

NERDS OF A FEATHER
FLOCK TOGETHER



2026 HUGO AWARD
VOTER PACKET
LAcon V

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Introduction

Arturo Serrano

Greetings, Earthlings.

If it's a dream come true to be nominated for the Hugos, it's an ecstatic vision of paradise to have been nominated multiple times already, to have won a couple of the rocket statues, and to keep being nominated for yet another year. The only thing more satisfying than the weekly cycle of sharing our obsessions with our readers is to know that our readers share the same enthusiasm for the type of discussion we bring. Thank **you** for your votes, and for staying with us after all this time.

And what a time! As I write this, reality and imagination seem to have blended: we just watched a new team of astronauts make it safely back from lunar orbit, there are reports of newly developed vaccines that could fight broader varieties of flu and even cancer, and adoption of clean energies is growing everywhere. At the same time, we're witnessing a cartoonish revival of the worst authoritarian ideologies from the previous century, we've become inundated with digital garbage pretending to have consciousness, and corporate greed is making the planet unlivable for humans. To understand the real world, we need more and more to understand what speculation has to say.

I'm a fan of Elizabeth Bear's term "Rainbow Age" to describe the current explosion in diversity across the speculative landscape. While much remains to be done to bring audiences in closer contact with the variety of stories out there, there has never been as good a moment as now for authors of every continent, every language and every gender to become known and valued. The online community that has formed around speculative fiction (by which I mean the entire ecosystem of writers, translators, editors, literary agents, scriptwriters, studio producers, reviewers, etc.) is a precious space that needs to be nurtured precisely as the dark forces of reactionary repression set their sights on the few progress that has been achieved.

Yes, I'm bringing up politics, but that's because politics is already an inherent part of storytelling. Which worlds we imagine, who gets to imagine them, where they can be discussed, how they are perceived and interpreted — there's a political dimension to any conversation about fiction. At *Nerds of a Feather* we feel it's an honor and a heavy responsibility to have the chance to add our voices to the conversation.

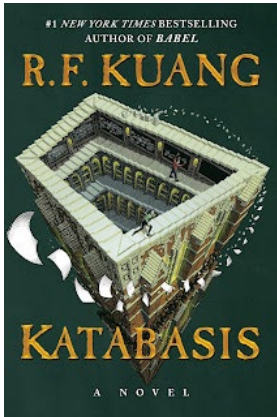
Let's keep imagining other worlds. Let's keep imagining ways to transform this one. Let's keep inspiring each other.

Section I: Literature Reviews

Book Review: *Katabasis*, by R. F. Kuang

Roseanna Pendlebury

A core theme worth exploring, obscured by lacklustre storytelling and the inability to trust the audience even one tiny bit



Before I get into the meat of this review, I want to talk a little about localisation of books, specifically for the US market. It's not a new topic – authors like Sascha Stronach and Emily Tesh have both publicly discussed their experiences of this impacting their own works – but it is a persistent one, and one that absolutely *plagues* R. F. Kuang's new novel *Katabasis*.

The novel is set in a university in the UK – Cambridge, specifically – and the main character is a PhD student at

the very same. And yet, within the *first two paragraphs*, I counted six errors in terminology/process for something in such a setting. US and UK academic terminology are bogglingly different, and so I'm used to ignoring the odd few in reading US published books set in non-US settings. It just comes with the territory. But as the first chapter of *Katabasis* went on, the sheer volume of them was kind of impressive. Nearly every bit of terminology that applies to the academic setting either of the UK or of Cambridge specifically was got wrong*. And it was this consistency that brings me to an assumption – that this is an editorial decision, rather than a set of authorial snafus, especially as I know Kuang has studied in the UK, *and* her previous academia-centred novel *Babel* is much, much better on the terminological accuracy front.

If it is editorial localisation...I then have to wonder why? Is there a belief that using non-US terminology will make the book inaccessible to its US market? If so...I would like to hope that's untrue. Coming from the not-US as I do, I know first-hand how easily we as a set of reading cultures have adapted to US-specific references. Baffling and nonsensical** as they are, you learn to remember what a sophomore is, what "Greek" means in a university – sorry, college – context, and an array of other tidbits of cultural richness that don't exist elsewhere. Clearly, readers of all sorts are fully willing and capable of adapting to this kind of vocabulary shift (even leaving aside that we're SFF readers who pick up a whole new set of neologisms half the time we read a book). And yet, this kind of US-ification persists. I assume that publishers know what they're doing and want to make money, so I have to believe based on those priors that there is a benefit to doing all of this, but even so...it frustrates me to no end.

And you might say, what's a bit of terminology among friends? Why does it matter if the person in charge of her PhD is an advisor, not a supervisor, or that she's doing a dissertation instead of a thesis? On the face of it, I would agree, it is a kind of silliness to get all het up about it when the core concepts are still being transmitted and understood, and perhaps even that localising this way means those concepts are *better* understood by their majority market. But to this

I would say – the terminology is just the tip of the iceberg. It's an easy thing to spot. But it signals deeper, more fundamental problems, all of which build to an overarching attitude issue – the need for curiosity and willingness to understand things on their own terms, to see the world as the varied and multiple thing it is, rather than needing it to be condensed into the narrowness of a single understanding.

It says: the world can only be understood through the lens of the USA, and the dominant culture there. Where I might be spotting it in terminology, who's to say there isn't more and deeper in how the work views that world? It certainly comes up in enough works that deal with race outside of the US, because there is a wide gulf in how that topic is tackled in different cultures. Or where works centralise a Christian view of the world. As a process, it stakes a claim to a default from which other things deviate, and that should be a pernicious and discomfoting thing to read, no matter where you're from.

And, yes, very simply as someone from outside that default...it rankles. I'm being shown an uncanny valley version of a thing I know so very well, and that's just *unpleasant*. Not only is it signalling that the things I know about are only worth including when adapted to US understanding (as an aesthetic that can be tweaked, rather than a real place out in the world), but also just that I, as an audience member for this work, am less worthy of consideration than the market it's being adapted to.

Which is a lot to pile onto a bunch of terminological inaccuracies in one book, but it isn't just one book. This is part of a pattern. And when it's a book like this, which has been released with a heap of anticipation and fanfare, it matters all the more. R. F. Kuang's work is the sort of thing the publishers are expecting to rake in the cash, getting the big marketing push all in the run up to release, and so what we see here, I think, very clearly signals what publishing thinks matters, and what will make them money. If that's "make sure a US audience never has to think about things in terms other than the ones they already know"... god help us all.

With that all being said – and inseparable from the work, because the text is not purely a story an author has come up with, but the product of all the decisions that went into creating the final version I get into my hands and brain – let's get onto this as a story object.

Katabasis follows Alice Law, who is (at some point in the late eighties to early nineties***) midway through her PhD in Analytic Magick at the University of Cambridge, under the...direction...of Professor Jacob Grimes, one of the brightest and most controversial lights in the field. Grimes is notable for the excellence of his work, especially the work he did during WW2, but also for the high failure rate of his students, and the intensity of his expectations and approach with them. He is a tyrant, and known for it, but a name that can open doors and make or break careers. More importantly, however, is the fact that he is currently dead. In order to have him open those doors and make that career that Alice so desperately wants, she has to head down to Hell and try to fetch him back. Unfortunately, her fellow student (and academic rival) Peter has had exactly the same idea.

Together, they head into an Underworld not trodden by magicians in the recent past, armed with research of a swathe of texts going back through the academic highlights of centuries all the way past the Ancient Greeks into the Hittites and Egyptians. They must use their

knowledge and intelligence to try to navigate the Hell they think they know to find Grimes and bring him back, no matter the cost to them.

Through those reminiscences, and their interactions, Kuang attempts to critique the idea of the genius, as well as to undercut the allure of academia by highlighting the physical and mental costs suffered by those trying to enter it, using the magic of the story (which is powered by paradoxes) to highlight the flawed thinking and uncomfortable cognitive dissonance needed to struggle through everything academia, and Grimes as its avatar, throw at them. I say "attempts", because I'm not at all sure the book succeeds either at this, or, perhaps more so, in the necessary twin aim of telling a story that engages you as a narrative object.

To tackle the thematic issues first, there are two complementary issues at work in this book. The first – Kuang seems unable to have any thematic feature of the story that she does not explain in plain, straight up text. There is very little show, no imply, no suggest. Instead, everything is laid out in clear, unambiguous language for the reader. In small doses, this can be fine, and even welcome. It's a tactic that was there plentifully in her previous novel *Babel* (which I enjoyed). But where in *Babel* it tended to be relegated to footnotes, here she just whacks it straight into the middle of the text. That alone would shift how it feels, and certainly curtail the stalling effect on the flow of the prose, but where in *Babel* it overshadowed the earlier part of the text and then receded, here it is omnipresent and obstructively lingering.

Which links in nicely to the second issue – Kuang dwells. On everything. Features of geography, vignettes from a character's past, little nuggets of maths or logic or literature (we'll come back to this) that turn up all over and, indeed, on those thematic explanations. The cumulative effect is of a book that cannot, on any level, let the reader get it themselves, whatever "it" might be, which ultimately builds into something patronising and condescending. I found myself muttering "just get on with it" no end of times, because I wasn't getting anything from the lingering. In another book, I might not be so impatient, but that straight up, uncomplicated language for every single thing being spelled out means there's no value in the dwelling; it exists to convey a point, and once the point is conveyed there's nothing of joy to extract. I don't revel in any of the descriptions. The vignettes don't give me a deeper sense of the person. They serve, each, their single purpose and overstay their welcome, continuing on and on through the whole, not particularly short, book.

It feels, on the whole, rather more like a lecture than a story, and a lecture pitched fairly low at that.

While predominantly the reviews of *Katabasis* and *Babel* I've seen have been glowing, there is one thread that occurs in common in the negative ones, and it is one I will pick up on too: it feels like Kuang simply does not trust the reader, at any point. We can talk about how justified this may or may not be (and invoke some of the clanger discussions people had about *Babel* in which they demonstrated that they absolutely did not get it), but I almost think that doesn't matter. This is dark academia – intended to be in the original sense, a book that looks at what academia is and highlights the darkness inherent in it by playing it up. Satire. Caricature. And the problem with both of those approaches to themes is that there will always be someone who misses it. That is just inherent in satire, because of the way it

plays with ideas. So if you try to write to avoid that, to make your point so abundantly, simplistically clear that no one could possibly ever miss what you were trying to say...it stops being satirical, because the satire needs the playfulness between ideas, rather than overt explanation. The inability to trust in the reader has cost Kuang the very essence of what she's trying to do.

Which is also a problem that comes up in another of her approaches.

To step back slightly, in the run up to its publication, I saw a number of early readers (predominantly but not exclusively on TikTok) providing reading lists of books one might read to better understand *Katabasis*. Those lists unsurprisingly contained a fair chunk of Renaissance and Classical literature that touched on the Underworld and journeys there (your Dantes and your Virgils, your primers of Greek mythology), alongside a grab bag of philosophy from Socrates all the way up to the 20th century. I had the slightly unkind thought that some of these readers were doing a speed run recreation of the traditional "western canon". But for all my amusement at the approach, it did make me interested in what Kuang was going to be doing – if those early readers thought reading those texts would bring greater insights into *Katabasis*, I wondered, how thoughtfully, how interestingly is Kuang engaging with the ideas those texts present?

She's not. I could talk around it, and phrase it more nicely, but she's not. Oh she namedrops them, don't get me wrong. And she cherry picks concepts or motifs from a goodly number. But every single goddamn time, she will explain why that thing matters in plain prose immediately afterwards, to the extent that the text reference itself no longer really serves a purpose except to say "I have read this".

Now, obviously, most of these moments happen in character. It is Alice (and Peter) who are dropping names. Surely, these two characters are doing it because this is the shibboleth they both have, the language they both speak, as people immersed in the study of all these tracts of magic and philosophy and logic and mathematics? These are PhD students! But they don't sound like any PhD student I've ever met. The way they talk about the texts, even the ones that become a little more plot crucial at various points, is horribly surface level, if it even goes that far. They came across to me, more than anything, as insecure first year undergraduates dropping names as a desperate bid to peacock their intellect, and undercut every time one of them – or the narrative – makes everybody pause to check in with the class that they understood what was being discussed and were there any follow up questions?

The whole premise that Kuang is trying to attack rests on – as Alice says, in plain text a number of times – the idea that these students are running a horrible gauntlet for the promise of a prize at the end. That prize might be prestige, or it might be the time and funds to pursue the study that they so desperately crave (Alice falls more into this bucket, though not entirely). As PhD students, Alice and Peter have already run a fair chunk of that gauntlet. They are already immersed in this world, its languages and its pitfalls. They may be more familiar with the darker side of things (oh they are), but they are also the ones who wanted or believed or craved hard enough the allure of the thing at the end. The balance, and the crux of the story, is whether the cost is worth it for that final prize, and indeed whether the prize even exists, or is a rotten, poisoned facsimile of the shining apple it appears to be. But for that to work, you need to sell the

dream that these two have bought into. We need to understand what it was they were striving for, why it sold itself to them. At the start of the story, and long before, they both thought the prize was good and worth it, and that they would, in this horrible process, become the knowledgeable, clever, incisive people who could get to it.

By failing to present them as that, by failing to create even a whiff of the alluring intellectual bubble that is the overt sheen of academia that hides the rot underneath that forms the “dark” half of the equation, Kuang fails at the first hurdle. By then cramming her book full of those references, by creating all these lists of names and works, all these famous texts from the traditional (and much critiqued) canon, she’s falling into the trap of the very thing she’s trying to undercut. Those creators with their reading lists show us that. Read these works, they say, and know the code to Kuang. Except there is nothing to decode. None of it is necessary. You could take out those names, the sassing of Heraclitus**** and the grumbling about Dante, and the text would be the same, because she doesn’t effectively use them to craft this semblance of academic glamour in the first place. The thought that kept occurring to me as I read was that this was all surface, and no substance. There are facts and names and works, but none of the connecting tissue necessary to make them all *feel* valuable as a coherent unit, or to sell us on the very critical idea that Alice and Peter are really very very clever.

Before I seem to be suggesting that this is a failure on every possible point, a pause. There is, under all the not particularly good writing, the core of something...if not quite *good* then perhaps promising. There are moments when Alice is introspecting, when Alice is examining how much she wants academia and everything she’s willing to give up to get it, that approach what dark academia can do well (even if the thing she aims for is never really sold to the reader). There’s one moment around half way through, where she describes drunk, giddy, silly grad students being playful with their topic, and that feels right and true, like a moment that could have happened, and would have had the effect it does in the story...but the infrequency of those moments just underscores how flat and un-right the rest of the book feels. There’s an essence. But it is no more than that wisp, ephemeral, and lost under the drudge of the story apparatus.

It suggests that, underneath it all, she does *get* it. Her Alice and that drive for academia. Or perhaps just a very particular sort of person (given how Alice does seem to rhyme quite well with some of the characters in *Babel*). But getting it isn’t enough. You have to make a story out of it, something that works on a sentence-by-sentence level, on a plot and theme level, that coheres from the granular up to the macro, rather than trading on glamour and the wisps of ideas, and these brief moments of having looked at the world and caught something real as a butterfly in your fingers. It needs to be a *story*, and it’s there it truly fails, far more than any inaccuracy or over explanation.

Some of that is the plain and overburdened writing I’ve already mentioned. But there are other key flaws. Despite that core of something true, neither of her primary characters manage to feel interesting and worth following for the majority of the time with them. Alice is introspective, but when that introspection doesn’t yield substantial character depth, it just begins to feel self-important rather than worthwhile. And, more to the point, she’s just not all that interesting to spend time with. Peter, whom we only see through her eyes, begins as the caricature man from seemingly all of dark academia,

who comes from privilege and is easily both attractive and intelligent, and who sails through the academic world with ease in contrast to the heroine’s grit and struggle. There are glimmers that he might have something more to him, but those don’t resolve until fairly late in the story, and then, because of the way the narrative turns out, his development just gets dropped for a whole section, and only resolved in part by the end. Their chemistry is nearly non-existent. Even their rivalry – which is absolutely critical to the resolution of the story – feels flat and empty.

And when it comes to plotting...it’s not so much that Kuang loves a bit of foreshadowing as that she signals with effusive clarity what’s coming, unfailingly. There’s no tension and no twists. Another victim of that plain and over-explaining style. If it evokes anything, it might be horrible inevitability, but even that implies a management of the story direction that I think might be undeserved. It’s just...a sequence of events, with heavy telegraphing of the following steps, such that you must, like her characters, trudge through the wide expanse of grey sand to get to where you want to go (the ending).

Which is...a let down. If you’re going to skewer academia, I think you need to do a better job of it than “the power of love” with a bit of vengeance sprinkled on for spicy seasoning.

But maybe the magic system will save it? The translation magic was one of *Babel*’s most interesting points, no? Well...not really. There’s actually a lot of similarities in how magic is described in both books. Where for *Babel* there’s a spark that comes in the frisson between words that can’t easily be translated, that cognitive texture, in *Katabasis*, Kuang is playing with the idea of paradox, and has her magicians need to be able to hold conflicting ideas in their head at the same time to essentially put one over on physics. The two ideas aren’t the same, but they feel like they approach similar theoretical ground from slightly different angles, and so some of the sheen is worn off the paradox magic. I’ll admit, I also just have less time for being walked through formal logic problems than I do for discussions of linguistics. But there’s just much less time given over to exploring it as a potentially fascinating idea than perhaps it could have merited. Instead, there’s much more lingering on the practicalities, the chalk and the blood and research. Which makes sense in a Watsonian sense, but from a Doyleist perspective makes for much drier reading. Once again, there’s a possible core of something fascinating here being let down by the connective tissue of storytelling.

And that’s my main takes on this book – I just think it’s a story told badly, in a number of the key ways in which a story can be told. The prose styling is weak, the plotting unexciting, the tension non-existent and the characters insufficient to carry the load left for them. All of which then fails to present in a coherent and persuasive way that thematic core. Yes, by the end, she has absolutely conveyed the “academia can really suck and many of the ways in which it sucks are baked into the structures of it”. But she’s conveyed it by just straight up telling us that. It may work as an idea being passed from author to reader, but it fails at every step on an intuitive level, because she cannot for a moment let it be free of that urge to explain. To tell this story in an emotively effective way, it needed freedom, and showing, and a trust that we could follow into the (frankly not particularly intellectually difficult) territory she was leading us to. A book does not need to be able to be for everyone perfectly and without friction. In removing the friction, she has removed what might have made it a

story at all.

Between this, and the fact that none of it was ever allowed to be itself in the first place, but instead translated to be more easily consumable by a specific audience, what's left is something hollow and insubstantial. Both the author and the editorial direction needed to have faith that a reader could do even a tiny amount of work for the story that this was trying to be to work. They both needed to assume anything but the worst and least of their audience. Neither of them did. And so it all falls flat, perpetuating some of the very problems that it theoretically seeks to condemn, and telling the audience in distressingly plain language how little it thinks of them.

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* The vast majority are indeed switching Cambridge/UK terms for US ones, but a small few are actually switching Cambridge specific ones for Oxford specific ones. Those...I struggle to account for, given the author did a year at both universities. Maybe Oxford just sticks harder in her memory.

**I say this tongue-in-cheek, but child-me did take ages to internalise the freshman/sophomore/junior/senior thing.

*** This isn't specified, but can be dated via events referenced in the text. I suspect the events of the story are taking place in 1991, but it could go a year or two either way.

**** She is very briefly very dismissive of him, because like many of the pre-Socratic philosophers he presents some ideas which, now, look absolutely batshit. But what she fails to mention in her mockery of him is that he, and the other pre-Socratics, were working from first principles to try to understand the universe, and they paved the way for the more accessible later works like Aristotle. Shoulders of giants and all that. No Heraclitus sass here.

The Math

Nerd Coefficient: 3/10

Book Review: *The Everlasting*, by Alix E. Harrow

Clara Cohen

In order to have a future worth fighting for, you must have a past worth remembering.



Do you remember back in, oh, 2017 or so, when a certain variety of shell-shocked well-intentioned liberal looked at the news, wrung their hands in distress, and bleated ineffectually, *This is not who we are?* People are resistant to changing their opinions on the basis of something as unreliable as mere factual evidence, but still, some facts get through, and some opinions do change. It's been very clear for a while now that yes, this is, in fact, very much who we are; it's who we've always been; and it's

who we'll always be, without some powerful work to leave that rut and break a new path.

The Everlasting is a story about the stories nations tell themselves about who they are; and what it takes to change the story, in the hopes that changing the story will change the nation. It is deeply embedded in modern times. It responds directly to the creeping, running, leaping, bounding, racing encroachment of fascism, but it drapes the conversation in the costumes and set dressing of historical fantasy, because every message is always more palatable when we have knights in armor acting out the lesson.

The tale is told by Owen Mallory, a historian by training in the nation/republic/empire of Dominion, which is not at all Great Britain. Before returning to academia, he served as a soldier in the not-at-all World War II against the Hinterlanders, who are not-at-all the rest of Europe. Although Dominion won the war — the latest in a long series of similar such conflicts — this conflict has left lingering wounds in the nation and the people. Owen himself is scarred across the throat from a wound that did not arise from honest combat, and speaks with a rasp in his voice. Owen's father has been left a drunk, a frustrated pacifist forever getting into trouble. His political agitations, a product of his own participation in the previous not-at-all World War I have for years brought shame and scorn upon himself and, by association, Owen. Now, he is joining activists for change within Dominion, whose increasingly vehement demands are causing embarrassment to the government.

