

**SUPERGIRL** KRYPTON'S DAUGHTER TAKES FLIGHT

# SEFX

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ON-SET FOR  
SEASON TWO

**DRAGONSLAYER**  
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DOING IT  
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## Captain's Log

"I'm considering nothing less than world domination..."



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How in Westeros do you narrow down the incredible cast and crew of *House Of The Dragon* for a cover feature when you're not writing a book on the show?! The simple answer to that is who's available within the limited time you have. Hey, we even tried for a dragon, but Tara Bennett wrestled the beast eventually!

But what a treat to have a fantasy show front and centre again, it feels like it's been an age. It seems we have fewer of them, so it's also a delight to welcome *Avatar: The Last Airbender* back to screens. We sent the wonderfully geeky Henry Calvert to Vancouver to visit the set – hey, he's young, he can handle the travel.

Elsewhere Nick Setchfield has a lunchdate (of sorts) with Supergirl, Robbie Dunlop takes on Deadites, and Ian Berriman steps back in time to remain perpetually under 30 for *Logan's Run*.

Jon Coates brings it all together with his usual flair and me, well, I'm just swanning around in a kaftan, ranting over the Omegahedron.

We'd hoped to bring you updates on *The Odyssey* and season three of *Silo*, but sadly it wasn't to be. As ever, what a time to have such a choice of genre releases though... When's that sci-fi renaissance happening, industry people? Thank goodness we've still got *Star Trek* – for now at least – so beam down in four weeks for the latest news from the USS Enterprise.

Darren X

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## Rants & Raves

Inside the SFX hive mind



**DARREN SCOTT** EDITOR

### RAVES

- Turns out *Mother Mary* – which I loved – was more SFX-relevant than we thought. Who knew!
- I've had a sneak peak at *Crystal Lake* and I love it.
- *Sinners* is a great "get" for a Halloween Horror Nights haunted house.

### RANTS

- Watching classic animation with breakfast – why on Earth did they change the music for *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You!* season two?



**IAN BERRIMAN** DEPUTY EDITOR

### RAVES

- Thrilled to see that "No Such Thing As A Vampire", the long-lost first episode of BBC anthology show *Late Night Horror*, has been recovered.
- Also very excited that the generation-scarring Spanish short film "The Telephone Box" is coming out on Blu-ray (20 July). Radiance Films, I could kiss your feet.

### RIP

- Very sad to hear about the death of Michael Keating: Vila was such a brilliantly-realised character, and Keating's interplay with Paul Darrow



**JONATHAN COATES** ART EDITOR

### RAVES

- Thought *The Boroughs* was such a fun watch. Keeping all my alien digits crossed that it gets renewed for season two (and three!).



**NICK SETCHFIELD** EDITOR AT LARGE

### RAVES

- Check out the *Going Rogue* podcast. Whatever your take on the *Star Wars* sequels it's an incisive deep dive into the decisions that shaped these movies.
- Reading some more Daphne du Maurier and once again I'm in awe. Weird, twisted and glinting with mischief. The recent *After Midnight* collection is a great place to start.



**TARA BENNETT** US EDITOR

### RAVES

- Apple TV's *Widow's Bay* is the horror-comedy sleeper of the summer (year?). The finale is the bow on an excellent first season led by a pitch-perfect Matthew Rhys.
- If you love stop-motion animation, don't miss Mexico's first feature with that technique, *I Am Frankelda*, now on Netflix. Gorgeous old-school creativity.



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# Red Alert

→ NEWS /// INTERVIEWS /// INSIGHT /// SYMBIOTES!

JULY  
2026



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## Wake Up Call

Classic horrors inspire new movie **Honey Bunch**

### Highlights



#### 14 SUGAR

→ Another eight spoonfuls of the private eye show. No, we didn't see that twist coming either.



#### 22 RED DWARF

→ The original crew return in a brand new novel, the first in 30 years, co-written by the late Rob Grant.



#### 23 DOCTOR WHO

→ The Fugitive Doctor returns in a new comic series for *Circuit Breaker* – and so do the Daleks!





DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

# The Scream Factory

Director Pierre Coffin rips up the rule book with **Minions & Monsters** WORDS: MATT MAYTUM



THE TITLE *MINIONS & Monsters* seems like it has been lab-engineered to extract the most fun and chaos from the *Despicable Me* franchise's yellow, pill-shaped supervillain helpers. But that's not the case, according to director Pierre Coffin. "The title came a little bit to my dismay at first because I thought, 'Well, it's not entirely about Minions and monsters,'" Coffin tells Red Alert. "I could see

the marketing reason why they wanted it named that. In the story itself, it makes total sense, but the movie is not *only* about that."

The way Coffin explains it, there's a lot more going on than the title suggests. "The core movie is about two Minion friends who meet, who become best friends, and then a little bit like a romcom, I guess, they sort of have a falling out... That's the core emotional story."

The French director has a long history with the franchise; he served as director on every installment from *Despicable Me* (2010) to *Despicable Me 3* (2017), including 2015 spin-off *Minions*, and he has voiced the goggle-eyed, overall-wearing critters from the start. But his passion for directing the films had waned, at least temporarily. "The reason why after *Despicable Me 3*, I didn't do any Minion-related directorial

stuff is that I just didn't want to do them anymore. I was just feeling, not tired, but I thought, 'Oh man, I wish I could do something else.' So I did other stuff."

While he continued to help out on the movies (and provide his sped-up voice), he stepped back from directing until Chris Meledandri, producer and CEO of Illumination, presented his idea for the latest banana-hued spin-off film.

"It was very general, about Minions wanting to make a monster movie, and then they create [a monster] or they somehow manage to get one, and then that thing starts destroying everything and then they have to correct their mistake, basically," he recalls. "When he said that, all these ideas started rushing in, like,





Coffin's new Minions try their hand at *The Mummy*.

and [Charlie] Chaplin and [Harold] Lloyd and all those other guys, we as animators always refer to them for the physical comedy and how to express emotion without necessarily using words. So that period was very important just because it was a way for me to give a nod to, 'Well, it all started from there.' The Minions are actually the very clear expression of what those guys were doing at the time, but at today's level, I guess."

Throwing back to kaiju movies, the *Monsters* side of the title also provides an opportunity to cut loose in the design stakes. All of the monster designs here originated with one artist, with

whom Coffin has worked with for two decades. His nickname, Goomi, has been used for a key *Minions & Monsters* character. "During meetings, while working, he has always been doodling, and everything he's been doodling was about monsters. He even did a comic book, sort of a Lovecraft for kids with cute little characters. When Chris pitched me the idea [I thought], 'Oh, wouldn't it be cool if he made a monster?' Obviously, I directly went to that Lovecraft sort of universe. So all the monsters that you see in the movie, it's him."

With *Minions & Monsters* exploring fresh territory for the franchise, the possibilities for the future are limitless. "[On this film] I wanted to push the envelope, technically and aesthetically. It looks a little bit different. It feels

**“It feels like everything can be possible from this moment on”**

different. This movie sort of opens up, 'Oh, let's make a movie that's happening, like, in the future, or in space,' and it feels like everything is possible from this moment on, provided the movie is a success."

Given that the series has banked more than \$5.4 billion to date across six movies, success for this film feels almost guaranteed – which is more than you can say for the Minions' own in-world movie... ●

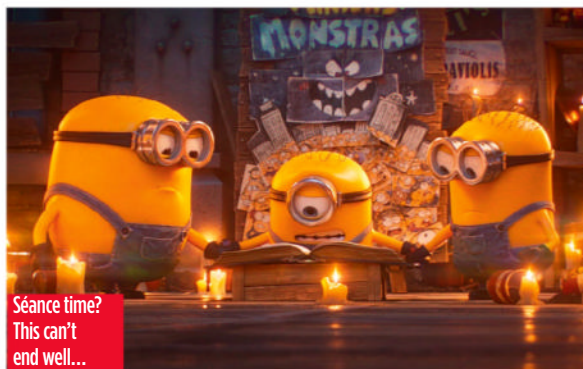
*Minions & Monsters is in cinemas from 1 July.*

South Park's Trey Parker features as Goomi (right).

'What's the time period? Can we have it happening in Hollywood in the '20s? Can it be not our regular Minions that we meet in those prequels, but other ones?' He said yes to everything." So began Coffin's work on *Minions & Monsters*, both as director and screenwriter.

Series stalwarts Bob, Kevin and Stuart are no longer centre stage, and in step Dick, Ed, James and Henry. That, in conjunction with the era it's set in, makes *Minions & Monsters* more of a standalone instalment than the previous spinoff movies and shorts.

The 1920s setting wasn't picked at random. "The basis of the cinema was born at that period," says Coffin. "From [Buster] Keaton



Séance time? This can't end well...



Our all-new heroes get heavy metal.

**SCI-FACT!** The Minions' voices are created by recording the lines in slow-motion, then speeding them up to reach the distinctive pitch.



DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

# Marriage Story

How far would you go for love? Just ask horror-thriller curio **Honey Bunch**

WORDS: JAMES MOTTRAM

→ WHEN *VIOLATION* was released in 2020, this extreme rape-revenge drama was a love-it-or-hate-it experience. “We knew we’d made a Marmite movie,” says British-Canadian director Madeleine Sims-Fewer, who co-wrote/directed with her Canadian partner Dusty Mancinelli. Now they’re back with a new film. “I think when we went to make *Honey Bunch*, we thought, ‘Let’s make something maybe a bit more straightforward,’” she adds. “And then ended up making another Marmite movie!”

Inspired by a brief health scare Mancinelli had, the '70s-set story follows Diana (Grace Glowicki), who wakes from a coma following a car accident. Her husband Homer (Ben Petrie) has brought her to an experimental trauma centre deep in the wilderness, where she endures intense therapy sessions. When the film premiered at the 2025 Berlin Film Festival, reviews leaned into its divisive nature. Or as *Paste* magazine put it: “100% weird at all times.”

“We knew it was going to be weird because we’re weird,” chuckles Sims-Fewer, “and we wanted to bring ourselves to it. With *Violation*, people saw our trauma, of things that had

happened in our past. With this, we wanted to show our personalities and who we are, and that we are a bit twisted, and that we do have a sense of humour. Showing your humour is also really vulnerable, because humour is so specific.”

She and Mancinelli are evidently expecting polarised reactions to *Honey Bunch*, a film that gets increasingly unhinged as Diana begins to question the motives of those around her. “It’s more accessible than *Violation* in many ways, but it takes big swings that are not going to work for everyone,” argues Mancinelli. “Some people are going to be frustrated, maybe, with the direction that it goes in, or not satisfied with ultimately what the movie is because of the misdirection.”

The weirdness did not put actors off. Real-life filmmaker couple Glowicki and Petrie felt just right as Diana and Homer, especially after Sims-Fewer and Mancinelli saw Glowicki’s 2019 debut feature *Tito*, which she stars in. “It was that that made us feel like she’d be right for Diana,” says Sims-Fewer, “because it’s a very physical performance, and she has a real physical transformation in *Tito*. We knew that this performance was going to need real physicality.”

Joining Glowicki and Petrie are Kate Dickie, who plays the in-house therapist, and Jason Isaacs as a father whose own daughter suffers similar ailments to Diana. “It reminded me of one of those fantastic '70s films that defy genre slightly, like a *Lindsay*

“It’s more accessible than *Violation* in many ways, but it takes big swings”



Entering the “Daphne du Maurier-type manor house”.



Kate Dickie and Jason Isaacs bring star power.



Real-life couple Petrie and Glowicki have a paddle.



Isaacs likens this to *A Clockwork Orange*.





Patricia Tulasne is the mysterious Dr Tréphine.

Anderson or Nic Roeg film,” says Isaacs. “It’s *A Clockwork Orange*, but it’s also *The Wicker Man* or *Don’t Look Now*.”

The filmic references stretch back further still. With Diana and Homer quoting Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rebecca* to each other, it’s little surprise that Sims-Fewer says they wanted to set the film in a “classic haunted Daphne du Maurier-type manor house”, a nod to the author whose novel inspired Hitch’s 1940 Oscar-winner. They ended up with a remarkable property near the city of Owen Sound in Canada. “That came with its own challenge – this 82-year-old man who lived there his entire life,” says Mancinelli.

With sprawling gardens, a huge hedge maze and a pet cemetery, it looked perfect on the outside. “But the house was very unkempt when we arrived. It was full of every piece of antique furniture that he had amassed over his entire life,”

says Sims-Fewer. Fortunately, the octogenarian owner, a former gardener, allowed them to rearrange it to their liking, and even brought out his shears to prune the hedge maze. “I think it really gave him meaning to be involved in this production and being able to help in that way,” says Mancinelli.

The homespun feel continued even into a special effects-dictated scene, where a fire breaks out close to Isaacs’s character, Joseph. Accidentally, too much accelerant was put near Isaacs. “We started the take, and his foot caught fire a little bit, but he didn’t want to ruin the take, so he just tapped it out, keep it rolling,” says Mancinelli.

The ballsy Isaacs simply shrugs. “I do quite enjoy doing slightly dangerous things on camera, thinking somehow that you’ll be safer because there’s a camera rolling.”

The filming got even more crazed, with one performer ending up in the make-up chair for seven hours as prosthetics were applied for certain scenes. Then there was the matter of actor availability playing havoc with the shoot (“Our schedules were the scribbles of a madman,” says Sims-Fewer). But the results mark these co-writer/directors out as distinct fresh voices in the indie realm. You might even call them the new Coen Brothers – well, if they were siblings and not romantically entangled. Sims-Fewer smiles: “We’re like the Coen Couple!” ●

*Honey Bunch is available on digital platforms from 22 June.*



**SCI-FACT!** The directors spent six months looking for the manor house they eventually shot in, Morland Place.





Abnett praises the series' "classic, retro" art style.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

## First Kill

Ahead of *Spider-Man: Brand New Day*, Marvel returns to **The Punisher's** first meeting with **Spidey**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**



**FROM THE PUNISHER: ONE LAST Kill** to the upcoming *Spider-Man: Brand New Day*, the different aspects of Frank Castle's character, ranging from ultra-violent vigilante to cape-less crimefighter, are on display on both the big and small screen this year. Now, Marvel Comics are releasing a new retro miniseries, which revisits the

skull-chested assassin's debut in 1974's *Amazing Spider-Man* issue 129, which was written by the late Gerry Conway – who passed away in April – and illustrated by Ross Andru and John Romita Sr.

"Apart from the pleasure of going back to such a classic era, the real interest for me is that the Punisher was such a different character back then," writer Dan Abnett tells Red Alert. "He was more of a costumed superhero, and the fact that he was capable of employing lethal measures was regarded – even by Spidey sometimes – as a quirk and a novelty rather than a moral line. The Punisher had yet to become the huge breakout character we now know, with all that anti-heroic appeal. You can argue that's simply because of changing sensibilities and storytelling styles, and the fact that the creators had no idea what the Punisher would become as a major Marvel character, which is what I wanted to look at."

Abnett insists that he isn't retconning the events of the issue. "I wanted to do a story

that explored and explained why the Punisher was different, as he had a slicker costumed look and a more no-nonsense, adventurer tone, and why he and Spidey quite clearly became partners and allies for a while," he continues. "The Punisher ought to be – and is now – a character that the likes of Spidey would take down on sight, but back then, Spidey often treated him as a buddy."

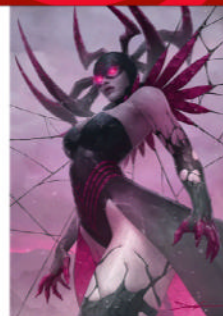
Just starting out on his murderous mission of vengeance after the brutal slaying of his family, the Punisher is more of a tragic figure at this early stage. "That's how Spidey sees him and he's trying to save him before it's too late, trying to channel that incredible ability and ferocious sense of right or wrong into a positive force," explains Abnett. "Frank is trying to convince Spidey that he's too forgiving. He wants to toughen Spidey up and 'weaponise' him for the war, and that's where this story dwells. The Punisher has always been the Punisher, but this is a point in Marvel history where nobody, from the characters to the



WRITER EXCLUSIVE

# Knull And Void

Symbiotic showdown in Marvel event series **Queen In Black** WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL



“It feels like a lost, unpublished story, but one that’s still modern”

creators and the readers, appreciated the potential of Frank’s relentless war. This is the point of that realisation.”

Abnett says he “literally visually quotes” from the original issue, including “lots of references and nods to it, as well as to the other early encounters with them in *Amazing Spider-Man*”. And he praises the five-parter’s artists Matteo Della Fonte and Alvaro Lopez. “They capture that classic, clean, almost innocent, retro feel without descending into parody,” he says. “It feels like a previously unpublished lost story but with modern sensibilities, so it doesn’t feel old-fashioned.”

*Punisher Vs Spider-Man is out on 15 July.*

AFTER FIRST PITTING REIGNING King in Black Eddie Brock against his son Dylan in 2024’s *Venom War*, and then isolating Midgard from the Nine Realms and removing all memory of the Thunder God in 2025’s *Immortal Thor* issue 25, Al Ewing is now colliding the worlds of Venom and Thor in new five-issue event series *Queen In Black*. With Asgardian Goddess of Death Hela seizing the throne of the God of the Void in the recent *Knull* miniseries, their conflict spreads across the universe, with Earth caught in the middle.

“A lot of the Venom stuff comes to a head in this, but the Thor stuff is more of a happy coincidence that pushes it over the line from a symbiote-only storyline to a wider scope,” explains Ewing, who’s currently scripting the Mary Jane Watson-starring *Venom* monthly as well as *Mortal Thor*. “*Immortal Thor* set up the circumstances that made it possible for Hela to be one of the big villains here, but [Thor’s amnesiac alter ego] Sigurd Jarlson himself just bounces off it briefly – he may never understand how integral he, Thor and Loki were to all this coming to pass.”

While her Norse mythological incarnation dates back centuries, Marvel’s version of Hela debuted in 1964, 54 years before Knull’s first bow in 2018. “For story purposes, they’re equal forces and, in fact, we gave Knull a whole miniseries to get back up to her level,” says Ewing, who promises appearances from Earth’s Mightiest Heroes.

“Hela is the Queen in Black at the beginning, but it’s also about Knull as the King in Light and Mary Jane Watson on the front line of the heroes caught in the middle,” he continues. “Beta Ray Bill and Iron Man both get things to do along with Cable and Monica Rambeau. We also have the Avengers doing their thing, while Scarlet Witch, Vision and Wolverine all get great moments, and you can expect some big appearances from the Fantastic Four and Nova too. But the heroes right at the heart of it are Venom, Spider-Man and a small circle of friends and war buddies.”

In addition to scripting two one-shots himself, starring Hela and Thor, Ewing is also liaising with the writers of the numerous spin-off miniseries, such as his Knull co-author Tom Waltz on *Defenders Of Light And Dark* and Charles Soule on the Eddie Brock-focused *Venom Unchained*. “In *Hela*, Karnilla of the Norns gives us the whole backstory, including Hela’s actions behind the scenes,” he teases. “*Defenders Of Light And Dark* is relatively required reading, although we’ll give everyone everything they need to know in the main book.”

Having previously collaborated on *Venom War*, Ewing is happy to be reunited with artist Iban Coello. “He really makes the alien invasion look so visceral, as I really wanted this to be a blockbuster instead of a horror movie this time,” he says. “To feel like an organised attack by a large force instead of one ultra-powered entity, although since Knull’s here as well as Hela, you actually get both of those things!”

*Queen In Black is out on 1 July.*



► **SCI-FACT!** While he appeared unnamed in 2013’s *Thor: God Of Thunder* issue six, Knull properly debuted in 2018’s *Venom* issue three.





WHEN THE SIXTH EPISODE OF Apple TV's *Sugar* revealed that Colin Farrell's titular character is – spoiler alert – an alien, the show shifted gears from intriguing detective drama to full-on extraterrestrial adventure. The intergalactic twist served as a shocking surprise to audiences, but has opened up the series to a slew of new viewers as the sci-fi element amps up. However, it wasn't always the plan for the out-of-this-world reveal to be unfurled at a late stage in the season.

Colin Farrell admits that the original script for the pilot episode revealed the alien information at the start of the story, but the team decided to hold on to the news until much later. “We didn’t want to lean into it,” the actor explains. “We wanted to test ourselves within the realm of the human drama of the show and believed that the show should be able to stand alone without any of the otherworldly aspects to it.”

Speaking to journalists at Apple's press day in Santa Monica, California, Farrell says: “The first season started with the fact that he was an alien. But he was also a very different incarnation of a being from another planet. We just decided it was better [to leave the twist until later].”

**“This series is a meta love letter to movie stars and the city that made them, Los Angeles”**

“He’s a being from a distant land who comes to experience what it is to be a human,” he continues. “Through that, we get to explore what it is to be a human being. All the rage. All the anger. All the stuff that we see that doesn’t work and that’s horrifying – but *Sugar* is always angling towards optimism. That’s one of the things I love most about the show.”

Another aspect of the show that appeals to the lead actor – and *Sugar* executive producer – is the fact that the series is a love letter to LA, the place he’s called home for more than two decades. “I love Los Angeles,” Farrell explains. “It took me a while to fall in love with this city, but over the last 23 years of living here, I’ve grown to love it more and more and more.”

“It’ll never make sense to me as a city,” he adds, rather honestly. “It’s so multi-faceted and it’s so cross-cultural. If you want to be a surfer, you can be a surfer. You can be an economist, a rocker, an artist, a graffiti artist. There’s some beautiful graffiti and it’s a very colourful city. The food is amazing. It’s got such personality, but it’s not really exposed too much in television or film anymore.”

In recent years, film and TV shoots in Tinseltown have slowly dwindled – with studios

Colin Farrell's extraterrestrial detective John Sugar (right).



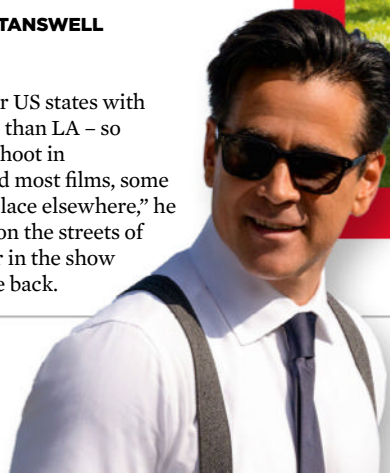
CAST INTERVIEW

## True Blue

What’s at the heart of Apple TV’s extraterrestrial detective drama

**Sugar** WORDS: ADAM TANSWELL

flocking to other countries or US states with more enticing tax incentives than LA – so Farrell admits it’s a treat to shoot in Hollywood. “Most shows and most films, some that are even set here, take place elsewhere,” he tells Red Alert. “So to shoot on the streets of LA and have it as a character in the show was something that drew me back.”







New cast include Laura Donnelly as Charlotte...



Shea Whigham channelling his inner "Dude" Lebowski.



...and Jin Ha (centre) as one of two Korean brothers.

That got me just as excited about the second year as I was for the first."

"This town can make or break you, sometimes in the same breath," adds Shea Whigham, who joins the *Sugar* cast for season two. "The legacy names born and raised here with a silver spoon; the newbies fresh off the bus with only a dream and the clothes on their back. Any of us could be John Sugar's latest case."

"This series is a meta love letter to movie stars and the city that made them," he continues. "It delves deep into the underbelly of contemporary Los Angeles, exposing gritty truths and our shared humanity. Those are just a few things that drew me to the show and make me excited to be joining the second season. Whether you're a high-powered Hollywood player or a lowly car thief trying to scrape by, everyone's got a past. No matter

how deeply those secrets are buried, John Sugar will dig them up."

There's a slew of new cases for Farrell's secretly blue-hued detective to explore in season two. "This time, we have two immigrant brothers from Korea," the actor reveals. "One of them has gone missing and we don't know whether it was of his own volition. It's made apparent pretty quickly that he got caught up with the wrong people and he played a hand in his own disappearance. That's what starts the case, but there are multiple cases – and then there's also the quest to try and find out what happened to his sister."

The actors are coy on how much the extraterrestrial story plays into season two, but Farrell teases: "He believes he's the only one of his origin species on this planet..." ●

*Sugar is on Apple TV from 19 June.*

► **SCI-FACT!** *Sugar* creator Mark Protosevich wrote a script for a third Joel Schumacher *Batman* movie titled *Batman Unchained*.



DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

# Rocket Man

The director decided not to use AI to create backgrounds.

Debut director Yoshitoshi Shinomiya's anime **A New Dawn** is a banger WORDS: JAMES MOTTRAM

 FIREWORKS HAVE been an integral part of Japanese culture for centuries. The hanabi taikai, or fireworks festivals, are summer spectacles, with huge competition-level displays. It was this that sparked an idea for painter-turned-animator Yoshitoshi Shinomiya, as he began to script his debut anime, *A New Dawn*.

"Fireworks have a particular significance," says Shinomiya, citing the Obon festival that runs in August. "That's the festival where the souls of our ancestors are commemorated. It also marks the end of the Second World War... the idea is that we console the

souls of the deceased and we remember those who are no longer with us. It also unites us, and for that reason, fireworks are also linked to the idea of hope for the future and wishing for peace."

Raised in Miura, a city in the Kanagawa Prefecture, south of Tokyo, Shinomiya grew up around such celebrations. "The hometown that I grew up in had a very big fireworks festival for many years, and it was stopped somewhere after 2008," he explains, when Red Alert sits down with him at the 2026 Berlin Film Festival. "I was really shocked that this tradition was lost. That's why I decided to make this movie, this first feature that I was going to direct."

Set in rural Japan, Shinomiya's story follows Keitaro (voiced by Riku Hagiwara), a young man whose family's fireworks factory is set to be shuttered permanently.

With his mother dead and his father missing, Keitaro shuts himself in the factory to create "Shuhari," a mythical firework, in a brightly hued story that dips

"Psychedelic" visuals were inspired by *Fantasia*.







Keitaro shuts himself in the family firework factory.

**“The film had a big team of key animators, and they all put so much passion into it”**

into cosmology, the ghosts of the past and the deeper mysteries of the universe.

Every bit as spiritual and fantastical as *Spirited Away* and other Studio Ghibli classics, the story unfolds with nods to environmental catastrophe and an impending apocalypse, as Shinomiya wanted to pen a tale about how things like the energy crisis are impacting ancient traditions. “For me, as an artist, it was important to find some ways or solutions to preserve the landscape that I’ve known since I was a child,” he says.

A former fine artist, Shinomiya studied traditional Japanese painting before moving into animation, applying for a job

at the company run by Makoto Shinkai, the director behind such popular fantasy anime features as *Weathering With You* (2019) and *Suzume* (2022). Working initially as a background artist, he began directing commercials – and even some segments of Shinkai’s *Your Name* (2016), the magical teen body-swap tale.

“I didn’t start with anime,” he says. “So maybe I have a different way of approaching it, because I did commercials and TV. I really wanted to bring different elements together, because with Japanese traditional painting, you made pigments from different materials, like animals or stones. So I wanted to bring various elements which at first don’t fit together... I think that’s my signature style.”

Dubbing his work “slightly eccentric and psychedelic”,

he says that his big inspiration was Disney’s classic animation *Fantasia*, notably in the firework and underwater sequences. Using 3D, hand-drawn animation, and stop-motion, he replicated a watercolour style – “There’s an element of nostalgia for this old handicraft”, he adds. Shinomiya’s analogue approach meant he worked as the colour designer, art director and animation director.

Despite this very human approach to animation, Shinomiya did contemplate whether using AI technologies would help achieve his vision.

“During the production, we weren’t entirely certain whether we’d be able to complete the film,” he admits. “We wondered whether we should use AI for the background and tap into AI technologies for that. However, as a matter of fact, AI isn’t really so well developed yet to do this kind of background. They’re not as good as human beings on the creative front in this context. There was a big team of key

animators on this film, and they put so much passion into it.”

“My daughter likes to look at anime,” he continues. “She loves to watch them on television, and she always says, ‘Wow, it’s amazing that it’s people who produce these animated films.’ She can’t really imagine that human beings can create this, she thinks it would all be created by AI. That’s her reality. [That way of thinking] is an entirely different generation.”

So does Shinomiya see *A New Dawn* as suitable for his daughter’s generation or – like his mentor Shinkai’s work – suitable for all? “Of course I would love to see both young and older generations watch my movies. First and foremost, I think animation is made mainly for children, so that’s why the protagonists in this movie are also very young. But I hope that I can also reach mature audiences.” ●

*A New Dawn is in cinemas from 10 July.*

**► SCI-FACT!** The seed of *A New Dawn* was planted in 2016, with the film taking 10 years to develop and complete.



CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

# It's A Game Of Two Halves

**The Last Starfighter** returns for a comic sequel

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

➔ CENTRING ON TEEN Alex Rogan, who goes from playing arcade games to becoming a pilot in an interstellar war, *The Last Starfighter* was one of the first films – alongside *Tron* – to use cutting edge CGI when it debuted in 1984. Now, four decades later, in collaboration with original screenwriter Jonathan Betuel and producer Paul Davidson, it's finally getting a sequel in comics form. Continuing the Rylan Star League's battle against the totalitarian Ko-Dan Empire, the five-parter opens in the immediate aftermath of the film's conclusion.

"The movie established such a rich and unique corner of the galaxy whose surface was barely scratched, so it made sense to try and find ways of going deeper into the lore of the Star League and life on [the planet] Rylos through the fish-out-of-water perspective of Alex and his girlfriend Maggie Gordon," says Benjamin Raab, who co-scripts with Deric A Hughes. "We'll see what happened to them after the credits rolled as our series picks up in 1984, only a couple of weeks after the defeat of Xur and the Ko-Dan Armada."

Raab promises plenty of familiar faces. "Grig, Centauri, Ambassador



The series picks up after the film ends, still in 1984.



"There's an elegance and beauty to their artwork that electrifies the stories even before the dialogue is added," continues Butuel. "Colour is emotion and they are masters." ●

**CREATOR EXCLUSIVE**

## Tom Morello co-scripts future history series

## Leviathan Freedom

"In terms of the artwork, I wanted to preserve an atmosphere that subtly echoes the era of Robert Smalls," adds Kudranski. "That meant using more muted colours and designing the characters' clothing with a certain simplicity. The goal was to make the story Tom and Marc wanted to tell easier to absorb, without the illustrations becoming distracting."

"In my very first conversation with the team, I mentioned that I saw the book tonally somewhere between *Alien 3* and *Snowpiercer* - dirty, gritty and mechanical," continues Kudranski. "I wanted the Doldrums to feel like desperate people, covered in oil and grime, pushed by the system into the lowest working class and forced to work their fingers to the bone. That contrast was very important visually - against them you have the clean, sterilised officers and authority figures who run the entire system from above. It creates a world that immediately feels oppressive, cold and deeply divided socially, which perfectly fits the themes of the story." 🍷

*Leviathan Freedom: Chapter One is out now.*



**Alien 3 and Snowpiercer serve as visual inspiration.**

**▶ SCI-FACT!** Tom Morello made his comics debut on 2011's post-apocalyptic Dark Horse series *Orchid*, which was drawn by Scott Hepburn.



CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

# Doing It By The Book

**Death Note: The Musical** finally comes to the UK

WORDS: HENRY CALVERT



IT'S HARD TO THINK of a manga that's been adapted into as many different media as *Death Note*. From an anime through to videogames, live-action movies and series, the story of student Light Yagami, who uses a supernatural notebook to rid the world of evil people by writing their names in it, has become successful with eastern and western audiences alike. Now composer Frank Wildhorn and director Stephen Whitson are bringing a full musical adaptation to London's Barbican.

"It's a story that lends itself well to the musical medium because it's so operatic in scale," says Whitson. "It has big themes, big emotions. It deals with large topics of, what is the justice system in our world? What is true justice and our collective and individual responsibility to the world? These are such big themes that lend themselves to song. And Frank's music really captures that in this indomitable rock-concert kind of way."

"It's been interesting trying to adapt something as uniquely stylised as manga into music, because the manga world is not our real world," Wildhorn notes.

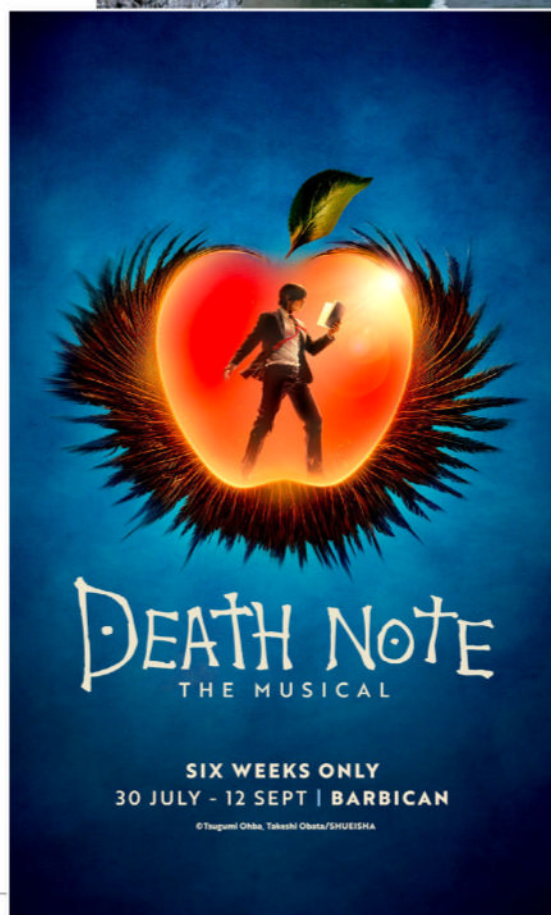
**“It's rock, pop and soul meets an orchestra, and that became my starting place”**

"Everything is heightened and stylistic, and every manga has their own signature and their own visual vocabulary. So for *Death Note* I was drawn to Linkin Park. How do I bring this symphonic world and the Linkin Park world together? It's rock, pop and soul meets an orchestra, and that became my starting place."

"Coming on board as a director for this production, and also just as a fan of the manga, I spent a lot of time thinking about trying to translate these drawings to the stage," says Whitson. "These drawings can almost feel like they're etched out of stone, and so that's been a huge part of our visual language for the show. That being said, one of the challenges is that in a manga you're existing in super close-up a lot of the time, and on stage you can't achieve that, so how do we physically achieve the same affect?"

"Similarly what makes Light so smart is his ability to research and use the internet – and in our version social media – to discover who L is. However you can't just have someone sitting on a laptop on stage, that would be boring. So we spent ages working on how we physicalise the idea of being connected to the matrix and connected to this world of people that aren't in the same geographic space."

