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*The
Mandalorian*

BATWOMAN

Bong Joon-ho

NEW
MUTANTS

Rogue Trooper

ATTACK ON
TITAN

Frankenstein
WESTWORLD

*The Letter For
The King*

MICHAEL
EMERSON

*Koko-Di
Koko-Da*

CARMILLA

*Starship
Troopers*

Mulan

Let's get down to
business! Director Niki
Caro discusses taking
on a Disney classic

Don't make a sound...
we explore the silent
world of A Quiet
Place Part II with John
Krasinski, Emily Blunt and
Cillian Murphy **PAGE 20**

The Sound Of Silence



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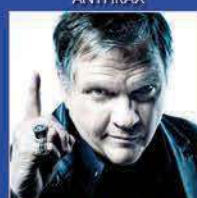
SACHA DHAWAN
DOCTOR WHO, DRACULA



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MANDALORIAN, AMERICAN GODS



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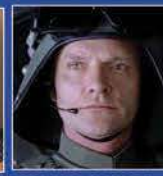
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I'm desperately hoping

winter will be over by the time you read this, which means a new season, a whole new slew of sci-fi, fantasy and horror goodies, and a new editor for *SciFiNow* magazine. I must say I am truly honoured to be taking over the mantle of this illustrious publication, and look forward to exciting genre times ahead.

And what an issue to start on! Once we were all over the panic of trying to silently eat popcorn in the cinema, it turned out that *A Quiet Place* would be one of a number of great horror films in 2018. The post-apocalyptic movie sent shivers down the spines of cinema-goers around the world and this month we were delighted to sit down with director John Krasinski and stars Emily Blunt and Cillian Murphy to discuss its highly-anticipated sequel, *A Quiet Place Part II*.

Elsewhere in the issue, Disney+ is finally here (or it will be, just a couple of weeks after you read this) and we can't wait! To make sure you're prepared for the binge-fest ahead, we have given you a rundown of all the lovely content you can expect from the streaming service. We even spoke to stars Pedro Pascal, Gina Carano and Carl Weathers about one of the platform's biggest programmes, *The Mandalorian*, a western-esque show which follows a lone bounty hunter throughout the *Star Wars* universe.

Also this month, we introduced a new generation of kids to the Psammead with a look at new Sky series, *Four Kids And It* and we honoured our fathers by speaking to *Mulan* director Niki Caro about taking on a live action version of the Disney classic. Talking of badass women, we also spoke to *Batwoman's* showrunner Caroline Dries and actor Camrus Johnson about the newest member of the Arrowverse, and to top it all off we sat down for a nice long chat with genre legend and ultimate bad guy, Michael Emerson.

If that wasn't enough, we caught up with Oscar-winning, Bong Joon-ho to talk about his 2006 classic *The Host*; took an in-depth look into the troubled life of Mary Shelley and her ground-breaking novel, *Frankenstein*; and got down and dirty with those damn bugs with a look at Paul Verhoeven's classic sci-fi satire, *Starship Troopers*.

So get 'quietly' excited for another great month of genre, and if you have any feedback on the magazine, questions, or if you just want

Rachael Harper

Rachael Harper, Editor

to say hi, email me at sfn.ed@kelsey.co.uk or get in touch via our social media channels.



H O N E

GET 'EXCELLENT' ABOUT BILL AND TED FACE THE MUSIC

More and more is getting revealed about *Bill And Ted Face The Music*, the third movie featuring the Wyld Stallyns, including the return of Death from *Bill And Ted's Bogus Journey*. We couldn't be more excited to see the time-travelling duo again in August 2020.



PORTAL

08 NEW MUTANTS

It's finally here! We talk about the dark new *X-Men* film.

10 WESTWORLD

What we know so far before we head into Season Three.

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We explore the first ever live action interactive sci-fi film.

FEATURES

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We speak to John Krasinski, Emily Blunt and Cillian Murphy about the silent sequel we've been quietly excited about.

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We speak to the cast and crew about the Arrowverse's newest addition.

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We find out more about Netflix's newest swashbuckling fantasy adventure.

36 MICHAEL EMERSON

From *Lost*, to *Saw*, to *Arrow*, to *The Dark Knight Returns*, we chat with genre's most famous bad guy, Michael Emerson.

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We speak to *Mulan* director Niki Caro about taking on a Disney classic.

48 THE MANDALORIAN

With Disney + mere weeks away, we speak to the cast behind one of the platform's most anticipated shows.

PLUS:

Rogue Trooper, *Four Kids And It*, *Carmilla*, *Koko-Di Koko-Da*, *Attack On Titan*.

REVIEWS

62 BIRDS OF PREY

How's Harley coping with her very own movie?

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Is Leigh Whannell's movie a monster hit?

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Is it gold rings or game over for Sonic?

PLUS:

Castle Rock, *Ready Or Not*, *Superman Red Son*, *Titans*, *I Am Not Okay With This*, *Locke And Key* and more...

BOOK CLUB

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Natasha Pulley gives us some insight into her sequel to *The Watchmaker Of Filigree Street*.

72 SPENCER LAMM

We speak to the man who was there at the very beginning of *The Matrix* about bringing the movie's comic books together for the first time.

PLUS:

All the latest book reviews.

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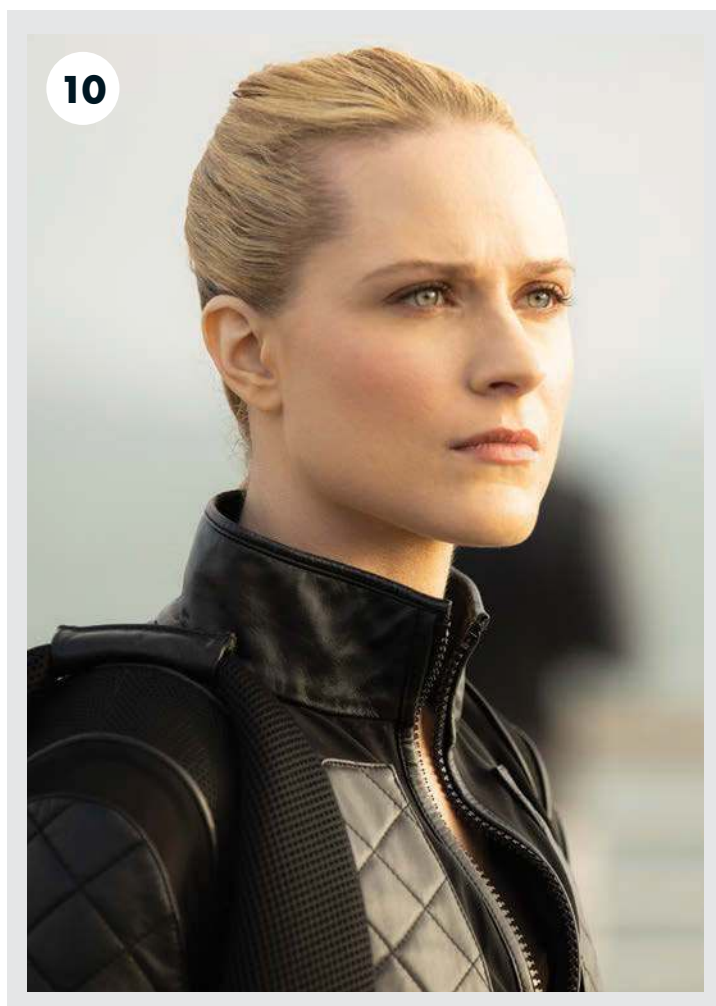
We take an in-depth look at *Frankenstein* author Mary Shelley and her monster.

88 STARSHIP TROOPERS

We would like to know more about Paul Verhoeven's often-overlooked classic.

92 THE HOST

We speak to Boon Jong-ho about showing the monster with his 2006 movie *The Host*.





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MEET THE TEAM

Q. What Disney + programme are you most looking forward to?



RACHAEL HARPER
EDITOR

A. The Mandalorian
It's a western-esque *Star Wars* show full of intergalactic dodgy deals and... okay fine it's because of Baby Yoda.



ABIGAIL CHANDLER
DEPUTY EDITOR

A. WandaVision
Looks trippy and original, and an exploration of Wanda and her powers is long overdue!



MARCUS FAINT
ART EDITOR

A. The Mandalorian
Prince Oberyn battling across a galaxy far, far away. Add in to the mix a fully animated Funko figure and I'm sold!



ANNIE MCKENNA
SUB EDITOR

A. The Mandalorian
Mysterious galactic bounty hunter, funky tech and a good measure of original *Star Wars* nostalgia - I'm in!

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98 NEXT ISSUE

Your first sneak-peek at the next issue of *SciFiNow*.

PORTAL

Your essential, trustworthy and unrivalled guide to the latest genre happenings

THE MUTANT CHRONICLES

Just when we were about to give up all hope on **The New Mutants**, along comes the exciting news that the film has a new release date. We speak to production designer, Molly Hughes, to find out what we can expect from the X-Men universe's newest addition...

WORDS RACHAEL HARPER INTERVIEWS ADAM TANSWELL

WELL, AFTER MANY ups and downs, 20th Century Fox has finally confirmed that *The New Mutants* will reach cinemas on 3 April 2020, and we couldn't be more excited.

Based on the 1982 Marvel graphic novel written by Chris Claremont and illustrated by Bob McLeod, *The New Mutants* follows five mutants: Rahne Sinclair/Wolfsbane (played in the movie by Maisie Williams), Illyana Rasputin/Magik (Anya Taylor-Joy), Sam Guthrie/Cannonball (Charlie Heaton), Danielle Moonstar/Mirage (Blu Hunt) and Roberto da Costa/Sunspot (Henry Zaga).

The movie, directed by *The Fault In Our Stars*' Josh Boone (who also wrote the film alongside Knate Lee) is set to take place in an isolated hospital where the group of young mutants is being held for psychiatric monitoring and to learn to control their powers. However, when strange occurrences begin to take place, both their new mutant abilities and their friendships will be tested as they try to make it out alive.

Boone's film has been in limbo since it originally finished shooting back in 2017. Its initial 2018 release date has been delayed a number of times due to reported clashes with other movies in the *X-Men* universe, as well re-shoots being ordered to reportedly change the tone of the movie, with test audiences apparently reacting favourably to the horror vibe of the film. But that's all in the past

now, so what can we expect from *The New Mutants* when it's released?

"Well, much of the movie takes place within the confines of Milbury State Hospital, where the kids are confined," explains production designer, Molly Hughes. "But we do have moments where we get a little bit of each characters' back story, because it is an origin film. So, we're being introduced to these new mutants and how they got here."

"We knew from the get-go that we were trying something new, and that's what Josh sold to the studio, something unexpected, as you introduce a new generation [to] *X-Men*. Appealing to the audience who will be the age of these kids in a different way than, I would say, the kids of today are not the *Twilight* generation, for example. There's an interest in organic reality mixed into *Stranger Things*, for example. So, our film is very grounded in reality."

As for the widely-reported horror elements, will the movie have a dark tone? "Josh is a big horror buff and he's a big Stephen King [fan]. He's attached to a number of Stephen King projects and he really brought the horror element to it," says Hughes. "And that comes through in the location that we chose. So, we decided to put them in this hospital as a way of adding a level to it where, as soon as the kids are here and we're brought into the story, things start to happen here and we don't know what's causing them."

Hughes also confirms that the movie will strive to stand out from the other *X-Men* movies: "We're trying to be our own [thing], I think the studio would like it to be its own new idea moving forward. I am sure they often connect in the future somewhere, but for the moment, *The New Mutants* are their own thing."

The New Mutants is due to be in cinemas on 3 April.



010 WESTWORLD



We bring you up-to-date with all things *Westworld*

011 DISNEY +



A rundown of what we can look forward to on Disney +

012 HUMAN FRONTIER



We go into the studio for a look at Big Finish's latest sci-fi play

018 THE COMPLEX



A look at the very first live action interactive sci-fi film...





EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT **WESTWORLD** SEASON THREE

According to co-showrunner Lisa Joy, writing *Westworld* is “like solving a complicated equation”. Here are some notes to help you put together Season Three’s equation...

WORDS ABIGAIL CHANDLER INTERVIEWS ALEX GUTIÉRREZ FOR DIARI ARA

WHERE DID SEASON TWO LEAVE US?

Dolores (Evan Rachel Wood) escaped the park while inhabiting a Host body based on Charlotte Hale (Tessa Thompson). In the real world, she rebuilt the deceased Host Bernard (Jeffrey Wright) and her own body, and is also in possession of the control units of five Hosts – who those are remains to be seen, although one is presumably now in Hale’s body.

THE REAL WORLD

Season Three will properly explore the world outside of the park for the first time, as Dolores and Bernard attempt to navigate the human world. Dolores meets Caleb (Aaron Paul), a down-on-his-luck construction worker forced to turn to crime, and finds that humans in the real world are nothing like the top 1% who can afford to visit *Westworld*. “After all, people come to this park to amuse themselves shooting robots and using them as toys,” co-showrunner Lisa Joy says. “What would that robot eye perceive by examining

that human nature? What can we learn from those perceptions?” The real-world, (probably) human characters also include mysterious roles played by Lena Waithe, Kid Cudi and Marshawn Lynch, with Vincent Cassel playing a villain.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE MAN IN BLACK?

Ed Harris’ Man in Black found himself in the far future, being questioned by a Host modelled on his daughter at the end of Season Two. Is he in a physical Host body in the future? Or is he in The Forge, Delos’ digital store of all their guest data?

WHO IS STILL IN THE PARK?

Maeve (Thandie Newton) got her daughter safely to the Host ‘afterlife’ at the end of Season Two, but was killed in the process. Season Three sees her in a new park, one modelled on World War II, but we don’t know yet if she retains her memories, or her Host superpowers. Luke Hemsworth’s Ashley

Season Two saw Dolores escape to the real world...

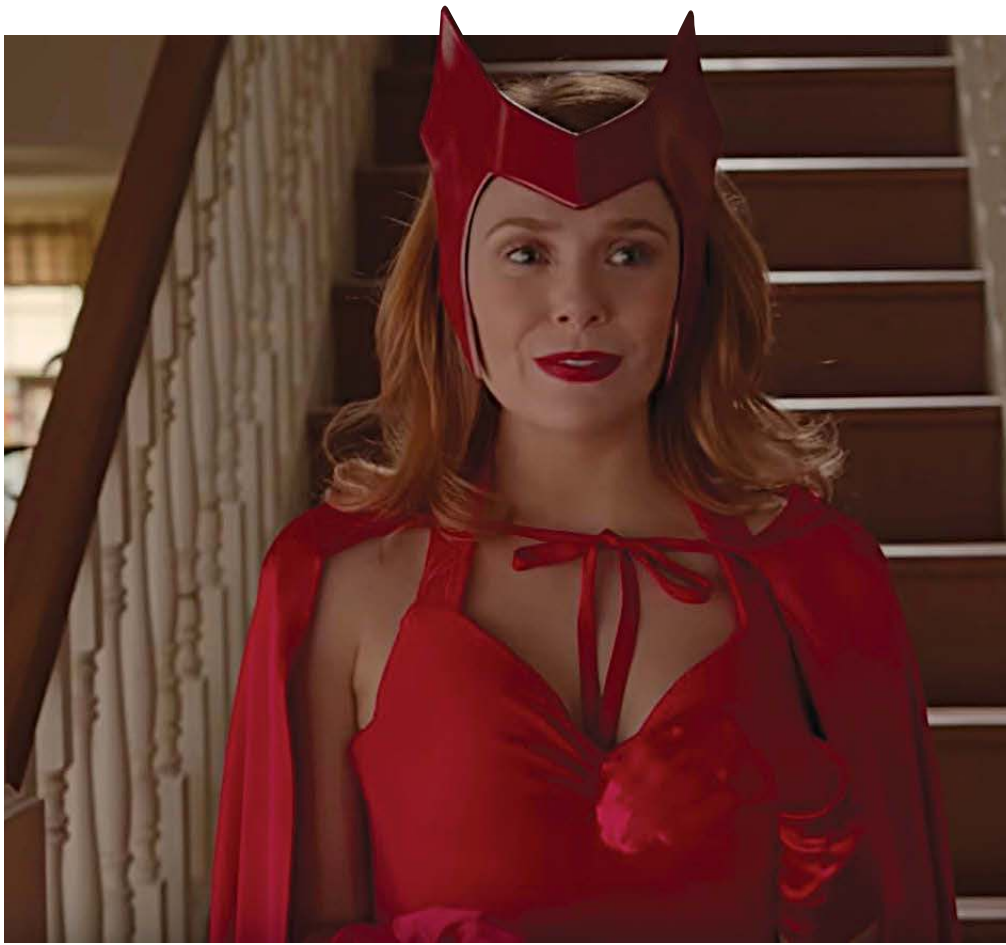


Stubbs, the park security guy strongly hinted to be a self-aware Host in the Season Two finale, is also back for Season Three.

SEASON THREE IS STILL ALL ABOUT HUMAN NATURE

At the end of Season Two, Dolores gained access to Delos’ human ‘code’ and now claims to understand humans completely. Joy explains that human DNA means that we don’t have free will so much as a “destiny marked by biology and evolution... We have inherited impulses that determine us and escape our control, but in spite of everything we try to change and be better. Trying to resist toxic impulses is one of the noblest instincts that people can have.” So far, Teddy (James Marsden) and Bernard have had to rein in Dolores’ toxic impulses. On her own, when faced with real-world humanity, will Dolores find herself becoming more, or less, human?

Westworld Season Three begins on Sky Atlantic on 16 March.



MORE FROM DISNEY+

MARVEL

Marvel is investing hard in Disney + , with upcoming shows focusing on Hawkeye, She-Hulk, Ms Marvel and Moon Knight, plus the animated Marvel's *What If...*

STAR WARS

A Cassian Andor prequel, spinning off from *Rogue One*, and the return of Ewan McGregor in an Obi-Wan Kenobi series are on their way.

AND MORE!

Including *Monsters Inc* sequel series *Monsters At Work*, and live action Christmas adventure *Noelle*, starring Anna Kendrick and Bill Hader.

DISNEY+ IS COMING

As Disney+ launches in the UK, we take a look at the streaming platform's biggest upcoming shows, and what we know about them

WORDS ABIGAIL CHANDLER



THE FALCON AND THE WINTER SOLDIER

AUGUST 2020

STEVE ROGERS MAY have passed on the Captain America baton to Sam Wilson (Anthony Mackie) in *Endgame*, but this is the first time we actually see Sam practicing with the shield.

Previously the only thing that Sam and Bucky (Sebastian Stan) had in common was a shared best friend. How will they cope when they have to team up to bring down Zemo (Daniel Brühl)?

Sam will have some competition for the Captain America role, as the US army wants to give it to John Walker (Wyatt Russell), AKA the US Agent.

ALSO STARRING... Emily VanCamp is returning as Sharon Carter.



WANDAVISION

DECEMBER 2020

WANDAVISION SEES WANDA (Elizabeth Olsen) trapped in a variety of classic sitcom settings with her deceased love Vision (Paul Bettany). In one, she's wearing a nod to her classic Scarlet Witch costume.

This sitcom world is clearly not real, with real-world Wanda seen encroaching on it. One of the sitcom flashes shows Wanda and Vision looking down on twin cots – in the comics, these twins go on to become Young Avengers Wiccan and Speed.

ALSO STARRING... *WandaVision* is bringing back Kat Dennings as *Thor's* Darcy and Randall Park as *Ant Man And The Wasp's* Jimmy Woo, while Teyonah Parris is a grown-up Monica Rambeau, and Kathryn Hahn is in an undisclosed role.



LOKI

SPRING 2021

THE NEW TRAILER for *Loki* shows the title treatment going through a number of changes before settling on the final version. This could be a nod to the different time periods/universes that the show is set in, or even to Loki's famous shape-shifting tendencies.

Our one glimpse of Loki (Tom Hiddleston) in the trailer sees him wearing the logo of the Time Variance Authority, an organisation that polices the timelines of the multiverse.

There isn't much information out there right now on *Loki* but we have to wait a little longer for this one, with the release being set for 2021.

ALSO STARRING... Owen Wilson, Gugu Mbatha-Raw and Sophia Di Martino are also set to appear.

WELCOME TO THE HUMAN FRONTIER

We visit the Big Finish studio to speak to writer and director Nicholas Briggs and star Clive Wood about new audio sci-fi drama, *Human Frontier*

WORDS ALASDAIR STUART

A colony ship with thousands of souls aboard. A top secret mission. A verdant planet named Triton. A problem none of them could have seen coming. Big Finish's latest, *Human Frontier*, deals with some big SF concepts.

"I thought about how human beings from different eras are very different. I mean, what would it actually be like if you had someone from the 1600s turn up here, or for us to go back there? I think it'd be almost impossible for them to relate to each other because of their assumptions about life," says Nick Briggs, who wrote and directed the new play.

'Human Frontier' is the name of both the series and the colony ship it's set on. Sent on a slow course from Earth, and buried in secrecy, the Human Frontier crew are shocked to discover someone has beaten them to their new home. Someone from Earth who does *not* want to share.

"I came up with the idea of people travelling to a distant planet but not being able to go there quickly, so they go into cryogenic suspension," Briggs continues. "And then they get there and find that people have

already beaten them to it and that they have all sorts of different assumptions about life.

"The people who colonised this planet have been there for 300 years. When this spaceship turns up, they think, 'what? If this was happening, we would have known about it!' But it was all done in secret... The idea underpinning it is 'do we really have free will and how much are we controlled?' Because we all think we know what the world's about, but that knowledge we take is on trust."

Briggs not only wrote and directed *Human Frontier*, he is also executive producer of Big Finish. You will have heard Nick many times given that he's the voice of the Daleks and the Cybermen. "It really is good to not be constrained by a format," he says when we ask if he enjoys working in his own 'sandbox'. "But then, there's the tyranny of choice. Because you could, literally, do anything.

And you could drown and not grab hold of something. For me, I need that long gestation period of just thinking about it; becoming familiar with the worlds I'm creating.

"So after thinking about them for several months they sort of start to become real in your mind in the way that *Doctor Who* concepts become 'real' in your mind. Because you know them. You know about the Tardis. I have to become familiar with the *Human Frontier* ship and the planet Triton and the back story. And the characters as well. They had to become familiar so that I felt I had the authority to write about them convincingly."

Speaking of characters, *Human Frontier* features the increasingly troubled President Brett Triton, played with Shakespearean relish by Clive Wood, who is desperate to stop the colonists from either landing or escaping. But his world is starting to collapse, Brett

has blood on his hands and the Human Frontier may be his last hope as well as his arch nemesis. "He's a human being. Everyone is fallible, but the more power people have, the more they abuse it," says Wood

of his role. "There are scenes where he is so fearful and he's dealing with that fear. But when you've been in power all your life, it's a kind of an alien concept..."

"I think *Human Frontier*'s got resonances of what's happening in this world now... we're all still tied into a ritual suspicion of technology, always looking for someone else to give us answers from high above. It's that kind of whole tribalism that exists and I just thought, 'I got to have a crack at that'."

So, are there plans for more *Human Frontier*? "Yeah, I can go forward from that point," nods Briggs. "Or I can go back to when the spaceship first set off from Mars or from the Earth. Or when they first arrived on Triton to colonise it. I could tell all those stories. I've got lots of ideas of potential."

Human Frontier is released in May 2020.



From left to right: Mark Elstob, Genevieve Gaunt, Pepter Lunkuse, Nicholas Briggs, Lucy Briggs-Owen and Clive Wood.

“WE’RE ALL STILL TIED INTO A RITUAL SUSPICION OF TECHNOLOGY”
CLIVE WOOD



All images © Tony Whitmore



AND NOW FOR THE BIG FINISH

Never heard of Big Finish? Never fear! Here is a brief lowdown...

WHAT IS BIG FINISH?

Big Finish is an audio production company which has been creating *Doctor Who*, *Doctor Who* tie-in material and original audio drama since 1996. Since then it has expanded its range to include titles focusing on Rose Tyler, Donna Noble, Torchwood and original properties.

SO IT PRODUCES NEW DOCTOR WHO STORIES? WITH THE ORIGINAL CAST?

Among other things, yes! Their stories are full cast, complete with music and special effects and cover everything from occasional visits from the First Doctor all the way to side stories featuring 10, 11 and 12. Length varies, with the 'Short Trips' series usually being one narrator and roughly half an hour while full length stories feature a full cast and clock in at roughly two hours.

IS THERE ANYTHING BIG FINISH DOESN'T COVER?

It doesn't tend to run stories featuring the current incarnation of the Doctor, so no TimeFam audio adventures just yet. It's got very good at doing Doctor-specific adventures without the actual actor involved. The 12th Doctor Chronicles set, releasing shortly, is a good example of that as is its solo narration Short Trips episodes.

BRILLIANT! WHERE SHOULD WE START?

Honestly, there are three really good ways to get into Big Finish. The first is to pick your favorite Doctor and see what it's produced for them. The second is to pick a title that looks interesting and jump straight on in... or start with an Original.

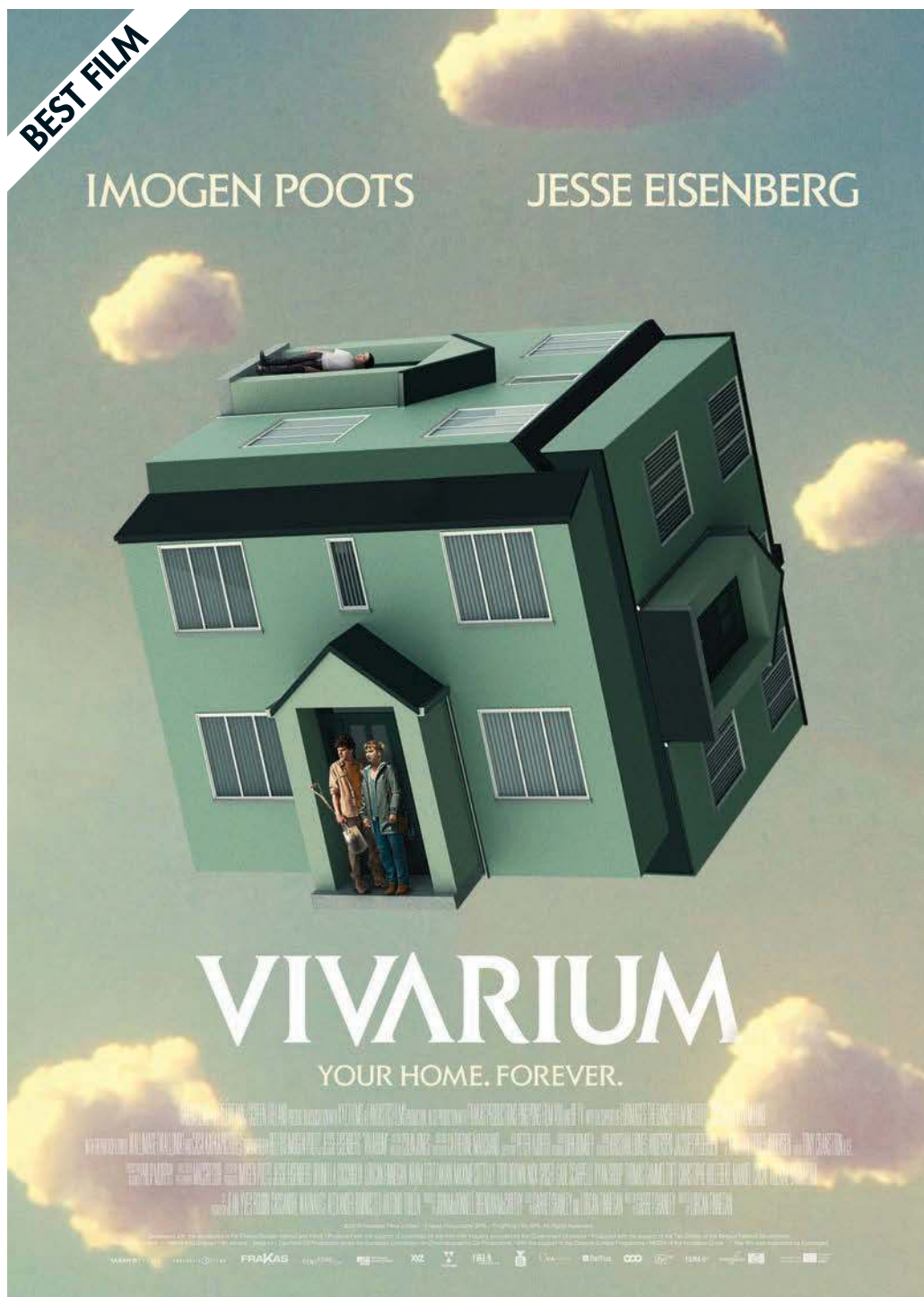


We joined Big Finish in the studio as it recorded *Human Frontier*.

BEST OF THE BILLBOARDS

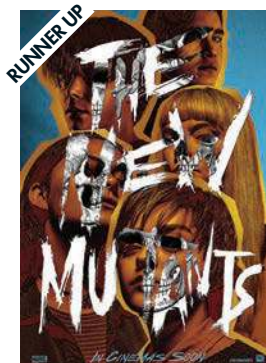
Celebrating the best, worst and weirdest movie posters out there

WORDS ABIGAIL CHANDLER



VIVARIUM

This is a weird, gorgeous puzzle-box of a poster, and a perfect summing-up of the film the poster is promoting. It is both twee and deeply unsettling, and more sinister the more you look at it (which we have... alot...). The poster raises so many questions. Who is that woman in the doorway of the top face of the house? Why does Jesse Eisenberg have a spade? This, ladies and gentlemen, is how to do a poster.



THE NEW MUTANTS

The New Mutants is finally coming to cinemas in April and this poster marks a statement of intent: we're coming.



SPIRAL

Spiral is a spin off from the *Saw* franchise. It could (perhaps should) be a dumb and schlocky poster. Instead it looks like a prestige crime thriller. Intriguing.



BILL AND TED FACE THE MUSIC

Thanks to the colour choice, you could mistakenly think that a *Doctor Who* film is on its way...

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introduced by
ROY THOMAS

Preface by
**MICHAEL
MOORCOCK**

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The X-Men! The Avengers!
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Marvel chronicles assembles
the greatest Super Heroes
of the Sixties!



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HELLO KITTY

We speak to Zoë Kravitz about her Catwoman costume in *The Batman*...

INTERVIEW: ADAM TANSWELL

"The costume has been an evolution," Zoë Kravitz says on her Catwoman costume for *The Batman*. "Jacqueline Durran, our incredible costume designer, has been beautifully collaborative. It wasn't as though I came to set and she threw something on me. No, it's been a long process and we've had many conversations about what we wanted it to look like. Matt, our director, had specific ideas, so there were many fittings where we would change things here and alter things there. Recently, we got to a place where we would put it on and think: 'There she is. There it is.' It's exciting. There's no part of me that feels casual about it. They called me to set recently and I was in the outfit – and I looked at everyone and it was so cool. I remember thinking: 'Oh my God... This is incredible. This is such a cool thing to do.' What they did with the costume is really exciting..."



© Gage Skidmore

R-BATZ SUIT REVEALED

Matt Reeves unveils a sneak peek at the new Batman suit

WORDS RACHAEL HARPER

A new *Batman* film is always highly anticipated and Matt Reeves, director of the new movie, has put the internet all-of-a-flutter with a first look at the new Batsuit.

Reportedly set in the Nineties, Reeves' *The Batman* is set to star Robert Pattinson as the Bat alongside Jeffrey Wright as Commissioner Gordon, Andy Serkis as Alfred Pennyworth, Colin Farrell as Oz, Zoe Kravitz as Selina Kyle (see box-out left) and Paul Dano as The Riddler.

Reeves showed snippets of the iconic suit via Twitter in a video entitled 'The Batman – Camera Test'. Bathed in red light and set to a macabre score by Academy Award winner Michael Giacchino (who has also composed scores for *Spiderman: Far From Home*, *The Incredibles* and *Doctor Strange* among many others) the video unveils Pattinson wearing the iconic costume for the first time.

Though less than a minute long, the video reveals a few interesting points of note. Firstly,

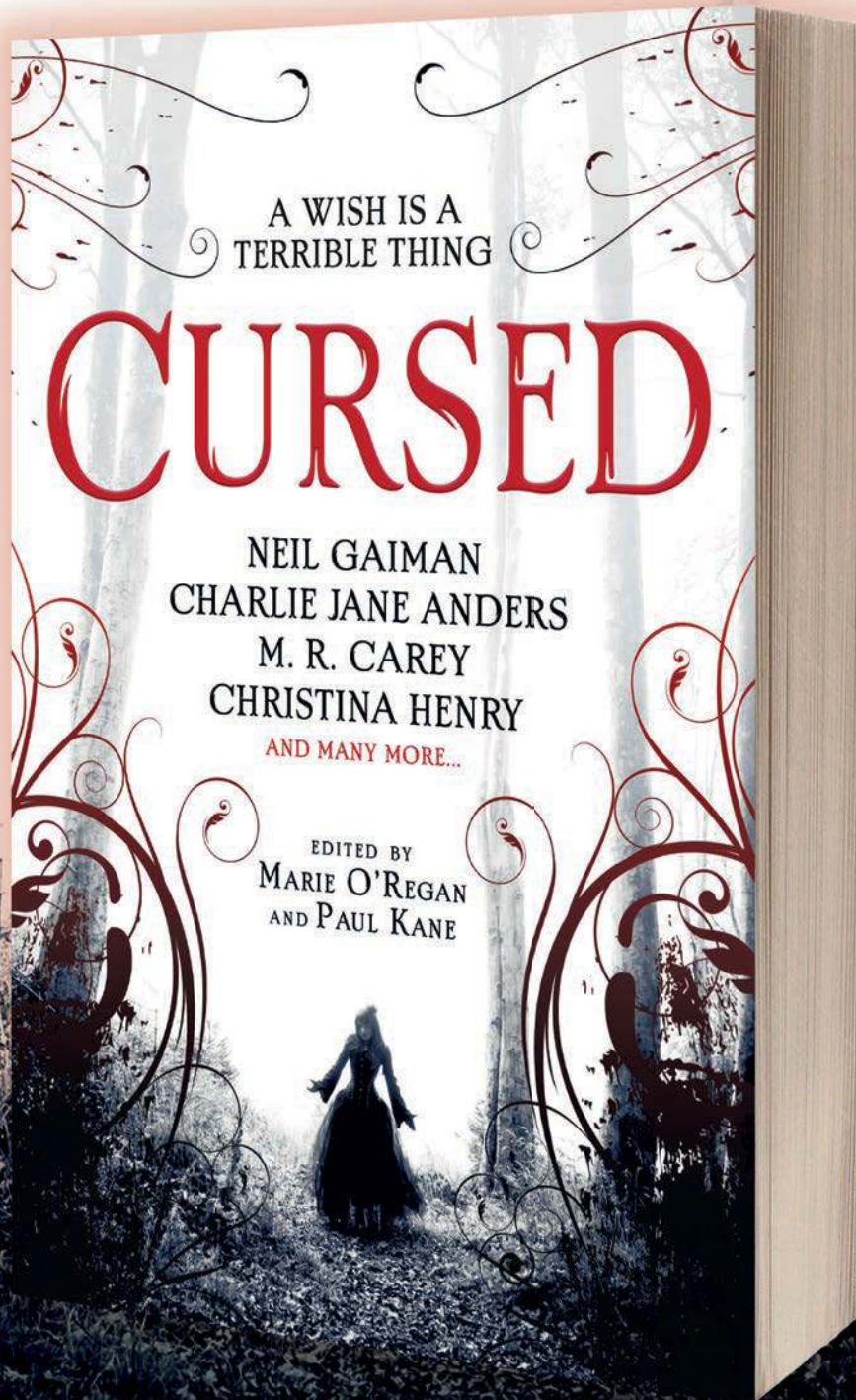
the armoured-looking suit – complete with interlocking plates – has, some have said, remnants of the look from the 2015 videogame *Batman Arkham Knight*, which sees Batman rescuing Gotham from fear toxin. However, the game's antagonists, Scarecrow and Deathstroke, are characters which have not been announced as being part of the film.

