

SPY

COVER 1 OF 2
TEAM BOYS

LEE
CRONIN'S
THE MUMMY
EXCLUSIVE
ON-SET
ACCESS



STAR WARS
MAUL: SHADOW LORD
SITH HAPPENS!

★ **WORLD** ★
EXCLUSIVE!

THE BOYS

**SOMETHING
VERY BAD IS
GOING TO
HAPPEN**
NEW NETFLIX
HORROR
SERIES

★
BLAKE'S 7
THE SCI-FI
CLASSIC REBORN

★
**THE MAKING
OF FALLOUT**
BEHIND-
THE-SCENES
SECRETS

All-Vought war in the final series!

FUTURE
ISSUE 403
APRIL 2026
PRINTED IN THE UK
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PLUS! EXIT 8 ★ THE SENTRY ★ DAREDEVIL ★ FLASH GORDON ★ THUNDERCATS ★ THEY WILL KILL YOU FROM ★ RESIDENT ALIEN ★ FORBIDDEN FRUITS ★ THE ETERNALS ★ THE TESTAMENTS ★ SCOOBY-DOO

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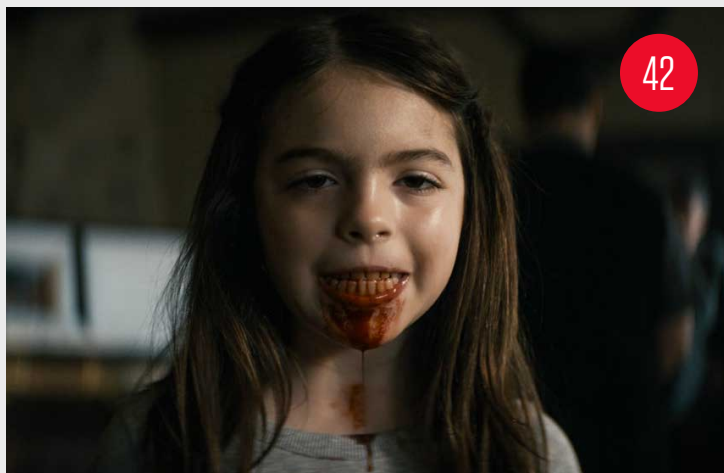
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Warriors* go for a spin.

Captain's Log



SERVALAN © BBC



I always find it really strange when a big franchise series comes and goes within the time I've been editing *SFX*. Sometimes it feels like these things come from nowhere – I didn't know anything about *The Boys*, for example, and felt it "probably wouldn't be my thing". I couldn't have been more wrong!

These shows end up becoming a big part of my everyday working life: I work closely with the teams behind-the-scenes in promotion, we do covers, features, go on set and I'll casually bump into the cast and creatives at SDCC or something like that... and then it's all just *done*.

I'm probably just showing my age now and becoming one of those people that laments "where's the time going?" but it really is worth taking a moment to stop and enjoy some of the all-time top genre television series we've been lucky enough to have in the last decade.

And sometimes they come back... Yes, it looks like we're finally getting a new version of *Blake's 7*, so we had to speak to the new producers – it all sounds *very* exciting.

But it's not just TV shows that come back in vogue, there's a new version of *The Mummy* and I got to go on set! So while it's sad to say goodbye, there's always something creeping up when you least expect it...

Darren
X

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Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind



DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

→ Thought that *Stranger Things: Tales Of '85* might dial down the scares, but they really do go there!

→ Thundering through *Andor* season two, *Scream Queens* season one and the latest *Blake's 7* Blu-ray box set at the moment. Who needs a social life?

RANTS

→ My backlog binge continues! Next up, season four of *Snowpiercer*... but maybe it should've just ended at season three?



IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

→ Bought a friction-drive Dapol Davros off eBay. Pull him back, let go, and he shoots across the floor! He'd be much less fun with legs.

→ Rewatching the movie has made me dig out my CD of the *Vampyros Lesbos* soundtrack to annoy the neighbours with. Well worth firing up on Spotify, if you don't know it.

RANTS

→ *THE BRIDE!*'s weak box-office mojo makes me (yet again) despair of humanity.

→ Gutted to hear about genre legend Bruce Campbell's recently announced "treatable but not curable" cancer diagnosis. Hang in there, fella.



JONATHAN COATES ART EDITOR

RAVES

→ *For All Mankind* season five is giving *Total Recall* meets Old-Biff-From-The-Future vibes so far, but I seriously cannot wait for this!



NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR AT LARGE

RAVES

→ My marathon *Fantastic Four* re-read finally reaches the post-Kirby era. These comics may forever be in the shadow of Stan and Jack but they're ripe for rediscovery – what a glorious art team John Buscema and Joe Sinnott made.

→ Check out the *2000 AD Thrill-Cast* for a zarjaz three-part interview with John Wagner, co-creator of *Judge Dredd*.



TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES

→ *Paradise* season two is thriving with its surprising new structure and really changing up the typical post-apocalyptic storytelling tropes. It's both emotional and compelling.

→ IMO, season two of *Monarch: Legacy Of Monsters* ranks up there with *Kong: Skull Island*.

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If You Go Down To The Woods Today

Uncovering the mysteries of **FROM**

Highlights



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EXIT 8

→ The hit videogame becomes a hit live-action movie – can you find the way out of the sinister subway?



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THEY WILL KILL YOU

→ This film will make you think twice about answering help wanted ads in future...



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THE TESTAMENTS

→ From the creators of *The Handmaid's Tale* comes a series based on the 2019 novel.



The movie captures the surreal feel of the game.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

White Space

Genki Kawamura's **Exit 8** brings the cult Japanese videogame to life

WORDS: JAMES MOTTRAM



Yamato Kôchi appears as the mysterious Walking Man.



SHOWS SUCH AS *Fallout* and *The Last Of Us* may, finally, have cracked how to adapt videogames for the screen, with glossy visuals, A-list casting and huge VFX budgets. But there's more than one way to level up, so to speak. This year sees the UK release of *Exit 8*, a devilishly surreal take on the cult walking simulator from Japan. Initially released on Steam, before shuffling its way across various consoles and platforms, the game traps the player in an endlessly looping metro station passageway,

requiring a subtle reading of clues to escape.

First published by Japanese videogame company Kotake Create in 2023, *The Exit 8* – as it was known – immediately caught the attention of filmmaker Genki Kawamura. “It was a game that had a great design, a great set of rules, but had no story, no narrative,” he notes. Players must scout for so-called anomalies in the white-tiled corridor – such as a poster, for example, suddenly hanging upside down. If there isn't anything amiss, you simply carry

on and progress to the next level. However, if you spot one, you must turn back on yourself, or else be booted back to the dreaded Exit 0 to start all over again.

While this story-free zone sounds nigh-on impossible to adapt into a movie, Kawamura was struck by the metaphorical possibilities such a set-up presented. “That space felt to me like if it were in Dante's ‘Divine Comedy’, purgatory, because you're kind of stuck there,” he explains. “It's also a place where your internal sins materialise as





Kazunari Ninomiya plays protagonist Lost Man.



Director Genki Kawamura and cast members on set.



The Boy is portrayed by eight-year-old Naru Asanuma.

anomalies, and in that way it's visualised. You have to face it because it's tactile. When I started thinking about these things, it made it more intriguing for me to do."

Kawamura was also reminded of Japanese Noh theatre, one of

the world's oldest theatrical traditions, that blends music, dance and drama in a very stripped-down form. He also felt it was akin to the more fantastical films of the celebrated Japanese director Kenji Mizoguchi, such as *Ugetsu*, his 1953 ghost story. "I

thought, 'If I could add a more videogame feel, an anime feel, and also a kind of a magic realism touch to it, that it will be a very unique film.'"

Unique is certainly one way to describe *Exit 8*, which stars singer-songwriter/actor Kazunari Ninomiya (a member of J-pop group Arashi) as the trapped Everyman. Dubbed Lost Man in the script, Ninomiya's terrified character appears doomed to walk the same corridor again and again. Every time, he passes the same businessman – known as Walking Man (Yamato Kochi) – who will be familiar to anyone who has played the game.

The more you watch *Exit 8*, the more you become incarcerated in the corridor space along with its poor protagonist. For Free Mags Check sastatus.com For the eagle-eyed, there's even a poster for an exhibition by the Dutch illustrator MC Escher, whose famous works depict endlessly looping geographical structures. There probably hasn't been a subway station this unsettling since that poor commuter got savaged at a deserted Charing Cross in *An American Werewolf In London*.

"I wanted it to feel for the audience like a monster," says Kawamura. "The corridor itself is very Japanese, very clean, and it's very orderly, and it has these oblong posters and what have you. But I wanted, ultimately, the corridor to become like [rogue computer] HAL in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, where it could be seen as a god or a devil or monster." Here, it's the corridor's "Exit" sign that is omnipotent. "I felt like that

I wanted the corridor to become like HAL in 2001

could be the eye of God or possibly the Devil... It's like a watcher of human beings and their behaviours."

Preparation for the movie saw the lead actor Kazunari Ninomiya watch play-through videos online to get a sense of the whole game. "He's a gamer, super gamer!" exclaims the director. "So he would bring his gamer knowledge to make sure we could create a new kind of storytelling [without losing] the feeling of the game." Kawamura also had a bash, feeling the frustrations of most who play the game experience. "I played it and, with a lot of stress, was able to get through."

There's even a more philosophical nod to the way we're all trapped, these days, by technology. The film starts with Ninomiya's character on the subway train, shown entirely from his point of view, recalling the videogame-like 2015 movie *Hardcore Henry*, which was entirely shot in POV form. "When you're on the tube and everybody is looking at smartphones, any one of you can be the protagonist of that game or story, which makes the other people on the train the NPCs [non-player characters]," says the director. "It felt like that was really interesting to explore as something very contemporary."

Exit 8 is in cinemas from 24 April.



Kazunari Ninomiya is also known as a J-pop star.



Kawamura likens the corridor to a god or devil.



Kotone Hanase's student is one of many intriguing characters.

SCI-FACT! *Exit 8* had the highest three-day opening for a live-action film in Japan for the year 2025.

ON-SET EXCLUSIVE

Terror Town

Harold Perrineau teases a terrifying season four of the haunting horror drama **FROM**

WORDS: ADAM TANSWELL

➔ WHEN THE FOURTH season of *From* premieres next month, viewers can expect tons of diabolical twists and treats. If you're into spooky, skin-crawling shocks and mind-blowing reveals, look no further.

"This season is very, very mean," explains actor and executive producer Harold Perrineau. "It's injurious. You know how horror is scary? Well, this horror is meant to hurt you. Badly."

Perrineau – who plays the town's pragmatic sheriff, Boyd Stevens – is chatting to Red Alert on the Canadian set of the creepy drama. "The horror is meant to hurt your feelings, which is worse than hurting your body," he continues. "Your body can heal, but your feelings are much harder to heal. I feel like this season the horror is really injurious emotionally. It's meant to stay with you."

The actor smiles, relishing every word of his diabolical description: "This season is the meanest season ever. The things that these creatures are doing to everyone... Urgh. As I read it in the script, it hurts my feelings. And I really mean that. I'm constantly thinking, 'Oh, man. They're kids. That shit's mean.' It's, like, 'Oh, no, no, no. You can't do that to her. Dang.' It's a really, really mean season."

FROM HELL

If you're new to *From*, you've been missing out. The sinister series is prestige television for horror fans. The story follows a group of seemingly normal people who are mysteriously trapped in a tiny town that's chock-full of menacing monsters and shadowy secrets.

The first three seasons have provided some tantalizingly

terrifying storylines, including gory tortures, grotesque murders and murmurs of child sacrifice, as well as revelations of reincarnation and story-walking – aka the *From* version of time travel.

There were plenty of surprises in the season three finale, which saw the confirmation of story-walking and the rebirth of the sinisterly spooky Smiley. There was also the shocking murder of Jim Matthews (played by Eion Bailey), whose throat was viciously slashed by the Man in Yellow (Douglas E Hughes) in the closing moments of the episode. The bloodcurdling scream of Jim's daughter, Julie (Hannah Cheramy), pierced the air as the scene faded to black.

"The story of season four picks up directly after the season three finale," reveals Perrineau, teasing the first episode of the upcoming season. "Jim's family doesn't know where he is in the world. They have no idea about what happened. The story picks up pretty quickly and it just doesn't stop. It's interesting because everything is happening to these people in the town really, really quickly. It's a relentless pace. How does anybody keep up with these high levels of stress? They are dealing with a lot."

"We pick up the story immediately where we left off, so we had to start the scene again with a big guttural scream," adds Hannah Cheramy, who plays Julie. "In the script, the story was supposed to pick up after the scream, but I said I wanted to do it again because it helped me return to that place. It totally did because my body was full-on shaking and trembling. It was a very heavy day on set, which feels really authentic when you're working on a storyline like this."



Director Jack Bender on set with Harold Perrineau.



Season four was filmed in Nova Scotia, Canada.

Perrineau is executive producer on the series.



Simon Webster (Ethan) and Scott McCord (Victor).

Elizabeth Saunders returns as Donna Raines.



“You’re going to absolutely love hating this character.”

Julie “story-walked” from the future for the blood-soaked slasher scene, which was conveyed on screen through the character’s scratched-up face and short new hairdo. “I’ve been trying to keep track of the timelines,” she chuckles. “Time travel stuff always confuses me, but I don’t know if I would actually call this time travel. This is something completely different on its own. It’s really cool.”

When it comes to the creepy creatures of *From*, the show’s creator John Griffin promises a lot of Smiley in the future. The grinning goon character was disturbingly reborn in a goo-heavy scene during the season three finale after Fatima (Pegah

Ghafoori) gave birth. “Smiley will play an interesting role in this season,” Griffin confirms. “You will definitely see Smiley again.”

Who else can fans expect as the show moves forward? “In season four, we have a new character and I think everybody’s going to love this character,” teases Perrineau. “Wait, love? That’s really strong. No, I think you’re going to hate this character. You’re going to absolutely love hating this character.” Bring on the screams... And make sure you grab a copy of *SFX* next month for more insider scoops from our exclusive *From* set visit! ●

From is on MGM+ in the US from 19 April. UK TBC.



Corteon Moore (Ellis) and Pegah Ghafoori (Fatima).

SCI-FACT! Perrineau is known to genre fans for being in *Lost*, *Constantine*, *The Matrix Reloaded*, *The Matrix Revolutions* and *28 Years Later*.

➤ **SCI-FACT!** In 2024 miniseries *Sentry: Legacy*, Bob Reynolds's powers were passed to several different characters, including Mallory Gibbs.



WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Christian Rosado's art for *The Sentry*.



Void Rivals

After taking on *Thunderbolts**, **The Sentry** returns in a new miniseries WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL

➔ AFTER BEING BROUGHT TO LIFE by actor Lewis Pullman in last year's *Thunderbolts**, the Sentry is next set to appear in the upcoming *Avengers: Doomsday*. But before then, the Golden Guardian is returning in a new miniseries written by Paul Jenkins, who scripted Robert Reynolds's debut 2000 *Marvel Knights* series for artist Jae Lee.

Describing it as a "fantastic experience", Jenkins worked as a consultant on *Thunderbolts**, and was pleasantly surprised when director Jake Schreier didn't just ignore his advice, as had happened in similar past circumstances.

"Jake was very invested in the mental health aspect of the Sentry," Jenkins tells Red Alert. "After the film came out, it was clear the Sentry had a number of new fans, so it seemed like a good time to bring him back to the comics. My editor, Mark Paniccia, suggested that I take the same approach I had previously taken, as opposed to tying up loose ends and outstanding continuity, and it was great to be given such trust and freedom."

While Robert Reynolds' dark alter ego The Void "is always there in the wings as part of Bob's story",

the Sentry is joined by his regular supporting cast. "We face a new menace and visit some old friends, so expect to see Lindy, CLOC and Watchdog, as they are the characters I often surround Bob with as they're the people – and pooch – in his life," teases Jenkins, referring respectively to the Sentry's wife, his sentient computer, and his faithful canine companion.

There are also guest turns by Reed Richards, Spider-Man, Kingpin and the Hulk. "I love Hulk's interactions with the Sentry, whom he loves and calls Golden Man," continues Jenkins.



AUTHOR EXCLUSIVE

Trial Period

The Punisher's accused of Kingpin's murder in a new **Daredevil** novel

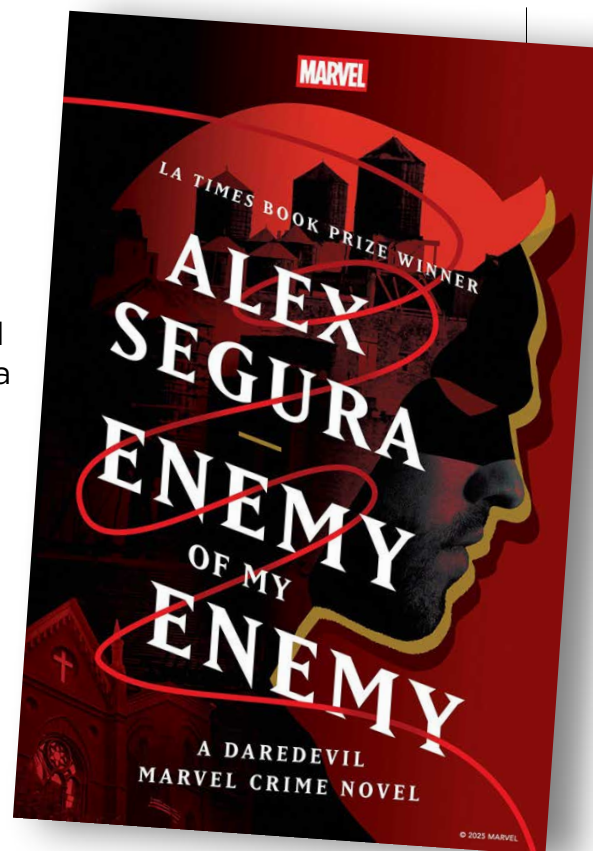
WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL

COINCIDING WITH *Daredevil: Born Again* season two, the Man Without Fear is headlining the second salvo from Penguin Random House's Marvel Crime line, following on from Lisa Jewell's 2025 Jessica Jones novel, *Breaking The Dark*. Written by Alex Segura - whose 2020 murder mystery *Secret Identity* and its 2024 sequel *Alter Ego* centred on a fictitious comics company - *Enemy Of My Enemy* is an ideal introduction for those who have only watched Matt Murdock on the small screen.

"With a book like this, featuring a character that readers know from multiple media such as comics and television, you want to give them an iconic version of the character," Segura tells Red Alert. "You want a familiar foundation which, for me, means Matt working as a lawyer who becomes Daredevil, who works with Foggy Nelson and who mourns past relationships and struggles with his mistakes."

The book begins with the Kingpin's murder, and sees Matt balancing defending main suspect Frank Castle (aka ruthless vigilante the Punisher) in his civilian guise as a leading defence attorney while simultaneously, as Daredevil, discovering the truth behind the New York crimelord's homicide. "I wanted the story to feel like a classic Daredevil story, so it'd be welcoming to longtime and new fans," continues Segura. "I also wanted it to feel fresh, so the plot lends itself to the latter."

Alongside well-known faces such as Electra and Ben Urich, as well as cameos



from Jessica Jones and New York mayor Luke Cage - setting up September's third Marvel Crime novel, SA Cosby's *Truth To Power* - Segura also includes a brand new character in Matt's girlfriend, NYPD Internal Affairs officer Melinda Torres. "I wanted a new love interest that would show Matt's strengths and flaws in equal measure," says Segura. "But also stand on her own as a compelling supporting cast member."

Considering the novel's gritty milieu, Segura places less emphasis on Hornhead's preternatural abilities, as he instead often relies upon his investigative instincts. "The benefit of Daredevil is that, aside from his heightened senses, his stories are very grounded, so they lend themselves to the crime genre," explains Segura. "I don't downplay his superpowers but I've tried to root them in the reality we've created. So while Daredevil hears the conversation happening two floors up, he still has to use his wits and strength to fight off that gang of ninjas as he's not invincible."

With the blurb proclaiming it as "the trial of the century", Frank Castle's court appearances evoke John Grisham's legal thrillers or Michael Connelly's *The Lincoln Lawyer*. "I wanted to give Matt a conflict that gets to the root of the character, which in my eyes is the idea of justice being blind - that it's fair for everyone no matter what," says Segura. "That's the core of the character and it's often proven to be untrue - even if Matt wants it to be true. So as much as he struggles with feelings of relief at Wilson Fisk's death, he also wants to make sure that Frank Castle gets a fair trial."

Enemy Of My Enemy: A Daredevil Marvel Crime Novel is out on 24 March.



“This series is very much about Bob’s difficulty dealing with hardship”

"I've written the Hulk as a very loyal and loving friend to Sentry, which is something Bob really needs in his life, although I can't tell you exactly what the Hulk's role is."

While the Sentry's inaugural series was initially promoted surreptitiously as a revival of a long lost '60s Marvel character, this four-parter doesn't lean so heavily into meta-fiction.

"This time around, it's very much focused on the weight of the emotions, as I loved the way Lewis Pullman played the character," explains Jenkins. "I had the chance to chat with Lewis at the *Thunderbolts** premiere and we shared some thoughts about Bob's vulnerability and the impact of his mental health issues. This series is very much about Bob's difficulty dealing with hardship. People might be angry with me because of the weight of the emotional stuff, but I think they'll forgive me in the end."

Observing that "some of the pages I've seen so far that he's drawn are a big reason why I think people will cry reading this series", Jenkins praises artist Christian Rosado. "He absolutely gets the Sentry," says Jenkins. "I'm really blown away by how he cares about the smaller, quieter moments as much as the bigger ones. To me, that's what makes good comics great: the juxtaposition of the more human moments against the superhero stuff. Each give the other meaning, and Christian cares about that." ●

The Sentry is out now.



IRINA PESCHAN

Matt Murdock is a perfect fit for writer Alex Segura.

► **SCI-FACT!** Alex Segura also chronicled Matt Murdock's five decades of comics recently, in November's *Daredevil: The Illustrated History*.

Zazie Beetz is about to pick up one hell of a cleaning bill.



DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Levelling Up

Director Kirill Sokolov on his unhinged action-horror-comedy **They Will Kill You** WORDS: MATT MAYTUM



IF YOU KNOW anything about the wild premise of *They Will Kill You* – in which a woman (Zazie Beetz) takes a job as a maid in an exclusive Manhattan high-rise, only to discover it’s a temple to Satan and she’ll be its latest human sacrifice if she doesn’t fight her way out – it will come as a surprise to learn that it’s based on a true story. Sort of. Director and co-writer Kirill Sokolov tells Red Alert that the kernel of the idea comes from his own experience.

“My wife and I moved to a different city in Russia and we rented an apartment in a 17-floor, huge building with hundreds of apartments,” he recalls. The other residents were a close-knit community all aged over 60, and Sokolov and his wife felt excluded. “We started to make this running joke that probably this whole building belongs to a cult and at some point they will just come after us and probably sacrifice us. I started to move furniture and I found a hole in the wall to the next apartment, which was like, ‘Oh my

God, now it’s definitely a cult! They’re coming for us!’”

The Russian filmmaker is quick to assure us that it *wasn’t* actually a Satanic cult (in fact, all the residents had worked at a local factory and been given their apartments), but when he later came to LA, this story became the seed of a screenplay he’d write with co-writer Alex Litvak. If you’ve seen the blood-soaked trailer, you know to expect a crazy actioner pitched somewhere in the middle of a Venn diagram featuring *The Raid*, *Rosemary’s*

Baby and *Ready Or Not*, as Beetz’s Asia Reaves fights for her survival using every weapon at her disposal (as well as her prison-honed combat skills).

It required a lead actress willing to go all-in, someone who could handle the fight sequences *and* the genre blend of horror and comedy, and have a “really big heart inside, because some scenes would be surprisingly emotional”. That gave Sokolov a pretty short list to work from. “Zazie was just my dream cast, because she combines all that,” he explains. “She had amazing action pieces in *Deadpool 2* and *Bullet Train*, but at the same time, she’s the star of *Atlanta* and she’s an unbelievable dramatic actress, and she could be very funny.” She was also, he says, “an unbelievable worker... To make those movies is very challenging because it looks like fun, but actually, nobody laughs on the set!



Tom Felton as Satanic cult member Kevin, with friends.

so natural and so organic," he says. "And we tried to achieve it. So we did as much as possible practically on set and then you just end up with a lot of cleanups or compositing or just some makeup on top."

Sokolov says that he drew inspiration from all over the place. "This movie is very postmodern and it's a genre mash-up, and you will see that it has influences from all around the world: it has spaghetti western elements in it, Hong Kong action movies, Japanese samurai elements, Sam Raimi wild horror-comedy elements in it," he says. "It definitely has a kind of Tarantino approach in terms of working with reference and using this postmodern language."

“It looks like fun, but actually, nobody laughs on the set!”

Beyond simply mixing up genres, Sokolov hopes to surprise audiences on an emotional level, too. "They start and they laugh, and then suddenly they become sad and then suddenly they become terrified and then they laugh again and they never know what's coming next. That's really cool, because now everyone is very experienced and you need to surprise [them] more..."

They Will Kill You is in cinemas from 27 March.

It's really hard work. A lot of bruises and scratches and sweat and long days..."

Among the film's other left field casting choices are the likes of Patricia Arquette, Tom Felton and Heather Graham, playing against type. "I followed the same approach with my previous movies. I felt it's always interesting when you take an actor who is associated with one type of movie and suddenly you put them in another type of movie and that suddenly gives you surprising depths. You have fun and you build up something very new and original together."

Due to the complexity of the stunt work, Sokolov storyboarded the entire film in advance and painstakingly followed those plans during the shoot in a custom-built set in Cape Town. As much as

possible was shot practically, including a sequence in which Asia takes on some of the building's hooded acolytes with a flaming axe. "I'm a huge fan of [90s movies], which in a way had the best combination of a practical effect with some CG on top, but it's mixed so that everything looks



Beetz as Asia, moving from one axe-cident to the next.



Asia's high-rise of hell is not for the faint of heart.

SCI-FACT! "The whole visual idea for the entire building is Dante's *Inferno*," explains Sokolov. "Every floor imitates a circle of Hell."



Chase Infiniti (second from right) is June's kid Agnes.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Blessed Be The Fruit

The Handmaid's Tale gets a sequel series as Margaret Atwood's Gilead is revisited in **The Testaments**

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

➔ IN 2017, SHOWRUNNER/CREATOR Bruce Miller (*The 100*) brought his adaptation of author Margaret Atwood's seminal dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* to television, and it freaked audiences out. Its near-future depiction of the totalitarian takeover of America by religious zealots felt a little too applicable for our times, and continues to do so. Over six seasons, the show followed the brutal subjugation of a so-called Handmaid called June (Elisabeth Moss) who's imprisoned under the government of Gilead, then eventually rebels and escapes.

During the series' run, Atwood was so impressed by Miller's cast that she wrote a

Booker Prize-winning sequel (published in 2019) called *The Testaments*. The prose is told from three points of view, including two girls being brought up in Gilead (Agnes and Daisy), and the fanatical supervisor of Handmaids, Aunt Lydia.

Seeing an opportunity to continue Atwood's world in series form, Miller also adapted *The Testaments*, setting it three years after the events of his original series. Miller tells Red Alert that he did have a serious think about continuing with such heavy material, but in the end, *The Testaments* was simply too good to pass up.

"First of all, the world is incredibly rich, and I feel very, very comfortable going on and having interesting stories to tell," Miller says. "Margaret is a spectacular plotter in a very interesting way, and I find that somehow I seem to be able to fit puzzle pieces into her plot that don't make her plot seem crazy but actually complement it. It is like collaborating with her from a distance, and it's been a wonderful collaboration."

The series opens on Agnes (Chase Infiniti), who doesn't know she is June's daughter, kidnapped by the forces of Gilead. She is on the cusp of puberty and fully indoctrinated into the submissive female culture around her. At her all-girls school, Aunt Lydia (the returning Ann Dowd) collects runaways, known as Pearls, and asks Agnes to take Daisy (Lucy Halliday) under her wing.

"To start with Agnes, I really feel like, from the heart and soul of *Handmaid's*, that's the person we're connected to most through June, because that was really the object of her thoughts for 10 years," he says of June's desperate search for the lost daughter

The young Pearls act as Gilead's missionaries.



Ann Dowd returns as the formidable Aunt Lydia.



Chelster Hall in Oakville, Ontario was a key location.



she named Hannah. “And now this [girl] is here.”

Unlike the previous series, *The Testaments* is focused on what it means to be a girl in this society, because Agnes is complicit in her obedience but also tempted to break the rules. “It’s a coming-of-age thriller,” Miller says of this show’s structure. “Anything in Gilead is a thriller, because you don’t know what’s going to happen, and the environment is so dangerous. There are mortal stakes to coming of age in Gilead for a young woman, which is fortunate as it’s what makes the show strangely excellent to adapt and really dramatic to watch. These girls are realising the dangerous waters they’re in, figuring out how to survive and rise above, and eventually overcome completely and take down Gilead.”

Like Miller, Dowd agreed to continue to *The Testaments* because Atwood revisited Lydia due to the actress’s award-winning performance in *Handmaid’s*. “Ann had

“Margaret is a spectacular plotter in a very interesting way”

conversations with Margaret, who laid out this part of [Lydia’s] journey,” Miller explains. “She got her head round it a lot earlier than anybody else did. She was able to incorporate it and guide her *Handmaid’s* character towards [this]. We do have a voiceover from Lydia later on, and we have voiceover from Daisy later, too.”

Another piece of casting information Miller shares is that during auditioning, he watched episodes of Infiniti’s work in the series *Presumed Innocent*, which also stars O-T Fagbenle – who played June’s husband Luke in *Handmaid’s*.

“[Hannah] wasn’t biracial in the book. She was just biracial because of O-T,” Miller says

of the actor’s impact on the original casting brief. “So, strangely, O-T called me and said, ‘You’re seeing Chase and I think she’s wonderful.’ We had a long conversation about her as a woman and as an actor. At the end of it, I was thinking, ‘He’s choosing his own daughter.’ It’s amazing. Casting her was fantastic.”

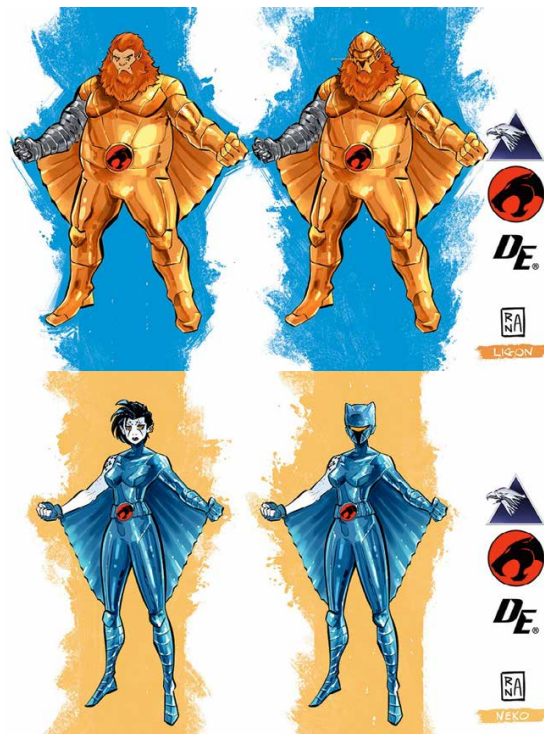
Asked if he sees *The Testaments* having the staying power of the original series, Miller says, “We didn’t really talk about a future beyond this season. The way that I think about it is – and with *Handmaid’s*, I did this, too – you don’t want to get involved in a project at all if you can’t think of 200 episodes. My sense is that Agnes and Daisy are fascinating, and I could go on with this for a very, very long time, even after Gilead falls.”

The Testaments is on Hulu in the US and Disney+ internationally from 8 April.

SCI-FACT! Ann Dowd was also one of the performers of the audiobook of *The Testaments*, released at the same time as the book.

► **SCI-FACT!** The only previous confirmed crossover was when *SilverHawks* villain Mon*Star appeared in the 2011 *ThunderCats* reboot.

Declan Shalvey cover art for *Mumm-Ra: The Ever-Living*.



WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Cat Fight

ThunderCats and **SilverHawks** meet for the first time in a historic comics crossover WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

► DEBUTING IN 1985 AND 1986 respectively, Warner animation series *ThunderCats* and *SilverHawks* are generally considered to exist in the same shared universe. However, they actually only met for the first time last year in the pages of

issue 10 of tie-in comic *ThunderCats: Lost*. Now publishers Dynamite Entertainment are bringing the two spacefaring teams together in an ambitious crossover, beginning in prelude issue *Road To War* before spanning a trio of interconnecting five-parters.

“We planted the seeds when the SilverHawk Flashback appears and takes the *ThunderCats: Lost* team of Pumyra, Lynx-O, Ligon and Neko into the future to help prevent a war that would lead to their own extinction,” explains *Road To War* writer Ed Brisson, who partners artist Vincenzo Federici on *ThunderHawks*, which spins out of the recent *ThunderCats: Lost In Time* one-shot. “I believe that’s the first

time that we have the *ThunderCats* and a *SilverHawk* interacting throughout the entire history of either franchise. The *Lost* team know a war is coming, but neither the mainline *ThunderCats* nor *SilverHawks* have any clue, and when they find out, it’s going to be too late.”

“A crossover of some kind has been inevitable and eagle-eyed *ThunderCats* readers will have spotted small Easter eggs pointing to some connectivity with *SilverHawks*, teasing an eventual meeting,”

adds Declan Shalvey. After scripting the *ThunderCats* core book, Shalvey is now writing and illustrating the flagship *ThunderCats X SilverHawks* title, in addition to collaborating with *ThunderCats: Lost* artist Rapha Lobosco on *Mumm-Ra: The Ever-Living*, which he describes as a little different. “It sits in the middle as its own origin story for Mumm-Ra, which will be imperative for what happens post-crossover,” he continues. “Rapha did some top notch superhero storytelling on *ThunderCats: Lost*, but this book pushes him into more horror vibes.”

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Out Of Patience

After the TV show's final season, it's now the end for the **Resident Alien** comic WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL



Designs for Ligon, Pumyra, Neko and Lynx-0.

Mentored by the veteran Quicksilver, rookie recruit Chromium is introduced into the ranks of the SilverHawks. “The emphasis in *ThunderCats X SilverHawks* is on the two main teams,” says Shalvey. “But there are some surprises along the way, as well as some new characters and some new spins on previously known characters.”

First introduced in *ThunderCats: Lost*, hot-headed warrior Neko plays a significant role in *ThunderHawks*. “She’s the raging fist of the team,” says Brisson. “While we’re focusing on the entire team, a big part of it is her struggle over the ThunderCats’ complicity with the events that led to this dark future and her own feelings of where she truly belongs.”

Running from April to August, *ThunderCats X SilverHawks* opens with ThunderCat Panthro launching a satellite high above his adoptive home planet of Third Earth, detecting a suspicious anomaly, which attracts the SilverHawks’ attention.

“We’ve put a lot of work into making sure this thing works,” adds Brisson. “It’s going to have an immense impact on the current status quo and the ripples will be felt for the foreseeable future in both *ThunderCats* and *SilverHawks*. It’s going to break allegiances and leave us with some compelling storylines to explore in the aftermath. As for who is behind it, no spoilers – but it’s probably not who or what you think it is.”

ThunderCats X SilverHawks: Road To War is out now. *ThunderCats X SilverHawks* is out on 8 April. *Mumm-Ra: The Ever-Living* is out on 15 April. *ThunderHawks* is out on 22 April.

JUST AS *RESIDENT ALIEN* CAME TO a conclusion on the small screen last year, Peter Hogan and Steve Parkhouse are now bringing their Dark Horse comic series to a close with a special one-shot. While Hogan insists that there has never been any form of grand plan, *One More For The Road* follows on from 2025’s ninth volume *The Book Of Changes*, which in turn was preceded by *The Book Of Love* and *The Book Of Life*.

“The end of book six could have been the ending,” he reveals, referring to 2020’s *Your Ride’s Here*. “But then the TV show happened, which bought us some more time to explore stuff readers really wanted to see, such as Harry and Asta’s relationship. Their having a child affected the whole world and brought Harry’s people into play. From there on, you can kind of see what the future might hold for Earth, so this one-shot is more like a coda to all that.”

Harry and Asta’s burgeoning romance and the birth of their hybrid human/alien daughter Clover is a significant divergence from the Syfy production, which the writer occasionally cameoed in as federal agent Mr Hogan. “The comic and the television series have always been very different to each other,” continues Hogan. “But coincidentally, the TV show came to an end just as I was wrapping up the book as well. If we’d gone on longer, it would have turned into a very different kind of book.”

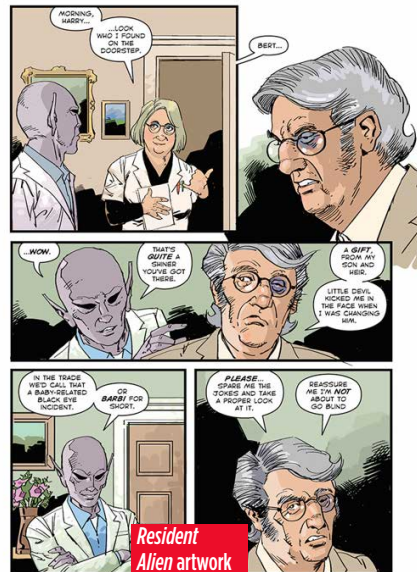
With the 32-pager balancing the efforts of extraterrestrial representatives from Harry’s native planet to unite Earth’s various

nations in the Circle of Worlds with his increasingly frantic attempts to conceal his true identity in his home town of Patience, most of *Resident Alien*’s supporting characters get the chance to take a final bow. “We haven’t managed to squeeze in everybody but the core cast are all there,” teases Hogan. “Right from the start of the comic, Harry and his people have been telling us what a dangerous place Earth is and what terrible things would happen to Harry if he got caught, so we’re finally showing that side of things. We’re going out with a bang!”

Recalling that “this all started because Steve wanted to do a story about aliens,” Hogan has enjoyed collaborating with artist Parkhouse. “Mainly this is a story about people, and Steve does people better than almost anybody,” he says. “Sometimes he’d get fed up with me making him draw rooms and offices, so we’d head outside and he’d draw amazing scenes of nature.”

While *One For The Road* is the last *Resident Alien* for now, Hogan doesn’t rule out continuing Harry’s Earthbound adventures at some future point. “There’s a chance the TV show might return in a couple of years as a miniseries or a movie,” he reveals. “So if Dark Horse suddenly wanted me to come up with another series, I’m sure I could. On the other hand, if that’s it and we’re completely done then I’m very, very proud of what we’ve achieved.”