The novel opens with Owen, in the proud tradition of academics everywhere, struggling to write a book in his chosen specialism, the folkloric traditions of Middle Dominion, and especially the legendary founding figure of Una Everlasting, who is not at all King Arthur. Any resemblance between the name of Sir Thomas Malory, who wrote *Le Morte d'Arthur*, and our own Owen Mallory, is entirely coincidental. One day Owen receives in the post an inexplicable book: a manuscript entitled *The Death of Una Everlasting*, an apparently contemporary record of the legend herself, written in the hand of someone who knew her personally, loved her, and watched her die.

Owen throws himself into the work of deciphering the book, and the moment he has finished it, he is summoned to a government office to meet Minister Vivian Rolfe, whose position is at risk as she absorbs the blame for the civil unrest. The nation must remember what it is, she tells him, and the publication of this new, contemporary account of their founding hero is just what the nation needs. Only Owen Mallory, a lifelong devotee of Una Everlasting, can write the translation that will save the nation from descent into factional violence. Then Vivian stabs Owen's hand with a letter knife. His blood spills onto the book, and he awakens in the past, under a tree, in the presence of Una herself. The book is in his hand, its pages blank. His task, it turns out, is not to translate an extant manuscript, but to write it himself, in the time and place where Una's story happened.

The first third of this novel seems straightforward enough: a time-travel tale, a nascent romance, a man struggling to reconcile his view of a myth with the reality of a person. He follows Una on her famous quests: to slay the last dragon in the land, to retrieve from its lair the Grail, which is the sole hope of saving the life of her beloved queen and benefactor, Yvanne. He is with her during the last, final betrayal, in which her comrade, the fabled Ancel the Betrayer, stabs her, so that she dies at Yvanne's feet.

Una's death seems like a logical stopping place for a story that is . . . simpler than I would have expected from Alix E Harrow. All we need is an epilogue, time enough for Mallory to return to the present, process his adventure, and make some grand decision about whether he will serve as a government propagandist for history, given that he now knows the reality of the past. Except the book is only a third of the way through, Part 1 is titled *The First Death of Una Everlasting* (emphasis mine) and things develop in ways that are far from simple.

I hesitate to write more, because part of the wonder of this book lies in following the timey-wimey twisty turns, the betrayals and revelations, and the long thread of cause-and-effect that makes up the history of a nation. But even in that first third we have a skilled depiction of the parallels between past and present, illustrating the inexorable repetition of historical events. The glorious martial campaigns that Una leads in Queen Yvanne's name mirror Dominion's conquest in modern days against the Hinterlands; and although the historical records and modern newspapers both report heroic victories and cries of welcome from the liberated populaces, the actual mood on the ground is very different from reports. The quest to kill the last dragon is justified with tales of dragons' dangers to civilians; but evidence of that danger seems scarce when you approach the dragon itself. Still, every story needs a villain; and when there are no more dragons to kill, Ancel the Betrayer steps in to serve that role in the national mythology, just as the Hinterlanders do in the present day.

It is hard to control the flow of history so that the sequence of events arrives at a particular desired present. The whole genre of time travel fiction is one long conversation about the challenge of truly understanding cause and effect. But controlling past events is not the only way to control the present. One of the brilliances of this book is its meditations on the types of stories that a nation uses to serve its interest. *There are only two kinds of stories worth telling: the ones that send children to sleep, and the ones that send men to war*, says Vivian to Owen, and he thinks, *There was no God in Dominion; there was only Vivian Rolfe, telling a story.*

A truly powerful story is not created on the spot, however. It must age. It needs the legitimacy of myth and history behind it. Owen, sent back in the past to tell Una's story, is given the opportunity not only to affect events, but to affect how they are remembered. I'm not entirely sure his final solution is all that different in method from what Vivian wants him to do; but it is very different in its outcome. Do the ends justify the means? There's an argument to be made in this book that they do. Or rather, at the end I was unconvinced that this argument was satisfactorily refuted.

This is not necessarily a criticism of the book. Vivian is an extraordinary character, and I found myself at more than one point musing that *her* side of the story would make a magnificent tale in its own right, far more sweeping and epic in its scope and deeds than the focused, personal narrative we get from Owen. Owen values the individual; Vivian values the nation. Or her version of the nation. Or, perhaps, her view of what the nation *should* be. This book is not, I think, discussing whether the ends justify the means, as much as *which* ends those means are pursuing. And it's a hard question. Vivian's ruthless utilitarianism is not a mere strawman argument here. It's given a chance to make its case; and to the extent that you agree that there is a case to be made for it, you might find yourself, like me, wishing that there were a companion novel telling Vivian's story.

But perhaps cliches about ends and means are not the perspective to take here. Perhaps we should turn our eyes to a different idiom. Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. Vivian Rolfe does not learn. But Owen Mallory does.

Give this book to your friends, your family, your enemies. Propose it at your book group. It needs to be discussed by people who have read it to the end.

The Math

Nerd Coefficient: 8/10. Well worth your time and attention.

Highlights

- Time travel
- National myth-making
- Not-at-all an allegory
- Medieval knights and armor

Book Review: Colourfields, by Paul Kincaid

Roseanna Pendlebury

A deeply thoughtful collection that muses on the nature of SF and its sub-categories, though not one without blind spots



I am not, by nature, someone uninterested in history; my degree was, after all, somewhat directed into the ancient world, and the study of the past has long captured my attention. And so it is very strange to find myself reading a book that contains reviews (a thing I love) many of which focus on histories (also a thing I like) of science fiction (a genre I greatly enjoy), and feel...disconnected from it, as was my experience with *Colourfields: Writing About Writing About Science Fiction*, the new

Briardene Books volume from long-time critic of the genre, Paul Kincaid.

Split into three sections, the volume collects his reviews of Histories, Topics and Authors, covering a broad span of work on a wide-ranging set of texts, all in Kincaid's enjoyably acerbic tone. It's not a collection to pull punches either; when Kincaid dislikes a text he is reviewing, or finds it wanting at the fundamental or surface level, he doesn't hold back in offering up his critique (and as someone with a strong ideological support for the negative review, this was extremely welcome reading). Each review digs deep into the substance of the book in question, offering a clear view both of what that text is setting out to achieve and how well it does it, and any blind spots, omissions or unusual choices made in the process, alongside interesting bits of contextual information drawn from a frankly alarmingly broad knowledge of the field.

Before I get into the musing about why I felt that disconnection, I want to emphasise — I did enjoy reading this book, at times, immensely. It came with me on a flight, and I found myself giggling despite my deep discomfort with flying, so it must have been doing some things right. But I found, as I read, increasingly there was one lens through which I was viewing the whole of the book, and so the thing that affected most deeply my reading of it both as a text entire, and in its individual components: namely, that I very often looked at the science fiction(s) being presented to me on the page, and simply did not recognise them.

I don't have a clear answer for why that is, though I have some theories. The first of which is simply one of the passage of time: the SF I grew up into and the one often portrayed on these pages have between them a gulf of years that encompassed a great deal of change. But I don't think it's just that.

Kincaid alludes in various of his essays and reviews herein to the multiplicity of science fiction — the idea that it is not a single, coherent genre (indeed, he talks about disliking that word as well) with a single, coherent history. And so my discomfort in many ways proves him precisely right — whatever my conception of science fiction was,

and is, it occupies a different strand of the weft (or a different shade of the colourfield, I suppose) than the ones under discussion here. But even with that acknowledgment that these reviews and essays look only at part of the story, it is still peculiar to see so little of the parts I do recognise — chiefly, the references to the Puppies and their Hugo activities. It's not even necessarily in the specifics of what's on the page, rather sometimes in tone, or in feel. This isn't a place I find myself or my experience within, and that's just downright odd, especially as I generally think of myself as at least reasonably curious and relatively informed, up to a point. Perhaps that self-image needs some adjustment.

However, my suspicion is that alongside the time gap there's a confluence of factors that lead to the genre I grew up into bearing little resemblance to the one Kincaid references, and I rather suspect gender plays a big part in it. The fiction I grew up reading, the fiction that coloured my childhood and my perceptions well into my time at university is what I might call, for want of a better term, girl-coded. It was aimed at children, and it was particularly geared at a market of female children. It was only at university (and sometimes rather later) that I encountered things I now see taken as universals. The SFF magazines of short fiction are a particular example, because I don't think I was more than passingly familiar with the barest concept of them until the mid-2010s. So maybe I wasn't connected to fandom, or only to a more forward-looking (or possibly just gender-segregated) subsection? Except...I don't think I was. Until fairly recently, I'd have called the university SF society I was a member of extremely backwards-looking, at least when I initially joined — they didn't read or discuss, for the most part, contemporary releases in my first couple of years, and if I think back to our society library, the overwhelming sensory memories are the feel and smell of slightly mouldering, very yellowed paperbacks. I was also, when I joined, one of three women in the whole society. Bastions of the futuristic we were not.

I am also, to be blunt, not the fresh face of the youth anymore, being a whole thirty-five. But that is exactly what reading this collection makes me feel — young, and terribly, terribly ignorant. Because, despite his clear awareness of that multiplicity of SF, there feels to be a coherent subsection of it on show here that does lean heavily backwards, not just in the sense of looking at histories (which would entirely make sense, given the topic of a whole third of the book), but in the sense of approaches and conceptions of what the genre is, where it is, and even more nebulously, but perhaps most crucially, how it is discussed. This is not a way of talking about the genre that maps to the vast majority of the conversations I have, many of which with people much smarter and more knowledgeable about both genre and fandom than myself.

If you're unsure from the way I'm talking about the book whether I think this is a good or a bad thing, well...join the club. I vacillate between poles as I consider it. Because...on the one hand, I feel like I'm benefiting from this thoughtful, considered and extremely thorough look back at a part of the genre that is alien to me, and that kind of thing is surely always a benefit? But then on the other, the incompleteness rankles, on a more emotional level. The inner voice that goes, "Well, where's the bit I'm in? Why doesn't that get a look in?". I think, if I try to boil it down, my opinion is that what it does is done extremely well — if you like an acerbic turn of wit, an inclination towards sass and a very analytical eye on the specifics of what a particular work is doing, this will absolutely be provided. But, like all these

kinds of projects, it has a limitation, and it may come to the fore if, like me, your experience of SF doesn't match up to what is being put under the microscope. And of course, that limitation may come from a number of places; as this is a selection of pre-existing work, it is predicated on what Kincaid has previously reviewed. The selection bias can come from any point on the journey: what was offered, what was accepted, what was actually written about, what was chosen for this project particularly. I don't know, and in many ways it doesn't matter, as all I have and can assess is the text in front of me.

However, to move away from the navel-gazing before it consumes all possibility of interesting thought, we should talk a little more in depth about the content of the book:

The three sections do pretty much as they say on the tin. Histories provides Kincaid's reviews of a selection of histories of the genre, and in general he seems somewhat dubious of them at a project conception level. When talking about Adam Roberts's *The History of Science Fiction*, he is fairly clear in his rejection of the idea that there can be a single, canonical history of the genre, not least due to the fact that SF as a single entity cannot first be defined. To quote:

"But when your subject is science fiction, famously undefinable, a protean literature that takes on the characteristics of its observer, no history can be anything but partial."

This argument crops up again and again, with variable strengths of expression, throughout the chapter, as he grapples with various attempts by a range of authors to both pin down and explain SF and its past. He takes pains to spell out his position well too, that many of these characterisations of the genre limit themselves in their inclusions and exclusions, often on gender, race or linguistic lines. It's an argument I think is made well, and one I mostly find myself in agreement with (I too have done a big sigh and rolled my eyes at the idea that there was a single progenitor of the genre and that it was Mary Shelley). The one downside with this section, outside of my previous discussion, is something that becomes apparent as you keep reading: he is dissatisfied with approximately every single text he discusses, possibly even exasperated, and it becomes quite wearing to get to another history and...oh yep, this one's bad too. He's right and he should say it, but structuring the book with these collected together and as the first section is a little of a trial by fire; if you can weather the grumbling, you can get to the good stuff.

Which brings us around to Topics, by far my favourite of the sections. Because, by nature, the works under discussion in this section are narrower in their scopes, the tone is much lighter — the fundamental objection to the project of them is much reduced. The reviews here feel much more wide-ranging, and include possibly the most positive section in the volume, a chapter that I had to put down and stare off into space for a little while after reading because it was such a glowing paean to its subject that it felt wildly out of place. It was, of course, the Clute chapter. I should not be surprised.*

As someone without a huge depth of knowledge on what was being discussed, I also found this section the most informative about the genre that I wasn't recognising — the different texts being reviewed start to paint a picture of some key areas of import, from Marxism to utopias to Gnosticism to grammar to the prehistoric and its role in genre works that may (or may not, depending on the light) be

counted as SF. Names crop up over and over again, and a web starts to form of connected thoughts, schools and ideas. This is the section where I found myself wanting to pick up the books under discussion, although Kincaid is more easily inclined to declare something universally necessary for those interested in SF than I would be, an assertion I am often moved to distrust. There are no universals, not even in criticism, and certainly not in worth or value. But the works held up as vital in this way are not ones I'm familiar with, and so I cannot say for a certainty that I don't agree, only that I distrust the instinct to make such bold declarations.

That being said, the confident tone in which Kincaid feels comfortable making quite broad statements felt more apt here than in Histories, or perhaps I had just acclimatised. Likewise, I felt less sand-blasted by my ignorance, more just informed, and I think that is also down to the reduction of scope. It's easy to look at a specific topic and be ignorant, and then to learn about it, whereas trying to behold the genre at large and finding it unrecognisable has something of a humbling effect. If there's a downside to it here, it is that occasionally Kincaid will confidently assert something — that X is author Y's best work, or similar — and it is unclear whether this is relaying the information presented in the book under discussion, or his own opinion thrown in. I don't particularly mind which; I am generally in favour of reviewers not feeling they have to hedge every single opinion as being just an opinion (it's a review; surely that's a given?), but it would be nice, in general, to know.

The final section brings us onto Authors, and this section is...tricky. I'll come onto the content/tone in a moment, but I want to first look at who the authors chosen are, especially in conjunction with Kincaid's assertions back in the Histories section about people looking at the genre with a closed-off scope of who fits (and who isn't included).

Of the 12 authors covered in 11 chapters, only three are female. As far as I can tell from cursory research, every single one of them is white (with a complication in that the Disch chapter talks just as much, if not more, about Delany, who is a queer black man). They hail from three countries in total: the UK (7, of which 2 from Northern Ireland), the USA (4) and Canada (1). Only three of them are living, and I'm unsure if one of those is still actively publishing. Their careers fill a gap between 1895 and the present day, though I would personally suggest most of them had their zenith...I'll say before I was born rather than pinning it to something more specific. If we're going to talk about limited scope, and especially if we're going to talk about genre being a spectrum whose constituent parts stretch back before Aldiss's claim about Mary Shelley and forward up to the present day... well, the selection here somewhat undermines that assertion. And again, I don't know the factors that led to these specific authors being selected. I don't know what biases operate on the books Kincaid has been offered over the years to review. But I have this work in front of me as itself, and as that text, at this time...I have some questions to ask about this selection, when placed alongside those earlier critiques.

So let's see how Kincaid talks about it in his own words:

Believe it or not, there is a plan to all this. Oh, yes, there is an element of happenstance about it all, because the actual pieces I have gathered here are often the chance result of what various review editors have chosen to send my way. But from that ran-

dom selection of material I began to shape a journey, an exploration. The exercise was a strange sort of sculpture as I cut away at the mass I first started with. The original manuscript I put together was getting on for twice the length of the volume you now hold in your hands. By excising some things (even some pieces I hold in great affection and would dearly love to have included here), and by moving others from one place to another, I began to see a figure emerging from the dull rock.

That figure began with a wide landscape, a vista that tried to hold within its view the whole history of what we call science fiction; though it quickly became obvious that such a grand perspective was impossible, and what we are left with are multiple different, and often contradictory, histories.

So we move closer in, try to get a sharper focus, by considering what it is we write about when we are writing about science fiction. But that proved similarly prone to contradictions and diversities. The more closely we look, the less it is possible to determine the simple, unitary nature of what it is we are trying to see.

There was only one solution: to come right up close, close enough to stare into the eyes of those who commit science fiction. Among their tics and quivers and evasions, will we find what we are looking for? Is some sort of consensual account to be unearthed among the very people whose work we have been circling around to this point?

Spoiler alert: No, it isn't. I didn't really expect it to be. But as we have seen in the first two parts of this book, what is revealed is the fascinating ecosystem we call science fiction.

- Preface to the third section of the book, entitled Authors

So yes, he alludes to the editorial selection issue, but then assures us that this selection is a designed one. And to take up the metaphor, if there is a figure emerging from the rock... well, it's a white, British man. That mirror being held up is indeed perhaps to the reader and to the reviewer himself.

But it's not just the demographics. When I said earlier that the way this feels is backwards-looking, this selection of authors only highlights that feeling. If this is the fascinating ecosystem we call science fiction, did it end in 2005 or so but for Margaret Atwood? And where, in Histories and Topics, that backwards glance feels more apt for the subject matter, here...here I struggle. For all the interest in each chapter of this section (plenty, let me stress), when I step back a ways and think of it holistically, I cannot stop myself from thinking about what this, as an indicative selection, says about SF. Because ultimately this book is about SF, what it is, what it isn't, and the blurred boundaries of its edges into other work. If I weren't thinking about the shape of the thing under the blanket, I wouldn't be engaging properly with the work.

To be blunt, the shape of the thing under the blanket looks exactly like the thing Kincaid has critiqued. That he has seen the problem and nonetheless himself gone on to replicate it is frustrating. Hopes dashed and all that.

Tonally, this section lies closer to Topics than Histories, and for me is the better for it. Particularly, not all the chapters are reviews — Peter Ackroyd, for instance, is covered in a short essay for an anthology about supernatural fiction writers, and this gives more leeway for the personal opinions and assertions of objectivity that are the mode in which I find myself enjoying Kincaid the most. Call it an opinionated potted biography, perhaps. Likewise the “impressionistic response” to M. John Harrison's anti-memoir.

It also made the better for many of the authors in question being people Kincaid has met — I enjoyed the brief digressions into personal anecdote a great deal, and again fit into the tone I seem to enjoy most in Kincaid's work, with added connectivity out to these figures who for me are distant and august, if I've heard of them at all.

Of the book's three, this section also generated by far the most online research and interest in discovering more. With each new author under the glass, I found myself tabs deep in discovery, and trying my best to withhold the onslaught of TBR additions. These are often authors familiar to me but now fundamentally more interesting by his discussion of them. Previously my interest in H. G. Wells was... well, not zero but hardly significant. Now? We're trending upwards, for sure. And the previous interest I had definitely had in M. John Harrison's *Viriconium* works has likewise been given a fair boost. When he's convinced of a work (or an author's) worth, the value it has, whether aesthetically, ideologically or contextually, is very well spelled out, and even when he's not trying, what he loves, he sells. When it's there, the enjoyment in a work is palpable, and because it exists in contrast to pretty honest and blunt critique, it is clearly authentic, making it all the more valuable.

It ended very much on a high — the section on H. G. Wells covers several works, but reiterates a point made earlier in the volume about the depth, range and contradictory nature of his character and body of work. It feels like the best of what the volume does (Clute lauds aside), capturing a person and their relevance to the body of SF, such as it is, in all their variety. This? This was the stuff I loved.

But it cannot erase what came before, nor the context in which it sits in that final section.

And so, somewhat contradictorily, my conclusion is this: In presenting only a subsection of SF, only a few colours of the field, Kincaid proves his own assertions about the nature of the genre entirely correct, and my inability to recognise them shows only how wide and deep the field ranges. But, on an aesthetic and personal level, I found it strange to read, and sometimes alienating, because, even as he acknowledges that there are many science fictions — acknowledges the absence of women, people of colour and non-Anglophone voices in frequent attempts at categorising them — the one presented in the book slowly feels as though it coheres into a single beast, one overwhelmingly white, male and British, and whose focus ranges backwards, a preoccupation I sometimes feel undermines SFF's ability to accurately assess itself, and the issues it faces in the present, except as viewed through the lens of that past. I know there is a value in history, and on the merits of that it delivers a thorough, thoughtful and fascinating insight. I learned much, developed my existing understanding more, and had a great time with the thoughts of someone with a deep feel of his part of the field and a knack of sharing it clearly. But in my inner self, I wished the mirror held up had

shown at least a little of a face I recognised. Demographically, but also environmentally and contextually.

Ultimately, I may need to look backwards to understand where SF has come from to reach the point it's at now. But equally, when attempting sweeping discussions of "what it is we write about when we are writing about science fiction," that "fascinating ecosystem" cannot be understood fully if we excise the last ten years either. The present owes its debts to the past, but must also be understood on its own terms — partly shaped by the ideas and people covered in this exploration of the genre, but not wholly defined by them. This is a snapshot of what SF was rather than is, a work I find in some ways limited, but within those limitations — fascinating, thought-provoking, discussion-provoking, occasionally laugh-provoking and more.

