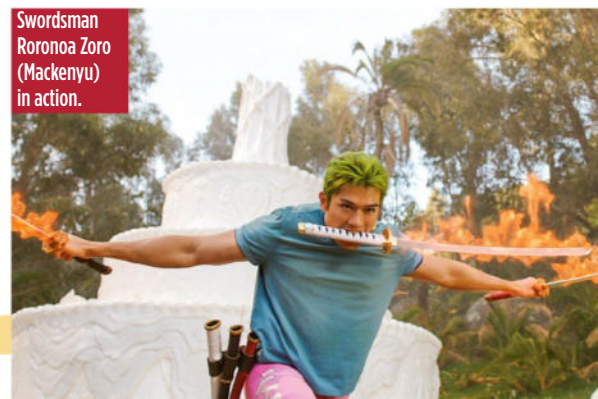
good. Their style is so much a part of it, and it was so fun to get to establish them.

"What we really loved about them is the way they function as a dark mirror of our heroes," he explains. "We've seen the Straw Hats come together, and they're all supporting each other's dreams. But now you have this group of agents who, to get ahead in Baroque Works, someone in front of you has to die, and that's how you get promoted. We have a lot of fun with the idea that our Straw Hats are trying to work together, and you have these villains who are quick to turn on each other and sometimes work at cross purposes. It's fun to watch, but it also reflects on what makes the Straw Hats special."

While there's a robust hierarchy of Baroque Works members in the manga, Tracz says here, Miss All Sunday (Lera Abova) is the face of the crime syndicate. "She's the one issuing orders. She's the one who's confronting our Straw Hats," he confirms.

Doing her bidding are assassins like Miss Wednesday (Charithra Chandran), Mr 3 (David Dastmalchian), Miss Goldenweek (Sophia Anne Caruso), and Mr 0 (Joe Manganiello). "I think they're such incredible villains who are weird and funny and surprising and test our characters in cool ways. We just had the pick of amazing actors this season," Tracz says. "David's son was a huge *One Piece* fan. It was

Swordsman Roronoa Zoro (Mackenyu) in action.





Meet Laboon, a friendly (and huge) "Island Whale".

## “You’re only as good as your villain, so Baroque Works is the thing I was most excited about”

the first time that he brought his son to set with him, and his son sat at the monitor next to me and gave his dad notes. I’ll tell you what, he had good notes,” he laughs.

“It was also so helpful to cast after [season one] had already come out, because people could be aware of the tone,” he adds. “We cast a lot of theatre actors, like Rob Colletti (*The Book Of Mormon*) plays Wapol and Sophia Anne Caruso (*Lazarus*) plays Miss Goldenweek. There is a big, heightened style for *One Piece* that I think really gives theatre actors a chance to do something fun and big.”

There’s also a CG motion-performance character joining the fun in the shape of fan-favourite Tony Tony Chopper (voiced by Mikaela Hoover), a talking reindeer/doctor who Tracz says was built with *Guardians Of The Galaxy’s* Rocket Raccoon as the benchmark. “Chopper’s emotions are Michaela’s emotions. It’s not just a voice performance. The way Chopper laughs, smiles and cries, that’s how Michaela laughs, smiles and cries in her recordings.”

Slingshot sharpshooter Usopp (Jacob Romero).



And, like last season where there was a “Big Bad” in the form of Arlong (McKinley Belcher III), Tracz says audiences should look out for Wapol, the spoiled, petulant king of the Drunk Kingdom arc. “In the manga and in our live action as well, there’s something kind of ridiculous about him,” he says. “He’s a character where literally ‘you are what you eat’ is his Devil Fruit power. Anything he consumes, he can transform into a weapon as part of his body.”

Wapol is also an example, in the wild, of what Luffy strives to be. “At the beginning of the season, Luffy asks the question, ‘What does it mean to be King of the Pirates?’” Tracz explains. “Then in the finale, he’s confronted with this king who believes that what being a king means is it’s my way or the highway. The reason why Wapol is the villain in our finale is because he’s someone who represents the absolute worst qualities a leader could possess. So for Luffy, who has found his crew as a captain, it’s like, what kind of captain is Luffy going to be?”

Currently filming season three of *One Piece* in South Africa, Tracz says fans shouldn’t worry about this season feeling incomplete. “Season two has an incredible ending on its own that emotionally moves me every time I watch it,” he shares. “I think it tells an emotional journey, getting to a place that manga fans will know, where the story of Drum Kingdom ends. It’s beautiful and moving. It’s both visually spectacular and emotionally heartbreaking. I think the season has a complete story to tell, and yet it’s setting up the following season that we’re so lucky to get to be in Cape Town filming right now.” ●

*One Piece* is on Netflix from 10 March.



## MULTI-LAYERED LADY

CHARITHRA CHANDRAN ENTERS THE FRAY AS MISS WEDNESDAY

**Did you know the complexities of Miss Wednesday when you auditioned?**

There are code names for the auditions. I tried Googling it, but obviously, with the name, I really couldn’t pinpoint what it was for. And the audition scenes are actually not in the script. They’re written for the auditions; at least it was for Miss Wednesday. But what an honour and a privilege to be able to play something like that. I get to play a character that has so much development and such a rich story.

**What’s the vibe between Wednesday and Luffy?**

The position that they’re both in is really unique, and that can be quite lonely, I think. So there is a real kinship in what they go through and what they can learn from each other. I think our characters bond. Filming-wise, our interactions were such a highlight because there’s so much joy and there’s frustration, and everything.

**What’s impressed you most about this season?**

We can guarantee that there are things this season that have never ever been done on TV before. How many actors can say that they are doing something for the first time on TV? It’s insane! I think even we were like, “Is this gonna work?” And it does.

WORLDBREAKER

# THE LAST OF US

**SFX HEADS  
TO NORTHERN  
IRELAND TO  
MEET THE  
TEAM BRINGING  
NEW SCI-FI  
WORLDBREAKER  
TO LIFE**

WORDS:  
**JACK  
SHEPHERD**

GREY MORNING IN A PUB JUST outside Belfast. Paper lanterns shaped like stars hang from the ceiling, and a small Irish band plays in the corner. *SFX* has arrived midway through the party. Luke Evans is standing at the bar, pint in hand, staring at Milla Jovovich, dancing with friends and family. It's a happy moment, the two actors coming closer together until they hold each other and kiss. Director Brad Anderson (*The Machinist*) lets the scene play out as long as it needs to, until finally, after the camera captures a few nice angles of the light between the pair, he shouts, "Cut!" The cast and crew relax while Evans returns to the bar for another swig of beer (*SFX* cannot verify whether this was alcohol-free).

It all seems rather... normal. Like a scene from a starchy romantic drama. Which is confusing, because *Worldbreaker* is meant to be a post-apocalyptic sci-fi actioner about a family fighting to survive. Perhaps we've arrived on the wrong set? "It's a flashback to their wedding," explains writer Joshua Rollins, who's sitting at a table tucked away behind the bar, out of the camera's sight. "It's a bit different to everything else."

#### **APOCALYPSE NOW**

As Evans and Jovovich go for another take, *SFX* heads off with Rollins to ask a few questions, starting with the most basic: what is *Worldbreaker* actually about? A press release describes the film as taking place after "a tear →



in the fabric of reality brought creatures to our world from an alternate dimension bent on our destruction,” which makes it sound like an alien invasion movie, but from what we’ve heard, that’s not exactly the case.

“Our world has reset itself many times in the past, whether it’s the dinosaurs dying off or the Ice Age or the Black Plague, and the idea here is the world has reached another point where it’s breaking, and this is an infection-based breakage, if you will,” says Rollins.

In fact, he does not mention any alternate dimension shenanigans, instead emphasizing the idea of a “primordial” threat that’s “been on the Earth for a while and has just started to seep out.”

While the writer does not go too much further into the specifics, during a break from dancing, Evans shares a little more. “These polarised caps, the Arctic permafrost, have melted, but what they were covering for millennia had been these cracks in the Earth’s surface,” he says. “They were holding down another creature that we were very unaware of. This was basically their planet before it was ours, and they certainly don’t want us to be around with the way we’ve treated this world.”

Considering the ever-growing impact of climate change, the monster outbreak sounds entirely topical, then. “I mean, everything about climate change is topical,” Anderson says while grabbing some food between takes. “The world in the movie heads into an apocalypse because man’s meddling with the environment and screwing things up, and hence we’ve unleashed this monstrous plague upon the planet that’s destroying humanity. It’s called *Worldbreaker* because the world’s being broken, we’ve broken it, but it’s really a story about a girl and her dad who are trying to survive and make the world better and heroically win the day against the monsters that have overrun it.”

Evans plays the father, known only as Dad, while Billie Boulet (*The Worst Witch*) plays his daughter, Willa, who has grown up in the apocalypse. They have escaped “the mainland” to a desolate island where he trains and protects her, and they act as the heart of the story. “I’ve always liked movies that are sci-fi, genre-based stories, but also have a central character element,” says Anderson. “They’re about characters dealing with fantastic events, but ultimately, it’s about the emotions of these characters and how they’re grappling with this new reality and how they can survive.”

### LAST MAN STANDING

Jovovich’s character, Mom, is notably missing from this family dynamic, and that’s because the monsters attacking humanity also brought with them an infection; one that targets people with Y chromosomes. The men of Earth are almost extinct, leaving the women to fight.

“These three human beings have been torn



Milla Jovovich as the warrior mother known only as Mom.



Billie Boulet’s Willa celebrates her birthday.



The world’s few remaining men prepare for battle.



Willa and Mom sharing a tender moment.

apart, and they all have a duty,” Evans says. “One has to go fight, which is the woman, because of this infection chromosome situation, there are not many men left, and I am an injured ex-soldier. My duty is to protect our child and to prepare her for the worst.”

“Essentially, the men fought and lost, and now the women are fighting the battle and the men that are left to protect the family,” Rollins elaborates. “The idea was, ‘What if you had a wounded soldier who had failed and is still trying to find the light, and still trying to help

his daughter find her path?’ Very often, masculine characters don’t get to be loving parents and don’t really get to have those hard talks. What if he had to have those difficult conversations?”

Jovovich is part of an army of female soldiers putting up a last stand, and they are a formidable bunch. *SFX* travels to a second set, this one in the countryside, and the scene is drastically different to the bar; war is upon us, the last remnants of humanity holed up in a muddy, broken building, with trucks and guns and ammunition everywhere – emphasis

PICTURES © KODIAK PICTURES/AIDAN MONAGHAN. STOCK ART: QUIRKY MUNDO/GETTY



Woodland training with a bearded Luke Evans.

## I'M A SURVIVOR

**Billie Boulet** talks training for the apocalypse



### Introduce us to your character, Willa.

She is 14, 15 and 16 throughout the movie. She's wild and she's very, very curious about the world. When it starts, she's very much in a bubble; her family has done that to protect her from the apocalypse. When she has to leave and goes off with her dad, she has to grow up quickly, which is a shock for her. But she's very well equipped, nothing fazes her. She's a very strong character.

### What's her relationship like with her father?

It's not a normal relationship because they both rely on each other to survive. It's usually the child who relies on the father, but they are in such a weird place, they're both on the same level. Her dad trains her, but they have so much love and respect for each other. He's put his whole life on the line for her because she is his whole world, and vice versa.

### Did you have to do any training for the role?

There was a lot of sword fighting, which I've never done before, but it's so much fun. It's a lot harder than I thought it was going to be. That's the main training that her father does, teaching her how to fight. He was in the military, so that's all he knows how to do.

### She sounds fearless.

She's grown up in a world that just isn't normal. Nature is dead. Animals are not there! She's never seen most animals. She doesn't know of them, because it's 15 years into this apocalypse. Everything's just grey and gone. Being wild, dirty, grubby, that's all in her nature. It's not like now, where we are civilised and we dress well and have fashion. Everything in her world is trying to survive, her nature is survival. She will do anything.

on the mud. It's gritty and feels big.

"We're shooting on incredible locations and the weather is going to be completely horrendous," says Evans with a smile. "That plays a role in the storyline. This isn't supposed to be sunny days at the beach. This is a bleak existence. So the fact that we're going to use what Mother Nature provides is actually fucking spot on."

Our heroes will be going up against two distinct varieties of monster: fanged, spider-like creatures the size of small elephants called Worldbreakers, and others that are hybrid infected. "I initially had a concept of, 'What if we take something that's zombie-ish but make it more terrifying and crazy?'" says Rollins, though he won't say whether these are the men who have perished since the outbreak.

"They're subterranean insectoid humanoid hybrids," adds Anderson. "They're a cross between a spider and a crustacean and a human. The humanoid elements make them more horrific. But there are also spider-like [monsters]. They're pretty formidable. They travel in big swarms, like ants or bees. *Starship Troopers* was a reference point for that."

### GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Two other reference points that come up multiple times are *The Last Of Us*, which centres on a father figure and a teenage girl traversing a zombie-infested world, and the post-alien invasion horror *A Quiet Place*. Rollins's script – and original story – was first sold over eight years ago, and the initial idea came about after he had his first child. "The spark that started this whole thing was, 'How

## “We're aiming for scope, as well as those softer, more intimate moments”

do we explain the good stuff, and the bad stuff, and teach our kids about the darkness and teach our kids about the light?”

*Worldbreaker* is not a major studio production, but Evans, who has worked on the likes of *Dracula Untold* and Peter Jackson's *The Hobbit* trilogy, does not think that matters. "What we've shot so far looks like a \$100 million movie."

"We're aiming high," Anderson says. "It's not based on any IP, which I like because so much seems to be these days. We're trying to get as much bang for our buck as we can. These days, you can do so much with so little, particularly with CGI. You don't need those giant, \$60 million budgets to get something cool and big. You just have to be smart about how you do it. We're aiming for scope, as well as those softer, more intimate moments."

"We did plan out a trilogy, and we did speak to all the actors about what the arc would look like for all three of them, which ones would make it and which ones would not," says Rollins. "I never write something thinking about what the toy is going to look like, but there's definitely a plan to have at least this initial arc, which would be this trilogy. Fingers crossed..."

*Worldbreaker* is on Prime Video from 7 March.

DAREDEVIL: BORN AGAIN

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# LIMITS

THE MAN  
WITHOUT  
FEAR  
FIGHTS TO  
TAKE BACK  
NEW YORK  
IN SEASON  
TWO OF  
**DAREDEVIL:  
BORN AGAIN.**  
AND HE'S  
NOT ALONE...

T

WORDS:  
NICK SETCHFIELD



HERE'S A WORM at the heart of the Big Apple.

A dapper, oversized worm by the name of Wilson Fisk. And he's doubling down on the other name he's known by: the Kingpin. Ascending to Mayor in season

one of *Daredevil: Born Again*, Fisk has consolidated his grip on New York City, trading in the kind of politics that find him crushing the skulls of opponents as easily as kissing babies. Martial law has been imposed and a brutal crackdown on vigilantes finds a private militia on the streets.

Operating from the shadows, blind crime-fighter Matt Murdock has a clear mission as season two begins. Reclaim the city. Extract that rotten, wormy core. Resist. Rebel. Rebuild. Vive la révolution!

"Fisk has won, the city is gradually being put under his boot and we pick up all of our major players around six months later," showrunner Dario Scardapane tells *SFX*. "The Fisk administration at this point has really taken hold. At the same time, there's a bubbling up of an underground.

"New York is being transformed. Some people might call that a rebirth, some might call it decay. And the characters are being transformed by dint of huge political machinations."

For Scardapane, season two's battle for the soul of NYC is a chance to present a purer creative vision. Previously part of the team behind Netflix's *The Punisher*, he was hired to overhaul season one of *Born Again* when the original version of the Marvel show shaped by Matt Corman and Chris Ord ultimately proved unworkable.

"The task of season one was a really sick kind of fun," he smiles, wryly. "They'd gone in a direction where it was a different kind of show. It was much more of a procedural, much more focused on the courtroom. We had a lot of that footage and kind of had to do this cobbled-together Frankenstein. But by landing really strongly at the beginning and end with an idea of 'This is what the show wants to be, this is what the show is', we were able to kick the narrative into the second season relatively unfettered.

"Most of the writers' room came back from season one, and the crew too. Now there were no limitations in that we didn't have to write into existing footage, we didn't have to finish out storylines that had already been started. The only thing that we had to take care of was the central Fisk vs Daredevil engine. It was



Daredevil (Charlie Cox) and Karen Page (Deborah Ann Woll).

great. You'll see in some of these episodes that we were able to really let it rip in a way we might not have been able to last season."

### POLITICAL POINTS

Once again incarnated in a powerhouse performance by Vincent D'Onofrio, Fisk remains the Man Without Fear's eternal nemesis. But how do you keep this well-tailored tyrant fresh as a story force, considering he's been the go-to antagonist since the original Netflix series debuted in 2015?

"Having been a student of the old show I was asking myself the same question as we went into this," Scardapane admits. "If you look at the times Matt and Wilson have been together on screen, there are maybe 10 of them, in total. Any time that happens, you have to bring them into that room with different reasons and different stakes.

"I think that now, with both of them becoming, for lack of a better word, *symbols*, the stakes are almost too high for each of them. This is one of the first times that they both recognise the other in a way that I don't think they did before. We ended [season one] with 'I beat you', and in a weird way this is 'I see you, but I still have to kick your ass!'

"With the interplay between the two of them, Charlie [Cox] and Vincent bring so much to the table. Whether it's the diner scene in



Wilson Fisk (Vincent D'Onofrio) plots his next move.

season one or a couple of real monsters in season two, there's the first version and then Charlie and Vincent get involved and we start talking it through – and every time they evolve it into something really special, because those guys know the characters better than anybody."

The Kingpin's uncompromising rule is inspired by a comic book storyline from 2017. Given recent events in America, it's a scenario that now feels uncannily prescient, and the echoes aren't lost on Scardapane.

"This was written a year ago. The Mayor Fisk run in the comics was written almost 10 years ago. The parallels to what's happening now are actually kind of spooky. Like most writers, we're students of history, so we built the playbook of an autocrat – and when you're



Krysten Ritter returns as PI Jessica Jones.

## “The parallels to what’s happening now are actually kind of spooky”

take sides, and some of them have to take sides pretty vigorously.”

There’s another familiar face signing up for the revolution. Season two sees the return of Krysten Ritter as super-powered PI Jessica Jones, one of the original alleyway-prowling heroes of the Netflix era.

“I think what Melissa Rosenberg did with season one of Jessica Jones is some of the finest superhero television work ever done,” says Scardapane. “When I first came in and talked to Marvel I was like, ‘We’ve got to bring Jessica Jones back!’ I don’t feel that her story ended. If you read the comic books, you’ll know that there’s a next chapter of her life that I thought was super interesting.

“One of the things we’ve leaned into is that time has passed between the end of the Netflix show and the beginning of ours. We’re acknowledging that. These characters have matured, they’ve gone through life. And Jessica Jones, bourbon-swilling smartass – what’s it like for her to mature seven years? That’s what we did this season, and it was just a blast. There was a moment when everybody was together, Debs and Krysten and Charlie and Jon [Bernthal] dropped by to say hi. It was all the actors from way back when and it was a really good feeling. It was truly like getting the band back together.

“It’s fun to have her back and I hope we get an opportunity to integrate this character more into this slice of the world.”

Just how does that slice fit into the wider Marvel universe? Is the bruising reality of Murdock and Fisk a self-contained bubble or could Howard the Duck one day waddle into Hell’s Kitchen?

“I’d be into it, because I dig the comics!” laughs Scardapane. “But no... That’s been kind of a fun and challenging thing. We know there’s that huge world out there of the MCU. This corner of it has crossovers. We’ve seen Daredevil in other shows, there are other characters that are going to be popping up in movies and stuff, and that all goes into the larger MCU of it all.

“The joke we make is, ‘Oh, those guys are uptown – we’re downtown!’ We kind of have a pocket that’s in this world of Hell’s Kitchen, in this world of New York. I always think that maybe these characters take little vacations into the larger world but the story that we’re focusing on is really granular. It’s this neighbourhood.”

Sorry, Howard. Don’t count on sharing that bourbon with Jessica Jones just yet. ●

*Daredevil: Born Again is on Disney+ from 24 March.*



D’Onofrio hits out. Not bad for a 66-year-old...

an autocrat you get yourself a militia that’s completely under your control, you identify an other or a marginalised community that you go after, you consolidate power through the media, education and the legal system. It doesn’t matter if it’s Nero, Pinochet or Franco... take your pick.

“The playbook is pretty well established, so when we were writing this stuff we were like, ‘Here’s what he does.’ The anti-vigilante task force is part of the comics. We built them and costumed them based on the comics. There are a few sequences

that were shot a year ago that could be off the news, and it’s weirding all of us out.”

Does Scardapane relish the fact that the show has a newfound political charge? “I have mixed feelings,” he tells *SFX*. “Stan Lee once said that he wanted to make his comic books a reflection of the world you saw outside your window. Then I also believe that what’s fun about the genre, and definitely fun in working with superheroes, is you’re dealing with huge archetypes, almost mythological characters, and that’s fun writing.

“Getting into the realm of politics, New York politics, the *Game Of Thrones* intrigue behind the scenes... okay, that’s fun too, but as it becomes almost too topical it feels like it’s going away from the large, mythological genre

stuff. So as we finish up the Mayor Fisk run with season two, as that storyline comes to its inevitable conclusion, what we’re doing going forward feels more like a return to the [Frank] Miller-era comics. So yeah, it was fun to play in the realm of politics but I like something a little more street level, personally.”

### RETURNING THE PAGE

Joining Matt on his crusade to retake the city is Karen Page, played once again by Deborah Ann Woll. “When I came into season one and Karen was originally not a big part of the narrative – or no part of it at all – I was like, ‘Guys, guys, guys, we can’t do that!’” says Scardapane. “Karen’s got to be a part of this world for a lot of reasons, and we didn’t have as much of her as I would have liked in season one. In season two, the evolution of Karen Page feels so on path with everything that’s come before. In my mind – and in Debs’s mind – she’s never been a sidekick; she’s never been a girlfriend. She’s always been somebody who both mirrors and pushes Murdock – not always in the best way.

“This version of Karen Page is a blast. It’s a curveball that you haven’t seen before. The great thing is we got to talk to her about it in season one, before we started getting into the real nitty-gritty of season two. Her input adds to what we do in the writers’ room and by the time you come out at the end you’re like, ‘Whoa, this actually makes sense!’ I think fans are really going to dig this Karen Page. The events of Mayor Fisk’s rise prompt people to



# Here's Where The Story Ends

**OUTLANDER**  
SHOWRUNNER  
MATTHEW B ROBERTS  
TEASES JAMIE AND  
CLAIRE'S FINAL  
CHAPTER.

WORDS: TARA BENNETT

**N**OT MANY TV SHOWS LIVE long enough to tell a complete story on their own terms. But the time travel/period piece *Outlander* is particularly unusual, because over 12 years, eight seasons and a final count of 101 episodes it's gone beyond its source material. It's based on author Diana Gabaldon's book series of the same name, and she's yet to finish her last entry, so the show has forged a unique path to closure.

Showrunner since season five, Matthew B Roberts tells *SFX* that outpacing the books is an issue he saw coming as far back as season six, when he first started pondering their show's end. "I prepped [an ending] for season seven, originally, and then we were graced with season eight, which was amazing," he explains.