Resident Alien: One More For The Road is out on 15 April.



Resident Alien artwork by Steve Parkhouse.

► **SCI-FACT!** Hogan initially wrote “a very pastoral, happy ending” for *Resident Alien*, but changed direction because it was too dull.



From left: Tung, Pedretti, Shipp and Reinhart.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Witch, Please

Retail's a killer in **Forbidden Fruits** WORDS: ROBBIE DUNLOP

➔ SOCIAL MEDIA HAS developed a serious sweet tooth for *Forbidden Fruits*. In the first 24 hours after its online debut, the trailer for Shudder's candy-coloured horror-comedy – about a “witchy femme cult” operating after hours from a mall's clothing boutique – amassed more than half a million likes on Instagram alone. The film's official account now boasts 50,000 followers. “I hope it translates to ticket sales,” laughs director and co-writer Meredith Alloway, speaking to *Red Alert*. It's an impressive response for an original project, though the cast list goes some way towards explaining the buzz. Victoria Pedretti, Lili Reinhart, Alexandra

Shipp, Lola Tung and Gabrielle Union have all starred in some of the most popular young adult series of recent years, while influencer Emma Chamberlain remains a formidable online presence, six years after being named one of *Time's* 25 Most Influential People On The Internet. Together, they command an Instagram following of more than 70 million. “They're fancy girls,” Alloway says, “but they were so down to roll up their sleeves and work. We shot most of our days from 9pm to 9am, and by the time we wrapped, it was morning traffic and we were driving back into the city against it. The girls just killed it. They really dug into their characters

and were incredible on set – screaming at 4am! It takes a lot of diligence, and they absolutely showed up for that.” Adapted from Lily Houghton's play *Of The Women Came The Beginning Of Sin, And Through Her We All Die* (with Houghton co-writing the screenplay), *Forbidden Fruits* centres on Free Eden sales assistants Apple, Cherry and Fig, whose tightly-controlled sisterhood begins to unravel when a new store hire – former pretzel-stand worker Pumpkin – starts questioning their performative girlboss rule book. Think *The Craft* colliding with *Mean Girls* via a lurid '80s slasher. The director cites giallo classics *Blood And Black Lace* and *Deep*

Red as guiding lights. Early on, Alloway realised she needed a producer who truly understood the film's core themes. “We pitched the film to dozens of people,” she recalls. “People either got it, or they said, ‘What?’ We met with Diablo Cody and her producing partner, Mason Novick, and they just got it. They had questions and gave thoughts and notes that were already so in line with what we were trying to do.” Alloway and Houghton are longtime admirers of *Jennifer's Body*, which Cody scripted. “It's a film that exists in the same sort of landscape of satire and horror and complex female dynamics,” Alloway says, describing Cody – who also wrote the screenplay for *Juno* – as an “incredible mentor and guide” throughout the production process. Because the film centres so strongly on female relationships, the team made a conscious effort to bring in “women-identifying and queer” collaborators. “This is what the crux of the entire story



"In my mind, every single role is a lead," says Meredith.

The film's stellar cast serve up some killer looks.



“I want people to see it with friends and make it feel like an event”

the energy you need from the other.”

As the early reaction suggests, the ensemble has already drawn a notably youthful audience (“*Forbidden Fruits* will be my entire personality in March”, gushed one Insta-fan), even if Alloway insists the film is “for all ages”. “I want people to go and see it again and again with different friends that dress up and make it feel like an event,” she adds.

If audiences bite, the “witchy femme cult” could spread even further, as a mid-credits scene teases. “I would be interested to see what the world of *Forbidden Fruits* would look like in another state, in another country, because it would change the dynamic,” Alloway says.

The apple, it seems, may yet fall a little further from the tree. ●

Forbidden Fruits is in US cinemas from 27 March. A UK release date is TBC.

is,” the director explains. “It was important for that, and it was important for the vibe of the set.” She’s quick to add, however, that there was no intention of alienating anyone. “There were people like Mason [Novick], our producer, and Karim [Hussain], our DP, who also offered a male perspective,” she emphasises.

Alloway describes her characters as “existing in a literal cement block trying to plant a flower. These women are trying to help each other. This cult is not set out to harm anyone.”

She hopes audiences will draw their own conclusions from the film’s underlying ideas. “It’s kind

of metaphorical,” she says. “If I knew what it was about, I don’t know that I would ever make it. I kind of make it define what it’s about. I try not to be too prescriptive.”

In the spirit of *Carrie*, *Forbidden Fruits* builds to a series of outrageous deaths, largely achieved in-camera. “I grew up on Coppola’s *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* and *The Lost Boys*, films that have incredible, campy practical effects,” Alloway says. “We looked at those movies and went, ‘Okay, well, obviously we want to modernise things.’ We didn’t want it to look super cheesy, but I did want it to feel visceral.”

Maintaining the tonal balance meant walking a fine line.

“*American Psycho* does it really well. There’s gore, but it’s so absurd that you can’t help but laugh. It’s horror satire. I was like, ‘Let’s stay in that landscape when it comes to the effects.’ It should always be fun.”

For Alloway, “The casting process was an embarrassment of riches. Every single person I’m such a fan of,” she enthuses. “In my mind, every single role is a lead. If Apple’s energy tips the scale in this direction, that affects Cherry’s energy. It was very much a seesaw effect, you cast one person and it determines

► **SCI-FACT!** In the original stage production, the lead characters were named after flowers rather than fruits.

► **SCI-FACT!** Kirby created *Eternals* (along with *Devil Dinosaur* and *Machine Man*) after returning to Marvel after a five-year spell at DC.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

New Gods

Marvel celebrates 50 years of Jack Kirby's **Eternals** with a new one-shot special

WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL

➔ RALPH MACCHIO ONCE controversially (and unsuccessfully) suggested in a letters column that the Eternals should exist in an alternate timeline after the godlike superhumans' cosmic adventures first appeared in 1976, in order to give writer/artist Jack Kirby's imagination "free rein". Now, five decades later, the former Marvel Comics Executive Editor and artist Michael Cho are chronicling the origin of Deviant Ransak the Reject – a member of the Eternals' monstrous adversaries – as part of a new one-shot commemorating Homo Immortalis' 50th anniversary.

"I've always had a special love for the Eternals, Deviants and [both groups' alien creators] Celestials," says Macchio. "They popped up at Marvel from Jack Kirby's brilliant brain just a few months before I began my 35-year stint as an editor."

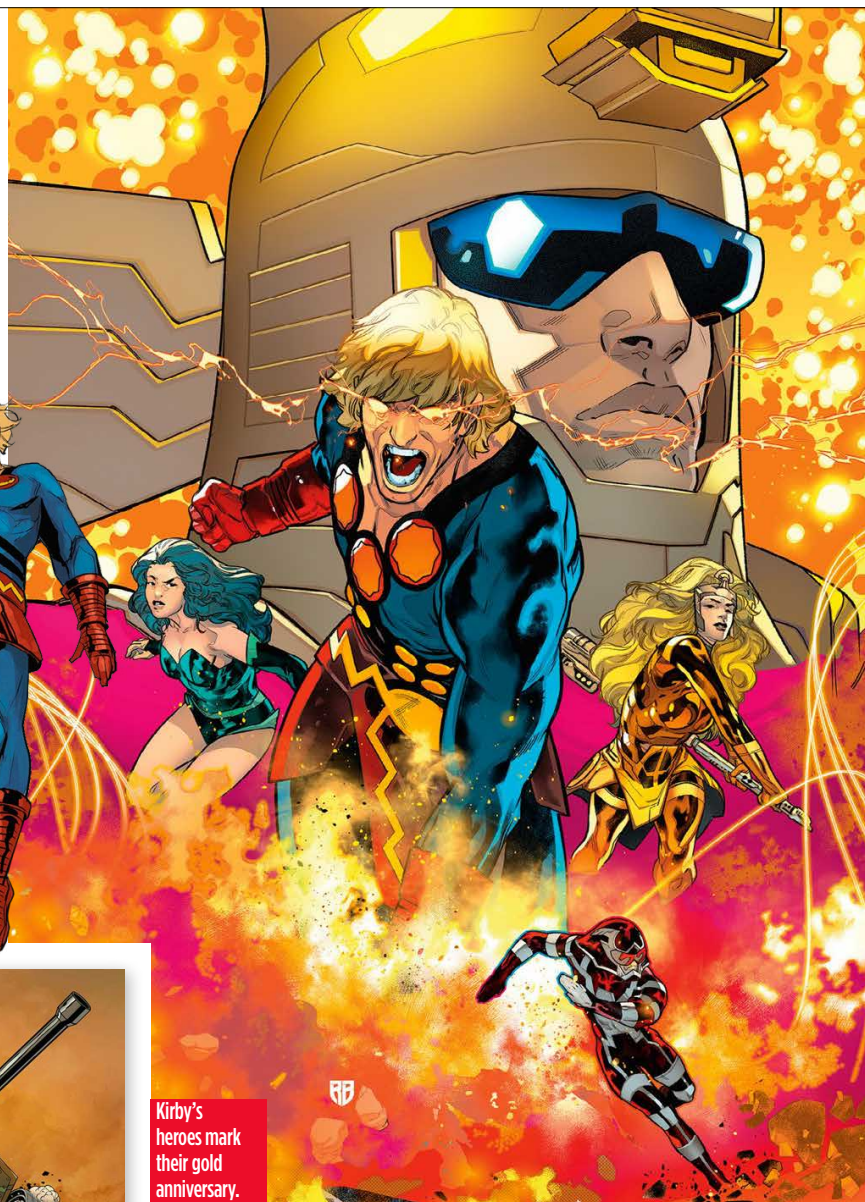
According to Macchio, "their world is open to endless possibilities for stories both contemporary and historical." Ethan S Parker and Griffin Sheridan, along with artists Dale Eaglesham and Phil Noto, jump between the present day and World War II as they partner the Eternals' leader Ikaris with another Kirby creation, Captain America.

"Our story showcases their first meeting and also how their relationship has evolved over the years," explains Parker. "These two immortal beings can both be tied directly into the history of any other Marvel hero, and we're celebrating the pasts of these two soldiers while also examining what it's like for them to still exist and operate in 2026. Cap and Ikaris couldn't be more different, but they're both disillusioned by modern times in many of the same ways that we all are, and they're needed now more than ever."



The new one-shot sees Ikaris and Cap team up.

himself as a "maximalist," Fall Out Boy vocalist/rhythm guitarist Patrick Stump believes that his preference for making "big, loud, massive music" is indirectly influenced by Kirby's similar artistic approach. "My natural impulse is to make everything a wall of sound, and in a way that feels inspired by how Kirby



Kirby's heroes mark their gold anniversary.

"Steve Rogers is the perfect character to put the Eternals into perspective," adds Sheridan. "As for what the story means for the future, Cap has some parting advice for Ike that you'll have to discover for yourself."

Describing himself as a "maximalist," Fall Out Boy vocalist/rhythm guitarist Patrick Stump believes that his preference for making "big, loud, massive music" is indirectly influenced by Kirby's similar artistic approach. "My natural impulse is to make everything a wall of sound, and in a way that feels inspired by how Kirby

drew with just so much detail," he explains. "He always went all-out with all those mysterious doo-dads resting on a villain's desk, or the ornate details on a spaceship's wall."

In his first Marvel script, Stump and artist Domenico Carbone introduce a previously unseen Lost Eternal, drawing on the same science fiction and mythology that inspired Kirby. "Everything from the influence that Erich von Däniken's *Chariots Of The Gods?* had on Eternals to Greek and Roman mythology and the wholly unique Kirbyisms that are already in the room when you start writing," says Stump. "I did tons of research, and hopefully even though my story is a brief 'get to know this character', you'll get little blips of that. If Marvel ever want me to write more for this character, I have so much backstory ready to be teased out!" ●

Eternals 50th Anniversary Special is out on 1 April.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

➔ BEST KNOWN FOR ASSEMBLING the famous second iteration of *Guardians Of The Galaxy*, Dan Abnett admits he has “a rep for sci-fi or cosmic stories”. Now, after recently returning to Marvel’s interstellar super-team with *Imperial Guardians*, he’s assuming the scripting reins of a space hero with a much longer history in Mad Cave’s *Flash Gordon* monthly, beginning with a special zero issue before continuing with issue 16 in May.

“The unique thing here is Flash Gordon’s legacy, the feeling of a long and glorious tradition of escapades,” says Abnett, who at a young age discovered collections of Alex Raymond’s classic comics – first syndicated by King Features as a Sunday newspaper strip in 1934 – before watching BBC repeats of a ‘30s black-and-white serial, and eventually “the delightfully wild” 1980 film.

“Flash Gordon is an iconic character, up there with James Bond, Sherlock Holmes and Tarzan,” he continues.

“This is less space opera and more ‘planet story’ in the science fiction definition of that subgenre. Daring and dashing high adventure that happens to be in space and with rocket ships. I don’t want it to feel dated and old-fashioned but I do want it to maintain that sense of rip-roaring thrills and old-school planetary romance.”

While he wanted “to tell a story that acknowledges the legacy of all past stories as well as the current run up to the point where I take over”, Abnett is mostly focusing on the core trio of Flash, his girlfriend and fellow space traveller Dale Arden, and leading scientist Dr Hans Zarkov. “Despite the adventure and the exotic alien threats, this book is character-driven,” he explains. “It’s all about their interactions and the three key supporting characters I’ve introduced to challenge and stress-test that dynamic. Though the story is serious, there are some playful character moments so the character ‘acting’ is crucial, which is

Star Trekker

Space is the final frontier as Dan Abnett takes over **Flash Gordon**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

why we’re so lucky to have such an expressive artist as Manuel Garcia.”

With arch-villain Ming the Merciless’s home planet Mongo and “all the wonderful supporting characters” sent into another

dimension by outgoing writer Jeremy Adams, Abnett is introducing a new threat. “There’ll also be some brand-new alien cultures to meet and contend with, and, of course, the world’s at stake,” he teases. “Flash, Dale and Zarkov are the only ones with the experience to know when it’s time to fight and when it’s time to talk, but maybe it isn’t *Flash Gordon* if we don’t meet a few familiar faces.”

Set a few months after the previous storyline, Abnett is returning Flash to outer space. “Flash’s exploits over the years – all about the courage of a plucky amateur in the right place at the right time – have shown the Earth that space is full of untold wonders and menaces that they need saving from. So an official space agency has been formed to look after Earth’s security, which may mean that adventurers like Flash are out of a job...”

Flash Gordon issues 0 and 16 are out on 8 and 16 April.

Dan Abnett takes the reins from Jeremy Adams.



Both old and new characters make an appearance.



➔ SCI-FACT! Out 29 April, *Flash Gordon Quarterly* includes a story by Paul Cornell, Lizbeth Myles and George Jeanty, with a prehistoric Flash.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Parklife

Step into some classic franchises at Universal's **Fan Fest Nights**

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

FOLLOWING THE runaway success of its inaugural year, Fan Fest Nights returns to Universal Studios Hollywood this April. The immersive after-hours event brings together a number of colossal players across sci-fi, fantasy, anime and gaming, taking over the entire theme park.

Stephen Siercks, senior director of entertainment production and executive producer of Fan Fest Nights at Universal Studios Hollywood, describes it as “the ultimate fan event”.

“Themed entertainment has really been continuing to define the word immersive,” he tells Red Alert, “and certainly an event like Fan Fest Nights takes that to the next level by the way in which we’re able to drop our guests into the middle of these environments and truly let them explore them.”

Brought to you by the creators of Halloween Horror Nights – their annual event, celebrating 35 years this October (“Much like HHN, it takes over a year to develop”) – it was this that

spawned the idea of doing something similar for fans of other genres. So it’s no surprise that something spooky crossed over...

Scooby-Doo! Meets The Universal Monsters: Mystery On The Backlot is not only bringing together two iconic brands, it’s offering a rare look into movie history.

“We’ve been able to take it up a notch by being able to bring our guests back to the backlot this year [following *Back To The Future* in 2025],” Siercks says. “We’re allowing them to get off the tram, which is a very unique experience, and be able to explore Little

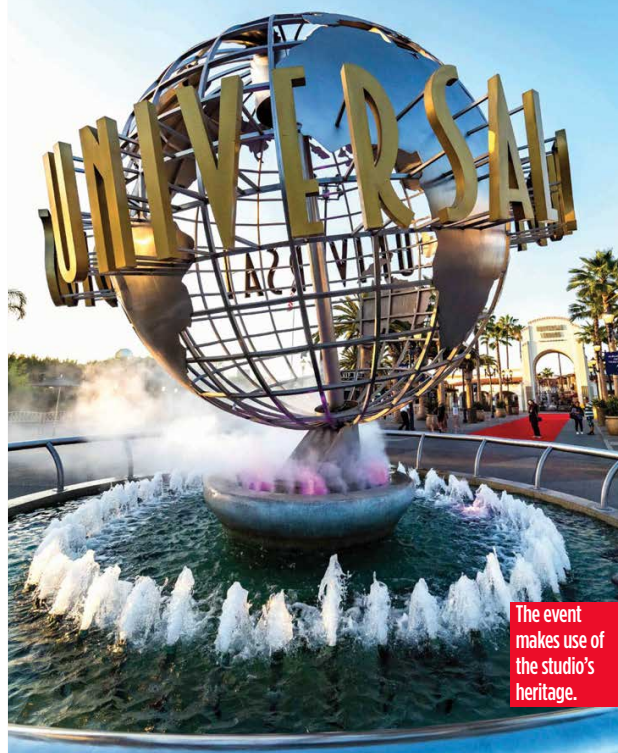
“It’s part exploration, part adventure, part interactivity”

Europe. Why that’s so iconic and authentic to this experience is that Little Europe is the birthplace of the Universal Monsters. It’s where many of the original monster movies were filmed here at Universal Studios.”

Guests will be able to “live a real-life *Scooby-Doo* episode in real time”, says Siercks. “A movie production has gone wrong and the Universal Monsters have been unleashed. Scooby and the gang have enlisted us to help solve the mystery. It’s part exploration, part adventure, part interactivity. You’re solving clues to see if you can find out who is the culprit.

At the very end, just like every *Scooby-Doo* episode, there’s that moment where there’s the unmasking of the villain.”

Siercks promises appearances from Frankenstein’s monster, Dracula, the Bride of



The event makes use of the studio’s heritage.

New additions to Super Nintendo’s Yoshi franchise.



Frankenstein, and the Wolf Man. “But you’ll also get a chance to experience some of the other monsters as well through different Easter eggs that are placed throughout the experience. So it’s further promoting that exploration – this is not linear; you get to choose your own adventure down there and really explore the backlot in a way that we have not been able to allow guests to before down at Little Europe.”

And yes, “There will definitely be Scooby Snacks along the way,” Siercks laughs.

Returning franchises this year include *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Super Nintendo World*, *One Piece* and *Harry Potter*.

“*Dungeon & Dragons: Secrets Of Waterdeep* really was a fan favourite. We heard loud and clear that guests want to experience it again,” says Siercks, noting that this year the adventure will be enhanced, but that fans will still come face to face with Xanathar the beholder, brought to life by Jim Henson’s Creature Shop.

“That’s what we call a story-based pulsed attraction, meaning

SCOOBY DOO: HANNA-BARBERA PRODUCTIONS/ALBUM/ALAMY.



Roll the dice and meet the beholder Xanathar.

that we're bringing small groups of people through this experience and telling a story as you go," he explains. "You go on an epic quest in search of the Dragonstaff, joined by two adventurers, Throckery and Evalina. Those two stay with you throughout your journey so you get to know the characters that much more. You get to understand the story that much more. It really allows us to create that deeper level of immersion."

Super Nintendo World: Yoshi's Colourful Celebration will add five different coloured Yoshi characters to proceedings, while *The Wizarding World Of Harry Potter* celebrates its 10th anniversary at Universal with *Forbidden Forest: Search For*

The Hippogriff, where a professor from Hogwarts will guide you on a journey to meet different magical creatures.

"No two experiences are the same, meaning that they might have the same type of engagement, but the way in which the story is told or the way in which the immersion is created will be vastly different."

One Piece, which was an interactive street zone in 2025, has also grown. Siercks says that the popularity of the franchise – and anime as a whole – led to them creating *One Piece: The Grand Pirate Show* in their *Waterworld* venue this year. He promises plenty of high-flying stunts and pyrotechnics.

"It's a great way of levelling up what we were able to introduce last year with *One Piece*."

With more still to be revealed for this year's line-up, Siercks says they plan for Fan Fest Nights to "continue growing and expanding over the years". As for the possibility of the event coming to other Universal Parks around the world, he teases: "We're certainly looking forward to how it can continue evolving into the future..." ●

Universal Fan Fest Nights is taking place at Universal Studios Hollywood on select nights from 23 April to 16 May. Visit universalstudioshollywood.com for tickets and more details.



The Scooby gang are ready for you to join an adventure.

SCI-FACT! Movies filmed at Little Europe include *Dracula* (1931), *Frankenstein* (1931), *The Bride Of Frankenstein* (1935), and *The Wolf Man* (1941).

Odessa A'zion voices Nikki (centre) in the spin-off series



➔ *Marty Supreme's* Odessa A'zion will voice Nikki Baxter in animated spin-off **Stranger Things: Tales From '85**.

➔ Mike Flanagan has yet another Stephen King project on the go. He's set to write and direct a new take on creature-infested novella **The Mist**, previously brought to the big screen by Frank Darabont in 2007.

➔ *Final Destination: Bloodlines* team Zach Lipovsky and Adam B Stein are to direct an animated **Venom** movie.

➔ Screenwriter Max Landis is working on a treatment for a new instalment of **GI Joe** – and so, it

➔ Ryan Coogler's reboot of **The X-Files** has been greenlit for a pilot. *The Sinners* and *Black Panther* supremo writes and directs, while *The Copenhagen Test's* Jennifer Yale serves as showrunner. Danielle Deadwyler will play one of the truth-chasing Feds dusting down the files.

seems, is *The Righteous Gemstones'* Danny McBride...

➔ *Annabelle: Creation's* David F Sandberg is attached to direct supermarket horror **A Little Slice Of Hell**, based on the short story by John Goodrich. That's one very unexpected item in the bagging area...

➔ *Rebel Moon's* Ed Skrein is the villainous Baldur in Prime Video's **God Of War** series.

➔ **Funko Collectibles** have signed a deal to build "scalable franchises that can live across screens, platforms and other consumer touchpoints". Ah, the magic of Hollywood!

➔ *Barry's* Bill Hader will write, direct and star in upcoming horror feature **They Know**.



➔ Winona Ryder is joining **Wednesday** as a character named Tabitha. Other notable additions to the cast include Chris Sarandon and Noah Taylor as Balthazar and Cyrus.

➔ Brie Larson is set to star in **Skeletons**, produced by JJ Abrams and directed by *Strange Darling's* JT Mollner.

➔ McKenna Grace will play Daphne in Netflix's live-action **Scooby Doo** prequel series. She previously voiced the heroine in 2020 animated movie *Scoob!*.

➔ Kurt Vonnegut's 1952 novel **Player Piano** is heading to the screen. *The Rhythm Section's* Reed Morano will adapt the prescient tale about the rise of automation and its impact on human labour.

➔ Jared Harris has joined the cast of Martin Scorsese's **What Happens At Night**.

➔ 19 May 2028 will see Brendan Fraser and Rachel Weisz's characters reunite for a new entry in **The Mummy** franchise, the fourth in the series.

➔ Karen Gillan, Josh Hutcherson and Clive Owen have signed on for supernatural thriller **Blasphemous**, the directorial debut of Luke Piotrowski.

➔ Glen Powell will produce a **Texas Chain Saw Massacre** series for A24, with a new movie also in development.

➔ Laurence Fishburne and Chiwetel Ejiofor are the latest names aboard Mike Flanagan's next chapter of **The Exorcist**, said to be a brand new story in the Pazuzuverse. 🕸

DANIELLE DEADWYLER PORTRAIT © COREY NICKOLS/GETTY IMAGES FOR IMDB; WINONA RYDER PORTRAIT © MIKE MARSLAND/WIREIMAGE/GETTY; STRANGER THINGS: TALES FROM '85 © NETFLIX.

SCI-FACT! It was a boy in a school Diana Wynne Jones visited who suggested she write a book called *The Moving Castle*.

NEW AUTHOR

REBECCA TEMPLETON

MEET THE WRITER BEHIND 18TH-CENTURY SCOTLAND-SET FANTASY *LOCHBOUND*



AMANDA HALL PHOTOGRAPHY. ALL PERMISSIONS

Tell us about your protagonist - what's her story?

→ Iris is heartbroken, cursed to spend her nights wandering the shores of a Scottish village and her days as Moireach, a terrifying monster imprisoned in a loch. When bodies start appearing, the villagers summon a hunter to kill the monster they believe to be responsible. Iris must find a way to break her curse.

Did the book have any particular spark of inspiration?

→ *The Little Mermaid* by Hans Christian Andersen - my favourite childhood fairy tale.

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

→ It took almost a year from initial spark to fully-edited draft. I had a rough plan at the outset, but some of my favourite twists and turns surprised me along the way - which, for me, is one of the best parts of writing.

Did you have to do much in the way of research?

→ I read up on Scottish history and folklore, which was fascinating, particularly the stories of witchcraft, kelpies and the lore of the Seelie/Unseelie fairy courts.

Got any advice for SFX readers who are would-be authors?

→ Get it all down on the page, however rough and messy it might be. The magic happens in the editing process, and you can't edit a blank page!

Lochbound is out on 16 April, published by Sphere.



We Have The Power!

New movie, new toyline! In fact, there's more than one, as the existing *Masters Of The Universe* "Masterverse" range now becomes "Chronicles", continuing the collector-level detail with characters from the upcoming live-action film. There's also a "Core" line of movie figures, for general playability, coming soon. Visit mattel.com



King Of The Castle

To celebrate the 40th anniversary - no, we can't believe it either - of Diana Wynne Jones's *Howl's Moving Castle*, The Folio Society are releasing a strictly limited edition of the book, complete with a map, an exclusive new foreword by Jones's son, and artworks by Marie-Alice Harel. If you want to snap up one of the 500 copies, it'll set you back £475. Visit foliosociety.com

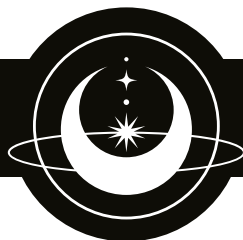


Gotta Catch 'Em All

Pokémon Day - yes, that's a thing - may have been and gone this year, but you can celebrate the lil' critters every day if they're on your shelf in connecting brick form. Yes, the first-ever Pokémon Lego sets are available now, and something tells us they won't be the last... Visit lego.com



THE FINAL



FRONTIER

ROB GRANT 1955–2026

Remembering the co-creator of *Red Dwarf*

WORDS: NICK SETCHFIELD



ROB GRANT PHOTOGRAPHED FOR SFX IN 2006 BY ROB SCOTT.

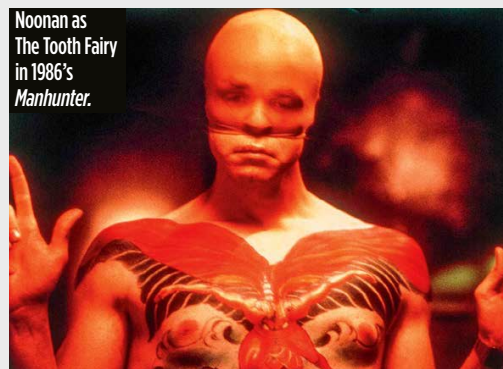
➔ “IT’S MY STYLE,” SAID ROB Grant in 2008, discussing the sharp, absurdist sense of humour that powered his career as a writer. “It’s the way I see the world.” It was the way he saw the universe, too.

Born in Salford, Grant grew up with a love of superheroes and science fiction. Winning a scholarship at the age of nine, he met fellow pupil and future creative partner Doug Naylor on his first day at Chetham’s Hospital School. The pair became fast friends and studied psychology together at Liverpool University, before pursuing work as comedy scriptwriters.

Selling sketches to radio and TV, the duo scored credits on everything from *The News Huddlines* to *Carrott’s Lib* and *Three Of A Kind*, a showcase for rising star Tracey Ullman. They created the radio shows *Cliché* and *Son Of Cliché*, introducing the continuing adventures of Dave Hollins: Space Cadet, last survivor of the human

race. Here was the conceptual seed of *Red Dwarf*, an interstellar sitcom as much inspired by *Steptoe And Son* as *Alien* and *Dark Star*. “We thought it was about time the working class had a shot in space,” said Grant. Initially rejected by the BBC – the pair jumped to ITV to oversee *Spitting Image* in its mid-’80s pomp – the show finally launched on BBC Two in February 1988 and became a cult hit. Grant would co-write three bestselling *Red Dwarf* novels before penning his own *Colony* (2000), *Incompetence* (2003) and *Fat* (2006).

Grant and Naylor split after 1993’s *Red Dwarf VI*, the latter taking custody of the series. In 2000, Grant wrote Sky One’s SF comedy *The Strangers* before forging a new writing partnership with Andrew Marshall, leading to *Quatermass* spoof *The Quanderhorn Xperimentations* for Radio 4 in 2018. The pair recently completed a new *Red Dwarf* prequel novel, *Titan*. ●



Noonan as The Tooth Fairy in 1986’s *Manhunter*.

PICTURELUX/THE HOLLYWOOD ARCHIVE/ALAMY

TOM NOONAN 1951–2026

☞ “I probably have a creepy kind of scary quality,” admitted imposing character actor Tom Noonan. “Otherwise I wouldn’t get jobs.”

Born in Greenwich, Connecticut, Noonan graduated from Yale’s acting school to begin his career off-Broadway. Moving from theatre to movies, he appeared in *Wolfen* (1981) before a memorably sadistic turn as serial killer Francis Dollarhyde, aka The Tooth Fairy, in *Manhunter* (1986). *The Monster Squad* (1987) cast him as Frankenstein’s Monster, while he was drug lord Cain in 1990’s *RoboCop 2*. Other genre film credits include *Last Action Hero* (1993) and Ti West horror *The House Of The Devil* (2009).

On TV, Noonan played child killer John Lee Roche in acclaimed *The X-Files* episode “Paper Hearts” – a role written for him – and had an 18-episode stint as the Pallid Man on *12 Monkeys*. An accomplished writer and director, his 1994 film *What Happened Was...* was honoured by the Sundance Film Festival.

DAN SIMMONS 1948–2026

☞ Born in Peoria, Illinois, Dan Simmons pursued writing while teaching full-time. Encouragement came from his wife, who gave him a refurbished typewriter on his thirtieth birthday, and friend and mentor Harlan Ellison, who Simmons met in a writers’ workshop.

Short story “The River Styx Runs Upstream” won a *Twilight Zone Magazine* competition in 1982, igniting his professional career. 1985’s horror novel *Song Of Kali* won the World Fantasy Award, while 1989’s *Hyperion* shifted to SF. Indebted to Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, this Hugo winner tells of pilgrims visiting the Time Tombs of the titular planet, and was followed by three more books in the Hyperion Cantos.

Leaving the world of education, Simmons established a run of smalltown horror tales with 1991’s *Summer Of Night*. 2007’s historical chiller *The Terror*, set around the doomed 1845 expedition to find the Northwest Passage, was adapted for television in 2018.

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THE BOYS

BACK IN TOWN

THE BOYS PREPARE FOR ONE FINAL FIGHT AGAINST HOMELANDER. ERIC KRIPKE AND HIS CAST TALK SFX THROUGH THE FIFTH SEASON

WORDS: JACK SHEPHERD







Butcher's beloved mutt, Terror, makes his return.

F

RIC KRIPKE wants to apologise. Last time we spoke, the

showrunner told *SFX* that he had no idea how many seasons *The Boys* would last. Then, just as our magazine went to press a few weeks later, Kripke released a statement saying that his satirical superhero series would end with its fifth season. Cue some disgruntled readers and one slightly miffed, misled writer.

"I'm sorry!" he says now with a laugh. "They have me under gag orders. I ultimately serve at the pleasure of massive corporate forces far more powerful than me, and I was told to keep

it under wraps until the final approvals came down. So my apologies!"

Water under the bridge, and in fairness to Kripke, he has a history of shows continuing much longer than originally intended – after all, *Supernatural* was also meant to last for five seasons, but managed to continue for 15. For *The Boys*, Kripke was set on five seasons from the start – he just hoped his Amazon overlords would agree with him.

"I kept saying to Amazon, 'This is going to be five,'" he says. "They let me finish season four, and it ends with the world exploding, right? There's really nowhere else to go except the finale. Some of the senior executives were like, 'Wait, do you really want to end it with season

five?' I'm like, 'I wasn't joking. And respectfully, you have no choice.' I mean, you cannot go back to the status quo after Homelander takes over the United States. So they're letting me end it on our terms."

ART IS POLITICAL

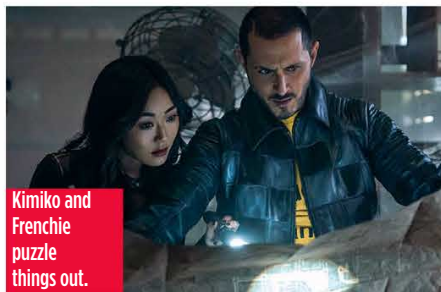
The world exploding is no understatement. The fourth season ended with The Boys captured by Vought's forces and put into imprisonment camps; Butcher (Karl Urban) going full-blown psycho, and the terrifyingly unhinged Homelander (Antony Starr) becoming America's de facto chief in command. Yet, thanks to *Gen V*, there's hope that things will get better, the spin-off's second



Starlight (left) has a tough time leading the resistance.



The odds certainly are stacked against them.



Kimiko and Frenchie puzzle things out.



Daveed Diggs makes his debut as Oh-Father.

“It’s Homelander’s world and, unfortunately, we’re all living in it”

right-wing, Christian podcast. The mixed response, however, has not made Kripke change anything about season five.

“We let the story drive where we were going, and we really tried to put the characters and their emotions first,” he says. “I mean, the show has a political bent. It always has. A new crop of people somehow suddenly realise it at the end of each season. The reaction of ‘Wait, this is woke garbage?’ has been happening since season one. This season, we take a lot of really good swings at how completely ineffectual the left is to deal with this particular right-wing threat that’s happening across the world. The left doesn’t emerge unscathed; how they completely roll over for things that they should be standing up for.”

“The thing that people say, which I take a certain amount of pride in, for Free Mags Check sastatus.com is that the show can be prescient. They’re really going to feel that this season, because even though we wrote it when we didn’t have a second Trump term, we tried to imagine what a curtailing of civil liberties and military forces in cities and grabbing people off the street would look like. Had we waited a few more months, we wouldn’t have had to imagine it; we would have seen it. Unfortunately, the world just keeps getting crazier, and we’re having a hard time keeping up.”

At the top of the show’s hierarchy of power is Homelander, who has gone from Vought

Continued on page 36...

season ending with Starlight (Erin Moriarty) and A-Train (Jessie T Usher) joining forces to recruit fellow Supes to their resistance.

Season five starts a year after season four ended, and six months after *Gen V*. “It’s just a totally transformed world. It’s Homelander’s world and, unfortunately, we’re all living in it,” Kripke says. “Starlight is mounting a desperate resistance, but The Boys are scattered. Frenchie, Mother’s Milk and Hughie have been captured. We talked a lot about the French Resistance and prison camp breaks. We were really working our way through that kind of season. I mean, there are not full battle scenes because we still don’t have *Game Of Thrones*’ budget, but there are a lot

of very direct confrontations; a lot of the people that you want to see smashing into each other smash into each other. I hope it’s cathartic and emotionally satisfying, but I’m a tiny bit terrified.”

He has reason to be scared. You can count on one hand the number of recent shows that have ended without causing mass hysteria online, and it’s not like last season didn’t have its detractors. In fact, the fourth season was the show’s most polarising to date, with many viewers saying the series had become “too political” as Homelander leveraged his powers over the now deceased Vice President Neuman, while Firecracker (Valorie Curry), a new member of the villainous Seven, ran a

VOUGHT RISING

COLBY MINIFIE TALKS ASHLEY'S NEW POWERS AND STICKING WITH HOMELANDER

How's Ashley dealing with her decision to stay with Vought rather than run like A-Train?

Since the beginning, she has been reckoning with how far she's willing to go to have power. She enjoys the position she's been put in, in terms of what it means for her life, but she has sold her soul to the devil. Vought is the world that she knows, and she knows how to survive there, even though she's pulling her hair out and not sleeping. She's willing to put up with that because it's the devil she knows. It's on some level comfortable for her.

How scared of Homelander is she this season?

The more power somebody gets, the scarier they become, and Homelander just continues to be more and more powerful.

“ Ashley's superpower has given her a bit of grit and about 1% stability ”

But Ashley shot V last season, and now she has a superpower. That's given her a bit of grit and about 1% stability. She's still dealing with somebody who is with a narcissist, who can kill her whenever he wants, and so she's constantly bowing to him. So she's just in a constant state of terror, but you can be adaptable in that state.

Having those powers must have made this season feel quite different for her.

I really can't say anything more about those powers, but there were moments filming this season where I looked back at where I started on this show as a recurring character that got fired and was always meant to be fired in season one, but was brought back, and now I am a superhero, and part of the Boys Cinematic Universe. It is such a cool thing.

She has also become quite the dominatrix. She was in a BDSM dungeon last season.

We continue to explore that this season. What was interesting to me about that was how Ashley needed to find a way to be in

control of something. And the great thing about the BDSM community is they communicate like crazy, exactly what your boundaries are. They're like, "You can touch my left foot, but not my right." That felt really good to Ashley, that level of communication and feeling control and feeling power.

Who does she have the most interesting dynamic with this season?

I would say with Daveed Diggs' character. There's some really interesting stuff that we get to explore there, and I have a lot of really fun stuff with Sage. She's one of my favourite characters on the show, because to have somebody who's the smartest person in the world be part of Homelander's regime is a fascinating thing. He's such a wild narcissist, to be surrounded by really, really smart people, it's a recipe for absolute chaos. Sage and Ashley have a lot of curious things to figure out with each other; they're the women behind the guy.

How emotional was it reading those last scripts?

There's a page-turning aspect where we're just so desperate to know what these writers have come up with. There is also a page-turning aspect of, "Oh my God, nobody is safe – am I next?" Whenever you see that log line in the script that says, "This section has only been sent to a few people, please do not share this information on the script." You're like, "Oh my God, what's happening?" But there's definitely a sad closure feeling, but also the great thing about this universe is that it keeps going. We've got *Gen V*. I can't wait to see what's going on with that. I am really excited about *Vought Rising*.

Were you happy with how it ended?

