



*2024 Best Fanzine*  
HUGO AWARDS  
VOTERS PACKET

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## Introduction

Adri Joy

How do you begin an introduction to a seventh year of Hugo finalist work?

Perhaps you start by acknowledging that seven, to many people, is a bit magical. From seven sins to seven chakras to seven wonders and, of course, the destiny of that seventh son or daughter in the fairy tale, seven is an excellent number for things that are a bit...special. It's a lot of items - more than a handful! - but you can't put them equally into smaller categories, so you just have to step back and take in the whole seven-ness of it all. Magic.

Seven Hugo nominations. Wow. Being relevant and recognised as a fanzine (did you notice there are seven letters in "fanzine"? coincidence?) for the best part of a decade is beyond an honour: it's an absolutely humbling vote of confidence from our readers. Out here, long after the heyday of the blog (yet somehow before the universal acceptance of blogs being legitimate fanzines), our team are out here putting words of criticism, analysis, conversation and pure nerdy joy onto [www.nerds-feather.com](http://www.nerds-feather.com), because we love doing it. (seven letters in "feather" as well...) That we are still finding our audience means more than we can possibly say. Thank you.

As always, we're on the ballot in excellent company, both old and new: Black Nerd Problems, Idea, Hugo Book Club Blog, The Full Lid, and Journey Planet are all fantastic publications and it's a delight to be recognised alongside them.

In house, our editorial team has grown in the last couple of years: along with our founders G and Vance, and our senior editors Joe and Adri (that's me!) we've got a day-to-day editing dream team of Roseanna Pendlebury, Arturo Serrano and Paul Weimer helping Nerds of a Feather keep our schedules packed and our dreams on track. (seven editors, you say?). Paul is also recognised on the ballot for Best Fan Writer this year, and we wish him all the luck! This zine has always been a labour of collective love, and especially through the ups and downs of the last few years, it's teamwork and mutual support that keeps the lights on for creative endeavours like ours. Our spectacular international flock of writers in 2023 ( $2+0+2+3 = 7$ ) was Alex Wallace, Ann Michelle Harris, Chris Garcia, Clara Cohen, Dean E.S. Richard, Elizabeth Fitzgerald, Haley Zapal, Joe DelFranco and Phoebe Wagner, and the only way we could ask for a better team is if we found some sort of cloning device and made more of them.

Also, several of us are from, or based in, the UK, so it's particularly exciting to be recognised at a Scottish Worldcon (7 letters in Glasgow). Shout out to our fellow British Hugo nominees across all the categories!

2023 was a fantastic year for Nerds of a Feather: we nearly broke our all-time record for most pieces published in a single year (315!) ( $3-1+5 = 7$ ) and took home a collective IGNYTE award for best critic, reinforcing our belief that we're writing work that's important to us and to our readers. As well as our packed schedule of reviews, essays and interviews, we also ran a new project in 2023 after taking a year off in 2022, as Star Wars Subjectivities (7 syllables) ran a series of essays and roundtables taking another look at this ever-expanding nerd classic. In project lead G's own words:

This project will follow a somewhat different format than our typical special modules. We will not be providing dossier-style reviews that present opinions with supporting evidence to make an argument that aspires to objectivity. Rather, we will lean into the subjectivity of our opinions with nakedly partisan feelpieces. Sometimes these will take the form of love letters or furious rants; sometimes they will be more measured. The point, ultimately, is just to be honest about how we feel, as individuals.

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It's no easy task putting together the highlights of a bumper year, but we hope this packet will guide both new and returning visitors through a few of our flock's favourites from the year that was. Organised into five categories (it would have been seven, but we put together the packet before I came up with this bit), we've got a little bit of everything from everyone who wrote for us last year, so you can get a taste of what we think makes Nerds of a Feather so special. Of course, if you want more, it's all available for free, as long as our hosting lasts, at [www.nerds-feather.com](http://www.nerds-feather.com): our chronological sidebar should make it easy to find the 2023 posts which are under consideration for this award.

As well as being magical, seven is, of course, also a lucky number for many, and I'd be lying if I said we don't hope it'll be lucky for us. But regardless of what the voters decide, we're proud and humbled and super excited to be here on this seventh Hugo journey. Thank you for having us again, voters.

LITERATURE REVIEWS



*Section One*

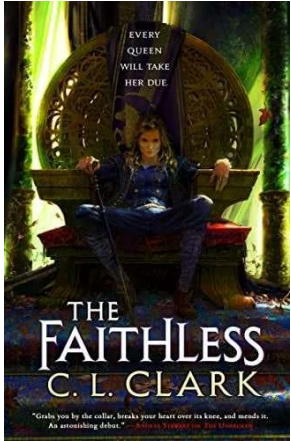


## Section I: Literature Reviews

### Book Review: *The Faithless* by C.L. Clark

Adri Joy

#### We've had Touraine's Arms, now it's time for... Luca's Legs



How do you follow up on the iconic Touraine's Arms cover illustration for *The Unbroken*? Why, with Luca's Legs of course! And Luca's slouch. Also, Luca's unpleasant little princess smirk. Luca's strained trouser fabric, and its several folds. In this analysis of Luca as portrayed by Tommy Arnold on the cover of *The Faithless*, I will... wait, uh, remind me what I was doing here again? The text! Yes, I remember now, the text. Of the book. Let's tear our eyes away from the cover for a minute and talk about the insides of *The Faithless*, the middle volume in C. L. Clark's trilogy about empire, resistance, and extremely handsome ladies.

(If you're new to this series, and wondering whether *The Unbroken* will be your thing to start with, I covered that in *Strange Horizons* so go and check that out instead. I start that one out by talking about Touraine's Arms, so there's a pattern emerging here, and very correctly so in my opinion.)

*The Faithless* begins in the middle of the political reorganisation that began at the end of *The Unbroken*. The colonising nation of Balladaire has chosen to pull out of Qazāl and recognise its independence, ending decades of oppressive rule. The treaty for this has been negotiated between Princess Luca, who had gone to govern the colony in a bid to secure her ascension to the throne in place of her regent Uncle, and a new leadership of former rebels. Among those rebels is Touraine: Qazāli by birth, stolen from her home and raised as a soldier by Balladaire, defected after realising that her coloniser superiors will never see her as anything more than a tool, and now the heir to a magical power which she isn't sure how to use. Through the events of *The Unbroken*, Touraine and Luca are well acquainted, by which I mean "Luca tried to use Touraine as a tool, Touraine had a severe case of divided loyalties and eventually decided not to go with the brainwashing coloniser, in theory Luca has worked her way around to respecting that". Also, they have absolutely scorching sexual chemistry every time they get within 50 metres of each other, and both of them continue to sometimes mistake this for mutual trust and respect. Luca mistakes her horny feelings for respect so much that she requests the Qazāli appoint Touraine as Ambassador to the Balladairan court, and the Qazāli, seeing in this an

opportunity to ensure Luca upholds the terms of their treaty, are happy to send Touraine into the lions den. See, Luca has every intention of honouring her treaty, but she's also still not the Queen, and her Uncle is using the political leverage he has gained from her "failure" in Qazāl to force a trial of competence and push her out of the succession entirely.

The events of *The Faithless* therefore mostly revolve around the Balladairan court, as Luca struggles to build political alliances and ascend the throne and Touraine struggles to gain respect as a representative of a former colony, to improve the lot of Qazāli who have settled in Balladaire, to protect the people in her delegation, and to field the varied requests for help from Luca. One of the more frustrating elements of *The Unbroken* was the extensive list of bad decisions and reversals from Touraine, even though they made intellectually as a portrayal of a woman stuck between the indoctrination of a colonial upbringing and a birth culture that views her with ambivalence because of her proximity to colonial power. In *The Faithless*, Touraine's decisions are similarly complex and still lead to Bad Times sometimes, but they come from a foundation of wanting what is best for Qazāl over Balladaire even when she doesn't know how to achieve that in the Balladairan court, and the extent to which helping Luca achieve her ambitions will be good for her own country (and, relatedly, to what extent she's doing it for horny reasons). Luca and Touraine are still far from being on an equal footing in this book, and that imbalance permeates their every interaction. But Touraine's greater confidence in herself, and her clearer recognition of the power imbalance, add a new dynamic to their relationship and, frankly, make it easier to enjoy its progression without being consumed with annoyance over Luca's exploitation. Their relationship is still deeply fucked up - and that's the point - but it's marginally less "Touraine, please just run away, Touraine, no, TOURAINÉ", and I found that added to my enjoyment of the story.

While it's difficult not to miss Qazāl, and some of the characters who we leave there, Balladaire makes for an equally fascinating setting, full of intriguing side characters both new and returning. First off, the aesthetics are wonderful: Balladaire is French inspired, and Clark kits out her sapphic elites in masculine French court outfits with plenty of mention of sword hilts. While we spend much of our time watching elite political machinations there's also exploration of broader socio-political dynamics, including Qazāli migrants who feel oppression in Balladaire is a better situation than economic uncertainty in their own country, and anti-monarchist sentiment among the broader population. One of Luca's plans to gain power involves rediscovering the "lost" magic of Balladaire, whose eradication was part of the country's colonial narrative: magic is uncivilised, science is civilised, therefore scientific Balladaire needs to go to other countries which still have their magic and replace it with good clean scientific thinking (and, of course, harness that magic

for their own military use, but that bit's not in the school curriculum). It would be a spoiler to say how this plot thread develops, but the wrinkles this adds to the worldbuilding are so deliciously "oh damn, of course" that I had to scream out loud for a bit after Luca figures it out. The Faithless also spends some time fleshing out Masridān, another region under Balladairan colonial rule whose people are of the same ethnic group as Qazāl, through the eyes of Touraine's former comrade and lover Pruett, who has been sent to build alliances but finds little immediate aid among the city's leadership.

If you liked *The Unbroken*, I think you're going to be very satisfied with where Clark takes things here, and how well the table is laid for the end of the trilogy (read: how very, very fucked our girls are). I, for one, can't wait to see whose body parts end up provoking thirst on the cover next time.

## Book Review: *The Mountain in the Sea* by Ray Nayler

Arturo Serrano

### An extended philosophical dialogue against human supremacy



Ray Nayler's debut novel *The Mountain in the Sea* employs the techniques and tropes of multiple genres to explore one overarching question. It has corporate espionage, but it's not a spy novel; it has drone warfare, but it's not a military novel; it has killer AIs, but it's not an AI novel. The unifying theme is instead the need to identify the logical flaws in anthropocentrism and in the notion of individual responsibility. What the main characters achieve, more than an immediate victory, is a realization on two levels: a human being is not an island, disconnected from the web of shared responsibilities that make up a community, nor is the human species an island apart from the rest of nature. Fittingly, Nayler's

choice of setting for this argument is a literal island, ultimately shown to be indissolubly linked to the events occurring everywhere else. In the world Nayler proposes, not even an island is truly an island.

The plot of the novel concerns the discovery, near the Vietnamese coast, of a species of octopus that has developed symbolic language, a material culture, toolmaking methods, a storytelling tradition, and a complex worldview with rituals and sacred spaces. By every anthropological criterion, this species has formed a society. However, anthropology proves to be of little help when faced with a society that grounds its conceptual repertoire on an environment, an embodied perception and a neural architecture that are fundamentally alien to the human experience. Here the novel reveals its core: although it has a team of experts attempting to crack the code of interspecies communication, most of the page count is dialogue about the moral implications of the research. This is not so much a "solve the puzzle" plot as a "moral illustration" one. Without ever getting didactic or preachy, *The Mountain in the Sea* addresses thorny questions about greed, negligence, hubris, exploitation, duty, and self-delusion.

Moreover, in keeping with the novel's anti-individualistic stance, the moral failures that set the plot in motion are never ascribed to one character or one faction. Sealife depletion is not caused by this one company's greed; it's humankind's greed. Rights violations are not allowed by this one government's negligence; it's humankind's negligence. Securing a future for all lifeforms is not this one hero's duty; it's humankind's duty. And yet, the individual characters we follow through the story

aren't diluted in an all-blurring mass movement. They remain conscious of their uniqueness, but also of their connection to the whole. The novel's message is not one of annulling the individual, just one of expanding the scope of moral analysis.

To bolster this point, Naylor deploys a reoccurring motif, simultaneously a hard fact and a metaphor: the nervous system of an octopus, a distributed network with semiautonomous parts and minimal top-down control. The novel applies this same model to describe the power structure of a multinational corporation, an artificial mind, and the entire biosphere. The human neural structure, with a centralized point of command that all the limbs obey (plus all the political ramifications that result from replicating that model in a society), is the anomalous exception rather than the norm. To solve the enmity between humans and nature, the novel argues, we must shed the top-down way of thinking. We don't rule over nature, and we never did. Of course, this moral position goes directly against the traditional Western Christian anthropology that positions humankind as the pinnacle of creation. In reality, there's no such hierarchy. Whereas Christian anthropology insists that we are in this world, but not of this world, Naylor replies that that's an impossibility. You can't be in this world without instantly becoming of it. You can't form a complete concept of yourself without acknowledging your ties to everything around you.

The structure of the plot mirrors this view of interconnectedness. Three separate threads build the story while barely intersecting, three full protagonists who never meet but end up collaborating toward the goal of preventing the human depredation of the newfound octopus society. Most notably, each of these protagonists becomes a hero when they independently reason that their place as a part in a whole doesn't diminish them, but actually opens an opportunity for them to influence the course of events. You can't save the world if you're not part of it.

This underlying assumption, that a change in conduct requires first a change in perspective, is reinforced by the inclusion of a Buddhist monastery in the Vietnamese island where the researchers live. Not only does Buddhism teach that all sentient beings are equally worthy of dignity; it's a basic Buddhist doctrine that the path to liberation begins with adopting the right view about reality, and the right view according to Buddha is that the endless pursuit of satisfaction only leads to pain. In the novel, this occurs in the form of overfishing, exploitation of workers, and individual ambition. To separate oneself from the world results in a loss of empathy. You don't need to care for ocean life if you see it as just a thing for you to use. When you adopt the right view that you're just another lifeform in a web of relations, the rest of the world ceases to be just a thing.

In the moral landscape of *The Mountain in the Sea*, the real enemy to defeat is indifference. The biggest cause of pain, the cruelest weapon, the most destructive flaw

in the human spirit is the failure to care. Once this problem is identified, the true nature of individualism is exposed: it gives us an excuse to indulge in indifference. This failure mode doesn't even need to be motivated by malice: if you see yourself as too small, too powerless, or too unimportant to change anything, indeed you won't. The type of caring that has a real effect in the world is one where you also care enough about yourself to notice all the threads of relations you can pull. That's how multiple parts acting semi-autonomously can move the whole.

More than a science fiction yarn about first contact with another intelligence, *The Mountain in the Sea* reads like a philosophical dialogue. Characters reflect and contrast their opinions far more than they do things, and somehow, marvelously, that doesn't hurt the pacing. The novel has several moments of exciting action, and yet this is not an action thriller. This is a thought experiment where the essence of humanity is put on trial and the sentence is probation. We still haven't demonstrated that we're capable of behaving responsibly in this world, and we're running out of chances. The novel ends with things pointing toward a happy ending, but happy endings need persistent effort to be maintained. Although this story has elements of a moral fable, it doesn't offer a definitive conclusion to its argument. Protecting a still-incipient octopus society would require a constant series of responsible decisions. To put it in science fiction parlance, the world is never finally saved. And that's OK; just as there isn't a hard boundary between humans and reality, there isn't one between the dark past and the shiny future. Pretending that there's an end date to the task of caring is another form of indifference. That's why *The Mountain in the Sea* isn't content with finishing its argument and leaving the reader alone. This is the kind of philosophical dialogue that hopes the reader will say something in reply. It is a call to action. It is a proclamation.

## **The Math**

Baseline Assessment: 8/10.

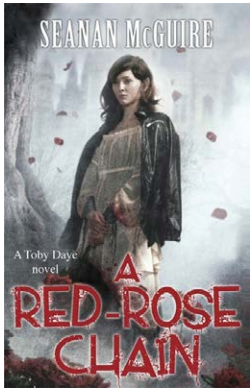
Bonuses: +1 for the hard rigor applied to the biology and linguistics of the octopus society, +1 for the skillful integration of the separate plots.

Penalties: -1 because many sentences in the dialogues could use a bit of trimming.

Nerd Coefficient: 9/10

## The October Daye Re-Read: A Red Rose Chain

Joe Sherry



Welcome back, dear readers. Today we're going to revisit the ninth novel in Seanan McGuire's October Daye series: A Red Rose Chain. We are now exactly just past the halfway point through the (thus far) published books. Nine down, seven to go - though this autumn is going to throw havok into my reading when Seanan McGuire will publish not one, but two new October Daye novels that are directly dealing with the consequences of Be the Serpent - which means at some point this year (and likely very soon) I will hit another pause like I did last year when I dealt with the emotional fallout of that novel.

A Red Rose Chain has its own emotional fallout, which depending on your perspective is either tied to the return of the deposed Queen of the Mists (do we ever learn her name and is it actually important that we don't?) or the part where Toby is tortured and killed. Spoilers, of course, but Toby is only mostly dead as is her wont and has an incredible revival. Frankly, I'm not convinced this series isn't going to end with Toby really truly actually dead rather than getting a happily ever after, but we'll see.

I've already started with the spoilers because that's apparently how I'm rolling today, but this is a re-read essay for the ninth book in a series where I've been spoiler heavy the whole time. So, let's keep reading along and expect more of the same.

Alright. Here's the whole set up (and, I suppose, the conclusion). Toby overthrows another kingdom. Not bad for a changeling. It's like this - Queen Arden's seneschal is hit with elf shot (meaning, will be sleeping for the next hundred years) and the Kingdom of Silences declares war on the Mists. Arden, being a newer ruler, and Faerie as a whole having been fairly peaceful (more or less) for quite a while means that there is a lack of diplomats and this \*is\* the October Daye series AND Toby is a named Hero, the extraordinarily undiplomatic Toby is sent as diplomat to help stop a war.

The complicating factor, and of course there is a complicating factor is that the current King of Silences was placed on the throne by the former and deposed Queen of the Mists (whose name we still do not know, not that it really matters as far as we are aware) and that Queen is behind the throne in Silences. That Queen, of courses, hates Toby. Hates.

We're all quite certain that everything is going to go well and there will be no complications, right? Right.

The whole book is a complication.

Silences is one of those Faerie kingdoms where the word "traditional" means racist (speciest?) as hell and incredibly discriminatory against changelings and less human presenting fae. So, besides being inclined to oppose everything Toby is seeking to accomplish, Silences is generally just a shitty place to be if you're not full on in the favor of the reigning Monarch. But maybe that last point is everywhere if you're not full on in favor. It's just degrees of what it means to be in favor and what sort of person you need to be to fall in or out of favor.

"Regicide is nowhere near as much fun as a good, old-fashioned deposing."

Toby is going to get a reputation. Deposing a ruling monarch once is a coincidence. Deposing a ruling monarch twice is a pattern. I believe this comes up later when another character alludes that other monarchs are not comfortable with Toby entering their realm given her history of overthrowing kingdoms. The thing is, Toby has no chill. When the options are let her friends and family be injured, through her actions or inactions allow actual war to occur, or to depose a King - Toby's going to take down the throne.

One thing that I haven't mentioned is that the way that Silences agreed that they would not invade Mists is if Toby physically gives herself over to Silences to be experimented on and for the False Queen to have Toby's blood. Remember, in this world blood is literally magic - and Toby has some of the most remarkable magic with her ability to heal and to change the magical genetic composition of the blood of others (assuming a mix). The consequences would be horrific for Faerie, ignoring the brutality to Toby and even assuming that Silences would, in fact, hold to their word of not going to war. This should not be assumed.

Also, speaking of war, I have an eight year old at home and he is fascinated by the concept of war and invasions, and one country taking over another, and of empire. He doesn't get it from me, that's for sure, though I know for a fact that I was much the same when I was his age. It's an abstract concept, though I try to convince him that war is a terrible and awful thing and that even when it is necessary (a distinction I am not yet making), it is still terrible and the cost of war is immeasurably awful and that families and communities and non-combatants are destroyed (I also don't use that term). All of that is with the understanding that I haven't been to war myself, though if there is another major war in the next decade I probably will and honestly, I'd rather not see things that I shouldn't have to see and I would rather my country and other countries not have to go through that - all because of the choices "leaders" make.



The reason for this digression is Tybalt's explanation of why Toby's mission is important.

"Preventing a war is always the right thing to do," he said gravely. "War is not a game, for all that some would play it as they would a game of whist. War is a tragedy in motion. Everyone is innocent, and everyone is guilty, and the crows come for their bodies all the same."

As a breather, now that I've talked around war too much - In some ways, all of this buries the ledge that Walther works out a cure to elf shot. That's amazing! It's a reminder of how strong Toby's magic is in identified specific strands of magic to give Walther the tools to work out the cure. There will, naturally, be long running and unexpected implications because if elf shot is no longer the way to stop conflicts short of killing, then how this plays out in the long term will be fascinating to see. Not that we'll be getting novels or perspectives far enough out in the series for that to truly shake out.

"Arthur pulling Excalibur from the stone got him a kingdom and a legend and a whole bunch of crappy knock-off stories. Hell, it got him a Disney movie. Me pulling a knife out of my own heart got me pain, pain, and more pain, until I felt like I was on the verge of blacking out again."

Finally - let's just consider just how much of a badass that Toby is. She is stabbed in the heart and pulls the knife out. The whole scene is incredibly dramatic and well done. The moment gets into the depth of the raw power of Toby's magic. It has come up a number of times that she may be functionally immortal and she very much does not want to test how far she can go, though the series is bringing her closer and closer and closer to finding out. This being the closest yet. Stabbed straight into the heart and Toby pulls out the knife while she feels every millimeter of that pain. Just incredible.

Next up in the re-read will be *Once Broken Faith*, though I am fairly certain there's going to be a bit of a gap between this essay and the next because I do have copies of both *Sleep No More* and *The Innocent Sleep* for review and those are going to take priority and all of my emotional energy. There's no way Seanan McGuire doesn't break my heart multiple times with those two books.

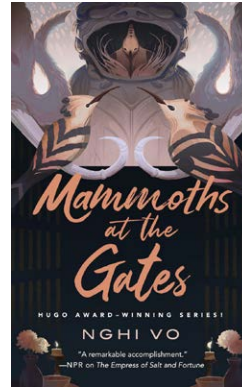
Open roads and kind fires, my friends.

## Book Review: *Mammoths at the Gates* by Nghi Vo

Roseanna Pendlebury

**A story about the remembrance of the dead, through a lens of the complicated legacies they leave behind.**

CW: Death, grief



The stories Nghi Vo has told in the Singing Hills novellas have all had a conceit, a neat little framing device that shapes the story into something a little more than just a story. It's one of the best things about the series, and means I go into each new one excited not just to know what happens, but how it's told. In the first, it was framed around found objects, the second a story told by different tellers, the third had unconnected tales that turned out to be connected by the people in them. In *Mammoths at the Gates*, the fourth in the series, it's stories of a person told by the different people who knew them at their funeral, stories from those who loved them,

who think of them fondly, their fellow clerics, their companion and their granddaughters, who knew them only as the best they were... and one that isn't quite so flattering, but no less true.

I read this book one week after my grandmother died.

Normally, I'm not so keen to put quite so much of myself into my reviews as this, but the resonance between the story and what has happened so recently in my own life was impossible to ignore.

My grandmother was... a complicated woman. Rarely a nice one, though more often to people who didn't know her well. The legacy she left us, when she passed, was no less complex. Her will makes plain that she cared very much about lifting some of those who survived her above others, showing her favour and her disdain in equal parts. No matter how much one knows about this when the person is alive, it becomes harder to bear when you realise it's the last thing they leave in the world, the message they want to be seen after they've gone, their last word. As I say, complicated. But part of dealing with that complexity is the family that gathers at the passing, who tell their own stories about her. I haven't seen my aunt - who lives abroad - in years, but we sat in the emptiness of my grandmother's house, her and my mother and me, and naturally, what grew out of that emptiness was stories. Stories the others may not have known, or that saw a complex woman from another side than the one the listener had in their mind, or that revealed hurts she caused

that the rest of us simply never knew about.

My mother asked me yesterday, did I want to speak at her funeral? I declined. I don't know how I'd even begin to frame that complexity into something appropriate for speaking publicly.

Nghi Vo did.

She begins the funeral with the expected stories, the ones that praised the deceased for the things most prized by the speaker. Patience, compassion, cunning, by turns. They reveal the different sides of the person, as person in the world and later as a cleric, to the surprise of those who only knew one part of them. But the greater surprise comes in the story that is not the best but the worst of their life. The listeners all had to then reframe their knowledge of the deceased, around the discovery that they weren't, as everyone had thought, always quite so wonderful.

That sort of story is so rare, in life and in books. We do not speak ill of the dead. We certainly do not speak ill of the fondly-remembered dead, or those who were good and bad in parts\*. But as Vo shows, there is incredible power in remembering the truth of a person, the good and the bad together, an emotional impact that cannot be achieved by simply speaking the kind words, the ones that everyone expects to hear. It was an impact I did not realise I would appreciate quite so much, but I felt it all the way down to my bones as I read it. It hurt, and it helped, to have a story reminding me that we can have complex feelings for our dead, in a time when I needed just that. From a personal perspective, I might even say this is the best of the stories in the series, simply because it has hit me so intimately in my own unsettled emotions.

But even if I step outside this personal impact, it's a story whose themes are bittersweet and beautifully crafted. As well as those of death and mourning and the memories of a person left behind - themes made all the more poignant in a setting full of characters whose entire purpose is their perfect recall - it is also a story of how people change, how parting and returning may bring you back to a different person than the one you left behind. And that in discovering that, you realise you too are different from the person who left. All the Singing Hills books are deeply, inexorably rooted in people and their relationships, but *Mammoths at the Gates* doubly so. We follow Chih, our cleric protagonist, as they return to the Singing Hills Abbey after their travels, hoping to see again their neixin companion who returned before them, as well as their familiar fellow clerics and old tutors. But they find their best friend suddenly serious and grown up, their neixin now a mother of a fledgling, and much of the abbey gone to a nearby situation that requires their attention. Their home is almost empty, and they have to reckon with the changes against the backdrop of a very present threat - the eponymous mammoths at the

gate - whose title drop within a few pages of the opening of the story I particularly appreciated.

But like all the other stories, it isn't really a story about Chih, no matter that we continue to learn about (and love) them through how they approach the stories of other people. And it is no different here - we learn about Chih through how they cope with the changes they bear witness to in their erstwhile best friend, and the stories they hear and react to during the funeral. They are the conduit through which we receive the stories, and like any good medium, they bring with them their own personality to the message. For only novellas, for stories that always spotlight other people, Nghi Vo has done an amazing job of giving us such an insight to the person on the fringes of all those stories, a wry, cheerful, thoughtful, ever so slightly rebellious but ultimately dedicated cleric, one who truly yearns to hear what people tell them, and believes in their duty to keep those stories safe, because the things that happen to the people in their world, even the little things, ultimately matter.

We likewise get those tantalising little glimpses into the world, and as in all the books, we continue to dwell particularly on food. In a book about homecoming and comfort, it feels all the more important to have that there, all the more true to life. Cleric Chih has always been quick to describe what they eat - or want to eat - in all the novellas, and so getting back to the green onion buns, the rice and mustard greens, the salted plums of their home, the things that comfort them against the world, makes you yearn for those foods too, even if you've never tried them yourself. Because they're not described in the way food sometimes is, as vivid sensory experiences, full of taste and smell and almost sensual aesthetics. Instead, food reverts to its emotional self - rice as a balm for the soul, a green onion bun or milk candies as nostalgia, a salted plum as a rare treat. We understand food, as we understand much of the story, through the lens of Chih's experience. Whether or not I would like salted plums, here, they are likeable, and that positioning in the story is, for the moment, more important than my own imaginings of what a salted plum might taste like.

If I were to be fanciful, I might say that all the Singing Hills books are a thesis on the importance of bias for the narrator in a story. Because they would not be what they are - which is wonderful - if they weren't constantly coloured by the perspective from which we see them. Whether it is Chih and their experiences, or the framing devices that shift from book to book, each of these stories is as much the medium as the message, the two woven so thoroughly together that extraction would make each meaningless except as part of the whole. And *Mammoths at the Gates* is no different in that.

But likewise, for me, it is also now inextricable from my own experiences, and my

own bias. I cannot but view it through the lens of my own mourning, I cannot but find myself in the story, and be comforted. I declined to speak at my grandmother's funeral, and ultimately, so does Chih decline to speak at their mentor's. I find a form of fellowship in that; I feel seen. And it is a testament to how well the story is told that such resonance is so easy to grasp, and so poignant.

\*On twitter, we quite frequently speak ill of the terrible dead, but twitter is its own little microcosm, and I don't want to use it as a pattern for society at large. God no.

### The Math

Highlights: A continued dedication to great framing devices, emotional resonance so substantial you could make buns out of it, bittersweet friendship

Nerd Coefficient: 10/10

## Book Review: The Jinn-Bot of Shantiport by Samit Basu

Paul Weimer

**A retelling of a very famous story in a fascinating, far future, slowly decaying city.**



Tell me if you've heard this before. A down at the heels "street-rat" and their monkey live in a beautiful, if corrupt city, where the wealthy do well and other people do not. They are contracted by Antim, a high official in the city's administration to find a powerful artifact, an artifact that has an entity that will provide the owner with whatever they desire. But when they get a hold of the artifact themselves, the equation changes completely. And then there is the attractive noble in the palace and their father, both of whom are overawed by that powerful corrupt official...

Except, this is the far future, the monkey is actually a bot and is her brother, and the mysterious narrator of this entire tale is of uncertain provenance himself.

This is the story of Samit Basu's *The Jinn-Bot of Shantiport*.

I am going to begin at the ending for a change. In the acknowledgements and notes, Samit Basu makes it absolutely clear that this is an interpretation of the story of Aladdin. He makes it absolutely clear when, after setting up our protagonists, he introduces the Jinn, who first manifests and is described in a way that anyone who has seen the Disney cartoon will recognize. And the novel itself eventually invokes Aladdin in other ways as well for the reader to discover.

But this is no straightforward retelling of Aladdin in the far future. Lina is our Aladdin, but rather than just being a straight up "street-rat", she is the daughter of failed revolutionaries. She is still living hand-to-mouth and has to constantly avoid the authorities who keep tabs on her. Her brother is a constructed bot in the shape of a monkey. Bador (formerly Danil) has a lot of hopes and plans. Much more than Abu from that cartoon does. Even in a world where bots are common members of society, he does not have what he desperately craves, and that is respect. Oh, and also complete and free rights for bots like himself. He is more than he appears, however, as early on he gets mixed up in a tournament fight between two large Pacific Rim-style bots and is not the hopeless combatant you might expect. Not by a long way.

And of course the Jinn. This is a novel where a lot of technology is indistinguish-

able from magic, but even so, the Jinn works by means that are mysterious to everyone. It's a powerful AI, and an alien one at at. It has strict and familiar rules (3 "wishes") that can be potentially abused by clever wording. It's not so much a character as a nearly literal *deus ex machina*.

But if unlike the movie the Jinn is not a character, there is an additional one, and one right in front of the reader. The narrator of this story. One of the themes I've explored in my reviews, learned intently from the 4th Street Fantasy convention, is that point of view solves everything. The choice of POV is important, crucial, and tells as much about the story as anything else. That simple choice (or choices if you go multiple) in who you have to tell your story shapes your novel in intriguing and important ways.

So who is the narrator of this story? It's not Lina or her brother, or even their mother who has big plans for the Jinn and its power. It's not the Jinn, the Jinn is not a character here as it is in the aforementioned movie. The Not-Prince, (our Princess Jasmine analogue) is not the narrator, either. Instead, the narrator is an entity of some kind found at the beginning by Lina and her brother. This entity says it's a "story-bot" but it doesn't truly explain at first what that means (and so we the reader have to figure it out.