"One of the big things I said to the writers' room when we started season eight was, 'Let's not try to recreate the story,'" he says of adhering just to Gabaldon's ninth book, *Go Tell The Bees That I Am Gone*. "We have a lot of book material that we can use and obviously, we have to create some new stuff to get to the

ending that the book doesn't do. But it worked out. It was nice that we got season eight, because we didn't have to rush. The ending that I had in mind right around season six is kind of what's in there now."

The last season picks up in 1779 with Jamie (Sam Heughan) and Claire (Caitriona Balfe) Fraser headed back to their beloved Fraser's Ridge community in North Carolina. They bring with them young Fanny (Florrie Wilkinson) who seems to have impossible ties to their long-dead daughter Faith. There are also reunions to be had with their time-travelling daughter Bree (Sophie Skelton), her husband Roger (Richard Rankin) and their kids, nephew Young Ian (John Bell) and his wife; old and new neighbours; perhaps a time traveller threat; and the ominous creep towards the Revolutionary War.

Jamie is also gifted by Bree a history book from the future that cites his specific death, which rattles the normally stoic Scot. "When you look at the wringer that they've been through over the decades, you wouldn't be human if you didn't have a little doubt,

especially for people who have actively tried to change the history that they're living in," Roberts says of Jaime and Claire's dilemma. "But sometimes you have to accept fate, because they've been living with their whole lives that everything has been fated for them. They're the *epitome* of destiny. She went to the stones and went through time and met him, and they had a child. What we say is, in any other universe, you might call it a coincidence, but in *Outlander*, it's fate. In the trailer, Claire literally says that... and to me, that's the arc of season eight and how season eight works out. Once everybody gets to the end, they'll understand why there was self-doubt, why there were these things, because once you truly believe, then we'll see what happens."

Roberts also promises a season that makes good on its complex mythology and deep bench of characters, some of whom will show up in interesting ways. He considers it a testimony to the impact of the show that they've had so many returning cast.

"That means a lot to all of us when they do that," he says with appreciation. "Almost →





## Woman Out Of Time

Caitriona Balfe reflects on firsts and lasts

**This season goes beyond Diana Gabaldon's books. Was that nerve-wracking?**

I think it was the first time we didn't get an overview of the season going ahead. We got the first two scripts, and then it was all a surprise unfolding as we went along which, as a control freak, was kind of hard because I like to know what's coming. I'm glad that we didn't really because it would have been hard to live with knowing what was going to happen. I think I would have had a lot of differing thoughts about it, and sometimes it's just best to be given what you're given.

**Episode two, "Prophecies", is your directorial debut. How did it go?**

There's nothing more terrifying than when you keep asking for something and they finally say yes. You're like, "Aww, shit. I have to do it now." But it was amazing. I loved every second of it. Being able to be there from day one of prep. They were setting up all these new locations, and I was able to be in there with conversations about how it was finished and be able to bring an actor's point of view. It was so interesting to see that process. Getting to work with Sam and all of the other actors in that way was so incredible, and with our crew. I felt supported by everybody.

**Did you keep anything from set?**

I asked for the [wedding] rings. I had to return them for a minute, but I think they're on their way back. But I feel like after that many marriages, I should collect the hardware, right?



Young Ian (John Bell) and Rachel (Izzy Meikle-Small).



Claire and Jamie (Caitriona Balfe and Sam Heughan).



Richard Rankin returns as time traveller Roger MacKenzie...



...with Sophie Skelton as wife Brianna.



Carla Woodcock joins as Amaranthus.

everything worked out the way we wanted it to. We got everybody we wanted. We even have this great arc coming where we were able to get Lauren Lyle and César Domboy back, as Marsali and Fergus."

Behind the scenes, series creator Ronald D Moore came back to write episode eight. Roberts says he called him and invited him to close out the show with them. "He was like, 'Oh my god, really? That's so sweet of you.' We gave him the parameters, and said, 'Just go for it' and he did. He wrote this really great, big episode. I think people will be happy." Gabaldon is back too, as the screenwriter of the penultimate episode, "Pharos".

Roberts says the final season will also fully embrace its supernatural elements by answering the Fanny/Faith issue, which he extrapolated from Gabaldon's prose. "There's a nugget in a conversation in the book, and that's where it sparked," he says of its origins. "Then, obviously, we had conversations with Diana about it. She's incorporated into a lot of these

really big decisions, of course. She was definitely consulted, and that's when it really started to take off once we got the green light."

While some don't worry much about the standing stone mystery in the books, Roberts says he considers it integral to their adaptation, and something which deserves its own narrative closure. "The answer is simple, and I'll say that there's magic in *Outlander*," he confirms. "The fact that a woman goes up to a rock, touches it and travels through time, that inherently puts magic into the show. The characters have to believe that too. Claire, who is technically a scientist/doctor, has to believe in magic. She just has to because she has actually travelled through time. She's watched her daughter do it. She sends her daughter

“You can have the books, and you can have the show, and they’re different”

Gazing into the future... or is that the past?

back in time to get her granddaughter fixed. So she has to believe that this world exists. If we, somehow, decided there's no magic in *Outlander*, that would be doing a disservice to the universe. Season eight helps show how that magic really works.”

The writing of the final episode fell to Roberts – his first time closing a show. “The one thing that I know for a fact is, I’m not going to please everybody,” he says, pragmatically. “When you start from that point, you can free yourself. When you start to please everybody, you please no one because you just water everything down. In writing the last episode, I knew how I wanted it to end. I did write multiple endings that fit perfectly into the ending, so no one would know *how* it ended. But I really knew how I felt like it should end; the TV show.”

He emphasises that the show is its own entity, which Gabaldon understands and he hopes fans get too. “The books are the books, and over the course of the last 13 years we

haven’t changed a single word in the books,” he stresses. “Go to your bookshelf, open them up. They’re right there. That’s the beauty of it. You can have the books, and you can have the show, and they’re different.”

As for the end of his almost 14-year journey to this point, Roberts says he’s still processing the finality of it all in pieces. For example, he says that usually at the end of a season finale script, he closes it with “End of season.” “But for this one,” he says, “I wrote: ‘End of series.’ I think when the final series ends and those credits roll, that’s when it will finally be over for us. And when I say over, I mean the actual physical act of making *Outlander*. I hope the legacy of *Outlander* lasts for a very long time.” ●

*Outlander* is on Starz in the US (6 March) and MGM+ in the UK (7 March).



## Fraser's Fate

### Sam Heughan's Highland hero comes full circle

This season, Jamie is moving towards his reported date of death, and he seems a little unmoored by it.

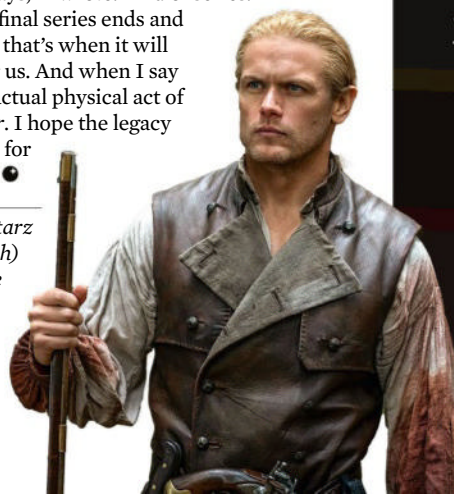
Even last season with Claire being shot, he’s more fragile and knows he has more to lose. There’s always been something about Jamie, about his death and his mortality, that he’s always been fine with it. He’s said that many times, so there is something about him that I think is almost fate-like. He knows when it comes, it comes. This season in particular, it’s something he’s facing. He comes to terms with it and has to face it head on, I think. Whether or not it is *true* or not is another question. I think it’s always been hanging over him in some way. But it’s less about him dying. It’s more about the people he leaves behind.

#### Did you keep anything from set?

It’s embarrassing, in my office I have a full Jamie Fraser. I also have his back scar. I thought I had a wig, but I don’t know where it’s gone. Maybe I’m wearing it now.

#### You’re an executive producer now, so was there anything you requested to close the story on the right foot?

There were a number of ideas. There was one that myself and quite a few of us other execs were keen on, and I think Matt went in different directions. We shot a number of ways it could be ended. We haven’t seen it, but we are excited because we *may* know, we think. But we’ll see. We’re gonna watch it with the fans, really, and be a fan ourselves. It’s gonna be interesting.



28 YEARS LATER:  
THE BONE TEMPLE

# DESIGNING 28 YEARS LATER:

GARETH PUGH AND CARSON MCCOLL TALK US THROUGH THE PROCESS  
OF DEVISING DR KELSON'S "ACTUALISED MEMENTO MORI"

WORDS: IAN BERRIMAN



# THE BONE TEMPLE

## DANNY'S BOYS

One of the standout elements of the returning *28 Days Later* saga is the Bone Temple, a monument to the dead constructed by Ralph Fiennes's loner Dr Ian Kelson.

On the face of it, Gareth Pugh and Carson McColl of creative studio HARD + SHINY were an unorthodox choice to mastermind its creation. Pugh's best known for his provocative fashion design, worn by the likes of Beyoncé, Kylie and Lady Gaga – and the duo had never done production design for a movie before.

"When Danny [Boyle] first came to us, we thought he was coming to us about costume design," McColl tells *SFX*. "Then he started talking about, 'We need to think about how it's been 28 years, and what Britain would look like.' We were like, 'Why's he talking to us about sets?', and it suddenly dawned on us that he was asking us to do both production and costume."

The director previously collaborated with the pair on *Free Your Mind*, his immersive take on *The Matrix* staged in Manchester. "It was quite a flat hierarchy in the creative team, so everyone could contribute in all different areas and offer up opinions," McColl explains. "I think Danny noticed that we have a bit of an anarchic spirit, and like to push things as far as we possibly can go!"

## CIRCULAR THINKING

As originally scripted, the Bone Temple would have looked rather different. "The way Alex [Garland] had written about it, it was very like the ossuaries they have in Central Europe or Southeast Asia, where they're places of worship, churches made of bones," McColl reveals. Pugh takes up the story. "Whereas we were tussling

The duo wanted the Temple to feel like a henge.



A 3D model of the Bone Temple in Blender.



A drone view of the finished Bone Temple set.



Over 900 uprights were sunk into rocky ground.

between whether we would do something designed around a pre-existing structure, whether that was a cooling tower or a pylon, or something gradually built over a period of time."

"There was this description of a spire of skulls," McColl adds, "But initially that was an interior space. Eventually we stumbled across the idea of: what if it was more like a henge? The whole film is about time. So we were trying to figure out how can we create something that felt like a space where when you step into it time dilates? That was the starting point of creating this sort of standing circle."

## SILENT HILL

Pugh and McColl came across one key inspiration during lockdown, while exploring Google Earth as a means to widen their horizons from the one-bedroom flat they were living in. "There's this place called The Hill of Crosses in Lithuania," McColl explains. "It's built upon a hill, and it's thousands of crosses that have been left there over time by pilgrims. It has this very graphic structure, and it's open air, and you can walk amongst them. We showed Danny, and within two days we were on a flight to Lithuania, because he was like, 'Well, we have to see it.'"

"When we got there it was the dead of winter, it was 7:00am, snowing, there was no one there, and it was the most peaceful place you could imagine. I think that was the moment where he was like, 'Okay, go for it. Do your worst and see what you come up with.'" →



ARTUR WIDAK/INRPHOTO VIA GETTY

The Hill of Crosses, near Šiauliai in Lithuania.



A shot of the Redmire site early on in construction.



Construction manager Tom Martin's Belfast base.

## LOCATION LOCATION LOCATION

Pugh and McColl worked with location manager Camilla Stephenson to find the perfect site. “Danny really wanted it to be by a river – for a bit of natural protection, but also so Kelson can wash bones etc,” Pugh explains.

They found it in North Yorkshire, by the River Ure. “It’s a beauty spot, right next to a little village called Redmire. Along that river there’s an ancient right of way. Luckily the land itself’s owned by the Bolton Estate, who own big swathes of that neck of the woods.”

Having done so, they had to flip their initial idea of a monument atop a hill on its head. “It was essentially a valley surrounded by hills, which I struggled with a bit,” Pugh recalls. “When you have an idea in your head and you find something that’s beautiful but totally the opposite of that, it’s quite difficult to recalibrate.”

## A PLACE IN THE SUN

Pugh: “We employed this guy who flies a drone, and has a LiDAR [Light Detection and Ranging] scanner on it. That enabled us to get the topography of the site, and input that into [software package] Blender. The topography was sent over to our construction fabricator Tom Martin in Belfast, whose job it was to build all the physical sets. He has a CNC machine [Computer Numerical Control], and CNCed us out a 1:50 scale model of the hills. It’s a bit like a laser cutter – a drill head will go around a solid chunk of wood or, in this case, polystyrene. Then we got all our little elements from Applied Arts, our modelmakers in East London, who laser-printed them within a resin in a resin bath, and that was all put together as a model and presented to the wider team.”

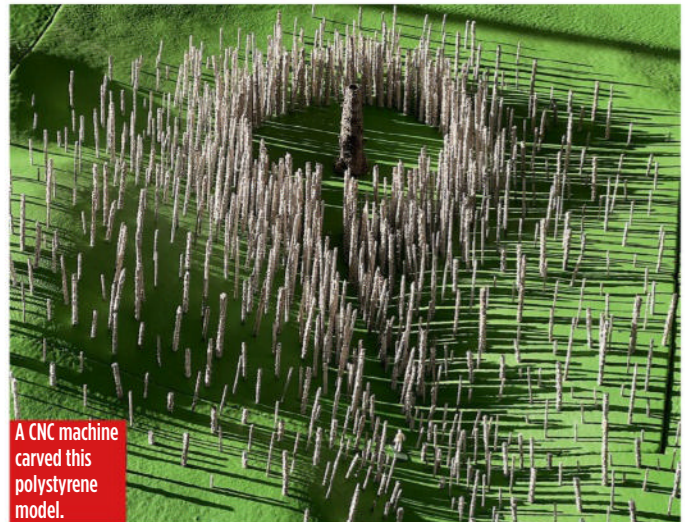
McColl: “This was our first film, so we went into it with a very collaborative approach. We really wanted Danny and Alex, but also Anthony Dod Mantle, the director of photography, to be happy with it. One thing Anthony mentioned early on was the position of the sun. At the ending of *28 Years Later*, where Spike climbs the Skull Spire, we wanted the sun to be in a particular place, and basically [know] when you

have sunrise and sunset and shadows. Having the model meant we could blast it with light and show them, across the day, the different positions, because it’s a bit like a sundial.”

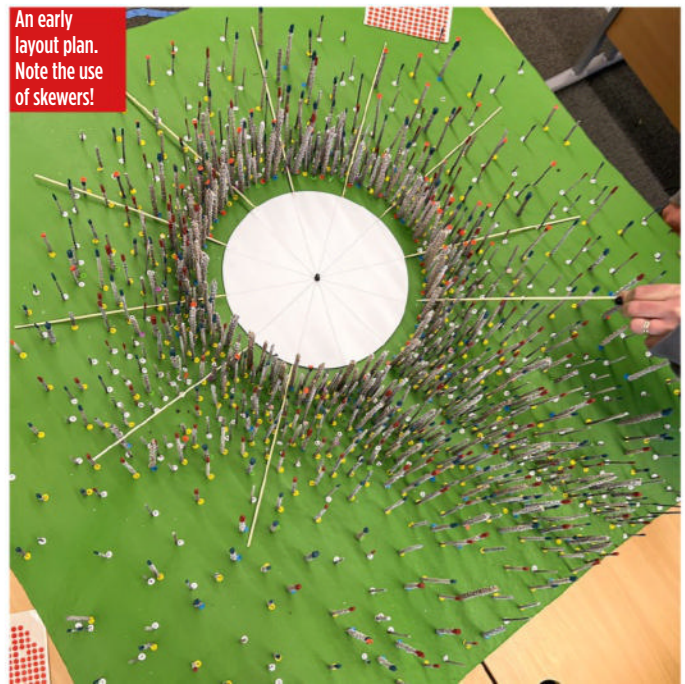
## DRILL, BABY, DRILL

“Once we had the model, and everyone was happy with it, more or less – apart from the producers, who didn’t want to spend all that money to make it, but I guess that’s their job! – it was a very difficult thing to then translate it,” Pugh notes. “It should have been easy, but actually being on-site and trying to copy what you had in small form and make it work was very different, because then you realise that you’re dealing with real skill.

“The uprights that we were using were huge, and the Skull Spire essentially sits in a well surrounded by hills. To land perfectly vertical, incredibly girthy, very heavy wooden uprights on a hill, the kind of drilling mechanism that they had to use to get all these uprights sunk down into what turned out to be incredibly rocky substrate... they ran through a lot of very heavy machinery in order to land all of these uprights.”



A CNC machine carved this polystyrene model.



An early layout plan. Note the use of skewers!

## DEM BONES

All the bones were individually cast – another expense which the team had to push for. “We went through this whole process of, ‘Would it be useful to have tubes wrapped with a printout of pictures of bones?’. We were like, ‘I don’t think so!’” Pugh laughs.

Masters of skulls of different sizes and sexes were replicated by Tom Martin’s team in Belfast, using a centrifugal casting process. “The skulls were cast in these things that constantly spin,” Pugh explains. “They put in a small amount of the rubber casting material, and because it’s constantly spinning, it’s cast as a very thin membrane. Seeing how a skull’s hollow, the things we ended up with were a very good replica.

“One note we’d given Tom was that you had to see both Infected and non-Infected alike,” McColl adds, “and we wanted to see signs of violence. In order to get that, you can’t have solid skulls. So a lot of thought went into it.” →



A test of how to attach the skulls to the Spire's spine.



Imagine being a rambler who stumbles upon this sight!



Please play Iron Maiden while looking at this photo...



Uprights stacked up in the warehouse in Belfast.

## TOWER OF STRENGTH

At points in both *28 Years Later* and *The Bone Temple*, characters scale the central Skull Spire – Spike (Alfie Williams) in the former; Dr Kelson (Ralph Fiennes) in the latter. And no, they didn't cheat! "There wasn't a fake topper built elsewhere," Pugh confirms.

So exactly how *do* you make a Skull Spire meet health and safety standards? "It had a scaffolding substructure, with lots of steel reinforced scaff tubes leading out from this central spine, and was all dug down and built into a concrete foundation. So it was pretty secure."

The manner by which the two scale the Spire is another example of how the two drew inspiration from real-world sites. "Danny brought in this image reference book that he'd put together back in 2000 for *28 Days Later* – a plastic-sleeved folder, full of things he'd ripped out of magazines. And one of the pictures was this *National Geographic* image."

"It's a mosque in Mali called the Great Mosque of Djenné," McColl adds.

"Into the wall of the building, there's a sort of wrap of sticks that's built into the render," Pugh continues. "It's a design detail, but it has a function, in that it allows people to scale that wall to repair the render. We used that as a device to suggest how Kelson would have built at such scale, and how he got up and got down."

"There was a safe route for Alfie to get up, but obviously he was on a huge crane on a wire, just for safety, because it was pretty high."

Spike (Alfie Williams) scales the Skull Spire.



Night shooting on *28 Days Later: The Bone Temple*.



Mali's Great Mosque of Djenné was an inspiration.



OUSMANE MAKAVELI/AFP VIA GETTY



Note the details based on the Sedlec ossuary.

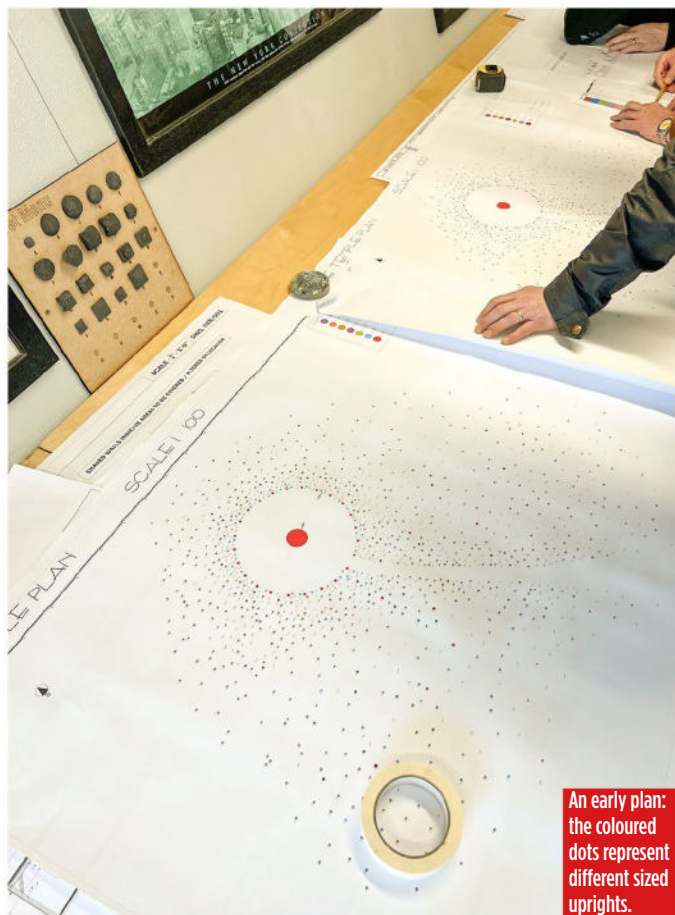
surface is covered in tiny little shells. This is the same sort of deal, but with bones. So there were a few things that we took from pre-existing things, but supplanting those more traditional flourishes onto something that felt a bit more pagan, and this megalith kind of structure.”

## VITAL STATISTICS

Time for some figures. “The original model had 1,000 uprights,” Pugh says – but they had to compromise a little. “I think production were a little bit scared. Obviously there’s a time when you start making the set, but there’s a very fixed time when that main unit turns up to shoot, and everything has to come to a point where those things converge. But we got quite close to the 1,000.”

“It was 900 and change,” McColl adds. “We made a concession that some of the uprights weren’t all covered,” Pugh explains. “We wanted it to look like it was a work in progress.”

“The highest upright we had was something like 20 feet, and I think the Skull Spire was 24-25 feet. Around all of the uprights are around 250,000 bones. For the Skull Spire, there were around 5,500 skulls. From them first getting on site to starting to shoot, it was around six months.”



An early plan: the coloured dots represent different sized uprights.

## JAPANESE KNOT WEIRD

The knots in the ropes used to tie the bones to the columns provide a further example of how painstakingly thought through the logic behind the Bone Temple was. “I think initially Ralph [Fiennes] thought it was a decorative thing,” McColl says, “and we were like, ‘No, it’s Japanese – it’s shibari [a style of rope bondage].’ It says a lot about Kelson’s character that he’d know what shibari was and how to tie those knots...”

“The fun part was that the prop guys who came in to build the set all had to learn shibari in order to make it. When we started, there were maybe two or three that knew how to do it and had a natural flair for it. But by the time we finished the set you could tell them all to do a series of specific knots, and they’d just go away and do it, and it’d be this incredible skill.”

*28 Years Later: The Bone Temple will be available on Blu-ray and DVD in April.*

## REALITY CZECH

Eagle-eyed viewers may have noticed that some of Kelson’s uprights have decorative details – skulls with bones fanning out from them. These were also inspired by a real-life location. “It’s directly taken from one of the more traditional ossuaries,” Pugh says. “Carson’s friend had this incredible book that we borrowed, that had all these amazing detailed shots [of ossuaries].”