The video also has a focus on the suit's chest piece, which isn't the classic Batman symbol but rather a bat-like shape that looks to be functional, which some commenters have mused could be a gun made from the weapon which killed Batman's parents (as seen in *Detective Comics #1000*). Interestingly, we do not see the ears in the video – an appendage which is also not seen on the new chest piece...

Obviously, this is all conjecture right now and we will have to wait until the movie's June 2021 release date to see the suit in its full glory.



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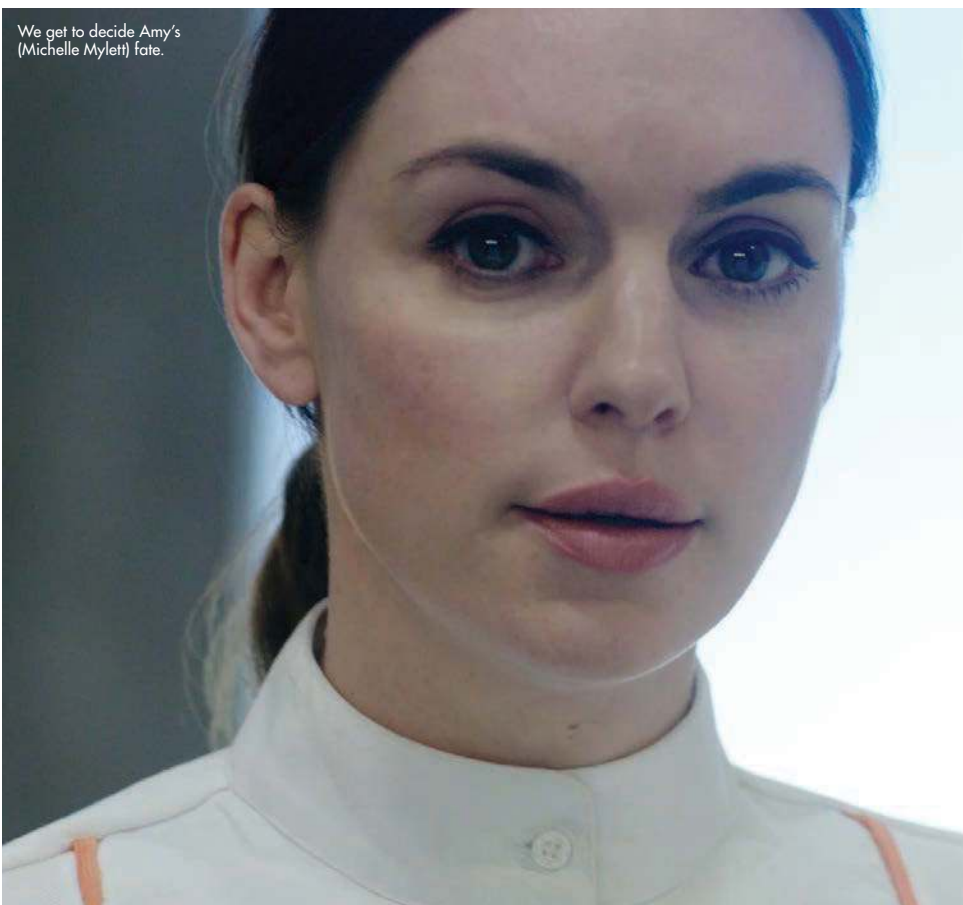
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The Complex has eight different endings...

We get to decide Amy's (Michelle Mylett) fate.



CHOICES CHOICES...

What would you do when faced with an impossible decision? We speak to director Paul Raschid and writer Lynn Renee Maxcy about *The Complex*, the first live action interactive sci-fi film that lets you make all the hard choices

WORDS RACHAEL HARPER

If you could only choose to save one life, who's would you choose? That's one of the first dilemmas Amy, protagonist of the new interactive sci-fi film *The Complex*, faces. But it's not Amy who has to make that decision. That's you dear viewer, because this is an interactive film and you're the one holding the reins.

Set in London, *The Complex* focuses on scientist Dr Amy Tenant (played by Michelle Mylett) who has become a leader in the advancement of Nanocell technology. However, news has broken of a terrorist attack involving a blood-vomiting civilian whose identity is far from coincidental. Reunited with old friend, Rees (Al Weaver), Amy is soon at the centre of this attack and trapped in an impenetrable HQ of laboratories – a womb of scientific advancement with a perilous secret. “This was an original idea of mine, I had written it as just a straightforward feature script and had been thinking a lot on the ideas of what it looks like to sacrifice yourself,” says Lynn Renee Maxcy, when we ask her how *The Complex* came about. “Then Wales Interactive asked if we could turn it into a choose-your-own adventure and it just seemed to fit really well.”

Available to download on a variety of platforms from PC to PlayStation, the viewer (or player) is involved from the very beginning, choosing the path of the narrative from not just who lives or dies, but whether to crack a joke or answer questions from a boardroom full of people. So is this a game or a film?

“That’s the thing, that’s the toss up,” laughs Paul Raschid when we ask him that very question. “I say both. I think technically playing because of the action of clicking it. But I’m a film maker so I want to say watch.”

“There is that line between film and game on both sides of the fence that is totally blurring and we’re going to see more and more crossover between the two of them. I feel like interactive films are something that are very timely at the moment.”

Maxcy agrees: “It’s like technology and soul meeting in this really interesting way. It’s a brand-new way of telling stories. This level of interactivity within a feature is completely new so we kind of knew we were out on a tightrope without a net!”

The interactive technology in *The Complex*

goes well beyond forming the narrative, it also affects the personality of Amy and the way the characters around her treat her. “One of the things that was really interesting beyond just ‘what direction do I have my character go?’ was this idea that we actually pay attention to the choices we make and they matter later. If you choose early on to be kind to another character, that can actually come back later in the story,” explains Maxcy. “That character then remembers and says ‘hey you were kind to me earlier, I’m going to help you out now’ in the same way that life can work like that. If you’re kind to people, they’re generally kind back.”

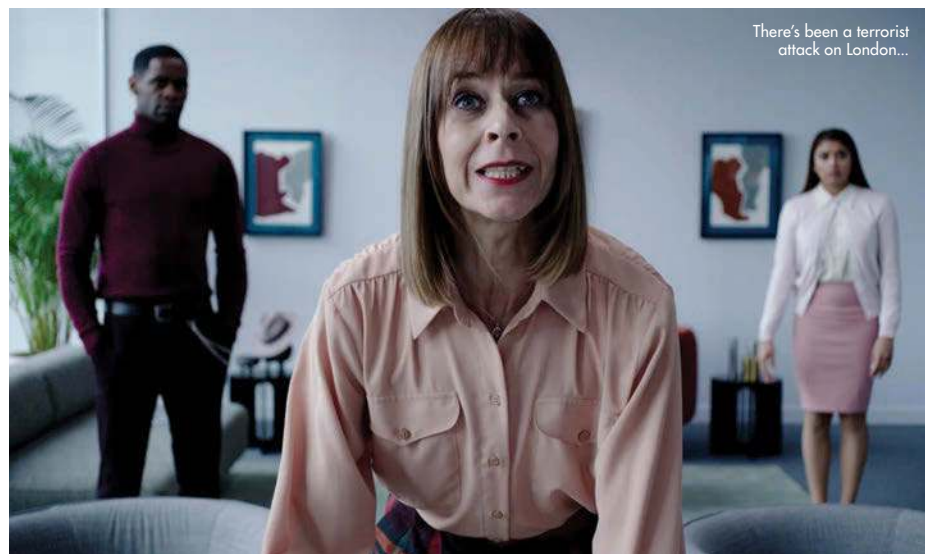
Indeed, a unique element to *The Complex* is its characters, who take different paths every time you view the film. Maxcy, who is part of the Emmy award-winning writing team from *The Handmaid’s Tale*, certainly knows how to create complicated characters, but what was it like to write characters whose outcomes can change with the click of a mouse?

“For me, as a writer, I felt like I was letting the viewers into my own creative process. Normally when writing a script, I’ve made all the choices for my characters. But with something like this I had so much fun because I got to write all of the different possibilities. It wasn’t just me standing at my giant board of Post-it notes saying ‘which one?’ – I could do both. Actually, I could write all the different endings I thought of.”

Which is in equal parts overwhelming, because you’re suddenly staring at a 190-page script like ‘dear God!’, but in a lot of ways it was so freeing and fun to be able to actually say ‘yeah, I am gonna write that. They are going to have both conversations’ and in a really cool way it allowed me to get to know the characters even better because I really made sure they stayed as the same core human the whole way through.”

Another unique aspect of *The Complex* is that you can go back to it a number of times and have different outcomes each time. “There are eight different endings,” confirms Lynn. “And there are definite branching points, so that once you make THIS decision you can only get to these four endings. There are a lot of different storylines – some loop back on each other, where you’re given a choice of ‘do you talk to this person first or that person first?’ you’re going to talk to both people eventually. There are some smaller, less intense choices but then there are MUCH larger ones, too. I’m hoping there will be people who play to find all eight endings and find all the different pieces. You get to spend a lot of time with the characters in lots of different movies. In fact, you get eight different movies in one!” Well that’s a bargain if we’ve ever heard one!

The Complex will be released worldwide through PC, PS4, Xbox One and Nintendo Switch on 31 March 2020.





It's Oh



WE SPEAK TO
DIRECTOR JOHN
KRASINSKI AND STARS
EMILY BLUNT AND
CILLIAN MURPHY
ABOUT BRINGING
BACK THE SOUND
OF SILENCE WITH
A QUIET PLACE
PART II

WORDS RACHAEL HARPER
INTERVIEWS JOANNA OZDOBINSKA

So Quiet



"My immediate response was 'I don't want to do a sequel,'"

laughs director, actor and writer John Krasinski. "The first one was so personal to me – as crazy as it sounds, it was a love letter to my kids. So how do you beat that?" Evidentially he thought he could because here we are two years after the phenomenal *A Quiet Place* landed in cinemas with its sequel, *A Quiet Place Part II*.

A Quiet Place was released during a high-time for horror cinema, the box-office-busting *It* and Jordan Peele's award-winning *Get Out* were released the year before and Ari Aster's excellent *Hereditary* would be released just months after. With such exemplary horror playmates, *A Quiet Place* – written and directed by *The Office* alumni John Krasinski – and starring the fantastic Emily Blunt, was a hit no-one saw coming.

But a hit it was – winning praise from

audiences and critics alike, and taking \$17 million in its opening weekend. "I saw *A Quiet Place* in the cinema with my kids and I thought it was terrific," enthuses Cillian Murphy, who stars in its sequel. "I thought it was one of the best films I'd seen that year."

Now, real-life couple Krasinski and Blunt are back with *A Quiet Place Part II*. But, with Jordan Peele's follow-up *Us* not winning quite as many accolades as *Get Out* and *It Chapter 2* not quite reaching the same heights as its predecessor, the pressure is on.

"You can't repeat what happened with the first one. So I think the approach on this one was always that this is the next chapter, this is the next step," explains Emily Blunt. "Because what happened with the first one, it was like that lightning-in-the-bottle thing that was astonishing to everybody involved, especially to John and certainly to me."

A Quiet Place was clearly a labour of love for Krasinski and Blunt, and making a sequel was never on the cards for them. But with the movie being such a success, there was likely to be a sequel no matter what. "The studio was probably going to make another

one regardless of our involvement and then suddenly out of nowhere, because I think they brought in like 20 writers to attempt to come up with the second one and none of the ideas really worked, John just went: 'I mean, if I was going to do another one, you know, this is sort of what I would do'. And he just started to pitch an idea. And I remember being gripped by it and thinking 'oh shit we're gonna have to do it'. It was just too rich of an idea, it's such an exciting world, there's so much to expand upon, that it then became this sort of organic journey for both of us that it was impossible not to do it."

Krasinski's desire to do right by his story was clearly too much to resist. It also meant he could go back and flesh out some of the ideas he had during the making of the first movie. "Everybody said 'do you have a back story?' I had the back story, I knew it very well and we sort of alluded to it in those newspaper clippings and stuff [in the first movie]," he explains. "So to get back there and to investigate it was really fun because again, it was something that I had created in the first one but just decided not to do."

Blunt continues: "I think it was very intriguing to John the idea of what happened to the world when this first happened, when the invasion first happened. This is a bigger movie and a much more visually ambitious film than the first one."

Set, ironically enough, in a post-apocalyptic 2020, *A Quiet Place* followed the Abbott family: Lee, Evelyn and their kids Regan, Marcus and Beau as they tried to survive against an alien invasion that had silenced the world. Because these merciless aliens hunt by sound, the family had to live a noiseless existence, communicating in sign language. That is until Evelyn (Emily Blunt) finds out she's pregnant, leading to the family holding up in an abandoned farmhouse in the middle of nowhere and desperately trying to stay quiet and survive...

Those who watched *A Quiet Place* in the cinema can probably agree that the viewing experience was something completely new, with audiences desperately trying to stay as quiet as the characters.

"The first film had a phenomenal affect on cinemagoers all over the world," agrees Murphy. "Usually people are quite blasé when going to the cinema; looking at their phones, talking and heavily snacking (which I kind of object to!). But I went

with my children and it was terrifying and exhilarating and everything that you'd expect from a movie like that."

The first movie proved that you don't necessarily need big-budget effects to scare audiences; that old-fashioned tension, an ominous crack of a twig underfoot and furtive looks can be more than enough. "We learnt to give the audience a lot of credit [on the first movie] for not a lot of information, and still how gripping an experience can be," Blunt tells us.

The second movie, Blunt assures us, will do the same: "The power of the fear factor of these things is so rich, it's so visceral, that I do feel [John] still plays with that tension because now the audience understands the rules so well, there's no rule-explaining now. And the rule is simple – if you make a noise, you're going to die."

Moreover from scaring the bejesus out of audiences, *A Quiet Place* was also firmly rooted in humanity – telling the story of this normal family in a far less-than-normal situation. "You have to tell a human story, that's what we learned from *A Quiet Place*," explains Blunt. "Yes, it's a sci-fi horror, a sci-fi thriller [but it's also] a very human story."

"The first film was very emotional," Murphy agrees. "It was about family really ➤

The female factor

Emily Blunt tells us why she thinks women would fare well in a post-apocalyptic world...

"I think people did see [*A Quiet Place*] as a very feminist film and certainly I think John just very naturally is, I think, attracted to writing quite empowered, complicated female characters. Because I hear this term like strong female character quite a lot and I'm always a bit like [cringes]. Because I think the mistake is to then just write someone as sort of hard line and tough and that equals strong. I don't think that's the case. I think strength comes from somebody who makes mistakes.

"With Evelyn, I think a lot of her power comes from these deep maternal instincts that run so deep through her and what she would do for her children, and her optimism actually, which you see a lot in the first film. You know, just her ability to thrive within a hideous environment, what she's tried to do with the home, and what she's tried to create for her children. Whereas I think John's character is all about survival and she's about trying to thrive.

"It's very real. It's a very, very real situation that she ends up finding herself in. I mean, for me in a crisis, other than my husband, I'll call a woman. I think women are really great in a crisis. I think they are brilliant."



Blunt believes Evelyn's power comes from her maternal instincts.

COVER FEATURE

A Quiet Place Part II

➤ and about loss. Those were the two things that stood out to me. Which is unusual for that genre.” So it makes sense that the sequel carries on this human theme, though this time the focus will go beyond the Abbott family, to the rest of the world.

“One of my favourite responses from the audience was the desire to see how other people survive in the world,” explains Krasinski. “The metaphor for the first one was the intimacy of family, and that idea that, as parents, you make that promise to your kids that if you stay with me you’ll be safe. That promise is inevitably broken at the end of the movie, and [laughs] in a much more dramatic way. So I thought I can lean into that idea of these children growing up and being forced to grow up too fast.

“That’s the core of the movie – the idea of growing up, loss, and dealing with loss.”

So where does this story pick up from the first movie? “It’s a direct continuation. And so now you’ve got Evelyn in a situation with the brand-new baby, husband is dead, two other children, house has burned down,” Blunt explains. “Where does she go? What does she do? Their whole nucleus, their utopian life that they sort of managed to create for themselves in the midst of this horrifying environment is gone. And so it’s that thought of ‘well, who can help me?’”

That idea of helping out one’s neighbour will play a big part in *A Quiet Place Part II* and when humans are being hunted by ruthless alien creatures, how will humanity treat each other? “The big theme for me is this idea of community and what happens when community is forced to break down so much that you choose to not involve yourself with anyone else,” says Krasinski. “Again, it was something I was thinking about on the first one, hence me putting the fires in the movie. I always wanted people to know that there were people out there and hopefully someday I would be able to investigate that.

“The deeper metaphor is that fractured sense of community that I think we’re all feeling on a global scale.”

With their safe haven now burned down, the Abbotts are out on the road and likely to test whether ‘love thy neighbour’ is still as important now the world has gone to hell.

“The second film follows similar themes but it’s expanded, they’ve broadened the world and added more characters,” explains Murphy. “The family is under a lot more pressure, and not just from the creatures.”

Though the sequel will encompass a wider world, Krasinski was conscious to not lose that sense of claustrophobia that was present in the first movie. “There’s only so many places you can go on bare feet with a baby in a box,” he says. “So it was kind of great to make sure that I didn’t go wild with ‘oh and then I want to show what a big city looks like and this and that’. I tried to just say ‘well, where would they go? what’s possible?’.

“I didn’t want to fall into a trap of being overwhelmed, or the story and the intimacy of the family being diluted by the bigness of the world. So what helped was to maintain the contained nature of the rules. The world they’re living in is the same, it’s just the amount of ground they cover is different.”

One of the elements that also remains present, and frighteningly correct in this sequel, is the alien creatures. In the first movie they were largely unseen until the latter part of the movie, where we saw them in all their horrific glory. So what will the sequel be like now that the unknown threat has been revealed? “I had such a good time designing the creature with ILM that we wanted to respect the creature just as much as we respect our lead actors,” says Krasinski. “There’s a restraint to all the things that Emily does in the second movie, there’s a restraint to the kids in the movie, so I had to restrain the creature as well. And if he’s just everywhere running around all ➤

Day One

John Krasinski and Emily Blunt talk about that exhilarating opening sequence portraying Day One of the alien attack, which can be seen in the film’s trailer...

“That opening shot of me in the car, there is no CGI, there is only one shot and there is a real bus,” remembers Blunt. “And it was the first take that we used. No one wanted him to do this shot but [John] had dreamt of this shot, he had it in his head. And everyone said it can’t be done. And they designed this special piece of camera equipment in Germany that came in through the roof of my car. And so it starts on me, back to the boy, from the bridge and it’s all in one shot. And then back to Noah [who plays Marcus Abbott] and you see him briefly but that was a highly choreographed shot that they spent two weeks rehearsing with the stunt team in some car park on the outskirts of Buffalo.

“We didn’t have the street so they couldn’t even rehearse on that, they rehearsed it in a massive car park! And there was a stunt driver on the top of my car. And that’s a real bus, like it’s all choreographed and my stunt girl Lauren, who I’ve worked with for a while, she just said, ‘I promise you, you’re safe’. It is like within an inch. And I remember just looking up at this stunt driver and I went ‘my life is in your hands’ [laughs]. And he looked down and I said ‘I hope you’re really good’. And he just shook my hand and he went ‘I’m the best’. And I went ‘okay!’. And I have never been filled with so much adrenaline in my life. Like we were shaking after it. And that’s the first take and the reactions you hear are probably very genuine!”

“That was the epitome of collaboration,” says Krasinski. “I mean, from the camera department to the design department, to the locations department, to stunts. And it was probably one of the most thrilling moments I’ve ever had on set because, yes, it was an exciting shot but it was that sense of... you don’t often get on a movie set that every single member of the crew in that moment was responsible for that moment.

“A lot of times you’ll say like ‘oh, this is our perfectly designed set, this is all the design team, mostly this is really the actors’ moment’, whatever. But in that moment, you know, hundreds of people stood up and cheered because they all had something to do with it. And if they hadn’t that shot would have failed. So it was really fun, really good. I mean the thing I’ll be most proud of for sure is that shot in the movie.”

This is a passion project for Krasinski.



A QUIET PLACE PART II

It's Oh So Quiet



COVER FEATURE

A Quiet Place Part II

Krasinski knew Murphy would be perfect for this role.



Surviving an apocalypse

So, you've found yourself in an apocalypse, tough luck. But not to worry! Here are some handy tips to help you survive (probably)

RAID A VENDING MACHINE

Look, no-one's going to care if you take some goodies from a vending machine. Everybody else is a zombie. Don't go too heavy on those sweets though, watch out for that sugar high!

FIND REFUGE IN A PUB AND WAIT FOR IT ALL TO BLOW OVER

Think about it: you have a source of liquid sustenance and bar snacks for days. Besides, that old gun behind the bar definitely works.

GET A BADASS CAR

Even though the world is running out of oil and your Nissan Leaf may be the responsible choice, surviving an apocalypse is far more fun with a V8.

FIND YOURSELF A BAND OF MISFITS

You may not have been friends with them before, but this is an apocalypse man and you have to align yourself with people who are going to help you survive.

AVOID SHOPPING MALLS

This may seem like a good option but it isn't. Trust us. Others have tried and failed. A lot.

➤ the time, then as a character you've betrayed him or her or it because you're basically asking that character to do more work than it should. And so we still are very protective of showing it as sparsely as we can."

The creatures have been created with CGI, which can be notoriously tricky to act alongside, but Krasinski made sure the sets were real and the actors weren't always working with both a green screen and CGI creatures, as Murphy says: "The way John runs the set, it never feels like you're working with a green screen. All of the locations were real. There was very little studio work, certainly for me. We shot in Buffalo in New York. On extraordinary sets. We didn't have to 'pretend act' like we would on a green screen.

"Sometimes John would even act out the creatures while on set so we would know where the creatures would be," Murphy laughs. "John is incredibly energetic; he transmits this enthusiasm. He's one of the most committed directors I've ever worked with. I just felt we were in an extension of that world. Also because I'd seen the first film I knew what [the creatures] looked like, how they moved. The way their bodies work and the way their hearing works. I was well aware of that, so it was never an issue!"

One of the people that the Abbott family meet now they're away from the farmhouse is Murphy's character, a mysterious man who's been navigating this tough new world. Murphy is a welcome addition to the movie and has his fair share of genre credits, similarly navigating a post-apocalyptic world as Jim in Danny Boyle's fantastic *28 Days Later*. In fact, the introduction of Murphy in the sequel seems to almost be written in the stars: "I was so impressed with the first movie that I wrote an email to John to tell

him that but I chickened out in the end and didn't send it!" Murphy laughs. "Luckily he was aware of my work and a year later he sent me an email asking *me* to be in the sequel, so luckily it worked out!" When we asked Murphy whether he thought this was some kind of psychic connection he laughs: "I like to think so!"

Blunt is quick to agree that this part seems to be made for Murphy. "John and I are probably the biggest *Peaky Blinders* fans in the world and so we were watching *Peaky* one night a while back and he went 'oh my god'; he had written this part and he went 'that's him!'. He just has the right kind of charisma and gravitas, and mystery, you know. I mean, it's a morally ambiguous character and so you need someone who knows how to do that with great nuance. We were thrilled he wanted to do it."

"It's an enigmatic character, which is my favourite type, but only a few people can do it as well as he does," Krasinski agrees. "And secretly what I was most looking forward to were the scenes between Cillian and Emily and I was not disappointed. In the first [movie] my favourite thing was waiting for



A QUIET PLACE PART II

It's Oh So Quiet

atmosphere when you're dealing with this sort of movie."

This family unit on set was very much encouraged by Krasinski who firmly believes in working together and utilising each other's skills to create the best possible outcome: "For me the most important thing on my sets is 'collaboration is king', that really the best idea has to end up on the screen," he says. "I had the greatest production designer on this movie with Jess Gonchor. Weirdly my tonal touchstone for the first movie was *There Will Be Blood* and *No Country For Old Men*. Jess designed *No Country For Old Men* so it was pretty great to have the guy that I based my movie on designing my second movie!"

This collaboration is also true for Blunt when it comes to working with Krasinski: "We work well together," she says. "The other thing we are lucky about is this aligned taste and what we respond to, even when we watch films together. We always feel exactly the same way about a performance, about what moves us and what doesn't, so I feel very aligned with him creatively; it was a very natural thing."

The couple was clearly a positive influence on set: "When you work on stuff like this, with quite heavy subject matter – especially when there's kids around – you have to keep the atmosphere up," says Murphy. "John and Emily are amazing at that."

With such a great time being had on the set by a great team, we can't wait to shut up and hold tight for the sequel. ✨

A Quiet Place Part II is released in cinemas on 19 March.

the bathtub scene to be shot. And in this one it was 'oh my god, I can't believe I get to be in the front row when Cillian Murphy and Emily act for the first time together'."

That mutual respect hasn't changed since meeting on set and shooting the film. If anything, it's intensified: "Cillian Murphy is, in my mind, one of the greatest actors I've ever worked with," says Krasinski.

The feeling is mutual: "John is hugely passionate about this film and this world," Murphy enthuses. "I think he puts a lot of himself into the film, a lot of that humanity, a lot of that authenticity and care comes from him because that's how he is as a man. He's a very caring, very genuine, very humble man and a brilliant director."

In fact, even though the movie is clearly a horror story, the atmosphere on set couldn't have been more different: "Working on [*A Quiet Place Part II*] has been one of the most pleasant experiences I've had working on a film. It really felt like an already-established unit and I felt very privileged to be allowed to become part of that. It was just a lovely working environment, a lot of laughs and a lot of good fun. You have to have that sort of



Krasinski and Blunt created a fun atmosphere on set.

AS THE ARROWVERSE'S LATEST ADDITION ARRIVES ON BRITISH TV SCREENS, WE TALK TO SHOWRUNNER CAROLINE DRIES AND ACTOR CAMRUS JOHNSON ABOUT BATWOMAN

SHE'S THE CBATTI MAN

WORDS ABIGAIL CHANDLER

Over the years the Arrowverse has faithfully filled out the corners of its DC universe(s), but one area has been more or less a black spot: Gotham City. DC is notoriously reticent about letting TV shows play around with the Bat characters, and, bar a cheeky reference or two, the Dark Knight and his world have been left out of the Arrowverse entirely. Until now.

Or, more accurately, until 2018's Elseworlds crossover, which gave us our first glimpse of Gotham City, and Ruby Rose's Batwoman. Now she's got a whole series to her name (and a Season Two already commissioned), but showrunner Caroline Dries has been working

on bringing Batwoman – and her alter-ego Kate Kane – to the screen for years, ever since Berlanti Productions secretly secured the rights to Batwoman. "They brought me on very early to make sure I gave the character the right voice and that we had the right costumes and the right sets and all those things [for Elseworlds]," Dries says of coming on board even before the *Batwoman* show was in the works. "So I was in a unique situation of deciding these things for a character when I hadn't written the outline for the pilot yet."

Despite the logistical and creative challenges posed, *Batwoman* was not a remotely tough sell for Dries. "I was instantly drawn to the fact that

it would be a female lead and that she would be a lesbian," Dries says. She adds that comic book shows appeal to her own creative sensibilities and tastes (she was previously a writer on *Smallville*), so "being in Gotham City is such a treat. The villains of the city have such a rich history and there's a lot to play with." The first challenge, before even getting to Gotham, was to cast the show's lead. As with all comic book characters, Kate Kane changes subtly with every creative team that tackles her, but Dries notes that "the thing that is part of every permutation of the character is this edginess combined with this softness to her". Ruby Rose was suggested early on, but Dries didn't think she would be



interested in the role, given that, at the time, she was starring in *The Meg* on the big screen. To her surprise, Rose was "interested in playing a lesbian who had all this rich background, who was really strong and could make a difference and change lives and all of the positives about the show, so she signed up to do it".

With her leading lady found and her series greenlit, Dries began crafting the story and Kate's on-screen supporting cast. "I found all of the stories incredibly rich, especially her origin story and the way that it unfolded in these flashbacks. But what I found was that over time the comics kind of started and stopped and started and stopped, and it was introducing

all these different mythologies, and I was like, 'hmm, there isn't a real through-line here apart from this story about Kate's military experience, and being kicked out because she was gay, and Kate's incredibly complicated family dynamic'. So those were the things I really globbed on to. Without spoiling where the story is going, I'm really trying to stay true to the Greg Rucka version of the origin story," Dries explains, singling out Rucka and J H Williams III's definitive run on *Batwoman*.

Season One certainly links strongly to that origin story, with the presence of Kate's father Jacob Kane (Dougray Scott) and Lewis Carroll-quoting villain Alice (Rachel Skarsten). Dries

tells us she's interested in exploring "just how complicated and intertwined the relationship is between [Alice] and Kate and Jacob Kane".

The rest of the cast was either borrowed from elsewhere in DC's *Bat*-books, or invented by Dries and her writing team. Where Kate has a cousin in the comics, Bette Kane, AKA Flamebird, in the show Kate has a step-sister, Mary (Nicole Kang). "It seems like Kate and Mary have literally nothing in common, but what we'll discover is that Mary is a hero in her own right and these two have a tonne in common," Dries explains. A more recognisable name joining the show is Luke Fox, the son of Batman's long-term R&D guy, Lucius Fox. Luke ➤

MUST-SEE TV

Batwoman

is to Batwoman what his father was to Batman, but actor Camrus Johnson didn't know any of this at the time of his first audition. "I actually didn't know that the character was Luke Fox when I auditioned for the show. DC tends to be pretty secretive about their projects," he says, in somewhat of an understatement. It was only when he did a little online digging and learnt that fans had already guessed that his character would turn out to be Luke Fox that he got *really* excited. He describes Lucius Fox as "one of the coolest characters ever made", and Luke as "this funny, neurotic, super smart dude who is holding a lot of secrets" – particularly that of Batman's secret identity. So when Kate comes knocking at Wayne Tower looking for information on her missing cousin Bruce Wayne, Luke tries – and fails – to stop her finding out more.

From that point onwards the two become occasionally-reluctant allies – a "yin and yang" relationship, according to Johnson – with Luke providing Kate with all the tech and paraphernalia she needs to become Batwoman, filling the Bat-shaped hole that Gotham has been struggling with for the last three years. "We had to find a way to make Batman part of the story without seeing Batman," Dries explains. (DC may have lifted the Gotham ban, but Batman is still off the cards – for now at least.) "And so I wanted Kate to come home to a city that needed her, and they needed her to figure out a way to save them." Johnson's Luke is on the same page as Kate, telling us that "all he really wants is for Gotham City to be safe, and he takes after Batman in that regard".

Johnson describes Luke as both an ally to Batman, and a fan. In that respect, Johnson's not that different to the character he plays. When we talk to him on the phone he gets audibly excited about the nitty-gritty of the *Batman* universe, and his new place in it. "I grew up watching the movies, watching the shows, playing the videogames," he says, adding that, in Christopher Nolan's *Bat*-trilogy, he'd always been a particular fan of Morgan Freeman's Lucius Fox. He read up on Luke Fox too, reading his comic book appearances in *Batwing*, the superhero alter-ego that Luke later adopts. When we ask if he hopes to play Luke as Batwing down the line, Johnson gives a firm "1,000 percent... if I could play one of the greatest superheroes ever written, especially in the DC Universe, why wouldn't I? But I don't want to rush to get to Batwing. He's such an incredible character, but I also think Luke Fox himself is such an incredible character and he deserves as much light as possible for who he is, rather than who he becomes. But, man, as soon as Batwing becomes a thing I'm going to lose it!"

Johnson also confesses to losing it when he visited the Batcave set. "When I first walked into the Batcave on my first day I cried," he laughs. "Who gets to say they're going to the Batcave for work?!" He tells us that the set is "gorgeous" and "gigantic", and that pilot director Marcos

Siega "put so many little hints in there, and comic book lovers, if they keep an eye out, can see some really cool stuff".

The Batcave is also a set that expands over time, with more rooms and details being added as the show continues – and it's far from the show's only spectacular set. Johnson tells us that he regularly finds himself "trying to open things that I think are real because it looks so impressive".

The detailed production design is all part of the grounded ethos that the show operates within. Unlike the other Arrowverse shows, *Batwoman* doesn't feature superpowers, and as a result Dries believes that "everything should feel real. That's the whole point of Batman. Bruce Wayne just trained really hard, he was really disciplined, he had a tonne of money, he built – using science – these tools that made him super awesome". Marrying that tone up with the rest of the Arrowverse, especially during crossovers, is especially challenging. "When you put a character like [Batwoman] next to Supergirl, what tone is that generating, and how do we make that feel like it's not, in a way, ruining all of the work that we've done to make our show feel like grounded show? That was the biggie, and I think we succeeded in doing it," Dries adds.

Ruby Rose was suggested early on to play Batwoman.

Kate has a complicated relationship with her father.