The Story-Bot, Moku, as point of view means we get externality on both the siblings and the action in general and provides us with a "two-shot" sort of look at Shantiport and its denizens, and life.

However, this is an entity that they don't understand, and as things progress and secrets are revealed, Moku themselves aren't quite what they appear, or even think that they are.

The setting is rich and interesting. Right from the first chapter, we get a view of a complex and complicated far future city that is literally crumbling and sinking, but is in the end, still home. It's a city of power and poverty, of oppression and opportunity. A city where crime lords control swaths of the city and put on fighting tournaments, where tourists from afar come to marvel at the ruins and history of a city that has lasted thousands of years and cycles of history, and where there are ancient secrets and technologies buried in the muck. Basu's writing is immersive, evocative, sensory and it put me as a reader right into Shanti-port. It's a place I would love to visit and photograph...but make no mistake, I'd always have to watch my back.

Even beyond the main characters, Basu peoples this world with a fascinating gallery of characters large and small. While character development and arcs are limited to the main characters, even small roles, like the bot General Nagpoe. Oh, and Tanai. Tanai is a mystery character, a space hero who is powerful, dangerous and has an agenda of his own. Struggles over directing him, neutralizing him, or getting him

on side are an important side plot in the novel.

But even more than the interesting characters and setting is the prevailing theme of the novel, a theme that overawed in my mind the other strong virtue And that theme is power.

So, what can one do with "wishes" when dealing with a powerful alien techno-djinn at one's command? There is a lot of debate between the characters as to what to do with such power, and how to keep such power out of the hands of those who would abuse it. There is a lot of matter thinking about the consequences of "Wishes" and the limits of unbridled and sudden change. Shantiport is a tower slowly decaying and sinking, and even an alien techno-djinn cannot solve all of its problems without what might be very harsh consequences for a lot of people. And then there are the questions of what to use the "wishes" for--personal or social reasons.

As Lina says:

"People really show you who they are when they think you serve them, and they have power over you."

These questions of power, above and beyond the plot and action beats, are what really drive the novel. The core of this story at the end is, for me, about power: What do you do to get it, keep it and what do you do with it? Basu gives us no easy answers and while the main protagonists go well by the experience, there is in the end no "happily ever after". The world, and what they do and what happens is very much a work in progress.

The contemporary novel that *The Jinn-Bot of Shantiport* reminds me of, on a couple of axes, is *The Archive Undying* by Emma Mieko Candon. Again, far future setting in a city that has seen much better days. Again, the technology as nearly magic. Again, artificial intelligences, and their rights, powers, prerequisites, and goals as strong actors in the narrative. Again, dangerous quests mixed with a street-level concern for the citizens of the city-state. The other work both works are in dialogue with is Saad Houssain's *The Gurkha and the Lord of Tuesday*, which again has AIs, magic, technology and a far future setting. Both *Archive* and this novel have huge bots thundering around the landscape. The Kathmandu of *The Gurkha* and Shanti-port are very much panopticons by the authorities and trying to avoid that notice is plot-relevant and important. And all three have a mythic resonance. *Archive* has AIs as Gods. *Gurkha* has a Djinn King. This novel has mysterious alien Techno-djinn, a story structure based on the *Arabian Nights* and like the other two, puts that blend of science and magic (or indistinguishable from magic science) on high and comes up with a very spicy and tangy result.

## The Math

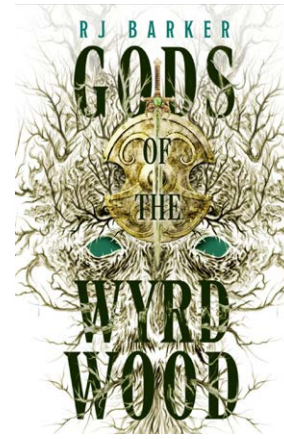
Highlights: Strong retelling of Aladdin, techno magic worldbuilding melds wonderfully with setting, excellent ponderings of the costs of power and change

Nerd Coefficient: 9/10

## Book Review: Gods of the Wyrddwood, by RJ Barker

Clara Cohen

### A weak execution of a perfectly adequate idea



RJ Barker has a thing for ineffable, dangerous natural environments. In his first trilogy, *The Wounded Kingdom*, the setting—the Tired Lands—is blighted by magic, which has stolen life from the land and left a blasted waste in its wake. In his second trilogy, *The Tide Child*, he invents a deliciously toxic nautical world, where the land hides horrifying perils, while ships built from the very bones of massive sea beasts poison the sailors who crew them. In his most recent novel, the first book of his newest trilogy, he has decided to take a different approach. In *Gods of the Wyrddwood*, Barker has created a vibrant, magical forest, featuring incomprehensibly (and, to be honest, incoherently—more on that later) vast trees, inhabited by an excellent array of creatures. Yet this time, these creatures are not malevolent. They can be deadly, yes, but there is a difference between danger and malice. This world is constructed of a web of magical connections; if you respect the web, you can live in harmony with it. If you blunder through it in ignorance of all but your own goals, you're in for a rough (and shortened) life. The ecology of the titular Wyrddwood shows all of Barker's characteristic inventiveness in worldbuilding, and is the best part of this book.

Outside the forest, all is not well with the world. The seasons have been set askew, replacing the warmth of summer with an unforgiving coldness; toxic bluevein poisons the fields at the edge of the forest; and the wide variety of small religions, each dedicated to one of the previously recognized infinity of gods, have been brutally suppressed in favor of the one *Tarl-an-Gig*. This would-be monodeity is served by priests, the *Rai*, whose powers come from a semi-sentient entity—a cowl—that endows them with strength, longevity, and magical powers by feeding on the life force around them. Unsurprisingly, there's a certain degree of human sacrifice that goes along with such a governmental system, which is not ideal. Surprisingly, there doesn't seem to be much murmuring or popular uprising. People seem pretty happy to go along with their new overlords.

In this world we have two plot threads. The first centers on Cahan, an exile who was bought up in one of the mini-priesthoods and endowed with a cowl of his own. He lost everything, though, when *Tarl-an-Gig* took over, and now he lives on

the edge of the wood, in an uneasy alliance with the neighboring town of Harn. The second thread centers on Venn, the child of Kivrin, the secular leader of the main city of Harnspire. Venn is a trion—a third gender in this world, using ‘they’ pronouns—and of particular interest because there is a prophecy concerning what will happen when a trion takes a cowl. The problem is that the process of becoming encowled is not always successful, and failure entails an unpleasant death full of screaming. Nevertheless, the benefits of fulfilling the prophecy are so enticing that Venn’s mother, in an act of extraordinary heartlessness, has been kidnapping and forcing every trion in her power—including Venn—to try to take a cowl. Cahan’s and Venn’s plot threads intersect, and what follows quickly organizes itself into a fairly standard process of self-discovery, family-finding, and conflict between the evil overlords and the virtuous nature-respecters, with the fate of the world at stake.

The problem, unfortunately, is that none of these elements are done particularly well at any level of the narrative. At the broad level, structurally, the pacing feels choppy and uncertain. Cahan’s story begins in at least three separate places, where an interaction between him and the local village leader forces him to undertake tasks that he doesn’t particularly want to do. Each task does set the scene for later developments, but they don’t lead naturally into one another. In between them, Cahan returns to his farm and resets, returns to the status quo, as if the previous events had not happened. It feels as if Barker came up with several perfectly serviceable inciting incidents, but when he couldn’t decide between them to figure out how to get his book started, he ended up cramming them all in.

Kivrin is initially set up as an antagonist of sorts, but she keeps getting outflanked by the Rai leadership, and because she does love Venn (despite setting them up for an agonizing death), she waffles and has doubts about pursuing her antagonistic plot points. And then Barker decides to tack onto her a history of domestic violence, which serves absolutely no purpose that I can figure out, as it is revealed far too late to illuminate anything about her actions or motivations. If I had to guess, I’d say that Barker is trying to rehabilitate her character by making her sympathetic when she and the Rai stop seeing eye to eye. ‘See? She’s a victim too!’ Except she’s not a victim of the Rai; her traumatic past is entirely unrelated to the actions she’s undertaking on her own initiative. It’s as if Barker can’t quite envision a world in which there might be three factions, all mutually opposed, so the instant one party stops aligning with the baddies, they must be forced into being a goodie, however clumsily.

One level down, at the level of description, we have the massive, enormous, mind-bendingly huge cloudtrees, so wide at the base that it takes most of a morning to walk past one of them. Their staggering size is repeatedly emphasized — Barker has definitely heard the phrase ‘sense of wonder’ and decided to run with

it— but the details about the scale simply don’t work.

Bear with me here. I’m going to get into Higher Mathematics. Actually, quite a lot of the rest of this review is going to involve math, both with respect to tree biology and then moving on to grammatical complaints as well. It may tax the patience of the most forbearing reader, when really the point I want to make is that there were a lot of irritating things about the description and writing style of this book that badly interfered with my enjoyment of the plot. If you don’t want to slog through it all, that’s fine. Skip to the nice tree picture down below.

Still with me? Great! Let’s go. Suppose that ‘most of a morning’ is, oh, three hours. At a relatively sedate pace of 2 mph, that makes a typical cloudtree six miles in diameter. It’s made perfectly clear that the branches are to scale with the rest of the tree, so I don’t see how cloudtrees can possibly grow anywhere near each other. Think about any forest you’ve been in: Even in the densest copse, the trees are typically a few tree-diameters apart from each other, aren’t they? They need to leave room for the branches. So, extrapolating to our six-mile wide tree, what we have is less a ‘wood’ and more a situation where you need a full day to walk from the start of one tree to the start of the next.

Now let’s do a little bit more mathematics. Trees’ height-diameter ratios tend to be measured in meters/centimeters—i.e., it’s common for the the height to be on the order of 100 times the diameter. In what follows, I’m going to keep the units constant, for clarity. So at a very conservative ratio of just 10:1, that means a typical cloudtree with a diameter of six miles is 60 miles tall. Sixty miles! Forget clouds—at sixty miles, the top of the tree is poking up at the Karman line, one rough indicator for the boundary between atmosphere and space. An alternative boundary, the top of the ionosphere, occurs at 600 miles of altitude, still well within the reach of cloudtrees if they have a height-to-diameter ratio of a perfectly typical 100:1. This is higher than auroras and satellites.

On its own, this is not a problem: magical giant forest trees can be as high as they like. The problem is that, when a tree falls in this book, it’s treated as a major economic event, a once-in-a-generation opportunity to harvest the wood, and all sorts of politicking about whether and who should be notified when evidence of a treefall is discovered. But let’s consider the volume of such a massive thing. Since trees taper at the top, we can use the volume of a cone as a rough approximation:  $\pi r^2 h / 3$ . Popping in three miles for  $r$  (half the diameter) and our conservative sixty miles for  $h$ , we’re left with 565 cubic miles. That is over twice the size of Deimos, the smaller of Mars’s moons. When something this big crashes to earth, we’re not going to be worrying about the economic and political implications of spreading the news to people in the town a few days away. If we survive the shock wave, we’re going to be more concerned with picking our way through the blasted wasteland

left over after an extinction-level event.

I get that the trees are supposed to be big. But I think Barker over-egged the pudding here.

Next, I'd like to pick nits with the sentence-level writing. And, because I can sense the hackles rising and the knives being sharpened, let me hasten to preface my criticism with this: Of course an author should use language freely and expressively to get their point across. Dialect, emotion, pacing, or any of a thousand reasons might lead an author to disregard conventions of writing in favor of narrative effect.

And yet. Sometimes, narrative effects can be overused. Not everything. Must be... Portentous. And Meaningful. And in this case, I'm left wondering: did fully punctuated clauses ever do something to Barker? Did they hurt him? Why does he flee from them, into the welcoming arms of sentence fragments and comma splices?

For example: Here we have early-Scrooge-like stinginess with main verbs, combined with a late-Scrooge-like profligacy with periods, in a pretty characteristic sequence of fragments:

A light.

A small fire beneath the bridge.

Growing.

Billowing outwards, flames following the pit around, igniting the chemicals from the tanners' pits. The crack of sap jars burning in the heat. The force of the exploding bottles throwing the makeshift bridge into the air, spilling soldier into the fire below to be impaled as they burned. Screams of fury replaced by screams of pain. Cahan raised his arm in front of his face. Fire hot on his skin. The Rai army backing away from the furious heat.

A exultation within him. Cowl writhing beneath his skin... (loc. 8605)

Because I don't want my reviews to become sidetracked further into Higher Mathematics, I'll skip over the bit where I invite the reader to calculate the fragment:sentence ratio in this excerpt, and simply jump to the end: it's 12:1. In that sequence I've just quoted, there are 12 periods, and only one full sentence (Cahan raised his arm in front of his face). Yes, in the heat of battle these sorts of stylistic decisions can be used effectively, but I can't emphasize enough that this is everywhere. Battle, introspection, dialogue, strolling through the woods—if there's a page, I can guarantee that Barker put a sentence fragment—or twelve—on it. Again. Over-egging the pudding.

Now, where does he get all these eggs to throw into his pudding of stylistic effect?

Where did all these periods come from? Well, given Barker's propensity to comma splices, I'd argue that they were donated from bits like this:

She sat back, there were still smears of white clay she wore during the day on her skin, it made her face look odd, strangely shaped. (loc. 7739)

Again, I'm not going to say authors should never use comma splices. But I will go out on a limb and suggest that when they use comma splices like Barker does, they give the impression that the writer is not intentionally breaking a rule for stylistic effect as much as blithely walking past it without realizing it's there.

And then there's the dialogue. Oh, dear god, the dialogue. Stylistic effect is one thing, but the dialogue becomes downright obfuscatory. I challenge you, dear reader, to figure out who is saying what in an exchange like this, between Rai Galderin (he/him), who is reporting back on an expedition to Venn's mother Kivrin (she/her):

'The trion,' whispered Rai Galderin as he closed with her, 'will not talk about what happened, and what they do say is not the truth.' She nodded. 'Venn walked out of the forest unharmed, while Vanhu, Kyik, and Sorha died. It seems, unlikely.'

'The false Cowl-Rai?' Galderin glanced back at the trion standing behind them, not looking at her. 'Venn says they were badly hurt and they escaped, that he is probably dead. I left a Hetton behind to find the truth of it.'

'You do not believe them?' Galderin's face creased into something dark, something cruel.

'The details, I think they are true. But they do not tell everything.' Galderin scratched his cheek. 'I can find out, if you wish.' She ignored that, instead stared at her child.

As far as I can tell, the attributions should be something like this, with Galderin in red, and Kivrin in blue:

'**The trion,**' whispered Rai Galderin as he closed with her, '**will not talk about what happened, and what they do say is not the truth.**' She nodded. '**Venn walked out of the forest unharmed, while Vanhu, Kyik, and Sorha died. It seems, unlikely.**'

'**The false Cowl-Rai?**' Galderin glanced back at the trion standing behind them, not looking at her. '**Venn says they were badly hurt and they escaped, that he is probably dead. I left a Hetton behind to find the truth of it.**'

'**You do not believe them?**' Galderin's face creased into something dark, something cruel.

'**The details, I think they are true. But they do not tell everything.**' Galderin scratched his cheek. '**I can find out, if you wish.**' She ignored that, instead stared at her child.

Do you see how confusing this is? Do you see how after the speeches that I think

must belong to Kivrin, we have a Galderin-action in exactly the place where a speech tag would go? And after Galderin's final utterance, we have an action by Kivrin? This is everywhere in the book: a character who speaks on the next paragraph does an action immediately following the previous speaker's words. Dialogue is perpetually being misattributed—except when it's done the expected way, so I can't even learn a different convention of speech-attribution, because it's so inconsistent. Usually I can figure out from context who is saying what, but it's a constant



cognitive load that makes the writing opaque, rather than transparent. Say what you like for narrative and stylistic freedom, but when the writing is interfering with the story, you've got a problem.

Welcome back! I'm bringing you back here because I want everyone to see my final point about the trions. Did you notice how Venn is repeatedly referred to as 'the trion' in the passage quoted above? (Maybe not, if you took the shortcut here. No worries. Venn is repeatedly referred to as 'the trion.' There—now you're caught up.) Barker loves to use his epithets—'the monk,' 'the forester,' 'the weaver,' 'the leoric' [leader]. This is fine. Not my favorite stylistic choice, but fine. But the thing about 'the trion' is that, in-world, it is the equivalent of 'the man' or 'the woman.' It is not an occupation or a position in society; it is a gender. And for all that Barker loves epithets, he doesn't use 'the man' or 'the woman' nearly as often as he uses 'the trion.' For that matter, he doesn't even use 'the weaver' or 'the monk' as often as he uses 'the trion' (Yes, I counted: Between locations 7299 and 8513 in the Kindle version, we have 33 uses of 'the trion' and only 28 uses of every other epithet combined, including things like 'the man' for a character who does not have any other name provided.)

In other words, Venn is repeatedly, perpetually, unendingly referred to solely with respect to their gender—exactly like those incredibly sexist narratives from the 1960s that referred to female characters only as 'the girl' even when they did bother to give her a name. What's more, Venn's entire existence in this story actually is predicated on their gender, because they're the only trion who's managed to take a cowl without dying (sort of). Venn's role in this story is to be a trion. And that's a

problem: Just because you've introduced non-binary genders in your books doesn't mean you've fixed sexism.

I wanted to like this book so much more than I did. Barker's Tide Child trilogy was genuinely brilliant and surprising, and I was so excited when I saw that he had a new book out. It will be hard to come back from this level of disappointment.

### Highlights

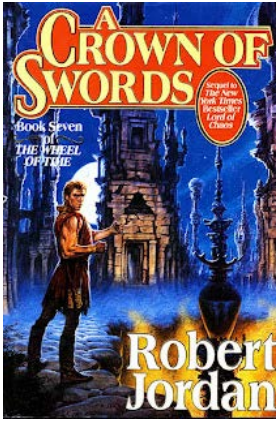
Nerd coefficient: 5/10, problematic, but has redeeming qualities

- Great magical creatures and forest ecology
- Upsettingly large trees
- Distressing punctuation and writing mechanics
- Modernized sexism applied to non-binary genders



## The Wheel of Time Re-Read: A Crown of Swords

Joe Sherry



Welcome back, dear readers, to The Wheel of Time Reread. Today we're going to talk about A Crown of Swords, the seventh book in the series.

We've been on a \*journey\* thus far, but we're here at the midpoint of the series (not counting New Spring as part of the main series, though we may well include it in the Re-read, either at the end or in publication order after Crossroads of Twilight) and it's been a wonderful journey. My memory of A Crown of Swords is that this novel is square up in the midst of the "not much happens" part of the series (beginning with the previous novel, Lord of Chaos) - though this re-read will tell me

if that's actually the case.

In order to figure that out, though, I need to actually start the conversation and work my way through the book. Along the way there will be spoilers. It's all spoilers at this point. For everything.

One thing I've noticed reading A Crown of Swords is that Robert Jordan's prologues are basically the "Cold Opens" from television shows. Some of the earliest prologues would give a significant scene from a part of that story that we would not typically get as part of the narrative, but now it's "let's just spend more time in Elaida's head" - which is effective and obviously comparing anything to the "Dragonmount" or even the one with Bors in The Great Hunt is a loser's game, but it does lessen the "specialness" of the prologue, for lack of a better term.

A Crown of Swords offers the fallout from Dumai's Wells, which is happily not nearly as long as the upcoming novel length fallout of the climactic event of Winter's Heart - which needed to happen, but there is certainly a bit of lessened impact because we've already seen Dumai's Wells and now we're recapping it from the perspectives of other characters. The end result, though, is Aes Sedai are prisoners and others have sworn loyalty to Rand and are furious and confused about it because they certainly didn't plan to do so but were ta'verened into the whole thing (not to mention Mazrim Taim's iconic "Kneel and swear to the Lord Dragon, or you will be knelt" - which is from the end of Lord of Chaos but plays out here).

The real fallout from Lord of Chaos and Dumai's Wells is that Rand is so intensely focused on the need to be "harder" and unbending to face what's coming and to never trust again. It's about as pleasant to read as it sounds, which is why I also

really appreciate every time the novel steps away from Rand. It's kind of fascinating how a series can be so successful for me when everything I like about it is NOT the protagonist. That owes a lot to the story structure because there really isn't a single main character. This is all ultimately about Rand and being the Dragon and facing the Dark One and the Last Battle and Using Capital Letters but the only way any of that occurs is because of everyone else. It really takes a village to save the world. Thank you, Emond's Field.

But, to return to Rand's quest to become an unbending stone, let's talk about Cadsuane.

Cadsuane! I'm fairly certain that I really didn't like this character when she was first introduced, but now all I can do is fantasy-cast Shohreh Aghdashloo as Cadsuane because she would be absolutely fantastic if the show gets deep enough to introduce Cadsuane. That's how I read the character now and my brain rejects any interpretation to the contrary. To the book character, though, we have one of the most powerful Aes Sedai who will not settle down into strictly political power because she believes in the work she's doing out in the world. She's a bit of an analogue to Moiraine without the interpersonal baggage that Moiraine has with Rand, and that might have been another issue I had with the character back in 1996 when this was first published.

Now - I dig how she swoops in with very little build and bullies herself into such a prominent role. To compare to the show one last time, the show has at least introduced her name multiple times so that if she appears they've been seeding her for a future appearance. This obviously has nothing to do with the book, where we're blindsided by Cadsuane's appearance / introduction.

She's brash (but not brassy) and is absolutely in control of any moment she places herself in. I almost said "any moment she finds herself in", but Cadsuane doesn't find herself in particular moments, she commands and controls those moments. She is a legend of an Aes Sedai, long rumored to be retired, if not dead, longer lived than most Aes Sedai, and up until the time of the series the most powerful chan- neler in perhaps a thousand years.

Cadsuane straight up forces herself into Rand's orbit with a stated goal to teach him to remember laughter and tears. She knows what's up and what is needed and even though she's a terrible bully she doesn't have time for anyone's shit.

To further that, there is Min's vision:

It's Cadsuane. She is going to teach you something, you and the Asha'man. All the Asha'man, I mean. It's something you have to learn, but I don't know what it is, except that none of you will like learning it from her. You aren't going to like it at all.

The funny thing is that Cadsuane is not as large of a part of A Crown of Swords as the time I have spent on the character would suggest. She looms large.

In things that have nothing to do with Cadsuane, the Mat and Tylin “relationship” begins, and it’s uncomfortable. It’s played for humor (and I think I enjoyed it when I was younger) but that’s fully gender based. If this was flipped and Mat (or some king) was pushing his attention on a younger woman it would correctly be viewed as assault. Especially since we mostly see these scenes from Mat’s perspective and he’s uncomfortable with what’s happening.

I really enjoy Elayne coming more into her own as an Aes Sedai - this is different from Egwene’s journey because Elayne was trained into leadership and raised with an expectation of authority, but learning authority is different than using it and being accepted into it. So when Elayne finally uses her command voice and talks down the Aes Sedai in Ebou Dar and controls the expedition - it plays really well - which while leading directly towards The Bowl of Winds, it’s the gathering of the Kin, cast out and never made it wilders and those not permitted to train as Aes Sedai - with dwindled numbers, there are as many Kin as there are full Aes Sedai out in the world.

Reading The Wheel of Time is an experience of encountering fantastic moments, and it’s always a question of how much you enjoy the journey. Elayne being accepted as an Aes Sedai and bringing the Kin into the fold of the White Tower (albeit the rebel White Tower with the assumption that Egwene and Salidar will prevail) is a journey that I absolutely enjoy. Also, the way that Elayne and Nynaeve discover the Kin when it’s been an otherwise open secret for The White Tower is significant - and it’s probably as significant of a future change for the Aes Sedai as anything that happens in this series (I mean, besides actually winning The Last Battle).

A Crown of Swords is also the book where Nynaeve finally breaks her block that prevented her from channeling unless she was angry and it’s given sufficient time to breathe. Nynaeve is almost killed, and how she was about to drown is what settled her to enough peace that she could just focus and get to work on channeling and then Lan is there - finally - and she can freely channel now and has no chill and pretty much married him on the spot and it’s all a whirlwind but the sequence is what the character needed.

I do also appreciate the moments of Forsaken plotting amongst themselves, though it’s always frustrating when a character leans in to tell someone else their grand plot, and Robert Jordan cuts away from that revelation. The most we get is something like “let the Lord of Chaos rule”. Thanks, Mr. Jordan. Thanks.

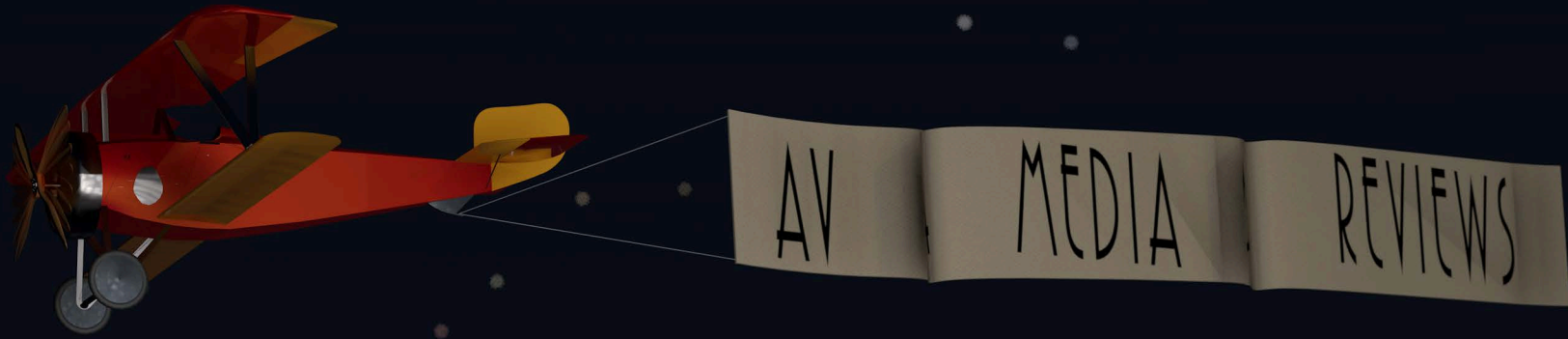
It’s all incredibly vague, but those glimpses are still appreciated. Plus, we have the path and punishment of Moghedien after her escape from Salidar (with help of

Halima / Aran’gar). Additional chances are given by the Dark, but there is a significant cost and consequence for those failures.

I’ve also ignored, to this point, the arc of Egwene working to solidify her authority as Amyrlin. I have thoughts about how this might be introduced as a concept in the show, but really what’s happening is a mirroring of Rand’s plotline with individual Aes Sedai swearing an oath of loyalty to her as Amyrlin.

On this re-read, some ten years after I last read any Wheel of Time, I’m enjoying the experience - especially on the stretches when it corresponds with watching the tv show. The combination of reading the books while watching the show really has me fired up about Wheel of Time.

Next up, The Path of Daggers, in which things happen (probably). Plus: Tedious kidnappings, reclaiming a throne, weather magic, armies clash, betrayals, oaths are given.



*Section Two*

## Section II: AV Media Reviews

### Asteroid City Lays Bare the Scaffolding of Narration

Arturo Serrano

**It's an outstanding magic trick to expose the inherent insubstantiality of storytelling by means of such a solid, heavy-hitting story**



Onto this Earth has landed an otherworldly fabulation: a film by Wes Anderson, which tells a [fictional] documentary filmed as monologue, which reenacts [allegedly real] events in the life of a writer, who writes a play with a troubled production, which narrates a short quarantine in a tiny town in the US southwestern desert, where an actress rehearses her upcoming movie. That's at least five layers of stories within stories. Asteroid City not only boasts Anderson's signature punctiliousness in set design, shot composition and character blocking, but also extends that deliberate artificiality beyond the look of the screen, reshaping its authorial relation from a single straight line to a segmented chain of railwagons, one leading to the next, serving as yet another form of expression of Anderson's artistic and personal fascination with trains.

In this Cold War-set multi-story, ironically structured as an Old West satirical paean to American achievements that is contained inside a set of Russian dolls, visitors to the town of Asteroid City, whose children are competing in a hilariously advanced science fair, are suddenly forced to stay at their motel for several days, overseen by the army, because the prehistoric meteorite that is the town's only tourist attraction has been stolen by aliens. This plot by itself is fertile ground for drama, and the film more than delivers on that front. However, in a reverse manner compared to a movie made by literally any other director (except for maybe Christopher Nolan), where the formal choices are a vehicle to deliver the message contained in the story, in Asteroid City the story is a vehicle to deliver the message

contained in the form. Marshall McLuhan would approve.

The multi-story device that Anderson had already used in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* is here blown up to the stratosphere: the theater play is shown to us as a movie, set in a desert that extends to the far horizon, shot from several angles (always straight angles, mind you), with digital visual effects, with titles superimposed—you know, what any movie does. But there's the catch: that's the story that is supposed to be a play, but you experience it the way its supposed audience in the theater never could. You're not watching the play; you're watching what the play represents. For extra mind-blown-ness, at one point the perspective is reversed and we see the backstage as one of the actors leaves the play. And for a brief second, in a shot worthy of *Las Meninas*, we get a glimpse of the audience. We see us. Not literally us, because the function of images on the screen isn't being, but representing; that's what makes the trick possible. The best stories are those about stories, and Asteroid City achieves a Sierpiński level of structural beauty in the way it folds upon itself. Even the dialogues are self-referential, with frequent use of easily missable constructions such as "He said that he said," "I believe that I think," "I wonder if I wish."

Every level of the production is influenced by this self-folding. In your typical Anderson shot, a main event happens in the foreground while equally important events are simultaneously happening at one or two degrees of separation in the background. The difficulty of reading an Anderson movie lies in the fact that each shot has a main focus, but you have to be fully aware of the entire screen all the time. Asteroid City takes the basic design of that multilayered space (three dimensions flattened into two) and uses it to create a multilayered plot (parallel lines converging into one). An actress rehearses her movie in a motel room; the play where she exists is shown to us as a movie; its author's life is shown to us as a play; and all those layers of fiction are shown to us as a documentary (that is, the genre of truth), but the documentary itself exists inside Anderson's scripted movie (the genre of lies). For super extra mind-blown-ness, the three acts signaled by the title cards inside the play-shown-as-movie contain some scenes of the upper levels, as if the documentary were part of the play that is mentioned in the documentary. This referential loop ends up eating itself when the layers start blurring together and the most significant emotional beat is revealed to take place offscreen, in a deleted scene, set in a dream, performed by an actress who was removed from the play. The secrets that explain the story rest on a moment that doubly doesn't exist, that its audience will never know.

In a tale that contains a [tale that contains a [tale that contains a [tale that contains a [tale]]]], where does the innermost level lie? In English, folk tales start with "Once upon a time..." In Tamil, it's "Having been said and said and said..." In Arabic, it's "There was and there was not..." The complex relationship between

recursively referenced layers of reality and unreality reaches a hard limit when one considers that, although some characters in the play-shown-as-movie seem aware of the audience, none of them show any awareness that they're in a larger movie, the one made by Anderson. In the first level, the narrator of the documentary talks to the camera, but he's addressing an imagined audience, not us. For mega super extra mind-blown-ness, Asteroid City ends where the play ends, but we don't return to the upper layers to see how they end. For all we know, they're still happening. (Another possible explanation, which closes the referential loop, is that we occupy the same layer of the play, and the upper layers contain us.)

So let's look more closely at that play. It contains several signifiers of quintessential Americana: cowboys, UFOs, absurd military guys, the Space Race, a roadside diner, vending machines, summer flings, overconfident teenagers, oblivious parents. This microcosm of US life is bordered on one side by a perpetual police car chase and on the other side by perpetual nuclear weapon tests. The script barely acknowledges them. Small and big violence are so commonplace that they've become part of the landscape, while the army looks with greed upon the children's fantastical futuristic inventions that prove completely useless to defend one coconut-sized rock. One marvels that the screen doesn't melt with how caustic the sarcasm is here.