“... and the book was called *Memento Mori*,” McColl notes – a phrase used by Dr Kelson in *28 Years Later*. “It’s called Sedlec – it’s in the Czech Republic.”

“It reminded us a lot of an incredible palace of shells in Margate [The Shell Grotto],” Pugh continues, “where every single



An early riff (left) on the photos of Sedlec (right).



NICOLAS JALLOTT/GAMMA-RAPHO VIA GETTY



Sometimes knowing bondage knots is useful...

Brought



To Book

# NEIL JORDAN

## Epic yet parochial: the director/writer discusses his first science fiction novel

Words by Jonathan Wright // Portrait by David Levenson

**O**NE CONSEQUENCE OF MAKING MOVIES, says Neil Jordan, is that your status as a filmmaker pushes other work into the background. “From the moment I made a film, it was like I’d never written a book. I’ve written almost as many novels as the movies I’ve made, but people don’t seem to be aware I’m a novelist.”

Hopefully, Jordan’s latest book, *The Library Of Traumatic Memory*, will help change that. His first foray into science fiction, it’s a remarkable novel centred on an “AI medical corporation gone clinically insane”. What if, asks the book, “the kind of magic that was implicit in science” before the Enlightenment actually came to pass in the near future? Jordan: “It leads to all sorts of chaos and madness.”

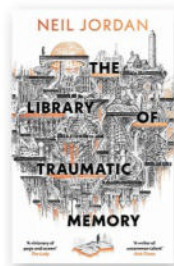
Figures from this era before the scientific method was set down, such as 16th century astronomer, mathematician and occultist John Dee, were drawn to mysticism and fields we’d now consider at best pseudoscientific. Many of today’s “mad fucking tech billionaires”, aren’t so different, Jordan argues. “They think they’ll transcend the physical conditions of human life, which is absurd and terrifying.” Philosophically, this isn’t so different, he suggests, to the way alchemists wanted to transmute base metals into gold.

If this sounds dystopian, that’s not Jordan’s intent. Rather, he was interested in exploring what the world might be like “if the future was not an apocalyptic wasteland” but “a bastard version of the present”. The setting, the isolated Beara Peninsula in south-west Ireland, an area Jordan knows well, reinforces this idea. “I said to myself, ‘Okay, I’m going to write the book and all of the parochialism of this place is still going to remain intact, even though I project the basic plot far into the distant future.’”

And the past, too. This helps give the book a depth and resonance as Jordan also riffs on local history and legends, like the story of the Hag of Beara, a woman doomed to immortality. The peninsula, he says, represents a “classic Irish haunted landscape”.

### PEOPLE ARE STRANGE

This idea of a deeper strangeness being somehow just off to one side of our everyday lives recurs in Jordan’s work, *SFX* suggests. “I don’t believe we’re rational beings at all,” he says. “I never have. I don’t believe our explanations for our world and our behaviour are sufficient. It’s a much crazier world than anything which rationality would tell us. I tend to be very impatient with descriptions of character that explain everything in terms of childhood, in terms of a series of logical steps. Look at the world, look at Donald Trump. We’re not logical, are we? We can’t be.”



### BIODATA

From  
Sligo, Ireland

**Greatest Hits**  
Jordan’s debut collection, *Night In Tunisia*, won the **Guardian Fiction Prize**. Subsequently, he has enjoyed a twin career as a novelist and as a filmmaker. He won the **Academy Award for Best Director for *The Crying Game* (1992)**.

**Random Fact**  
Growing up in Clontarf, Dublin, Jordan often cycled past **Bram Stoker’s house**, “the creepiest place you can imagine”.

It’s perhaps revealing that two of the key figures in Jordan’s career also operate in this space where the fantastic and the everyday intersect. While Jordan never trained formally in filmmaking because, as an Irish citizen, he couldn’t get the funding he needed after being accepted by the National Film and Television School, his prose attracted the attention of John Boorman.

He wrote a script for the director, *Broken Dreams*, that has never been made. When Boorman made his “big, wild Arthurian fantasy” *Excalibur*, in Ireland, Jordan made a documentary about the production, a major break as a filmmaker. Later, Boorman produced Jordan’s debut feature as a director, *Angel* (1982), starring Stephen Rea as a musician and killer.

### IN GOOD COMPANY

Jordan says he was lucky to start out at this time, when companies such as Film Four and Stephen Woolley’s Palace Pictures were keen to fund British and Irish films. “I was enabled by a filmmaking culture that doesn’t exist now,” he says. “I don’t know how one would make a movie as crazy as *The Company Of Wolves* today.”

But made it was after Jordan became friends with Angela Carter (1940-92), who wrote vivid and extraordinary magical realism-infused fiction. Carter had written a radio play based on her short story “The Company Of Wolves”, a retelling of “Little Red Riding Hood”, but Jordan thought it was too short to expand into a movie. Reading Carter’s fairy tale-infused collection *The Bloody Chamber*, he realised they could expand the material by employing “a structure of stories within stories” where dreamscape and reality meet.

“Angela was a great friend,” he says. “A great influence in my life.” Sadly, Carter’s life was cut short by cancer. She had wanted to work with Jordan on a project called *Vampirella*, but died before the script was finished. “When I was asked to do *Interview With The Vampire* by Anne Rice, another very forceful female imagination, I always thought of it as my debt to Angela in a strange way,” Jordan explains, “finally making a vampire movie that she would have loved.”

Whatever the difficulties of filmmaking, Jordan still has projects he wants to make. Emphasising the interplay between movies and literature that runs through his career, he’s written a screenplay of his own novel, *The Well Of Saint Nobody*, an eerie tale of love and the possibility of second chances. Then there’s what he calls “a Sam Peckinpah biker movie”, *Dirt Bike Ride*. That sounds great. “Believe me, it’ll be fun,” he laughs, “a bit disgraceful, but fun!” ●

*The Library Of Traumatic Memory* is published by *Head Of Zeus* on 12 March.

DAVID LEVENSON/GETTY

“I don't know how  
one would make a  
movie as crazy as  
The Company Of  
Wolves today”



**THE HUNT  
COMES HOME!**

*Predator 5-Movie Collection* on 4K is available at a special price as part of the Movie Magic Promotion (at retailers including Amazon and HMV) from 17 February. *Predator: Badlands* is available separately on 4K Ultra HD, Blu-ray and DVD from 23 February.



# LET THE HUNT BEGIN!

Prepare for battle – and get ready to land on the Death Planet – with the complete live-action Predator collection on 4K UHD **WORDS: LUKE SMITH**

**Y**OU CAN RUN, YOU can hide – but it won't change your fate... The only way to hopefully avoid becoming prey is to know your enemy! Gather your wits and your weapons as the galaxy's greatest hunters, the Yautja, return to do battle on one of the deadliest planets in the known universe...

Your essential mission briefing ahead of the journey to Genna, aka the Death Planet, is to get ahead of the fight and study the Predators in various combat situations. Learn all about them and their various human encounters – and how to survive them! – in the *Predator 5-Movie Collection*, a special box set that's available now on 4K, Blu-ray and DVD.

A paramilitary team get more than they bargained for in the jungle, as they're picked off one-by-one by an unknown – and unseen – assailant in **Predator (1987)**. It soon becomes apparent that their hunter is not of this world – but it's not the first time the Predators have visited the planet...

It's not the last time, either, as **Predator 2 (1990)** swaps the jungle for the boiling streets of New York City in the summer – and a slew of brutal murders.

In **Predators (2010)**, the action takes place off-world, with humans, and others, transported to a game reserve planet. This hunting and training ground for a group of Super Predators gives a first glimpse at how the feared

creatures prepare for war.

**The Predator (2018)** brings the battle back down to Earth with a bang as a Yautja ship crashes – but this Predator is far from alone...

In **Prey (2022)** we learn that humans have encountered the Yautja as early as 1719 when Naru, a young Comanche woman, hunts a Predator in the Great Plains.

*The Predator 5-Movie Collection* also features a host of legacy special features including commentaries and behind-the-scenes featurettes – *Prey* also includes a Comanche language option.

Also available on 4K Ultra HD, Blu-ray and DVD from 23 February is **Predator: Badlands (2025)** – the latest and highest-grossing

movie in the Predator franchise globally. Join junior Predator Dek and Weyland-Yutani synth, Thia, as they attempt to survive the wilds of Genna and kill the Kalisk.

Included on some formats are deleted and pre-visualisation scenes, making-of featurettes and audio commentary from director Dan Trachtenberg and members of his creative team.

Think you know your Predator lore? Make sure you've got the full story! Good hunting...



MARCH  
2026

edited by Ian Berriman

# Reviews

CINEMA 70

TV 74

HOME ENTERTAINMENT 76

BOOKS 82

COMICS 90

GAMES & STUFF 92

THIS ISSUE  
**59**  
REVIEWS



## GOOD LUCK, HAVE FUN, DON'T DIE

Diners Assemble

### Highlights



**74**

**A KNIGHT OF THE SEVEN KINGDOMS**

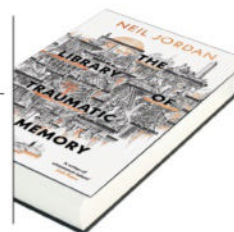
→ George RR Martin's Tales Of Dunk And Egg hits the small screen.



**76**

**THUNDERBIRDS**

→ The Anderson classic gets an extras-crammed Blu-ray release, with all 32 episodes restored.



**82**

**THE LIBRARY OF TRAUMATIC MEMORY**

→ Neil Jordan's latest: literary SF set in an enigmatic institute.

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

# Reviews

CINEMA

## GOOD LUCK, HAVE FUN, DON'T DIE

A meet-recruit story



RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 134 minutes

▶ Director Gore Verbinski

▶ Cast Sam Rockwell,

Haley Lu Richardson, Michael Peña, Juno Temple

▶ **What would you do if a seemingly deranged, plastic-dressed man arrived in a restaurant where you were just trying to enjoy a meal, and announced that he was from a post-apocalyptic future and needed to recruit you to save humanity from a terrible technological threat? That's**

the basic setup for *Pirates Of The Caribbean* and *A Cure For Wellness* director Gore Verbinski's first film in nine years.

Sam Rockwell, in full manic flow, is our unnamed future dude, all scraggly beard, wild eyes and full to the brim with knowledge about the unsuspecting diner patrons, since he claims to have tried this mission more than 100 times previously. He may not dance, but he's certainly magnetic, especially in the early scenes as he bounces around the diner trying to convince the phone-obsessed patrons to pay attention to his cause.

Around him, Verbinski assembles a rag-tag group of potential conscripts, including a delightfully nervy Michael Peña and Zazie Beetz as teachers who've had their own recent brush with the dangers of artificial intelligence; Susan (Juno Temple), a grieving mother with a cloned son (Asim Chaudhry's Scott), who evolves from disbelieving malcontent to true-believing warrior; and Haley Lu Richardson as Ingrid, allergic to mobiles and Wi-Fi, and constantly afflicted by nosebleeds in our chronically online society.

Writer Matthew Robinson's script tips its hat to a variety of genre influences – there are strands of *12 Monkeys*, *The Terminator*, *The Matrix* and even *Ghostbusters* at one point floating around the film's DNA, while it's primarily pitched at the level of an anarchic episode of *Black Mirror*. Yet the whole is thankfully more than the sum of its inspirational parts. A healthy serving of nuance among the chaos also helps make it feel human, particularly in the case of Temple's grieving mother. And there is real pathos to be found lurking, too; Rockwell in particular finds his character's depths as the story develops, even if the twist that fuels it is fairly easy to see coming.

What initially might seem to be a slightly fractured meditation on different hot-button subjects (AI, school shootings, social media) does actually connect in satisfying ways by the frenetic finale. It throws genres including techno-fear future shock, zombie horror and grief trauma into a blender, and the result mostly works. While there are a few issues here and there – one or two characters get shorter shrift and are mostly there to be cannon fodder, dying in gruesome, darkly comic fashion, while the plot doesn't completely fill a two-hour-plus runtime – *Good Luck, Have Fun, Don't Die* proves to be a raucously watchable sci-fi comedy that absolutely gels with Verbinski's punk rock style of filmmaking when he's let off the leash. **James White**

**i** Alex Cox's *Repo Man* was a big inspiration for Gore Verbinski: "It didn't feel like they asked for permission."



## ARCO



RELEASED 20 MARCH

PG | 89 minutes

▶ Director Ugo Bienvenu

▶ Cast Will Ferrell, America Ferrera, Natalie Portman, Romy Fay

▶ **In a world where Studio Ghibli and (given *Arco's* French origins) *The Triplets Of Belleville* exist, debuting a new, original hand-drawn animation is a daunting prospect. But director Ugo Bienvenu and the team at production company Remembers are to be applauded for putting this whimsical, emotional and entertaining sci-fi charmer into an increasingly competitive world.**

The titular young hero yearns to travel in time like his parents and elder sister, who spend their days riding rainbows to bring back samples to their far-future pastoral home in the clouds. But when he sneaks out and tries his hand at flying through the ages, he crash-lands circa 2075, where young Iris is desperate for change.

*Arco's* actual plotline is relatively slight: lots of bonding between the two youngsters, chat about how their worlds differ, and an off-the-peg chase structure late on. Yet it has a lot more to offer, including some beautiful design work (the zero-gravity beds are a particularly fun touch), charismatic characters, and some welcome comic relief voiced (in the international version) by the likes of Will Ferrell and Andy Samberg.

While it won't challenge the best of Ghibli etc, it certainly has enough to break through in a time when *Minions* and, to a lesser extent, *Mickey* still dominate. **James White**



In the future, personal hygiene is frowned upon.



## RESURRECTION

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

15 | 160 minutes

▶ Director Bi Gan

▶ Cast Jackson Yee, Shu Qi, Mark Chao, Huang Jue

◉ **Chinese director, writer** and poet Bi Gan's latest sprawling epic offers a tribute to loving cinema without holding that such love is pure and painless.

Set in a future where people can live forever by giving up their ability to dream, it follows a rare holdout (Jackson Yee) who chooses to continue to dream anyway, slipping through five chapters that double as a loose tour through film history. Dreams here are films, and filmmakers are reckless enough to keep making them, even when it comes with a cost.

Each chapter lands in a different register: silent-era grotesquerie, brittle noir, ghost story, con-artist drama and finally a rain-soaked, neon-bright romance. Bi's references are explicit, but these aren't exercises in style so much as moods to inhabit. Yee's physical performance anchors the film's constant shifts, while Shu Qi's quietly moving presence as his guide gives *Resurrection* its emotional throughline, softening its more abstract ideas with real tenderness.

Formally, Bi is showing off with changing aspect ratios, the foregrounding of sound and a lengthy single take, but there's more playfulness here than reverence. *Resurrection* doesn't argue that cinema saves us or lasts forever. It suggests something simpler: that dreaming, living and watching movies is beautiful precisely because it ends. **Leila Latif**



She regretted volunteering to be first-aid representative.

## SEND HELP

### Paradise, Lost

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

15 | 113 minutes

▶ Director Sam Raimi

▶ Cast Rachel McAdams, Dylan O'Brien, Dennis Haysbert, Xavier Samuel

◉ **Hats off to Sam Raimi** for making the weirdest movie of the year so far, a genre mash-up that mixes workplace revenge drama with desert island adventure, romantic romp and gross-out horror. Were it not for the talent both in front of and behind the camera, this film really might not work at all.

Rachel McAdams plays sad-sack office worker Linda, who has 10 times the brains but none of the swagger of her new boss (*Teen Wolf*'s Dylan O'Brien), who fully intends to exploit and discard her after an overseas trip. When their plane crash-lands, she utilises her obsession with the TV show *Survivor* to find food, water and

shelter for the two. But office politics won't stay put.

So far, so generic, but this is horror legend Raimi, and he never lets you forget it. There are *Evil Dead*-esque boar's-eye-view angles, and an array of eye-gouging, vomiting, splattering and squelching scenes enough to give *Drag Me To Hell* a run for its money. There's sufficient grue to have the average viewer covering their eyes between all the shots of sandy beaches, verdant forests and crashing waterfalls. It helps that both McAdams and O'Brien are incredibly game, mastering comedy, stunts and general humiliation with panache.

If you can cope with genre whiplash, *Send Help* is a whole lot of fun, let down only slightly by a final act that's very similar to another highly acclaimed film, and an over-long runtime. Still, what a wonder that such a movie even exists – not perfect, but always capable of surprising, if not by the plot, at least by what's going to be squirted into, or out of, someone's mouth next. **Rosie Fletcher**

“This is horror legend Raimi, and he never lets you forget it”

**i** Look out for a portrait of Bruce Campbell in the background of the office scenes, implying that he's Bradley's late father.



## RETURN TO SILENT HILL

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

15 | 106 minutes

▶ Director Christophe Gans

▶ Cast Jeremy Irvine, Hannah Emily Anderson, Evie Templeton, Nicola Alexis

◉ **The 2001 horror videogame** *Silent Hill 2* followed a grieving man's psychological sojourn after receiving an impossible letter from his late wife, becoming a cult classic on the PS2 for its mature storytelling. This loose adaptation recreates memorable shots and even rips tracks straight from the soundtrack with all the aplomb of a fan film, but demonstrates all the maturity of a child wearing their dad's shoes.

To be fair to returning director Christophe Gans's take on the titular town itself, a once all-American city abandoned under a carpet of ash remains a decently creepy setup (and potentially more nerve-jangling than ever before). Alas, the film abandons these eerie streets in favour of sloppy CGI monsters and dodgy green screen composites.

*Silent Hill 2* was always going to be a challenge to adapt, but this take demonstrates little vision beyond “Well, it was in the game, so it should be here, too.” A questionably remixed story completely defangs the original's horror, instead shambling through mental health horror tropes. Most actors would struggle to sell the clattering dialogue, and lead Jeremy Irvine is shunted around so unceremoniously that there's no risk of building a sense of intrigue, much less tension. **Jess Kinghorn**

# Reviews

CINEMA



"Is this a dagger I see... oh wait, wrong play."

## SCARLET

2D and not 2D



▶ **RELEASED 13 MARCH**

15 | 111 minutes

▶ Director Mamoru Hosoda

▶ Cast Mana Ashida, Masaki Okada, Koji Yakusho, Yutaka Matsushige

◉ Mamoru Hosoda's new film *Scarlet* isn't like his backlist (such as 2021's *Belle*, about a girl who becomes a cyberspace pop star), nor like most recent anime. *Scarlet* is comparable more to offbeat, maverick animated fantasies, like *Time Masters* or *Fantastic Planet*.

The heroine, the eponymous Scarlet, is a gender-swapped Hamlet. Poisoned by her monstrous uncle Claudius, Scarlet wakes in an afterlife desert realm whose human inhabitants prey on each other mercilessly. She meets an angelically gentle male nurse, Hijiri, who's from modern Japan.

But her thirst for vengeance is unsated, because Claudius is there too.

The hybrid visuals include some traditionally drawn scenes, but the figures are largely CG, looking curiously like paper cut-outs. They have little sense of subtle detail, something that is even truer of a story whose characters are so one-note – the raging Scarlet, the gentle Hijiri and the gleefully evil Claudius.

Patches of the film are tedious, but there remains something compelling in such an unusual, broad-strokes vision, laid out in immodestly epic Cinemascope. It ultimately picks up with a crazy dancing dream sequence and a silly but satisfying ending.

Andrew Osmond

**i** The earliest known film version of *Hamlet* was a 1907 French silent short directed by Georges Méliès (now sadly lost).

## COLD STORAGE

Tons of fungus



▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

15 | 99 minutes

▶ Director Jonny Campbell

▶ Cast Joe Keery, Georgina Campbell, Liam Neeson, Lesley Manville

◉ The fact that one character is spotted reading Jack Finney's *The Body Snatchers* early on is just one indicator of the knowing register that this easy-to-enjoy horror-comedy operates in. Screenwriter David Koepp (*Jurassic Park*) has adapted from his own novel, and director Jonny Campbell (best known for TV work, including *In The Flesh*, *Westworld* and *Dracula*) brings it to brisk, pulpy life.

It benefits from a couple of satisfying character duos that spark with chemistry. There's Liam Neeson and Lesley Manville as a couple of military types (they work for the DTRA – Defence

Threat Reduction Agency) who investigate a mysterious extraterrestrial fungus in a '90s-set prologue, before being called back to duty in the present day, when self-storage co-workers Teacake (*Stranger Things*' Joe Keery) and Naomi (*Barbarian*'s Georgina Campbell) discover mysterious goings-on in the bowels of their building. There's some crackle to Keery and Campbell's flirtation, while Neeson once again demonstrates sharp comic instincts after *The Naked Gun*. Only Vanessa Redgrave is short-changed in a supporting role that adds very little.

There's also a pleasing yuckiness to the fungus's side effects – parasitically infiltrating humans and animals, it zombifies the host before they burst and disperse the fungus further. Even



"Yellow doesn't really suit my complexion."

if there's an over-reliance on digital effects, there's still plenty of invention to the grue, and a steady supply of appropriately dispensable candidates to suffer the microorganism's wrath.

True, the film does feel somewhat slight, and you occasionally wonder if it could've been more uproarious had Campbell and Koepp leaned even harder into the gloop and

absurdity. But even so, for a fun, throwaway piece of sci-fi, *Cold Storage* punches above its weight thanks to likeable lead casting, snappy pacing and some witty dialogue, all delivered with a throwback spirit exemplified in a couple of choice '70s-inspired needle drops. **Matt Maytum**

**i** Scream queen Georgina Campbell has two more horror films lined up for 2026: *Psycho Killer* and *The Shepherd*.



## ALL YOU NEED IS KILL

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 27 FEBRUARY**  
15 | 82 minutes

▶ Director Kenichiro Akimoto  
▶ Cast Ai Mikami, Natsuki Hanae, Kana Hanazawa

👉 **Here's an anime version of** *Edge Of Tomorrow*, the film where Tom Cruise and Emily Blunt fought invading aliens. Their characters were timelooped; whenever they perished, they woke up before the battle for another go.

*Edge Of Tomorrow* was based on a Japanese novel, though this anime rings many changes of its own. It's no longer an army story – the characters are civilians, though with handy high-tech hardware. The monsters are plant-creatures guarding a gargantuan alien tree. And our viewpoint character is a woman, Rita, very different from Emily Blunt's character. Sullen and solitary, her childhood's left her almost wanting the world to end.

Rita's one of the best things in the film, her emotional journey compelling. Her male counterpart, when we eventually meet him, has his own vulnerabilities, and their relationship is charming. The film's design is ambitiously original – colours, backgrounds and monsters are great, but many of the supporting characters look plain weird.

The film runs for barely 80 minutes, and some of the plotting is cheesily convenient. The action's lively, changing with the shifting timelines, but the scenario feels overfamiliar after so many timeloop tales. Still, we always have Rita to cheer on. **Andrew Osmond**



## DOLLY

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 6 MARCH**  
TBC | 82 minutes

▶ Director Rod Blackhurst  
▶ Cast Fabianne Therese, Seann William Scott, Max the Impaler, Ethan Suplee

👉 **Note to self: if you find** yourself in a massive woodland and happen upon an area festooned with creepy dolls, best not hang about. Not that there's much logic to the actions of our protagonists Macy (Fabianne Therese) and Chase (Seann William Scott), the hiking couple who are ambushed by a hulking great brute in a cracked doll mask and cutesy dress, played by wrestler Max the Impaler.