*I have yet to grapple with Clute myself but I am beginning to understand that he operates as a sort of saintly figure, or perhaps the icon of a mystery cult, for a lot of British SFF criticism. If I start babbling about him as Dionysus reborn, you must assume that I too have been initiated.

The Math

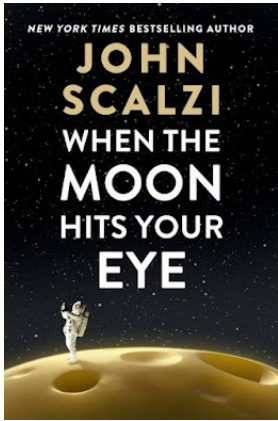
Nerd Coefficient: 7/10.

Highlights

- Acerbic tone of voice, leading to occasional snicker-out-loud moments
- Huge depth and detail of information about SFF history, criticism and its discussion
- Thoughtful discussion about the nature of the genre

Book Review: *When the Moon Hits Your Eye*, by John Scalzi

Joe Sherry



I have a confession to make: when I first heard of *When the Moon Hits Your Eye* I was *deeply* skeptical. I've been riding with John Scalzi since day one (to be transparent, I didn't find out about the self-published *Agent to the Stars* until after *Old Man's War*) and I've truly enjoyed just about everything he's had published. Scalzi's science fiction is a lot of fun, I've really dug his move to standalone work with *The Kaiju Preservation Society* and *Starter Villain*, and if I hated the cover for *Starter Villain* it's

probably not Scalzi's fault (my wife liked the cover, so maybe I'm in the minority here).

Despite that, finding out that this book was about the moon turning into cheese still gave me a visceral reaction that could best be described as a cringe. The cover didn't help.

Friends, I'm here to tell you that *When the Moon Hits Your Eye* is as delightful as you might hope it would be. It's Scalzi, with everything that entails. Scalzi gives us the big concept and then treats it seriously (well, mostly). The moon has turned to cheese. Okay. What would that actually mean? Well, if the moon keeps its mass then it would be much larger. It's brighter in the sky. It would be a bit of an existential concern on earth and there would be plenty of doubters and mockery and those trying to take advantage of the situation.

Would there be a moon mission? How would this impact the space program? What about the cheese mongers?

When the Moon Hits Your Eye has John Scalzi's typical light touch and humor. Are there cheese jokes-a-plenty? There are. The obvious puns, of course, and ones that you need to be a bit more cheese invested to have thought of.

Does it work? Your mileage will vary, but as someone who really likes bad jokes (they're all good jokes, Brent) and who typically gets on with Scalzi — *When the Moon Hits Your Eye* is a truly fun time with a ridiculous idea that I'm sort of surprised hasn't been played with more often and more popularly.

There isn't a true narrative arc to the novel in the sense of following one or two characters through their story. *When the Moon Hits Your Eye* follows a wide-ranging cast of characters from astronauts to retired scientists to top level government officials to a rich asshole (aren't they all) to competing cheese mongers to just regular people going about their lives and figuring what/how/or if they need to deal with the moon having been turned to cheese. We all still have to go to work even if the moon is cheese, after all.

The novel is a slice of life, if you will (I'm having a lot of restraint here, people). During a period of time when the moon first turned to cheese, this is how some people and the United States government

reacted and responded. That's ultimately what we're working with here. Progressive snapshots that move forward in time and there is an overall arc to the world's and the reader's understanding of what happened and more or less what it means for their lives and the lives of those they love.

The novel's hook is the concept. If you're down for a not-really-plotty examination of what happens when the moon turns into cheese that's funny and occasionally emotionally touching — this is the book for you. If you've read Scalzi before and his stuff works for you, this is an absolute winner. If Scalzi isn't your thing and you've tried, I'm not sure this will convince you. From my perspective, it's a delight.

It's a cheesy good time. It's really grate and I truly brielieve that it couldn't have been cheddar than this.

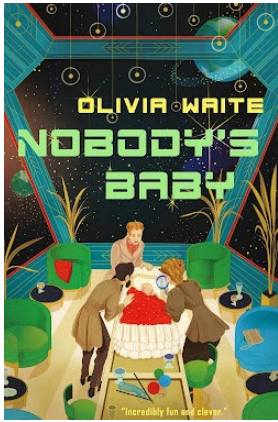
I'm not sorry.

It's all gouda.

Book Review: *Nobody's Baby*, by Olivia Waite

Christine D. Baker

Cozy noir-style space mystery featuring a gender-bending detective and lots of queer characters



You are aboard the HMS Fairweather, a spaceship that has been travelling from Old Earth for 350 years in search of a new home. The approximately ten thousand people on board regularly back up their memories in their own personal memory book so that, when they die, their new bodies will have access to their full memories. When someone dies, they are “reborn” at approximately twenty years old. There are no children on board and people are not supposed to be able to reproduce on ship.

So where did this baby come from?

Enter Dorothy “Dot” Gentleman, ship detective.

Her nephew Ruthie (short for Rutherford) and his partner, John, have found a baby in a basket on their doorstep. Dot quickly finds the baby’s parents, but the real mystery is that no one remembers having a baby at all! So now we have a memory crime, where people’s memories have been tampered with. Memory crimes are Dot’s specialty.

If you are looking for a cozy sci-fi mystery with noir vibes that has mild gender bending and queer characters, look no further. *Nobody's Baby* is the second book in the Dorothy Gentleman series by Olivia Waite. In book one, *Murder by Memory* (2025), Dot found herself awakened inside another passenger’s body and had to solve the mystery of how several memory books had been destroyed.

For me, the fun of this series is in the society that Waite creates aboard the Fairweather: no one should be able to die, and people’s needs are provided for, but they’re still incentivized to have jobs or run businesses to entertain themselves or to make a bit of money for their future.

Book one introduced a set of jobs related to the curation and protection of memories. Dot’s nephew works as a librarian who helps protect the memory books of the Fairweather’s passengers. His partner, John, is a memory bartender: he can mix you a drink that will bring back memories of a summer storm or fall in New York. He works at the Antikythera Club, the by-membership-only hideout for the ship’s artists and literati.

In book two, we learn about “flickers,” movie-like stories crafted by a single projectionist wearing a “skimmer,” a device that lets them project a story from their brain onto a screen. We are introduced to an entire set of society that makes these movies, the devices that make them possible, and their fans. There are also more prosaic jobs: for example, Dot has a crush on a woman named Violet who runs a cozy yarn store.

So, come for the mystery, but stay for larger theories on how this future society works. In a society like the Fairweather, where everyone can live multiple lives aboard a generation ship looking for a new planet, how do people relate to each other? What rules do they create to keep their society healthy? What happens when you find yourself in a situation where the rules don’t fit?

Peregrine, the foundling, falls into a gap in the ship’s laws. The ship has no procedure for creating a new identity onboard. They have written laws for once they reach a planet, but planetary identity does not come with a memory book or a right to new embodiments. Dot firmly believes in the Fairweather’s system, but can also see where the system needs to be bent to prevent a greater wrong. She tells us that “Paperwork is law and order. The papers are what make us a society and not just a gaggle of desperate people sharing a geography. We set up a system because a system can be permanent, where human beings are not.” Not everyone agrees: the system doesn’t always serve people, and there are some who begin to think that the system is more important than the people. So what does this mean for Peregrine?

On Peregrine’s behalf, Dot must petition the Fairweather’s Board of Directors to officially grant the baby a right to a memory book and new embodiments. She must also convince them, since Peregrine’s birth parents do not remember having him and do not want a child, that Ruthie and John should get parental rights. And she must get justice for Peregrine’s mother, who was robbed of her memories of the baby.

The Fairweather may be a society where you can live forever and you want for nothing, but people are still people: they are greedy and jealous and, sadly, will look for ways to hurt each other. But we can enjoy Dot’s expertise in unravelling the mysteries.

You could probably read this book without first reading *Murder by Memory*. But the first book is novella length (103 pages) and the second not much longer (144 pages), so why would you deny yourself the pleasure of more Dorothy Gentleman?

The Math

Nerd Coefficient: 7.5/10. An absolutely enjoyable experience.

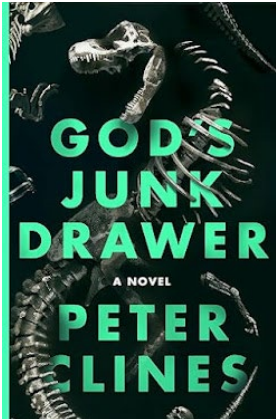
Highlights

- Cozy mystery with a likeable detective
- Lots of queer characters
- Fun space-noir vibes
- Interesting questions about memory and society building

Book Review: God's Junk Drawer, by Peter Clines

Paul Weimer

A story of expectations, the hazy memories of youth, and...oh yes, a plot and setting inspired by a famous TV show



Noah Barnes is a strange duck. He's an astrophysicist. A bit of a loner. More importantly, he has joined an astronomy group going into the backcountry to get to some dark skies for observations. But he isn't interested in astronomical observations and astrophotography. And gets annoyed when his own side project gets interrupted. He's trying to find a phenomenon...

...a phenomenon that transported Billy Gather, a young boy, his sister

and his father elsewhere several decades ago. The three disappeared, with just Billy returning two years later, halfway across the globe. No one believes in Billy's story of dinosaurs and Neanderthals and strange artifacts in a valley lost to time. No one serious, anyway. They figure it was some sort of gang thing gone wrong, an international kidnapping plot that whisked Billy across the globe. His father wasn't eaten by a T-Rex, his sister wasn't lost. All that is just books and stories. Right?

But there's something I haven't told you. For, you see, Noah is actually Billy Gather, the valley is real, and Noah's attempts to return to the valley will accidentally draw in others and propel the plot of Peter Clines's *God's Junk Drawer*.

The way I'm going to continue this discussion is by quoting the theme song to a TV show from the 1970s:

"Marshall, Will and Holly,

on a routine expedition

Met the greatest earthquake ever known

High on the rapids

It swept their tiny raft

And plunged them down

A thousand feet below...

To the Land of the Lost."

The high concept of *God's Junk Drawer* is to take a solid SF approach to the existence of the Land of the Lost, having one of the expeditioners come back from the titular location, and decades later, seek a way to return to the valley. That high concept sold me right away and pushed me to getting a review copy of the book. I am of an age, like the author, to have seen the show in re-runs, and I wanted to see

what a modern, more rigorous take on the concept might be like.¹

And that's what we get. Noah and his unwilling companions are back in the valley, Noah on a quest to find his sister (his transport back to Earth was alone, and their father died a year before his escape). But Noah finds that the valley is larger, different than he remembered. He expected it to only be some years since his escape, especially with the time dilation he thinks is active — but he finds that centuries have passed. What's more, many more people are in the valley now (from a variety of time periods), and Noah's status is more than a bit of legend among them. The Gathers teamed up with another stranded figure in the valley: an android, Ross, and Ross has been around since Billy left, working with those who have arrived in the four centuries since. Ross does not, as it turns out, know what happened to Billy's sister, which helps propel the plot further. The terrain is wider, larger, and landmarks are further apart. Billy's valley and time there were a very different time, even through the lens of childhood.

Soon enough, Noah and his companions learn that the humans are not even in control of their own destiny, that a new and mysterious power has moved into the valley and controls its fate. So the novel plays a lot with Noah trying to reconcile his earlier knowledge of the valley with the current state of affairs and still trying to figure out what happened to his sister. And of course, survival in a much more uncertain world. To this end, Noah does get some flashback POV sequences, as we see him arrive in the valley with his sister and father, and a few of their more memorable encounters. Clines is crafty, and these sequences help ground the theme (more on that in a bit) as well as show us the "then" state of affairs.

The technologic and scientific underpinnings of the valley come into play here. Noah thinks he knows what and where the valley is, but its true nature is part of the book's journey. There are clues for a reader to make guesses, and all roads run to a mysterious character, the Castaway. The Castaway does not appear to exist in the present, so we only see them in flashback, and in Noah's explanations of his past in the valley. The Castaway is a multidimensional being living in the center of the valley, and their multidimensional nature (including the dimension of time) makes communication with rather difficult. There's a sadness, a pathos to the Castaway that reminds me, doubtless deliberate on Clines part, of the "intelligent Sleestak," Enik, who finds himself marooned in this land just like the protagonists, and yet having a wider perspective on their journey. The teasing out of that is also part of the joy of reading and immersing oneself in the book.

The novel has a strong minor key on allusion, genre savviness and a love of genre. We get characters arguing about *The Winter Soldier*, for example, or making a *Star Trek V* reference, among many other genre references and touchstones. This is a novel that lives in a modern SF world, where everyone can and will likely understand or at least appreciate a casual reference to genre. Familiarity with pop culture is not needed to understand this book (just like, really, you need never have seen *The Land of the Lost* to appreciate this book), but it does add an extra layer to the proceedings.

That said, the novel also plays a lot with *Land of the Lost* itself. In the universe of this novel, that show never existed, although there were plenty of novels and books written about the Gathers and their adventures. And this all started with a routine rafting expedition (although instead of California, the Gathers disappeared while in

Maine). Instead of the Pakuni from the show, we have Neanderthals as neighbors to the Gather family. There are obelisks, not pylons, and they act differently. There are plenty of dinosaurs — more species than in the TV series, in fact.

Clines takes this to the next level and makes allusions and references to *Land of the Lost* itself as things that are NOT in the valley. Several times there is an easter egg reference to the show, but through the weird lens of a world where that show did not exist. The author's love of *Land of the Lost* and its formative aspects for him is on its fullest display here. Also, see the Castaway above.

There are plenty of inventions, speculation and surprises in Clines's valley as well. This is not an expy of *Land of the Lost*; he has a considered and really interesting idea of when and where the valley is, why it scoops up people, and what it all means. We get to see his imagination unleashed on a Land of the Lost-like setting, and his speculative inspirations are wide and interesting. And some of what he finds are absolute surprises and delights for the reader, as well as perils. The valley is not a safe place in the least.

The underlying story of *God's Junk Drawer* is, as I have started to tease out, two themes that emerge in the telling of the narrative. The first is "the past is a different country," and that is triply true of one's youth and upbringing. Billy Gather's time in the valley is a hazy, almost golden age for Noah, and his memories of the valley being much more pastoral and peaceful (even with carnivorous dinosaurs) clash over and over against the actual reality of the valley now as Noah and his companions, and the inhabitants of the valley, find it. There's a scene in the flashback POV for Noah where Billy doesn't really understand what is happening in an encounter with the Neanderthals, but the reader can and does put together the pieces quite quickly as to the true state of affairs.

The theme that is allied with this is the concept of science being willing to change or abandon hypotheses. Repeatedly, Noah shows that he is reluctant, at best, to change his mind to fit the actual facts on the ground, stubbornly insisting on an outdated and clearly incorrect information set. This is especially ironic and pointed given that Noah IS an astrophysicist, and his limited and incorrect understanding of the phenomenon of the valley allowed him (and accidentally others) to get back there in the first place.

Finally, late in the book, Noah does recognize that his assumptions are faulty, and that clinging to them is getting people hurt. It's a real moment of growth for Billy, and this, combined with the theme of youth and memories, gives real ballast to the novel. This is a fun, entertaining, exciting and engaging read, and at the same time it has a strong emotional depth and heft.

Where I think the novel could have been slightly stronger is in its other protagonists. Billy/Noah's journey is the main arc, and the remainder of those caught up in his trip to the valley, as well as the people who are already in the valley when they arrive, get much shorter shrift. Sure, some of them die, quickly or later, but it feels like there could have been much more done with the secondary characters. There are some interesting bits here and there (such as a guide who is not what he appears at all), but in general, the college students are more interchangeable in my mind than I really like.

The novel that comes to mind in thinking about *God's Junk Drawer* is Chris Roberson's Paragea. That novel features a Russian cosmonaut, Leena Chirikov. Shortly after launching in the mid-1960s, she winds up in the alternate world of Paragea. The novel holds the tension of Leena trying to understand a world on her terms, while giving the reader enough clues to see it is a strange post-singularity world where civilization has regressed, manipulation of nanotech and the like is "magic," and Leena clearly went through a wormhole. That novel features a major character, Hieronymous Bonaventure, from the British Royal Navy of the 18th century, who also fell into a wormhole some time ago and has been wandering around Paragea ever since. To show his bonafides, Roberson has a scene where Leena stumbles upon a stone plaza that will be familiar to those who ever watched the show. Paragea, like this novel, delights in its cultural references and allusions, but is more focused on the action-adventure side, sometimes following pulpy conventions.

I think that *God's Junk Drawer* does a better job overall and balances the action and adventure and references, genre knowledge and allusions with an emotional core that gives the novel that extra note of emotional depth. It's an entertaining and engaging read, and unlike some other novels that might tread in this space, succeeds at doing more than a relatively straightforward adventure story. Like in *Land of the Lost* itself, while there's plenty of action and adventure, *God's Junk Drawer* contains veins of nuance, thoughtfulness and insight.

Highlights

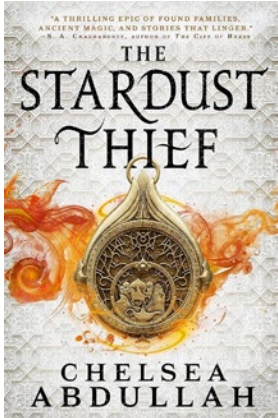
- Hard science meets a classic television show plot
- Strong emotional beats and character growth for Noah
- If you've ever been earwormed by the TV show theme song, this book is for you

¹ We are not going to discuss the Will Farrell *Land of the Lost* movie here, only to know that it does, in fact, exist.

Book Review: *The Stardust Thief*, by Chelsea Abdullah

The G

A good entryway to non-Western fantasy for readers in search of new ground



When I was a kid, most epic fantasy novels were decidedly Eurocentric. A lot hewed close to the Tolkienic blueprint; others diverged from it, but rarely from its Eurocentrism. Over the past three decades, fantasy authors have grown more daring in terms of the source material they draw upon, and more willing to explore the world and its rich tapestry of mythical traditions, so to speak.

The Stardust Thief by Chelsea Abdullah is by no means the first work of

epic fantasy to draw from *The Thousand and One Nights* for inspiration, but it is an excellent place to start for readers seeking something new and fresh, yet also familiar. After all, while these stories are not as central to Western culture as they are for the peoples of the Middle East, they long ago entered into our own cultural discourses — through art, books, film and so forth. Aladin's lamp, Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, Sinbad the Sailor — not everyone will have read or heard the actual stories, but few people who read books (or blogs about books) aren't at least passably familiar with these myths.

The Stardust Thief centers on Loulie al-Nazari, more popularly known as the "Midnight Merchant." She is a famous collector — and purveyor — of magical relics, and as such is a celebrity in the great city of Madinne. Wherever Loulie goes, so does her companion Qadir, a jinn who can take the form of a human or a lizard. As the book progresses, we learn that Qadir saved Loulie's life and gifted her an enchanted compass, a relic that leads its owner to other relics and the source of Loulie's trade.

The city is ruled by a cruel and mercurial Sultan, whose son Omar bin Malik leads the Forty Thieves — a group of assassins who seek out and kill whatever jinn try to enter the city and pass for human. We learn that, in doing so, Omar obeys the commands of his father, the Sultan; and that wherever jinn blood spills, an oasis forms. This too, it seems, is at the heart of the Sultan's rule — an onslaught of violence that transforms the city's desert environs and enriches its inhabitants. This is clearly metaphor.

The Sultan, however, is restless and greedy. He hears of a famous relic hidden deep in the dunes of the Sandsea, far outside Madinne's imposing walls — a lamp that cages a jinn, who will grant wishes to whatever human possesses it. He summons Loulie to his palace, coercing her to seek it out — and sends Omar with her to make sure she does not betray him. But Omar has other plans...

Since this blog's inception, I have ruminated on the nature of imaginative genre fiction and why I'm drawn to it; why, in comparison, mimetic fiction often seems so dull and dreary. In part, it is the opportunity to "travel" to and "inhabit" different worlds. Given the

sorry state of our own, it's no surprise that readers increasingly want to imagine something different. But even the most imaginative epic fantasy (or science fiction) draws upon and ultimately is a vehicle for understanding the world we actually do inhabit. Sometimes this is hard-hitting and serious; other times, it is like a lightbulb that illuminates a part of the house you've never really explored.

That's ultimately how I think about *The Stardust Thief*. This is a good story, with a brisk pace, centered on strong characters in a world you immediately want to get deeper into. It isn't a work of high-minded literary fiction, but its prose is smooth and never gets in the way of the story. Its cliffhanger ending implicitly offers you a difficult choice: to go straight into the sequel or go find the latest translation of *The Thousand and One Nights* and explore the novel's source material. At a high level, *The Stardust Thief* is a fun book that I wholeheartedly recommend to fans of epic fantasy who are looking for a fun summer read.

With that said, it's not perfect. A few major character decisions are confusing; the goal is clearly to surprise the reader, but there's a difference between a surprise that makes sense in retrospect and one that just leaves you scratching your head. Some of the interpersonal relationships are not well developed, which in turn makes character motivations more opaque than I'm guessing Abdullah intended.