It was definitely surprising. I was excited, and it was satisfying to me. I was happy with how that whole thing ended, and I'm excited for people to see the finale. I remember reading it, feeling that it was heartbreaking. I was really moved. I hope people are happy. We're landing this massive, huge plane here, and I think the writers had a really, really hard job. I was really moved by what they did.



NEW TRACKS

JESSIE T USHER TALKS A-TRAIN LEAVING VOUGHT AND JOINING THE RESISTANCE

How is A-Train reckoning with turning on Vought?

He's in the most vulnerable, most dangerous place that he's ever been, and that's inclusive of the time that he spent directly under Homelander's watch. He has no allies. He's not really on the best of terms with The Boys. Essentially, he has made it known that he's not going to be a puppet anymore, and he's really just a one-man band.

We saw him in *Gen V* working with Annie/Starlight.

We see him in regular clothes, which was a very different thing for me. That was a big reveal that he and Annie had been working in cahoots, silently behind the scenes, and that he's joining that resistance team. He's just helping in whatever capacity he can.

His look this season is more in line with his *Gen V* look.

I felt like I was playing a different character. Once you take the suit off, you already feel different. But then, he's growing his hair out, he's got scrubby facial hair. Everything is different. The

sets were different, he's not at Vought. It's just very unfamiliar. It lent to his persona, and I just felt more human, no pun intended, but I did feel less super. He's been stripped of his title. He doesn't have that facade of strength. In season five, you see exactly who he is without all that nonsense, and it does entirely feel like a different character.

Who does he have the most interesting dynamic with this season?

Annie. We play on the history that you don't get a chance to see, we assume what that relationship has been like over the last year [between seasons]. We refer to things that we don't get a chance to actually see. We have so much unspoken history that we just have

“He's in the most vulnerable, most dangerous place that he's ever been”

to play scene to scene. We've been doing a lot in secret for a long time, which you see some of in *Gen V*. Everyone else is looking at us confused, like, “What the hell? We didn't know you guys even liked each other, let alone have been working in cahoots!”

How was it reading those scripts, knowing they would be the last script for the main *Boys* series you would ever read?

It was hard. Tough. You're reading page to page, looking for lines and thinking, “The one that I just read could be the very last line that I will ever say as A-Train.” It's a very unsettling feeling. We love these characters. You grow closer to them. You learn a lot about yourself through playing them, especially because they deal with such real, grounded issues. It just becomes a very personal experience. I feel A-Train's story transcended far beyond where I thought he was going to go. The fact that he's been able to stay relevant and important and real has been a very pleasurable experience. It's been an honour to be a part of a

show where the writers cared so much about this character and about his story.

Were you satisfied with how things ended for A-Train?

I think it was at the end of season four, when A-Train was making a stance. I figured that he was going to be leaving Vought, and there was no real safe place for him to turn. I reached out to Eric, and I just wanted to have a conversation with him. I ask him, “What's the plan?” And he literally said to me, “Honestly, we don't know.” We were all perplexed, like, “Oh shit, he's backed himself into a corner with no way out!” It was like, “We'll deal with that next year.” It was a crazy time, man. But to be able to wrap the show up with the people that were there from the very beginning, the way that we intended to, was an incredible experience and a whirlwind of emotions. I still don't know if I have fully let go of A-Train yet. It is hard to do. But am I satisfied with the way that it ends? Absolutely. I'm very happy with the big bang that is season five.



THE BOYS





Homelander with freshly unfrozen 'dad' Soldier Boy.



It looks like *The Boys* are back for one last showdown.

puppet to running the United States. “We really make the point of the more powerful he becomes, the less happy he becomes,” says Kripke. “He can’t understand why. He assumes that he just needs to get a little more powerful. We have a guy who the president answers to, and he finds himself more miserable than ever. He’s like, ‘Okay, what are the next steps that can finally make me happy?’ We explore those steps in season five, and they’re batshit.”

NO-ONE IS SAFE

As always, Butcher plays the yin to Homelander’s yang. Having ripped VP Neuman in half with his tendril-like powers, Butcher’s on a one-man mission to destroy Homelander and all he stands for. “The thing I love about Butcher’s story is it’s about how vengeance and violence, even if done for a just cause, is ultimately toxic and poisons your soul,” Kripke says. “The big turning point for Butcher at the end of season four was that he committed to the fact that he’s a monster. He’s given up any semblance of humanity. The angel on his shoulder, which was represented by [the hallucinogenic ghost of his deceased wife] Becca, is gone. He’s committed to being a true monster in order to achieve his goals.

“The question for this season is, as scary as Butcher is, and as driven and bloodthirsty as he is, can Hughie and the others rekindle some spark of humanity in this guy? They have their work cut out for them. Butcher and Homelander veer between this thing of, are they monsters, or are they human? We just put them on different parts of that spectrum.”

We already have an inkling as to where Butcher’s story may end. Garth Ennis and Darick Robertson’s comic series, on which the show is based, but doesn’t adapt frame-



Firecracker and Ashley continue to calculate.

frame, concluded in a particularly grim way. Kripke said just after season four’s release that his show has “elements inspired by that, but it’s not the ending from the comics.”

However, asked now by *SFX* whether we should expect a similar fate to meet these characters, he stops himself from saying too much. “I think any answer I give to that’s a spoiler,” he says. “So I think I have to say no comment on that.” Whether that means he’s backpedaled and decided to be more faithful to the source material, who’s to say? But Kripke does want to stress that anyone and everyone is at risk this season.

“One of the joys of the final season is you don’t have to be precious with keeping anybody alive,” he says. “Not only that, you can let

“The world just keeps getting crazier, and we’re having a hard time keeping up”

people have the emotional confrontations that they’ll never recover from. We wanted to take full advantage of that, having these mind-blowing moments. It’s a battle, and there are going to be casualties. It would be unrealistic not to. It bums me out when you have a big, epic sci-fi show, and then at the end, it’s like, ‘Oh, everyone’s fine.’ I keep yelling at the screen, ‘Things cost things, you can’t just get away with this!’ So yes, I wouldn’t get too attached to any single character.”

It shouldn’t be too hard to say goodbye to the show’s latest addition, Daveed Diggs, who is reportedly playing Oh-Father, a Supe previously accused of molesting children, but is now on Homelander’s side. It would, on the other hand, be more surprising to see any of the characters from *Gen V* meet their demise, with the likes of Marie Moreau (Jaz Sinclair) and Jordan Li (London Thor) confirmed to be crossing over into *The Boys* this season.

Kripke assures that “*Gen V* is not required viewing”, but those who have watched the series will benefit from knowing those characters better. He gives an example: Sister

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violence. It's not a sanitised '50s; it's a filthy '50s. Hopefully, we'll put our tone on an international show, if we get *The Boys: Mexico* up and going. I'm happy to explore the universe as long as each show clears a particular bar of quality and has that really irreverent tone, which, after *Deadpool*, there aren't many things that are doing that. We're happy to carry that torch."

Perhaps it's fitting with *The Boys'* bloodthirsty tone, then, that Kripke's not yet feeling too emotional about the main series coming to an end. "It's funny, even now that we're, for all intents and purposes, done – maybe there are 25 VFX shots I have to do – even now, I'm just still so focused on getting it done and hoping for good results. I haven't had a moment to really reflect. People around me are reaching for Kleenex all the time. When we're in final mixes, people are crying. I'm a little jealous, because I'm just such a big ball of stress about delivering this thing and hoping it's received well. It's going to hit me at a very strange time, because it is the best job I've ever

had. The best group of people I've ever worked with. The best opportunity I've had to write the things that I love. It's really, really sad it's over."

Kripke has to leave to look over some of those VFX shots, but he wants to stress one last thing about his show. "We've always been accused of being pessimistic or dystopian, but I've always felt, and maybe it's my own weirdness, the show had a lot of hope and a lot of heart," he says. "It's just a very realistic version of



Sister Sage (left) is reeling from the *Gen V* aftermath.

Sage (Susan Heyward), who debuted in *The Boys'* fourth season, had a love affair with Dr Thomas Godolkin when she appeared in *Gen V*. "She makes a reference to it [in season five], and all you need to know is that she's heartbroken," Kripke explains. "Had you watched *Gen V*, you would understand a little more why that is. That's about the level we keep it in. People should be prepared for the *Gen V* kids to not come in and save the season. We've been following *The Boys* for five years, and it's time to bring that story to a head. I'm not here to make some crazy Marvel multiverse. I want to end that story well."

NEW BEGINNINGS

So what does *The Boys'* ending actually mean? The "Boys Cinematic Universe" – or BCU, as Kripke calls it – will continue with the prequel series *Vought Rising*, centred on Jensen Ackles' Soldier Boy (also returning in season five), and the new spin-off *The Boys: Mexico*, which is being executive produced by Diego Luna and

Gael García Bernal. That sure sounds like the story continuing for a long while to come.

"The story of the main series is about Hughie, Butcher, Homelander and *The Boys* themselves," Kripke says. "I really want to bring that story to a conclusion. The audience has earned it, and that was the whole reason I wanted to end the show. But the BCU, it's just a very fun and expansive universe, and in the way that *Gen V* didn't have Homelander as the primary adversary, it was our tone, and the brand of the universe is the tone.

"If *Gen V* was our take on a coming-of-age college show, then *Vought Rising* is our tone mixed with a '50s detective show. It's a lurid, pulpy detective story, but done in our tone. So really graphic, really profane, lots of sex and

hope, which is a candle and a hurricane, but you have to protect the candle. We have a real interest this season in exploring that idea of, when the chips are completely down, and everything is against you, how do you hold on to hope? I would rather the world not reflect the show at all, but I think we're living in a time where people could use a little hope, and are struggling to hold on to it. And I think in a big way, that's what the season's about. Hope is hard won, like progress and change. There are a lot of setbacks, but it's the getting up every single time you're knocked down, that's what's so amazing about the human condition, and that's something we're trying to capture." ●

The Boys is on Prime Video from 8 April.

MAVUL: SHADOW LORD

MAVUL

AS THE BREAKOUT STAR OF THE PHANTOM MENACE RETURNS WITH HIS VERY OWN TV SHOW, THE **MAVUL: SHADOW LORD** CREATIVE TEAM TELL SFX ABOUT THE EX-SITH LORD'S MOVE INTO "PULPY NOIR" CRIME TERRITORY

WORDS:
RICHARD EDWARDS

THE PHANTOM MENACE didn't end well for Darth Maul. While he'd made a name for himself with his balletic fight moves and the double-bladed lightsaber that would become a staple on Christmas 1999 wishlists, Darth Sidious's apprentice wound up being sliced in two by Obi-Wan Kenobi. As his torso and legs tumbled – separately – down a Naboo reactor shaft, it felt like we'd seen the last of this angry young man. But Sith Lords are rather harder to kill than you might think... Maul (he's ditched the Darth prefix now his Sith membership has been revoked) made his comeback in *The Clone Wars*, his ingenuity and hatred for Kenobi motivating an unlikely resurrection. He went on to forge a name for himself across the criminal underworld, and that's where we meet him in *Maul: Shadow Lord*, his very own animated TV show. "I call Maul the Michael Myers of Star Wars," laughs executive producer Athena Yvette Portillo. "He just keeps coming back!" →



Janix's crime families have an uneasy alliance.



Maul plans to rebuild his crime empire on the planet.

“When he first showed up in *The Phantom Menace*, as a fan I wanted to know more about this guy immediately,” admits supervising director Brad Rau. “So after they brought him back in *The Clone Wars*, the kind of stories we could tell with him were tantalising – there’s definitely more to say about this guy.”

In *The Phantom Menace*, Maul (then played by Ray Park and voiced by Peter Serafinowicz) was essentially a highly-trained thug, a strong and silent type acting as Darth Sidious’s enforcer while the hooded puppet-master lurked in the shadows. But when Maul reappeared in *The Clone Wars* (now voiced by Sam Witwer, who reprises the role in the new series) it became apparent that he’d learned a thing or two from his old boss. He was suddenly a prodigious talker, a strategist and an ambitious, power-hungry guy eager to build an empire of his own.

“Maul really turned into a new character in *The Clone Wars*,” says co-executive producer Alex Spotswood. “It is so compelling to watch this person who said almost nothing in any of the prequels, and is now this very eloquent and verbose character. We know where Maul ends up and how his story ends [see right], but it’s so fun to show how he gets to the place he is going to go.”

BAD BOYS FOR LIFE

Over the course of the Clone Wars, Maul built his own Shadow Collective crime empire, appointed himself ruler of Mandalore, and sussed out Palpatine’s plans for Anakin Skywalker long before anyone else. He ended up in Old Republic custody, but was freed by Ahsoka Tano to act as an agent of chaos when her own Clone Troopers turned on her.



Master Eeko-Dio Daki – living in the shadows.



A Star Destroyer looms over the noirish, crime-ridden Janix city.

Crucially, he never found – or, indeed, looked for – redemption. Maul is, and will fundamentally remain, a bad guy.

“It’s a story about a guy who’s been wronged by a bunch of different people, and he wants payback,” explains executive producer and writer Matt Michnovetz. (Michnovetz also co-developed the show with Dave Filoni, the former *The Clone Wars* overlord who’s now Lucasfilm’s president and chief creative officer.)

“In terms of Maul being the villain? This is a bad guy fighting worse guys. We definitely did not want to make him a hero. He’s courageous, and he’s got his own code, but what we did was create a bunch of interesting new characters around him, so that his behaviour and actions directly impact them. We may know how Maul’s fate turns out years after our story, but we don’t know the fates of our new characters.”

The series is set a few years after Palpatine established the Empire (the production team won’t specify exactly when), a similar time period to Lucasfilm Animation stablemate *The Bad Batch*. It’s mainly centred on the previously unseen planet of Janix, a world where several crime syndicates tussle for control.

“It’s a city that has a fragile balance, because these crime families work in an alliance for profit,” says Michnovetz. “They’re not in conflict until our story begins, so it’s not quite like Gotham in *Batman*, in the sense that it’s not overridden with crime.”

Caught in the middle is Brander Lawson (voiced by *The Secret Agent*’s Oscar nominee Wagner Moura), an honest cop who – along

with his droid partner Two-Boots (Richard Ayoade) – gets caught up in Maul’s schemes after some mobland killings on his patch.

“Lawson’s conflicted,” Portillo explains. “He has a high position at the police station, and a kid that he hardly gets to see because of the hours he works. His job was also the reason he’s not so connected to his wife, because she got a job for the Empire, and he’s against the Empire. But Two-Boots, who he works with, is very much by the book.”

“Maul is courageous, he’s got his own code... but we did not want to make him a hero”

So could this be *Star Wars*’ answer to *Heat*, with Maul and Lawson fulfilling the archetypal De Niro/Pacino cat-and-mouse roles in a galaxy far, far away?

“*Heat* is a good touchstone for *Maul*,” admits Michnovetz. “There’s a pulpy noir feel to all this, where we’re going to show some of the underbelly of the galaxy and the crime syndicates. *Maul* is a great catalyst for all these characters coming together.”

With the nascent Empire tightening its grip on the galaxy, it’s not an easy time for a former Sith Lord – and enemy of the state – to make a living, especially with Darth Vader’s Inquisitors hunting down anyone with a high Midi-chlorian count. There are also still Jedi

LIFE AFTER DARTH MAUL

A brief history of *Star Wars*' ultimate comeback kid

Maul was born 54 years before the Battle of Yavin on the planet of Dathomir. A Zabrak, he was the son of Mother Talzin, leader of a group of Force-sensitive Nightsisters.

When Maul was in his teens, Darth Sidious recruited the boy as his apprentice. He'd been impressed by the kid's prodigious anger.

Maul famously revealed himself to the Jedi during an infamous trade dispute on Naboo. After killing Qui-Gon Jinn, he was unceremoniously sliced in two by Obi-Wan Kenobi.



Despite ending up at the bottom of a reactor shaft, a unique combination of Nightsister magic and unbridled rage allowed him to survive. Maul's torso eventually found its way to a scrapyard, where he fashioned himself some scorpion-like robot legs.

Maul was rescued by his brother, Savage Opress. Although no longer technically a Sith Lord, Maul remained a disciple of the Dark Side, and took on his sibling as an apprentice. He subsequently became a thorn in the Republic's side throughout the Clone Wars, but there was no love lost between Maul and his former master – especially after Sidious killed Opress.

Maul built his own Shadow Collective crime empire, and eventually took control of Mandalore. He was subsequently overthrown by Ahsoka Tano and Bo-Katan Kryze, and placed in Old Republic custody – until Tano freed him to act as a diversion in the post-Order 66 chaos.

By the time the young Han Solo was completing Kessel Runs in 12 parsecs, Maul was top dog in the Crimson Dawn crime syndicate.

He was eventually overthrown, and went into hiding from the Empire. He did see potential in Force-sensitive Rebel Ezra Bridger, however, and tried to recruit the boy as his latest apprentice.

Maul was killed in a final duel with Kenobi on the sands of Tatooine, a couple of years before the Rebel Alliance stole some Death Star plans. You probably know what happens next...

Ahsoka villain Marrok has a supporting role.

on the run following the Order 66 massacre, one of whom – Devon Izara (voiced by Gideon Adlon) – has become disillusioned with life as a fugitive. Maul will come to regard her as a potential apprentice, just as he did (or rather will) with Ezra Bridger in *Star Wars Rebels*.

“Devon had prepared her entire life for what she thought that was going to look like, and then that was robbed from her,” says Michnovetz. “Now she and her master [Eeko-Dio Daki, voiced by Dennis Haysbert] are living hand to mouth in the shadows. That’s not the life she wanted, so she’s got some angst to say the least.”

This is also a time period when many familiar *Star Wars* faces – from Obi-Wan Kenobi and Ahsoka Tano to Darth Vader and the Emperor – are very much in play. It’s yet to be seen whether these A-listers will make an appearance – always in motion is the future – but there will be support roles for Maul’s Mandalorian right-hand-woman Rook Kast, and future *Ahsoka* villain Marrok.

“Dave Filoni always says there has to be a reason to incorporate a character,” says Portillo. “It can’t just be a cameo for funsies.”

“It’s important to make sure *Star Wars* doesn’t seem like too small of a universe,” adds Spotswood. “You don’t want to have every character in every *Star Wars* appear in the same show.”

DIFFERENT STROKES

Maul: Shadow Lord may be part of an expanding universe of *Star Wars* animation that has included *The Clone Wars*, *Rebels*, *The Bad Batch* and more, but, even though the new show’s visual style echoes its predecessors, there has been a concerted effort to evolve the aesthetic. As well as softening the edges of the characters, Maul has followed the innovative lead of *Into*



Maul mixes CG animation with more trad techniques.



Brander Lawson and sidekick Two-Boots.

The Spider-Verse, *Puss In Boots: The Last Wish* and *Arcane* by mixing its CG animation with more traditional techniques.

“Dave Filoni wanted us to put the hand of the artist in every frame,” explains Rau, “so you see more brush strokes in the skin tones, in the buildings and in the [background] matte paintings. Joel Aron, our director of lighting, photography and effects, had this really cool idea, where his team would paint on glass with actual brushes, and then scan those brush strokes into the computer. In the pilot there’s this great hero shot of Maul as his lightsaber turns on, and if you look at the smoke next to him, there’s actual brush strokes in the smoke.”

Another change is the episode-to-episode continuity of this debut season, which Michnovetz describes as “the most serialised storytelling we’ve ever done at Lucasfilm Animation”. Each of the 10 instalments will run directly into each other, with Disney+ debuting two per week throughout the show’s run. “Going two by two really does get you pulled in,” Spotswood assures us.

Whatever happens on Janix, we know that Maul will live to fight another day – long enough to cameo in *Solo* (seven or eight years after the new show), and become a pivotal antagonist in *Rebels* (a decade or so after that). Will *Shadow Lord* continue beyond this season’s crime drama to fill in other gaps in the former Sith Lord’s surprisingly eventful life after death?

“You’ll have to wait and see!” laughs Michnovetz. “This is a show for fans and it’s a roller coaster ride – so get your favourite popcorn bucket out, sit down and watch it back-to-back to see where it goes.” ●

Maul: Shadow Lord is on Disney+ from 6 April.



THAT'S A WRAP

HE REVITALISED THE *EVIL DEAD* FRANCHISE. NOW LEE CRONIN
IS COMING FOR **THE MUMMY** WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**





WHEN *SFX* ARRIVES AT DUBLIN'S Ardmore Studios in May 2025, it's fair to say we're expecting a very different movie. That's not because they're shooting using the name "The Overlook" – a very obvious nod to one of the director's favourite movies, which he says he saw "at a really impressionable age" – but because no-one *really* knows exactly what *Lee Cronin's The Mummy* is *actually* about.

Wikipedia, at that time, stated that it's a remake of the classic 1932 Universal Monster movie. "That's not right," Michael Clear, the CEO of Atomic Monster and producer on the film tells us. "It's a whole new idea. It's not a remake at all, it's an original idea."

So let's get that out of the way – it's nothing to do with the original Universal mummy movies or the Brendan Fraser remakes.

"It's not Universal canon. Very broadly, we just want to make a scary mummy movie. So it doesn't actually take from any of those elements.

"Our movie starts in Cairo with a family. It's Jack Reynor's character, [Charlie Cannon] relatively contemporary. They've got two kids, Katie and Seb, who are eight and seven, and it's a normal day until Katie is abducted. Obviously a devastating moment – cut to eight years later, they get a phone call. Katie's been found in a sarcophagus, alive..."

The trailers ask "What happened to Katie?" Well, to go into specifics would be spoilers but it doesn't take too much to work it out from the gruesome clips that have been shared.

"We always lean hard into the directors that get us excited," says Clear of Blumhouse's path to Cronin, and seeing an early cut of his last film. "*Evil Dead Rise* is such a punch in the face! We were curious to see what he had done with the franchise. I just remember the moment that went to black – there weren't even credits at the time, just the room goes black – and I was like, 'We've got to work with this guy!'"

RISK FACTOR

The result of that, and a subsequent Zoom with Clear, Cronin and Jason Blum, is where you find us today, on the set of *Lee Cronin's The Mummy*.

It's close to the end of the shoot – we're in week 10 with two more weeks shooting in Spain to follow. Locations where Sergio Leone



previously filmed Westerns will double for both New Mexico and Egypt.

They've been prepping for this since 5 January, are shooting for 49 days and have just 15 days left. They expect to complete the film by February 2026, just two months before it hits screens.

Some of the scenes we're seeing filmed today form the "very last part of the finale", Cronin tells us, so we're certainly wide-eyed but unfortunately tight-lipped. What we can say is that it's really not *The Mummy* people will undoubtedly expect. "That's the most important thing," Cronin stresses. "I try not to make stuff that is expected in any way, shape or form.

"Without giving too much away, we all see in the concept of mummification or mummies it's a historical thing. It's a real thing. It's part of history, and we always view it, especially in cinematic terms, through a particular lens,

which is in relation to the pharaohs, the rich or important people. This is about mummification that happens to an unimportant person in the grander scheme of things, and the impact that that can have. There's quite a few secrets inside it, and I hope it's something that can start a different type of movie built off this one, which is always an exciting thing to try and do."

Some might consider deviating from an established pop-culture shorthand a risk. Not Cronin.

"The risk was not making a sequel to my last movie, because that was really easy for me to do," he says of the *Evil Dead* franchise. "I said no, ultimately, because I wanted to do something else, and I like to take a risk and gamble. The other risk factor is there's brilliant movies called *The Mummy* but they've also been there since the '30s. It's not just about Brendan Fraser, 25 years ago, but there's a risk because modern culture probably looks at



Lee Cronin directing in the shadowy tomb set.



Natalie Grace plays the previously-missing Katie.

those movies that way. Maybe the Tom Cruise one wasn't necessarily as well received, although I really enjoyed that film, but for me, the risk was breaking the mould in terms of what people will expect. It's going to definitely surprise people, but when you make a movie, you have to take a risk, because it might be your last chance to make something, and repeating a trick is a sin to me."

Cronin explains again that this isn't repetition and gives some insight as to the origins of his vision.

"Something that's wrapped up points to a secret – I think that's what drew me in – and points to a mystery as well. Somebody came to me and said, 'What would you think about making a mummy movie?' Truthfully, I was like, 'I don't think a lot about it.' Then when someone said to me, 'When was there a really, really terrifying one?' that started to tickle me a little bit.

What happened to Katie? That's the question.



Verónica Falcón plays grandmother Carmen.



"I'm always interested in telling stories about the dark side of family and then I started to find a lore and route in to it all. Then I found this missing kid story, which seemed like a really interesting pathway. I wanted to create a new mythology as well. So it offered me a lot of things where I could get really, really creative.

"But the whole point being, why should the story about a mummy be limited to tourists in Cairo? We're not making it for a crazy amount of money, but it is a mini epic, and it takes place in different countries, and it's got a huge visual spectrum, both from putting a child to bed in a room, that basic thing we all do, down to being inside a pyramid, or finding something mysterious and dangerous in the desert. It covers all that spectrum. I'm just trying to put it through a very, very different format, because, as I said a little while ago, what's the point of repeating the trick? Those other mummy moves past are awesome. I can't do anything with that, but I can do something new..."

FAMILY AFFAIR

We take a trip to soundstage A, where there's a huge New Mexico-style house built inside. There are massive backdrops hanging from the ceiling which will match the exteriors in Spain.

The Cannon family home is sprawling inside – all low orange lighting, fake plants and heavy stone that's in fact wood, with a massive staircase leading upstairs. We later discover that the actual sets for upstairs are in a completely different studio.

The set took between six to eight weeks to design and then nine to 10 weeks to build. →

To the left of the living room is an open casket, lifted up at the back. No, we can't tell you who the unfortunate recipient is, but let's just say their misery doesn't end with them being placed inside it...

Part of this series of events will see the coffin tumble and the body topple from inside – and that set up is a large hydraulic machine which can be reset, as the SFX supervisor demonstrates several times, at several speeds. It's loud and it's scary and, yes, we want a go.

"It's obviously a real coffin, so there's no structure to it, so we've had to reinforce all of it," he says, inviting us to get a little too close and take a look. "It's got steel frame inside, and these," he points to the two lids, "obviously are meant to hinge up and down, so we've had to bolt all these back up so they can't fall over, so when it tips over, no-one can get crushed. It's just basically like a big toy for kids to play around with."

To the back of the house, the kitchen table is covered in plates filled with rotten food – we're told this will be enhanced with CGI insects later. There are markings of rotting on the walls and a sinister burn mark on the ceiling...

In Charlie's office there's a 'missing' poster for Katie, clocks showing the time in New

“It's a mummy movie set in a domestic setting, which no-one's seen before”

Mexico and Egypt and a pinboard about a fundraiser in her honour. This is a family that has never given up on their missing daughter.

"I like the shortcut to how you can use horror to connect really directly with people and put them in really familiar places," Cronin explains, "which is why this movie, although it's a mummy movie and everyone has an expectancy, what I liked about it was it's a mummy movie set in a domestic setting, which no-one's seen before. What's more frightening? A spider in the forest, or a spider beside your face in your bed? It's the latter. So trying to bring the horror home is something I'm always really interested in doing.

"I've always been drawn to movies where you care about the people, and then you put them through the wringer. I think they're the most effective versions of horror stories.

"It's about family first and foremost. It's about guilt as well, in terms of decisions that people make or wishing they could have done a little bit more. It's about blame also, and it's my meditation on grief. Ultimately, what it is, I experienced the first really big grief in my life when I was approaching this movie, and I didn't want to just tell a story about my grief, but I did want to tell a story *about* grief, and this is very much my meditation on that



Shylo Molina and Billie Roy as Katie's siblings.

process, and perhaps the hope of connecting with someone that's gone, but also the darkness that that could let in when you do."

PRACTICAL MAGIC

We continue our tour of various departments and are taken to a room lined with hundreds of photos of costumes featuring *lots* of linen. Most of the actual costumes are in the process of being packed up for shipping to Spain, but we spy a suspiciously gruesome bloody green nightie on a wooden mannequin.

When we visit the prosthetics department in workshop seven – "Lee loves blood..." designer Matthew Smith tells us – we see boxes and boxes of makeup pieces of wounds and sores, like pie boxes with skin pinned inside like butterflies. Among the many prosthetics there's a *very* realistic dead body and also a long puppeteered tongue – clearly someone's getting licked!

"It's really fun to make those things along the way, to create monsters and prosthetics, and how do we create a certain type of injury," Cronin grins. "There's a cool moment in this movie where someone gets impaled through the eye..."

"There's a huge range of VFX, but VFX primarily in this movie, like in a lot of horrors and particularly in the way that Lee likes to work, is here to serve the movie and not take over as spectacle," VFX producer John Kennedy tells us.

"The idea of how it's being made is to get as much in camera, like old-school horror. Be traditionalist, get it in camera, get it as real as possible. That's why we've even had live scorpions on set for some of the particularly gruesome moments. Some CG scorpions will need to work in places where that's just not acceptable. So we're here to augment and kind of get it over the finish line visually. We're not



As much as possible is being done in-camera.



It looks like the little sister isn't afraid to bite back.

here to take over and create the impossible.”

Expect characters crawling in places you wouldn't expect, bodies doing things you don't want to see and, apparently, lots of vomit. Plus some gnarly scenes with embalming fluid. A good old gore-fest, basically.

Kennedy says that up to 85% of what's there is practical.

“I sold my drum kit when I was 15 and bought a camcorder and started trying to do special effects before I figured out how to tell stories,” Cronin tells us. “So I've always liked that idea of something real. The way that I operate with the otherworldly that I create in my movies is it's practical until it fails.”

DANGER BELOW

We visit another set – something that feels a little more familiar when we see the top of a grey, stone pyramid breaking

out of the ground of a dusty old chamber. There are broken slates scattered around, as though it's somehow crashed through the floor.

It's here that the police find an entrance takes them into a cobweb-filled stairwell, a tunnel and then into a pyramid tomb that reaches up into the sky. (In truth, the tomb is located just behind this set.)

Hieroglyphics absolutely cover the walls, with urns set into alcoves. A sarcophagus sits in the very centre – but those are secrets for another day.

We head to Studio D, which is dark, with smoke filling the air. We're underneath the first floor of the house – but the house itself is on the soundstage we saw this morning. The entire thing is held up below by wood and a huge



The police uncover much more than just missing kids.

framework of metal. When you watch this climactic scene, SFX are sitting downstairs...

We see the stairs leading up and can hear creaking above us as the scene is being set. There's blood, there are wounds. There are lots of flickering lights and decay on the walls. Something thunders across the floor on all fours and throws itself at a door! But these are moments from right at the end of the movie so we must keep them... yes, under wraps.

“This movie I describe as *Poltergeist* meets *Seven* – and I love both of those ends of the genre,” Cronin tells us. “There's some tough, dark material in it, and there's a hard-boiled detective streak, but then there's also a huge domestic, supernatural swirl that's going on.

“*Evil Dead Rise* was a very clear roller coaster ride. It reaches a point and – one of my friends said to me before, it's kind of like a rocket ship fuelled by blood, and it just and it goes. This movie is a different type of fairground attraction. It's more of a maze, and you don't know whether you're going to go left or right next, but you're not in control. Ideally, if I'm doing a good job, I've got my hand on your back and I'm telling you which way to go.”

Maybe just don't let him steer you into that sarcophagus chamber... ●

Lee Cronin's *The Mummy* is in cinemas from 17 April.

SOMETHING VERY BAD
IS GOING TO HAPPEN

RED

WED

SOMETHING VERY BAD
IS GOING TO HAPPEN

THE DUFFER BROTHERS' FIRST PRODUCTION SINCE ENDING STRANGER THINGS
IS A BLOODY BAD MARRIAGE. SHOWRUNNER **HALEY Z BOSTON** TALKS
SFX THROUGH WRITING HER VOWS

WORDS: JACK SHEPHERD



D I N G



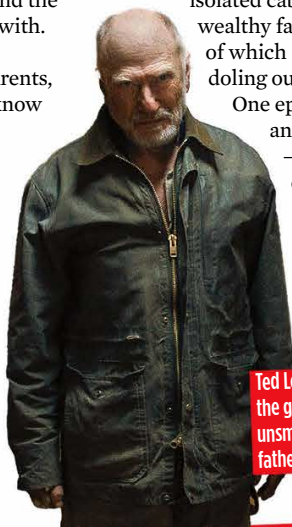
Camila Morrone plays main character Rachel.

HEN HALEY Z

Boston was 10 years old, her mother

warned her: “Don’t marry the wrong person.” Fairly normal advice from a parent, you might think, but advice that would haunt Boston for the next 17 years. “When you’re 27, you’re closer to 30,” she tells *SFX*. “There were all these people I knew from school who were getting married, and I felt very far from that. The idea of, ‘What does it mean to find the right person to marry, to find your soulmate? How do you know when you meet them?’ I heard people say in their wedding vows, ‘I never had a doubt in my mind’ and I’m like, ‘How could you never doubt?’ I was envious of people who could just go with it.”

Her mother’s words haunted her, and Boston felt an “intense pressure” to find the right person to spend her life with. “Because I had a model of [a wonderful marriage] in my parents, I was like, ‘I know it exists; I know you can have lifelong love, be fulfilled, have a partnership and be teammates.’ So I found myself weighing so much against my parents’ marriage. All those things coming together, it felt obvious to me that that’s a horror story.”



Ted Levine as the groom’s unsmiling father, Boris.

DREAD CENTRAL

A few years after her 27th birthday – and following a pitch to executive producers the Duffer Brothers, the creators of *Stranger Things* – Boston would transform her marital dread into her debut series as a showrunner for *Something Very Bad Is Going To Happen*. The pilot starts with a terrified bride, Rachel (Camila Morrone), walking down the aisle, almost in tears. We’re then transported back five days before “I do”, with Rachel and her fiancé Nicky (Adam DiMarco) on a road trip, the pair seeming utterly in love.

Across the next 40 minutes, there are a few terrifying hints at what’s to come: Nicky listens to a podcast about a local serial killer; there’s an abandoned baby at a petrol station; a scary older man accosts Rachel at an empty bar; their wedding venue happens to be a huge, isolated cabin owned by Nicky’s strange, wealthy family. You will have questions, many of which are quickly answered, the show doling out revelations across the season.

One episode’s cliffhanger is often answered at the beginning of the next – only for another, more pressing question to be asked.

“I get frustrated if a show asks too many questions without answering them,” Boston says. “I like the idea of giving the audience an answer either at the end of the episode or at the beginning of the

next one, then expanding on it. We talked a lot about wanting the show to be bingeable and feeling like you’re ending on a cliffhanger and getting sucked deeper into the world.

“It’s really difficult to sustain horror in television, because once you reveal what the monster is, it’s no longer scary,” she continues. “I wanted to play with the audience, which is also where the title of the show comes from. It’s a bit cheeky, because we’re not telling you what it is, and not even telling you what genre we’re in. Is the horror a person? Is it a monster? Is it coming from inside the house or outside? Is it supernatural? Is it all in her head?”

The idea of keeping people guessing was partly inspired by *Servant*, a series created by the master of the twist, M Night Shyamalan. “It was all in service of keeping the audience guessing, and I want them to have theories about our show,” Boston says.

A sense of dread is evoked as the inevitable bad things start to happen, the show’s tone inspired by many different subgenres of horror. Boston highlights psychological movies “set in reality but where one thing is off.” “Like *The Killing Of A Sacred Deer* or *The Vanishing*,” she says. “That movie really is about a relationship, dealing with a mysterious thing that happens and trying to solve it. But then there are movies like *The Celebration*, which is a family drama. There’s a bit of surrealism in it, but there’s nothing overtly supernatural, but it feels like the tension and the horror of just being a person in a situation that



Each episode covers a day leading up to the wedding.



Dinner with the future in-laws: always frightening.



Jennifer Jason Leigh, the mother-in-law to be.



Adam DiMarco plays Nicky, Rachel's rich fiancé.

getting married. That's the next horrifying thing. Maybe that's season two."

MOVIE MAGIC

Keeping Rachel's story grounded was of the utmost importance to Boston. The showrunner created rules for the other writers to follow, such as not having any dream sequences and making sure they stuck primarily to Rachel's point of view. "We were using the genre to talk about this fear of commitment, but I tried to strip out all the genre elements, and I wrote out just the emotional story, and what that does to this character, emotionally, in this week leading up to her wedding. Once that was figured out, I figured, 'Okay, now how do I externalise that within the genre?'"

To structure the show, Boston started at the very end, figuring out what the big climax was going to look like and then allowing her characters to lead the way. Each episode became a different day running up to the wedding. "I had the idea for the climax in my head," she says. "I don't like outlining, I do a lot of thinking before I start writing, so I had done that for a year before I actually sat down and wrote the script, and then it was just so natural, and it flowed. I really felt like I was on the road trip with these characters, and so much of what was in the first draft of the script made it all the way to the end."

The initial version of the series ended up feeling almost like a movie, something the Duffer Brothers brought up when Boston first pitched the idea. "The first thing they said was, 'Well, this seems like a movie.' I was like, 'Oh yeah, but I think we can make it work,'" Boston says, adding that lead director Weronika Tofiliska, who previously helmed four episodes of *Baby Reindeer*, pushed to make the series cinematic. "I hear other creators talk about how a limited series is like a long movie, and some people find that obnoxious, but that is how we went about it. There are three acts to the season. That's how my brain works. I'm a movie person."

The show is the Duffers' first major production since their flagship show ended, with a host of *Upside Down* alumni working on the series, including Kate Trefry, who wrote multiple episodes of *Stranger Things* and *Something Very Bad's* fourth episode.

"The Duffers are quite selective about who they let into their little family, and it's because they really need to care about everything they're doing," Boston says.

"They're not producers who are just collecting their money, so I was honoured to be let in. They were just so supportive of my vision. I think they saw themselves in me; they were very young when they ran *Stranger Things* and were given this huge opportunity. They want to uplift first-time creators and new voices. So it was great.

"They're very honest. They're always going to tell you how they feel, and they're never going to lie to you. They were fantastic collaborators who protected me, helped support my vision, and they convinced Netflix to let me run the show alone. That doesn't happen."

Morrone, too, would become a key collaborator, helping shape Rachel's character. "Cami is really incredible and singular," says Boston. "She brings such a warmth to the character that wasn't really in the scripted version. When I wrote that character, she was more sarcastic and dry. I was picturing an Aubrey Plaza type. I realised that we needed someone who has more humanity and can bring real emotional depth to the character, because we're going to watch her for so long. She had never done horror, so I had Cami watch 30 horror movies to get the genre, and she would send me voice notes after every single one."

The cast is filled out by Jennifer Jason Leigh as Nicky's mother and horror royalty Ted Levine (*The Silence Of The Lambs*) as his father. "Working with Jennifer was incredible," says Boston. "I was kind of afraid of her before I met her, because she takes a lot of intense roles. I was like, 'There's no way she's lovely, right?' But she is. I talked to her a lot about the scripts, and she had so much great insight, and I made some changes based on her thoughts. And Ted Levine, horror icon. His performance is fantastic and surprising. I wanted to see something I've never seen before, and these performers really, really did that."