From the poster this looks like it could be a Chucky-esque sentient doll film – it very much is not. Instead it's an old-school exploitation movie, shot on grainy 16mm and influenced by '70s B-movies, particularly *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Ethan Suplee's redneck captive is even called Tobe), but with none of that film's magic-in-a-bottle menace.

*Dolly* is grim. It's extremely violent and deeply unpleasant, as Macy is kidnapped by the titular wordless monstrosity, who dresses her as a little kid, puts her in a high-chair, and force-feeds her baby food and later, err... milk...

There will be a niche audience for this, and it's conceivable that watched with a like-minded group, it's just about outrageously funny enough to entertain. At best though, *Dolly* is gross-out trash that feels long at 82 minutes. Oh and there's a post-credits scene which really isn't worth the bother. **Penelope Dee**



## THE STRANGERS: CHAPTER 3

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**  
15 | 91 minutes

▶ Director Renny Harlin  
▶ Cast Madelaine Petsch, Gabriel Basso, Richard Brake, Rachel Shenton

👉 **The ending of *The Strangers: Chapter 2*** left a vacancy to be filled among the trio of masked killers at the dark heart of Renny Harlin's trilogy-spanning reboot. That could be a potential lifeline for "Final Girl" Maya (Madelaine Petsch) – provided, of course, that she's prepared to sacrifice her scruples for what might only be a temporary reprieve. Turns out the murderous threesome known as Scarecrow, Dollface and Pin-Up Girl have a Sugababes-ish way of replenishing their ranks whenever they're depleted. There's a reason too why their reign of terror has gone so woefully uninvestigated, something disclosed here via a series of flashbacks.

The problem with spilling beans as well as blood is that it undercuts the mystery that made Bryan Bertino's 2008 original so creepily unnerving. What we get in its place is pedestrian and banal, without so much as a cameo from the previous film's crazed boar to liven things up. New characters are introduced so cursorily they may as well have "Next Victim" etched on their foreheads, while a sequence in which a trailer comes under attack is entirely lacking in tension. Add some arbitrary plotting and a listless pay-off and the result is a chapter, and triptych, that you can't wait to finish. **Neil Smith**



## WHISTLE

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**  
15 | 100 minutes

▶ Director Corin Hardy  
▶ Cast Dafne Keen, Sophie Nélisse, Percy Hynes White, Nick Frost

👉 **From videotapes and** embalmed hands to plain old dolls and toys, there's rarely been an inanimate object horror can't make menacing. In Corin Hardy's latest, though, the idea of an ancient Aztec death whistle that precipitates the demise of anyone who hears it blown works better in theory than in practice.

Like *Final Destination*, *Smile*, and Hardy's *The Nun* before it, *Whistle* conjures an indestructible, implacable entity that makes short shrift of the misfit teens who meddle with it. That it should take the form of their expiring future selves, however, is a nebulous concept more suited to gory yuks than spine-chilling tingles.

If the quietus awaiting them includes a car crash, an immolation or an industrial shredder, *Whistle* can and does spectacularly go to town. But it's harder to summon shivers when old age, lung cancer or overdoses are involved, with their relative innocuousness thwarting Hardy's efforts to render them terrifyingly.

There's engaging work here from Dafne Keen as a goth with a secret, while Nick Frost is a welcome bonus as a chain-smoking Brit who has somehow found gainful employment at her all-American high school. For all its affectionate nods to iconic movie scaremasters, though, *Whistle* is fated to be remembered as a minor addition to the cursed item subgenre. **Neil Smith**

TV

## A KNIGHT OF THE SEVEN KINGDOMS Season One

He's a good Egg

★★★★★

▶ UK NOW TV, Mondays

▶ US HBO Max, Sundays

▶ Creator Ira Parker

▶ Cast Peter Claffey, Dexter Sol Ansell, Bertie Carvel, Henry Ashton

**EPISODES 1.01-1.06** Both of the previous TV shows based on George RR Martin's "A Song Of Ice And Fire" sequence have tended to focus on the bigger picture. *Game Of Thrones* told a story of various factions vying for political power in Westeros, while *House Of The Dragon* is about the fracturing of the kingdom's ruling house. Both favour epic battles,

aristocratic families, and huge, world-shaking events.

A *Knight Of The Seven Kingdoms* is not like that. Adapted from the first of Martin's *Tales Of Dunk And Egg* novellas, it's a smaller, more intimate affair, with HBO specifically ordering a spinoff that wouldn't cost *House Of The Dragon*'s staggering \$20 million per episode. Despite this tighter budget and a shorter running time – six episodes, each roughly around the 30-minute mark – this is the most exciting the franchise has felt in years.

We're introduced to squire "Dunk" (Peter Claffey) after the

death of his mentor, Ser Arlan of Pennytree (Danny Webb). Taking on the mantle of "hedge knight" – a euphemism for a homeless warrior with no specific allegiance – the newly dubbed Ser Duncan the Tall sets out to prove himself by taking part in a tournament. There, he meets a young boy called "Egg" (Dexter Sol Ansell). The two become fast friends, but Egg is hiding something that could land them both in danger.

Fans will know that secret, but we won't spoil it here. Besides, it's less interesting than the tone of the piece, which mixes the usual blood, sex and swearing with a sweeter heart than we're used to from this universe. Dunk is naive and not particularly smart. Egg is sharper than he lets on. Together, they make for a genuinely charming duo.

Still, the duo's natural optimism is put to the test, as is Dunk's belief that knights are inherently noble. A bunch of Targaryens show up, which raises the stakes, especially when Dunk draws the ire of the vile Prince Daeron (Henry Ashton). The mood darkens further in the brutal final two episodes, which fill out Dunk's backstory and give him his first experience of combat. We're back in prime *Thrones* territory here, but because we've spent so much time with the character, the savagery of what he experiences hits that much harder.

Even so, the season ends not with tragedy, but a moment of unexpected grace and the promise of adventures to come. In a world defined by its cynical antiheroes, Dunk and Egg's everyday decency shines brightly. **Will Salmon**

**i** Martin intends to write many more Dunk and Egg stories – but they're on hold until he's finished *The Winds Of Winter*.



## SMALL PROPHETS Series One

★★★★★

▶ UK BBC iPlayer,

streaming now

▶ Creator Mackenzie Crook

▶ Cast Pearce Quigley, Lauren Patel, Michael Palin, Mackenzie Crook



**EPISODES 1.01-1.06** There are few shows as charmingly bonkers as the latest sitcom from *The Detectorists* and *Worzel Gummidge* writer/director Mackenzie Crook.

It's a gentle comedy with a WTF high concept that a broadcaster would only greenlight from someone with a proven track record. Anyone else and they'd be going, "We just don't think there's a demographic for a whimsical urban fantasy about a sardonic DIY shop employee who's growing precognitive homunculi in his garden shed so he can find out why his girlfriend ran off." That demographic is people who love weird shit with genuine heart and a few good laughs.

The most urban of Crook's BBC shows so far (it's set in the suburbs of Manchester), it's still seeped in his love of nature, and even manages to create what feels like an authentic modern mythology. A puddle of oil that pools into the silhouette of a *Watership Down* bunny is just one of many bizarre but oddly evocative moments. And the homunculi are a triumph of "naive effects" – weirdly characterful and endearing in their jerky artificiality.

Perfectly cast, the show gets off to a bit of a slow-burn start, but by the end, it's sublimely wonderful, with multiple plotlines coming together and a promise of more. **Dave Golder**



The *Twins* remake was a radical new take.

## FALLOUT Season Two

### Dicing with Deathclaws

★★★★★

UK/US Prime Video, streaming now

► Creators Geneva Robertson-Dworet, Graham Wagner

► Cast Ella Purnell, Kyle MacLachlan, Aaron Moten, Walton Goggins

EPISODES 2.01-2.08 **We're back in**

the blasted Wasteland of a post-nuclear alternative America, inspired by the series of videogames of the same name – and, in particular, fan-favourite instalment *Fallout: New Vegas*.

The increasingly jaded Lucy (Ella Purnell) is on the hunt for her treacherous dad Hank (Kyle MacLachlan, clearly having a ball playing a baddie who's convinced he's a goodie). Meanwhile, Cooper Howard, aka the Ghoul (Walton Goggins), is intent on finding his cynically frozen daughter, and wife Barb – could she be yet another traitor?

Maximus (Aaron Moten), meanwhile, is on a quest of his own, having become disillusioned with the Brotherhood of Steel's religious ravings. They will all converge on billionaire mogul Robert House, the head of RobCo, whose brain-control device plays a key part in the story, and whose lair is deep within New Vegas.

Given how long it takes our characters to get there, and the rich lore of the city in the game, it's a shame that very little is made of the location itself, blockaded as it is by monstrous Deathclaws. Similarly, the cult of Caesar's Legion – properly terrifying

“There are flashbacks – lots of flashbacks – to pre-war times”

Whoever's sitting to your right at the moment: duck!



psychos who will crucify you as soon as look at you – is represented here as more of a group of bumbling cosplaying manbros.

But that's for the hardcore to quibble over. *Fallout's* ethos of OTT violence, explicit but slapstick gore, sly satire and gorgeous vistas remains addictive, if a little disjointed. There are flashbacks – lots of flashbacks – to

characters in their pre-war times, and these combined with the skein of plot strands in the present day mean you second-screen at your peril.

It all rumbles along enjoyably enough, but season three will need to up the stakes in terms of really big bang moments. **Ed Ricketts**

**i** Coming to Prime Video: *Fallout Shelter*, a 10-episode competition series based on the mobile game. Casting is open now!

## WONDER MAN Season One

### No much action, just great acting

★★★★★

UK/US Disney+, streaming now

► Showrunner Andrew Guest

► Cast Yahya Abdul-Mateen II, Ben

Kingsley, Zlatko Burić, Arian Moayed

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **Anyone expecting**

*Wonder Man* to be a gender-swapped Amazon warrior fighting for your rights is in for a big shock (notwithstanding the fact that Wonder Woman is DC and Wonder Man is Marvel). There's barely any Spandex in this show, let alone satin tights.

*Wonder Man* is a genuinely pleasant surprise from Marvel. It's barely even a superhero show, but don't hold that against it, because it's all kinds of – ahem – wonderful. Based on a Z-list Marvel character (an occasional Avenger who moonlighted as an actor), it ignores most of his comic lore, and nobody but

hardcore comics geeks (and probably few of them) will care.

About all that remains is the acting element, which becomes the peg on which to hang a show about self-expression, redemption and friendship. Superpowered Simon Williams (Yahya Abdul-Mateen II) wants to act in a Hollywood where superpowered actors are banned after an unfortunate incident involving Josh Gad and a human portal. So Simon keeps his superpowers secret while auditioning for the star role in a remake of his favourite childhood movie, *Wonder Man*. His main barrier to stardom isn't his powers, though, but an overthinking attitude to his craft that has directors pulling their hair out.

Enter The Mandarin. Or rather, the guy who “portrayed” the super-terrorist in 2013's *Iron*



SFX Loves

“He insisted I try this on, I prefer jorts and a t-shirt.”

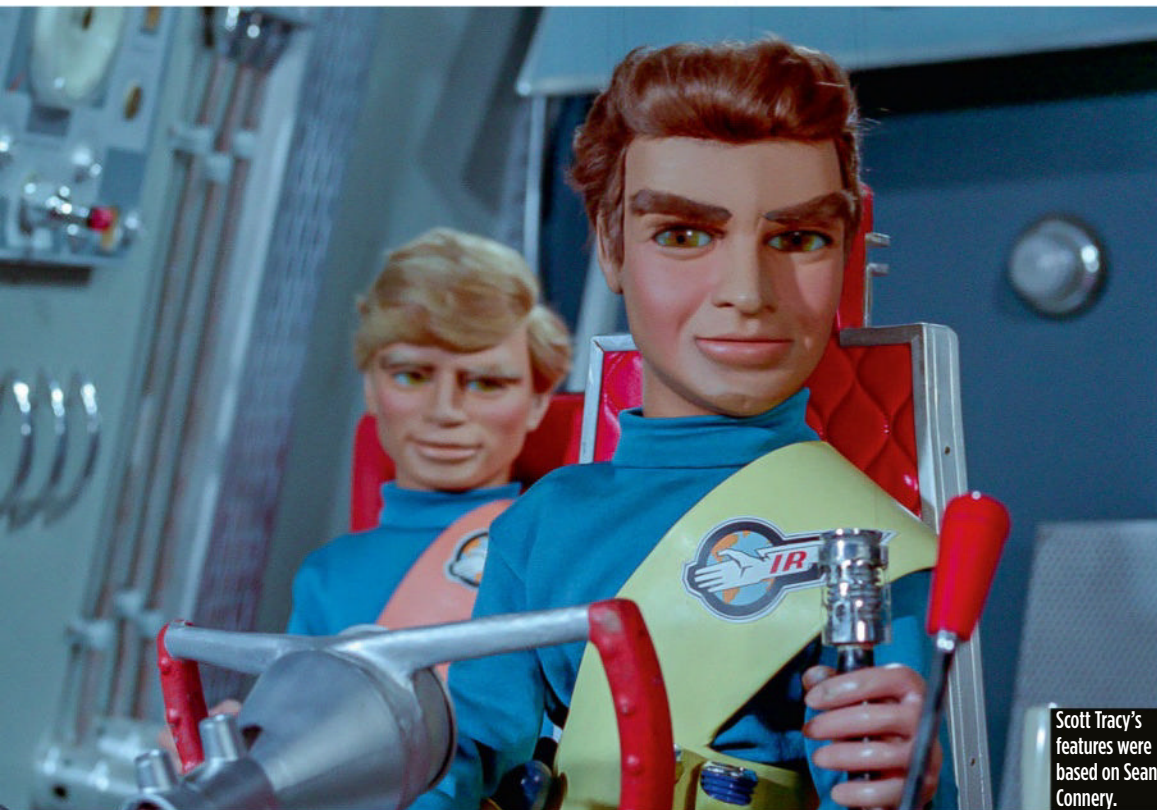
*Man 3*, Trevor Slattery (Ben Kingsley), who becomes Simon's unlikely mentor.

The result is a charming, witty, heartwarming comedy drama, a bromance full of surprises, with some gloriously bizarre moments. It's an acting tour de force for Abdul-Mateen II and Kingsley as they quote Shakespeare and *Amadeus* at each other, with hilarious cameos from Josh

Gad and Joe Pantoliano sending themselves up.

In its own low-key way, it's one of the most adult Marvel live-action projects – a truly character-led story with nuance between the silliness. Just don't expect massive punch-ups and a CGI-fest finale. **Dave Golder**

**i** In the fourth episode, the song Josh Gad sings in a club is “In Summer”, which he originally performed as Olaf in *Frozen*.



Parker is Go!" (11 minute), a re-edit of a 1990 fan-made comedy short, available with commentary.

"Talking Thunderbirds" (42 minutes) delivers a fascinating collection of archive interviews with key creatives (art directors, puppeteers, directors) with some great behind-the-scenes stills. "The Making of Thunderbirds" (three minutes), made to promote the 1965 launch, boasts some intriguing backstage footage. A series of ads for products such as Zoom ice lollies, Sugar Puffs and car insurance includes Brains performing a jig to "Rhythm Is A Dancer" to promote spring water (six minutes).

Recycled material includes two clip-based compilations created for the show's 30th anniversary – "Great Disasters" (57 minutes), "Great Rescues" (66 minutes); "All About Thunderbirds" (59 minutes), a behind-the-scenes doc for BBC Four's 2008 Thunderbirds Night; "Thunderbirds in Concert" (19 minutes) – which compiles tracks from a 2024 concert (19 minutes); "Thunderbirds Century

## THUNDERBIRDS

Looking FAB in HD

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1965-1966 | U | Blu-ray

▶ Creators Gerry and Sylvia Anderson

▶ Cast Sylvia Anderson, David Graham, Shane Rimmer, Matt Zimmerman

**BLU-RAY DEBUT** Few shows stand

the test of time as well as *Thunderbirds*. Gerry Anderson's puppet spectacular about huge, globe-trotting rescue craft was a visual anachronism in the '60s, and still is today. But Supermarionation was a technique that gave the show a fully immersive, fully coherent aesthetic, with both the characters and the ships held up by strings.

This 60th Anniversary Collector's Edition Blu-ray release makes the strings more visible than ever. But you won't care, because it makes the amazing

effects, sets and character designs look better than ever too.

▶ **Extras** This 11-disc set has an impressive mix of new, updated, recycled and archive features on offer – and several Thunderbird Two pod-loads of them.

The centrepiece is *Thunderbirds: FAB At 60*, a 97-minute documentary with celebs (Jonathan Ross, Sanjeev Bhaskar), filmmakers (J Michael Straczynski, John Logan) and fans waxing lyrical about the show. It's an entertaining, pacily-edited watch, though a little overlong, with some of the talking heads running out of new ways to enthuse by the last 20 minutes.

The other highlight is the first official home entertainment release for three crowdfunded special episodes shot for the 50th anniversary. Using soundtracks

from three audio dramas released on vinyl in the '60s, these episodes – "Introducing The Thunderbirds" (27 minutes, with director's commentary), "The Abominable Snowman" (31 minutes) and "The Stately Homes Robberies" (28 minutes) – were created using the same shooting techniques as the '60s show. The results are astonishingly successful, with fan-pleasing attention to detail.

Six random episodes come with commentaries from an eclectic bunch, including the 2004 movie cast and *Doctor Who's* Sophie Aldred and Nicola Bryant; they're light on facts, but generally fun. A seventh utilises archive interview clips from many of the original show's main creative forces.

"Thunderbirds Rebooted" (17 minutes) spotlights various revivals over the years, including Japanese and US re-edits, the 2004 movie and the CGI series. New(ish) is "Fablebox" (23 minutes), in which Lady Penelope and Parker offer an amusing meta, *Gogglebox*-style commentary for "The Perils Of Penelope". There's also goofy fun to be had in "Nosey

“The results are astonishingly successful”

21 Tech Talks" – seven videos (seven to eight minutes) on Thunderbirds 1-5, FAB1 and The Mole; "The Thunderbirds Companion" (54 minutes) – a 2000 DVD special introducing the show to a new generation; three more clips-based docs from the Carlton DVDs (10-15 minutes); and a four-minute promo from 2000 on Carlton's restoration work.

Rounding things off are a 2022 full-cast audio drama, "Brains Is Dead" (50 minutes), the crazy opening titles to the Japanese edit (two minutes), a '60s Thunderbird One promo (one minute) and a compilation of silent, textless 35mm footage (12 minutes). On the downside, there's a lack of subtitles on some extras. The set also includes a 110-page episode guide and six cutaway artwork posters. **Dave Golder**

**i** "The Mighty Atom" (the sixth episode of season one) is the only episode to feature all five of the main Thunderbird craft.

## THE VISITOR

### Girl trouble

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1979 | 15 | 4K

▶ Director **Giulio Paradisi**

▶ Cast **Paige Conner, John Huston, Mel Ferrer, Lance Henriksen**

➔ **From Damien Thorn to Regan MacNeil**, the '70s saw a population boom in demonic brats. Adding to their number is this cult Italian-American co-production, now upgraded to 4K.

Seemingly stitched together by dream logic, it's an ungainly, deeply eccentric collision of science fiction and occult horror, chasing *Star Wars* as much as *The Omen*: eight-year old Katy Collins is the deadly, foul-mouthed, Pong-playing spawn of the interplanetary equivalent of Satan, and she might just have a brother on the way... In fact the film jackdaws any number of

inspirations, from *Close Encounters* to boardroom conspiracy thrillers, climaxing with a spectacular bird attack that goes full, unabashed Hitchcock.

The thin, garbled script short-changes such slumming talents as John Huston, Glenn Ford and Shelley Winters. But director Giulio Paradisi – masquerading here as Michael J Paradise – brings genuine energy to the madness, staging some admirably dynamic set-pieces that showcase practical stuntwork. And while Franco Micalizzi's score may be frequently inappropriate it's also never less

“A spectacular bird attack goes full, unabashed Hitchcock”

Don't say 6-7. It's already over. You'll never be cool.



than gloriously funky. The Devil has the best tunes, it's true.

➔ **Extras** New special features on this Arrow Video release include a commentary by critics BJ and Harmony Colangelo, and two thoughtful visual essays: Meagan Navarro analyses the movie's place at the intersection of sci-fi and religious horror (19 minutes), while fellow film historian Willow Catelyn Maclay unpicks its stance

when it comes to the issue of abortion rights (11 minutes).

Carried over from Arrow's 2014 Blu-ray are three interviews (23 minutes in total), including an entertaining chat with screenwriter Lou Comici. Plus: trailers; image gallery; booklet.

**Nick Setchfield**

**i** Denied the rights to *The Exorcist*, producer Ovidio G Assonitis went on to make 1974 knock-off *Beyond The Door*.

## CRY OF THE BANSHEE

### The Howling

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1970 | 15 | Blu-ray

▶ Director **Gordon Hessler**

▶ Cast **Vincent Price, Elisabeth Bergner, Essy Persson, Hugh Griffith**

➔ **The first entry in Hammer Presents**, a new range showcasing horrors by other studios (in this case AIP) is an understandable choice, but a disappointing one.

Vincent Price (in full scenery-chewing mode) plays a cruel magistrate, cursed by the head of a coven (Elisabeth Bergner's Oona) after slaughtering her disciples, revenge exacted via the monstrous transformations of one of his staff.

It echoes Price's 1968 film *Witchfinder General*, and also anticipates 1971 folk horror *Blood On Satan's Claw* – both superior efforts. Coming from Hessler and writer Chris Wicking (who also

teamed up on the eccentric *Scream And Scream Again*), it all feels rather rote. They had their hands tied, told that they could “only change it 10%” from the outline that had been pre-sold.

It makes little sense. If Oona's acolytes follow “the ways of peace”, why does she call on Satan, and stick pins in voodoo dolls? Why kill half her flock, but leave the leader alive? The “banshee” is no such thing, but a werewolf-like creature. Sensibly, the make-up job (all boot polish and big ears) is kept in the shadows.

In its favour, the camerawork is more fluid than many Hammer outings. And the opening titles – an animated sequence that marks the big-screen debut of Terry Gilliam – are striking. But the first act's catalogue of misogynist abuse – five young women in a row have their breasts bared as they're



“Should my next gourmet cookbook be for scenery?”

assaulted – is grim viewing. The perpetrators get their comeuppance, but there's a degree of cake-and-eat-it leering here too.

➔ **Extras** This two-disc edition offers the director's cut (with more nudity) in both widescreen and full-frame, and AIP's theatrical cut – a reordered edit that butchers Gilliam's credits and inserts a replacement score. There's the requisite Kim Newman talking

head (13 minutes), while former *Fangoria* editor Chris Alexander comes to the film's defence in a new commentary. The highlight is a 2003 interview with the late Hessler (18 minutes), which offers some interesting insights into “the AIP way”. Plus: gallery; trailer; TV/radio spots. **Ian Berriman**

**i** The main location, Grim's Dyke in Harrow Weald, previously belonged to WS Gilbert (one half of Gilbert and Sullivan).



"At least we are colour-coordinated."

## WORLDBREAKER

Only Women Lead

★★★★☆

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2026 | 15 | SVOD

▶ Director **Brad Anderson**

▶ Cast **Luke Evans, Billie Boulet, Milla Jovovich, Mila Harris**

**PRIME VIDEO** With echoes of

everything from *The Last Of Us* to *A Quiet Place*, this gloomy survival thriller takes us to an altogether familiar dystopia.