Overall, though, this is a fun read that I highly recommend for readers who are looking for a good escapist fantasy novel that tries and mostly succeeds in treading new ground.

The Math

Nerd Coefficient: 8/10.

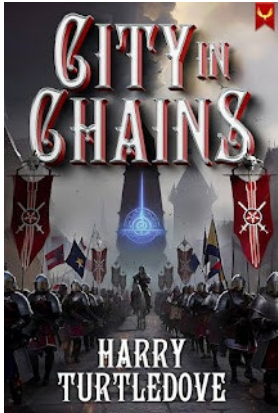
Highlights

- Fun, escapist "Arabian Nights"-derived fantasy
- Likable, relatable characters — but sometimes their motivations are unclear and confusing
- Different take on magic in a fantasy setting, which feels fresh

Book Review: *City in Chains*, by Harry Turtledove

Alex Wallace

A well-executed fantasy story that is fighting yesterday's battles



I am going to be upfront with the reader here and now: I cannot ever be fully objective about the oeuvre of Harry Turtledove. When I was an impressionable fourteen-year-old, I learned of his WorldWar series. For the unaware, that is his eight-book series about an alien invasion that happens to land in the particularly eventful year of 1942. I inhaled those books, and then the eleven books of his Southern Victory (also called 'Timeline-191' or 'TL191' among online alternate history fans due to its point

of divergence revolving around special order 191) series beginning with *How Few Remain*. I have read over forty of his books, as of writing, and he is the writer that gave me my enduring love of the alternate history genre. He is in a sense what I aspire to be as a writer, with several different speculative genres coexisting with a solid historical bedrock under all of them. I would not be the writer or indeed the man I am today without the hours and hours I spent reading his books, getting lost in his worlds. Not for nothing, his books consistently come with the blurb calling him "the master of alternate history."

In the alternate history circles I frequent, the man's work has something of a mixed reception. They say he relies too much on historical parallelism, such as his Southern Victory series quite clearly reenacting European history in the first half of the twentieth century in an American setting, or his Atlantis trilogy reenacting the early history of the United States on a landmass that consists of our world's Nova Scotia to Florida, having drifted off of the mainland in prehistory. The man has had some deeply bizarre sex scenes in his work, some involving real people (although I will argue that Robert Conroy's sex scenes are leaps and bounds worse). His work at points has had some very repetitive characterization (such as how often Sam Carsten is sunburned), as well as a few stock turns of phrase ("he said it with inevitability, like the sun will rise tomorrow"). As I have grown from an impressionable fourteen year old to a jaded twenty-eight year old, his books from the 2000s come off to me like the Star Wars prequels; with hindsight, I can see all the myriad flaws that others have pointed out, and many things could have been done better, but I still find myself enjoying the experience, and in awe of the worlds they opened up to me.

Much of the weaknesses of his big series are often connected to the fact that he had to pay for the college educations of his three daughters in quick succession, and writing is his sole source of income. He had to churn a lot out, and quickly, to give his children a future, and I can't be mad at him for that. His work since then has been leaner, less dependent on well-trod periods of history, and with less bizarre weirdness (but plenty of fascinating weirdness). His book *Three Miles Down* (reviewed on this site by Arturo Serrano) is easily his most personal book, being a look at the Los Angeles the man himself

grew up in, with plenty of wistfulness and added aliens. His *Alpha and Omega* is delightfully weird. Now, dear reader, I shall get to the point: his most recent novel, *City in Chains*.

This is one of Turtledove's straight fantasy novels, with no direct textual reference to our history. However, those with familiarity with the periods that he likes to write about will see the inspiration, as the novel is rather clearly a pastiche of occupied Paris during World War II. The city is Lutesse (no relation to certain peculiar characters in the *Bioshock* series) in the Kingdom of Quimper, a name which it shares with a city in Brittany (mention is also made of a battle at a place called Carentan, which is also real, and I learned from the mission in the original *Company of Heroes*). This city, and this kingdom, are under the occupation of the villainous Chleuh, and the quotidian cruelties have become part of the fabric of life.

The exact aesthetic of this whole shebang is a little bit confused, or so I thought. There are trains, but the occupying forces are primarily still using crossbows. As such, the novel feels like an odd mishmash of the Middle Ages and the 19th century with some tropes of World War II fiction thrown in. Of the latter, the most obvious of these is a sort of magically-infused crystal that occupies the role of radio in the historical fiction that inspired this novel. Nighttime bombing raids are in this world nighttime dragon raids; there is a brief plotline where a dragon rider, having been shot down, is secreted away in the basement of one of the main characters and later handed off to the organized resistance (a plotline which, sadly, is ultimately underdeveloped). The whole thing is a mishmash, one with a lot going for it, but overall Turtledove neglects to really describe what this city looks like, smells like, sounds like. The entire project feels more than a little threadbare, abstract even, rather than something concrete.

The book does shine, however, in its two main characters. One of them is Malk Malkovici, a junkman of the minority Old Faith sect who is a refugee from persecution in another country now occupied by the Chleuh. The Old Faith is the target of genocidal persecution by the occupiers, who are sending them to vaguely described but clearly ominous camps in the east, territory occupied by the Chleuh and conquered (albeit apparently temporarily) from a strange monarchy that believes that the gods have declared that wealth needs to be shared. It becomes clear quite early on that Malk is a member of the group that is this world's analogue for Jewish people under Nazi occupation.

What makes life more complicated for Malk is that his services as a collector of junk, including various types of metal, is in high demand by the occupiers who hate him and, on an ideological level, want to kill him. He and his family are complicit in the occupation and from there the mass murder and the genocide. He has rapport with officers who come to buy his wares, as well as a collaborating policeman whose beat is his neighborhood, and tries not to advertise his religious beliefs. He is wracked by the knowledge that he is, however indirectly and however reluctantly, complicit in evil, but he knows there is a huge price to pay if he were to stand up for himself.

The other main character is Guisa Sachry, a rich man, a great actor, the head of his own theater troupe, and the greatest star of the Lutesse theater scene. He has a much younger wife (his third) and had planned to keep his head down throughout the occupation with inoffensive slice-of-life plays until an officer of the Chleuh military came knocking, 'asking' him to appear as one of the Lutesse luminar-

ies at a parade honoring the city's new rulers. Knowing he stands to lose a lot, perhaps even his life, if he says no, he goes along with it. He is then asked by the occupation to write a play glorifying the occupation and demonizing the resistance. He does so, reluctantly (and the solution he devises to this is a very clever one on Turtledove's part, one that he is capable of creating because he knows how people interact with the historical and cultural context in which they live), and from there is pulled headfirst down the vortex of collaboration.

Guisa Sachry is not a good man, and the narrative correctly emphasizes that fact again and again. He hires a dancing girl from another company on the condition that she have sex with him. He is deeply and profoundly unpleasant to his wife, with whom it is clear he doesn't really love, and the feeling is mutual. He is ruthless to his underlings and sycophantic to the men who pay him off. But it is with that sycophancy that the novel really furnishes its theme, that of complicity.

Both Malk and Guisa are men who are constrained by structural factors from acting free of the occupation. Malk dislikes working with the Chleuh out of his religious beliefs and his own moral principles. Guisa, on the other hand, has no principles whatsoever, and his own naked self-interest is what compels him to comply; even if he is the ethnic majority in Lutesse, the Chleuh would still make an example if he were to fall out of line. Both don't want to collaborate, but both are forced into collaboration, their distinct characters and distinct paths nevertheless reaching the same destination.

As a longtime reader of Turtledove's work, Guisa Sachry as a character reminded me strongly of another one of his characters: William Shakespeare, as portrayed in his novel *Ruled Britannia*. That novel is set in a world where the Spanish Armada succeeds, and England is under the cruel yoke of Philip II. This version of Shakespeare is a covert sympathizer with the English resistance who is coerced by the Spanish to write a play glorifying Philip, while simultaneously writing a play about Boudica, the ancient queen of the Iceni people who lead a failed rebellion against the Romans, and a thinly-veiled diatribe against the Spanish. Shakespeare, as portrayed by Turtledove, is a man with a strong moral conscience who is forced into collaboration, but takes covert action to resist. Guisa Sachry, on the other hand, is a man with no moral conscience at all, and his arc is almost that of a foil to Shakespeare's in the earlier novel.

At its core, *City in Chains* is about collaboration. Many Americans in recent months have been beating the drum against collaboration with the new Trump administration, filled to the brim with neo-Nazis, technofascists, and a rogues' gallery of some of the most unpleasant, most boorish, most malevolent, and most stupid people on the planet. We have, rightly, been infuriated with the spinelessness of Democratic Party leaders in not taking a harder line against the wrecking of the federal government or the evisceration of trans rights in this country, to name but two examples (but a part of me thinks that Ta-Nehisi Coates was right in saying that you can't really expect a party that had no spine to stand up against the genocide in Gaza to have the spine to stand up for democracy). We are in a moment where the moral imperative is not to comply, but to resist. Releasing a book like *City in Chains* in a time like this is an interesting decision, and one that is revelatory.

Harry Turtledove is an outspoken liberal on his social media; before

he decamped from Twitter, his pinned tweet was "I didn't mean to be topical" repeated several times. He is consistently good and well intentioned, if not radical, on racial justice and LGBTQ+ rights, and is blisteringly critical of the current administration. I remember that, in his novel *Alpha and Omega*, a novel set mostly in Israel (and released a few years before the current genocide), he states frankly, but does not dwell on, the second-class status of Palestinians in that country. I do remember one particular interaction I had with him on Bluesky where he told upcoming writers to share their new works, and I shared *Broken Olive Branches*, the anthology in which I have a story raising money for refugee relief in Gaza (and discussed on this blog here). He liked and boosted the anthology, for which I am grateful to him. In terms of his historical interests, he has been blisteringly critical of neo-Nazis and neo-Confederates.

But the man is not without his blind spots. His portrayal of race is very much that of an older white liberal; his novel *Guns of the South* has been taken to task by multiple critics in recent years, such as by Monroe Templeton on the Sea Lion Press blog (which, for full disclosure, I have written many articles for in previous years). As an Asian-American (half Filipino through my mother), I was more than a little irritated by the fact that his Hot War trilogy, a series about World War III breaking out over Korea, has no Asian viewpoint character; the only Korean character is the plucky sidekick of a white American soldier.

Ultimately, I think the core of the issue is that Turtledove's view of World War II is very much that of old war movies, where brave soldiers fight for justice, and innocent civilians bear the brunt of the ultimate evil. The conflict becomes a great moral drama between justice and injustice (in fairness to him, Turtledove has always been frank about American racism both in that period and in other periods). In that regard, he glorifies the resistance fighter and denounces the opportunist, but fundamentally casts the thing that they are resisting as a foreign force, an invader.

This is a view of fascism that has been superseded in the historical literature by a view that situates fascist regimes in the broader context of the imperial world of nineteenth-century Europe. Aimé Césaire, in 1950, published *Discourse on Colonialism*, which made the argument that colonialism made Europe a savage continent, one that had come to accept racial hatred and mass murder as de rigueur, a formulation that culminated in Nazism deciding to do those things to other Europeans. Césaire's English translator called this a 'boomerang effect,' an abstract but effective translation of the original French phrase 'choc en retour,' literally 'return shock.' Not long after Césaire, Hannah Arendt argued in her magnum opus *Origins of Totalitarianism* that Nazism was the confluence of millennia of European antisemitism and the race thinking of imperialism. Hitler himself openly stated that the Nazi plan for Eastern Europe was explicitly modeled on the United States.

Here I shall analyze *City in Chains* as a critical work, in the manner that Phoebe Wagner on this very blog discusses *Andor*. In attempting to critique modern fascism, he falls into myths of the original fascism. Contemporary American fascism is not something that was imported from Europe; Trump is not merely the achievement of Russian propaganda, but rather a culmination of centuries of American bigotry. A president who is promising ethnic cleansing cannot be considered a break from a country that systematically expelled

its indigenous populations from their homelands. A movement that is backed in no small part by violent militias cannot be considered a break from a country that has enforced slavery, white supremacy, and indigenous dispossession with heavily armed mobs, some of which called themselves militias.

As a narrative device and as abstract philosophy, the theme of complicitness in this novel succeeds. As a description of complicitness in today's injustices, it falls flat. This novel has a model of the theme that could work perhaps most perfectly for Ukrainians under the Russian jackboot (and Lord knows they need it), but not in America or Western Europe. For the latter, the complicitness we face is different and in some ways more totalizing. Does the company that makes our food give money to pay tribute to Donald Trump? Is the fast food place we go to supporting the IDF as they raze Gaza to the ground? Is our laptop made in a slave labor camp in Uyghurstan? The complicitness we face now is our own convenience, our survival on a very basic level. What we are complicit with is capitalism, and capitalism gives us no choice. This is the essence of the phrase "there is no ethical consumption under capitalism."

That is the sort of question that *City in Chains* has no answer for, as it is uninterested in probing the broader systemic reasons for why this occupation, this war, this genocide are happening in the first place. We only get broad descriptions of the prewar status quo, and most of that is a pretty clear parallel to interwar Europe. If Quimper is France, as its name will show, there is no Algeria, no Senegal, no Indochina, and from there no equivalent to the American insistence that the first Allied troops to enter a liberated Paris be white. According to this novel, the enemy is foreign, alien even, and it requires of us no introspection, no questioning of basic assumptions. In valorizing resistance to complicitness with a foreign evil, it leaves open the door to complicitness with a domestic evil, letting us be comfortable in satisfaction while continuing to play our own little part in keeping evil alive, be it through our purchases, our tax dollars, our employment, our voting, or our own personal conduct. The parallelism that is one of Turtledove's standard tricks works to the detriment of the broader moral indignation, and as such cannot even really be said to critique contemporary fascism.

As such, the basic narrative scaffolding of *City in Chains* is perfectly entertaining as fantasy fiction, but as an answer to the current moment it feels woefully out of date. The novel on some level feels like it's fighting previous battles, not the current battle. Its portrayal of the struggle against fascism is what America of previous decades wanted World War II to be, and what modern white liberals want the struggle against contemporary fascism to be. It is a book that is fascinated by abstract questions of morality in years gone by, while not having much to say about concrete questions of morality in the present. It has nothing whatsoever to say about how the current moment is the compounded result of previous historical moments, and how the problems of today are deeply structural. It is a book I enjoyed very much, and it has some very smart moments, but on the whole the novel reveals the weaknesses of Turtledove's worldview in an age of resurgent fascism.

Section II: Media Reviews

Rebellions Are Built on Hope: Andor S2E8

Phoebe Wagner

In “Who are you?”, the best episode of season two — and a top-tier moment in television generally — we bear witness to the Ghorman Massacre.

Content Warning: Discussion of domestic violence, violence against protesters.



As Cassian is preparing for his assassination of Dedra Meero, the plaza is opened and the Ghorman Front immediately starts to rally people. In a surprising moment of clarity, the leader of the Ghorman Front, Carro Rylanz, points out the danger of gathering, but his rebels refuse to listen to him. Meanwhile, Dedra speaks to her supervisor, Major Partagaz about the plan. “The only story that matters is Ghorman aggression,” he says. “The threats, the inexplicable resistance to imperial norms.” He points the success of their propaganda and media, revealed in the board meeting during episode one: “Our struggles with Ghorman are well documented at this point.”

In a great piece of cinematic storytelling, a few minutes later as Syril walks through the memorial plaza, a news reporter repeats Partagaz’s lines about resistance to imperial norms. The propaganda plans have fully taken over the media, demonstrating there is no help for the Ghor from the story being recorded by traditional media sources. They are fully part of the Imperial machine.

As Syril makes his way to ask Dedra what’s going on, he’s confronted by Carro Rylanz as people file by, chanting: “We are the Ghor! The galaxy is watching.” Rylanz tells Syril about the mining equipment that’s been witnessed on different parts of the plant, which Syril still tries to deny, but at this point, Rylanz knows Syril must have been helping the Empire and says: “What kind of being are you?” Syril has no response, and Rylanz demands to know: “What’s in our ground? What is it you’ve been sent to steal from us?” Like Rylanz, though, Syril has no knowledge of the mining, as Dedra has kept it from him.

He tries to see Dedra, but he’s blocked by other Imperial officers as things become more volatile during the protest. When he is finally brought in to see her, she reveals the plan he has already guessed. In this moment, Syril finally finds his agency, even though it’s through an exertion of power via domestic violence. In true fascist fashion, he can’t express himself except through domination (as opposed to be-

ing dominated by the other women in his life who dictated his agency, such as his mother or Dedra). He chokes her while asking about the mining. His shock seems to have two layers — the destruction of the planet and people he’s come to admire to some degree and the fact his girlfriend kept the information from him. He rushes out to join the crowd.

While Syril’s capability of violence has been demonstrated in season one when he tried to find Cassian, this intimate partner violence demonstrates a shift in his character. Throughout season two, Syril has received much of what he’s wanted. His partner is an officer in ISB, his mother is finally respecting him, and he’s on a special mission for the Empire. Importantly, much of these “successes” haven’t happened due to his choices. In a brilliantly acted scene early in the season, Dedra tells his mother, Eedy (Kathryn Hunter), that she will control how much Syril sees his mother and that contact will be dictated by if Eedy can behave. Syril trades one domineering relationship for another. While it does seem like Dedra cares for him in her own way — both of their abilities to care dictated by their lack of empathy — Syril is also controllable, which is why he’s the perfect person to infiltrate the Ghor, because Dedra knows she can control him.

As Syril realizes he’s been used by his partner, he watches the breakdown of the protest in the plaza as the new recruits from the previous episode are sent out to clear a path to the memorial. While their commanding officer says that’s a bad idea, the officer in charge of the operation sends them out anyway.

In an intensely powerful moment, Lezine starts singing the Ghorman national anthem. The crowd picks it up, and soon the whole plaza is singing, united in this moment of oppositional nationalism. As they sing, the green recruits go out to clear a path to the memorial, and the crowd grows angry, harassing them while stormtroopers blocking off the plaza observe the situation. Above the plaza, a sniper watches while TIE fighters fly over.

Partagaz orders Dedra to continue the plan: a sniper takes out one of the young recruits, which prompts the imperial forces to open fire, including the stormtroopers. What had been a crowd singing the Ghorman national anthem becomes stormtroopers and imperial officers shooting into a plaza. A few of the Ghorman Front have blasters, but most of them are unarmed civilians. The sniper continues to take out people from the rooftop.

In the panic, Syril watches the stormtroopers kill people he had been working with, murder the citizens he’d walked past every day, and destroy the plaza his office had overlooked. In a series of slow moments, the camera focuses on Syril standing still in all this violence.

Several commentators have suggested that Syril might have had some sort of awakening in these moments, and Disney’s official episode guide seems to support that reading as the episode summary states: “[Syril] comes to the realization that he’s been a pawn for the Empire’s machinations.” It’s easy to want to look for redemption for Syril. While he’s not a sympathetic character, we do come to know him intimately over the course of two seasons, from seeing the inside of his bedroom and how his mother treats him to the manipulation from his partner, Dedra. But he’s always been an active part of the Empire. He wasn’t swept up into it out of necessity or drafted into the stormtroopers or even just passively involved. One of the

first introductions to Syril is while he attempts to create an even more stringent sense of law and order on Ferrix. It's his dream to be recruited by Dedra to be a spy, even if the reason for his spying is at first a lie. To me, what makes Syril such a compelling and well-written character is not this moment where he perhaps regrets his actions but because he is as dedicated to the cause as Cassian or Luthen. Cassian also has moments where he questions their tactics, but he still has resolve. So does Syril as his opposite.

Meanwhile, as Syril is having these confrontations, Cassian is quick to recognize the gathering in the plaza is a bad idea and will end in violence. As he hurries to check out of the hotel, the bellhop, Thela, tells Cassian, "Don't worry, you were never here. Didn't log you in." This moment demonstrates some of the brilliance of the storytelling in *Andor* — and I want to point out a similar moment in the next episode. Gilroy and his team take careful pains to show how one resists. The tools are documented, and this moment is one of them. Thela breaks a small rule in order to make sure Cassian remains undetected. When Cassian responds that he hopes everything works out, Thela says: "Rebellions are built on hope." By giving this key line to Thela, it emphasizes even more that it's not the great leaders like Cassian, Bix, Vel, and Luthen who make the rebellion work, it's the small acts of resistance that create great opportunities. As Nemik from season one says in his manifesto: "Remember that the frontier of the Rebellion is everywhere. And even the smallest act of insurrection pushes our lines forward."

Cassian joins the Ghorman protest outside, trying to find Wilmon, as they both realize the stormtroopers are prepared to "kettle" the Ghorman, cutting off their escape in a great visualization of tactics currently being used against protestors in L.A. these past few weeks. Much like Thela's small act of resistance, Gilroy and his team also show the tactics of empire to disrupt protest. The stormtroopers contain the protestors, fly intimidating TIE fighters over the crowds, and, most importantly, they start the violence by killing one of their own people to then pin on the protestors. K2 units are released on the crowd, and their efficient violence and nearly impenetrable armor makes them horrific enemies as they are able to crush people to death.