One of the ways in which Dries and the production team have grounded the show – and also connected it to *Batman* lore – is by shooting certain exterior scenes in Chicago, the city that stood in for Gotham in Nolan's *Bat*-trilogy. According to Johnson, it helps them to “keep the heart of the *Batman* universe in our show... we want to keep that grittiness, we want to keep the streets of Chicago, the roads, the rooftops, the cityscapes”. It also keeps Johnson in a state of happy disbelief that he is now occupying the same extended universe as that trilogy of films.

Gotham City and its wacky residents are rich grounding for a TV show, and Dries and her team have found a lot of material to work with from the comic books. She tells us that Tommy Elliott will feature in Season One; an old friend of Bruce Wayne who, “because he comes off as incredibly arrogant and just kind of awful, he gives us great insight into the Wayne legacy. Also if you follow the comics you know that he

becomes one of Batman's arch enemies, Hush. So we are excited to see that story unfold.” Arkham Asylum was seen in the Elseworlds crossover, but Dries promises a return to it, and also teases the appearance of *Batman* rogues including Magpie, Duela Dent and Nocturna.

Going forward into Season Two, Dries has once again returned to *Batwoman*'s comics. “We're definitely going to explore another vein of [*Batwoman*'] mythology that we don't deal with in Season One, and something that is very true to the comic books.”

Dries isn't interested in simply coasting on Batman's coattails – *Batwoman* is the star of this story and the driving force behind it. As one of DC's biggest break-out ‘new’ stars (the character is now 14 years old) *Batwoman* is certainly rich enough to stand on her own two feet – and we're interested to see how her show progresses. 

Batwoman is coming to E4 in early spring.



Villain Alice has a penchant for Lewis Carroll.

NOT STARRING BATMAN

Running out of Gotham-centric TV shows that don't feature Batman? We might have some ideas...

BEYOND THE VALE

Plucky journalist Vicky Vale sets off to shed her tabloid reputation and use her platform for good as she tackles organised crime in Gotham. Slam Bradley as reluctant sidekick??

ICE ICE BABY COLD AS ICE

Terminally ill Nora Fries just wants to work through her bucket list, but begins to be concerned by her husband's growing obsession with cryogenics.

TWEENAGE DIRTBAG

Life's a drag when you're hitting puberty and your mum's an evil bitch and your granddad's Ra's Al Ghul and no-one's taking your vegetarianism seriously. Also, you're a child assassin (maybe lead with that?).

PENNY FOR EM?

Alfred Pennyworth takes a job as a high school guidance counsellor. Things soon get out of hand. School of Batmen?

DC - CALL US!!



Royal Mail

Writer Will Davies and star Ruby Serkis introduce us to the mythic new world of Netflix fantasy *The Letter For The King*

WORDS SIMON BLAND

“These are fantastic characters, it’s an amazing quest and it’s an incredible world that it all takes place in,” enthuses Will Davies, writer and executive producer for Netflix’s new family-friendly adventure *The Letter For The King*. Based on Dutch author Tonke Dragt’s eponymous best-selling novel, this sword and sorcery epic has all the key ingredients of any binge-worthy series: a brave hero, insurmountable odds and an evil plot. However, throw a youthful cast forced to do battle with an older generation intent on destroying everything into the mix, and it suddenly becomes all very timely. “The idea of these young people navigating their way through a very broken world feels very real to the period we’re in,” suggests Davies between shifts in the VFX room. “This felt like a huge opportunity to not only make the story feel more relevant – but to recapture the reason why everyone in Holland had been excited about it for so long.”

And excited they were. Translated into 13 different languages and adapted into a 2008 Dutch feature film, Dragt’s 1962 tale of a young squire whose fate is forever changed following a chance encounter was an international hit. Although despite these successes, *The Letter For The King* remained largely unknown among English-speaking audiences – until now.

“It begins with a boy who desperately wants to become a knight and finally gets the opportunity to do so,” explains Davies, shedding some light on our hero Tiuri, played by *His Dark Materials*’ star Amir Wilson. “During the last part of the challenge he has to sit in a vigil in this very

frightening chapel and stay there all night. Then something happens and he’s faced with a choice: is he going to do what he has to do to become the thing he’s always wanted to be or is he going to respond to something his heart is telling him to do, even though it means risking everything?”

This chance encounter sends Tiuri on a perilous quest to deliver a secret letter to the king that could stop an evil prince from sending the world spiralling into darkness. Along the way, he meets a group of brave and like-minded young warriors who help him on his crusade, whilst learning of a mythic prophecy about a hero destined to restore peace and some secrets regarding his own past. “When we were beginning to develop the series it was at the time of the Syrian Refugee Crisis and all the conflicted views different countries were having about it,” says Davies on the show’s resonant themes. “That idea got mixed into Tiuri’s back story. He doesn’t know about his past and on the course of this journey away from the place he thinks of as home, he finds out what his roots were. He discovers what his mother went through, what happened to his real father, as well as what he’s capable of.”

Before long, Tiuri finds himself in the trading town of Mistrinaut where he meets the cunning mayor’s daughter Lavinia, played by newcomer Ruby Serkis. “She knows exactly what she wants,” smiles Serkis. “She comes from a really corrupt town. When Lavinia first meets Tiuri it’s because she wants to steal his horse so she can use it to go on her own quest. She’s very independent and confident with an element of sass – it was very empowering to play. She’s very clever and very worldly having grown up in a horrible place like Mistrinaut. Even her relationship with her dad is all based on money, bounty hunting and trying to exploit people, so when she meets Tiuri she’s very much of that mindset.”

Davies agrees that Lavinia is far from trustworthy: “She looks at Tiuri and reads his purity and innocence as complete naivety. She sees him as somebody that she can take advantage of and use for her own purposes – and yet inside she needs ➤

➤ the one thing that he does have, which is hope. She has the skills to navigate this very dangerous world which he doesn't have. They make a very unlikely pairing."

Lavinia's untrustworthy traits run in the family, on screen at least. Serkis' role in *The Letter For The King* provided her with the unique opportunity to act alongside her real-life father Andy, who stars as Mistrinaut's equally-as-corrupt mayor. "It was bizarre," laughs Serkis. "I don't think many people have had the opportunity to play different characters in a different world but still have the same familial relationship and father-daughter bond." It also marked an odd role-reversal for the duo: "It was funny; I've spent my whole life on dad's film sets and at the back of his stages. When he finally came on set, I was like: 'Yeah dad, this is actually my set...'," she laughs. "It was great."

Davies also has fond memories of shooting these scenes: "It was so funny watching a father and daughter play father and daughter. There was such a spark and life to it. It was really special."

Production for *The Letter For The King* took the show's cast and crew to a range of eye-popping locations in New Zealand, Prague and the Czech Republic where they were able to capture a grounded yet otherworldly feel. "When Tonke wrote the book it was set in a version of medieval Europe and what New Zealand gives you is a kind of cinematic version of that," reasons Davies. "It feels like medieval Europe on steroids. There's these massive landscapes – and that was great because you could then drop these young people into these huge spaces and it makes the journey they're going on feel even more overwhelming."

Serkis agrees – despite their sometimes temperamental setbacks: "The landscapes were incredible. There were days where it was pouring down with rain when it shouldn't have been, but the scene just adapts to it. We shot in gorgeous castles around the Czech Republic. It helps so much being surrounded by an environment that's so detailed. It completely transports you to the world you're trying to create."

As with any 'ye olde' fantasy epic, the series came with a hefty amount of intense swordplay and tricky stunt work for its young recruits. Thankfully they couldn't wait to get stuck in. "All the stunt training

Horsing Around

Writer Will Davies explains the show's unlikely western connections...

Despite being packed with swords, magic and castles, *The Letter For The King* shares an odd connection to one of cinema's most enduring genres. "In a funny way, this series is both a medieval show and also sort of a western," explains Davies. "We were having to re-learn lessons that people knew how to do in the Fifties – when they knew how to shoot people on horses and do dialogue on horses." While it may seem like a canter around the park, capturing these key sequences came with their own challenges: "We'd put actors on a horse and film them walking, but in a minute a horse can cover such a huge distance. We had to start recalibrating all of our sets otherwise we'd run out of space. By the end of the shoot, we really knew what we were doing – but unfortunately we were at the end of it," he chuckles. "Had we known what we were doing at the beginning it would have been much easier."



was fantastic," grins Serkis. "I learned knife throwing and horse riding – it was unbelievable. I really loved it."

"In the schedule we called it Boot Camp," Davis adds. "They all had to learn to throw knives, fight and ride. Amir went from not really knowing how to ride to loving it so much he was riding as soon as he got back to England." What's more, this shared, hands-on experience helped its actors form an incredibly close bond: "I can't even describe how amazing everyone was, we were such a close family," says Serkis candidly. "We were all going through similar things and we never felt there was much of an age difference. It was like being paid to go on holiday around Prague and New Zealand."

Visuals aside, one of the trickiest parts of Davies' adaptation was crafting the show's unique tone. While it may have magical elements, *The Letter For The King* is very much a family show, unlike its grizzly sword and shield genre predecessor *Game Of Thrones*. The show's tone had to reflect that, which wasn't always easy. "We wanted it to feel real and rooted in the natural world, not just something where people hold their

The cast went through stunt training before shooting...





hands up and magical forces come out of their fingers,” says Davies. “The question was... how do you build a world that can feel fun and exciting but have real jeopardy where people can get hurt and characters you care about could possibly die – yet feel like it was an appropriate thing for both families to be able to watch together and for adults to watch by themselves? It was incredibly difficult to do but in the end, all the actors really got it.”

Serkis agrees that maintaining this family-led vibe was key, especially with today’s binge-heavy culture and abundance of boundary-pushing content: “I think the messages it’s trying to send out are really important for young children: working together as a team, coming together and overcoming individual problems to fight against a greater evil,” she suggests. “When you have the chance to sit down and watch something with everyone in your family, it’s a really nice shared experience.”

With the show’s first series consisting of just six episodes, it surely won’t be long before audiences find themselves eager to find out what’s next for Tiuri, Lavinia and their quest to save their world from darkness. “I’m quite happy leaving it up to Will and the creators because they’ve done such a brilliant job,” says Serkis when quizzed on where she’d like to see Lavinia go in Season Two. “Ideas that I’ve heard so far for the second series make me think that 1) It’s really exciting, and 2) I could never come up with those ideas on my own,” she laughs. “We’ll just have to wait and see.”

Davies is also hopeful he’ll get to return to the complex characters and immersive worlds

Blind Ambition

Biting off more than you can chew isn’t always a bad thing...

Tiuri’s quest might be pretty daunting, but the cast and crew also had their work cut out for them whilst bringing *The Letter For The King* to life. Thankfully, they quickly discovered that ignorance is bliss. “It’s funny because none of us had made a TV show like this before,” reveals Will Davies, the show’s writer. “We really didn’t know what we were doing so we bit off far more than we could chew – but in a funny way precisely because we didn’t know what we were doing, nobody who knew anything about television would have tried to do what we tried to do,” he laughs. “We tried to do something that was hopelessly over-ambitious and as a result it’s got this scale that’s out of proportion to the size it really should have been. That fits the story, to me,” adds Davies. “It needed to be this huge world so we could really feel how difficult the journey for these young people was.”



that Dragt created – and he has no shortage of source material to pull from should the opportunity arise. “The great thing is that Tonke wrote a second book, *The Secrets Of The Wild Wood*, which is fantastic. In some ways with Season One, it was a case of: ‘What can we leave out?’ – there was just so much more we wanted to put in,” he teases. “There’s a lot more story that we want to tell.”

The Letter For The King will be launched on Netflix on 20 March.

Michael Emerson

We speak to genre legend Michael Emerson about fighting the Green Arrow, finding the iconic laugh for the Joker and always being the bad guy **WORDS RACHAEL HARPER**

Can you tell us more about your new show *Evil*?

It's a story about a clash between belief and scepticism. There's a team of three people who work for the catholic church who investigate what appear to be supernatural events, including demonic possession, exorcism and clairvoyance. The leader of the team is a priest in training, but he works with a forensic psychologist and a technician who's an expert at debunking false events. So they get involved in these cases but the answers are never as easy or as cut-and-dry as they expect them to be. A lot of questions get raised but they don't necessarily get answers.

I would say there's a horror dimension to it which you would have unlikely previously seen on the CBS network, so it's fun in that way and it's really scary. A lot of people tell me they can't watch it before they go to bed!

Where does your character fit in with the show?

I play what appears to be their permanent adversary – a man that the priest has been at war with for years and he seems to be the master of a dark net web of demons or would-be demons. He has a kind of frightening power. He likes to set traps for humans. He likes to goad humans into certain behaviours to see how it works out.

Did you read up on any real-life occult events before taking on the role?

No, the writers – Robert and Michelle King – feel that everybody knows enough about this world of ghosts and demons and possession, just from reading the papers and watching other media. I've never really been one for research of a subject matter. I kind of tend to take a script at face value but play it in a way that kinda sounds like I do.

Can you tell us about your process when developing a character like this?

I try to imagine a character's voice and I try to think of the elements of character that are outside the realm of good and evil. I initially try to think 'what is their work? How do they see their work? To what extent do they enjoy their work? And why might they enjoy it?' And then I try to find the lightest notes possible – are they sarcastic? Are they ever funny? Or is there an element of drollery?' And I have cobbled together a character for this man in *Evil* who is, so far, the arch-villain of the series. He always seems to be involved in the really bad stuff.

What do you mean by the 'notes' of the character?

Well, in every role I like to say a line until it sounds right to me and it sounds right in every way for the moment, for the project. People can take character work for granted. Character work is kind of intuitive for me now so I have other ways of judging or other goals for the performance, and sometimes they're a little abstract, it's like my private thing but if it works it works!

How do you go about choosing a role?

I go by the writing. For *Evil*, the Kings' pilot script was stunning – not just for clarity, I mean not just the twists and turns of it, but the surprising language; they're real people talking, they're having real arguments and they're smart about not saying certain things so there's mystery built in to the show. I like all of that. But there are factual considerations too – I knew that *Evil* was going to shoot in New York City, for example, so I wouldn't have to relocate and I had wanted to work with Robert and Michelle for a long time. My wife has

worked a lot with the Kings over the years and she really liked them. I thought I'm not going to see a better pilot script this season so let's just jump on it.

You've played a lot of bad guys, why do you think you choose those types of characters? Is it because of the complexities that playing a character like that affords?

The complexities yes. I mean, I'm not choosing the 'bad' I'm choosing the 'interesting'. The characters with layers. There's something inexplicable about them. Those are the things I gravitate to and I have to say that in the culture of American television the villains are usually the better talkers. They tend to be a little more verbal. Good guys are usually quiet and steady but the villain can be colourful and flamboyant. I guess I gravitate toward it!

Another famous role you've had is as Ben in *Lost* – what did you know about the show when you joined? Did you have any idea on how big it was going to be?

No, I had no idea! I was actually hired to do a guest spot which was supposed to be a three-episode arc, so I went in not expecting it to change my life. I went along just to have a paying job and to get away from the New York winter for a few weeks! And it worked out!

Did you know the way that Ben's character would progress from the outset?

I had no idea where the character was going or what the writers' intentions were. Actually that probably served me well – if they'd have said 'look you have to play it kinda cool' at the beginning cause we're gonna blow this thing up into something wild, I might have jumped the gun. But as it was, my ignorance was my bliss because I played it straight and

over the course of many episodes and many seasons I realised that it was the best policy anyway. I'm not one to call the writers and say 'where is this going? What do we mean when we say that?' I just tried the lines until they sounded intelligent to me! If that turns out to be a little inexplicable to the audience then so much the better! That way I think you create intrigue.

How did it move on from a guest spot to a regular role?

It was in small increments. I think that they were happy with my work. I think, perhaps, that the three-episode arc was a kind of audition. It was a way for them to test the idea of putting a face and a name to the darkness of the island. And I think I passed that test!

Lost ended up going for six seasons and Ben went through a huge story arc, what was it like being in a show and being with a character for such a long time? It was a wonderful way in which the creators of *Lost* turned the audience's feelings in a new direction – Ben went from being someone that the audience hated to someone the audience felt a kinship with. With the writing on a thing like *Lost*, you just hold on and hope that you can stay up with the idea and with the drama and depth of the scenes. I was fortunate that the show had such a large cast because sometimes a villain can be overexposed but with *Lost*, episodes would go by in which you wouldn't see Ben. It was more like you felt he was out there doing things and you would have to wait to see what they were. So that was good, otherwise he could have overstayed his welcome! After a while we realised how damaged Ben really is – bad childhoods make for bad adults! For such a criminal mastermind he could also be a bit of a bumbler.

You also played Cayden James in *Arrow*, can you tell us more about this role?

So, with *Arrow*, every year they have a 'big bad' of the season and I was the big bad for the first part of Season Six. But then they pulled the rug out from under the audience because it turned out there was a bigger bad right around the corner. But it was fun!

What was it like being the big bad on an established show like that?

Well it's strange because nobody's wearing regular clothes. You're walking around with, you know, comic book characters! And they give you better weapons, I mean I had these glowing metallic spears that I could throw that would knock the Green Arrow across an entire warehouse! You also get to do that green screen stuff where you pretend like you have a glowing spear in your hand and then you throw it and they do it with all the CGI in the end but it's fun to watch once it's all finished! Stephen Amell was such a cool guy, and he was very hospitable to me.

Another very famous role of yours was as Zep in *Saw*, how did you come on board with that film?

When I saw the script I thought it had one the greatest endings I had ever read. I didn't expect that at all! I didn't expect the movie to be big either because it had a really low budget and an inexperienced production team. It was really a rough shoot. I mean physically there was a lot of combat and there were a lot of guns that were way too big with blanks that were way too powerful or loud. I was just glad to escape that film without being hospitalised! It definitely worked out though. That movie became a monster franchise!

Did you know how gory it would be?

Everything about that movie got wilder and wilder as it went along – the violence, the blood, the gunfire... I'm sure they had to cut some stuff out because some of it was just completely over the top!

it's a bit daunting when you're stepping into a character which has had so many brilliant iterations. I couldn't help but think I'd be compared unfavourably to everyone who played the Joker. But then you

It seemed to work out pretty well but it was hard work I must say.

In what way was it hard work?

Well, the director had done all of those animated features and she was very strict and knew exactly what she wanted. It would reach a point where you would feel you had screamed yourself out or laughed yourself out but she would say 'let's go at it again and give it a little more' and you'd say 'okay! Be careful what you wish for!' She ended up getting terrific results.

How did you get that voice and that laugh for the Joker?

I thought he would be tonally sarcastic and that he'd have what we in the theatre would call 'the silver voice' rather than a 'golden voice' – an edgy, crackly quality to his voice – and that it'd be a little bit high in the larynx. And as for the laugh, well you think 'what would a laugh sound like in that voice?' and after some experimentation you're good to go!

Is there a different preparation when it comes to voice acting?

It's not fundamentally different, but with voice acting everything has to be vocal, your face and your hands aren't of any use – although you do end up doing a lot of hopping around in the booth! But you have to portray everything just using your voice.

You've been involved in many genre films and TV shows – have you noticed any differences between audiences?

All the fan bases are different. For example I noticed that my *Person Of Interest* fans were the parents of my *Lost* fans! So sometimes it's generational.

What's next for you?

I'm working on a videogame called *Crucible* where I play a little flying robot, which is fun – it's a family game, very sweet. I'm also looking forward to the second season of *Evil*, which we will start filming in the summer, and whatever else comes up between now and then! 🐼

Season One of *Evil* is available to stream now CBS.



You also played the Joker in *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. How familiar were you with the story before you took on the role? You cannot grow up in America without knowing about *Batman*. I never dreamt I would be asked to do work like that though;

just go to work and think about how a character like that speaks and the tone of their voice. What kind of laugh would come out of the character's mouth... and you just practice it at home and annoy your neighbours and then you go into the booth and do it!

Made of Honour

MULAN IS THE LATEST OF DISNEY'S ANIMATED CLASSICS TO GET THE LIVE ACTION TREATMENT. WE TALK TO DIRECTOR NIKI CARO ABOUT BRINGING MULAN TO A NEW KIND OF LIFE

WORDS JOSH SLATER-WILLIAMS

It's early January 2020 and **SciFiNow** is among what's apparently the first audience to see select full scenes from one of the year's most intriguing blockbuster prospects. We're very impressed by the thrilling scale and tender, moving intimacy of the wildly different sequences we're shown. And this is somewhat surprising because this film is one of those oft-dreaded propositions: a remake.

Well, yes and no to it being a strict remake of another movie. Disney's new *Mulan* is definitely a live-action update of its own animated film from 1998, but the character of Hua Mulan originates in a famous story first told over 1,500 years ago, in which a young woman, disguised as a man, took her aging father's place in the army. In paying tribute to various versions of the story, as well as the character's importance for Chinese audiences, the new *Mulan* is a very different beast from its Disney predecessor.

Development on this adaptation began in 2015, with Niki Caro being hired to direct in February 2017. Caro had not previously directed an action film, but the New Zealand filmmaker had a critical and commercial success for Disney on her resume already: the Kevin Costner sports drama *McFarland, USA* (2015). Additionally, two of her prior features prominently showcased her skill with stories of women standing up to or navigating their way through traditionally male-dominated spaces. Her first American film, *North Country* (2005), told an account of the first major successful sexual harassment case in the United

States, and her breakthrough debut feature, *Whale Rider* (2002), made in New Zealand, told the story of a young Māori girl fighting to fulfil her destiny in the context of a patriarchal tribe.

Disney is said to have sought an Asian director for *Mulan* at first, with Ang Lee among those reportedly meeting with the studio but passing. Though Caro's hiring is a boost in a studio system where women-helmed mega-budget blockbusters are still rare, the optics of a white filmmaker directing a Chinese story are not lost on her. "*McFarland, USA* also had a very specific set of cultural requirements because it was set in the Mexican-American fieldworker community," Caro tells *SciFiNow*. "So, I think Disney felt very comfortable that I could handle the cultural imperatives of making a movie like this."

William Kong, the Hong Kong-based producer of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and other international crossover smashes, was hired by Disney as an Executive Producer on the film. "Bill was the first person I spoke to," Caro continues. "I'm not Chinese, and I'm not Māori either in regards to when I did *Whale Rider*. But I have made a lot of movies outside of my culture and I have a way of doing it where I take the responsibility of the cultural authenticity very, very seriously. And so, the first thing I wanted to do when I got this job was to speak to Bill and start to have those conversations about how I might deliver a film that everybody loves, but, in particular, that Chinese – and Asian people too, generally – can feel very proud of in ➤



➤ the way they clearly, and should, feel proud of *Mulan*.”

Caro was on board all through a year-long worldwide search of nearly 1,000 candidates for the lead role, with the criteria being that the actor of Chinese descent had to have a certain star quality, the ability to speak fluent English, credible martial arts skills for a physically intense shoot, and a look that could plausibly veer into androgyny, so that *Mulan*’s hiding within the army ranks would be remotely believable. So, not a lot of asks then. Additionally, the person they eventually cast is also a trained singer, though Caro tells us that her *Mulan* is categorically not a musical, but that “music is used in interesting ways”.

In November 2017, Chinese-American actor Liu Yifei was cast as *Mulan*. The rest of the main cast is largely made up of Chinese industry superstars – Donnie Yen, Jet Li, Gong Li – and familiar Chinese-American faces – Jason Scott Lee as villain Bori Khan, Tzi Ma as *Mulan*’s father. Principal photography finally began in summer 2018, across China and New Zealand.

“One of the really nice things about Disney,” Caro says, “in my personal experience, is that they’re very director-friendly and focused. They shared the vision for this film and just gave me the tools to execute that. When I sign up for something, I’m all in. The entirety of my body, mind, soul is in a movie and there is no way I would be separated from the vision of one. And certainly, there was never any moment in the entire three years that I didn’t feel that Disney was hugely supportive of that vision.”

The earliest known transcription of ‘The Ballad Of *Mulan*’ was in the 6th Century, with the earliest extant text of the poem being located in an anthology dating back to either the 11th or 12th Century. In written form and spoken tale, the ballad’s story has been told in so many different ways. *Hua Mulan* has also appeared in novels, stage plays, television series and, as we know, films. When it comes to cinema, at least five film versions made in Asia preceded Disney’s first stab at the material. Concerning story influences from the earlier incarnations, Caro says: “I didn’t go back to all of them. I was, of course, very aware of how many times *Mulan* has been made and in all different various forms in China, even all the way to opera. But it had never been made on this scale, or in this language, under the Disney banner. And so that presented a really amazing opportunity.”

Being both faithful to and different from the animated film means a few character changes. Caro suggests her heroine is shown as an accomplished horse rider before she heads to war. And while far from a trained fighter, she’ll have some degree of combat prowess under her belt already, in unique ways. “What she is very good at as a child is that she’s very calm,

physically,” Caro tells us. “We see her as a young girl practicing martial arts in secret. Her chi is immensely powerful and innate in her even as a little girl. And so, there’s a very sweet mini action sequence at the beginning of the movie where we see, in a very unlikely way, just how physically strong and agile she is.”

Other character changes from the animated version include the outright absence of many hallmarks of the Disney musical. The villains are different, few character names carry over, and there’s reportedly no Eddie Murphy-voiced dragon named Mushu helping *Mulan* on her journey. But while the talking animal sidekicks are gone and the story’s more grounded, Caro suggests the fantastical hasn’t been removed entirely. For one thing, Gong Li’s antagonist is a witch with shapeshifting abilities. And while Mushu may be absent, preview footage teases that another creature may be filling in as a guardian spirit of sorts.

“The thing for me about telling the *Mulan* story in live-action is that it gets to be real,” Caro says. “Actually real. And that’s thrilling. So, with that commitment to realism on an epic scale, we were in real landscapes. It was about balancing some of the more magic elements and the grounded realism that makes this movie somewhat unusual but special, I think, to keep all of those things in balance.”

For the large-scale sets, Caro was reunited with Grant Major, a frequent Peter Jackson collaborator who was the production designer on *Whale Rider* and won an Oscar for his work on *The Lord Of The Rings: The Return Of The King*. “I love Grant,” Caro enthuses. “I love his eye, his style and his taste. But I think the thing that I love about Grant above everything else is that

the scale of his vision is equal to mine. So, with Grant and I, our two heads together, this was always going to be... epic’s a very easy word to use, but it genuinely is!

“It’s unusual in a movie of this genre and scale to have so much that’s in-camera, that’s so much shot on location. We have a throne room scene that in another movie may have been just the throne and greenscreen,

Woman at war

An action sequence we’re shown – which appears to be the first encounter between Bori Khan’s forces and the soldiers with whom *Mulan* has assimilated herself – impresses but also surprises for a Disney family-aimed blockbuster: while it’s not gory, we see arrows make contact with soldiers’ bodies, and those soldiers subsequently falling to the ground, without the film cutting away from that. The battle looks like something out of *The Lord Of The Rings* but with a pinch of the style of very different action films.

“That’s the commitment of the studio to an authentic retelling of this classic tale,” Caro says of the lack of sugar-coating in the battle sequences. “And that it is essentially the story of a girl on an epic journey to war and back. And so, at some point, you’ve got to deliver what war looks like. Obviously, it’s not *Game Of Thrones* – that would be really, really wrong for the brand. But the way that I devised those sequences where we do go to war is that it’s intentionally set in a sort of geothermal valley, so that steam becomes a way of revealing and obscuring violence. So, your imagination can come to it without anything being in any way graphic or disturbing.

“The other thing that made it an easier trick to pull off is that the style of fighting is martial arts-based. So, it’s very beautiful and athletic in its nature, as opposed to just guys with axes hacking at each other.”





[Left]: *Mulan* director Niki Caro (with actress Yifei Liu who plays *Mulan*) wanted to make sure the live-action version of the film was grounded in realism but on an epic scale and ensured the movie was filmed on real landscapes.



but in our movie is a huge throne room. Even I was shocked when I went into it for the first time. When we were working on the design, I kept saying: 'Oh Grant, is it big enough?' And he said: 'Niki, it goes to the outside walls of the biggest stage we have!' And when I walked into it the first time, I was like: 'Holy shit!' It's huge and it's all real. And it's wonderful too. It's wonderful for actors to work in sets that are real."

The scale of *Mulan* astounds. Caro mentions that David Lean's epic *Lawrence Of Arabia* (1962) was a conscious influence on the film and indicates that a good chunk of the movie was shot on 65mm film, with similar lenses to those used on *Lawrence* back in the day. Talking about Australian cinematographer Mandy Walker, Caro says: "My collaboration with Mandy has been one of the best of my career. She's an artist, a visionary and she pulled off a very rare and special trick with this movie in that we deliver scale



and visceral raw action in the cinematography, but also absolute beauty all the time. And that feminine approach, like being really strong and kick-arse where we need to be but being beautiful and sensitive also, is something you get with the great cinematographers, of which Mandy is certainly one. Her feminine vision is really a very strong part of this movie."

Concluding our chat, Caro discusses how, despite the gargantuan upgrade in terms of budget and resources, she sees *Mulan* as of a piece with debut feature *Whale Rider*: "Both of them [have] strong and unusual female protagonists in cinema terms, but in human terms they are ordinary girls with unusual strength. And in both of those movies, what's starting to be recognised in them as little girls is seen as not appropriate. And yet, they are born to be leaders and they are born to be warriors and heroes. In that way, they are emblematic of any number of young girls. And I hope young girls rise up in their millions now, inspired by a movie like this to step into their own power and potential." 

Mulan will be released in cinemas on 27 March.

THE ROGUE

SCIFINOW OPENS THE SECRET DOSSIER ON THE CREATION OF 2000AD'S ROGUE TROOPER, ONE OF THE UK'S GREATEST COMIC BOOK HEROES, AND SPEAK TO DIRECTOR DUNCAN JONES ABOUT HIS MOOTED MOVIE ADAPTATION

WORDS RUSS SHEATH

IT'S BEEN ALMOST 40 YEARS SINCE ROGUE TROOPER EXPLODED FROM THE PAGES OF 2000AD, HIS EYE FIRMLY ON THE UK COMIC BOOK THRONE.

The azure-skinned, mohawk-wearing, genetically-enhanced lone survivor of a race of super soldiers was the sort of character who could only have come from the pages of Britain's leading sci-fi comic. Bred to survive, fight, and die in an apocalyptic wasteland, his only allies were doomed to exist as disembodied computer chips encased within his spartan equipment.

By 1981, *2000AD* was just four years old. Having already established characters such as Judge Dredd as firm fan favourites, editor Steve MacManus was looking to fandom to inform the comic's next generation of hard-boiled heroes, via reader surveys. "These questionnaires were enthusiastically completed and gave a great picture of the

readership, which at the time seemed to include students as well as the traditional 8-12 age range," MacManus recalls.

Comic book legend and Rogue Trooper co-creator Dave Gibbons picks up the story, telling us that "readers had said in the survey that they wanted to see a 'future war' story and MacManus saw this as an opportunity to get me back drawing for *2000AD*".

Gibbons was still a few years away from co-creating *Watchmen*, but he was already a fan-favourite artist, drawing for titles including *Doctor Who* and *Dan Dare* as well as *2000AD*. MacManus had his eye on pairing Gibbons with veteran scribe Gerry Finley-Day, to create a top-tier team to meet his readers demands. "Gerry had an impressive track record as a writer of off-beat war stories and would indulge my love of war strips," MacManus says, "while Dave

was a natural first choice, where passion and creativity shines through in every page he drew." With a clear mandate, Gibbons and Finley-Day set about thrashing out their ideas for their new hero. The first challenge was to come up with a name.

"I think it was Steve who came up with the name Rogue Trooper," Gibbons says. "I didn't like [it], but it's like naming anything... once you use it for a while it seems like it couldn't be called anything else."

One key aspect to Rogue Trooper was MacManus' mandate that the character be a 'loner', but in contrast to their editor's instructions, the trio hit upon one of the most identifiable components of the Rogue Trooper mythos, the 'bio-chips' which would contain the personalities of Rogue's fallen comrades: Gunnar, Bagman and Helm. Gibbons tells us that they thought that "this

All Rogue Trooper artwork © Rebellion/2000AD



QUE ONE

WE'LL RIP HIS MASK
AND WATCH HIM CHOKE
ON THE CHEM-CLOUDS!

character might need someone to talk to, and I came up with the concept that he might have a backpack which was sentient. They would have this symbiotic relationship, where he was the physical hero and the backpack was the strategist, but that didn't seem to fly". Instead, he and Finley-Day came up with the bio-chips, which would become the most enduring and original aspects of Rogue and his world.

Of the initial images that Gibbons would create for Rogue Trooper, one in particular stands out to this day. "I think the key image I came up with was of Rogue standing against a hazy background with the word 'WAR' coming out of it," Gibbons says. "The piece was inspired by a strip which [artist] Paul Neary had done for one of the Warren magazines, where he had a piece of graffiti which said something like 'war', 'death' or something like that."

When he first appeared in issue 228 of *2000AD*, Rogue Trooper joined a growing roster of instantly iconic and visually arresting characters, including Judge Dredd,

Strontium Dog, Nemesis The Warlock, Slaine, and more. The fan reaction to Rogue Trooper was instantaneous and positive, with the combination of Gibbons' dynamic visuals and Finley-Day's tried and tested war credentials exploding from the pages.

"I was surprised by how popular Rogue was, the mix of a basic heroic character in a science fiction setting, just seemed to work in a limited environment, in the same way that Mega City One offered a limited environment for Judge Dredd to operate in," Gibbons says. Although his time working with Rogue Trooper was initially short lived (he would later return to offer his revisionist take on the character with *War Machine*), Gibbons remains proud of one of his earliest creations, born just five short years before *Watchmen*. "I've been very lucky to have a long career where I have been identified with *Rogue Trooper*, *Dan Dare*, *Harlem Heroes*, *Doctor Who*, *Green Lantern* and then of course *Watchmen*. I love comics, so the chance to do anything that becomes considered a landmark, especially as a fan of

the medium, I feel really proud of that."

Rogue Trooper's adventures continue to appear in *2000AD*, and he may soon be stepping outside of comics as *Moon* director Duncan Jones announced that he would be adapting Rogue's one-man mission of vengeance for the big screen. MacManus is looking forward to seeing Rogue head to cinemas: "I don't see how a production of *Rogue Trooper* could fail. There's a great cast of characters to surround him with, and to cause him problems."