Civilisation has fallen, crumbling under the combined weight of global warming, mass power failures and the emergence of Breakers, creatures that spew from cracks in the Earth known as Stitches. As the male population succumbs to a deadly infection that targets the Y chromosome, women are left to hold the line.

Against this bleak backdrop we follow a father and daughter, played by Luke Evans and

newcomer Billie Boulet.

Selling the tenderness of their relationship, the pair bring genuine soul to an otherwise rote tale. Evans is essentially Gandalf in a wax jacket, while Boulet impresses as a young girl stepping up into a terrifying world. Milla Jovovich makes fleeting appearances as the kick-ass military leader mother, but is called upon to do little more than roar.

The world-building is woolly, though some rugged locations help sell the reality, and the monsters, while generic, are effectively realised. But as the plot increasingly wheel-spins you realise this is a movie that's mistaken a situation for a story.

**Nick Setchfield**

**I** Screenwriter Joshua Rollins is also an actor; he played a SWAT sniper at the Prewitt Building in *The Dark Knight*.



### CRAZY OLD LADY

★★★★☆

▶ **RELEASED 27 FEBRUARY**

2025 | N/A | SVOD

**SHUDDER** There are unmistakable echoes of *Misery* in this Argentinian horror. Essentially a torture porn two-hander, it places a man at the mercy of his ex's demented mother, a woman with a taste for psychological games that cost the occasional finger or toe.

It's a queasy mix of tones, with a black streak of humour that defangs the scares. But *Volver's* Carmen Maura impresses as the titular psycho-granny, delivering a magnetic performance that's just the right side of a gothic grotesque. **Nick Setchfield**



### GOD OF FROGS

★★★★☆

▶ **RELEASED 2 MARCH**

2026 | N/A | Digital

⚡ **You don't get many rubber monsters** in low-budget horror films these days, so it's nice to see that old-fashioned effects aren't entirely extinct. But the big slimy frog monster is the only fun part of this otherwise dreary anthology.

Across four chapters, hapless women get fed to the frog god – but if there's any social commentary intended it's lost, thanks to murky cinematography, waterlogged pacing and truly dire dialogue ("It could win the Palme d'Or!" "You know I don't speak French."). A toad-al waste of time. **Sarah Dobbs**



### LURE

★★★★☆

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

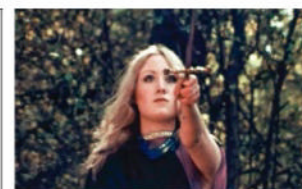
2026 | N/A | Digital

⚡ **If you thought *Married At First Sight* was the worst way to start a relationship**, wait till you meet the poor lads of *Lure*.

Islay is an heiress looking for love so, per family tradition, she throws a "party": actually, an elaborate set of tests for potential partners. There's a quiz, a game of Blackjack... then a round of yanking their own fingernails off!

It's not clear why any of that would make a guy marriage material, but then no one acts like an actual human in this movie. Absolute nonsense.

**Sarah Dobbs**



### THE LAST SACRIFICE

★★★★☆

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2026 | 15 | SVOD

**SHUDDER** This intriguing doc takes as its starting point the grisly 1945 murder of Warwickshire farm labourer Charles Walton – supposedly the last ritual killing in Britain – and traces its connections to everything from *The Wicker Man* to the Highgate vampire.

Maintaining a delicious air of dread throughout, and capped by a truly improbable coda, it's a vibrant, wittily-edited exploration of the shadow side of the Age of Aquarius. **Nick Setchfield**

## EXCALIBUR

### Blade Stunner

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1981 | 15 | 4K & Blu-ray

▶ Director **John Boorman**

▶ Cast **Nigel Terry, Nicol Williamson, Helen Mirren, Nicholas Clay**

◉ **For John Boorman this was** more than a passion project. It was a personal grail quest, a crusade to bring the Arthurian legend to the screen and reclaim the glory of Camelot from the smirking shadow of Monty Python.

As this impressive new restoration reminds us, *Excalibur*'s all about the shining myth, not the mud-spattered, deconstructed reality later Hollywood takes would favour. Set in the poetic conceit of "the lost centuries", it's a firmly Pre-Raphaelite vision, with a striking visual aesthetic that influenced everything from *Robin*

*Of Sherwood* to '80s pop videos. "Can't you see, all around you, the dragon's breath?" asks Merlin, and he may as well be talking about the swirls of dry ice that give the film its ethereal haze.

Boorman hits all the requisite mythic beats, so in love with the legend that the tone can occasionally feel earnest to the point of stilted. Nicol Williamson's idiosyncratic turn as Merlin brings a welcome pinch of mischief, reframing the court sorcerer as a slippery trickster with an intriguing relationship to time, more *Doctor Who* than Gandalf.

All the more remarkable for its reliance on practical filmmaking, *Excalibur* seems somehow grander and deeper as the years pass. Just like the best myths, then; to borrow a phrase from Arthur, "the stuff of future memory" indeed.

◉ **Extras** An archival commentary by Boorman himself is supplemented by two new tracks, one by Brian Hoyle, author of *The Cinema Of John Boorman*, the other by David Kittredge, director of recent documentary *Boorman And The Devil*.

This three-disc Arrow Video set also delivers engaging new interviews with Boorman and son Charley, young Mordred in the movie (28 minutes); creative associate Neil Jordan, who gives a fascinating account of his collaboration with the man he saw as "a Merlin figure" (25 minutes); production designer Anthony Pratt (26 minutes); and a career-spanning conversation with second unit director Peter MacDonald (76 minutes).

There's also a welcome chance to see Jordan's rarely-screened 1981 *Making Of*, which uses copious behind-the-scenes footage and interviews to illuminate Boorman's "obsessive personal vision"; intelligent and perceptive, it puts modern promo puffery to shame (48 minutes). A 2016



## ELSE

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 2 MARCH**

2025 | 15 | Digital

▶ Director **Thibault Emin**

▶ Cast **Matthieu Sampeur, Edith Proust, Lika Minamoto**

◉ **Hands up who fancies** seeing another movie that'll remind you of Covid? Thought not. But for the second month in a row, here we are. Thankfully, this artful French-Belgian body-horror is more interesting than *Jimmy And Stiggs*.

Again we're restricted to a single apartment, this one belonging to Anx (Matthieu Sampeur). After an epidemic of "metamorphism" transmitted by gaze (example: a tramp merges with the pavement) cues a lockdown, he's joined by new belle Cass (Edith Proust). She's firmly in the Manic Pixie Dream Girl mode; a free spirit who calls her you-know-what "Ingeborg". He is, naturally, a bundle of anxieties. But they remain a charming pair.

What follows is by stages absurd, tragic and haunting, with the doomed duo struggling not to be absorbed by their surroundings as the apartment gradually metastasises. Striking, surreal images abound – the sight of a sickly Cass merging with her bedsheets, her face acquiring fabric folds, is strangely beautiful – and there's a dash of weird eroticism too.

It's effectively a two-hander, with little plot, one rather too keen on out-of-focus imagery. But the film's slow slide from vivid colour to monochrome is deftly done. And you won't come away too depressed, since (like David Cronenberg) the director is open to the idea that what looks like degradation may simply be evolution. **Ian Berriman**



He wondered if it would be rude to criticise the drawing.

## “It's a firmly Pre-Raphaelite vision”

retrospective is also included, with an impressive roster of stars participating (52 minutes). Elsewhere co-writer Rospo Pallenberg is in the spotlight, offering tantalising insights into Boorman's never-made *The Lord Of The Rings* (38 minutes), while a thoughtful if slightly precious visual essay makes the case for the director as "a philosopher filmmaker" (30 minutes).

A rare TV edit of the film proves an inessential curio; dialling down the sex and violence and pruning the runtime to 120 minutes, it features a unique Merlin voiceover – one for completists. Plus: trailers; an extensive image gallery, including original production notes and complete draft screenplay; booklet; double-sided poster; six postcards.

**Nick Setchfield**

i The Lady of the Lake was played by both Hilary Joyalle and Boorman's own daughter, Telsche. Neither were credited.



"Talk about the hot seat!" she quipped yet again.

## REDUX REDUX

### Vicious cycle

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2026 | 15 | Digital

▶ Directors Kevin McManus,

Matthew McManus

▶ Cast Michaela McManus, Stella

Marcus, Jeremy Holm, Jim Cummings

🔗 **This indie sci-fi/neo-noir uses** the concept of the multiverse to dramatise the struggle to move beyond grief, and the perils of becoming addicted to vengeance.

Michaela McManus (sister of writer/directors Kevin and Matthew) plays Irene, whose 14-year-old daughter was kidnapped and murdered, and now uses a device resembling a high-tech coffin to hop dimensions in the hope of finding one where she's still alive – taking the opportunity to execute the serial killer responsible over and over as she does.

This is no *Sliders* – the parallel universes barely differ at all. Which has left the lonely Irene locked into a loop of violence and disappointment that's clearly become corrosive to her soul.

It's a smart high-concept, brought to life with gritty naturalism, and the tale becomes cumulatively more engaging once Irene rescues a kidnap victim – sassy runaway Mia (Stella Marcus) – and their lives intertwine.

Combining taut, tense sequences and explosions of action with well-characterised human moments, all set to a pulsing electronic score reminiscent of *It Follows* and *Drive*, *Redux Redux* deserves to be a box office hit on at least one alternate Earth.

Ian Berriman

**i** At one point we glimpse a pack of "Morley" cigarettes – famously the brand of *The X-Files*' Cigarette Smoking Man.

## WESTWORLD

### Fatal Attraction

★★★★★

EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1973 | 15 | 4K/Blu-ray

▶ Director Michael Crichton

▶ Cast Yul Brynner, Richard Benjamin, James Brolin, Alan Oppenheimer

🔗 **While the 2016-2022 TV show** unpacked the wider implications of the rise of AI (like humanity's extermination), Michael Crichton's original feature is too busy showing viewers a good time.

After economically sketching out the android-populated theme park worlds of the Delos resort – Medieval World, Roman World and Western World – its latter stages have more in common with *The Terminator*, as Yul Brynner's on-the-fritz gunslinger implacably hunts down Richard Benjamin's charmingly awkward vacationer.

The premise is questionable. Would waking up on the floor of a

saloon, after being punched out in a bar brawl, really be fun? Is there no danger of a ricocheting bullet killing a guest? But the film moves so briskly that there's little time to dwell on such details – or, indeed, the ickiness of Delos' customers enjoying the "services" of sexbots.

The result is a compelling, wryly amusing, albeit shallow tech-thriller, which still resonates. (You may double-take when it's noted that – like AI photos – the robots can be identified as "they haven't perfected the hands yet".)

🔗 **Extras** This Arrow Video release has five new extras. Stars Richard Benjamin (12 minutes) and James Brolin (17 minutes), and producer Paul N Lazarus III (34 minutes) are interviewed. Affable fellows all, well-stocked with anecdotes – especially about Brynner's eccentricities (dressing head-to-toe in leather; buying



Get counting those fingers...

\$400 bottles of wine). Alexandra Heller-Nicholas's video essay (13 minutes) on gender politics has some smart observations – though sometimes, a robot snake is just a robot snake, not a phallic symbol... Finally, film historian Daniel Kremer provides commentary.

The pilot of 1980 TV spinoff *Beyond Westworld* retcons an inventor for the robots, who's placed them in positions of power

as part of world domination plans; Delos' security guy must detect the infiltrator on a nuclear sub. It's corny hokum (the sub is stupidly easy to pop on and off...), but the cast play it endearingly straight. Plus: an on-location piece (nine minutes); trailer; gallery; poster; booklet; six art cards. Ian Berriman

**i** Brynner taught Benjamin how to fire a gun without blinking. (You practise firing repeatedly with one round chambered.)

**NOW ON DIGITAL FORMATS** *Anaconda • Eternity • Silent Night, Deadly Night • Zootropolis 2*



She was doing her "Total Eclipse Of The Heart" routine again.

## PICTURE OF A NYMPH

### The Woman In White

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★★  
**▶ RELEASED OUT NOW!**  
 1988 | 12 | Blu-ray  
 ▶ Director Wu Ma  
 ▶ Cast Yuen Biao, Joey Wong, Wu Ma, Lawrence Ng, Elizabeth Lee

**BLU-RAY DEBUT** The phenomenal success of *A Chinese Ghost Story* inspired two official sequels, but also this soft-hearted fantasy which you could, technically, tag as a prequel. It stars several of the same cast, one of whom (Wu Ma, who also directs), plays a Taoist priest with the same name as his previous character.

Detailing the plot is a challenge, but at its heart lies a (chaste) romance between a mortal man, hapless scholar Tsui Hung-Chuen (Lawrence Ng), and the ghost of a woman who leapt from a cliff to escape being kidnapped by the King Ghost (Elizabeth Lee – yes, you'd think that'd be a male actor, wouldn't you?). For a while, Mo Chiu (Joey Wang – yes, that's a lass) hides out in a portrait painted by the scholar: hence the title.

Technical values impress: the key sets are sumptuous, the score is pretty, and there are some stunningly choreographed

set-pieces. In one, the King Ghost's demonic minions attack, swooping about beneath bright red parasols. Another, featuring multiple sedan chairs, is weirdly reminiscent of an early videogame, or a *Star Wars* dogfight. And there are charming performances by fresh-faced members of the ensemble: both Ng and Yuen Biao (playing the priest's apprentice) are highly expressive in winningly earnest roles.

What's missing is a truly gripping throughline. And *A Chinese Ghost Story* fans will be disappointed by the lack of gruesome horror (barring one encounter with a bulging-eyed female ghost).

➊ **Extras** This 88 Films Limited Edition offers two commentaries: one by their regular expert Frank Djeng, the other by David West. Unless your Chinese cultural knowledge is tip-top, you may wish a hologram of one of them could sit beside you on the sofa to explain what the hell's going on, but we've probably got a decade or two to wait before that tech arrives... Plus: gallery; trailer; booklet; art cards. **Ian Berriman**

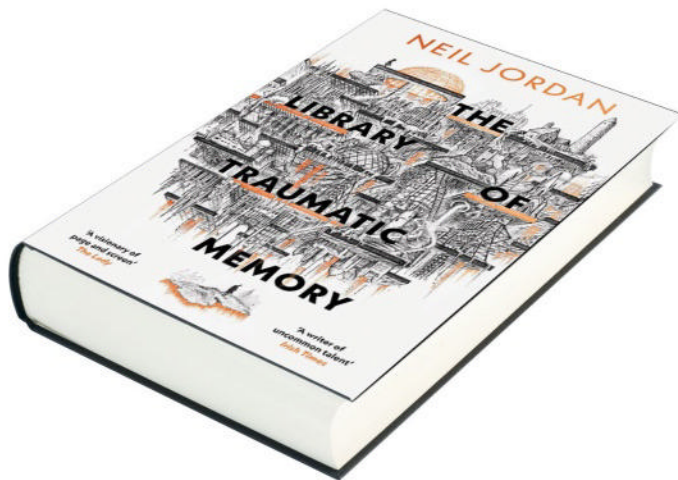
**i** Elizabeth Lee, who played the King Ghost, was the runner up in the Miss Hong Kong beauty pageant in 1987.

## (ROUND UP)



Time to run down the recent theatrical releases now hitting shiny disc... **FIVE NIGHTS AT FREDDY'S 2** (9 March, Blu-ray/DVD) ups the ante on the 2023 videogame adaptation. There are three sets of rogue animatronic creatures this time around, plus a new antagonist: an evil marionette which possesses people. We said: "Only a marginal improvement on its tame and torpid predecessor, with too many storylines jostling for attention, a disappointing dearth of actual bloodshed, and a bland endgame." Bonus-wise, you get five featurettes, totalling 44 minutes. A Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever is the break-out star of **GOOD BOY** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD), which is told largely from the perspective of Indy, who accompanies his owner to a rural house he's inherited. There, the pooch's keen senses detect an ominous presence. We said: "A heartbreaking tale of a loyal hound." Bonuses: a five-minute Making Of. The 4K adds four art cards. Described by Osgood Perkins as "a look at disgusting maleness", **KEEPER** (out now, Blu-ray/DVD) sees the director return to the slow-burn chills of *Longlegs*. This folk horror follows a couple who celebrate their anniversary by visiting a cabin in the woods. We said: "Come the climactic reveal, it feels like it's unearthed something truly monstrous." Extras: director's commentary. Edgar Wright's take on Stephen King's 1982 dystopian novel, **THE RUNNING MAN** (2 March, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD) is more faithful than the Schwarzenegger movie. Glen Powell plays the hero entered into an ultra-violent chase event where contestants must evade death by Hunters. We

said: "Watchable enough, but suffers from arriving after similarly-themed films and shows have covered the same ground." The 4K bonus spread includes commentary (Wright, the writer, and Powell), four behind-the-scenes featurettes, make-up and costume tests, deleted scenes and a host of in-world material (commercials and so on). Buy the Blu-ray, though, and you just get the commentary and three of the featurettes. Festive horror **SILENT NIGHT, DEADLY NIGHT** (2 March, Blu-ray/DVD) reimagines the 1984 movie in which a boy sees his parents killed by a man dressed as Santa, then goes on to kill himself. This time, the people getting the chop have been so naughty that they deserve it... We said: "Tempers its excesses with humour and a surprising amount of sweetness." Bonuses: just one featurette. Daisy Ridley stars in **WE BURY THE DEAD** (out now, Blu-ray/DVD), an elevated take on zombies, set in Tasmania. After an electromagnetic pulse weapon test kills thousands – a few of whom "reboot" – she volunteers to help with the clear up, but then strikes out to find her husband. We said: "Heavy on big skies and watery eyes... The undead's penchant for grinding their teeth is an unnerving touch. But don't expect your heart to be broken." Bonuses: not a sausage. Finally, the latest TV releases include **THE HANDMAID'S TALE** Season Six (9 March, DVD), **STAR TREK: STRANGE NEW WORLDS** Season Three (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD), **TALAMASCA: THE SECRET ORDER** Season One (2 March, Blu-ray/DVD), and **THE WAR BETWEEN THE LAND AND THE SEA** (out now, Blu-ray/DVD).



## THE LIBRARY OF TRAUMATIC MEMORY

Tragic moments



► **RELEASED 12 MARCH**  
336 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook  
► Author Neil Jordan  
► Publisher Head Of Zeus

◉ **Jutting out into the Atlantic** in the south-west of Ireland, the Beara Peninsula is not a place where you immediately imagine the future might be decided. But it is replete with myths, stories and, in its copper mines, an industrial heritage. It's a place where you can most certainly imagine the past, present and future colliding in unexpected ways.

This is exactly what happens in the first science fiction novel from writer and filmmaker Neil Jordan. At this point, more cynical *SFX* readers may well be bracing themselves for one of those slim volumes where an established writer dabbles in science fiction, unaware that many of the ideas being explored are old hat to

anyone with more than a passing knowledge of the field.

So let's be clear: this is a remarkable science fiction book, which you could as easily describe as an exercise in tech-enhanced, near-future magical realism. The tech in question we see largely through the eyes of Christian Cartwright, a librarian with responsibility not for books, but the painful memories collected at the library that gives the novel its name, located at a "cadaver of a mansion" run by the mysterious Huxley Institute.

Cartwright has his own agonies, connected to the death of his married lover, Isolde. Grief-stricken and in defiance of his boss, Dr Rainer Fischer, he uses the digital technologies at his command to resurrect his beloved.

The first half of the novel also introduces us to Christian's 19th century forebear, Montagu Cartwright, whose connection to

Beara begins when he's commissioned to design a church. Unfortunately, owing to "an architectural mixup", the church is in the gothic style, albeit beautifully finished by the local master builder, Muck Corrigan. Meantime, a Celtic church more appropriate to rural Ireland has been taking shape in Carlsbad, Southern Bohemia. Throughout the novel, Jordan delights in this kind of sly humour.

Gradually, we learn that the connections between Christian and Montagu extend far beyond the familial line. These stories intersect with other tales, too, as Jordan ranges across time to bring in local myths, the legend of Tristan and Isolde, and those years when the Enlightenment was beginning to come into focus, yet old magic still flourished – metaphorically or literally – and a figure such as John Dee could be both natural philosopher and mystic. A sense of the eldritch being present in the everyday is never far away in these pages.

If the first half of the novel is primarily concerned with collisions between past and present, the second half looks to the future. Running with the idea of contemporary Ireland as a place where companies locate their HQs because of low rates of corporate tax, it's in part a story of how businesses develop advanced technologies not for the benefit of humankind, but because they may become profitable. Douglas Adams's idea from *The Restaurant At The End Of The Universe* of spending interest that will be accrued in the future even gets an airing.

To make one major criticism, the technology we're shown as being current in 2084 seems a little too rooted in the present, but that's a small matter when set against the sheer quality of Jordan's storytelling and prose. It's a book you immediately want to read again when you've finished it, because it's clear a second pass will reveal hitherto unnoticed details, ideas and resonances.

Jonathan Wright

**i** Daphne du Maurier's 1943 family saga *Hungry Hill* (Neil Jordan: "It's not very good.") is also set on the Beara Peninsula.



## A PLACE BOTH WONDERFUL AND STRANGE



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

272 pages | Hardback/ebook

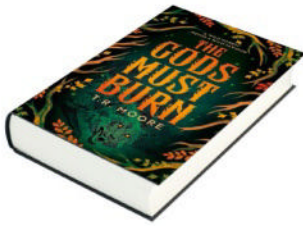
► Author Scott Meslow

► Publisher Faber & Faber

◉ **A wave of new books** about David Lynch's life and art have been released in the wake of the director's January 2025 passing. Most of these have concentrated on Lynch's filmography as a whole, but this aptly titled tome hones in exclusively on his most beloved creation: *Twin Peaks*.

Where previous books have largely focused on the original series, *A Place Both Wonderful And Strange* covers the whole story, from the beginning through to 2017's revival, *The Return*. Meslow recounts all of the beats of the show's history: its instant rise and calamitous fall on TV; the brilliant, but at the time loathed feature film, *Fire Walk With Me*; and the show's bold revival for the streaming era. He's aided by new interviews with cast and crew members, including co-creator Mark Frost and producer Harley Peyton.

Meslow's admiration for the material shines through, especially in the character essays that draw on the wider *Peaks* canon, but he's also lucid about the much-criticised second season. Hardcore fans will have heard many of these stories before, but as a big picture view, it immediately joins Brad Dukes's oral history *Reflections* as one of the truly essential books about this one-of-a-kind and brilliantly baffling show. **Will Salmon**



## THE GODS MUST BURN

★★★★☆

▶ **RELEASED 26 FEBRUARY**

368 pages | Hardback/ebook/  
audiobook

▶ Author **TR Moore**

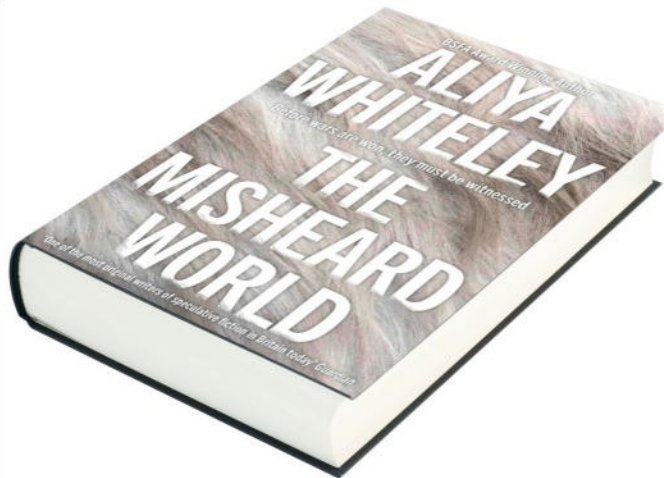
▶ Publisher **Solaris**

◉ **Part Avatar, part Princess Mononoke, *The Gods Must Burn*** is a high fantasy with a dark heart. When the soldiers of a godless empire invade an island of forest deities, a disgraced warrior, Captain Basuin, is given a chance at redemption.