In the violent chaos, Cassian still tries to complete his mission of assassinating Dedra, and as he is about to take the shot, Syril finally sees him in the crowd. Syril reacts with an intensity of violence that we nearly saw when he threatened to kill his partner. Now, he turns all that anger onto Cassian, the man he'd hunted and had caused him to lose his job. It's a brutal fight as they both go for the soft parts — the eyes, mouths — and use whatever weapons are at hand as the Imperial forces continue to massacre the Ghorman.

Syril is relentless, dragging himself upright after an explosion that Cassian thinks has taken him out. He finds a gun and has Cassian in his sights. With desperation in his voice, Cassian asks: "Who are you?" Cassian's lack of awareness of Syril's existence makes Syril hesitate. It's easy to imagine what might be going through his mind, that the only reason Syril is standing in that plaza, a contributor to a massacre, is because of Cassian, the man he became obsessed with. In that moment of hesitation, Syril is shot through the head by Rylanz.

In interviews, Gilroy and Diego Luna have talked about how they had to fight to keep the line "Who are you?" in the episode, which seems

wild. The moment provides so much clarity for Syril's character — all that hatred for a person who doesn't even know him. As a piece of anti-fascist media, this moment feels important to the broader message. A necessary tool of fascism is an "other" that can be blamed for the ills of the world. On an interpersonal level, Cassian represents that "other" for Syril (and from a casting perspective, Diego Luna and Kyle Soller replicate the current fascist othering happening in the U.S. right now). This question from Cassian dramatizes how all that hate from Syril is a one-way street and not representative of reality. Rather, Syril was trying to turn something he'd imagined into reality.

After Syril's death, Cassian and Wilmon escape the plaza. Wilmon chooses to stay on Ghorman to help his girlfriend, a member of the Ghorman Front. In the final shots, Wilmon's girlfriend Dreena (Ella Pellegrini), attempts to broadcast what happened during the massacre. Wilmon also charges Cassian to spread the story.

A close up of Cassian's face as he cries listening to the message asking for help for the Ghorman's.

A long shot shows Cassian's face as he escapes and Dreena's message plays as narration: "We are under siege. We are being slaughtered..." This message contrasts with the news media, which shares the Imperial narrative that the Ghor started the violence and that the dead imperial officers are martyrs (including Syril).

What makes this episode, and the following episode "Welcome to the Rebellion," so important is the familiarity of it all. Videos on TikTok juxtapose shots from these episodes with protests actively happening across the country as I write. Someone graffitied an ad for *Andor*, adding a speech bubble to Luthen's mouth condemning ICE. Like the best revolutionary media, *Andor* has captured our current moment. While Gilroy has stated in interviews that this season wasn't meant to be predictive, the prescience is still uncanny and speaks to Gilroy and his team's understanding of fascism.

In a recent video post, resistance scholar Dr. Tad Stoermer points out that *Andor* is "practically an instruction manual" and sums up what he sees as the takeaway: "Resistance, to have any hope of success, requires regular people...to risk, to sacrifice, to lose with no force on their side other than their own will. [...] What are you ...willing to risk... for a better world you might never live to see?"

Movie Review: The King Tide

Arturo Serrano

What if we were really nice to the kid in Omelas?



Life has proceeded uneventfully on a secluded island of fishermen, somewhere in Canada, for many generations. But one day, during a storm, a boat crashes ashore, carrying only a baby. The villagers are amazed to discover that this baby has magical healing powers, and decide to keep her a secret from the rest of the world. In just a few years, she becomes the center of their faith and the guarantor of their prosperity. As long as she's around, no one gets sick, the boats catch abundant fish, and all

goes well. She's a happy child with loving parents and an entire community devoted to her. Sounds like utopia.

Except that the meaning of an "uneventful" life has been warped. In this version of utopia, to keep the miracle to themselves, the islanders have cut off all contact with the mainland. The village doctor is now a jobless drunkard, the school doesn't teach about the exterior world anymore, the men hold bloody brawls for fun because they know any broken nose will be fixed, and the children routinely play with poisonous plants. No risk matters anymore. There are no consequences. But this time, the price of utopia isn't a tortured child: everyone is unfailingly kind to the miraculous girl. They ritually thank her for her gifts. She doesn't have to suffer for their happiness. She just has no clue there's anything more to life.

Among many possible readings, the film *The King Tide* seems to suggest that one of the dangers of religion is learned helplessness. Why make any effort, when you're guaranteed infinite blessings? Perhaps God is wise to keep his distance and stay invisible to us. We might not want to let him go.

Soon enough, the islanders get a glimpse of what they could lose. One day, while the girl is busy elsewhere, a kid dies. She arrives too late to heal him, and it turns out her gifts don't include raising the dead. The shock is so heavy on her that the magic seems to go away. People's wounds stay open. Hangovers won't go away. The sea carries no more fish. The village doctor may even have to reopen his old clinic. But don't worry: they still love the girl. They love her so much. They keep standing in queue every day to see her for a few minutes. They haven't lost hope. They won't countenance the thought of going back to the way things used to be, when health and prosperity took effort.

It's often said that people reveal their true face when they're given power. At first, you don't feel like the people of this village have changed. They don't think so, either: as far as anyone can tell, they're all smiles and polite words. But just because they don't mistreat the child, as in Omelas, doesn't mean she's any less exploited. That's the most chilling part about this film: until almost the very end, you won't find a sinister attitude in any of them. It's with the most level-headed, measured tone that they discuss the extremes they're capable of

when they discover the girl can still do wonders when she's sleeping.

The King Tide examines how alarmingly easy it is for people to lie to themselves with open eyes in the name of sincerely good intentions. This time, the price of utopia isn't paid by one child. It's paid by everyone else, once they get used to actions not having consequences. They have so lost themselves that they react to the possibility of having their normal lives back as if it were the end of the world, and that panic makes them willing to turn their placid, guilt-free luckily-not-Omelas into a totally-definitely-Omelas if that's what it takes.

But there's another angle to this situation: the reason why the sea has no fish left is that industrial fishing leaves nothing for the villagers. They aren't to blame for their suffering. But since the girl's arrival, they've been buffered from it. Of the available strategies to deal with the ills of modern life, they've chosen denial. You don't need to help fix a broken world if you have your own personal Jesus who can multiply fish on demand. Over the years, the island has developed a strong local identity, but there's a difference between proud self-reliance and uncaring isolation.

That's the thorniest question throughout the film: every increasingly awful step these people take to preserve their little magical corner of the world is ostensibly done to protect the girl from what the modern world would do to her. And yes, it sounds reasonable to want to prevent her from becoming a lab rat. On the island, she plays with other kids, goes to school, is lovingly cared for. But the loss of her gifts reveals that love as conditional. The implication is left unspoken, because it burns the tongue: would you still love God if you didn't receive any blessings?

This is not the same question as the one asked in the book of Job; I'm not talking about a miserable life. I'm talking about an ordinary one, where you rely on what your hands can hold. If nothing terribly catastrophic were to happen to you, but you had no promise of eternal, painless bliss, would you be satisfied? Or more poignantly: if you had experienced a brief taste of that heaven, would that be enough for you? In the film, the villagers do have the impending disaster of running out of fish, but the script goes out of its way to highlight several times that at any moment they could simply move elsewhere. The danger isn't inevitable. It's by choice that they don't bother to interact with the mainland and possibly push for a better deal with the fishing industry. They have plenty of mundane options for fighting that injustice. But with a miraculous child, they can afford inaction. And it's very seductive to have a life that allows and even rewards inaction.

The thought experiment proposed in Omelas is usually framed in these terms: Is it ethical for all to enjoy infinite happiness if it requires the infinite suffering of one person? It's less common to find it in these terms: If one person could provide infinite happiness for all, is it ethical for that person to refuse? In other words, would you demand that Jesus die to save humankind?

It's subtle, but you can notice that it never occurs to the people in *The King Tide* to inquire what the girl wants. On one hand, it's unfair that people take her for granted. On the other hand, it looks like it pleases her to help people. On the other other hand, she's legally a minor who has not made an informed choice on the matter. The film wisely stops before she has the chance to walk into the exterior

world, so these questions are left hanging for the viewer to mull over. It suffices to explore what our endless asking does to God. It's up to you to ask yourself what it does to you.

The Math

Nerd Coefficient: 9/10

Video Game Review: Metaphor ReFantazio

Joe DelFranco

Time marches on, and the age of a new king draws nearer...



The death of the Euchronian king, with no apparent heir, brings about a power vacuum in which tensions run high and anxiety reigns supreme. A few primary choices become obvious, but how to decide who will lead? That's when the old king's magic comes into play, bringing to this storybook fantasy world something it has never experienced before: democracy. In this fantastical world, candidates vie for the throne with words, swords, magic, and ideals, all while dealing with the social and racial inequalities that have plagued Euchronia for far too long.

Enter the main character (whom you name), an ally of the long-thought-dead prince of Euchronia. Hidden from the world and afflicted with a curse, the prince has been removed from the board as a potential candidate. It is the main character's responsibility to free him from his magical curse and bring about peace in a world full of inequality. Through forging bonds with others and awakening to magic long forgotten, the player is taken along for a heartfelt, thought-provoking narrative that brings Euchronia to life in what I think is Atlus's finest game to date.

Upon booting up the game, I was greeted with a beautifully animated cutscene, introducing Metaphor's initial conflict and the world that birthed it. From the initial cutscenes until the first moment the main character steps into Gran Trad, I could tell I was in for a treat. The art direction is splendid, immediately drawing me in and giving me a sense of authenticity that I rarely feel that early in a game (especially one this big). Sunlumeo Street and Sunshade Row represent different socioeconomic spheres of the great capital of Gran Trad, but still carry the same heart. And the further you explore, despite the extreme differences of the biomes, Euchronia feels connected and looks fantastic. And let me not forget the special pitstops the gang make throughout their journey, each one postcard-worthy, and each a little piece of the magic that drew me further into an already endearing world.

Exploring the cities and towns is a treat. Anytime a new primary event occurred, I made sure to go around the streets of all the cities to soak in all the information and gossip. This added extra depth to Euchronia, making it feel as though the world was moving alongside me instead of remaining static. Because of this, even small, insignificant gossiping characters on the street show a modicum of

character growth. Also, the ability to look at the dialogue log is such a blessing (just in case you missed something). With spoken dialogue, you can have the line repeated, which I did multiple times for some of my favorite lines.

I always have to mention the UI design in the more recent Persona games, and Metaphor is no exception. This is undoubtedly the best I've seen. *Metaphor's* UI is a thing of beauty that kept me staring at the screen. They went quite hard on something that is usually a passing thought in most games and I am all the more grateful for it.

Metaphor gets you into the combat early and blows open the archetype-class-based gameplay, but it continues to expand throughout the entire playthrough. It's no small wonder that Metaphor is similar to the Persona games regarding its magic and combat systems, considering Studio Zero is made up of many of the developers from P-Studio, including its director, Katsura Hashino. Party characters are capable of embodying archetypes, old magic that is intention manifest, allowing them to summon a powerful being that fulfills a specific purpose toward one's ideals. Whether that be the archetype of a warrior, knight, or merchant, the archetype system echoes Persona's system of summoning beings to assist the party in combat, though instead of summoning, the archetype is an embodiment of each character's willpower. By giving the main character the ability to transfer this focused intent to his companions, they too can achieve different archetypes. This allows *Metaphor* the freedom of allowing all party members to mix and match archetypes, blowing past Persona to create a more flexible and versatile party utilization system.

Like the Persona games (and most JRPGs), exploiting an enemy's weakness in this well-crafted turn-based combat is the key to victory. Gems atop the screen show the player how many turns they have against a current enemy. Each gem constitutes one character's turn. Upon delivering a critical hit or dealing damage with an enemy's weakness, the player is awarded a half gem, which gives another turn. Exploiting weaknesses gives the player a huge advantage and can turn the tide against strong foes, but equally, missing enemies with an attack or using an ability with an affinity that they are impervious to removes extra gems, relinquishing precious turns. When an enemy increases their agility, it is wise to debuff them, and when they debuff you, it's a good idea to get back to neutral. In addition, the game introduces Synthesis abilities, which incorporate a mixture of different archetype classes to create a completely different set of abilities that allow party members to work in tandem to take down an enemy. These moves mostly use only two characters, but some use three or four. Depending on the Synthesis skill and number of party members involved, this will take up a gem corresponding to each party member involved. Discovering all the class abilities and Synthesis skills is a treat throughout the entirety of the game. There are so many possibilities to mix and match that the game truly continues to give the player options until the very end (and into a second playthrough).

But Studio Zero decided to go a step further and add action combat. This action combat is how the player character interacts with enemies in the overworld. By knocking an enemy's stamina to zero, the player character can initiate an ambush on the enemy, allowing an advantage at the beginning of the fight, inducing both stun status and inflicting damage. This works for enemies that are both within level range and that are stronger than the protagonist. For

weaker enemies, they are simply killed in overworld combat without having to waste too much time. In this way, it feels like *Metaphor* respects the player's time, especially when you have an eighty- to one hundred-hour adventure on your hands. Not only is killing weaker enemies a breeze, it makes grinding much easier (which is totally optional). *Metaphor* is one of the few games that I found that respects grinding while also retaining its balance. I thought I had saved up so much money with the Merchant class after grinding for quite some time only to find that I didn't have nearly enough to afford all the items I encountered in shops. A million reeve just doesn't go that far these days. Studio Zero built a system that takes into account players who like to grind and those who don't, and balanced it well. Quite the achievement. While overworld combat is a time saver and mostly satisfying, it's not overly complex by any means. Some class weapons are a little less enjoyable to use than others, so I found that I would sometimes level certain archetype classes with seeds and roots instead of through combat. Turn-based combat is the bread and butter of this game, but it's nice to have options.

While the primary dungeons are satisfying and large enough to explore and get lost in, some of the side dungeons are a bit basic. It doesn't ruin any of the immersion by any means, but it would have been nice to have a more lived-in feel to some of the side content. I know they're supposed to be simple side missions, but when the rest of the game feels so high quality, it feels a bit sad that you can run through some of the side dungeons very quickly, though I can see how that would be a benefit for some. With the combat so enticing, I would have happily spent more time encountering enemies in side dungeons.

The combat options in the game expand as the player meets and advances their relationships with their followers. This works like a traditional Persona game, but instead of forcing a player to make the correct dialogue options to move the relationship along, the relationship advances regardless, so long as you take the time to level up your royal virtues (stats that increase through different activities like reading, listening to others, etc.). This is a huge advantage to *Metaphor*'s benefit. This allows the player to spend more time learning about the world instead of trying to gain someone's favor over and over because you didn't pick the perfect dialogue option.

Speaking of followers, this game has the best set of followers (or confidants, as you would see in a Persona game) I've come across in an Atlas game. And that's saying something, considering how much I love the Persona series and its characters. This is probably my favorite group of party members in any JRPG. I loved them all. Some more than others, naturally, but I didn't actively dislike or feel indifferent to any. To watch them all grow and make their choices was an absolute treat, and there wasn't a single character that I didn't look forward to spending time with. I don't want to spoil any potential revelations and character growth, but just know, I loved it all. It felt satisfying to reach the end of each arc (except for one — one of my absolute favorites, unfortunately — which was still good, but not quite as good as the rest). You have the twofold benefit of enjoying a story arc while also increasing and expanding combat prowess.

This satisfaction is in huge part the writing, but the English dub voice actors are excellent. Most of them shine, delivering emotional, honest performances. I feel as though the main character, though mostly quiet, is a bit of an exception to this. He's fine but is outshone

by his cohorts. A few other actors are also dubious, but are outside of the main party and don't take up too much screentime. Heismay, Hulkenberg, Strohl, and almost every character throughout the game kept me hooked. Oddly enough, one of the best performances was none other than the primary villain Louis Guiabern (voiced by Joseph Tweedale). His calm, cool, collected, confident delivery is such an allure that he almost pulls you to his side by sheer force of charming magnetism. He steals each scene he's in and is such a strong part of what makes *Metaphor* work. The contrast of such strong personalities elevates the game. He is, without a doubt, one of my favorite video game villains. Using his wits and power to remain one step ahead of all adversaries, Louis kept me on my toes all while making it look easy. It's a thing of beauty to see two groups of people who wish to rid the world of inequality have such different ways to do it. I love each character's consistency and passion (though I did find a moment or two that stuck out as a counter to that). This was one of the consistent drivers of the game for me. I only wish that all companion interaction were voiced. Sometimes the interactions felt like they could have had increased impact if only they'd had recorded voiceovers for the scene.

While still on the subject of sound, *Metaphor*'s music is an excellent amplifier to the rest of the game's quality. The chanting music in combat hyped me up, while the music in the gauntlet runner brought a sense of calm, and oddly enough at the same time, a sense of adventure. When a follower found their purpose, the music filled me with a sense of pride in my companions. As Gallica says, "Music was the first magic this world ever knew, after all. Makes the road a little easier." And it truly does. The soundtrack is just another piece that fits into this wonderfully large, intricate game.

With the primary story full of twists and turns, like the primary villain himself, it keeps you guessing. Some of the events are lied about early on to create false enmity, which works in the grand scheme of things, but seemed to be a bit of a cheat. Some things are simply unknown. But each revelation seems to fit, odd as some might be, which closes up almost all plot holes that had me wondering how things fit together. In the end, I felt extremely satisfied, even if the final conflict left a bit to be desired plotwise.

Metaphor: ReFantazio is a game that came along at a perfect time. It reflects our world in many ways and is a reminder that belief in an ideal that betters the greater good — however imperfect — is worth pursuing, despite the pain and difficulty endured on the road to its achievement. For all of the inequality that runs deep within the world of *Metaphor*, it is balanced by the beauty of the world itself and the traditions of its eight contrasting tribes. While the overarching narrative may sometimes seem to drive the point home very strongly, the characters alongside the protagonist consistently bring the nuance and the acknowledgment that the ideals they strive for are not only going to be difficult to achieve but nearly impossible. Nothing is truly sugar-coated when the layers are peeled back, and it's one of my favorite aspects of the game.

Metaphor is a phenomenal first entry from Studio Zero that enchants, enlightens, excites, and ignites. There is even more that I could say about this game, but I feel like experiencing the game, its world, and its characters is a bit of magic in itself, and I wouldn't want to take that away from anyone. *Metaphor* is a game that made me want more. Knowing that the clock was ticking and that I was getting close

to the end of the game made me genuinely sad, as I didn't want to leave the world or the characters behind, even after a hundred hours.

The Math

Objective Assessment: 9/10.

Bonuses: +0.5 for party and characters, +0.5 for beautiful art direction, +0.5 for experimental combat classes, +0.5 for worldbuilding and lore, +0.5 for strong voice-overs and music.

Penalties: -1 for weak protagonist VO, -1 for a few cheap plot gimmicks.

Nerd Coefficient: 9.5/10.

Movie Review: The Brutalist

Haley Zapal

An epic feat of dazzling filmmaking that's a meditation on trauma, architecture, and the American dream. (Spoiler free)



The Brutalist follows the story of Laszlo Toth, a Hungarian Jewish architect who manages to flee Europe after surviving the horrors of the holocaust. He leaves behind in Europe his wife and niece, and once in America he manages to make a soft landing with his cousin who owns a furniture store in Pennsylvania.

A commission by a local rich family eventually leads to the patriarch, Harrison Van Buren, to discover

exactly who Laszlo is — an extraordinarily talented and famous architect that been toiling in obscurity here in America. He hires him to construct a modern masterpiece in the form of a multi-use community center in honor of his deceased mother, trusting Laszlo to create an intense, brutalist building that will dominate a local hilltop.

The Brutalist, of course, is an A24 movie, so trauma is the primary motivator behind the characters' actions, and for Laszlo it's trauma that is layers and layers deep. Surviving the holocaust is one. Being separated from his wife for years and years is one. Arriving in America and struggling to survive and start anew is one. Adapting to anti-semitism in a country that is supposedly the land of the free is one.

Adorno once said "There can be no poetry after Auschwitz." Which, in the context of this film, could be interpreted as "how can we as a society ever think about the good things our species is capable of after witnessing the willful and hateful destruction of millions of people?" For Laszlo, he uses brutalist architecture — which his patron finds beautiful, which in fact is beautiful despite its hard edges and blunt corners — to express his despair and sorrow. He is a creator of meaning who uses towering blocks of concrete and yawning chasms of marble as other artists use ink or a piano.

There's much to be said and written about this movie, and folks that know far more about the holocaust, architecture, drug addiction, and anti-semitism can speak more eloquently about some of the issues presented in *The Brutalist*. But my enjoyment of the movie comes in a more Barthes-inspired "pleasure of the text" type way. I loved just being immersed in the images and scenes in it. The score is also stellar and really heightens the high highs and low lows of the film.

Memorable scenes

When light enters Van Buren's library as they open the cabinets

Nothing can prepare you for how beautifully this scene unfolds. You think you know what beautiful shelving looks like, but you don't. I didn't even think it was possible to create shelving that is this sublim-

inal. But the way the scene is constructed is a marvel of light and timing. The rest of the movie doesn't work without this scene and the genius it exudes.