Wes Anderson's distinctive style has recently been repurposed for hundreds of insultingly superficial, horrific, lifeless imitations. Asteroid City should come as a relief for artists worried that an algorithm may one day do their job. A machine that scoops up image files and regurgitates their rearranged bits can't express the intimate experience of solitude, regret, self-doubt, and compassion that you get from Asteroid City, nor can it design the web of narrative threads that support the plot, nor can it think of drawing from the influences and the context that complete the movie's meaning. Anderson is in every sense a human being and in every sense an artist if either has ever existed in Hollywood.

Nerd Coefficient: 10/10

## What's in an Adaptation? A Sapkowski Fanatic Watches Netflix's The Witcher

The G



Literature is magical because, at some point, you read a book and grow convinced that it contains answers to all the mysteries of creation. I have felt this way several times in my life, particularly with esoteric novels. Many of my absolute favorite books, from Roberto Bolaño's fragmented mystery 2666 to William Gibson's cyberpunk classic Neuromancer, read almost like scriptures - arcane texts that require hermeneutics of interpretation.

Indeed, it is not always clear what these books are about; at times they seem to be more vibes than plot, with hints of deep lore sprinkled like fairy dust across their pages. Neuromancer, for example, is a book I've read at least five times over the course of my adult life - and every experience has felt unique. The current rise of AI chatbots has even recontextualized this book once again, leading me to consider a sixth go around.

Of all the fantasy series I have read (and there are many), none have given me that quasi-religious experience quite like Andrzej Sapkowski's Witcher cycle.\* The characters are tremendously well articulated: complex, raw and human. The books are, I would argue, part of the dark turn in fantasy. But they are not just dark, they are also warm and romantic; they do not focus just on pain and suffering, but also on loyalty, friendship and what it truly means to love.

The series is not, however, an easy read. The plot is more elliptical than linear, with a narrative focus on small groups of characters rather than big set-piece moments

of great import - which happen offstage and are more referred to than described. The world-building is complex, but there is virtually no exposition to aid the uninitiated; like Gibson's science fiction, it is all showing and zero telling. Character motivations, meanwhile, can be opaque in the moment, only to be revealed piecemeal through oblique reference. For all these reasons, I can see how the series could be frustrating to someone expecting Martin, Sanderson or Hobb. But for someone like me, who craves a literary puzzle, the Witcher books are pure magic.

\*[For those who don't mind spoilers, you can find more detailed, book-by-book analysis on *The Last Wish*, *Blood of Elves*, *Time of Contempt*, *Baptism of Fire*, *The Tower of Swallows* and *The Lady of the Lake*. But warning: these reviews will contain spoilers for the book and TV series.]

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I actually first discovered the Witcherverse through other media - specifically, through CD Projekt Red's *Witcher 2: Assassin of Kings*. The world and characters were so captivating to me that I jumped online to find out more about the book series. I learned that Sapkowski's books were a sensation in Eastern Europe and Latin America, somewhat akin in popularity and influence to George R. R. Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* series, which was (rightly) viewed as a breakout fantasy series when first published in the 1990s. I also learned that the *Witcher* books were being translated and published in English, so of course I had to read them.

The games and books do not tell the same story; rather, the games pick up the story at the end of the book series. And as good and likable as the games are, the books to me are just on another level. What's interesting, though, is that I didn't stop liking the games after reading the books. If anything, my enthusiasm for the games grew. This is progress for someone who often gets hung up on changes made to revered media (e.g. some of the creative license taken for the *Game of Thrones* TV series).

Really, the games feel like spiritual companions to the books. They tell a different story, but the characters and world they inhabit feel true to their literary roots. Sapkowski himself isn't a big fan of the games, in part due to ambivalence toward games as a storytelling medium and in part due to licensing disputes with CD Projekt Red (which now appear to have been resolved). But what strikes me about the games is how loyal they feel to the world Sapkowski created. They are loving tributes to their source material.

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Enter Netflix, which in 2017 announced a new TV adaptation in development. The streaming service hoped to capitalize on both *Game of Thrones* mania and the

popularity of the Witcherverse in other media, with a series launch scheduled to coincide with the end of HBO's mega hit. It was announced that the series would adapt the books rather than the games and would star known nerd Henry Cavill as the eponymous Witcher.

The first season had the unenviable task of adapting *The Last Wish*, a short story collection that sets the stage for the cycle proper, which begins in *Blood of Elves*. The showrunners could have just adapted the stories in episodic format, but they wanted to reel people in the way only serialized programs can. The show also had to grapple with the fact that Witcherverse lore is so deep, complicated and - as I mentioned earlier - shown piecemeal rather than told straightforwardly. Their solution was a nonlinear narrative that combines episodic stories with backstories that unfold across different dimensions of time. Yennefer's story, for example, is told across a 70-year period while Ciri's happens within 2 years.

The result, in my opinion, is a mixed bag. Overall I think the first season provides a solid introduction to the characters, world and general themes of the series - and I like some of the adjustments to character (e.g. fleshing out Yennefer's backstory). But I've never been sure whether it could truly capture the imagination of someone who never read the books or played the games. Nor how they would follow the world's complicated and often opaque politics. And on top of that, the pacing of season one can only be described as sluggish.

Since comparisons are inevitable, I'll note that this contrasts unfavorably with the first season of *Game of Thrones*, which does a superb job of telling you what's at stake (Westeros), who the main players are (the Starks, the Lannisters and the Targaryens) and why it matters (emerging threat to everyone from the White Walkers). It seeds these vital pieces of information within a compelling political mystery plot with parallel narratives of discovery north of the wall and on the continent of Essos. Finally, through a truly shocking plot twist (which readers of the books already knew was coming but TV neophytes did not), the show sets viewers up brilliantly for season 2.

With this in mind, I didn't exactly have high hopes for *The Witcher* season 2. *Blood of Elves* is an odd book - a good book, to be sure, but not the best in the series. As I noted in my review, it's the installment where Sapkowski's preference for micro over macro perspectives works least well. A lot of the action takes place at the stronghold of Kaer Morhen, where Ciri trains to become a witcher. There is a very long passage, brilliant in writing but difficult to translate to the screen, where sorceress Triss Merigold castigates the all-male witcher cadre for expecting Ciri to behave like a boy and undervaluing her femininity. We are introduced to Rience, who is one of the series' main antagonists, and get glimpses of the political machinations that propel the macro plot across the cycle. My concern going into season

2 of the TV series was that this would not make for compelling television, which requires even more “watercooler moments” than books. What if the show remained sluggish?

Boy was I wrong. Season 2 of *The Witcher* is fantastic. The pace picks up, as the story shifts from contained monster hunting and backstory exposition to the multi-pronged contest to capture and control Ciri, with Geralt and Yennefer desperately trying to keep her out of the hands of those who would manipulate her for their own ends.

The shape and structure of Sapkowski’s book series only really works in the medium of literature; in order to turn it into effective television, the showrunners had to make changes - opting to capture the tone and feel of the books while diverging from them in specific ways. In season 2, the plot is simpler, clearer and strikes a more even balance of micro and macro events than does *Blood of Elves*. Which is not to say that it is better than *Blood of Elves* - the opacity and nonlinearity, even in its least compelling installment, has always struck me as a feature rather than a bug. But the streamlined narrative does work better as television.

Season 3, half of which is available as of writing (with the second half dropping worldwide on July 27), wraps up events from *Blood of Elves* and shifts to the second novel in the cycle proper, *Time of Contempt*. In contrast to *Blood of Elves*, Sapkowski’s elliptical narratives and micro-focus work tremendously well in this book. In fact, *Time of Contempt* is one of two *Witcher* novels I scored as a 10/10, and is a supreme example of what can be accomplished within the fantasy genre. I even suggested that it “may be the best fantasy novel I have ever read.” - which it probably was, at the time (though now, having finished the series, I am inclined to think *The Lady of the Lake* is even better).

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Season 3 struggles a bit more with the source material than in season 2, perhaps because the roadmap to transitioning the story to television is less clear. But it is still quite good - and, knowing what comes next, I am very excited for part two. Having watched the preview trailer, it looks likely that the show will adapt the intensity and pure weirdness of *Time of Contempt*’s denouement. I don’t want to spoil anything, but since you can see them in the trailer, all I will say is this: unicorns. The unicorn sequence in *Time of Contempt* is batshit crazy, in the best possible way.

The show is supported by a superb cast of actors; besides Cavill, British actresses Anya Chalotra and Freya Allen shine as Yennefer and Ciri, and Eamon Farren is superb as the enigmatic Nilfgaardian agent Cahir Mawr Dyffryn aep Ceallach. Some of the smaller characters are also quite memorable - sorceress Sabrina Glevess-

sig, dwarven adventurer Yarpem Zigrin and magical detectives Codrigher and Fenn all make the most of limited screen time.

Notably, some characters from the book series have been altered past the point of recognition. Sometimes this works. Prince Radovid of Redania is far more interesting as King Vizimir’s perennially underestimated brother than he is as Vizimir’s young, stern son. Sorceress Fringilla Vigo is also transformed from a minor character in the early novels into to a major player with backstory, nuance and complexity. We similarly get a deeper look at elven Queen Francesca Findebair, who like Fringilla Vigo becomes a more important character later in the book series but isn’t really a major player in *Blood of Elves*. This exposition should make it easier for *Witcher* neophytes to understand the roles Fringilla Vigo and Francesca Findebair play as the cycle unfolds.

At other times, the changes work less well. Philippa Eilhart is one of the most intriguing characters in the books and games - a scheming puppet-master with the mercurial, predatory demeanor of her other form, the owl. The way she’s played in the show feels off to me, she is more sensual and almost feline. Not that there is anything wrong with that, and as always with these things, your mileage may vary - it’s just a deviation from the books and games that doesn’t really work for me.

There are also a lot of new characters, some of which work better than others. Gallatin the elven insurgent appears in season 3 to create conflict but doesn’t really have much of a role otherwise. Dara is another elven character who seems to exist more to move the plot along than anything else. But Istredd to me is a very strong addition to the story.

Now, to be fair, Istredd does appear in the short story “A Shard of Ice,” but he does not appear in the cycle proper. However, unlike, say, Stregobor, he is not the feature of the story nor does he have a major place in *Witcher* lore - rather, he is included in that story as a device that helps us delve deeper into Geralt and Yennefer’s relationship. As such, his portrayal in the show as an academic mage with a key role in unfolding the central conspiracy at the heart of the first two novels feels more original than just expanded.

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All of this is a lengthy way to say the TV adaptation has to date surprised me with its quality, its depth and its ability to know when to adhere to what has been established in the books and games and when to deviate from them.

With that in mind, I have some major concerns about how the series will wrap up. Let’s start with the obvious: for some baffling, unimaginably stupid reason, the show’s producers decided to let Henry Cavill go and replace him with Liam

Hemsworth. It's not that Hemsworth is a bad actor or would make for a bad Geralt; it's that Cavill has embodied the character as only someone with a true passion for the role can. Cavill is a known nerd who came into the role as a big fan of the games; since taking on the role, he has dived deep into the books and broader Witcherverse, to the point where cast and crew have called him the set's expert on series lore.

This may have been the reason for his dismissal. Cavill allegedly argued with the showrunners on deviations from the book series, whereas the showrunners would prefer not to stick too close to the books. Given my comments on the series above, you might think I'd take the showrunners' side here - but seasons 2 and 3 clearly show Cavill's influence. Without that, the deviations may become less authentic to fans of Sapkowski's writing.

The show may also suffer from the ongoing WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes (which we strongly support). The scripts for season 4 have apparently already been written, but the strike could impact necessary revisions. And does anyone, for a moment, think the studios might not just rush the product out to meet financial obligations, ready or not?

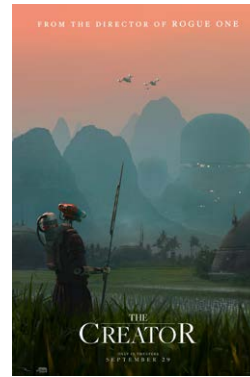
I have even greater concerns about how Netflix will handle the show's ending in season 5. After all, we've now seen countless examples of streaming channels chasing ratings by letting beloved series end miserably. Even worse is the new trend to cut costs by killing off projects that people love, no matter where we are in the storyline. Both would do a major disservice to what has been, up to now, a major success. I hope neither comes to fruition, but I do have serious concerns here.

Ultimately, though, we can only judge the series on what it's done to date - and it's hard for this Witcherverse fanatic not to see the adaptation as a glass more than half full. Sure, it's not the books - and it may not be the games either, but it is good. Very good. I hope that the show continues to live up to its promise.

## Film Review: *The Creator*

Alex Wallace

### Nice America you got there—shame about your Asia



I became intent on seeing *The Creator* as soon as I saw that it was from the man who directed *Rogue One*, my favorite piece of media Disney *Star Wars* has produced. It certainly looked intriguing; a near-future science fiction story with a good deal of action? I'm all for that. Unfortunately, the end result is somewhat uneven, but overall worth seeing.

Twenty minutes into the future, an automated system nukes Los Angeles, turning the United States government against all forms of artificial intelligence. By the time of the actual plot, the only places willing to openly host AI are various cells in the vaguely defined superstate 'New

Asia,' which a map seems to imply is a peculiar amalgam of Japan and the stretch of Southeast Asia from Myanmar to the Philippines. The action properly kicks off with US special operative Joshua Taylor (John David Washington) being sent on a raid against one of these AI cells, where he finds a robot child (Madeleine Yuna Voyles) eventually christened Alphie, who happens to know something he desperately wants. They then go on a wild goose chase all throughout New Asia to find what they both need, all the while pursued by the US government.

The best part of this film is the relationship between the two leads. They are both conflicted, on the run, and setting out to do something they had been told time and again not to do. They have a sort of teacher-student interaction where, as the best of these stories always have, the teacher learns as much as the student. They have to see both sides of American imperial power, both abroad and later domestically.

It is the portrayal of the US, a few decades in the future, where the worldbuilding in this film really shines. The Pentagon now carries a big stick that happens to float: NOMAD, as they call it, is a hulking behemoth in the sky, going all over the world to wreak havoc on rogue artificial intelligence (it has a suitably scary way of announcing its presence). It is the 'War on Terror' gone digital, the logical conclusion of drone warfare, the expansion of the 'frontier' to the digital realm as well as to an Asia that America has ravaged before. It's a futuristic, all-too-believable extrapolation into a future that Nikhil Pal Singh described in these terms:

Defending the launching of the global War on Terror, U.S. diplomatic historian John Gaddis gave scholarly imprimatur to the settler idiom: the borders of global civil society



were menaced by non-state actors in a manner similar to the “native Americans, pirates and other marauders” that once menaced the boundaries of an expanding U.S. nation-state. Foreign affairs writer Robert Kaplan concurred: ‘The War on Terrorism was really about taming the frontier,’ as he heard U.S. troops in Afghanistan and Iraq repeat the refrain, ‘Welcome to Injun Country.’

[...]

The history of the American frontier is one of mounting casualties and ambiguous boundaries, of lives and fortunes gained and lost. In the settler narrative, “collective security” never meant just the existential kind of safety, that is, situations where material survival and self-defense were mainly at stake. Freedom is essential to the equation, and freedom in this conception is built once again upon dreams of a blank slate—this time cheap, empty, exploitable lands and resources that must be cleared of any competing presence.

However, what pained me, as a Filipino-American on my mother’s side, was the frankly lazy portrayal of Asia. As previously described, the AI and their supporters are hiding in a superstate ‘New Asia,’ an unwieldy amalgam of disparate countries that were last unified, if one could call it that, when Japan rampaged across the region in World War II. The scenery looks Vietnamese, echoing many Vietnam War movies, but the urban areas are vaguer, filled with what appears to be Chinese writing (which could easily be Japanese). It’s a blatant hodgepodge which, to be blunt, made it seem like the filmmakers just didn’t care enough to set this in a real Asian country.

They could have easily done something like Paolo Bacigalupi’s novel *The Windup Girl*, unambiguously set in Thailand. I’ve read comments from Thai people saying that it’s clearly written by a Westerner, which is something I’m not sure can be avoided at all, but it at least *tried* to engage with the complexity of a real Asian country. This film didn’t. (Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Red Moon* may also be relevant here).

What results from this lushly developed America and a smorgasbord Asia is a film about American empire from an American (or Western—director Gareth Edwards is British) point of view. Many have observed that these wars have barely had any effect on the day-to-day lives of Americans on the whole (veterans, refugees, and their families excepted), and it is easy to mush all American wars into ‘Asia’ or ‘the Middle East’ stereotypes. That’s what this film does: it reduces several countries to cardboard cutouts into which to smash American special forces to kill, die, and steal. It commits the grievous sin of forgetting that the targets of American guns are people, too, with agency and beliefs and histories.

I wanted to like *The Creator* more than I did, and in many ways it is a fine movie. The action is exciting, the American characters get good development, and the future is believable technology-wise. It falls, however, in portraying American wars as solely American experiences, which is both its greatest failure and, inadvertently, its most potent element of commentary.

Highlights: great action, great futuristic aesthetic when it isn’t being orientalist

Nerd Coefficient: 6/10

## Film Review: Suzume

Ann Michelle Harris

### A universal coming of age story that resonates across cultures



Written and directed by Makoto Shinkai, *Suzume* is the journey movie we need right now. The trailer may evoke the idea of a romantic adventure, but *Suzume* is instead a compelling coming of age story of friendship and loss, echoing classics like *The Wizard of Oz*.

Suzume Iwato is a high school student, raised by her stressed aunt after the death of her mother many years ago. On her way to school one day, she meets Souta, a young man who asks if there is a door nearby. She directs him to the local ruins of an old resort area. Curious, Suzume heads to the area herself and finds a freestanding door upright in the waterlogged destruction. When she opens it, she can see into another dimension filled with stars. A cat statue staked into the ground catches her attention, then comes alive and flees after she picks it up. Once she gets to school, she sees a red, smoke-like creature rising from the ruins in the distance. No one else can see the phenomenon, but earthquake warnings shriek on all of her classmates' cell phones. Suzume races back to the ruins and finds an injured Souta desperately trying to close the door against the violently escaping red storm. By working together, the pair are able to close the portal. While Suzume bandages his arm at her home, Souta explains that the doors he seeks are portals that form in places of loss. The stormy red phenomenon is a "worm" that will cause catastrophically lethal earthquakes if let loose. Souta is a Closer, part of a secret society of people who monitor the portals to keep everyone safe. The strange cat from the ruins appears and turns Souta into a living version of a broken, child-sized chair in Suzume's room.

The escaped cat, Daijin, is one of two "keystones," objects keeping the worm phenomenon under control. Without the keystone, the worm starts to unleash earthquakes across the country. Suzume and Souta (in his changed chair body) must team up to stop the disasters and recapture the keystone. Otherwise, as the creepy cat reminds them, "a lot of people are about to die."

There is so much to like in this tale. *Suzume* is appropriate for most ages but still deals with heavy issues of family and loss. The film has several key elements which make it particularly enjoyable:

Allies. In her journey, Suzume meets Chaki, a student; Rumi, a single mom of

twins; and Serizawa, Souta's college classmate. They are all strangers who help her in her quest. In many current adventure films, the good Samaritan characters tend to fall into two categories: 1) not really a good Samaritan or 2) future victim of the villain/antagonist. In *Suzume*, we instead see the value of connection, compassion, and mercy. Not just in stereotypical lifelong friendships but in the kindness of humanity towards each other—a thing that can seem lacking in society lately. The idea of Suzume helping the changed Souta is an ongoing theme reflected in the allies Suzume encounters. Later in the film, after Suzume is wounded by a traumatic event, the kindness of her allies is contrasted with phone-obsessed onlookers in the crowded city who comment on her injuries and disarray without offering help.

**Technology.** *Suzume* is heavily grounded in very current technology. In particular, the film shows the way our everyday technology borders so much on magical that it is able to operate as a believable explanation for otherwise fantastical happenings. Suzume and Souta are able to hunt for the spirit cat Daijin by tracking social media posts. When Rumi's twins notice Souta's chair form moving and talking, Suzume easily convinces them that it is a robotic AI. Although no one but Suzume and Souta can see the red phenomenon, everyone's cell phones alert them to coming earthquakes.

**Animation style.** I don't normally see anime on the big screen, but this was worth it. The scenes of bridges soaring over landscapes are worth the price of admission. Even a passing scene of travel through a brightly lit highway tunnel is beautiful in its simplicity and authenticity. The film's music is also gorgeous and integral to the story, from sweeping lush pieces to the pop songs Serizawa sings along to on the radio. Suzume's first encounter with Souta is filled with beautifully drawn facial expressions. When Suzume observes that Souta is beautiful, the comment feels more aesthetic than romantic (and becomes ironic when Souta is transformed into a broken chair).

**Emotional connection.** We get a glimpse of Souta's normal life through his close friend Serizawa, who is worried that Souta has missed the college exam to become a teacher. Later, Suzume and her aunt Tamaki, who externally appear to be happy together, have a fraught conversation about their forced relationship, including Tamaki's bitterness at the sacrifices she has made to raise her niece and Suzume's anger at her aunt's smothering. Despite the fantastical chaos around them, the story drills down to complications of close relationships.

**Collective loss.** *Suzume* explores the loss and sorrow caught up in a place rather than a person. This concept evokes the idea that a location can hold the emotions and memories of those who inhabited it, long after they are gone. We see the

spirituality of physical spaces as we mourn the loss of a community. These themes connect us across cultures and countries—the sorrow at the loss of a beloved, or perhaps just familiar, space due to natural disasters, human conflict, or economic devastation. In *Suzume*, everything from a closed amusement park to the potential destruction of a city of millions pulls us up the emotional ladder of loss.

**Personal strength and maturity.** Unbeknownst to Souta, his fate is sealed early in his encounter with Daijin. Each day he has an increasingly difficult time waking up and feels further and further from his humanity. In a pivotal scene, Suzume is forced to make a terrible choice regarding Souta. She miserably looks for an alternative but ultimately has the strength to make the heartbreaking but inevitable choice. The tone of the film takes a more somber turn and it becomes clear that this is Suzume's journey story.

Despite *Suzume's* appeal, there are things I could do without. Does anyone like a Cheshire cat? We have one throughout most of the film. We also have the trope of the person who inadvertently unleashes disaster. Shouldn't life-altering talismans be more secure or at least have a "don't touch" sign? I'm also not the biggest fan of anthropomorphized objects—why isn't Souta's cursed form a wolf or a cat? But somehow, the broken chair manages to be less annoying than I feared.

Overall, the themes of community, loss, compassion, and friendship make this a movie with wide appeal. *Suzume* is an out of the ordinary movie that celebrates the ordinary in a way that will have you smiling as you leave the theater.

Nerd Coefficient: 8/10

### Highlights

- Gorgeous animation and music
- Annoying cat...
- A story grounded in real-life sorrow

## Film Review: Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse

Joe DelFranco

**Across the Spider-Verse is exactly what a sequel should be**



The follow-up to the critically acclaimed 2018 hit *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* swings into theaters with a heavy burden to bear: simply live up to the expectations set up by its predecessor. Not an easy task considering the previous film topped the long-awaited *The Incredibles 2* for the best animated film Oscar at the Academy Awards. Despite the burden, *Across the Spider-Verse* not only succeeds in this but exceeds its predecessor in some ways. This film is a treat not only for the eyes but for the heart as well.

Without his old spider-friends, Miles Morales hits a low. Having made friends that understand him, his struggles, and his view of the world, all the rest becomes a bit dull. Luckily for us, through unintended (yet at times hysterical) consequences, our hero finds himself on a multi-dimensional romp that extends its web beyond Miles's world and into those of many other spider-people. The primary villain is introduced early and seems to be a one-off intro to the film. A quick, easily discarded "villain-of-the-week." But as the film progresses, we see the horrifying possibilities of the Spot. The introductory battle is comical, action-packed, and only a taste of what *Across the Spider-Verse* has in store for its viewers.

The writing is brilliant, with almost every comical quip hitting its mark. Considering every spider-person in every universe has some sense of humor, it's impressive to see each of them aptly apply their humor in specific situations that succeed within the narrative framework. With so many moving pieces, it's commendable that the writers rarely stumble with any of their spider-folk. This extends to the serious moments too. The frustration of being a parent is palpable

(especially the parents of Spider-Man), the desire to do the right thing despite negative repercussions weighs heavy, and the conflicting anxiety of choosing to help a friend or save the multiverse pulls at the heartstrings. Phil Lord, Chris Miller, and David Callahan nailed it.

Miles's Afro-Latino heritage plays a large part in who he is and how he is accepted in not only his world but in the entire multiverse. I found the storyline within the spider-people's HQ to be an allegorical exploration of Miles's entire existence. Being a minority in a place where people don't think you should exist (or that one should "go back to where you came from") hits home for many, and seeing Miles's solution to the problem play out on screen is both rewarding and inspiring. Ensuring Miles never forgets who he is and where he comes from does the character, and in turn the film, a great service.

On the other side of the emotional coin, Gwen's personal issues are explored. Again her side is allegorical, but in this case in regards to trans acceptance. Struggling with her father's denial of who she is and the choices inherent to her is reflected by the bleeding watercolors that sink ever down. The despair she feels at losing the person she trusts most to protect her is on full display with the dialogue and reinforced by the beautiful animations that represent the mood. The brilliance is in the obvious yet subtle implementation and spot-on delivery. The film doesn't outright mention Gwen being trans, but the trans symbols surrounding her are quite apparent. A trans flag can be seen on her father's police officer uniform, a "Protect Trans Kids" sign hangs above the door of her bedroom, the colors primarily used in her world share the same color with the trans flag, and the lighting used when displaying her are frequently blue, white, and pink. Easy to glance over if you were not paying attention, but the repetitive use caught my eye.

While comedy and drama are on an equal balance, the third element of any great superhero film is here in full force: the action. The smooth yet stop-motion-like animations flow so perfectly. Each combat or escape scene plays out with a precision that complements each character. Each spider-person and villain has a unique take on combat, regardless of how similar many of their ability sets are. Renaissance Vulture fighting three different spider-people is an amazing intro that sets the pace of the film. Watching the combat scenes kept me engaged throughout, and the escape scenes felt like I had a web shot stuck to my chest as I was yanked along for the ride. This is where the animation style flexes its biggest muscle, as up to six different styles come together in the harmonic cacophony that never lets up. This movie is worth it for the action alone, but I'm glad it's so much more.

With quips, web thwips, and feeling trips all in beautiful equilibrium, one would think the setting would seem to be somewhat of an afterthought. Luckily for us,

this is yet another visual treat. Each world is beautiful and distinct. Even when representing many different New Yorks, the artists and animators ensure that the viewer can not only see a difference but feel it. Gwen's world has a more watercolor feel. Earth-616 boasts a more lively atmosphere, while Earth-42 contains heavy shadows, indicative of its more oppressive environment. The seedy underworld of Spider-Man 2099 contrasts with the pristine skylines of the technologically advanced society up above (anyone for a quick trip to the moon?). The fusion of Mumbai and New York City makes for the comical Mumbhattan, the world where Pavitr Prabhakar is Spider-Man. I can go on and on about how well they've represented each Earth, but it's better to use one's own eyes because what we have here is an absolute delight.

The VO performances here boost the film into the stratosphere. I can list every major voice actor here, but it would do a disservice to all the people who deliver only a few short lines. Each character is important and it's frequently the smaller characters that deliver memorable lines, each one placed with a purpose (usually comical). One could say that much of it is fan service, but it isn't there for the sake of being fan service. It serves the narrative, the world, and the characters, and almost every performer has a stellar performance here.

At the beginning of the film, I had a bit of trouble hearing the dialogue. I wasn't sure if it was my specific theatre or the sound itself. Upon doing some research, I discovered others had similar issues, though at different parts of the film. If there had been no one else in the theatre, it may have been less noticeable, but as it was, it hampered the opening moments of the film for me, if only slightly. My only other major negative criticism of the film comes at the end. Though I knew it was coming, it's still a bit annoying to see a "To Be Continued..." with a wait time of a year. Most of the plot points aren't wrapped up when all is through.

Despite a major cliffhanger that introduces a new plot line in the film's last ten minutes, the themes that the film set out to explore are done well and reach great heights with satisfying exploration and discovery, the allegory is subtle and accurate, and the characters all grow in unique ways. This is the continuation of *Into the Spider-Verse* and an amazing setup for *Beyond the Spider-Verse* (coming March 2024). Exhilarating action scenes, tender character sequences, and near-flawless humor put *Across the Spider-Verse* among the best films of this year, and definitely above many other superhero films. Every person who worked on this film should be proud of what they've accomplished. Not only do I want to see this again in theaters, but I look forward to having it in my BluRay collection so I can share it with friends for years to come. This isn't just a great animated film; it's a great film, period. It's an example of what this specific medium can achieve with the proper vision.

March 2024 can't come soon enough.

## The Math

Objective Assessment: 9/10

Bonus: +1 for phenomenal animation and writing, +1 for living up to the first film.

Penalties: -1 for audio issues, -1 for the cliffhanger ending.

Nerd Coefficient: 9/10

## Film(s) Reivew: Barbenheimer

Haley Zapal

### Barbenheimer — The summer movie double-feature spectacle/meme event



For months, the internet has been murmuring about the simultaneous release of Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* and Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer*. Two diametrically opposed films — sugar vs substance, pink vs

black and white, divine feminine energy vs stark, intellectual masculinity — both dropping on the same fateful Friday in late July.

By mid-June, the phenomenon had a name, and #barbenheimer was heavily trending on Twitter and picked up by news outlets. People all over the world were talking about and gearing up for this pop culture explosion (pun intended, of course). It even had its own Wikipedia page.

Naturally, I made plans to take PTO and see them both on opening day — *Oppenheimer* at 3 p.m in 70 mm at the Plaza Theatre in Atlanta, then *Barbie* at Midtown Arts Cinema (a two-mile drive away) at 7 p.m.

### Let's start with the order

One of the things that has made #barbenheimer fun to discuss and debate is one's preferred viewing order. I decided to go heavy and dark first, and then end the night with the fizzy, buoyant *Barbie*.

I'll admit, it's a weird feeling to spend three hours chronicling the break-neck race to build an atomic bomb and then dive headlong into a bright pink world filled with perfect dolls, but I think it's the best order for viewing if you don't want to end your marathon cinema experience too morose. It's like having a steak, then getting dessert. It's also easier, in my opinion, to sit through a long movie first then cap it with a short little number.

### Oppenheimer, destroyer of worlds

As a caveat, I'm a Christopher Nolan fan. I admire the way he mixes the extremely serious with the dreamlike, the hard science with sentimentality (looking at you, love-exists-in-the-fourth dimension *Interstellar*).

The film chronicles the life of J. Robert Oppenheimer, beginning around college and following him all the way through into his old age. Cillian Murphy never once for a moment makes you believe he's anyone other than Oppenheimer for the entire three hours. He's incredible, and this portrayal will win an Oscar, I'm sure of it. I didn't even think about Thomas Shelby *once*.

In the hands of any other director, a biopic about a physicist wouldn't exactly be record-breaking box office fodder, but Nolan deftly makes this movie into a nail-biting thriller. Once we learn about the need for beating the Nazis to the atomic bomb, it becomes almost like a heist movie. Even Matt Damon is there, portraying the gruff engineer general tasked — along with Oppenheimer— with assembling the crew of scientists that will pull it off.

They build a town to house the scientists so they can work in seclusion in the deserts of New Mexico. The first two hours of the movie you learn about all of the interpersonal drama between the famous scientists of the day — names like Fermi, Einstein, Bohr, Heisenberg, Feynman. Ones you remember from chemistry class.

The end of the second act leads up to the Trinity test in New Mexico, and you're on the edge of your seat the entire time. The explosion itself is divine, triumphant, frightening, mesmerizing. It builds in silence for 40 seconds before the shock wave hits the scientists — and you — with an otherworldly wall of hell-like noise (another Nolan specialty). The light that this bomb emitted was so bright that a girl blind from birth miles away reportedly asked what the brightness was.