His shifty superior officer is searching for something divine on the island, and Basuin, being one of the few soldiers who still prays, could be the key to finding it. But then Basuin goes native when he saves some wolf cubs from a burning den, and the island's Wolf God decides to deify him.

This is a book filled with atmosphere, emotive (almost impressionistic at times) imagery, and harrowing internal monologues. What it doesn't have is much plot or detailed world-building. This is clearly an artistic choice – the book is more concerned with character, motivation and personal perception – but if you like your fantasy with clearly laid-out rules, beware.

More problematic is the stodgy, florid, repetitive prose that sucks the life out of some quite promising ideas. The “rules” may be fluid, but Basuin's actions and thoughts aren't, because we're kept informed of them in forensic depth every step of the way. It seems like everything he does is accompanied by a flashback and multiple paragraphs of self-psychoanalysis. **Dave Golder**



## THE MISHEARD WORLD

### Question Time

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 26 FEBRUARY**

272 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

▶ Author **Aliya Whiteley**

▶ Publisher **Solaris**

◉ **To quote an academic paper** published by researchers at the University of Vermont's Computational Story Lab in 2016, “The emotional arcs of stories are dominated by six basic shapes.” Think rags-to-riches tales or rise-fall-rise *Cinderella* narratives. Simple. So straightforward that it rather begs the question: why are stories so powerful?

One answer is that stories help us understand the world and process experiences. They also help us to establish a sense of self, which is why it matters that stories should, at some level, be *true*. For prison guard Elize Janview, the survivor of an attack using a terrible and powerful weapon, this is a problem because, for most of Aliya Whiteley's remarkable new novel, she's someone operating on at best partial information in the midst of a war with deep roots. And shallow roots too, because things are rarely as they seem in *The Misheard World*.

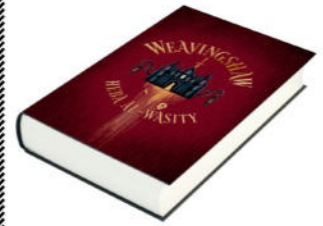
Despite the tragedy she's seen, Janview's life is essentially unremarkable until two larger-

than-life characters show up at Crag, the vast stronghold where she's stationed. One is trickster, performer and spy Marius Mondegreen, an agent of the North, who has been taken prisoner. The other, representing the South, is his glamorous and haughty interrogator, Allynx Syld.

Janview's task is to bear witness to meetings between the two, which in effect means listening to them exchange stories. Are the two friends or enemies? It's not clear. In a novel of switchbacks and unexpected turns, it gradually becomes clear that Janview doesn't understand how outside forces are shaping events in her world. She's been listening, but lacks crucial information.

Without giving away spoilers, enlightenment does arrive, although it brings precious little resolution. Nevertheless, as Whiteley explores the interplay between our “true” selves, the characters we invent and the faces we present to the world, the novel is true to itself despite its odd and discombobulating structure, internally consistent and emotionally convincing – which is exactly what you want from any story. **Jonathan Wright**

**i** Whiteley's 2023 project *Small Objects* saw her write weekly flash fiction, pieces keyed off by artefacts she photographed.



## WEAVINGSHAW

★★★★☆

▶ **RELEASED 26 FEBRUARY**

464 pages | Hardback/ebook/  
audiobook

▶ Author **Heba Al-Wasity**

▶ Publisher **Bantam**

◉ **When we tell you that**

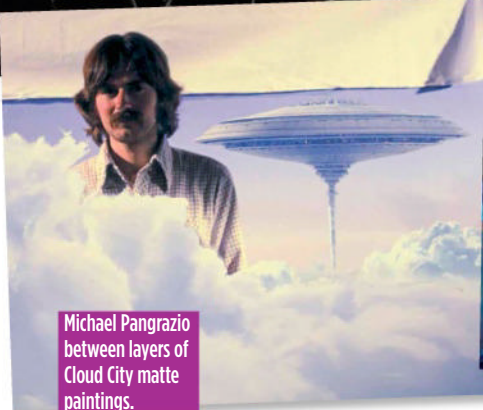
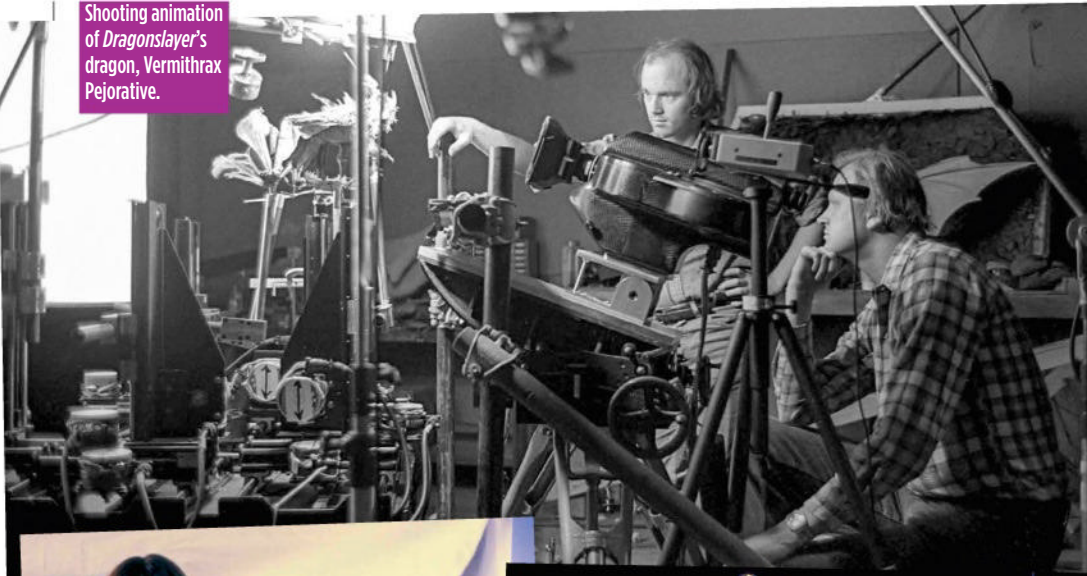
*Weavingshaw* is a gothic romantasy, you might get the wrong idea. It *is* gothic, and it *is* a romantasy, sure, but we're talking classic gothic literature here. This is a book that doffs its cap to 18th/19th century creepy mansion novels like *The Castle Of Otranto* and *The Mysteries Of Udolpho*, with a stormy central romance more along the lines of *Wuthering Heights* or *Rebecca*.

Leena is a poor orphan who can see ghosts, an ability which draws the attention of the Saint of Silence, aka St Silas, a Byronesque brooder who pays coin for secrets. But he has the biggest secret of all, which Leena begins to discover when St Silas employs her to help him find a ghost he's keen to locate. It's a search that ultimately leads to his ancestral home, Weavingshaw.

This is a hugely enjoyable debut novel that has an appeal way beyond romantasy fans. Full of fascinating detail and atmospheric descriptions, it doesn't go overboard trying to ape its gothic influences, but has fun playing with them (especially in the more melodramatic moments). It may be a little slow-burn for some, but the main problem is that it's the first in a series: while there's some emotional resolution, it ends on a really irritating cliffhanger.

**Dave Golder**

Shooting animation of *Dragonslayer's* dragon, Vermithrax Pejorative.



Michael Pangrazio between layers of Cloud City matte paintings.



Readying a Millennium Falcon motion control shot.



## RIVENNIA: A GAME OF WAGERS

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

400 pages | Paperback/ebook/audiobook

► Author **Jaime Urencio**

► Publisher **Sunrise & Rooster Press**

There's an undeniable *The Hunger Games* vibe to the setting of this novel (being pitched as "speculative fiction"), as a shady elite forces reluctant contenders into contests with life-or-death stakes. *Rivennia* should not be confused for a YA adventure, however, as it takes detours to some dark places.

The narrative rotates between the perspectives of four protagonists: newly-elected chief minister Gren Moritz, his wife Lorelei, data analyst Samuel Rosendale, and retired supermodel Primula Zhang (not to be confused with a brand of squeeze cheese). Gren, Samuel and Primula are selected by an amoral secret society to participate in the eponymous Game of Wagers, bringing three very different people into each other's orbits – while opening their eyes to who's really pulling the strings in the upper echelons of society.

While *Rivennia* is a futuristic world with its own calendar, first-time author Jaime Urencio keeps things grounded by alluding to familiar political structures and peppering the dialogue with British slang. The book asks big questions about the ethics of genetic engineering and euthanasia (all dressed up in sci-fi clothing), yet never loses sight of the characters at its heart. While a rushed final act can't quite deliver on the book's earlier promise, this is an impressive debut. **Richard Edwards**

# INDUSTRIAL LIGHT & MAGIC: 50 YEARS OF INNOVATION

Sufficiently advanced technology

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

368 pages | Hardcover/ebook

► Author **Ian Failes**

► Publisher **Abrams**

"I needed a new way to create visuals," remembers George Lucas in his foreword to this celebration of storied effects house Industrial Light & Magic.

What he really required was a means to pour the contents of his head onto celluloid. And, bankrolled by profits from *American Graffiti*, that's what ILM delivered, changing the movie

game forever from an unprepossessing warehouse in Van Nuys.

This generously illustrated book charts the company's half-century, from the primal burst of technical innovation that birthed *Star Wars* through to the contemporary wizardry of facial capture and digital de-aging. Everything from animatronic whales to ABBAtars.

There's a faint whiff of corporate brochure in the prose – "Employees say ILM is a place where creative ideas flourish" – and disappointingly little insight into the personalities of the

mavericks and hippy geniuses that made cinema history. You'll learn more about optical printers than the creative friction between John Dykstra and Lucas.

But the photos capture a sense of ILM's pioneering spirit. Just look at the behind-the-scenes shot of the Millennium Falcon model sharing the same mundane reality as a stepladder; you'll marvel again at how Lucas's canny investment in talent truly made the jump to hyperspace. **Nick Setchfield**

The original ILM logo was the work of Michael Pangrazio, matte artist behind the warehouse shot in *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*.



## AGNES AUBERT'S MYSTICAL CAT SHELTER

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

368 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

▶ Author Heather Fawcett

▶ Publisher Orbit

◉ **There's a touch of *Howl's Moving Castle*** about this cosy fantasy, which wonders what would happen if a charity worker falls in love with a messy and disorganised wizard. Add cats to the mix and the result is delightful.

We open with Agnes trying to find a home for her cat sanctuary in '20s Montreal. Eventually choosing a shop that is clearly too good to be true, she's intrigued by its forbidden basement. Naturally, it's being used by the most evil magician in the world: Havelock Renard. This becomes clear when his wicked sister turns up and places Agnes and her feline friends in danger. But is Havelock *really* a bad guy, or just a hot mess?

Agnes is splendidly drawn and, like the titular character from Heather Fawcett's previous series, *Emily Wilde's Encyclopaedia Of Faeries*, possibly autistic, which means that the chaos caused by Havelock's magic is all the more exasperating for her.

On the downside, we spend so much time with her worrying about little things that the novel's bigger picture gets lost. But if you don't mind long swathes of text in which nothing in particular happens, this is a lovely, comforting read. Best read with a purring cat on your lap. **Jayne Nelson**



## THE LAST STARBORN SEER

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 5 MARCH**

438 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

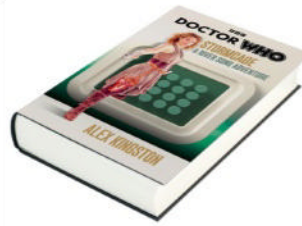
▶ Author Venetia Constantine

▶ Publisher Head Of Zeus

◉ **Leilani Stellarion is the last** of her bloodline, a Branded, Sistertouched woman whose fate is to marry Astrophel, a man she despises, while watching her mother die slowly while her father, the king, frequently reminds her that he considers her to blame.

There's more, but the outpourings of fantasy lore contained in this novel would fast overwhelm this review. Suffice to say, there's a princess with magic she considers a curse, her world is dying, and she teams up with her fiancé plus a group of strangers from different realms to travel to a distant mountain and recover a magical spear, which may offer a chance to reverse the Sickening that's killing the land and its peoples. Oh, and there's a love triangle.

For a modern romantasy, it has a very old-fashioned feel, with a classic quest undertaken by a group drawn from different human-adjacent races. It is at times overwrought and overwritten. There's also far too much info-dumping of the world's intricate mythology, plus a main character whose frequent betrayals and secrets quickly lose her the reader's sympathy. Go in knowing that this is the first of a trilogy, and at least you won't experience the rug-pulling the characters undergo when their epic quest turns out just to be the first of many. **Rhian Drinkwater**



## DOCTOR WHO: STORMCAGE

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

304 pages | Hardback/ebook

▶ Author Alex Kingston (with

Jacqueline Rayner and Steve Cole)

▶ Publisher BBC Books

◉ **You are River Song, circa** incarceration in the Stormcage facility. Do you: become a YouTube hair tips influencer (go to 101)? Escape and save the universe (go to 001)? You decide.

*Stormcage* is no ordinary *Doctor Who* spinoff novel. This is a gamebook novel in the manner of the Choose Your Own Adventure series, where you "play" River Song, and each mini chapter gives you a choice of which to go to next. So you end up skipping back and forth through the book, more often than not making wrong choices and ending up dead. But no worries – you can easily backtrack to choose a different path.

The technobabble-heavy story amusingly involves multiple realities, but never totally grabs the opportunity for having fun utilising this voguish trope in the gamebook genre. The format also requires a relentlessly plot-driven style of storytelling, so don't expect much in the way of subtlety, nuance or characterisation. But River is such a larger-than-life character anyway that her essence is easily captured in the broad strokes required here.

The main issue is that if you choose the one true path first time, the story is quite short, plodding and too easily resolved. It's more fun to head down the Easter egg-packed cul-de-sacs. **Dave Golder**

## REISSUES

Our pick of the paperbacks this issue is Nicholas Binge's latest, **DISSOLUTION** (★★★★★, 26 February, Harper Collins). It centres on a



woman who's spent the last decade caring for her husband, who's told by a stranger that his

memories are being removed to stop a secret coming to light. Probing his memories in an effort to save him, she unravels a mystery spanning centuries. We said: "A strange and compelling slipstream thriller... ambitious and complex."

Combining speculative fiction and family drama, Silvia Park's **LUMINOUS** (★★★★★, out now, Magpie) is set in a reunified Korea where robots have integrated



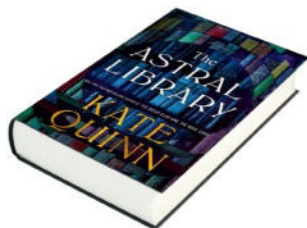
into society – not just as servants, but as lovers and children.

Sifting through a junkyard for parts to repair her failing body, 11-year-old Ruijie discovers a lifelike robot boy. Meanwhile, a detective in the Robot Crimes Unit unearths mysteries about the history of the country. We said: "Has moments of exquisite emotional fragility and captivating visual metaphors." Finally, Holly Race's **SIX WILD CROWNS** (★★★★★, out now, Orbit) offers an epic fantasy spin on Henry VIII. Presented from the perspectives of (Ann) Boleyn and a gay lady-in-waiting, (Jane) Seymour, it imagines a world where a



polygamous Henry is required, seemingly for the good of the kingdom, to marry six wives. We

said: "A serious book, but also one with plenty of intrigue, adventure and dry humour."



## THE ASTRAL LIBRARY

★★★★★

► **RELEASED 26 FEBRUARY**

384 pages | Hardback/ebook/  
audiobook

► Author **Kate Quinn**

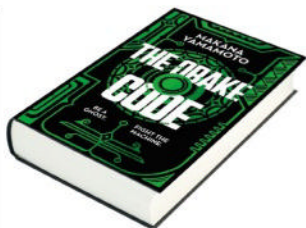
► Publisher **HarperCollins**

🔥 **Public libraries are** brilliant. Free access to all the books, music, internet and even – in the case of Greenpoint Library in New York – power tools you could want. Who could possibly object?

The truth is, libraries always need defending, whether against austerity, book banners, or literal invading armies. Even a magical one, like Kate Quinn's dimension-bending biblio-palace, isn't safe. It may have the power to host you in a bespoke version of your favourite out-of-copyright storyworld, transform your outfit and conjure you a cuppa, but it's still vulnerable to the world outside. And an attack on the Astral Library is an attack on the abused kids, desperate refugees and poverty-stricken dreamers hiding in the pages of its collection.

Herself the daughter of a librarian, historical novelist Quinn infuses her first fantasy with a joyful love for libraries and their custodians. The fight of lonely care-leaver and lifelong bookworm Alix to save the Astral Library cleverly dramatises the role of libraries as sanctuary and inspiration.

The novel isn't *super* subtle, and definitely creaks under the weight of all the literary references – Quinn may not be able to visit Middle-earth, the Stillness, or Prythian, but by god she can mention them – but its charm is boundless. **Nic Clarke**



## THE OBAQUE CODE

★★★★☆

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

322 pages | Hardback/ebook/  
audiobook

► Author **Makana Yamamoto**

► Publisher **Gollancz**

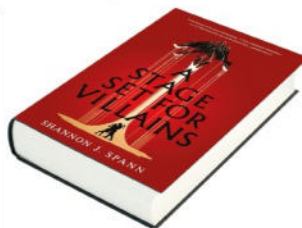
🔥 **There's nothing like a heist** to grab the attention, and this sci-fi novel is very effective when it's concentrating on delivering cyberpunk-influenced crime-caper thrills, even if it's a little bit wobbly elsewhere.

Set in the far future, it's the story of Malia, a legendary hacker known as the Obaque, whose life on the Kepler space station goes awry when her fight-rigging habit lands her in debt to some dangerous gangsters. Her only option is to help topple a politician, but that means carrying off a dangerous heist – one that unexpectedly brings her up against an AI copy of herself.

When it works, *The Obaque Code* is a lot of fun, with a likeable cast of engaging characters, some enjoyably tense set-pieces, and a punky vibe that echoes classic cyberpunk like *Neuromancer* and low-tech space opera like *The Expanse*. It's less successful when it tries to broaden its scope and turn its AI antagonist into a bigger threat, while the pacing is a little uneven and there are some stylistic choices that feel like they've wandered in from a different novel.

However, there's still an immersive sense of place from the world-building, and a central character who's distinctive enough to pull this sci-fi thriller through its occasional awkwardness to a satisfying conclusion.

**Saxon Bullock**



## A STAGE SET FOR VILLAINS

★★★☆☆

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

528 pages | Hardback/ebook

► Author **Shannon J Spann**

► Publisher **Mayhem Books**

🔥 **Imagine a world where** going to the theatre was illegal... and the actors might kill you.

This chunky YA fantasy is about as high concept as you can get. It's set in a world where entertainment has vanished: there's no music, no storybooks, and barely any colour. The gods are dead, and so is joy – except in the Playhouse, where superpowered immortal Players perform for adoring (and brainwashed) fans.

Our teenage protagonist, Riven, had a run-in with a Player as a child that left her disfigured and dying. Her only hope of survival is to infiltrate the Playhouse's gladiatorial casting call and kill a Player to take their spot. Except it turns out to be even more world-shakingly dangerous than that.

Most fantasy novels eventually allow you to settle into their rules and magic systems, but this one is extremely difficult to go along with. The central, load-bearing metaphor is too wobbly, and past the halfway point (styled as the Intermission, of course) there are so many layers of twists, false identities and symbolism that it stops making any logical sense.

Worse, it stops making *emotional* sense. The stakes become so nonsensical that it's impossible to know who or what to even root for. The epilogue is cute, but by then it's too little too late. **Sarah Dobbs**

## ALSO OUT

Ryan Cahill's self-published epic fantasy saga *The Bound And The Broken* (five books so far) has sold over half a million copies. The opening instalment, 2021's **OF BLOOD AND FIRE** (out now, Broken Binding) has now received a more traditional release. It centres on 18-year-old Calen Bryer, who discovers he's a "Draleid", able to mentally bond with a dragon. Debut author Katalina Watt's **SALTSWEPT** (26 February, Hodderscape) draws on Southeast Asian mythology. A sea-faring tale, it sees a pirate, a farmer, a priestess, a pickpocket and a talking ottercat banding together to sail into a raging whirlpool known as the Maelstrom, and find the mysterious treasure hidden within it. The sixth book set in the world of the *Mortal Engines* series, Philip Reeve's **BRIDGE OF STORMS** (out now, Scholastic) is a companion to 2024's *Thunder City*. It sees that book's protagonist, Tamzin Pook and her friends heading to the city of Museion to help save it from the ferocious predator suburbs that surround it. Suitable for ages 12 and up, Amie Kaufman's **RED STAR REBELS** (out now, Hot Key) is set on Mars in 2067, and sees a stowaway girl and a trust fund boy teaming up to prevent mercenaries blowing up the United Nations base. And they're on their own, as the grown-ups have evacuated thanks to a fake toxin alert. Finally, the latest in YA series *Remixed Classics* is Elle Grenier's **THIS WRETCHED BEAUTY** (out now, Titan), a gothic, trans retelling of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture Of Dorian Gray* (featuring a 16-year-old Dorian).





# Gareth L Powell

The award-winning SF novelist is very close to Boba Fett...



## What is your daily writing routine like?

▶ The competing demands of a part-time job and being a grandfather mean my week tends to be somewhat chaotic. However, I do tend to do my best writing either first thing in the morning or last thing at night. Perhaps that's something to do with being closer to sleep, when the membrane between the waking and sleeping imagination becomes more porous. All I know is that when I get in the zone, it's the best feeling, like surfing a wave.

## Do you find it helpful to listen to music while writing?

▶ I've seen studies that say music or white noise can really help focus and concentration, and I've certainly found that to be that case. When I'm writing, and depending on my mood, I'll listen to film and TV soundtracks, instrumental jazz, or Brian Eno's ambient albums. I've also found that coffee shop noise works just as well, and there are many coffee shop ambience videos on YouTube.

## Do you have any nick-nacks on your desk?

▶ I still use the same desk my father bought for me when I was 10 years old, as

something on which to do my homework. It's an old wooden thing with six drawers and two of those pull-out shelf things. He got it from an office surplus warehouse, so I think it had probably done several years of service in a bank or other business before it came into my possession. Right now, it has a spider plant and two action figures, one of Boba Fett and the other of Ellen Ripley in her spacesuit – or as I call her, Our Lady of LV-426.