The cube discussion

For much of the movie, the relationship between Laszlo and Van Buren is positive. It's Van Buren who manages to help get Laszlo back on his feet and begin working again as an architect. Van Buren seems in constant awe of Laszlo's brain and brilliance, and constantly talks about how intellectual their conversations are. There's a scene where Van Buren is trying to understand just how Laszlo's brain works, and asks "Why architecture?" To which, he responds, "Is there a better description of a cube than that of its own construction?" It's a relatively short conversation, but the way Brody embodies his character just so damn believably is mesmerizing to watch.

The entire marble quarry sequence

As a caveat, I have a long history of digitally exploring marble quarries thanks to the video game *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*. So when the characters travel to Italy to personally oversee the excavation of slabs of marble for the project, I was stoked. Corbet, the director, apparently was too. Huge images flash upon the screen of the landscape to give the scope and grandeur of it all, and later scenes take us into the depths of the quarry lit only by candlelight. My favorite part, though, is when the manager of the quarry showcases the natural beauty of the marble by pouring water down and across a huge slab. The sparkling gray slab fills the entire screen while you're in the theatre and the results are gorgeous. It's a simple act, and I wouldn't expect this brief shot to leave an impression on me, but here I am, five days later still thinking about it.

The train wreck

The beauty of a 3 hour and 40 minute movie, if you can handle it, is that it allows a film to really breathe. Scenes that would be 3 to 5 seconds can take a good solid minute to form, build, and explode, in the case of the train wreck carrying stone to the build site. This catastrophic wreck lands two local linemen in the hospital, and it causes the project to be canceled pending litigation. But before we learn all of this, we get a beautiful overhead shot of the train plowing through the Pennsylvania countryside. The camera pulls back slowly, and eventually we see sparks. Then, more sparks. Then smoke begins billowing, and soon the entire frame is swathed in billowing clouds of caustic smoke rent from the violence of a collision. This is the classic stuff of art films, and you're into it, you're going to love it.

The performances

There is some seriously good acting in *The Brutalist*.

Adrian Brody. What can I say that folks don't already know about this incredible actor? It's impossible to think about his portrayal of Laszlo Toth without thinking of his character Władysław Szpilman in *The Pianist* — both artistic geniuses who suffered at the hands of anti-semitism.

Joe Alwyn, also known as Taylor Swift's ex-boyfriend, plays Van Buren's insufferable rich son, and he does an excellent job; he made

playing an ass extremely believable, so I guess that's good.

Guy Pearce is magnificent as a baron of industry. It took me a few minutes to even realize this is the same Guy Pearce from *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (I just realized that all of my Guy Pearce references are now 25+ years old, and thus my consternation.)

The only one I didn't buy was Felicity Jones as Erzsébet, Laszlo's wife. This, I fear, may be an entirely personal problem, as I literally couldn't stop thinking of her as Jin Erso from *Rogue One*. She has Star Wars Face, which is a condition I just made up that's akin to iPhone Face, which is when you can't believe an actor in a historical role because they look too modern. Jones looks too Star Wars for me to take her seriously as tough-as-nails 1950's Hungarian woman.

The Math

Score: 8/10

Movie Review: Frankenstein

Haley Zapal

Guillermo Del Toro masterfully crafts a visually stunning, moving adaptation of Frankenstein, full of body horror, epic vistas, and heavy-handed themes.



To start off (for those who are worried), Guillermo Del Toro's *Frankenstein* is definitely worth watching. I haven't read the novel since college, when I took a Literature of Horror course, but I won't bore everyone with a scene-by-scene comparison of how Del Toro's version strays from the original text — that's not what's important. What's important is how he's taken this story and made it his own. I saw in an interview that he's

spent his entire life, apparently, aching to get this production off the ground. Doing it now, of course, means he's an absolute master of his craft, able to bring all of his considerable powers to bear in getting it done.

First, let's talk about the mise en scene. Every single still from this film could be a painting, it's so lush and vibrant. You could easily go down a rabbit hole about color symbolism throughout the run time, but I think it's enough to say that nobody does the color red like Del Toro. The bookends of the movie take place in the arctic, and the glaring white and blues are simply divine. As an Arctic history lover, the attention to detail is superb — that's actually a real boat set we see. The Danish sailors are ice-rimed and visibly freezing, wearing Welsh wigs to keep warm.

When it comes to the story of *Frankenstein*, everyone knows the drill: A deeply ambitious and cold man aims to create life, then is disgusted by his creation and abandons him. Del Toro's choice for Viktor Frankenstein is Oscar Isaac, and while I love Oscar Isaac in almost everything, I felt he was a deeply silly choice for this role. He's too charming, too attractive, too suave to play a monomaniacal scientist. With his pinstripe suit, wide lacy shirts, and cocked hat, he runs around Europe looking like Prince. He drinks milk constantly, which is a heavy-handed thematic bit about being a life-creator, etc. But instead of channeling a 19th-century Romantic archetype, I wish he had played like his engineer in *Ex Machina* — a cold, dispassionate creator of a similar form of artificial life, AI. It's clear that Victor has daddy issues, but Del Toro absolutely nails it out of the park when he cast Charles Dance — the epic Tywin Lannister — as his father. Victor can neither live up to his father nor provide paternal guidance to his own creation. Truly a pitiful man.

Now, let's talk about the Monster. For almost a century, the archetype has revolved around Boris Karloff's green-faced, bolt-necked, flat-top creature, and it's hard to shake that path. Del Toro opts for a more put-together monster, with no visible stitches or mismatched body parts. The creature that gets created is none other than Jacob Elordi, one of the most beautiful men working in Hollywood right now. After he is born, however, he runs around the tower in yellow hot

pants and tan bandages, looking for all the world like Rocky from the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Here is a list of other characters/people he resembles:

Gotye from the 2012 Somebody That I Used To Know music video

The Engineers from the Alien universe

All in all, Elordi does a good job of portraying a monster created from dead body parts who's rejected by his maker. His eyes are incredibly expressive, dark brown pools of wonder, fear, and hurt. The most striking examples in the movie of artificial life actually come from Frankenstein's early research. There's one scene in which he's lecturing to medical students, and he unveils a head, half a torso, and an arm attached to a piece of wood, reanimating it in a way that's truly frightening and otherworldly. Similarly, he encounters the splayed-out nervous system of a human on a board, and it makes you realize how we're all just hunks of meat protecting a bundle of nerves. It's how the universe experiences itself.

An interesting thing about this Creature that I guess I didn't pick up on in other adaptations is that he's not only insanely strong, but also immortal. That definitely adds to the untold misery of being an unwanted and rejected being. This also opens the door to moments of some pretty wild body horror. Each time, it's always by surprise, and it always made me wince, it was so graphic. The opening 8 minutes or so, you can barely breathe because of all the action — the Creature emerges from the Arctic tundra and absolutely lays waste to a ship full of Danish sailors, all black cape and mutilated skin and enraged fury as he shouts for Victor.

One thing that wasn't graphic throughout the movie was the horrible use of CGI in a few scenes, especially those in which the Creature encounters the wolves and rats. It takes you right out of the movie, and it's jarring because there's SUCH good use of practical effects elsewhere. You could take the CGI animals out entirely and the film loses absolutely nothing. It's a shame they're in there.

When it comes to the sets, I had a curious sense of déjà vu in the tower where Victor creates the creature. The stairway felt exactly like the one from *Crimson Peak*, while the laboratory was definitely giving *Wicked* in a good way.

There's an H.R. Geiger-meets-steampunk aesthetic that I really dig throughout every scene, though. I just wish I cared more about the Creature once we get his point of view. I've talked to several folks who said they felt deeply maternal toward him, which is completely the point! I just never bonded with him in the way that I think Del Toro wanted me to. *Frankenstein* is not unlike the recent *Nosferatu*, I think, in that it manages to succeed in a visual and stylistic way, but somehow misses the mark on characterization and depth.

Overall, I think this is a great piece of work from one of our best living directors. I just believe that I'm perhaps too uninterested in Victor and the Creature's strange relationship. Victor is just an asshole, and the Creature is unclear in his motivations toward Victor. I never really cared for either person throughout, and when they are in the same room, they just hurt each other. I think what the world really needs is an adaptation of *Frankenstein* written and directed by a woman. One that doesn't have such heavy-handed symbolism as "Victor drinks a

lot of milk because he's a mother figure who creates life." That would do Mary Shelley proud, I think. Unlike ending the movie with a Lord Byron quote! You have an entire novel by Ms. Shelley filled with some of the most mind-bogglingly beautiful words and you picked another dude for the epigraph. Humbug.

Fortunately, Maggie Gyllenhaal's *The Bride!* comes out soon.

Unanswered questions:

- Was the Victor-Elizabeth relationship supposed to be a romance? He seemed like he couldn't stand her, and not in a fun, enemies-to-lovers way
- How did Victor manage to burn down the stone of the tower without managing to catch tons of paper on fire?
- Is the Creature "born" into a mind that's the equivalent of a newborn? Or is it something more akin to a toddler? He can walk, say a few words, etc.
- Does a 4-barreled blunderbuss really exist?
- How did he sew together the Creature without any stitch marks?!!
- Why does Mia Goth with eyebrows look like a) Cole Escola dressed as Bernadette Peters at the Tonys and also b) Lana Del Rey?
- Is the cross-shaped platform on which the Creature reanimates supposed to look like Christ?

The Math

Nerd Coefficient: 7/10.

Highlights

- Mia Goth both eyebrowless and eyebrowful playing Victor's mom and unrequited love interest
- Christoph Waltz as a syphilitic patron of science dazzles in his few scenes
- The incredible set design and loving attention to detail.

Video Game Review: Citizen Sleeper 2

Stew Hotston

Exploring a capitalist wasteland one kindness at a time



I'm a lover of roleplaying games — especially ones that give you a chance to live a life and inhabit a personality. Sure, linear stories with lots of action are fine, but for me the real joy is in finding something where you feel like the world is alive, lives are precious, and decisions mean something. In other words, I don't have time for games where I'm asked to shoot a hundred goons in the face and then care about the big bad's moral quandary — the moral

contradictions are just too jarring.

I had not come across Fellow Traveller as a publisher before, and the only reason I got into *Citizen Sleeper 2* (having not played the first) was because it was included in my Playstation subscription. I say this to give you context for what comes next.

Citizen Sleeper 2 is about a character, a Sleeper, whom you play. The entire story is narrated in the second person. It's set in a small part of a solar system not our own, which is now several decades if not longer after the collapse of a grand empire. That empire, a corporate behemoth that spanned multiple star systems, is gone, and in its wake so is interstellar travel.

All that's left to the people living on the shore as the tide went out to never come back is an asteroid-filled star system in which they cling to the vestiges of what came before and try to make a life while they can. It's clear that corporations still exist in this world — they occupy the fertile and rich inner system, but this game takes place entirely within an asteroid belt at the edge of their reach while they fight one another. The people here expect the war to reach them eventually but hope it won't. In the end there's nothing they can do about it, so they carry on with their lives.

You, as a Sleeper without a name, are an artificial being — a body made to house a partial personality someone sold to the corporation who made you so that the body you're in could work as a slave.

The story starts with you on the run from your current master, who is quickly established as a pretty evil dude. From there you have a reasonably free hand on where you go and who you talk to within the scope of the game.

This isn't an open-world RPG. In many ways it's more of an interactive story with RPG elements. That's an important distinction to make because the game has a story to tell, and although your choices make for a unique experience, the scope here is small.

Small is not an insult; it's to set your expectations. I want to call out *Disco Elysium* as a companion game in its vibes. Not that you can die

of a heart attack during character creation or be a destitute drunk; those are surface ornaments. Where the two games are similar and why *Citizen Sleeper 2* works so well for me is that they're concerned with telling a story and allowing you just enough freedom to build that tale yourself.

I would encourage you to experiment with its mechanics, because it doesn't explain them beyond the most cursory help screens. I started this three times before I worked out how to navigate the systems in such a way that I didn't choose myself into a frustrating dead end early in the game.

A lot of the game's story is delivered one of two ways, through a series of dice rolls or through text that arrives in response to conversations and choices you make as a Sleeper.

This means there's a lot of text on the screen. That wasn't a problem for me because the narrative is well written, the text meaningful, and the game deeply immersive, but be warned: this isn't an RPG where you're moving people around the screen and getting into fights. All that could lead to a mediocre game that covers a lot of the ground anyone who's been around the block is going to be familiar with. However, in an example of taking something familiar and executing it brilliantly, *Citizen Sleeper 2* takes its elements and delivers a banger: a story involving the development of self, the essential nature of collective action, the plight of slaves and refugees, the need (or otherwise) to determine your own fate and how to build community when everything is objectively getting worse.

There are a good number of side characters, including some that arrive and depart after a couple of missions. Not everyone can be pulled together, but at the same time, there are only a few places where I think you can rupture your relationship with them once they're on board. I note, though that your companions interact with you but not really with one another, and even then you can't just initiate conversations — the game dishes them out in response to events.

Citizen Sleeper 2 does a good job of hiding the seams of the story, but they do occasionally show through — most often when you've botched a job or chosen a route that should break a relationship but doesn't. I don't mind this too much, because I found the process of exploration and of helping people to be extremely emotionally rewarding.

Most of all, just like *Disco Elysium*, *Citizen Sleeper 2* doesn't change the world — morally ambiguous people continue on after you're done; others rise and some fall. The Sleeper's arc feels complete but not finished, and the same is true of those around them. I like this kind of story because it remembers well that it's never the case that the world revolves around an individual, no matter what we are told.

Citizen Sleeper 2 is a deeply satisfying storytelling experience and roleplaying game. I felt love and sadness, urges towards kindness, and anger throughout. The game made me feel things. On top of that, it managed to make the stakes feel pressing and urgent, both via its mechanics that don't let you sleep on making choices and also through its story.

It's not a game that wants you to rush, whether that's in the delivery of a lot of text or in giving you free time on different stations to just

potter about making friends and earning credits. Indeed, it rewards such patience.

The influences here are clear enough: from *Saga*, *Descender*, *Cyberpunk* and *Bladerunner* to *Firefly* and *Silent Running*. *Citizen Sleeper 2* feels like the kind of thoughtful RPG you're delighted to discover after playing D&D your entire life.

A last word on the characters. Each character gets some time to develop and interact with you as the Sleeper. Some are looking at their identities, some are trying to establish themselves. Some are on their own quests and some just want connection. Each of them feels like they matter, and it's your intersection with their values and desires that brings the best out of the game.

Highlights

- Miners unionising to defeat exploitative bosses
- All kinds of different intelligences
- Loneliness at the end of the universe

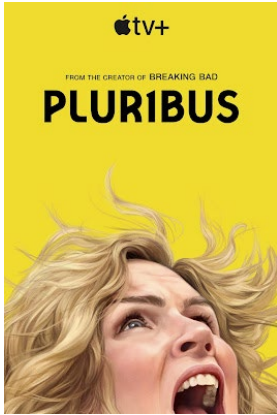
The Math

Nerd Coefficient: 8/10, a patient piece of storytelling that takes the familiar and executes it almost perfectly.

TV Review: There's no "I" in *Pluribus*

Arturo Serrano

The nicest zombie horde you've ever met would do anything to make you happy — emphasis on anything



There's a wealth of metaphors wrapped up at the heart of *Pluribus*. One could summarize the show as: "What if the Borg succeeded at conquering Earth, but were really sweet and polite about it?" Or: "What if the world's population became a single, massive Sense8 cluster except for you"? Or: "What if you were the last sensible person left in a world that has lost its mind?" I've encountered other descriptions that see connections between the story of *Pluribus* and the fake version of

human interaction that LLMs provide, or a not very disguised allegory of the culture war over coronavirus quarantine measures. *Pluribus* can be about all that. It can be about everything. It contains multitudes.

But let's try a less wide lens for a moment. Picture this: you're Carol, a famous author of romantasy novels with a chronic inability to appreciate the blessings that life has given you. Your fantastic success with sales has allowed you to afford a beautiful house with an unbeatable view. You and the love of your life routinely go on exotic vacations. You readers can't wait to give you more of their money for your next book. And yet, you hate all of that. You wish you were writing another genre. You wish you didn't feel pressure to hide the person you love, because you fear that being openly queer will hurt your sales (which is a strike against the publishing business and how little it knows readers). In fact, you wish your readers would leave you alone. By any measure of our modern world, you've achieved the ideal life the rest of us can only dream of, but it doesn't suffice to make you happy.

So one day the gods of fate decide to test you, and all of a sudden, your beloved dies. And the world immediately looks different to you. At first you run around, begging for someone to lend a hand, but no one is willing to listen. They seem absorbed inside their minds. You can't make them understand. This pain is only yours. And it gets worse: when the rest of the world finally pays attention to your tragedy, their comforting words sound hollow, trite. They're the same overused words everyone says at such times. They don't sound sincere. So you lash out, and protest, and scream, but they waste no time in reminding you that you don't have the right to get angry. All those negative feelings you're carrying are an inconvenience to them. So better keep them to yourself, if you would be so kind. This pain is only yours. Can't you see how they're so generous and accommodating? They want nothing more than your happiness. Just remember not to let them hear how you truly feel. Don't be ungrateful. Don't ruin the mood.

Now you look around, and to you it appears like everyone has been possessed by a bug that dampens their humanity. It's like nothing

is real anymore. Without the love of your life, the world may as well have ended, and you're the only one who's noticed. Of course, people go on, doing their daily stuff, but for you it has lost its meaning. The world feels like an endless desert without her. How could anyone claim to empathize with you? They haven't suffered through it the way you have. They haven't watched their world crumble down around them. Their inner selves are fundamentally separate from yours. They can't read your mind. They can't pry into your head to know what it's like. You've been left alone. This pain is only yours.

This is what grief feels like. The genius trick of *Pluribus* is that it takes the "as if" feeling and makes it literal. When you lose the only source of joy in your life, it feels like the world has ended; it feels like everyone else's happiness is feigned and pointless. So *Pluribus* arranges a scenario where that's precisely what happens: just as Carol's wife dies, the world literally ends and humankind is literally transformed into an empty, perpetually cheerful husk of itself. Civilization has gone up in flames, and Carol is left to deal with her grief without any useful support. The people around her may as well have merged into an amorphous blob of a hive mind, for all the good their help does.

The richness of the gimmick in the plot of *Pluribus* can be seen in how variously it's been interpreted. I've seen online commenters describe it both as communist propaganda and as anti-communist propaganda, and it's a credit to the show's thematic complexity that both positions can be argued for. With humankind now connected in a single consciousness, except for a scattered dozen of the lucky immune, the social problems that have plagued centuries of our history have magically disappeared: no more crime, no more exclusion, no more discrimination, no more violence, no more hatred. But still, something feels off. Gone is the spark that makes life interesting. If Carol wasn't previously willing to accept the normal joys of life, she's absolutely livid at a world where everyone is satisfied all the time.

Now that we've explored the personal side of the story, we can go back to the larger picture. In the *Foundation* series of novels by Isaac Asimov, Gaia is a unified planetary consciousness designed by a robot who independently deduced the Zeroth Law of protecting humankind as a whole. The novels portray Gaia as a positive development for humans, because a mechanism for full mutual understanding and instant cooperation is preferable to the preceding centuries of violent clash. However, one also needs to consider the motivations behind Gaia: the robot who planned its formation followed the same principles underlying psychohistory, that is, ensuring that the mass behavior of humans would be uniform, predictable, and amenable to deliberate intervention. In other words, to make us easier to protect, it was necessary to make us easier to control.

That's why Carol rebels against the collective mind. A world filled with good intentions is morally meaningless if no one has the option to do wrong. Heaven is torture if no one is free to sin. I'm not saying evil is necessary; I'm saying that the alternative of evil is necessary for virtuous choices to count. It's a grim vote of no confidence in human potential to argue that the only way to solve evil is to amputate our ability to rule ourselves.

The type of mandatory bliss that *Pluribus* presents is so self-evidently horrible that literature has warned against it for literally thousands of years. The Lotus Eaters in the *Odyssey* are so perpetually satisfied

that they effectively stop having meaningful lives. We find the same stance expressed in *The Futurological Congress*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *The Lion of Comarre*, *The Neverending Story*, *Vurt*, and *The Wheel of Time*. Even if your political sympathies lean toward the collective sharing of aid, you have to beware any scenario where satisfaction is automatic and disagreement is unheard of.

Despite the thousands of plot ramifications that can be traced from such a fertile premise, *Pluribus* keeps its attention close to its characters. Carol's response to the collective mind goes through the standard stages of grief until she comes dangerously close to acceptance. Meanwhile, her fellow survivor Manousos is firmly stuck in anger. While Carol still hopes to reason with the hive, Manousos views them as the enemy, preferring to risk death by infection to accepting any form of help from them. They still don't have the full picture of how the hive stays connected, but they agree that unmaking the hive equals saving humankind. If the hive persists, humans are as good as finished. That's the size of the challenge, and the best moments in the series are those that follow our characters' obsessive investigation and experimentation with how the collective mind works and how to navigate around its irritating pleasantness.

The complication comes when a still lonely and vulnerable Carol lets herself be seduced by a member of the hive, and for a while lives the fantasy of a normal relationship. She soon crashes against the painful truth that the gathered consciousnesses of humanity won't love her more than they love an ant (and to be fair, they do love ants very much). In the same way that individuality is dissolved in the hive mind, they don't love Carol for any attribute that is specific to her; they love her because she has a pulse and is breathing. And that breaks the spell for Carol: one can love humanity in a general sense, but what we usually mean when we allude to the importance of love has to do with what's individual about it. Love is drawn toward the unique, the irreplaceable. That's the way we need to be loved. That's the form of happiness the collective mind can't provide.