In all honesty, I think the movie should have ended there. The last 40 minutes focus on the problems Oppenheimer ran into after the war. As the father of the atomic bomb, he was lauded as a hero at first, but as the reality of all the past — and future — blood on his hands sank in, he struggled with his feelings on all of it. He eventually spoke out against the creation of further weapons of mass destruction like the hydrogen bomb, and for this he was blacklisted and accused of being a communist. It's a stark examination of the McCarthy era witch hunt mindset. But the next 50 years of the Cold War proved him right. Even though the world has yet to be destroyed by nuclear war, we came perilously close. And it still might happen.

Unlike Barbie, Oppenheimer only has two female characters, and they're not terribly sympathetic. I know you can't change reality, but it still kinda stings to have both ladies simply be the love interests of Oppenheimer. The first, his

communist lover Florence Pugh, who spends the majority of her few minutes on screen completely naked. The second, his wife, played by Emily Blunt, a woman who hates her children and is an alcoholic.

### **Barbie, giver of hope**

For my Barbie caveat, I will say that I never played with them growing up. I was a tried-and-true tomboy who loved Ninja Turtles and He-Man action figures. But Barbie is no ordinary doll movie — it's directed by Greta Gerwig and co-written by her and her husband, Noah Baumbach. Early on the rumors leaked of it being a feminist movie, not what you'd expect. Of it being deeply funny and weird, also not what you'd expect.

We rushed from one theater to the next, driving down Ponce de Leon avenue in Atlanta during a thunderstorm with flooded streets. I won't lie, this added to the cinematic nature of my afternoon.

Arriving into the lobby during the evening rush was a sea change. Pink everywhere, in every way you can imagine. Men wearing pink t-shirts. Young women decked in pink dresses and boas. I saw a group of Muslim girls wearing pink hijabs. It was fantastic! I had no idea how much people loved Barbie. And even though it's never been my cup of tea, I was happy that people that did love it were reveling in the celebration. It's easy for society to dismiss the things that women love when it comes to movies, so I beamed with pride that Barbie was having this moment.

But Barbie is being simultaneously praised — and derided — as a feminist movie.

Let's get this straight: It *is* a deeply feminist movie in a way that I've never seen in a mainstream film, and certainly not in a way that I expected from a movie about a blonde doll.

The plot, briefly, is this: Barbie lives in Barbieland, an idyllic place where women are supreme court justices, presidents, astronauts, and more. As the first doll to not just be a baby or a mother, Barbie showed girls that women could be anything. And it was inspiring (for a while).

But that's just in Barbieland. In the Real World, there's still patriarchy and problems to be solved for gender equality. Barbie and Ken get to visit this Real World, and Ken very quickly learns that in the Real World, men are on top.

When they return to Barbieland, he spreads the gospel of patriarchy, turning their world upside down. It takes teamwork, probing, and self-examination, but Barbie and her friends learn the power they possess deep inside themselves, and eventually all is returned to normalcy in Barbieland.

I'm not doing the plot justice here, but the plot is secondary to the main point of the film. There's an incredible scene in the climax of the movie where America Ferreira, playing an exhausted mom, gives a monologue about how hard it is being a woman, and all of the never-ending and impossible-to-fulfill demands placed upon them. The key message is: You are enough.

At this scene, a big chunk of the audience I was in started crying. This message is something that many women need to hear, and Greta Gerwig gave it to them. It was awe-inspiring.

Some detractors have claimed this movie is "anti-man" and filled with "nuclear-level rage" against men. It's not. It's a movie made for women about being a woman and all the complexities therein. And spoiler alert: There's not many of these films.

Barbie is enjoyable, wildly funny, and very, very smart. The movie opens with a parody of Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* that had the entire audience cackling. There's a reference to Proust! A character name drops Stephen Malkmus from the band Pavement. There's a second Kubrick reference that combines *The Shining* with a Barbie.

As someone who never once desired to play with a Barbie, I'm struck by an overwhelming desire to see this movie again. I will, too.

Nerd coefficient: 9/10

## Festival View - Intense Science Fiction Short Films of 2023

Chris Garcia



In addition to being a nerd who lives and breathes zines and sci-fi goodness, I happen to be the co-head for Short Film Programming for the Cinequest film festival. That's right, I get to watch a couple of thousand short films and choose a hundred or so to put on at the festival every year. It's a fun job (so fun I've been doing it for 20 years even without being paid!) and I've been lucky enough to see some actors and filmmakers at a critical point in their careers and even help a few along the way.

Every year, there's an unwritten theme that bubbles up from the best films. Some years, it's a lightness, a visual aspect, or even just a technique. In 2022 and 2023, it was genre

films that took on pretty big issues in a way that wasn't lasers-and-dragons, but more near-to-home takes.

The best genre short films usually look like every other short film. Rarely is it the window dressing, the costumes or the sets or the effects, that set them apart from your average short. It's the utter core of the concept. While films like *Gattaca* and *Blade Runner* drop you into a visual world that is clearly something else entirely, it's the films that play in the world we know like *Her* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* that have always appealed to me. They look like now, with a few minor exceptions, but the very idea at the heart of them is someplace else.

That can easily be applied to the masterfully dark *I XXXX My Sex Doll*, which showed at Cinequest this year.

The idea boils down to this—the British government has noticed that the levels of domestic violence have increased to epidemic levels. Like all governmental programs of the 2020s, they decided to regulate all dating by the use of an app where you meet people virtually, and then if you're deemed suitable, you can date in reality. That seems logical, no? I mean, aren't governments always getting in the way of our personal relationships in various ways, and they're often trying to figure out a way to make use of those cell phones we're all carrying these days.

Now, with the law in place, a new need arose — sex dolls.

Now, these dolls are human-shaped androids, and they're ultra-realistic. Their voices are modulated, and there are problems with the software, like any other banal technology, and there's even a customer service line you can call, and our unnamed main character does just that.

And he has to make a return because his doll is broken.

Let me be exceptionally clear—this is a film about men being violent to women, and has a high potential for triggering and general discomfort. It's a commentary on the violence that lives within many men, and how our current thinking that technology can solve our problems will always bump up against that violence itself. This story could be told as a satire, about how dumb legislative ideas can have unintended consequences, but this is almost 180 degrees away from that. This is blunt, in-your-face, brutal light-of-day stuff meant to slap you out of your assumptions, and about the inevitability of violence. In this world, it can not be destroyed, merely channeled, and here, it is a humanoid who pays that price.

And people know it.

It could easily be read as a condemnation of men, and that's a valid reading, I think, but there's also more to it. Our main character is vile, and is viewed as such, but only behind the scenes. Those that know talk, quietly, but they do nothing. How often have we heard that story about humans doing terrible things to other humans and the loudest comments we hear about it are barely amped beyond a whisper as a warning to a friend? When the target of the terror is non-human, there are more questions, of course, but also more self-justification, perhaps. Fay Beck raises all these questions, and they each made me incredibly uncomfortable every time I watched it. It is high cinema when you can manage that sort of effect in such a compact package; she manages it all within 10 minutes.

This is a story that is told with strong aesthetics, the camerawork is precise, and the acting falls in with the kind of genre acting we don't see as much these days. It's not subtle, but it's also not only showy to the edges, never beyond. Every choice made here is meant to make you question why this happens, and after a while, you realise that your assumptions are probably wrong.

Thought-provoking SF like this happens in short films from time to time, but rarely is the landing punch of the content quite this visceral. It is literally hard to watch, though the production is incredibly easy on the eyes and ears. The banal-

ity of evil presented here is so utterly thorough that you feel as if it's the message, but I see it as something that hits deeper. It's somewhere between a call-out and a cautionary tale, and one that wounds deeply. I went into my first viewing not even knowing the name of the short or anything about it (we do largely blind viewing for programming) and as I passed through the film, I was deeply moved, angered, and made dark realisations that this is a story that Ballard would have understood, Dick would have conceived of, and Butler would have written, though only as a stat down an even darker road.

*I XXXX My Sex Doll* is still on its festival run but keep an eye open. You can hear director Fay Beck talk about the film for the Deep Fried Film Festival [here](#).

### Fast recommendations

**AlieNation.** This is a very good short film about the perils of border crossings. Also, there's a monster, both literally and metaphorically. There's a lot here to see that makes it a commentary on what we should and shouldn't be doing with regard to immigration, but also about the view of the 'other' we encounter in extraordinary circumstances. It's another punch-to-the-gut short, but it's so well done that I watched it three times to absorb it fully. When you've got a pile of a couple of hundred films you've got to watch in a week, that's a big compliment.

**BEBE AI.** Two young people with Down syndrome want to adopt an AI baby in a strange future. They have to fight for it, and get assistance and find new troubles along the way. It's both a heavy story that deals with the disposableness of people with disabilities, and a somehow heartwarming tale of perseverance. It has elements of *A Handmaid's Tale*, as well as commentary on the idea of brand control and identification. There are so many great layers to it that it demands your full attention.



The image depicts two astronauts in white space suits standing on a grey, cratered lunar surface. They are facing each other, with their shadows cast on the ground. The astronaut on the left has a blue circular patch on their right shoulder, while the one on the right has a small American flag patch. In the background, a large, bright yellow sphere, possibly the sun or a planet, dominates the horizon against a dark, star-filled sky. The text 'Section Three CONVERSATIONS & INTERVIEWS' is centered in the middle of the image.

*Section Three*  
CONVERSATIONS &  
INTERVIEWS

## Section III: Conversations/Interviews

### Adri and Joe Talk About Books: 2023 Hugo Award Finalists

Joe Sherry, Adri Joy



**Joe:** Well, this has certainly been an adventure of a year and even taking the pandemic related delays of Discon III into account, this has been a long Hugo season filled with anticipation. No longer!

The 2023 Hugo Award finalists have been announced and Hugo Season can begin in earnest! Finally, all the rumors and guesses about what the ballot might possibly look like can be put to rest. We have a ballot and in many ways it is a fairly traditional one with a number of reasonable contenders in most categories. At the same time, there is Chinese language representation across the ballot. I don't believe you or I had any real understanding of what is popular in Chinese fandom, so I know I'm excited to read those works when translations are available.

**Adri:** Yes, congratulations to all the finalists and especially to all of the finalists publishing in Chinese who are on the ballot for the first time this year! I'm particularly delighted to share the fanzine category with two Chinese language zines, both of which look extremely cool and which I understand are vital to the Chinese SF scene. I hope we'll see lots of translation both ways so that as many of us as possible can enjoy all the finalists in their respective glory.

Starting from the bottom and working our way up, then: neither of us did particularly well at our predictions for Best Novel this year, though our collective surmise that it might be a repeat-heavy ballot were well founded. Legends and Lattes and Nettle and Bone provide Nebula overlap, and perhaps Nettle and Bone should have been less of a surprise given what a Hugo darling Vernon/Kingfisher has been in other fiction categories. I've said what I need to say about

Legends and Lattes in our Nebula conversation, so let's leave that one there.

Two surprises, then: Silvia Moreno-Garcia is overdue for Hugo recognition, but I didn't think *The Daughter of Doctor Moreau* had the level of buzz around it to make it her "breakthrough". It's on my shelf at home and I'm looking forward to reading it. It's also surprising that *Babel* isn't on this list given its profile, and frankly I think it's a less powerful shortlist for the absence. It's hard not to speculate (i.e. it's possible it reached the threshold of votes but was withdrawn by Kuang) but I've seen so much speculation at this point, some of it verging on xenophobic conspiracy theory. So, instead of feeding into that I'll just hope Kuang is doing well, staying off certain websites (like Twitter) and enjoying the constant stream of other nominations, wins and accolades coming to her.

**Joe:** Absolutely! Based on how *Babel* had been performing in other genre awards, the amount of discussion I've seen elsewhere in genre (that nebulous "buzz"), and just how wide it seems to have penetrated the wider literary conversation tells me that it was a real breakout novel. Its exclusion was probably the biggest surprise of the entire Hugo ballot and I guess we'll find out how everything shook out when the nomination statistics are released after the awards are presented in October. It \*seems\* likely that Kuang recused, and if so she is more than within her rights to do so for any reasons she might have and those reasons are frankly none of our business. If she didn't recuse, I can only assume *Babel* missed the ballot by 1 vote. It's a staggering omission if *Babel* didn't have the votes - but hey, each year's electorate have their own tastes and preferences and it's not like they ever traditionally match up with mine anyway.

The other major surprise across the entire ballot is, as you mentioned, Silvia Moreno-Garcia. *The Daughter of Doctor Moreau* wasn't part of my predictions because you're right, it hasn't had the same level of buzz as some of the other finalists and Moreno-Garcia has not been truly on the Hugo Award radar. Honestly, I figured if *Mexican Gothic* didn't break through then this wouldn't either. With that said, I'm incredibly excited for her and I'm a little behind on some of her more recent novels so I'm ready to catch up with Silvia Moreno-Garcia. As of this conversation I have it on request from the library and it's already on its way for me to pick up.

**Adri:** She's also the only author of colour on what is otherwise a white dominated shortlist.

**Joe:** At this point, I don't think we need to talk too much about Tordotcom's Hugo Award dominance with novellas (4 out of 6 this year), but the thing is that they are generally all really good if generally predictable. We've seen Seanan McGuire,

Nghi Vo, and Alix E. Harrow here in this category before. McGuire and Vo are both previous winners (for truly excellent novellas at that). I'm a fan of all three of their novellas this year, so that's certainly not a complaint. Just a statement about a potential lack of nominating imagination. The only Tor.com novella I have not read yet is *Even Though I Knew the End*, from C.L. Polk.

Tor is also on the ballot with their Tor Nightfire line and a T. Kingfisher story, *What Moves the Dead*, which I am much less familiar with. This is a big year for Kingfisher / Ursula Vernon in the fiction categories. Finally, Adrian Tchaikovsky is on the ballot for *Ogres*, which at least certain of our friends have been banging the drum for very hard.

**Adri:** I love some of the books here - *Even Though I Knew The End* in particular was wonderful - but novella continues to be one of the least fresh categories to me: 5 out of 6 Tor (even if one is a Nightfire) and all of the authors are repeat nominees. We'll hopefully talk about this more, but having novella dominated by series entries for the same few authors by the same publisher is doing the medium a disservice, in my never-very-humble opinion.

**Joe:** For sure, and that's a later conversation that I think we will absolutely have.

I haven't been keeping up with the short fiction scene, so what I can say about Novelette and Short Story is that I've heard good things about John Chu's novelette "If You Find Yourself Speaking to God, Address God with the Informal You", John Wiswell's short story "D.I.Y.", and "Rabbit Test", from Samantha Mills. "Rabbit Test", specifically, was one of the most buzzed about stories that hit my radar.

**Adri:** I'm absolutely delighted for Wole Talabi's "A Dream of Electric Mothers" in novelette (one of only a few works by Black authors which made the ballot this year) and I really enjoyed S.L. Huang and Samantha Mills' stories too. I would have liked to see Ai Jiang and/or Filip Hajdar Drnovsek Zorko in short story, but I'm very excited for Lu Ban, Ren Qing, Jiang Bo and Regina Kanyu Wang for what I'm pretty sure are first Hugo nominations for each of them (I may be forgetting something that Regina Kanyu Wang has translated, apologies if so!)

**Joe:** Moving on to Best Series, I'm really excited about this category. This year there are two long running series, and while I know Seanan McGuire has been on the ballot every year of the category's existence and her October Daye series has been on the ballot each year it has been eligible - it is also the exact sort of work this category should be celebrating. Long running urban fantasy are almost certainly never going to be recognized in Best Novel (Jim Butcher and extenuating circumstances aside) but this category can recognize the series as a whole in ways that the Hugo Awards never will do so anywhere else.

That's a long way to say that this is the right place to recognize October Daye as well as Ben Aaronovitch's Rivers of London series, another urban fantasy. Actually, had Rivers of London not been nominated this year it would be a very strong potential finalist in Scotland next year. October Daye is coming off of a very strong novel in *Be the Serpent*, which is a nice punctuation to the series as a whole.

In trilogies, we have Adrian Tchaikovsky's Children of Time which I've heard nothing but amazing things about but because he seems to publish a new book every time I turn around I find it daunting to get into his work. We have The Founders Trilogy from Robert Jackson Bennett, another work I haven't read but I'm more familiar with Bennett's other novels and he's a fantastic writer and I'm excited to get into this one. Then we have Naomi Novik's Scholomance, a series perpetually mis-shelved in the Lodestar but of which I did enjoy the first book. Finally, there's the Locked Tomb not quite a trilogy now that Tamsyn Muir split Alecto the Ninth and gave us Nona last year. Honestly, being one book from the end I would have held off until the final book before nominating but most series have limited opportunities at a Hugo so I can't fault the voters in putting Muir on the ballot now.

**Adri:** By now, I think it's clear that Hugo voters as a collective aren't going to "hold off" and tactically vote for a series to be on the ballot at some technically optimum point of completion, and I'm fine with that for several reasons. First, there's the weirdness of assuming Hugo voters do collective action at all, second, there's the fact that the award has only gone to a completed series once in its history (with the Vorkosigan saga) so it clearly doesn't disadvantage a series to be on the ballot before its author says it's finished. Finally, as Nona's publication history shows, a series can be a nebulous thing, whose shape can look very different to how an author plans, and with eligibility being as weird as it is in this category, I wouldn't want to assume that another year is going to be better or worse for a given nominee unless it's very much "completed trilogy, now's your chance". In theory, The Locked Tomb being on the ballot now means that if it doesn't win this year, it won't be re-eligible after the planned fourth-and-final volume comes out - but what if the fourth volume isn't Alecto but a side novella or a second unexpected spin-off, and people leaving it off the ballot this year stopped it from having a hypothetical second chance at eligibility after Volume 5? We don't know, and it quickly gets silly to speculate, and that's why I think it's a good idea for voters to put series on the ballot when they're eligible and they think the series is award-worthy, regardless of its completion status. (It's entirely possible I have said something different to this in the past, and I'll no doubt be cranky when we get an incomplete Best Series winner that gets super bad in future volumes, but these are my current thoughts.)

**Joe:** No, you're absolutely correct about that. And as we've discussed before, a Hugo window can be incredibly tight and in the case of series, what if for some

freakish reason we get new volumes in *The Wheel of Time*, *A Song of Ice and Fire* and something else pops off and suddenly *The Locked Tomb* doesn't make the ballot with Alecto? Get your nominations when you can.

**Adri:** Anyway, my reaction is that this list is good-to-excellent, unsurprising, and extremely white. Ken Liu's *Dandelion Dynasty* series feels like a particularly egregious omission. That said, I'm really very happy to see the *Children of Time* trilogy here: Adrian Tchaikovsky does indeed write a lot, but this is my favourite of his series by some margin and it's nice to see him "break through" into more Hugo recognition having been a staple of the UK genre scene for a long time.

**Joe:** I could be off base, but *The Dandelion Dynasty* seems like it came back very quietly after five years between books 2 and 3 and it didn't have the same buzz it did after *The Grace of Kings* debuted. That said, I would have liked to see Liu get that Hugo recognition but the number of writers who I want to have additional Hugo recognition is long and distinguished.

**Adri:** In *Lodestar*, the first thing I notice is Naomi Novik's insistence, once again, in taking up space in a YA award that she should know damn well she isn't eligible for and have the basic respect for the category to stand aside in. It's unsurprising that she hasn't suddenly changed her mind on this, having been here twice before, but nevertheless very disappointing. Otherwise, this is a cool ballot and my heart is very much behind Rachel Hartman's *In The Serpents' Wake*, for all I enjoyed everything else I read in the category too. Catherynne M Valente's book here is new to me, and unfortunately I don't think it's available in the UK, but it's not surprising to see her here and I did enjoy the *Fairyland* books so I'm intrigued by this one.

**Joe:** As a general rule and specifically in relation to this year's *Lodestar*, I'm less familiar with the YA offerings outside *Scholomance*, which I briefly touched upon when talking about *Series*, at least in that I haven't read anything on the ballot but I've read previous books from most of the writers. I'm excited to see Tracy Deonn back on the *Lodestar* ballot. I really enjoyed *Legendborn* and had planned to read *Bloodmarked* anyway. I've picked up Valente's *Osmo Unknown* and the *Eightpenny Wood*, which is a book I haven't even heard of though I've read a number of Valente's adult novels.

**Adri:** In the *Astounding Award*, I'm always absolutely delighted to see authors break through on the strength of short fiction and Isabel J. Kim is a fantastic writer and *Subjective Chaos* Award winner. Embarrassingly, I was not aware they had only been writing since 2021 and was eligible here, so I'm very pleased other voters were paying attention! It's also great to see Naseem Jamnia, whose novella *The Bruising of*

*Qilwa* is really powerful stuff and deserves all the recognition, on the list.

**Joe:** Most of the *Astounding* writers are new to me. Obviously, Travis Baldree had all the buzz for *Legends and Lattes*, and I had previously read Everina Maxwell's *Winter's Orbit*, which was an absolute delight. I'm excited to discover everyone else, especially Naseem Jamnia.

**Adri:** I don't have strong feelings in the more visual-fictional-things categories. Based on the early release, I thought we would be having a year off from *Marvel*, but *Wakanda Forever* has made the *Best Dramatic Presentation Long Form* Category in place of the *Andor* season nomination, and *She-Hulk* is now in *Best Dramatic Presentation Short Form* in place of one episode of *Severance*. I'll probably give *Graphic Novel* a miss this year, since I have zero interest in reading *Cyberpunk 2077* or *Dune*.

**Joe:** I just finished the latest *Monstress* collection and I know I'm fully in the minority here but that is just not a series for me and every collected volume has been a Hugo Award finalist (with the first three winning). Not that I'm obligated to read every work on the ballot, and the other Hugo nominators obviously love *Monstress* but it's a struggle.

For the rest of the category, I'm interested in *Once and Future*, *Supergirl*, and the return of *Saga*, Olav from the now three time finalist *Unofficial Hugo Award Book Club Blog* has been talking up *Supergirl* for the last year, so I'm excited for that one. *Dune* and *Cyberpunk* seem like slightly unusual choices, so okay.

**Adri:** Once again, *Best Related Work* is heavily non-fiction this year, mostly of the book variety. I am delighted that S.L. Huang's "The Ghosts of Workshops Past", a deep dive into the history and impact of writers' workshops is here: it's a fantastic piece, and one which sparked a lot of good and in some cases very overdue conversations about how the methodology of critique that dominates these spaces is disproportionately hostile and damaging to BIPOC writers.

The other work that's interesting to me is the *Buffalito World Outreach Project*, which is an attempt by Lawrence M. Schoen to get his short story "Buffalo Dogs" translated into as many languages as possible. I'm fully down with the concept of translation being a best related work, especially after we saw Maria Dahvana Headley's *Beowulf* translation take the category in 2021. However, the nomination isn't credited to any of the *Buffalo Dogs* translators (who, I infer from the website, are generally doing this as a personal favour and not being paid for their work), but to Schoen himself? The only way I can read this is that we're supposed to be judging the author's process of outreach, and the concept of "it's one story but it's in a lot of languages", not the actual translations. That doesn't really sit right with

me, and I'd have far preferred to see the translators credited for this work alongside Schoen as coordinator, even if judging those translations as a whole would be practically impossible given all the languages involved.

**Joe:** That's how I'm reading the title and even content of the *Buffalito World Outreach Project*. It's the "outreach project" part that is key. Even in the light of *Beowulf*, the *Buffalito World Outreach Project* feels like a bit of a stretch for the category but it is a related work. I think we are certainly not intended to evaluate the story but more the concept of the outreach to translate the story.

I've started reading Wil Wheaton's **Still Just a Geek**, which is a weird artifact of an annotated version of his previous memoir. But what I'm excited about here is **Blood, Sweat, and Chrome** - Kyle Buchanan's story of the making of *Mad Max: Fury Road*. I've seen a ton of buzz for that and I've been meaning to read it since it was first announced.

As a general rule I prefer Related Work to be primarily written non-fiction with a further preference for book length work - so this category works for me. As with other categories with Chinese language works I'm very much hoping for a translation of Chinese Science Fiction: An Oral History, Vol 1 to be in the voter packet. That is full on part of my interests.

As a general rule we don't spend a whole lot of time talking about the fan categories, but we're probably burying the lede by not acknowledging that we are on the Hugo ballot for a (staggering) sixth time. It remains intensely awesome every time we get that notification e-mail and we get to continue to be an active part of the Hugo Awards, which we'd obsess about whether or not we're on the ballot.

I would say a light-hearted "Go us!" but what I really mean is some of what we said in our Thank You article, which is that we have a really great group of writers and while it is traditionally the editors names on the Hugo Award ballot the work that gets us here is done by the full team and that should never go without being said.

The other thing that I'm excited about with this year's nomination is that we get to share it with our awesome crop of new editors Paul Weimer, Roseanna Pendlebury, and Arturo Serrano. They've been much of the heart of Nerds of a Feather the last several years and it is incredibly satisfying to have them share in this in an official category as Hugo Award Finalists. Paul has been on the ballot in Fan Writer and as part of the Skiffy and Fanty Fancast team, but this is his first Fanzine nomination. He needs to do some officially fannish photography so he can get a Fan Artist nomination and then be a finalist for every fan category currently in existence.

This is the first ever nomination for Arturo and Roseanna and I am so, so glad they are getting that recognition.

**Adri:** Yes, all of the above. I'm so very proud of our team, and all we achieved last year, and it's an absolute honour to not only be on the ballot again but to be sharing it with our expanded editorial gang. Disappointingly, some of our peers in fanzine and semiprozine have been denied this, through the award administrators' insistence that teams can only have a maximum of 7 names on the ballot this year. This is, quite frankly, bullshit, especially when all that is being asked for is a name on a spreadsheet and a website, and larger zines like Strange Horizons have made it clear that they don't expect their entire staff to be at the ceremony and have offered to foot the bill for other finalist perks (i.e. commemorative pins and certificates) to be sent to their staff.

It would be *lovely* to go a single year without the people in charge of one of the biggest awards in genre - and one of the only ones which offers recognition to fans - undermining the experience for some or all of us. That said, Chengdu Worldcon has made it pretty clear they aren't taking feedback on a lot of their decisions - having Russian nationalist genocide supporter Sergei Lukyanenko as guest of honour being another notable kick in the teeth - so it looks like we have to eat the Hugo sandwiches with whatever proportion of shit they get served with this year. "It's an honour!", I say again, my right eye only *slightly* twitching.

(Seriously though, it IS an honour, because you readers and nominators are the ones who make it so. Once again, *thank you.*)

**Joe:** To that point, and partially circling back to our brief musings on whether or not R.F. Kuang declined a nomination for Babel. As I noted, we should only expect to find that out when the longlists are announced with the nominating and finalist voting statistics and I had thought that would be the end of the conversation and that wouldn't tie into the more controversial elements of this Worldcon because it's one of those things that people who decline nominations just don't talk about.

Except that S.B. Divya has recently shared that she declined two spots on this year's Hugo ballot. One was her place as part of Escape Pod as co-editor. The other, though, was her story "Two Hands, Wrapped in Gold" had received enough votes to be on the ballot in Best Novelette. Divya shared her reasons in her public statement, but the reasons boiled down to a full non-participation in this year's Worldcon in protest of "China's treatment of the Uyghur people in Xinjiang" as well as the convention honoring Sergei Lukyanenko as Guest of Honor. Divya notes that Lukyanenko is "an apologist for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, another act

of aggression that I cannot support”.

**Adri:** That’s a really difficult decision to make and I massively respect Divya for doing so. There are ethical issues around this Worldcon that should be impossible to ignore - I’ve made personal decisions around participation as well, though not ones I want to get into - and it sucks. I respect everyone who is more publicly grappling with it, especially since Divya and others I have seen talking about this make the distinction between Chinese fandom, and the wider context of having a Worldcon in the PRC, rather than conflating the two.

I don’t think this is the only struck-through nomination we’ll see when the data comes out - but that’s a conversation for October.

**Joe:** It is. I love digging into the numbers anyway, and all that changes now in the absence of other public statements of declination is that we understand there is a greater potential of more declined works in the long list.

This is probably a good place to close things out because I’m not sure how we follow it with anything of real substance. Next time we chat will probably be when we start diving into individual categories.

**Adri:** For all the shenanigans so far, I’m still really glad we’re back in Hugo season again and my TBR is filled with interesting stuff to talk about. See you soon!

## Rereading The Old Kingdom Series by Garth Nix

Roseanna Pendlebury, Elizabeth Fitzgerald

**First published 27 years ago, the Old Kingdom series by Garth Nix was a big part of many people’s childhoods, but does it still hold up to a reading in 2023? Elizabeth and Roseanna look back at the original three books of Sabriel, Lirael and Abhorsen, and reflect on how their opinions of the series have changed, and how they’ve stayed the same.**



Sabriel follows a young woman as she leaves school and heads back across the Wall into her mysterious home country, after finding out that something has happened to her father. Who happened to be a necromancer, and has been teaching her to follow in his footsteps - not to raise the dead, as most necromancers do, but to lay them to their final rest. Her journey into the Old Kingdom will reveal to her how little she knows of her craft, the charter magic of her homeland, her father and her heritage, and will test her resolve as she faces an evil far greater than she anticipated.

**Roseanna:** I first read Sabriel when I would have been about 12 - it came out in Australia in the 90s, but didn’t make it to the UK until 2002 - and I was exactly the right age to fall completely in love with it. There’s a strong memory that still sits with me of some book-selling group coming into my school with a pile of various delights, and of me seeing the UK hardback edition, which was bright white, with an extremely fancy clear plastic dust jacket with a gold illustration on and thinking to myself “ooooooh”. The series was also one of the first I remember reading with female characters I genuinely liked and thought were well done, ones that seemed heroic and exciting and like people whose adventures I wanted to follow. That it was set in a gorgeous world with an interesting magic system was absolutely a bonus, but it was the characters that really did it for me the first time around, and who kept bringing me back to the series over and again.

**Elizabeth:** Honestly, I’m not sure I can remember exactly how I first came across the series – it seems almost by osmosis. Certainly, I’d read it by 2004 when I started studying Creative Writing at the same university as Garth Nix, where he was something of a hometown hero. Although I was in my early twenties, the mix of adventure and magic drew me in and kept me hooked. I’m not much of a rereader (there are always so many new books!) so the details have faded over the years. But the Abhorsen’s bells remain etched clearly in my memory.

**Roseanna:** One of the things that really stuck with me after reading the series for the first time was the magic system - particularly the bells. It's one of the best examples I remember reading as a child of a magic system that manages to be neat, easily comprehensible and fully integrated into the world-building. The bells aren't just bells, the Abhorsen isn't just a person, they're all woven into other parts of the Old Kingdom, and this only gets deepened and deepened as the series goes on - the more we learn, the more we understand how things fit together. And part of how well that worked was the little rhymes that explained parts of it - even years after I first read the books I could recite you segments of them, because they were catchy and exactly the sort of thing that would be taught to children, or memory rhymes, or other bits and bobs - the world-building works in the how, as well as the what, and I love that it captured child-my imagination.

**Elizabeth:** I love what you said about the bells not being just bells. Not only does each one have a particular purpose - a particular kind of magic it's used for - but even a personality. Some are serious, others mischievous, and all worthy of caution. They even correspond to a particular Precinct of Death and the way that precinct manifests: whether the river of death comes in tidal waves or looks calm but has hidden potholes.

In addition to mnemonic rhymes, the lore of the world offers a visual language in its heraldry: the silver key of the Abhorsen, the gold tower of the King, the silver trowel of the Wallmakers. We know our heroes by their colours.

That visual language is less well defined when it comes to the magic itself, but is no less evocative for allowing the readers to picture their own Charter Marks.