## Have you ever come up with a good plot idea in a dream?

▶ I come up with so many ideas in

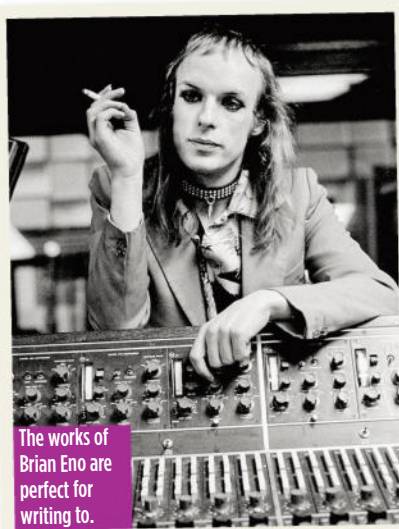
dreams. The trouble is, they don't always make a whole lot of sense in the light of day. That's if I can remember them long enough to actually write them down. But from what I *can* remember, since I became a writer, my brain tends to try to impose a narrative structure on the chaotic flow of my unconsciousness.

## Were you a keen reader as a child?

▶ I was fortunate to have a well stocked local library, and read everything I could get my hands on. *Watership Down*, *The War Of The Worlds*, *Ringworld*, *Biggles Of The Camel Squadron*, *On The Road*, *Fear And Loathing In Las Vegas*... If I had to pick some favourites from that time, I'd probably pick Samuel R Delany's *Nova*, *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy*, and later, Douglas Coupland's *Generation X*.

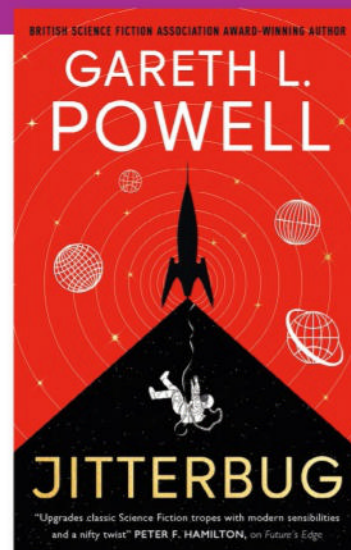
## What would be your desert island book?

▶ This might be a cheat, but I have *The Norton Anthology Of English Literature* and *The Norton Anthology Of American Literature* on my shelves. If I could take them to a desert island, they would provide an endless treasury.



The works of Brian Eno are perfect for writing to.

BRIAN ENO PORTRAIT: GUSBERT HANEKROOT/REDFERNS/GETTY



## What's the biggest misconception people tend to have about being a professional author?

▶ That we're rich.

## What's the best piece of writing advice you've received or read?

▶ Read with intention. Pay attention to the way the author creates emotion and conjures imagery. Try to understand why you like certain parts and dislike others. Feel the rhythm of the dialogue and how it reveals character. ●

*Jitterbug* is out on 3 March, published by Titan.

# First Read

AN EXTRACT FROM A NEW BOOK

# Pretenders To The Throne

## Adrian Tchaikovsky returns to the darkly exuberant world

**Eres Ffrenegh is the next state slated for conquest by the Palleseen. But its citizens won't give up sovereignty easily...**

When you were the oldest man in the world, you woke slowly, often, at random intervals. There were spells for an ageing bladder but you had to remember to cast them. There were spells for an ageing memory; the problem was the same. And probably he wasn't the oldest man in the world. It's not as though he'd taken a census of the entire population. There was probably some divine yogi in the depths of a cave somewhere who had a few years on him. It wasn't a competition. One of the things that being maybe the oldest man in the world taught you was that being old wasn't a prize worth contending for.

He woke, knowing something was wrong. You developed certain senses, if you lasted that many years in his profession.

Alert to the balance of magic as a fish is to water. Beside him, the bed was empty. He spoke a name, but not loud. It was a big tower, and if Ghastron was up and about, unlikely he'd be within earshot. And, again, there were spells. There were spells for every damn thing, but then you had to actually corkscrew your mind through the various contortions any individual act of magic required. You had to find where the power was, and then force it into the exact right shape, through those extra spaces and directions that such forces operated in, all about as natural as trying to nail soup to the wall. So often it was just easier to go and do, physically, like any pig farmer or thug of a soldier, rather than make the magic happen.

And Ghastron didn't sleep, of course. Ghastron consented to lie in this bed beside him and at least do a decent impression of it, but sleep wasn't native to where he was from. And so once his – not

master, not any more; his *lover*, say the word – was dozing, the dread lord of Hell got up and potted about the tower, entirely normal. That wasn't what was wrong.

The old man – maybe oldest, certainly he felt it right then – sat up. Felt the chill even though spring was weeks into its reign. The local week, pleasantly long so you could really relax into it, take that half day of rest in the middle which he'd always found so civilised. Supposed to be warm, therefore, but the problem with living in a big stone tower constructed several hundred years before anyone really thought of insulation was that it was always cold. And again, there were spells. There was a whole actual elemental monster of fire that he – a younger he – had defeated and captured and bound into the place, just so he could have heated floors and hot water for the bath.

Except the monster was old, too, and needed a bit of a prod on a morning, to start railing and roaring in its elemental prison and thereby bring even a glimmer of warmth to the place.

Something was definitely wrong. Even as he tried to feel out the problem – *please don't say the bloody sixth floor has ceased to exist again; that's where I keep my stuff* – he heard a sound; a voice, maybe, from a few floors down. An exclamation, cut off. And perhaps it was Ghastron spilling some tea, and biting off a demon's curse so as not to wake his love, but it hadn't sounded like that.

For the first time in several human lifetimes, the old man had a sense that he wasn't alone. Meaning that he and Ghastron weren't the only free presences in the tower. A very long time ago, the lack of distinction between "he" and "he and Ghastron" was because he was the great sorcerer, and Ghastron just the servant he had conjured. These days it was because he couldn't imagine a life without his wicked demon lover. Wicked? Well, Ghastron was old now, too, and mostly the wickedness had transmuted into catty humours and a little sly nose-tweaking, but wicked once. *We were all wicked once*, the old

man thought. Like the magic, these days wickedness seemed a lot of effort, and he'd rather just shuffle about his tower and drink tea.

He got out of bed, feet groping about for those good slippers they picked up in Magnelei during the war. He called his lover's name.

Descending the first set of stairs down from the bedchamber, he heard some scuffling down below. Ghastron, it must be. All the wards were in place. You didn't just walk into a wizard's tower, most certainly not *this* wizard's. Didn't they know who he was?

They did, as it happened, know who he was. That was why they were here.

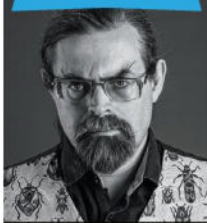
After the second stairs, he came out into their favourite sitting room, his and Ghastron's, and there he saw them. Eight of them, because the means they used to get in here were chancy, and two of the squad hadn't made it through. He registered the uniforms: charcoal-grey. Palleseen. And yes, he had been employed on the other side, in that big war the Pals had against the Loruthi. And yes, his arrival here had resulted in the Pals being kicked out of this city, because everyone had thought he was taking sides when he was just coming home. But despite all of that he hadn't thought the bastards were really his business.

He stared at them. They stared at him, in the manner of burglars caught in the act of breaking into a house, which seemed to be exactly what they were. And they'd got in without breaking a single barrier or triggering a ward, and there was some magic sniff about them that was rather *other*. In different circumstances he'd have been fascinated. He'd be asking questions. He'd offer them tea and they could sit down and have a proper chat, professional to professional. Not often someone pulled off a piece of magery to catch *him* off guard, after all. Except there was the gap.

It wasn't a body. Some things didn't leave bodies. It was a gap. An absence made tangible by the way the eight of them were standing. A hole where the body had fallen before it fell out of the world and back Below.

Below, the capitalised. Where they came from, where they went. The torment-grounds of Hell from where, long ago, he had fished up a servant – no mere imp but a grandee of the infernal, as befitted his status as the greatest of conjurers. From which smoking halls he had

### The Author



Adrian Tchaikovsky is a British science fiction and fantasy writer known for a wide variety of work, including the *Children Of Time*, *Final Architecture*, *Dogs Of War*, *Tyrant Philosophers* and *Shadows Of The Apt* series, as well as standalone books such as *Elder Race*, *Doors Of Eden*, *Spiderlight* and many others. *Children Of Time* and its series has won the Arthur C Clarke and BSFA Awards, and his other works have won the British Fantasy, British Science Fiction and Sidewise Awards.

PORTRAIT © TOM PEPERDINE

# Throne Of God

by Adrian Tchaikovsky

## of The Tyrant Philosophers

drawn the infinitely cruel and wicked creature, the deceiver, the tempter, who had been his bosom companion for more centuries than he could recall.

A lie. He could give you the exact years, and not a one of them that hadn't been the sweeter for Ghastron's company.

A sound came out of him. Some of the Pal soldiers tried to shoot him, then, but the element of surprise was gone. Had been wasted on a servant, when these hard men and women – thugs of soldiers, save there was that magic about them – had intended to spend it on *him*, the master. The magic of their batons fizzled and spat but he put a finger on the scales and it slid away into a hole somewhere, in some unnamed direction, and failed to trouble him. He was still waking up, honestly. Both in the literal sense, and waking up to a realisation of what he'd lost.

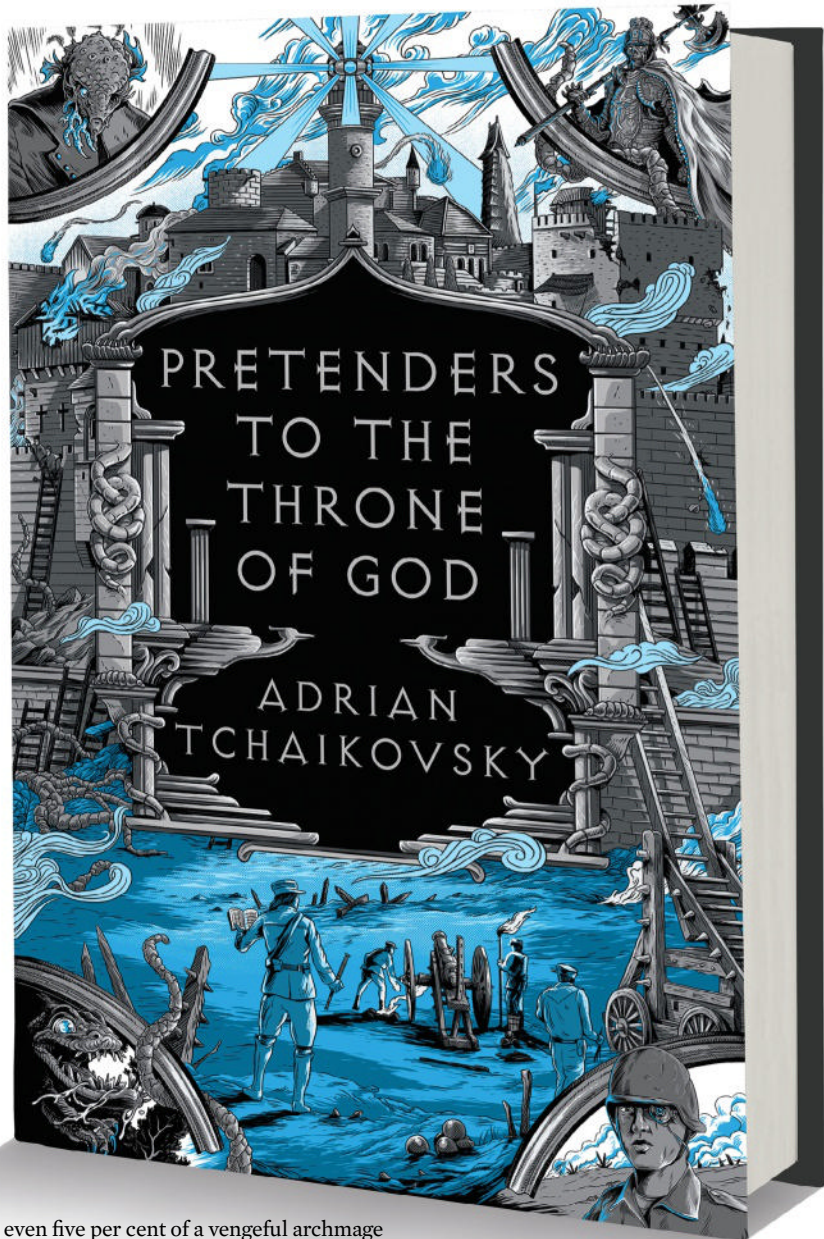
A sound came from him. It was like a logic problem really. Because, yes, his lover had just been shot, and that was one level of it, but there was no body. There was no *body*, of course there wasn't, and that meant his lover was *gone*. Gone in a way that mere human grief and loss couldn't even begin to imagine; gone beyond the dreams of necromancers; *gone*.

The soldiers were shouting – at him, at each other, he really wasn't interested in anything they had to say. There was a lot of power in the spaces around them. It was waking to his demands. The roaring furnace monster was slipping its bonds. Stone ground against stone as the tower felt the horror and despair its master's aged frame couldn't contain.

More shooting; irrelevant really. One of them, seeing how the magic of their batons was just pissing into the storm, went for him with an actual knife. Cold iron, inscribed with sigils, a proper wizard-killing piece of work. The wizard turned the knife into a thought and the man into an exploded anatomical diagram. That was how they knew they'd failed.

In fact, they hadn't failed. They'd achieved everything they set out to, save actually killing the wizard. A tactical failure but a strategic victory. Right then, at that rather tense moment, nobody realised this.

He began killing them. The fire came up from its kennel below and ravened through the room, turning charcoal-grey uniforms crispy black. He himself, the wizard, the great sorcerer, just stood there keening, far more of him consumed by loss than seeking vengeance.



But even five per cent of a vengeful archmage wasn't something you wanted to stand in front of.

The soldiers fled, meaning they exited the tower by the ineffable means they'd used to enter it, the one he hadn't known to guard against because the Pals did occasionally come up with something really novel. Some of them got away, others didn't. He didn't really care at that point. On his knees in the inferno, beating

his gnarled old fists on the floor where the corpse wasn't, where Ghastron wasn't, and would never be again.

*Pretenders To The Throne Of God, the latest entry in Adrian Tchaikovsky's Tyrant Philosophers series, is out now, published by Head of Zeus.*

## DC KO Fight Club



▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

▶ Publisher DC Comics

▶ Writers Scott Snyder,

Joshua Williamson

▶ Artists Javi Fernández, Xermánico

**ISSUES 1-3** Superhero event

comics and crossovers can often feel like blatant opportunities to shoehorn in as many characters as possible to have a gigantic punch-up. DC's latest event proves to be about as shameless an opportunity as it gets, as multiple DC heroes and villains are pulled into a contest of champions where there can be only one victor.

DC KO actually links back to a long-running story thread that is connected to the apparent death

of the villainous Darkseid, but the hyper-involved setup is only slightly relevant here – all that matters is that Earth is now at risk of being taken over by Darkseid. The only way to prevent this from happening is to gain control of the mysterious Heart of Apokolips by becoming the “King Omega”, and this can only happen via a series of brutal no-holds-barred fights until one survivor is left standing to claim their reward.

As usual, this consists of a core miniseries and a bewildering number of crossover issues, and the first three chapters of this five-issue miniseries do a fairly impressive job of threading some genuine character drama into all the

over-the-top action and endless punching.

Scott Snyder's script (accompanied by brief sequences from Joshua Williamson) keeps the pacing as fast as possible, and focuses on the question of whether Superman's innate goodness can survive a conflict where cunning and brutality are more important in order to win.

There are some points where the lunk-headed dumbness and relentless continuity references get exhausting, but the giddy momentum of the story successfully helps to paper over some of the cracks. There's also major assistance from the excellent art by Javi Fernández and Xermánico, which goes all-out for maximum visual impact, keeping the action clear and exciting while at the same time pulling off a number of striking images.

It would probably be easy to rank this as a good example of the superhero comic equivalent of fun but deeply unhealthy fast food, if it



## HARLEY & IVY: LIFE AND CRIMES



▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

▶ Publisher DC Comics

▶ Writer/artist Erica Henderson

**ISSUES 1-3** One of the most

unexpected yet enduring superhero comic relationships of the 21st century has been the colourful love affair between Harley Quinn and Poison Ivy. Amazingly, there has never previously been an origin story for the relationship. This six-issue miniseries is filling in the blanks on how Harley and Ivy got together.

The story is told in flashback (with narration from both protagonists), and takes us back to the last stages of Harley's abusive relationship with the Joker. A lonely night at the ACE Chemicals factory brings her up against Poison Ivy, only for them to both discover unexpected common ground and a fierce attraction.

We're currently three issues in, and writer/artist Erica Henderson is doing a fantastic job of making this into a frothy superhero romcom that's also capable of being dramatic and genuinely emotional when it wants to be. The interplay between Harley and Ivy is fast-paced and charming, and Henderson pulls off some gorgeously energetic art while packing in plenty of gags and action.

The only real flaw is the odd decision to utilise the faceless (and overly unpleasant) “Death Of The Family” version of the Joker. Otherwise, this is a breezy, lively romp that's giving two iconic characters the romantic origin they deserve.

**Saxon Bullock**

“Threads  
some genuine  
character drama  
into the action  
and punching”

wasn't for the way it clumsily torpedoed the idea that an event's core miniseries should work as a relatively self-contained story, without needing to read any crossover issues.

Instead, there's an entire round of the overall contest taking place between issues two and three that's only told in eight separate one-off specials, and is barely referenced at all in this core miniseries, having the effect of making it feel like a huge chunk of the story went randomly missing. It's a baffling cash-grab that leaves a bad aftertaste, and ultimately keeps DC KO from being a satisfying (if deeply trashy) slice of blockbuster superhero entertainment.

**Saxon Bullock**

**i** Snyder's 2014 horror miniseries *Wytches* is currently being adapted as an animated TV series for Prime Video.





## A STAR CALLED THE SUN

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

▶ Publisher **Image Comics**

▶ Writer/artist **Simon Roy**

**GRAPHIC NOVEL** One of the principal creators involved in mind-bending Image Comics sci-fi saga *Prophet*, writer/artist Simon Roy has made a speciality out of exploring idiosyncratic future worlds.

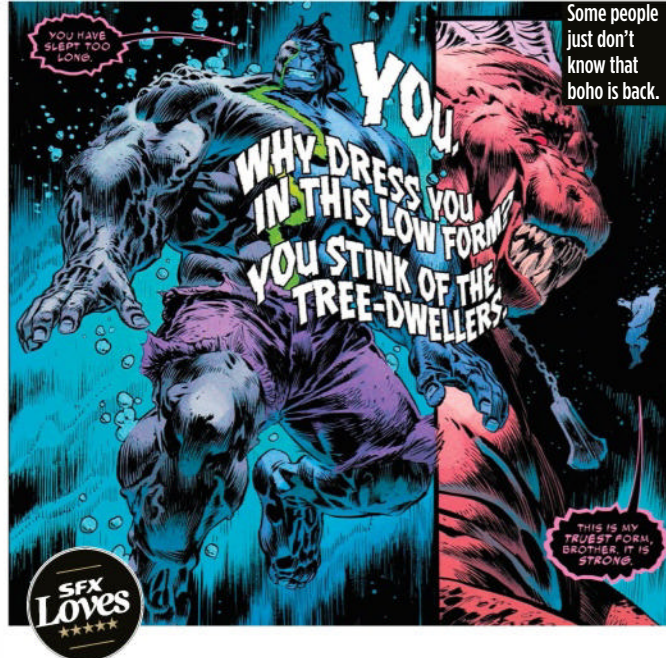
His latest release is a collection of tales set in the same futuristic universe as his previous graphic novels *Habitat* (2016) and *Griz Grobus* (2024). They showcase a fascinating blend of lurid strangeness and intense, detailed world-building.

The stories depict a universe of bizarre religion, ancient robots and weird mysteries, and the subjects range from an artist finding his ideal audience in a hive of alien insects (“Portrait Of The Artist As A Hive Parasite”) to the secret lurking at the heart of a distant convent (“The Anchoress”).

As well as Roy’s inventive and characterful visuals on each story, there’s a heavy dose of extra world-building thanks to in-universe documents and guides, along with plenty of commentary and concept art.

A common theme in these stories is humanity trying (and sometimes failing) to adapt to alien environments (as in “The Oxpecker And The Elephant”).

However, while there are moments that are grotesque, dark and sometimes brutal, Roy’s worldview is ultimately warm and optimistic, making this a collection that any self-respecting fan of offbeat science fiction would do well to check out. **Saxon Bullock**



## THE INFERNAL HULK

Doing the split

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

▶ Publisher **Marvel Comics**

▶ Writer **Phillip Kennedy Johnson**

▶ Artists **Nic Klein, Kev Walker**

**ISSUES 1-3** After the recent rise of

*The Mortal Thor*, Marvel appears to be making a habit of saying, “Hey, let’s relaunch a comic right in the middle of a story arc!” The publisher’s latest ongoing title to get a shiny new issue one in the midst of an epic saga is Phillip Kennedy Johnson and Nic Klein’s run on *The Incredible Hulk*, which is reborn here as *The Infernal Hulk*.

The retitling coincides with the point where the battle between scientist Bruce Banner and his angry green alter-ego has seemingly reached a point of no return. Banner and Hulk have been permanently split apart, and the body of the Hulk is now inhabited by Eldest, a god-like entity that’s out to transform the world into a nightmare realm of monsters.

These first three issues waste no time pitching us into the new

status quo, and Johnson continues his full-on, EC Comics-influenced approach to the story, portraying the now “Infernal” Hulk as a truly frightening, determined and unstoppable adversary.

He also manages to make the “new issue one” sales gimmick mostly work, opening with a spectacular (and gory) action set-piece, and carefully building some effective mysteries, while still keeping the story relatively accessible for newcomers to the Hulk narrative.

On the art front, Nic Klein continues to showcase imaginative layouts and tremendously kinetic action, while Kev Walker brings emotional depth to the issue three plotline following the Hulk-free Bruce Banner.

Together with Johnson’s confident storytelling, this all adds up to a thrillingly potent blend of superheroes and lurid horror that’s pushing the Hulk mythos into some entertainingly twisted territory. **Saxon Bullock**

**i** Johnson first started writing comics to help his brother learn to be a comic artist, by giving him scripts to illustrate.



## EVENT HORIZON: DARK DESCENT

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

▶ Publisher **IDW Dark**

▶ Writer **Christian Ward**

▶ Artists **Tristan Jones, Christian Ward**

**ISSUES 1-5** With **Paul WS**

Anderson’s 1997 space-horror film centring on a subsequent rescue mission, this prequel five-parter reveals how exactly the titular spaceship fell into a hellish black hole.

Writer Christian Ward pares back the plot, giving Tristan Jones’s artwork room to breathe. After issue one’s set-up, he swiftly plunges the ship into the infernal dimension in issue two’s opening pages, in a detailed double-page spread which, as elsewhere, is enhanced by Pip Martin’s gloriously lurid colours.

Providing the mostly previously anonymous crew with fuller personalities, Ward delves into their backstories, revealing the traumas and dark pasts that led them to commit to the voyage.

Giving a name to the demonic entity that rules the chaotic realm, *Dark Descent* emphasises how *Event Horizon* owes as much to Clive Barker as it does to *Alien*, although Paimon – who didn’t appear in the film, and is strikingly depicted by Jones – doesn’t only bring to mind *Hellraiser*’s Pinhead but also the Beast from Tenth Doctor *Doctor Who* episode “The Satan Pit”.