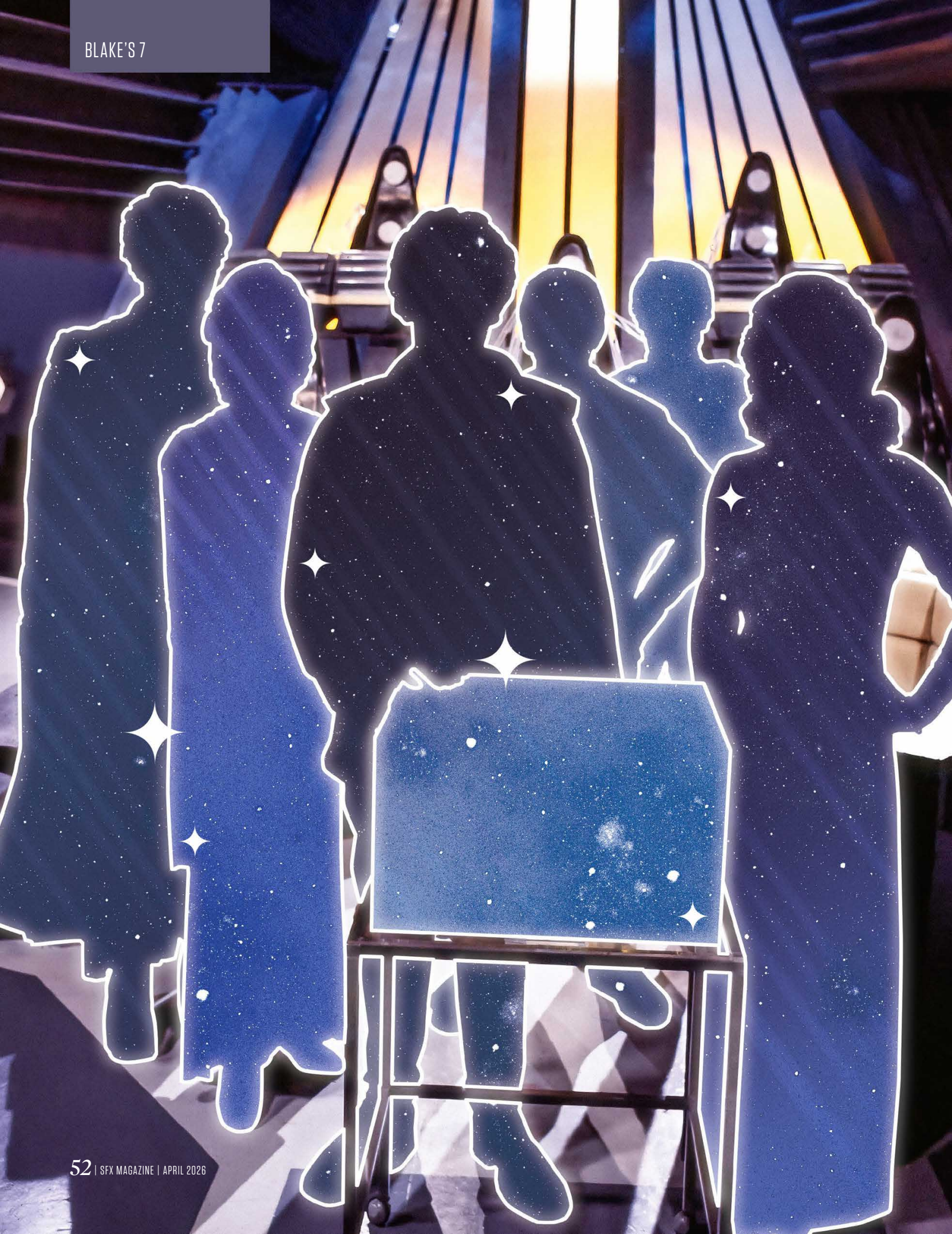
With Rachel's red wedding already written, there's a question of whether the show could return for another season or if it remains a limited series. "I mean, it's a pretty complete story," says Boston. "It was very personal to me to be exploring this fear that felt very salient at the time in my life and still does. That's how I work as an artist. It needs to be something that I'm going through. So it depends on if I find something else big to fear." ●

Something Very Bad Is Going To Happen is on Netflix from 26 March.

is beyond you."

Horror proved the perfect genre to explore the taboos that Boston, who previously served as a writer on *Brand New Cherry Flavor* and *Guillermo Del Toro's Cabinet Of Curiosities*, was keen to address, particularly those around marriage and having children. "As a young girl, you talk about your wedding a lot with your friends, and you talk about the colour scheme, and I think that's strange," she says. "There's so much wedding tradition that feels very outdated, and I feel like I hadn't seen that really expressed in this horror context. I went to a bachelorette party as a 30-year-old, and I was like, 'This is horrifying. We're too old for this. We shouldn't be playing these games.' I also find it fascinating to explore romantic relationships in the context of the genre, because there is so much that goes on emotionally in that space. Rachel and Nicky are talking about having a kid, which is after

“I wanted to play with the audience, which is also where the title of the show comes from”





Peter Hoar with more of Terry Nation's creations.

RETURN OF THE SEVEN

IS THE LIBERATOR ABOUT TO SOAR AGAIN? MEET THE TEAM LOOKING TO BRING **BLAKE'S 7** BACK TO THE SCREEN. "YOU HAVE TO BE TRUE TO THE SPIRIT OF THE SHOW..."

WORDS: NICK SETCHFIELD

WE'RE NOT MAKING IT FOR THE fans," says Peter Hoar, upfront about his ambitions for a revival of *Blake's 7*. "But I am one, and I'll be the most ruthless fan of all."

"I think that's an important distinction," echoes Matthew Bouch, sharing a video call with his friend and creative partner. "Because a lot of the previous attempts [to bring it back] have been fan service and ultimately the fans don't really want that. They want to see a *Blake's 7* for '27 or '28, not just a straight remake, because they've got those shows. They lived through those shows."

For Hoar and Bouch, January's announcement that a reboot of Terry Nation's fatalistic space saga was in active development was more than a nostalgia-baiting story about the potential comeback of a Brit SF classic. It was a statement of intent.

Steeped in genre TV – the BAFTA-winning, Emmy-nominated Hoar has directing credits on *Doctor Who*, *Daredevil* and *The Last Of Us*, while Bouch served as producer on *Being Human* and *The Sarah Jane Adventures* – the pair have teamed to launch a new production company, Multitude, an indie with a mission to restore a classic spirit of storytelling to the small screen. If they can topple the totalitarian might of the Federation while they're about it, so much the better.

"Peter and I have known each other for a long, long time," Bouch tells *SFX*. "Easily 10 years. We were chatting in Peter's front room, about all the things we loved..."

"We were wearing smoking jackets and we had pipes and were reminiscing about the good old days!" laughs Hoar.

"We were just chatting about our various enthusiasms," Bouch continues, "and various companies that we could approach and Peter just said, 'Why don't we set up our own company? Why don't we just do it ourselves?'"

"It feels like quite a counterintuitive time to launch a company, but it's something we felt we had to do, because we clearly had shared passions and interests, and there was a gap in the market. This country used to be known for doing science fiction and genre work, particularly in the '70s and '80s, and we've slightly lost that knack. We wanted to explore that British vein of sci-fi. So that's partly why Multitude exists. We've got other things on our slate, but it's partly about our shared passion for *Blake's 7* and *Doctor Who* and all of those shows that we all know and love."

VOICE FROM THE PAST

Hoar remembers the mark Nation's creation made on him as a viewer. "It seemed to tread that area of what dark, adult sci-fi could be and should be, but it didn't ever forget that it was →

going out at eight o'clock in the evening. And also the ambition of it. It was so cleverly thought out and plotted. I don't think I've ever been as impacted by the end of a series as I was with *Blake's 7*. When everybody died at the end of 'Blake' – or did they? – I was like, 'You can't do that! It's not possible!'"

The original series ran as the '70s bled into the '80s. For Hoar that makes this a timely resurrection. "I feel like there's a big parallel between then and now. It was quite a dark period, there were a lot of things going wrong. I think we had four governments within the decade – although that's par for the course these days! – and the strikes and the lights going out and all that kind of thing. I remember as a kid thinking, not end of days, I'm not that dramatic, but it was a strong period."

The times may chime but how much will a 21st-century *Blake's 7* be in thrall to its predecessor?

"There will be lots of plot elements and character elements and certainly design elements that will be carried through and maybe modernised in some ways," shares Bouch. "There's no point in acquiring IP if you're just going to throw it out and do something completely different. But equally there's no point in taking a 40-year-old format and just trying to remake it, because the world has changed."

"We've acquired this piece of '70s IP that we remember really fondly, and as we discovered after the announcement there is a huge fanbase there. But also there's a lot of people who aren't going to know about it, and purely on a commercial level we need to address that audience that doesn't know these characters and doesn't know the theme tune and doesn't know the *Liberator*."

As Hoar reveals, the finer details of Multitude's take are yet to be nailed down. One thing's certain: it's not a sequel. "We can say that – because they're all dead!"

"We do love the concept of the story. We love the rebellious nature of criminals in a super-spacecraft, and the fact that they don't trust each other. There's a real tension, which the show mines occasionally. We want to mine it more. It's like *The Sopranos* in space! I think we will use [the original] character names. We will indulge in the characters. I was thinking only yesterday – this is hot off the press –

“You have to be true to the spirit of the show, which is that it was quite morally complex”

PICTURES © BBC

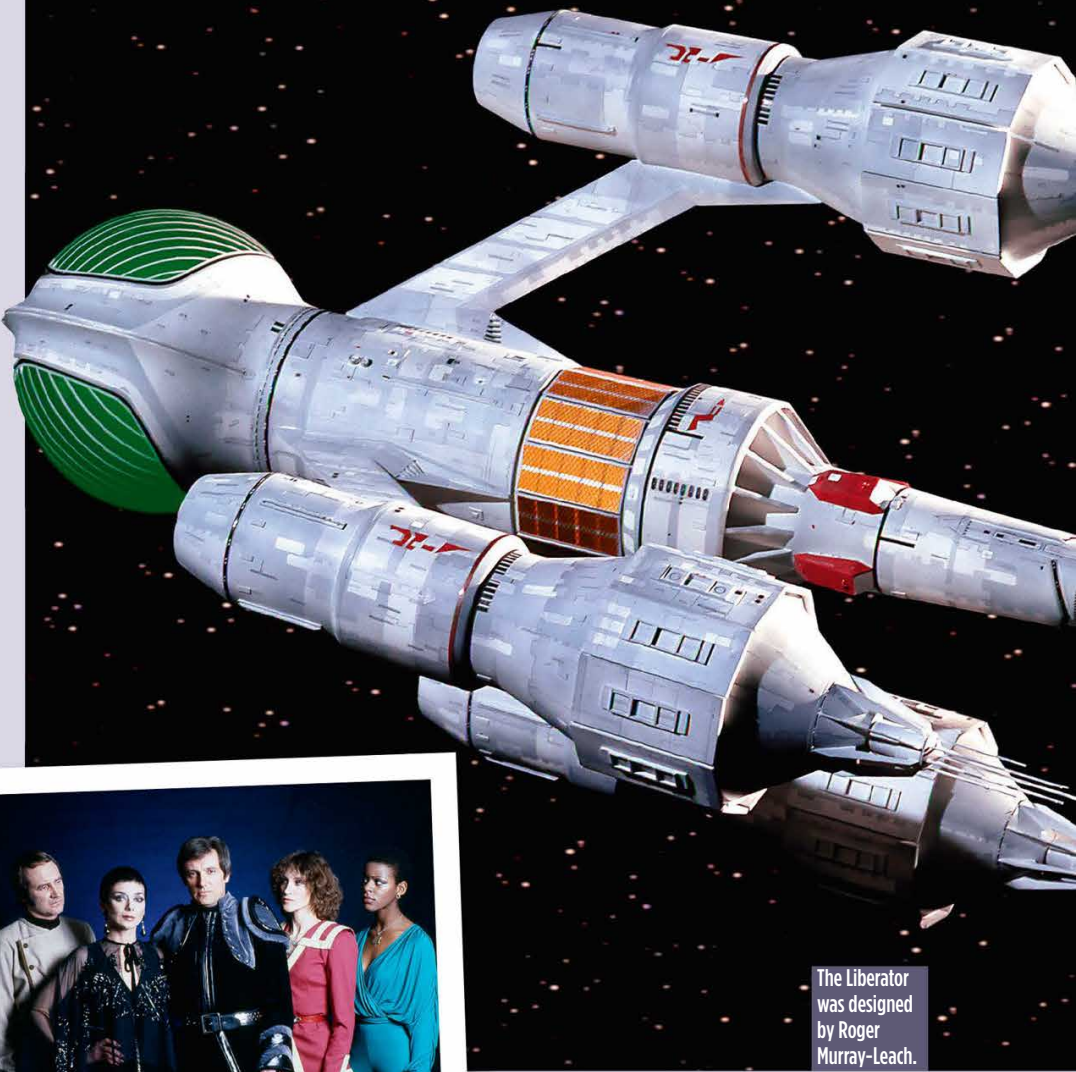


The original cast from series three, without Blake.

whether we should introduce a new one, because that'll really throw everybody! It's a reset, definitely, but with all of those strong story ideas that Terry Nation wrote.

"I've been mining the show for my favourite bits. I'm going through it, saying, 'Right, I want to do a bit like that!' Because obviously it had arcs. There were stories that threaded through, character stories but also things like Star One and whether Blake was coming back, which is threaded almost all the way through those last two seasons. Things like that I think are very, very valuable, to have those flashpoints where some people will go, 'Oh, I know what that means...' and then completely subvert that! Yeah, I've got my eye on a few specific stories that I would like to remake."

One potential candidate is the series one episode "Bounty", Hoar reveals. "TP McKenna is playing a deposed leader. A very big political animal. They are going to rescue him so that he could go back, and him being back in charge would help the cause. They shot it in a folly on some private estate, with an old 1920s car, and they made up a story that he was a collector and he'd managed to get these things from old Earth..."

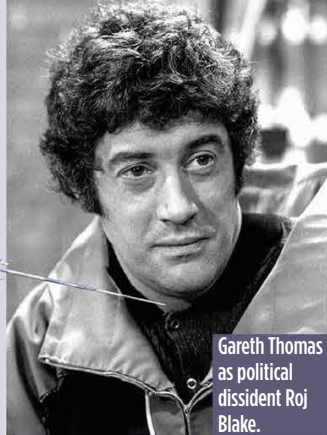


The *Liberator* was designed by Roger Murray-Leach.

"I can hear my dad's voice going, 'Oh, that's a lot of nonsense!' But if you actually take the story apart it's really clever and brilliant. It also made me think: is that one of the stories that we lean into? Because there was a lot of politicisation around that story, big ideas about what it means to be a figurehead and how much power you have and whether you want it. And that's a big Blake storyline."

"You have to be true to the spirit of the show, which is that it was quite morally complex," says Bouch. "These were characters that weren't necessarily sympathetic. Even Blake, who has a very strong moral core, is actually quite earnest and is in some ways not a particularly attractive character. You kind of root for Avon, because he's dastardly and a lovable rogue. So I think we want to get into that."

"The moral complexity is very important but also – and this is characteristic of a lot of those '70s and early '80s shows and movies – the complete and utter belief in the reality of the world that these characters exist in. Too much recently, for my taste, creates a falseness, this idea that you can address the camera directly as some shows do. *Enola Holmes* has many good qualities but personally I find it quite tricky when somebody breaks the fourth wall. Particularly in a fantasy or period piece because it obviously takes you out of that straight away, so you're saying,



Gareth Thomas
as political
dissident Roj
Blake.



Jacqueline
Pearce played
glamorously
nasty Servalan.

‘Okay, so my relationship to this has been weirdly triangulated...’

‘I think one of the joys of shows like *Blake's 7* is that you enter a world with these characters and you do suspend your disbelief in the classic sense. We're very aware of that. If you look at *Blake's 7* and the *Doctor Who* of that era, and also movies like *Star Wars*, *Ghostbusters* and *Indiana Jones*, they are done with absolute conviction. They may be camp, they may be slightly ridiculous, but in the end they expect a degree of suspension of disbelief from their audience, and then they reward it. I think that's the key for us in terms of bringing this show back.’

REBOOT CAMP

Yes, for all its edgy antiheroes and occasional cast-culling massacre, there's an unmistakable streak of camp in the original *Blake's 7*. A pinch of interstellar flamboyance mixed in with the grit and cynicism of Nation's bleak, oppressive universe. Is that an essential component of the show's appeal?

‘It's part of it,’ says Hoar. ‘The way Servalan used to glide into the room is part of the fact that I loved it. That's Jacqueline Pearce, as well. She was phenomenally good at that. It's fair to say that we've got our eyes on a Servalan – as in the character, not a person, it's too soon for that!’

‘There are many examples [of shows] where the brief's been sent over to the costume department and there's no encouragement from the director. ‘Oh, I bet he'd look good in a big cape and flowing gown!’ Then it turns out he's a terrorist and he's blowing things up and he has a big gun... You look at it and go, ‘Did nobody have a conversation before this happened? This is completely wrong!’ he

laughs, then concedes ‘But yet wow, how bold, how bold!’

‘I do think costumes are going to be very important. I think it's something to negotiate around. How do we do it? How do we, in essence, have that flamboyance occasionally and also be really practical? Because this is a world that is very dystopian.’

‘It's an interesting one, the concept of camp,’ adds Bouch. ‘What does it actually mean? I think it's about how you imagine that world. Obviously we're imagining a world which is a fantasy, that's different from our everyday world. It doesn't automatically make it camp, because you can do something which is very dour and very dark. But if you take camp to mean flamboyant or colourful, that kind of vividness... We do want to retain that colour and that sense of escape. You could argue that there are elements of *Stranger Things* that are camp, and that's not a camp show in an overall sense.’

‘It's about where you deploy it. One of the great things about these shows is you are doing stories of the week. You are going to all sorts of different worlds and environments. So some of them will be camp and some of them won't be, and that's to do with the joy of imagining something other than our world.’

Soon to be offered to potential buyers in the broadcasting world, this new iteration of *Blake's 7* arrives in straitened times for TV drama. For Hoar that's a plus, a chance to weaponise the inventive, penny-scraping spirit of the original, a cosmos-spanning epic famously made for the budget of a BBC cop show.

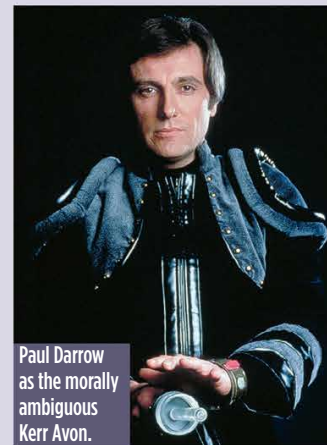
‘What they did with that lack of money was phenomenal, absolutely phenomenal. I think there's space not just to bring it back but indulge what made it great, and remember that sometimes having less can make you more creative, more fiery and more ambitious.’

‘You don't want to overstretch yourself. That's where Matthew comes in, because he'll make sure that I don't. But at the same time I've worked on all those big shows with the big money and it's quite soul-destroying when they throw money at those things. There's such a lot of waste and it doesn't need to be like that. It's quite a pompous approach to some of that big TV, where it feels like they'll publicise the budget before they tell you what the story is. I know that's not going to happen to us, because those days are gone, and I'm glad about that. I'm really glad.’

‘I want to indulge that noirish, lo-fi nature the world had. Not the *Liberator* – that'll be splendid! I'll spend all my money on that! I think there's a way to do it, I really do. You've got to have great writing, great dialogue, and then you can attract great actors. Ultimately that's how it worked in the first place.’ ●

MISSION TO DESTINY

The Way Back



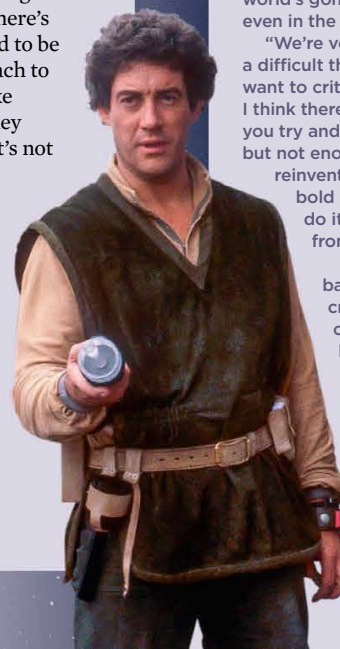
Paul Darrow
as the morally
ambiguous
Kerr Avon.

While *Blake's 7* has been successfully revived on audio, beginning with 1998's BBC Radio production *The Sevenfold Crown*, numerous stabs at bringing the show back to the screen have floundered over the years. Original series star Paul Darrow was attached to a miniseries sequel in 2003, while *Life On Mars* co-creator Matthew Graham conceived a potential ‘next-generation’ project. In 2012 *Casino Royale* helmer Martin Campbell was linked to a Syfy network remake by *Heroes* writer Joe Pokaski.

‘We've tried to get as many materials as we can from previous attempts,’ says Matthew Bouch. ‘We've read them and thought about them. There are a lot of pitfalls in bringing this stuff back, not least in how the budget works, how it commercially functions in our current world. It's not like we can go to the BBC and they'll say, ‘Here's a cheque’ and we just go out and make it. That world's gone now. In fact it's gone even in the world of streamers, really.’

‘We're very conscious that it's a difficult thing to do, and I don't want to criticise previous attempts. I think there is always a danger that you try and shift the dial a little bit but not enough. If you are going to reinvent it you have to be quite bold about it but you have to do it in a way that comes from a love of it.’

‘We come from backgrounds which creatively and commercially mean we have a lot of experience in delivering these kind of shows. We feel quite confident that we can deliver our vision for the right kind of price.’



WHEN SFX WAS INVITED to the top-secret set of *Fallout* for season two, there was a lot to uncover. Behind the colossal gates of Stage 15 at The Culver Studios in California, a feast for the eyes (and ears) unleashed spoilers, secrets and stacks of surprises that we were banned from revealing – until now. Join us as we chat to the cast and crew for the ultimate guide to the second season, including brand-new interviews conducted at a *Fallout* finale event in Las Vegas earlier this year. From the Deathclaw to Dinky the T-Rex, prepare to have your mind blown as we dive deep into the bold and brilliant post-apocalyptic chaos with The Ghoul, Lucy, Maximus and more.

Death Wish

⚡ “For season two, we loved working on the Deathclaw,” explains *Fallout* executive producer Jonathan Nolan. “It was a great challenge. We wanted to have some reality on set, so we worked with the extraordinary team at Legacy Effects, who did an incredible job building this thing. The Deathclaw is basically a puppet operated by five people and then the visual effects team – with Jay Worth at the helm – fills in the blanks. It was a lot of fun. It was almost as hard to build as it is to beat a Deathclaw in the game.”

Practical Magic

⚡ “I think *Fallout* fans would be surprised to know how many of our sets are real,” says the show’s creator, executive producer and showrunner Geneva Robertson-Dworet. “Going into it, I assumed we would be creating digital versions of so much of what we ended up doing practically. I remember a moment in post-production where we were looking at two versions of a shot of a Deathclaw and we decided to go with the version that used the puppet almost entirely because we wanted it to have that tactile reality. Even though, arguably, the version that had been enhanced with VFX was more convincing, we felt like we’d rather be more *Star Wars: Episode IV* than *Star Wars: Episode I*.” →



Season two introduced viewers to Freeside.

FAST FALLOUT FACT

On set, there are three versions of the Deathclaw. There’s a full-size puppet. There’s an insert head, which only goes down to the neck. And there’s an insert hand, which only goes to the elbow.

CASINO

SILVER KUSH

The Insider Guide To

FALLOUT

Season 2

SFX TAKES A TRIP TO THE CULVER STUDIOS,
CALIFORNIA TO BRING YOU BEHIND-THE-
SCENES SECRETS

WORDS: ADAM TANSWELL

Las Vegas Or Bust

⚡ “Pre-war Vegas has some incredible sets,” explains Frances Turner (Barb Howard). “I mean, Lucky 38 is beautiful. It’s literally art. You step on set, and you’re there. There’s very little distance that your imagination has to travel in order to put you in the place. You are transported. Our production designer, Howard Cummings, did an incredible job.”

Oh Boy

⚡ Pip-Boys are an essential piece of equipment for vault dwellers, but how functional are the props for these wearable computers? “The screen works,” confirms Annabel O’Hagan, who plays Stephanie Harper. “Inside the Pip-Boy, there’s an old iPhone 4. Pip-Boys are heavy and they change the way you move. I really liked getting my gold Overseer Pip-Boy because that felt very fancy. I levelled up with that one. It’s so beautiful and detailed. My ‘phase two’ Pip-Boy [seen in the season two finale] is extra fancy and scary. It’s very glossy. It’s the Darth Vader Pip-Boy. I’m excited to find out what that baby can do.”

The More The Merrier

⚡ “I sometimes need three prop people to help me put on my Pip-Boy,” adds Kyle MacLachlan, who plays Hank MacLean. “You have to do the costume’s sleeve right. You have to crease it right and fold it over correctly. Then you have to have someone wrap it up and someone has to snap it on. It’s a whole thing.”



Steph’s pre-eyepatch past has light shed on it.



Lucy and Hank become even more estranged.



POWER RANGERS

The Truth Behind The Power Armour

Game On

⚡ For season two, the creative team was tasked with designing an all-new Power Armour suit for Maximus (played by Aaron Moten). “It was really exciting to work on the Ranger Power Armour because it is something that didn’t exist in the game yet,” reveals Legacy Effects’ Cary Gunnar Lee. “A lot of the time, we’re asked to create something that already exists in the game, so you’ve got all the reference material for it – but the Ranger Power Armour is something completely new. It’s a little bit more exciting when people get to see something for the first time, because they haven’t been staring at it in a videogame for years. I’m really proud of how it turned out.”

Naked Gun

⚡ “The internal structure of the Ranger Power Armour is essentially the same as the T-60,” explains Cary Gunnar Lee. “We used a lot of the existing T-60 moulds to create it, but added pieces because the whole concept of the Ranger Power Armour is that it’s a kit-based armour. That’s how it was described to me by Jonah [executive producer Jonathan



“Wait, shouldn’t you be in this suit?”

Nolan]. People have found a broken Power Armour and they’ve added to it; they added a bunch of guns and weapons. They’ve militarised it. It’s a cool design.”

I’ve Got The Power

⚡ For the first season of *Fallout*, only two Power Armour suits were built. “The suits went through quite a lot in the first season, so we took them back to Legacy to refurb them at the end of the shoot,” reveals Cary Gunnar Lee. “We patched them up, fixed them, gave them some fresh paint and got them ready for season two. Then we were asked to build a third full Power Armour suit because they knew they’d need more. Now have three full, wearable T-60 Power Armour suits.”



The action sequences didn't let us down.

SUITED AND BOOTED

The cast on the Power Suit

WALTON GOGGINS

"It's not pleasant working in the T-45. In fact, it's extremely unpleasant. I thought I had a tough run with becoming The Ghoul - but there's something so claustrophobic, almost coffin-like, about putting on that armour because you can't move your body and you're being pulled in two different directions. There's gravity and the weight of the machine is pulling your legs and your arms down - and there's absolutely nothing you can do about it. Mentally, you have to submit to it. It's not easy. My hat's off to Aaron."

AARON MOTEN

"There are four different versions of the suit. We've got the clamshell, which is a full statue that can't move. The back opens, you step inside and the back closes - but it takes four to five crew members to close. There's also the full armour stunt suit that can walk and move, as well as the top half, which is 40 to 50 pounds. It's a motorised helmet, which is really heavy because you have to have all the batteries and the gears inside to make it operate. The final version is inside the helmet, which is a totally different set-up."

KYLE MACLACHLAN

"The Power Suit is cumbersome, for sure, but I didn't mind it. It's heavy, but it's fun to play with and it's another side of Hank that we get to see. He's clearly had some experience with it over the last 200 years. Fortunately, I did not have to wear the helmet because some of the other actors were saying it can be quite claustrophobic. With the helmet on, you're at the mercy of the people around you and you need help. There's a small little shelf that just happens to be part of the Power Suit design. I set my coffee on the shelf during the downtime. I'd have a little straw, so I could enjoy my coffee."



The suit was hard work, but the actors liked it.

Third Time Lucky

⚡ "There have been a couple of very minor adjustments with the third suit," continues Cary Gunnar Lee. "A lot of it was just about adding comfort for the stunt actor. We knew where some of the pressure was really affecting his shoulders, so we introduced more padding there. There are a few spots in the armour that would get caught on doors or be a little more susceptible to damage, so we made those out of rubbery material, instead of something harder. Functionally, it's about the same. The third one is almost a carbon copy of the first two."

Lighten Up

⚡ "The full suit weighs just over 100 pounds [45kg]," says Cary Gunnar Lee. "It's made out of a flexible urethane, so it's stunt friendly. If you were to look at a cross-section of the armour, it's less than an eighth of an inch thick - but it's such a big structure that we had to introduce a skeleton to it. On a project like *The Mandalorian*, we have close to 30 suits for Pedro Pascal's character. With only two suits for *Fallout*, you don't have a lot of options if it breaks, so it was pretty important to make them as robust as possible."

A Tall Order

⚡ "The Power Armour is supposed to stand at eight foot tall, but we settled on seven foot for practical reasons," explains Cary Gunnar Lee. "If they were eight foot, we'd have to find very tall stunt people to wear them, but there aren't a lot of stunt →"





The end of the world makes for some unlikely allies.

artists who are six foot nine. Inside the Power Armour, you stand on six-inch platforms and it has little hand extensions, so you can still use your hands for certain scenes. The knees have to align for you to walk. We tried to keep it as true to the game as possible.”

Living On A Prayer

⚡ It's not easy to navigate the set in the Power Armour. “The chest of the armour gives the biggest vision impairment,” says Cary Gunnar Lee. “The chest is so far out in front of you that you can't see your own feet. You have to look at where you're going and try to memorise it before it gets lost in the horizon of your chest piece. As much as you have a decent field of vision horizontally and vertically – well, upwards at least – if you're looking down, you just see that gigantic lunch box of a chest in front of you, so you have to plan your steps. A lot of it is just a wing and a prayer.”

Suit Speed

⚡ It took around six weeks to build the third Power Suit, with a crew of up to seven people working on it.

Take A Break

⚡ The crew created a nifty system for resting in the Power Armour. “We build a backless chair with a pulley system to take the weight of the armour off the stunt performer,” explains Cary Gunnar Lee. “Basically, we hook a couple of lines to the strongest point at the top of the armour and literally pull the suit up off the stunt performer's shoulders. Essentially, it just hangs there. This gigantic contraption doesn't

fit everywhere and it's not super-convenient in really tough terrain, so we also have a half stool. This has been built at the right height for you to sit, but it doesn't have the creature comforts of the full system with the pulleys.”

Battle Cries

⚡ According to Aaron Moten, it took five days to shoot the Freeside sequence where Maximus fights the Deathclaws. “It was a challenging process in Power Armour,” he explains. “We have an incredible stunt performer called Jeremy [Fitzgerald]. He really killed it. Not only does he have to deal with getting notes from the camera team and his stunt coordinator, but also from me. If I'm not in the top half of the suit, we have to make sure it looks like Maximus inside it. Freeside was a great moment because we upgrade Maximus's fighting style. The boxer in me was super-psyched to see him with his guard up, as opposed to so many fights in the series where we've had Maximus be willing to take a punch to his face and then swing back. The battle is epic. It's like, ‘When will these Deathclaws stop spawning?’ They just keep coming.”



Aaron Moten continues to star as Maximus.

DEATH

Death Race 2000

⚡ “It took about three months to build the Deathclaw,” reveals Cary Gunnar Lee. “We first 3D-printed a sixth-scale model, which is probably a little over a foot in height because the full creature stands at just under 10 foot tall at his tallest. We have a big life-size printout of him and a little model of him – and then we have to think, ‘Well, how do you fit a person in there?’ In the end, we have one person inside the Deathclaw and multiple people puppeteering, because it's animatronic. He has an animatronic neck and an animatronic jaw – and then his arms are also puppeteered from external people. I typically puppeteer one of the arms.”

Dino Delights

⚡ “On set, there are a minimum of four people working on the Deathclaw,” continues Cary Gunnar Lee. “There are two people for the arms, one person inside and another person works the sixth-scale model, which is mechanised. When you move the model, it moves the creature. This is something that [pioneering special effects artist] Stan Winston used on *Jurassic Park*. All of my bosses are old *Jurassic Park* guys. That's how they controlled the T-Rex and they've been using this technique for the last 30 years.”

The Animaniacs

⚡ “We took the life-size 3D print and patterned it,” explains Cary Gunnar Lee. “Then we made a big foam shell and started building a structure inside to hold all of the animatronics. We had two mechanics working on a mechanical neck and one working on the mouth. I was tasked with building a skeleton, but also helped with the animatronics. We had one guy building a tail, trying to make it as lifelike as possible. If VFX need to take off the arms for a shot, it's going to make more sense if it's modular, so all of the arms, legs and tail come off with one little pin.”

Reality Bites

⚡ “There are two other elements to the Deathclaw,” continues Cary Gunnar Lee. “We have an insert arm, which is very light and is printed in a very high-detailed resin. We mould it, cast it in foam rubber and put animatronics inside the hand, so the hand has movement. We also have an animatronic head. We print a full-sized head, mould it, then give it skin. We then put a bunch of animatronics

IN PARADISE

The Introduction Of The Deathclaw



What we've waited for: taking on a Deathclaw...

FAST FALLOUT FACT

Deathclaw drool is made using the same process created for the *Alien* movies – complete with a drool motor, similar to the ones used on the xenomorphs.

inside of it, so he can blink, move his eyes and furrow his brow. He can also chomp his jaw.”

That's Life

⚡ “We use some of our old tricks, which give the Deathclaw the ability to drool and to have smoke come out of his nose,” admits Cary Gunnar Lee. “These are fun little special effects gags. The first time we used it, the Deathclaw was drooling all over Walton in the Alaska scene and we were really happy to see more of this real, visceral, scary creature. We tried to get it as lifelike as possible in the shots where you can use the lifelike animatronic head or the lifelike hand, giving the VFX team a break and being able to use something that can be used without any VFX treatment.”

The Vest Intentions

⚡ “Inside the Deathclaw, a team member wears a rig, which is a big fibreglass vest,” continues Cary Gunnar Lee. “It’s all mounted to that. We’ve created a way for him to control the arms via large rods inside the puppet, but it’s a little limited. The stunt performer inside the Deathclaw has a little view screen through its chest, so he can walk around and see where he’s going – but we will be controlling the head for him off-screen.”

Art Attack

⚡ “We spent a lot of time carving detail into the foam of the Deathclaw and we give it a realistic paint job,” says Cary Gunnar Lee. “We give it the right shine, so that light will hit it in a realistic way. Even though we know a lot of it will be replaced with a VFX skin, we still give them a lot more information than they’d get from using a big grey puppet. The silhouette is accurate and all the little spikes inform the VFX team how it’s moving through space.” →



Lucy and the Ghoul come to depend on each other.



Much care went into depicting the Deathclaw.

Game, Set And Match

⚡ In season one, the filmmakers took over several sound stages at Steiner Studios in Brooklyn, New York, to house the vaults and other practical sets. They also visited the Skeleton Coast of Namibia to stand in for the Wasteland. Season two was filmed entirely in California, with the vaults rebuilt inside sound stages in Los Angeles. A variety of Californian locations were used, including Dumont Dunes for the Wasteland, as well as a state-of-the-art LED Volume sound stage at The Culver Studios.

Rinky Dinky

⚡ The Novac set, which is home to Dinky the T-Rex, was a practical build for the *Fallout* crew. It's where fans catch their first glimpse of The Ghoul (played by Walton Goggins) in the second season – and it was a thrill for the actor. “That set was completely real,” he explains to *SFX*. “It was shot in the desert. We went out and spent two or three nights there – and I stayed in my van at base camp. Everybody else was in a hotel, but I was in my little mobile home. That sequence was so big and so daunting. When I read it on the page, I thought, ‘How are we going to pull this off?’ But you just do it, one take at a time. That’s the magic of storytelling.”

Pearls Of Wisdom

⚡ *Hellboy* actor Ron Perlman is an iconic voice from the *Fallout* game, so it's fitting that he appears in the TV show – albeit under a mass of make-up as a Super Mutant. Will he return for season three? “Ron does what Ron wants to do,” chuckles Jonathan Nolan, dodging the question when *SFX* asks about the future of *Fallout*. “We love working with Ron. He has been a part of every *Fallout* game. He’s the common link, right? His voice is an essential part of the fabric of the games, so we talked for a long time about how to bring that into the show. To me, making him a Super Mutant and making him part of that faction was a delicious idea.”



The series is definitely living up to the games.



Sound stages became a convincing Wasteland.



The Ghoul (Walton Goggins) gets his close-up.



World Building

⚡ What's in store for season three? “We know The Ghoul is heading to Colorado, ideally, but in the Wasteland, thou shall be sidetracked by bullshit every goddamn time,” chuckles Geneva Robertson-Dworet. “He still needs to figure out exactly where he’s going. Of course, Lucy [Ella Purnell] and Max and many of our other characters are not necessarily heading to Colorado, so we’re very excited to unveil new locations next season. In *Fallout*, you’re always journeying and exploring and building your map out bigger, so that’s what we want to be mimetic of. That’s such a core component of *Fallout*, so the show is always going to get bigger and bigger – and explore new regions. There are definitely a few things from the game that we’ve wanted to do since season one. Now, it’s narratively the right time to get to them – but I don’t want to say more than that and spoil it.”