**Roseanna:** And the Charter Marks are such a neat part of how the world is visualised - not least because they're everywhere. Magic isn't distant and ethereal in the story as we see it. Important places and objects are spelled, and to those who have been baptised with a Charter Mark are able to see, and read in what they see, the magic in the world around them. It means that our characters - and especially Lirael in the second book, who is a skilled Charter Mage working in a library full of peculiar, old and magical objects - connect us to the lore of the world simply by looking around.

I love too that this is tied into how the books are presented. The British editions I had as a child were bold, plain hardcovers with a single charter mark each on the cover, while the paperbacks that came after had smaller marks printed all over them in clear gloss, so they were invisible until they caught the light - just as we are told of the marks in the story. For twelve-year-old me, that felt utterly magical... and still does to my somewhat older self now.

But the magic isn't just the written symbols - there are links to all sorts of other elements, many of which are older, more folkloric, and so while we learn about one part, the other parts - especially around the Free Magic side of things, or the wardings and bindings - feel already familiar.

**Elizabeth:** Part of this is because Nix draws on existing folklore to create the Old Kingdom and its magic. For example, when Lirael is researching how to banish a powerful Free Magic creature, the book she finds tells her to use "...an ensorcelled sword or a rowan wand, charged with the first circle of seven marks for binding the elements..." Rowan has long been popular in European folklore for holding protective properties, and rowan growing by stone circles - echoed by the Charter Stones of the Old Kingdom - was believed to be the most potent. This weaving together of old folklore with the unique elements of the world grants it a solid foundation and that feeling of strange familiarity.

It's also an element of world-building that points to the strong influence of English children's literature. After all, this is European folklore, European plants, not Australian like the author. While this is a common trend among Australian fantasy, it is by no means a foregone conclusion. For example, Cecilia Dart-Thornton's *Bitterbynde Trilogy* (the first book of which was published in the same year as Lirael) subtly weaves in Australian flora and fauna into the background of a tale strongly influenced by English fairy lore. Much more recently, Sam Hawke's *Poison Wars* books eschews our world entirely in favour of making up plants and poisons from whole cloth.

In the Old Kingdom Trilogy, we get rowan and Charter Stones. Across the Wall in Ancelstierre, we get boarding schools, bobbed hair and firearms. Although Sabriel isn't strictly a portal fantasy, the story functions in much the same way. In rereading it, I felt like I had stepped into a world adjacent to the *Chronicles of Narnia...* although one with rather stronger representation of women.

**Roseanna:** And this is one of the things that really drew me to the stories as a child - Sabriel herself, despite being young, and often afraid or out of her depth, was the first protagonist I remember reading in a "proper" book who was both female and fighter, and she's written with a depth and reality that really sells it, rather than just being the pattern of a 90s female action hero, who has to be all machismo and "one of the boys" to fit in. Especially with her all-girls-school, jolly-hockey-sticks background, she feels grounded in a realistic idea of a young woman on a journey, albeit one who has been learning to do necromancy since she was very young and taking fighting arts classes at school.

It isn't just Sabriel herself though - Lirael too manages a great balance of competence, inner strength and doubt, as well as being the first representation of

depression I recall reading. She's not strong in the same way as Sabriel; her fighting skills aren't at all her focus. But she's compelling, willing to go out and achieve what needs achieving, and brave confronting dangers those around her find difficult to face.

What they both contrast beautifully is the men around them too. It seems to be something of a theme in Nix's work to write competent women who, for all their turmoil, get the job done, alongside men with strong emotional focuses who, for whatever reason, are unwilling or unable to solve the problems of the story alone, or struggle to live up to the roles set out for them. For Sabriel, it's Touchstone, a man out of time being overcome by guilt over his past actions, to the point of sometimes being unable to act at all. For Lirael, it's Sam, the man who is supposed to be learning necromancy to follow in his mother's footsteps, but fears the dead, the bells and Death itself right into his bones. Neither man is weak, both of them are brave at points in the plot and very good at their areas of expertise, but neither have the driving determination and ability to just Get On with things that their female counterparts have. This holds true even among the side characters - the whole series is peopled with various no-nonsense women who just get on with things, including an entire glacier of matriarchal seers.

This isn't even restricted to just the human women - Lirael's Disreputable Dog companion epitomises the exact same attitude in her oft-repeated statement of "it's better to be doing" whenever any of the characters get a little too moody for her liking.

**Elizabeth:** Contrast this with Mogget, arguably the most memorable of Nix's animal companions. This powerful and somewhat malevolent spirit has been forced to take the shape of a white cat for so long that he has taken on many of the traits of that form. The contrast here is not like that between the female and the male characters of the book; Mogget does not by any means have a strong emotional focus and would be perfectly happy to Get Things Done, if this meant burning them to the ground. Instead, he contrasts the Disreputable Dog's drive to action with pure laziness. For the most part, he rides around in the backpack of his companion and rarely takes initiative, responding only to commands and providing snarky comments.

Actually, that's not entirely accurate. Mogget does have a driving focus on eating fish.

While Mogget may be the most well-remembered animal companion of not just the Old Kingdom Trilogy, but Nix's oeuvre, the Disreputable Dog is particularly significant for being the first of Nix's many canine companions. His middle-grade fantasy adventure Frogkisser! springs to mind. This story has a pack of canine

advisers to the royal family. They're presided over by a matriarch, and one of the younger dogs serves as a companion to the main character on her adventures.

Nix's adult works are less likely to feature canine companions, but are not entirely devoid. For example, his 2006 story "Dog Soldier", published in Jim Baen's *Universe*. In the story, a military engineer on the front of a space war receives a package from R&D containing a robot with the mind of a dog.

However, while canine companions are more prevalent in Nix's work for younger audiences, one does not need to be young to appreciate them - or, indeed, the themes of the Old Kingdom Trilogy.

**Roseanna:** Absolutely. And this was something that was particularly obvious to me coming back to reread as an adult - there's a strong theme in both Sabriel and Lirael of the death of one's childhood and childhood dreams, and moving past them to becoming the person you'll be as an adult, which hits really hard in a way it didn't when I first read them. In many ways, some of the themes become more appropriate to someone reading them looking back, rather than forward, as you have the experiences to really appreciate how well those emotions have been put across on the page. Unsurprisingly for books that centre the experience of death, however fantastically, they are often unflinching in dealing with hard topics in ways that make them both appropriate for a young audience while still poignant to older readers. The darkness and emotionality never overwhelms the more fun aspects of the stories, but neither are they trivialised and sidelined.

There is a sadness running through so many of the characters' stories - Touchstone, trapped out of time and away from everyone he ever knew and loved, forced to reckon with the worst of his own experiences alone, at least at first; Sabriel, facing the death of her father right on the cusp of her potential adult opportunity to join him in her homeland; Lirael, constantly reckoning with the idea that she may never achieve the one thing that her family seem to think is worth being, and the loneliness of never being part of the community that surrounds her. There is depression, suicidal ideation and a lot of really sensitively handled big topics that I think just become better and better when you come back to them.

And for me, they are at the heart of what makes these somewhat timelessly good stories. They have a solid emotional core that rewards new perspectives from the reader, and in many ways feels sufficiently universal to be able to touch something in everyone, even if it may not be quite the same something.

**Elizabeth:** I think you're right about there being something here for everyone. Even if the reader is not taken in by Lirael's teenage angst - or her desperate and genuine need for belonging that is so relatable - there's Sabriel repeating (and,



arguably, making worse) her father's mistakes in raising her own children.

It may have been the magic and adventure that enchanted us as young readers, but the themes hold wisdom that will have us coming back all our lives.

## 6 More Books with Preme Mohamed

Paul Weimer



Preme Mohamed is a Nebula, World Fantasy, and Aurora award-winning Indo-Caribbean scientist and speculative fiction author based in Edmonton, Alberta. She has also been a finalist for the Hugo, Ignyte, British Fantasy, and Crawford awards. She is an Assistant Editor at the short fiction audio venue Escape Pod and the author of the *Beneath the Rising* series of novels as well as several novellas. Her short fiction has appeared in many venues and she can be found on Twitter at @premeesaurus and on her website at [www.premeemohamed.com](http://www.premeemohamed.com). She is represented by Michael Curry of

DMLA.

Today she returns to Nerds of a Feather to tell us about Six More Books.

### 1. What book are you currently reading?

I'm in the home stretch of Simon Jimenez' *The Spear Cuts Through Water*, which is by miles the best book I've read this year. I'm struggling to sum it up in a couple of sentences, but among other things it's a fantasy story about two young warriors who meet by chance and swear an oath to fulfil the final wishes of a dying god. The language is beautiful and precise, the mythology is intricately multi-layered -- nothing is what it seems, secret identities abound, the complicated historical relationships between characters and gods and demons and monsters are revealed in bits and pieces. In some places, it seems like a superhero movie; in others, a tiny, intimate stage show with only a few actors. I'm also struck by the effortless elegance of what small-minded editors might call 'head-hopping' -- you'll see it right away -- italics that tell us what someone else in the scene is thinking. It lends such an interiority to this beautiful, cinematic story. You feel what people feel, you hear what they aren't saying out loud, what they aren't admitting even to the people they're interacting with. The point-of-view character watches a man pick up his child in the face of a natural disaster and the next line is the man thinking: If this is the end, she is the only thing I wish to hold close to me. I've never read

another book like this. Jimenez is an insta-buy author for me now and I hope he writes dozens more books.

## 2. What upcoming book are you really excited about?

Last To Leave the Room, by Caitlin Starling. In the interests of full disclosure, I've read this one already, but I'm still excited for it to come out. People's heads are going to explode. What I kept thinking in this book was that there were so many scenes where another author would have pulled the punch, made it 'look' convincing but with no real impact -- and every time, Starling is like "Nope, I'm putting my full weight behind it." It's a story about weird physics and the corrosive effects of ambition and exploitation, on the one hand, but also identity, memory, the construction of self. What are we made of, what pieces did we use to put ourselves together? Do we really think it's us doing it, or is it the world? Even the parts that seem like a respite from the horror are, in retrospect, the horror. It's all horror. I can't wait for people to read it. I'm rubbing my hands together like a movie villain in anticipation.

## 3. Is there a book you're currently itching to read again?

I just read Ed Yong's An Immense World in April, and I'm itching to read it again already. It's not that I didn't absorb information from it and annotate it heavily the first time! It's that it was a wonderful experience. The science, the anecdotes, the footnotes, the asides, the interviews and quotes, even the photos. What I love about Ed Yong, both in his books and in his long-form journalism, is that he writes about all his subjects, from researchers to bats to ducks to bacteria, with such interest and respect. He's never patronizing or twee; he doesn't chop down the science because he's writing a 'pop-sci' book; he just explains it carefully, using appropriate language and analogies, and building on concepts introduced earlier in the book. And you can feel how fascinated he is with everything he's learning, and how eager he is to share it. I enjoyed reading it so much, I felt like I was going on a journey with an amazing tour guide, and I want to do it again!

## 4. How about a book you've changed your mind about - either positively or negatively?

I recently re-read Bernhard Schlink's The Reader, and I think I was a little too harsh on it the first time I read it six or seven years ago? The first time, I think I was expecting this very angry, inflexible condemnation of Hannah and I could not fathom why Michael kept in contact with her after she went to jail, so I condemned them both and to the same degree. To me, 'pity' was not enough of a reason. This time I find myself more forgiving -- it's not the novel's job to make me calculate someone's motivations. It's to make me feel them.

## 5. What's one book, which you read as a child or a young adult, that has had a lasting influence on your writing?

I think I must have read Lloyd Alexander's *The Chronicles of Prydain* (all the books, but particularly the first one, *The Book of Three*) a hundred times as a kid. I loved the intense visual images, the adventure, the humour, the villains (those terrifying undead soldiers!), even the frustration of all the characters trying to force their friends to do something that they didn't want to do. I guess it was an object lesson in inter-personal conflict as a driver for plot, although of course I wasn't thinking that at the time.

## 6. And speaking of that, what's your latest book, and why is it awesome?

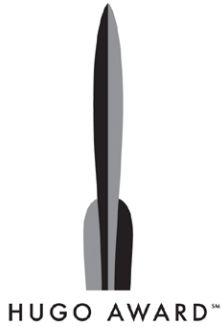


My most recent is my debut short story collection *No One Will Come Back For Us*, published by Undertow Publications! I'm very excited for this to be out -- this contains some of my favourite short stories I've ever written, and the whole collection has a dark fantasy, horror, sci-fi with horror elements theme. There are some shared-universe stories and some stand-alone stories; it contains my only Pushcart-nominated story and my only published novelette; and it also contains author notes on all of them. I also love the cover art (by Slug Draws; art direction by Vince Haig), which seems to tell a story all on its own!

**Thank you, Premeel!**

## Adri and Joe Read the Hugos: Novel

Adri Joy, Joe Sherry



**Joe:** I don't want to oversell what's going to go down here, but I almost began this by cracking my knuckles and neck like we're about to scrap. Not that I actually know anything about scrapping, but I've seen movies and I've read books and that's almost like the real thing, right?

I've been looking forward to talking about the Best Novel category since right around the time we started making our Hugo predictions (we were both terribly wrong) because even then you were salty about one of the books that eventually made the shortlist and you've become even saltier about what is currently sitting at the top of my ballot.

**Adri:** You're entirely too excited about this, but: yes. We had some surprises on both sides about how we ranked certain books, but my overall feeling about this ballot is "ugh".

To clarify my exact level of saltiness: I have three books sitting below No Award on my final ballot, and I don't feel like this is an overreaction to the works we've been presented with this year. 50% of these novels are fluffy escapist confection, with little deeper quality or meaning to them, and I simply don't think that this is the best the genre has to offer. Yes, it's 2023, we're exhausted, the pandemic ruined many of us for "deeper" reading, but "I wanted to read fluff in 2022" and "I think the best genre writing of 2022 was fluff" are two different statements and the fact that voters have gone in on the second one is really quite disappointing to me.

I also want to say that sticking my head above the parapet on fluffy fiction is nerve-wracking, not least because one of the (very established!) authors on this ballot has gone very "I'm not mad, please don't print in the newspaper that I got mad" about folks who think his book isn't good, to the tune of multiple thousand word blog posts and a customised t-shirt. There's a "who are you to say what's Hugo worthy over and above the actual voters" element to saying a work isn't good enough, and everyone is encouraged to take all such opinions with a grain of salt (I've got plenty of spare!). But, fundamentally, saying that your book is unquestionably award worthy because it's been nominated for an award makes as much sense to me as saying a person has unquestionable leadership qualities because they get

elected to run their country, and I'm just going to leave that there and move on to the actual critique.

Let's start at the height of 2022 fluff: Legends and Lattes. I've said everything I needed to say about this book, except that I wish I'd encountered it in a non-award-ballot capacity. But you've just read it, so I'd be interested to hear your thoughts!

**Joe:** I do think the three books under No Award is a bit excessive, but I tend to use No Award in a very surgical manner. Or, more likely, I can be a fairly basic person and I generally like most things that meet a relative level of quality - whatever that means to me on a given day.

We do need to talk offline about whichever author is so incredibly thin skinned, though, because my gradual weaning myself off of social media means that I completely missed the side entertainment / drama of whatever that was. There aren't any books that I'm expecting to tee off on, though most years there aren't. Sometimes it would be more fun if I was just angry about a book making the ballot, but at most I get mild parental disappointment at the other voters.

Which brings us to Legends and Lattes.

We are mildly closer in how we view this book than you might think - but mostly in the sense that I wouldn't have nominated it even had I read it before the nominating deadline.

Legends and Lattes is an absolutely delightful book and I fully understand why people fell so hard for it, loved it, and likely nominated en masse to the point I expect that it'll be on the most nominating ballots of all the finalists, possibly by a large margin.

Legends and Lattes is absolutely fluff, though I do think it's high quality fluff and it reads as having just about all of the trappings of epic fantasy and epic fantasy seldom makes the Hugo ballot because epic fantasy is often part of series work and also I don't think is quite the flavor of the typical Hugo voter - though at the same time Legends and Lattes isn't really \*epic\* fantasy. It is secondary world fantasy (often a trademark of epic fantasy, but not exclusively). The epic, in my opinion, is generally in combination with the idea of secondary world fantasy with a large "epic" story or quest that could shape the world.

This is not that. This is a small, quiet, cozy story of an orc opening a coffee shop in a part of the world that has never experienced coffee (which makes Viv a coffee evangelist as well) and while the stakes are high and deeply personal to Viv they're pretty low stakes overall. Legends and Lattes is also low conflict, in that there is

conflict and struggle in getting this small business off the ground but that conflict and struggle is exactly that, the struggle of a small business owner.

I expect one of your complaints is going to be that everything comes very easy to Viv, and yep, some of the overcoming is pretty handwavy. Overcoming the struggles isn't exactly a struggle. It's....cozy.

**Adri:** Overcoming the struggles sometimes involves giving a crime boss some cakes, and overlooking any ethical questions about whether befriending the crime boss while she happily extorts your rivals solved anything in a meaningful way. But sure. Cozy.

**Joe:** Hey, we all have to live in the world we're born in.

But here's the thing - Legends and Lattes is absolutely delightful and charming and I didn't want to put it down. It's not an ambitious novel by any stretch of the imagination, and I'd like to talk next about an ambitious novel that I think really didn't hit the mark, but Legends and Lattes is a book that is exactly what it was aiming to be: a cozy, pleasant, quite-kind fantasy novel.

Now, whether it should be on the Hugo ballot is an entirely different conversation and the root of what this is all about - and that's where I'm always a lot easier on the finalists than you are here. In comparison to all of the other finalists, how does it compare and how would I feel about it winning? For Legends and Lattes it's pretty solidly in the middle of my ballot. It's above a fairly ambitious novel and a disappointing work from a favorite author. It's behind more technically accomplished and impressive work, and one that I found utterly delightful and stronger overall that we're going to argue about quite a bit.

Since I'm using way too many of my words: I liked Legends and Lattes, have requested Bookshops and Bonedust, would not have nominated it and I'm perfectly fine with it being on the ballot. I think it's a perfect representation of the shape of the genre in 2022. We can also revisit some of the stuff we lament not being on the ballot later, too.

**Adri:** There's far too much high quality, thoughtful work from last year for me to call this the "shape of the genre", regardless of how effective its fluff is.

**Joe:** See, I'll disagree with that, but mostly because I didn't intend to suggest Legends and Lattes was the entirety of the shape of the genre last year, though I can definitely understand how it could be read as such.

**Adri:** Before we get to this long-teased fight, let's talk about the cozy work that disappointed you and actually surmounted the (admittedly low) bar I had for it.

The Spare Man by Mary Robinette Kowal is a murder mystery set on a space cruise ship, in which a ludicrously wealthy heiress' incognito honeymoon is spoiled by an inconvenient death on the ship, for which her husband becomes prime suspect. Tesla Crane is "cover your eyes and peek between your fingers in horror" levels of awful, in ways that I've disliked Kowal protagonists for before: on a surface level, she's aware of her privilege, but she doesn't let that awareness stop her from bulldozing and ask-for-the-manager-ing her way through every interaction. While the book gives her a chronic illness and PTSD to manage, it also allows her to abuse her medical aids in ways that seem like they should have consequences, but never do. The dog is amazing, but it's also a yappy little Westie so I'm not even giving full marks for that.

The reason this worked better than the later Lady Astronaut books for me is because it's fluff, and therefore I don't have to take it seriously as a social justice narrative. Everything in The Spare Man is set up to tell a particular kind of locked room mystery, in which folks who are used to having more resources at their disposal have to figure out an initially baffling crime. That aspect of The Spare Man is really very enjoyable. I will also admit, though I'm not proud of this, that "wealthy, skilled heiress bulldozes and outwits everyone around her" is a more enjoyable form of wish fulfillment for me than "burned out mercenary opens small business, makes friends" or "insecure gig worker takes job they are massively overqualified for, makes friends, sees cool stuff". If you embrace the fact that Tesla is awful, and meeting her in real life would be a miserable experience, it becomes quite entertaining to watch her solve the mystery.

It's still a no award for me, but it's the highest of my no awards.

**Joe:** For those keeping score at home - The Spare Man isn't the aforementioned fairly ambitious novel, but rather the "disappointing work from a favorite author". Most recently, I absolutely loved The Calculating Stars and The Fated Sky (though maybe a little bit less The Relentless Moon) and farther back, I've been a fan of Kowal's short fiction and transition into novels with the first of the *Glamourist Histories*, though I haven't read them all (or Ghost Talkers, which I always meant to) - which is a long way to say that I really dig Kowal's work and The Spare Man really didn't work for me.

I couldn't be more disappointed that this is at the bottom of my Best Novel ballot. I'm not using No Award this year, but The Spare Man isn't it. Thankfully, this isn't a novel truly dealing with the troubles of the extraordinary wealthy and elite because Tesla Crane's troubles aren't specifically that of wealth. Wealth is the tool she uses, often as a bludgeon, to get her way and I am absolutely shocked that it didn't piss me the hell off. It should. It's a testament to Kowal's generally soft touch

that Crane is generally sympathetic even as she's railroading everyone around her into submission.

My problem is that the central mystery wasn't that interesting to me and the quirks of Tesla Crane aren't nearly as charming as those of Elma York in the first two Lady Astronaut novels. I get what you're saying about not taking the social justice aspect as seriously as you might otherwise because *The Spare Man* is fluff, but therein lies the problem. It's heavy-handed fluff and while Kowal's handling of how Crane used her wealth and position was softer than one might expect, the rest of the novel - the social justice aspects and the mystery storytelling, was just clumsy.

**Adri:** Which leaves us with fluff-novel number three: *The Kaiju Preservation Society*. I know you loved this one, and that this is where our foreshadowed showdown takes place, but: I just don't have much to say about this book, except that it was a resounding failure on every level for me. The plot was basic and weak, the humour felt like something from the 2000s, almost every character sounded the same (to the point where other characters have to point out "oh, you're the less snarky one" and "oh, you're the REALLY snarky one" among the main group for you to notice any difference), and the kaiju go basically undescribed so the action scenes are impossible to satisfyingly visualise. It's readable, sure! If I was stuck in a remote mountain hostel without my kindle and this was the only thing on the book swap shelf, I'd have a diverting couple of hours with it. But I have nothing nice to say about it beyond "it's readable", and it feels like a significant step backward for Scalzi after *The Collapsing Empire*.

Now you can tell me why I'm wrong!

**Joe:** You're just keeping me from complaining about Nona right now. You know that, right?

You're wrong!

Actually, you're wrong about the significant step backwards since *The Collapsing Empire* as much as you are wrong about this not being good, because *The Last Emperox* was the significant step backwards and I'm really confused about the 7/10 score I gave it three years ago because the lasting memory that book gave me was just a sour note over *The Interdependency*. I thought I hated it way more than that.

But *The Kaiju Preservation Society* was just a damned delight.

Listen, if you're not down with the basic conceit of a dude stumbling his way into a job he has no frame of reference to understand and the whole thing turning into Scalzi's version of *Jurassic Park*, I really don't know what to tell you.

*The Kaiju Preservation Society* is VERY Scalzi. The only thing that might be more Scalzi is his next book, *Starter Villain*. And I know you've been on board with Scalzi in the past, but I'm just confused because absolutely everything works here.

I read it when I was coming off watching 30+ *Godzilla* movies in relatively short order and while missing the commentary of the original *Godzilla - The Kaiju Preservation Society* is an absurdist *Godzilla* movie, it's *Jurassic Park* when we get through the gates and the music swells, it is absolutely full of that sense of wonder I'm looking for.

Where you didn't get a sense of the kaiju, I did. I felt their enormity and whether I could fully visualize one didn't matter because I \*felt\* them. They are real, and they are spectacular.

**Adri:** Surely this is just nostalgia and projection in the place of good writing, though. Sure, you can hum the *Jurassic Park* theme tune to yourself because the setting is a bit like *Jurassic Park*, and that feels great because the *Jurassic Park* theme is banging. You can imagine the kaiju from the 30+ *Godzilla* movies when the writing says "there was a kaiju ahead, it was very, very big, no, bigger than that, really humongous like the mountain". (not an actual quote). But that feels like a pretty shallow form of storytelling to me, and it doesn't do anything to convince me this is a good novel.

A comparison that springs to mind is *Into the Drowning Deep* by Mira Grant: a novel which has also been compared to *Jurassic Park*, and takes plenty of beats from monster thrillers, but which takes the time to establish the variety of characters populating this world (or, in this case, ship), and to make it clear exactly what is hunting them down (mermaids). It doesn't rely on "hey, you know what mermaids look like from all those killer mermaid movies? Well, imagine them doing a thing!" - to be fair, it can't, but it also makes it a much better book.

**Joe:** *Into the Drowning Deep* was a staggeringly good novel that should have received all of the acclaim and I dearly want more of \*that\*.

Scalzi is a commercial science fiction writer and *The Kaiju Preservation Society* hits the mark for being that fast paced entertaining book that landed at just the right time, especially given that I read this in late 2021 when Covid was dropping another wave on the United States - so I needed what this book was laying down. But, beyond that, with the exception of *Lock In* (and maaaaybe *Fuzzy Nation*), this was a different sort of novel than what John Scalzi had written before at novel length. He's off the sweeping space opera / military SF and into, well, I don't know, a rip roaring frigg'n dinosaur book?

But, where *The Spare Man* is Mary Robinette Kowal doing Mary Robinette Kowal things not nearly as well as she's done in the past, *The Kaiju Preservation Society* is John Scalzi doing very John Scalzi things at a really high level.

This is #1 on my Hugo Ballot.

**Adri:** It's a piece of fluff, and if it ends up winning - or if any of the above do - we might have to put these conversations on hold until I regain my respect for the Hugos again.

ANYWAY.

That's a very long time complaining, and I want to move on to less disappointing works - but here I run into problems because even though I think we're firmly in Hugo worthy territory with the rest of the ballot, I did run into some personal disappointments with two of the three books remaining here.

I reviewed *Nona the Ninth* last year and to say this book was hyped is like saying the ocean is a bit damp. *The Locked Tomb* has picked up a huge fanbase by this point, and Tor dot com has been very happy to capitalise on that with ALL the marketing. This is a series that pulled a frankly ridiculous stunt in its second book in the way it messes with the first book's canon, and that created one of my favourite books ever in *Harrow* - but the similarly jarring perspective shift from *Harrow* to *Nona* unfortunately didn't captivate me in the way it seems to have worked for others. *Nona the Ninth* presents us with an intricate, complex plot full of returning characters in unexpected circumstances and new characters who seem to have more going on than we realise. However, it presents these things from the perspective of a clueless ingénue whose entire character can be summed up as "just happy to be here", and despite all of the marketing to the contrary, I did not love *Nona*. Unlike *Harrow*, where the misdirection and canon confusion made me desperate to keep reading and find out what was going on, the first half of *Nona* is quite a slow experience, and it's only in the second half that things start to get wild in the way that this series thrives on.

That said, *The Locked Tomb* continues to be amazing and nothing about the way *Nona the Ninth* unfolded makes me less confident about the series as a whole. Hopefully I will go into *Alecto* and realise "oh, that's why *Nona the Ninth* had to be that way", and there are plenty of elements (John, ugh, John) that have stuck with me in a good way. This would be a weird winner, though, since I do think it's the weakest of the series so far.

**Joe:** I do think you are right about *Nona* being explained by *Alecto*. If I remember correctly, *Nona* was born out of Tamsyn Muir writing *Alecto* and realizing the supposedly smaller "Nona" opening section of the novel was turning into a much

larger work and Tor dot com said "yes, we like money" so *The Locked Tomb Trilogy* became *The Locked Tomb Quartet* and *Nona the Ninth* became a full length novel.

This is my "fairly ambitious novel" that didn't work for me. Like you I loved *Gideon the Ninth* and *Harrow the Ninth*. I was blown away by how effectively Muir pulled off the twist, or the stunt as you called it, in *Harrow*. Muir had moxie to spare and no shame and she absolutely pulls it off.

*Nona the Ninth* is no less ambitious than *Gideon* or *Harrow*, possibly all the more so because it obviously upends everything we know of the series and whatever we expected from *Nona* - this isn't it. Nothing makes sense. *Nona*, the character, doesn't make sense. Her place in the world doesn't make sense. I know it's intentional and I trust Muir to deliver this story, but the amount of questioning I'm doing and trying to figure out who the hell *Nona* is (because there's no way she's \*just\* a cipher) was taking up more of my energy that should have been spent falling into the narrative.

I really need to read *Alecto* to see how *Nona* fits. I think how we ultimately view *Nona* will depend fully on how well Muir pulls off *Alecto*.

But that's where I struggled because where I was onboard with *Harrow's* mystery and thought that story was perfectly told, *Nona* didn't quite feel like it belonged to the same overarching story and I had a very difficult time accepting *Nona* on its own....not quite merit, but as its own thing.

**Adri:** Still, I love that this series has captured the Hugo voters' imagination, along with the hearts of a million *Gideon/Nona*-avatarred Tumblr/AO3 kids. Muir has done well to bring that unholy alliance together.

**Joe:** Each of the novels we've discussed up until this point were not Hugo surprises, at least to me. We disagreed on the Hugo odds for *Legends* and *Lattes*, but even though this wasn't the line up I necessarily predicted, they are not unexpected.

*The Daughter of Doctor Moreau* and *Nettle and Bone* were unexpected, though you were less surprised by *T. Kingfisher* than I was. My thing is that, with the exception of new authors, until you make the Hugo ballot I have a hard time predicting you for the Hugo ballot. Authors who have built a reputation of writing quality work but not making the Hugo ballot are tough to predict to make the ballot unless they have a real breakout novel. Seanan McGuire's *Middlegame* was that novel after being nominated up and down the rest of the ballot for years, but until that novel broke out I'm not predicting McGuire for Best Novel.

**Adri:** Give or take a few Mira Grant nominations, but I agree that those are different.

**Joe:** On the other hand, you have Elizabeth Bear, a two time Hugo winner for her shorter fiction (and a two time winner in Fancast) who writes novels I often consider the best of the genre and the best of the year and whom I may never predict for Best Novel because until she breaks through in that category I don't think she's breaking through.

That's where T. Kingfisher fell for me - she's a hell of a prolific writer who is consistently good and has an impressive following. She's been on the ballot three times before, winning once as T. Kingfisher (as well as winning a Lodestar Award) and twice more as Ursula Vernon - but she was never a finalist for Best Novel.

Until *Nettle and Bone*.

What isn't a surprise is that *Nettle and Bone* is good!

**Adri:** *Nettle and Bone* is indeed very good Kingfisher - practical women and unsentimental fairy tale telling with some solidly creepy stuff thrown in for good measure. Supernatural dogs are a fast way to my heart, and "Bonedog" was already in my skinny white whipper's nickname rotation (as was "Noodle", the name of the dog from *Nona the Ninth* - it's a very Zag heavy ballot!), so that was a winner. Like much of Kingfisher's work, this is a book that spends time on the margins of political power but focuses on the kinds of people who don't want to wield it - in the case of *Princess Marra*, this is partly a requirement of her position, but *Nettle and Bone* is pretty firm on the moral toll of wielding fairy-tale-monarch power and makes it clear that this is no sort of happy ending for a woman who values her integrity.

I didn't get around until reading this until it landed on the Nebula ballot, and even if I had read it during nominations I'm not sure it would have cracked my top five, but it's my favourite of the works here, and I think it gives Kingfisher a great shot at her first Best Novel Hugo to go on her already well-populated award shelf.

**Joe:** I liked it a lot. It was a reminder that I should read more Kingfisher / Vernon because I've been delighted with just about everything she's written.

**Adri:** Which leaves the final book on the ballot, *The Daughter of Doctor Moreau*. I'm a huge fan of Silvia Moreno-Garcia and I happily follow her into genres I wouldn't normally have much to do with, but I put this one off because I've never actually read the H.G. Wells story that it's based off. It turns out that's not a big problem, since Wells' work is archetypal enough to make everything obvious as long as you're familiar with the concept. This story does what Moreno-Garcia does best, which is to ramp up the tension between people in a very claustrophobic environment (whether the characters are actually isolated, as here or in Mexican Gothic, or more emotionally isolated like *Velvet Was the Night*).