With Ward scripting and illustrating the epilogue hinting at the ship’s designer’s links to Paimon, the scene is set for the series to continue with April’s sequel, *Inferno*. **Stephen Jewell**

## CODE VEIN II

### Dungeons that drag on



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Reviewed on PS5

► Also available on Xbox Series, PC

► Publisher Bandai Namco Entertainment

**VIDEOGAME** It's borderline

impressive to take a concept like time-travelling vampires and make it boring. *Code Vein II* pulls off this feat by stretching itself thinner than a sheet of A4 on Ozempic. Its predecessor was essentially an anime spin on *Dark Souls*. It boasted a lovely art style, but also starred female characters seemingly designed by only the horniest of teenage boys.

*Code Vein II* keeps the embarrassingly proportioned ladies (lord knows how poor Holly even *breathes*, let alone fights) but has taken a major graphical hit. This clearly aspires to be a huge

open-world adventure, like *Elden Ring*, and has compromised itself horribly in the process. It's a bland, lifeless world with major pop-in issues on PS5. Hope you like riding the world's slowest motorcycle through it.

Dungeons are, frankly, appalling. When someone suggests "How about a level in a water treatment plant?" you're meant to politely ask them to get out. Stuningly, that's not even the most boring locale. This would be fine if there were smart twists, supernatural elements, or *anything* to stop these places feeling like their tedious real-world inspirations. *Code Vein II* has more dungeons than its predecessor, but who cares when so many of them are this crap?

Combat *almost* saves it. It's all about blocking, parrying, and

dodge-rolling when you wimp out of parrying – then exploiting any opening you get to go ham with your blades. All familiar to Soulslike veterans and well executed, though the presence of a constant NPC companion gives it a twist. They help to get extra attacks in, and work wonders as bait while you happily run away.

Die, and that companion will immediately bring you back. But necromancy doesn't come cheap, and so the companion temporarily disappears in the process. Die again before they return, and that's a proper game over. It's a fun system that rewards taking risks. A clever blood-sapping mechanic, wherein you can recharge your special attacks mid-battle, also encourages you to get stuck in.

With tons of special attacks to discover, you can find some fun here. But when all you fight is endlessly repeated enemies in dull as dishwater dungeons, it hardly feels worth the effort. **Abbie Stone**

**i** The game is set in two time periods, a century apart. You'll be underwhelmed when you find out how little changes.



## DOCTOR WHO: THE VIOLET HOUR



► **RELEASED 12 MARCH**

► Running time 55 minutes

► Format CD/download

► Publisher Big Finish

**AUDIO DRAMA** Fans of *Doctor*

*Who* often cite its gothic horror-tinged '70s as the pinnacle of the classic era. It's a tone that Thirteenth Doctor era mostly avoided on TV – "The Haunting Of Villa Diodati" aside – but adopts in fine style for the latest Big Finish adventure.

The Doctor (Jodie Whittaker) and Yaz (Mandip Gill) end up in New York. The TARDIS arrives in the wrong place but the right time. It's 1926 and a string of women have been murdered in London's East End. The duo finds a link between the victims: they're all psychic mediums. The trail leads to the retired Colonel Maltravers (David Robb), who's been conducting some very dangerous experiments. But he's not the only threat – something is following the Doctor.

Rafaella Marcus's script has fun with the moody, Hammer Horror-tinged setting, while never forgetting the human impact of the killings or Yaz's former policing career. Indeed, the latter is something this season has been good at exploring. As the episode progresses, its place in the series arc also becomes clear, giving us another piece in the mystery of who and what "the Tourist" is. This is a fine blend of old and new *Who*, and the best Jodie Whittaker audio adventure so far. **Will Salmon**

Lady Gaga's latest look took everyone by surprise.



## THE HUNGRY MOON

### Old Harry's Game



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Running time 274 minutes

► Format Download

► Publisher Room 5064 Productions

**AUDIO DRAMA** This ambitious adaptation of Ramsey Campbell's 1986 novel was originally due to be released in 2020. Planned as a 140-minute full-cast dramatisation, the project has clearly grown in scope in the intervening years: it now runs to an epic – and slightly challenging – 274 minutes.

It's 1986 and Diana Chung (Jemma Moore) has travelled to the Peak District in order to join an anti-nuclear weapons protest. She finds herself in the village of Moonwell – your classic folk horror setting, complete with eccentric locals and a pub with an ominous name. Diane is not the

only newbie in town: a zealous American preacher named Godwin Mann (Anthony DP Mann, who also directed the piece) has also come to the village, just as the dark force trapped in the local well, a presence known as "Harry Moony", starts to exert its evil influence once again.

Recorded during the pandemic and co-starring a cast of *Doctor Who* notables (Peter Davison, Colin Baker, Mina Anwar and Louise Jameson all have prominent roles), this is an impressively immersive production, one steeped in a doomy, rain-soaked atmosphere. And while it's certainly not shy of trading in a few well-worn folk horror tropes, there are engaging characters and some neat subversions of the genre along the way.



There's no doubt, however, that at four and a half hours in duration, *The Hungry Moon* feels long. The story also gets a little muddled in the final episode as it tries to attend to everyone in the

large cast. Still, it's a solid adaptation with bags of spooky charm. **Will Salmon**

**i** The release comes with a bonus 89-minute conversation with Campbell, a 32-minute chat with Moore, and two takes of a song.

## STAR TREK VOYAGER: ACROSS THE UNKNOWN

### Treknichal difficulties



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Reviewed on PC

► Also available on PS5, Switch 2,

Xbox Series X/S

► Publisher Daedalic Entertainment

**VIDEOGAME** On paper, the journey of the USS *Voyager* – a starship cut off from Federation support, desperately trying to get home on limited resources in unknown territory – makes for a great videogame. Unfortunately, videogames don't happen on paper.

The fundamental idea is an attractive one. The game broadly

follows the plot of the show, with some material remixed or relegated to subplots and side quests. Crucially, there's an element of choice, allowing you to mess with the canon. If you spent the whole series wishing that Captain Janeway was a consistently cold-hearted monster, for example, then you'll be pleased with some of the available options.

There's miles of text, minimal animation, and a lot of static images. Nonetheless, the away missions – a mixture of choices and RNG – are enjoyable. The problem is... everything else.



This was clearly developed on a tight budget, a chunk of which was diverted to tedious combat and a resource management system that undermines the entire experience. Even on story difficulty, the scarcity of resources and the seemingly endless plummet of crew morale disincentivises exploration. You want to see what happens if Janeway embraces Borg technology, not spend half your time building crew quarters and scanning planets for minerals.

Those unfamiliar with *Voyager* will be unlikely to care about any of the loosely portrayed characters or events, while Trekkies are likely to become frustrated with the undercooked systems that get in the way of the story. The great visual novel that might have been has found itself stranded in the middle of an awful survival game. **Luke Kemp**

**i** The last *Star Trek: Voyager* game was *Elite Force*, a first-person title concentrating on action, released in 2000.

# SEPTEMBER 1977

SFX's time machine hurls us back to a random month once again

WORDS: NICK SETCHFIELD



## FLASHBACK

Stuntman Fred Waugh's son Scott directed *Expend4bles*.

### Hammond It Up

**14 SEPTEMBER 1977** Spider-Man was no stranger to the small screen. In the '60s, he had fronted a cartoon – complete with an immortal theme tune that did whatever an earworm could – while the mid-'70s saw educational series *The Electric Company*, produced by *Sesame Street*'s Children's Television Workshop, showcase a series of snappy, live-action skits called "Spidey Super Stories".

CBS's *Spider-Man* pilot would mark the web-slinger's debut in a full flesh-and-blood drama, two decades before Sam Raimi brought him swinging into the multiplex. Cast as Peter Parker was Nicholas Hammond, best known as one of the von Trapp brats in *The*

*Sound Of Music*. Now 27, he made for a decidedly mature take on the high-school loser of the original comics. This Peter was a graduate student, nipped by that fateful radiation-soaked arachnid while conducting his own experiments in the lab. "They wanted a real actor, not a stuntman," Hammond later recalled.

Luckily for him, there was a stuntman on the call-sheet, one who would bring a daredevil sense of showmanship to Spidey's wall-crawling, roof-leaping feats. "I looked better in the suit than he did," said stunt co-ordinator and second unit director Fred Waugh, "so they just seemed to let me do everything." A former circus performer, Waugh had invented a helmet-cam that gave an immersive first-person POV to the often legitimately perilous

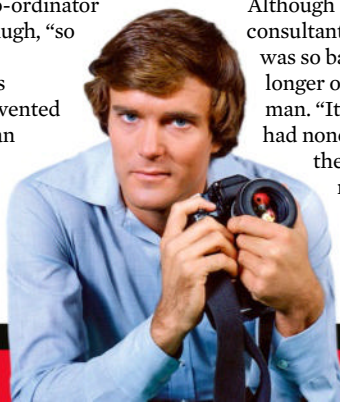
acrobatics, many of which demanded complex arrangements of cables and rigging.

While the *Batman* TV show had capitalised on a colourful pantheon of villains, CBS opted for a more grounded approach. Ignoring such outlandish comic book miscreants as the Green Goblin, the Vulture and the Rhino, the pilot pitted Spidey against Thayer David as Edward Byron, a New Age guru using mind control to extort the city.

Boosted by brand recognition, *Spider-Man* was a hit, the highest-performing CBS production of 1977. A series followed in April 1978, rechristened *The Amazing Spider-Man*.

Although officially billed as consultant, Stan Lee wasn't happy. "It was so basic," he rued, once no longer obliged to serve as hype man. "It had none of the humour. It had none of the drama – none of the intense human relationships that we tried to put in."

*Spider-Man* was released theatrically outside the US, its runtime extended by reinstated footage.



CBS PHOTO ARCHIVE/GETTY



## He Who Dares

**3 SEPTEMBER 1977** “I’m here, gentlemen!” announced Dan Dare, striding back into the pages of *2000 AD* after a five-week furlough.

Reborn as a cross between Dirty Harry and Ziggy Stardust, the legendary British space hero had spearheaded the title’s launch in February. But his revival had dismayed fans of Frank Hampson’s ’50s original: liberally doused in nightmare fuel by the hallucinatory art of Massimo Belardinelli, Dare’s exploits were a universe removed from the bright, well-mannered pages of *Eagle*.

Now, the strip was completely retooled. New artist, new aesthetic, new mission. Summoned by the bigwigs of SASA (Solar Astronautical and Space Administration), Dare is tasked with exploring the Lost Worlds, a treacherous region in quadrant four where thousands of colonists have inexplicably vanished; “Hell itself, some say!”

If this is indeed Hell then Dare needs “a legion of devils” to match it. In *2000 AD* Prog 28, he assembles a ragtag crew of freaks and outlaws from a scummy satellite trading post called Topsoil. We’re a long way from *Eagle*’s cuddly Lancastrian sidekick Digby: one recruit, Hitman, brandishes a gun fused to his own flesh by the absolute zero of space. It’s *Star Trek* by way of *The Dirty Dozen*.

The new artist was Dave Gibbons, then a rising star in British comics and later one of the architects of *Watchmen*. Gibbons brought a dynamic, militaristic vibe that emphasised the strip’s newfound grit. “War action in space,” he later called it. “Quite mercilessly and blatantly riding the wave of *Star Wars*.”

ART BY DAVE GIBBONS © 2000 AD/REBELLION



ACCUSOFT INC.

## Roger And Out

**10 SEPTEMBER 1977** It was meant to be 20th Century Fox’s sci-fi blockbuster of 1977: an ambitious adaptation of *Damnation Alley*, Roger Zelazny’s 1969 novel about a perilous trek across America in the aftermath of a nuclear war.

But trouble more real than the movie’s giant, mutated scorpions dogged the production. Star Jan-Michael Vincent went AWOL after a peyote trip in Arizona, while a reported quarter of the budget ended up

being diverted to another Fox film by the name of *Star Wars*. Executive meddling then saw 44 minutes sliced from the cut that journeyman director Jack Smight (*Airport 1975*, *Midway*) turned in.

Premiering in Japan a month ahead of its US release, the film ultimately sank at the box office. “I was a little dismayed by it,” Zelazny admitted in 1981. “On the other hand, I took their money and I’d do it again... I’m in business to sell what I write.”



MAURICE HIBBERD/EVERING STANDARD/GETTY

- **Prime Minister:** James Callaghan
- **US President:** Jimmy Carter
- **In the charts:** Following his death in August, “Way Down” by Elvis Presley sits at number one.
- **In the news:** NASA launches space probe Voyager 1; the last execution by guillotine takes place in France; the US and Panama sign the Torrijos-Carter treaties on the future of the Panama Canal; glam rocker Marc Bolan is killed in a car crash; Freddie Laker launches his budget Skytrain service; optical fibre is used to carry live telephone traffic.

## ON THE SHELF



- Issue nine of US mag *Starlog* spotlights a new wave of sci-fi TV, leading with the small-screen version of *Logan’s Run*.

© STARLOG GROUP, INC.



# Weddings

Here comes the Bride (of Frankenstein)... so what better time for a quiz about sci-fi and fantasy nuptials?

Quizmaster Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor

### QUESTION 1

Why might you get rather chilly at a Betazoid wedding?

### QUESTION 2

In *Harry Potter And The Deathly Hallows: Part 1*, what disrupts Bill and Fleur's wedding?

### QUESTION 3

In *Doctor Who's* "The End Of Time: Part Two", what wedding gift does the Doctor leave Donna?

### QUESTION 4 Picture Question

Identify this wedding-themed horror movie.

### QUESTION 5

As we learned from *Andor* season two, how long does a Chandrilan wedding ceremony last?

### QUESTION 6

In the Tim Burton film, who voiced the titular Corpse Bride?

### QUESTION 7

In *Lois & Clark*, what device does Myrtle Beech use to try and prevent Lois and Clark's wedding?

### QUESTION 8 Picture Question

Supply the title that's been removed from this poster.

### QUESTION 9

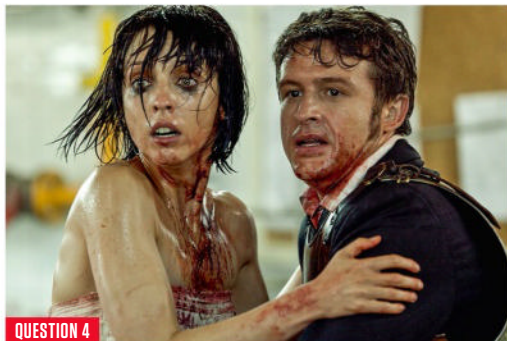
Name the TV movie in which Steve Austin and Jaime Sommers get hitched.

### QUESTION 10

In *Torchwood's* "Something Borrowed", what calamity occurs on Gwen Cooper's wedding day?

### QUESTION 11

Who gets married in the *Futurama* episode "Meanwhile"?



QUESTION 4



QUESTION 8



QUESTION 12



QUESTION 16

### QUESTION 12 Picture Question

Supply the title that's been removed from this poster.

### QUESTION 13

In *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*, who played 007's bride, Countess Tracy di Vicenzo?

### QUESTION 14

Jean Grey and Scott Summers tied the knot in 1994's *X-Men* issue 30. Which U2 song was their first dance? (Clue: it's a one-word title.)

### QUESTION 15

What goes wrong in the *Buffy* wedding episode "Hell's Bells"?

### QUESTION 16 Picture Question

Identify this wedding-themed horror movie.

### QUESTION 17

In *Game Of Thrones*, the wedding of Edmure Tully and Roslin Frey ends in a slaughter. What are the last words Robb Stark hears?

### QUESTION 18

Who were the only witnesses to the secret marriage of Anakin Skywalker and Padmé Amidala? (We're looking for two names.)

### QUESTION 19

Who officiated at the wedding of transporter chief Miles O'Brien and Keiko Ishikawa?

### QUESTION 20

In the *Doctor Who* episode "The Big Bang", which Queen song does the Doctor dance to at Rory and Amy's wedding disco?

Answers  
 1 Everyone must be naked 2 An attack by Death Eaters 3 A lottery ticket 4 Bonham Carter 5 Three days 6 Helena Melancholia 7 An electric-shock ring 8 She wakes up pregnant 9 Bionic Ever After? 10 Diana Rigg 11 Fry and Leela 12 I Married A Monster From Outer Space 13 Anya 14 "One" 15 Xander Lannisters send their regards." 16 C-3PO and R2-D2 17 Jean-Luc Picard 20 "Crazy Little Thing Called Love"

### How did you do?

Rank yourself by wedding present

0-5

Relationship advice book

6-10

Toaster

11-15

Dinner set

16-19

Cash

20

Foreign holiday

# SFX

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"I'm going to need to see Kong's bollocks"



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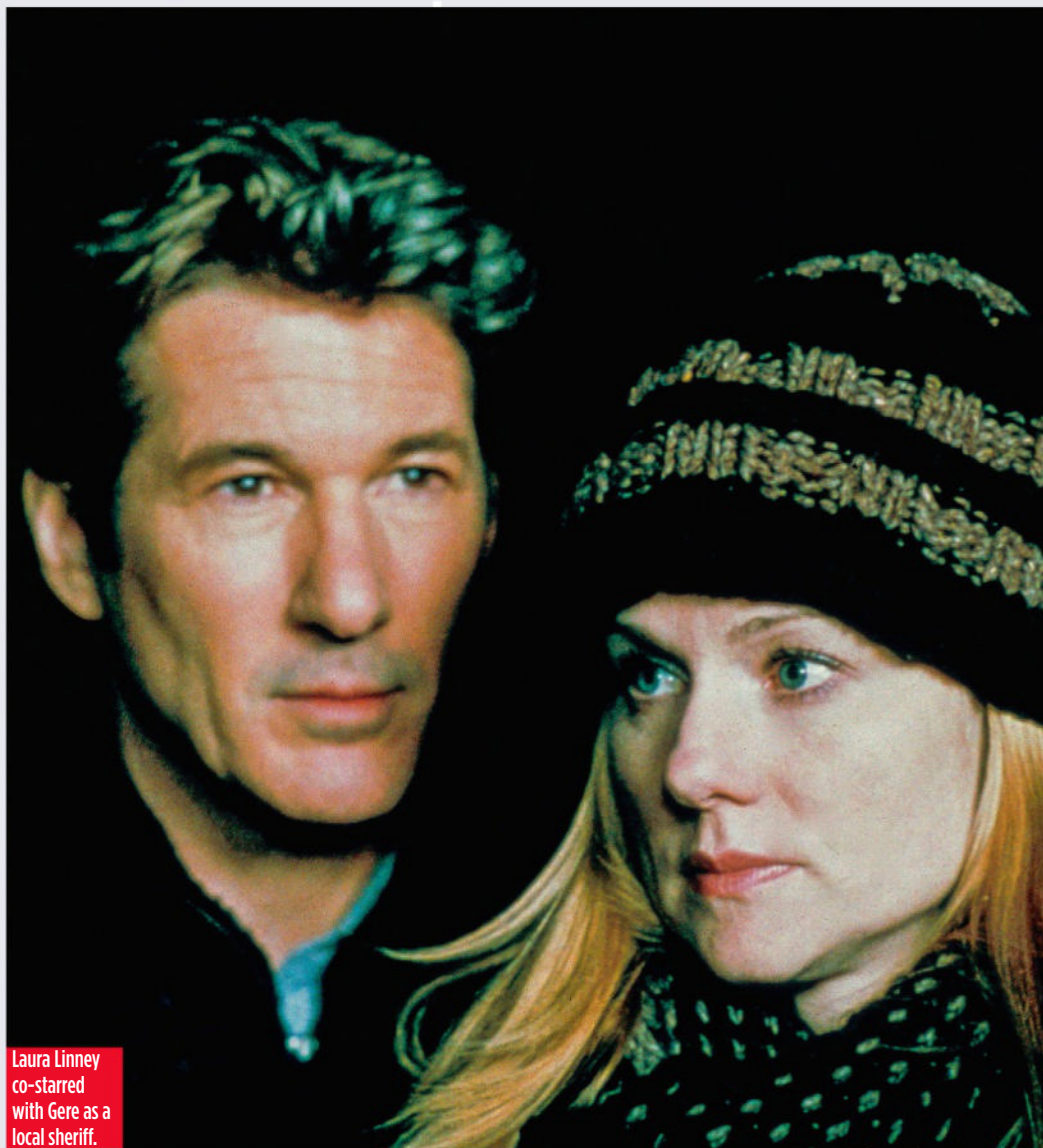
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MARCH 2026 | SFX MAGAZINE | 97

# Total Recall

Personal recollections of cherished sci-fi and fantasy



Laura Linney co-starred with Gere as a local sheriff.

thing is horribly true: on 15 December 1967, a year after the sightings started, the nearby Silver Bridge collapsed, killing 46 people, including some who had witnessed the apparition.

Mark Pellington's film plays fairly loose with the "truth", moving the events to the early '00s and replacing Keel with a fictionalised avatar named John Klein (Richard Gere). Even so, it plays the book's hits well, from Klein/Keel's accidental arrival in Point Pleasant, through a series of disturbing phone calls from an entity calling itself "Indrid Cold", to that fateful night on the bridge.

*The Mothman Prophecies* is not a truly great film. It's visually drab, with pedestrian direction and a dull grey-green colour palette that radiates early 2000s TV. And yet it's capable of capturing an eerie mood better than many far more lauded horror movies. I've rewatched it twice on my own in recent years, and on both occasions have had moments where I've needed to take a break to stop the skin from crawling off my bones. In its best moments, it achieves an almost Lynchian atmosphere of being trapped inside a waking nightmare.

## The Mothman Prophecies

### Will Salmon, Freelance writer



*Prophecies*, based on Fortean writer John Keel's book of the same name.

Some films don't seem especially significant on release, but have a strange way of sticking with you. A movie that has haunted me for decades is 2002's *The Mothman Prophecies*, based on Fortean writer John Keel's book of the same name.

Keel's book is a disturbing account of real events that happened in the town of Point Pleasant, West Virginia in 1966. Over a period of several months, many locals reported witnessing an ominous inhuman figure, nicknamed "the mothman", with some claiming that it was a harbinger of doom. Much remains ambiguous about this period, but one

And its closing depiction of the Silver Bridge tragedy is genuinely haunting.

Today, *The Mothman Prophecies* has been mostly forgotten outside of Fortean circles – where Keel's work remains rightly celebrated – and a small cult following who admire the film's gloomy mood and relentless ambiguity. It may not be a 1:1 depiction of whatever the hell was going on in Point Pleasant in 1966, but it captures the alarming weirdness and high strangeness of those events perfectly. ●

*Will would simply hang up on Indrid Cold.*

### Fact Attack!

→ The Mothman expert in the film (played by Alan Bates) is called Alexander Leek. You may notice that Leek is "Keel" backwards.

→ Director Mark Pellington supplied the voice of Indrid Cold during the scene where Gere's character receives a phone call from him.

→ The mothman is still big in Point Pleasant. As well as a statue in the town, there's also an annual festival celebrating the local legend.

→ In addition to eight other features, Mark Pellington has directed music videos for the likes of U2, The Flaming Lips and Nine Inch Nails.

→ Pellington's latest film is an action thriller titled *Lone Wolf*, starring Bryan Cranston and Lily Gladstone. Its release date is still to be confirmed.

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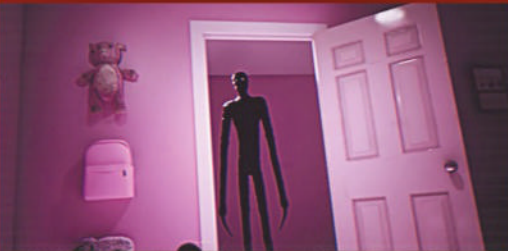
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