While full-scale productions of the show have taken place around the world, the UK has only seen concert versions of it up until this point. "When we did those concert versions, we saw that not only did



PORTRAIT BY DANNY KAHN





L-R: Xander Pang plays Light; Colin Ryan is L.

it translate in terms of the language but also in terms of the audience,” recalls Wildhorn. “People were coming to the show dressed up as the characters. I really think this is going to be a big West End show, hopefully a big Broadway show. I think it has that potential of catering to two audiences at once. Of course we want the fans to be happy, the Comic-Con crowd, but I also think that a more traditional theatre

crowd will get a lot out of it too and if we can get both of those fanbases on side then we’ll have something special here.”

“I’ve always been such a fan of *Death Note* and for me, I’ve always been drawn to the character journeys,” says Whitson. “I like seeing people grapple with things that seem impossible and that are put in situations that we would never be in – that’s the joy of fantasies – and I feel very blessed

to be part of adapting this story that’s brought me so much joy.

“We work quite closely with the original publishers and authors. We still talk with them about what we’re looking to achieve, and they’ve shared original documents on their initial vision for the *Death Note* universe and how that can play into the musical and being a fan, it’s just the coolest thing.

“I think one of the things that we have to be very conscious of is

having respect for the people that hold this world so dear. This show is both for the fans and for people that are probably discovering *Death Note* for the very first time, but it should sit as part of the canon and should be respectful of the rules and the intricate twisty nature at its core.” ●

*Death Note: The Musical is at London’s Barbican from 30 July until 12 September.*

**SCI-FACT!** Frank Wildhorn co-wrote Whitney Houston’s 1988 hit “Where Do Broken Hearts Go”.



WRITER EXCLUSIVE

# Clash On The Titan

WORDS:  
RICHARD  
EDWARDS



*Titan* authors  
Andrew  
Marshall (left)  
and Rob Grant.

Rimmer and Lister go back to the start in new prequel novel **Red Dwarf: Titan**

FOR *RED DWARF*, “THE END” WAS always the beginning. In that very first episode, Dave Lister was put into stasis for smuggling a cat on board the titular ship, his roommate Arnold Rimmer triggered a radiation leak that killed the crew, and the duo resumed their hate/hate relationship some three million years later – alongside a fashionably dressed descendant of the contraband kitty. Now, however, new novel *Red Dwarf: Titan* (the first since 1996’s *Backwards*) imagines events that took place before that fateful voyage – albeit “one universe to the side”.

The prequel was written by the sitcom’s co-creator Rob Grant and his *Quanderhorn Xperimentations* collaborator Andrew Marshall. Grant sadly passed away in February but, as Marshall tells *Red Alert*, “Rob felt it was time he contributed to the *Red Dwarf* universe again, but in a slightly different way – to refresh it in a wider and deeper sense.”

In the book, the crew set down on Titan, Saturn’s largest moon, for a spot of shore leave. Finding themselves in the Mos Eisley-esque spaceport of Xanadu, Rimmer, Lister, Kristine Kochanski, Captain Hollister, Olaf Petersen and other members of the crew find plenty of opportunities to misbehave – Rimmer and Lister even stumble on a message from the future that may just have implications for the whole of reality.

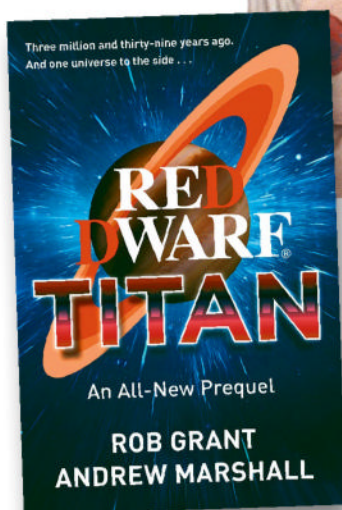
“The sitcom half-hour is limiting in some ways,” says Marshall. “You can develop arcs, but we felt that we could interweave various plots in a more satisfying way in a longer form story.

We also felt that some of the characters you’d only seen peripherally hadn’t really been exploited sufficiently.”

The larger cast of characters immediately separates *Titan* from *Red Dwarf*’s “four guys floating in a tin can” origins.



Fresh-faced  
Rimmer (left),  
Kochanski  
and Lister.



“When we began [writing], Rob was saying that up to this point, *Red Dwarf* was about loneliness, and the human condition being boiled down to this tiny world of four people,” Marshall recalls. “I said that my view of *Red Dwarf* was it was four idiots in terrible danger, and that’s kind of the model we used to make the book.”

In another universe, the novel could perhaps have materialised

on TV. Since a long-running legal dispute was resolved in 2023, Grant and co-creator Doug Naylor (who’s written every series since 1997’s *Red Dwarf VII* without Grant) both had rights to make their own separate small rouge one projects.

“We did go to the BBC and try to pitch them what we had in mind,” Marshall explains. “But I think they thought of it more as just another continuation of *Red Dwarf* with some slight differences, and they weren’t terribly enthusiastic. But we kind of visualised the book as a rather spectacular movie written down, because the great thing about a book is you’ve got an infinite budget. Also, you can simply imagine the cast younger – you don’t have to go into questions of how on earth you’d make them look younger, or whether to recast them.

“I don’t rule out it ever being a visual version if somebody wanted to make it,” he adds, “but I felt that the book was the better way to go.”

*Red Dwarf: Titan* is published by Gollancz on 16 July.

© BBC/UKTV



WRITER EXCLUSIVE

# First Contact

It's Fugitive vs Daleks in *Doctor Who's* **Circuit Breaker** event

WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL



➔ FOCUSING ON THE Fugitive Doctor and UNIT's Black Archive, *Doctor Who's* latest multi-platform event includes novels, audiobooks, games and a Titan Comics miniseries. Respectively titled *Adversary Of The Daleks* and *Dawn Of The Daleks*, the two-parter sees the renegade Time Lord meeting her deadliest enemy possibly for the very first time.

"I'm not sure if this is the first time they have come into contact, as time travel is a stinker like that," laughs Dan Watters, who is the miniseries' co-writer with Dulce M Montoya. "But if it isn't, it's pretty damn close."

"Unlike other encounters the Doctor has had with the Daleks, she's going into this one never having heard of them," continues Montoya. "She's totally blind as to who they are and what they're capable of, so she starts out a bit dismissive of them, but quickly learns that to continue to do so would be a grave mistake."

With *Circuit Breaker's* central premise involving a group of strange objects that propel the Doctor on various journeys through time and space and into battles with her deadliest enemies, including the Cybermen and the Sontarans, the miniseries is part of a larger narrative. "Our series can be read as a standalone story, but alongside the other projects it's working to enrich the greater story of the Fugitive Doctor," explains Montoya. "It's clear the Fugitive Doctor is badass from the moment you meet her, and a lot of that is because of Jo Martin's performance as she brought such a fun, snarky energy to the Doctor."

According to Watters "there's real joy writing a canonically older Doctor that taps into that more cantankerous,

fire-and-brimstone version of the character," and both he and Montoya identify with the Fugitive Doctor. "Out of all the Doctors, I feel the most kinship with her," says Montoya. "So in approaching the character, I thought a bit about my own journey getting over misanthropy. In our series, the Fugitive Doctor is in the early stages of learning that being a lone wolf isn't always a good thing, so of course she's going to be bristly. But she's finally learning that having people around like, say, companions isn't so terrible an experience after all."

As The Fugitive Doctor is currently alone in the TARDIS, Black Archive Head Osgood and her assistant take on the role of companions. "They don't travel with

her," says Watters. "They're there for the Doctor to insult."

"Osgood is such a cheery person and believes so much in the idea of the Doctor, so it was really enjoyable to play her off against this gruffer incarnation," continues Montoya. "Andrew was great for getting under the Doctor's skin, especially when she needed a nudge forward in completing UNIT's mission."

With Watters describing the series as "a story of two halves," artists Roberta Ingranata and Sami Kivela faced different challenges. "We gave them both, in a way, the challenge of designing a new Dalek," teases Watters. "They're breathtaking, and you'll know them when you see them!"

*Doctor Who: Circuit Breaker* is out on 8 July.



The Fugitive Doctor, as portrayed by Jo Martin.

➔ **SCI-FACT!** The event also includes *The Kaleidoscope*, a novel by Jo Martin herself, and Robert Valentine's Big Finish audio *Full Circuit*.



CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

# Clone War

Christine Spar returns in new miniseries **Grendel: Devil's Crucible – Sedition** WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL

FREQUENTLY ASKED BY HIS READERS TO resurrect Christine Spar, Matt Wagner has finally found a way to return to the second Grendel, whose tenure as the mystical assassin spanned 1986-1987's 12-parter *Devil's Legacy*. With cyborg warrior Grendel Prime joining the fight against the vampiric Necro-Lords, *Defiance* – last year's first arc in the *Devil's Crucible* quartet – concluded with resistance group The Hounds of Orion creating X-tine, their version of a super-soldier.

"Christine's tale was very tightly choreographed and took place over a short time period," Wagner tells Red Alert. "We saw every instance of her wearing the costume and acting as Grendel, and then she was tragically killed."

Compared to the various *Grendel: Black, White & Red* series, in which original Grendel Hunter Rose's untold tales were chronicled, *Devil's Legacy* doesn't have the same kind of narrative expansiveness. "I finally struck on the idea of bringing Christine back as a clone, based on the DNA from her tears and her blood that had saturated a handkerchief that her lover Brian Li Sung had kept hidden away," continues Wagner. "It was eventually lost and retrieved and worshipped as a holy relic by a sect known as the Daughters of Orion. Of course, it's all based on somewhat comic book-style science, but it gave me a great opportunity to do what I said for years couldn't be done."

Wagner stresses that X-tine is her own individual. "It's been fun exploring her character and what makes her distinct from Christine," he says. "In most ways they're incredibly similar, as X-tine exists with Christine's fully intact memories, but realises that she is, in fact, not that same person who died centuries ago. She still achingly remembers the death of her son and, of course, that fuels her battle with what is now a whole race of vampires that have taken over the world."

While *Devil's Legacy* was illustrated by Jacob and Arnold Pander, *Sedition* sees Wagner drawing Christine himself for the first time. "My version is a bit more muscular than the Panders' rendition, which was more lithe and angular," he says. "We'll see X-tine go through significant changes as the story progresses, as she's not exactly the same character. That shows in my art."

"I tend to stick to more muted tones and then pick a distinctive pop of colour that helps draw the



X-tine – not the Christine you thought you knew.

eye to moments of narrative impact," adds colourist Brennan Wagner (Matt's son). "Such as the glowing pink of Grendel Prime's sabre against a backdrop of desert or snow. A saturated blood red has always been thematically important to Grendel stories and has been consistently on brand for this book as well, making violence pulpy and heightened."

Third series *Necrotic* builds up to final arc *Purgation*. "It's basically one extended action sequence," teases Wagner. "A giant battle royale between the vampires and the Grendels, taking place on two different fronts." ●

*Grendel: Devil's Crucible – Sedition* is out on 25 July.



CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

 LIVING UP TO ITS NEW AND improved subtitle, writer/artist Matt Kindt's latest *Mind MGMT* series really is "a full-on reboot" as he moves the psychedelic espionage series from Dark Horse Comics to Oni Press. With a decade having passed since the covert government agency imploded, the events of the previous six volumes have effectively been forgotten after rogue operative The Eraser deleted everyone's memories.

"It was the only way to approach this title again, to just wipe the slate clean," Kindt tells Red Alert. "I've designed this series to be the ultimate comfort food of genres, as it starts as a procedural detective drama with a potential romance between detective duo Delphi and Swan, and a series of bizarre murders. The detectives just happen to have mind powers, which is an easy hook to get you in."

As it becomes apparent that someone is killing erstwhile *Mind MGMT* employees, Swan's preternatural talent for sniffing out leads comes in very handy. "As far as Swan's ability to detect clues via scent, it's a double-edged sword," says Kindt. "It gives him insight into crime scenes, but it also makes it hard for him to ignore his scent-memory. He's got a lot of history and, like all of us, scent is a very powerful memory catalyst."

With Kindt taking inspiration from authors like Philip K Dick and real-life historic mind-control programmes run by organisations such as the CIA – "but just turning the knob up to maybe 20 instead of 11" – including the infamous MKUltra, none of the characters in *Mind MGMT* actually possess superpowers. "It's not magic. It's pushing your mind and your training as far as you possibly can and then adding a bit of imagination," he explains. "You can train yourself to be better at smelling and you can weaponise micro-expressions, which is one of Gemini's powers, so when you open that door the sky is the limit, creatively."

Kindt is interested in how our perceptions of reality can create a slightly different version of reality in our minds, which we

# Brand New Day

Matt Kindt's **Mind MGMT** returns New And Improved

WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL

then use to navigate through life. "The friction comes from that, each of us bumping into each other with these differing perceptions of reality," he continues. "That idea is what inspired the real MacGuffin in *Mind MGMT*,

which is this super-library that has all of recorded history in it, an objective recording of all that's happened on Earth since recorded time. That library is really the most valuable thing on Earth as it contains the answer to every mystery, and it's the thing that we're fighting for or, against."

Compared by Kindt to "*Watchmen* meets *GI Joe*", *Mind MGMT* is joined in August by the Brian Hurtt-illustrated 12-partter *Fort Psycho*. "If *Mind MGMT* is me sort of spinning around inside my head, *Fort Psycho* is a lot more grounded with the gear and gadgets," he says. "It's an action comic for our 13-year-old selves, but with a grown up story and approach to archetypes that we want today." ●

*Mind MGMT: New And Improved is out on 24 June.*

The series is a "full-on reboot", says Matt Kindt.



**SCI-FACT!** The story of Project MKUltra was told in a 2021 graphic novel drawn by 2000 AD's Stewart Kenneth Moore.





➔ Blistering barnacles! Peter Jackson and Fran Walsh have been working on the script for a belated sequel to 2011's **The Adventures Of Tintin**.



➔ Split the difference: Sebastian Stan is officially a lock for Harvey Dent aka Two-Face in Matt Reeves's **The Batman Part II**. Scarlett Johansson and Charles Dance are also on their way to what's reportedly a wintry Gotham City.

➔ Steve Buscemi and *Weapons* stand-out Amy Madigan join the guest cast for Ryan Coogler's reboot of **The X-Files**.

➔ Marvel's **VisionQuest** will materialise on 14 October.

➔ Tom Cullen, Leisha Hailey, Raúl Castillo and Owen Teague are joining Prime Video's adaptation of time-rewinding videogame series **Life Is Strange**.

➔ *Jurassic Park* and *Disclosure Day* screenwriter David Koepp is set to bring **Westworld** back to the big screen. The new take will reportedly lean closer to Michael Crichton's original 1973 movie, rather than the recent HBO show.

➔ There's another **Planet Of The Apes** movie on the way. *The Fantastic Four: First Steps*' Matt Shakman and Josh Friedman are developing a brand new chapter of the simian saga, not a continuation of 2024's *Kingdom Of The Planet Of The Apes*.

➔ *Scream VI*'s directing team Radio Silence will helm a movie version of the **Choose Your Own Adventure** books, written by Andor's Tom Bissell. If you think this is a peculiar idea, turn to page 102.

➔ Milly Alcock will return as Supergirl in James Gunn's **Man Of Tomorrow**. Matthew Lillard has also joined the cast.

➔ Jenna Ortega stars in Leos Carax's post-apocalyptic fable **Lily May B**.

➔ Matt Damon is in talks to star in the new SF comedy from **Everything Everywhere All At Once** duo the Daniels.

➔ Brandon Sanderson's novel **Skyward** is heading to the small screen, courtesy of *Agents Of SHIELD* showrunners Jed Whedon and Maurissa Tancharoen.

➔ Blumhouse and Atomic Monster are turning Image Comics fave **Chew** into a live-action series, following the adventures of an FDA agent with the power to receive psychic impressions from whatever he eats.

➔ Sound the horns! Season three of **The Lord Of The Rings: The Rings Of Power** arrives on 11 November.

➔ Prime Video is adapting Rebecca Yarros's dragon-riding romantasy book series **Fourth Wing**.

➔ *Andor*'s Diego Luna joins the live-action version of **Tangled**.

➔ **Very Young Frankenstein** – a prequel to Mel Brooks's 1974 classic *Young Frankenstein* – has a won a full series order from FX. Zach Galifianakis, Dolly Wells and Cary Elwes are among the stars.

➔ Sam Raimi will direct a new version of William Goldman's novel **Magic**, written by *Send Help*'s Mark Swift and Damian Shannon. The original 1978 adaptation starred Anthony Hopkins as a vent act haunted by a sinister dummy named Fats.

➔ Vanessa Kirby and Lewis Pullman play astronauts in SF thriller **The Spacesuit**, written and directed by *The Royal Hotel*'s Kitty Green.

➔ *Goosebumps*' Rob Letterman and Hilary Winston will showrun a new live-action **Casper The Friendly Ghost** series for Disney+.

➔ The second season of **Star Wars: Ahsoka** has been pushed to 2027.





➤ **SCI-FACT!** Long believed lost, the translucent prototype of the Xenomorph came up for auction in 2021, selling for \$44,800.

NEW AUTHOR

## SARA HINKLEY

MEET THE COSTUME DESIGNER  
BEHIND HISTORICAL VAMPIRE  
TALE *THE RED SACRAMENT*



### Tell us about your protagonist

➔ Arnault is the leader of a theatre troupe of vampires in Paris, 1869, a fractious found family he must manage and protect. Their status quo is broken by strange visitors – first a witch from a backward province, then two reckless young vampires from the New World – just as the city stands on the brink of revolution.

### Did the book have any particular spark of inspiration?

➔ I was inspired by *Interview With The Vampire*, revolutionary history, and my own experiences working in theatre; I set out to write an unholy combination of Anne Rice and Karl Marx.

### How long did it take to write?

➔ I had draft zero completed in seven months, but this was during Covid lockdown, so it's not like I had a lot going on! The book transformed a lot in edits, but its blood and guts were always there.



### You're also a costume designer – are there skills which are transferable for writing a novel?

➔ So many, but I'd say the biggest is character. Costume design is about expressing character based on what's in the script; getting to create my own characters was the most creatively satisfying part.

### Any advice for budding authors?

➔ I never wrote fiction before *The Red Sacrament* and had trouble conceiving of myself as an author. I remember telling a friend, "What if I wrote a book, as a bit?" So my advice is write first, decide what you are later.

*The Red Sacrament* is out on 7 July, published by Titan Books.



## ◀ Creature Feature

There's no question – every home needs a 6ft animatronic *Alien* Xenomorph. Thanks Spirit Halloween, now we need to figure out a way to (drop)ship this from America.

Visit [spirithalloween.com](https://www.spirithalloween.com)



## ⬆ Back From The Dead

A restored version of Hammer's 1958 classic *Dracula*, featuring previously lost footage never released in the UK, is coming to cinemas and Blu-ray in October. You can't keep a bad man down.

Visit [hammerfilms.com](https://www.hammerfilms.com)



## Not Just For Christmas

*The Haunted Archive* is a new limited hardback book range of annotated ghost story manuscripts by MR James – featuring archive material, illustrations and much more.

Visit [crumpledlinenpress.com](https://www.crumpledlinenpress.com)



## ⬆ Roaring Trade

A new line of *Doctor Who* Vortex Edition collector figures has been announced for 2026 – with each set containing a piece to build the long-coveted Yeti toy. They've got balls!

Visit [character-online.com](https://www.character-online.com)



## THE FINAL



## FRONTIER

### MICHAEL KEATING 1947-2026

The man behind Blake's 7's reluctant hero

WORDS: NICK SETCHFIELD



Vila Restal: arguably the unsung star of *Blake's 7*.

➔ A CHANCER, A CAREER thief and a self-confessed coward, Vila Restal was in many ways the heart of *Blake's 7*.

"Underneath it all, he really is quite brave," argued Michael Keating, who made this cosmic everyman an audience favourite across all four seasons of the BBC space opera. "He expresses a lot of fears and worries, but comes through in the end. Vila represents a side of me, I think... You could say Michael Keating is Vila."

Born in Edmonton, Middlesex, Keating pursued an acting career from the age of 14, inspired by a production of *Peer Gynt*. "I just thought, 'That's what I want to do someday,'" he recalled. After studying at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, he joined the Nottingham Playhouse as assistant stage manager. He made his TV debut in *Special Branch* in 1969.

Director Pennant Roberts cast him in "Enquiry", a 1972 episode of eco-

minded SF thriller *Doomwatch*. Roberts remembered him for the role of Goudry in 1977 *Doctor Who* story "The Sun Makers", which in turn led directly to the flight deck of the *Liberator*. "It was wheels within wheels, really," Keating remembered, "as Pennant became a director on *Blake's 7*, so he was a great help in me getting the Vila role."

A successful stage career saw a stint at the National Theatre, while later TV credits included a recurring role as the Reverend Stevens in *EastEnders* between 2005 and 2017. Keating also went on to reprise Vila in numerous audio adventures, beginning with 1998's *The Sevenfold Crown* for the BBC.

Vila was the only character to appear in every episode of *Blake's 7*. Perhaps, in the end, the series was his story all along. "I always thought it should have been called *Vila's Angels!*" Keating once quipped. ●

### ROGER SWEET 1935-2026

● As lead designer in Mattel's Preliminary Design Department, Roger Sweet – often called the Father of He-Man – brought the power of Grayskull to the *Masters Of The Universe* toy line.

Born in Ohio and graduating from the Institute of Design at the Illinois Institute of Technology, Sweet's career took in everything, from the packaging of mouthwash and fabric conditioner to the interior of a Boeing 747. Joining Mattel in 1972, he became part of the team charged with developing a rival to Kenner's phenomenally popular *Star Wars* figures.

Fashioning a prototype from a Big Jim action figure augmented with clay to create a preposterously muscled hero, Sweet christened it He-Man, arguing that such a generic name was a marketing win.

Retiring from Mattel in 1992, Sweet explored his part in He-Man's creation in 2005 memoir *Mastering The Universe: He-Man And The Rise And Fall Of A Billion-Dollar Idea*.



Koji Suzuki was a true great of Japanese horror.

### KOJI SUZUKI 1957-2026

● Japanese horror novelist who wrote the six-book *Ring* series, which began in 1991, along with 1996 short story collection *Dark Water*, whose "Floating Water" was also adapted for the big screen.

### JILL CURZON 1938-2026

● British actress who played Dr Who's niece Louise in 1966's movie adaptation *Daleks' Invasion Earth 2150 AD*. She also appeared in *The Champions* and *Adam Adamant Lives!*.



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HOUSE OF THE DRAGON



THE PIECES ARE IN PLACE FOR THE BEGINNING OF THE  
END OF *HOUSE OF THE DRAGON*

WORDS: TARA BENNETT

**FAMILY**





# PREVIEW



“H

ELL IS COMING.”

*House Of The Dragon* showrunner Ryan Condal doesn't mince words telling *SFX* what to expect from this third season of his

television series adaptation of George RR Martin's book *Fire & Blood*. For two seasons, Condal and his writers painstakingly set up the conflict between the Targaryen factions known as the blacks and the greens. The blacks back Rhaenyra Targaryen (Emma D'Arcy) as Queen of the Seven Kingdoms, while the greens back Aegon II Targaryen (Tom Glynn-Carney) as their king.

By the end of season two, the multitude of characters, dragons and set-pieces had finally been put in place so that season three could stage several anticipated Westeros-changing battles, including the Battle of Tumbleton and the Battle of the Gullet.

“I didn't want to change my plan overall, which changed the structure of what we were doing and the order that we were telling the stories,” Condal says with regards to the audience's impatience with the show's pacing. “I felt like it was better to build up to everything that's yet to come. If you look at the end of season two as the true midpoint of the story, which it really is, it was meant to be Rhaenyra's dark night of the soul before plunging ahead.”

### WINGING IT

Over the precipice they all will go in this season's eight episodes. Condal says Rhaenyra stands at the ready in Dragonstone with husband Daemon (Matt Smith) fully on her side, the armies of their Westeros allies close to King's Landing, and a new contingent of fierce dragonriders as her “nuclear button” option. Season three will confront what kind of sovereign Rhaenyra is going to be in seizing the throne.

“We were really interested in playing with this idea of divine providence and prophecy, how that plays on a character when they've been told by two substantial people in their life, her father and her uncle/husband, that it's meant to be her,” Condal says of how these gruesome battles will test Rhaenyra. “Destiny is here, and we know that she is, at her core, a thoughtful person at this stage of her career. But what happens when you combine those ideals, the absence of her father as a presence in her life, the presence of Daemon Targaryen, →

“We were really interested in playing with this idea of divine providence”

Hey Daemon (Matt Smith), you've got red on you!



Aemond (Ewan Mitchell) and Alicent (Olivia Cooke)



Rhaenyra (Emma D'Arcy) takes the initiative.



Jacaerys (Harry Collett) on his dragon Vermax.





## ISOLATED ALICENT

*Olivia Cooke says Alicent Hightower will confront some ugly truths*

### **Alicent looks to be heading into a season of self-reflection...**

► Alicent has realised how indoctrinated she's been to this system. She wants to shed this royalist, strict, quite fascist version of [herself], and wants to live very simply and make amends where she can. But it's not all altruistic. She wants to save herself and save Helaena [Phia Saban] as well. That's where we're finding her at the top of season three, which is about five minutes after season two ended. It's directly after the conversation with Rhaenyra at Dragonstone.

### **As Rhaenyra ascends in power, Alicent loses hers. How does she process that?**

► There's a real liberation in terms of people don't imbue power and importance onto her any more. She's able to exist with a huge amount of

freedom within the straitjacket that she's been given because no one cares any more what she does. I think she is able to reflect on what she wants, who she is, and the mistakes she's made. She's found herself completely isolated, but it's not dissimilar to the way that she's already lived her life; it's just her perspective has shifted.

### **Who has the most impact on Alicent this season?**

► With Mysaria [Sonoya Mizuno] and Alys Rivers [Gayle Rankin], there is a real mirror that is held to her in her interactions with these two characters at various points. They exhibit a way of being and a way of exploring their own womanhood in ways that are completely foreign to Alicent.

### **Helaena Targaryen is Alicent's oft-ignored daughter. Does that**

### **relationship change for the better this season?**

► Her relationship with Helaena changes over the course of the season because she learns to understand her a lot better. She starts off by trying to protect and smother and baby this person who she doesn't understand how her brain works, or what she's capable of. Over the season, she realises that she can't continue to hide or smooth over the truth or take shortcuts with Helaena because she literally sees through it.

### **Where's the Alicent/Rhaenyra friendship at this season?**

► I think it's a never-ending game of snakes and ladders with them. Alicent has hit a few snakes in terms of their relationship. She is trying to just parlay on an even playing field. It's proving to be more and more difficult, and more complex and more gnarled.



Corlys Velaryon (Steve Toussaint).







## DISPELLING DOUBT

*Emma D'Arcy says Rhaenyra is finally stepping into her power*

### What was most exciting thing to explore about Rhaenyra this season?

► Ryan and I were both excited to see Rhaenyra front-footed for the first time. She's actually in a position of confidence and strength, which hasn't been a broad narrative until this point. Her relationship with Daemon sort of only functions when they are both in a position of strength and confidence; that is their erotic love language. Weakness doesn't play. So it's unusual going into a season in a state of optimism.

### Rhaenyra has generally been a sympathetic character. Will that change with her war choices?

► Rhaenyra has been a broadly sympathetic figure. I'm interested in making legible any move that Rhaenyra makes. Targaryens, I suppose, are known to have quite distinct light and dark sides. But

even when there is movement towards that darkness, I do take the responsibility of making that movement legible really seriously.

### Power corrupts – so should we be worried at all?

► Rhaenyra starts this season in a position of immense strategic power. She commands an army of dragons, has a powerful naval presence. Daemon has delivered a strong land army, coupled with the fact that House Hightower seems on the brink of self-combustion. We meet Rhaenyra on the precipice of victory, as she

perceives it, with a powerful sense of momentum for the first time. There are so many forces acting to define her premiership. Ultimately, it's a religiosity that starts to govern her leadership. We've seen Rhaenyra doubtful and self-interrogatory about her supposed birthright, about the nature of rule, and about what her father's intentions were, whether they were misguided or otherwise. But when one believes that one's plight is a holy one, it's much easier to turn the dial down on doubt.

### How would you describe Rhaenyra and Daemon's dynamic in the wake of his renewed pledge?

► I've spoken a lot about how much I love working with Matt. In some ways, my understanding of Rhaenyra as a character was forged in counterpoints to his

characterisation of Daemon. Them working together as allies will never be straightforward. Were there an HR department, I think they'd be contacted! But it was very exciting to feel them, once again, as a singular organism, and to experience with Matt and Daemon the horizon of possibility. Because of Rhaenyra's back-footedness in the previous two seasons, that horizon has felt a little inaccessible. But there's an appetite that has returned this season, and they galvanise the appetite in each other.

### The season two finale pact between Rhaenyra and Alicent does not stick. What influence will she have on Rhaenyra?

► As counterintuitive as this may sound, I think there is something in Rhaenyra still experiencing Alicent as a conscience. No matter how polarised their positions, Rhaenyra honestly seeks Alicent's affirmation. Somehow, Alicent has remained the judge in Rhaenyra's life.

### Do you finally get to wield a weapon this season?

► Yeah, I won that battle.

### Who has the most influence on your character this season?

► I do think that Mysaria continues to offer a completely different space from her relationship with Daemon and her son, Jace [Harry Collett]. But crucially, I think Mysaria and Daemon both have strong ideas about Rhaenyra's premiership, and they're not compatible, necessarily. At some point Rhaenyra will have to pick a future.

### Is there an episode you're most excited for audiences to see this season?

► I am excited about episode two. For me, it was a thrill on the page, and I hope will be a thrill to watch.

### There's one season left to close the House Of The Dragon story. Are you ready to go back one last time?

► I know that I need to bank some sleep. They'll be taking no prisoners with that final set of episodes. But I'm excited too because this is the first recurring role I've ever played. There's no doubt about it, there is such a deepening that takes place. I'll be excited to drive this vehicle to the end of the road. There's a great privilege to conclusion and getting to resolve this section of the story.







More epic battles are promised this season.



Fans are eager to see the Battle of the Gullet.



Ormund Hightower (James Norton).

## “Everybody’s been waiting for Tessarion because Daeron is such a fan favourite”

and the stress of trying to not only win a war but also establish her legitimacy as a claimant?”

In servicing that story, Condal says there will be a lot of “fun movement” this season as characters branch out and head to new places that will be populated with some legendary book characters, or fresh expansions of existing characters.

“We have Dan Fogler as Ser Torren Manderly, Joplin Sibtain as Bold Jon Roxton,” Condal says. “We have Tommy Flanagan playing Lord Roderick Dustin, or ‘Roddy the Ruin’, a fan favourite. And Tom Cullen comes in as Ser Luthor Largent, Daemon’s old buddy from the streets of King’s Landing.”

Condal says one of his favourite characters to write this season has been Lord Ormund Hightower (James Norton), the biggest addition to the ensemble in terms of his presence in the story and in the plot. “He’s the Lord of the Hightower, basically the Tywin Lannister [Charles Dance] of this world,” he contextualises. “He’s the richest guy who’s not sitting on a throne somewhere. Ormund has the largest standing army left in Westeros and a dragon, so he is going to introduce a big old wrinkle into this. Ormund is really a sketch in the book and we don’t have a sense of who he is, so it was really fun diving in and creating a really deep, complex and three-dimensional character out of him that

Aegon Targaryen (Tom Glynn-Carney).



introduces a new kind of complication into the world.”

Speaking of dragons, Condal says you should be prepared for two introductions this season. “Everybody’s been waiting for Tessarion because Daeron Targaryen [Charlie Gordon] is such a fan favourite,” he teases. “That’s the smallest key dragon remaining in this story, so it was how does he manifest, and what that means? For me, the most interesting of the dragon characters is probably Sheepstealer just because it’s the only wild dragon put on the

board thus far. With that comes a lot of stuff that’s very different from all the other dragons in play and that makes him particularly interesting and, in a way, charming.”

As for the opposition greens, Aegon II has slunk away in secret from King’s Landing, ruining the accord made between Rhaenyra and his mother Alicent (Olivia Cooke) in the second season finale. Meanwhile, his maniacal brother Prince Aemond Targaryen (Ewan Mitchell) is left to claim the throne, igniting a brotherly battle for power.

“Aemond is going to launch off on one of those great *Game Of Thrones* diaspora stories and be mixed in with all kinds of different →



Baela Targaryen (Bethany Antonia).





## BACK TO BLACK

Matt Smith's Daemon Targaryen is back in the fold to fight

### How did it feel to be back with everyone in season three?

► It was great to be around Emma more consistently again, because I really missed acting with them. And ultimately for the character, probably more interesting as well, really. Both creatively and practically it was good to be back in the room with my quote-unquote family and team of actors.

### Do you think Daemon interpreted his visions as an almost religious experience, making him commit in a way he hasn't before?

► I do think you raise an interesting point when you mentioned religiosity, and perhaps there is a sort of zealotry. There's a kind of clarity of this idea that he's seen himself to be ordained. Whether he's the rightful king or not, there's

something about a higher power there. And for better or worse, that might be. I definitely think there was an element of thinking that, which bled into the third season around that central dramatic premise.

### Can Daemon ever be truly committed to anything beyond his own ambitions?

► There is probably a degree of maturity in Daemon's way. But he's still got that same irreverence for authority. I film all these council scenes, and I always say to them, "I just have no idea why he's there." I just think Daemon would be like, "Fuck this man! I should not be here. I want to be flying my dragon or taking down an army somewhere." I think there's still that element in him of inner rebellion, no matter how well [he and Rhaenyra] are getting on, or how much harmony they may

have developed. He's not without his complexities. I mean, he can't be the easiest man to date!

### Outside of his wife, who has the most impact on Daemon's story this season?

► I've always been really intrigued by his relationship with Mysaria, the complexity and nature, and the genuine intrigue that surrounds both of those characters.

### That's interesting, because both Olivia Cooke and Emma D'Arcy also said Mysaria influences their characters the most this season.

► She's expertly played as well by Sonoya Mizuno, who is a wonderful actor and a wonderful person. It's good to see her character come to the forefront this year. She's always been one of my favourite characters, for sure.

### How does this season, which is stacked with battles, rank for you in terms of scale and production value?

► I think it's important that it has scale and blood and guts. A show of this size can sort of live up to itself. I know that's certainly the intention. I suppose this year it's just going to be really interesting to see how from stage to screen those battles have come off. We spent so long piecing them all together, and often they're real technical feats. Obviously, there's a lot of people been working really hard in the last eight or nine months rendering all those big shots and putting the elements that come after we've done our stuff on set and put that together. It's just a huge line of people really that are involved in getting it onto the screen. But certainly from episode one, and then as we get through to the end of the season, the intention was always to really do something that felt like it had intentional scale. But I have not seen anything yet, so I'll have to watch like you and see if they pulled it off.

### With one season left to close out the *House Of The Dragon* story, have there been any conversations about how the show treats Daemon's fate?