That isolation is punctuated by glimpses of the outside world - through the arrival of Eduardo Lizalde, the dangerous son of Doctor Moreau's patron, and through the shadowy threat of Maya rebels lurking deeper in the jungle - but most of the drama comes from interpersonal relationships, and the actions of Carlota Moreau, the titular daughter.

Unfortunately, *The Daughter of Doctor Moreau* didn't do it for me in the way that Mexican Gothic and *Gods of Jade and Shadow* have, and I suspect that's because the world here is too darn interesting for the souped-up love triangle between Carlota, Lizalde and Loughton (Moreau's overseer) to be an interesting focus of attention. I know that keeping the wider politics of the Yucutan is a deliberate choice in this story, but it's one that I found myself railing against for much of the novel, and it left me with less enjoyment for the actual story. Also, while Moreno-Garcia's reimagining of Moreau's experiments - and their undeniable personhood and agency in this story - are interesting from a literary standpoint, they aren't particularly interesting from a science fiction angle. It adds up to something that feels like a cool literary experiment, but not like a top novel of 2022. Still, I'm absolutely delighted that Moreno-Garcia is getting noticed by the Hugo awards at last and I don't begrudge this being the novel that finally does it for her. It's in a solid second place for me.

**Joe:** I also have *The Daughter of Doctor Moreau* in second place on my ballot, we just have very different #1 picks. Moreno-Garcia was another surprise Hugo finalist for me. Not because this novel isn't worthy or that Silvia Moreno-Garcia hasn't deserved a place on a Hugo ballot for a number of years, because it is and she has - but simply because I didn't see Moreno-Garcia as an author who receives Hugo recognition. I'm happy she has.

I want to say *The Daughter of Doctor Moreau* is probably the most technically proficient novel on the ballot, but I'm afraid that's going to suggest the "literary" quality of a book gives it more merit than - say, the easy commercial properties of John Scalzi or Mary Robinette Kowal - and that's not quite what I mean because writing smooth, fast reading prose that propels a story can be as technically difficult as writing "serious literature". I also don't want to fully launch us off topic here.

What I am trying to say, though, is that *The Daughter of Doctor Moreau* is working hard to exist within the science fiction trappings of the original story of *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, but to reframe it away from a shipwrecked Englishman discovering Moreau and towards a tale of colonialism, family, and identity - while still very much being a Doctor Moreau story. It's incredibly well done and it feels more "accomplished" than many of the other works on the ballot, for whatever that means. Sometimes I only have these vague ideas of how and why

I'm slotting work together on a Hugo ballot. We're ranking novels for an award and none of the finalists are anything like the rest.

**Adri:** And I think that brings us to the end of a marathon discussion! We've already talked about favourite books and omissions from this ballot a few times this year, so I don't want to retread old ground too much, but it does disappoint me to think of all the things we could have had on this ballot but don't. Of course, we're late enough in the year that plenty of those books have been recognised already, but I wish I had more to look forward to when it comes to best novel announcement this year. I'll have to hold my excitement for other categories.

**Joe:** It was a year! These extended Hugo seasons are weird, because I feel like I should be reading next year's work and we're still talking through last year - so let's push on.



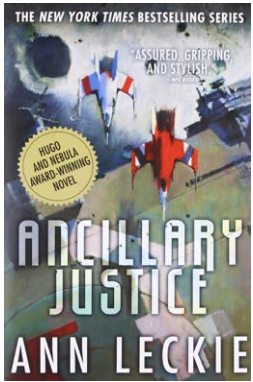
*Section Four*  
COMMENTARY



## Section IV: Commentary

### Lindsay, Leckie, and LeGuin: A century of pronouns and gender in SFF

Clara Cohen



Ann Leckie's *Imperial Radch* series burst upon the SFF world in 2013, drawing notice for (among other things) its linguistic worldbuilding. The Imperial Radch, the central power of the series, speaks a language that lacks any gender distinction in the pronouns. Linguistically, this feature in itself is hardly unusual. There are many languages spoken today (on Earth) that do not distinguish gender in their pronoun systems, ranging from Imbabura Quichua in Ecuador (*pai*), to Finnish (*hän*), to 252 other languages listed in the World Atlas of Language Structures as lacking all gender distinctions in their pronoun system (Siewierska, 2013).<sup>1</sup>

No, what made the Radchaaï gender invariance striking was that Leckie chose to render that single, gender-neutral pronoun in English as *she*. And since the narrator, Breq, is Radchaaï, every character in the book is rendered as *she*, regardless of their own individual gender identity. Furthermore, in a nod to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, speakers of Radchaaï struggle to recognize gender as a property of humans.<sup>2</sup> When Breq is forced to use gendered pronouns in other languages, she<sup>3</sup> often resorts to guessing, based on what she knows of that culture's arbitrary and idiosyncratic cues, and hoping she got it right. To Breq, categorizing humans as one gender or another is as pointless as many English speakers find categorizing inanimate nouns. In Spanish, *key* is feminine and *bridge* is masculine. In German it is the reverse, and what is more, *girl* is neuter. Bantu languages distinguish as many as ten, fifteen, even twenty different categories, at which point even the most classical grammarian gives up on the idea of sex-based gender terms and just calls them 'noun classes' (Marten 2021). Surely, thinks many an English-speaker, this grammatical ornamentation is an entirely unnecessary and frivolous complication. Likewise, to Breq, pronouns and gender.

But Leckie is not the first person to employ pronouns as a tool of linguistic world-building. Indeed, she is only the latest in a long series of SFF authors who have departed from English language pronoun conventions to enrich their creations. And by tracing the strategies these authors have used throughout the years, we can also trace the concerns of the time in which those authors were writing, both on the macro level of decades and generations, and also on the micro-level of

years that separate a book and its sequel.

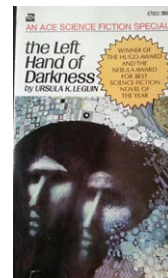
If we start our historical journey at a nice round centuryish ago, we discover that the neopronouns *aelaer* are not, in fact, terribly neo. They were first introduced in 1920 by David Lindsay in his novel *A Voyage to Arcturus*, to describe the phaens:

[T]his person, although clearly a human being, was neither man nor woman, nor anything between the two, but was unmistakably of a third positive sex, which was remarkable to behold and difficult to understand. In order to translate into words the sexual impression produced in Maskull's mind by the stranger's physical aspect, it is necessary to coin a new pronoun, for none in earthly use would be applicable. Instead of "he," "she," or "it," therefore "ae" will be used.

Note that the link between sex and gender is taken for granted. The need for a new pronoun has nothing to do with social self-presentation in the phaens, and everything to sex and procreation:

He found himself incapable of grasping at first why the bodily peculiarities of this being should strike him as springing from sex, and not from race, and yet there was no doubt about the fact itself. Body, face, and eyes were absolutely neither male nor female, but something quite different. Just as one can distinguish a man from a woman at the first glance by some indefinable difference of expression and atmospheres altogether apart from the contour of the figure, so the stranger was separated in appearance from both. As with men and women, the whole person expressed a latent sensuality, which gave body and face alike their peculiar character.... Maskull decided that it was love—but what love—love for whom? It was neither the shame-carrying passion of a male, nor the deep-rooted instinct of a female to obey her destiny. It was as real and irresistible as these, but quite different.<sup>4</sup>

Now, to be sure, Lindsay's brainchild is hardly a masterpiece of progressive foresight. In 1920, it was an uphill battle to suggest that male passion need not be shameful; that female sexual pleasure need not stem from a biological urge to "obey her destiny," and Lindsay was evidently not interested in fighting that battle. But he could at least suggest that it was possible for people to land in a third box—even if you had to go to Arcturus to find them.



If we jump forward half a century, to 1968, Ursula LeGuin continued this conversation about gender in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and it's quite striking to compare the choices Lindsay made with LeGuin's decisions. Some of the contrasts are simply related to differences in world-building. Where Lindsay's phaens have all the sexual organs, perpetually in abundance, LeGuin's Gethenians have none of them, most of the time. Only when they enter the biological state known as *kemmer* once a month do

they develop sexual characteristics, becoming either male or female, and possessed of an incredibly strong sexual drive. When kemmer ends, the Gethenian reverts to androgyny until the next month, when they may develop an entirely different set of sexual characteristics from before.

All or nothing, fixed or shifting, genders that don't obey the male/female binary will run up against the question of pronouns. Lindsay, as we have seen, invented completely new ones. Intriguingly, although you'd imagine LeGuin's readership in the 1960s would be willing to match Lindsay's in their appetite for adventurous pronouns, LeGuin herself was more linguistically conservative. She decided to stick with the 'gender neutral' pronoun he/him/his in all contexts, defending this choice in an essay written from 1976:

I call Gethenians "he" because I utterly refuse to mangle English by inventing a pronoun for "he/she" "He" is the generic pronoun in English, dammit. (I envy the Japanese, who, I am told, do have a he/she pronoun.) But I do not consider this really very important.

Yet ten years later, in 1989, LeGuin revisited that essay,<sup>5</sup> and describes how she changed her mind entirely not too long after such a breezy dismissal of the importance of pronouns:

This "utter refusal" ... collapsed, utterly, within a couple of years more. I still dislike invented pronouns, but now dislike them less than the so-called generic pronoun he/him/his, which does in fact exclude women from discourse; and which was an invention of male grammarians, for until the sixteenth century the English generic singular pronoun was they/them/their, as it still is in English and American colloquial speech. It should be restored to the written language, and let the pedants and pundits squeak and gibber in the streets.

Despite its grammatical conventionality, *The Left Hand of Darkness* is a much more thoughtful meditation on gender and society than *A Voyage to Arcturus*. Part of that is that it's just a better book. But it's also a book written in a society that had moved on in which conversations about gender it's willing to engage in. Linguists in the 1960s and 1970s were engaging in lively discussions about how sexism is encoded in language,<sup>6</sup> and whether *he* truly is as neutral and generic as people (like LeGuin in the 1960s) like to claim.<sup>7</sup> In this context, LeGuin's Gethenians don't just represent a wonky biology that requires a matching pronoun. If they did, then their pronouns would have to change every time they enter and exit kemmer. No, the Gethenians allow LeGuin to explore the idea that gender need not dictate one's role and recognized capacities. That gender is not, in fact, a necessary part of society.

Yet, like Lindsay, LeGuin was still controlled by the idea that sexual identity directly affects personality. Because, as we learn in Chapter 7, "the sexual impulse is

tremendously strong in [kemmer], controlling the entire personality, subjecting all other drives to its imperative." For all that the Gethenians are not sexual or gendered most of the time, the fact remains that when they acquire sexual organs, sex becomes dominant in defining their identity.

Furthermore, for all her progressive thoughtfulness, LeGuin still catered to a default male perspective. Beyond the decision to use default 'he' for Gethenians, she also presented the world of Gethen through the perspective of Genly Ai, a visitor whose own biology has fixed his gender as biologically male (a property that the Gethenians view as a bit perverse, to see a human who is perpetually and continuously a sexual being). And as the perpetually sexual and perpetually male Genly Ai grows closer to his Gethenian companion Estraven, who—if not always male—was always coded with male pronouns, we find that LeGuin also catered to a default heterosexual perspective. A certain amount of rhetorical gymnastics are used to sidestep the queer potential growing in the nascent intimacy and eventual sexual attraction between them. (LeGuin does say, in the same essay where she revisits her pronoun decisions, that she also regrets this knee-jerk assumption in her worldbuilding. Her views changed remarkably in the space of that decade.) Indeed, more generally on Gethen, a committed couple will match their biological sex 50% of the time they enter kemmer, and yet when Gethenians are in kemmer, they only ever choose heterosexual partners. Once again, sexual attraction and sexual identity cannot be separated from procreation, even on Gethen.

Jump forward another half century, and we have in Ann Leckie's *Imperial Radch* books another set of perspectives separated by a decade. The original *Ancillary* series came out starting in 2013, and her most recent installment in that universe, *Translation State*, came out just this year, in 2023 (reviewed (by me!) on Nerds Of a Feather here). And once again, we can trace developments in social concerns about gender by looking at the differences between Leckie in 2013, and Leckie this year.

From the beginning, Leckie was not so considerate of the default male, default het, default binary conventions as LeGuin was. Indeed, she is downright provocative.<sup>8</sup> Rather than treading a truly neutral path with default *they*, as LeGuin later wished she had done, Leckie builds a world where the default coding is female. Although superficially this decision had the same effect as LeGuin's genderless society with default male coding—the same pronoun for everyone!—its impact was very different. Not only was the male perspective entirely erased, but the *Radch* isn't like Gethen, where everyone is by default sexless. In the *Radch*, people still have sexual organs in profusion. Those organs are simply uncoded by gender. And that idea made a vocal, active subgroup of science fiction readers *extremely uncomfortable*. The very idea of it! People with the same plumbing doing things, cats and dogs living together, mass hysteria!

What the original *Ancillary* books did *not* do, however (or not much), was touch on questions of gender identity or trans issues. How could they? Gender isn't a thing in the Radch. Everyone is she. It's as impossible to misgender someone within the Radch as it is for a 21st century human, whose culture simply does not recognize the concept of questors, to misquestor another 21st century human.

I don't know whether Leckie was deliberately side-stepping the issue, as LeGuin did on Gethen, or whether she merely overlooked it. Breq observes in *Ancillary Justice* that 'the cues meant to distinguish gender changed from place to place, sometimes radically, and rarely made much sense to me' (pg 3). This recognition that gender can be arbitrary certainly leaves open the possibility of transgender people outside the Radch. Yet, later, in a rather entertaining sequence in *Ancillary Sword*, we learn about the historical tendency of an annexed system, the Athoeki, to make 'a division between people with penises and people without' (pg 84), which is agreed among the Radchaaai to be parochial and bizarre. Of course, there are more than just the Athoeki outside the Radch, but it is striking that one of the most in-depth discussions about gender-having, non-Radch is still explicitly linking gender to biology.

Within the original *Ancillary* trilogy, it seems, Leckie was primarily interested in exploring what happens when gender and biological distinctions are both removed entirely from society. She wasn't quite yet ready to explore what happens when they're still present, but delinked in the way that is necessary for building a trans-inclusive society.

And this decision is understandable, given the publication date of 2013 for *Ancillary Justice*. In 2013 society was not talking about trans rights the way it was talking about gender roles. 2013 was a lot longer ago, culturally, than it feels to middle aged ladies like me. Gay marriage in the US was not legal. J. K. Rowling had not yet alienated her readership with her anti-trans views. Trans people existed,<sup>9</sup> but trans equality was not yet in the public spotlight the way it is now. Politicians were much more het<sup>10</sup> up about which adults got to marry than about which people were allowed which kind of medical care. Forget banning gender-affirming surgery and hormone therapy—*abortion* was still legal in 2013. In 2013, only a decade ago, the dominant gender-related questions still centered on male-female binary oppositions. Sheryl Sandberg published *Lean In* in 2013. Remember *Lean In*? It's the book that suggested that workplace sexism could be fixed if only women changed their behavior.

By 2023, however, trans rights have become a rallying cry for the progressive left (and a target of hate for the reactionary right), and Leckie has expanded the world of the Radch to address it in a fascinatingly deft way in her new book *Translation State*. Because, although the Radchaaai do not distinguish gender in their

pronouns, there are cultures around the Radch that do. The Athoeki of ten years ago stuck with a traditional Earthlike male/female-style binary, but in *Translation State* Leckie has introduced other cultures that have finally, fully delinked gender and sex, allowing more than just male-female binaries, and respecting people's own choices about which gender category they use.

And when these people interact with the Radchaaai, they get misgendered. Unlike Breq, who at least makes an effort to guess at what the correct gender coding might be, most other Radchaaai don't even bother. In *Translation State*, when a Radchaaai official is explicitly and repeatedly corrected, she waves it off with a disdainful 'Whatever. Anyway . . .'

This is not, in the world of the book, any kind of transphobia at work. To be transphobic, you must believe that gender is immutable; to believe that gender is immutable you must know what gender is, and the Radch are entirely blind to it. Rather, in the world of the book, this attitude is a reflection of the political dominance of the Radchaaai, and their refusal to recognize cultural traditions that they do not possess themselves. This is an American asking a colleague whether they have plans for Easter Break, assuming that *of course* the colleague is Christian. This is a bathroom technology engineer assuming that *of course* all hands look like white hands, resulting in automatic soap dispensers refusing to dispense soap for people of color. It is cultural imperialism behind these misgenderings, not transphobia.

And yet—and yet and yet and yet. Even though the Radchaaai can't see gender, it's hard not to read the repeated misgenderings as transphobia. It feels oddly reminiscent of white people who insist that they 'don't see color' and then proceed to indulge in all sorts of racial microaggressions.

The insidiousness of this transphobic flavor to the Radchaaai is characteristic of Leckie's deft touch. She never has the broader conversation explicitly with her readers. Her books are never *about* gender and pronouns, not the way that LeGuin's work was, or even the bits dealing with the Phaens in Lindsay's work. Leckie doesn't have her characters discuss gender and pronouns explicitly. She doesn't use them as mouthpieces, having them speechify her worldview, engage with each other to present The Gender Issue. Indeed, the books are very straightforwardly discussions of the consequences of cultural dominance and imperialism. But by simply presenting the treatment of gender and pronouns as she does, with their transphobic resonances, she forces the readers to have the conversation with themselves.

In the *Ancillary* books, Leckie also forced people to confront gender relations without ever explicitly discussing them, simply through the nature of the Radchaaai's pronoun system. This was an important conversation in 2013. And now, Leckie

is forcing people to confront transphobia and gender identity without ever explicitly discussing it, again, simply through the nature of the Radchaai's pronoun system. In the space of a decade, the same linguistic worldbuilding has been repurposed to engage with the evolution of ongoing issues, without ever making those issues the focus of the book. It's more elegant than Lindsay—no surprise there—but I'd argue it's also more elegant than LeGuin. It's all rather quite brilliant, actually.

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**1** This number is an order of magnitude more frequent than the other possible systems of pronoun gender expression listed. Although WALS is not an exhaustive inventory of all languages, it is constructed with a particular eye toward representing the range and scope of diversity across human languages (Comrie et al 2013), and so I'm inclined to believe that non-gendered pronoun systems may well be the rule, rather than the exception, to human language grammars. <sup>↵</sup>

**2** Earthling speakers of Quichua and Finnish and 252 other languages do not have this problem. <sup>↵</sup>

**3** Breq's own relation to gender is not quite the same as other Radchaais', because she is not a human. Rather, Breq's body is one of many biological avatars of a spaceship's AI, which controls many human bodies as extensions of her own consciousness. I use 'she' here simply because it's what Breq would use for herself. <sup>↵</sup>

**4** This sequence goes on quite a bit, with a lot of rather quite rude remarks demands on the part of Maskull, who says things like, 'Never mind that. It is your *sex* that interests me. How do you satisfy your desires?' At least buy the nice phaen a drink first! <sup>↵</sup>

**5** If you have read *The Left Hand of Darkness*, I highly, highly recommend reading this revisitation. It's called 'Is Gender Necessary: Redux', and it is formatted in two columns, with the original text on the left, and LeGuin's revisions and annotations about how her thinking has shifted in the intervening years on the right. It is effectively a three-way conversation between LeGuin-in-1968, LeGuin-in-1976, and LeGuin-in-1989. One LeGuin is brilliant; three LeGuins are triply so. See references for link. <sup>↵</sup>

**6** For a very accessible example of one such discussion, see 'Language and Woman's Place', by Robin Lakeoff, 1973, link in references. She even talks about the use of 'he' as the neutral, unmarked pronoun for mixed groups. <sup>↵</sup>

**7** I'm reminded here of a line from James H White's 'Sector General' stories, originally written in the 1960s and 1970s, which offers an interesting perspective on the universal use of he: '... When O'Mara became quiet and polite and not at all sarcastic, when he began treating a person as a patient rather than a colleague in other words, that person was in trouble up to his or its neck.' *His or its*. Not *His*, *hers*, or *its*, but *his or its*. Clearly, 'his' can't be truly a gender neutral universal pronoun, or else it would have included aliens who individually would take 'its'. And

since this book is wildly misogynistic in many, many other ways (oh, good gravy, far too many ways to remain within the scope of a footnote), I think it's unlikely that White intended for 'his' to mean 'his or her' the way grammarians intended. 'His' meant 'his'. Women need not apply. <sup>↵</sup>

**8** She is not the first to be deliberately provocative, of course. Samuel R Delaney springs to mind as a writer who made a point of pushing all sorts of boundaries with respect to gender identity and sexuality a generation before Leckie. But Delaney was not representative of the SFF reading public's preferences. Indeed, his willingness to push boundaries cost him publishing contracts with Bantam when he explicitly included the AIDS epidemic in his Nevèrÿon books in the 1980s (Lucas 2023). He would not spring to mind so easily if he were not so exceptional in his work, if he were not an exception to a more general tendency. <sup>↵</sup>

**9** Trans people have always existed. <sup>↵</sup>

**10** Get it? *Get it?* <sup>↵</sup>

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## The Writer's Guild of America is on Strike

Vance K



This week, for the first time in 15 years, the Writers Guild of America (WGA) called a strike against the major Hollywood studios. Pencils down. Unlike 15 years ago, however, the “major Hollywood studios” now include names like Apple, Amazon, and Netflix.

A lot of the reporting I've seen this week has been...not great. Not biased or misleading, necessarily, but incomplete, lacking crucial context, and subject to the routine both-sides-ism of many mainstream news reports. So to the best of my ability, I'd like to walk readers

who are interested through what this strike is about, how we got here, and why the Guild position that this is a strike about an existential threat to the profession of writing for film and television is in no way a hyperbole.

Full disclosure, while I do belong to a Union, I am not a WGA member. I recently participated in negotiations for my Union and helped achieve a pay raise for other film and video professionals represented by my bargaining unit, and I lived through the 2007-2008 WGA strike. In many ways, that strike cost me a burgeoning screenwriting career. I'll address that later, but the point is that writers are going into this work stoppage with eyes open, aware that there will be personal costs, and yet they go in — in service of the greater good of all writers, and future generations of writers. While I acknowledge the familiar trope of the “Hollywood elite” and the popular characterization of professional artists as entitled or ungrateful or what-have-you, I reject that. This work stoppage underscores why we have Unions at all — this is fundamental E pluribus unum shit.

Let's take a walk together.

### **This is not about “wages”**

Much of the reporting I've seen around the WGA strike has said something along the lines of “Writers are asking for increased compensation.” To my mind, this is a meaningless sentence. No Union I'm aware of has an agreement that ties employee compensation to the Consumer Price Index (CPI), so every Union, during every bargaining cycle, will ask for increased compensation to, at the very least, keep up with inflation. In my experience, even during economic downturns Unions will

usually get an annual pay bump or contract bonus. This is basic, basic Union stuff. So while the WGA proposal does include a raise to writer minimums, this is not the issue.

There are two core issues behind this strike: 1) The studios have engaged in systematized practices of eliciting free/discounted work from writers while their own profits have ballooned, and 2) the advent and proliferation of streaming services has irrevocably changed the nature of filmed entertainment. This is crucial to understand. We are on a new planet, and while the studios may feel that, sure, the oxygen content is different but everybody who keels over can be replaced, the Union would like to acknowledge that yes, we are on a new planet, but no, writers are not interchangeable cogs to be worn out and tossed away. The difference is that stark, and almost that literal when it comes to the integration of AI.

For context, the last time the WGA contract expired was in 2020. Streaming had advanced out of its infancy, but because of the pandemic, all of the Hollywood guilds decided to punt on contract negotiations and mostly extend the previous contracts. This was entirely justified. Nobody wants to go public with demands for more money for prestigious jobs when millions of Americans are out of work and locked at home. But the reality was that the landscape had already, irrevocably changed from when the previous contract had been negotiated in 2017. So 2023 is a reckoning that has been brewing for essentially the entire lifetime of streaming television.

## Free Work

In 2018, the WGA rolled out an initiative called “No Writing Left Behind.” At issue was the practice of studios bringing in multiple writers or writing teams to pitch on “open writing assignments.” This means the studio bought the rights to, say, Slinky, they want to make a Slinky movie, and they bring in 20 writers to give them detailed breakdowns of what the beginning, middle, and end of a Slinky movie might be, and who the characters are. Young writers would routinely spend 4-6 weeks preparing a detailed pitch and presentation, and after they gave it in person for a studio or producer, they would leave behind a written summary. In practice, many studios and producers would know in advance that they were never going to hire any of these writers. They would instead sift all of their pitches into their ideal Slinky movie, and then hire an A-list writer to write the actual movie, using the unpaid work of all of the job candidates as a backbone. Sounds insane, right? It was regular practice. This exchange from a 2018 episode of the Scriptnotes podcast highlights the issue.

John: So this most recent version of this topic came because last fall we did a bunch of screenwriter outreach lunches. So the WGA would invite screenwriters in and we'd talk

about what things were concerning to them. And so you went to one of those lunches and I went to a bunch of those lunches and there was one lunch - I think not the one that you were at - where this writing team was there and they described how they had to write a 50-page treatment to get this job.

Craig: Oh man.

John: I wanted to reach through time and grab them by their lapels and say don't do that. But of course they didn't know they were doing that at the start. They went in and they pitched on a project, they had their little notes with them. The producer or the executive said like, “Oh hey, could you send through that stuff?” And so they sent through that stuff and then he's like, “Oh, could you just work on it a little bit more?” And it escalated up until it became a 50-page document for which they were not paid before they were hired to write that script.

Scriptnotes, October 31, 2018

Imagine working 4-6 weeks for free. And then a year later seeing the work you did show up in a movie that makes a **billion** dollars at the box office. Seriously.

Before the 2007-2008 strike, I was a young feature writer, and the spec market for original screenplays still kind of existed. But without representation, I didn't have the ability to send a script out to the entire town. Instead, through word of mouth and relationships, I wound up with a number of screenplays in development with some serious production companies, including some with offices on studio lots, run by people who used to run studios. Including with people who went on to win Best Picture Oscars. But the deal was always the same for me: we love this script, it's almost there, we'd love to bring it in and get it set up, but we'd like you to make a few changes first. For one company, I did 12 rewrites on a feature screenplay. That's a lot of work for no pay.

This kind of thing happens even with represented writers whose scripts have been acquired by studios, under the guise of what's called a “producer's pass.” A studio contract to write a feature film will have one or more “steps” in it, and each step has a definition and a dollar amount attached. Many deals are a “one-step” deal, which means you turn in the first draft of a script, and that's it. The studio can offer you more to do a re-write, but once the script is turned in, that's the end of the contractual obligation. So you write your script, hand it to the producer (who isn't the studio — they are different entities), and the producer says it's great, change this-this-and-this, and we'll hand it in. That second pass the writer does through the script is a producer's pass. You want to hand in the best possible script, the script that's most likely to get you the opportunity to do the re-write, the one that's most likely to get the studio's greenlight, so you polish it up. Or fully rewrite it, you know, depending on the producer's notes. Or do that 12 times before the

producer is willing to turn in that “first draft” to the studio.

At one point, I was doing that on four different original scripts with four different production companies. I was writing full-time, even had a borrowed office that I went to, and I wasn't getting paid. I was not alone. With the recent shift of original feature films largely to streaming platforms, I'm not sure how prevalent this remains today, but it happens, and at the time it was common practice.

## Writing Teams

The other practice that I don't see mentioned anywhere, but was a big problem for a long time, is the idea of “paper teams.” Under WGA agreements, a writing team was treated like an individual. So if you and Sharon, who you grew up with, dreaming of making movies or TV shows together, decided to work together as writers, you would count as a single writer. If the WGA minimum for a 60-minute episode of TV was \$40,000, you and Sharon would both get \$20,000 instead of the \$40,000 you'd get if you worked individually.

Fine. That's not tyrannical. It sucks, but you opted to work together, etc. It's not the best, but you buy the ticket, you take the ride. It's important to note here that you two don't actually get that \$40,000. You will have an agent (who got you into the room to even be considered for the job), who gets 10%. You will have a lawyer (who made sure your contract wasn't full of termites), who gets 5%. These days, you'll probably also have a manager, who isn't regulated by any governmental agency, and will take maybe 5% or maybe 10%. So from the jump, the two of you are making at best 80% of that writing fee. And then you pay taxes, which we'll peg at maybe 35%.

You are now at \$20,800. For the two of you, that's \$10,400 each, for however long you worked on that project. You sold a script. It's going to be on television. You are living the dream!

And if that's all you sell this year, you are living below the Federal poverty level.

But it's cool. You get hired onto the show as a Staff Writer, and you get a weekly rate in addition to your episode fee. So that's a little better. But now imagine that there's no Sharon. It's just you, and you've been busting your ass for years to get your first TV job. Everything goes well, and a producer for a successful TV show tells you, “Look, we love your writing. We think you're perfect for the show. We want to bring you in. But there's another writer we love just as much. Are you cool if we say you two are a team? That way both of you get hired, you're both on the successful show, and you both have an on-ramp to the TV career you've always dreamt of?” If you say “yes,” you are now working for half of the industry minimum scale rate. But you're on a hit show??

Many writers had to settle for this. They were a team with another writer on paper only, and got paid half of the WGA minimums for episodes, rates, and residuals. (Writers get residuals when their episodes are re-aired, and if the show is sold into syndication. So if TBS buys the rights to re-air the Slinky TV Hour, which was originally produced by Warner Bros. TV, those writers would also get a residual based on the licensing fee.)

So with broadcast and cable television, writers are paid for 1) writing the episode, 2) being staffed on the show, 3) a residual for every time the episode re-airs, and 4) a residual based on the license fee when the show is sold to syndicated TV. You could have a good run with Slinky — work on it for a few years, about 40 weeks a year, with the ability to develop projects of your own during the 12 weeks or so of hiatus, waiting for the next season. As a writer you generally go to set to shepherd the episodes you've written through production. You learn how to talk to the crew, to directors, and to get the thing you saw in your head, and wrote on paper, up onto the screen through production and post-production. It's not trivial — it is a difficult skill to master, and it generally takes a number of tries.

Between the open writing assignment pitches and the paper teams, the studios had exhausted a ton of credibility over the last few years, with the WGA stepping in with efforts like No Writing Left Behind and negotiating for the end of paper teams. Then came mini-rooms.

## Mini-Rooms

With a few exceptions, TV shows are written by a bunch of folks in a writer's room. Standard network TV orders were generally somewhere around 22 episodes. It's just way too much for a single person to write, or even five people. So the writers would work under the direction of the showrunner, who's also usually credited as the Executive Producer, and that person's the last say before something would go to the network. In film, since the emergence of the auteur theory in the 1950s, the director is seen as the top creative on a project. In TV, it's the showrunner, who is also a writer.

These 22 episodes would keep the writing staff busy for about 40 weeks a year, as I've mentioned, because the show is still being written even while it's in production. The writer's room will assemble, they'll break major beats of the season, a bunch of story ideas, character arcs, all that, and get some scripts written before cameras roll on the first episode, but from that point on, both operations will run simultaneously. Writers traditionally cycle out of the room to guide their episode on set and through post-production, and then cycle back into the room.

Shows for streaming platforms, as we are all aware, have much smaller orders. Somewhere between six and 13 episodes now constitute a full season or limited



series. So when you work in streaming, you no longer have 40 weeks of employment for the year, if you get staffed. And to be clear, just because you work one season on a show, even if it gets renewed, there's not a guarantee you'll be asked back for the next season. So even with the network model, there's a ton of uncertainty and turnover. But writers would often be placed on exclusivity agreements while the future of their show was decided by the network, so they couldn't take another job, and would just have to wait to see if they were offered the next season.