Gibbons finds himself similarly excited: "I was thrilled to hear that Duncan Jones was attached to the movie. I have huge respect for him as a filmmaker and from what I've seen he obviously gets the character and is a huge fan. For me, it's really all about him and his take on *Rogue Trooper*." It's not bad going for a 40-year-old blue guy. >

Follow Dave Gibbons @davegibbons90
Steve MacManus' *The Mighty One: My Life Inside The Nerve Centre* is available from book sellers. >



CHARACTER STUDY

Rogue Trooper



TROOPING ON TO THE BIG SCREEN

Director Duncan Jones took a break from leading the charge to bring *Rogue Trooper* to the big screen, to speak with SciFiNow about his comic book heritage...

TELL US ABOUT YOUR HISTORY WITH COMICS, AND IN PARTICULAR 2000AD AND ROGUE TROOPER?

I was never a disciplined comic collector. More of a scavenger, picking things up when opportunity arose. I had a pretty unusual upbringing and I travelled a lot growing up, so I would go through phases of being into American comics and then moving back to the UK and being obsessive about UK ones such as *Eagle*, *Tiger*, *Commando*... I don't remember when I first started buying *2000AD*, but I do remember feeling like my luck was in when I could get *Eagle*, *2000AD* and *Tiger* at the same time.

WHAT APPEALED TO YOU ABOUT 2000AD IN PARTICULAR?

There was always something punkish and darkly comic (pardon the pun) about the *2000AD* characters. Political and acerbic... but ALWAYS entertaining. DC and Marvel were very clever in addressing other things, but for whatever reason, not in a way that spoke to me so directly.

Eventually though, I started finding I was more excited about the *2000AD* characters than the others and they fell away. I remember loving *Slaine* and that didn't start till '83. *Rogue Trooper* was more of a sleeper. *Judge Dredd* and *Slaine* were the bits I'd always turn to first, but *Rogue Trooper* just grew on me, and I started diving back, trying to find old stories I missed. I think my love of the old *Commando* comics, and my budding love of all things sci-fi just made *Rogue Trooper* hit me at the right time, right place. The sweet spot for my 'fictionaphilia'.

WHAT WAS IT WITH ROGUE THAT RESONATED WITH YOU? WERE YOU MORE ATTRACTED TO THOSE SINGLE CHARACTERS IN COMICS, THAN TEAMS OF HEROES?

Ironically *Rogue*, at least the *Rogue* I grew up loving was a team... AND a loner! That was the beauty of the bio-chips. Being a bit of a classics nerd, I had always read Plato's 'division of the soul' into the way it was written; a philosopher king being a balance of one's mind, one's heart and one's appetites... I had the chance to ask Gerry Finley-Day if that had been the inspiration for the bio-chips... not in the slightest! Haha! Ahh well. It made sense and resonated with me!

DO YOU READ ANY COMICS THESE DAYS?

I'm actually working on a graphic novel with the incredibly talented Alex de Campi. It's a beast of a book, but a story I have been desperate to tell one way or another since 2012. Very British. It would have had a good home as a *2000AD* series, if I hadn't been so gung-ho about doing a giant feckin' book!

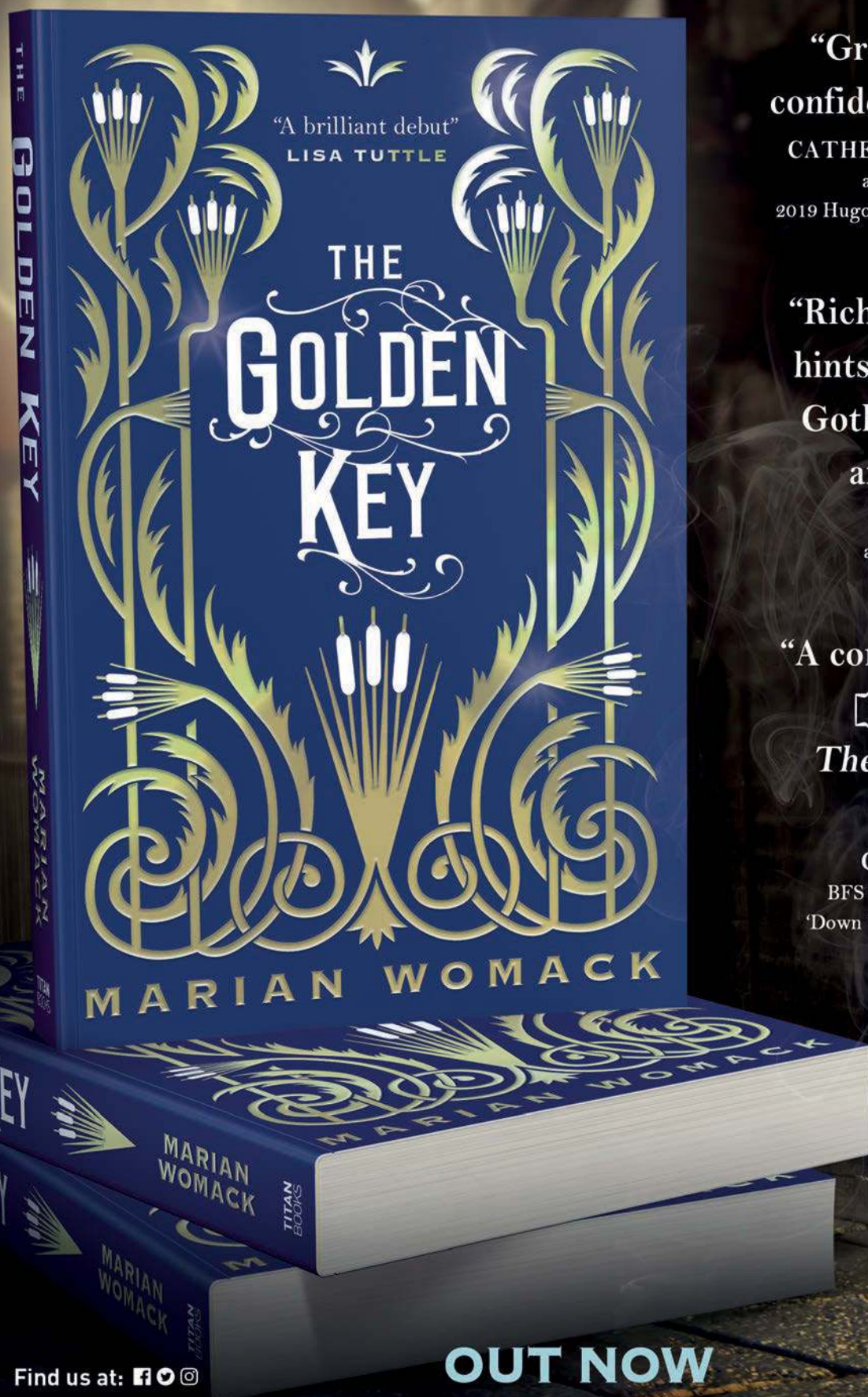
DO YOU HAVE A FAVOURITE COMIC BOOK MOVIE?

I thought the recent *Dredd* was great. I think Marvel do amazing work for its fandom. I'm excited to see where DC goes as it finds its tone... I think the *Rogue Trooper* in my head is my favourite though. I just hope I can get it out without breaking something!

WHEN DID THE IDEA OF LOOKING TO ADAPT ROGUE TROOPER FIRST COME ABOUT?

I'm embarrassed to say that during film school I actually got a mohawk, went to visit (*2000AD*/Rebellion Publishing owner) Jason Kingsley and asked him for the rights to make a *Rogue Trooper* movie! I had never made a film! He wryly asked if I planned to play the lead and wisely suggested I get a few films under my belt first.

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Four Out Of Five Ain't Bad

Jacqueline Wilson's follow up to E Nesbit's classic children's book is getting a movie adaptation courtesy of Sky Cinema. We talked to the director and the VFX team about *Four Kids And It*, and about how the beloved Psammead has been reinvented

WORDS ABIGAIL CHANDLER

Children have been falling in love with *It* since 1902. Not the arm-chomping clown, but the wish-granting Psammead at the heart of E Nesbit's *Five Children And It*.

But kids of a younger generation may know of only one Psammead – the one that appeared in *Four Children And It*, Jacqueline Wilson's 2012 children's book, a modern-day sequel to Nesbit's story, in which a new group of children meet 'It'. It is Wilson's book that this film, retitled *Four Kids And It*, is based on.

Four Kids And It centres on a blended family on holiday – David (Matthew Goode) and his children from a previous relationship Ros (Teddie-Rose Malleson-Allen) and Robbie (Billy Jenkins), his wife Alice (Paula Patton), her daughter Smash (Ashley Aufderheide) and David and Alice's daughter Maudie (Ellie-Mae Siame). Director Andy De Emmony tells us that the story has "got the same themes of 'be careful what you wish for' [as *Five Children And It*], but it was so nice to get it updated with Jacqueline's version of that story, putting it in a contemporary, dysfunctional family". He says that, at its heart, the film is about "a new family coming together", with the added complication of the children meeting the Psammead and making a series of ill-conceived wishes.

The film makes some changes from the book, including the addition of a villain, Tristan, played by Russell Brand, who wishes to use the Psammead for his own gains. Completing the cast is Michael Caine, who provides the voice of 'It'.

"Script-wise it has a lot of laughter and tears..." De Emmony says. "There's a nice emotional, strong storyline through that, and humour that stops it getting too earnest." He tells us that he was drawn to the project in part because of the emotional and humorous elements, but also because he was intrigued by the challenge of working with children of a variety of ages, and creating a CGI creature

that was also a fully-rounded character. "All the things you're not supposed to do," he chuckles. "And it was certainly very challenging. But it was great fun." To make things even more complicated he opted to film as much of it as possible on location, on a beach. In Ireland. "[I]f you've got a lot of visual effects, being in a real environment really makes a difference in grounding the thing," he says, although he admits that the weather did throw up some extra hurdles.

He was also convinced to take on the project thanks to his daughters, who were massive Jacqueline Wilson fans in childhood. De Emmony admits to feeling the need to "do [Wilson] proud", and adds that he found her to be an excellent collaborator on the film. "She's much more a novelist than a scriptwriter, by her own admission, but she was very useful. She's surprisingly flexible as well when elements were changed of her story. So long as the idea was still the same, she was very amenable and very collaborative."

She also makes a cameo in the film, and, according to De Emmony, spent much of her time on set signing books for children. "She was great fun," he remembers, fondly.

One thing De Emmony and the producers were especially interested in was making sure the film felt grounded, and didn't tip too far in any direction – he didn't want the humour to become too broad, or the emotion to become schmaltzy, or the Psammead to become too cartoony. He also had to create a believable world that the actors – especially the young ones – could engage with.

In casting the children De Emmony tells us that he "had to really look for that ability to let go, to really be there", especially as the children would be acting opposite a creature that wasn't there. Puppet stand-ins were used on set, and Michael Caine's pre-recorded lines would be played for the children to respond to. "One of the actors was only five, so it's really important she could look at this



puppet and it would make the real sounds, and she could really let go and believe he was there," he explains. On the other hand: "Sometimes the older kids don't want to feel silly so you have to give the whole thing a very credible setting for them." He says that finding children who could do everything that the film demanded of them was a "tall order", but one that he's confident they met.

The children weren't the only people facing challenges on the production – creating the Psammead posed interesting dilemmas for even the seasoned folk at Milk VFX, who had to create a character who was ancient but energetic, grumpy but loveable. De Emmony tells us that the process was about "finding a look and feel for him that was not too scary but also not too cute, so

FOUR KIDS AND IT

Four Out Of Five Ain't Bad



the grumpiness still worked”.

In the first instance, concept artist Brian Froud (the man behind the look of *The Dark Crystal*) produced an early design for the character, which was modelled as a sculpture and then scanned into a computer, so that the team at Milk could begin tweaking the design and making sure the character could meet all the demands of the script.

“We spent a lot of time talking about what he was like and what drove him, and all that helped you inform how he moves and how he smiles and things like that,” Clare Norman, VFX Executive Producer, says, giving the example that “within the story he is a kleptomaniac, he likes to steal things, so one of his features was long fingers”.

The initial design process took about eight

months before they landed on a look and functionality that worked. In the original Nesbit book the Psammead had eyes on stalks, an idea that was quickly binned because, according to De Emmory, “it’s hard to love something with extendable eyes”.

In terms of his movement, Norman says: “We often talked about elderly kung fu martial arts experts, who have that element of being agile, but they’ve got wisdom, so they carry an air of respect.” He was also a creature that had to work in two elements – on land, and swimming through the sand. The VFX team decided that the latter would be his natural element, making him clumsier when he’s on land. The key, according to Creature Rigging Supervisor Neil Roche, was to make the Psammead “physically

plausible”, even though he’s a fictional creature, and to really commit to the realism of the character rather than making him cartoony. “It was about getting the little stuff he’d do, like hand gestures or facial motions and just really sell some of the animation in terms of realism,” Roche says. “You can get 80% of the way there reasonably quickly, but getting the last 10-20% is the really difficult part of any animation job.”

The other challenge was to maintain the consistency and integrity of the character, a tricky feat when multiple animators are working on him. Head of animation Chris Hutchison tells us that he was in charge of making “sure [the Psammead] didn’t detour too much from what I thought made him him. So it was just trying to make sure that the performance was there, and that he wasn’t doing anything out of character”.

Roche agrees, saying: “You’ve got to understand his story and his motivations for what he does... that’s a really tricky thing to get across in animation, and to make it believable and convincing for the audience as well.”

One element that helped immeasurably with bringing the Psammead to life was the casting of Michael Caine. They filmed Caine’s performance, tracking his facial and upper-body movement onto the digital creature where possible. “He’s someone who is known for very minimal, controlled performances,” De Emmory says. “He was able to let loose a bit, which was really good fun as well. He can go quite big at times for the creature, very emphatic. So it was quite nice playing with that with him. He really got into the freedom of that, playing with the voice, playing with the movement.” When he returned for additional dialogue recording and was able to see animated footage of the Psammead, De Emmory says that Caine grew in confidence, until “there were whole ten-minute takes of him just mumbling and grumbling and burping and making weird sounds, which the animators loved”.

Hutchison says that “you’d work on some of the shots and see glimpses of [Caine] come through, it would take you by surprise”. Hutchison admits that after months of working on the Psammead – he was there from the first shot to the last – he was quite sad to say goodbye to a creature he had come to know inside out.

As the animators and the directors say goodbye to the character, yet another generation gets ready to say hello, and meet their Psammead. This may be a contemporary take on the character, but he hasn’t changed all that much in the last 118 years. He’s looking good for his age. 

Four Kids And It is released in cinemas and on Sky Cinema on 10 April.



KEEP YOUR **HELMET ON**

WE SPEAK TO THE MANDALORIAN STARS PEDRO PASCAL, GINA CARANO AND CARL WEATHERS ABOUT BOUNTY HUNTERS, WAR AND JUST WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE PART OF THE ICONIC STAR WARS FRANCHISE

WORDS RACHAEL HARPER
INTERVIEWS ADAM TANSWELL

The impact of Netflix is hard to ignore (it's even starting to become a verb...) so when we heard that a slew of companies were going to start their own streaming services, we weren't overly surprised. In fact, so many companies (Prime Video, Disney +, NOW TV, Apple TV...) announced new streaming services that the excitement almost got lost. But then they started announcing their exclusive shows. Prime commissioned *Good Omens*, NOW TV meant you could stream HBO series like the excellent *Watchmen* and Disney + announced *The Mandalorian*. Ah yes, as soon as the latter's trailer hit our phone screens its intention was clear – Storm Trooper heads nailed to spikes, dodgy dealings and that iconic Mandalorian look made famous by Jango and Boba Fett... not only did *The Mandalorian* look great, it seemed to be dark and original. We were in.

Fast forward a frustratingly long amount of time (both Disney + and *The Mandalorian* were launched in the US last November) and it's finally here in the UK, and we're not the only ones who are excited: "I can't believe it. It's really an exciting time for storytelling," says Pedro Pascal who plays the titular character in *The Mandalorian*. "I honestly feel like we're breaking new territory now with the way that we have access to stories and the way that access is developing the telling of these stories. I mean, this is the first live-action *Star Wars* series ever!"

The Mandalorian is set in a war-torn galaxy after the events of *Episode Six* and before *Episode Seven*. The show follows the trials and tribulations of the mysterious character known only as 'The Mandalorian' (or 'Mando'), a lone bounty hunter who is part of the traditional ancient Mandalorian martial order all bound by a common culture, creed and code. "We definitely play with the idea of mystery," Pascal says of his character. "I feel like we've been building on iconic characters from the past, starting with Akira Kurosawa's Lone Samurai and going into Sergio Leone's The Man With No Name. There are different ways in which we take this very mysterious man, whose identity is kept from us quite literally with armour, and basically take that apart."

Though we never see his character's face, Pascal, who also played Oberyin Martell

in *Game Of Thrones* ("from one big hit to another!"), explains that audiences will still learn a lot about him: "You can tell so much about this character through his posture and with movement and the way that the artful creation of the costumes contribute to body language. I find it incredibly liberating, because you put on a mask and your imagination gets to go completely wild."

Pascal is joined by actress Gina Carano, who plays solitary soldier Cara Dune: "She's a loner and that's where we find her and the Mandalorian. Originally, she thinks the Mandalorian's there because he's got a bounty on her. If you think somebody is coming for you and they're at a place where you're trying to hide out, you can just imagine how that might go down!"

After the battles from *Episode Six*, a sort of depression has taken hold of the galaxy and money is hard to come, which is where Carl Weathers' character Greef Karga comes in. Karga is the leader of the Bounty Hunters' Guild (which regulates bounty hunter activity) and assigns bounties to specific individuals, which is how he and Mandalorian meet: "There's a mission that Greef Karga wants to send somebody on and he feels like the Mandalorian is the only person who seems to be able to deliver the goods," Weathers explains.

Carano's character is similarly feeling the aftereffects of the rebellion: "She feeds off of war; she feeds off of this extreme lifestyle. Then, when she doesn't have that purpose anymore, what will she do? She goes off and she's getting into trouble. And she's making money any way she possibly can."

"After war, people normally try to find some sort of place to be safe again," Weathers explains. "They try to find a sense of balance, but there's also a lot of opportunity that presents itself. Certainly, there's opportunity for people who want to play the system and find those little nooks and crannies where they can make some money. Sometimes, they may be making that money off the books; they'll be making that money as a criminal."

This post-*Episode Six* galaxy is indeed a breeding ground for nefarious dealings and the classic *Star Wars* theme of right versus wrong ➤➤



➤ is very much present in *The Mandalorian* even if that battle is within one's self. "What [writers] Jon Favreau and Dave Filoni have done, which is fascinating to me, is start to blur the lines of what is good and what is evil," says Pedro of his character. "They take somebody who seems like he's covered up in armour and is impenetrable and can defeat anything – but they then take him to the brink of survival repeatedly. They find many different ways to show that vulnerability. They break the rules, quite frankly, in terms of what we understand *Star Wars* to be while building on its original foundation of rules. It's fascinating to witness."

"I love how they keep bringing up things within the stories that harken back to other *Star Wars* stories and old lore [in *The Mandalorian*]," Weathers agrees.

The plot themes in *The Mandalorian* may hark back to the original films but the look of the show could not be more up-to-date, with new technology perfectly melding with the iconic aesthetics created for the original movies.

"Dave Filoni and Jon Favreau took our favourite moments from the older movies and our favourite feelings that the older movies brought with them, and they took a good portion of the new technology available and meshed it together," says Carano. "I feel like this is an awesome shout out to the older movies and it really has that *Star Wars* flavour to it –

but then it takes advantage of new technology in a really great way. Walking on this set, you get the feeling of how it must have felt when they were working on the original movies. There's an old-school vibe to it that's incredible. Plus, the technology is insane."

"If you compare the technology from the Seventies to now it's light years away. It's *Star Wars* away in years," Weathers explains. "When we stand there on the set, I'm amazed

at how good it is and the experience is so real as an actor. I'll give you an example. When we were making *Predator*, there was no 'Predator' on the set. We were looking at a spot on a tree or something in the distance that's supposed to be coming at us. With this, if you're standing there and you're in a boat and you're supposed to be moving – there is a screen behind you that shows everything moving, but then you look at the camera and you know you're not moving.

Baby Yoda has become a phenomenon in his own right.



There are some nefarious dealings afoot...



Greef Karga has an important job for Mando...



SUIT UP

Pedro Pascal tells us about wearing that iconic armour

"Everything that looks good comes with a price. It's definitely challenging, because these old bones aren't as young as they used to be. There's a very specific silhouette and it's completely mobile – but to teach your body how to move in it to the best of its ability is very challenging. The costume is about 30 pounds of extra weight, so it's not easy. It's much harder to just get up from a sitting position than it is to be standing the whole time. But this guy was talking to me the other day – I was at a breaking point because I was so physically tired – and he referenced something that he did on his first movie, which happened to be *The Terminator* from the Eighties. I was like: 'Wait... I am one degree of separation from the first *Terminator* movie? This is incredible.' I said to myself: 'Get over it, you're fine. Get over the physical discomfort and remember who you're around. And also remember that it's everybody that makes this story.' There are about five people that help me get into the costume, because everything has to be just right. It's very collaborative. I love it."



"THIS IS AN AWESOME SHOUT OUT TO THE OLDER MOVIES AND IT REALLY HAS THAT STAR WARS FLAVOUR TO IT"

GINA CARANO



But the set is so interactive now that it really enhances our performance because you're not having to make believe about something. It's all happening around you."

Though *The Mandalorian* is yet to launch in the UK, US audiences have clearly liked what they have seen and the show has already been commissioned for a second season: "Well, we know we're doing our second season, so we know the story's continuing," confirms Weathers. "With television in particular we don't have multi-year contracts. But we are in this second year for sure; we signed the contracts for that. So we know there's going to be another eight episodes at least."

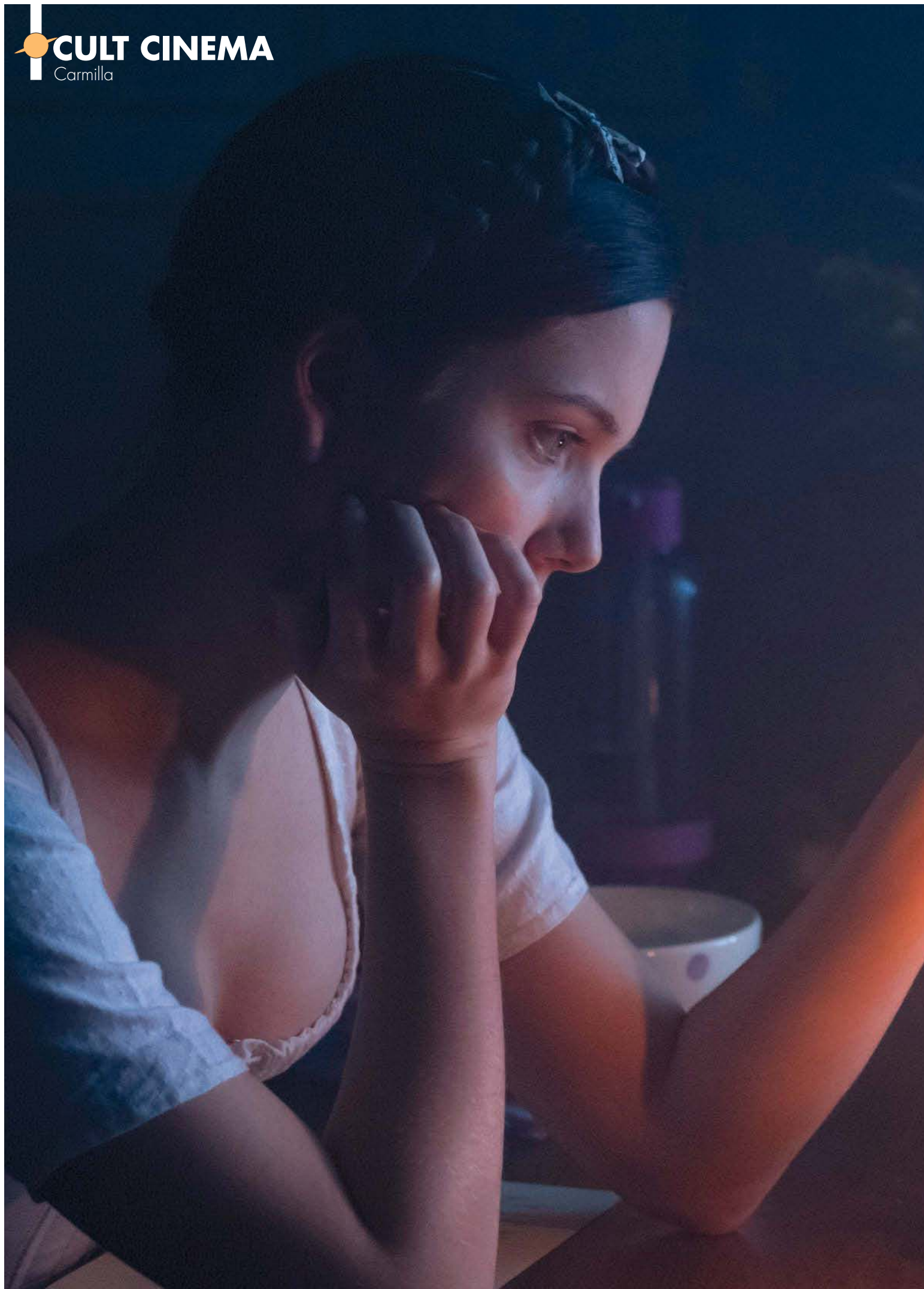
The actors are clearly impressed with the show too, and fact that *The Mandalorian* is part of the iconic *Star Wars* franchise is not lost on them, in fact, it's even making some of them new fans of the movies: "For me, I thought I was a fan. I was like: 'oh, I love the movies.' But I didn't understand what all of the drama was about," says Carano. "But then, when I got involved in this project, I went back and I started to watch everything again and that's when I realised I was missing so much by being a 'casual' fan. There's so much more depth that comes with these stories. So I now consider myself to be a 'newborn' fan."

"The first time I stepped on to the set was a huge deal," enthuses Pedro. "The first

time I put on the costume and looked in the mirror was epic. It was a shocking experience because to physically inhabit something that harkens back to your childhood is really weird. My legs, my torso, my arms and my head are physically a part of *Star Wars* now. And that's weird." ✨

The Mandalorian will be available along with the Disney + launch in the UK on 24 March.





The Age of Innocence

WE SPEAK TO CARMILLA DIRECTOR EMILY HARRIS AND
ACTRESS HANNAH RAE ABOUT TAKING THE 19TH CENTURY
GOTHIC NOVELLA IN A NEW DIRECTION

WORDS KATHERINE MCLAUGHLIN

**Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's 1872
Gothic novella has a long history of
adaptation and reinvention in cinema.**

In 1932, Carl Dreyer's *Vampyr* stripped away the lesbian erotica, in the Sixties, horror legend Christopher Lee starred in a good-looking but barely coherent Italian version of the text called *Terror In The Crypt*, Hammer Horror had a stab at it in 1976, with *The Vampire Lovers*, starring Peter Cushing and Ingrid Pitt, and the 1972 Spanish film, *The Blood Splattered Bride*, has been hailed as a cult classic for its X-rated but progressive, feminist handling of *Carmilla's* themes.

In 2020, director/writer Emily Harris' interpretation hits UK cinema screens. Filmed in 2017 at an Elizabethan manor house in East Sussex, she transposes the time to the 1780s and relocates to rural England.

The film strikes an eerie ambience from the start, introducing its isolated, 15-year-old protagonist Lara (Hannah Rae) as a captive of sorts to her stern governess, Miss Fontaine (Jessica Raine). When a horse and carriage crash brings an auburn-haired mysterious stranger, Carmilla (Devrim Lingnau), to their door, Miss Fontaine's suspicions and superstition lead her to believe she is in fact the devil.

"I'd never actually read the book before, so when I did, I found that aspects of it really intrigued me, which I felt hadn't been expressed in cinema before and that made me want to make it," explains Harris. Her previous background in theatre gave her a fresh approach to the adaptation: "Having ➤

Lara forms a bond with the mysterious Carmilla.



➤ worked in theatre as an interpretive art form I didn't have an aversion to something being done before. You can see the same thing being interpreted in different ways so that in itself was exciting; seeing what my version would be.

"At the time I came to it, it was reflecting a lot of what was happening in the world in terms of how we were behaving as a society and those aspects of human nature that were coming to the fore were very obvious to me in the book. It felt like the right time to explore it in this way, to look at how prejudice and hate towards an outsider has become so ingrained as part of normal life.



This version of *Carmilla* is set during the 1780s.

We've started to accept that as the norm."

Themes of fear, persecution and sexual awakening are key in *Carmilla*. As far as the fantasy and vampiric elements go, Harris decided to take her interpretation in a new direction. "I tried to really think about, what is a vampire? Where does the vampire come from in literature and what does it represent?" she says. "For me, a vampire has always represented the feeling of being in love. That feeling, when you have fallen deeply in love, and you just want to find a way to keep the person or create a mutual pact! I guess that's really weird, but it's just this visceral urge where you just want to attach to somebody and make sure they're yours forever and ever. I really relate to vampirism in that way, which isn't actually scary it's just very practical. I guess what I was seeing in *Carmilla* was definitely that first coming-of-age moment of love. I was trying to reflect first love and using that idea of vampirism in that way. So, it's not this scary thing, it's a feeling."

Harris' conversations with Hannah Rae on set mainly focused on loss of innocence, first love and coming-of-age. "The way that we saw the relationship between Carmilla and

Lara was very innocent," explains Rae.

"Lara hasn't grown up with a lot of interaction with other kids her age. When Carmilla is introduced, it's like her coming-of-age, through their relationship, finding out who she is and how she deals with the situation. She's never experienced a girl like her, her own age before. We had lots of chats about the film, and I drew on my own experiences of being a 15-year-old and trying to find out who I am."

Phil Selway from Radiohead (who also has themes and music from *Legion*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *iZombie* under his belt), composed the score for *Carmilla*. "He came on board very early," says Harris. "The score and sound design are half the film so it was important that it wasn't left until the end of production. He had read the script very early on as he's a percussionist which I felt, from a storytelling point of view, made initial sense. When he read the screenplay, he said there was so much percussion in the script with the crunching leaves, crashing rain and crackling fire, so he developed a score that elevated the story. He gave it an element that I hadn't even thought about. He came on set and he absorbed the environment. The score

definitely underpins all of the emotional arc that we were trying to get at.”

Harris introduces the world of *Carmilla* by juxtaposing rigid routine with the wild abandon of the natural surroundings. The interiors at night are all lit by candle and by day only natural light pierces through the windows. Gerrit Dou’s paintings are a touchstone for the way the images are framed and Harris cites Peter Weir’s *Picnic At Hanging Rock* and Lucile Hadzihalilovic’s *Innocence* as key references for the atmosphere and feel of the film. “*Innocence* was a big influence on me when I saw it, and how she tapped into that coming-of-age moment in a female’s life in a really beautiful way and also created a world that you just believe. *Picnic At Hanging Rock* is driven by this need for companionship more than lust and that need to be understood. It’s something that is quite beautiful about how Lara and Carmilla relate to one another. That age group, there’s a difference between being understood and understanding, and I think the need here is to be understood. Lara doesn’t mind that she doesn’t understand Carmilla, she just feels understood. I think that’s the beauty at the heart of it.”

That’s not to say that Lara doesn’t have dark carnal desires though. Her burgeoning emotions are placed in visceral erotic dream sequences that occasionally pierce her

oppressive reality. “The dream sequences are so bloody and gory,” exclaims Rae. “The thing Emily and I were talking about, was that although Lara seems quite innocent and young, she does have this dark curiosity inside her. There’s the dream sequence where I’m being sawn in half so it shows how her desires are transforming from her attraction to a man to Carmilla. It’s her inner turmoil that she can’t express as she’s so repressed and contained by Miss Fontaine.”

An earlier sequence places Lara in charge of her sexual cravings and fully on top of a local magician who she seems to have a crush on. “The dream you’re thinking about is the one where she almost enters the magician through his chest,” laughs Harris when I suggest how powerful a depiction it is of untamed, penetrative female longing.

“She’s having a sexual awakening; these feelings and thoughts are transferring into her dreams. She’s peeling off the layers of clothes from this magician character that she’s infatuated with. It’s almost as if she can’t get enough of him! Like, peeling his clothes off isn’t enough so she has to keep going deeper and deeper inside of him, which is a dream logic in a sense. It’s not meant to be nasty or mean, it’s actually meant to be visceral and sexual. Lara just wants more, more, more! She literally goes into him!”

The LGBTQ themes that subtly ripple through the film in this candid exploration of sexuality that shows how desires can shift were not something that Harris was initially focused on. “It wasn’t something discussed on set, but I’ve noticed that it has come to the fore as the film has been out there with the public, and it definitely has that aspect to it,” Harris says. “I don’t know if this is a good thing or not, but honestly, I was looking at first love and it didn’t matter at the time of writing it what gender that was. It’s set in a time when female sexuality was repressed, Lara’s absolutely isolated and everything she’s learnt comes from Miss Fontaine, who is really trying to stop her from growing up.” The impetus was on the importance of Lara coming-of-age on her own terms. “First love doesn’t necessarily come with identifying your sexual orientation. That exploration of first love can come in any shape or form.”

Rae concludes by explaining what *Carmilla* means to her, and what she hopes an audience will take away from it: “It’s okay to be different. People are scared of what they don’t understand or things that are out of the ordinary. Different isn’t bad. This different girl that came into Lara’s life is probably also one of the best things that has ever happened to her.”

Carmilla is in cinemas 3 April.

“First love doesn’t necessarily come with identifying your sexual orientation”

EMILY HARRIS

Jessica Raine plays stern governess, Miss Fontaine.





DON'T LOOP NOW

WORDS JOSH SLATER-WILLIAMS

KOKO-DI KOKO-DA

WE TALK TO DIRECTOR JOHANNES NYHOLM ABOUT HIS UPCOMING HORROR MOVIE KOKO-DI KOKO-DA

FANS OF GRIM BUT STRANGELY UPLIFTING FILMS BUT WHO ALSO HAPPEN TO LOVE GROUNDHOG DAY, WILL HAVE A NEW HORROR FABLE TO PRIORITISE IN 2020 WITH KOKO-DI KOKO-DA.

This second feature from Swedish director Johannes Nyholm really does do something inventive – and frequently disturbing – with a time loop storytelling device.