► Kind of. They don't really tell you what elements they're going to write about. Sometimes I thought maybe they would follow this line of the book, and they chose not to, so you just don't really know. Whether I agree with that or not, it's above my pay grade, really. I just get the scripts, hopefully as early as you can, and then try and influence them creatively through the character and as an actor in the most interesting way. But I still don't know. But there are big bookmarks.

### Book readers are hoping for the Battle Above the God's Eye with Daemon versus Aemond.

► One assumes they're headed there, but you never know. It's quite present in the story, isn't it? Even in the book, it's been illustrated. It's surely got to head there, but I'm not privy to the details of it until the script. But I'm going to cross my fingers too.

### You've done an impressive job making us love/hate Daemon with his questionable choices. Is that how you hope audiences react to a character like him?

► He's a great character. He's a bit of everything. You never quite know what you're gonna get!





Admiral  
Sharako  
Lohar (Abigail  
Thorn).

Daemon's  
fearsome  
dragon  
Caraxes.



Aemond  
finally takes  
the Iron  
Throne.



Roddy the  
Ruin (Tommy  
Flanagan) and  
his men.

forces in his life,” Condal says of the Prince Regent’s arc. “We’re excited to take him there. At the core, he’s still Aemond Targaryen. But after two seasons, we really want to just dig into that next couple of levels of the surface and really get at what makes him tick – and remind you that we met him back when he was an innocent little kid who was bullied by his older brother and didn’t have a dragon.”

### BATTLE GROUNDS

Bringing it back around to the campaigns of warfare coming this season, when you have the high bar of the *Game Of Thrones* Battle of Bastards or the Battle of Blackwater, how do you try to best them within *House Of The Dragon*?

Condal admits it was daunting. “For the Battle of the Gullet, which is definitely the thing that is on the tip of everybody’s tongue and the front of their minds, I looked back at one of my favourite films of all time, *Star Trek II: The Wrath Of Khan*,” he reveals. “Just in terms of, how do you do this insane thing in scope and scale that is almost too big when you read about it in the book? So, there’s a dynamic in [Gullet] that very much plays homage and harkens back to the great dramatic moves that you see out play in [Khan].”

But Condal promises that won’t be the only impressive set-piece we have to look forward to

“More than half our shoot days were exterior – that includes backlot and location”

this season. “This is the biggest season we’ve ever made by a big margin,” he says. “We were exterior more of the season than any season before by a massive margin. More than half of our shoot days were exterior – that includes backlot and location. Our visual effects budget is bigger and badder than it’s ever been before. As we talk, I’m finishing the cuts of the season. When you look at it, it’s huge in breadth and scope. Action is a part of that, but it’s also huge in terms of the dramatic underpinnings of the show and the

things that happen, and the sea changes that are coming this season.

“I think everybody’s going to find it satisfying,” Condal says. “If you’ve liked the show to date, I think you will continue to like it. People that find it new will find a lot of stuff to like. It delivers everything that a classic season of *Game Of Thrones* would deliver.”

Meanwhile, he’s deep into the writing of the fourth season, which will close this era in Westeros’ history. “It’s a great privilege to be able to reach this point where we get to land the plane on our own terms, knowing when and where it’s coming,” he says. “Having been able to plan it for multiple years is really satisfying. Now it just sits with us to do it well.” ●

*House Of The Dragon* is on HBO Max from 21 June.



SUPERGIRL

# THE WILD ONE

THE LAST DAUGHTER OF KRYPTON GETS A ROCK 'N' ROLL  
TWIST IN **SUPERGIRL**

WORDS: NICK SETCHFIELD







RUTH, JUSTICE AND THE right to party. Words to live by when you're a superhero for our messy, chaotic age.

"She's unapologetic," says Craig Gillespie, director of *Supergirl*, the next chapter of James Gunn's rebooted DCU. "Her honesty and wanting to hold people to her own moral code is not necessarily in line with Superman. She has her own belief system that makes her truly independent."

"These are all things we can really appreciate. In the midst of our very complicated times, to have somebody that's holding people accountable and doing it from a very human place... She's not asking to be in the spotlight. It's been thrust upon her, this responsibility. She's tried to avoid it in a way that's very relatable. Eventually she realises that she cannot avoid it, and she has to deal with it."

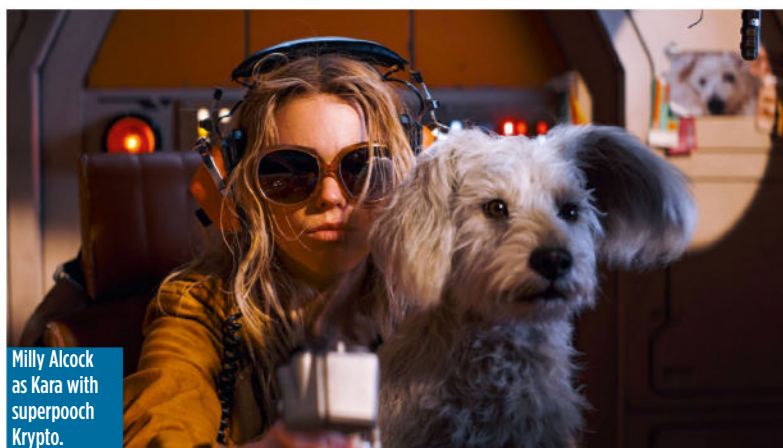
Meet the new Maid of Might, a cynical, pleasure-seeking wild child hiding a world of trauma beneath her cape. It's a fresh take that shakes up the traditional image of the DC icon. Originally a poster girl for wholesome Americana – even the fiery demise of her homeworld didn't dent that indestructible smile – Kara Zor-El debuted on the comics page in 1959, introduced as the Man of Steel's cousin, last survivor of Argo City.

She arrived on the big screen in 1984, played as a sky-soaring innocent by Helen Slater. 2023's *The Flash* jettisoned the optimism to bring us Sasha Calle as a sullen, battle-hardened Kryptonian warrior. But while Calle had signed a multi-picture contract, Gunn and co-CEO Peter Safran's creative overhaul of the DCU saw Milly Alcock step into the red boots, making a charismatic cameo in the closing moments of last summer's *Superman*.

Best known as the heir to the Iron Throne, Rhaenyra Targaryen, Alcock was a given when Gillespie signed to direct. "That was a huge part of me wanting to do the movie, having that security of knowing who Supergirl is, and loving Milly as an actor. I'd seen her in *House Of The Dragon* and a lot of her work in Australia."

"Tonally, this dance that I love to do between the humour and the drama, I feel like it's in an actor's DNA. It's like asking someone to play a tune on a piano, they either have the rhythm or they don't, and I knew she had it. We had that kinship of being Australian together."

"This story goes to some very heavy emotional places and she can deliver that, no problem whatsoever. Also, having an actor that people aren't familiar with was an amazing opportunity on a film of this scale. It rarely happens."



Milly Alcock as Kara with superpooch Krypto.



A possible planet-ending threat for Kara to face.

## DEEP SPACE NINE

Alcock rocks a Blondie tee in the movie, a wardrobe choice that Gillespie made to underline "this sort of rock 'n' roll, punk attitude that she has. To be able to pull that off is not an easy feat as an actor. To have that carelessness and that coolness without trying. She manages to do it so well. It's such a fine line, because it can get grating to an audience, where you can feel the affectations, but you truly feel like she does not care, in the best possible way."

Some of that punk sensibility made its way into the filmmaking, too. "Just the grit of the whole thing," Gillespie tells *SFX*. "The look of it, the camerawork, the lighting. It's not what you would think of as a conventional superhero film. We sort of rebelled against that!"

Written by Ana Nogueira, currently at work on a reboot of *Wonder Woman*, the movie takes inspiration from *Supergirl: Woman Of Tomorrow*, the acclaimed 2021 comic book by Tom King and Bilquis Evely. Itself inspired by 1969's John Wayne Western *True Grit*, the eight-issue miniseries teams Kara with Ruthye Marye Knoll, an alien girl who seeks justice after her father is slain by space pirate Krem of the Yellow Hills (Eve Ridley and Matthias Schoenaerts bring these characters to the screen).

"I got the script blind," shares Gillespie. "I hadn't read *Supergirl: Woman Of Tomorrow* and I deliberately didn't pick it up before I saw the script. Two scenes in, I'm in. I'm absolutely in. There was this incredibly dark scene and then this incredibly irreverent, morally ambiguous character scene with [Kara]."



Matthias Schoenaerts as Krem of the Yellow Hills.



The film's "war-ravaged world overrun by bandits."

"To have a superhero character – and particularly a female character – that's so flawed and complicated, that's what I was truly excited about. Then the gravity of it was it's a whole galaxy that we have to create. It all happens off-planet. It's its own story, completely isolated in a way. I've always





"I'm attracted to outsiders," says Gillespie (right).



Kara and Ruthie's quest pays homage to *True Grit*.



Aussie mates Gillespie and Alcock take five on set.

wanted to do some sci-fi thing, so to have that opportunity was incredibly exciting, and then at times incredibly exhausting!"

Conceived as a cosmic "road movie", Supergirl embraces the interstellar sprawl of DC mythology, taking in no less than nine distinct planets, Gillespie estimates – including a war-ravaged world overrun by bandits.

"I came in with around 120 pages of images of what I thought this movie should be. I started out with thousands of images and by the time I'd narrowed it down there was a narrative to it, and something that was very exciting and tactile and messy.

"I showed all of that to James, and then I asked him, 'How much do you want me to

**"I was excited to have a female superhero that's so flawed and complicated"**

be in your world, coming off of *Superman*?' He said, 'Not at all. I'm approaching all of these films like they're their own graphic novels, and every graphic novel has its own illustrator and its own writer that make it distinctive, so this is your version.' That answer, for a filmmaker, is amazing!

"I was trying to make it feel unique. I kept coming back to the story: what would be happening on this planet? What kind of disrepair would it be in? How many different alien species? Who's in charge? What's the hierarchy? It was a constant conversation, and that was probably the most surprising amount of bandwidth that I wasn't expecting. Everything has to be invented and discussed. Even a menu. What language is it in? What's the typeface?"

#### GOING TO THE DOGS

Supergirl's planet-hopping leads to an encounter with another DC legend. Brawling, cigar-chewing Czarnian bounty hunter Lobo →





"To pull off a punk attitude is not easy," says Gillespie.

**M**ILLY ALCOCK IS NOT where she's supposed to be.

"I thought I would make it back to my house in time, but I didn't," she explains, hopping on a video call with *SFX*. "So I just had to run into a café. I'm sitting outside."

And there she is, perched against a wall in the London sun. Shielded by a pair of sunglasses, she exudes more than a little of Kara Zor-El's trademark cool.

In all other respects, she's exactly where she wants to be. A turn as a runaway teen in *Upright* earned her a Rising Star Award. *House Of The Dragon* crowned her as a genre star. Now, she's fronting a major summer movie and her world, you imagine, is about to explode, albeit in more career-friendly fashion than the fate of the planet Krypton.

As we chat a sudden shadow soars across the wall of the café. How did the intro to that old *Superman* show go? It's a bird! It's a plane! It's...

"It's a bird," says this young Australian, staying grounded.

**What makes this a Supergirl for 2026?**

"She's someone who's suffered a lot of trauma. She's gone through a lot and she's been at war with herself, which is something a lot of people can relate to. She's unconventional,

## FLIGHT ARRIVAL

Milly Alcock powers up as Supergirl

she's unapologetic. She's not trying to be perfect. I think that's very refreshing for audiences. It can be really exhausting, having role models thrust upon us. It's more about realising what you can control within your inner life, because the outer life is chaos."

**You get to wear a Blondie t-shirt. Did any female rock icons feed into your take on the character?**

"I really love Amy from Amyl And The Sniffers, who are an Australian band. She's like this punk-rock pixie, as well as being a phenomenal performer."

**Is Supergirl's taste in music the same as yours?**

"Overall they're pretty similar, yeah. I've been really into R&B, but then I also like Fleetwood Mac and The Strokes. I'm an eclectic girl! I was listening to Raye's new album. She's a wizard."

**Did you have heroes as a kid?**

"I loved the original Annie. I don't know why. I was never an orphan! But they always have that in children's films: dead parents. Every character I've played has had dead parents, which I think is very interesting. But I didn't really

idolise people growing up. I didn't really have an icon that I looked up to in that kind of way."

**Are you ready to be idolised?**

"No. Absolutely not. Shit-scared! I think it's because I know all of me. You guys only know a certain part and that's a frightening thing, to be met with that."

**How big a challenge was being fluent in Kryptonian?**

"On the scale of challenges that this job provided, it wasn't too bad. I've spoken a fake language before on screen; I just used the same process, which is learn it in English, front and back, then put in the dialogue. Make it like a muscle memory, so when you're speaking whatever language it is, in your brain you're remembering the English words. And then, *voilà!*"

**What kind of energy does Jason Momoa bring to the movie?**

"Big energy. He's a big guy, in his aura and his physical form. It was a lot of fun when Jason was on set because he's wanted to play Lobo for a very long time. So you could really feel that excitement whenever he stepped on, and he had his motorbike and he was in

all the make-up and the contacts. It was just a very transformative thing to witness."

**You read *Woman Of Tomorrow*, the graphic novel that inspired this story. Did you dig into Supergirl's earlier comic book appearances too?**

"You know what, I didn't. Please don't hate me for saying that. But I could just see how the overwhelm of information and options and expectations wouldn't have allowed me to access a place of truth. At the end of the day, that's the heart and soul of my job."

**You were James Gunn's choice from the start, after he spotted you in *House Of The Dragon*. Did that give you confidence going in or was it scary in its own way?**

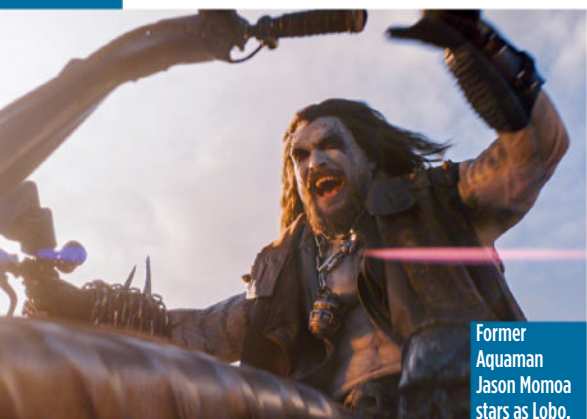
"I mean, it's all scary. It's all intimidating, you know? But it's exciting. It's both. I think that confidence was something that grew on set, and it's continuing to ebb and flow. It wasn't like, 'Oh yeah, I got this!' I had an interesting relationship with playing her. It was kinda meta. Her inability or want to be a hero... and then her resolve. I think I surprisingly saw a lot of myself."

**And how was the flying?**

"Really fun, but really uncomfortable! It's a lot of pressure on your hips. But it's a lot of fun to spin around. I felt like a kid."



Eve Ridley  
(left) as  
Ruthye  
Marye Knoll.



Former  
Aquaman  
Jason Momoa  
stars as Lobo.



"What she's  
been through  
is intense,"  
Gillespie adds.

## “She’s coming from a different headspace to Superman. It gave us licence to go darker”

makes his big-screen debut, played by Jason Momoa – Aquaman in the pre-Gunn DCU. It’s a piece of casting so perfect you half suspect Momoa snuck back in time to inspire the character in the first place.

“He was so ready!” laughs Gillespie. “Years of waiting and wanting to get that character. He was very involved with the R&D on that, in the best way.

“For me, it was an education, going back and looking at all the Lobo comics through the decades. What are we going to narrow in on, wardrobe-wise and look-wise? I’ve got hundreds of versions of Lobo on my laptop,

but we all narrowed in on a particular version: the armour, the knee-pads, the boots, all of it. Jason was involved in all of that.

“Then, when we got to the set, it was like, ‘How intimidating or foreboding is he? How much fun is he having?’ Jason gives the gamut. He was fearless in that way. It was so much fun to have that energy that came in, because it’s been a very serious mission for Kara and Ruthye. [Milly and Eve] had been shooting for two months at that point. Then to have this energy that kind of verbally attacks her, and they just go at it, and have this banter... It’s just so fun to watch.”

Did Gillespie feel any pressure bringing such a fan favourite to the screen? “Yeah, you kind of want to put the blinders on and not let that get into your head too much! He’s so beloved, Jason, and he’s so comfortable in this role that you can just feel it. From the early screenings we’ve done with audiences, he’s just so loved.”

At Supergirl’s side is superhound Krypto. A scampish scene-stealer in *Superman*, he proves a crucial part of the plot here as his mistress races to find the antidote to the poison that threatens his life.

“It’s Supergirl’s dog,” says Gillespie, promising a different dynamic to the one we saw in *Superman*. “They have such a strong bond. It’s such an intimate relationship that they have because Krypto came from Krypton. It’s the only tangible thing she has left of that life. She’s lost it all, and they’ve lived through it together, all of that pain and suffering. So he embodies so much more than just being Krypto to her. He’s a little physical touchstone. She’s maybe not as concerned as Superman, with him being well-trained! She’s a much freer spirit in that sense.”

Gillespie seems to specialise in maverick souls. From *Lars And The Real Girl* to *I, Tonya* and *Cruella*, he has repeatedly shown us people who exist beyond society’s expectations. Is *Supergirl* part of that throughline of flawed, fascinating characters?

“I feel like I keep getting attracted to outsiders,” he nods, “people that have been marginalised. Parts of them are dealing with trauma, and they’re working through that. I don’t know why I keep being attracted to that story!”

“What Supergirl’s been through is quite intense. Superman grew up in a very loving, nurturing environment and was almost groomed for the role and the responsibility. She grew up in a situation where her planet is dying, she’s losing all of her loved ones and this responsibility has been thrust upon her.

“She’s coming from a very different headspace. It gives us licence to go to a darker place, in a way. I enjoyed being able to have that opportunity.”

*Supergirl* is in cinemas from 25 June.





BATTLES



AVATAR: THE LAST AIRBENDER

# THE ELEMENTS

FROM WATER TRIBES, TO THE EARTH KINGDOM, SFX HOPS ON APPA AND HEADS TO VANCOUVER TO GO ON SET FOR AVATAR: THE LAST AIRBENDER

WORDS: HENRY CALVERT



# M

MANY FANS OF *AVATAR: THE LAST Airbender* must have dreamed of what it would be like to hop on to a sky bison's back, fly off and join Aang and co on an adventure in one of the four elemental kingdoms. As *SFX* touches down in Vancouver, Canada to visit the set of the latest season of Netflix's live-action series, that dream is beginning to feel like a reality.

The first stop on our tour takes us to the lower rings of Ba Sing Se, a physical set built adjacent to a derelict sawmill. The overcast day, the smell of damp wood, and the empty set create a post-battle atmosphere but, as fans of the show will know, there's no war in Ba Sing Se...

We're joined by production designer Michael Wylie and executive producers Christine Boylan and Jabbar Raisani, whose passion and dedication to getting this adaptation right shines through. "With an adaptation, it's less about creating a one to one, direct replica of what you see in the animation and more so about getting the essence and atmosphere of the space right," says Wylie.

As we work our way through the lower ring, dodging market stalls and being sure not to lose our footing on the varying levels of shops and houses, it's hard to not be in awe of the attention to detail on display. Earth kingdom currency lies scattered on tables, Badgermole and Lion Turtle carvings adorn every building corner, and in the middle of the square sits a familiar vegetable cart.

We turn right at the square into Iroh's tearoom. It's a familiar setting for some of the animated show's most beloved episodes, so we're keen to know what storylines fans can expect to see carried over to live action. "Netflix gives very little real estate when it comes to episodes," says Boylan. "We have seven episodes this time round and while we

wrote eight, cutting that down forced us to focus in on key themes. So while we knew we couldn't include everything, fans can certainly expect to see elements of the fan-favourite episode 'The Tales Of Ba Sing Se' throughout the series."

"There are certain episodes we knew we couldn't cut," continues Raisani. "'Zuko Alone', for example, we knew had to be in there, and it was such an honour to be able to direct that episode too. The thing is there's never enough time to do everything one-to-one, but we try and draw as much inspiration as possible from every aspect of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, be it the comics, novels or the show, and we hope that this live-action version can drum up excitement for these other aspects of *ATLA* and newcomers to the series will go off and explore them."

The lower ring set continues to open up before us like a great sprawling maze. Alleys cut across each other, past ramshackle houses that feel as though they've stood for centuries. "We wanted the sets to feel as though as our characters endure and go through all this hardship, so do the sets," explains Wylie. "Especially somewhere like Ba Sing Se. A key theme for the show is trying to highlight life during wartime, and even though the city's under the impression there is no war, we still

want it to feel as though this is a city that's *seen* war and persisted through it. We also knew, especially in this area of Ba Sing Se, we didn't want to use the Volume or anything like that because we wanted this to feel tactile and lived-in.

"We spent a lot of time and money on the visuals of Ba Sing Se. It's the main setting for the season, so we knew we had to get it right. I think on this set alone we spent four months setting everything up, not just because we're in Canada and it snows and rains all the time but [because] we knew we needed that time to get it right."

"A key theme for Ba Sing Se is migration," adds Boylan. "It's kind of a key theme for the series as a whole. Our characters never stop moving and we want our sets to evoke this multicultural feeling too, so as much as the set



The Gaang show off their bending powers.







Katara, Sokka, Aang and Toph put the world to rights.

## “The prop department went crazy making all sorts of Easter eggs to hide among the scrolls”

is rooted in the Earth Kingdom aesthetic, we want each building to feel as if it's got its own character and personality.”

Next stop on our tour of the Earth Kingdom takes us to a Ba Sing Se-sized studio, filled with a number of active sets. The main shoot for today sees our Gaang (as fans describe Aang's friendship group) in the Spirit Library interacting with the wise and powerful spirit owl Wan Shi Tong.

Before visual effects play their part, it's hard to imagine the giant blue room transforming into a Spirit Library holding over 30,000 scrolls, let alone trying to imagine the man in a blue morph suit – holding an extremely long pole with a ball on top – transforming into the majestic Wan Shi Tong. “Fans will want to keep their eyes peeled in the Spirit Library,” says Boylan. “The prop department went crazy making all sorts of Easter eggs to hide in amongst all the scrolls.”

### SQUAD GOALS

The Gaang press through multiple takes. It's a tense scene but that tension's relieved when Gordon Cormier (Aang) slips on a line and the cast break into hysterics, hitting dance moves and cracking jokes before the next take begins. Even when the cameras aren't rolling the cast feel like they share that same camaraderie you see on screen, and Boylan was keen to bring that vibe to set from the offset.

“I want to be there for everyone as much as I possibly can,” she emphasises. “We have a young cast that's growing up with this show, and it's important that as a crew we are not only looking after them and nurturing their dynamic, but also our dynamic as a crew. I think we can learn a lot from our characters in the way that we should all just nurture, care and love each other, and hopefully that care comes across on screen.”

The Gaang is joined by a new face this season: Miya Cech, as fan-favourite earth bender Toph. Seeing her in her costume and delivering lines with that quintessential Toph style of defiance, it feels as though Toph couldn't have been cast more perfectly.

“I still can't really believe I'm here,” Cech says. “Toph is such an amazing character and I feel so lucky I've been trusted with this incredible role. Everyone has been so welcoming and supportive, and even though I've only just joined for season two I feel like I haven't missed anything.”

Between takes the cast are all buzzing and laughing, and SFX is all of a sudden thrust into that quintessential Gaang atmosphere. “Earth Rumble is probably the most exciting part of →



Dallas Liu as Zuko is ready to rumble. Always.



Hang on, they're just kids! The cast with scripts.



“It was so important to us to draw as much as we could from the animation”

this season for me,” says Ian Ousley (Sokka). “The fight scenes this season are so much fun,” adds Thalia Tran – in this moment it’s hard to imagine this jovial young actress as the cold, stone-faced Mai. “It’s so exciting because we didn’t get to do any of the fights last season, so it’s been such a fun learning experience getting involved this season,” adds Momona Tamada, completing the iconic fire nation duo as Ty Lee.

For Sebastian Amoruso (Jet), however, the fight scenes seem to have brought a noticeable leg injury; he spends most of the scene with his leg up on a stool, while a double stands ready to step in for any of the more physical aspects of the scene.

(SPOILER ALERT for the rest of this paragraph!) “Thankfully I only got this injury while filming my death scene, so we haven’t had much overly physical elements to film since.” Amoruso, reaching the end of his time on set, has an air of reflection and gratitude for his time on the show.

“It’s been such a great experience. Not only playing such a cool character like Jet,” he says, with his iconic hook swords noticeably still strapped to his back, “but being a part of this family too. Everyone has been incredible to work with and I’ll miss them all so much.”

**FIGHT CLUB**

We’re also joined by Dean Choe, the supervising stunt coordinator, who’s happy to share how well the team has handled the physical aspects of this season. “The cast’s tenacity is so admirable. I’m so proud of the way Sebastian has picked himself up after his injury because that could’ve really knocked his confidence, but he’s got back in the swing of things without missing a beat.

“It’s also been amazing to see Miya pick up all the fight choreo. She picked it up straight away, and brought all the talent and dedication needed for a character like Toph.”

In a show where the fighting style is just as iconic as its characters, we’re keen to know how Choe handled bringing this to the live action medium. “Of course we always use the animation as a base, but there’s certain limitations that a live action medium brings that animation inherently doesn’t have,” he explains.

“The fight scenes are really one big collaborative effort between us and VFX. We spend hours discussing how the two will interact and impact each other, while maintaining that traditional martial arts base. We draw on all sorts of martial arts disciplines: we’ve included Indonesian Silat stomps into the earth bending, we’ve added Polynesian

Azula (Elizabeth Yu) isn’t happy with Zuko.



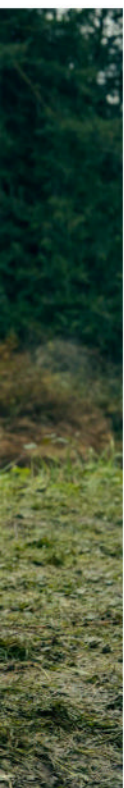
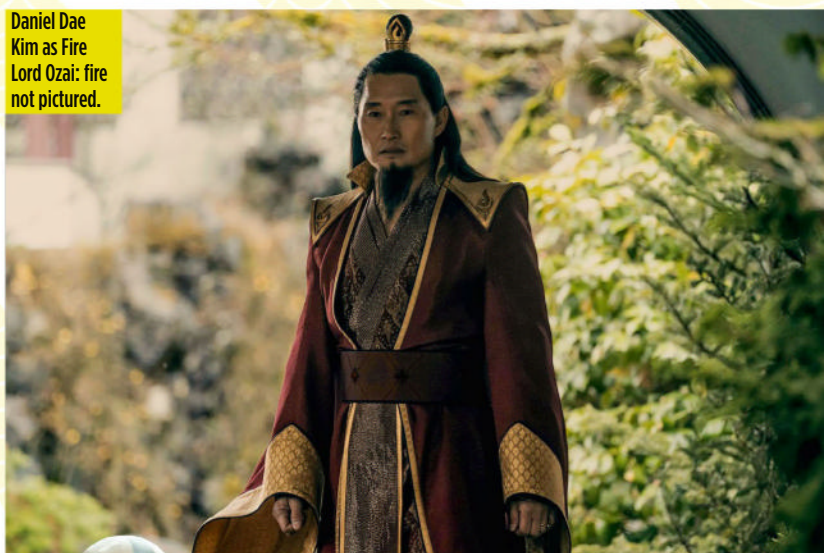
Miya Cech joins the cast as earth bender Toph.







Daniel Dae Kim as Fire Lord Ozai: fire not pictured.



Haka into the Boulder's fighting style. We want the diversity of our cast and this story to come through in the fighting styles as it makes the world feel so much more culturally rich."

After our adventure into the blue-screened Spirit Library we're taken into a truly ornate physical set for the Earth Kingdom palace, which we're told also doubles as the Fire Temple. It's another "hot" set: this time we see Azula interacting with Long Feng and Judee.

The set is truly a marvel: high ornate ceilings adorned with all manner of fauna stretch as high as the studio allows. The wide-arched doorways create a perfect frame for the tense conversation between the three antagonists. The room opens out in the back to reveal a gorgeous garden. Trees full of blossom, colourful flowers and vines stretch across the opening, inviting us into a truly delicate set.

"Again, it was so important to us to draw as much as we could from the animation but we never wanted to do a one-to-one replica," explains Wylie. "While transferring from animation to live action presents some limitations, I think there's also a lot of opportunity, and with this set I'd like to think we've increased the level of awe and grandeur tenfold. We really wanted to have a really sharp contrast between the upper levels of Ba Sing See and the lower."

As set-up for another take, begins we're taken through to another connecting studio where eight cherry pickers and a further 50 crew members are setting up the Crystal Caverns that sit adjacent to Appa's jail. Fluorescent green crystals lie everywhere, creating a dazzling maze and what's surely a spectacular setting for the season's final battle...

"That battle was by far the biggest challenge," says Choe. "That scene required full synergy between every single department. Sets, VFX, stunts, everyone had to come together and be completely on the same page before we even started shooting, because it's such a massive and iconic scene, we knew we had to get it right."

As we head out of the cave we enter a jail cell our beloved Sky Bison will be kept in and, even without him in front of us, SFX can't help but feel sorry for Appa.

The final stop of our tour takes us to Aang's house in Ba Sing Se. After the grandeur and spectacle of the previous sets this is a more intimate setting, a solitary cottage in the middle of the studio. Similarly to other Earth Kingdom buildings, the cottage features carving of Badger Moles along the edge of the roof, Eastern-style tiling and an ornate courtyard, which includes a training area where we can expect to see Aang getting to grips with this new bending style.

"I feel like this set kind of represents what we want from this season," says Boylan. "It's a place of grounding and I feel that's what this season needed, coming off the first. I think that season one might've felt a bit more elevated than we would've liked. Coming into this season we were keen to focus on grounding the characters and giving them a really solid foundation to build off before we head into the hot fire nation summer."

The world of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* is considered by many one of the most culturally rich, thematically interesting and downright coolest in animation. Fans dream of climbing on the back of Appa, earth bending with Toph or sharing a snack with Momo, and though they can't live out that fantasy, Michael Wylie and his team have built the next best thing.

With a third season already in development and multiple animated spin-off shows also in the works, for fans, the elements seem to be bending to their will... ●

*Avatar: The Last Airbender* is on Netflix from 25 June.

Azula's annual eye test comes at an awkward moment.





EVIL DEAD BURN

PLAY  
WI



# IGNITING THE FIRE

THE DEADITES ARE BLAZING BACK ONTO THE BIG SCREEN IN **EVIL DEAD BURN**

WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

**W**HEN SFX SPEAKS TO FRENCH filmmaker Sebastien Vaniček, he is still adjusting to the fact that, with *Evil Dead Burn*, he has become part of one of horror cinema's most enduring franchises. He suspects that the true magnitude of it may only hit him later that afternoon.

"I'm understanding all of this as soon as something is out," he explains. "When the movie is released, I think I will understand how big all of this is. When you're writing and making the movie it's still kind of like family work, just you and the people you are working with."

*Evil Dead Burn* is only the second feature from Vaniček, whose breakout 2023 horror *Infested* followed a deadly spider outbreak tearing through a Paris apartment block. The Shudder Original's success helped bring the filmmaker to the attention of Sam Raimi and Robert Tapert, producers of the *Evil Dead* series through Ghost House Pictures. Raimi, of course, directed the original trilogy.

"They asked me what would be my story in their universe," Vaniček says of their approach, one of many he received following *Infested*. "Other studios just sent me scripts and told me, 'Oh, you should direct this and that.' But I love to write, so this was a pretty amazing offer." ➔





**“Let’s do something different. Let’s break this; let’s destroy that”**

Vaniček describes himself as being, at the time, more of an admirer of the franchise than an encyclopaedic fan. “I was like, ‘Oh, these movies are fucking insane,’ but I couldn’t answer all the trivia questions. Right now I can, of course,” he laughs.

Partly for that reason, he brought in his friend and *Infested* co-writer Florent Bernard – “a huge fan of the franchise” – to work alongside him on the screenplay. “We found a good balance between respecting the legacy, what they want, and also having a new vision,” Vaniček says. “Let’s do something different. Let’s break this; let’s destroy that. Respect the father, but kill the father, like, to find a good balance.”

According to Vaniček, Raimi has remained closely involved throughout the process, while also giving him the freedom – along with the tools – to put his own stamp on the material. “He understands everything that’s going on in a young director’s mind,” Vaniček says. “He understands the pressure and what the studio is asking. He’s like, ‘Do your thing, have fun, just enjoy every minute.’ And when you have a question or you need him, he’s there.” Original *Evil Dead* star Bruce Campbell serves as one of the film’s executive producers. “We had some meetings about writing and everything,” Vaniček recalls. “He was telling me, ‘Please respect this and that because we love this franchise deeply. It’s important to us and it’s important to fans.’ So he was just basically protecting his children,” he adds with a laugh. “I was like, ‘I’m 100% with you.’ He’s one of the funniest guys I’ve ever met.”

### RAISING THE DEAD

At the centre of *Evil Dead Burn* is Alice, played by Souheila Yacoub. Following the funeral of her husband, she joins her in-laws at a secluded house for one final supper. “That’s the starting point of our story,” grins Vaniček, otherwise remaining tight-lipped. “And then shit will happen!”

A good indication of the carnage in store – you may never look at a dishwasher the same way again – can be gleaned from the trailer, whose brutal tone recalls the wave of transgressive, intensely violent French horror films released during the late 1990s and early 2000s, later grouped under the banner of New French Extremity.

“I was really young when I discovered these movies,” Vaniček says. “That was the big DVD period. I was buying DVDs of everything only because the poster was cool. I didn’t even know the director or the story or whatever, but the poster was cool.”

Among the films that left the strongest impression on him were *Frontier(s)*, *High Tension* (aka *Switchblade Romance*) and

*Martyrs*, directed respectively by Xavier Gens, Alexandre Aja and Pascal Laugier. He also points to Gaspar Noé as a filmmaker who became “pretty huge” within French cinema. “These guys were completely crazy,” he laughs, describing their films as “the most intense I’ve ever seen. I’ve never seen an American movie go above that”.

When pitching his take on *Evil Dead*, Vaniček consciously set out to follow in their footsteps. “I was like, ‘I will bring some of the best things we are doing in France into this American franchise: how you shoot things, how real they feel, how extreme they are.’ At the same time, he was keen not to rely too heavily on direct influences.

“My biggest dream is to create my own language,” he says. “Sometimes it’s difficult because you have so many amazing movies, amazing shots and amazing directors. But I’m trying to create something unique, for my movies to be like, ‘Oh, I can see that there’s a shape that was in *Infested*, and now it is in *Evil Dead*, and it will be in my next project too.”