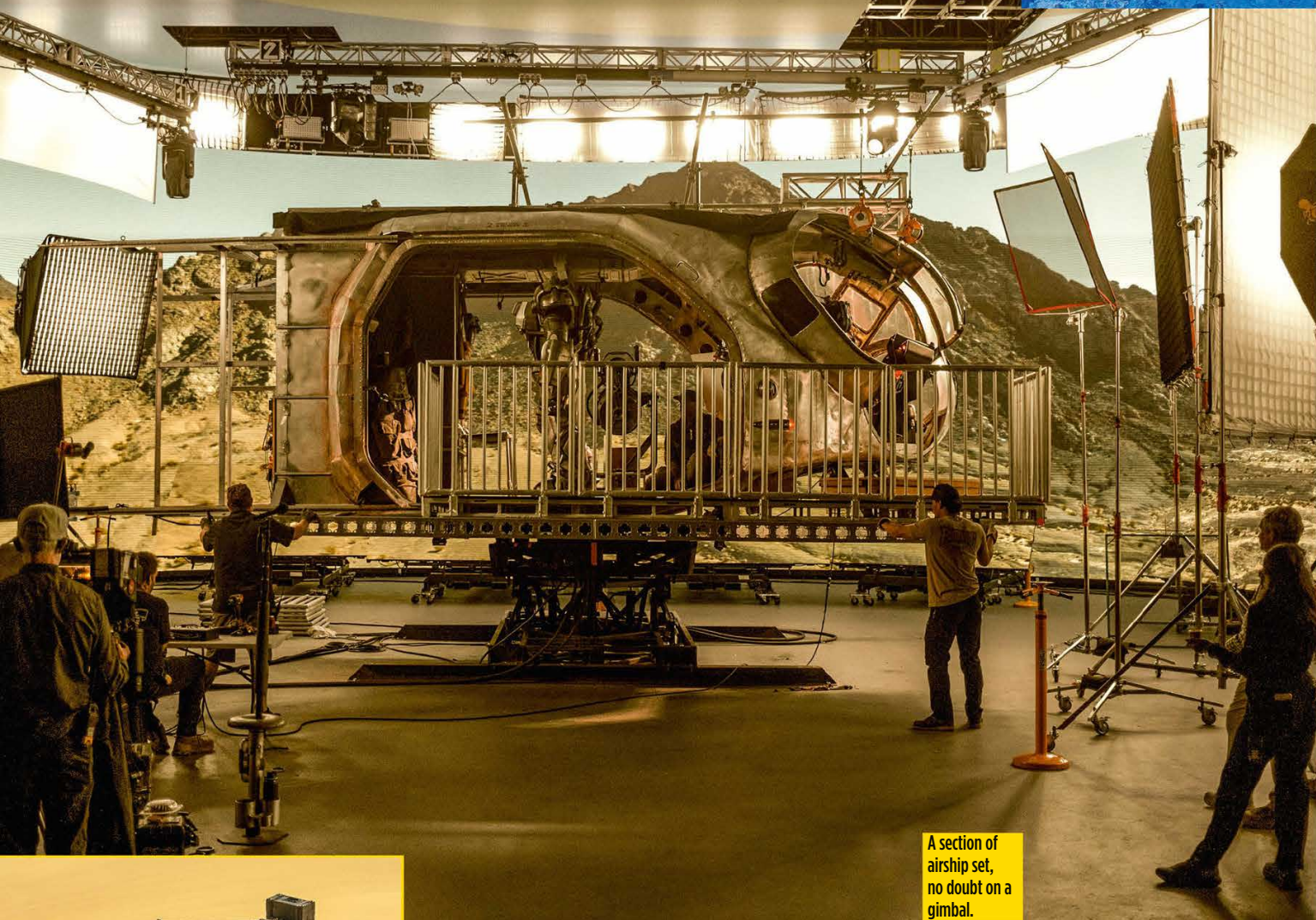
Back To The Future

⚡ With season two revealing a surprising backstory for Steph and Hank, the actors are keen to find out what happens next. When asked what the future holds, Annabel O’Hagan



Filming took place at Dumont Dunes, California.

tells *SFX*: “Good question! Backyard and a few kids? I’m so curious to know if they pull us out of our current predicaments, because we’re both trapped in a different way. Hank with the chip and me in my office – with an angry mob outside my door. Hopefully that fancy black Pip-Boy can get me out of that situation – and I



A section of airship set, no doubt on a gimbal.



Well Dune

⚡ “Filming at Dumont Dunes was beautiful,” reveals Aaron Moten. “Usually, you want to be able to close everything off on a set, but this was an open park. Johnny Pemberton [Thaddeus] and I have this amazing moment where we’re being careful not to walk on the sand for a shot. There was this beautiful dune, which was a stunning set-up for the massive wide shot where we walk off into the distance. As soon as we heard ‘cut,’ we started to walk back – only to see six or seven dune buggies start to do tricks on the dunes. It wasn’t our crew. We looked at each other and said, ‘I’m glad we’re not still out there.’ We’re still not sure if they saw us filming.”

don’t think the future involves sunshine and rainbows. I hope I’m in Power Armour [next season]. I don’t know if that’s realistic, but Power Armour and Steph feels like a fun, lethal combination. Bring on a Deathclaw, too. Steph can give him one of her scary one-eyed glares and he’d just wither.”

Quick Change

⚡ “When it comes to the make-up process for The Ghoul, I don’t really think there are any more minutes we can shave off when we start work on season three,” chuckles Walton Goggins, speaking exclusively to *SFX*. “It started off taking five hours to put on. That was the very first application, but we now have it down to about two hours and 15 minutes. Maybe we can get it down

to two hours on days if we’re flying, but that’s it. That’s the time we need. We have a rhythm and I have a wave in which I approach it psychologically.”

Future Stories

⚡ What does the future hold for Maximus and Lucy? “Oh, boy,” chuckles Aaron Moten. “I’m sure there will be more chaos. Much more chaos. I’m excited to get to be back at work with my good friend Ella. It will be really fun – and we’re both really excited to hit the ground running again.” ●

Fallout is on Prime Video.

The Ghoul’s journey will continue in season three.



RICHARD MORGAN

Back from other fronts: the writer re-energised by returning to prose

Words by Jonathan Wright // Portrait by Chris Ridley

IT'S BEEN A WHILE SINCE THE WORLD welcomed a new novel from Richard Morgan. So long that what he calls “the whole dance” of readying a book for publication is something he’d forgotten about. “And now, obviously, we’re hitting publicity and that’s another part of the dance where I’m like, ‘Oh, yeah, I remember I used to do this,’” he says.

By nature, Morgan adds, he identifies more with the likes of Ian Fleming, “reclusive guys who had a life and then sat down somewhere with a typewriter and became novelists later in life”, than today’s social media-savvy writers. That may be true, but Morgan is known as a talker, a reputation he confirms by holding forth for about 45 minutes, only occasionally interrupted by *SFX* sneaking in a question.

His new standalone fantasy, *No Man’s Land*, is chief among his subjects. It’s a book that was possibly inspired, according to Morgan, by rereading the poetry of Ted Hughes, where the idea of “the borderline” between wild nature and the human world recurs.

“Out of nowhere, I have this image,” he says of the book’s genesis. “It’s this guy, and he’s wearing a long trench coat, and he’s got a baby in his arms and he’s just come out of a forest. That was literally all I had. I’m like, ‘What’s all that about?’ And I started writing.”

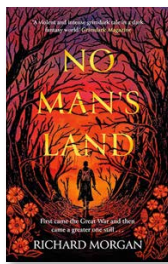
These rough paragraphs collided with another idea, a story about “a private eye type” whose beat includes working for families with changelings in their midst. Morgan, who had been struggling to write a sequel to his previous novel, the Mars-set *Thin Air* (2018), had a way forwards. He would write about a man with a shotgun – “I do love me a shotgun, I put that down to seeing *Mad Max* too young” – who “retrieves children stolen by the fae”.

So it was that his protagonist, Duncan Silver, a Great War veteran turned scourge of elves, came into focus in a book that Morgan says he “burnt through” once it was underway.

WAR DAMAGE

Silver is a figure who, albeit tangentially, taps into a rich heritage. “[SF novelist and academic] Adam Roberts has this theory about how modern fantasy was formed,” says Morgan, “and he’s very big on the fact that a lot of these guys were writers who had gone through the First World War. A rejection of the horrors of mechanised warfare becomes a rejection of modernity in all forms, and a longing for this bucolic, pre-modern past.” It’s no coincidence that one of the two epigraphs to *No Man’s Land* is a quote from JRR Tolkien, who saw action on the Western Front.

Despite the book being set in a world that riffs on 20th-century British history, there’s much in its pages that seems to address contemporary concerns. “I realised quite



BIODATA

From
Norwich

Greatest Hits
Altered Carbon (2003) won the Philip K Dick Award and was adapted into a Netflix series. *Black Man* (2007, also published as *Thirteen*) took the Clarke Award.

Random Fact
Altered Carbon was cancelled after two seasons. The problem with screen cyberpunk, says Morgan, is that it’s expensive, and its grittiness puts off mainstream audiences.

early on, ‘Oh Christ, this thematically is related very closely to where we are,’” says Morgan. By this, he means he finds parallels between our times and the interwar era of flappers and partying. “We haven’t had a war, but I think we have had a crash in our belief system,” he continues. “I think we don’t any longer know what we believe.”

He’s suspicious of “the appeal to atavism” represented in the political sphere by the populism of Donald Trump and Nigel Farage, but also in “healing through crystals” and “the wellness industry”. Morgan: “It is the abandonment of any measured and rational approach to the world that might upset or disappoint you. Instead, you retreat into ‘What I want to be true is true; you know?’”

SLOW GOING

This may sound downbeat but, speaking with him, Morgan comes across rather as a man deeply engaged with the world. And also as someone energised by being back writing prose. So what’s he been doing in the seven years since *Thin Air* was published? His output, he says, had already slowed down because he had a child at the comparatively late age of 44: “That was a bit of a shock to the system.”

More life happened, too. Morgan began working for a Ukrainian-German games developer, Gunzilla, and “accidentally” found himself filling a “full-time development director’s post”. Both his father and mother-in-law were diagnosed with cancer. He was involved with the Netflix adaptation of his novel *Altered Carbon*.

Then there were the issues with a book that, in the near future, looks set finally to be published, possibly under the title *Gone Machine*. He had been, Morgan belatedly realised, writing the equivalent of *Thin Air*’s DVD extras rather than something genuinely new. It took writing *No Man’s Land* to make him see this. “It’s still not an easy finish,” he says of the reworked sequel, “but it’s much better now because it’s a book that breathes.”

What he won’t do is return to the world of *No Man’s Land*, although he is “touting” the book around for adaptation as a movie. In an ideal world, he says, Guillermo del Toro, an influence on parts of the novel, would direct. He could set it around the Spanish Civil War, suggests *SFX*. “Exactly,” he says, “in *El Laberinto Del Fauno* [*Pan’s Labyrinth*], there are a lot of the same feelings.” Besides, he adds (referencing *Hellboy II: The Golden Army*), del Toro is the only director who’s ever captured “the essential uncanniness” of elves, just how scary they are. To be clear, we’re not suggesting del Toro has even read a single page of *No Man’s Land*, but we’d certainly pay to see this movie... ●

No Man’s Land is out on 24 March, published by Gollancz.

“ Out of nowhere,
I have this image.
It’s this guy, and
he’s wearing a long
trench coat ”





FANGTASTIC FACTS

The green anaconda, aka *Eunectes murinus*, is one of the largest snakes in the world.

Anacondas are the largest snakes by weight, but are beaten in length by the reticulated python.

The semiaquatic snakes are found in South America – the generic name *Eunectes* is derived from Ancient Greek meaning “good swimmer”.

The 2025 version of *Anaconda* is the seventh instalment in the film franchise.

Paul Rudd and Jack Black were initially cast in each other's roles, but swapped.

Filming took place over two months in Queensland, Australia.

The score for *Anaconda* was composed by the award-winning David Fleming, who recently worked on *Superman (2025)* and *The Last Of Us*.

HISS AND TELL

There's a rumble in the jungle with the latest *Anaconda* movie **WORDS: LUKE SMITH**



AS HARDCORE GENRE FILM FANS, THERE'S ANY number of cinematic classics we can quote inside out, re-enact and – if called to – remake if the opportunity should ever arrive.

That's the premise of *Anaconda* – where the dream of two lifelong friends, Doug McCallister (played by Jack Black) and Ronald “Griff” Griffin (Paul Rudd) has been to film a brand new version of their all-time favourite film, 1997's horror-adventure *Anaconda*. Be careful what you wish for, because sometimes dreams do come true!

All it takes is an eventual midlife crisis to set the wheels in motion, but when you're remaking a movie about a snake hunter tracking down a legendary killer creature, you might just have bitten off more than you can chew. Or indeed, vice versa...

With your BFF filming by your side in the Amazon rainforest, what could possibly go wrong? Just an actual giant anaconda making an unexpected appearance in your dream blockbuster... Suddenly the comedy takes a chaotic turn and that childhood dream very much becomes an adult's nightmare – not to

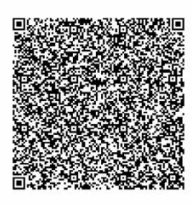
mention that they might wind up as dinner for their starring lead!

But all is not what it seems with Griff's claim on the classic franchise, plus there's tension caused by the arrival of Ana (Daniela Melchior), and Doug adding her to the cast of their indie flick. Will any of them make it out of Brazil alive, and why is there another film crew on the scene?

Keep your eyes peeled – well, keep them peeled for giant snakes, obviously – because with the newest *Anaconda* being a clever meta-reboot of the original, there's going to be more than a few Easter eggs and surprises.

Available on DVD, Blu-ray, 4K UHD and a limited edition SteelBook®, all formats include a host of bonus special features, including “Hiss-terical outtakes and bloopers” – yes, of course they went there – deleted and extended scenes, and featurettes looking at the cast, director and writer Tom Gormican, Black and Rudd on a journey to chaos, and how the team reinvented the legend of the original 1997 production.

Anaconda is out now to buy on DVD, Blu-ray, 4K UHD and SteelBook®



APRIL 2026

edited by Ian Berriman

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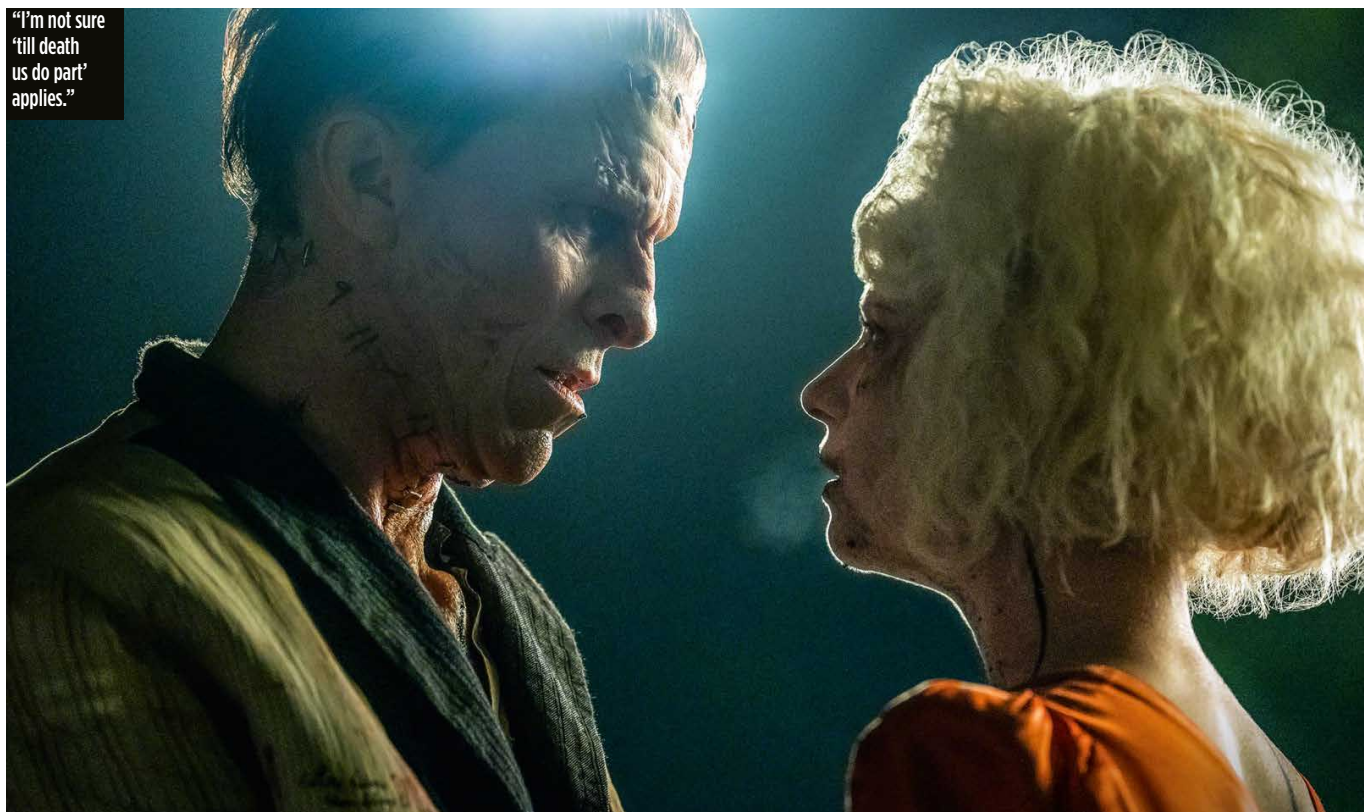
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NO MAN'S LAND

→ Richard Morgan's latest sees a war-scarred WWI veteran recovering kids stolen by the fae.

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

"I'm not sure 'till death us do part' applies."



THE BRIDE!

Dead Woman Walking



▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

15 | 127 minutes

▶ Director **Maggie Gyllenhaal**

▶ Cast **Jessie Buckley, Christian Bale, Peter Sarsgaard, Annette Bening**

➔ **Maggie Gyllenhaal's** second directorial credit – her first big-budget production – is a roller coaster take on Mary Shelley's brainchild, rambunctious and imbued with such punk rock spirit that it'd be fitting if its Creature's features were held together by safety pins, not stitches.

Frankenstein (yes, that's his name – Gyllenhaal elegantly squares this circle by having Christian Bale's character declare, "It's my father's name") isn't the central figure here, however. That's Ida, Jessie Buckley's murdered escort in '30s Chicago,

revived by a sympathetic scientist to end the now 117-year-old "Frank"'s tortured solitude.

This seems unlikely to end well, and so it proves; after Frank kerb-stamps a pair of attackers, the resurrected lovers are forced to go on the lam, a development that sees the film's genre Venn diagram intersecting Universal horror and '30s gangster flicks with the amour fou tradition of films like *Gun Crazy*, *Bonnie And Clyde* and *Badlands*.

Buckley is a delight, firing off loosely-associated verbiage like there's a short-circuit in her left hemisphere; knocking jars off the edge of dinner tables like a bored cat. This Bride is rude: Buckley's predecessor, *Bride Of Frankenstein* star Elsa Lanchester, never asked "Want to fuck?". She's righteous: the notion that resurrection has

given Ida a superpower – knowledge of the crimes committed against dead women by men – is fascinating (if a little under-explored), and inspires a barnstorming speech. And she's an inspiration: "GRRRLS RIOT" screams a newspaper headline when copycats spring up – an obvious nod to the riot grrrl bands of the '90s.

You can easily imagine that influence leaking into real life: if there's any justice, we can expect Comic-Con cosplayers rocking laddered stockings, black tongues and callipers, while her catchphrase "I would prefer not to" (a pinch from Herman Melville) is surely destined to launch a thousand Etsy store products.

When *SFX* suggested, in an interview, that this is a #MeToo movie, Gyllenhaal pooh-poohed the idea – but then, she also closes the film with a scene where her heroine repeatedly yells "Me too!"... And it's impossible to watch scenes featuring a gangster who's collected the tongues of uppity women, pickled in jars,

without thinking of that toad Harvey Weinstein.

Gyllenhaal's denial is understandable, though: no one wants their bold, brassy big-screen entertainment misconstrued as a po-faced polemic. *THE BRIDE!* is certainly not one of those – newly-stitched tongue is sufficiently placed in cheek for Gyllenhaal to nod to *Young Frankenstein's* "Puttin' On The Ritz" sequence, and run Bobby Pickett's "Monster Mash" over the end titles.

It's a political film all right, but more predominantly a warped romance – a surprisingly non-judgmental one, given that it begins with Frankenstein treating Ida like an object. Boasting an exuberant dance number, it's a film that crashes the party, sticks it to the Man, becomes ungovernable. Though *THE BRIDE!*'s lovers are doomed, this is, ultimately, a joyous endeavour – a tale of a pair of resurrected corpses that makes you feel more alive. **Ian Berriman**

i Look out for a poster of Marcel L'Herbier's 1924 film *L'Inhumaine*, in which a scientist restores a dead woman to life.



READY OR NOT 2: HERE I COME

★★★★☆

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

15 | 108 minutes

▶ Directors **Matt Bettinelli-Olpin, Tyler Gillett**

▶ Cast **Samara Weaving, Kathryn Newton, Sarah Michelle Gellar, Elijah Wood**

◉ **In the first *Ready Or Not***, blushing bride Grace (Samara Weaving) spent her wedding night being stalked by devil-worshipping in-laws. Picking up where its 2019 predecessor left off, *Here I Come* adds some *John Wick* to the mix by having an entire cabal of wealthy inbreds seek her scalp.

Ante upped, co-directors Matt Bettinelli-Olpin and Tyler Gillett – aka Radio Silence – duly unleash the carnage on a sprawling resort that includes a golf course, a casino and a creepy Satanic temple. The star wattage is also augmented, with *Buffy*'s Sarah Michelle Gellar – the supercilious daughter of a cadaverous David Cronenberg – leading the hunt, under the watchful gaze of Elijah Wood's dispassionate arbiter.

In giving Grace a sister in Kathryn Newton's gum-popping Faith, though, *Here I Come* tweaks the formula too far. There's little chemistry between the pair, while having two targets makes for a messy continuation of an admirably streamlined original.

Amusing needle-drops are again part of the gumbo, with one pepper-spray-assisted girl fight unspooling to Bonnie Tyler's "Total Eclipse Of The Heart". Like many a follow-up before it, alas, *Here I Come* has a vexing case of difficult-second-album syndrome. **Neil Smith**



Do we know what *his* favourite scary movie is?!

SCREAM 7

Ghosts of the past

★★★★☆

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

18 | 114 minutes

▶ Director **Kevin Williamson**

▶ Cast **Neve Campbell, Courteney Cox, Isabel May, Matthew Lillard**

◉ **"This time it's all about nostalgia,"** someone says in *Scream 7*. That's no surprise as the meta-horror series celebrates its own 30th anniversary, while revisiting the 1996 murders in Woodsboro and the eight in-universe *Stab* movies they spawned.

Confused? Don't worry. While it feels like it's treading the same ground as the 2018 *Halloween* reboot, it doesn't undo anything. Well, possibly, depending on whether or not you believe a certain legacy character really is still alive.

The opening sequence does most of the recapping, returning to the Macher family property in Woodsboro – now an Airbnb

“ Puts Sidney front and centre, and works all the better for it ”

specialising as a meta *Stab* “murder house” – with the parasocial obsession with celebrity and true crime playing right from the outset.

Sidney (Neve Campbell) is now married to Joel McHale's police officer and is running a coffee shop in Pine Grove when a voice – and possibly face – from the past reignites the Ghostface killings, placing her teenage daughter Tatum (1883's Isabel May) at risk.

This chapter puts Sidney front and centre in a way she hasn't been for a while, and works all the better for it. But it's reporter Gale Weathers (Courteney Cox) who gets the best lines and the loudest cheers from the audience. A pity, then, that such an intrepid newshound literally vanishes before the final act.

Scream 7 wears its bloody heart proudly on its sleeve – but as an observation on deepfakes, AI and horror fandom it's smarter than people may think. It doesn't reinvent the wheel – it's *Scream 7*, for goodness' sake – but you'll have a killer time. **Darren Scott**

i The *Scream* series is now one of only six horror franchises to have passed the \$1 billion point at the box office.



THE BLUE TRAIL

★★★★☆

▶ **RELEASED 17 APRIL**

12A | 86 minutes

▶ Director **Gabriel Mascaro**

▶ Cast **Denise Weinberg, Rodrigo Santoro, Miriam Socarras, Adanilo**

◉ **Somewhere on the shimmering border between speculative sci-fi and modern fable, *The Blue Trail* charts an unexpectedly buoyant course through a dystopian Brazil.** Gabriel Mascaro's premise – a society that “protects” citizens over 75 by shipping them off to a mysterious Colony – is chilling, yet the film glows with warmth rather than despair, driven by Denise Weinberg as the fiercely independent Tereza.

Opening amid propagandistic slogans and bureaucratic euphemisms, the film reveals its world obliquely, letting graffiti and rituals sketch a system of soft erasure. Tereza's modest dream, to fly in an aeroplane, becomes the engine for a gently rebellious odyssey upriver through the Amazon.

Mascaro's visual flair is in full force: rusting infrastructure, surreal tyre mountains and languid river vistas coexist in hypnotic high-definition splendour. Structurally, it plays like a road movie without roads, drifting from encounter to encounter – a drunken boat captain, hustlers, dreamers and fellow escapees – each adding texture to Tereza's awakening.

Crucially, *The Blue Trail* sidesteps the bleakness of its genre cousins, opting instead for a defiantly humane optimism. It's a quietly radical adventure about ageing, autonomy and rediscovering wonder before the system files you away. Gentle, strange and sneakily uplifting sci-fi. **Leila Latif**

PROJECT HAIL MARY

Between a rock and a hard place



RELEASED OUT NOW!

12A | 157 minutes

▶ Directors Phil Lord, Christopher Miller

▶ Cast Ryan Gosling, Sandra Hüller, Lionel Boyce, James Ortiz

Some well-deployed jaunty vintage rock tracks set the tone for this ambitious sci-fi, adapted from *The Martian* author Andy Weir's novel of the same name. The occasional needle-drops are a throwback to the kind of character-driven genre films we see far less of in this era of franchise domination. And "jaunty rock" is also a fitting description of a key supporting character in this interstellar bromance.

Directed by Phil Lord and Christopher Miller, *Project Hail*

Mary is the directorial duo's first feature since 2014's double-whammy of *22 Jump Street* and *The Lego Movie*, following their ill-fated work on *Star Wars* spin-off *Solo*. Their comedic sensibilities come through here; it's rare for an adventure on this scale to be so funny, though the frequency and intensity of the laughs is well judged, and balanced with appreciably apocalyptic stakes.

Ryan Gosling continues to make this leading man thing look easy, pairing a likeable everyman energy with unforced comic timing, and drawing on reserves of self doubt when needed. He also proves he can generate chemistry with a rock, quite literally, as his scientist Ryland Grace befriends a

stony-faced, crab-like being in the far reaches of space (near the star Tau Ceti). Both Grace and Rocky (as his new pal becomes known) are the sole survivors of their respective missions; they've travelled here to study this star, which seems immune to a micro-organism that's draining power from their own suns.

The odd couple bromance is the film's central pleasure. Rocky is a delight, brilliantly puppeteered (and voiced) by James Ortiz. Information is smartly parcelled out, too. Another throwback element to *Project Hail Mary* is its pace – at two hours 37 minutes, it's in no hurry, and like the source novel, it breaks up the amnesiac Grace's time in space with flashbacks to his life as a teacher on Earth, before he became part of this last-ditch mission.

There is sometimes the sense that the time in space could do with more ticking-clock tension. While the Earthbound scenes have a suitably apocalyptic doominess (and a poignant karaoke scene featuring Sandra Hüller's pragmatic project leader, Eva Strat), Grace and Rocky could occasionally use a bit more urgency. And despite some moving moments, the film doesn't quite obliterate the heartstrings like it promises to at times. It also suffers slightly by inviting comparison to exceptional recent sci-fi dramas of this type, such as *The Martian*, *Arrival* and *Interstellar*.

But despite those minor shortcomings, there's a lot to be thankful for here. There are some sublime visuals, from space-docking dances to disorientating close-ups, Daniel Pemberton's score is melancholic, tense and optimistic in all the right places, and the repartee between Grace and Rocky is immensely entertaining. If you've been waiting for a sci-fi spectacle with smarts and heart, your prayers have been answered. **Matt Maytum**

The screenplay is by Drew Goddard, who also adapted Weir's *The Martian*. He's currently working on a *Matrix* script.



THE LAND OF SOMETIMES



RELEASED OUT NOW!

U | 93 minutes

▶ Director Leon Joosen

▶ Cast Ewan McGregor, Helena Bonham Carter,

Alisha Weir, Andrei Shen

Ewan McGregor has buckets of fun voicing a magical Wish Collector in this animated romp, also notable for featuring Terry Jones's last screen appearance (well, technically), as he lends his vocals to a supernatural clock. Throw in Helena Bonham Carter as a mean fairy and, bizarrely, Mel Brooks as a postman, and this is quite the superstar brew.

At its heart are twins Elise (Alisha Weir) and Alfie (Andrei Shen), whose idyllic life is shattered when they lose their father and then find they can't connect with their mother – probably because she's so underwritten. Adventure calls when the kids get their hands on a magical wishing clock and head to the land of Sometimes. As the children navigate this new world, lessons are learnt, danger is thwarted, and songs are sung (co-written by Tim Rice, they're not that bad).

The bizarre, noisy creatures waiting in *Sometimes* wear thin pretty damn quickly, but they should distract any youngsters viewing this for a while; ditto all the fart gags and vats of slime. But barring the occasional one-liner from the Wish Collector, the screenplay feels undercooked, lacking in humour and sharpness. The end result is a tale that shouts a lot, but remains as one-dimensional as the twins' mum. **Jayne Nelson**





DEAD LOVER

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

18 | 85 minutes

▶ Director Grace Glowicki

▶ Cast Grace Glowicki, Ben Petrie, Leah Doz, Lowen Morrow

❖ Forget *Wuthering Heights*.

If you're after a sexed-up take on a gothic classic, this is the one. A Frankenstein story by way of Michele Soavi's *Dellamorte Dellamore* and those early-'00s Judderman adverts for Metz alcopops, Grace Glowicki's *Dead Lover* is relentlessly disgusting and yet somehow still beautiful.

Poor old Gravedigger (played by the director) is lonely and horny, doing weird science to try to disguise how much she smells of corpses, when she meets Lover. Inexplicably, he's really into her stench. But when he dies in a shipwreck, leaving her nothing but his ring finger, her attempts to put together a Franken-lover go horribly awry.

Even setting aside the necrophilia, this is a film that will alienate some viewers. It's unapologetically theatrical, with rhyming dialogue and black box sets, and it's even more unapologetically homemade – there are only four cast members, each playing up to seven different roles, aided by very fake-looking beards and wigs. Add in the down-and-very-dirty approach to sex and death and you've got no hope of getting your mum to watch this.

You could be looking at a new cult classic, though. This is a story about obsession and grief; the heightened, absurdist visuals are appropriate when dealing with emotions that big. *Dead Lover* even manages a weirdo-flavoured happy ending, if only for a moment. **Sarah Dobbs**



HOPPERS

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

U | 104 minutes

▶ Director Daniel Chong

▶ Cast Piper Curda, Jon Hamm, Dave Franco, Meryl Streep

❖ **Pixar's increasing reliance** on sequels (see *Inside Out 2* and the upcoming *Toy Story 5*) is making standalone films like *Hoppers* almost as endangered as the forest critters its plucky heroine Mabel (Piper Curda) seeks to shield from her mayor's plan to drive a highway through their habitat. It's worth championing, then, if only for its audacious blend of mind-transference tech, anthropomorphic antics and environmentalist messaging.

The "hopping" of the title enables Mabel to zap her consciousness into a robot beaver (just go with it...) and interact with real ones. ("It's nothing like *Avatar*!" snaps its inventor, in one of several knowing asides.) Once inside her new furry carapace, though, Mabel realises that the animal kingdom has its own rules and hierarchies which, if upset, could put her entire town in jeopardy.

Daniel Chong's film boasts an absurd premise elastic enough to encompass an animal-only aerobics class, a car chase involving an airborne shark, and a finale straight out of *The Dam Busters*. Though things do get rather frenetic as a consequence, not least when the son of Meryl Streep's insect queen (Dave Franco) inhabits a robot modelled on Jon Hamm's mayor, it's a small price to pay for a fantasy this inventive.

To quote Leslie Nielsen at the start of *The Naked Gun*: nice beaver! **Neil Smith**



ORWELL: 2+2=5

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 27 MARCH**

15 | 119 minutes

▶ Director Raoul Peck

❖ **Adam Curtis has a lot to** answer for. His documentaries make clever use of editing to sweep people along with a narrative, but close your eyes and you may realise that all too often he's presenting questionable assertions as fact.

Raoul Peck is clearly a disciple. This scattershot, amorphous doc on *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* enduring relevance fires off clip after clip, to bamboozling effect. January 6! A Nazi book burning! Gaza! Myanmar! That *Frost Report* sketch! Jeff Bezos! The Titan submersible! *The Passion of Joan Of Arc*! Le Pen! *Marathon Man*! Football ultras! Hitler! BLM! Like Curtis, Peck is incapable of letting a sentence pass unillustrated – when down and outs are mentioned, Charlie Chaplin's tramp flashes up. You may struggle to stifle a guffaw.

The film's at its best when it circles back to Jura, the Scottish island where Orwell wrote the novel (though the portentous half-whisper Damien Lewis adopts to read his letters still irritates). It's at its weakest when making broadbrush political statements. At one point the words "antisemitism 2024=criticising Israel" appear, as if this trite formulation and de-euphemising "collateral damage" are equivalent.

Orwell, a champion of clear prose, would surely have been bemused. If you want to learn about the writing of the novel, or its enduring, much-contested legacy, read Dorian Lynskey's book *The Ministry Of Truth* instead. **Ian Berriman**



UNDERTONE

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 10 APRIL**

TBC | 94 minutes

▶ Director Ian Tuason

▶ Cast Nina Kiri, Adam DiMarco, Michèle Duquet

❖ **This tightly-confined A24** chiller recalls no-budget classics like *Paranormal Activity* and *The Blair Witch Project*, but applies meticulous control and a greater degree of technical gloss to their style of suggestive scares.

Initially, you may wonder if it'd work better as a radio drama. The story centres on Evy (Nina Kiri), one half of a paranormal podcast team, and walking up and down stairs is about as kinetic as it gets. Since Evy's waiting for her mute, bed-bound mother to slip away, sitting listening to spooky audio files (anonymously emailed in) almost seems like light relief. But after she gets the results of a pregnancy test, it becomes increasingly clear that Evy's walking into a demonic trap...

Writer/director Ian Tuason is not shy of trading in familiar tropes: the creepiness of nursery rhymes, reversed speech, dolls and children's drawings all come into play. But then, such things are horror clichés because they *work*.

Making effective use of slow pans, he understands how to put the viewer on edge, forcing them to anticipate what might appear in the extremities of the frame. And while much of the skin-crawling results from just listening intently, he doesn't go overboard with the audio equivalent of jump scares. The result is a tightly-wound horror guaranteed to tease up the hairs on the back of your neck, which may leave you digging your nails into your palm. **Ian Berriman**


Reviews


TV




DRINKING GAME


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


 A character uses programmable matter to get themselves out of a fix.


 Khionian cadet Darem vomits a rainbow.



 Caleb Mir mentions his missing mother.

 Nahla Ake sits on a chair in an unconventional way...

 ... or walks into a room with no shoes on.

 An Academy kid faces off against a War College rival.

 Stephen Colbert's Digital Dean of Students makes an announcement.

STAR TREK: STARFLEET ACADEMY

Season One An Education



UK/US Paramount+, streaming now

Showrunners Alex Kurtzman,

Noga Landau

Cast Holly Hunter, Sandro Rosta,

Karim Diané, Kerrice Brooks,

George Hawkins, Bella Shepard

EPISODES 1.01-1.10 Ignore naysayers

who've given this new, youth-orientated iteration of *Star Trek* a kicking online. In fact, before you watch *Starfleet Academy*, it's worth remembering that not everyone loved *The Next Generation* when it launched in the late '80s, with its mould-breaking captain, a teen on the bridge, and – whisper it – guys in skirts. Outrageous, right?

Like the early seasons of *TNG* – not to mention the cadets at its

centre – *Starfleet Academy* is a work in progress, a show that does its best to boldly go where no *Trek* has gone before, but doesn't always get it right. And while Holly Hunter's Captain Nahla Ake couldn't be more different from Jean-Luc Picard, she's a similarly compelling presence.

A *Starfleet Academy*-set story has been on the drawing board for decades, but it's finally materialised in the distant, 32nd-century-set future of *Star Trek: Discovery*. That means plenty of super-advanced tech that's barely distinguishable from magic, and a bunch of kids who've grown up in a galaxy without warp travel.

It's *X-Men: First Class* in space or *Harry Potter* with phasers, and arguably more focused on coming of age than voyages on the final frontier. At times it feels like it's trying too hard to chase the teen/

20-something demographic – things never got so steamy on Picard's *Enterprise* – and the threat level rarely gets anywhere near yellow alert. Indeed, when the show's Big Bad, pirate boss Nus Braka (an excellent, scenery-chewing Paul Giamatti), does appear, his Federation-threatening scheming feels slightly tacked on.

But look past the over-earnest growing pains, and there's plenty to enjoy. The storytelling often tries to subvert *Trek* norms, with smart use of split-screen and voiceover, and a soundtrack that veers away from orchestral scores. The series also embraces existing lore in creative ways, most notably when it reveals the tragedy of the Klingon Empire, and explores the mysterious fate of an iconic character from *Deep Space Nine*. Robert Picardo also returns as a centuries-old version of *Voyager's*

Emergency Medical Hologram, and becomes increasingly pivotal.

However, with the exception of *Discovery's* wonderfully deadpan engineer-turned-teacher Jett Reno (Tig Notaro), it's the new characters who stand out. There's real chemistry between the cadets, whether they're royalty, reformed fugitives, or months-old photonic lifeforms there to study "organics".

So while too many episodes miss the mark, and the show often feels unsure of its target audience, it's worth – as the staff remind their students – persevering. Like *TNG* when it first landed, *Starfleet Academy* is bold, progressive and features some clever sci-fi ideas – and the voyages of the *Enterprise-D* didn't turn out too badly, did they? **Richard Edwards**

Showrunners Alex Kurtzman and Noga Landau are among several real people on *Starfleet Academy's* wall of fame.

ONE PIECE Season Two Having a Grand old time

★★★★★

UK/US Netflix, streaming now

► Showrunners Matt Owens, Joe Tracz

► Cast Iñaki Godoy, Taz Skylar, Mackenyu, Jacob Romero

EPISODES 2.01-2.08 **Netflix's**

live-action take on *One Piece* confounded expectations, turning a manga with wacky designs and storylines into a warm-hearted, charming series. Season two sees Luffy and his crew – Nami, Zoro, Usopp and Sanji – about to cross onto their world's most perilous stretch of sea, the Grand Line.

This is a dangerous promise to make: that the adventure's ramping up and you ain't seen nothing yet... but *One Piece* delivers. Along the way there are giants, dinosaurs, a whale, an uphill waterfall, and a psycho-villain's tea party from hell. The other splendid baddies include a

fastidious slimeball obsessed with waxing, and a pantomime megalomaniac resembling a metal-jawed Jack Black.