In previous WGA negotiations in 2014, the terms of those unpaid holds were re-evaluated for the streaming era, because you might have a writer who works twelve weeks on a Netflix show, which premieres a year or more later because the room and the set aren't running in tandem — the whole show is written before cameras roll — but the writers would be on a hold pending a decision on the series' renewal, and can't go find more work. There were writers who found themselves in situations where they wrote for a show that was becoming a huge hit, but were prohibited from going out and finding more work for months and months. In 2020, the WGA negotiated limits to those exclusivity provisions, and established that writers employed in mini-rooms of less than 8 weeks duration cannot be subject to holds of this kind.

Not many people can make ends meet by working eight weeks and then being forced to sit at home for the next few months. And even with the protections now in place, having to go out and try to score your next gig while working your current gig is tough. When I started my video production business twenty-some years ago, I was spending half of my time doing work, and half of my time looking for the next work. It's not the kind of situation you would expect card-carrying Union members to find themselves in, let alone many members, all the time. But an acquaintance of mine, who is one of the workingest TV writers in town, started out on a network show, and I remember when that series ended, they wound up working on three different shows for two different networks the following year. And they were lucky (and good...very, very good and in-demand).

But the companies are not only totally fine with this arrangement, they want to make it more prevalent. Two common practices today: mini-rooms of low-level writers doing the heavy lifting on breaking seasons and episodes, before a streamer has decided if they are going to move forward with the show, and streamers wrapping the room and sending all the writers, except the showrunner, home before physical production starts.

In the first scenario, the studios get to read what a show will be, how the season will go, and have a good idea about the entire arc of it thanks to the work of junior writers who got paid for just a few weeks. But they didn't write episodes, so they won't get any episode fees or residuals if the show does get picked up, nor are they

guaranteed a spot in any eventual writer's room if the network decides to move forward with the show. It's like the open writing assignments issue all over again, with only a nominal fee paid upfront. So as a young writer, you're being forced to bounce from show, to show, to show with no kind of stability and no ability to plan, which affects every life decision from where you live to if you will try to start a family. This is not a sustainable model.

And that leads to the second scenario, where only the showrunner is left for the actual production. The showrunner's job is massive. There are reasons individual writers would take the helm on individual episodes. There are very, very few people in this business who can shoulder all of the responsibilities of a showrunner on a show in production without any additional creative support. It is a recipe for creative and professional burnout, or even worse outcomes. And the industry forecloses its own training ground for the next generation of creators and showrunners. A common refrain I have heard from writers over the last few weeks is that it's not uncommon for a writer to have been on staff on three shows, and have never been to set, let alone through post-production. Again, this is not a sustainable model. You will have an entire generation of show creators and showrunners who have no experience beyond the writer's room, and the quality of programming will suffer, subscriber bases will erode, and the pursuit of profits today, as we see in so many other areas, will close the door to long-term success.

This is in many ways par for the course for the new breed of studio: Apple, Amazon, Netflix, etc. I recognize that no matter what sector they may operate in, every public corporation in America is actually in the same business — paying dividends to shareholders. But these companies in the streaming space bring with them a number of particular, specific worries.

## **Tech Companies and AI**

First of all, the tech sector is famously Union-averse. So they'd rather the WGA just go ahead and fuck all the way off. They are also not in the TV business, they are in the technology money business. So they will find ways to pay writers less, and they will engineer structural systems to ensure that they can continue driving down the cost of using people to generate content. They will cry poverty as their rationale. The WGA estimates that their entire package of demands will cost the studios somewhere around \$450 million. To put that in perspective, the CEO of Warner Bros. Discovery, David Zaslav, made nearly \$250 million in 2021 through salary, stock, and other compensation. Apple is the most valuable company in the world, with somewhere between \$50 billion and \$900 billion in cash-on-hand alone and a total market cap of almost \$3 trillion. Amazon is worth over \$1 trillion, as well (and for what it's worth, Amazon's initial foray into entertainment creation was to ask aspiring writers to send in scripts for a "contest," and the grand prize would

be -- not money, no -- Amazon would produce your script and monetize it for themselves). We've probably all heard that Netflix has been losing subscribers and value, but they also have earned a reputation for throwing tons of money at stupid projects. They have also earned a reputation for hiding their metrics.

You now have a situation where the residual rate for streaming is a fraction of the rates for traditional broadcast and cable television, no way to verify how many people are actually watching anything (I guess we just have to take their words for it...), vertically integrated employers who both produce and distribute the content, so no more licensing fees and residuals, business practices designed to employ the fewest number of people for the shortest period of time, like Uber drivers for "streaming content," no more pipeline for professional development, and employers who also happen to be developing AI tools designed to write things. This all adds up to an environment, just like the WGA has said publicly, that aims to make the profession of writing for film and television a gig economy.

If you don't think the studios will try replacing a mini-room with ChatGPT, and then giving whatever it spits out and the executives sift through for their preferred iteration to a small team to actually produce the scripts, or even just to a showrunner to lead it through production, then I think you haven't been paying attention. Remember famous tech start-up Napster? Their entire business model was facilitating the transfer of art they didn't pay for, millions of times a day. This is tech's jam. I mean, check out the companies' response to the Guild's proposal on AI:

#### ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Proposal: Regulate use of artificial intelligence on MBA-covered projects: AI can't write or rewrite literary material; can't be used as source material; and MBA-covered material can't be used to train AI.

Response: Rejected our proposal. Countered by offering annual meetings to discuss advancements in technology.

An annual briefing on how they're going to be eliminating more writing responsibilities? Nah.

#### **So be wary when you hear the kind of "one side says this, the other side says this" reporting like in this NPR excerpt:**

"The companies' behavior has created a gig economy inside a union workforce, and their immovable stance in this negotiation has betrayed a commitment to further devaluing the profession of writing," the WGA said in a statement Monday night. "From their refusal to guarantee any level of weekly employment in episodic television, to the creation of a 'day rate' in comedy variety, to their stonewalling on free work for screenwriters and

on AI for all writers, they have closed the door on their labor force and opened the door to writing as an entirely freelance profession."

The WGA said picketing would begin Tuesday afternoon. In a statement sent to NPR sent shortly before the announcement of the strike call, AMPTP said it had presented a package proposal to the guild "which included generous increases in compensation for writers as well as improvements in streaming residuals."

According to that statement, the studio's alliance told the WGA it was prepared to improve that offer "but was unwilling to do so because of the magnitude of other proposals still on the table that the Guild continues to insist upon. The primary sticking points are 'mandatory staffing,' and 'duration of employment' — Guild proposals that would require a company to staff a show with a certain number of writers for a specified period of time, whether needed or not."

And be wary when you see phrases like "the Guild also complained..." where the verb choice is doing a lot of work, none of it benefitting the writers:

The WGA and AMPTP spent months trying to renegotiate their 2020 contract, which expired Monday at midnight. The biggest issue was the guild's push for higher writing compensation on streaming shows.

The WGA argues that the median pay for a writer-producer has declined by 23 percent in recent years when adjusted for inflation, that its members on the West Coast were paid less in 2021 than 2020, and that they have fewer job opportunities.

The guild also complained that writers' livelihoods took a hit when traditional TV seasons of 20 or more episodes gave way to shorter seasons on services such as Netflix, Hulu or Amazon, typically between eight and 12 episodes.

Members are also unhappy about studios' use of "mini-rooms," where lower-paid writers work to develop stories and write scripts before a show has been signed off on by a studio.

Consider, instead, this LA Times roundtable quote from Liz Tigelaar, showrunner of **Little Fires Everywhere**:

Q: What's been the temperature in the room, Liz? What is your staff talking about?

Tigelaar: It's interesting because when we struck in 2007, at least from my perspective, the things we were striking for felt conceptual and heady. Now I think every single writer is touched by what's happening. [...] The mini room people are — it's so abused. And I've noticed even if you're lucky enough to have a full room, they leave and then you are on set as the showrunner to do every single thing. That is more than one person could possibly do. [or] if you're lucky, maybe you get one or two people to stay. It's not that assembly line of each writer goes and has the experience to produce their scripts. And then what you have are people moving up so fast, or at an intense deficit. And they don't

even know it, because they're so happy because they did four episodes, and then became a story editor, and then skipped a co-producer, and then became a supervising producer, and they have never been on set before. And they are going to be poised to create a show and not have the ability to run it.

“Every single writer.” This **is**, in fact, an existential crisis for the future of professional writing in filmed entertainment. Media framing that suggests otherwise is misleading at best. And...might be worse than that.

For my own story, what happened to me after the 2007-2008 strike? I had bad luck. I had gotten a manager right before the strike at a boutique management company, and it went under during the strike. My new manager was also out of work. Three projects of mine were at companies that also went under, or downsized the executives I was working with during the strike, so those projects no longer had homes. The fourth project was at a big company that was no longer seen as a solid investment for its corporate parent, and was shuttered a few months later. I tried to get some of the projects set up again, but in the end, I just ran out of time. When the strike was called, my first child was about nine months old. I had a family, rent was going up, and we ran out of runway. I had to pivot back to the kind of production work I was doing before I moved to LA, and that was kind of that for screenwriting.

That's the future the Guild and its members are trying to fend off for everybody. A future where the only people who can write, the only voices that make it to our screens, are those of people who can afford to not work, who won't run out of runway, or people that don't have families and can commit to working 16-20 hour days as the showrunner on a limited series with no other support.

That's a future none of us should want.

## Our Retellings are Dull - the Problem of the Modern Mythical Reimagining

Roseanna Pendlebury



Most of the myth retellings we have right now are bland.

There are several reasons for it, not least because most of them are retelling a relatively small subset of the stories from primarily one culture (Ancient Greece). Even the best, most interesting work that only plays in this small sandpit would run the risk of being overdone. And, in my opinion, most of what we're getting isn't anywhere near that best.

For one thing, the way many of them are adapted to modernity, in format, but critically in tone, does them a disservice. The originals have guts and teeth and claws, and they may not be the ones we want now, but they have them. But, unfortunately, the majority of the retellings take them out, make them... more palatable, but less substantial. Sometimes, this is in service of not spotlighting and lauding some of the truly awful things that were valorised in the past, which I can get behind, but sometimes... the originals actually have a better message, or a theme that remains relatable, even without it being above moral censure. Even when meant in the best possible way, some of the modern simplification erases the glorious complexity of the original - why make Achilles gay when you can accept that he could have sexual love for Patroclus, but also father a child on a woman, and neither of these things defined his identity in the ancient world. Isn't it more interesting to look at a world that viewed sexuality differently than to cut the edges off a figure from the past to make him fit a single, modern narrative? Or take any of the dangerous female figures of myth, for example, and Medea or Circe in particular. There is something to be said for leaving a powerful, dangerous, vengeful woman in a world hostile to femininity exactly as the nightmare to men that she is, rather than softening her for approachability. The Romans particularly had a deep-seated fear of the power of the virgin woman... so let that fear be palpable.

And then for another, a large proportion of the ones published and heavily marketed in recent memory are billed as “feminist retellings”... while having the blandest, most milquetoast version of feminism imaginable. In the year of our common era 2023, I submit it to you that “making a woman the protagonist” is not actually all that much of a feminist statement anymore. “What if it was told from a female perspective, so we can understand her suffering from her point of view?” I'm sorry babes but Ovid got there before you in \*checks notes\* the first century BCE. And

then Euripides before him in the 5th century BCE. It is my genuine, considered opinion that about 75% of the modern feminist retellings do no better in their feminism than was achieved by either *The Trojan Women* or the *Heroides*, both of which centre the female experience of, respectively, the Trojan War or “being in any way associated with a hero of Greek or Roman myth”, and the suffering that causes. And these are far from the only historical works that do exactly the same thing - wonder what the women felt in these stories that focus on men and their heroism, and dwell on the human cost. It was a common rhetorical training activity to ask students to argue the extent to which Helen was villain or victim in the Trojan War. Seeing these women as people, who lived and thought and felt and suffered... just isn't new.

And maybe stories don't need to all be new. Maybe sometimes we can reexamine something without having to do a radically different take on it. But given the intense saturation in the market at the moment for these stories... well, sure, it's allowed. But it's rather dull.

And finally, of course, we have the problem of who gets to tell those stories. If we look at the ones that get the big press, all the marketing and the buzz and the social media engagement, they are your Madeline Millers, your Natalie Hayneses. Both are good writers, for whom there is no criticism for their success. But there are notable absences - why are all these big ticket Greek myth retellings from white, anglophone women? Where's the variety?

If you saw any of the discussion around the recently announced Greek myth anthology *Fit for the Gods*, you will be well aware that there's a repeated issue around lack of Greek storytellers and perspectives being represented in these retellings. *Fit for the Gods* bills itself as a diverse anthology, and, on some metrics, it very much is, but it is also intensely US-centred in terms of its authors. In the same way, if we look at the truly big names in Greek myth retellings... who among them isn't British or American? Who is getting all that marketing push, except these women from the anglosphere? And far more than in *Fit for the Gods*, they are overwhelmingly white, cis, and straight. There's a tight noose around who gets to tell these stories, who gets promoted when telling these stories, and it's stifling out a lot of other voices, even the ones from Greece. From actual Greece.

Which feeds into exactly the same problem - we're getting the same stories retold and retold, by people from the same background, with the same perspectives on the same stories... and so we're not really getting anything new.

How many retellings are there, at the moment, of Hades and Persephone, but make it a love story? It's a lot. I've read (and disliked) several of them. This is not only a take that multiple people have done, but one that is, at its heart, intensely

uncomfortable - we take a story of the rape of a young girl and decided, actually, it will be nicer and more fun to read if the dark and broody god is instead a softboi and will protect our beautiful little sheltered heroine from harm and/or her overbearing mother. How... how have we managed to go *backwards* from the original myth? And then do it to saturation? It's not feminist, it's not new, it's not interesting, most of them aren't good... so what exactly *are* they bringing to the table?

It's easy money and easy marketing, right? The great thing about these retellings, from a publishing and marketing perspective, is that you're selling people something they have a lot easier job of telling if they're going to like it, and so making them much more likely to buy it. “For fans of Madeline Miller” grand, done. Retell the same love story? If they know they like it, they'll buy more. Make them all occupy the same tone, the same perspectives, the same takes, make them safe and sanitised and bland, and they will be so very widely marketable and unobjectionable, but with a “feminist” tag to hide how truly unrevolutionary the content actually is.

What if we were braver? Or publishing were. What if, and bear with me on this one, we took our direction from elsewhere in fantasy, and looked to *The Locked Tomb* series for our inspiration. What if we decided we could handle stories full of messy, troubled, violent, scary and problematic people, just... being that. Stories open to interpretation and different readings. I was very lucky, a number of years ago, to read a book called *Bright Air Black* by David Vann, which does just that. It is a retelling of the story of Medea, and it does something that very few retellings have ever approached, for me - it let a figure from mythology be messy, and complex, and bad, and let her be the protagonist anyway, with not a single apology for her being exactly as she was. There is a great deal of power in that, and a power many of those feminist retellings are lacking, even though this was never marketed as such a thing.

Or what if publishing didn't wait until the market was utterly swamped with all this same old same old before being sufficiently daring to dip a toe outside of its comfort zone. Because there are people writing things that aren't these same five myths or same three perspectives - look at Maya Deane's *Wrath Goddess Sing*, where we imagine Achilles as a trans woman? Or look at *Kaikeyi* by Vaishnavi Patel? Or *Home Fire* by Kamila Shamsie? Or *Love in Colour* by Bolu Babalola? Or *Under my own Shadow* by Elena Kotsile? What if we could have got those types of stories right from the start, getting the buzz and the marketing and the special editions and the bookseller events and the press coverage that a new Madeline Miller book gets? What if we let “diversity”, however you want to articulate it, be there right from the start, and let us have genuinely diverse stories,

different genres and emotions and responses to different stories, stepping outside of this same little paddling pool of only a fraction of the Greek myths, out into a wider world of so many mythological stories?

I'd be happier. I'd read more of them.

Because this is the thing - I've mostly stopped reading those big marketed myth retellings. I am, in many ways, the targetest of target markets for a Greek myth retelling. I'm a white, anglophone, middle class feminist with a degree in Classics who likes to read. Selling them to me should be the easiest thing in the world. So it's insulting, to think that these books that ought to appeal to me, that clearly are targeted at my demographic, assume that what I want is to read the same three things over and over again, to never be challenged, to never have to think, or learn. To never have to explore what feminism might be outside of the smallest, most isolated and privileged little sphere. To never care about myths that aren't the ones I grew up with. To never be willing to live with a character who engages my sympathy while also being morally... complicated.

Of course, there's always the answer of "why don't we just stop retelling these stories at all and read new stuff", which is a fair point. But there is something in the older stories that clearly pulls us in, and I don't think it's necessarily bad to be swayed by that. *Antigone* has been staged as a play across 2464 years because there is something in it that appeals to us still. It still tells a story that resonates, in the tension between duty to morality and the state, the debts we owe to family, how authority can become tyranny. These are still relevant themes. And they are made all the more so when someone like Inua Ellams turns it into a commentary on being Muslim in modern Britain. But I believe that those values comes in the reinterpretation, the shift into different perspectives, the examination of the same core themes in different settings, by different voices and people. And we don't get that unless we let those stories be told by those different people. And we miss out on so many of these stories that may be just as compelling if we constrain ourselves to such a limited corpus of sources.

We don't need those bland, limited retellings.

Instead, we should have more retellings where Circe is terrifying, Medea is cruel and vengeful, where Artemis destroys those who wrong her, where Hades is a kidnapper and Persephone has to figure out where she fits in the aftermath, where Athena walks a careful line, avoiding the attentions of e.g. Hephaestus, where Achilles can love Patroclus as cousin, as sword-brother, as lover all in one, but also have a son by a woman and there be no contradictions. Where Hera is both wronged and wrong. Where Clytemnestra is everything she is and needs no justifications. Write them loud and bold and complex, and trust that readers

can find the value and the meaning in them, just as they have for the last three millennia. We should have retellings of myths that mean an anglophone audience might have to stop and listen to someone else's thoughts. We should be trusted to go and look things up, to be fascinated to learn more, and willing to not be pandered to on every page. We should live up to that trust. We should have retellings that let everyone have a voice.

They exist. They're just not being marketed. So maybe we should go find and read them, and embrace the wider, wilder world of myth. Maybe then they'll listen.

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## So... let's talk about the 'Tok

Arturo Serrano

**The conversation about MovieTok reviews has to do with more than expertise. It has to do with the way media companies have succeeded in outsourcing their perception management**



Remember when everyone was excited for BookTok? At least publishers were; a wave of free publicity is always welcome, even when its credibility is marred by blatant conflicts of interest and performative consumption. And yet, there are undeniable redeeming qualities to a movement that spreads the love of the written

word before millions of consumers of digital orality eager to find the exact subgenre of fiction that will match their microniche tastes. Doesn't the news complain all the time that books don't get enough respect? When was the last time your teenager browsed *Zoetrope*, or *Lapham's Quarterly*, or *The Times Literary Supplement*? At least in principle, we should celebrate any trend that raises mass literacy, as long as we can pretend not to notice the branded tote bags and sponsored segments.

The controversy around TikTok reviews has recently shifted venues. Last week, *The New York Times* published a piece on rising TikTok celebrities who comment on movies yet eschew the traditional label of critics. The author, Reggie Ugwu, doesn't explain how he picked which content creators to showcase. The selection comes off as mixed: some of the quoted reviewers routinely make posts that abound in hyperbolic praise, are happy to stay at the most superficial level of analysis, rely excessively on listicles to fill up space, recoil against the use of sophisticated layers of meaning, and prioritize the immediate sensations of the watching experience to the point that it often seems like they're not judging and rating the films but judging and rating their response to them. To the extent that film criticism is its own art form, and therefore TikTokers are, in a sense, making art (not so much a descendant of the Lindsay Ellis school of video essays, more properly an offshoot of knee-jerk reaction culture), MovieTok operates as an extreme version of an Expressionist movement, more interested in communicating the creator's feeling than in referring to the object that caused the feeling. This refusal to engage with the tough elements of narrative imposes a self-inflicted handicap on their possible contributions to film discourse, even if we count only the videos that aren't obviously ads.

Fortunately, bad habits are not universal across MovieTok. As deep as movie studios have put their hands inside this yummy cookie jar, other creators mentioned in the same article are clearly able to speak about media with the same perceptiveness, thoughtfulness, insight, subtlety, and sharpness that you'd demand from any professional critic. The short video format inevitably leads to rhetorical shortcuts, but there is quality to be found there. So *Pajiba's* response to Ugwu is unfairly reductive with its blanket verdict that "MovieTok Creators Are Corrupt." Even allowing for Sturgeon's Law, there is competent commentary to be found in every space and format. However, Ugwu doesn't paint a realistic picture of the issue either. Consider this baffling comparison he makes (quick, drink a cup of coffee so you can do the appropriate spit take):

"MovieTok creators are not the first in the history of film criticism to rebel against their elders. In the 1950s, François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard and other writers of the journal *Cahiers du Cinéma* disavowed the nationalism of mainstream French criticism."

I strongly suspect I'm at no risk of being called snobbish if I point out that "Highest Grossing Movie per Sport" and "2023 Movies that Need MORE Excitement" (whatever that means) don't quite match the areas where *Cahiers du Cinéma* prefers to set its focus. To give you a quick glimpse at the way the venerable French magazine talks about media: It finds the eponymous train network in *The Underground Railroad* "a glimmer of hope and a bottomless pit, phantasmagoria and nightmare;" it describes *Stranger Things* season 4 as "at the same time a continuation and an eternal return," where "the subversive potential of horror is undermined in favor of a binary prism;" chastises the latest *Indiana Jones* as "a saga that had already in its previous entry made fun of its aging hero," who is "apparently cursed to see his death endlessly postponed;" upon reviewing *Oppenheimer*, it identifies a fitting resonance in the origin of the word *blockbuster* as the name of a weapon capable of leveling city blocks, and thus a parallel between deadly radioactive sequelae and our current plague of film sequelitis; and in *Barbie* it finds that "the rigidity, emptiness and asepsis of the toys appear as hypostases of American Puritanism" and, even more damningly, "the didacticism of empowerment acts as an equally stifling discursive counterweight that prohibits any possibility of an event."

So, no. Definitely, no. MovieTok does have commentators who know what they're talking about, but in aggregate, it's nowhere near the ballpark, or the postal code, or the tectonic plate, or the galaxy cluster of what's going on at *Cahiers du Cinéma*. One of the TikTokers featured by *The New York Times* complains, "When you read a critic's review, it almost sounds like a computer wrote it." That's sad to hear from someone who purports to be interested in enjoying art. Moviegoers who search in TikTok for personal flavor may want to try for a change the refreshing sincerity and unmistakable voice of Jessie Earl, or Rory Doherty, or Tim Grierson, or

Sam Adams, or Tom van der Linden, or Leila Jordan, or Evan Puschak, or Darren Mooney, or Rowan Ellis, or Matthew Nando Kelly, or Jacob Oller, or David Ehrlich, or Matt Baume, or Trace Sauveur, or Georg Rockall-Schmidt, or Angelica Jade Bastién, or Thomas Flight, or Joshua Rivera, or Sage Hyden, or Michael Tucker, or Jonathan McIntosh, or Taylor J. Williams, or Lina Morgan, or Patrick Willems, or Jake Cole, or Kyle Anderson, or Isaac Feldberg, or Kaiya Shunyata, or Glenn Kenny, or A. A. Dowd, or Mikey Neumann, or Lars van der Peet, or Jack Nugent, or Maggie Mae Fish, or Chris Winkle.

I mention this many names to underscore the point I'm making here: to utter the barefaced claim that film critics lack a distinctive personality, you have to be afflicted by a malignant incuriosity.

Patrick Sproull and Matt Goldberg have written more measured responses than *Pajiba's*, and several of the arguments they present coincide with my own stance. On one of my more cynical days, I'd daresay that TikTokers' reluctance to call themselves critics comes from a decidedly uncritical approach to films. The once wholesome "let people enjoy things" meme became so poisonous a weapon against any form of media criticism that its creator had to kill it. There truly is a serious problem going on in film criticism, but MovieTok is not that problem. If you'll allow me a brief moment of bragging, *Nerds of a Feather* itself is proof that knowledgeable, eloquent and fun reviewers exist outside of professional publications. So I'm not going to try to build the full, reasoned case for more respect for independent reviewers, because we've proved our worth more than enough. What interests me here is not to counter the narrative that MovieTok is any sort of threat to traditional critics. There's no monopoly on good criticism (or bad; both "serious" and "informal" media can commit crimes of embarrassing cluelessness). As for conflicts of interest, TikTokers are more open about them than alarmists allege. What I want to point out is the underlying malaise of which MovieTok is only a symptom.

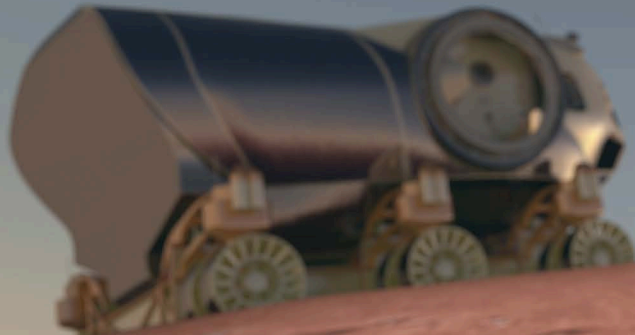
A portion of fandom has mutated into a curious cultish devotion, one that doesn't only swear eternal obedience to its idols, but in exchange demands eternal obedience from them, unaware that those idols still hold the reins of the relationship, and that the favors they grant are actually an insult to the followers. The crisis of movie discourse mirrors the ongoing crisis of moviemaking: after the Snyderbros and the Fandom Menace discovered how easy it was to bully studios into risk-avoidance, we've reached a volatile state where fans and executives know exactly which buttons to push on each other. Meanwhile, in the age of ChatGPT, art is in growing danger of being standardized and converted to automated formulas. Studios figured out they can get away with insulting viewers' intelligence with mediocre sameness, empty nostalgia and pointless pandering, because fans refuse to see themselves as more than consumers. The result is that the few works that still

try to make sincere art from within the Hollywood machine, such as *The Last Jedi* or *The Matrix Resurrections*, are received with undeserved hostility.

TikTok is not the enemy. Anti-intellectualism is the enemy, and the internet gives it countless chances to spread and put down roots. What critics can do to counter it is what they're already doing: speak as honestly as they can and give audiences the tools of discernment that enrich the viewing experience. And what moviegoers can do is what art has been trying to tell them all this time: Be more curious. Have more empathy. Don't be afraid of difficult ideas. And above all, don't let someone else, like an obscenely wealthy movie studio, decide what you feed to your mind.

**STAR WARS**

**SUBJECTIVITIES**



*Section Five*



## Section V: Star Wars Subjectivities

### On Andor Translating Theory into Community Action

Phoebe Wagner

#### When Capitalism Produces Anti-Fascism: On Andor Translating Theory into Community Action



Note: This essay contains spoilers for season one of *Andor*. A spoiler-free review is available [here](#).

Speculative fiction writers have often been united in their call that more just futures must first be imagined in order to achieve those futures. Yet, these imagined futures are, by definition, speculative and often produced for the masses by major capitalist franchises and publishers. I argue that such stories are the ideal source to inspire community action. In 2022, the second biggest media company, Disney, produced a radical piece of anti-fascist storytelling: *Andor*. The twelve-episode first season follows

Cassian Andor (played by Diego Luna) as he joins the rebellion. The radical potential of the Star Wars franchise has always come in fits and starts. While the costumes and borrowed language of WWII clearly emphasize the evils of fascism, the casual orientalism of the Jedi and the racist depictions throughout the franchise undermine the limited engagement with the concept of empire featured in the three trilogies. *Andor* showrunner Tony Gilroy addresses the Empire by depicting it as a war machine of extractive industry—and how communities mobilize against an entity so galactically large.

Disney has rarely been progressive in its storytelling, from the 1946 *Song of the South* to reluctance to show LGBTQIA+ content to pro-government propaganda throughout phase four of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. While there are certainly surprising moments, such as *Ms. Marvel*, the media company would not be considered leftist. Similarly, the Star Wars franchise pre-Disney acquisition made sweeping gestures that fascism was bad, but more nuanced takes were often buried deeper in the canonical novels or animated shows, which became noncanonical with the Disney acquisition. Additionally, the anti-fascist sentiments were often undermined by the orientalism, racism, and sexism throughout the first six movies. While the films' messages were clear that the Empire was the villain, the Empire is also cool enough to be worn on T-shirts and tattooed on people. The franchising around *Star Wars*, as continued by Disney, is incongruous with any focused critique

of anti-fascism or imperialism. Yet, the popularity of *Star Wars* makes the franchise an ideal vehicle to deeply engage with issues of imperialism and fascism because it has become cultural shorthand in the U.S.

While the plot of *Star Wars* cannot function without the Empire, their acts of colonization are often minimized as tragic backstories or trivialized, as with the Ewoks. Even one of the most shocking moments, the planetary destruction of Alderaan, is shorthand version of colonial violence that undermines the act. It repeats a common Western concept of apocalypse that people and cultures are erased in a singular moment, and, in a narrative sense, that such a moment is merely a plot point, an inciting incident. This depiction of instant erasure undermines not only the violence but the act of resistance against empire. As Nick Estes writes of Indigenous resistance against the U.S. empire: “Ancestors of Indigenous resistance didn’t merely fight against settler colonialism; they fought for Indigenous life and just relations with human and nonhuman relatives, and with the earth” (Kindle Loc 3858–3859). Even the monarchical Princess Leia does not seem to experience trauma over the loss of her home planet, but rather the focus remains on destroying the empire—not fighting for life. Indeed, for Alderaan, there is no life left to fight for as the white imperial fantasy is fully played out in *A New Hope* at the instantaneous destruction of entire peoples, cultures, and ecosystems.

*Andor* presents the Empire as machine of colonialism through extractive industry. Over twelve episodes, *Andor* follows the titular Cassian Andor as he experiences colonization and is radicalized against the Empire. Cassian lives on Ferrix, an industrial planet, with his adopted, elderly mother Maarva (played by Fiona Shaw). Cassian is looking for his sister while making money selling contraband, and during a security shakedown, he ends up killing both officers. Desperate to make enough money to leave Ferrix, he sets up a meeting to sell a piece of Imperial space technology, which is how he meets Luthen Rael (played by Stellan Skarsgård), the current shadowy head of the nascent Rebellion. Luthen recruits Cassian for one job, which would make him enough money to escape Ferrix with his mother, Maarva. Cassian agrees to fly the escape ship after a rebel group steals from the Imperial payroll. While the heist is successful and Cassian escapes with his chunk of the money, he is captured and imprisoned for being in the wrong place at the wrong time in an industrial prison complex where the incarcerated people make parts for the Death Star. Meanwhile, Ferrix is occupied by Imperial forces due to the extra attention Cassian’s actions have brought. Cassian is further radicalized in prison and helps lead a revolt. He returns to Ferrix to help his community, and they rise up against the occupation.

In the first few episodes, *Andor* focuses on two communities resisting the Empire: the working-class people of Ferrix and Cassian’s home planet of Kenari. These

opening episodes present a facet of the Empire that the Star Wars franchise often leaves to the viewer's imagination: how is the Empire oppressing people? In episodes one and two, the fictional Empire is shown acting like an empire. In episode one, "Kassa," Cassian Andor is shaken down by two security guards, outsourced by the Empire. The sequence of two white men in uniform threatening a brown man blends reality into the science-fictional space of *Star Wars*. The fallout of this moment is interspersed with flashbacks to Cassian's childhood on Kenari, a planet stripped and mined by the Empire before the planet was abandoned due to an unnamed disaster. The extraction also seemed to have disrupted the Indigenous families of the area as only the children remain. Wide shots are reminiscent of images of mines in Venezuela or Appalachia. Rather than used as a playground for a lightsaber battle or using the Indigenous people for laughs as in *The Phantom Menace* (1999), the destruction is centered on Kassa, a child without any elders, who does his best to fight the Empire with what tools he and the other young people have created. As Kathryn Yusoff points out when discussing mining and colonialism: "While the search for geologic resources instigated the imperative to enslave, geology quickly established itself as an imperial science that both organized the extraction of the Americas and, in the continued context of Victorian colonialism, became a structuring priority in the colonial complex, especially in India, Canada, and Australia. These territories became organized as material resources and markets for Empire" (82-3). Thus, in the first episodes of *Andor*, the beginnings of the *Star Wars* Empire parallel imperial tactics used by the U.S. and the British empires. Even the plot points of Cassian searching for his sister he was separated from on Kenari by a well-meaning white woman parallels the U.S. separating Indigenous children from their families and the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women movement. These echoes of current environmental and social justice issues deepen the possible engagement with not just understanding Empire in a popular context, but also what it means to resist.