Like 2023’s *Evil Dead Rise*, the film was shot in New Zealand, with several local actors joining the cast. Tandi Wright (*Pearl*) plays Susan, while Luciane Buchanan (*The Night Agent*) appears as Thya. The ensemble also includes American actor Hunter Doohan, best known for *Wednesday*, as Joseph, and Australian performer Maude Davey (*The Newsreader*) as Polly, a wheelchair user with an amputated leg that, Vaniček teases, will factor into the story in a particularly nasty way. “You will enjoy her,” he laughs.

As the trailer makes clear, many of the characters do not remain human for long. Finding actors capable of transforming convincingly into soul-possessing Deadites became a major part of the casting process. “They had to do a scene where they did a human character, and then they had to do horrible stuff,” Vaniček explains.

For the director, the physical side of the actors’ performances was crucial to making the creatures feel believable. “How they behaved with their body; how they moved their heads. Because the strength of *Evil Dead* is that it’s not demons from *The Exorcist*,” he asserts. “It’s not something completely unique and original.”

The cast and filmmakers also spent considerable time discussing how the Deadites should behave on a psychological level. “How smart they are; how evil they are; how they play with your mind; how controlled they are by this entity. They behave like animals. I needed to feel [the cast] had what it takes.” Yacoub brought an especially physical background to the production. A former gymnast, she was part of the Swiss National

There’s always someone who takes it too far.

Joseph (Hunter Doohan): stressed out.

Luciane Buchanan as one of the many victims.

Nothing like a wholesome family get-together...





Greta van den Brink gives it the full Deadite.



## RAGE HARD

The scene you won't see in cinemas

When SFX speaks to Vaníček, *Evil Dead Burn* is in the middle of the MPAA ratings process. The aim has always been to secure an R rating – equivalent to a UK 15 or 18 – in keeping with previous entries in the franchise.

"It's really, really difficult right now because there is a scene that is not R-rated," the filmmaker admits. "It's a really, really hard scene. And I have to cut it, unfortunately, so you just won't experience it as brutally as it is right now because I need to have the right now because we are trying to find a good balance."

Battles with censors are hardly new territory for the series, however, and Vaníček hints that the more extreme material could yet surface on a future release.

"The director's cut will be way more violent than what we will have in the theatre," he teases, while insisting that the theatrical version will still deliver the kind of carnage fans expect from an *Evil Dead* film.

Alice (Souheila Yacoub) is not having much luck.

Rhythmic Gymnastics Team and competed in the 2009 and 2010 World Rhythmic Gymnastics Championships. "She has this competition state of mind," Vaníček says. "Like, she wants to do better. She knows how to move her body, and she can endure pain. Of course, I didn't want her to be in pain, but when you're making these kinds of movies, you know that it will be really, really hard and you have to be tough."

The director warned Yacoub early on that *Evil Dead Burn* would likely be the most physically demanding project of her career. "She was like, 'I know pain. I know competition. I know how to break my body.' She did so much with all of that that she was the perfect actress to do the part."

## WAR STORIES

Vaníček confirms, with a laugh, that the team devised their own stomach-churning answer to *Evil Dead Rise*'s infamous cheese grater sequence. "It's one of the most brutal, violent moments in the film, very, very visceral," he says. "The prosthetics and make-up teams did that for real!"

For all the bloodshed, Vaníček says he never wanted *Evil Dead Burn* to feel like a conventional splatter movie. Instead, he

approached it with the immediacy and intensity of a war film. "It's about framing and camera work," he explains. "I wanted the camera to be inside the scenes – inside the violence and brutality – so, for the audience, it's like you are experiencing things from the inside. I wanted something that feels really grounded."

Although *Evil Dead Burn* tells a standalone story, one Vaníček describes as being, at its core, about the "death of love", he was also keen for it to fit into the wider mythology of the franchise. "I try to connect the movies together and do something with it," he explains. "Not just make another spin-off with new characters and a new book. I want you to discover things. There is a little game of connecting dots."

And when the ashes settle, the Deadites will rise once more. Currently in production for a planned 2028 release, *Evil Dead Wrath* is being directed by fellow French filmmaker Francis Galluppi. "We were introduced to each other, so we had these little chats, and we tried to do something cool," says Vaníček when asked whether the films will connect in any way. "I did some little things in his [film] to try and create some little things that feels connected for the audience, for them to play with these thoughts and to have these Easter eggs here and there."

Three days after SFX's conversation, the *Evil Dead Burn* trailer has passed 11 million views on YouTube alone. Forty-five years after Sam Raimi's original film, the franchise remains very much alive. ●

*Evil Dead Burn* is in cinemas from 9 July.

That's probably going to sting next day.







# ENTER THE DRAGON

HAILED AS A GROUNDBREAKING MOMENT IN VISUAL EFFECTS, **DRAGONSLAYER** REMAINS A HIGH WATER MARK OF FANTASY ADVENTURE FILMMAKING. *SFX* SPEAKS TO DIRECTOR MATTHEW ROBBINS ABOUT HIS LANDMARK 1981 FILM

WORDS: OLIVER PFEIFFER

**F**OR ANYONE OF A CERTAIN AGE, THE '80s were a golden moment for fantasy and science fiction cinema. The original *Star Wars* trilogy was redefining what blockbuster spectacle could look like, while films like *Clash Of The Titans*, *The Dark Crystal* and *Return To Oz* proved there was still room for myth, magic and monsters on the big screen. It was an era when filmmakers sensed that technology had finally caught up with imagination.

"The late '70s and early '80s were when our very close friend George Lucas was becoming George Lucas," laughs writer/director Matthew Robbins. "He had created Industrial Light & Magic, and my writing and producing partner Hal Barwood and I were very present for that. We were aware of what could be emerging from ILM, but it was all starfields and TIE fighters. We thought, 'Why not take advantage of the horsepower?' Visual effects were becoming so sophisticated; why not create something else to put through that system? Because we knew, before anybody else, what it was capable of."

Influenced by JRR Tolkien, the producing team completed a screenplay set in Anglo-Saxon times, centred on an apprentice wizard sent to defeat a dragon sustained →



by sacrificial virgins from a beleaguered kingdom. It quickly attracted interest from studios beginning to sense the commercial potential of fantasy worlds beyond science fiction. “Our agents showed it around LA, and there was immediate interest from both Paramount and Disney,” Robbins continues, recalling a meeting where Paramount studio head Michael Eisner noted that the growing popularity of *Dungeons & Dragons* had already sparked a wave of commissioned fantasy scripts designed to capitalise on the game’s fanbase. “Here we come off the street, so to speak, and they liked our screenplay – it was ready to go.”

More importantly, it came with a clear creative and technical roadmap; one that placed ILM at the centre of its ambitions. Paramount ultimately struck a co-financing deal with Disney, cementing the origin of *Dragonslayer* as a major studio-backed fantasy with unprecedented visual aspirations. What truly set *Dragonslayer* apart, however, was its gritty, stripped-back worldview, one in which magic was a fading, unreliable force rather than a convenient solution. “We always hated those movies where anything could happen,” he explains. “There were no rules, and you felt cheated because characters could get in or out of anything. So we thought it would be good to make magic not so easy and not overuse it.”

## A DYING BREED

That philosophy is embodied in the film’s mentor figure Ulrich: a Merlinesque sorcerer who, like the dragon he is initially tasked with destroying, represents the last of a vanishing order. Ageing and far from omnipotent, Ulrich’s struggle underscores *Dragonslayer*’s central tension of an old world slipping away. The role came to life through Shakespearean actor Sir Ralph Richardson, who brought a kindly yet craggy, cantankerous edge to the character. “At first it was not easy,” Robbins recalls. “He was a rascal during rehearsal and would query and challenge me: ‘Why this word, not that word?’ He’d marked up his screenplay and was a little irritable, a little nervous.”

Over time, however, Richardson warmed to the production, his concerns rooted less in ego than in circumstance. “He was 79 and worried about his mobility and forgetting his lines. He knew he was in unfamiliar territory.”

A crisis on location during an elaborate early sequence led to a breakthrough. “I brought him out and showed him what the shot was, and he stopped me and said, ‘Dear boy, I can’t do it!’” says Robbins. “We’d put down planks so he could walk without stumbling, but he was worried about falling, forgetting his lines, or performing at length with wind, fog, a big crew, and a dolly shot. He was very aware of the investment we’d made in preparing it. I reassured him we’d simplify the sequence



**Dragonslayer**  
big bad  
Vermithrax  
Pejorative.

and shoot it in pieces, and that was exactly what we did.

“The next day, a gift arrived at my trailer from him. He was a pipe smoker and had sent a very expensive pipe from his favourite shop, along with some of his favourite tobacco. I wasn’t much of a pipe smoker, but I appreciated the gesture, and he included a lovely note. From then on, we had the best time. We became very good friends, and I spent a lot of time in his trailer. He was endlessly fascinating, sharing stories about his upbringing, Shakespeare, and his other passions, like motorcycling and clocks.”

Their friendship quickly deepened, and it wasn’t just conversation that held the actor’s interest. The technical side of the production fascinated Richardson, too, who delighted in learning how things worked.

“He was particularly intrigued by the occasional VistaVision camera brought onto the set for ILM – the large-format cameras used to shoot plates for combining elements,” Robbins continues. “Ralph was captivated by the way the film ran sideways through the gate and he was particularly interested when the film transport broke down. He would often come over in costume, offering advice and comments, fully embracing the spirit of the production.”

## THE SORCERER’S APPRENTICE

A young Peter MacNicol was cast as Ulrich’s spirited apprentice, Galen, in a bid to appease Disney. “[They] were very worried that we were going to have an all-English cast, which would have been our preference, but they

**The sorcerer**  
Ulrich and his  
apprentice  
Galen (left).



would not hear of it,” says Robbins. “It’s almost inconceivable now, particularly after the *Harry Potter* films, but they were terrified it would alienate American audiences to hear English accents throughout. I knew going in that we’d have a mix of English and American actors. That meant paying close attention to voices and finding a mid-Atlantic sound that wouldn’t contrast too sharply with the traditional English accents. That was one of the reasons Peter was chosen – as well as being a very good actor.”

One small but pivotal role was that of the ill-fated priest who initially attempts to confront the dragon, played by future Darth Sidious, Ian McDiarmid. “This was before he played the Emperor, and I’m pretty sure it was the first time George Lucas ever saw him,” says Robbins. “We’d originally cast René





A young woman is sacrificed to the dragon.



The people of Urland seek out the sorcerer.



Brave young Galen enters the lair of Vermithrax.

“George Lucas sat next to me in the preview, and said, ‘It’s a hit!’ But it was not a hit...”

Auberjonois, a good friend of mine who was physically not unlike Ian. But at the last minute, Disney told us we were over budget on casting and that René couldn’t come, so we had to scramble to find an English actor.”

But it was the delightfully named dragon Vermithrax Pejorative, whose complete reveal is withheld until well over an hour into the film, that ultimately stole the show. That approach owed a debt to an earlier lesson in suspense. “Hal and I were very involved on *Jaws*,” Robbins reveals. “Steven Spielberg showed us how limiting what you show can really get the imagination working. It’s a great way to build suspense, and it also saves a bit of money.”

Working with ILM quickly taught the production the value of restraint. Each effect began as a storyboard, broken down shot by shot, with costs calculated for every element required for compositing. It soon became clear how rapidly those costs could escalate, reinforcing the need to suggest scale and threat without showing too much. At \$19 million, *Dragonslayer* was already a substantial production for its time, with most of the visual effects handled by ILM, alongside a small number of specialist subcontractors.

That discipline was tested by the sheer physical ambition of Vermithrax. At Disney’s

Burbank workshops, three full-scale sections of the dragon were built: a claw and tail for the early virginal sacrifice sequence, and the head and neck for a confrontational cave scene where Galen first encounters the creature. Designed by artist David Bunnett, then new to the film industry, the dragon took on a more wolfish, unsettling presence than traditional reptilian designs, with elements subtly drawn from Bunnett’s own facial features.

Shipped to Pinewood Studios, Vermithrax was brought to life through Phil Tippett and Dennis Muren’s pioneering Go-motion animation (first utilised for the AT-AT walkers in *The Empire Strikes Back*). Visual effects artist Ken Ralston served as dragon supervisor and was specifically responsible for animating the flying sequences. The result was a dragon of unprecedented weight and fluidity, marking a major leap forward in creature animation and earning *Dragonslayer* an Academy Award nomination for Best Visual Effects.

“George Lucas was sitting next to me in the preview, and he said, ‘It’s a hit!’ The audience loved the film, the cards were good, and the comments were very promising. However, it was not a hit,” Robbins recalls. “It was only a week or two before the release of *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*, and Paramount had really put all their concentration on that. Their summer was built around it, so *Dragonslayer* was very much an afterthought. The head of distribution didn’t even come to the preview.” When they eventually met, the message was blunt. “He told me, ‘I don’t like that title, *Dragonslayer*, and I’ll tell you right now, it’s not my kind of movie.’”

The film’s underperformance that summer delivered what Robbins calls one of his harshest early lessons: “You just never know. We weren’t trouble-free, but we were a happy set. It wasn’t a trainwreck, we weren’t wildly over budget, and we were blazing new territory in tone. However, over the years, the film has acquired a nice reputation, which [gives me] some solace.”

Indeed, the considerable influence of *Dragonslayer* and its iconic dragon design can be appreciated in everything from the work of Guillermo del Toro to *Game Of Thrones* and *The Hobbit: The Desolation Of Smaug*. For Robbins, that influence, combined with the film’s belated restoration (see right), has brought a welcome sense of vindication. ●

*Dragonslayer* is available on a region-free US 4K Blu-ray.



## DRAGONSLAYER: RESTORING FAITH

How Matthew Robbins’s return to *Dragonslayer* helped preserve the film for a new generation

For years, Robbins couldn’t bear to watch the DVD of *Dragonslayer*. “It was terrible,” he says. “Fringing around Peter [MacNicol’s] hair, buzzing, matte lines and these big rectangles in the sky – what we call garbage mats at ILM. For years, there would be *Dragonslayer* revivals. I was always happy to take part, but only after the screening, as I didn’t want to see it.”

In 2023, Paramount’s archival restoration unit remastered the film for a special 4K Blu-ray release and asked Robbins to approve it. “They were undertaking archival restorations and went to management to request *Dragonslayer* because they were more aware of that film, being of a certain generation, and persuaded them to make the investment, which was not insignificant.”

“I went down to LA with a list, ready to confront everything that had bothered me for years. But they’d already anticipated every issue – I could’ve torn up my notes!”

The filmmaker also contributed an audio commentary, sitting down with a director of his choice: esteemed *Dragonslayer* superfan Guillermo del Toro, with whom Robbins had previously collaborated as a co-writer on *Crimson Peak* and *Pinocchio*. “So I got Guillermo, an old pal, with a microphone and a film he adores. He was like the master of ceremonies, just unbelievably eloquent.”

The 4K triumphantly preserves *Dragonslayer*’s legacy, introducing the cult-classic fantasy adventure to a new generation of fans.



Vermithrax remains one of cinema’s great dragons.







# EXIT SANDMAN

THE POPULACE DIDN'T OUTLAST 30 IN **LOGAN'S RUN**, BUT THE MOVIE ITSELF CHALKS UP A HALF CENTURY ON 23 JUNE. TO CELEBRATE THE CLASSIC DYSTOPIA'S 50TH BIRTHDAY, WE PRESENT AN INTERVIEW WITH STAR MICHAEL YORK

WORDS: IAN BERRIMAN



LANDMARK SCI-FI FILM OF the '70s, *Logan's Run* is one of those movies whose concepts entered the popular imagination. If you're of a certain age, there's a good

chance that when you turned 30, someone made reference to it – perhaps something about a red light flashing in your palm?

This dystopian tale began life as a slim 144-page novel, knocked out in three weeks by William F Nolan and George Clayton Johnson – one that feels very much a reaction to the '60s "youthquake", with its rejection of older authority figures. The book questions that, with a passage near the end declaring: "The young don't build. They use. The wonders of Man were achieved by the mature, the wise..."

From very early on, the intention was that the story would transfer to the big screen – the original 1967 edition notes that it is "Soon to be a major motion picture". George Pal, producer of *The War Of The Worlds*, took an interest. Later, *Lost In Space* creator Irwin Allen was attached. But as often happens, it got bogged down in development hell. A movie didn't go before the cameras until June 1975, with Michael Anderson (of *The Dam Busters* fame) in the director's chair.

Enter actor Michael York, who'd worked with Anderson in December 1974 on period legal drama *Conduct Unbecoming*. "I was in Los Angeles doing a play, *Ring Round The Moon*," he tells *SFX*. "It got good reviews and so on. Then I was called in to MGM to talk to them about *Logan's Run*. They sent me the script beforehand. I read it and honestly didn't think it was for me – it wasn't pressing buttons."

Thankfully, York got a second opinion. "I gave it to the young kid in the company



who was deputed to drive me, and he said, 'Can I read it?' I said, 'Yeah, of course.' He came to pick me up the next day and very vigorously said, 'You *have* to do this!' Then he explained what was going on. And he was right, of course."

York was cast as Logan, one of the "Sandmen" who police the society of the year 2274. In this hedonistic future, people in a domed city live lives of leisure and commitment-free sex, with everything provided by "the servo-mechanisms". The snag: as you approach 30, the "lifeclock" in your palm starts blinking red. Once your Last Day comes, you must submit to "carrousel" (as

the opening slide spells it...). This ritual – in which participants float into the air, then are zapped by a laser – promises rebirth, but is really mass euthanasia. The Sandmen's job is to hunt down and kill those who resist participating. "There's an exhilaration about it. They're doing their job, and doing it well," York notes.

Logan soon sees the other side. The computer that runs the city tasks him with following 1,056 unaccounted for "Runners" to "Sanctuary", a potentially mythical place outside the domes. To maintain his cover, it advances his lifeclock so it starts flashing.

## THE BRIT PACK

As York points out, it was a film with creatives from these shores at the fore. "It was so interesting that there were three British talents, when you think of Jenny Agutter, Peter Ustinov and then myself" Agutter played Jessica, who accompanied Logan on his flight, while Ustinov portrayed a dodderly, elderly man they discover living in the overgrown ruins of Washington DC. Surrounded by strays, he's old enough to quote TS Eliot's *Old Possum's Book Of Practical Cats*. "Peter just had a field day," York says, recalling his co-star's improvisations. "I think there was dialogue, but he just ran with it. Made it up, all that stuff about cats, way before Andrew Lloyd Webber got his hands on Eliot [for *Cats*]."

Despite his initial misgivings, York had no issues getting a grip on the character. "I'm very much instinctual," he says, "and you did have the luxury of you're playing into the future, so no one can say, 'I'm sorry, they didn't do that' – everything is permissible." This partly explains why York didn't affect a full-blown American twang. "It was a sort of slight →





Michael York as Logan and Jenny Agutter as Jessica.

## “Of all the films I’ve done, it seemed to touch the Boomer generation”

mid-Atlantic, because who knows how people would sound so far in the future. But in order to fit in with the rest of the cast, we [Brits] compromised.”

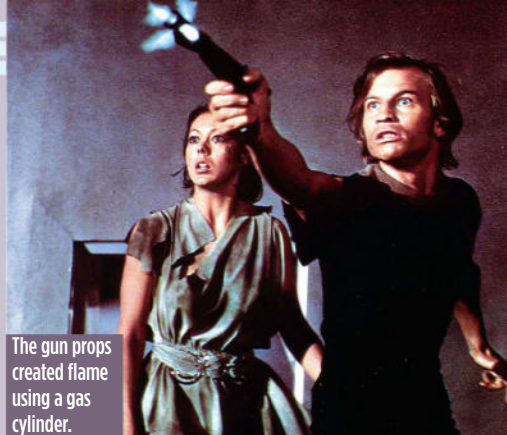
A fourth member of the ensemble broke the pattern. “My great boast,” York says, “is discovering Farrah Fawcett.” The future star of *Charlie’s Angels* played Holly, an assistant in a plastic surgery clinic. “I saw her playing tennis, this vision of delight, found out she was an actress, and suggested her for the role [to producer Saul David]. She got it, and the rest is history.”

This means York pretty much singlehandedly caused a generation of women’s haircuts, we point out. “I take full responsibility!” he laughs. “But she was breather-taking to look at, so it would have happened with or without Holly.”

It was a stress-free set – something York puts down to Anderson exuding calmness. “I cannot sing his praises loudly enough,” the actor says. “He’s someone who did it all in the cinema. He’d had a lifetime, from being the tea boy. He loved his work and had a great understanding of actors, and indeed everyone involved in the film. He was an incredibly modest and un-pushy man.”

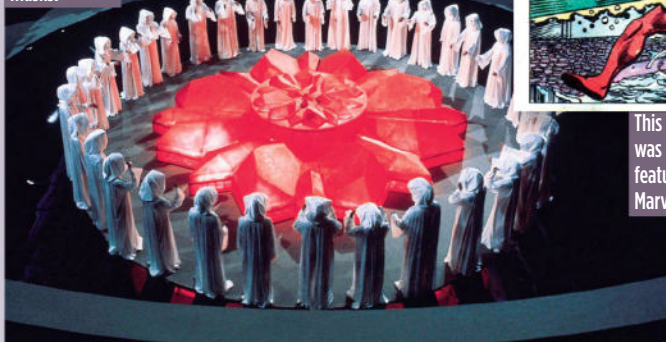
“We had one of the great cameramen, too,” he adds. “[One of] these old Hollywood legends.” Ernest Laszlo had already received seven Academy Award nominations (for titles like *Judgment At Nuremberg* and *Fantastic Voyage*), and snagged an eighth for his work here.

“I had a great time!” York enthuses, recalling how the film used real locations for spaces like its consumer paradise, Arcade. “It was the beginning of the whole mall experience. This was an early one in Dallas, the Apparel Mart [part of Dallas Market Center], a giant enclosed space.” If you’re planning a trip, sorry – the Apparel Mart shut its doors in 2004. “America hadn’t been malled yet, so this was quite a new thing. Plus a lot of buildings with glass fronts.” The Dallas HQ of jewellers The Zale Corporation served as



The gun props created flame using a gas cylinder.

The carousel participants all wore hockey masks.



This opening was cut, but featured in the Marvel comic.



Michael York recommended casting Farrah Fawcett.

Peter Ustinov improvised many lines as the old man.



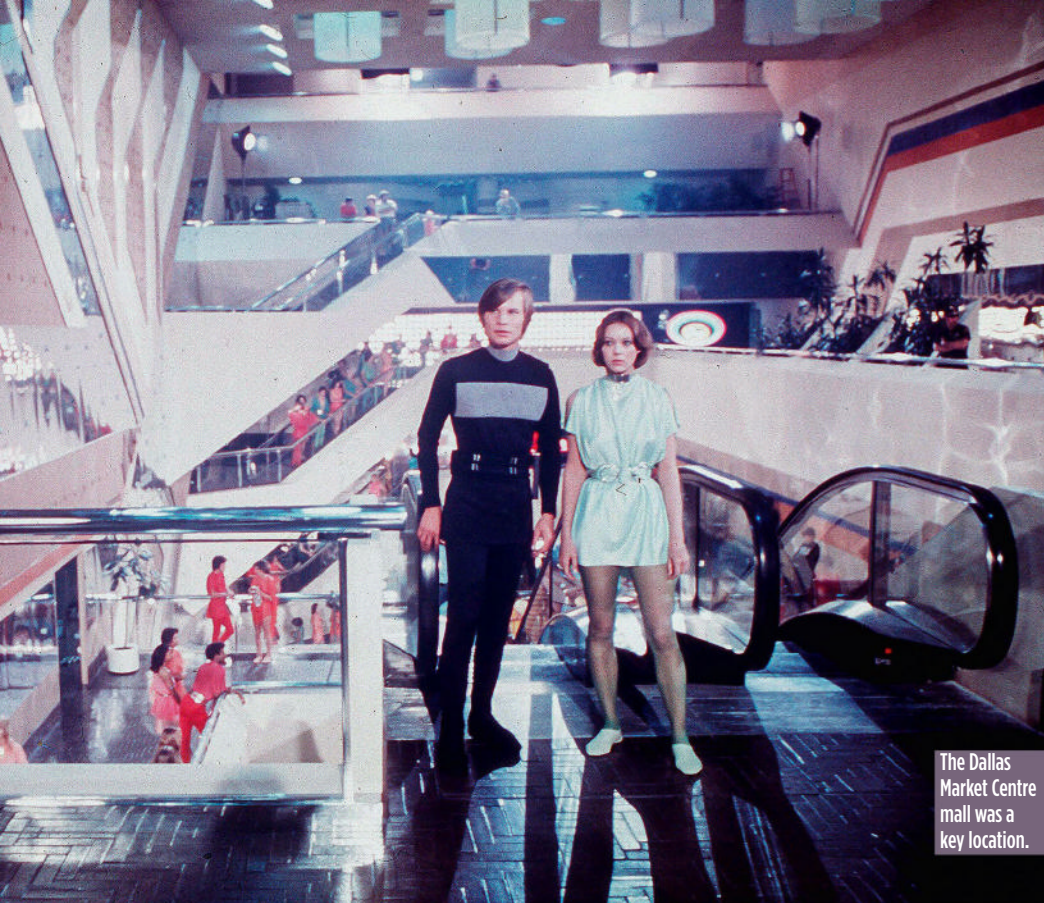
## ALL GUNS BLAZING

Sci-fi films tend to entail technical challenges, and *Logan’s Run* was no exception. An example leaps to York’s mind. “Those guns, for example,” he says, referring to the Sandmen’s weapons. “They had a gas cylinder that gave a sort of jet flame, and they were very tricky.” They often didn’t work. “And I remember the blinking thing in the palm. That was simply a little diode connected on a wire that was hidden up the sleeve. Low-tech but effective.”

“We hated our nylon costumes,” he adds. You can’t knock them for durability, though. “I still have a sort of cape/cloak... It’s indestructible, I think! The costume designer ran it up just before the shoot, as they decided they needed something more *décontracté* – relaxed.”

Filming took place in high summer – fortuitously for the leads, during scenes like one where Logan and Jessica, having emerged into nature, skinny-dip in a lake. “That was the

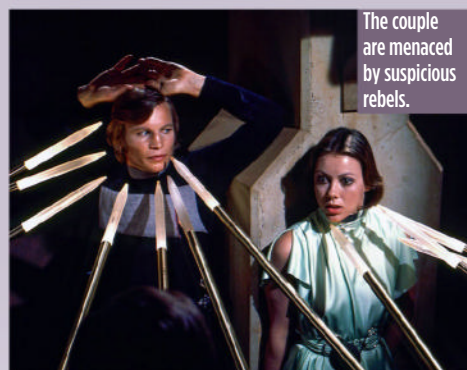




The Dallas Market Centre mall was a key location.



In a deleted scene, Box sculpted the couple in ice.



The couple are menaced by suspicious rebels.



Fox Ranch in Los Angeles," York recalls, "A huge ranch owned by the studio where they filmed cowboy movies." On the downside, an ice cave scene was shot under studio lights in sweltering heat. "That's acting!" York laughs, of his on-screen shivering.

This sequence – in which Logan and Jessica encounter Box, a robot that turns out to have placed previous escapees in frozen storage – could have been longer. Originally, it included a moment where Box convinces the couple to pose nude as he carves an ice sculpture. This ended up on the cutting-room floor.

Another significant trim was the original opening, in which Sandman Francis executes a Runner. Both are included in the Marvel Comics version, which adapted the movie across five issues dated January to May 1977.

To Anderson's regret, the orgiastic Love Shop scenes were also trimmed (by two thirds): "Quite a battle was waged with the censorship of the time to retain the original version, but they felt that they would give it an R rating," he explained in a 1997 DVD commentary. "[MGM] in the end wanted the PG rating, so they decided to make the cuts."

Marvel's comic wasn't the only spin-off. A *Logan's Run* TV series ran for 14 episodes from September 1977 to February 1978; *Star Trek's* DC Fontana acted as story editor, enlisting *TOS* writers like David Gerrold and John Meredyth Lucas. "Then there was talk about a sequel," York recalls. "I think William Nolan had written a story, maybe as a screenplay." Was he approached about returning? "I can't remember that," he says. "Obviously I was interested, because you feel proprietorial if you have created a character."

Talk of a revival periodically resurfaces: *The Matrix* producer Joel Silver has invested

## TRIVIA

Jon Voight turned down the chance to play Logan, while future *The Bionic Woman* star Lindsay Wagner was the leading contender for Jessica. According to Anderson, Agutter had better chemistry with York.

Michael Anderson also approached James Cagney about playing the old man, but he was retired at the time.

The backdrop seen from the window of Logan's apartment also turns up in the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode "Tapestry" (the one where Picard revisits being stabbed in a youthful bar brawl).

When Logan and Jessica ride a freight elevator up to the ice cave, you see a shot of pistons. It's stock footage, reused from the 1959 film *The Wreck Of The Mary Deare* (also directed by Anderson).

Keep 'em peeled at the end. When the city's residents surround the old man, you can clearly see one extra cheekily flashing a Vulcan "Live long and prosper" salute.

Two sequel novels by William Nolan were published: *Logan's World* (1977) and *Logan's Search* (1980). An ebook novella, *Logan's Return*, followed in 2001. A fourth book, *Logan's Journey*, was apparently completed with a co-writer, but hasn't seen the light of day.

much time overseeing development for Warner, with a host of names attached over the years: Alex Garland, Simon Kinberg, Christopher McQuarrie and Nicolas Winding Refn are just a few. When a now disgraced director was in the frame circa 2004, York had an idea how he could be involved. "Bryan Singer kept telling me they're going to remake it, and I said, 'Well, you've got to give me a part – maybe the old man?'"

"I think if they do remake it, they'll go even younger," he adds. "In the original story [the book] the people were 21. Which makes an even more brutal point."

Since "filmmaking sensibilities have moved on", York is hesitant about what a CGI-fest *Logan's Run* might look like. "In any modern version, you'll get fantastic special effects, and maybe the story will get slightly lost. I think that was our advantage. The effects were there, but they didn't overwhelm the narrative."

York gets recognised on the street for a variety of roles. "The whole gamut, from *Austin Powers* to *Romeo And Juliet* [Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 film]." But it's *Logan's* adventure that's made the deepest impression.

"Out of all the films I've done, it seemed to touch the Boomer generation, acutely," he says. "Whether this was because it was reflecting what was going on – hedonistic societies, parentless societies... it was a sort of pre-AIDS utopia, with the free sex – I don't know. But it touched a nerve. I constantly had people coming up to me saying, 'There was one film when I was growing up that really got to me...' And I'd say, 'Don't say any more, I know what you're going to say: it was *Logan's Run*!'"

*Logan's Run* is available on Blu-ray and DVD, and to stream via Prime Video.



# FLYING SORCERY

WITH DISCLOSURE DAY UPON US, IT'S TIME TO REVEAL THE HISTORY  
OF CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE SCREEN KIND

WORDS: NICK SETCHFIELD





THE SKIES HAVE NEVER been empty.

Some say Old Testament prophet Ezekiel was a proto-UFO spotter, witness to the unearthly spectacle of “a great cloud” with “a fire infolding itself” and a “brightness... about it”. Alas the Bible doesn’t tell us if the Babylonian authorities instigated an official cover-up.

The late 19th century brought a rash of unexplained airship sightings over America. A similar flap occurred in Britain in the early 1900s. Christened “scareships” by a sensation-hungry press – what’s new? – these mystery craft weren’t seen as evidence of extraterrestrial visitation but unnerving glimpses of some unknown nation’s technological superiority. Jules Verne anticipated this phenomenon: his 1886 novel *Robur The Conqueror* features an impossibly advanced flying machine, built by a brilliant lone inventor who’s out to spook the world.

The true age of the UFO began on 24 June 1947, when private pilot Kenneth Arnold reported nine gleaming discs flying in formation at startling speed near Mount Rainier in Washington state. Arnold’s sighting enshrined the classic image of the flying saucer but such iconography had already been seen in science fiction; the cover of a 1929 issue of *Science Wonder Stories* placed a saucer-shaped object in orbit around the Earth. Arnold soon despaired of the attention his claim had brought him: “Half the people look at me as a combination of Einstein, Flash Gordon and screwball,” he lamented.

## WATCH THE SKIES

While the Mount Rainier incident fired the public imagination – reports of a “flying disk” crashing in Roswell, New Mexico a fortnight later only added to the frenzy – it took Hollywood a while to capitalise on UFOmania. 1949’s cliffhanging serial *Bruce Gentry – Daredevil Of The Skies* featured the screen’s first flying saucer, a man-made creation that’s the secret weapon of an enemy agent known as the Recorder. Supposedly fuelled by a mineral called platonite, the craft actually flew by the power of animation in the crude effects sequences.

A year later came the feature-length *The Flying Saucer*, which found Soviet spies investigating UFO reports in a remote part of Alaska. The future 49th state felt a fitting location for such a tale, a liminal frontier where a paranoid America feared a Russian incursion, just as flying saucers themselves seemed to hint at a phantasmic Cold War being waged among the clouds. “Streaking out of the unknown comes a strange new terror!” screamed the poster, but once again the threat proved to be distinctly earthbound. This saucer’s the invention of an American



Gort and the craft in *The Day The Earth Stood Still*.



*The Thing From Another World*, in different sizes.



Tom Neal as Bruce Gentry – *Daredevil Of The Skies*.

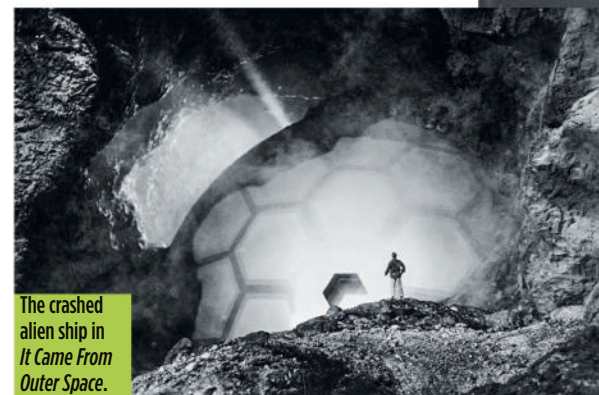
scientist, caught in a Communist plot to seize the secrets of his creation. At least 1950 serial *Flying Disc Man From Mars* had the good grace to put a bona fide Martian at the helm of its mysterious, boomerang-shaped vessel.

Christian Nyby’s (or was it Howard Hawks’s?) *The Thing From Another World* (1951) moved to the North Pole, where a downed saucer is discovered in the ice. “Watch the skies, everywhere!” the film urges in its closing moments. “Keep looking. Keep watching the skies!”

Audiences needed no persuasion, especially as fact and fantasy appeared to be playing tag. First-contact classic *The Day The Earth Stood Still* (1951) sees a saucer land in Washington DC; a year later, in real life, newspapers reported an inexplicable cluster of lights gathered above the White House. Edward J Ruppelt, director of Project Blue Book, the US government taskforce set up to investigate UFO sightings, would later recall “During a

six-month period in 1952... 148 of the nation’s leading newspapers carried a total of over 16,000 items about flying saucers.”