It's not perfect. The first episode descends into a lot of rather unengaging fights, which teeter on the edge of naffness. Later, a supersized bar brawl, centred on Zoro, is amazingly constructed, but it's hard to buy into what's theoretically a massacre like those in *Kill Bill* or *Kingsman* when there's so much *Peter Pan* wirework and barely any blood.

Much of the season is extraordinary, though. Some of its wildness evokes *Doctor Who*, or the fantasy of Terry Gilliam. A standout episode, "Reindeer Shames", recalls the '80s Jim Henson series *The Storyteller*, as it sets up one of *One Piece's* most iconic characters: the brave little

They've found all six episodes of "Fury From The Deep".



boy reindeer Chopper, who has all the furry pathos of Paddington, but with a bit more swearing.

Of the established crew, Nami tends to be sidelined after her

“The adventure's wrapping up and you ain't seen nothing yet”

central role in season one, but the other characters have great moments, Sanji especially. And Iñaki Godoy is still a wonder as Luffy, conveying the manga's childlike joy whether he's eagerly rushing into battle or blissfully sitting on top of a dinosaur's head. **Andrew Osmond**

i The anime series has racked up 1,150 episodes; this second live-action season gets to the events of about episode 90.

THE BEAUTY A pretty state of affairs

★★★★★

UK Disney+, streaming now

US Hulu, streaming now

► Creators Ryan Murphy,

Matthew Hodgson

► Cast Evan Peters, Ashton Kutcher,

Anthony Ramos, Rebecca Hall

EPISODES 1.01-1.11 **Evan Peters**

describes *The Beauty* as “an international sci-fi satirical body-horror action-thriller”, which almost tells you everything you need to know about the show. The crucial thing he leaves out is that it's a Ryan Murphy (*American Horror Story/Monster*) show, so you shouldn't expect much in the way of subtlety.

An adaptation of a comic book (which is a handy way of defusing accusations that it's just ripping off *The Substance*), *The Beauty* kicks off with a supermodel going postal on a Paris catwalk, shortly before

exploding. Turns out there's a new drug that's turning the fat, ugly and old into perfect physical specimens, but with potentially grisly side effects.

FBI agents Cooper (Peters) and Jordan (Rebecca Hall) begin a globetrotting search for the source of the drug, but events soon overtake them, as ruthless evil tech billionaire Byron Forst (Vincent D'Onofrio/Ashton Kutcher) stops at nothing to get his product to market, and quash negative publicity. (We'll let you guess why Forst is played by two actors – he's far from the only example in the show).

This is very much a Murphy product: bold, brash, pervy and icky, with a meandering narrative and larger-than-life – some almost grotesque – characters. While the FBI investigation forms the backbone of the early episodes,



“I really wish I hadn't eaten that egg sandwich.”

midway through the season the writers become obsessed with overlong flashbacks exploring other aspects of its beauty-obsessed world. This provides some interesting, much needed context, but makes the show feel almost like an anthology at times, when you really want to get back to the central characters.

But while there's so much about *The Beauty's* storytelling that's

clunky, inelegant, contrived and in-your-face, it remains weirdly fun. It's glossy, the cartoon characters have an esoteric charm, the gore is memorably gross, and there are plenty of surprises. As a satire on an appearance-obsessed society, however, its bite barely goes skin deep. **Dave Golder**

i Ryan Murphy texted actor Jeremy Pope, “Hey, do you want to read something weird?” before sending him the script.

DOCTOR WHO Season 21 Out for Five

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1984 | 12 | Blu-ray

▶ Producer **John Nathan-Turner**

▶ Cast **Peter Davison, Janet Fielding,**

Mark Strickson, Nicola Bryant,

Colin Baker

BLU-RAY DEBUT Peter Davison's final season finds *Doctor Who* poised between the high of 1983's 20th-anniversary celebrations and the abrupt fall from grace of 1985's brush with cancellation.

Fittingly, a streak of fatalism runs throughout these seven stories. Nihilistic opener "Warriors Of The Deep" revives beloved Pertwee-era monsters the Silurians and the Sea Devils, but is hobbled by a rushed production. Snappy two-parter "The Awakening" resets the quality dial, serving techno folk horror in a

classic English-village setting, while the doomy but witty "Frontios" may be Davison's finest turn as the Doctor.

If the Lanzarote locations of "Planet Of Fire" feel like a holiday after the bleak "Resurrection Of The Daleks", then "The Caves Of Androzani" plunges us back into the grime; a bruising, propulsive exit for the Fifth Doctor, it's an artistic highpoint of the classic series. Too bad it's followed by the aesthetic apocalypse of "The Twin Dilemma", a ruinously naff introduction to Colin Baker's brash new Doctor.

➤ **Extras** A Special Edition of "Warriors Of The Deep" goes some way to redeeming this misfiring story, tightening the pace and giving a VFX glow-up to panto monster the Myrka. Elsewhere, this 10-disc set indulges a final opportunity for the range to

celebrate all things Davison: Matthew Sweet delivers three in-depth interviews, unpicking the private lives of companion actors Matthew Waterhouse (74 minutes), Mark Strickson (61 minutes) and Janet Fielding (67 minutes); covering all bases from tropical ulcers to arms dealing, these revelatory chats are on occasion downright jaw-dropping.

More insight into Fielding comes from a candid look at her current life in Ramsgate (35 minutes); she also reunites with Davison and Sarah Sutton for a river cruise, a jaunt that finds the trio firmly in bantering public-persona mode – a late pivot to a Q&A format, complete with special guest star, proves a highlight (83 minutes).

Elsewhere an excellent Making Of on "Resurrection" musters an impressive roster of cast and crew (50 minutes); an equally insightful retrospective on "The Twin Dilemma" is more of a post-mortem (55 minutes). As well as star-packed Behind The Sofa watch-a-longs for every story, we get two rather drawn-out escape-room games, showcasing the Davison cast (70 minutes) and their Colin Baker-era competitors (69 minutes). A vintage episode of spiritual forebear *The Adventure Game*, starring Fielding, is a nicely nostalgic addition (40 minutes).

Studio footage from "Caves" (70 minutes) offers a fascinating peek behind the scenes at the regeneration, while Davison provides a new commentary for "The Awakening", as well as his wry 2013 spoof *The Five(ish) Doctors Reboot*. Plus: optional effects upgrades; archival clips (including a *Breakfast Time* visit to the Radiophonic Workshop and a *Did You See...?* interview with first producer Verity Lambert); a whopping 7,706 pages of PDF material; numerous extras carried over from DVD. **Nick Setchfield**

Writer Christopher H Bidmead was inspired to create the Tractators in "Frontios" after woodlice infested his flat.



CALVAIRE

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2004 | 18 | Blu-ray

▶ Director **Fabrice Du Welz**

▶ Cast **Laurent Lucas,**

Jackie Berroyer, Jean-Luc Couchard,

Brigitte Lahaie

BLU-RAY DEBUT *Calvaire* comes

from the same New French Extremity wave as Pascal Laugier's *Martyrs*. It's a very different film, though still only recommended for those with strong stomachs.

Marc Stevens (Laurent Lucas) is a singer. When his van breaks down in the woods, he accepts an offer from eccentric local Bartel (Jackie Berroyer) to fix it. Bartel also warns Marc not to go into a nearby village...

From there the film takes on a tone somewhere between the backwoods nastiness of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and the grotesque absurdism of *The League Of Gentlemen*. A blackly comic parade of horrors.

➤ **Extras** Brand new for this Arrow Video edition are a video essay by critic Willow Catelny Maclay, which unpicks the gender themes (14 minutes), and a commentary by critics BJ and Harmony Colangelo.

Director Fabrice Du Welz appears on two commentaries, and in interviews from 2004 (27 minutes) and 2023 (32 minutes).

You also get archival making-of "Autour De Calvaire" (27 minutes), casting tapes (72 minutes), storyboard-to-scene comparisons (19 minutes), the production bible (seven minutes), and Du Welz short "A Wonderful Love" (22 minutes). An optional Theatrical Grade Version restores the film to its original colour grading. Plus: trailers; galleries; booklet. **Will Salmon**



Peter Davison realises just how long ago 1984 was.



THE BIRTHDAY

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2004 | 15 | 4K/Blu-ray

▶ Director Eugenio Mira

▶ Cast Corey Feldman, Erica Prior, Jack Taylor, Rick Merrill

BLU-RAY DEBUT Sometimes it's easier to admire a film than it is to enjoy it. That's the case with this Spanish-made cult item. The viewing experience is – as with *Uncut Gems* – uncomfortably akin to teetering on the edge of a panic attack.

Corey Feldman is the awkward Norman, whose presence at a family gathering in a hotel sees him buffeted by pushy waiters, disobedient lifts and a girlfriend who holds him in contempt. He's so twitchy – eyebrows in constant motion – that his anxiety is contagious.

Unfolding in real time, via impressive choreography, *The Birthday* keeps the viewer on the back foot. Something odd is afoot – what's in that big crate being wheeled past? But it's a while before its Lovecraftian true form comes into focus.

It's a viscerally disorientating film, with an extended buildup so exhausting that it might have benefitted from some trimming. But if you can muster the stamina it will clearly reward repeated viewings.

➤ **Extras** Director Eugenio Mira (17 minutes) is interviewed; this and a scene breakdown he narrates (17 minutes) provide interesting insights into the shoot (in a former sanatorium near Barcelona). The latter makes use of storyboards and rehearsal footage, revealing a remarkable level of pre-planning. Mira's joined by his leading man for a commentary. Plus: screening Q&A; trailers; gallery; booklet. **Ian Berriman**



OBEX Dog gone

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2026 | 15 | Blu-ray/digital

▶ Director Albert Birney

▶ Cast Albert Birney, Callie Hernandez, Frank Mosley

➤ **This lovingly hand-crafted**, made-in-Baltimore indie has faint echoes of *Eraserhead* (making much of rendering chirping cicadas eerily sinister), but also possesses a charming naïvety.

Shot in black and white, it's set in 1987. Director/co-writer Albert Birney also stars as Conor, a shut-in whose best (and probably only) friend is his dog, Sandy. After responding to an ad about a “breakthrough in interactive gaming”, he receives a disk of *OBEX*. Initially, it seems like a swizz. But then Conor's transported inside the game's world, where he must embark on a quest to rescue Sandy from a wolf-headed demon named

“Ixaroth's base may be cinema's least convincing castle”

Ixaroth. Traversing an adventure game map, he teams up with Víctor, a humanoid with a TV set for a head.

The budgetary limitations are always apparent: that map may include locations like the Swamp of Eternal Sadness and the Valley of Bones, but all we see are woods, while Ixaroth's base may be cinema's least convincing castle.

Ultimately, the narrative feels a little too linear, and rather slight. But the film's quirky digressions – such as a plodding karaoke take on Gary Numan's “Cars” – are good fun, and the retro electronic score (by Animal Collective's Josh Dibb) is a delight. For anyone who knows that *Jet Set Willy* isn't an STD and gets a Proustian rush from hearing a dot-matrix printer, the world of *OBEX* is worth exploring.

➤ **Extras** Birney and his co-writer provide commentary. Three shorts by Birney include faux footage of two fictional old-school videogames. You also get a featurette on the score (15 minutes), and seven deleted scenes. Plus: gallery; trailer. **Ian Berriman**

i Albert Birney's uncle, Reed Birney, played an amnesiac quarry worker in *Strange New Worlds*' “Among The Lotus Eaters”.



HELTER SKELTER

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED** 23 March

2012 | 18 | Blu-ray

▶ Director Mika Ninagawa

▶ Cast Erika Sawajiri, Nao Ōmori, Shinobu Terajima, Gō Ayano

BLU-RAY DEBUT This Japanese film shares a central theme with *The Substance*: the pressure to conform to female beauty standards. But though it's being marketed as body horror, it doesn't lean anywhere near as far in that direction as Coralie Fargeat's movie.

Erika Sawajiri is fashion idol Lilico, who (thanks to multiple surgeries from an illegal clinic) has reached the peak of her fame – but now ugly blotches are appearing on her body. In private, she's a monster, moving from spitting water in her assistant's face to humiliating her with sexual demands as she spirals into hallucinations.

The messaging is on-the-nose, and police interview interludes that contribute nada could have been liposuctioned out of the flabby running time. That leaves sets and costuming as the highlights. Lilico's gilded cage is a colourful, extravagant one, and fashion photographer turned director Mika Ninagawa's design team pull out all the stops.

➤ **Extras** An appropriately all-female team provides chatty commentary for this 88 Films release – critics Tori Potenza and Amber T are big fans. Six-minute interviews with the director and Sawajiri are accompanied by two “stage greetings” (26 minutes), a film festival Q&A (five minutes), and 13 minutes of behind-the-scenes footage. It's unlikely you'll sit through this stuff. Plus: trailers; gallery; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

VAMPYROS LESBOS

Sapphic flick

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★
▶ RELEASED 30 MARCH
 1971 | 18 | 4K/Blu-ray
 ▶ Director Jesús Franco
 ▶ Cast Soledad Miranda, Dennis Price, Paul Muller, Ewa Strömberg

BLU-RAY DEBUT Perhaps the quintessential film by Eurosleaze auteur Jess Franco, *Vampyros Lesbos* is largely an exercise in voyeuristic titillation for straight men. But its appeal isn't confined to said demographic; neither is that reason enough to dismiss it.

Though "turned" by Dracula, Countess Carody (Soledad Miranda) isn't your average vamp. She drinks blood, and holds people under her thrall. But she also sunbathes naked, and has a reflection – as showcased in an erotic floor show, one of several sequences designed to get the libidinous blood flowing.

The film has two key strengths. Miranda is ravishingly beautiful; you'll fall under the spell of her sultry stare too. And Manfred Hubler and Siegfried Schwab's score is monstrously groovy, all fuzz guitar, blaring brass and psychedelic sitars.

One can't help feeling that Franco's recurrent symbolism – scorpion, butterfly, kite – is merely padding. His reliance on wobbly zooms feels lackadaisical. And the plot is perfunctory at best. But what *Vampyros Lesbos* undeniably does have is a vibe.

⊕ **Extras** This dual-format Severin release ports two extras from a 2015 US release. Interviewed (24 minutes), the late director says he likes Miranda, and the film's atmosphere, but "nothing else". A biography of the star (20 minutes) has interesting clips of early roles in musicals and westerns.



The staring contest entered its second day.

There are five new bonuses. Franco expert Stephen Thrower provides even-handed analysis (45 minutes), declaring the film "wild and anarchic", while digging into the lesbian vampire trope's homophobic origins. *Anora* director Sean Baker's appreciation (10 minutes) reveals how it influenced the casting (and the costume) of his titular stripper. A 19-minute piece sees Thrower visit

locations from *other* Franco films. Huh? Two commentaries show how academia has annexed Franco's work, waffling on about "transgression" and namechecking psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. We kinda preferred it when they were seen as sleazy perv fodder... Plus: German titles; trailer. **Ian Berriman**

1 According to Franco, *Star Wars* make-up artist Stuart Freeborn (a friend) told him that Yoda's face was modelled on his!



BODYCAM

★★★★★
▶ RELEASED OUT NOW!
 2025 | N/A | SVOD

SHUDDER Asking an audience to feel sympathetic towards a cop who fatally shot an unarmed man, in this day and age? It's a bold move, and one that doesn't really pay off in this ultra-low-budget horror.

The conceit is that the whole nightmare is shot on the cops' bodycams. Yeah, like *End Of Watch*, only with a demonic cult instead of a drug cartel – and much, much cheaper. The wobbly visuals in Brandon Christensen's film might be forgivable, but the frequently inaudible dialogue makes this a tough watch. **Sarah Dobbs**



BONE KEEPER

★★★★★
▶ RELEASED 6 APRIL
 2026 | N/A | Digital

⊕ **It's always nice when a monster movie establishes up front that, yes, there's gonna be a proper monster.** This gloopy creature feature opens with a meteorite smashing into Earth and something with tentacles plopping out.

The human drama, when it arrives – in the form of a group of explorers looking to find the legendary "Bone Keeper" in a remote cave system, and a hitchhiking vlogger they pick up along the way – works pretty well, but it's the nightmarish monster effects that make this worth seeing. **Sarah Dobbs**



SORORITY HOUSE MASSACRE

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★★
▶ RELEASED OUT NOW!
 1986 | 18 | 4K & Blu-ray

⊕ **This Halloween Xerox is tediously formulaic.** When Beth moves into a sorority house, she's plagued by bloody dreams. Meanwhile, an escaped murderer is headed her way. You'll twig the connection 50 minutes before it's spelt out.

Every beat is predictable – the only mystery is how the killer leaps up through a first-floor window. Maybe he carries a trampoline around? ⊕ **Extras** Two commentaries; seven interviews; video essay; UK VHS cut; more. **Ian Berriman**



GHOST KILLER

★★★★★
▶ RELEASED 6 APRIL
 2025 | 15 | Digital

⊕ **When college student Fumika picks a bullet casing off the street, she's lumbered with the ghost of a hitman until she avenges his death.**

Silly? Yes, but this action-horror-comedy makes it work. Kudo's ability to possess Fumika's body means we get high-octane sequences where she kicks the living daylight's out of the bad guys... then bickers with Kudo about it, both speaking through the same mouth, just to really freak everyone out. Slick and stylish, it's a supernatural treat. **Sarah Dobbs**

THE DEVIL'S HAND

The main event

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1943 | PG | Blu-ray

▶ Director Maurice Tourneur

▶ Cast Pierre Fresnay, Josseline Gaël, Noël Roquevert, Guillaume de Sax

BLU-RAY DEBUT It may concern a cursed, disembodied hand, but this French fantasy's horrors are nothing compared to those unfolding in the streets during the period when it was lensed.

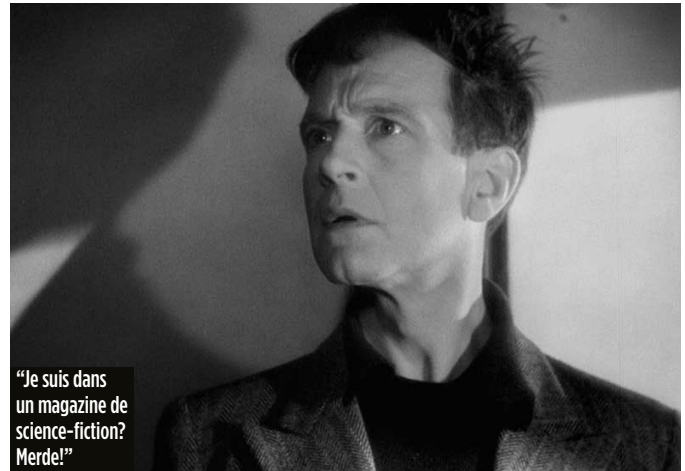
It was made by Continental Film, a Nazi-controlled production company during the occupation. Goebbels saw the benefit in keeping the populace entertained; at the same time, realist portraits of everyday life were, naturally, verboten. So Continental turned to historical subjects and fantasy, like this riff on the Faust legend.

Directed by Maurice Tourneur (father of *Cat People's* Jacques), it

centres on Roland Brissot, an untalented painter who agrees to buy the titular mitt for a token fee. Replacing his own left hand, it brings success in both the personal and professional spheres. But if he fails to sell it on before dying, he'll be damned for all eternity...

It has some lovely touches: the depiction of Satan (Pierre Palau) as a bowler-hatted petit bourgeois type is very droll, and Pierre Fresnay, compellingly intense as the struggling artist, injects a sense of urgency. A series of flashbacks to the hand's previous owners make striking use of shadowplay, and there's fun to be had detecting the odd whiff of subversion – such as when a casino employee tries to comfort Brissot by telling him “all men are links in the same chain”.

The fact that the Devil is eventually defeated by a legalistic detail is a tad anti-climactic, but



this remains a beautifully shadowy product of very dark times.

▶ **Extras** A new video essay by film historian Samm Deighan (19 minutes) provides useful context on both Continental Film and the story's fictional forebears. Critic James Oliver provides a smoothly flowing, extremely well-prepared commentary. But the highlight of this *Eureka!* Masters Of Cinema release is a fascinating French-

language documentary from 2010 (46 minutes), which discusses the history of the company, public attitudes to their output, and the difficulties of making films in such straitened circumstances (for example, plaster chicken legs had to stand in for the real thing). Plus: a booklet. **Ian Berriman**

I In a scene where the disembodied hand is seen moving in a box, the assistant director's hand was used.

FEAR IN THE NIGHT

School's Out

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 23 MARCH**

1972 | 15 | 4K & Blu-ray

▶ Director Jimmy Sangster

▶ Cast Judy Geeson, Joan Collins, Ralph Bates, Peter Cushing

▶ **The last hurrah for Hammer's** line of psychological thrillers – titles like *Maniac*, *Nightmare* and *Hysteria* – *Fear In The Night* toys with the viewer, suggesting a variety of supernatural possibilities, before finally delivering answers that almost seem even more implausible.

Judy Geeson plays the mentally fragile Peggy, who after being attacked by a mystery figure with a prosthetic arm relocates to a rural boarding school with her teacher husband (Ralph Bates). It's not long until she meets the head (Peter Cushing) – have a guess how many limbs he has.

Strangely, it takes Peggy a while to notice. But perhaps she's preoccupied by the mystery of why she keeps hearing the sounds of schoolboys, despite the building being deserted outside of term time. Is she cracking up?

A four-hander (Joan Collins makes up the numbers), it's essentially what you'd get if you took a giallo, dialled down the outrageousness, and sprinkled on Land Rovers, Granada service stations and brown corduroy. The fiendish plan has so many possible points of failure that only a complete idiot would be so foolish as to attempt it. But then that's all part of the fun. As ever, Collins (playing the headmaster's wife) gives good bitch, and while Cushing is a minimal presence, he elevates every scene he's in.

▶ **Extras** Studiocanal's dual-format Collector's Edition has one



brand new bonus: what's probably Kim Newman's 3457th Blu-ray talking head overview (26 minutes) – to be fair, he's always good value (and it's nice to see he's tidied that room a bit...). Carried over from the 2017 Blu-ray, “End Of Term” (17 minutes) intercuts talking heads by four Hammer mavens; if you're the sort of person who's thrilled to learn what other horror films a sofa has popped up

in, this will earn your respect. A fifth Hammer expert, Marcus Hearn, skilfully prompts the late writer/director Jimmy Sangster in an archival commentary; it makes a second yack track by writer Troy Howarth feel slightly redundant. Plus: gallery; trailer; 64-page booklet; two posters. **Ian Berriman**

I The main location now belongs to the International Society for Krishna Consciousness; George Harrison paid for it.



That's one way to give your mate a lift home.

WAR MACHINE Super Trooper

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2026 | 15 | SVOD

▶ Director **Patrick Hughes**

▶ Cast **Alan Ritchson, Dennis Quaid, Jai Courtney, Stephan James**

NETFLIX Given that *Reacher* star Alan Ritchson could double for Ben Nevis, it takes a certain class of physical opponent to persuade us he's the underdog.

This military survival thriller serves up the ultimate oversized antagonist. Ritchson plays a combat veteran, haunted by frontline experience in Kandahar. Determined to win a place in an elite regiment, he leads a training mission that turns unexpectedly deadly with the arrival of a towering mechanical invader, spearheading an alien incursion.

Essentially a weapons platform on legs, this stalking cyber-beast

delivers a primal sense of menace. Part Transformer, part prehistoric titan, its wordless, animalistic presence feels authentically uncanny. The global reach of the invasion is mainly off-screen – inevitably, there's some shameless sequel bait at the end – keeping the focus firmly and effectively on Ritchson and his grunts. While the effects impress, helmer Patrick Hughes plants our boots on the ground, maintaining a tactile, visceral vibe throughout.

Homaging the earnest macho spirit of '80s actioners – *Predator* is clearly a touchstone – this is peak post-pub viewing, though you might need to mop your floor after, given the sheer volume of sweat and testosterone seeping from the screen. **Nick Setchfield**

i The pyrotechnic effects team on the film used 400 litres of fuel to create fireballs that reached 500 feet high.

SPACEWAYS A Duff effort

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1953 | U | 4K & Blu-ray

▶ Director **Terence Fisher**

▶ Cast **Howard Duff, Eva Bartok, Alan Wheatley, Andrew Osborn**

BLU-RAY DEBUT Though the trailer promised “incredible space islands of the future!”, this humdrum offering from a pre-horror era Hammer (then called Exclusive) barely scrapes into Earth orbit.

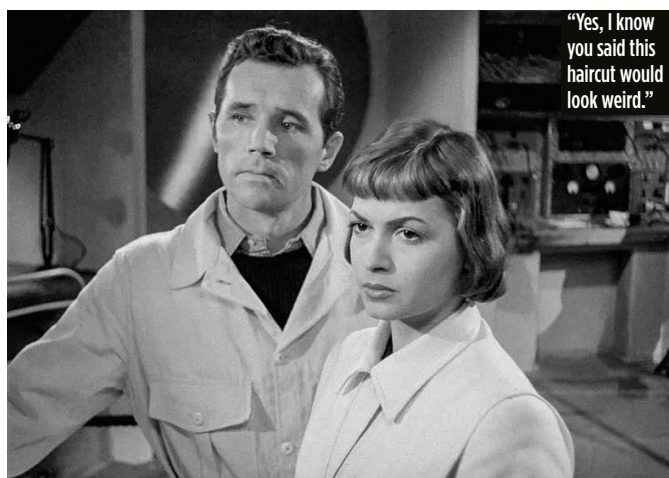
Adapting a radio play and subsequent novel by Charles Eric Maine, it's essentially a procedural crime drama based around the burgeoning British space programme. Imported American star Howard Duff is all mid-Atlantic blandness as the boffin accused of “the perfect murder” – one where telltale corpses are stuffed into a handy rocket and blasted into space – while Eva

Bartok adds continental glamour as a lovestruck mathematician, complete with geometric haircut.

Connoisseurs of post-war Britain will appreciate this *Quatermass*-adjacent world of Brylcreem and Commer vans, where towering launch gantries promise a future that never came. But the mystery itself is less than compelling, and the drama rarely rises above the level of romantic potboiler. Some impressive effects shots are recycled from 1950's *Rocketship X-M*.

✚ **Extras** Critics Sarah Morgan and Heidi Honeycutt provide an audio commentary for the UK theatrical release, while *The Reprobate*'s David Flint takes care of the only marginally different US cut, also included here.

The highlight is a Zoom-style chat between genre aficionados Tim Lucas and Stephen R Bissette



“Yes, I know you said this haircut would look weird.”

– yes, the guy who drew *Swamp Thing*, here wearing his film historian hat. Steeped in geek knowledge, it's an entertaining dissection of both the movie and the novel (67 minutes).

Elsewhere there's an engaging discussion about the differences between British and American big-screen SF in the '50s (20 minutes), as well as discussions of star Alan Wheatley (27 minutes) and leads

Bartok and Duff (32 minutes). Plus: trailers; the UK censor card; an extensive gallery showcasing some truly gorgeous vintage posters and lobby cards. This dual-format Limited Collector's Edition also comes with a 120-page booklet.

Nick Setchfield

i The success of *Rocketship X-M*, which Exclusive distributed in the UK, convinced them to have a go at sci-fi themselves.

NOW ON DIGITAL FORMATS *Dolly* (6 April) • *Mercy* • *Stitch Head* (30 March) • *The Thing With Feathers* • *28 Years Later: The Bone Temple*



IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2026 | 14+ | SVOD

▶ Director Andrew Stanton

▶ Cast Kate McKinnon, Rashida Jones, Daveed Diggs, Jorge Vargas

DISNEY Topped and tailed by shots of the Big Bang and the Milky Way – with a Sylvia Plath quote added for good measure – this millennia-straddling study of human existence can't be faulted for ambition.

Three storylines interplay: a family in the twilight of the Neanderthal era; a romantically unfulfilled academic in the present day, studying the past but about to change the destiny of mankind; a starship pilot in 2417 AD, leading a next generation to a new world. Life throws its challenges at all of them, from infant mortality to terminally ill parents and all points in-between, with the intertwining plots resonating in subtle and not so subtle ways.

The 25th-century segments obviously lean heaviest into pure sci-fi, but here this wilfully portentous movie suffers an imagination failure. Borrowing elements of *Silent Running* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*, it brings us a second-hand cinematic future where the tech looks barely removed from Alexa.

Returning to live action, director Andrew Stanton misplaces the lightness of touch he brought to *WALL-E* and *Finding Nemo*. An increasingly anodyne screenplay also begins to fast-forward the years, sacrificing any true emotional investment in these characters. Aiming at the profound, Stanton never quite escapes the banal. **Nick Setchfield**



Being a Spurs fan is an emotional roller coaster.

FADE TO BLACK

Shooting schedule

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1980 | 18 | 4K & Blu-ray

▶ Director Vernon Zimmerman

▶ Cast Dennis Christopher,

Tim Thomerson, Gwynne Gilford

BLU-RAY DEBUT Sometimes 88 Films

don't best serve movies by crowbarring them into their Slasher Classics range. More of a character study, *Fade To Black* is a case in point. Slasher fans may come away disappointed; film buffs may bypass a title which would really speak to them.

Dennis Christopher is the much put-upon Eric, a movie geek obsessed with Hollywood's golden age. After a Marilyn Monroe lookalike is a no-show for a date, he snaps, pushing his wheelchair-using aunt down the stairs, then dressing as a vampire, Hopalong Cassidy, a mummy and a gangster to put those who've wronged him on the cutting-room floor of life.

George Romero's *Martin* is one comparison point; while that featured interludes depicting its protagonist's vampiric fantasies, *Fade To Black* is interspersed with clips of movies like *White Heat*. Maintaining our sympathy as the

bodies stack up, Christopher is superb. A startling sequence where Eric masturbates over Marilyn shows just how far he was willing to go for verisimilitude.

It's a flawed film. A subplot with a criminal psychologist is underdeveloped. And there are many elisions and logic gaps (how does Eric acquire a Tommy gun?). Still, it should delight the sort of cinephile who'll get the reference when Eric considers shoving a grapefruit in someone's mush.

▶ **Extras** Nine interviews (142 minutes) mostly stem from the US Vinegar Syndrome release of 2020. Christopher's is by far the most interesting; feeling a "personal responsibility to elevate the script", he made numerous good suggestions, which were adopted. We also hear from producer Irwin Yablans, two cast, the make-up artist, an editor, the squibs guy, and the composer (twice). There are three commentaries; a solo outing for Christopher is the pick. A new video essay (18 minutes) is intelligent but not jargon-heavy. Plus: trailer; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

i You could argue the film features a young Chris Pine – his mum, actor Gwynne Gilford, was pregnant during production!

(ROUND UP)



In Julia Ducournau's **ALPHA** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD), a rebellious 13-year-old gets a tattoo, causing concern that she's contracted an illness that turns people to marble. We said: "A fable about infection, fear, and the limits of love... deeply compassionate." Extras: four interviews (director/three cast); Ducournau's 2011 short "Junior" (21 minutes); a video essay.

PREDATOR: BADLANDS (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD) slipped past us last issue. Dan Trachtenberg's third Predator movie sees Yautja runt Dek travel to a "death planet" to prove himself via the ultimate trophy kill. We said: "A pleasingly uncomplicated adventure story delivered with brutal efficiency."

Bonuses: commentary by Trachtenberg and three collaborators; four featurettes (25 minutes); deleted scenes. **WICKED: FOR GOOD** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD) wraps up Jon M Chu's take on the *Wizard Of Oz* prequel musical. We said: "Largely all third act, the big resolution to something that's come before. Yet it still works." Bonuses: director's commentary; a 51-minute Making Of; deleted scenes; four featurettes (25 minutes).

In **ZOOTROPOLIS 2** (out now, Blu-ray/DVD), a pit viper pinches an old journal, forcing bunny cop Judy and her vulpine partner (framed for the crime) to pursue him. We said: "The wit and charm which made the first film so rewatchable have gone similarly AWOL." Bonuses include a tour of Disney Animation Studios (18 minutes), eight deleted scenes, and five short features (25 minutes).

Finally, the latest TV box set is **SMALL PROPHETS SERIES ONE** (23 March, Blu-ray/DVD).

First Read

AN EXTRACT FROM A NEW BOOK

Rivennia: A Game

Evolution is no longer natural – it's political

In this futuristic debut novel, the confluence of several lives at a secret society's dinner party leads to revelations in a world that's covering up an ugly reality.

The setting is a concealed underground chamber beneath the Human Order Temple, a location shrouded in secrecy where the tyrannical syndicate gathers. They have invited three outsiders to join in their grand ceremony. But the evening doesn't turn out as the three expected, and their lives will be changed forever.

I'd never been good with crowds or fancy dos, but this was on another level. It took all my energy to try to appear normal, pasting on a grin and pretending I wasn't having a terrible time. Too many people. Too much small talk. All that pressure to say something interesting and funny... Not my thing at all.

I wasn't dressed for the occasion, but I had worn my smartest clothes. The only interaction I genuinely enjoyed was with Primula Zhang, the model. I had seen her before, I was sure, but she looked different now. Less girly, maybe? Her hair was pink, like one of those dolls you'd see in a toy shop, and I didn't think it had been that way before. Anyway, she was the only one who talked to me like I was an actual person, not some awkward bloke who didn't belong in that place. She was nice, yeah – dead nice, actually – and, well, stunning. Proper stunning.

It turned out the new politician from Varcega was also a guest; go figure. He wasn't too bad, I suppose, but he seemed a bit out of his depth, not as comfortable as I'd expected someone like him to be. And maybe a bit annoyed, too. Not sure why.

Famous faces were everywhere, and they kept saying we couldn't tell anyone we'd been there.

By the end of the night, things had got properly weird. Everyone threw on these cloaks and white wigs, making them look like some ancient priest gang. Primula, Gren – the politician guy – and I stood at the front of the

crowd wearing yellowish cloaks and the same wigs. Igor Voychenko announced the start of a ceremony – some kind of important ritual.

Then, a pair of bots wheeled an elderly man into the room. The bots wore only black and had their hoods pulled low to obscure their faces, if they even had faces at all. It was strange to see the man in the wheelchair without a wig like everyone else. His cloak was dark with a wide hood that was crumpled around the back of his neck. It wasn't until they brought him closer that the straps became visible – tight plastic ropes wrapped around his wrists and ankles.

The wheelchair was rolled out to the front, right where the crowd could get a proper look at him. The guy sat there, scanning the faces as if he was trying to find someone he knew – or anyone who'd look him in the eye, really. His beard was patchy and grey, like he hadn't shaved in weeks, and his hair was an unwashed mess. Up close, you could tell he wasn't that old – early sixties, maybe. But something about him made him seem worn down, like life had taken a bit too much out of him.

Voychenko moved with small steps towards the wheelchair. "Before us sits Thomas Locke," he said. "Once one of us. A brother. A Liffdom Lodger."

The man's lips trembled, and his eyes turned glassy. He could just about use his fingers enough to fidget with the loose end of a strap.

"Following severe accusations that Mr Locke breached the sacred concealment of our Lodges, our judiciary board has concluded its investigation and come to a resolution."

A faint whisper rippled through the crowd. Voychenko raised his voice over it. "The board has determined that Mr Locke intentionally and maliciously shared, outside our guild, confidential information regarding the existence of the Liffdom Lodges. A serious violation of our vow of secrecy. To assist in granting Mr Locke's redemption, the object of his forfeiture has now been defined." He paused, scrutinising everyone slowly before continuing. "By decree of our Lodges, Thomas Locke has been sentenced to forfeit his humanness. This ritual will aid in his transition, allowing him to remain part of this universe, though from today onwards, it will be in a different form."

"Our board, in its infinite mercy, has allowed the use of a painless method this evening. Mr Locke will be in the company of his brothers and sisters, who, by virtue of this ritual, agree to forgive his offence." Voychenko turned to the bots. "Please, proceed."

The injection took only seconds.

Voychenko leaned down, speaking softly into the old guy's ear – but loud enough for those of us up front to hear. "This is the time, Mr Locke, to share any final words with the Lodgers."

Then he stepped back, leaving the poor man and his wheelchair alone under the lights.

Minutes crawled by before Thomas said anything. You could see the anguish all over his face. When he opened his mouth, he made a small sound, almost like a whimper, and finally, the words came out.

"I did not have a chance to say goodbye to my wife." His voice was a shaky drawl. "I urge those of you who know her to offer comfort in her grief and help her accept that

The Author



Jaime Urencio was born in Mexico City and has long made London his home. His career has been in corporate finance, primarily in the biotechnology sector. Today he is a Vice President in a leading biotechnology organisation. Jaime took a sabbatical in 2024–2025 to complete *Rivennia*, his debut novel – an exploration of power, technology, and identity in a world transformed by genetic engineering. *Rivennia* examines how ambition, technology and morality collide in an age of engineered progress.

Of Wagers

by Jaime Urencio

“An excellently plotted and paced SF tale that also engages the heart.”
– Kirkus Review

my disappearance is permanent. Help her move on.”

He got no response from the crowd.

“I want to thank all of you for your compassion, my brothers and sisters, and especially our leader, Igor Voychenko, for allowing me to see you before my departure, and letting me go without pain.”

The calm dignity in Thomas’s words struck me like a stone. He looked drained – sad even – but there wasn’t a hint of panic in him. I kept waiting for someone to step in and shout that this was wrong and it didn’t have to happen. But the crowd just stood there, silent. That’s when I realised I might’ve been the only one hoping for some kind of change. I couldn’t tell if the others had seen this coming or if they were just as blindsided.

I spotted a glint in Thomas’s eyes, and what looked like joyful tears began to form. His grim expression transformed into one of happiness. It became clear that he had entered a trance, a state of elation. His eyes closed. He swayed his fingers from side to side and began to hum a melody.