Koko-di Koko-da follows a grieving married couple taking a holiday, stopping off in the woods on the way to camp for the night, only for their tent to come under siege from a group of figures straight out of the circus of your nightmares. We talk to Nyholm about his film.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR FILM?

It's a drama about a relationship that is breaking apart and it's inspired by situations like that, where you sometimes feel that the whole world around you is falling apart. A lot of the experiences in the film I actually saw with my own eyes, through my own relationships and others', as well as in dreams.

The whole film has the structure of a dream. Dreams, or nightmares at least, have this loop structure with small differences where you walk around in eternal loops trying to escape. But the small differences between one loop and another is something I wanted to convey with the structure of the film. And it's also an interesting way to portray grief.

DO YOU HAVE ANY FAVOURITE FILMS THAT ALSO EXPLORE GRIEF WITH A HEIGHTENED ATMOSPHERE?

Don't Look Now is fantastic and it also has a very dream-like structure. I wasn't inspired so much by other films but more by my own experiences.

YOU SHOT VERY EARLY IN THE MORNINGS FOR MUCH OF THE PRODUCTION, WHICH GIVES THE SECOND AND THIRD ACTS OF THIS FILM THIS HAZY, DREAMY FEELING...

It's supposed to be like a limbo state; a transition between awake and asleep. There's no real contrast. Everything is kind of floating, you don't really know where you are. I wanted

to achieve a timeless mood. A lot of the film was shot really, really early in the morning. The hour of the wolf, they call it sometimes. That's the time of the night when you dream the most, have the most violent dreams. It took a lot of effort to pull off because you don't have so many hours to shoot, no more than one usually, because if we stayed longer that specific level of light would pass. I think we were out in the woods for 20 days.

WHERE DOES THE TITLE, KOKO-DI KOKO-DA, COME FROM?

It comes from a children's song that's been sung in many languages, originally a French folk song called 'Rooster's Death' or something like that in English. In French, it's 'Le Coq Est Mort'. It's a childish, naive song about a



dead rooster that can't sing 'koko-di koko-da' anymore. You repeat that 'koko-di koko-da koko-di koko-da' in the refrain. It's a song with a lot of morbid undertones. It came in early when writing. I wanted the gentleman in the white costume, who leads the group terrorising the couple in the tent, to sing a song; to have a melody surrounding him. And I thought of that old children's song, which has a weird structure as well, which fits well with the film. The song has this structure of a never-ending loop that you're trapped in and can't escape.

WHAT WAS BEHIND THE CONCEPT OF THE THREE FIGURES THAT PLAGUE THE PROTAGONISTS THROUGHOUT THE FILM?

In the discussions with me and the costume designer, it was about making them look

like how they came across in my dream. If you like, you can probably see a symbolic meaning to each and every one of them.

INTERSPERSED THROUGHOUT THE FILM ARE A FEW DIFFERENT SEQUENCES OF SHADOW PUPPETRY, DEPICTING FABLES...

They weren't there from the beginning, but I felt the film was too cruel without them. It's a violent and harsh film and I think it needed a bit of comfort for the viewer; to show some beauty. That's why I added it, to make people be able to still sleep afterwards.

WHAT KIND OF REACTIONS HAVE YOU BEEN GETTING FROM AUDIENCES?

It's been very mixed. For some people, it's a comedy and they laugh a lot at the violence. Others love it and take it very personally. Yet others are engrossed by it and find it disturbing. It doesn't really look like many other films so that makes it hard to compare it to other things. Some people are prepared only for the usual sorts of entertainment, so for them it can take a lot of effort.

YOU DID A TOUR OF THE FILM ON A BUS IN SWEDEN. WHAT WAS THAT LIKE?

One reason I did that is I wanted to have a private dialogue with the audience, to talk to them afterwards. We wanted to make the framing of the film as personal as the film itself, and wanted to take the film out to people instead of forcing them into a cinema. The bus we used for the tour had been used for this mobile theatre a long time ago, so it had a stage inside to seat 40 to 50 people. And then we redid it into a cinema. It was a really neat way to show the film and have a super intense experience with everyone crammed together in a really small space. A bit claustrophobic and warm, but a very friendly way to show the film and take care of the audience. We talked a lot afterwards and I tried to explain things in more detail than a traditional Q&A. ☞

Koko-di Koko-da will be released in cinemas on 27 March.

DEATH TO THE TITANS

WE LOOK AT THE ENTERTAINMENT BEHEMOTH THAT IS ATTACK ON TITAN, FROM ITS MANGA ROOTS TO ITS POSSIBLE HOLLYWOOD FILM ADAPTATION, AND SPEAK TO SOME OF THE ANIME SERIES' VOICE ACTORS

WORDS TOM ARDEN

ATTACK ON TITAN is a juggernaut of Japanese pop-culture. Set thousands of years in the future, it envisions an Earth where humans are preyed on by terrible man-eating giants. These are the Titans, seemingly mindless, with grotesquely grinning human faces. Where they came from, no-one knows (or they're not telling). The humans have regressed to a quasi-medieval state and live within giant walls. The Titans breach those walls at the start of the story, leading to bloody mayhem, but it's not the apocalypse yet. A small group of elite fighters, swinging on wires like giant-killing Spider-Men, lead the defence and slowly unearth the truth of their world.

The saga debuted as a manga strip in 2009, created by artist Hajime Isayama when he was in his early 20s. The manga remains the central plank of the franchise, and is expected to end this year. Many fans, however, follow the hugely popular TV anime, which is being released on Blu-ray and DVD by Manga Entertainment. This March, Manga is bringing out the latest anime episodes (Season Three 'Part Two'), containing massive revelations about the show's world.

"It's basically a zombie apocalypse story," says author Rachel Aaron, a prolific SF/fantasy author who wrote the *AOT* spinoff novel *Garrison Girl*. "Except these zombies are hundreds of feet tall. Also, you're in a non-magical fantasy world, so there are no good guns, no convenience stores, and no remnants of an industrial society to raid for supplies. Just a multi-walled city and medieval-level tech. Oh, and you might be the last outpost of humanity."

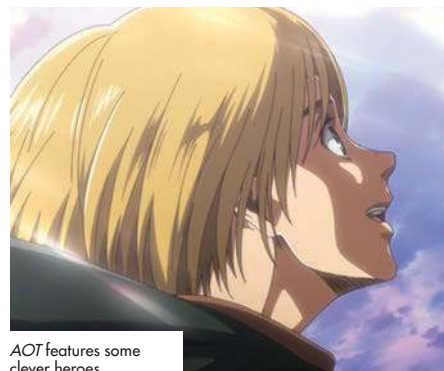
"It was this set-up that sold me on the series more than anything else," Aaron continues. "How do you feed all the people? How do you fight something so much bigger and tougher than you? How do you survive? The screws get even tighter when the Titans break through and start stomping on

houses and eating people whole. They're terrifying monsters: huge and tough and pretty much immune to gunfire, and they're rapidly pushing humanity towards extinction as wall after wall falls."

Voice-actor Bryce Papenbrook was a fan of the anime series before he was cast as the hero Eren in the American dub of *AOT*. He compares the series to *Lost*. "It seems to pull you in deeper and deeper with every episode. Every episode would answer one question, but create two more. For those who haven't watched it, give it five episodes. I think you'll be hooked at the same moment I was – no spoilers!"

For Papenbrook's co-star Trina Nishimura, who voices *Titan*'s heroine Mikasa, the title monsters have a real-world resonance. "In our world there are so many things that we, as individuals, cannot control. We don't have to worry about Titans peeling the roof off of our homes and devouring us, but we all feel a very real sense of terror about facing our own 'Titans'. I think the idea of kids fighting against literal Titans emboldens us to face the very real issues we all face daily."

Aaron describes the Titans as a fantastic wall to throw heroes against. "The Titans have got all the classic zombie characteristics – they're man-eating and unstoppable – except they're the size of houses. That may not sound scary – I know there are GIFs online of running Titans with stupid faces that might make people think the show's silly, but when you see that shot in the actual episode, it's terrifying. They're everything you could want from an implacable enemy, but still with weaknesses that allow clever heroes to bring them down."



AOT features some clever heroes.

The truth of the world is slowly unearthed...



**"I THINK THE IDEA OF KIDS
FIGHTING AGAINST LITERAL
TITANS EMBOLDENS US TO
FACE THE REAL ISSUES
WE ALL FACE DAILY"**

TRINA NISHIMURA

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The clever heroes are highlighted by anime commentator Rayna Denison, author of the book *Anime: A Genre*. Many of the characters in *AOT* are teenagers; Denison highlights how Isayama was little more than a teen when he created them. "The teenaged characters have an anger at their situation, a frustration with authority and a love for one another that feels real. They're more than just love interests for one another."

"In *AOT*, stereotypes of teenagers are de- and re-constructed to allow for real growth over the course of the story, and for surprising twists in characters. One of the stand-out characters is the girl Mikasa Ackerman, who deconstructs notions of heroism by becoming the franchise's most fearsome military fighter."

Mikasa's voice-actress Nishimura says: "When I was young, a female protagonist in a series could be smart but not physically capable, let alone the most adept at fighting. Or on the off chance that she was, she would be hyper-sexualised. Similarly, a male lead would likely not be the brightest and he'd only be considered a 'man' if he had a six-pack and a physique that exuded physical strength. In *Attack On Titan*, Mikasa



The humans in *AOT* live behind giant walls.

➤ is the most capable physically and she's not hyper-sexualised."

Mikasa is one of three central orphaned youngsters in the series, who are bonded together like a family. Another of the trio is Armin, who's a delicate boy, cowardly-seeming at times, but with a brilliant mind. "Armin is not capable in battle," says Nishimura, "but he has a strategic mind that the team leans on. Plus he is the most emotional character in the series. The idea that the female lead would be the best fighter, and a male lead would be allowed to cry in the series is something I never saw in the media growing up."

The other focal character in *AOT* is the boy Eren, whose story is packed with surprises. He often seems defined by fury and trauma; his mother was devoured by a Titan before his eyes. Eren spends much time shouting

or screaming in rage. Papenbrook confesses he's an exhausting character to voice:

"It's true that Eren is extremely angry," says Papenbrook, "When I'm in the booth recording, I try to live in the moment as the character as much as I can, and Eren goes to some very dark places. I pushed myself to feel that same pain, and I hope it came through in my performance."

Eren has a particularly alarming habit of self-harming. At key moments, he bites down hard on his own hand, for reasons we won't spoil. "It may sound real," says Papenbrook, "because I bit my hand too and was left pretty bruised. I wouldn't recommend trying that technique yourself."

In contrast, Mikasa looks eerily detached, even serene, in her aerial battles, shooting and spinning through the air to deal death to the Titans. "I think that Mikasa is a

survivor," says Nishimura. "Other people's opinions of her are irrelevant. The only thing that matters to her is keeping her people safe. She is honest 100% of the time as a character and her motivations are clear."

Mikasa is very often described as a 'badass' character. Asked if that's a fitting label, Nishimura tells us: "If disregarding society's opinions, accolades, or critiques of oneself makes you a badass, then fuck yeah, she's bad."

Yet Mikasa and Eren aren't just fighters. They have especially deep feelings for each other, as they were raised together for several years by Eren's mother. "There's one moment that stands out," says Papenbrook. "In the midst of a battle, there's a moment of connection between them. Time seems to stand still and Eren promises to always wrap Mikasa's scarf around her. I thought that was an amazing scene."

For fans who embrace *AOT*'s world, it's a formidable franchise. As well as the main manga and anime versions, it's also spun-off videogames, prequels and side-stories (a prequel manga series, *Before The Fall*, ran to 17 volumes). There was also a two-part live-action Japanese film, though this took huge liberties with the storyline and was slammed by many fans. Since 2018, a possible Hollywood film version has been in development, with *It* director Andy Muschietti attached.

Whether the Hollywood version happens or not, Denison says: "Even from early in the franchise's life, there were lots of ways for Japanese fans to see, read and otherwise consume *AOT*, and this has helped the franchise to find fans. And then keep them." There was even an 'official' slapstick parody, *Attack On Titan: Junior High*, which transferred the characters to a high-school setting. *Junior High* was made as both a manga and an anime TV series; the 'real' *Titan* actors voiced their characters in the anime.

"It was so much fun to let loose," says Papenbrook. "It was hilarious to make really goofy sounds as Eren. The comedy made some of the screams even more extreme, and my voice actually gave out during one recording session."

However, the main *AOT* story remains dead serious. No-one except Isayama and his publishers knows if the fan-favourite characters will reach the imminent ending alive. Nishimura says: "I always hope for a happy ending. This series has been such a roller coaster that I have no idea what will happen. I hope for the best, but I think the creators have done such an amazing job that I trust whatever their final conclusion is." 🐼

Humans have regressed to a quasi-Medieval state.



Attack On Titan Season Three 'Part Two' is released by Manga Entertainment on 23 March.



62 Birds Of Prey

"A roller coaster full of heart, humour and guns"

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GOES TO REVIEWS THAT
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MUST
SEE
NOW



Top: The
Birds Of Prey
are ready to
take on the
bad guys...

Birds of Prey (And The Fantabulous Emancipation Of One Harley Quinn)

These dames ain't no damsels

Release Out now
Director Cathy Yan
Cast Margot Robbie,
Rosie Perez, Mary
Elizabeth Winstead,
Jurnee Smollett-Bell, Ewan
McGregor, Ella Jay Basco
Distributor
Warner Bros
Certificate 15

TRIVIA

MARGOT ROBBIE
DOESN'T JUST STAR IN
BIRDS OF PREY, SHE IS
A PRODUCER ON THE
MOVIE AS WELL.



From her explosive presence in *Suicide Squad*, Harley Quinn (played by the exceptional Margot Robbie) has been a gleam of hope on the rocky terrain of the DC Universe. So, has she lived up to the pressure with her first solo movie (deep breath): *Birds Of Prey (And The Fantabulous Emancipation Of One Harley Quinn)*? Of course she goddamn has.

Birds Of Prey opens on a broken-hearted Harley, who is now split from Mr J. But this breakup doesn't just mean excessive drinking and copious amounts of ice cream, it also means she's unprotected with a target on her back and she's upset A LOT of people.

One of those people is crime boss Black Mask aka Roman Sionis (played with just-the-right-amount-of-camp by Ewan McGregor) who also has renegade cop Renee Montoya, crooked lounge singer Dinah Lance and hitwoman Helena Bertinelli on his tail. When all of these women's paths cross after sneaky pickpocket Cassandra Cain steals something from him, they realise that if they band together they might actually be able to take down Roman once and for all...

The resulting girl gang is a motley crew of diverse women – Dinah aka Black Canary is a criminal with a lot of heart, Renee is a rebel cop straight from an Eighties movie and Helena aka Huntress is an awkward assassin who gets upset when someone mistakes her superhero name. But director Cathy Yan successfully brings them together, resulting in a complex, grounded group

who are slinging insults to one another in one breath and borrowing hair bands in the next.

But this is undoubtedly Harley's film and Robbie plays her to perfection. She's the biggest punk rock bad girl in the playground, and we just want to be her friend. A character who is just as well versed in psychology as she is in batshit crazy, Quinn rationally analyses the people and situations around her just as she rationally decides to break people's legs and blow up buildings. How she manages to be so incessant and over-the-top while being completely lovable is anyone's guess – and the same goes for the film.

Birds Of Prey is a true comic book caper, a riotously funny chariot of joy – it's as in-your-face as the glitter guns the titular character uses and we're enjoying the ride. It's wonderfully self-aware, with direct-to-camera dialogue and fantasy-filled asides, all aided with a cracking soundtrack that ranges from Marilyn Monroe to Doja Cat.

Yes, the underlying themes are about as subtle as the main character (pretty much every male character in this movie is horrible), the plot can get a bit muddled and the story slugs a little in the middle but just buckle up and enjoy the ride – this is a roller coaster of a movie full of heart, humour and guns. Does Harley deserve the weight of optimism for the DC Universe? Hell yeah.

Rachael Harper



The Invisible Man

Perceptive

SciFiNow
MUST
SEE
NOW

Release 7 February

Director Leigh Whannell

Cast Elisabeth Moss, Oliver Jackson-Cohen, Aldis Hodge

Distributor Universal

Certificate 15



Universal's classic monster movie

The Invisible Man, directed by James Whale in 1933 and based on the H G Wells novel, was a hugely influential horror thanks to John P Fulton's impressive special effects.

In 2020, this Blumhouse-produced reimagining, written and directed by Leigh Whannell, proves to be a success thanks to a smart script that takes its subject matter of domestic abuse seriously and turns it into a terrifying nightmare.

Elisabeth Moss stars as the film's heroine, Cecilia, who we first meet running away from her tech entrepreneur partner Adrian, intimidatingly played by Oliver Jackson-Cohen. After her escape, the long-term effects of violence persistently haunt her every move, even in the safety of close friend and cop (Aldis Hodge)'s home.



Soon after, she's told Adrian has passed away but strange bumps in the night convince Cecilia that her partner's death was a hoax.

Whannell sets a tense atmosphere from the outset which rarely lets up throughout the film. He clearly takes inspiration from Nineties thriller *Sleeping With The Enemy*; with the beach-side concrete mansion setting and inversed narrative about a woman faking her own death to escape from a controlling husband, the similarities are evident. It also avoids resemblance to *Hollow Man* by placing the focus on Cecilia.

As in his previous feature, *Upgrade*, Whannell employs some nifty fight sequences, and also blends science fiction and horror to hint at how technology can be used by egotistical, business magnates for ill gotten gains.

There's been a surge of films about women reckoning with powerful men in the post #metoo era and *The Invisible Man* wrestles with the emotional ordeal of harassment and isolation. Stalking, gaslighting, aggressive behaviour, not being believed and the questioning of sanity are all touched upon. Even though some of these issues are not all handled with subtlety, the true horror of Cecilia's situation is effectively conveyed with Moss turning in another gloriously edgy performance. The film gives her plenty of space to express a plethora of reactions as she rages against a chillingly real kind of monster.

Katherine McLaughlin



Although never revealed on the show, Ricardo Montalban claimed Mr Roarke was a fallen angel, whose sin was pride, and *Fantasy Island* was his purgatory.

Fantasy Island

What dreams may come

Release Out now

Director Jeff Wadlow

Cast Michael Pena, Lucy Hale, Maggie Q, Michael Rooker

Distributor Sony Pictures

Certificate 15



"Da plane! Da Plane!"

exclaimed the diminutive Tattoo (Herve Villechaize) excitably at the beginning of each episode of Aaron Spelling's TV series *Fantasy Island*, after glimpsing the aircraft that brings guests to their magical resort for fantasy fulfilment.

Tattoo is conspicuous by his absence in Blumhouse's horror reinterpretation of the vintage family show (his iconic line is uttered several times throughout however), and so too is the charm and sophistication that the much-missed Ricardo Montalban brought with his commanding portrayal

of island guide Mr Roarke.

"Here everything and anything is possible!" assures his cinematic successor (Michael Pena) to his motley guests with far less conviction. It doesn't help that Jeff Wadlow's (*Truth Or Dare*) direction is predictably workmanlike and that the script is anything but inspiring, even if the aesthetics are deceptively glossy.

The hapless island guest ensemble includes the mouthy Melanie (Lucy Hale), the maternal Elena (a compelling Maggie Q), the comic relief brothers-from-another-mother Bradley and Brax (Ryan Hansen and Jimmy O Yang respectively) and soulful Randall (Austin Stowell). Their diverse customised experiences range from laughable erotic titillation, wistful familial fulfilment to blood-curdling revenge... but as Roarke aptly laments: "Often people's fantasies are painfully unimaginative."

Indeed, a little more imagination could have made proceedings more thrilling for this *Fantasy*-turned-horror-*Island*. Admittedly, some effort is made to explore the nightmarish myths behind the island's life-fulfilling supernatural power, (the TV show left things ambiguous). However, it all becomes too convoluted when the fantasies cross

over and an attempt to illogically tie everything together with a twist proves even more tiresome than the predictably sign-posted jump scares.

If you were stranded on this desert island and made to live out your chosen fantasy to its logical conclusion, you would surely choose something more life-affirming than this forgettable affair.

Oliver Pfeiffer



Carmilla

Bloodlust



Release 3 April

Director Emily Harris

Cast Tobias Menzies, Greg Wise, Jessica Raine

Distributor Republic Film

Certificate 15

Director/writer Emily Harris whips up an intoxicating affair between two women in *Carmilla*, as she takes her turn at adapting the 1872 Gothic novella by Sheridan Le Fanu. It's a text that has inspired many directors over the course of cinematic history, from the likes of Carl Dreyer in 1932 with *Vampyr*, Vicente Aranda with Seventies cult classic *The Blood Splattered Bride*, and even British director Phil Claydon with the complete piece of trash, *Lesbian Vampire Killers* in 2009.

In 2020 Harris takes a discerning stab at the book, with a sensual tale of first love and sexual awakenings packed full of beguiling and provocative imagery.

Harris relocates the story to 1780s rural England, where a 15-year-old girl named Lara (Hannah Rae) lives in an isolated dwelling with her strict governess Miss Fontaine (Jessica Raine). When a mysterious stranger lands on their doorstep, after an unfortunate crash, her presence titillates and frightens those around her.



The titular role of Carmilla is played by German-Turkish newcomer Devrim Lingnau, who – with her red hair and piercing eyes – resembles a woodland fox. Lingnau's dynamic and on-screen chemistry with Rae is sizzling hot which, alongside Harris' eye for visceral visuals, makes this an extremely scintillating viewing experience.

The score by Phil Selway, the drummer from Radiohead, works well with Harris' focus on the fertile wilderness surrounding the women, but it's occasionally distracting as it overpowers what is happening on screen.

The vampiric element of the book is pared back somewhat, with symbolic displays of

violence appearing in potently realised dream sequences, where women thirst heavily for blood and flesh. It's all delivered with a dash of humour and an obvious affection for the ways young women bond and yearn for things that they don't yet understand.

Harris displays real promise with her first solo feature film; sinking her teeth deep into the original novella's themes of fear and persecution, and elegantly translating them for a modern audience.

Katherine McLaughlin



▼ Johannes Nyholm shot the film early in the morning to give it a dream-like vibe.

Koko-di Koko-da

Unhappy death day

Release 27 March

Director Johannes Nyholm

Cast Leif Edlund, Ylva Gallon, Peter Belli, Katarina Jakobson, Morad Baloo Khatchadorian, Brandy Litmanen

Distributor Picturehouse Entertainment

Certificate 18



On a day out in Denmark just before her eighth birthday, young Maja (Katarina Jakobson) tells her parents, Elin (Ylva Gallon) and Tobias (Leif Edlund), that she wishes the day could last forever. The day will end up playing in her parents' minds in perpetuity, though not for the reasons that the happy child intends.

And in Swedish writer-director Johannes Nyholm's *Koko-di Koko-da*, a literal never-ending

quality will take effect for another dreadful day in the aftermath.

Tragedy follows, and three years later the couple are back on the road once more. Taking a trip to find their way back to each other from a state of freefall, their overnight camping in the woods spells disaster. In the dusk hours of the morning, an entourage of creepy, nursery rhyme-singing individuals – accompanied by both a deceased pet and a very much alive and threatening one – attack their tent. Elin is assaulted and seemingly killed, while Tobias cowers and hides. He doesn't last long as the bowler hatted dandy-like leader (Peter Belli) of the pack pulls a Mr Burns and releases the hound on him.

That would appear to be the end of the couple, except Nyholm rewinds the narrative back to them in the car from earlier and arriving again at their campsite, with different nuances to the story direction we saw maybe 20 minutes before. The same attack events ensue, except Tobias seems to have a degree of precognitive awareness of what's about to go down.

A more melancholic, ethereal riff on the narrative formula of *Groundhog Day* or, indeed,

Happy Death Day, Nyholm's horror fable is a fascinating and genuinely unnerving exploration of people stuck in a cycle of grief they can't escape. It combines absurdist excursions with genuine emotional weight concerning trauma, loneliness, abandonment, guilt and resentment. And just when you think you've cracked its unrelenting narrative games, things veer wildly off course.

It's a tough watch, but few films have achieved the feel of a waking nightmare quite like this.

Josh Slater-Williams





Sonic The Hedgehog

Live-action level up

Release Out now
Director Jeff Fowler
Cast James Marsden, Jim Carrey, Ben Schwartz, Tika Sumpter
Distributor Paramount Pictures
Certificate PG



Narrated, in part, by the super-fast hero himself, *Sonic The Hedgehog* sees the spiky speedster flee to Earth after evil forces injure his mentor and threaten to steal his power on his home planet. Ten years on, he's grown to love living in Green Hills, Montana – watching baseball from under the bleachers, running in the woods and catching Keanu Reeves movies through a neighbour's window – but the thought of living in solitude forever is starting to wear thin.

Loneliness proves the least of his worries though, when he accidentally causes a power outage across the Northwest and the government hire machine-mad genius Dr Robotnik (Carrey) to find out what – or who – is responsible. Unfortunately for Sonic, he's not above animal testing in the name of scientific discovery.

Sonic's success is largely due to its cast. Ben Schwartz infuses Sonic with excitable energy, showcasing how annoying he'd be without taking it too far. Opposite him, Carrey goes full *Mask-meets-Grinch* zany with Robotnik, dancing around his evil lair and screeching at any idiot who dares tell him how to do his job.

Elsewhere, James Marsden is the perfect fit for Sonic's unlikely ally, sheriff Tom, who wants to make a difference beyond helping people change a tyre or birth a cow. He wants to be the person someone depends on in a life-and-death situation, and it's happily refreshing to watch good guys and bad guys stay in their lanes.

Its black-and-white depiction of morality is likely due to it catering to youngsters but that doesn't mean it can't appeal to older audiences. There are fart gags, flossing and cheesy music, but it's packed with cool action sequences too, like Sonic getting out of a bar fight slow-mo style and a high-speed chase from San Francisco to the Great Wall of China and back again.

It's visually vibrant – Sonic looks great – and it's got heart, touching on themes about being satisfied with what you've got and looking out for the little guy. It doesn't offer up anything new, but it's fun. Gold rings all-round.

Amy West



▲ Marvel's Tom Holland and Paul Rudd, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* star Andy Samberg, *It Chapter Two* actor Bill Hader, and *Frozen's* Josh Gad were all considered to voice Sonic.

Deadly Manor

House party

Release Out now
Director José Ramón Larraz
Cast Clark Tufts, Greg Rhodes, Claudia Franjul
Distributor Arrow Video
Certificate 18
Format



Caught short a long way from their destination and with a storm approaching, six teens and their hitchhiker decide to drive off the beaten track and hold up in a spooky, seemingly derelict, mansion for the night. Yep, we would have found a hotel as well. This is just the first in a bunch of bizarre decisions the characters of *Deadly Manor* make during the film ('let's go down into the basement of the creepy barn!', 'I'm going off on my own in the scary woods!').

Once in the mansion, the teens find all sorts of weird things such as walls plastered with the pictures of the same woman, scalps in the closet, and a basement with two coffins inside. Still, the teenagers decide to stay the night rather than go out in the storm (it's just rain!) but the house is hiding more horror still...

Spanish director José Ramón Larraz creates atmosphere a-plenty in his last American film but the plot is too predictable for any kind of tension and even if it did manage to create some, the characters are so unfortunately one-dimensional that we don't really care what happens to them anyway.

The Arrow Video restoration looks great on this Nineties horror, and the extras does include a delightful interview with actress Jennifer Delora, but there's nothing overly exciting about this house party.

Rachael Harper



Superman: Red Son

Comrade Clark

Release Out now
Director Sam Liu
Cast Jason Isaacs, Amy Acker, Diedrich Bader
Distributor Warner Bros. Home Entertainment
Certificate 15
Format



What if all-American hero Superman wasn't actually American but born in Soviet Russia instead? That's the question being muted in *Superman: Red Son*.

The theme of nature versus nurture is an underlying thread throughout the movie because, as a character who's always been a symbol of truth and justice, just how will his morals fare after being raised under the ideals of the Communist Party? Well... let's just say they're pretty murky.

Once Superman finds out his country's dark secrets he goes on a journey that will test those virtues and put a whole new and interesting spin on the character.

The film also brings in fellow DC heroes Wonder Woman and Batman, though neither are given nearly enough screen time and we can't help but wonder if the film would have been more exciting if they had. Because, as interesting as the concept is, there is just too much pondering and not quite enough action to keep things enticing.

However, the disc does come with some lovely extras including a trippy animated short, and a trip down memory lane with episodes of the brilliant early-Noughties *Justice League* animated TV show.

Rachael Harper



Guns Akimbo

The game is on

Release Out now

Director Jason Lei Howden

Cast Daniel Radcliffe, Samara Weaving, Natasha Liu Bordizzo, Ned Dennehy, Rhys Darby

Distributor Saban Films

Certificate 18

Format On Demand



Illegal online game *Skism* pits armed players in live-action death matches, with the whole city their arena. After casually flaming its users, hapless geek Miles (Daniel Radcliffe) is visited by game runners who nail guns to his hands and force him into a deadly contest with reigning champ Nix (Samara Weaving).

In Jason Lei Howden's follow-up to *Deathgasm* (2015), the high-calibre, over-the-top dynamics of a shoot-'em-up are grounded in the comic normality of an everyday protagonist who prefers flight to fight, and whose voiceover keeps emphasising the un-cool realities of combat (the indignity of haemorrhagic shock, the deafening loudness of bullets and the ravages of PTSD). Not that this ever stops *Guns Akimbo* being an all-out hyperbolic bullet ballet, or Miles improbably travelling from zero to kickass hero over the course of a single day. Along the way, Ned Dennehy's tattoo-covered Riktor is a mirthfully mercurial villain, while the film gently satirises our addiction not just to electronic devices, but to the low voyeuristic pleasures of Schadenfreude and ultra-violence.

Anton Bitel



Magic

What a dummy!

Release 23 March

Director Richard Attenborough

Cast Anthony Hopkins, Ann-Margret, Burgess Meredith

Distributor Second Sight

Certificate 15

Format Blu-ray



When struggling magician

Corky (Anthony Hopkins) finds fame with his new ventriloquist act, his self-doubts come to the fore and

he runs away to his childhood town with his dummy Fats to figure things out. There, he hooks up with old flame Peggy (Ann-Margret) but Corky soon finds himself talking to Fats more and more, even when they're alone, and Fats doesn't like sharing Corky with anyone...

Written by William Goldman (who also wrote the novel the movie is based on) and directed by Richard Attenborough, *Magic* has legends of cinema behind it. The cast, too, take solid turns – Hopkins doesn't quite go into the realm of over-crazy (he gets pretty close though), Ann-Margret is charming as former prom queen Peggy and Burgess Meredith shines as Corky's cigar-twirling agent.

The film stalls a bit in the middle and the plot gets a little silly, but *Magic* is an entertaining film with enough tension to keep audiences interested. The extras on the new Blu-ray release are also great, featuring interviews with the likes of Hopkins and cinematographer Victor Kemper. Our favourite, however, has to be the wonderful anecdote-filled interview with Goldman who reflects on working with Attenborough and writing the original novel.

Rachael Harper



Ready Or Not



Don't upset the in-laws

Release Out now

Directors Matt Bettinelli-Olpin, Tyler Gillett

Cast Samara Weaving, Adam Brody, Andie MacDowell

Distributor 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment

Certificate 18

Format Blu-ray • DVD



So, it's your wedding night and you've discovered that your new husband's family has a tradition of playing hide and seek with the new spouse. But in this version of the game, if you're found, you're dead. Sounds like the plot of a terrible movie, right? Well yes... but *Ready Or Not* is anything but.

When Grace (Samara Weaving) marries into a wealthy gaming dynasty, she finds herself at the mercy of this tradition – pick a card and play a game, just don't pick the 'hide and seek' card because that means if the new spouse isn't killed by midnight, the family will die. Of course Grace picks said card and soon finds herself trying to survive the night as her in-laws hunt her down.

But Grace is not going down without a fight. Weaving plays her brilliantly and is surrounded by a great cast (especially mother-in-law Andie MacDowell), allowing audiences to feel a kinship with Grace as things get crazier and crazier.

A taunt, nail-biting horror full of fun and satire, *Ready Or Not* is not to be missed.

Rachael Harper



I Am Not Okay With This

Puberty gets serious

Release Out now

Showrunners Jonathan Entwistle, Christy Hall

Cast Sophia Lillis, Wyatt Oleff, Sofia Bryant

Distributor Netflix

Format NETFLIX



There's nothing particularly

new about the 'puberty as superpowers' trope, but where most of those takes lean into the supernatural elements, it's rare to see a show where a character is just as concerned with her weird zits as she is with her burgeoning psychic powers. But that's where *I Am Not Okay With This*' interests lie – not in central character Sydney's special abilities – but in all the other difficult teenage aspects of her life.

I Am Not Okay With This focuses on Syd (Sophia Lillis), an awkward 16-year-old grieving for her father and beginning to develop confusing feelings for her best friend Dina (Sofia Bryant), while trying to side-step the affections of neighbour Stan (Wyatt Oleff). Syd is not a

clean-cut heroine – she's angry, rude, and often dismissive of others' feelings – but she's also just lonely and starved of love, and therefore making the same mistakes that all teenagers make. Plus, she experiences telekinetic outbursts whenever she gets upset or stressed... so I guess we can cut her some slack.

Lillis is brilliant as Syd, which will come as no surprise to anyone who has seen *It*. She brings to life all of Syd's more unflattering aspects with the emotional honesty you'd expect from her. But more of a revelation is Oleff, one of the more underused *It* kids, who here demonstrates some serious comedy and dramatic chops as a character who is simultaneously charismatic and awkward, confident and vulnerable. Bryant rounds the central threesome out nicely as the sweet new girl who's beginning to feel the pull of the glamorous cool kids.

The show has a nostalgic visual style, with fashion nods to the Nineties and minimal modern tech, which fits its tone perfectly – somewhere between the exuberant John Hughes movies of the Eighties and the grungy teen angst shows of the Nineties. The superpowers

are visually impressive too – this show has Netflix money behind it, after all – but director Entwistle and writer Hall never let the superpowers hijack the story. This is a funny, moving, and gripping story that's over far too soon, and is crying out for a Season Two.

Abigail Chandler



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NOW

Keep an eye out for a nod to Entwistle's previous show, *The End Of The F***ing World* – James and Alyssa can be glimpsed in a newspaper at one point.