Seen but unseen, documented but dismissed, UFOs were the perfect metaphor for these jittery times, when the Reds might even be lurking behind the neat picket fences of →



The crashed alien ship in *It Came From Outer Space*.

Gregory Gaye in serial *Flying Disc Man From Mars*.



A malevolent alien in *Earth Vs The Flying Saucers*.

small-town America. Based on a film treatment by Ray Bradbury, 1953's *It Came From Outer Space* sees a blazing object smash into the Arizona desert. These alien visitors are shapeshifters, assuming human form in order to repair their ship, but for all their bodysnatching ways they are essentially benign cosmic tourists. "I wanted to treat the invaders as beings who were not dangerous, and that was very unusual," remembered Bradbury.

### SMALL SCREEN INVASION

1953's *Invaders From Mars* delivered a more sinister visitation. The first UFO movie in colour – rushed into production to beat George Pal's *The War Of The Worlds*, which topically reinvented HG Wells's tripods as sleek aerial craft – it begins with a young boy witnessing a saucer descending behind his home one thundery night. Blending daylight reality and nocturnal fantasy, the film has a haunting, hallucinatory vibe, suggesting dreams are just another liminal space for these otherworldly vessels to navigate.

Ray Harryhausen gave stop-motion life to the phenomenon in *Earth Vs The Flying Saucers* (1956). "I found it a challenge to try to make the metallic objects... have an intelligence

**“The US authorities, we’re told, are engaged in a clandestine plot to bury the truth”**

inside,” admitted the effects genius, who invented a geared brace that allowed his hand-tooled models to tilt and fly at angles, all the better to strafe the streets of Washington. The shots of Harryhausen's featureless, futuristic saucers juxtaposed with such timeless symbols of American power as the White House and the Capitol dome still pack an uncanny punch, clear inspiration for 1996's *Independence Day*. “This is it!” the poster warned potential punters. “The battle that may be waged in your lifetime!”

Ed Wood's infamous *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (1957) offered considerably less spectacle. But despite all those store-bought model-kit saucers wobbling on visible piano wires it brought a crucial part of the folklore to the screen. The US authorities, we're told, are engaged in a clandestine plot to bury the truth about UFO sightings. “Flying saucers are still a rumour – officially,” declares Colonel Tom Edwards of government agency Saucer Field Activities, setting out the default position behind decades of conspiracy theories to come.

UFOS also swept through television. Launching in 1967, *The Invaders* saw architect David Vincent encountering “a craft from another galaxy” on a lonely highway. Part of an



Roy Thinnes as David Vincent in *The Invaders*.



James Earl Jones in TV movie *The UFO Incident*.

infiltration by a nameless race from a dying planet, the saucer's design took its cue from photos of alleged extraterrestrial craft taken by self-proclaimed contactee George Adamski in the early 1950s. Gerry Anderson's equally paranoia-steeped series *UFO* also favoured the classic disc shape, enhancing Derek Meddings's spinning silver miniatures with an eerie shimmering sound.

The 1970s proved a darker, more complicated era for UFO stories, reflecting the

shifting cultural currents. Broadcast less than two months after President Nixon's resignation over the Watergate scandal, TV movie *The Disappearance Of Flight 412* offered a documentary style account of a government cover-up. It opens with authentic footage of the Catalina Island sighting of 1966 and a voiceover that persuasively declares “The official position is firm. The evidence is erroneous, illusory. But if, in 1,000 reported sightings, one tenth of 1% could be fact, then that is one real, existing UFO!” The maths is out there.

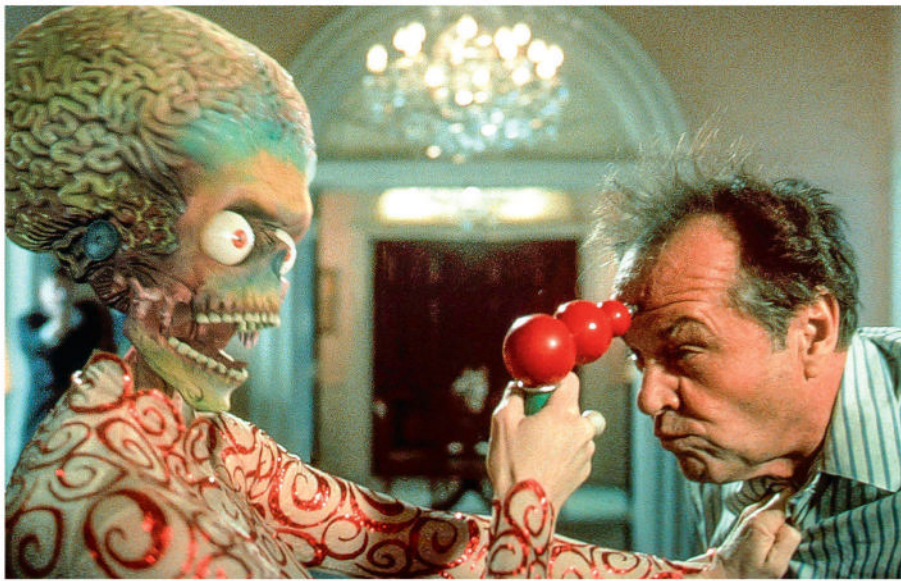
### POSTER BOY

Another TV movie, 1975's *The UFO Incident*, explored more disturbing territory. The story

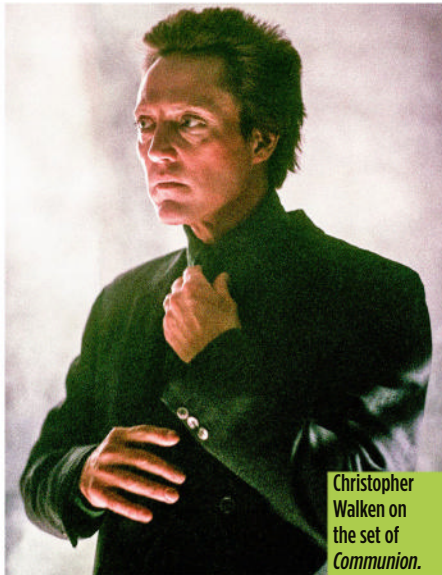


Rory Culkin, Mel Gibson and Abigail Breslin in *Signs*.





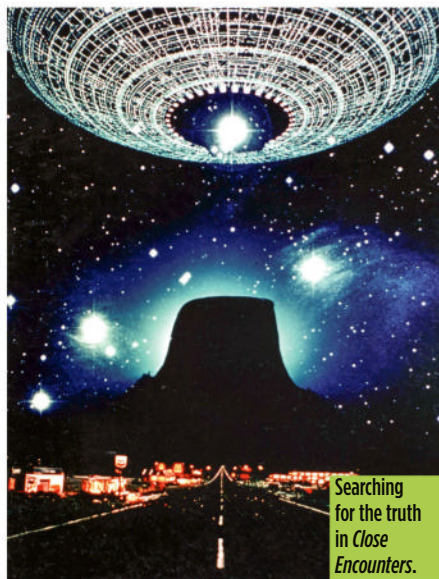
Jack Nicholson as the US President in *Mars Attacks!*



Darren McGavin as Harry Forbes in *Hangar 18*.



Tor Johnson attacks in *Plan 9 From Outer Space*.



Searching for the truth in *Close Encounters*.

of Barney and Betty Hill, who claimed to have encountered a craft in rural New Hampshire in 1961, it brought the concept of alien abduction to prime time, complete with memory lapses, missing hours and onboard surgical experiments performed by the Greys, the race whose teardrop heads and impenetrable, almond-shaped eyes would become the enduring face of interplanetary contact.

Steven Spielberg traded sphincter-tightening fear for wide-eyed wonder with 1977's *Close Encounters*

*Of The Third Kind*. Named after a contact classification system devised by astronomer and ufologist J Allen Hynek, who served as a consultant and also cameoed, the film's Oscar-nominated effects dispensed with traditional saucer iconography in favour of something more abstract and enigmatic. "The design of the UFOs was my own," said Spielberg, inspired by reports of "plasmic firelight" in the skies. "I just didn't want the film to be visually boring. I wanted to have a Ferrari and a Lamborghini and



Possibly the most critically acclaimed UFO movie ever.

a Ford and a Cadillac and an International Harvester – and I wanted every model our imaginations could come up with." Spielberg's aliens were friendly, which turned the spooky tagline We Are Not Alone from a threat to a hug as the movie unspooled.

*CE3K* gave another boost to the whole phenomenon. On TV *Project UFO* dramatised the files of Project Blue Book with such dryly bureaucratic episode titles as "Sighting 4006: The Nevada Desert Incident." Even *Charlie's Angels* got in on the act with the episode "Unidentified Flying Angels", while 1980 TV movie *Hangar 18* mined the conspiracy theory around Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, where a downed UFO was reportedly stashed.

For all Spielberg's attempts at rehabilitating these sky-skimming intruders with *Close Encounters* and *ET The Extra-Terrestrial*, UFOs felt more unsettling than ever as the '90s arrived. If they weren't coming for us in our beds then faceless officials were locking their secrets away – after performing grisly autopsies on the bodies of their passengers. Abduction tales like *Communion* (1989) and *Fire In The Sky* (1993) stoked that creepiness, while *The X-Files* made UFO lore a cornerstone of its mythology, from the taking of Mulder's sister Samantha to the poster pinned to his office wall: an old-school saucer hovering above the words I Want To Believe.

*Mars Attacks!* (1996) saw Tim Burton openly paying homage to Ray Harryhausen's craft from *Earth Vs The Flying Saucers*, only with added laffs and blockbuster destruction, while M Night Shyamalan's *Signs* (2002) generated shudders from crop circles, which have been linked to UFO sightings since the 1960s. Meanwhile Spielberg finally embraced the flying saucer as a design classic with the '50s-set *Indiana Jones And The Kingdom Of The Crystal Skull*. More recently Jordan Peele's *Nope* and season 10 of *American Horror Story* have continued to watch the skies.

Now, as Spielberg returns to the genre with *Disclosure Day*, UFOs – or should that be UAPs? – are once again seizing headlines in the real world. In February Donald Trump announced he will order the Pentagon, CIA and FBI to "begin the process of identifying and releasing" official files related to these matters due to "tremendous interest" on the part of the public. A month later the US government registered the domains alien.gov and aliens.gov.

Of course, definitive proof of the existence of flying saucers would relegate every last scrap of entertainment ever made on this subject to the status of quaint historical curio. It might, just might, also upend civilisation as we know it.

In the end it all comes back to that poster on Mulder's wall. We want to believe. But maybe we don't want to believe *too much*. ●

ILLUSTRATION: KOBAL/SHUTTERSTOCK; BILL NATION/SYGMA/GETTY; FILM PUBLICITY ARCHIVE/UNITED ARCHIVES/GETTY; SUNSET BOULEVARD/CORBIS/GETTY; MARK SENNET/GETTY; SUNN CLASSIC PICTURES/EVERETT COLLECTION/ALAMY; STOCK ART: ALEXANDRA TURKINA/GETTY



# PETER F HAMILTON

Nearly instant karma: talking time dilation and space opera

Words by Jonathan Wright // Portrait by Kate Hamilton

**E**VEN IN A SCIENCE FICTION COMMUNITY SO often in thrall to shared universes, there's nevertheless a lingering sense that tie-in novels shouldn't be written by the genre's leading writers. It was, then, something of a surprise when space opera luminary Peter F Hamilton took on a commission to write *Exodus: The Archimedes Engine* (and its newly published sequel, *The Helium Sea*) on behalf of Archetype, to accompany a videogame that they were developing.

"The thing they said that made me get interested was actually, 'You just be you, it's your book, but set in this universe,'" remembers Hamilton. "We are not going to interfere, we're not going to do anything so long as you stick within this universe."

As Hamilton had also been approached to consult on the game's world-building and the books were not direct adaptations of the game, he decided to go for it. "They were as good as their word," he says. "There were no phone calls going, 'Oh, you can't do this. Oh, we want this.'"

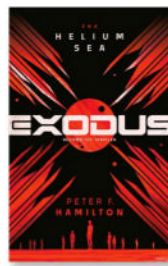
The result is that the *Exodus* books read exactly like the kind of Peter F Hamilton books that have made him globally successful, which is to say sweeping space operas with chapters that switch viewpoints, and where you're never too far from an action scene.

The world-building process behind the novels, as Hamilton describes it, isn't so far from how he creates novels where he has originated the original idea. He made copious notes to help the developers, just as he begins each of his own books in much the same way. Except Hamilton doesn't offer himself visual feedback. "They have all these really great artists, so they would hand them this little description [of his], and they would come back with these beautiful colour images," he says, "and, of course, because they're good artists, they've embellished things."

## CELESTIAL STORYMAKER

Hamilton could then use this work in his own books. He also found the developers' own ideas intriguing, such as the lack of faster-than-light travel. When spacefarers return from a journey, they have aged far less than those around them. "The reason they wanted this was to show, in the game, the consequences of your actions," he says.

This throws up such scenarios as bringing a piece of technology to a planet and then returning, from your perspective, a few weeks later to find that years have passed and the technology has radically reshaped life on the planet – potentially in good and bad ways. Then there's the situation faced by spacefarer Finn, a "Traveller" who goes into space and returns to find his twin has aged by decades.



## BIODATA

From  
**Rutland**

**Greatest Hits**  
Hamilton has written more than 30 books. His big breakthrough came with the *Night's Dawn* trilogy (1996-1999), set in a future where characters from history (including Al Capone) return from the Beyond.

**Random Fact**  
Hamilton now lives in Essex. "I always describe it as the land Dr Beeching forgot, because all the villages here have railway stations," he says.

Both the books and game take place 40,000 years in the future, and are set in a universe where Earth had to be abandoned and vast ark ships travelled into the void. One consequence of this plays out on Centauri, where the earliest settlers have evolved into advanced beings known as Celestials. How might such creatures view today's meat puppet people?

"They look like us – just slightly bigger – but they're not human, they're really not," says Hamilton. Yet because of the similarities, people "keep making the mistake" of assuming the Celestials' motivations and perceptions are comparable to those from whom they've evolved. "The biology is different, therefore their society is different," adds Hamilton, "which seems to us a very callous society, but to them it's just the way they live."

This could be read as an allegory for the oligarchy, but Hamilton is wary of this idea. Today's billionaires, he points out, "still put their trousers on one leg at a time".

## ARK LIFE

The game sounds fantastic, so when can we expect to see it? Hamilton says he really doesn't know, although the RPG is – if the World Wide Web is to be believed – expected to be released in early 2027. At which point, he may presumably be asked to write more novels. Again, Hamilton really doesn't know. What will be will be.

In the meantime, having reached his mid-sixties (something he likely won't thank us for mentioning), he remains as busy as ever. This year, Angry Robot are publishing his Arkship trilogy, a series of YA novels that were initially available only as audiobook exclusives via Tantor Media. Set on a generation ship where things are going wrong, the books' narrator is a teenage girl. It represents his second series aimed at younger readers after the fantasy sequence *The Queen Of Dreams* (2014-2017). "I actually put [my kids] in them – they were the stars – to get them to read," Hamilton notes. "Guess how well that worked out!" Both trilogies emphasised how Hamilton likes to try out new approaches. "It helps with the writing process," he says. "You've always got to come up with something new."

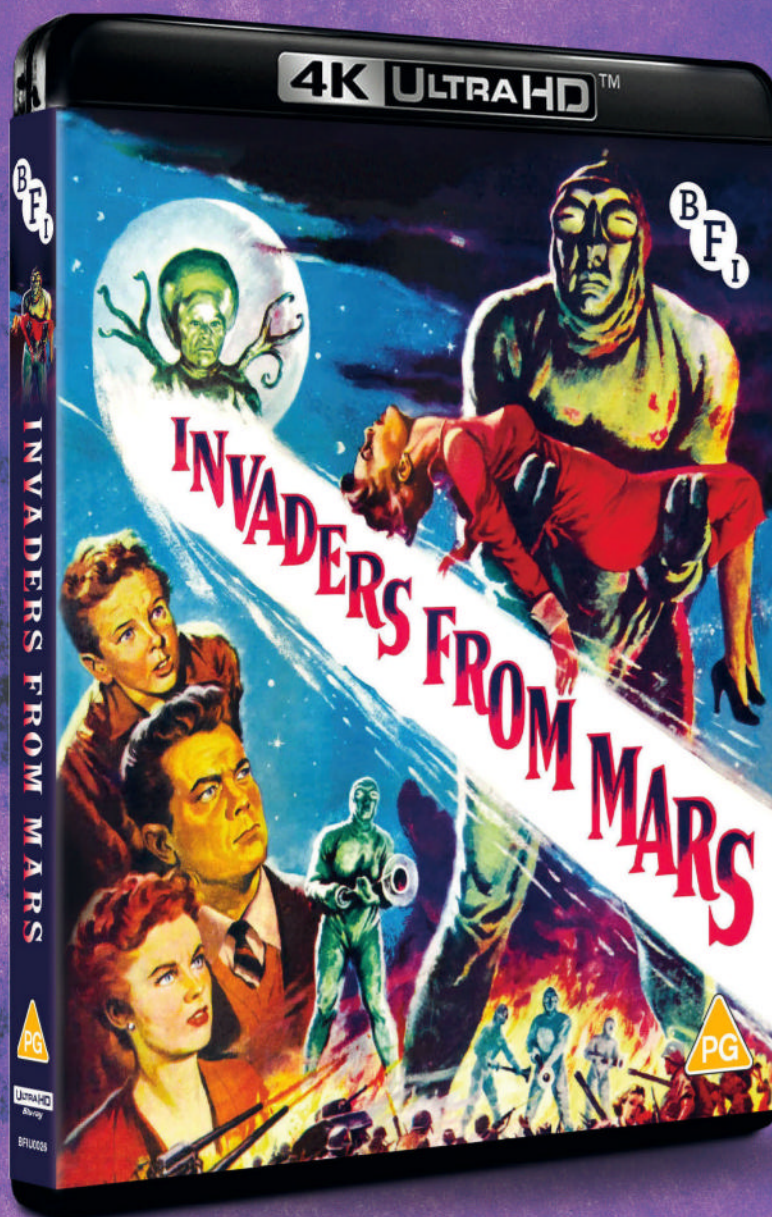
On which note, he's at work on a new book called *Heavy Light*, set 200 years from now. "It's a straight-up spy thriller," he says. Although presumably there are science fictional elements? "Just by dint of when it's set, really," he concedes. "Plus there's interstellar travel." On, he adds, "borrowed starships". Whatever he does, somehow Peter F Hamilton always ends up back in space. ●

*Exodus: The Helium Sea* is published by Tor on 18 June.



“It seems to us  
a very callous  
society, but to  
them it’s just the  
way they live”





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## Masters Of The Universe

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→ RATINGS EXPLAINED

★★★★★ SUPERB

★★★★★ GOOD

★★★★★ AVERAGE

★★★ POOR

★ TERRIBLE





This is why you never grab a live power line.

## MASTERS OF THE UNIVERSE

### It's He-Man's World



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

12A | 141 minutes

► Director Travis Knight

► Cast Nicholas Galitzine, Jared Leto, Camila Mendes, Idris Elba

► **Is *Masters Of The Universe* an attempt to give another Mattel toyline the *Barbie* treatment?** *Bumblebee* director Travis Knight similarly leads with knowing, irreverent humour, but there's also plenty in the rebooted *MOTU* for nostalgic adults who enjoyed the '80s action figures and tie-in cartoon and franchise newbies. It's a robust origin story with a likeable cast, plentiful action scenes and an unpretentious sense of world-building.

It's similar in spirit to the throwback adventure of 2023's

*Dungeons & Dragons: Honour Among Thieves*, and that won't be the only connection you'll make; it also shares DNA with modern superhero films. There's a pinch of *Superman* in the retooled setup, which finds the young Prince Adam, heir to Eternia's throne, sent to Earth when his home comes under attack from the evil Skeletor (Jared Leto). But there's more Thor in the mix: both in the mythical-hunk-out-of-time culture clash and the winning (and occasionally ribald) comedy Taika Waititi brought to more recent entries.

Like the Asgardian god, Adam (played as an adult by Nicholas Galitzine) has to find his signature weapon to return home and defend Castle Grayskull. With a script from four credited

screenwriters, *MOTU* never quite marries up the two opposing worlds, and its attempt to position Adam's powers as more than just brute strength via magical intervention is admirable, if not entirely successful, with attempts to tug on the heartstrings not quite landing. But chances are you'll be enjoying yourself enough to overlook those shortcomings.

Galitzine makes a likeable He-Man, with the appropriate amount of self-awareness to pull off the gags and the leather two-piece. Some pretty shrewd casting of the supporting players – including Alison Brie as Evil-Lyn and Idris Elba as Man-at-Arms – is a shortcut to bulking up some potentially one-trait characters. Leto, meanwhile, is unrecognisable physically and

vocally as the cartoon-accurate Skeletor with his purple cloak and shredded blue abs, and his petulant villainy is rinsed for laughs. Like much of the rest of the film's CGI, his skull head is impressively rendered. Adam's pet Cringer is the only digital effect that comes up short, with the green tiger never feeling like he's occupying the same space as the human characters.

Rejoice, then, that another of this film's chief pleasures is practical effects, some of which are used to realise fan-pleasing familiar faces. You get the impression that Knight is revelling in the toybox joys of bringing this world to life – there's a palpable affection for the material that comes across, and it's easy to be swept along, not least thanks to Daniel Pemberton's triumphant score, which gallops like a Battle Cat and will have you grinning from here to Eternia. **Matt Maytum**

► Director Travis Knight's next film – *Wildwood*, a Laika stop-motion adventure about a magical forest – opens in October.



## PASSENGER

### Ride and die

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

15 | 94 minutes

► Directors André Øvredal

► Cast Lou Llobell, Jacob Scipio, Melissa Leo, Joseph Lopez

➤ **Haunted highways and night terrors** combine for *Trollhunter* director André Øvredal's latest chiller, which throws two travellers into some all-too-familiar situations.

The central figures in Zachary Donohue and TW Burgess's sparse script are Maddie (Lou Llobell) and Tyler (Jacob Scipio), who have recently packed up their rat-race existence for *Nomadland*-style van life. He's thrilled to be on the road; she's less convinced, but willing to give it a try.

Then they stop at the site of a crashed car during a dark night drive, and soon discover that

something scary has hitched a ride. Introduced during an effective and slick opening sequence, that something is very old, very supernatural and prone to tricks of the mind. Tyler and Maddie are filled in on what's happening by Melissa Leo's experienced traveller Diana; she's mostly an expository character, even if Leo gives it her all, dishing out details on hobo signs and Saint Christopher.

It's all very familiar, with few really inventive moments and thin characterisations, but Øvredal gives the film a real sense of style and momentum – though even that isn't quite enough to keep things thrilling as the story reaches its final destination. **James White**

**i** Real-life RV owners and stall owners participated in one of the van life festival scenes; some sold food during filming.



Not sure why he didn't just turn the light on.

## BACKROOMS

### Massive Shop Of Horrors

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

15 | 110 minutes

► Director Kane Parsons

► Cast Chiwetel Ejiofor, Renate Reinsve, Mark Duplass, Lukita Maxwell

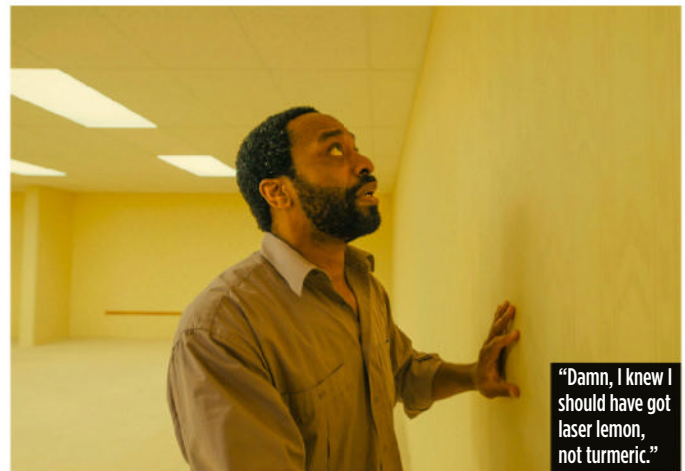
➤ **If you don't have a clue what a creepypasta** is then don't be put off by *Backrooms*' genesis – no prior knowledge is required to enjoy this dizzying and unsettling horror with strong central performances from Chiwetel Ejiofor and Renate Reinsve.

The lore grew from a series of tales revolving around empty office buildings – “liminal” spaces tinged in grotty yellow light, with mildewed carpets and illogical furnishing, where unspeakable things are just out of sight, lingering in your peripheral vision. Though director Kane Parsons didn't invent the original meme,

he certainly contributed to the expanded mythos via a series of web videos first published when he was just 16.

It's set in 1990. Ejiofor plays furniture store owner Clark, who discovers a maze-like mirror image of his shop that he can access by walking through a wall. Desperate to convince his sceptical therapist (Reinsve) that it's real he takes a cameraman with him, but they soon discover they are not alone. The backrooms themselves, and all that inhabit them, are described as a memory that's somehow wrong, and the longer Clark spends inside them, the more freakish this faux reality becomes.

“Visuals become increasingly outlandish”



“Damn, I knew I should have got laser lemon, not turmeric.”

This is a hugely confident feature debut from Parsons, who has a clear eye for space and colour, both in and out of the furniture store. He's unafraid to take risks with his visuals, which become increasingly outrageous and outlandish as the film progresses. At its best, *Backrooms* plays like a very modern take on *The Blair Witch Project* meets *Event Horizon*. The one thing that

lets the movie down is, ironically, its existing lore. Mark Duplass is superfluous as a mysterious corporate character who exists in the wider *Backrooms* stories, but adds nothing to the film and makes the internal logic unnecessarily confused. Still, there's much here to explore. **Rosie Fletcher**

**i** Kane Parsons became A24's youngest director with *Backrooms*; aged 19 when it began production, he's now 20. The swine.





## LESBIAN SPACE PRINCESS

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED** 19 JUNE

15 | 87 minutes

▶ Directors Emma Hough Hobbs, Leela Varghese

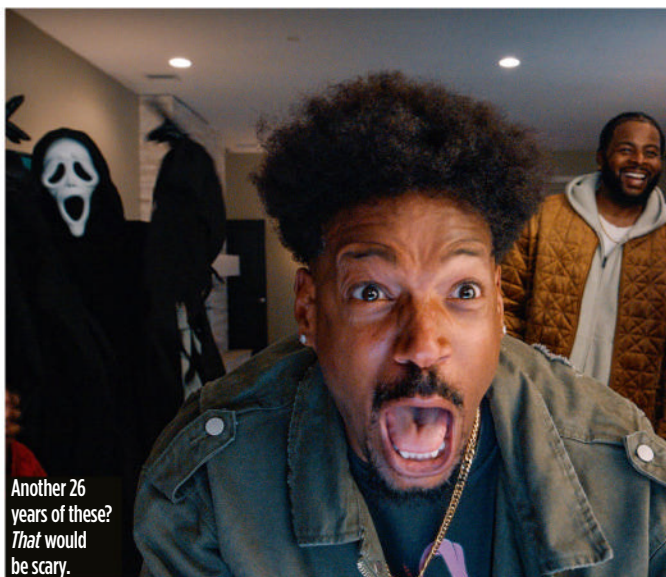
▶ Cast Shabana Azeez, Bernie Van Tiel, Jordan Raskopoulos, Madeleine Sami

❖ **Poor Princess Saira.** Voted the most boring royal in history by the people of Clitopolis, she's a disappointment to her mothers, and she also just got dumped by her hot bounty hunter girlfriend Kiki. *On her birthday.* But she doesn't have time to mope about it, because Kiki has been kidnapped by a gang of Straight White Malians, and only Saira can save her.

Joyfully queer and deeply silly, this Australian coming-of-age animation uses all the tropes of sci-fi adventure to tell a story about a young woman trying to find her place in the galaxy. There's some Douglas Adams deep in its DNA, a helping of *Adventure Time*, a dollop of *Steven Universe*, and lots of Tumblr humour, with pop culture references that stretch from S Club 7 all the way to *K-Pop Demon Hunters*.

Despite the bright colours, catchy songs and goofy animation, it's got too many crude jokes to be suitable for kids, but it's also too charming to really offend anyone. Well... except for some of the stuff Saira's spaceship's archaic computer comes out with, but he learns his lesson in the end.

Sweet, funny, and utterly absurd, *Lesbian Space Princess* is a rainbow-coloured romp that'll speak to anyone who's ever battled gloom goo of their own. **Sarah Dobbs**



Another 26 years of these? That would be scary.

## SCARY MOVIE

An absolute horror show

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED** OUT NOW!

15 | 96 minutes

▶ Director Michael Tiddes

▶ Cast Anna Faris, Regina Hall, Marlon Wayans, Shawn Wayans

❖ **If you've actively chosen** to watch a *Scary Movie* film then you know what you're in for. So it's possibly superfluous to point out that this latest one – the sixth entry in the parodic horror-comedy franchise – is, of course, tedious rubbish.

The main appeal here is likely to be nostalgia. Twenty-six years after the first *Scary Movie* landed in cinemas, the sixth sees many members of the original cast reunited: Anna Faris, Regina Hall, Shawn and Marlon Wayans and others all reprise their roles.

Michael Tiddes, best known for *A Haunted House* and its sequel, comes in as director. (Original director Keenen Ivory Wayans,

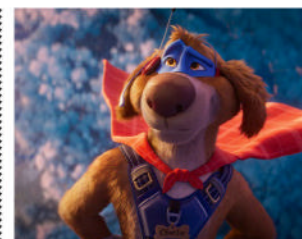
meanwhile, serves as writer and producer this time around.)

While the original *Scary Movie* came hot(ish) on the heels of the postmodern horror boom, aping primarily *Scream* and *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, this “rebootique!” trips over its own feet attempting to be current, and roundly fails. The most up-to-date references are cursory nods to *Sinners* and *Weapons*.

The grim sex comedy bits feel very old-fashioned, and trying to counteract that with jokes about the prevalence of woke culture, via a callback to the quite funny talking-in-the-cinema bit from the first film, just doesn't land.

Still, Marlon Wayans stoner Shorty hasn't aged a day and scenes of him and his mates and Ghost Face getting high are about as funny as they were the first time around, while Anna Faris and Regina Hall are as game and charismatic as ever. If you've come this far you might as well stay for the two post-credits sequences too. But don't say we didn't warn you. **Rosie Fletcher**

**i** Savannah Lee Nassif, who plays Cindy's daughter, was barely a month old when the first *Scary Movie* came out in the UK.



## CHARLIE THE WONDERDOG

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED** OUT NOW!

PG | 95 minutes

▶ Director Shea Wageman

▶ Cast Owen Wilson, Ruairi MacDonald, Tabitha St Germain, Anthony Bolognese

❖ **Supergirl's Krypto** has nothing to fear from the lead of this Canadian animation, an ageing mutt lent a new lease of life (and Owen Wilson's voice) after a close encounter with a squid-like alien race. Equipped with a cape, a mask and the ability to fly, Charlie becomes a heroic protector of humanity who, in one amusing sequence, must choose between saving a plummeting plane and devouring a taco.

For all its fleeting flashes of wit, alas, this convoluted caper is rarely more than serviceable, even when a malevolent cat enters the fray with plans to morph his human overlords into submissive felines.

“Anything is possible if you just believe in yourself!” says Wilson at one point, a sentiment reprised in one of the two Bryan Adams songs that accompany the credits. Why, then, does director Shea Wageman insist on being so derivative? *Cats & Dogs* explored the notion of crimefighting house pets some 25 years ago, while having Charlie framed for a diamond theft (and labelled a “golden deceiver”) smacks of *Paddington 2*.

The real head-scratcher, however, is the way this film occupies its alternative White House with a Hillary Clinton doppelgänger. Was a Donald clone too dire to contemplate, even in cartoon form? **Neil Smith**



## NIRVANNA THE BAND THE SHOW THE MOVIE Slackers To The Future

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 3 JULY**

TBC | 99 minutes

▶ Director **Matt Johnson**

▶ Cast **Matt Johnson, Jay McCarrol, Jared Raab, Ben Petrie**

Canadian performers **Matt Johnson** and **Jay McCarrol** have been slowly developing characters loosely based on themselves for years now, working on them through their *Nirvana The Band* web series and TV show – and now this movie version, a scruffy, often hilarious story of time travel that also contains a solid dollop of unsentimental heart.

The “Matt” and “Jay” of this mockumentary are struggling musicians endlessly trying to land

a gig at storied Toronto venue the Rivoli. Live-wire improv singer/lead **Matt** cooks up all manner of screwball schemes to get them on the list, while laidback keyboardist **Jay** goes along with it all thanks to their long-time friendship bond. Around them is an ever-present group of filmmakers documenting their lives, for reasons that are never quite explained.

Like the show, the film riffs on pop culture, targeting *Back To The Future* specifically, “borrowing” plot points wholesale as the heroes accidentally end up in 2008. The

“A scruffy, often hilarious story of time travel”



result is some inspired wacky nonsense, which blends in unused footage from the duo’s web work for extra meta value.

The buddy comedy chemistry between the leads is what really makes it all work, but the story keeps chugging along nicely, setting up a mixture of scripted scenes, *Jackass*-level stunts (it’s no surprise that **Spike Jonze** is a producer on the film) and **Sacha**

Baron Cohen-style encounters with befuddled real-life people on the street. In particular, the duo’s attempt to explain why they’re looking to buy shears in a hardware store while wearing parachutes is one that will stick in the memory.

**James White**

**i** The film was originally planned – and shot – as a road trip, but that footage will instead be used for the third TV season.

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## SPIDER-NOIR Season One

### Into the dark web



► UK/US Prime Video, streaming now

► Showrunners Oren Uziel,

Steve Lightfoot

► Cast Nicolas Cage, Li Jun Li,

Brendan Gleeson, Lamorne Morris

**EPISODES 1.01-1.08** There's a fine line

between loving homage and clumsy pastiche. For the most part, this spirited new Spider-Man show treads that vertiginous path skilfully, though there are times when it wobbles dangerously close to the edge.

Nicolas Cage is Ben Reilly, a private eye living and working in New York City in the 1930s. Ben has a secret: he used to be the city's guardian, a superhero known as the Spider. He gave all that up following a personal tragedy and now he makes his money – just about – by taking on

cases for clients. But when a glamorous but dangerous woman named Cat Hardy (Li Jun Li) struts into his office, he finds himself pulled into a world of gangsters and super-powered villains where nothing is quite as it seems.