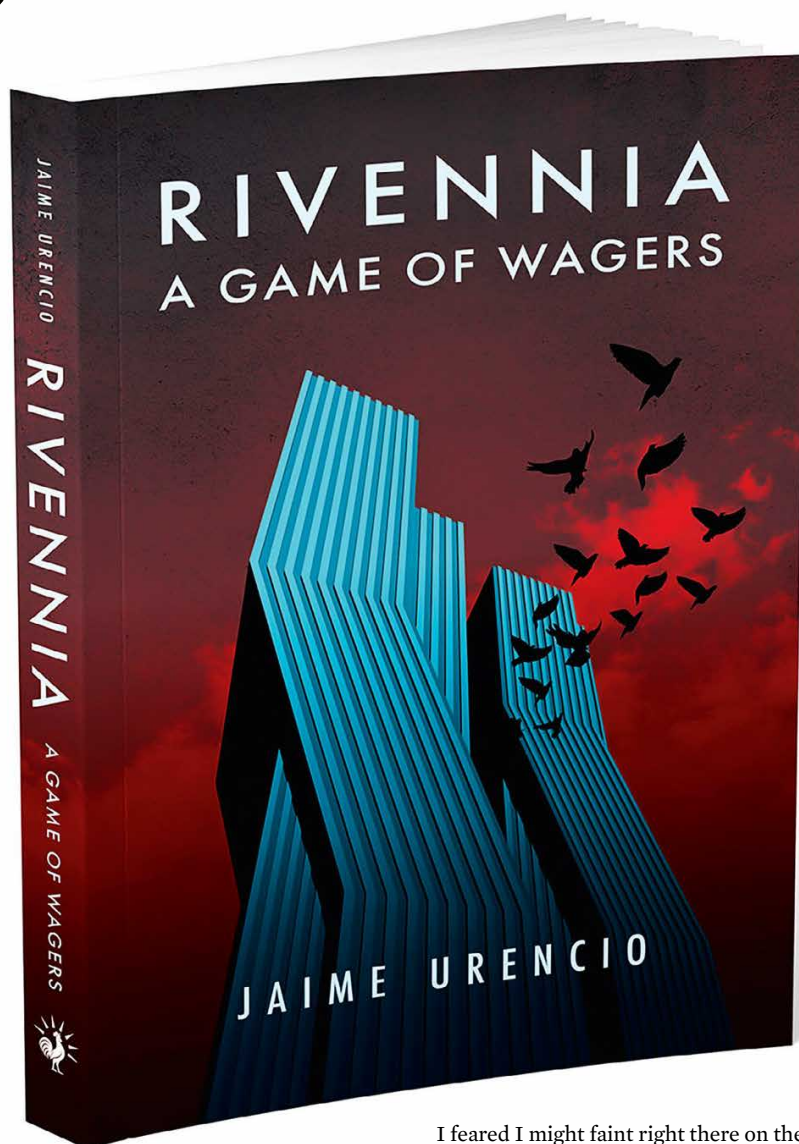
The bots returned, carrying a big glass structure – a rectangular box, like something between a display case and a coffin. They didn’t rush as they untied the man from his wheelchair, pulled off his cloak, and lifted his slack body, setting him gently inside. Thomas didn’t fight them. He just kept humming as they moved him. His limbs hung loose, and a thin line of frothy drool trickled from his lips.

I spotted two vats beside the box just before the contents were poured in. A black, glistening stream spilled out, pooling around Thomas’s body and creeping over him, inch by inch. It took me a moment to realise – it was insects. Thousands of them, crawling and writhing together. I broke out in a hot sweat. Beside me, Primula’s shallow, anxious breathing matched my own.

I couldn’t tell exactly when the humming stopped, but it wasn’t long before Thomas disappeared beneath the black mass, thick and clinging like tar. The crowd stood motionless, eyes locked on the box as the minutes dragged on. Every part of me wanted to turn away and spare myself the sight. I wanted to stop it from etching itself into my brain, so it couldn’t haunt me later. But somehow, that wasn’t an option. It would’ve been unthinkable – a breach of some unspoken rule I was only just beginning to understand. We weren’t mere

bystanders; that much was clear. The three of us were meant to stand there, watching like everyone else. Whatever this was, we were supposed to learn it too.

As the insects slid away, the black mass thinned, turning slick and fluid. Bit by bit, white shapes emerged – naked bones, horrifically clean. By the time it was over, nothing remained but a skeleton: a grinning skull with hollow eyes and limbs stripped smooth like birch twigs.

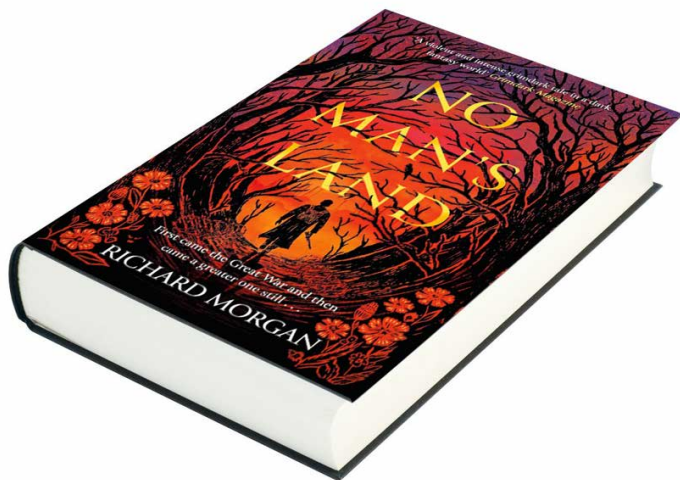


I feared I might faint right there on the spot. My legs wobbled, but I pulled myself together. I needed every bit of my strength to get out of that place. Fast.

Rivennia: A Game Of Wagers, published by Sunrise & Rooster, is available to buy on Amazon: bit.ly/RivenniaBook.



Scan and listen to Chapter 10 on Audible.



NO MAN'S LAND

A soldier's story

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 24 MARCH**

494 pages | Hardback/ebook

▶ Author **Richard Morgan**

▶ Publisher **Gollancz**

◉ **The First World War is fading** from our collective cultural memory. The men and women who saw the filth and the fury of mechanised warfare on the Western Front have left us. As these figures further recede, a space opens up. Those writing historical fiction no longer have to worry about what Grandad might think. There's nobody saying, "No, it wasn't like that." There is room for stories to grow.

So it is in recent years that Steven Knight's Birmingham gangster epic *Peaky Blinders* has become an international phenomenon. And while the series is set in the interwar era, it's hard to imagine how you could understand Tommy Shelby without first grasping that he's a veteran suffering from PTSD.

In Richard Morgan's first novel since 2018, his protagonist, Duncan Silver, is cut from similar cloth. Which isn't so surprising. Like Knight, one of Morgan's recurring themes is masculinity. Like Knight, too, Morgan enjoys a

tough-guy anti-hero. In *No Man's Land*, as with Shelby, you root for Silver despite his capacity for violence, because his fight is with authority figures who treat their "lessers" with disdain.

But where Shelby has only humans to deal with, Silver also battles the fae, and in particular elves, the Huldu, creatures who inhabit vast, dense and dangerous forests that flourish across the British Isles. By trade, Silver is a "woodsman". He makes his living by going into the forest to retrieve children stolen by the Huldu and replaced with changelings.

Even for a man scarred by war and his own encounters with the Huldu in younger life, this is brutal work. For all that Morgan's elves are, as is traditional, vulnerable to iron, they are strong, speedy and, being long-lived, see humankind as ephemeral. They hold grudges. They're shapeshifters, sometimes monstrous in appearance, and they can hold people in thrall. They're nightmarish figures.

The Morgan of previous years would have led with both the violence and the horror inherent in this set-up. But while he never skimps on the fighting and gore, Morgan's style has shifted. *No Man's Land* builds gradually. It's

also a character study of Silver, a secretive man, psychologically alone and yet, paradoxically, surrounded by people: Garner, a gruff Lancastrian and fellow woodsman; veterans; his lover; and, representing the feminine approach to problem-solving and life more generally, witches.

Silver needs their help after being sent to rescue a child, Miriam, only to find himself caught up in the deadly machinations of the great and the good. This is a novel where class matters. And that, in an era of privately educated, petty populists pretending to be tribunes of the people in the long wake of the global financial crisis, gives the book a contemporary resonance.

Again, there are parallels here with Steven Knight's treatment of the rise of fascism in *Peaky Blinders*. The interwar period, when traumatised people lived with huge uncertainties – and in

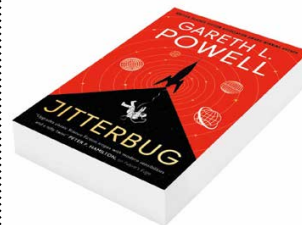
“You root for Silver despite his capacity for violence”

the aftermath of the Spanish flu pandemic, too, not so dissimilar in its terrible toll from Covid – may, you suspect, figure often in fiction in the years ahead.

If that's true, *No Man's Land* sets a high bar for what can be achieved. Because while you may wish more of the female characters got to carry scenes more often, this is a beautifully constructed slow-burner of a fantasy novel that subtly draws in Arthurian myth, the oddness of spiritualism (which flourished in the shell-shocked wake of 1914–18), and the idea that maybe all heroes and anti-heroes are changelings, as their experiences alter them so profoundly.

Most of all, it reads as the work of a mature novelist who, far from caught between the lines, knows exactly where he is and what he's doing. It's good to have Richard Morgan back. **Jonathan Wright**

i Those drawn to spiritualism included Sherlock Holmes's creator Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who wrote books on the subject.



JITTERBUG

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

320 pages | Paperback/

ebook/audiobook

▶ Author **Gareth L Powell**

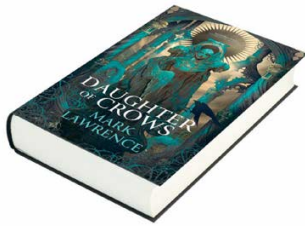
▶ Publisher **Titan Books**

◉ **Gareth Powell's latest** no-fat space opera starts with the destruction of our solar system's gas giants, and a man falling off the roof of a tower block. It's an arresting contrast of the cosmic and the personal which filters through the rest of this fast-paced combination of *The Expanse* and *Firefly*.

Flashing forward from that opening, we arrive in a future where some unknown force has reformed the remains of the gas giants into eight ginormous wedges orbiting the Sun. Handily, they also have life-supporting atmospheres on their Sun-facing aspects, which has accelerated mankind's colonisation of space.

In this new normal, bounty hunter Copernicus Brown is captain of a small spaceship, Jitterbug, with an AI interface in the form of a parrot. When a lucrative-sounding tip-off ends up with him reluctantly taking on board a woman fleeing both pirates and Earth security forces, Copernicus finds himself on a crash course with the aliens who built the wedges.

It's all huge fun, with some entertaining gnarly characters, snappy dialogue and a cinematic scope. It's not hard SF so much as mind-bendingly fanciful sci-fi, and only fumbles things slightly with an exposition-heavy denouement that deserves a book of its own, and the sudden introduction of a genre trope that inspires a whole load of head-scratching "Hang on...". **Dave Golder**



DAUGHTER OF CROWS

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 26 MARCH**

376 pages | Hardback/ebook/
audiobook

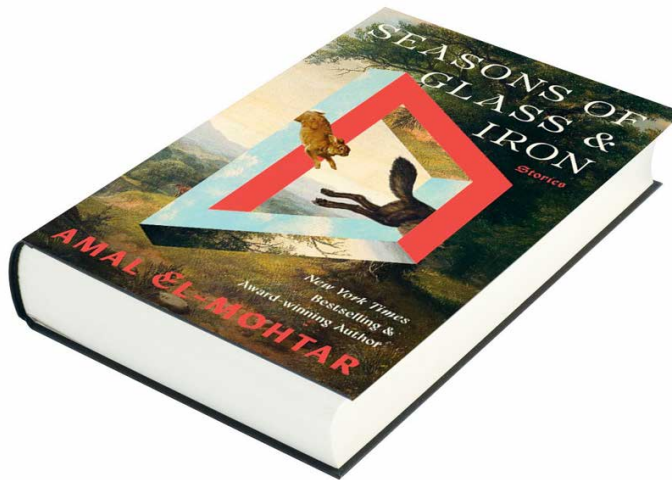
▶ Author **Mark Lawrence**

▶ Publisher **Harper Voyager**

☞ **Three is the magic number** in Mark Lawrence's new fantasy series. Like 2017's *Red Sister*, *Daughter Of Crows* concerns an order of women that trains warriors. The Academy of Kindness accepts 100 girls every year, whittling them down to three through a harsh 10-year programme that produces assassins. The story unfolds in three strands: the elderly Rue is a past graduate of the Academy hoping to spend her final days in peace; Mollandra is a new initiate with a dark secret; and Eldest is a child trapped within a mansion, hunted by her inhuman father.

The revelation of the link between the three protagonists arrives as no great surprise, but the story possesses a relentless sense of momentum as each plot strand informs the others. Lawrence writes with a keen edge, lacing his fantasy with abundant horror. Violence is a constant and written with vigorous ferocity, his characters delighting in their savagery.

The relentless cruelty and the struggle to survive threaten to smother the reader in misery, but the heroines seek connection and friendship amid the bloodshed, alleviating the gloom. The mechanics of magic within this world can be frustratingly obscure, and death seems a peculiarly transient state of affairs, but Lawrence delivers his tale with visceral excitement. **David West**



SEASONS OF GLASS & IRON

Tiny worlds, big feelings



★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 24 MARCH**

208 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

▶ Author **Amal El-Mohtar**

▶ Publisher **Arcadia**

☞ **If you normally only do** novels, consider this review an invitation. No, an exhortation: come join us in the land of short stories! All the big ideas and strange new worlds you love, but distilled into a handful of pages, and often available for free through online magazines.

Canadian writer and critic Amal El-Mohtar hit the big time as co-author of the best-selling 2019 novella *This Is How You Lose The Time War*, but she's been publishing exquisite little jewels of imagination for the best part of two decades now. This collection covers 15 years of El-Mohtar's career, through 14 short stories and four poems. In a lovely touch, two of the poems, Damascus tribute "Song For An Ancient City" (2008) and Palestine-inspired lament "Qahr" (2023), are also presented in Arabic translation.

The award-winning 2016 piece that gives the collection its title reads like a charming revisionist

take on a fairy tale that never existed: a woman exiled to a hill made of glass and a woman walking the world in iron shoes help each other escape the stories written for them by their families. "The Lonely Sea In The Sky" deals with space travel, possibly sentient diamonds, and an arrestingly strange conceptual breakthrough. "The Truth About Owls" and "A Hollow Play" both bring magic into our own world, with a focus on characters navigating exile and belonging (and wings). In "The Green Book", characters communicate across generations through the marginalia of a sinister book, while a woman makes dreams from precious stones in "To Follow The Waves".

El-Mohtar's writing is both sensuous and crisp, woven through with metaphors that ground the fantastic in physical sensation and distinctive, complex character notes. Every one of these vivid, brilliantly crafted stories packs an emotional and imaginative punch far beyond its size. **Nic Clarke**

i "And Their Lips Rang With The Sun" is a gorgeously weird fantasy about Arabic letters. Read it here: bit.ly/elmohtar.



THE FOX AND THE DEVIL

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

400 pages | Hardback/ebook/
audiobook

▶ Author **Kiersten White**

▶ Publisher **Del Rey**

☞ **Van Helsing's kids aren't** alright. First there was *Abraham's Boys*, now there's *The Fox And The Devil*: both semi-sequels to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* that, by telling stories about his children, recast the kindly old vampire hunter as something much crueller. Though at least here he was right about the monsters.

Anneke Van Helsing should be a brilliant detective, but in fin de siècle Amsterdam, her gender holds her back. Instead, the police bring her in as a consultant on particularly tricky (and gruesome) cases. But there's a case she can't solve: her father's murder. She witnessed it five years ago, and saw the woman who killed him – though everyone else believes it was a suicide.

The story unfolds over several years and European locations, from Paris to Lesbos in Greece – and if you're thinking the answer is obvious, you're wrong. Kiersten White chooses something far stranger and more compelling. Her queer feminist adventure is a smart inversion of common gothic horror tropes, with a truly tragic love story at its cold heart. Choosing the playground of the 1900 World's Fair as the backdrop of her finale is an inspired choice – though from today's perspective, perhaps we haven't made as much progress as Anneke would've hoped.

Sarah Dobbs

BULLET TIME A BOOK IN BULLET POINTS



SPACE JOURNAL

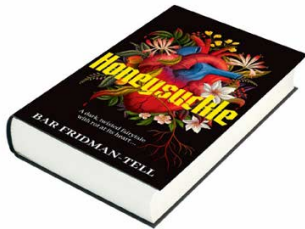
▶ **RELEASED 26 MARCH**

288 pages | Hardback

▶ Author Dallas Campbell

▶ Publisher Thames & Hudson

- Subtitle: *The Art And Science Of Cosmic Exploration.*
- Split into 33 chapters, this “visual celebration of our perception of the cosmos, and our efforts to reach it” mixes real-life science with science fiction.
- The likes of Wernher von Braun and Neil Armstrong are covered, but so are Jules Verne, *Clangers*, and the creator of *Space Invaders*.
- More obscure figures include space artist Chesley Bonestell (who provided *Destination Moon*’s matte paintings), and Gerhard Zucker, who hatched a “Rocket Mail” scheme.
- Dallas Campbell (known for his presenting work on shows like *Stargazing Live*) has an accessible, likeably wry style.
- Cleanly designed, it has 517 illustrations: Galileo’s shopping list, maps of Mars, Voyager’s Golden Record, Brooke Bond tea cards and so on. A pleasure to dip in and out of.



HONEYSUCKLE

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 2 APRIL**

324 pages | Hardback/ebook/
audiobook

▶ Author Bar Fridman-Tell

▶ Publisher Tor Nightfire

👉 **Drawing together Welsh mythology and echoes of *Frankenstein***, this atmospheric debut deals with complex issues of consent.

Bored with his constant entreaties to play, teenage Wynne crafts her younger brother Rory a blodeuwedd – a girl constructed of flowers, fruits and branches; a playmate who will never get bored, and who will always do what Rory wants.

He’s delighted with his new best friend, naming her Daye. The happy tale soon turns darker, though, as Daye can’t survive the changing seasons without being renewed by Wynne – and as Rory grows up, what he wants from a companion inevitably changes...

It’s a bold look at thorny issues, as Rory grapples with the morality of having a friend who depends on him to survive, and was created to please him, but is still very much her own person. It’s both heartbreaking and enraging to see him try to balance morality with desire, often blind to Daye’s own personhood while claiming to think of nothing else.

Daye herself is delicate but strong, a delight to watch grow in harmony with the natural world around her, even as Rory plunges himself deeper into his gory experiments in an attempt to make her self-sufficient and more suited to his needs. A dreamlike fantasy that will stay with the reader long past the final page. **Rhian Drinkwater**



THE TRICKY BUSINESS OF FAERIE BARGAINS

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 7 APRIL**

416 pages | Paperback/ebook/
audiobook

▶ Author Reena McCarty

▶ Publisher Orbit Books

👉 **How often have you clicked “accept all” on a website’s terms and conditions without reading a word? Never do that with a faerie.** They love to find a loophole and exploit it – with devastating results. Such is the premise of this impeccably thought-out novel from Reena McCarty, who invents a law firm, Carter Lane, to negotiate with the tricky fae.

Our POV character is their employee Poppy, who was kidnapped by faeries as a child, kept for over 100 years in their world, and then plopped back, barely aged. She now constructs contracts for humans wanting wishes granted (example: an Oscar win) in exchange for things faeries want from humans. When a contract goes horribly wrong, however, Poppy must leap into the fae realm to find her client. She’s soon drawn into the politics of her old home, while caught in a weird love triangle between two faeries.

Her travels through the Otherside are wonderfully vivid, with an inventive use of faerie lore, frequent plot twists and excellent pacing. That pace does tail off at the end, though, as a huge event happens off the page, giving Poppy nothing to do except mope for a few chapters. Luckily the book recovers well, with its brilliantly drawn world staying alive to the very last page. **Jayne Nelson**



THE BRIDES

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

400 pages | Hardback/ebook/
audiobook

▶ Author Charlotte Cross

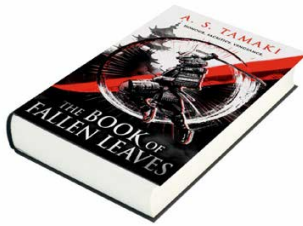
▶ Publisher Tor Nightfire

👉 **Nearly 130 years after its publication**, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* continues to set the standard for sensualist gothic horror, forever emulated and deconstructed but rarely bettered. Debut novelist Charlotte Cross now steps up to re-examine the text, weaving together the stories of four women travelling to Dracula’s castle before the events of the original novel.

One of Cross’s talents is invoking a gorgeous, gothic atmosphere, taking readers from the innards of crumbling castles to the silhouettes of mist-cloaked hills. Like *Dracula*, the novel is also told in an epistolary style, pieced together from letters, diary entries and psychiatric reports, giving it a charmingly disorganised quality, as if the reader were assembling it themselves.

But that feeling doesn’t last long. At 400 pages, *The Brides* feels overly long, and is stuffed with a rotating cast of characters who all recount the same events.

A thought-provoking kernel elevates the novel above typical vamp horror romance. It’s not a spoiler to reveal that these women are destined to become the infamous Brides of Dracula, and the book is at its most riveting when looking at the way women’s desires and insecurities can be weaponised by more confident, powerful men. Yet a shorter, sharper novel would have nailed this point home a lot harder. **Kimberley Ballard**



THE BOOK OF FALLEN LEAVES

★★★★☆

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

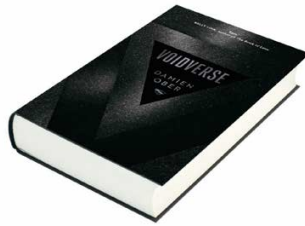
322 pages | Hardback/ebook/
audiobook

▶ Author **AS Tamaki**
▶ Publisher **Orbit Books**

◉ **The warring clans** of medieval Japan provide the inspiration for this sprawling debut. Sen Hoshiakari lives in exile and disgrace following his father's failed attempt to stage a coup, longing to restore the family name. Rui is a fiery-tempered peasant who attracts the attention of a mysterious god, and Yora is a soldier turned poet hoping to prevent war.

There's no faulting the scale of AS Tamaki's plotting and worldbuilding, but the novel presents several challenges. Foremost, his characters are passive, reacting to or observing events rather than driving the story. It can read like a Greek tragedy where the dramatic stuff happens off-stage, with characters hearing reports of uprisings and battles rather than participating in them.

Too often, the narration becomes bogged down as everyone overanalyses their every thought, desire and emotion, dragging down the pace. There's a long section when Sen is tutored by a monk who talks exclusively in Zen riddles, which seems intended to imply wisdom, but makes the dialogue frustratingly obtuse. And there are a tangle of clan names, honorary titles and class distinctions that would be easier to navigate with a glossary, but none is provided. Tamaki's tale is carefully crafted, but his storytelling is emotionally dry. **David West**



VOIDVERSE

★★★★☆

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

322 pages | Hardback/ebook/
audiobook

▶ Author **Damien Ober**
▶ Publisher **Solstice Books**

◉ **The otherworldly setting** of *Voidverse* is both disconcertingly weird and strangely satisfying. Built on sci-fi foundations, but with fantasy undertones, it takes place in a vast, apparently infinite void where communities live on floating rocks separated by a nothingness few dare to explore. Adding to the intrigue, its residents are still getting their heads around the many mysteries intrinsic to their home, from the nature of its strange, physics-bending anomalies to the origins of the Construct, a vast machine with a Galactus-like penchant for devouring worlds.

But for all its ideas, *Voidverse* is easier to admire than love. Author Damien Ober (whose credits include episodes of Netflix drama *The OA*) certainly requires you to pay attention, as he shifts the narrative between point-of-view characters, and goes big on in-universe vocabulary – it's worth keeping a note of terms like "the Deciding" and "The Slant", as they *will* come in useful later.

Of course, complexity isn't a problem in itself, but the novel's momentum sometimes gets lost among all the description, with a conclusion that doesn't quite deliver on the story's promise. Meanwhile, most of the lead characters could do with an injection of humour – life may be hard in the void, but a few lighter moments wouldn't have gone amiss. **Richard Edwards**



BURN THE WATER

★★★★☆

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

368 pages | Paperback/ebook/
audiobook

▶ Author **Billy Ray**
▶ Publisher **Scholastic**

◉ **Billy Ray knows how to** bring us both good and bad yarns, being the screenwriter for the *Hunger Games* movies and true-life drama *Captain Phillips*, and the co-creator of *Earth 2* (only *SFX* readers remember that one). Here, for his first novel, he's plumped for a post-apocalyptic version of *Romeo And Juliet*.

It's 2425, and London has been flooded by Earth's melted ice caps. Two houses, the Crowns and the Rogues, are at war, with Jule and Rafe our star-crossed lovers (they bond over a record player, in a nod to *West Side Story*).

As a blood-soaked, violent adaptation of the play, the book has moments of pure tension, such as during a swim through a flooded Tube tunnel. Young teens needing a visceral introduction to Shakespeare will be lured in with nods to the original that more familiar readers might find too obvious.

Yet (even taking into account the time jump) the British setting can feel unconvincing. Why does the book use American spellings? Why are there wild bears in this England? How do adders evolve into aquatic monsters in just a few hundred years? (Somewhere, Charles Darwin's ghost is twitching.)

Still, there's a reason this love story has lasted through the ages: Jule and Rafe's story remains compelling. That Shakespeare fella was definitely onto something. **Jayne Nelson**

REISSUES

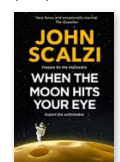
Our pick of the paperbacks this time is Silvia Moreno-Garcia's **THE BEWITCHING** (★★★★★, out now, Arcadia). This tale of black magic connects three women in different time periods:



Minerva, a student in the '90s; an author of creepy tales in the '30s; and Minerva's

great-grandmother in the 1900s. We said: "The kind of book you'll pick up and immediately lose a whole weekend to, fully engrossed in its eerie (but beautiful) atmosphere." John Scalzi's latest, **WHEN THE MOON HITS YOUR EYE** (★★★★★, 27 March, Tor), has an eyebrow-raisingly

preposterous premise: what if the Moon turned into a ball of cheese? It's set over the course of a lunar month, with each

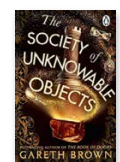


chapter spotlighting a different set of characters as they try to make sense of the new normal. We said: "Takes a completely Lunar Tunes concept, then treats the fallout in all seriousness... and it's a blast. Funny, emotional, thought-provoking and scary." Finally, Gareth Brown's latest, **THE SOCIETY OF UNKNOWN OBJECTS** (★★★★★, 9 April, Penguin), centres on

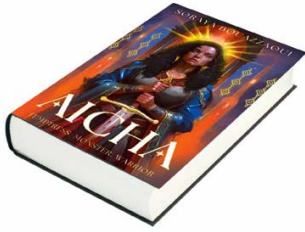
Magda, a writer who's part of a four-person-strong secret society devoted to locating magical objects, then hiding them. When a new artefact comes to light in Hong Kong, she jumps on a flight... but has she been told the truth about the society's purpose? We said: "More often than not hits the sweet spot where it's fast-moving fun without ever insulting your intelligence."

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AICHA

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 24 MARCH**

336 pages | Hardback/ebook/
audiobook

▶ Author Soraya Bouazzaoui

▶ Publisher Orbit Books

☞ Soraya Bouazzaoui channels Moroccan folklore and anti-colonial struggles in her interpretation of the tale of Aisha Qandicha, a mythic figure who lured Portuguese soldiers to their deaths. In a Moroccan citadel under Portuguese control, Aicha and her sister have been raised to serve the resistance. But a voice lurks within Aicha, a bloodthirsty spirit impatient to unleash its fury upon the occupiers, even as Aicha's father tries to protect her from the Portuguese commander, Duarte.

A seething anger pervades Bouazzaoui's story. The Portuguese, particularly Duarte, are one-dimensional sneering villains. The prose and Aicha's florid romance with fellow rebel Rachid suggest a young adult novel, with every emotion writ large and an obvious arc from constant squabbling to eternal devotion. The abundant bloody violence is frequently implausible, with characters shrugging off mortal wounds that beggar credibility.

The relationship between the Aicha and her father is a peculiar form of tough love – he thinks nothing of stabbing her during a training session, an injury she absorbs without consequence or complaint. Apparently knife wounds are harmless if done with good intentions. Her final rampage of vengeance arrives when the Portuguese are already defeated, making it both savage and redundant. **David West**



IMAGINE A FRIEND

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

128 pages | Paperback/ebook

▶ Author David Quantick

▶ Publisher Stars and Sabers

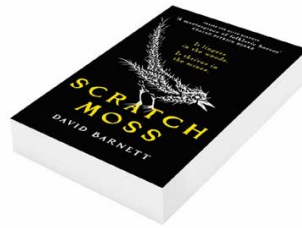
☞ Sometimes, the melancholy aspects of growing older hit home even at a young age. Suddenly, days that used to pass without a care grow heavier. We don't always fully realise that this has happened at the time, but looking back down the years, the sense of something lost can suddenly become acute.

Much of the emotional landscape of David Quantick's beautiful new novella seems rooted in such moments; from the perspective of his sixties, he has crafted a glorious story about the pains of growing up. At its centre are Louie and Marcie, and the fallout from the moment when Marcie can no longer see her best friend.

This being a fantasy story, it's not giving too much away to say that this is a book involving imaginary friends. That might make it sound slight, but this couldn't be further from the truth. Rather, as Quantick lands his narrative by bringing in the idea that a sense of community might serve as a bulwark against 21st century atomisation, this is a small book with the biggest of hearts.

For all its brevity, *Imagine A Friend* could probably be more tightly edited in a couple of places. Nevertheless, it reads like the work of someone who has long excelled as a scriptwriter and journalist finding his voice as a novelist.

Jonathan Wright



SCRATCH MOSS

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

352 pages | Paperback/ebook/
audiobook

▶ Author David Barnett

▶ Publisher Canello

☞ The latest novel set in David Barnett's *Withered Hill* universe is the author's most ambitious yet, with a story that starts in the present day before stretching backwards across six different time zones.

Joe Collier returns to the decrepit mining town of Scratch Moss following the death of his father – a violent wrong 'un who the locals nevertheless view as a hero. An oppressive pall hangs over the place: kids are going missing and the locals are whispering about the return of a terrifying local legend, "Red Clogs", an evil entity that seems somehow connected to Joe's family.

There's a touch of both Royston Vasey and Derry about Scratch Moss, a strange place with its own rituals to keep the dark at bay. The time-hopping structure – similar to David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* – is both a strength and a bit of a weakness: there's a sweeping scope as we see patterns recur throughout history, but it does mean that we don't get to spend much time with some of the more interesting characters. Joe, meanwhile, seems more concerned with a possible romance than the violent death of a family member which he witnesses!

Still, it's an always enjoyable page-turner, and the final chapter suggests stronger connections to Barnett's emerging folk horror universe.

Rob Lockwood

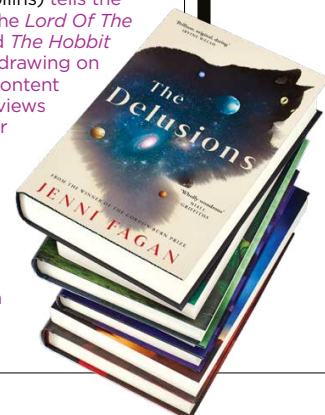
ALSO OUT

There are plenty more books we couldn't fit in. Described by Irvine Welsh as "Nineteen Eighty-Four for the afterlife", Jenni Fagan's latest, **THE DELUSIONS** (out now, Hutchinson Heinemann) centres on Edi, who has spent 47 years in admin on the other side, processing the newly dead. With a mass extinction event looming, it looks like her workplace is going to get chaotic...

The fourth in the Children Of Time series, Adrian Tchaikovsky's **CHILDREN OF STRIFE** (out now, Tor) centres on the rediscovery by a research vessel of a lost outpost where, centuries ago, a maverick terraforming team played God. Waking to find most of her crew vanished, scientist Alis must venture onto the planet in search of them. The first in a YA romance trilogy, Clíodhna O'Sullivan's **HER**

HIDDEN FIRE (out now, Penguin) is set in a world where magical abilities are an elite privilege. A servant girl discovers she's a Channeler – then passes off her powers as belonging to the heir apparent she loves. But what'll happen if the ruse is discovered? First published in 1952, Naomi Mitchison's whimsical fantasy **TRAVEL LIGHT**

(out now) is getting another run out for the Virago Modern Classic line. It follows a princess cast out by her stepmother, raised by bears, then adopted by a dragon. Finally, **MIDDLE-EARTH: FROM SCRIPT TO SCREEN** (26 March, HarperCollins) tells the story of the *Lord Of The Rings* and *The Hobbit* trilogies, drawing on archival content and interviews with Peter Jackson and key members of the art dept, shooting crew and Weta Digital teams.





Patrick Ness

The award-winning author who feels the fear, but does it anyway...



STEPHEN DALY

What is your daily writing routine like?

▶ I always like to have two projects at different stages on the go at the same time, so I can spend the morning on one and the afternoon on the other. One might be first draft, blank page stuff, and the other a rewrite or something in a different medium. I always worry about my creative reservoir running low, so mixing it up keeps me fresh. I hope.

Do you have any nick-nacks on your desk/within reach?

▶ Looking at my desk right now, I currently have a rhinoceros Beanie Baby, a hand-crocheted Dalek, and a coaster that says Ukraine, given to me by my brilliant and brave Ukrainian publishers ACCA. Everything else is work or clutter.

How do you deal with writers' block/the urge to procrastinate?

▶ I mostly seem to deal with the urge to procrastinate by procrastinating, which isn't great. But sometimes that's where ideas come. If I'm resisting, sometimes I'm resisting for a reason, and it'll all come good. Of course, sometimes I'm resisting because writing is hard, so I'm not always right.

Do you have any writing "bad habits" that you have to keep in check?

▶ This is actually a fun game among writers. We've all got them: things we have to edit out of our first drafts. For me, my characters in early drafts talk too much with their eyebrows. And they also "look": "I looked at her." "She looked at me." "He gave me a look." It's fun. Treat it like a swear jar. Put 20p in every time you do it, then buy yourself a treat.

Which of your books are you the most proud of?

▶ I get asked this a lot by young people in school talks, and I ask if they have brothers or sisters. When they say yes, I ask, "Do your parents have a favourite?" They

say yes, which means they can laugh about it, or they say no, which means they're the favourite. Parents shouldn't have favourites, *but they do*. In conclusion, I love all my books exactly the same.

What would be your desert island book?

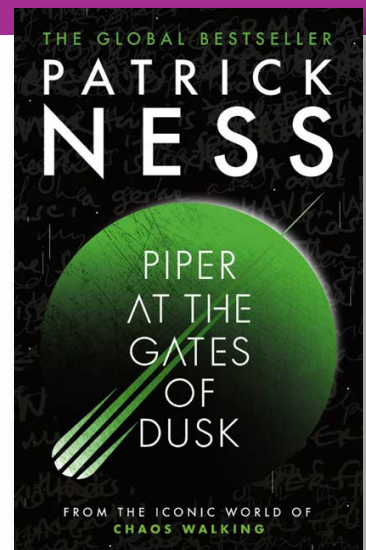
▶ I'm going to *wildly* cheat here and consider Discworld a single book (because I can; if the island is theoretical, then so is "book"). I'm always reading one of them. When I finish, I go back to *Strata* and start all again. They really are works of genius, so funny, so human. Just wonderful literature.

Which SF/fantasy book published in the last year has most impressed you?

▶ I'm a huge Adrian Tchaikovsky fan, and I've been loving the Tyrant Philosophers series. Plus there's a new *Children Of Time* book coming out. I'm amazed, impressed, eager for his output. Just pure, smart enjoyment.

What's the best gift you've had from a reader?

▶ There was a time when you could get personalised Coke cans. Someone in New York brought me a Coke can brought me a Coke can they'd personalised with the name Manchee, the dog

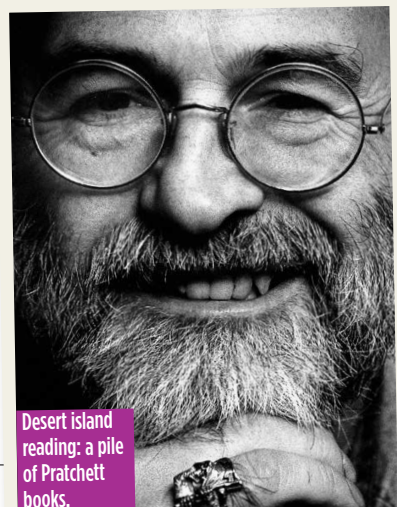


from *The Knife Of Never Letting Go* (about who I still get letters). That was pretty damn cool.

What's the best piece of writing advice you've received or read?

▶ Not *writing* advice, but it applies: "What would you do if you weren't afraid?" As in, yeah, you're afraid of doing this, of writing this thing, of going all in on a novel, but what if you weren't? What would you do? And then you try to do that thing. It's a life-changer. We're all so ruled by fear. Be afraid. Do it anyway. 🍷

Piper At The Gates Of Dusk is out on 7 April, published by Walker Books.



Desert island reading: a pile of Pratchett books.

DAVID SANDISON/ALAMY

First Read

AN EXTRACT FROM A NEW BOOK

The Last Star

A cursed heroine. A fractured realm. A prophecy that could

The first instalment of an epic romantic fantasy trilogy, charting a deadly quest through a fractured realm of light and dark magic.

Ten more paces to the palace gates.

Fighting the urge to check behind me, I draw the cowl of the grey cloak lower, inhaling my liegemaids' crisp scent of starch and soap. The bitter wind pierces the thin fabric, lashing my skin. In accordance with my father's laws, the mantle is cheaply made and lacks embellishment: drab, anonymous, perfect.

No one will look twice at me disguised in the garb of an indentured air-refugee. No one will shrink back or make the sign of the Star as I pass either. Not so long as I remember to keep my strange eyes lowered, my cursed hair and the marking on my wrist covered.

Eight paces.

Five.

One.

The gates. I've made it to the gates and no bells have sounded. The steady clip of hooves on cobblestones echoes close by. I focus on the rhythmic sound, try to match my ragged breaths to it. I look over my shoulder, back at the palace. Tiers of iridescent starcrystal crowned by turrets, stacked like the frosted layers of my bridal cake. A beautiful cage, but a cage, nonetheless.

No sign of the King's Guard – my father's Watchers.

The clacking hooves falter. I whip my head back. A cart now blocks the entrance, loaded with trussed carcasses of bucks. Their charnel-sweet scent taints the air. They'll be carved up, turned into pies for the banquet celebrating my binding to Lord Astrophel next moonsquarter. A rare treat in these lean times. If I can only make it past the gates and over the bridge,

if I can only thread my way through the city and breach the wall, that star-damned ceremony might never take place.

Two men dismount, heave a buck onto their shoulders with a shared groan. Its head lolls back, glassy eyes staring upwards. I twist away from them, tug my hood lower. Biting the inside of my cheek, I focus on keeping my breaths even, on ignoring the wild thuds of my heart. I adjust the weight of what I hope will pass as a laundry bundle, while the men stagger past me. While precious seconds are squandered.

I don't dare check behind me again.

The horse leading the cart paws the frosty ground, then edges forwards. A small gap opens up, large enough to slip through.

The palace is behind me. Now, to reach the city wall.

The setting sun gilds the rainbow waters of the Opaline River, but I don't pause to admire the view as I cross the Bridge of Stars. Not tonight. My gaze darts through the starcrystal spires spearing the sky, over the great domes of the Bindery and Observatory, winding between the loose knots of citizens scurrying home from work. No one idles in Meissa. People keep moving. Less chance of exposure that way.

I head for the market square.