The violence of colonialism is also centered during the heist sequence as the Imperial airfield occupies a sacred site on the planet Aldhani. The Imperial settlers have slowly been displacing and replacing the Indigenous Dhanis population, and now just as many Imperial soldiers want to see the planet's famed meteor shower as Indigenous people. The tactics of Empire once again blend with reality, as the Empire funds way stations along the path, using cheap alcohol as a way to disrupt the event: "It's a ten-day trek up from the Lowlands. [...] Along the way, we've placed a series of 'Comfort Units,' shelters and taverns with cheap local beverages" ("The Eye" 00:05:39). While there are more examples of colonial violence enacted on the Dhanis people over several episodes, this engagement demonstrates the actual workings of empire as reimagined in a space opera context. These two depictions of colonialism through extractive industry and military occupation turn

the Empire into an actual imperial force.

Importantly, *Andor* doesn't rely solely on critiquing empire but includes revolutionary theory. Throughout the show, the rebels aren't slinging lasers but manifestos. Because the cultural shorthand of *Star Wars* is so prevalent in the U.S., backing the rebellion with leftist ideology creates opportunity to inspire the viewer. During the Aldhani heist, Cassian meets Karis Nemik (played by Alex Lawther), a young white radical writing a manifesto. While teaching Cassian how to use a piece of modular, nonnetworked star-charting technology, he explains how the empire creates knowledge systems: "We've grown reliant on Imperial tech, and we've made ourselves vulnerable. There's a growing list of things we've known and forgotten, things they've pushed us to forget. Things like freedom" ("The Axe Forgets" 00:11:29). This rhetoric mirrors current thought around many countercultural acts: from homesteading to food foraging to the "right to repair" movement. An excerpt of Nemik's manifesto is read aloud in the final episode: "Random acts of insurrection are occurring constantly throughout the galaxy. There are whole armies, battalions that have no idea that they've already enlisted in the cause. Remember that the frontier of the Rebellion is everywhere. And even the smallest act of insurrection pushes our lines forward" ("Rix Road" 00:14:25). These words play as a working-class town of mostly people of color prepare to face off against an occupying Imperial force that has already injured some of their people. While inspiringly vague, "random acts of insurrection" as an overwhelming force against a galactic Empire provides a framework for the viewer to do something, even if it seems small. It gives meaning to the protests that have erupted across the U.S. year after year, from Standing Rock and #NoDAPL, to the 2020 George Floyd protests, to the marches for the right to an abortion, to protect Trans rights, for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women—the list continues. Nemik's manifesto ends on a simple call to action: "Remember this: Try" ("Rix Road" 00:14:52). In a clear rejection of Yoda's famous line, Nemik's manifesto recognizes that ending an Empire is not as simple as blowing up a single ship but requires ongoing acts of resistance to dismantle oppressive systems.

Nemik's manifesto is not the only call to action. Throughout the show, Tony Gilroy utilizes monologues by talented actors Andy Serkis, Stellan Skarsgård, and Fiona Shaw at pivotal moments to inspire action. For example, Andy Serkis as Kino Loy motivates incarcerated people to participate in a prison escape. With abolitionist overtones, Loy reminds the incarcerated people: "We know they [killed] a hundred men on Level Two. We know that they are making up our sentences as we go along. We know that no one outside here knows what's happening. And now we know, that when they say we are being released, we are being transferred to some other prison to go and die and that ends today" ("One Way Out" 00:27:26). While prison breakouts are a staple in science fiction, the Imperial Prison Complex

connects incarceration with imperial rule. After the heist, Cassian successfully escapes with his share of the money. He's caught and sentenced to prison not because of his connection to the heist or because he killed the security officers on Ferrix. Rather, Cassian was simply in the vicinity of a crime, looked "suspicious," and was convicted to an extended sentence because the Empire had raised the sentencing limits to squash resistance. Again, the policing of people of color as a tactic of control blends reality with the science-fictional. With this incident as the set-up, the prison complex is already positioned to be critiqued as an arm of imperial control rather than any gesture at justice or rehabilitation. This critique is furthered when the viewer realizes the incarcerated people are being used to build parts of the Death Star, thus connecting the prison system with the ultimate tool of control in the Star Wars universe. The only possible response is a violent uprising where the incarcerated people work in solidarity to take over the facility and escape.

While these are only a handful of examples, what makes *Andor* a potentially powerful tool for disseminating ideas is that the show takes seriously the cultural impact of *Star Wars* and uses that impact—the nascent ideas of empire, rebellion, freedom—to critique, inspire, and demonstrate direct action. As an academic tool, *Andor* offers a cultural touchstone that can be used as a translating tool to connect less accessible ideas—empire, the panopticon, settler colonialism, extractive industries—with a story many in the U.S. think they know: *Star Wars*. Sylvia Wynter sees humans as hardwired for story, as evidenced in the Western world by the reliance on biblical and Darwinian origin stories, which have been disseminated by white colonizers. Wynter pulls from Frantz Fanon to propose a new description of humanity that acknowledges the human reliance on story, something that Wynter sees as unique to the species. McKittrick summarizes Wynter's argument: "Our mythoi, our origin stories, are therefore always formulaically patterned so as to co-function with the endogenous neurochemical behavior regulatory system of our human brain. Humans are, then, a biologically evolved, hybrid species—storytellers who now storytellingly invent themselves as being purely biological" (11 italics in original). Following Wynter, if we recognize that humans are hardwired for storytelling and that Western thinkers have been using what Wynter's argues is a biological imperative in order to narrativize certain ways of living (i.e., capitalism), then it is a wasted opportunity to ignore stories like *Andor* that stand in opposition to such origin narratives. In fact, neglecting these oppositional narratives may be what people in power would prefer. Talking about empire in the context of *Star Wars* might be easier to understand, help people be less defensive. It's easy to say the Empire was wrong to displace the Dhanis in order to make an airfield for one of the most common symbols of the Empire: TIE fighters. Breaking down the tactics of imperialism through a science fiction show creates a different lens to understand the same actions in the context of U.S. imperialism. The

universality or popular enjoyment of *Star Wars* shouldn't be viewed as cheapening but rather as an ideal way to engage with people who might shut down at the word "colonialism" or "abolition." Use Nemik's manifesto to guide the inspired to other people who call for freedom: Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, June Jordan. Let Kino Loy's call of "One way out!" inspire solidarity.

In the final episode, the working-class community of Ferrix clashes with the Imperial occupiers of their town during a funeral for Cassian's adopted mother, Maarva. As part of the funeral, a holograph of Maarva plays in which she challenges the people of Ferrix: "We've been sleeping. [...] We had each other and they left us alone. We kept the trade lane open, and they left us alone. We took their money and ignored them, we kept their engine churning, and the moment they pulled away, we forgot them. Because we had each other. We had Ferrix. But we were sleeping. I've been sleeping. And I've been turning away from the truth I wanted not to face. [...] But I'll tell you this, if I could do it again, I'd wake up early and be fighting those bastards from the start!" ("Rix Road" 00:36:18). In these final moments, this condemnation about ignoring the creep of fascism paired with Nemik's call for even the "smallest act[s] of insurrection" create more than a *Star Wars* story, but a call to action.

These examples lead to my question: Why would Disney produce such a series? Disney is associated with the media franchise of the U.S. empire and continues to propagate stories that support U.S. ideology, from *Pocahontas* to *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*. As a capitalist enterprise deeply associated with Americana, what does it mean for *Andor* to be accessed via their streaming services? Tony Gilroy is a successful Hollywood creator, long established in the industry. Perhaps it signals a change in American culture, the hard work of BIPOC activists. Can such literature truly be radical, and what does it mean for radical stories to be disseminated from such a source? It would be too easy to say that perhaps Disney missed the leftist potential of the series—one should not underestimate the producer or the audience. The story of *Andor* could have been told without the skin of *Star Wars*, but placing it under the banner of *Star Wars* places anti-fascist work, abolitionist theory, class solidarity, anarchism and socialism in front of people primed to be supportive of the rebels and at least understand the Empire as evil. *Star Wars* places these ideas in front of the largest audience possible. Academics, independent artists, and public intellectuals rarely have the opportunity to reach such a large audience or guarantee their work will remain viewable and available. Rather than hope these ideas will be disseminated by professors and activists, trickling down from those who have access, time, and education to analyze and share these theories, the radical work happening on the big stage—rare as it is—should be embraced as a teaching tool rather than disregarded as contaminated or selling out. While it is yet too early to know if *Andor* will inspire people in any meaningful way, it

demonstrates that rebellions are built on more than hope, but communities coming together in solidarity, willing to fight for their freedom.

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## Hello There, General Kenobi

Dean E.S. Richard

### Obi-Wan fanboying INCOMING



Despite being at the very center of the Star Wars universe, first training (in-universe chronology) training Anakin Skywalker’s whiny ass, and then beginning to train Anakin’s whiny progeny (there’s a pattern with Skywalkers) before following in his own master’s footsteps and being bisected by a Lord of the Sith, Obi-Wan never got to be the star of the show. That may not be a bad thing - some characters should just stay out of the spotlight, or stick to being supporting characters. There’s no shame in that. While being fairly center stage in the prequels (and being damn near the only good part of them) and *The Clone Wars*, those feature the likes of Anakin, Ahsoka, and a host of clones and other Jedi sharing the stage.

*Kenobi* takes all that away and asks him to stand on his own, in exile, watching the kid who he hid in literally the most obvious spot in the galaxy from his father who has infinite resources at his disposal. The good news is, we have heard Luke’s story, we know where it starts and where it ends, and that is the first thing Kenobi gets right is by not trying to shoehorn Luke into this story.

The second thing it gets right is by recognizing that we are no longer bound by the conventions of television, with set run times and commercial breaks. Every episode is as long as it needs to be, tells the story it needs to tell, and then we move on. More series do this please.

I’ll be honest - there’s not much that *Kenobi* gets wrong, which is what you’re going to get when you hand Deborah Chow the reigns. The story construction, alongside the variable runtimes, means this is a tight, well-executed *Star Wars* story. As I’ve said in several of these pieces, I think *Star Wars* exists best in the margins, and *Kenobi* is true to that. There are no earth-shattering revelations, not anything that pretends to change the complexion of the galaxy in the middle space between Order 66 and *A New Hope*, but what we get adds to both of those, in the same way that the final season of *The Clone Wars* did.

For all the margins that get filled in by the likes of *Andor*, *The Mandalorian*, etc., *Kenobi* may be the most important. Anakin Skywalker/Darth Vader is the central figure for pretty much all of *Star Wars*, and directly responsible for most of the events and storylines in that universe. Arguably, the two most important people in

his life are Ahsoka and Obi-Wan - even more so than Padme and his children. *The Clone Wars'* final season brought his relationship with Ahsoka (mostly) full circle, and what *Kenobi* gives us is a brilliant finality to their relationship, while adding to what we have already seen from it.

*Kenobi* also makes the very wise choice to add some color to a couple underserved characters - Lars shows a little spine, and we get a bit of an understanding about why he's so grumpy in *ANH* (besides, you know, being a moisture farmer on a backwater world). The Inquisitors get some live-action screen time, and are predictably badass.

I hesitate to call Leia underserved, but at the same time... she kind of is. Again, steering clear of Luke is a great choice, but *Kenobi* succeeds where the sequels fail - her reluctance to train in the force is sort of shoehorned into a trilogy where literally everything feels shoehorned. Here we get Young Leia, excellently portrayed by Vivien Lyra Blair, who is wise beyond her years, but stubborn and headstrong - qualities we see honed in Carrie Fisher's Leia, and serve her well as a senator and Rebel leader. They are not, however, qualities befitting a Jedi - and this is where I think *Kenobi* excels in its storytelling - simply showing her being like Anakin does more to draw a line between them than saying She's Luke's sister - she stands more on her own, as a character, as Anakin's daughter, and her choices, both in the show proper and the entire arc of her character have more fidelity.

*Star Wars* - the franchise is still finding out what it is. There is some good, and some bad, and a lot of fans are inclined to be on one side of that line. The OT, for all that it revolutionized, is a fairly paint-by-numbers heroes journey about Good vs Evil. But that's not a world that we or anyone else lives in, and as that universe grows, we start to, by necessity, ask questions about the reality of it. Are the Jedi pure bastions of good? Clearly not, but I think Kenobi - the person - always tried to do good, regardless of any code, order or structure, and this is driven home nowhere better than in his penultimate duel with his former pupil - defeated, literally buried by Anakin's overwhelming hatred, anger and lust for power. Ready to accept fate in lieu of continuing a life in exile, watching over a new generation that might fail him just as the last did, as the Order he dedicated his life to did - instead he finds resolve in those new charges, and wills himself back into the fight - that, and love and the vague hope that Anakin can be redeemed. The fight concludes, not with either of them victorious or defeated, but with Obi-Wan tearfully apologizing to Anakin, and then being forced to confront the fact that Anakin no longer exists.

Because that, lately, as much as anything defines *Star Wars* - the franchise - lately: missed opportunities. *Kenobi* could have just been another one, another paint-by-

numbers affair, where the titular character set off on adventure, challenges ensued, were overcome, fade to black. Instead, we get a brilliant exploration into the heart of a character that is, himself, at the heart of the franchise.

## The Empire Strikes Back

Ann Michelle Harris

### A film that breaks your heart and teaches you the meaning of a plot twist



The original *Star Wars* (*Star Wars: A New Hope*) was a gamechanger for me. Back in 1977, science fiction and fantasy movies and television shows existed, and many of them were very well done. But most required some imagination or a willing suspension of disbelief to fill the gaps between the intended story and the reality of the visual effects. *Star Wars* was revolutionary in terms of having both fully immersive special effects and an engaging story. Later generations take this for granted. But, back then, *Star Wars* was an astonishing achievement of narrative, visuals, sound, and music. And the story even

had a very satisfying ending. It was hard to imagine a sequel that would live up to that. Then, in 1980, we got *The Empire Strikes Back*.

As a child, I remember seeing cars backed up on the highway exits, filled with people trying to get to theaters to watch the sequel. We were all looking forward to the new adventures of our *Star Wars* heroes. However, *The Empire Strikes Back* represented a profound shift in the tone of the narrative. As the title implies, the characters get an epic beating, including dismemberment, physical and emotional torture, abduction, deathlike freezing, and astonishing heartbreak. The story changes from upbeat to tragic, from adventure to introspection, from trust to betrayal. And when the credits roll, there is no happy ending. We should hate this movie, especially after the energy and optimism of the first film. Instead, *The Empire Strikes Back* is considered by many to be the best film of the franchise.

If it's been a while since you've seen it, here is a quick synopsis: After destroying the Death Star, the Rebel Alliance moves its secret base to the ice planet Hoth. Luke Skywalker, Princess Leia, and Han Solo are fresh from their victory against Darth Vader and the Empire. While Luke is out on patrol, Han tells Leia he has to abandon the rebellion because there's a bounty on his head. They argue about his leaving and Han teases that Leia is upset because she is in love with him. Meanwhile, Luke is violently attacked by a snow creature. He escapes by using his lightsaber but soon finds himself stranded and freezing to death. Obi Wan appears to him and tells him to find the Jedi master, Yoda. Han finds Luke in the snowstorm and brings him back, reminding Luke that this is the second time he's saved his life. When the Empire attacks the base, the friends become separated in the ensuing battle. Luke goes to find Yoda on a swamp-like planet. Han and Leia

end up in the cloud city of Bespin. Luke trains to become a Jedi but has a vision of his friends being tortured in a city in the clouds. Luke defies Yoda's warning and abandons his training to try to save them.

Meanwhile, Han and Leia and the others meet up with Han's rival Lando Calrissian, who is the leader of Bespin. Although friendly at first, Lando betrays Han and delivers them to Darth Vader who tortures them in a successful attempt to lure Luke to him. Han is frozen and given to a bounty hunter. Lando has a change of heart and helps Leia and the others escape, but they are too late to save Han. Luke confronts Vader, who overpowers him and cuts off his hand. Vader reveals that he is Luke's father and pleads with him to join forces to defeat the emperor. Luke is devastated by the news but refuses to submit to Vader and instead chooses to fall into a chasm rather than stay under his intensifying psychological influence. Leia hears Luke's voice through the Force and rescues him with the help of Lando and the others. But Han is gone.

*The Empire Strikes Back* stands out in all of the ways it is different from *A New Hope*. It ends on a cliffhanger and doesn't follow the traditional story beats normally seen in epic adventures. It's a Shakespearean tragedy complete with heroic fights, family drama, betrayals, and a plot twist that has influenced decades of future films.

We have two new major characters introduced in the film: Yoda and Lando. Yoda is amazing visually and spiritually. He is funny and terrifying, wise and deceitful, small, alien, familiar, strange, powerful, universal. Even the way he speaks—using reverse sentence structure—is hypnotic.

Lando is cynical, pragmatic, the scoundrel with a kind heart. Billy Dee Williams brought energy, irreverence, and charisma to the role. It meant a lot for me to see a person of color on the screen, especially in a role that wasn't demeaning or tragic. Across the landscape of science fiction films, there are still very few such roles. It saddens me to think how slow the progress has been, even decades later. Even in *Star Wars*. Several years ago, I took my kids to see Billy Dee Williams at a very crowded Dragon Con in Atlanta. I'm not one for long lines, but we waited to meet him and get his autograph. It was important to me. Like Nichelle Nichols's gift of Uhura, I just wanted to say thank you—thank you for saying yes to the role, even if it was imperfect.

Another character who appears briefly in the film is Boba Fett. I mention him only because he later takes on a larger role in the expanded *Star Wars* universe. But in *Empire*, he is primarily there to show the cold, business-like pragmatism that goes with trading in the lives of people.

Besides the shift in tone and the new characters, *Empire* is special because of the ‘big’ scenes. Han Solo is tortured by Vader, then frozen in carbonite to be given to a bounty hunter. Just before he is lowered into the freezing chamber, he kisses Leia. As he is pulled away from her, she confesses something: *I love you*. Given their very contentious relationship, this is a big confession. Han looks back at her and gives her his last words: *I know*. After watching this iconic scene hundreds of times, I have realized it is more than a romantic exchange. Leia is saying *I’m going to save you*. And Han is saying *I trust you*.

But *The Empire Strikes Back* is best known for the climactic fight scene between Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker—the violent, dismembering lightsaber duel where Luke Skywalker gets some really bad news about who he really is. I remember watching this scene in the theater, on a giant screen, as a child: the flash of the lightsabers, the darkness and smoke, the pounding of *Darth Vader’s Theme* as Vader crushes Luke with flying objects, and then finally severs Luke’s hand leaving him battered and virtually defenseless. Their epic lightsaber duel is my favorite part of the film. Luke is strong and clever, but Vader is a master. The battle takes on a poignancy when we realize Vader doesn’t want to kill him. Conversely, Luke finally gets the chance to take revenge on the monster who killed his father only to find out that his father *is* the monster—one who is very much alive and murdering people across the galaxy. It is the ultimate plot twist. When I watched Vader say the words “No, *I am your father*,” my heart raced, my jaw dropped. The revelation is not just stunning on its own; the larger implications are profound. Luke’s father has been mourned and referenced in the prior film but he’s actually alive and he’s the villain. This means that Luke’s allies, Ben and Yoda, have been deliberately lying to him and manipulating him. Everything we thought we knew from the first film has been upended. Decades later, it’s still such a great scene.

Although the big scenes define the film, the quiet moments also deliver a huge emotional payoff:

- Leia makes the choice to close the shield doors, knowing she is stranding Han and Luke outside in the lethal cold. The camera slowly zooms in on her face as she watches the heavy metal doors closing.
- As they prepare for the battle of Hoth, Han notices Luke and asks if he is okay. Luke quietly says “yeah” then looks at Han and starts to say something but he stops and remains silent. Han gives him a knowing look. The wordless communication quietly shows their deepening friendship.
- When Luke gets frustrated with his training, Yoda tells Luke the story of the Force and the way it binds all things together. It is a beautiful soliloquy in the dreamlike swamp setting with the haunting musical score in the

background. *Luminous beings are we, not this crude matter*.

- Leia and a recovered Luke stand together watching the stars. Luke puts his arm around Leia. It’s meant to seem cliché and optimistic but, in fact, it shows the two heroes looking small, vulnerable, and childlike. Two siblings holding a space for their grief.
- Every scene with James Earl Jones as Darth Vader is delivered with grim calmness and control. Vader Force-chokes multiple characters in the film, but never lets his emotions rise above irritation. He is cold, quiet perfection in every violent encounter.

*The Empire Strikes Back* is too sad to be my favorite *Star Wars* film. That honor goes to *The Return of the Jedi* (despite the annoying Ewoks) because it has closure. *The Empire Strikes Back* is not perfect. After four decades, some of the visual effects (even with the CGI updates) and acting seem dated. However, *The Empire Strikes Back* remains anchored in my psyche as a defining film and a defining moment in my childhood. The story is a reminder that life isn’t always fair, the good guys don’t always win, friends will betray you, and sorrow and change are a painful but necessary part of growth. The scenery of Hoth, Dagobah, and Bespin are gorgeous. The new characters of Yoda, Lando, and Boba Fett are engaging. The revelations are deep and iconic: two very opposite people love each other; Jedi are not trustworthy; and Luke has very deep father issues. All of this makes *The Empire Strikes Back* a film for the ages and one of my all-time favorites.

## The Mandalorian

The G

### Lone Wolf and Cub



It's fair to say that *The Mandalorian* changed how we think of *Star Wars*. Sure, the franchise long ago branched out from films to other media (novels, comics, games, etc.) but for whatever reason it never really stuck as a television franchise. *The Mandalorian* showed us that you could take the HBO “prestige television” model and repurpose it to tell stories within a popular cinematic universe. And do it well.

Shifting from film to the television format allows storytellers to do two things simultaneously: (1) narrow the scope of conflict to tell “smaller” stories; and (2) lengthen the narrative timeline for telling those stories. Turns out we *like* seeing what the (more) regular folks are up to and *really like* getting to know the characters in more depth.

*Mando* succeeds for a few reasons. First, the setting. *Star Wars* is many things: space opera, galactic fantasy, sci-fi romance and so forth. *Mando* leans into another element: *Star Wars* as space spaghetti Western. The films create a clear delineation between the metropole (Core Worlds) and periphery (Outer Rim). The Outer Rim is an institutionally weak place, with many planets run by gangsters who have cut deals with the Empire. The Empire, for that matter, is present but not ever-present.

After the destruction of the second Death Star, authority falls to the New Republic - which is less violent and oppressive than its predecessor, but isn't more present. And, as it happens, Imperial remnants have largely decamped to the Outer Rim to reorganize as an insurgency. It is here that we meet the eponymous Mandalorian, a bounty hunter named Din Djarin who is part of a zealot cult within the Mandalorian diaspora.

Din Djarin is hired by Imperial agents to retrieve an asset, which he discovers is a Force-sensitive child from the same species as Yoda. During the retrieval, the Child saves Din Djarin's life. Once he gets a sense of why the Empire wants him, given

this debt and a growing bond with the Child, Din Djarin reneges on his contract and becomes himself a wanted man.

Over the course of three seasons, *The Mandalorian* tells the story of Din Djarin's fight to protect the Child and, ultimately, to raise him as his own. His war against the Empire is not one fought for the Greater Good or The Cause, but rather one fought to save his adopted child and fulfill his obligations, first as a life debt holder and then as a father. This is fundamentally at odds with the *Star Wars* cinematic framework, where all is subordinated to a zero-sum war between light and darkness.

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It's fair to say that *The Mandalorian* is the only Disney franchise that has really resonated with me on a human level. It's not the only one I like: I appreciate the hardboiled political narrative in *Andor*, the grim military drama of *Rogue One* and the elegant visuality of *Ahsoka*. All are very good, and good precisely because they tell different stories, in different ways, from the central narrative of the installment films. But *The Mandalorian* is special to me for a few distinct reasons:

### A “Lived In” World

Space opera films typically portray the future in gleaming whites and chromes. When attempts are made to depict “normal” living conditions, it either ends up looking sterile or just super fake and low budget, a la *Star Trek: TNG*. The exception is *Star Wars: A New Hope*. Tatooine is a junk pile of a planet, where life is tough and most things are jerry-rigged from multiple pieces of scrap. *The Mandalorian* puts us right back in this part of the *Star Wars* world - even the stormtroopers look worse for wear.

It also does a good job of capturing the moment in time when these events take place. The Empire is gone and, for many, it's good riddance - one early episode even shows stormtrooper heads on pikes. But remnants of the Empire remain active and malign. We get the sense that the Outer Rim isn't much changed from the Imperial days; if anything, institutional power is *more* thin than it was before.

### A Focus on (Non-Romantic) Relationships

We are collectively obsessed with “shipping” characters, which in turn is a reflection of how films and television programs collectively center romantic relationships. But most meaningful relationships in any given person's life are not romantic in nature: familial ties, friendship ties, neighborly ties, collegial ties, etc.

*The Mandalorian* is ultimately about the relationship between a father and his



adopted child, about the father's relationship to the community he is a part of and the various bonds of friendship they forge along their adventures. As with the Original Trilogy, a central theme of *The Mandalorian* is the importance of loyalty and dedication to the people who love you, that you can do no better than to do right by them and that, ultimately, the "winners" will be those who show the greatest capacity to love (platonically).

What's more is this never feels corny or overwrought. Nothing, after all, is more cringe than stories about the power of friendship that don't first establish why we should give a shit about *these particular friends*.

### **The Right Kind of Anti-Hero**

Anti-Hero stories are common these days, so common in fact that many iterations are now as cliché as the rote heroism they purport to deconstruct. *The Mandalorian*, on the other hand, presents the right kind of anti-hero, at least for me. Din Djarin is a reluctant hero who doesn't really want to be involved in any Galactic entanglements - but is drawn in against his will and better judgement. This happens because he has a strong code of ethics and even stronger bonds of loyalty. He is fundamentally likable, but he is not a "white knight" like Luke Skywalker.

But let me tell you something - do *not* piss this guy off. Many of the most satisfying scenes in *The Mandalorian* involve Din Djarin exacting revenge on various malign forces. It's almost better when you know going in that the antagonists stand no chance. And it's doing it 100% because these fools will not stop messing with his kid.

### **Superb Guest Appearances**

There are so many memorable characters, from villains like Werner Herzog's Client and Giancarlo Esposito's Moff Gideon to companions and allies like Taika Waititi's IG-11, Katee Sackhof's Bo-Katan Kryze and Bill Burr's ex-Imperial Migs Mayfeld. Burr in particular shines, giving what may be the performance of the entire series for Season 2's *denouement*.

### **General Vibes**

As I've now argued in several reviews and roundtables, Star Wars is at its best when it projects a certain aesthetic and mood - less about what is happening and more about *how it looks and feels* when things are happening. *The Force Awakens* showed us that vibes can only take you so far, but the Prequels taught us that Star Wars with the wrong vibes is just fundamentally not good. *The Mandalorian* nails the Star Wars vibes perfectly.

At the end of the day, *The Mandalorian* is exactly what I want from a new Star Wars story. It nails the mood and vibes while telling a different kind of story in a different way. It is the complete opposite of the amateurish Prequels or the tired, unimaginative Sequel films. It is, in a word, superb.

## TIE Fighter Video Game (1994)

Haley Zapal



Some folks just really wanted to pretend to fly for the Imperial navy in the 90s, and this old-school, lo-fi PC video game let us have a blast while doing it.

“Enter your name, pilot!” is the first thing you hear when the log-in screen pop up in the *Star Wars: TIE Fighter* video game. That’s right, you’re a new pilot recruit in Palpatine’s space navy.

### First, though, let’s set the scene.

POV: 13-year-old me, obsessed with flying (for years I wanted to grow up to be a naval aviator, and I so much spent time playing Jane’s US Navy Fighters video game, another fun romp) and finally getting to pilot a space fighter! (I sometimes jokingly say that the great tragedy of my life is that I’ll never be able to join a spacy navy. Thank god for *Battlestar Galactica* Reruns).

How was I playing this game? In my bedroom, on a huge clunky Compaq desktop. It ran through MS-DOS (ancient technology). The graphics? A few steps above 8-bit. The sound? Oh the sound card was MIDI, most definitely.

But it was *fun*.

### More Than Just a Space Shooter

Galaga was just a button masher. The *Rogue Squadron* N64 game? Just a console button masher. You flew and pressed shoot, sometimes launched a missile.

*TIE Fighter*, on the other hand, actually made you a pilot. You used *an actual joystick*. You know, like a pilot.

But the fun and strategy of this particular game lies in how much control you have over the tools in your cockpit—and you have a lot of it.

In the top corners, you have scanner screens that tell you who’s in front and behind you, so you can juke at opportune times to evade laser fire.

You have shield and engine gauges, and if you want to go faster, say, you can shunt power from the shields to the engines for an extra boost — and vice versa. Granted, not every ship in the game even has shields, but there are some fun advanced ships that do.

In the center of your screen is a display that lets you toggle through nearby ships, both friendly and enemy. You can see how much damage they’ve taken, how far away they are, and their name and cargo, if you get close enough to scan it.

When you’re in the pilot’s chair, you have to make a ton of small adjustments and decisions to gain that competitive edge, and you actually feel like you’re keeping the wheels on the damn thing just to make it to the end.

### You’re Just a Hardworking Pilot Trying to Make Their Way in the Galaxy

Before this game came out, there was an X-Wing game, told from the POV of the good guys. It’s not as fun! I can’t explain it, but becoming a cog in the Imperial navy is so, so much more entertaining.

You’re not just fighting rebels, either. This game surprisingly introduces a more nuanced approach to “the bad guys.” As a pilot, you help planets having a civil war, battle space pirates, and root out traitors. Just every day military stuff.

After each battle, if you’re good enough, you obtain decorative ribbons and awards. You can also follow subplots that place you into the Emperor’s secret circle — you even get rewarded with special tattoos.

Did I take pride in my Imperial navy decoration book? 100%. Was I a weird kid? Duh.

### A Glimpse into the EU

*TIE Fighter* also played into the Expanded Universe of Star Wars content (thin though it was in 1994). You see a blotchy, digital Thrawn (and Pellaeon!) throughout the game, fresh off his appearance in the Zahn book trilogy just a few years before.

Not only do we get Thrawn, we also get our first-ever view of Coruscant! At least, I think it is — would love to know if someone else can find an earlier visual depiction of our favorite capital city-planet.

## Later Iterations

It's amazing how quickly graphic technology progressed in the 90s. Just a few short years later, *X-Wing Vs TIE Fighter* was released, and the screens were so much clearer and more impressive. The score was instrumental, not MIDI keyboard blops. There was also a multiplayer capacity, but I didn't have good fast internet until I got to college in 2001.

Then, 2 years ago, I heard they were releasing a modern version for PlayStation called *Squadrons*. I purchased the game, and then a VR headset, and then also a throttle and joystick.

It was incredible. You look down wearing the headset and see a body clad in an orange jumpsuit, flying an X-wing through space in full surround-sound and view.

I only played it for a few months, but it was worth every penny to be able to relive my love of space dogfighting with modern, mind-blowing technology. God bless adult money! High-five, 13-year-old Haley.