This alt-reality version of Spider-Man was introduced in the *Spider-Verse* animated movies – sort of. In those films, Spider-Man Noir was another iteration of Peter Parker. The TV show has made him a distinct character, for reasons that feel slightly opaque. Regardless, the gimmick remains the same: this is a gumshoe Spidey living in a film noir world.

The show embraces its retro vibe with admirable gusto. The sets and lighting are appropriately moody. Cage adopts a questionable

accent and gives a typically bananas performance, one that's riffing on actors from the period ("70% Bogart, and 30% Bugs Bunny", as he told *Esquire*). You even get a choice of two ways to watch the show: in "Authentic Black and White" or "True-Hue Full Color" – we prefer the stylish former.

A fun idea for a movie or a TV special, then – but this is a full-length TV series, and while *Spider-Noir* is always watchable, it feels over-stretched at eight episodes. Each plot development is disconcertingly familiar because it's trading exclusively in tropes from real film noirs or because it's riffing on something from Spider-Man lore, with several familiar villains showing up in reconfigured form (though the show deliberately

"Alright, who put stickers over my eye-holes?"

“Always watchable, but feels over-stretched”

avoids invoking the real big-hitters from Peter Parker's rogues' gallery, perhaps saving them for potential future seasons). There's also a distinct whiff of *Surf Dracula* about it (to invoke the famous meme), with Cage typically only appearing in the Spider-suit for a few minutes each episode. The series is far more invested in Ben's hapless investigations than his web-slinging.

Still, you have to applaud the whole endeavour as an example of a distinct TV spin-off, and one that doesn't play things safe. A few people are going to love *Spider-Noir* very hard. Everyone else may be left scratching their heads and wondering how on earth it got made in the first place.

Will Salmon

**i** In the mainline Marvel comics, Ben Reilly is a clone of Peter Parker who goes by the superhero name the Scarlet Spider.



## THE BOYS Season Five



► UK/US Prime Video, streaming now

► Showrunner Eric Kripke

► Cast Karl Urban, Jack Quaid, Anthony Starr, Erin Moriarty

**EPISODES 1.01-1.08** After four

seasons of debauched, blood-soaked, biting satirical superheroics, *The Boys* comes to an end with a frustratingly aimless season, capped with a low-key but emotionally satisfying finale. With loads of gory deaths.

With Homelander now the de facto US president, his next step is godhood (this was written *before* Trump started posting pics of himself as Jesus). Less than keen on this development, Team Butcher goes on a number of side quests with the aim of developing means to kill the world's most powerful superhero: first there's a supe-killing plague, then a way to reproduce Soldier Boy's superpower-draining energy blast.

The fact that the writers seem to have forgotten that *Gen V*'s Marie Moreau was being lined up to take Homelander down wouldn't be so bad if she didn't keep cameoing. Other subplots feel underdeveloped too. But there are some great cameos, *Supernatural* reunions, and inventive gore, along with some sniggersome swipes at the far right.

The finale doesn't deliver the apocalyptic fight most were expecting, but the more understated, character-led approach still has some powerful gut punches. It's a messy end, but one that feels right for the show. **Dave Golder**







## THE PUNISHER: ONE LAST KILL

★★★★★

► UK/US Disney+, streaming now  
► Director Reinaldo Marcus Green  
► Cast Jon Bernthal, Judith Light, Andre Royo, Deborah Ann Woll

**SPECIAL** This Marvel one-shot comes with an “only for mature audiences” warning, and it’s certainly the most balls-to-the-wall violent project in the MCU. It’s perfect for the Punisher, who was created in the ’70s as Marvel’s answer to the *Dirty Harry* and *Death Wish* movies.

Unlike *Daredevil: Born Again*, which feels like a natural successor to Netflix’s Marvel shows, *One Last Kill* takes a more stylised, designer violence approach. The result is something like a bite-sized, small-screen version of *The Raid* or *Dredd*. Even the plot has similarities, with Frank Castle trapped in a tower block with every pissed-off criminal in the city coming for him.

There’s a lot to like here. Jon Bernthal gives an impassioned performance, with Frank suffering PTSD and on the verge of suicide before being forced into action. The fight scenes are impressive – despite the fast cutting, the visual storytelling is crystal clear, even allowing for moments of nuance, while the stunt work (one overly CGI-enhanced stunt aside) is top notch.

But there’s no getting away from the fact the script verges on threadbare, and Frank’s “epiphany” is embarrassingly trite, not helped by a cringey “heartwarming” moment with a small girl who, by rights, should be traumatised. Worth a watch, but you may feel short-changed. **Dave Golder**

# THE BOROUGHES

## Season One

### Old age tension

★★★★★

► UK/US Netflix, streaming now  
► Creators Jeffrey Addiss, Will Matthews  
► Cast Alfred Molina, Alfre Woodard, Geena Davis, Clarke Peters

**EPISODES 1.01-1.08** How weird it is to live in a world in which Geena Davis is called an “old woman”. The cheek! Yet, *The Boroughs* is filled with such “oldies”: Alfred Molina, Bill Pullman, Alfre Woodard, Clarke Peters, Denis O’Hare – all treated with contempt, or just plain dismissed, by younger characters. There’s an echo here of the kids in *Stranger Things*, who were also overlooked because of their age... which makes perfect sense, as the Duffer Brothers are executive producers on this similarly ’80s-nostalgic, occasionally scary treat.

“Seeped with that glorious, oh-so-familiar nostalgia”

The premise, mind you, isn’t quite as original as it wants us to think: a group of senior citizens in a retirement village are being stalked by a nocturnal monster. *Bubba Ho-Tep* would like a word, chaps. What elevates this is a Netflix-level budget. What hasn’t been spent on the show’s impressive cast has gone on the sets, special effects and location filming – honestly, the deserts of New Mexico look stunning.

We first arrive at *The Boroughs* with Molina’s Sam Cooper. Moving there against his will, trapped in a contract after the death of his wife Lilly (Jane Kaczmarek), he is understandably grumpy. Yet soon he becomes intrigued by the housing complex’s mysteries. Monsters scuttle in the dark. Other residents are getting sick, losing their minds to an illness that echoes Alzheimer’s

disease. Sam’s seeing crackly visions of Lilly. As deaths mount up, he eventually joins forces with his neighbours to find out why. Channelling “Goonies never say die!” energy, this group of eclectic pensioners are soon involved in shenanigans that would put folks half their age to shame.

And it’s bloody wonderful! Fun scares, snappy dialogue, genuinely rounded characters, realistic depictions of ageing, emotional paeans to love and loss... The monsters are the least interesting aspect of the show, yet they’re great too. One downside is that perhaps, as a seasoned sci-fi fan, you’ll spot a few twists before they land. You may also find a few scenes frustrating in their logic: for example, *The Boroughs*’ creepy owner, Blaine (Seth Numrich), explaining the story of the boy

who cried wolf to 62-year-old Sam as though he’s never heard it before – while Sam sits and listens, utterly rapt. As if!

But so much else is brilliant. And all of it is seeped with that glorious, oh-so-familiar nostalgia we know so well from the *Stranger Things* world – despite being set in the present day. At times, this feels like watching an updated version of that show, or a homage to *Gremlins* or *Ghostbusters*. Elements of John Paesano’s music even echo Alan Silvestri’s *Back To The Future* score and other ’80s classics.

Best of all? “Old woman” Geena gets a hot young boyfriend and it doesn’t feel gratuitous. Who you callin’ old? **Jayne Nelson**

**i** Easter eggs from the ’80s pop up during episodes; for example, an appearance by *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*’s golden idol.

He suddenly realised it was 22 years since *Spider-Man 2*.





## TOOMORROW

The In Sound From Way Out!

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 22 JUNE**

1970 | 15 | Blu-ray

▶ Director Val Guest

▶ Cast Benny Thomas, Karl Chambers, Olivia Newton-John, Vic Cooper

**BLU-RAY DEBUT** This swinging '60s

sci-fi musical was written/directed by Val Guest, who brought us *The Quatermass Experiment* and *The Day The Earth Caught Fire*. It was co-produced by Don Kirshner, whose songwriting stable provided hits for The Monkees, and Harry Saltzman, who partnered with Cubby Broccoli on the early Bond films. And it stars a cute-as-a-button Olivia Newton-John. "How have I never heard of this?", you may be asking. Because Saltzman failed to pay Guest £75,000 he was due, so he slapped an injunction on the film.

Newton-John is one of four members of the titular band, who – like The Monkees – share a house, but are more randy, and politically aware, though not exactly radical. Olivia's boyfriend may lead a sit-in at their arts college, but he's keen not to (gasp) actually inconvenience anyone.

Though the hippy-drippy numbers of this well-groomed quartet ("Keep grinning" seems to have been Guest's main directorial note) have about as much edge as The New Seekers, *Toomorrow* nevertheless attract some notable fans: alien "Alphoids" who believe the band's "vibrations" can rejuvenate their race. Roy Dotrice plays the shapeshifting observer charged with making sure nothing impedes the climactic gig at Camden's Roundhouse, which will see them elevated into orbit.

It's a time capsule, but an ersatz one, more Cliff Richard than counterculture (figures: Guest also directed *Expresso Bongo*). The script is rife with phrases like "You're grooving, man!" or "What a trip!"; it feels like Guest – 57 when shooting took place – had been given a list of lingo to work in. A detour into sex comedy, as an Alphoid transforms into a dolly bird to seduce the keyboard player, meanwhile, is terribly corny.

All the same, this sanitised take on *Swinging London* is charmingly dated. The kaleidoscopic spaceship sets impress. And Hugo Montenegro's incidental cues – all sampleable breakbeats and "ba-ba-ba"s – are seriously groovy.

▶ **Extras** This BFI 4K remaster mixes film-specific bonuses with a grab-bag of archival oddities.

Guest recalls his falling-out with Saltzman in a 10-minute extract from a 1988 interview, and discusses his career in an on-stage chat from 1998 (62 minutes). Celeste de la Cabra's visual essay (12 minutes) offers a not especially insightful overview. Pop music

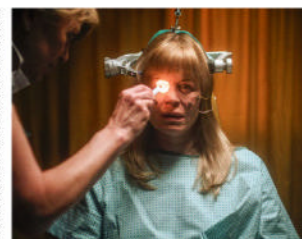
**“It's a time capsule, but an ersatz one”**

historian Andrew Sandoval's commentary is well-researched.

Then we dip into the BFI archives. "The Nose Has It" (eight minutes), a 1942 Ministry Of Information short made by Guest sees Arthur Askey reminding folk to sneeze into their hanky. The spirit of 1969 is evoked in a five-minute promo for the capital, plus footage of an anarchist "free theatre" troupe performing at the Roundhouse (13 minutes); heavy on nudity and anti-war slogans, it's light years from Olivia Newton-John.

The most bewildering inclusion, however, is "Alice Goes Pop!" (17 minutes); this 1975 episode of a Children's Film Foundation series sees kids in a band enter a talent competition – with their drumming chimp in tow... Plus: a 30-page booklet. **Ian Berriman**

According to Val Guest, Kirshner wanted Newton-John to film a love scene, but she "went berserk" and burst into tears.



## HONEY BUNCH

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2026 | 15 | Digital

▶ Director Dusty Mancinelli,

Madeleine Sims-Fewer

▶ Cast Grace Glowicki, Ben Petrie, Jason Isaacs, Kate Dickie

◉ **Would you still love your girlfriend if she was a worm?** Okay, but what if she was paralysed, couldn't remember who you were, and was prone to violent outbreaks?

Homer (Ben Petrie) seems like a perfectly dedicated partner to Diana (Grace Glowicki, Petrie's real-life wife) when he accompanies her to a mysterious treatment centre that promises to be able to restore her memories and her ability to walk, both lost in a car accident.

But he disappears at night sometimes, and whispers with the staff, and Diana is convinced something's wrong. Or is something wrong with her?

The allusions to other works start at the character names (Homer, really?) and don't let up, with Homer and Diana even reciting a scene from Hitchcock's *Rebecca* to each other at one point. But no worries if you don't catch them all, because what really matters is the emotional and psychological back-and-forth.

Without performances as strong as these, the whole thing would fall apart. But Glowicki and Petrie convey so much – tenderness, resentment, adoration, suspicion – through looks and movements that their ever-shifting relationship is captivating. Clever, creepy, with some stunning visuals, this is a gloriously uncomfortable watch – so be careful who you see it with. **Sarah Dobbs**



"Hello children. Would you like to sing a song with us?"



## THE DEVIL'S CANDY

### Killing In The Name

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2017 | 18 | Blu-ray

► Director Sean Byrne

► Cast Ethan Embry, Shiri Appleby, Pruitt Taylor Vince, Kiara Glasco

**BLU-RAY DEBUT** In this lean, dark effort by Aussie director Sean Byrne, a family move into a Texan farmhouse, despite learning that the last two residents died.

Given that dad Jesse and daughter Zooley are metalheads, this could almost be a selling point. But then former resident Ray (Pruitt Taylor Vince), who's driven by voices to murder children as offerings to Satan (hence the title), returns home...

“There's more to it than home invasion horror”

Satisfyingly there's more to *The Devil's Candy* than home invasion horror. A supernatural dimension sees painter Jesse driven to create canvases incorporating Ray's killings, which generates tension that he might turn on his family; the cross-cutting during these sequences is extremely effective. Vince impresses, bringing a lost, childlike quality to his galumphing killer – given the gnarly uses Ray makes of a rock and a saw, you couldn't call him sympathetic, but he also seems like a victim.

Metalheads, meanwhile, will raise devil-horns on seeing their subculture depicted with a degree of respect; the fact Metallica let well-known tracks be used at a discount rate is testament to that.

► **Extras** A typical Second Sight spread is led by substantial new interviews. Byrne (33 minutes), Embry (20 minutes) and designer



The “are Iron Maiden better than Sabbath” chat got ugly.

Tom Hammock (16 minutes) all prove interesting; the DoP (25 minutes) and editor (23 minutes)... not so much. Byrne explains how the script evolved through many rewrites; Embry discusses finding his “Christ Cobain” look; Hammock is a mine of anecdotes.

Effects breakdowns (three minutes) show how CG fire was added to the climax. You also get two Byrne shorts: “Advantage

Satan” (2007, 11 minutes), which sees a couple terrorised in a tennis court, is horror; “Work?”, centred on a woman's first booking as an escort (2000, 11 minutes), is not. Byrne also provides a commentary track. The dual-format Limited Edition comes with a 120-page book and six art cards. **Ian Berriman**

Byrne was inspired when his sister bought a house, and the former owner regretted selling, becoming increasingly unhinged.

## EMPIRE OF THE ANTS

### Join our insect nation

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1977 | 15 | Blu-ray

► Director Bert I Gordon

► Cast Joan Collins, Robert Lansing, John David Carson, Jacqueline Scott

**BLU-RAY DEBUT** Supposedly based on a short story by HG Wells – though he'd be well within his rights to demand a paternity test – this enjoyably schlocky creature-fest proves a curious collision of big-screen genres, as creakily old-fashioned as it is absolutely of its moment.

Director/effects maestro Bert I Gordon made his name with such atomic age fare as *The Amazing Colossal Man* and *Earth vs The Spider*. He resurrects that drive-in sensibility for the post-*Jaws* era of beasts-on-the-loose eco-horror here, as a radioactive spill spawns a colony of giant, mind-enslaving

ants in the Everglades. We're also in prime '70s disaster flick territory: the film takes a full half hour to introduce its sprawling cast of polyester-clad ant-bait, including Joan Collins as a flinty real estate agent.

When the swampland thrills finally arrive, Gordon marshals his limited resources, utilising trick photography and full-sized puppets – surprisingly effective when captured with frantic, hand-held camerawork – to conjure his mandible-twitching hordes.

► **Extras** This Eureka! release offers a choice of audio options, including an archival commentary by Gordon and a more exuberant take by film historians David Del Valle and Michael Varrati, celebrating this “deliciously guilty pleasure”. Chris Cooke, co-director of the Mayhem Film



“Get some formic acid up ya!” “Ooh, me proboscis.”

Festival, provides an equally appreciative introduction, sharing how the movie's micro-budget spectacle inspired him to become a filmmaker – “Everything was possible if you didn't aim too high” (seven minutes).

Meanwhile, Kim Newman (18 minutes) appraises Gordon's career as a whole, arguing that his reputation should be higher: “He plainly loved this stuff.”

Intriguingly, the film's promo material reminds us that HG Wells was still considered a box office draw in the '70s; an amusingly portentous radio spot declares him “history's greatest prophet”, while the original trailer ominously asks “Is Wells right again?” No, but nice try. Plus: a booklet. **Nick Setchfield**

It was so cold on location that it caused actor Pamela Susan Shoop's jaw to dislocate during a screaming scene.



## DEEPSTAR SIX The Underwater Menace

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1989 | 15 | 4K/Blu-ray/digital

► Director Sean S Cunningham

► Cast Taurean Blacque, Nancy Everhard, Greg Evigan, Miguel Ferrer

**BLU-RAY DEBUT** *Underwater*, no one can hear you scream either. One of several deep-sea films released in the same year as *The Abyss*, this aquatic actioner wears its influences on its wetsuit sleeve. You soon get the idea, as crew in trucker hats and vests (but no bras...) bicker round a dining table.

Yes, it's a wetter take on *Alien/Aliens*, which sees co-workers forced to problem-solve one calamity after another, numbers dwindling in flooded sets as they're picked off by a monster; there's even a ticking clock to a reactor explosion. Here, it's the crew of a military base. Finding a

cavern beneath the site for a missile platform, they blow it up – releasing an ancient beast.

With its romance subplot (future *TekWar* star Greg Evigan has put a co-worker in the club), acts of heroic self-sacrifice and wise-cracking dialogue ("He's gonna shit kittens!"), *DeepStar Six* has a high corn quotient. But it has good production value for the budget, decent gore and an effective jump scare (cribbed from director Sean S Cunningham's *Friday The 13th*). It's the kind of film critics sneer at, but genre fans will feel well-disposed towards – especially after a drink or two.

► **Extras** The newest thing on this StudioCanal Cult Classics release is a 2025 commentary by a duo from website horror-fix.com – the jovial, observational kind. A 2001 track by the director and effects supervisor is sparse (with gaps of



EVERETT COLLECTION INC./ALAMY

several minutes), while a Covid-era one by the writers is awash with laconic banter. A fourth track combines isolated score and a chat with composer Harry Manfredini.

Three interview pieces stem from a 2020 US release. One with three effects guys (21 minutes) is enlivened by footage of them testing the monster out in a swimming pool. Evigan and co-star Nancy Everhard (17

minutes) reveal their nickname for the creature: Buffy. Finally, Kane Hodder discusses his work as the stunt supervisor (13 minutes).

Plus: four minutes of BTS footage; a brief vintage promo; EPK interview snippets; an extensive gallery; trailer; TV spot; four art cards. **Ian Berriman**

**I** The film was supposed to be titled *Deep Six*, but hit legal issues due to 1958 Second World War drama *The Deep Six*.



### WOKEN

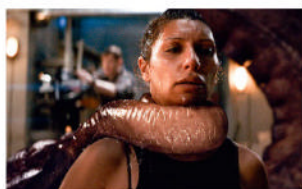
★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2024 | 15 | Digital

► **This British film** sees Anna (28 Years Later: *The Bone Temple's* Erin Kellyman) waking on an island, with no memory of her husband – or the baby she's carrying. It's eventually revealed that the island is a safe haven from a hideous contagion, but a bigger cat is still in the bag.

Anna is initially frustratingly incurious, but Kellyman excels, while Maxine Peake provides solid support as a suspiciously solicitous neighbour. The mystery's compelling, and one final-reel moment provides a winding gut-punch. **Ian Berriman**



### KRAKEN

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2026 | 15 | DVD/digital

► **This Norwegian monster** movie reclaims the homegrown legend that somehow strayed into Greek waters in *Clash Of The Titans*. True to its mythic origins, the tentacle-thrashing beastie surfaces to menace a fish farm when new technology disrupts the ecosystem of the Sognefjord.

Mostly a moody slow-burn affair, played with conviction, this Scandi-noir take on a creature flick shifts into base-under-siege mode for the last half hour, finally unleashing the spectacle and thrills.

► **Extras** None. **Nick Setchfield**



### AFFECTION

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2026 | 15 | Digital

► **What is it with Jessica** Rothe and getting stuck in loops? First there was *Happy Death Day*, and now there's this sci-fi nonsense.

Rothe plays Ellie, a woman who wakes up convinced she's someone else, with someone else's memories. Her loving husband insists it's just a brain injury, but the truth is more high-tech (and goooey).

Somehow both audacious and predictable, the main issue is the pacing. It's a trudge. Rothe should be a star, and she deserves better scripts than this. **Sarah Dobbs**



### SIGNAL ONE

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2026 | 15 | Digital

► **"I guess I just want to know** what's out there," says Isabelle Fuhrman's computer scientist, recruited by Dennis Quaid's tech bro for a secret project. That's the crux of this existentially ambitious indie, where advances in quantum communication revolutionise the search for alien life.

*Signal One* has distinct echoes of 1997's *Contact*, and never quite achieves the heights it aims for. But it's an intelligent and emotionally resonant take on the wider implications of an extraterrestrial encounter.

**Nick Setchfield**



## TRANSCENDING DIMENSIONS

### Across The Universe

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2025 | 15 | Blu-ray

▶ Director Toshiaki Toyoda

▶ Cast Yōsuke Kubozuka, Ryūhei

Matsuda, Chihara Junia, Haruka Imō

➤ **It's no surprise to learn that** *Transcending Dimensions* director Toshiaki Toyoda was once arrested for marijuana possession. Sedately paced (often deploying slow motion) and toying with notions of transcendence, it seems designed to be consumed while partaking of the leaf.

Chihara Junia is the leader of an ascetic cult, who demands that his followers chop off their pinkies. Ryūhei Matsuda is the hitman hired to kill him, whose employer

turns out to be a ghost. Then there are sequences set in the mirrored interior of a spaceship at the edge of the universe, to which the ascetic's protégé can mentally project. All this plays out to the sounds of drumming troupe Kodō and jazz quartet Sons of Kemet.

Alejandro Jodorowsky's oeuvre is an obvious comparison point, though this universe feels cleaner and more controlled, with a deadpan sense of humour. You may find time there captivating or frustrating – possibly depending on how baked you are.

**“Jodorowsky is a comparison point”**



He was a big Black Sabbath fan, and proud of it.

➤ **Extras** The above also applies to Toyoda's *The Blood Of Rebirth* (2009), included on disc two of this Third Window Films release. Centring on a masseur killed by a petty lord, who returns as a “hungry ghost” and must be taken to a “spring of rebirth” to become corporeal, it's even more glacial. Much of it's spent dragging our hero through forests; on arrival, a whole five minutes are devoted to

him splashing about. Luckily, the scenery en route is stunning.

A video essay (12 minutes) maps connections with other Toyoda films. Three of his shorts (68 minutes) are included. *Dimensions* comes with director's commentary; *Blood* a director interview (19 minutes). **Ian Berriman**

**i** During prep, the director met eight people who had wandered the mountains for five days as spiritual training.

## JEAN ROLLIN

### Blood And Wine

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1978/1982 | 18 | 4K/Blu-ray

▶ Cast Marie-Georges Pascal, Félix Marten, Françoise Blanchard, Marina Pierro

➤ **Indicator's latest Jean Rollin** releases stem from a period when the cult French director had set aside scantily-clad vampires to embrace the living dead.

Brought about by a producer who saw the financial potential of aping George Romero, **The Grapes Of Death** ★★★★★ sees a pesticide used on a vineyard turning locals into melt-faced psycho killers. At least it doesn't end in a siege: the heroine instead stumbles from one life-threatening situation to another. By Rollin's standards it's disappointingly bad, with dialled-up gore (including a dwelled-on decapitation) and little of his usual poetic ambience.

**The Living Dead Girl** ★★★★★

brings an offbeat sensibility to zombie horror more satisfactorily. Revived after toxic chemicals are spilled in a tomb, Catherine (Françoise Blanchard) returns to the chateau that was her home with an uncontrollable thirst for blood. A friend assists her need to feed, but as Catherine begins to regain her humanity, she becomes increasingly tortured. With Blanchard pulling out all the stops to convey agonised hysteria, it's an affectingly melancholy tragedy.

➤ **Extras** *The Grapes Of Death* deserves ★★★★★ and *The Living Dead Girl* ★★★★★. Both films benefit from astute, accessible appreciations by Stephen Thrower (37/34 minutes), who mounts a defence of *Grapes*, and queries if David Cronenberg influenced *Girl*.

*TGOD* comes with a solid 31-minute retrospective, in which



“... and it comes with a built-in music system.”

Rollin's assistant Daniel Gouette is the leading voice. He pops up again on *TLDG* to discuss their working relationship (25 minutes), declaring “everyone loved Jean”. The late Blanchard is charming in a 19-minute interview. Other topics discussed include how a 17-year-old came to do the effects (25 minutes) and how, bizarrely, an English version was shot in parallel, by a different

director (16 minutes). Both films get new critical commentaries; *TLDG* adds a Rollin track, plus 26 minutes of scene-specific chat by Blanchard, and a blurry Austrian VHS version. We'd list all the remaining archival bits and bobs, but then this page would need a fold-out flap... **Ian Berriman**

**i** Blanchard initially agreed to jump in a moat... until a stuntman advised that the water was so shallow she'd break her legs.



## THE CARS THAT ATE PARIS

Road rage

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1974 | 15 | 4K/Blu-ray/digital

▶ Director **Peter Weir**

▶ Cast **John Meillon, Terry Camilleri, Kevin Miles, Rick Scully**

**BLU-RAY DEBUT** The feature debut of Peter Weir (later to make *Dead Poets Society*, *The Truman Show* et al), this Aussie film has a logline – and some stills – which suggest a close cousin of *Mad Max*: a small town community whose members “cannibalise” in another fashion, causing car crashes, then stripping the wrecks of parts and passengers’ possessions. However, it’s more understated, sedately paced and satirical than that, a head-on collision of exploitation and arthouse.

Our meek protagonist is itinerant worker Arthur (Terry

Camilleri), who survives when his brother’s killed in a smash – and unlike most survivors, doesn’t end up as the unwilling participant in one of the local doctor’s medical experiments... The Mayor (John Meillon) takes a shine to Arthur, taking him in and appointing him parking inspector. As Paris’ disaffected young folk roar about in spray-painted vehicles fit for a demolition derby, this places him on the front line of a generational clash (cue some wry riffing on classic Western standoffs).

The final reel, where their simmering resentment boils over into outright conflict, sees Weir’s surrealism sharpened to a cutting edge in the iconic image of a VW Beetle covered in deadly spikes, like an automotive hedgehog. It’s a film with an offbeat sensibility, and an interesting subtext: the way

that a culture founded on exploitation is corrosive to the spirit of the next generation.

▶ **Extras** New features on this two-disc BFI release include a video essay which provides Aussie political context (15 minutes), and an interview with Camilleri (21 minutes), who happily recalls on-set pranks – like Meillon standing up to reveal he had no trousers on! Aussie cinema expert Dr Stephen Morgan provides a seamless, well-informed commentary. Weir discusses his inspirations in a 2003 interview snippet (11 minutes), while an audio recording of a 1985 on-stage interview (70 minutes) plays over the film. You also get two shorts: “Michael” (1970, 31 minutes) follows a square young man who befriends bohemian types, while “Incredible Floridas” (1972, 12

“A head-on collision of exploitation and arthouse”

minutes) documents a modern composer’s homage to French poet Arthur Rimbaud.

Disc two includes a second Weir feature: *The Plumber*, a 1979 TV movie in which a masters student feels increasingly menaced by the tradesman fixing her pipes; a study in class dynamics, it never quite explodes as it promises to. It comes with its own extras: another Weir interview extract (eight minutes) and critical commentary. Finally, “Peter Weir’s Dream Within a Dream” (18 minutes) sees the director discussing how he gave *Picnic At Hanging Rock* a dreamlike ambience, over unused footage. Plus: a producer interview from Ozploitation doc *Not Quite Hollywood* (six minutes); trailers; galleries; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

**i** Peter Weir was partly inspired by being diverted by men wearing high-vis jackets while driving in rural France.



## BEAM ME UP, SULU

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2026 | 13+ | Digital

▶ Directors **Timour Gregory, Sasha Schneider**

▶ **This *Star Trek* documentary** has an interesting hook. In 1985, a bunch of student filmmakers began work on an 8mm short, “Yorktown: A Time To Heal”. There’s nothing remarkable in that, except that producer Stan Woo somehow convinced George Takei to appear in it.

Once it began to interfere with his studies, Woo set the project aside – then mislaid the film. Thirty-six years later, with the help of a fan who’d read about it in *Starlog*, it was finally completed. This is presented as a triumph of perseverance, though you may find yourself siding with the director who nursed a grudge for decades.

The film is really only a jumping-off point, however, as the focus broadens to tackle topics like the egalitarian ethos Gene Roddenberry infused into the show, and the stereotyping of East Asians. Most of all, the way the franchise has embraced diversity is trumpeted, in somewhat repetitious fashion. (The lack of a gay member of bridge crew until 2017 is, of course, glossed over...)

It’s moving at times – especially when Takei himself discusses his years spent in an internment camp – and the use of Filmation-style animation to illustrate talking heads is cute. But it covers a lot of rather familiar ground, and can feel frustratingly short on detail when it comes to its central subject. Mind you, since said short is, as interviewees tell us, “hard to watch”, maybe that’s understandable. **Calvin Baxter**



Family gorefest  
*Herbie Goes Ballistic*.



► **NOW ON DIGITAL FORMATS** *Exit 8* • *Hoppers* (also on Disney+) • *Lee Cronin's The Mummy*  
*The Magic Faraway Tree* • *Mortal Kombat II* • *The Super Mario Galaxy Movie*



## THE HOUSE OF HAMMER Volume One

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2026 | 15 | Blu-ray

► Directors Various

► **Reviving the name of the** '70s magazine, this is a curious proposition: a two-disc grab-bag of analyses, profiles, retrospectives and assorted oddments. It could easily be a bunch of special features in search of a movie; alternatively, consider it a ticket to a weekend horror conference.

It reaches beyond Hammer, most notably in the centrepiece documentary on the studio's Stateside soulmate AIP (111 minutes). A thoughtful, evocative look at Cornish gothic is another highlight (38 minutes), while Jonathan Rigby offers some illuminating insights into British horror icon Michael Gough (44 minutes).

Elsewhere there's an absorbing history of movie censorship (65 minutes), an interview with make-up artists Dave and Lou Elsey (29 minutes), and a masterclass on Hammer's scores by David Huckvale (39 minutes).

Archival footage includes Roger Corman at 1995's Festival of Fantastic Films (36 minutes) and an on-stage Q&A from last year's presentation of *The Curse Of Frankenstein* (31 minutes). Recently recovered Hammer quickie "Ticket To Happiness" (1959, 30 minutes) is a baffling inclusion, a youth club drama that feels all too prosaic in such eldritch company. A 120-page booklet with well-researched new essays completes the package. **Nick Setchfield**



## THE THING EXPANDED

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2026 | N/A | Digital

► Director Ian Nathan

► **In the streaming era, where** runtime doesn't need to be restricted to fit onto a disc, fan-made documentaries have mutated into unrecognisable narrative shapes. Less tightly edited narratives, more multi-talking-headed mutants, that frequently mistake epic size for detailed insight.

After '80s SF explorations like *In Search Of Tomorrow* (five hours) and *RoboDoc* (four hours), comes *The Thing Expanded*. It's split into 17 (!) chapters, clocking in at five hours, 12 minutes, all to tell a story fans probably already know. John Carpenter's horror masterpiece was underappreciated on release, and it's built a cult following for its symbolism and subtext, with its paranoia/pandemic themes becoming more relevant in recent years. We get it!

What makes this worthwhile is the participants. Carpenter remains sarcastic and cuttingly unsentimental, while Kurt Russell and Keith David offer flamethrower levels of warmth. And there are enough talking heads to fill a research station, from Guillermo del Toro to Frank Darabont and beyond.

Some voices are less welcome (Eli Roth stating the obvious as if it's profundity) but for fans, this is the definitive word on a movie labelled DOA, that's evolved through 35mm, VHS, Blu-ray and streaming, and will live long after we're all face down in the snow.

**Sam Ashurst**

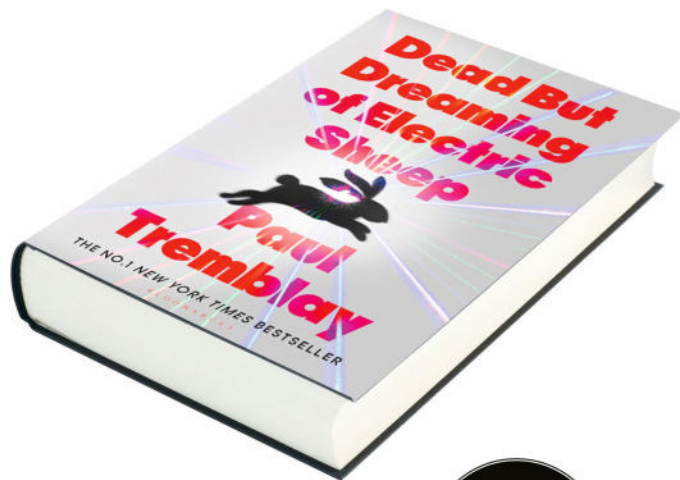
## (ROUND UP)



Time to run down recent theatrical releases now hitting shiny disc. Based on a 2023 videogame, Japanese chiller **EXIT 8** (29 June, Blu-ray) follows a man trapped in an endlessly looping subway corridor, which can only be escaped by spotting a series of anomalies. We said: "Slow-burning but brilliantly unsettling... uses slick direction and nerve-jangling sound design to build an oppressive, claustrophobic atmosphere." Extras: a behind-the-scenes piece; two "film festival red carpet" featurettes. The latest Pixar movie, **HOPPERS** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD), sees a student zapping her consciousness into a robotic beaver to save forest critters from a plan to drive a highway through their habitat. We said: "An audacious blend of mind-transference tech, anthropomorphic antics and environmentalist messaging." Extras: a Making Of, footage from a research trip to Yellowstone Park, an Easter eggs featurette, a screen breakdown, a blooper reel, and 19 minutes of deleted scenes. More of a demonic possession flick than a mummy movie, **LEE CRONIN'S THE MUMMY** (29 June, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD) sees a family torn apart when eight-year-old Katie is abducted in Cairo. Eight years later, she's found in the debris of a plane crash, inside a sarcophagus. Unfortunately she looks like she's been dug up, and is now prone to munching scorpions and vomiting pea soup. We said: "Cronin does little that we've not seen before... But he does it well, with intensity, and through it all bubbles humour blacker than blood in the midnight moonlight." Extras: director's commentary, three

featurettes (totalling 24 minutes), and 10 minutes of deleted scenes. Following straight on from the original film, in which a bride survived being hunted by her in-laws as part of a Satanic ritual, **READY OR NOT 2: HERE I COME** (22 June, Blu-ray/DVD) sees Samara Weaving's Grace joined by her sister as they're kidnapped for a new game, this time involving four competing families. We said: "Having two targets makes for a messy continuation of an admirably streamlined original... There's little chemistry between the pair." Extras include two director commentaries, a 14-minute Making Of, and a gag reel. The latest feature by acclaimed anime director Mamoru Hosoda (*The Girl Who Leapt Through Time*, *Summer Wars*), **SCARLET** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray) riffs on *Hamlet*. Waking in an afterlife desert realm after being poisoned by her uncle Claudius, the titular sword-fighting princess finds he's there too. Can she break the cycle of hatred? We said: "Patches of the film are tedious, but there remains something compelling in such an unusual vision." No extras. Thirtieth anniversary outing **SCREAM 7** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD) places Neve Campbell's Sidney front and centre as Ghostface targets her teenage daughter, amid rumours Stu Macher didn't really die in the first film. We said: "Doesn't reinvent the wheel... but you'll have a killer time." Bonuses: a 22-minute Making Of; featurettes on stunts/production design; six deleted scenes; a music video. Finally, the latest TV box set is **A KNIGHT OF THE SEVEN KINGDOMS Season One** (15 June, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD).