Locke & Key: Season One

Head games

Release Out now

Showrunners Carlton Cuse, Meredith Averill, Aron Eli Coleite

Cast Connor Jessup, Emilia Jones, Jackson Robert Scott, Darby Stanchfield, Laysla De Oliveira

Distributor Netflix

Certificate 15

Format NETFLIX



Now that we've come to terms with the fact that someone finally got a *Locke & Key* adaptation made, it's still a little hard to judge the show on its own merits. Its existence is an achievement in itself, but there's still Joe Hill and Gabriel Rodriguez's incredible source material to live up to.

The duo has given the Netflix series their seal of approval and it's easy to see why. For all the tonal tweaks and structural changes, this is 100% *Locke & Key*. The showrunners' decision to downplay the gory horror in favour of foregrounding the fantasy element is a little jarring but what really shines through over the course of the ten hours is that bleeding, wounded heart. Yes, it's a show about



magical keys and marauding monsters, but it's first and foremost about a grieving family struggling to come to terms with the murder of their father and carry on living in the house where he grew up.

The three Locke siblings are all perfectly cast. Jessup hints at the guilt under Tyler's taciturn façade, Jones nails Kinsey's fight-or-flight panic early on before she quite literally buries her fear, and Scott is a joy as the excitable young Bode. The decision to spend so much time with them and their budding relationships with new friends pays off hugely. The adults never quite get the same rich material, but Stanchfield is solid as Nina Locke and genre vet Steven Williams deserves a big shout-out for his performance as kindly principal Joe.

It's when the show needs to ramp up the threat that things get wobbly. The Mirror Key delivers chills and malevolent demon Dodge (De Oliveira) is great in the early episodes, but once we've established the rules her threat is seriously diminished. The show is more interested in using the fantasy element to explore trauma; clearly visible when the kids use the Head Key to remember Rendell's bedtime stories.

There is room for improvement, but it's a very strong introduction and all the pieces are in place for a barnstorming second season.

Jonathan Hatfull



Castle Rock: Season Two

Misery loves company

Release Out now
Showrunners Sam Shaw, Dustin Thomason
Cast Lizzy Caplan, Tim Robbins, Elsie Fisher, Barkhad Abdi
Distributor STARZPLAY
Certificate 15
Format VOD



In Season One of *Castle Rock*, creators, Sam Shaw and Dustin Thomason, introduced an audience to their dark version of the Stephen King-extended universe by taking elements of the revered horror writer's body of work and blending it with themes of dementia and insidious evil to reveal a disturbing portrait of modern America. Season Two continues in the same vein, tapping into issues of mental health and fear of the other by combining elements of *Misery* with *Salem's Lot*.

Lizzy Caplan stars as a younger iteration of Annie Wilkes, who is suffering with severe issues of abandonment that are taking their toll on her teenage daughter, Joy (Elsie Fisher turning a discerning performance). Tim Robbins plays the



lesser-known Reginald 'Pop' Merrill, who has appeared in small roles in a couple of King's titles, and is here shaded in as an ex-soldier who served in Iraq and has now set up shop in Castle Rock to welcome in a Somali community of refugees. His generosity has extended to the adoption of two Somali children, Abdi (Barkhad Abdi) and Nadia (Yusra Warsama), who now, grown up, have some unanswered questions for their father.

The show switches between Annie's childhood, her devoted approach to motherhood, and the lengths she goes to, to keep her mental health issues under wraps in her job as a nurse. It's a clever way to show how we got to the point of the older, iconic Annie played by Kathy Bates in Rob

Reiner's Nineties classic. Caplan sticks with that version of Annie; giving her a pronounced limp and a bubbling rage that comes to the surface with a vicious act of self-defence that is gleefully violent. Robbins' narrative isn't as engaging, but it eventually takes flight in the final episodes.

Castle Rock doesn't pay fan service in the same way that *Stranger Things* did with its heavy reliance on nostalgia. It instead examines how tragic past real-life events feed into current issues with a focus on the dangers of history repeating itself.

Katherine McLaughlin



Titans Season Two

Titans go!

Release Out now
Showrunners Greg Berlanti, Akiva Goldsman, Geoff Johns
Cast Brenton Thwaites, Teagan Croft, Anna Diop
Distributor Netflix
Certificate 15
Format NETFLIX



There is clearly some unfinished business when old nemeses Slade Wilson/Deathstroke (played with a disarming charm by newcomer to the series, Esai Morales) turns up in Season Two of *Titans*, which rocks our superhero gang to its very core. Season Two opens with Titan originals, Kory, Hank, Dawn and Donna, going their own ways and Dick deciding to bring young Rachel, Gar and Todd into the fold to continue doing hero work as a new generation of Titans. However, that plan doesn't last long when Slade turns up, forcing the gang to begrudgingly reform to take down the assassin.

There is a lot crammed into this season of

Titans – the return of Slade arouses flashbacks to the Titans' past and introduces more new characters in the form of Slade's daughter Rose and son Jericho. Adding to this, the characters themselves are also going through a lot of personal troubles, with Hank and Dawn's relationship hanging in the balance due to drug and violence addiction, Kory dealing with pressures from back home and Dick facing up to a decision he made long ago. And that's before we discuss Superboy, Krypto the dog and an ominous company run by Lex Luthor that is trying to create a super soldier.

The dark tone from Season One is carried on in *Titans* Season Two, with themes including parricide AND filicide, but none of these are ever deeply explored due to the show trying to squeeze too much in. The same goes for the characters. Hardly any of them have the chance to evolve much beyond what we know about them from Season One, which is a shame because these are all excellent characters just waiting for some extra layers. The exception to this is Brenton Thwaites' Dick Grayson, who has a great arc this season, going from bothered to badass over the course of 13 episodes.



Season Two does contain some gems, though. The episode introducing Superboy is particularly stand-out as is Iain Glen's (*Game Of Thrones*) intriguing take on Bruce Wayne. *Titans* is entertaining enough and it looks great. We're looking forward to seeing more from the characters in Season Three.

Rachael Harper



70 NATASHA PULLEY

We speak to the author of the electrifying new novel **The Lost Future Of Pepperharrow**

Bestselling author of
**THE WATCHMAKER
OF FILIGREE STREET**

THE LOST FUTURE OF PEPPERHARROW

BLOOMSBURY



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PERFECTLY TIMED CHAOS

We speak to author Natasha Pulley about *The Lost Future Of Pepperharrow*, the sequel to her debut novel *The Watchmaker of Filigree Street*

WORDS RACHAEL HARPER

Your debut *The Watchmaker of Filigree Street* received critical acclaim, how did it feel to hear such great things about your novel?

Terrifying! But also great. I now have an ego the size of Mount Everest.

What is it like coming back to the characters and world for its sequel *The Lost Future Of Pepperharrow*?

Quite difficult at first. I started writing *Watchmaker* when I was 21, and the characters reflected my age. When I came back to them years later, it felt like trying to go back in time, which was uncomfortable, because I don't actually like past-me very much. It took a long time (and several drafts) to make those characters mine again.

Had you already planned where the story would go next?

Inefficiently, no. I know some writers who plan things wonderfully, with cork boards that have strings and graphs on them, but I just sat down for this one and went 'right, something weird with electricity, I reckon'.

This is not how you should write a novel, by the way. It becomes very stressful.

***The Lost Future Of Pepperharrow* is a fantastic mix of steampunk, historical fantasy, romance, ghost stories and politics. What are your influences and how did you first imagine this world?**

I used to live in Tokyo, so that helps a lot; modern Tokyo is very different to Meiji Tokyo of course, but basic things are the same. Some of the old train stations are still there, the geography, all that. Just like modern English, modern Japanese is full of 19th Century ghosts. The way employees speak to the bosses at large corporations is very similar to the way that junior samurai would have spoken to their lords; that incredibly strict social hierarchy is alive and well even now, not least because today's big corporations in Tokyo were often founded by major samurai houses. Visit, and you see snatches of that older Japan every day.

Japanese ghost stories are brilliant too. If you've never tried any before, a lovely collection to start with is Akinari's Ueda's

18th Century collection, *Tales Of Moonlight And Rain*; there are scary stories and wistful ones, but they're all beautiful. I also love *The Tale Of Genji*, which is an enormous, ancient novel by Lady Murasaki, full of wild places and ghostly women. It's like a big treasure hoard of the best things about Japan.

I think Meiji politics are fascinating, too. This is an era when castles are being demolished by government mandate, senior politicians are being assassinated, and what used to be an uninfluential country is suddenly becoming a world power.

The novel juxtaposes Victorian England with Meiji era Japan – how integral is setting and time era for you in your novels?

It's everything and nothing. Characters have to be of their time and country, so those things are important, and they define a lot about the books; but I do also believe (and this is after living in Japan, China, and Peru) that humans are basically human, wherever or whenever they're from.

***The Lost Future Of Pepperharrow* incorporates complex politics. Why did you decide to add this, and how important is to you for this medium to hold a mirror to world politics?**

A mirror implies that world politics might look back, and I really don't think I'm influential enough for that. But what I did want to do was show 19th Century Tokyo with real complexity, because it's easy to flatten out historical fiction. There's a horrible temptation to assume that historical Japan is all cherry blossom and samurai, and I wanted to push against that. Meiji Tokyo was an unexpected, fantastic, dangerous place, and even though writing it that way meant dumping a lot of politics into the book, I hope readers will understand why.

Your novels have very complicated characters. What is your character development process and how integral is having complex characters?

Any novel needs complex characters. Without that, even a beautifully written story with amazing landscapes and a wonderful

plot will feel hollow. For me, the most important thing to know in developing a character is what makes them laugh. If you can pin down someone's sense of humour, it often tells you far more about them than other traits. For example, someone who loves to play around with words – the kind of character who'd giggle at 'the very pineapple of perfection!' – is often going to be different to someone who loves practical jokes.

The intricate plot to *The Lost Future Of Pepperharrow* has many moving parts – how did you go about planning the story?

I didn't plan it, it's all chaotic, and the point at which my editor published it was when it just about made sense.

What other authors/novels are you reading right now and who/what are you excited about?

I've been on a Russian theme lately! I love Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, and I'm reading *The First Circle* right now, which is fantastic, alongside *Mother* by Maksim Gorky, which is awful but informative. Mikhail Bulgakov's *A Young Doctor's Notebook* is probably the funniest book I've read this year.

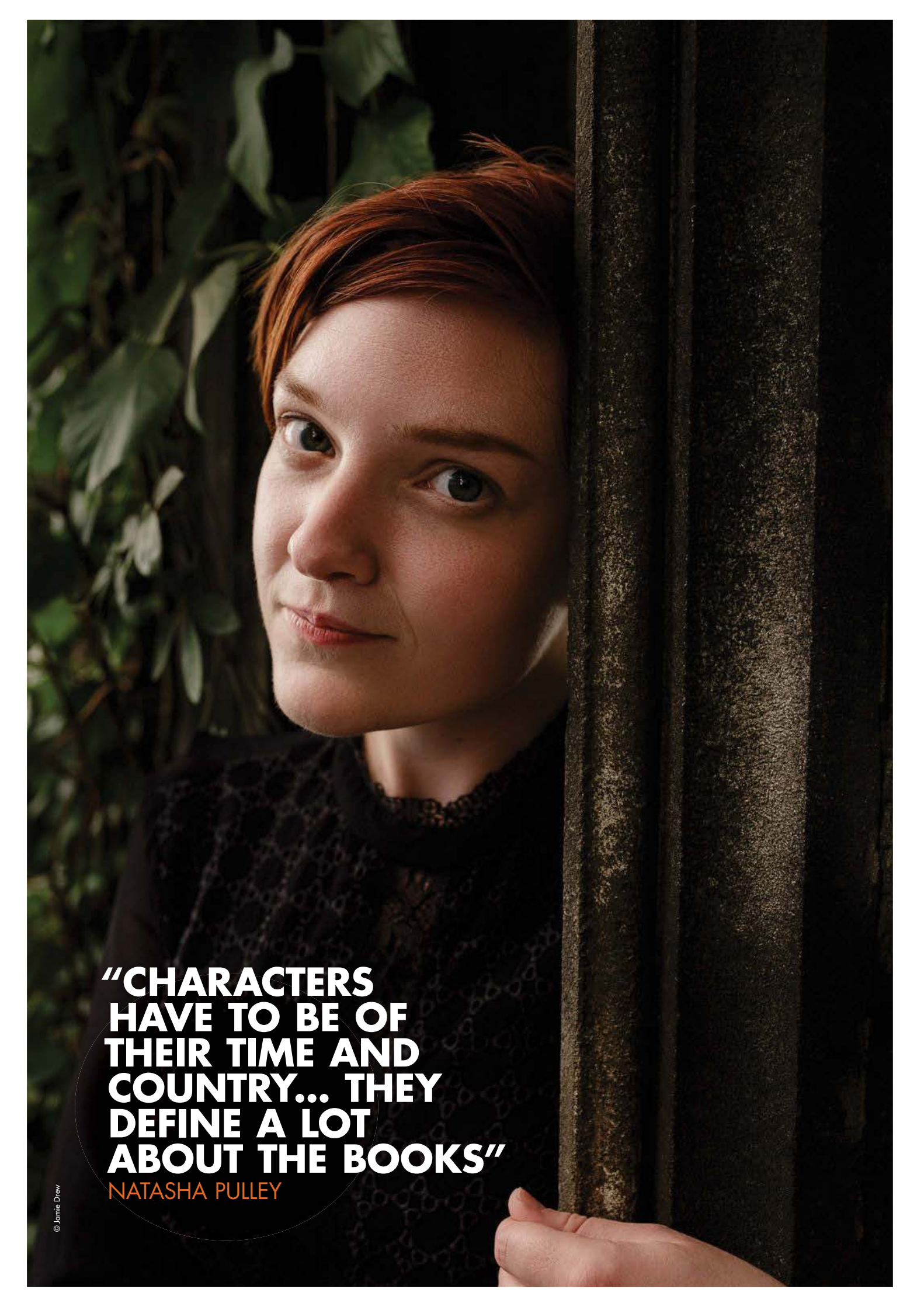
I also love Laura Purcell – Queen of the Gothic – and I'll always be first in the queue for anything by Robert Harris. I'm very excited indeed about Catriona Ward's new book, which will be published by Serpent's Tail next year, and also Stuart Turton's next, which I hear is about a shipwreck where things have gone strangely wrong...

What is next for you?

It's a book called *The Kingdoms*. It's an alternate history about what might have happened if the English had lost the Battle of Trafalgar. It's set in 1901, and London is a French colony, slavery is very much in force, and a strange epidemic of what doctors think is epilepsy is giving people visions of relatives who don't exist and places they've never been to. 🐍



The Lost Future Of Pepperharrow is published by Bloomsbury Publishing on 5 March.



**"CHARACTERS
HAVE TO BE OF
THEIR TIME AND
COUNTRY... THEY
DEFINE A LOT
ABOUT THE BOOKS"**

NATASHA PULLEY



SPENCER LAMM

We speak to the editor of upcoming graphic novels *The Matrix Comics: 20th Anniversary Edition* and *Doc Frankenstein*, as well as the creator of the original *Matrix* website, about working with the Wachowskis and his extensive career

WORDS RACHAEL HARPER

Can you tell us how you met the Wachowskis and got involved in *The Matrix* comics?

We met at Marvel comics, and worked on a book called *Ectokid*. Lana was hired to be the writer right at the same time I was hired. *The Matrix* was still years away at this point, this was mid-Nineties and *The Matrix* started filming in 1998. At that point Lana and Lilly wanted to be filmmakers. They were writing a bunch of scripts and I have drafts of *The Matrix* that definitely pre-date the filmmaking draft by at least a couple of years. They got interest in the script of *The Matrix* but people didn't fully understand it. That's where [artist] Steve Skroce came in. They didn't just do normal storyboards, Lana and Lilly had to go in to Warner Bros, and walk executives through the script. And they did that with two 11x17 book glyphs of Steve's work. They were more than storyboards; they were basically full-on comic books and they walked the executives through visually what the film was.

My connection with the film itself is that I stayed in touch [with the Wachowskis] after I left Marvel and would talk to Lana and get

copies of the script as things were moving forward. And Lana was like 'if we do this, do you want to work on it and do the comics?'. [When filming eventually started] Steve and I jumped on a plane to Australia where they were filming in 1998. I didn't have a firm plan but the bottom line is my theory of doing the comics turned into me doing the *The Matrix* website. Thank God I went. I was going more as a vacation really. And it was amazing. I realised I had a tape recorder, a camera and access. So, I did interviews with Carrie Anne Moss and did all this stuff just because I was there! And that was all the content we used for the first wave of the website and the comics.

It was more passion and interest and excitement in the moment. I'd already met with the powers that be at Warner Bros so I knew I already had some kind of a budget to do a website and to put together the comics. There was no plan to get content or anything except go to Australia and see friends but then it turned out to be a Godsend.

How did you compile the original stories for *The Matrix* comics?

In 1998 we were already reaching out to authors and explaining what we wanted to do which was 'we want to do a ten-page story centred on a film that's coming out next year from Warner Bros. A sci-fi. And can we tell you more?' If they said yes then we would send them the script. There was no security, it was a different time. Some people like Bill Sienkiewicz responded really well and I am completely indebted. Some people who will remain nameless responded with not-so-kind words but most of the people we got, Neil Gaiman, Kurt Vonnegut... that all happened back in 1998 before the film came out.

There are four new stories in the new edition, can you tell us about those?

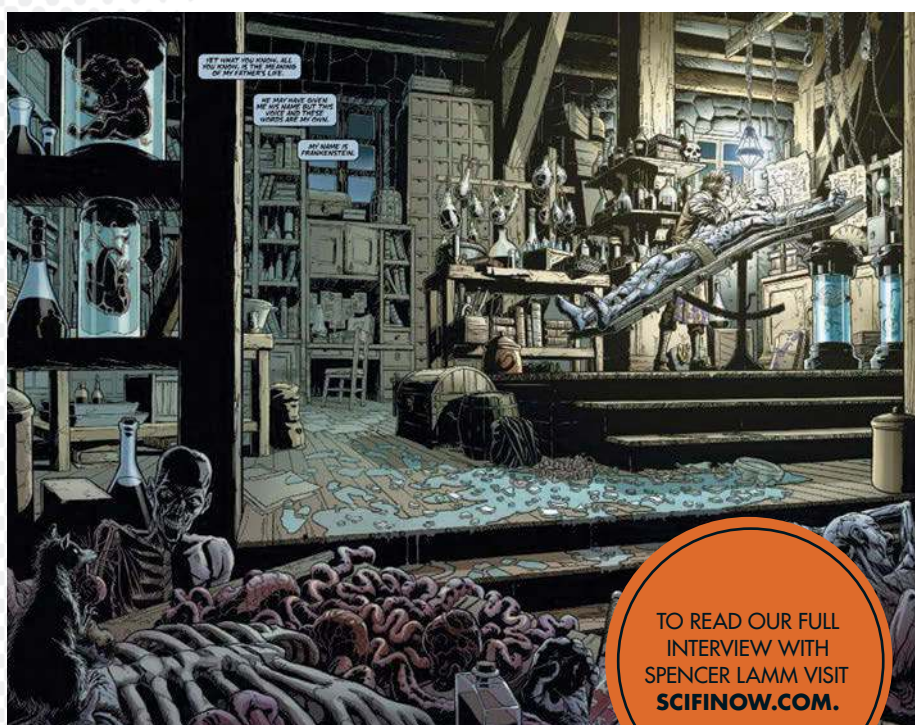
We already had 28 stories but we originally did trade paperbacks and it broke down well into 12 stories for each, so that's 24. That left four stories. So actually these four stories are not technically new, they were just never printed before. It's a beautifully unique situation to be able to have something new to print 20 years after it was first created.

You have mentioned *The Matrix* website, where users could use codes to unlock content on the site, can you tell us more about that?

The website was born of the comics. We would not have been doing the website if we didn't have the comics. If we didn't have the notion of 'hey let's do these comics, hey let's do them digitally' then it wouldn't have happened. And then if we're doing them digitally, we have to be in control more directly of the website.

If you look at the end pages in *The Matrix* book, they are literally the news updates that I wrote throughout the dates of us releasing the comics. It was a bit of push-and-pull, but eventually we did get complete control of the website. If you look at the credits of the first *Matrix* film, one of the last things is code=stake and that's our first major code for the website. The codes thing that we set up is something that I could not even imagine now. We would put stuff up and people would find codes. There were even dedicated websites to find the codes.

What made you decide to come back to *The Matrix* 20 years later?



TO READ OUR FULL
INTERVIEW WITH
SPENCER LAMM VISIT
SCIFINOW.COM.



The comics never went away completely and *The Matrix* is very personal to me. I can't even imagine not wanting to put [the stories] out there.

Because we had decided to do *Doc Frankenstein* as an oversized book, we thought it would be cool to also do *The Matrix* as a slightly oversized book and just put everything that we'd done in the past in there. There was a lot of stuff and I was just excited to put together a single collection. I'm looking at it now and I'm ecstatic that this thing finally exists in a physical form.

I'm glad the opportunity came about to be able to do it. When it first came out it was paid for to be a marketing tool, but I like to think we created something that people actually wanted and would have a life.

Can you tell us more about the *Doc Frankenstein* collection? What made you come back to it?

We put out a trade paperback of some of the *Doc Frankenstein* issues in 2014 and then we thought we would come out with a second volume soon thereafter. However, various things got in the way, be it pulls to other films or artist Steve Skroce needing to draw more, but we always wanted to get *Doc Frankenstein* out there.

Doc Frankenstein has quite controversial subjects, did you ever



question on whether to include some of those themes?

No, there was never a discussion about pulling back. If anything, it was how far can we go. The idea of any form of limitation wasn't there. *Doc Frankenstein* definitely hits hot buttons, there's like an orgy with a priest and a fairy; that's taking it to next levels and I love it. I think it's great. And in the printed book it's even bigger!

What are you working on now?

Now *The Matrix* and *Doc Frankenstein* are

out, it is making me think of going back to [another thing from my past] and doing something with *Expressions Of Dread*. I'm not sure how/what I'm going to do but that's kind of exciting. I like the idea of doing things that are personal and that is the very first thing that I did that led me to all these other incredible things. I'm not sure in what form but I'm dusting off those files now...

The Matrix Comics: 20th Anniversary Edition and *Doc Frankenstein* will both be released on 6 March in the UK.

The Last Human

The last of the galaxy's most dangerous species

Release 24 March

Writer Zack Jordan

Publisher Hodder & Stoughton

Price £18.99

How would you feel if you were the last of a species so abhorred that you cannot even say out loud what you are?

In a galaxy where different beings are tiered in order of intelligence by a Network of information, Sarya the Daughter has been living a secret life with her adoptive mother Shenya the Widow. Disguised as a different species to hide that she is, in fact, human (a species that was deemed too dangerous to exist), Sarya has struggled to fit in. You see, the majority of beings use the Network to speak to each other and learn about their surroundings, but as her human biology doesn't quite work with the Network interface, she's ostracised and living on the fringes of society. Which is exactly what Shenya the Widow wants to keep her safe.

A fascinating but terrifying species, Widows are natural hunters who have blades for limbs and are born with a deep bloodlust. But Shenya the Widow is also a dedicated mother who will do anything to protect her daughter, including hiding out with her on a remote Watertower spaceship.

That is until Sarya meets a high tier intelligence called the Observer, a being with such intellect that His mind is split into hundreds of thousands of bodies. He tells her that He knows who (and what) she is and gives her the choice to follow Him and find out more about her people. The decision she makes sends her on a journey of epic proportions, where she meets new friends, new foes (and some who are a little of both) and gets to know the Network far more than she would ever want to.

Sarya soon finds herself on her own without the protection of her mother on a ship full of misfits and she's heading to one of the Network's main ports to discover more about why humanity has been wiped out. Why is everyone so afraid of humans? What happened to the rest of her species?

The world of *The Last Human* is fascinating, and so are the species that Zack Jordan has littered throughout his novel. The most interesting has to be that of the Widows, whose killing instinct is at odds with their pride and, in Shenya's case, all-

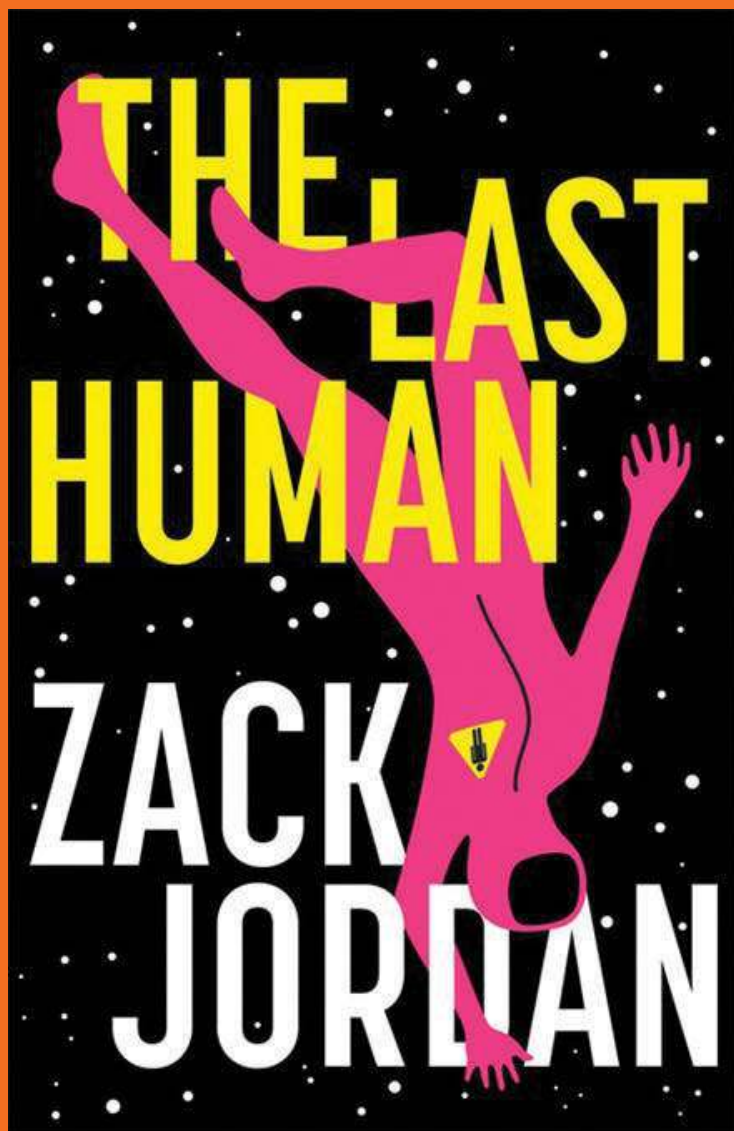
encompassing love for their children. When Sarya has a chance to explore Shenya's memories, we get to see more of the way this species lives, and we wish we could have spent more time there.

The character of Sarya is fallible and quite selfish, however, and we can't help but wonder if this is Jordan holding a mirror up to some of the traits we, as humans, can also exhibit. Either way, it can make the protagonist a somewhat tiring person to spend so much time with and we would rather have spent more time with the characters around her. From Sandy, the little ball of fluff with

exceptional intelligence; to Mer, the affectionate giant; and even the hilarious Network helper program in Sarya's brain (who insists on being called Ace), Sarya's band of misfits are great.

The Last Human is a very funny novel, full of compelling ideas, engaging dialogue and fascinating species and technology, and we hope to see more of the galaxy Jordan has created.

Rachael Harper



WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE BOOK SET IN SPACE?



Light Of Impossible Stars
"I'm just finishing *Light Of Impossible Stars* by Gareth L. Powell. Stunning conclusion to an incredible series."
@STBwrites



Quest Of The Shadow-Forge
"The book *Quest Of The Shadow-Forge* is a delightful fantasy."
#questoftheshadowforge
@StephenJBauer1



Children Of Time
"Adrian Tchaikovsky's *Children Of Time*. Clever story-telling with space spiders... yup, you read that right space spiders!!! #BookClub"
@andyangel44



Bobiverse
"The Bobiverse books by Dennis E Taylor. Just super fun reads!"
@Craigsg1



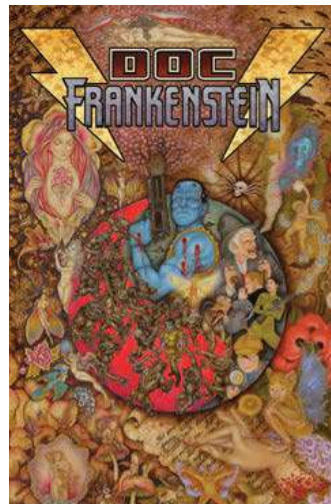
Doc Frankenstein

Of monks
and monsters

Release Out now
Writers Lana & Lilly Wachowski
Publisher Titan Comics
Price £31.99

The new complete collection of *Doc Frankenstein* opens with a heartfelt introduction from Lana Wachowski. It's made clear from the outset how personal the following story is to its writer. It's a story many years in the making, and, having been left unfinished for the best part of a decade, we are at last able to read the complete story in a single, uninterrupted volume.

This is the interesting tale of what happens to Frankenstein's monster once Mary Shelley's book finishes... now calling himself 'Doc Frankenstein', he becomes an immortal genius scientist/cowboy/vigilante, who is just trying to find his place in the world.



Doc is a monster hunter and this time the monsters are an especially well-funded, fanatical branch of Christians, with an arsenal of jet planes, missiles and never-ending supply of machine gun-toting priests. This is the war of science vs religion as you've never seen it.

One of the big highlights of the book is the wonderfully bombastic artwork of Steve Skroce. You can

see the length of time it took to produce the book as from start to end his style evolves, becoming as bold and as in-your-face as the story itself, culminating in some of the most wondrously obscene and hilarious double page spreads.

Doc Frankenstein is an incredibly controversial book, or at least it wants to be. There is an obvious lack of subtlety which plays to the absurdity of the story, but this can also swing the other way and make its message appear preachy. This book is designed to invoke a response. It wears its liberalism without shame and is an antagonistic assault on right wing religious conservatism. Being deliberately over-the-top helps soften some of the more risqué moments and gives the reader a way to enjoy a story that really benefits from having a complete edition. Just don't leave it on the coffee table when the vicar comes to tea.

Burt Peterson



YOUR READS

What have you been reading this month?



"I'm reading *The Undead. The First 7 Days* by R R Haywood. Great book!"
@FuckOffBlondie



"*Children Of Ruin* by Adrian Tchaikovsky – just as good as I'd expected it to be
#BookClub
@andyangel44



"Just finished *A Little Hatred*. It's great, but I do wish Joe Abercrombie would describe how the characters look at the BEGINNING of the book."
@HamSpanner



"@unamccormack's *Picard* prequel novel. She absolutely nails Picard as a character. Enjoying it immensely."
@Rozza1210



"Currently re-reading *The Dresden Files* in anticipation of *Peace Talks* being released in July!"
@DiscoDuck_78



"Almost finished *The Ocean At The End Of The Lane* by @neilhimsel. It's excellent."
@Oscarfinnmedia



"Reading *Cage Of Souls* by Adrian Tchaikovsky. Taking a few chapters to get into. Love the way the world is built up slowly."
@dan-ielp59006909



"*Imaginary Friend* by @StephenChbosky."
@solamentenic

Tell us what you're reading on Twitter or Facebook

The Matrix Comics: 20th Anniversary Edition

You have to see it
for yourself

Release Out now
Writers Various
Publisher Titan Comics
Price £35.99

It's been 20 years since *The Matrix* exploded on to our screens. For many, the cinema experience was the first time seeing the rich and complex alternate world that Lana and Lilly Wachowski envisioned. But prior even to the shooting of the movie, the Wachowskis had shared their script for *The Matrix* with some of the greatest modern comic book writers and artists to get their take on the concept.

Those that bought into it soon began to create their own tales based in the world of *The Matrix*, many of which were originally published as online-only, digital comics on *The Matrix* website. Twenty years later, Titan Comics has released an anniversary edition that pulls all 28 of the original digital comics together for the very first time in hardback print.

Standout works include art by Bill Sienkiewicz (*Legion*), whose masterful blend of oils and collage deliver a new tangible representation of the Wachowskis' original complex fantasy world. Neil Gaiman (*Sandman*) brings us a captivating short story, beautifully supplemented with art by Greg Ruth. While Dave Gibbons (of *Watchmen* fame) proves that a picture can indeed paint a thousand words, with his silent yet deadly 12-page action-packed adventure.

There is also a touching introduction by editor Spencer Lamm (original creator of *The Matrix* website that launched the comics, see page 72), which provides an earnest behind-the-scenes retelling of the process that made *The Matrix*



the cultural phenomenon that it was. Even the inside covers feature astonishing archive material from the original *Matrix* website.

For hardcore fans of *The Matrix*, the book provides a beautiful, near 400-page nostalgia trip that will get you excited to jack back into that ground-breaking franchise. If you weren't excited about *Matrix 4*, you will be after this.

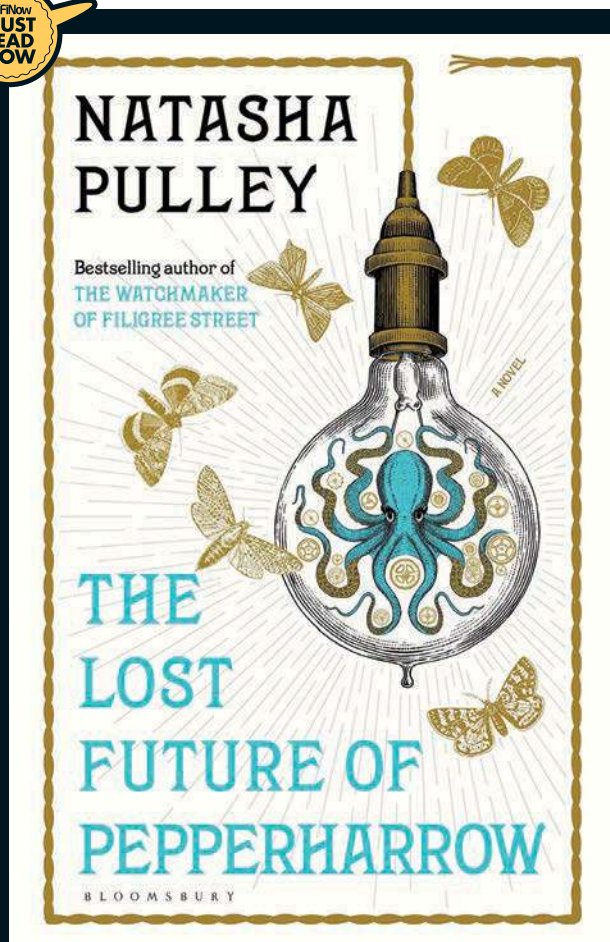
Burt Peterson





BOOK CLUB

The Lost Future Of Pepperharrow // Thorn



The Lost Future Of Pepperharrow

Are fiends electric?