Pluribus excels at every level of audiovisual storytelling: beautiful shot composition, compelling performances, sharp dialogues, careful pacing, deliberate editing. It's a difficult trick to produce an existential dramedy where the only characters for most of the runtime are one random nobody and Everyone Else. And it's even harder when the one individual we're asked to follow is a grumpy misanthrope who, after losing everything, has no patience left for demands to make herself acceptable to society, much less when the society in question is as dishonest and manipulative as the one in this series has shown itself to be. The common rules of courtesy advise against acting like you're the only one with the right opinion, but they don't give guidelines for what to do when that exact scenario comes to pass, when the entire rest of the world is wrong.

I was briefly worried during the last episode of the season, when it looked like Carol was going to abandon the fight against the hive, so I was pleasantly surprised by the way the plot resolves her doubts. What it takes for her to finally renounce her fantasy is being bluntly faced with a question that is central to adulthood, a question that too many prefer to ignore: what matters to you more than other people's respect?

Nerd Coefficient: 10/10.

Movie Review: *Wicked: For Good*

Ann Michelle Harris

Pragmatism versus idealism in the emotional conclusion of the hit musical



Those who have seen the long-running stage musical *Wicked* already know that the second half of the performance takes a dark turn as the story moves from bold empowerment to anger and tragedy. While *Wicked, Part 1* explores the relationships of the witches of Oz during their time in school, the second part of the story undermines the original plot elements of the classic film, *The Wizard of Oz*. The result is an emotionally stressful story that will have you reaching for your tissues. *Wicked: For Good* picks up with an angry and disillusioned Elphaba (Cynthia Erivo) trying to expose the corrupt Oz government while trying to free the newly oppressed talking animals. Meanwhile Glinda (Ariana Grande) accepts her figurehead role at the hands of the evil Madame Morrible (Michelle Yeoh) while still worrying over Elphaba's safety and pining for Prince Fiyero (Jonathan Bailey) who remains devoted to Elphaba. After the death of their father, Elphaba's sister Nessarose (Marissa Bode) becomes the governor of Munchkinland. But her obsession over her former classmate Boq (Ethan Slater) (who only loves Glinda) turns her into an oppressive and toxic tyrant to the Munchkins and to Boq in particular. Meanwhile, the arrival a little girl from Kansas creates a catalyst for the final confrontations in the story.

It's hard to top a musical production as entertaining as *Wicked, Part 1*. The film did a great job of addressing themes of bigotry, social gaslighting, hypocrisy, and oppression. But, the messaging was subtle and cleverly woven into addictive show tunes and big dance numbers. The enemies-to-friends dynamic between Elphaba and Glinda was funny, endearing, and ultimately led to an entertaining ensemble dynamic with their friends Fiyero, Boq, and Elphaba's sister Nessarose. However, in *For Good*, the amusing love polygon from the first film takes a grim turn as Nessarose obsesses over Boq to the point of imprisoning him, Boq pines for Glinda to point of bitterness, Glinda fixates on Fiyero to the point of a forced engagement, and Fiyero longs for Elphaba to the point of endangering his life and his humanity.

In *Wicked: For Good*, the societal and philosophical commentary is more direct, the set design darker, and the songs sadder. The combined weight of this removes any subtle irony and makes the film more angrier, rather than quietly critical. The more serious tone is underscored by solid performances by Jeff Goldblum as the comfortably deceitful Wizard, flippantly justifying everything from fraud to

oppression to murder. Additionally, Marissa Bode's Nessarose is excellent, shifting from adorable pining to a physically toxic control of Boq.

The grim visuals of the film stand out as an extension of the anger of the characters and the toxic nature of the new Oz society. However, the film balances the dark themes of the source material against an apparent need for a PG rating. As a result, several intense moments where key characters meet their demise are diluted or given minimal screen time. Additionally, the Tin Man aesthetic was disappointing as it remained mostly aligned with the traditional film version rather than opting for something edgier. Given the grim tone, it would have been nice to see something a bit more creatively gothic as the character descends into anger and bitterness.

The two main villains, Madame Morrible and the Wizard, dominate the characters' fates, but do so without much introspection or depth. Instead, the real villains are the residents of Oz who openly accept the injustices around them and readily swallow the lies from their leaders without debate or question. That seems to be the real message of the film: the manipulation or gullibility of the masses. As the film tells us, truth is what everyone agrees on, not what really exists. The Wizard is highly symbolic as a great, unrepentant con-artist who notes that once people buy into a lie, they will irrationally choose to cling to it, even when it's been clearly disproved and shown to be toxic.

The other key theme is the idea of pragmatism versus idealism. Glinda and Elphaba both agree that the oppression of the talking animals is wrong and that the Wizard's deception is wrong, but they still take very different paths. Glinda accepts a position in the oppressive Oz administration and uses it to her advantage, admitting she has an addiction to adoration. Elphaba is headstrong and repeatedly directly attacks the Wizard and Madame Morrible, but with failed results that paint her more and more as a villain. She, initially, lacks the subtlety to be strategic and Glinda, initially, lacks the resolve to be ethical. Fortunately, as the film's title implies, the two opposites influence each other and result in a change in both of them, for good. As expected, the performance of the song "For Good" by Cynthia Erivo and Ariana Grande is the showstopper moment of the film that will have viewers reaching for tissues in the best possible way.

Wicked: For Good is a grim change from the tone of the first film but ultimately leaves audiences with a sense of hopefulness. Elphaba shows that her core value is her love for Oz and her desire to see it be the best version of itself. As the film tells us, in this second part of the story, we may not be changed for the better, but hopefully you will feel changed for good. The hard themes of *For Good* may be a bit heavy handed, rather than introspective, but the pay off is worth it for a solid ending that will leave you cheering, even if things aren't as perfect as we wish they would be.

Highlights

- Grim tone and visuals
- Heavy handed but relatable themes
- Showstopping moment defines the film

The Math

Nerd Coefficient: 7/10

Graphic Novel Review: The One Hand and Six Fingers

Stew Hotston

The Left hand can't know what the Right hand is doing



I don't read many graphic novels – mainly because I'm a latecomer to the field. I love stories – I read, I listen, I watch. *Akira*, which I first discovered as an imported graphic novel as a teenager, cemented a love of visual media. However I haven't ever really had the time for or interest in reading about superheroes.

In a confession of my own ignorance I discovered only very late that western graphic novels were much broader than simply Marvel and DC. My

exploration of what they do have to offer has led to me developing a bit of a habit which I'm sure keeps my local comic book shop happy.

A recommendation for *The One Hand and the Six Fingers* came to me through a friend after he sold me on another of Ram V's standalone stories – *Rare Flavours*. *The One Hand and the Six Fingers* has a central premise that's outside of the story; that Ram V collaborated with two different other writers on the story to bring together essentially what is two stories about the same subject into one intertwining experiment in storytelling.

To understand how that works we have to explore the story itself a little (although no spoilers). *The One Hand and the Six Fingers* is a tale about a set of murders happening in a city that could be any big American city but mostly reads as New York or Chicago. We learn in the first chapter that the murders are serial murders and have been solved not once, but twice before by the same cop and now they're back for a third spree it's all falling apart.

The thing is the people locked up for the first and second set of murders each obviously did those murders. The cases against them were watertight. So what is going on and how is someone replicating the cases exactly, including elements that were never released to the public?

As it turns out the two sides of the story were planned as a complete arc but then the different people involved in each side got on with producing their pieces separately (with Ram V being the common writer across both sides). This is an audacious piece of plotting and artistic creativity because it means the telling has contextual divergence built into its fabric even if the meta-narrative is coherent.

There are the classic set of tropes – the cop due to retire, the maverick nature of their obsession with the murderer. We also have a murderer who's not entirely sure if or why he's doing what he's doing. We have black police lieutenants ready to suspend the cop, we have accidentally caught up love interests who may or may not support the murderer.

Across the top of this we have the setting which is neo-noir but also

cyberpunkish in a very *Bladerunner 2049* sense. The detective has a long term relationship with a synthetic human, called here a Cog. The entire thing is at once familiar.

What is interesting to me though is what V and his collaborators do with the story. There are two extremely pertinent references beyond *Bladerunner – Dark City*, the 1998 film directed by Alex Proyas and *The Matrix*, the 1999 film written and directed by the Wachowskis. In that sense, *The One Hand and the Six Fingers* is treading well-worn ground for people as old as I am. That doesn't mean it's not fun or interesting both from a dramatic and a philosophical point of view, just that it's standing on the shoulders of giants.

The themes here, hidden behind gory murders and lush, economically structured panels and vistas are about meaning, information, the lives we perform for ourselves and how we create coherence in the worlds we build.

When I talk about world building I mean that in the personal sense of how I construct the world I encounter each day, the meaning in my experiences and what baggage I bring to it as well as grander ideas about how meaning is constructed.

V et al are very interested in deconstructing how we consider the world is put together. From Gerard 't Hooft's holographic principle to Nick Bostrom's simulation hypothesis we are asked to question whether the world we encounter with our senses, while the 'us' exists somewhere internally, can be considered real. If the world is not 'real' then what does that imply for both our sense of self but also our sense of self through instantiation?

This is the kind of thing that you might think is a bit sophomore in nature – to be discussed at three am at a house party with strangers but the narrative here handles it pretty well. Certainly the framing device of the killer and the detective wrestling with the same crimes adds more flair and nuance than the simple contemplation of everything being constructed (i.e. the classic antirealist stance).

Not that V tackles it here, but if the world is one that's entirely constructed whether by our social consensus or through the illusionary constructs of our sense data then building racism, sexism and other prejudices into it becomes a deeply weird position to take.

The One Hand and the Six Fingers doesn't offer a definitive answer – its characters are in one specific iteration of the nexus of these ideas (which I am being careful not to spoil!) and in true story telling style it follows them to the end of that idea, to a position that is very definitely *reductio ad absurdum*.

This is where it fell a little short for me. It may well be because I've come across these ideas a lot in my own reading/studying/writing but the main characters are, in the end, sitting in the well of fatalism. They are most concerned with identifying that they're in the well and when they do? At that point they stop fighting and that was kinda disappointing to me.

That's a me thing – I want existential puzzles to have meaning, to be an impetus to changing the world. Ram V's story presents a different epistemology – in that the limits of knowledge are both emotional as well as physical and intellectual. For his characters the *weltanschau-*

ung they dwell within is one that starts and ends in despair and the discoveries along the way being transformative are decidedly not transformative of the fundamental meaninglessness of existence.

The One Hand and the Six Fingers suggests that learning the truth might only offer us an escape from these limits through non-existence because only by non-being can we counter the futility of being. It's bleak when you write it out longhand.

Highlights

- Serial killers
- Cyberpunk, noir, hard bitten detectives
- Weird as fuck world building

The Math

Nerd coefficient: 7/10, a familiar set of tropes given new life with a brilliantly structured, drawn and coloured story about meaning wrapped up in a serial killer mystery.

Video Game Review: Hollow Knight Voidheart Edition

Joe DelFranco

Before you enter the world of silk and song, fill your heart with the void.



For those of you who may have dodged the indie gaming scene since 2017, *Hollow Knight* is one of the sparkling gems that come up in conversation quite frequently. Partially because of its overall quality and difficulty, and partially because its sequel, *Hollow Knight: Silksong* — announced in February of 2019 — is not only highly anticipated but also missing in action. The most recent update from the developers confirms that “the game is progressing nicely” and that it really does exist. After finally taking the time to play *Hollow Knight*, I can understand the hype and the anticipation (albeit with a few caveats). *Hollow Knight Voidheart Edition* is the full package containing the base game and all of its DLC.

Hollow Knight is a beautiful, thrilling 2-D Metroidvania that focuses on platforming, melee/spellcasting combat, and exploration. The art is clean and crisp and manages to balance the contrast between adorable characters and infected monsters, with other intimidating friends and foes. Everything is hand-drawn, and the animations look and feel so precise and purposeful. The game has a charming aesthetic that is instantly memorable, and the style is consistent throughout all the biomes. Each level has a specific look and feel, a different history portrayed with a paintbrush instead of words. From the City of Tears to Queen’s Gardens, entering a new zone brings both a chance to enjoy Team Cherry’s beautiful aesthetic, as well as the chance to ponder the history of the new section of Hallownest.

Despite being a game of few words, *Hollow Knight* still tells a story. I’ll probably receive a lot of flack for this one, but I kept thinking of *Souls*-like games throughout my playtime. I’ve never played a *Dark Souls* game, but I’ve played *Demon’s Souls*, *Bloodborne*, *Elden Ring*, and *Sekiro*, and I have to say, despite Team Cherry not using any *Souls* games for inspiration, *Hollow Knight* feels precisely like a 2-D version of one of those games (though I suppose it could be said that *Souls* games are 3-D Metroidvanias). This isn’t to say that’s a bad thing or that there aren’t distinctions between them, but the similarities are rather uncanny. Nebulous story: check, lose currency upon dying and have to reclaim it without dying or you lose it all: check, enemies reset after resting: check, high focus on bosses/minibosses: check (just to name a few). There are a ton of parallels that one can draw from the game. If you like both the *Souls*-like gameplay system and 2-D games, you may very much like *Hollow Knight*.

The gameplay is pure and simple, though mastering movement in intense situations is where the complexity comes in. The game has an incredibly high skill ceiling: easy to learn, difficult to master. The game focuses primarily on combat, with platforming as a close second. The combat is the most challenging part of the game, especially the boss fights and overcrowded areas. Bosses and challenges that require platforming and aerial maneuvers while fighting can be extremely frustrating and require a lot of patience and practice. I could tell when I hadn’t upgraded enough when I had a lot of difficulty in a specific zone, so I’d go off and explore or upgrade my abilities.

While I found it a delight to discover a new zone, I sometimes found the road to discovery a bit of a chore. Sometimes the exploration flowed, and I felt like the game had a perfect pace, but other times I would get stuck, unsure of my next move. The beginning hours felt like a bit of a slog, especially before I got the Dash ability. The fast travel system isn’t the most convenient, and considering enemies respawn every time you rest, I sometimes found it tedious to explore, especially when my next move was limited to only two options. The game is mostly cryptic, making discoveries feel rewarding, but it also makes getting stuck feel irritating.

As someone who places a game’s story on the same level as (or in some cases above) gameplay, I find the enigmatic story not rewarding enough for some of the sufferings that I endured (which is the same way I feel about *Souls*-like games). Some of the challenges were so overwhelming or poorly paced that I almost put the game down entirely. While the Trial of Fools is still causing me grief, at least it’s optional (though the only reward is a currency I no longer have a use for). The main offender was the White Palace. Oh boy. For a game that has mildly challenging platforming interspersed between/with combat segments, this was a complete turn (and unfortunately necessary to advance the game). This level is a 100% platforming segment that not only overstays its welcome but is extremely difficult and out of place. I sincerely hope the developer learns from this and either completely omits content like this or makes it optional.

But I feel like I’ve been complaining too much. While the game can be frustrating at times, for the most part it is challenging and rewarding. Fighting a boss and learning its patterns, substituting different charms (little boosts to platforming/combat abilities) to get through an area/enemy, and discovering new zones easily make this game worth a shot. Not to forget the charming aesthetic and accompanying soundtrack. I love the calming music that plays in the City of Tears. Nothing like feeling a sense of peace while being attacked by a bunch of aristocratic insects. There’s a wistfulness that’s weaved throughout the soundtrack that can haunt and entrance at the same time.

When *Hollow Knight* is flowing, the game makes me feel like I’ve stepped into this microcosm of a larger world. Despite not being forthright with every historical detail, the few folks at Team Cherry made the world feel real, lived-in, and worth exploring. While I had the occasional disconnect because of uncertainty within the plot’s obscure framework, the overall feel was one of curiosity. What’s around the next bend? What’s behind that door? What do I get from defeating this boss and what does he have to do with the lore? Realizing a new ability would allow me to unlock a previously unreachable area was always a treat.

If you're a fan of Metroidvania-type games, then you've probably already played *Hollow Knight*. To those who are fans of the genre and haven't, I'd say it's definitely worth a shot. To those who aren't, you should answer a few questions before buying: Are you patient? Do you like a challenge? Is a sense of accomplishment from said challenge enough of a reward? Is discovery its own reward? Do you like backtracking and opening previously locked areas? If you answer yes to most or all those questions, *Hollow Knight* is probably worth your time. Its qualities significantly outweigh its flaws and make the wait for the sequel all the more exciting.

The Math

Objective Assessment: 9/10.

Bonus: +1 for beautiful art and animation. +1 for worldbuilding, character design, and accompanying music.

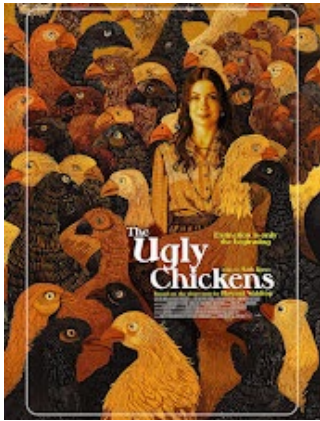
Penalties: -1 for unbalanced difficulty spikes. -1 for exploration pacing issues. -1 for unrewardingly vague story elements.

Nerd Coefficient: 8/10.

Festival View: The Ugly Chickens

Chris Garcia

Every now and then, there's a short that comes across my desk that plays on each and every one of my things. The Ugly Chickens happened to be one like that. Subtle science fiction? Yep. Extinct animals? Quite. An adaptation of Howard Waldrop? No doubt. Felicia Day? In the extreme!



Let me start with a thing that has always been true: the best science fiction short films are gentle science fiction. This is what draws the line with features for me. Yes, effect-driven features are really where it's at (and you can fight me on that!), but the shorter the short, the more based on our world the science fictional scenario should be. When I came across *The Ugly Chickens*, I knew that it was going to be the one that made me happiest.

The story of *The Ugly Chickens* is fairly simple: it's the late 1970s in Texas, and an ornithology associate professor, Paula (played by Felicia Day) is running to her class when she bumps into a woman who sees the cover of her extinct birds book showing a dodo. She says she hadn't seen 'those ugly chickens' in years, and tells the story of how her neighbors had raised them. She's been obsessed with the dodo for a long time, and that led to an adventure to find the dodo, who she hopes is not as dead as everyone had thought. Her obsession leads her to travel to Louisiana, and she finds proof that there were dodos, but runs into a local, and that sets her off on another series of adventures at tremendous cost to herself. The way it plays out is both utterly satisfying and completely non-ambiguously a let-down.

I can remember reading the story in the late 1980s. It was so smart, and it dealt with my favorite: the dodo. They were a sweet, loving bird. They weren't dumb, just trusting. I might have identified with them a bit too closely, and when I read a story where these noble creatures were present, well, I dove in. It's helped by the fact that it was a Howard story as well. His writing went into so many other areas and there's always the Waldrop style I miss so much now that he's gone. I was lucky enough to get to meet Howard a few times, and even did an exhibit based on his book *The Texas-Israeli War of 1997*. *The Ugly Chickens* was easily my favorite of all his stories.

The short switches the gender of the ornithologist to a woman, which, when played by Felicia Day, is a perfect choice. I maintain that Felicia is the finest genre actor in America today. Yes, it is a different and more specialized form of the art. It requires the ability to interact with a setting as much as other characters. It's a multi-tier reaction process that Felicia has mastered in a way that few not named Christopher Lee have managed. She gets to roll through a series of emotional tones in a way that brings her natural charm to the front, while also not blowing out the story as it progresses.

The film is beautiful. The cinematography, handled by Alan Poon, is magnificent. It looks gorgeous, and it takes the changing setting, various time periods, and regional environments, and gives each a deliberate sense of place. Poon also handled the shooting of *American Born Chinese*, one of the best shot TV programs of the last decade. The entire look of the film plays with Howard's tendency towards the rural, the backwaters and backwoods. There's a certain Southern Gothic sense even to the classroom scene.

Now, this is an adaptation that isn't exactly fully faithful to the story, but it absolutely maintains the spirit of the original. George R. R. Martin, one of the producers, reports that Howard saw an early cut of the picture before his passing and much approved. The script is really smart, and moves between beats without dwelling too much. This is actually more difficult than it sounds to maintain across 30 minutes and still give time for character development and Day's amazing emoting.

I've programmed thousands of shorts, and there are a few which I knew would be winning awards from both audiences and the jury. *The Ugly Chickens* was absolutely one that I knew would, and I wasn't wrong. At Cinequest, it won both, and I could not have been happier.

I hope that *The Ugly Chickens* gets a release along with the other short films that are being made from Howard's stories, including *Night of the Cooters* and *Mary Margaret Road Grader*.