## DEAD BUT DREAMING OF ELECTRIC SHEEP

AI be damned, before we all are

★★★★★

► RELEASED 2 JULY

326 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

► Author Paul Tremblay

► Publisher Bloomsbury Archer

✦ **Trust the author. Don't trust anyone else.** The latest novel from horror maven Paul Tremblay, who wrote *A Head Full Of Ghosts* and *The Cabin At The End Of The World*, is his most SF-skewed yet. It's still horrific, it's multi-layered and massively meta, and it's absolutely brilliant.

The plot, thank god, is fairly straightforward. Gamer Julia is hired through connections of her nefarious mother to undertake a top-secret task for a massive paycheck. Her job is to remote-control chaperone the brain-dead body of a man only technically still alive via medical intervention, who's on a plane journey so his mother can see him one last time.

The thing is, the man – dubbed “Bernie” by Julia, in a reference to *Weekend At Bernie's* – isn't as dead as all that. Powered by AI, not in possession of his own sense of self or memories, but aware enough to know that something is happening to him and that he must find someone, “Bernie” is bandaged up so the surgery on his brain isn't visible, and waddled around like a Mario brother.

With chapters interlacing the third person of Julia and the second person of “Bernie”, it's a claustrophobic reading experience. Standout set-pieces include the semi-conscious Bernie being folded up like luggage. His perception is distorted, but meshing together the “you” chapters and the “Julia” chapters allows you to compare his half-human world with reality. And what a frightening vision that is: to live inside a simulation filled

with shadows and ghosts, with only the tiniest bit of reality left to you. So while the plot might be easy to follow, *Dead But Dreaming Of Electric Sheep* is otherwise anything but straightforward.

Interspersed in the main narrative are a couple of “interludes” that will help guide you through this labyrinth of ideas, which is a great story in and of itself, but also a furious rallying cry against AI – one that has a slyly practical aspect.

Julia learns that her journey with Bernie isn't just a personal humanitarian mission; it's a troubling experiment run by the most terrifying of tech companies. And just as in our reality, AI is trained using copyrighted work (Tremblay filed a lawsuit against OpenAI in 2023 for scraping *The Cabin At The End Of The World* to teach ChatGPT), so in this dystopian world, Bernie's being used to train a different kind of AI.

Embedded within the story and the typeface, language and layout

“**Horrific, multi-layered and massively meta**”

of the book is the concept of soft sabotage, where creators – or in this case Julia – introduce errors and anomalies so that the intelligence learned is wrong. So if you think there's a mistake – someone's name is incorrect, something is spaced strangely – it's almost certainly on purpose.

With a title referencing Philip K Dick's *Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep*, Tremblay's book is packed with literary echoes, from Mark Z Danielewski's seminal *House Of Leaves* to Thomas Pynchon, Iain Banks and more.

If we have any criticism, it's that it concludes rather abruptly. That's not *really* a criticism, though; more an expression of the very human desire for things to go well, for justice to prevail... and that is not how it goes. It ends not with a bang or whimper, but with short-lived laughter when there's nothing else left. **Rosie Fletcher**

**i** In preparation, Paul Tremblay re-read his favourite (Philip K) Dick novels. He still finds saying “Dick novels” amusing...



## WITCH SEASON

★★★★★

► RELEASED 30 JUNE

320 pages | Hardback/ebook/

audiobook

► Author Julia Bianco

► Publisher Headline

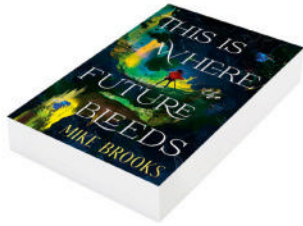
✦ **You know that film/TV cliché** where someone cuts their palm to draw blood, even though that's a *really dumb* place to cut yourself? Characters in this enjoyable romp slash their palms left, right and centre to perform blood magic. How do they ever hold a mug?

But that's just the life of a witch in LA, as we discover through the eyes of coven deputy Katherine. She ensures that teenagers coming into their powers (think X-Men-style mutants) don't explode and hurt people. Just as hunky trust-fund kid Silas turns up to inspect the coven, one teen does indeed go 'splodey, killing a bunch of “ordinaries” (think Muggles). Naturally, Katherine and Silas fall for each other in the ensuing chaos.

A confident debut from Julia Bianco, this urban fantasy is set in an energetic, well-realised world that's a lot of fun, even as the plot gets darker in later chapters. It does dance with romance-trope cheesiness, though, such as Katherine thinking she could “count the flecks of copper” in Silas's eyes – go on then, love. There are also some jarring POV changes mid-chapter, and our review copy was filled with Americanisms (eg “couple dozen” instead of “couple of dozen”). We can only hope they'll be fixed by the time it hits the shelves of UK bookshops. **Fingers crossed.**

**Jayne Nelson**





## THIS IS WHERE THE FUTURE BLEEDS

★★★★★

► RELEASED 30 JUNE

400 pages | Paperback/ebook/audiobook

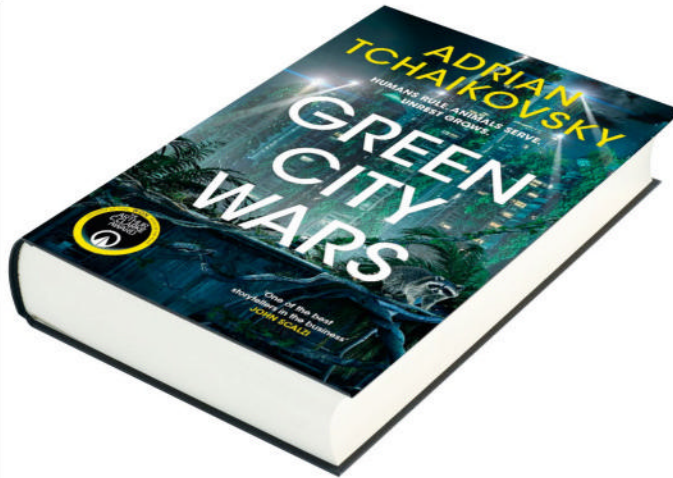
► Author Mike Brooks

► Publisher Titan Books

◆ Here's something a little different from Mike Brooks, best known for his epic fantasy books *The God-King Chronicles* and the gnarly space opera series *Keiko*. *Where The Future Bleeds* is a lighter, looser and quirkier fantasy tale, with a ragtag band of heroes on a quest that only really defines itself as the story unfolds, in a world where fate and destiny have been monetised.

In Kitt Carver's world, everyone has magical talents, though some are more useful than others. Kitt is a diviner, with a talent for locating actualised destinies (they look like rocks) in an area where time stands still. But when some shady figures purloin the most powerful destiny she ever discovered – and kills her dealer to cover their tracks – she pulls together a crew, including a permanently pissed-up mage and her arsey duellist best friend, to prevent whatever unpleasantness they're planning.

It's not quite a comic fantasy – more fantasy with comedy – and the result is a hugely entertaining romp with moments of almost Discworld-like silliness and satire, full of colourful characters and droll dialogue, with a sprinkling of queerness. And while it's not a "Part One" (everything is wrapped up neatly), it'd be a shame never to visit this world again. **Dave Golder**



## GREEN CITY WARS

### Mean streets trash panda

★★★★★

► RELEASED 25 JUNE

368 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

► Author Adrian Tchaikovsky

► Publisher Tor

◆ In a future where humans live in solar-powered cities, things still need to get done. So it is that, in Neuwien-Grunstadt, bioengineered animals called "Little Helpers" serve humanity. The animals do this while observing Rule One, which is to go about their business without attracting humanity's attention.

But bioengineering has had unforeseen consequences. Creatures made to be pliant haven't read the script. They have developed a rich society of their own. Creatures such as Skotch, a gumshoe PI who just happens to be a raccoon. Following the conventions of crime fiction, he's an outsider, a freelancer, and down on his luck, about to run out of the drug that enables his higher cognitive functions. His ability to shape thoughts and talk is fading.

Then Skotch gets a break, although whether it's a good break or not is debatable. For reasons

“Fast-paced and never takes itself too seriously”

that aren't immediately clear, different factions are keen to ascertain the whereabouts of a mouse, Doktor Meece. After getting a commission to find the rodent from the kind of mobster turtle you don't mess with, Skotch's life becomes both complicated and dangerous.

If all this makes *Green City Wars* sound like a grown-up version of *Zootropolis*, well, there's some truth in that. It's a fast-paced novel that never takes itself too seriously, and delights in sly gags, such as when we meet Saint Frances, a nun who treats sick animals.

This doesn't mean the book doesn't make some serious points. As with so many of Adrian Tchaikovsky's novels, it's also a meditation on how different kinds of intelligence function because of deeper evolutionary factors. Rarely has the phrase "bird-brained optimist" seemed so apposite as when you meet Lulu the pigeon.

Plot-wise, *Green City Wars* takes too long to get moving, but the world-building is superlative. Tchaikovsky proves yet again here that he's one of our best and most inventive SF writers. **Jonathan Wright**

**i** In reality, raccoons (descendants of escapees from fur farms) have begun to colonise Europe, especially Germany.



## ATOMIC COFFIN

★★★★★

► RELEASED 25 JUNE

320 pages | Paperback/ebook/audiobook

► Author Benedict Anning

► Publisher Bantam

◆ The term "atomic coffin" was once used to describe Soviet-era nuclear submarines. But in this dour, '80s-era sci-fi thriller set on a top-secret USSR sub, it's not radiation exposure or dodgy build quality that's going to kill you.

When MI6 agent Heidi Sperling, undercover in East Berlin, discovers a naval log revealing a Soviet submarine, TK-15, that has been motionless in the North Atlantic for three years, she's reluctantly recruited by the Royal Navy to search for the mysterious craft. Finding it deserted, they decide to board. They soon wish they hadn't.

Boasting some claustrophobia-inducing detail about serving aboard military subs (have you ever wondered about the smell when watching *Das Boot*, for example?) and a believable, quirky, multi-layered central character (whose head you spend a lot of time inside), *Atomic Coffin* feels like an underwater version of *Event Horizon*, with a little bit of *Solaris* mixed in. It's basically a ghost story with just enough science-y rationale to make it sci-fi. But while it's a perfectly effective, often tense page-turner, it feels a little over-familiar and never delivers the contemporary narrative twist it needs to move it up a level.

Still, if you love novels where characters keep telling themselves "It isn't real!" this is a sunken treasure chest of delights. **Dave Golder**



Jake and the Toruk tangle with an RDA dragon.



Jake attacks the RDA in this concept art.



Concepts for Varang's battle costume (left) and a Pevlak captain's cloak.



## THE ART OF AVATAR: FIRE AND ASH

### Profoundly In Love With Pandora

★★★★★

► **RELEASED 2 JULY**

272 pages | Hardback

► Author Chris Prince

► Publisher DK

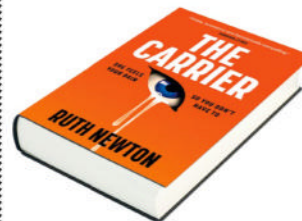
Despite the storytelling limitations of the *Avatar* movies, you can't fault the unparalleled depth and beauty of James Cameron's world-building. In fact, you could almost argue that a book like this is the ideal way to experience his lucrative saga.

It's often said that one of the biggest challenges of telling stories set in an alien world is that you have to build everything from scratch. Never has that been more true than on the fictional moon of Pandora, where Cameron went as far as commissioning renowned New Zealand-based effects house Weta to manufacture over 2,000 costumes, even though they'd never actually be seen in this performance-capture threequel. That's just the tiniest hint of

the director's extraordinary attention to detail.

Through hundreds of pages of stunning concept art, this beautiful book reveals the production backstories of everything from antagonist Varang and her Mangkwan clan to the more *Aliens*-like hardware used by the human interlopers from the RDA. The accompanying in-depth interviews and painstakingly researched background information are also compelling enough to sustain a book by themselves. For all the film's flaws, this deep dive into the creative process does an impressive job of explaining how creating Pandora has taken up almost two decades of Cameron's life. **Richard Edwards**

Artist Joseph C Pepe used a hairless cat like Mr Bigglesworth from the *Austin Powers* films as inspiration for Na'vi ears.



## THE CARRIER

★★★★★

► **RELEASED 2 JULY**

448 pages | Hardback/ebook/

audiobook

► Author Ruth Newton

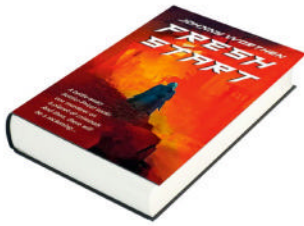
► Publisher Bantam

Why put yourself through the hassle of negotiating difficult emotions when you can pay someone else to experience them for you? That's the hook of this speculative thriller, in which big tech employs (and exploits) women known as "Carriers" to process other people's negative feelings.

Viv Harper has well and truly downed the Eudaimonia Kool-Aid, enjoying the career opportunities, social standing and desirable boyfriend the company has given her – especially if they can help her application for custody of her teenage sister. But when Viv inadvertently witnesses the suspicious death of a Carrier in the backroom of a fancy "Salon", she realises her employers have been withholding crucial information about the safety – and side-effects – of their lucrative business model.

Although debut author Ruth Newton spends plenty of time creating a plausible framework for the story's "Expression" technology – particularly its lexicon of associated jargon – the sci-fi elements are pretty low in the mix. Instead, this highly allegorical, UK-set novel prioritises delivering social commentary, as Viv learns her paymasters' wealth is built on the exploitation of women from poorer backgrounds. So while the plot follows a predictable mystery thriller structure, *The Carrier* undeniably provides plenty of food for thought along the way. **Richard Edwards**





## FRESH START

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

336 pages | Hardback/ebook

► Author Johnny Worthen

► Publisher Flame Tree Press

Any précis of this novel won't do it justice. It's a western-flavoured sci-fi yarn (yawn) set on a dusty prison planet (yawn), where a sarky, quipping marine-turned-warrior monk (yawn) searches for an estranged colleague with a dodgy past (yawn).

But if you're thinking, "Yup, seen all that before," don't dismiss this sassy book too quickly. Not only does it inject some fun into a well-worn subgenre, it also has a few surprises up its sleeve, albeit not so much in terms of plot as its surprisingly thought-provoking morality.

The kick-ass monk in question is Qays Mendoza. Born into a crumbling galactic Empire of lofty ideals often at odds with reality, Mendoza was at the centre of a scandal that unfolds in flashback, parallel to the main action. Now, he's on the penal planet Fresh Start – which has practically become a new colony built by the descendants of the original convicts – trying to find answers for what happened.

Fresh Start itself is a vividly grungy location, the Tarantino-esque dialogue helps sugar the frequent infodumps, and there's a surprising amount of depth when it comes to the characters' motivations. The Big Bad is a bit bland, and it does become a tad road movie-ish in places, but it's a pacy, lively affair with a killer ending. **Dave Golder**



## I FEEL YOUR PAIN

★★★★★

► **RELEASED 25 JUNE**

384 pages | Paperback/ebook

► Author AM Ellis

► Publisher Penguin

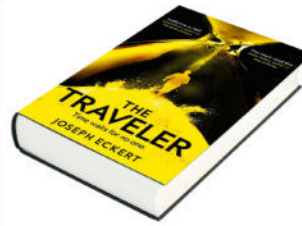
Misunderstandings have been a staple of romance writing since Romeo thought his Juliet was dead. But how often have you thought, "Just bloody talk to each other!" during a love story? *I Feel Your Pain* concocts a brilliant reason for her YA heroine to keep something from the hero: she's only gone and signed an NDA.

Nova Williams lives in an America reeling from a solar flare that randomly inflicts a painful electrical parasite. Luckily, for a price, it can be transferred to someone who won't feel it as much. When super-rich Castor Fox starts to crackle, his new girlfriend Nova anonymously takes the disease on his behalf – she has debts and Pain Carriers are paid well.

That's when she discovers the secret the NDA which prevents her from telling him... Having the book's central misconception propped up by Nova's fear of going to jail throws welcome shade on the dodgy NDA practices of powerful people in our own world. And that's not the only social justicing going on here: there's racism, billionaires hoarding wealth, and media lies (not for nothing is Castor's family named Fox).

But all of that wouldn't really connect if Cas and Nova's relationship wasn't so sweet, funny and well-drawn. They lift off every page, filled with energy and life – an absolute credit to this debut author.

**Jayne Nelson**



## THE TRAVELER

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

380 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

► Author Joseph Eckert

► Publisher Tor

A time-travel tale with a difference, *The Traveler* is inextricably shaped – and ultimately overwhelmed – by its high-concept format.

Scott Treder (a German surname derived from *treit*, meaning to tread/walk, doing some heavy nominative determinism lifting here) is an average middle-class US Joe, until the day he jumps forward in time 24 hours. Then, a day after that, he jumps forward two days. Then a day after that four days. It keeps happening, the jump doubling each time. Within weeks (Scott's time), he's billions of years in the future and still going.

To start with, it's utterly compelling as Scott and his family struggle very realistically with his new normal. And the in-built "What happens next?" of each jump makes this more of a page-turner than most. It's funny, scary and emotional, but grounded and believable, as Scott leaves his loved ones in the past.

But the further into the future the book moves, the more it becomes hamstrung by its formula, with some leaps like breathless précis for entire other novels happening just off-stage. For a while it becomes a dystopia/utopia/dystopia see-saw, before evolving into existential philosophising as the universe nears heat death, ending on a surprisingly on-the-nose quasi-religious note. But hey, it's the journey that counts. **Dave Golder**

## REISSUES

Our pick of the latest paperbacks is Claire North's sociological space opera **SLOW GODS** (★★★★★, out now, Orbit). Its narrator is a pilot who



died yet survived, whose ability to travel through "arc-space" – the realm through

which starships move – comes in handy once various inhabited worlds are threatened by the blastwave from a supernova event. We said: "An extraordinary novel". A slim volume, **THE RIVER**

**HAS ROOTS** (★★★★★, 18 June, Arcadia) is the solo debut of Amal El-Mohtar, who co-wrote the Hugo-winning *This Is How You Lose The Time War*.



Drawing on the tropes of traditional ballads, it follows a family who sing folk songs to the

willow trees on their land as they harvest magical wood for market – and whose daughters are now receiving overtures from suitors. We said: "A powerful, gorgeous little story of sisterly love, the power of words, and revenge as a dish best served in verse." Finally, Stephen Baxter's **HEARTHSPACE** (★★★★★, 18 June, Gollancz) is set in

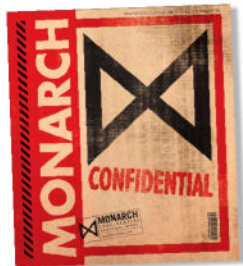


an area of space containing millions of planets, many Earth-like worlds colonised

by humankind. It centres on the commander of a vast, light sail-powered patrol ship who comes under attack from an unknown enemy – slavers who plan to take the inner Hearth for themselves. We said: "A story of survival that plays out brilliantly... The central relationships are deftly sketched... Can be read as commenting on our present geopolitical situation."



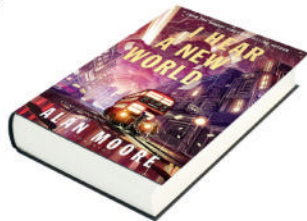
## BULLET TIME A BOOK IN BULLET POINTS



### THE MONARCH FILES: A MONSTERVERSE MANUAL

► **RELEASED 30 JUNE**  
160 pages | Hardback  
► Author Greg Keyes  
► Publisher Titan Books

- An in-universe guide to people, Titans and tech from the MonsterVerse movies and *Monarch* TV show.
- Packed with illustrations and photos.
- Topics are grouped according to the respective screen releases, though they're labelled as "Incidents" to avoid breaking the fourth wall.
- There are profiles of around 50 monsters, ranging from superstars like Godzilla and Kong to bit-part players like the Warbat and "Doug".
- It's detailed enough to provide Latin names for the Titans, and blood types for the human protagonists.
- Has a decent stab at providing a quasi-scientific explanation for the Hollow Earth and other weird MonsterVerse mythology.
- References to unresolved stories are conveniently redacted.



### I HEAR A NEW WORLD

★★★★★  
► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**  
336 pages | Hardback/ebook/  
audiobook  
► Author Alan Moore  
► Publisher Bloomsbury Archer

➦ **The title of the second** instalment in Alan Moore's Long London quintet is taken from a 1960 experimental album by Joe Meek – a brilliant, if troubled, producer whose work foreshadowed much contemporary electronic music. It's an eccentric, visionary album: two words that can also be applied to Moore's writing in this unique series.

It's 1958, 10 years after the events of the previous novel. Dennis Knuckleyard is now a jobbing writer, with bylines in the *New Musical Express* and trashy tabloid *Reveille*. He has done his best to avoid thinking about the magical *other* London, which sits alongside the mundane everyday city, but when Joe barges into his house, Dennis is dragged back into the fray. The two cities are colliding and that means disaster.

As with the previous volume, *I Hear A New World's* chief pleasure is Moore's luxurious prose. He's on wry form here, elucidating the bizarre characters of the city (both real and imagined) while revelling in his hapless hero stumbling into adventure. When Dennis crosses into the Great When, however, the writing shifts in tone, becoming a maximalist onslaught of imagery. It's the definition of an acquired taste, but those willing to surrender to Moore's world will find a singular and deeply evocative urban fantasy. **Will Salmon**



### YOU ARE NOT ALONE

★★★★★  
► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**  
390 pages | Paperback  
► Author Patrick Mulhern  
► Publisher Ten Acre Books

➦ **Your first reaction to this** book's subtitle, *A Gay History Of Doctor Who*, might be "Is there any other kind?" After all, the series has always held appeal for gay viewers. But Patrick Mulhern's "queer eye" perspective is undeniably valuable, making visible countless contributions by gay and bisexual people. Did you know that John Wiles was *Who's* first gay producer, back in 1965? Or that UNIT colleagues Richard Franklin, Nicholas Courtney and Ian Marter all struggled with their sexuality?

The book is heavy on potted bios of guest stars, but a long list of writers and directors also builds. It can get a little gossipy: do we gain anything by knowing that composer Delia Derbyshire could "get fruity" in her cups? However, frank interviews with Brian Hodgson (deviser of TARDIS sounds) and director Waris Hussein really give us a fuller picture of them as people.

Now and then, Mulhern will also posit that, say, a character from 1964 was a lesbian. A fun game, but questionable without evidence of creative intention. He's on firmer ground with Ace's "queer coding", smuggled in by writer Rona Munro.

The book wraps up with today's showrunners discussing Captain Jack, Bill Potts, "Thasmin" etc. But it's those secret life stories – often ending in AIDS-related tragedy, or joy as life partners marry – that are most fascinating. **Calvin Baxter**

## ALSO OUT

There are plenty more books that we couldn't squeeze in. This week's dark academia book set in a magical boarding school, **THE UNMAGICAL LIFE OF BRIAR JONES** (out now, Gollancz) is YA author Lex Croucher's first adult title. Its hero fails to be accepted by the Temple School of Thaumaturgy, but then gets a temp job sorting through magical junk in the attic, and unearths some ugly secrets... This week's riff on *Sleeping Beauty*, meanwhile, is Camille Chong's **LOVE, GODS AND SINNERS** (out now, First Ink). Sixteen-year-old thief Corin dismisses the legend of Princess Amelia, cursed to eternal sleep... until her sister Elly runs away to find her. On following, Corin discovers a portal into Amelia's subconscious, meeting both her dream alter-ego and the demon who cursed her. **HM Wolfe's DAGGERMOUTH** (25 June, Tor Bramble) is already an indie hit – 22.3 million KU page reads, apparently (whatever that means). Now you can buy it in hardback. Set in a corrupt surveillance state, this dystopian romance follows a mercenary who botches the assassination of the President's son, and ends up forced to marry him. In Grace Curtis's sapphic fantasy mystery **HEAVEN'S GRAVEYARD** (18 June, Hodder & Stoughton) an archaeologist explores the ruins of an enchanted city. With war brewing, rival powers circling and ancient magics stirring, it's probably not going to be 300-odd pages of painstakingly brushing off soil. Finally, **THE ART OF MARVEL ANIMATION'S YOUR FRIENDLY NEIGHBOURHOOD SPIDER-MAN** (25 June, Abrams) includes sketches, storyboards, character designs, cels and other ephemera from the Disney+ series.







# Ken Liu

The award-winning author has a bone to pick with Samuel Johnson...



© LISA TSANG LIU

## Do you have any personal mementos or nick-nacks on your desk?

► I have four mugs filled with writing implements on my desk: pens for writing, styli for screens, Sharpies for signing, scissors and rulers and whatever else doesn't fit. I fidget with these constantly even though I type all my books. Somehow, the pens help. Perhaps magically.

## How do you deal with writers' block and the urge to procrastinate?

► I find reading poetry to be a great way to break out whenever I feel I'm stuck. Some favourites: Sappho, James Merrill, John Ashbery, Edna St Vincent Millay.

## Which of your books are you the most proud of?

► The Dandelion Dynasty. It took me more than a decade to finish this epic fantasy series about technology, nationhood, and modernity, and by the time I put down the last word, I was a completely different person and writer from when I put down the first. I feel like I've lived an entire life in another world, and how often can we claim to have done that?

## Which of your books was the most difficult to write?

► Whichever book I'm working on at the moment (right now, it's the third book in the Julia Z series of techno-thrillers). I try to do something entirely new with each book, which means that with every book I have to learn anew how to write. This is good insofar as I'm unpredictable, but it also has the consequences that I have no "brand" – a word that, in any event, I despise in connection with art. Readers who enjoy one of my books may not like the next one. But I feel this is the best way for a writer to retain freedom, the highest ideal of art.

## What would be your desert island book?



Inspirational poet Edna St Vincent Millay.

► Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Of it, Dr Johnson said, "None ever wished it longer than it is. Its perusal is a duty rather than a pleasure." I hate to disagree with Dr Johnson, but I do. It's a poem that grows with you, changing as you change.

## Is there any particular author whose writing ability makes you envious?

► Every author who's worth reading ends up inventing a personal language – an idiolect – uniquely suited to the kind of stories that they tell. Their writing abilities then become fitted to that language, like bespoke tools shaped by the artefacts they shape. Envy, therefore, has no use, for you cannot have those tools unless you become that author. It would not benefit anyone to copy Emily Dickinson's language, or the way she shapes a sentence, or the way she perceives a dew-speckled cobweb, for that combination is suited only for the kind of beautiful poems she made. All I can do is strive to invent a language uniquely suited for the kind of books only I can write.

## What's the best gift you've ever received from a reader?

► A reader once gave me a painting they had done of the three children found at the beginning of *The Wall Of Storms*. It was so lovely, and completely unexpected.



To find a creation of your imagination taking form, substantiated by another imagination, is indescribable. I'll treasure it always.

## What are people's biggest misconceptions about being a professional author?

► That we know what we're doing. Admitting that we know nothing is the only superpower. 🕒

Ken Liu's most recent novel, *All That We See Or Seem*, is out in paperback on 9 July. *The Passing Of The Dragon*, a collection of short stories by the author, is due for release in September.



## First Read

AN EXTRACT FROM A NEW BOOK

# Artificial Wisdom

by Thomas R Weaver

This genre-defying technothriller explores a near-future world in which AI shapes global politics, forcing humanity to confront the ethical costs of survival in a climate-ravaged landscape

**The year is 2050, and mankind must decide whether to entrust its future to an Artificial Intelligence. Investigative journalist Marcus Tully is pressured to suppress an article... then hears some incredible news as the results of a global election are announced.**

"It's Cavanagh, right?" Tully said.

Cavanagh gestured with his hands as if to say *Does it really matter?* "I understand you plan to push your story soon," he said, "so I'll keep this short. The mayor of Houston is asking you to kill this story, the governor of Texas is asking you to kill this story, the White House is backing them both, and your own English government will do whatever the White House tells them to do, just as it always has."

"Would any of them like to comment on the record?"

"Let me be very clear," Cavanagh said. "You've got your facts wrong. Someone is playing you. Take this one out with the trash, we forget the whole thing and your reputation stays intact. As a gesture of goodwill, we'll sponsor a different story for you. And we'll be generous. I understand things are tight. Let us loosen them for you."

"Let me play that back to make sure I have it right," Tully said. "You're denying the story is correct and are willing to bribe me to forget the whole thing and write a story about someone else?"

"Don't fucking twist my words. By the way, anonymous sources? That can't be credible for this type of allegation."

"Sure it can," Tully said.

"How many?"

"How many what?"

"Sources."

"One."

"Just the one?" Cavanagh's mouth hung open and he looked around as if seeking validation. "You can't base all this off one source. There's that – what? – journalistic code. You're required to corroborate with a second source at least."

Tully nodded. "More of a guideline, actually, but in any case, we have the recording to corroborate."

"We watched the video. Deepfaked."

"It was in NR, and the experts say you can't deepfake neuro-reality."

Tully checked the clock. "Plus we have a doctor's account of the injuries, and he's convinced you used microwaves. Now, if there's nothing else—"

"No, no, wait," Cavanagh said, his tone now reasonable, eyes all understanding, mouth in a we're-really-on-the-same-side smile. "Listen. Maybe you're wrong and maybe you're right.

But you can't put this out there. You send this article out, you make it seem like climate hobos are being fucked, and the city will explode. Then cities all over the US and beyond will follow – the world is a fucking tinderbox right now with this election for protector going on."

Tully could practically hear the air quotes around "protector". Most people – the Americans in particular, who disliked submitting to any authority save their own – saw this as little more than a sanctioned dictatorship. Most people also saw they had little choice at this point, both environmentally and politically. Still – *Climate hobos?* "Not my problem."

Cavanagh's smile slipped. "You stupid fucking motherfucker! If this goes south and they riot, it'll all be your fucking fault. You really want that?"

"I just want to tell my readers the truth."

"You can't put this kind of shit out there. Take some responsibility!"

That was the thing about the truth. Sometimes you were judged more harshly for revealing it than for concealing it. Some bastard running for president hired a hooker, and they called the reporter "salacious" for writing about it. "The responsibility lies with those who did the deed and those who prop them up, not the ones exposing it."

"You finished?"

"Yeah, I'm finished. Appreciate your time, Mr Cavanagh," Tully said, and nodded at Livia. She tapped the air and Cavanagh disappeared.

Tully leaned on the table next to Lottie, who was still typing away, tidying up his original draft using an AI assistant. "So help me, Lottie, you'd better have something ready to go out—"

"It's done," she said. "And perfect, if you ask me."

"Thank you."

"After I had a chance to fix your shitty writing, that is." She made her screen public.

He scanned the text. "Not bad." Behind him, Bolivar swore. Tully swung around. "What is it?"

"They're about to announce some breaking news from Athens."

"The round six results? Already?"

"Looks like they reached a decision quicker than they expected."

Bolivar created a public screen

### The Author



Thomas R Weaver writes stories about tomorrow to help make sense of today. A tech entrepreneur turned author, he holds a degree in Computer Science but never expected to actually use it in his career. After spending years exploring how technology could transform experiences in the places outside of the home and the office, he founded a tech startup in the restaurant hospitality space, which was later acquired by Just Eat Takeaway. Exiting in 2018–2019 left him with no more excuses not to pursue a long-held dream: writing fiction.

Despite vowing he had enough grey hair and would never run another startup, he continues to build a portfolio of new ideas with his former cofounder, backed by a major Silicon Valley tech accelerator. Outside of spending time with his family, he loves to cook, draw, paint and lose at online bullet chess. He also collects more books than time allows to read.



showing a newscast and turned up the sound.

A commentator was talking to the camera. “— let’s turn live to the election congress chair here in Athens, former UN Secretary-General Amare Abara, to hear which of the twenty candidates are through to round seven.”

Amare Abara walked out onto the stage of a huge auditorium in Athens. His hair had silvered since his time in the UN. He looked wiser – a serious guy for serious times.

“Thank you,” Abara said. “We’ve unexpectedly narrowed the pool of candidates from twenty to a final two, either of which could win a majority against any of the other candidates. They’ll progress to the global popular vote on the eighteenth of August.”

Every country in the world had submitted a candidate in round one, nearly six months before. No one had expected to reach a final two this quickly, let alone that the election itself would now be in a little over six weeks’ time.

Abara paused and looked up and around the congress venue, thousands of quiet delegations from governments around the world watching him. This was a moment that would be replayed in the history reels, and in that pause, he seemed almost overwhelmed by it. The camera zoomed in, and he swallowed, taking a sip of water and a deep breath.

“The first candidate for protector, nominated by Japan: former two-term President of the United States Lawrence G Lockwood,” he said.

Applause from the delegations in Athens, but the office in London was silent.

“I thought the pollsters said there was no way an American would get this far,” Lottie said.

She was right. Maybe once upon a time, America would have clearly led the pack. But it had squandered that leadership over many decades. The rest of the world had munched popcorn while the country became irretrievably polarised. They’d elected ever more extreme leaders on both sides, until the electorate had fortified itself in two circles that almost never overlapped.

Bolivar snorted. “Pollsters. They say all that, and the nomination drops on Independence Day.”

The applause in Athens had died down, and the delegations were waiting expectantly to hear which candidate would face Lockwood in the final round.

Abara stared at the paper in his hands as if he couldn’t bring himself to read what was on it. The auditorium was now silent, bar a couple of coughs. The silence stretched on well past the point of comfort. Tully wondered if Abara was unwell. Surely he’d known who the final candidates would be before he went on stage? What was going on?