Release 5 March
Writer Natasha Pulley
Publisher Bloomsbury Publishing
Price £12.99

If you've read Natasha Pulley's first novel *The Watchmaker Of Filigree Street*, about clairvoyant samurai Keita Mori, you'll be prepared for just how strange its sequel is. There's a lot to take in.

Juxtaposing Victorian England with Meiji era Japan, *The Lost Future Of Pepperharrow* follows Thaniel Steepleton, a civil servant and part-time musician, as he travels to Tokyo to investigate a spate of hauntings at the British embassy. With his adopted daughter and clockwork octopus

in tow, he finds himself navigating a complex political maze: Russian warships are inching closer, and the Japanese prime minister is spoiling for a fight. Mount Fuji is on the verge of eruption, and somewhere past the Aokigahara forest, a scientific outpost is doing something unspeakable with electrical currents. On top of that, Mori – Thaniel's sort-of boyfriend, and the only person who might unravel what's going on with the ghosts – is missing.

An intricately plotted mystery, this novel demands the reader's full attention. The prose is gorgeous, and the characters fascinating. Mori himself is the kind of character it's impossible to fully pin down, a man literally and figuratively out of time, but there's barely a character here who doesn't contain multitudes.

As it's the second in a series, this book probably isn't the best place to jump into this world. But if you have read the first one, or you're willing to go along with it, it's pretty wonderful.

Sarah Lines



Thorn

No usual princess

Release 24 March
Writer Intisar Khanani
Publisher Harperteen
Price £7.99

Based on the Grimm fairytale, *The Goose Girl*, Intisar Khanani's *Thorn* tells the tale of the Princess Alyrra. She is belittled by her mother and beaten by her brother so she desires an escape from the royal duties she is forced to carry out. When she is betrothed to Prince Kestrin, she finds herself tangled up in a long-standing feud and transformed from princess to lowly goose girl. She is finally freed from the life she wanted to escape, but will duty draw her back in?

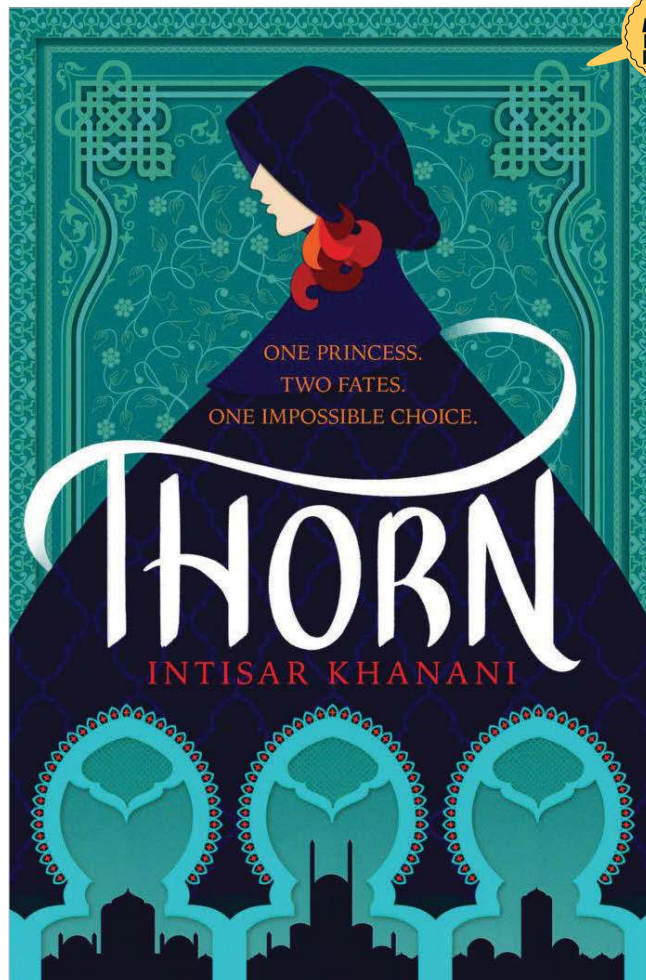
Thorn was self-published as an ebook back in 2012, but is being republished with a revised text and a very pretty print edition. And it's easy to see why. There's a softness to the tale that mingles with the

harsher edges. Khanani never shies away from the brutality inherent in the story, but nor does she forget to contrast it with lighter moments.

Narratively speaking, *Thorn* sticks closely to the plot of the original *Goose Girl* fairytale, but Khanani takes the time to establish it within the world she has built. The tweaks feel organic to Alyrra's story; there's a larger number of political machinations here, class struggles, and even gang warfare. The world beyond Alyrra's feels suitably large and it gives the reader a desire to explore the corners of it further.

There is a lovely boom in fairytale reinterpretations going on now and *Thorn* is a worthy addition. Light and lyrical, Khanani crafts a coming-of-age story that plays out on a political stage without losing the sense of intimacy that makes Alyrra such a compelling heroine.

Becky Lea





The City We Became

City uprising

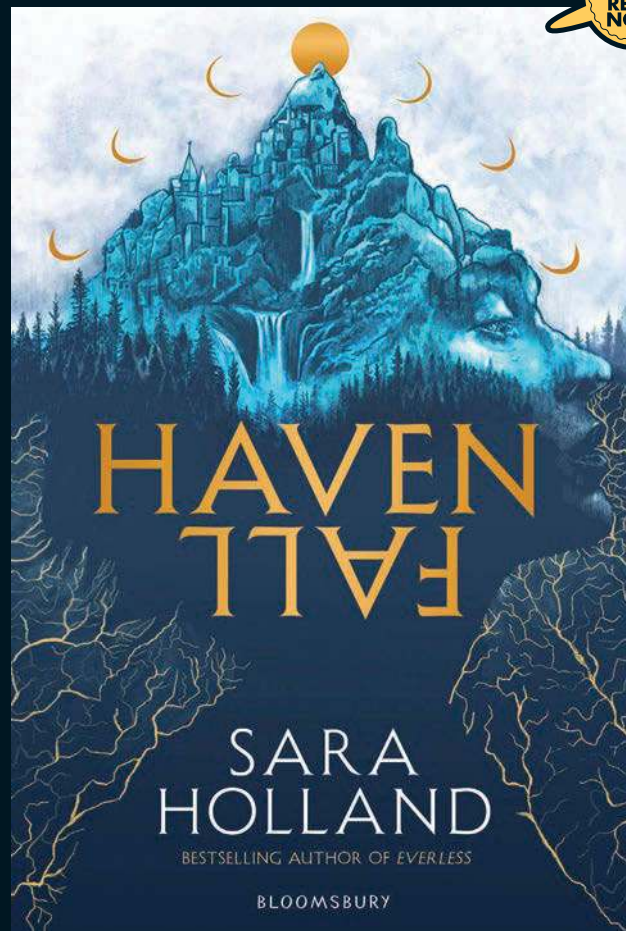
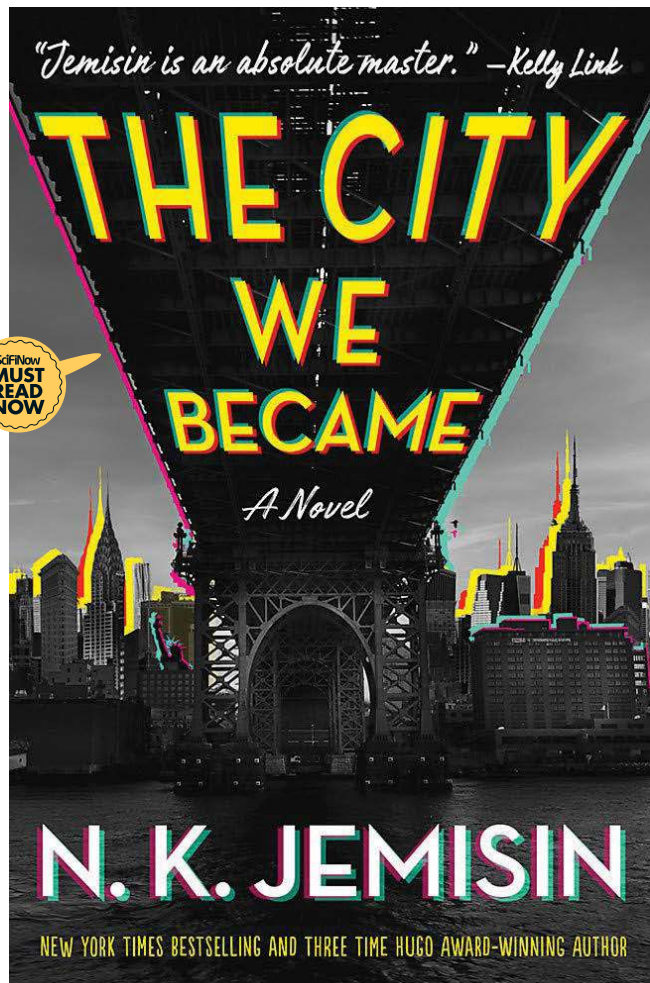
Release 26 March
Writer N.K. Jemisin
Publisher Little, Brown Book Group
Price £16.99

Every once in a while, a genre novel comes along that is determined to floor you with its brilliance and imagination. N K Jemisin's *The City We Became* is one such novel; a bold, inventive urban fantasy that deserves all its praise. It began life as a short story (which can be read in Jemisin's fantastic collection *How Long 'Til Black Future Month*), which forms the introduction here. New York City is about to be birthed; achieved when a city reaches a certain level of maturation. But there are powers at work that would see the birth fail, a disastrous thing for the city.

To protect the city and its inhabitants, human representatives of the five boroughs arise; Manhattan, Staten Island, The Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens must unite to protect the human representative of New York, with the help of Sao Paulo and Hong Kong. From there, the book becomes an ode to the people, foibles, and traditions that make up New York City. It's unapologetically diverse, encapsulating a city at the heart of the American melting pot.

Jemisin's narrative manages to dip in and out of so many forms and influences, her novel is just as much a construct of American literary history as her city is a social one. 'I sing the city' is all at once Homeric and Walt Whitmanesque. Ralph Ellison (directly mentioned at one point), Neil Gaiman, and Toni Morrison infuse Jemisin's pages, but feel utterly unique to her; a writer at her peak.

Becky Lea



Havenfall

Beyond the doors

Release 3 March
Writer Sara Holland
Publisher Bloomsbury
Price £7.99

Wanting to take over the family business as a teenager is ambitious. But when the family business is running an inn at the end of the world where annual peace summits are held between the ruling classes of other dimensions? That's a whole other level of ambition.

Maddie Morrow isn't a normal teen, though. Her mum's on death row for the murder of her brother, though Maddie knows she's innocent; her uncle is the innkeeper, responsible for ensuring the accords between the worlds hold; and her crush is a soldier from another world. When the long-sealed portal to a realm of monsters cracks open and Maddie's uncle falls ill, it's left to her to stop everything falling into chaos.

The scene-setting info-dump at the beginning of *Havenfall* is a little intimidating, with a lot of names and rules to remember. But once the story starts in earnest, it turns out not to matter. Sara Holland deftly crafts a memorable cast of characters and sense of place. Her supernatural world makes sense: it owes a small debt to C S Lewis's *Chronicles Of Narnia*, with the inn functioning kind of like the wood between the worlds, but still feels original.

The mystery unfolds satisfyingly, too. The reader gets to feel Maddie's confusion and fear as various powers make their play for her trust and power; she makes some bad decisions, but never out of stupidity or contrivance. She's a great character even as the most ordinary person in a book full of extraordinary ones, and it's impossible not to root for her to succeed. Clearly intended as the first of a series, it's hard to think of a more promising YA franchise-starter.

Sarah Lines



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SARA
HOLLAND

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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AND THE GIRL SWORN TO PROTECT IT.

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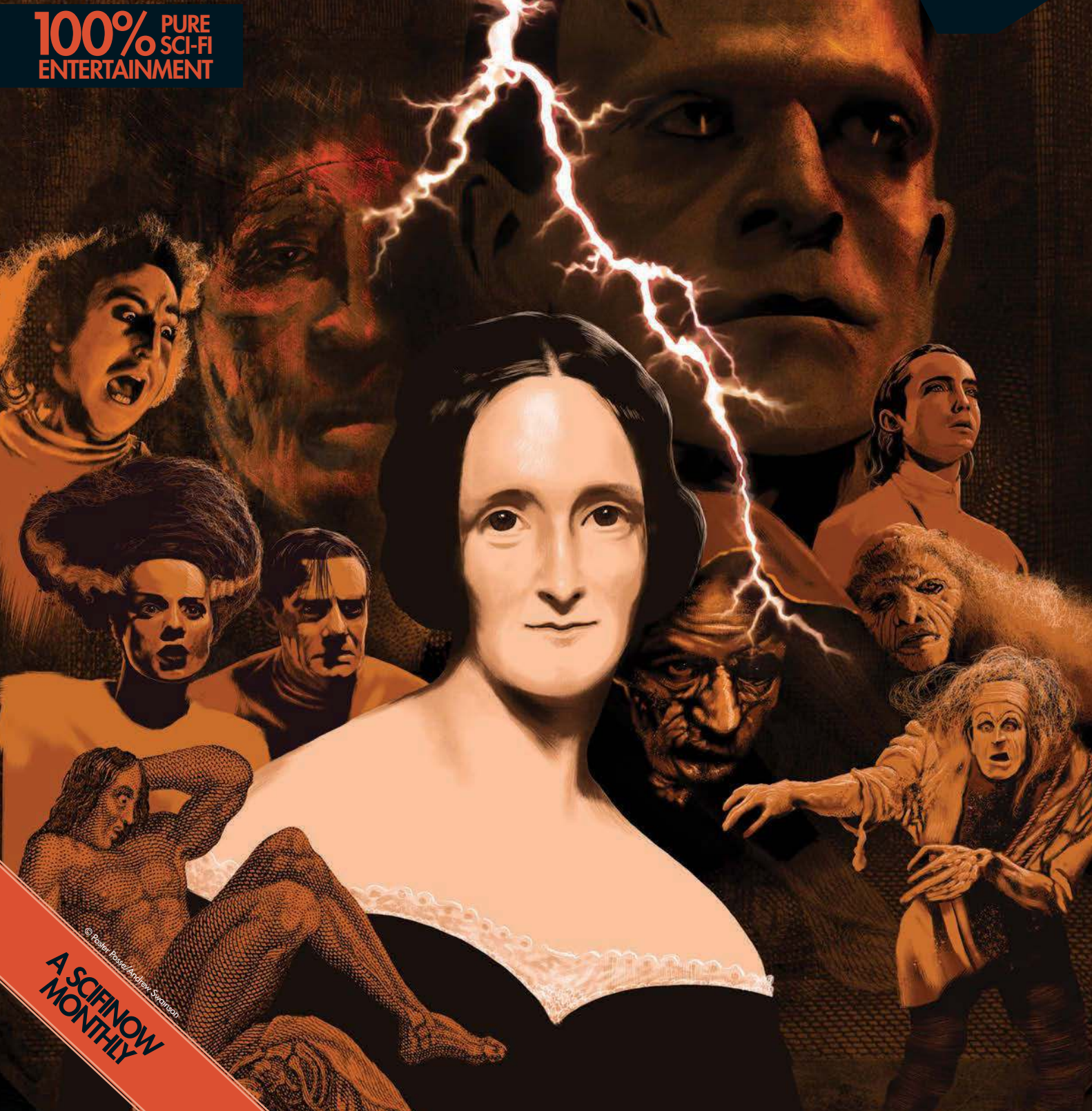
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THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO MARY SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN

FEW NOVELS CAN HOPE TO HAVE THE CULTURAL IMPACT THAT FRANKENSTEIN HAS HAD, ITS INFLUENCE SPREADING ACROSS ALL MEDIUMS EVEN TO THIS DAY. WE TAKE A LOOK AT THE LEGACY OF MARY SHELLEY'S CLASSIC NOVEL

WORDS GEM WHEELER

Unhappy teenagers often find their way to science fiction, one way or another. It's hardly surprising that a genre laden with metaphors of loss, loneliness and longing for connection should be attractive to young people struggling to find their place in a world that seems to resent their very existence.

Few such troubled kids have ever conveyed their fears and desires as powerfully – or as significantly – as Mary Shelley. She wrote *Frankenstein*; or, *The Modern Prometheus* at the age of 18, having survived unimaginable grief to emerge as one of the greatest writers in the English language. This extraordinary woman

used her own tragic experiences as fuel for a novel rich in existential questions and moral conundrums. As the daughter of two eminent philosophers and the wife of poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, circumstance guaranteed her at least a footnote in literary history. Instead, her own genius won her a place in the literary pantheon.

Dr Sorcha Ní Fhlainn is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies and American Studies and founding member of the Manchester Centre for Gothic Studies at Manchester Metropolitan University. She's well-placed to assess Shelley's role in birthing a genre still vital to today's pop culture. "It's one of those very influential novels that taps

into the very primal fears we all have: around birth, around death, around rebirth. Shelley herself had lost a child, and Shelley scholars have found that the torment of this was the psychological drive behind that novel. I think it's to do with who grants the right to give life and take it and, possibly, to steal it from the gods: that Promethean fire. Who gets to do that? Of course, the novel grapples with the powers of creation – and also the horrors of creation – throughout. The novel is so loaded with those kinds of metaphors that you feel that she was grappling with a very serious emotional heft at the tender age of 17, 18 years old."

Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin was born in London in 1797. She was brought up by her father, radical philosopher and writer William Godwin, following the death of her mother just a few weeks after her birth. Her childhood was blighted by a sense of guilt at having 'killed' Mary Wollstonecraft, a feminist thinker and writer of considerable repute.

A fractious relationship with her stepmother and a complicated bond with her father drove her into the arms of poet-philosopher Percy Bysshe Shelley. Separated from his pregnant wife and estranged from his aristocratic family due to his radical politics, Bysshe Shelley was a kindred spirit. Their passionate affair – allegedly consummated on Mary Wollstonecraft's grave in St Pancras cemetery – caused scandal and a rift with Mary Godwin's father. ➤



Young Frankenstein is a comic take on the source material.



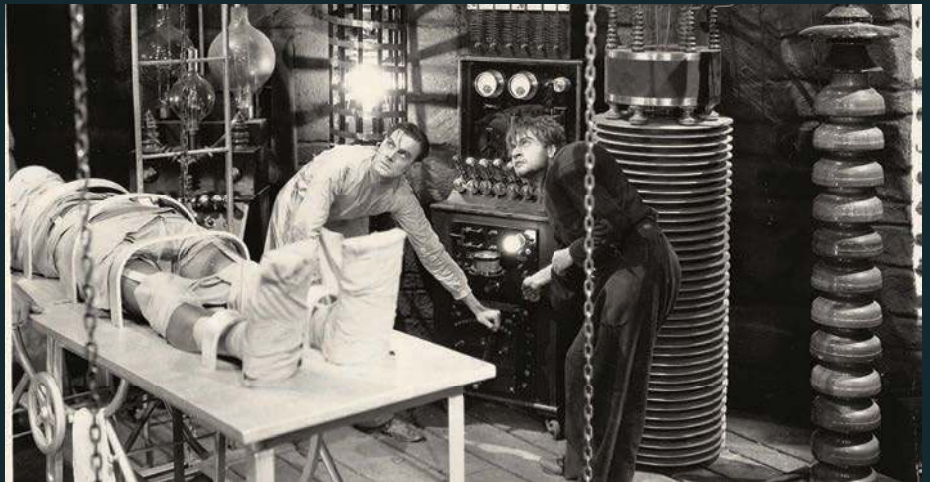
Mary Shelley's novel has had many iterations...



➤ It was the aftermath of this rift that the couple were trying to flee when they holidayed with Lord Byron and his lover, her stepsister Claire Clairmont, on Lake Geneva. Byron's physician, John Polidori, was the final member of this talented party. The ghost story competition the friends held would become the stuff of literary legend. Polidori would offer up *The Vampyre*, the first modern vampire story ever published. Mary Godwin's contribution was a devastating voyage into emotional torments, reinforced by her knowledge of the then cutting-edge science of galvanism: the movement of muscles in dissected frogs using electrical currents, pioneered in the 1790s by Luigi Galvani.

Ní Fhlainn takes up the story of that strange summer in the Villa Diodati, just a year after the tragic death of Mary Godwin's baby daughter: "When you think of that night on the lake, in a summer with no sunshine because there was a volcanic eruption the previous year, which had essentially knocked the climate out of whack, you have this really profound, elemental level of disturbance and discord. These influential people are coming together to create their own version of these monsters that will haunt them for the rest of their literary careers and lives. The fact that Mary Shelley outlived them all, and at the same time was possibly the most biologically haunted by her own story and its legacy, is really fascinating, I think."

Initially unable to think of a story, Godwin found herself inspired to write *Frankenstein* in the course of one feverish night. Its first edition, published in 1818, was anonymous, and it wasn't until a second edition in 1823



MARY SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN

COMPLETE GUIDE

that its author was identified. The book was a collaboration with Bysshe Shelley, who enthusiastically supported his lover's work, but the full extent of his involvement remains unclear. Ní Fhlainn cautions against misattribution: "I don't want to give him too much credit, but Bysshe Shelley really does help her fine-tune her work in a way that it's ready for publication, as all good writers have good editors."

Frankenstein tells the story of the brilliant scientist Victor Frankenstein, whose hubristic creation of a man built from human remains leads to the utter destruction of everything he has ever loved. The 'monster' is no mere shambling zombie, but a being haunted by a yearning to experience all that human life has to offer. When his attempts to find friendship and love are rebuffed, not least by his appalled 'father', the tragic creature exacts terrible retribution. Drawing on the Ovidian myths of *Prometheus* and *Pygmalion*, in which humanity is shaped from clay and a lover is conjured from a sculpture, *Frankenstein* unites timeless fears of social rejection, unnatural power and the existential shock of reproduction. Its impact is as devastating today as it was on its publication.

Ní Fhlainn and her colleagues were thrilled by the reaction to events planned for the book's bicentenary in 2018. "We had anticipated

that there was going to be a celebration within the community, but the extent of it was quite extraordinary. The second you thought that people had kind of acknowledged it and wanted to move on to whatever else was going to be preoccupying the Gothic world, we came back to *Frankenstein*! I suppose it's the fact that the metaphor of *Frankenstein* and the reawakened dead is so potent. It's not going away anytime soon. It just is a question of to which era you're applying it. *Frankenstein* contains so many of the fleshy horrors of undeath. The clean, stripped-down, aristocratic version of that, which would be the vampire, has waxed and waned just as much as the reanimated undead. With *Frankenstein*, though, the really interesting thing is that it comes back as the horrors of not dying. Death is not the end. That's both a blessing, if you're terrified of death, and really horrifying, if you're enslaved: whether you're enslaved to corporate capitalism, or you're enslaved to a person, or a thing, or an idea, or an ideology. So we feel that we're never going to truly escape the horrors of the present, because we're trapped in it. It's a perfect moment for *Frankenstein* to really be revived."

She expands on the visceral horror of Mary Shelley's creation. "The emotional horror of *Frankenstein* is the isolation. The isolation, the ➤

A DIFFERENT TAKE ON FRANKENSTEIN

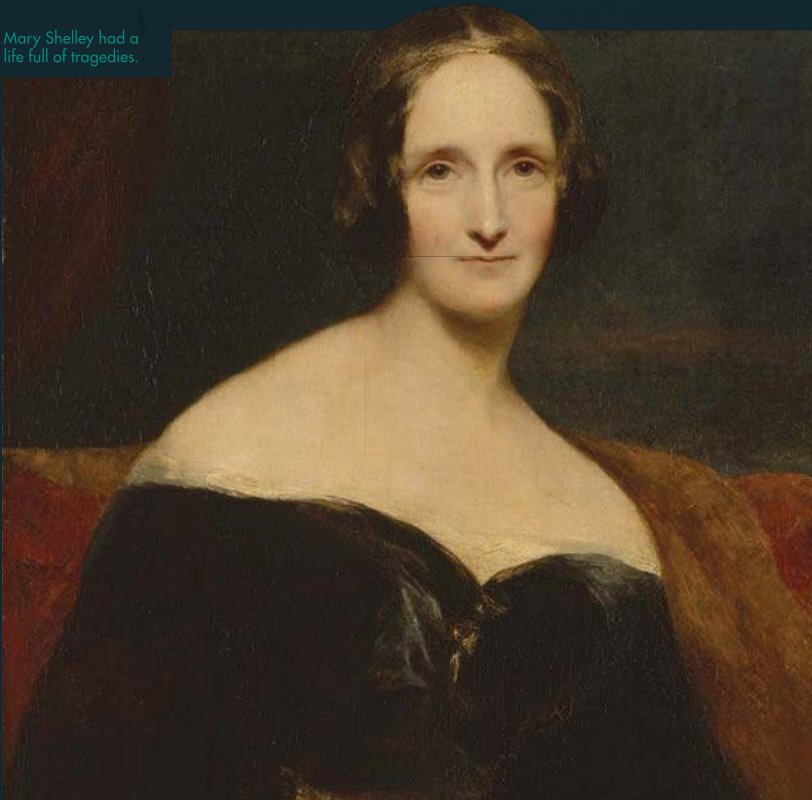
Most film adaptations of *Frankenstein* have jettisoned the novel's epistolary format and narrator, along with most of the work's emotional depth. Kenneth Branagh's 1994 version, which he both directed and starred in as the doomed scientist, took a very different approach, as Sorchá Ní Fhlainn points out. "All the Hammers completely run away with it and go in very different directions! There are some great ones, especially 1957's *The Curse Of Frankenstein*. What I like about the Branagh one – and I don't think it's a particularly great film – is that it's very fleshy, it's very sticky, and it's very homoerotically charged. Lots of adaptations have tried to avoid that, but there's that great sequence where the creature's been tipped out of what is essentially a birthing vessel full of amniotic fluid, and Frankenstein grasps the creature's body. They're grappling in this amniotic fluid for about 40 seconds, and you're just thinking 'what a strange choice it is for a Hollywood production'.

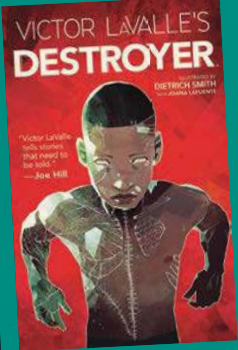
"You can see how a man cannot cope with the physiological bonds that birth requires, that the creature – this overgrown baby, as played by Robert de Niro – can't be nurtured by this man. It's all written into this steampunky mise-en-scène that Branagh works quite hard at to make it seem hubristic and ridiculous. It was made during that early-Nineteies Hollywood Gothic period, when *Dracula* (1992) was reinvented. They were trying to make literature fun again for people who they thought wouldn't read the book! It does a good job, but it's very in tune with Nineites politics around coding representations of male desire, without necessarily being something really taboo."

"IN A WAY [MARY SHELLEY] HAS BIRTHED THE IMAGININGS OF MODERN SCIENCE FICTION"

DR SORCHA NÍ FHLAINN

Mary Shelley had a life full of tragedies.





FROM WORD TO IMAGE: VICTOR LA VALLE AND DESTROYER

Novelist Victor LaValle took his very first steps into comic books with his brilliant *Destroyer* back in 2017. This story features Dr Josephine Baker, a black American doctor grieving her dead son, who was murdered by the police. She's also Victor Frankenstein's last surviving descendant. The stage is set for a tragic and emotional narrative that Shelley would doubtless have loved. LaValle tells **SciFiNow** about the comic book's inception and its development.

HOW DID THIS PROJECT COME ABOUT, AND WHAT DID A COMIC

BOOK ALLOW YOU TO EXPLORE THAT A NOVEL WOULDN'T?

Being a comic book reader since childhood, I'd been trying to kick my way into the medium for years. But previous attempts failed. I just didn't know how to tell a story visually when I was younger. I kept trying to turn it into a novel.

With time I came to understand the beauty of collaboration: words and pictures, not to mention colours and lettering. When they're truly working together, they make something spectacular. Having the *Frankenstein* story as a kind of spine for my tale helped me to get out of my own way. It just took a decade or so for me to finally figure the balance out.

DR BAKER'S IMPULSE TO REANIMATE HER DEAD SON IS DRIVEN MORE BY GRIEF THAN HUBRIS. HOW DID YOU DEVELOP THIS CHARACTER?

If you go back and look at Mary Shelley's original novel, I do think there's a similar impulse of grief that drives Victor Frankenstein, it just gets buried under the hubris. And the movies are pretty much all about his hubris. In the novel, Victor's mother dies right before he goes off to college. When he gets there he becomes determined to figure out how to bring the dead back to life. It's a pretty clear cause and effect.

Also, Mary Shelley's mother died [as a result of complications when] giving birth to her so that thread of grief and longing is deeply autobiographical. For me, it was just a matter of plugging into that aspect of Victor's journey. Then it was easy to find the connection between Josephine and Victor and Mary Shelley, too. Loss can drive a person mad.

YOUR VERSION OF THE ORIGINAL 'MONSTER' LOATHES HUMANITY AND HAS SPENT 200 YEARS IN ISOLATION. HOW DID YOU DIFFERENTIATE HIM FROM SHELLEY'S CREATION?

Shelley's creation clearly does hate humanity by the end of the book. Or, at least, he hates Victor. I felt I was actually getting back to the original by having my creature filled with loathing for humanity. It's the intervening years of movies and TV shows and comics and literature that have, in most instances, worked to soften the creature's feelings.

Also, I'm dubious about the value of human beings these days. It wasn't difficult for me to understand why the creature would hate us. I hate us, often.

THE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CURRENTS OF *DESTROYER* COULD HARDLY BE MORE TIMELY. HOW DID YOU APPROACH THIS HUGE IMPORTANT TOPIC WHILE RECONCILING IT WITH THE THEMES OF SHELLEY'S OWN WORK?

Shelley's novel is deeply political. It's about man's scientific hubris, of course, but also about topics like xenophobia and even veganism. The Creation, in Shelley's novel, is vegan. I'm more baffled when people siphon all the politics out of their *Frankenstein* retellings/reimaginings.

I thought of my comic as a continuation of the gauntlet Mary Shelley threw down. Her portrait of Victor Frankenstein as a driven, arrogant, self-involved man-baby could easily be the story of modern tech-bros like Mark Zuckerberg, who has also created something without thought of its effect on the world, and all the damage it may do.

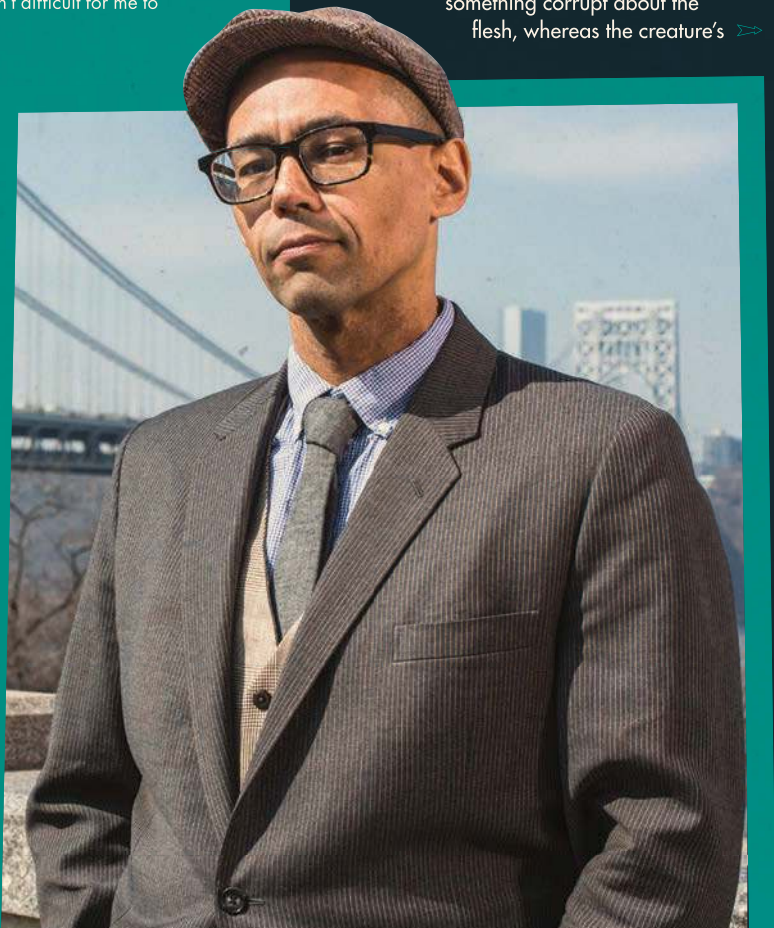
HOW DID YOU WORK WITH THE ARTISTS INVOLVED (DIETRICH SMITH AND JOANA LAFUENTE) TO DEVELOP THE COMIC BOOK?

The best part of the process came in trading pages with the artist of the series, Dietrich Smith. I wrote the scripts first, laying out what I wanted in each panel. Often Dietrich gave me a gorgeous version of what I'd written. But at other times he took the essence of the idea and made something substantially better. I'd use a hundred words to describe an image and he would sum it up in a single expression on a character's face. I was impressed by the visual storytelling about a dozen times per issue.

➤ thirst for knowledge, and being aware of his own abject nature. He demands a wife to be made for him because he's been crushed by the isolation into which he's been cast off. With zombies, you have the horde mentality, especially with the Romero era, but even if you're looking at earlier stuff, there's the idea that the zombie is a metaphor for enslavement and the ideology of capitalist discourse. You look at zombies with a lot of revulsion, whereas in *Frankenstein*, the revulsion around the monster is mostly from his creator. He doesn't necessarily provoke that feeling in the earlier parts of the novel when he's learning to read and things like that, because he's trying to rise to that challenge and become more humanised and socialised. But when you get to the zombie and the tearing flesh, the virality, the disease, and the lack of being able to express consciousness, that's when we get the divide. It's between the horrors of reanimation and being reborn, even if you never asked to be brought back, versus the zombie, who never wanted to leave in the first place and, when they do come back, it's for destructive ends."