Once I've cut across that, Mother says it should only take ten minutes to reach the wall. I've never been allowed in the Northern Quarter, my movements restricted to a half-mile radius of the palace, and always accompanied by the Watchers. But I've studied enough maps. I'll find my way.

A prickling rises at the nape of my neck. The world dims.

No. Not now. Not again.

Light speckles the darkness, pinpricks stretching to a web of silver threads. I clutch the parapet in case my legs give way.

The tinkling whisper settles in my ears. *Arcelia stands on a knife-edge. Look to the mountain.*

That's the third such warning since dawnrise.

But these visions aren't to be trusted; they're possibilities only – a constellation of ifs – and sometimes dark mirrors signifying the opposite of what they first suggest. I focus on what's real. The cool, slick parapet beneath my hands, the crunch of permafrost beneath my boots. I stop my ears to the whisperings as best I can; shut my inner eye to the blurred images barreling towards me; refuse to reach for the threads and allow those images to weave into something intelligible.

Still, I can't help but follow the instruction, even though it means confronting the source of the realm's magic – of my own star-cursed magic. Drawing my cloak closer, I search the northern horizon for the peak of the Astral Mountain. Thanks to the Sickening, I've never known its full radiance, just as I've never known anything but the faintest glimmer of my own silver skin, but I've never seen the halo this dim before either. Levels of Star-Aether must be running dangerously low.

The mountain is the heart of Estelia's magic, but it's scarcely beating anymore.

My vision is still mottled, but I can't afford to linger. The blindness will pass. It always does. I push against the parapet, yank my hood down, continue over the bridge.

My pulse stutters as I weave through Meissa's winding streets.

The urge to run towards the wall is overwhelming. I could reach it in half the time if I sprinted. But I mustn't give in to temptation.

Rule number one: blend in, don't attract attention.

A rule I've spent my whole life trying, and failing, to obey.

Besides, if I get to the wall ahead of schedule, I'll miss my narrow window of escape. My only hope of getting past the patrols for illegal air-refugees is to arrive as the guard changes. I clench my fists and shorten my strides, falling into step with the people milling around me, careful to keep my eyes trained on the cobbles.

Arcelia stands on a knife-edge.

The warning echoes with every step I take. Despite my father's attempts at denial, perhaps the protective wards have finally worn thin, the full weight of the Sickening at long last bearing

The Author



Venetia Constantine read English at King's College, Cambridge and holds a PhD in Art History from the Courtauld Institute. She paused a cherished career in the art world to pursue her dreams of becoming an author, swapping galleries for an enchanted windmill, where she now writes full-time. Venetia lives in London with her husband and their three children.

born Seer

by Venetia Constantine

change everything

down upon us. I shudder. Stars forbid. But it would explain the mutterings of blight and rising cases of Flamefever beyond the city wall, of mounting tension among the Outrealmers, discontent that threatens the centuries-old Partitioned Treaties. It would explain too, the sharpened edge of accusation in the courtiers' stares on the rare occasions I'm allowed to walk among them.

They blame me for all of this, or my kind anyway.

I blink the last of the light-spots away, swerving to avoid an elderly man stooped under a bundle of kindling. It was bad enough being able to read people's auras, but these nightmarish visions are so much worse. Burdens of knowledge I never asked for. Orthriel, my Guardian cielsylph, says my magic is evolving because I'm coming of age, and while there are limits to Orthriel's knowledge of the ways of the Branded, I trust them on this. Just another reason I have to leave Meissa now, before my wretched powers grow any stronger.

For, what if this is the start? The start of my descent into Shadow...

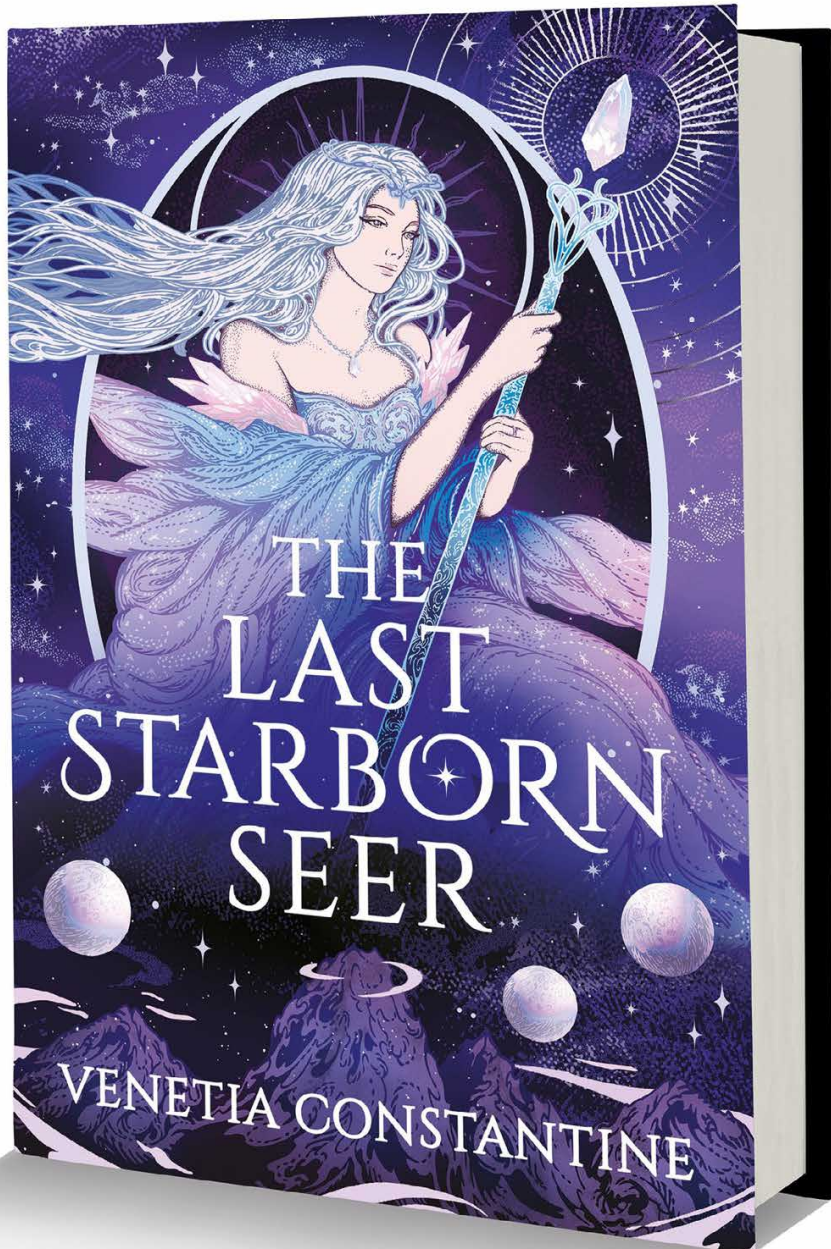
Rounding a corner, I find myself in front of the Bindery. Its great doors, carved to resemble the open pages of a book, stand to my right. I pause as a cart carrying starfruit rattles past, trailing the crop's honeyed scent in its wake. More precious supplies for my binding feast.

The library is my favourite place in Meissa. Its books have offered me solace and companionship, opened gateways, allowed me to soar far beyond the city wall, though I've never once set foot outside it.

Yes, books have saved me before. Stars willing, they'll save me again.

"Leilani, are you sure you want to do this? There will be no turning back once you do."

I stiffen as Orthriel's thoughts resonate inside my head, settling like lead weights down the bridge between our minds. I bristle at their reprimand. But, for all they're a thorn in my side, my Guardian is only thinking of my best interests. However much they disagree with my plans to flee the city in search of the Book of Mysteries – the lost grimoire that once belonged to the Sisters themselves – ultimately, they'll always support me. Orthriel is loyal to the bone that way – if cielsylphs had any bones, that is.



I shift the weight of my pack, turn again for the city wall.

Skittering past the great dome of the Observatory, this is now the furthest I've ever travelled from the palace. My breaths come faster, pluming the air as I glance left and right. Still no sign of the Watchers, though they must be looking for me by now. My nerves are

stretched moonbeam-thin, but the fist clenched tight around my heart loosens.

Maybe, just maybe, this will actually work.

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DOCTOR STRANGE

Angela's Bashes



▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

▶ Publisher **Marvel Comics**

▶ Writer **Derek Landy**

▶ Artist **Ivan Fiorelli**

ISSUES 1-3 If there's one word that comes to mind when thinking of Doctor Strange, it's "psychedelic". Marvel's master of the mystic arts has been a representative of the trippier end of comic book storytelling ever since his creation in 1963.

A degree of mind-bending weirdness is therefore expected, especially if you're restarting Strange's ongoing series and trying to welcome in new readers – which makes Marvel's latest relaunch feel distinctly off-kilter. That's because instead of

beginning with Strange's traditional status quo in his Bleeker Street mansion, we're picking up right in the middle of some ferociously over-complicated continuity.

Swindled out of his position as Earth's Sorcerer Supreme by Doctor Doom (in the 2024 event comic *Blood Hunt*), Strange has ended up serving a similar role for the mythic realm of Asgard. However, thanks to recent events in Thor's ongoing series (including the "death" of Thor), Asgard has been sealed off from Earth, leaving Strange trapped there. These first three issues see Strange trying to figure out a way of escaping, but when he's pulled into a conflict between elves and angels, his habit of stretching the rules ends

up accidentally releasing a dark sorcerer.

Now he has to work with grumpy angelic warrior Angela to find a solution, and while writer Derek Landy is certainly pulling off a good sense of pace alongside some effective emotional moments, he hasn't yet found a compelling narrative hook for the ongoing story.

Without any chance to collide Strange's magical world with the normality of everyday New York, we are instead in fish-out-of-water territory, but with Landy not delivering anything truly weird, the results tend to feel over-familiar.

This kind of epic fantasy world is Thor's usual stomping ground, and adding Stephen Strange into the mix just doesn't make this feel different or distinctive

“Derek Landy hasn't yet found a compelling narrative hook for the story”

enough. Instead, we get plenty of intrigue, some enjoyable but far-from-seismic plot twists, and a villain who hasn't yet become properly interesting.

This is the kind of title where you look to the art to do some of the heavy lifting, but while Ivan Fiorelli's cartoony art delivers detailed fantasy world-building and kinetic action scenes, it hasn't yet given the series the visual impact and atmosphere it's in serious need of.

It's possible that this opening arc may eventually kick into gear and drive Strange's story forward into more satisfying territory. At the moment, however, this relaunch is a fun but flawed read that isn't quite managing to feel truly essential. **Saxon Bullock**

i Derek Landy is best known for writing the long-running dark fantasy YA series *Skulduggery Pleasant*.



BLACK PANTHER 60TH ANNIVERSARY



▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

▶ Publisher **Marvel Comics**

▶ Writers **Various**

▶ Artists **Various**

ONE-SHOT Recent years have seen Marvel going down the "anniversary anthology" route at every opportunity, but this latest example manages to be a little more distinctive and characterful in its celebration of the iconic Black Panther.

Fitting into current Marvel continuity, where T'Challa is exiled from Wakanda and has gone missing, this special sees ex-cop Kevin Cole (aka White Tiger) enlisted to find him.

The quest acts as the linking narrative between three other stories, all of which have separate creative teams, and all of which explore different aspects of T'Challa's character and the Black Panther mythos.

Best of these is "Exiles" by Christopher Priest and Javier Pina, in which T'Challa is forced to make a tense deal with Magneto. Sharply told and gripping, the story does a great job of exploring both characters and their contrasting senses of morality and justice.

While the other tales don't reach the same heights, they're still enjoyable, shifting between hard sci-fi and mythic fantasy, and delivering impressive visuals – most notably in Eder Messias's gorgeous artwork for "Through Your Eyes".

The end result can't help feeling a little too brief, but overall this is a satisfying anthology, and a step above some of Marvel's more perfunctory recent anniversary specials. **Saxon Bullock**





THE COMPLETE 2000 AD BY ALAN MOORE Volume One

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED** 8 APRIL

▶ Publisher Rebellion

▶ Writer Alan Moore

▶ Artists Various

COLLECTION Before he changed the face of American comics, Alan Moore was a contributor to *2000 AD*, where he most famously created “The Ballad Of Halo Jones” with artist Ian Gibson. Less well remembered, but just as important to Moore’s growth, were his contributions to the comic’s short story strands, “Future Shocks” and “Tharg’s Time Twisters”. This volume collects those, as well as the short tales he penned for “The ABC Warriors”, “Ro-Busters”, “Rogue Trooper”, “Ro-Jaws’ Robo Tales” and “Abelard Snazz”.

There are too many to detail here, but what’s most impressive about these pieces is how packed they are with ideas, memorable characters, and political or philosophical themes. Moore would put a unique spin on a well-worn format – “Time Twister” “The Big Clock” plays out like a documentary on how time is created, for example – or riff on comic lore, putting a cynical spin on Superman’s origin in “Future Shock” “Bad Timing”.

It’s also fascinating catching glimpses of ideas that would become a part of Moore’s more mature work. “The Regrettable Ruse Of Rocket Redglare!” sees an ageing hero trying to stage a false-flag alien invasion. Sound familiar, *Watchmen* readers? A packed collection from a one-man ideas factory. **Will Salmon**

What happens when a Turtle eats four Weetabix.



TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES

Kowabunga comics

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

▶ Publisher IDW Publishing

▶ Writers Gene Luen Yang/Variou

▶ Artists Freddie Williams II/Variou

◉ **With the four brothers** reuniting at the end of previous writer Jason Aaron’s run on the flagship title, Gene Luen Yang’s opening storyline for *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* ★★★★★ – so far spanning issues 13 to 15 – is initially quite discombobulating for newcomers.

Aided by Freddie E Williams II’s muscular, kinetic art, Yang combines affectionate humour with a hectic, enthralling plot. Twist is piled upon twist, with the Turtles’ long-lost mentor Splinter unveiled as brutal assassin Ujigami, who targets those fated to kill the individual Turtles. And you’ll definitely be back next issue after the identity of Raphael’s potential murderer is revealed.

While Yang only sparingly dips into *TMNT*’s storied history (such

as bringing back Shinigami, the scheming witch from 2012’s animated series), you’ll need to be well versed in Turtles lore to keep up with the references in *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Battle Nexus* ★★★★★. Crossing *Secret Wars* with *Gladiator*, this five-parter pits characters from across the multiverse and various mediums against each other, while there’s also a sly nod to *TMNT*’s original Mirage Studios home.

It’s set on an interdimensional asteroid, with the tournament overseen by the Time Lords (no, not *those* ones). Co-written by Tom Waltz, Paul Allor, Sophie Campbell, Caleb Coellner and Erik Burnham, the plot follows a predictable path as the Turtles take on various opponents, while the bombastic conclusion could have intriguing future implications for Yang’s *TMNT*. **Stephen Jewell**

i Other recent miniseries include *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles X Godzilla*, and solo outings for Casey Jones and Shredder.



THE BAT-MAN: SECOND KNIGHT

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

▶ Publisher DC/Black Label

▶ Writer Dan Jurgens

▶ Artist Mike Perkins

ISSUES 1-3 A sequel to *The Batman: First Knight*, 2024’s pulp-influenced take on Batman’s earliest era, felt inevitable, and this new three-issue miniseries throws us back into the crime-infested underbelly of 1939 Gotham.

World War II has begun, and we’re once again following the early days of Bruce Wayne as a costumed vigilante, as a series of grotesque murders shifts the city into panic mode. This is only increased by the rise of the Scarecrow and his fear gas, while Bruce also has to contend with the arrival of an inquisitive reporter named Clark Kent...

As with 2024’s *First Knight*, there’s a tremendous amount of potential, but the execution leaves it as a frustrating and haphazard experience.

Using vintage comic eras to explore the politics of the time can be an effective storytelling tool, but *Second Knight* feels like it’s trying to be a hard-edged, violent noir with dark political themes, and a campy pastiche of ’40s pulp movies.

The mix ends up feeling awkward and unconvincing, with writer Dan Jurgens failing to pull off the themes he’s aiming for, while also delivering some genuinely terrible dialogue. By contrast, artist Mike Perkins’s eye-catching work is both atmospheric and brilliantly detailed, but it ultimately isn’t enough to save this flat thriller from feeling deeply mediocre. **Saxon Bullock**

RESIDENT EVIL REQUIEM

Saving Grace

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Reviewed on PS5

► Also available on PC, Xbox Series X/S, Nintendo Switch 2

► Publisher Capcom

VIDEOGAME Marking 30 years of the iconic horror series, this ninth entry is certainly no funeral – more a celebration of unlife and the terror it can bring. Previous games have bounced between delivering *Blair Witch*-style scares and bombastic gore-soaked action that wouldn't be out of place in *Evil Dead*. Rather than picking a lane, *Requiem* allows us to have our cake-like zombie skull and embed it with a hatchet too.

Wielding the blade is Leon Kennedy, a returning special agent now more than proficient at zombie slaying, who's on a ticking clock to fight off his own infection,

and won't blink twice mowing down legions of undead to do so. Caught up in the conspiracy (one her own mother was seemingly murdered to protect) is Grace Ashcroft, an FBI analyst more suited to desk work, who will huff, puff and occasionally trip as she jogs away from foes. By default, Leon's action is third-person and over-the-shoulder to give him a view of the hordes he'll take apart, while Grace plays in first-person view to get a better sense of line of sight as she creeps about.

You don't choose a character, but play as both as the story demands. The disparate playstyles work well to keep the action varied, though it can feel spread thin – fully nailing neither true action horror nor survival horror. But it's a balance that feels fresh. Control fundamentals are close enough between the two so that

it's not confusing, but more that you get a sense of them as different people with different skill sets: Leon can pepper enemy limbs with bullets to open them up for a close-quarters pummelling, whereas Grace can use things like thrown bottles to distract foes.

Zombie lurches and violent death animations are amazingly detailed, and many of them creepily follow patterns they had in life – undead maids obsessed with scrubbing up endless puddles of blood, for example. The core maps are wonderfully dense and mazy, full of danger and puzzles, and while some linear sequences lose their bite on replay, they provide some of the scariest challenges in the series to date. It's a bloody good time. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

i A locker in the STARS office includes boxed copies of the original *Resident Evil*, *Street Fighter Alpha 2* and *Mega-Man 8*.



Leon gets a real kick out of dealing with zombies.



SCOTT PILGRIM EX

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Reviewed on Nintendo Switch 2

► Also available on Nintendo Switch, PS 4/5, Xbox Series X/S, PC

► Publisher Tribute Games

VIDEOGAME The work of the team behind *Marvel Cosmic Invasion* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge*, *Scott Pilgrim EX* tells a brand new tale in the world of the beloved graphic novel series (which is never a franchise to shy away from referencing videogames).

You're thrust into a time-travelling adventure in which Scott must defeat a robotic version of himself – something sure to give *Sonic CD* fans some déjà vu. Ramona, a number of her evil exes, and a robot companion team up with you as you warp through time saving members of Scott's band Sex Bob-Omb. It's a fun story, if a bit inconsequential.

Those exes are the highlight, because their fighting-game-inspired movesets – burly Lucas Lee being a heavy hitter, while Roxy Richter is super-agile – make for one of the best brawlers on the market, as far as the scrapping is concerned.

That being said, it's unfortunately paired with a poor canvas on which to paint. The in-game version of Toronto takes on a semi-open world structure, with tedious quest design that doesn't amount to much more than walking around the map fetching something.

Fun dialogue, great music and gorgeous pixel artwork do somewhat make up for this, but *Scott Pilgrim EX* still feels like a case of major untapped potential. **Scott McCrae**



DOCTOR WHO: PANDEMONIUM

★★★★★

► **RELEASED 5 APRIL**

► Running time **74 minutes**

► Format **CD/download**

► Publisher **Big Finish**

AUDIO DRAMA All of Big Finish's

Ninth Doctor and Rose range takes place in the gap between the episodes "Father's Day" and "The Empty Child". The former (aka "The One Where Rose Met Her Dead Dad") hangs over *Pandemonium*, a comic romp with a vein of melancholy at its heart.

The TARDIS lands in London, 2006 – cue an amusingly pointed aside from the Doctor about the price differences between the north and south. The Powell Estate is even more chaotic than usual thanks to the arrival of a gaggle of historical characters, who have materialised without explanation. Edith Nesbit (Kate Harbour) has moved in with Jackie Tyler (Camille Coduri), and Samuel Pepys (Nick Denning-Read) is roaming about the place. But the most troubling return is the late partner of one of Rose's neighbours, an ordinary man of no historical importance...

As with the season's prior releases, *Pandemonium* captures the tone of the era well, but it's the way that Katharine Armitage's script tugs at the emotional threads left hanging by the events of "Father's Day" that make this such an emotionally resonant listen. Though the explanation is a little garbled, that doesn't take away from a witty, moving story that fits perfectly into the wider jigsaw puzzle of the Ninth Doctor's era. **Will Salmon**



Cynthia Erivo gets to the heart of the matter.

DANIEL BOUD

DRACULA

A vampire defanged

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Booking until **30 May**

► Venue **Noël Coward Theatre, London**

► Production company

Sydney Theatre Company

STAGE PLAY There's no denying

that *Wicked* star Cynthia Erivo is a tour de force in her one-woman adaptation of *Dracula*. The question is, was memorising a 20,000-word monologue the best direction a West End stage version of Bram Stoker's most famous work could have taken?

It's certainly a brave, bold take, leaning heavily on a camera-filmed production style made popular recently by the likes of Jamie Lloyd's Nicole Scherzinger-led *Sunset Boulevard*. While that was a sensational production, sadly *Dracula* is not.

Because Erivo plays all 23 parts, and interacts with pre-recorded inserts of herself, the whole piece

“The staging looks like a noughties Atomic Kitten video”

feels rushed to ensure it keeps in time with the video elements. Whereas *Sunset* played out to the audience, *Dracula* almost entirely ignores them in favour of the onstage cameras.

When scenes switch to a setting in an all-white room, the staging looks like a noughties Atomic Kitten pop video. Speaking of music, the soundtrack appears to be almost all pre-existing tracks – which immediately takes you out of a scene when you recognise a piece or singer. That's when you're not trying to keep up with Erivo rattling off dialogue like a machine gun.

It's worth noting that although the star plays all 23 roles, not all of these actually appear live onstage. Among them are her takes on film classics such as *Nosferatu*, *From Dusk Till Dawn* and Bela Lugosi's 1931 incarnation of the Count.

An interval and better pacing would have given this undead incarnation more life. As it stands, *Dracula* distinctly lacks bite, despite the obvious talents of its leading lady. **Darren Scott**

i Writer/director Kip Williams previously directed a one-woman version of *The Picture Of Dorian Gray*, with Sarah Snook.

RECORD STORE DAY

The vinyl-geek event is back on 18 April. Here are a few highlights you may deem worth queuing for

DOCTOR WHO: THE RESCUE



This 1965 two-parter introduced Maureen O'Brien as new companion Vicki, a spaceship-crash survivor menaced by a terrifying alien (... or is she?). The latest in Demon Records' soundtrack range, it threads the audio with O'Brien's narration, and is on translucent red vinyl.

GOBLIN: THE SINGLES COLLECTION 1975-1979



Fans of Dario Argento's Italian horrors will need no introduction to prog rockers Goblin. This album includes three tracks from *Profondo Rosso* and *Suspiria*, plus another nine, including "Yell", the theme for Italian horror anthology series *Sette Storie Per Non Dormire*. It comes on white vinyl.

THE MAN WITH THE IRON FISTS



Back in 2012, Wu-Tang Clan main man RZA directed a fantasy-tinged martial-arts tale set in 19th-century China, centred on an emancipated slave who channels energy through his metal forearm. The double-LP soundtrack mixes the likes of Kanye West, The Black Keys and Corinne Bailey Rae with various Wu-Tang types.

WICKED: ONE WONDERFUL NIGHT



Aired in November, NBC's TV special saw Cynthia Erivo and Ariana Grande performing eight numbers from the *Oz* prequel, plus a mash-up of musical classics "Get Happy" and "Happy Days Are Here Again". Jeff Goldblum accompanied them on piano at one point! This double-LP release comes on purple and green vinyl.

OCTOBER 1968

SFX's time machine hurls us back to a random month once again

WORDS: NICK SETCHFIELD



FLASHBACK

Designer Jacques Fonteray took a mould of Fonda for this outfit.

Cosmic Girl

11 OCTOBER 1968 She may be an icon of psychedelic cinema, but Barbarella was born on the page. The creation of French artist Jean-Claude Forest, she debuted in *V Magazine* in 1962, her erotically charged capers so potentially scandalous that a subsequent album of the strip was ruled unfit for public display.

Forest saw his interstellar ingénue as the embodiment of the emancipated woman of the '60s, freshly liberated by the contraceptive pill, and reborn in the far future, among the stars. A key visual inspiration was Brigitte Bardot, who had brought an incendiary new sexuality to the screen in 1956's *And*

God Created Woman, directed by her then husband, Roger Vadim.

"One can easily say that Brigitte Bardot entered the history of cinema like a Martian," observed Vadim, who would go on to helm 1968's *Barbarella*, Italian producer Dino De Laurentiis's kitschy adaptation of Forest's strip. For all her otherworldly credentials, Bardot turned down the role, along with the rather more earthbound Virna Lisi and Sophia Loren.

Vadim ultimately cast Jane Fonda, whom he'd married in 1965. Immortalised on posters, T-shirts and fridge magnets, Fonda's

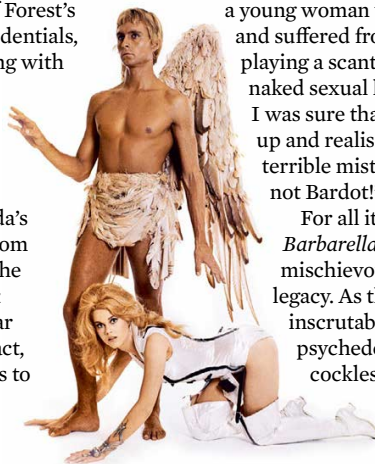
image is now inseparable from this "mythic creature of the space age", as *Newsweek* dubbed her, but it was far from a seamless fit. In fact, Fonda's first reaction was to

Plans for an underwater sequel cheekily titled *Barbarella Goes Down* were later abandoned.

lob the script in the bin. Vadim later stated that Fonda "didn't enjoy shooting *Barbarella*", claiming she disliked the character "for her lack of principle, her shameless exploitation of her sexuality and her irrelevance to contemporary social and political realities".

Fonda shared her own take in her 2005 autobiography *My Life So Far*: "There I was, a young woman who hated her body and suffered from terrible bulimia, playing a scantily clad, sometimes naked sexual heroine. Every morning I was sure that Vadim would wake up and realise he had made a terrible mistake. 'Oh my God! She's not Bardot!'"

For all its star's misgivings, *Barbarella's* pop art stylings and mischievous tone left an enduring legacy. As the loungecore title song inscrutably declares, "Barbarella psychedella, there's a kind of cockleshell about you..."



MOVIESTORE/SHUTTERSTOCK, PARAMOUNT PICTURES/SUNSET BOULEVARD/CORBIS VIA GETTY



Lazenby was voted Top Model Of The Year in 1966.

The Unlikely Lad

7 OCTOBER 1968 “This never happened to the other fella,” declares George Lazenby, taking aim at the fourth wall of the Bond franchise in the opening minutes of *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*. It's a knowing nod to his illustrious predecessor, but for audiences, Lazenby was the other fella, the man daring to replace Sean Connery.

Potential Bonds included Oliver Reed, Patrick Mower and Terence Stamp. More improbable names in the mix included Adam West, Dick Van Dyke and Lord Lucan. Were these genuine contenders or part of some fiendish disinformation campaign by SMERSH? Whatever the case, the ultimate winner of the Walther PPK was perhaps the unlikeliest choice of all.

Unveiled at a press conference at London's Dorchester hotel on 7 October 1968 – “Australian Non-Actor Chosen To Play Bond” reported the *Washington Post* – Lazenby was a former car salesman and male model, best known for advertising Fry's chocolate bars. He had pursued the part with an assassin's eye, snapping up one of Connery's discarded suits from a Savile Row tailor and having his hair cut by the star's barber.

“We wanted someone who oozed sexual assurance, and we think this fellow has it,” director Peter Hunt told the assembled press.

Destined to be a one-shot Bond, Lazenby's bid to supplant Connery had an inauspicious beginning. Reporting for duty at Pinewood Studios, he was denied entry by the guy on the gate, who refused to believe he was in the presence of 007 himself. Now, that definitely never happened to the other fella.

EVERETT/SHUTTERSTOCK



Producer Bob Justman called for an “angry red” sky.

© PARAMOUNT TELEVISION

Go West

25 OCTOBER 1968 There were distinct traces of gunsmoke and sagebrush in the DNA of *Star Trek*. Born into the age of the TV Western, it was pitched as “*Wagon Train* to the stars”. Even the deathless phrase “the final frontier” evokes the pioneer spirit of the Oregon trail.

Season three's “Spectre Of The Gun” possibly comes closest to the genre, however. Trapped within a simulation of Tombstone, Arizona, the crew's phasers exchanged for

six-shooters, James T Kirk and co are compelled to replay the legendary 1881 showdown between the Earps and the Clanton gang. While a ticking clock countdown is pure *High Noon*, budget-conscious measures give the episode a memorably surreal vibe – the fateful town is pieced together from studio facades, flat backdrops framed against an uncanny red sky.

Star Trek may have gone where no cowboy had gone before, but for DeForest Kelley, Tombstone was something of a homecoming – he'd played Morgan Earp a decade earlier in John Sturges's 1957 film *Gunfight At The OK Corral*.



Apollo 7: the program's first crewed flight.

IN REAL LIFE

- ▶ **Prime Minister:** Harold Wilson
- ▶ **US President:** Lyndon B Johnson
- ▶ **In the charts:** “Those Were The Days” indeed – Mary Hopkin's Macca-penned melancholy sits at number one.
- ▶ **In the news:** Juan Velasco Alvarado seizes power in Peru; the M1 motorway is completed; the US teams with South Vietnamese forces in the Mekong Delta; NASA launches Apollo 7; the Olympics are held in Mexico City; Equatorial Guinea receives independence from Spain; Led Zeppelin make their live debut at Surrey University.

HUM IMAGES/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP VIA GETTY

ON THE SHELF



- ▶ The latest issue of *Galaxy* showcases stories by Robert Silverberg, Gordon R Dickson and HH Hollis.

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Mummies

If you know your Egyptological fantasy and horror, you could have this issue's quiz all wrapped up...

Quizmaster Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor

QUESTION 1

What's the name of the mummy played by Boris Karloff in Universal's original version of *The Mummy*?

QUESTION 2

In the *Buffy* episode "Inca Mummy Girl", which character falls for an exchange student who turns out to be an Inca princess?

QUESTION 3

Which author wrote the 1903 novel *The Jewel Of Seven Stars*?

QUESTION 4 Picture Question

Which *Doctor Who* story featured this mummy?

QUESTION 5

What's the name of the undead Egyptian sorcerer in *ThunderCats*?

QUESTION 6

What was the name of the titular character in the '70s Marvel comic *The Living Mummy*?

QUESTION 7

Which TV series had a story called "I'll Be A Mummy's Uncle"?

QUESTION 8 Picture Question

In which TV series would you find this mummy?

QUESTION 9

In the 2002 film *Bubba Ho-Tep*, what kind of institution is stalked by a mummy?

QUESTION 10

In Hammer's 1959 version of *The Mummy*, which actor played mummified high priest Kharis?

QUESTION 11

Name any of Hammer's three other mummy movies.



QUESTION 4



QUESTION 8



QUESTION 12



QUESTION 16

QUESTION 12 Picture Question

Supply the title that's been removed from this movie poster.

QUESTION 13

What was the name of the adventurer played by Brendan Fraser in 1999's *The Mummy*?

QUESTION 14

Who wrote the short story "Lot No 249", recently adapted by Mark Gatiss for the *Ghost Story For Christmas* strand?

QUESTION 15

In *Hotel Transylvania*, which singer voiced Dracula's mummy pal Murray?

QUESTION 16 Picture Question

Which *Doctor Who* story featured this mummy?

QUESTION 17

Who was the director of the 2017 version of *The Mummy*, starring Tom Cruise?

QUESTION 18

Which enemy of the Tomorrow People spent several centuries inactive in the form of a mummified Pharaoh?

QUESTION 19

Which 1981 mummy horror ended up on the "Section 3 list" (making it liable to confiscation and destruction) during the video nasties panic?

QUESTION 20

Who played the mummy in the Universal sequels *The Mummy's Tomb*, *The Mummy's Ghost* and *The Mummy's Curse*?

Answers
 1 Imhotep 2 Xander 3 Bram Stoker 4 "Mummy On The Orient Express" 5 Mumm-Ra 6 N'Kantu 7 Batman 8 Koltchak: The Night Stalker 9 A retirement home 10 Christopher Lee 11 The Curse Of The Mummy's Tomb/The Mummy's Shroud/Blood From The Mummy's Tomb 12 Abbot And Costello Meet The Mummy 13 Rick O'Connell 14 Arthur Conan Doyle 15 Ceelo Green 16 "Pyramids Of Mars" 17 Alex Kurtzman 18 Jedlikiah 19 Dawn Of The Mummy 20 Lon Chaney Jr

How did you do?

What's your level in Ancient Egypt?

0-5
Servant

6-10
Farmer

11-15
Craftsman

16-19
High Priest

20
Pharaoh

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Jayce And The Wheeled Warriors

Richard Edwards, freelance writer



In the '80s, toys and sci-fi were pretty much synonymous. Everybody knows how George Lucas became extremely rich off the back of *Star Wars*

merchandising, while the *Masters Of The Universe* cartoon was essentially an advert for implausibly muscle-bound action figures. But not every effort to marry screen adventures with vacuum-formed plastic was so successful.

He-Man's creator, toy giant Mattel, had already launched a Wheeled Warriors line by the time it hired future *Babylon 5* creator J Michael Straczynski (a veteran of the *MOTU* writers' room) to craft a mythology for a spin-off cartoon. But while each toy came with an accompanying comic book, Straczynski was effectively starting from scratch. Pretty much the only thing that survived the transition

was the notion of two warring factions of vehicles: the human-controlled Lightning League (the goodies), and the plant-based Monster Minds (the baddies).

Straczynski later said his job was to "hijack a dopey concept and make it into something more", and he arguably succeeded – albeit with certain caveats. The Monster Minds were now an evil race of sentient plant people capable of transforming into battle-ready vehicles. The Lightning League, meanwhile, became a ragtag bunch of cartoon archetypes (a pirate, a wizard, a "cute" but annoying sidekick) led by Jayce, a headstrong kid. They had weekly skirmishes with the militant vegetation as part of their ongoing quest to unleash the "magic root" that would eliminate the troublesome foliage.

Look past the workmanlike animation, generic storytelling and incompetent villains, and – like many other cartoons of the mid-'80s

– *Jayce* has a solid premise at its core. This was an era when Saturday morning kids' shows were the place writers went to scratch that sci-fi itch, only to find their wilder ideas toned down by the requirements of their time slot.

I'll be the first to admit that the show hasn't aged well, but to the space-obsessed little me, *Jayce* had a near-perfect mix of memorable vehicles, ickiness (there's still something a bit creepy about the Monster Minds), and the ongoing mystery about the whereabouts of Jayce's dad. This was never satisfactorily resolved, of course, as disappointing ratings and toy sales led to the show's premature cancellation. And so, four decades later, *Jayce's* greatest legacy may just be its pair of ridiculously catchy, peak-'80s theme songs. ●

Rich still thinks things'll turn out right when your wheels get you there.

Fact Attack!

→ *Jayce And The Wheeled Warriors* came from the same DIC animation stable as *Inspector Gadget*, *Ulysses 31* and *The Real Ghostbusters*.

→ After *Jayce*, Straczynski's next job in television was working on the rather more acclaimed *The Real Ghostbusters* animated series.

→ Straczynski says he wrote a script for a *Jayce* movie that would have wrapped up the plot, but it never went into production.

→ Shuki Levy and Haim Saban are credited with composing the two theme songs. Other credits include *MASK* and *The Mysterious Cities Of Gold*.

→ Mattel's *Wheeled Warriors* toys had "X-changeable parts", meaning you could mix and match components to create unique vehicles.

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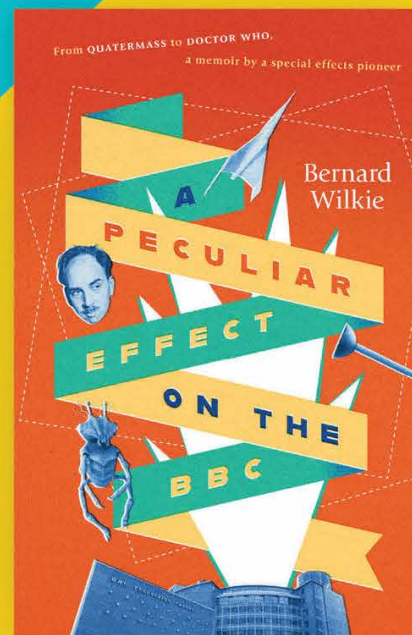
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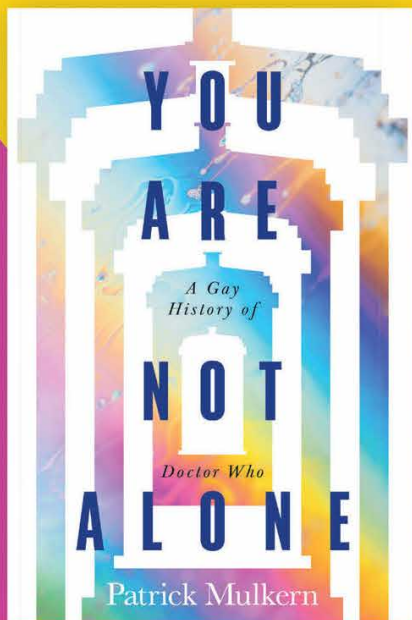
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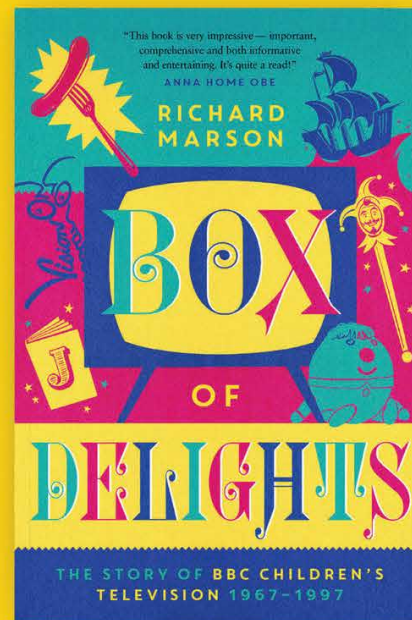
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