Abara seemed to pull himself together, with a little shake of his head like he had some kind of internal argument going on. He looked up,

and the paper dropped out of his fingers and drifted out of camera shot. “Excuse me. The second and final candidate,” he said, much slower and fully enunciated this time, as if he wanted to make sure everyone caught his words with no chance for misunderstanding, “nominated by the Swedish delegation: the artificial intellect, head of state of the Floating States, Governor Solomon.”

There was uproar from the moment he’d named the Swedish delegation – their nomination of Solomon had been huge news and the source of many online memes – and the volume of his last words had gone up and up in order to be heard, until he’d practically shouted Solomon’s name. Audience members were swearing, gasping, and certainly not applauding. It was chaos.

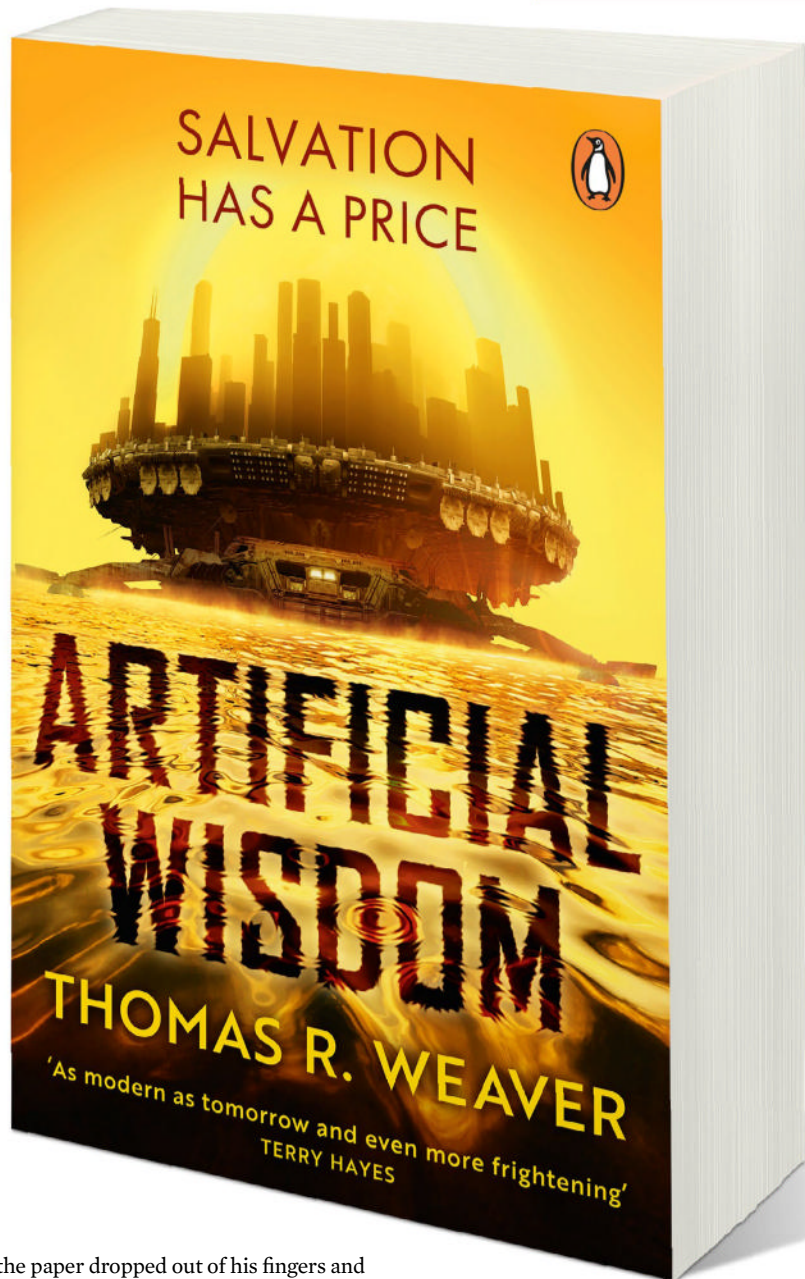
A new headline appeared on the feed: GLOBAL PROTECTORSHIP ELECTION: ARTIFICIAL INTELLECT SOLOMON IN FINAL TWO.

The breath had stopped in Tully’s throat.

Solomon. The first AI – or “artilect”, as pundits had dubbed it – to hold political office. The technology had been unveiled nine years ago to manage the six new sea-cities known collectively as the Floating States. Solomon could appear in neuro-reality like a real person, to millions of people individually, at once. It could make complex decisions from billions of data points in nanoseconds. It’d been designed by a woman regarded as a genius, Martha Chandra. Tully knew Martha. He’d interviewed her several times, early in both their careers. They weren’t friends, not exactly, but they liked each other.

Moreover, Martha owed Tully a favour. He employed Martha’s sister, Livia.

*Artificial Wisdom is out in paperback now; it’s also available in ebook and audio, read by Steven Pacey. Don’t miss the follow-up *Infinite Wisdom*, coming in November 2026.*





## PLANET OF THE APES VS FANTASTIC FOUR

Going ape



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher **Marvel Comics**

► Writer **Josh Trujillo**

► Artist **Andrea Di Vito**

**ISSUES 1-4** Disney's purchase of 20th Century Fox has had many consequences (some of them far from good), but one of the weirdest has been the resulting flood of oddball Marvel crossover comics. The opportunity to throw

legendary Fox film franchises up against the Marvel Universe has been too much to resist, and this new miniseries is an especially attention-grabbing example.

The story sees the Fantastic Four coming up against legendary Marvel villain the Red Ghost and his pet apes, only to be unexpectedly catapulted through a portal into the classic humans-vs-simians world of the Planet of the Apes.

The journey robs them of their superpowers, but just as they're facing the deadly threat of ape justice, the FF's abilities somehow migrate to classic movie characters Zira, Cornelius, Dr Zaius and General Ursus, throwing all of ape civilisation into chaos.

Also adding Doctor Doom into the mix (for little apparent reason other than "Why not?"), the story sensibly doesn't try to stretch itself beyond four issues, instead delivering the kind of kooky fish-out-of-water adventure that regularly featured in standalone *Fantastic Four* issues back in the '60s.

It's helped by the fact that the retro-'60s pulp SF vibe of the FF blends surprisingly well with the charmingly lurid mood of the classic *Apes* movies (which would *not* have been the case with the more recent Andy Serkis-starring trilogy).

Fitting in continuity-wise shortly after the events of the original 1968 film, it's a lively and ludicrous romp with an entertaining script from Josh Trujillo that captures the correct tone of melodramatic sci-fi action. Trujillo also does a good job of getting the characterisation right for both the FF and the classic ape characters (especially when it comes to female chimpanzee scientist Zira).

He's aided significantly in this by artist Andrea Di Vito, who switches smoothly from classic Marvel action to the colourfully lurid pulp of the *Apes* movies, giving the whole series a visually engaging and kinetic feel that brings energy even to its silliest sequences.

What this crossover ultimately can't hide is how daft and throwaway it all is, or how it largely has to ignore the darker, more political subtexts of the *Apes* movies. However, it still remains an unashamedly entertaining burst of nonsense that delivers pretty much everything you could want out of such a loopy premise, even if the end results are unlikely to stick in the mind for long.

**Saxon Bullock**

**i** The very first *Planet Of The Apes* comics were two separate manga adaptations published in Japan in 1968 and 1971.



## UNIVERSAL MONSTERS: THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher **Image Comics**

► Writer **Tyler Boss**

► Artist **Martin Simmonds**

**ISSUES 1-4** The comic-book revamps of classic Universal horror icons just keep on coming. This latest example takes on the 1925 silent adaptation of Gaston Leroux's 1910 gothic horror novel.

Unlike some recent *Universal Monsters* reinterpretations, which have frequently been left-field takes, writer Tyler Boss and artist Martin Simmonds go for a largely traditional approach here.

Streamlining the original story, but hitting the important beats, this four-issue miniseries follows the chaos backstage at a Paris opera house as mysterious deaths are revealed to be the work of the shadowy figure known as the Phantom.

Boss's script livens up the 1910s period drama vibe with occasional splashes of gore, and strikes a good balance between character drama and creepy menace.

The writing is strong, exploring the fine line between creativity and madness, but it's the spectacular visuals from Simmonds that make this miniseries shine. The same expressive, painterly approach he brought to the *Dracula* series pays dividends here, cranking up the atmosphere, and making this into a strikingly compelling adaptation, worth savouring.

**Saxon Bullock**



Meanwhile, Reed Richards is flinging poo at people.





## LOBO

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher DC Comics

► Writer Skottie Young

► Artists Jorge Corona,

Nicoletta Baldari

**ISSUES 1-3** With DC's self-professed "main man" about to get his big-screen introduction in *Supergirl*, it's the perfect time for him to get his own comic. Again. This is the sixth *Lobo* series since 1990 (one of which ran to issue #1000000, and definitely did not cheat to get there), but in case you've not made his acquaintance in that time: he's a loud-mouthed, hard-drinking space mercenary who specialises in self-aware jokes and murder. Imagine Deadpool with Wolverine's hair, if he was designed by Tim Burton.

If that sounds irritating, then congratulations, your imagination is working correctly. Created as a pastiche of grim 'n' gritty antiheroes, Lobo is intentionally unlikeable – even ripping the arm off a jobsworth parking attendant in the first issue's opening scene isn't enough to win us over.

Writer Skottie Young steers into the comedy aspect with a series of wacky, short-lived premises. One issue casts Lobo as a kind of intergalactic Dog The Bounty Hunter, and the next jumps back into his childhood for some pint-sized psychopathy. The antics rarely raise so much as a smile, but the shift from Jorge Corona's art – who takes the opportunity to cut loose with weird alien designs, then cut bits of them loose – to the Pixar-ish vibes of Nicoletta Baldari's at least helps sell the Lil' Lobo gag.

Alex Spencer



## BATWOMAN

Get Her To The Greeks

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher DC Comics

► Writer Greg Rucka

► Artist DaNi

**ISSUES 1-3** Sometimes, it's hard not to have high expectations, especially when you have a prospect like Greg Rucka returning to write *Batwoman* for the first time in 16 years, following up his spectacular, character-defining 2009-2010 story *Elegy*.

The downside of high expectations, sadly, is that sometimes they're not met, and what we've ended up with here in this new ongoing series is a bafflingly impenetrable mess.

We're once again following ex-soldier and crimefighter Kate Kane, who's in a sanatorium in Greece, having been traumatised by the apparent death of her twin sister (and occasional arch-nemesis) Beth. The bizarre cult who believed Beth to be an avatar of the apocalypse now has Kate in their sights – but Kate's desire for

vengeance pushes her over the edge into violence and murder.

Hesitantly paced and lacking a strong narrative hook, these first three issues are aggressively inaccessible for new readers, and even well-read DC continuity nerds may find themselves scratching their heads.

Rucka is in no mood to answer any of the story's important questions (like why the location has shifted to Greece, or what Darkseid has to do with any of this), instead serving up vague character conflict and inscrutable storytelling.

The art from DaNi sensibly doesn't try to compete with JH Williams III's mind-bending visuals on Rucka's original run, and instead showcases a stylised approach to action and character drama that delivers some impactful moments. However, it's never enough to stop this *Batwoman* relaunch feeling like a deeply perplexing misfire.

Saxon Bullock

**i** The original Batwoman was created in 1956 to counter controversy over *Batman* comics being "homosexual propaganda".



## WAR OF THE WORLDS: THUNDER CHILD

★★★★★

► **RELEASED 30 JUNE**

► Publisher Titan Books

► Writers Matthew Hardy, Rob Jones

► Artist Kevin Castaniero

**GRAPHIC NOVEL** From Orson

Welles to Jeff Wayne to Ice Cube's Razzie-bagging dud of a movie, *The War Of The Worlds* continues to seize our imaginations.

This pacy graphic novel slots into the margins of HG Wells's original tale, fleshing out the plight of HMS *Thunder Child*, the plucky Royal Navy ironclad that engages the invaders.

We meet the people aboard the vessel, including an idealistic couple named the Youngs, whose belief in essential British decency is pitted against the hawkish Major Makepeace. It's an ideological clash that picks up on Wells's theme of imperial overreach, even as our own knowledge of the Martians' malign intent encourages us to side with the warmonger.

Seemingly more indebted to European comics tradition than American, Kevin Castaniero's art brings colour and energy to the *Thunder Child*'s final hours. Faces occasionally verge on the grotesque, but they're vivid and alive. The tripods, meanwhile, resemble steampunk molluscs, tottering on craneleg legs.

The script rations the words, making dialogue count and letting the images breathe: a memorable silent spread shows the blazing wrecks of ships, testimony to the power of the Martians. Come on, *Thunder Child!* **Nick Setchfield**



## DIRECTIVE 8020

And another *Thing*...



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Reviewed on Xbox Series X

► Also available on PS5, PC

► Publisher Supermassive Games

**VIDEOGAME** *Directive 8020* is a decent if derivative terror in outer space. Riffing on the likes of *Alien*, *Dead Space* and *The Thing*, Supermassive Games revives its identifiable cinematic branching narrative structure, as seen in *Until Dawn* and *The Quarry*, where a revolving cast of characters live or die by decisions you make. Only this time, there's more than just high-stakes choice, consequence and quick-time events to worry about.

The game strands you four years from Earth in the orbit of a distant planet, where a human colonisation mission goes wrong. A mysterious alien lifeform

infiltrates the Cassiopeia spacecraft for a deadly game of cat and mouse, moving through a fungal-like network of fleshy globules capable of merging to mimic the crew. Paranoia soon sets in as the colleagues start to doubt one another; as you can imagine, that leads to a bunch of broken friendships and corporate finger-pointing.

It's a shame that only a handful of these characters feel substantial, with the most two-dimensional cast members hogging the spotlight in glittering plot armour while leaving no room for others. This makes it hard to be truly upset when certain characters die, though *Directive 8020* makes sure that risk is always at hand.

The game introduces a new sneaky stealth mechanic to anthology series *The Dark Pictures Anthology*, helping you

move the space techie ensemble through the ship (relatively) undetected. Crouch-walking over broken glass draws enemies' attention, hacking into televisions with your utility wristband distracts them... you get the idea. Get caught during a stealth segment more than once, and there's a high chance you'll have a dead crewmate on your hands.

While these survival-horror moments do offer a fresh approach to Supermassive's well-trodden niche of interactive movies, they come off over-simplified. There's no progression in terms of the tools each character uses, so 8-10 long hours spent scanning and hiding behind alien-gunked spaceship detritus falls flat. This, paired with how few truly meaningful consequences there are, means *Directive 8020* fails to dig deep enough to leave a lasting impression – though its couch co-op mode proves a fun night in with your mates.

**Jasmine Gould-Wilson**

**i** Lashana Lynch (the MCU's Maria Rambeau) supplied the voice and likeness of protagonist Brianna Young.



## BATTLESTAR GALACTICA: SCATTERED HOPES



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Reviewed on PC

► Publisher Dotemu

**VIDEOGAME** *Optimism is a lovely thing*, but it doesn't have much relevance to *Battlestar Galactica*; and the unpredictable, choice-driven experience of *Scattered Hopes* captures that grim desperation very well. You and your crew are following a message from the *Galactica*, and it's not going to be a pleasant journey.

There are 12 sectors to traverse, and permanent upgrades unlockable after each failure means that you're expected to go through multiple runs before you succeed. Events and points of interest are randomised, but one thing is guaranteed: you will never have the resources or options to avoid all negative effects and keep everybody happy. Although some dialogue and events can repeat more than is ideal, trying to keep your *Gunstar* together is an enjoyable challenge.

Your journey is punctuated with space battles, but the objective is never victory; it's survival. The Cylon forces are relentless, so you need to hold out long enough for the FTL jump to be ready. *Gunstar* and squadron upgrades are yet another plate to spin, especially as difficulty jumps once you're halfway through or so.

Occasionally frustrating, often tense, with plenty of difficult decisions to make? That's a great *Battlestar Galactica* game. **Luke Kemp**



Second prize at the annual *The Thing* dress-up convention.



## BEETLEJUICE THE MUSICAL

Say his name, say his name

★★★★★

▶ **RUNNING UNTIL** 27 APRIL 2027

▶ **Venue** Prince Edward Theatre, London

**STAGE SHOW** London's best West

End show right now isn't about a fashion magazine, a wizard or a talking bear – it's about death. That's made blatantly clear from the opening number, performed at a funeral as your host for the evening, Beetlejuice, spells it out in no uncertain terms.

The 1988 Tim Burton classic has received a new lease of afterlife in this musical adaptation, originally staged in Washington, DC in 2018. It's taken seven years since its subsequent Broadway run to cross

over to the other side... of the pond. Now it's Halloween all year round at the Prince Edward Theatre, with the show tweaked slightly to include modern pop culture references and a couple of delicious swipes at the aforementioned *Paddington* – one of which even elicited gasps. Ah, grow up!

The Maitlands are electrocuted and die in their home. They want the new occupants out: enter Beetlejuice, with a plan to be

“It's campy and tongue in cheek, and most of all fun”



David Fynn has some big trousers to fill.

reincarnated by having mourning teenager Lydia say his name three times... As Lydia, Hannah Nordberg is a powerhouse, while David Fynn's Beetlejuice has the audience eating out of his grubby hands in a turn that feels like a modern Frank-N-Furter.

There are subtle nods to Danny Elfman's original score throughout – the two Harry Belafonte songs are of course included – but otherwise it's all original numbers, including a show-stealing

performance of “What I Know Now” by Vanessa Aurora Sierra as Miss Argentina.

With innovative set design, outrageous puppetry and gorgeous lighting that fills the auditorium, *Beetlejuice* is campy and tongue in cheek, and most of all *fun*. You just know it's going to be wildly popular with those that are strange and unusual. **Darren Scott**

The show's been produced in Australia, Brazil, Czechia, Japan, Poland, South Korea, the UAE and on a cruise ship.

## IN OTHER WORLDS

A New Hope

★★★★★

▶ **RUNNING UNTIL** 6 SEPTEMBER

▶ **Venue** Barbican Centre, The Curve

**EXHIBITION** Science fiction's vision

of the future is largely defined by the pessimism of dystopian worlds. Anyone who's been reading the news lately, however, will likely agree that it has not been pessimistic enough.

Australian director and speculative architect Liam Young has a more hopeful vision.

Immersive exhibition *In Other Worlds* sees Young collaborating with figures including *Westworld* co-creator Lisa Joy and *Andor* stars Diego Luna and Denise Gough to imagine futures in which humanity has taken the action necessary to avert climate catastrophe.

These colourful scenarios play out across a series of six sets, each

a mixture of animated film, architectural models, speculative costumes and short audio stories. The first installation, World Machine, envisions a time in which demand for AI has become so great that we have transformed the planet into a supercomputer. Its accompanying story, Lisa Joy's superb “A Common Language” (read by actor Jeffrey Wright), follows an artificial intelligence that yearns for nature.

The Great Endeavour, meanwhile, dreams of the largest engineering project in human history – enormous machines that can suck pollution from the

“Science fiction rooted not in problems, but solutions”



Astronauts could look fabulous too, y'know.

atmosphere, brought to life through a striking 360-degree VFX projection.

If you can forgive the grandiloquence of the narration, not to mention the queues for headphones to listen to the audio stories, there's a compelling theme here of science fiction rooted not in problems, but solutions.

Indeed, *In Other Worlds*' finest moment comes towards the end, in which you are directed to cross a road and enter the dark,

haunting expanse of the Barbican car park, lit by a series of LED screens that hang from the ceiling. On each screen, a documentary explains that many of the seemingly far-fetched planet-saving technologies featured throughout the exhibition are already in development. A car park has rarely felt so hopeful.

**Stephen Kelly**

The costumes were designed by Ane Crabtree, the costume designer behind *Westworld* and *The Handmaid's Tale*.



## JUNE 1990

SFX's time machine hurls us  
back to a random month again

WORDS: NICK SETCHFIELD



Arnie's Doug Quaid flips out in the offices of Rekall.

## FLASHBACK

## False Memory Syndrome

**1 JUNE 1990** It took a while for Douglas Quaid to "get [his] ass to Mars."

Competing for 1990's summer blockbuster crown, *Total Recall* freely adapted Philip K Dick's story "We Can Remember It For You Wholesale", originally published in the April 1966 issue of *The Magazine Of Fantasy & Science Fiction*. The mag's title may have been thuddingly literal, but Dick's story traded in the kind of slippery, fractured reality that made his name, telling of a meek office drone whose implanted memories of the Red Planet conceal a deeper truth...

Ronald Shusett bagged the rights in 1974 and worked on a screenplay with future *Alien* collaborator Dan O'Bannon. Dick's novella demanded

expansion with a third act that took the protagonist beyond Earth. "It seemed obvious to me that the guy has to go to Mars now," O'Bannon recalled, "because the whole thing is his obsession with being James Bond on Mars."

Judged unfilmable, the project smouldered in development hell for over a decade, burning through multiple directors – everyone from *Highlander*'s Russell Mulcahy to body horror king David Cronenberg, who wanted mutant camels in the Martian sewers. Potential stars included Christopher Reeve, Harrison Ford and perennial cinematic everyman Richard Dreyfuss, a choice considerably closer to Dick's workaday hero than the name on the final poster.

2002's *Minority Report* was originally optioned as a potential sequel to star Schwarzenegger.

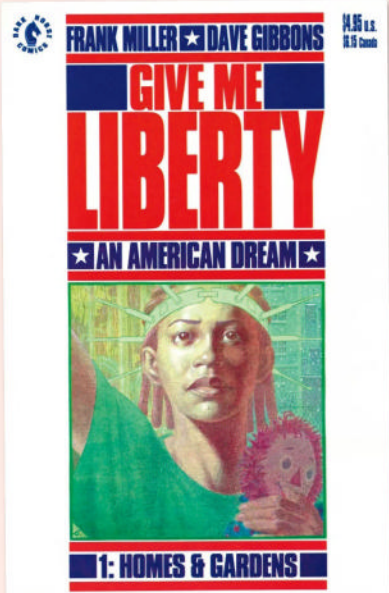
Arnold Schwarzenegger saw *Total Recall* as the perfect showcase for the bicep-loaded brand he had cultivated through such '80s fare as *Conan The Barbarian*, *Commando* and *Predator*. Persuading Carolco to purchase the rights, he approached Paul Verhoeven to direct, impressed by 1987's *RoboCop*.

Rising star Sharon Stone was cast as Quaid's wife Lori alongside Ronny Cox and Michael Ironside, while future *Star Trek* icon Robert Picardo delivered a scene-stealing turn as robot taxi driver Johnny Cab. Filming took place in Mexico, where cast and crew endured the perils of dust inhalation and gastroenteritis. Only Arnie's innards survived unscathed: he had his food imported from the States.

*Total Recall* was the number one box office draw on release and the highest ever opening for an R-rated movie. Schwarzenegger's ascendancy to action genre deity was assured.







## American Nightmare

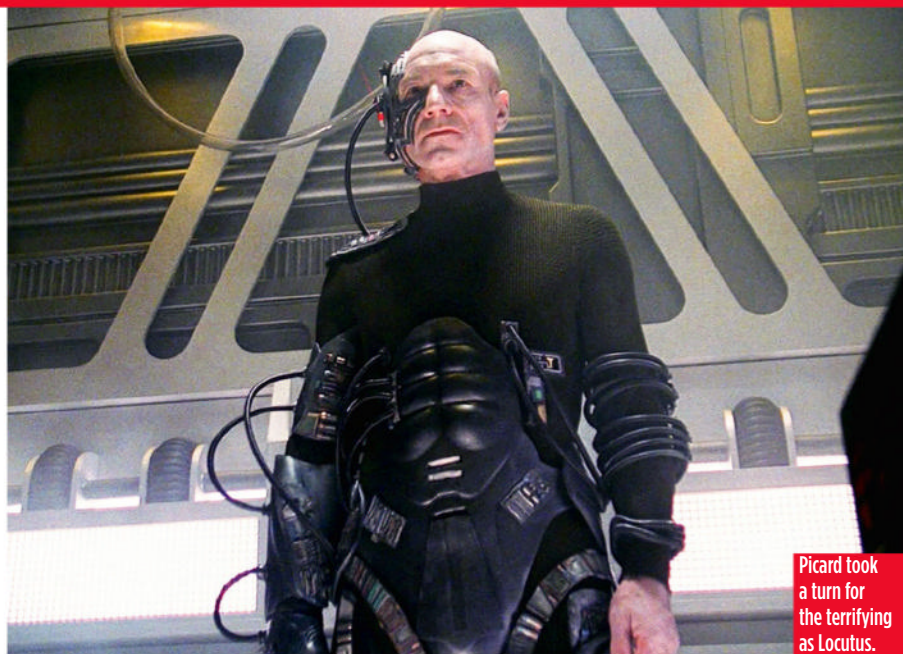
Released within months of each other, *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns* upended the comic book industry, part of a creative pincer movement that redefined the medium's possibilities. *Give Me Liberty* teamed two of the talents behind these landmark titles: Dave Gibbons and Frank Miller.

The pair had met at a convention in London in the early '80s. Reuniting at San Diego Comic Con in 1988, they vowed to collaborate, with Miller as writer and Gibbons as artist. Months later, Miller delivered "a stream-of-consciousness piece of prose", an initial glimpse of a surreal near-future that left Gibbons "happy to have something so outlandish to get my teeth into".

Published by Dark Horse Comics and slyly subtitled *An American Dream*, the four-issue miniseries told the saga of Martha Washington, a trooper in the PAX Peace Force sent to fight in South America. While Martha was a progressive choice of hero for 1990, a young black woman raised in a Chicago housing project, the story balanced its sociopolitical credentials with a satirical, absurdist sense of mischief, phallic orbital lasers and all.

For Miller and Gibbons, it was a chance to sidestep their increasingly worthy reputations. "All of a sudden we're being interviewed on MTV and even by literary journals," Miller told *Comics Interview* in 1990. "I felt that what I was seeing, and some of what I had been doing, had lost that sense of joy... and I wanted more of that."

© DARK HORSE COMICS



Picard took a turn for the terrifying as Locutus.

CBS PHOTO ARCHIVE/GETTY

## Advantage Borg

**18 JUNE 1990** It wasn't the first cliffhanger in *Star Trek* history – that distinction belongs to part one of "The Menagerie" in 1966 – but the audience-baiting tease at the end of "The Best Of Both Worlds Part One" was undeniably the most impactful.

Straddling seasons three and four of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, it found the Enterprise D under Riker's command, facing the forces of the Borg led by a transformed and radicalised Picard,

now known as Locutus. As the camera closed on the hastily promoted Number One declaring "Fire!", the looming summer break seemed to double in length...

For producer Ronald D Moore, it was the moment *The Next Generation* was finally found worthy by longtime fans. "That [episode] was really the pivot of when we became the real *Star Trek*," he observed. "Then we were accepted and the conventions were different. It all turned on a dime."



England's David Platt celebrates his late winner.

### IN REAL LIFE

- **Prime Minister:** Margaret Thatcher
- **US President:** George HW Bush
- **In the charts:** Elton John's sludgy "Sacrifice" knocks ENGLANDneworder's "World In Motion" off the top spot.
- **In the news:** George Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev sign a treaty ending chemical weapon production; Universal Studios Florida opens to the public; the World Cup kicks off in Italy; East Germany officially begins the destruction of the Berlin Wall and Checkpoint Charlie is dismantled; Nelson Mandela tours North America.

ALBERT COOPER/DAILY MIRROR/MIRRORPIX VIA GETTY

### ON THE SHELF



- *Back To The Future III* and British horror-comedy *I Bought A Vampire Motorcycle* feature in *Starburst* issue 143.

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# Greek Mythology

Ancient tales continue to ripple through popular culture. Do you know your Homer homages, or is it all Greek to you?

Quizmaster Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor

## QUESTION 1

Name the *Star Trek* episode in which the crew are held captive by the Greek god Apollo.

## QUESTION 2

In Rick Riordan's YA series *Percy Jackson & The Olympians*, who is Percy the son of?

## QUESTION 3

Name the giant bronze statue battled by the heroes in 1963's *Jason And The Argonauts*.

## QUESTION 4 Picture Question

Name this *Doctor Who* story that riffs on Greek mythology.

## QUESTION 5

In which '70s TV show would you find characters called Apollo, Athena and Cassiopeia?

## QUESTION 6

Which actor played Zeus in 1981's *Clash Of The Titans*?

## QUESTION 7

And who played Zeus in the 2024 Netflix comedy-drama *Kaos*?

## QUESTION 8 Picture Question

Supply the title that's been removed from this film poster.

## QUESTION 9

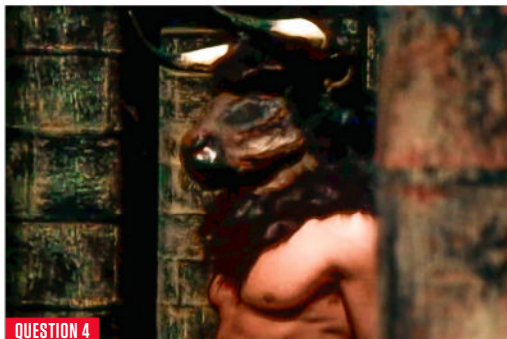
Name the '90s TV series that starred Kevin Sorbo as a hero from Greek mythology.

## QUESTION 10

In which superhero movie are Atlas's daughters Hespera and Kalypso the villains?

## QUESTION 11

In which fantasy world can you find Centaurs called Glenstorm, Cloudbirth and Roonwit?



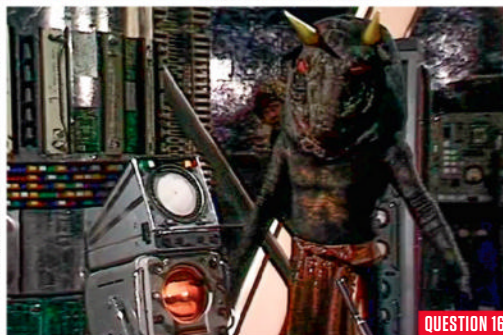
QUESTION 4



QUESTION 8



QUESTION 12



QUESTION 16

## QUESTION 12 Picture Question

Identify this film, based on a famous Greek myth.

## QUESTION 13

Who is seen riding a Pegasus-like winged horse in both *Thor: Ragnarok* and *Avengers: Endgame*?

## QUESTION 14

Who played the titular son of Zeus in the 1970 comedy *Hercules In New York*?

## QUESTION 15

Which artefact has featured in episodes of *Atlantis*, *Charmed*, *Sleepy Hollow*, *Warehouse 13* and *Xena: Warrior Princess*?

## QUESTION 16 Picture Question

Name this *Doctor Who* story that riffs on Greek mythology.

## QUESTION 17

The *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* episode "Help" features a girl who – like the Trojan priestess Cassandra – can foresee the future. What's her name?

## QUESTION 18

In the '80s cartoon *Ulysses 31*, what's the name of the giant spaceship commanded by Ulysses?

## QUESTION 19

Wonder Woman's mother is based on an Amazon queen from Greek mythology. What name do they both share?

## QUESTION 20

Which mythological creature is Zefram Cochrane's warp ship (as seen in *Star Trek: First Contact*) named after?

Answers  
1 "Who Mourns For Adonais?" 2 "The Time Monster" 3 Talos 4 "The Time Monster" 5 *Battlestar Galactica* 6 Laurence Olivier 7 Jeff Goldblum 8 *The Gorgon* 9 *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* 10 *Shazam! Fury Of The Gods* 11 Narnia 12 Orpheus 13 Valkyrie 14 Arnold Schwarzenegger 15 Pandora's Box 16 "The Horns Of Nimrod" 17 Cassie (Newt) 18 The Phoenix 20 The Phoenix

## How did you do?

What is your fate?

0-5

Chained to a rock for eternity

6-10

Taunted by the Harpies

11-15

Roaming the Asphodel Fields

16-19

As strong as Hercules

20

King of the Gods



# SFX

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"The squirrels are on their way"



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# Total Recall

Personal recollections of cherished sci-fi and fantasy



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## Spider-Man And Zoids

**Darren Scott, Editor**



Superheroes of all kinds were in my life from early on – probably partly because I was one of three brothers – be it cartoons, comics, annuals or summer specials. But it wasn't until Marvel UK reprinted *Secret Wars* in 1985 that the fan gene was properly activated in my brain. Suddenly everything came together – including differentiating between DC and Marvel – and I was fully on-board.

So when the publishers decided to resurrect their weekly Spider-title as *Spider-Man And Zoids* in March 1986, I was ready. I'd always been a Spider-fan, but now it felt like I really knew what was going on.

And what a time to be a fan... The new black costume (which I loved so much in *Secret Wars*

– I still cherish my original '80s Mattel action figure), the Puma, Black Cat, Hobgoblin... Suddenly I understood that comics were so much more than just a short adventure with no consequences – there was a proper storyline that kept unravelling.

The artwork of Ron Frenz is burned in my brain forever, alongside so many of his fantastic *Amazing Spider-Man* covers that were reprinted. That is, when there wasn't a giant ruddy toy on the cover.

*Vol II*, as this UK reprint was subtitled, paired Peter Parker with Tomy's sci-fi creature toyline Zoids, ported over from a successful run in *Secret Wars*. Little did I know that this strip would come to be an important part of comic history, being some early work by Grant Morrison. My interests lay elsewhere at the time though.

Back-up strips included *Sectaurs*, *Star Wars*, *Star Brand*, *Strikeforce: Morituri*, and an epilogue to *Secret Wars II* – but it was the return of the new-look *Fantastic Four* from issue five that thrilled me the most. Aside from *Secret Wars*, there'd been no Marvel heroes in a back-up strip since *Power Pack* left the pages of *ThunderCats*.

*Spider-Man And Zoids* lasted a mere 51 issues, closing in February 1987 and taking a three-year break. But it set me on a Spider-collecting path that continues to this day, with many of the storylines that thrilled the young me now on my shelves as graphic novels – thankfully complete after cuts I was unaware of years ago. And not a robot toy in sight! 🕸

Darren still laments the fact that there wasn't an ongoing *Amazing Friends* comic.

### Fact Attack!

→ *Spider-Man Comics Weekly* ran under various guises from February 1973, fizzling out as *Spidey Comic* with issue 666 in December 1985.

→ *The Complete Spider-Man*, which republished four current Spidey tales each month in a US format, ran from 1990 to 1992.

→ *The Exploits Of Spider-Man*, which included UK hero Motormouth and *Spider-Man* 2099 reprints, ran from 1992 to 1995.

→ *The Astonishing Spider-Man* has been in continuous publication across various volumes since 1995, reprinting two stories per issue.

→ A new *Zoids* comic was planned – work had begun on the first issue – but it was cancelled before it saw the light of day.



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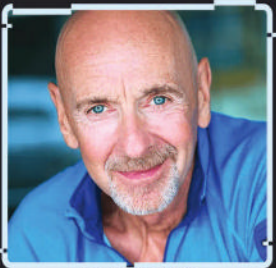
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