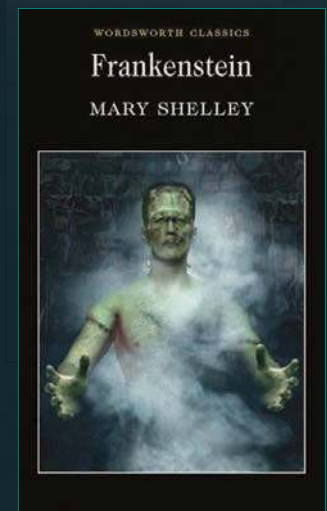
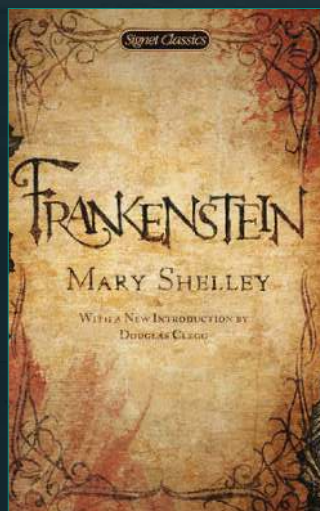
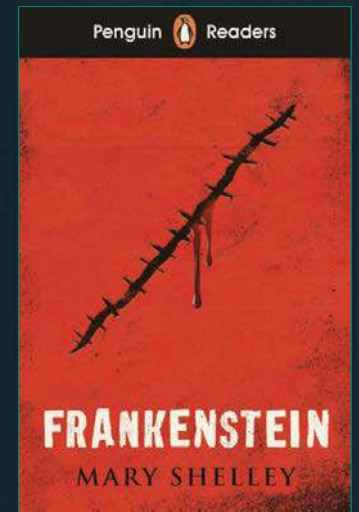
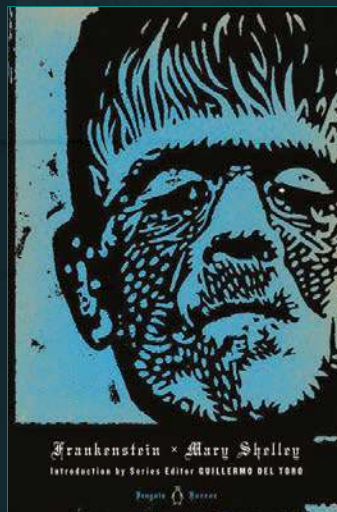
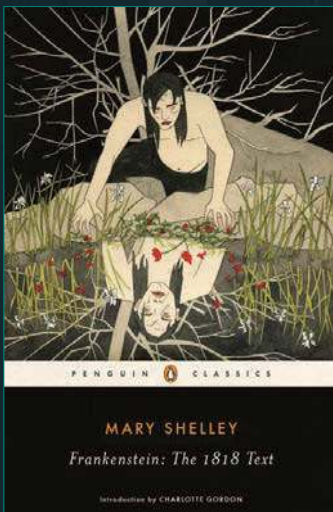
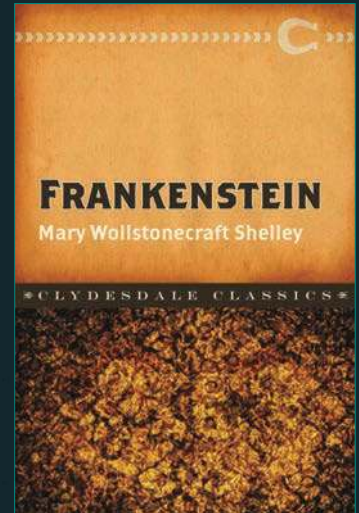
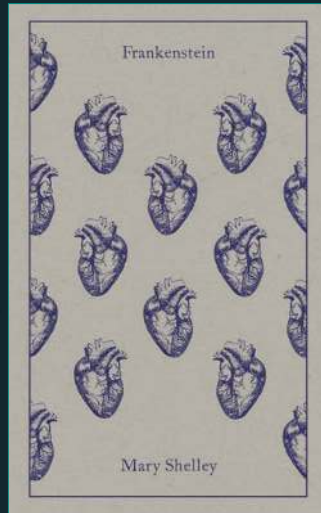
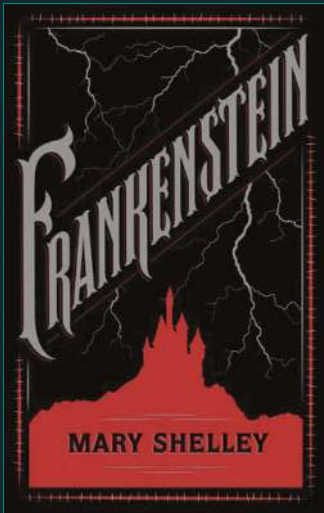
Frankenstein's rage-filled 'child' is a murderer with a bitter loathing of his selfish and arrogant creator. Why do we find him such a compelling object of sympathy, when we cheerfully watch nameless hordes of undead get mown down by the heroes of countless zombie flicks? "The creature is made monstrous, because his creator is so monstrous. He's an innocent, and zombies are not innocent, because most of the time they've lived their lives and are brought back by supernatural or celestial means, depending on which narrative you follow. There's

something corrupt about the flesh, whereas the creature's ➤



MARY SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN

COMPLETE GUIDE





➤ flesh, even though it's described in the novel as something that's stretchy and too thin, that doesn't cover all the viscera and the muscles, is something that is not as abject in terms of its ability to fall apart as that of the zombies."

It's a potent work that finds the pressure points in all our psyches – a craving for acceptance, a paradoxical combination of rejection of and craving for familial approval, an equally confounding desire to be both unique and one of the crowd – before pressing down, hard.

As Ní Fhlainn notes, the creature's response to Frankenstein's callous rejection is appalling in its brutality and wincingly familiar in its motivation: "Revenge is one of the oldest narratives we have ever had, in any form of storytelling. You're stripping away everything you can from

a person, just as the creature himself felt that he was completely stripped of all kindness or humanity. That idea that you can strip a person down to their most vulnerable, just to remind them that their hubris is what caused this nightmare in the first place. The fact that, at the end, he does wander off into his own existential loneliness takes us back to the beginning of the novel where he feels abandoned.

"It's a powerful thing in its own way, and I think that suffering is what the creature really wants, to impose that sort of emotional suffering and bring it back to its original roots: the idea that the decisions we make have consequences. Shelley says in the second edition that there was a lot of emotional discord in her writing of the novel. She had at times a very strained relationship with her father. She was doted on by him, but she also felt emotionally at sea because of her mother's death. I think that undertow does come out in the difference between what you are expected to be and what you are, all those frustrations we can relate to as people, and it's there in the relationship between the creature and Frankenstein."

Frankenstein was far from Mary Shelley's only achievement. After Bysshe Shelley's death in a boating accident in 1822, she spent the rest of her life writing to support their son while

promoting her late husband's own acclaimed work. Her literary output encompassed novels and travel writing, all of it marked by her unique imagination. She died of a brain tumour in 1851, aged just 53.

Ní Fhlainn deftly summarises her immense significance as a writer and a thinker: "In her own writing, she has in a way birthed the imaginings of modern science fiction. There's no question about that. She came before all the great male science fiction writers of the 19th Century. I think it's incredible what she achieved. Early science fiction is rarely kind to women."

Life itself wasn't kind to Mary Shelley. Through her writing, she seems to have found a kind of peace with the competing impulses and concerns that caused her so much pain, marked as she was by unwarranted guilt for the death of the mother she never knew and for the brutally abbreviated lives of all but one of her children. In another 200 years, there will still be vulnerable young people who have cause to be grateful that this titan of English literature was brought into the world. ☞

Victor LaValle's *Destroyer* is published by BOOM! Studios and *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* is available on Blu-ray from Sony Pictures Home Entertainment.



- MONSTER IN A MIRROR - 10 FRANKENSTEIN ADAPTATIONS



FRANKENSTEIN (1931)

James Whale's picture for Universal Studios dispensed with most of the novel, but we'll forgive him, because it's great. Its 1935 sequel, *Bride Of Frankenstein*, is another showcase for Boris Karloff's indelible take on the creature.



HAMMER FRANKENSTEINS (1957-1974)

Peter Cushing was a fixture in Hammer's numerous and typically inventive versions of the source material. Ralph Bates, Veronica Carlson and Christopher Lee were among the genre luminaries joining in the gory fun.



THE ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW (1973)

Richard O'Brian's stage musical sees Dr Frank N Furter invent a creature, Rocky, while a fun, sexy time is had by all. The 1975 feature film sealed the Faustian deal.



YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN (1974)

That's Frankenstein to you. From one of the greatest novels ever written to one of the funniest films ever made, courtesy of Mel Brooks. Gene Wilder plays Frankenstein's heir, surrounded by props from James Whale's 1931 *Frankenstein*.



THE BRIDE (1985)

Sting as Frankenstein? Jennifer Beals as his female creation? It could only have been made in the Eighties. There is no singing or dancing in this grim version of the tale, though.



GOthic (1986)

Not an adaptation as such, Ken Russell's film recreates the atmosphere of that fateful night on Lake Geneva. Scripted by Stephen Volk and starring Natasha Richardson, the movie is soundtracked by synth pioneer Thomas Dolby.



FRANKENSTEIN (NATIONAL THEATRE, 2011)

Directed by Danny Boyle, this acclaimed stage version of the book featured alternating performances in the roles of Victor Frankenstein and his 'monster' by Benedict Cumberbatch and Jonny Lee Miller.



FRANKENWEENIE (2012)

Tim Burton's remake of his own 1984 short is a sweet-natured stop-motion animation in which the reanimation of a beloved pet leads to all kinds of complications. Stuffed full of parodies and references, it's a genre treat.



PENNY DREADFUL (2014-2016)

Victor Frankenstein and his creature (who is played by Rory Kinnear) both pop up in this acclaimed horror series, alongside Timothy Dalton and Eva Green.



THE FRANKENSTEIN CHRONICLES (2015)

Anna Maxwell Martin played Mary Shelley while Sean Bean played a police officer investigating body snatching in 19th Century London in this take on the novel, aired by ITV.



RETRO CLASSIC

STARSHIP TROOPERS

THE LEGENDARY PAUL VERHOEVEN FOLLOWED HIS DYSTOPIAN CLASSICS TOTAL RECALL AND ROBOCOP WITH 1998'S STARSHIP TROOPERS – WE DELVE INTO THE SATIRICAL MILITARY SCI-FI WONDER TO FIND OUT JUST WHY WE ALWAYS WANT TO KNOW MORE

WORDS RACHAEL HARPER

Over the span of ten years during the late Eighties/early Nineties, director Paul Verhoeven dominated the box office with some of the all-time greatest dystopian sci-fi movies of not only the era but perhaps of all time, most notably with *Robocop* in 1987 and *Total Recall* in 1990 (with psychological thriller classics, *Basic Instinct* in 1992 and *Showgirls* in 1995, thrown in for good measure too). But a film that's perhaps less written about but certainly deserves to be on this list is *Starship Troopers*, released in 1997.

The darkly funny, bold satire of right-wing militarism focuses on high-schoolers Johnny Rico (played by Casper Van Dien who had largely been in TV roles until this point) and his girlfriend Carmen Ibanez (a fresh-faced Denise Richards) in a future where humans have started to colonise other planets and are in battle with alien Bugs who hurl meteorites in to space to defend their planet.

Based on the book by Robert A Heinlein, *Starship Troopers*, which was released in 1959, was reportedly written as a response to the US suspending nuclear tests, though it garnered some controversy with its depiction of a world dominated by the military – where residents of the planet cannot become true citizens (and thus be afforded the right to vote) until they have completed their military service.

The film, too, follows these themes. The teachers are ex-military and instead of dissecting frogs in biology class, they dissect

baby Bugs to find out how best to kill them. Corporal punishment is standard. Graduation day is dominated by a military sorting and signing up process, with colourful banners encouraging the excitable kids to join the army. Which is exactly what Rico and Ibanez do (the former joining the infantry to impress the latter, who is heading for flight school). Unfortunately for them (and the human race), the Bugs have just sent the biggest meteorite yet, completely wiping out Buenos Aires, and Earth is now going to glorious, glorious war...

It's an ugly vision of the future, a Bug vision of the future. Politics and people are

seemingly governed by the media, portraying fake news long before Mr Trump made the phrase so popular. The movie is littered with propaganda, showing young children gleefully stamping on regular Earth-bound bugs to 'do their bit' and graphic videos of Bugs being gunned down, so we know exactly where to aim for when we slaughter their race. The movie is joyfully self-aware, pointing out the extreme power of the media and the futility of war under a veil of dark comedy and light-hearted segways. At a time when the internet was arguably just beginning its mass domination and Facebook was a whole seven ➤



We're at glorious war!

RETRO CLASSIC
STARSHIP TROOPERS





TOP FIVE MOVIE BUGS



THE FLY THE FLY

The Brundle Fly is a formidable foe with increased strength and stamina. Bad fingernails though...



EDGAR THE BUG MEN IN BLACK

A giant cockroach disguised as a farmer – don't kill bugs around him.



VENEZUALAN SPIDERS ARACHNOPHOBIA

A nasty new species of drone spider – don't mention the lack of sex organs.



CETI EEL WRATH OF KHAN

Warning: do not let their larvae in your ear. It WILL wrap around your cerebral cortex.



THE JUDAS BREED MIMIC

Trying to eradicate a disease caused by cockroaches? Don't play with genetics.

➤ years away, *Starship Troopers* portrays targeted advertising and click bait (when one piece of propaganda finishes, another simply asks 'would you like to know more?' of course we do!).

Critics at the time (and some now) weren't as impressed as they were with some of Verhoeven's earlier work, with Rita Kempley calling it a "squishy, senseless, putrescent romp" in the *Washington Post*. "It's exactly like *Star Wars* – if you subtract a good story, sympathetic characters, intelligence, wit and moral purpose," Kempley continued.

Star Wars this is certainly not – there are no noble battles against evil here, the fights are dirty and ruthless, and the Bugs are incessant killing machines; evolved over generations to do nothing but kill and propagate. There is no proud rebellion. From the very beginning it's been made clear that for every one dead Bug there are a handful of dead humans. This is a slaughter which our heroes happily run to, spilling out catchy slogans as they head to an inevitable defeat: "The only good Bug is a dead Bug!".

Perhaps it's the characters that many critics didn't like – Rico is not the haunted Murphy from *Robocop*, nor the brave, hapless Quaid

in *Total Recall*. Rico is a high-school jock who is beguiled by a shiny war ideal (and of his girlfriend) to fully understand the bigger picture and seemingly too focused on his ego to realise that he'll soon be heading straight into the front line. Ibanez, too, is overconfident and self-obsessed; a smile is permanently plastered on her face and we see only a hint of a frown even as she delivers a spaceship of hundreds of people to their likely demise. It's as though these characters embody the propaganda ideals around them – the handsome all-American boy and the pretty prom queen proudly grinning their way into a grisly battle.

But doesn't this make the satire all the more obvious? The picture-perfect characters' contrast to the bloody, horrific war making the whole idea of war more ludicrous? Besides, Rico and Ibanez are surrounded by characters that lend much of the film its humour and heart. From love-sick soldier Dizzy to the gruff father figure Rasczak, it's these characters who ground the film in a sort of realism before it catches itself, shakes itself off and carries on skipping blindly into colourful war (even the Bugs' blood is a vibrant orange).

Written by *Robocop* screenwriter, Edward

Neumeier, *Starship Troopers* delves into similar themes of the corrupt elite and sheep society. But this, too, isn't *Robocop*. The comedy isn't quite as dark and the characters do not have an inspiring story arc. There are certainly faults here and saving the cookie-cutter characters without any real pay-off can leave a bitter taste. But its vision of the future is unique and very interesting, keeping the viewer just as beguiled as its characters by its bold visuals and fun technology.

This is a future where attractive humans are dominating other planets. Where telepathy is possible and where there are fun sports games that involve somersaulting over the opponent. There is no class system (unless you count military and non-military), there is an abundance of wealth, the streets are clean and there are just oh-so-many places we can vacation now we're taking over the galaxies. But underneath all this sunshine and lollipops there remains an ugly dominance; a rotten society that's pigeonholed the populace with the promise of doing just the opposite. It's an inspired idea to have a corrupt but so-called optimistic vision of a future full of the things that politicians promise us today.

The Bugs are also a great enemy – scary and unrelenting. When one falls (eventually) another simply takes its place. They have no emotion or empathy, it's a continuous deluge of seemingly inescapable wrath. They're bigger and stronger, with an almost impenetrable exoskeleton, and they can rip a person in half without the need for weaponry. Their reptile-like, ugly exterior yet again veils the fact that these creatures are obviously



"THE BUGS ARE A GREAT ENEMY – SCARY AND UNRELENTING"

acting in self-defense against a force blindly subjugating anything and everything it finds.

The film itself cleverly adheres to the idealism of war while satirising it. On the one hand showing absurd propaganda in cutaways while being one itself; the war is indeed glorious, Rico is merely stabbed in the leg (and this future has medical technology which can heal this quickly) as his fellow infantrymen and women are slaughtered around him, and Ibanez sports an attractive cut above the eye as she emerges from a space battle that's decimated half of humanity's military. Why do these cardboard cutout characters emerge unscathed? There

It's an ugly planet, a Bug planet...



YOUR TAKE ON THE CLASSIC

"Honestly one of my favourite films. Just incredibly enjoyable and fun. A lovely blend of satire and earnestness (it seems anyway). Larger than life characters, cheesy sci-fi. Love it." **@Bolt_451**

"It's a masterpiece that also somehow foretold the 'war on terror'." **@eds209**

"Genius sci-fi from the master. The Bugs are only defending themselves and their right to exist, but they're not as pretty as the collection of daytime American soap stars fighting for the other side. A brilliant take down of fake news and fascism, so clever that many didn't notice!" **@KeithMansfield**

"What if the Bugs didn't even launch the meteorite which wiped out Buenos Aires? What if the Federation used an accident to spark a race war?" **@Danny11M**

"Classic. I hope PV gets to direct at least one more big Hollywood sci-fi film." **@JamScore78**

"Classic... ultra violent but with Verhoeven's light touch, almost absurdist approach, makes it seem less shocking somehow... This *Robocop* & *Total Recall* all share similar qualities." **@mjduffy11**

"Great satire. Twenty years ahead of its time." **@dan_dresdner**

"It was an excellent film, whilst it diverged from the book in several ways it added its own character to the story and managed to have a sly dig at sci-fi and the media at the same time." **@JonBlanchard**

"One of the greatest science fiction films of all time." **@TLK_1983**

is no somber contemplation on war's futility in *Starship Troopers*, there is no grand moment of reflection. But then again, when one war is over, there is soon another on the horizon. Even the film's closing credits show our unscathed heroes in yet another military recruiting video, encouraging others to join them as the war continues.

It's this complexity that keeps *Starship Troopers* in the same list as Verhoeven's other works and the fact that it isn't like *Robocop* or *Total Recall* means it has a rightful place – it's a mind-melting messed up trip all on its own. The satire is obvious and dumb, just like all good propaganda. It doesn't mean that people don't take it seriously – the absurdity of the movie only emphasises its point. War is absurd. *Starship Troopers* is wonderfully absurd, and if you would like to know more, give it a watch (or re-watch) for yourself. [🔗](#)

Starship Troopers is available on Blu-ray and DVD from Walt Disney Studios HE.



FLASHBACK

THE HOST

AS DIRECTOR BONG JOON-HO ATTAINS INTERNATIONAL AWARDS GLORY, HE TALKS US THROUGH HIS 2006 MONSTER MOVIE THE HOST, ALONGSIDE LEADING ACTOR SONG KANG-HO

WORDS KAT MCLAUGHLIN

WHO EXACTLY IS THE MONSTER?!

It's August 2019 at Locarno film festival when we sit down to chat to actor Song Kang-ho and director Bong Joon-ho about the longevity of their working relationship. The pair first worked together in crime drama *Memories Of Murder* in 2003, and since then have collaborated on monster movie *The Host* (2006), post-apocalyptic science-fiction thriller *Snowpiercer* (2013) and most recently the historic multi-Oscar-winning *Parasite*.

The Swiss Alps can be seen in the distance from the conservatory room at the fancy hotel in which we meet, the sweltering heat cooking us like bugs under a magnifying glass. Then suddenly the weather changes, the heavens open and torrential rain kicks in, making an almighty racket atop the intricately designed glass structure. It's a bizarre coincidence that we all chuckle about considering that most of their collaborations together have been rain-soaked or water-logged ventures, with more than a tinge of black comedy about them.

Since winning the treasured Palme D'or award at Cannes Film Festival in 2019 for *Parasite*, and the film becoming a global phenomenon, the pair have been travelling the world to speak about its success. "Honestly speaking, of course I'm very happy and honoured to receive the award, but my way of working and creating over the last 20 years, that's not going to change as a consequence," explains Joon-ho.

Today, they're happy to take a break from chatting about their most recent film, and cast their memories back to 2006 and the making of their Korean box office smash *The Host*. It's a film that spawned from the imagination of

Joon-ho while he was still at high-school and at a time when, under some duress, he thought that he saw a strange creature crawling out of the river.

At the time of release, *The Host* broke records and was the most watched Korean film of all time. It was also a massive deal in Hollywood, with a Gore Verbinski-produced remake immediately going into works (it thankfully never happened) and Quentin Tarantino listing it in his top films of that entire decade.

Over 20% of the South Korean population took to cinemas to watch a film that was inspired by a very real and not-too-distant scandal. In 2000, an American mortician, Albert McFarland, who worked at the morgue

their search for weapons of mass destruction, as seen through news clips of the Iraq War, Joon-ho states that: "The film is not overtly anti-American".

Sure, it's taking aim at the many layers of corruption and ineptitude at a government level and it's specific to a certain event, but it works as an examination of any government on how their actions impact everyday people. *The Host* directly comments on the US military's interference in Korean matters that they know virtually nothing about but also looks to the powers in charge as to how they handle 'virus' breakouts. That is, by essentially leaving those at ground level to fend for themselves against a monster that is eating them whole. The fallout from the way the

SARS virus was handled in Asia was an issue that the film touched upon and something still relevant right now with the coronavirus currently holding China hostage. The multi-layered film is also concerned with

"IT WAS CERTAINLY AN ENDEAVOUR TO REVEAL ALL OF THE MONSTER AT THE BEGINNING [OF THE FILM]!"

BONG JOON-HO

at the US Military base in Seoul, ordered his employees to dump formaldehyde down the drains. It eventually ended up in the Han River – which serves as a water source to 12 million Koreans.

"In the opening scene you see the dumping of the chemicals," explains Joon-ho. "It was called the McFarland scandal. It was a huge political scandal at the time but it also had a genre feeling to it. I felt like that would be a great opener for a monster film."

The morgue worker is unnamed in the film, and played by the late American actor Scott Wilson, who Joon-ho cast after seeing and liking his small performance in Patty Jenkins' *Monster*. Though the film pokes fun at the American government, with political satire of

injustice and class stratification across the board, as it pits those in power against the 'losers' of society.

The heroes of the film are in fact a poverty-stricken family who run a food stall on the banks of the Han River. Kang-ho plays a hapless father to his smart 13-year-old daughter, Hyun-seo played by Ko Asung, Doona Bae plays his sister, an Olympic bronze medal winning archer, Hae-il Park plays the attractive and arrogant unemployed brother and Hee-Bong Byun appears as their vulnerable, elderly father.

"The father I play in *The Host* is not really a typical father figure," explains Kang-ho. He's a lazy drunk and the entire family are dysfunctional, but they share a deep love for ➤

"ONE OF THE GREATEST MONSTER MOVIES EVER MADE!"

- Logan Hill, NEW YORK MAGAZINE



THE HOST

STARRING SONG KANG-HO, BYUN HEE-BONG, PARK HAE-IL, BAE DOO-NA, KO A-SUNG / PRESENTED BY CHUNGGEORAM FILM, SHOWBOX / MEDIAPLEX, INC. / A CHUNGGEORAM FILM PRODUCTION / PRODUCER CHOI YONG-BAE / EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS CHOI YONG-BAE, KIM WOO-TAEK / CO-EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS JEONG TAE-SUNG, CHUNG JIN-IL
CO-PRODUCER JOH NEE-SEON / VFX SUPERVISOR KEVIN RAFFERTY / VISUAL EFFECTS AND ANIMATION BY THE ORPHANAGE / CINEMATOGRAPHY KIM HANG-SOO / ORIGINAL STORY BONG JOON-HO / SCREENPLAY BONG JOON-HO, HAH JOON-WON, BAEK CHUL-HYUN / DIRECTED BY BONG JOON-HO

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➤ one another, and decide to take matters into their own hands when the youngest of the clan is snatched up by the beast. He adds: "It may be funny for the audience to watch, but in fact it's his family's reality, this is the society that we live in."

Joon-ho's empathy for the disenfranchised can be seen throughout his body of work, and how he places his characters. It's especially apparent in *The Host*. "These are people alienated from the system, people who despite not being helped by anyone don't curse at the system, and embrace each other when disaster hits them... When I went to university there were people from all sorts of different backgrounds, from the very rich to the desperately poor," he states. "We would be drinking together and learning together every day, so that was really my education which I think was much better than the textbooks. Of course, it was still limited from my own perspective and my own point of view about things, but I think that's where I got a lot of positive influence."

For *The Host*, Joon-ho didn't follow in the footsteps of Stephen Spielberg's water-bound masterpiece *Jaws* by keeping the shark hidden for the most part. Instead he broke all the rules with the appearance of a slithering, river monster terrorising Seoul at the start of the film. "Within the first 13 minutes you see the full monster dramatically appearing in full sunlight for everyone to see," he says. "I didn't think of it so much as a political symbol... But at that young age, lacking in reverence, I just very boldly in a manic way, decided to go for it! Usually you have to wait an hour in, monster films to see a bit of the tail or the monster's foot. I thought that in the first 13

WHO IS BONG JOON-HO?

Asian cinema has a fantastic reputation when it comes to smart genre, often inspiring Hollywood to remake them in the English language. So far none of Bong Joon-ho's genre titles have inspired this foolish behaviour and it's something that he commented on in his speech when receiving his Golden Globe for best foreign language film for *Parasite*, stating: "Once you overcome the one-inch tall barrier of subtitles, you will be introduced to so many more amazing films. I think we use only one language: the cinema."

After the success of *The Host*, the director made the move to creating movies in the English language himself with *Snowpiercer*. It was a runaway word-of-mouth cult hit that was not shown in UK cinemas until 2020, seven years after release. His follow up, *Okja*, made its mark in Cannes by being one of the first Netflix productions to show at the festival. Their title card was met with loud boos, but by the end of the film the cynical press audience were graciously applauding its heart-warming, hilarious and exhilarating take on major themes such as corporate corruption and the moral benefits of vegetarianism.



minutes I would show you everything! It was certainly an endeavour to reveal all of the monster at the beginning! But we still had a lot left to say for the rest of the film. With the Park family, especially there was still a lot that we wanted to show."

The mutant creature is as big as a bus, and chomps up humans with sharp incisors – a terrifying sight to behold. Its gruesome actions of swallowing victims whole, spitting out bones and saving them for later in a gooey sewer lair, (under the Wonhyo Bridge in Seoul) were influenced by "watching National Geographic and learning about the habits of pelicans and Amazonian anacondas!" says Joon-ho.

The creature cost about 5.2 million dollars to create, nearly half the entire budget. Originally the job was supposed to go to Weta Digital, in New Zealand. Joon-ho discussed the computer graphics with them for almost a year, but it was too pricey. Instead US special effects company The Orphanage took on the task.

"There's a Korean designer called Jang Hee-cheol who I worked with for over a year and it was a very complicated process," explains Joon-ho. "In real life there was this mutated fish that we would see as a result of environmental pollution where the spine looked distorted, so we took a lot from that. We wanted the monster to take on the appearance of something that looked very unwell."

Joon-ho and his crew shot on location at the Han River, a mammoth task, that he describes as "difficult". He continues, saying: "The river's water level was a big issue and the sound recording team had a horrible time with all the noise. Controlling so many people on the



The Host focuses on the disenfranchised.



Bong Joon-ho wanted the monster to look unwell.



FLASHBACK

THE HOST



The monster took over a year to create.



in to self-blame, although he's done nothing wrong. There's loss and mourning but also a mixture of blame and blaming others. The very complicated feelings that come out towards myself and towards society, those feelings are shown a lot in *The Host* and I think that's a very strong, distinct Korean feeling. It's very common for this feeling to happen even in daily occurrences."

Joon-ho continues that sentiment, saying, "I think it's almost an Asian feeling, if this happened in France, people would be throwing stones at the government buildings, whereas in Asia if something bad happens people tend to blame themselves. I think that is what actor Song is saying, and it is shown a lot in the film. Like, it was my fault that I lost the child, or it was my fault that I didn't buy my child a car and that they died in an accident on the underground, [he is referring to another national Korean tragedy, The Daegu subway fire] when, in fact, it is a governmental issue or a systemic issue. It's very common that you see people put the blame on themselves, they harass themselves or they persecute themselves instead of looking to the real source."

Fourteen years after its premiere at Cannes film festival in the director's fortnight strand, *The Host's* social and environmental horrors are writ large today. Government ineptitude and corruption is out of control and it is the laypeople who are suffering the tragic consequences, this time on a catastrophic, global scale. It's a film that so rightly deserves its 'modern monster movie masterpiece' moniker. 

The Host is available on Blu-ray by Studiocanal.

riverbank was really difficult. Plus, the stench underneath the Wonhyo Bridge, where the monster lives, was unbearable."

It's at that river's edge location where the creature, known in modern circles as Gwoemul (the Korean title for the film) first jumps out to startle a crowd and greedily gobble them up.

In all the chaos, the bumbling father struggles to keep a grasp of his daughter's hand, losing her to the monster, which Kang-ho explains is a symbol of self-blame: "In Korea, and I'm sure it's true for other countries as well, the sense of a very collective disaster where you see the loss of your family or for some unfortunate reason are separated from your family breeds a kind of social collective atmosphere."

He continues saying: "I tried to act very symbolically when he loses the grip on the hand of the daughter. The father really goes



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Editorial

Editor Rachael Harper

☎ 01959 541444

Email sn.ed@kelsey.co.uk

Art Editor Marcus Faint

Deputy Editor Abigail Chandler

Sub Editor Anne-Marie McKenna

Contributors Tom Arden, Anton Bittel, Simon Bland,
Jonathan Hatfull, Becky Lea, Sarah Lines, Katherine
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Advertisement Sales

Tandem Media Ltd

Natalie Crossgill ☎ 01233 227763

natalie@tandemmedia.co.uk

Richard Rowe ☎ 01233 228757

richard@tandemmedia.co.uk

Production: Tandem Media

scifi@tandemmedia.co.uk

☎ 01233 220245

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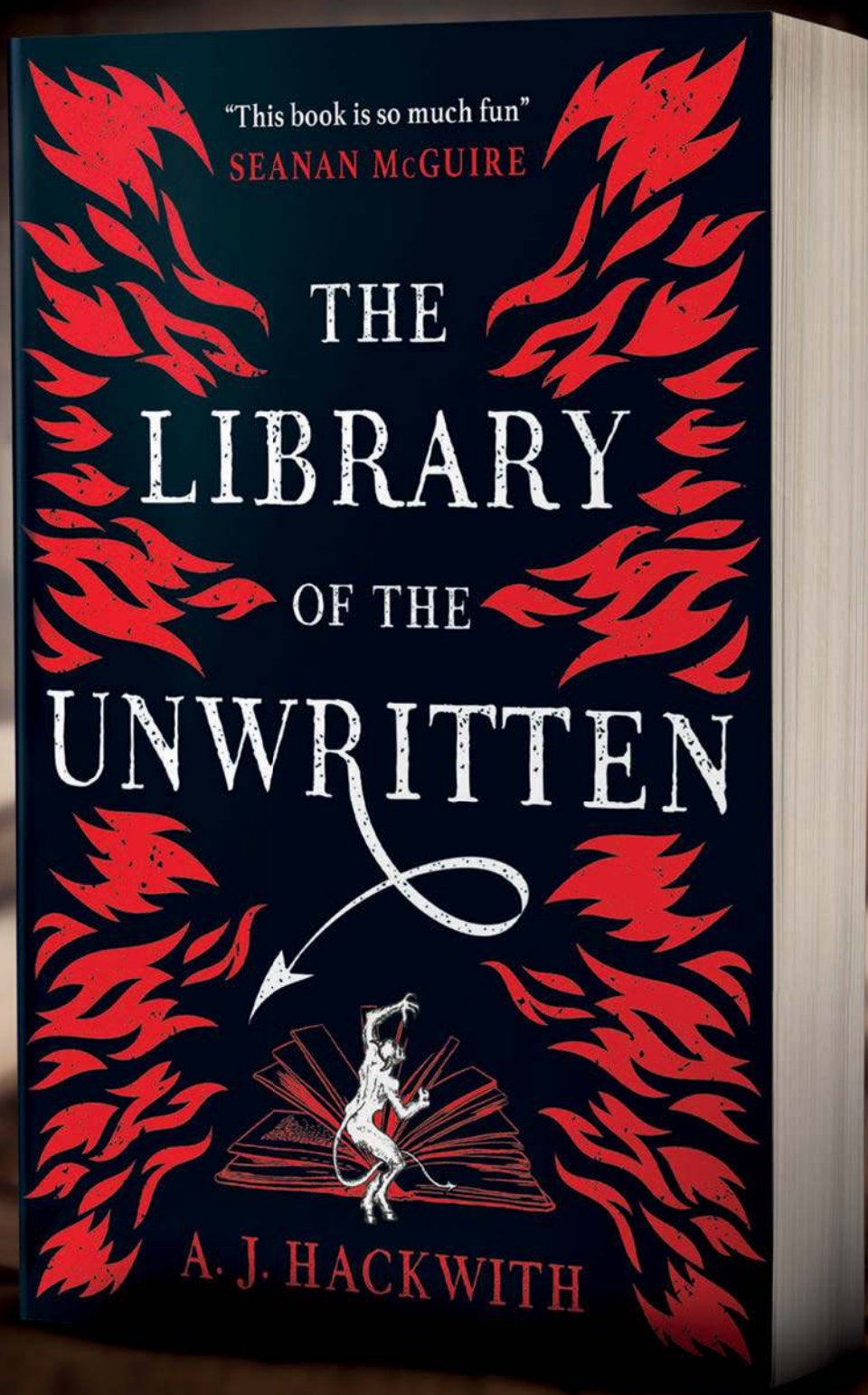
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