Anime Review: Apothecary Diaries Season 2

Ann Michelle Harris

Escalating drama, family secrets, disturbing themes, and increasing heat on the slow-burn romance



After a clever and addictive first season, it was no surprise that *The Apothecary Diaries* earned one of the coveted nomination slots for 2025 Anime of the Year. The first season introduced Mao Mao, a cynical genius apothecary in an ancient kingdom who gets kidnapped and sold into bondage as a servant in the harem of the imperial rear palace. Mao Mao's foil in all of this is the gorgeous and clever eunuch Jinshi, who is in charge of the rear palace. Despite his swoon-inducing good looks, Jinshi is clever and clearly more than he appears to be, just as Mao Mao is more than she appears to be. In the first season, Mao Mao solved mysteries ranging from dying royal infants to dancing ghosts and mysterious murders. Both leading characters spend much of season 1 hiding who they really are while dealing with a relentless assassin and lots of palace intrigue.

In season 2, Jinshi is hunted by political assassins and Mao Mao is abducted during a clan insurrection and tasked with a heart-rending task while the safety of the nation is at risk. The new stakes are higher and the emotional investment is deeper, with a sinister conspiracy to overthrow the emperor, and revelations about the lead characters that will permanently change their relationship. Mao Mao is publicly revealed to be the secret daughter of the quirky genius and politically important clan leader, General LaKan. Similarly, Jinshi's true identity, which was hinted at in the first season, is finally revealed to be Ka Zuigetsu, the Moon Prince, younger brother to the emperor.

While season 1 delivered a solid combination of a historical detective mystery, quirky opposites-attract personalities, hidden identities, lethal adventures, and lots of subversive feminist commentary, season 2 leans into the drama with upsetting sexual power dynamics, violent betrayals, profound family revelations, and an explosive uprising with far-reaching implications.

The Apothecary Diaries continues to use clever techniques to captivate viewers. For example, the show gives access to different characters' points of view. As a result, in a given scene, the audience is often aware of more facts than one or both of the lead characters. This storytelling technique adds to the anticipation as each revelation occurs. In a recurring plot point, Jinshi's repeated attempts to tell Mao Mao the truth about his identity become increasingly entertaining, especially since the audience knows a deeper level of truth about

Jinshi than Jinshi does. Their fraught conversations are also funny because Mao Mao's desire to avoid being drawn into drama makes her avoid engaging in things that will unnecessarily land her in trouble. In an iconic and awkward scene, she comes up with a particularly ridiculous explanation for a shocking truth she discovers about Jinshi. These early bits of humor soon give way to disturbing conversations and tragic events, making season 2 much less humorous and much more intense than season 1.

Season 2 also uses poignant flashbacks to provide a deeper understanding of the unusual personalities of the two protagonists. The new season focuses on Jinshi's thwarted efforts to avoid both his destiny and his political role and also shows him being called to task by multiple characters for hiding his identity. However, we get an intriguing picture of his early childhood in the palace where everything (toys, people, pets) he shows particular love for is intentionally taken away from him to force him (as the potential future emperor) not to get attached to things he cares about. As a result, he grows up with a profound longing for attachment, and, although he is confirmed to be much younger than he purports to be (only nineteen years old), he is also emotionally immature, and at times clingy and jealous in relation to Mao Mao. However, consistent with his sharp intellect and secret royal status, he is also conversely shrewd, manipulative, focused, aggressive, and lethal.

As a servant, Mao Mao aggressively tries to avoid involvement in palace drama by internally denying or externally avoiding dangerous information. However, we also get a glimpse into her early childhood being raised in a busy brothel, where her cries were largely ignored until time permitted someone to attend to her. As a result, she grew to be stoic, self-reliant, and highly distrustful of relationships. In season 1, she is irritated by Jinshi and also annoyed by her gossipy fellow servant girl Xiaolan. However, in season 2, she is decidedly protective of Jinshi (but still distrustful of his advances). She also, ironically and reluctantly, finds herself drawn into an ill-fated friendship with the child-like fellow indentured maid, Xiaolan and the mysterious bug-loving newcomer Shisui. That tragic friendship, the fraught but addictive relationship between Jinshi and Mao Mao, the cruelty of the Shi Clan uprising, and Jinshi's ascension to power politically and personally, make up the four primary pillars of season 2.

Overall, we have a feast of a fast-paced storytelling adventure with a dizzying array of family secrets, unexpected connections, and lots of revenge. All this intensity is balanced with quiet moments of meaningful character introspection, explorations of identity, and an examination of disturbing themes. In addition to the political intrigue, the show gives us an uncomfortable exploration of sexual power dynamics for those associated with the imperial palace. In one episode, the emperor flippantly suggests taking Mao Mao as a concubine to help him solve a restricted royal maze, which upsets both Mao Mao and Jinshi. Seeing their reaction, the emperor suggests Jinshi to claim her as concubine. As the season progresses, the show presents a disturbing backstory on the old emperor's abuse of young girls who ultimately end up trapped in the rear palace forever. And we see the way his behavior is finally stopped by another disturbing act of revenge by the empress. The show also addresses war and its effect on the innocent, particularly children.

The slower, less traumatic episodes of an otherwise fast-paced season are not merely fillers but provide context and connections

to characters whose lives are about to change dramatically in the subsequent, more intense episodes. Although the show still has elements of humor and avoids very graphic scenes, the themes and topics are clearly aimed at mature viewers. We also learn that many beloved characters are quite capable of harsh acts and violence. It is a fascinating contravention of expectations in a show that has had (and still has) moments of hilarity and classic anime-style humor.

Season 2 asks a lot of hard questions and offers less humor and playfulness than season 1. However, the exploration of difficult themes is worth it for viewers who want to see the intrigue and storytelling of season 1 expand and deepen rather than merely repeat itself. And we see the evolution of Jinshi and Mao Mao's relationship and learn that, despite Jinshi's ultimate power, it is Mao Mao who will determine the pace of their interactions. After a bold and clever first season, *The Apothecary Diaries* continues to push the boundaries of storytelling, identity, and social issues while still maintaining its core of intriguing characters. And, given its expansive source materials from numerous light novels and manga, there should be much more enjoyment and intrigue to come.

The Math

Nerd Coefficient: 8/10.

Highlights

- Drama, betrayals, and fast-paced adventure
- Disturbing and challenging themes
- Unique and intriguing storytelling

Movie Review: The Naked Gun

Alex Wallace

When Frank Drebin Jr. saves the day, what is actually being saved?



Back when I was an impressionable elementary schooler, I saw the first Michael Bay *Transformers* film with my dad, and I remember being struck that this time around, the robot that turned into a police car is evil. The men and women in blue uniforms and caps who drive cars with sirens have fallen from the heroic status they held in the 20th century, and we now focus not on the uniforms or the cars, but on the guns they have on their belts, and the wide variety of ways

they know how to kill people. As such, the very idea of the original *Naked Gun* trilogy, and the *Police Squad* show before it, feels like something out of an allegedly more innocent time (although the likes of Bull Connor would probably disagree), a quainter, more naive time.

When the decision was made to make *The Naked Gun* for release in 2025, it was to be made and released in a country that has had massive unrest over police violence. More and more Americans do not look up to cops, but fear them. As such, to portray the police as the heroes in a spoof movie will read differently than when Zucker, Abrahams, and Zucker made the original *Police Squad* show.

To get the most pressing question out of the way: this movie is hysterically funny. It's very much a modernized version of those old spoof movies where, if you don't like one joke, the writers are banking on the prospect you may like one of the four other jokes occurring within the next minute. It's that density of comedy that really saves the original trilogy for a modern viewer, as perhaps one in five jokes (and frankly that is being charitable) are hideously offensive by modern standards (one particular reveal in the third movie taking the crown for single most offensive joke in the franchise). There is a series of gags involving an infrared camera that, while not particularly offensive to anyone, are possibly raunchier than anything in the original trilogy. That density is preserved here, as the film is crammed with funny background events and a conga line's worth of one-liners.

Liam Neeson is doing a Leslie Nielsen impersonation through all of this, and he is very good at it. What made Nielsen so good in his role as Frank Drebin Sr. was that he was capable of saying, and responding to, completely absurd horseshit with a completely straight face. Neeson is very similar, capable of making absurd *Sex and the City* references or questioning the use of a certain slur in an old song in a manner that sounds very earnest. Neeson sells Frank Drebin Jr. as a man who has no idea that what he's saying is complete nonsense. In the younger Drebin's mind, his responses are perfectly rational, and he is the rational man in an irrational world.

The basics of the plot are ripped from 2014's *Kingsman: The Secret Service*, involving a sonic frequency that makes people kill each other. The villains here are what Naomi Klein and Astra Taylor described as 'end times fascists,' wishing to see an end to human civilization so

that they can make a new world atop its ashes. They feel like Musk- or Thiel-style technofascists, a clear departure from the villains in the original trilogy, whose aims were far more down-to-earth, relatively speaking. Since we live in a world that feels like it's careening ever quicker into a dystopian future, this movie is the first time that the series gets openly science fictional.

That swerve into science fiction is one way that this film shows its origins in this century; a subtle shift in the characterization of Frank Drebin, and by extension *Police Squad* as a whole, is another. In addition to thinking that the completely ridiculous is completely normal, Neeson's Drebin is portrayed as a violent asshole, going by several of the jokes. When he urgently needs to use the restroom, he fires a gun at the ceiling to get a crowd out of the way between him and a toilet in a coffee shop. Before doing that, he let a speeding driver get away with a warning. This Drebin is actively destructive to human life and property in a way that Nielsen's Drebin never was. He is, if not racist in his heart of hearts, happy to admit that his violence disproportionately affects people of color. One particularly memorable background gag in *Police Squad* headquarters has an officer escorting away some crying children while he holds their confiscated lemonade stand around his arm. The question eventually has to be asked: does *Police Squad* do anything other than terrorize innocent people?

It's subtle, and easy to miss given the rapid-fire comedy, but this film portrays *Police Squad* as at best completely useless, and is very aware of the myriad problems of contemporary policing. *Police Squad* is filled with cowboy cops — the sort of cowboys that massacred Natives. I'm reminded of Peter Moskos's book *Cop in the Hood*, his memoir of taking a job with the Baltimore police department to do anthropological work on policing. He says that most cops that he knew were not committed racists; the violence they meted out affected Black people disproportionately because of the broader structural inequalities of American society rather than any particular animus as individuals. But it's not intent, but impact, that matters, and these cops, Frank Drebin Jr. foremost among them, are terrorizing the streets of Los Angeles like the imperial enforcers from which American police have drawn so much. They rampage around the city with impunity (for them, punishment for police misconduct warrants a pool party) and have brought the war home. In another world, Frank Drebin Jr. could be a particularly dim-witted officer of the Philippine Constabulary, brutalizing a people white Americans called the n-word. It was a service that attracted brutes, and this version of *Police Squad* acts that way.

[An aside — if you want to read more about imperial influence on policing, I recommend Julian Go's *Policing Empire*, Matthew Guariglia's *Police and the Empire City*, Alfred McCoy's *Policing America's Empire*, and Radley Balko's *Rise of the Warrior Cop*.]

Frank Drebin Jr. ultimately saves the day, as he was bound to do, fighting the villain outside of Ponzischeme.com Arena. It is telling that the only dangerous crime anyone actually stops in this movie is one that threatens the interests of the rich and powerful. He does so with the cooperation of his love interest, who makes up fictional stories and sells them as true crime, thereby saving *Police Squad*'s funding, after the Spirit Halloween banner had already been hung up on its building. Earlier in the film, it is shown that *Police Squad* is rank with nepotism, where the son of Nordberg heavily implies that his father (portrayed in the original trilogy by O. J. Simpson) committed

crimes similar to that of his actor. The whole enterprise, the whole concept of policing, and indeed contemporary American society are all immersed in a slimy morass of corruption and theft.

Police abolitionists argue that policing, as an institution, does not solve crime, nor prevent crime, but rather punishes crime, to the detriment of the aforementioned. They often insist on referring to the American legal system, rather than the American justice system, as it is designed to execute laws rather than to pursue any real form of justice. Looking at the movie from this lens, the ultimate joke of *The Naked Gun* is justice in America, and the punchline is: "Justice? What justice?"

Movie Review: Predator: Killer of Killers

Dean E.S. Richard

All Killer, No Filler



Predator is one of my favorite franchises out there, possibly even rivalling my rabid Star Wars fandom. One of the things I love about the growing Predi-verse is that it is simply unapologetically what it is. The first two are tight, tense affairs, with a few hints at a larger universe and timeline. The years that followed brought some fun comics and video games, before the tepid *AVP* movie threatened to derail the whole endeavor. Then came the vastly underrated *Predators*, then *Prey*, and now the lid is off with *Killer of Killers*. It doesn't concern itself with silly frivolities like a super deep story, historical accuracy, subtlety or nuance. It gives us what we came for – scenery chewing hunters, wrecking everything around them and slaughtering redshirts in brutal and hilarious ways.

Split into three(ish) parts, across the Viking era, feudal Japan and WWII in the Pacific, a different Predator (the species we now know to be called 'Yautja'), with different weapons, takes on a different warrior from each timeline. The extremely simple review is: It's really good. Like I said - it's exactly what it is. Each Yautja is unique, with badass weapons that slaughter everyone except their target in creative ways. Each target is likewise unique, a badass (with Torres, the American, playing a little too much into the aw-shucks-underdog American fantasy a little too much), that overcomes their pursuer with ingenuity and determination.

This exposes the inherent flaw in the Predi-verse: They are presented as the ultimate hunter, killer of killers, etc, and yet...they always lose. Sure, they kill the NPCs with reckless abandon, but the main character always wins in the end, and sure, we see those people get picked up by squads of Predators, but the title card fight always ends with the humans on top. It was one of the things that drove me nuts about *AVP* - the tagline was "whoever wins, we lose", and yet, humans were the ones standing at the end.

Perhaps the upcoming *Badlands* fixes this, but at a certain point, it takes the punch out of Predators treating Earth like a hunting preserve, but getting their asses kicked every time (that we see). To be honest - it's a fairly small complaint, and each one of the movies, including this one, is extremely entertaining in its own right. But like so many other cinematic universes, as it grows, it opens itself up to more and more scrutiny, especially of its own in-universe rules and composition.

All that being said, since Disney owns the rights to *Predator* and nearly every other IP in the known universe, and we are clearly trying to visit every era of human history with Predators, I am available to write any of the following movies for a modest fee:

- *Predator vs Stitch* - Stitch is ultimately accepted by the Yautja as one of their own; Lilo disembowels her bullying classmates. Post-credit scene teases *Predator vs Toothless*.
- *Predator vs Terminator* - Dutch is brought out of stasis to fight the OG terminator; this confuses the Yautja greatly.
- *Predator vs the Sith* - just two hours of lightsabers and Yautja weapons
- *Predator vs Ewoks* - Just two hours of Predators slaughtering Ewoks
- *Predator in the era of the Aztecs*. Two movies - in the first, a Predator defeats an Aztec warrior, immediately before the Spanish arrive. Post-credit scene shows them taking the Aztec gold, with the Yautja watching. They become the curse of the Aztec gold, slaughtering any who possess it for taking it dishonorably.

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 9/10

Bonuses: None, but worth mentioning the score above includes points for not trying too hard, and just focusing on the basics.

Penalties: -1 for the humans winning.

Nerd Coefficient: 8/10 - well worth your time and attention

Section III: Conversations and Commentary

The Sand in Our Lungs: The Desertification of Our Imaginations

Phoebe Wagner

Hi, folks! Unfortunately, I've had to pause my weekly *Andor* posts due to some unexpected life circumstances, but I will finish up my deep dive with a final essay on the last two episodes in the near future. Until then, here's an essay about why two sci-fi films with deserts might not be the best for our cultural imagination. Thanks for reading!



In 2024, two major science fiction franchises produced blockbuster sequels: *Dune Part II*, directed by Denis Villeneuve, and *Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga*, directed by George Miller. Both films overlapped in their depictions of the desert landscape, cults of survival, and a desire to return to a “green place.” These respective deserts are not seen as their own habitats, as unique biomes and cultural spaces, but rather as something dangerous that must be made green. This utopic desire

combined with the extractive activities in both Villeneuve's and Miller's deserts suggests an inability to imagine life beyond extraction in the heat of global warming but only in lush greenness, where even the air is purer. The impact of this cultural imagining can be seen in the recent political landscape, as President Trump released an AI-generated video depicting the West Bank as an “oasis” with palm trees, and when Elon Musk, while heading DOGE, reposted a *Mad Max* meme with the text: “Ladies, it's time to start thinking whether the guy you're dating has post apocalyptic [sic] warlord potential.” In current political imaginings, the desert can either be greened to create some type of utopia or is full of savage warlords hoarding resources.

Rather than focusing on how humanity has adapted and survived these places, *Dune Part II* and *Furiosa* depict progress as the desire to return to green. While this view of the desert not only supports the current imperial actions in the Middle East, it also limits the ability to imagine and pursue survival in the heat of global warming. These coincidental releases suggest a turn toward imagining hot, dry futures where the air is poisoned or changing humanity, as in the Spice sands on Arrakis. Rather, we must (re)imagine these desert futures as more than extractive places where the heat and air can kill.

Unlike its predecessor *Mad Max: Fury Road*, which I've argued in my essay “*Mad Max* and the Wasteland of Commodification” has strong ecofeminist and environmental justice themes, *Furiosa* reverts to a biblical story of the sinful woman. The first shot of the titular character is her reaching for a lush piece of fruit while another girl whispers they should hurry. Immediately after she picks the fruit, Furiosa sees that men have invaded their sanctuary. While trying to warn the others, she is captured, which prompts her mother to follow them into the desert to rescue her. She fails, and Furiosa is enslaved and raised by Dementus (Chris Hemsworth) before she is eventually traded to Immortan Joe (Lachy Hulme) to be one of his or his son's

child wives as part of a deal for Dementus to run Gas Town, a petrol fortress. Indeed, it is the attempted rape by his son Rictus (Nathan Jones) that allows a young Furiosa to escape and hide among the War Boys, eventually growing up to become a mechanic and then learning to drive the War Rig alongside Praetorian Jack (Tom Burke). They become partners — both romantically and in their desire to escape. Meanwhile, Dementus is scheming to take over Immortan Joe's fortress, which features fresh produce, green gardens, renewable energy, and — most importantly — unlimited water from underground aquifers. Caught up in his schemes, Praetorian Jack and Furiosa are captured, Jack is horrifically killed, and Furiosa escapes to tell Immortan Joe in hopes of enacting her revenge. After a forty-day war, she tracks Dementus through the wasteland to kill him. The film ends with the History Man (George Shevtsov) suggesting that Furiosa didn't kill Dementus but rather planted the seed of the fruit she took from the Green Place where she was captured while eating the fruit, and the film ends with Furiosa now played by Charlize Theron handing one of these fruits to the enslaved women that she escapes with in the next film.

In many scenes, *Dune Part II* mirrors the plot points of *Furiosa*. Like Furiosa, Paul (Timothée Chalamet) comes from a place utopic for its greenery and, most importantly, water — a sacred element on Arrakis. Furiosa and Paul both seek revenge against grotesque villains known for their cruelty. In *Dune Part I*, Paul's family, who have come to rule the desert planet, are murdered by the villainous Harkonnens, and Paul and his mother flee to hide in the desert, where they are taken in by the native population called Fremen. Paul's mother, Jessica (Rebecca Ferguson), is part of a galaxy-wide religious order that has seeded prophecies and propaganda about an outsider who will turn Arrakis green again and lead the Fremen. While Paul is perfectly positioned to fulfill this prophecy, he is hesitant at first, but in order to defeat the Harkonnens and avenge his father, he must use the native practices of the Fremen to not only survive the desert but to control their loyalty. By ruling the Fremen, he regulates what makes Arrakis so important: Spice production. The drug called Spice enables interstellar planetary travel, so it is a necessary and valuable resource required by the empire. Ultimately, Paul takes leadership of the Fremen to oust the Harkonnens from Arrakis by force, which prompts the other ruling families to threaten violence, leading to the Fremen intergalactic war off their home planet.

The desert is the prime visual for both these films, but in *Furiosa* there is no cinematic beauty in the desert, only fear, while *Dune* features long shots of the sun catching Spice in the air, the shifting sands, the decorated sietchs where the Fremen live, often overlaid with a stereotypical Middle Eastern soundtrack. While both films depict the desert in different lights, survival and exploitation are still central to the desert, primarily for various types of fuel, whether it's petrol, food and water, or Spice.

Furiosa is unable to escape her captors because she has no resources to survive the desert, and resources are exclusively stolen, not shared. The apocalypse of the *Mad Max* franchise is summarized in voiceovers at the beginning of the film, and the first two instances of destabilization listed are the power grid collapsing and that “currency is worthless,” (Miller 00:00:30), once again proving the quote commonly attributed to Fredric Jameson that “it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.” The voiceovers end with the final sentiment from the History Man: “As the world

falls around us, how must we brave its cruelties?” (Miller 00:01:21). The film’s answer to this question is revenge and the utopic desire to return to a green paradise. The cruelties that *Furiosa* survives depict what Naomi Klein and Astra Taylor call “end times fascism:” “A darkly festive fatalism — a final refuge for those who find it easier to celebrate destruction than imagine living without supremacy” (“The Rise of End Times Fascism”). Indeed, destruction — of both property and the human body — are moments of joy rather than horror, such as when Dementus orders a wasteland gang he’s overcome to fight each other for the honor of riding motorcycles attached to the body of their boss, pulling him apart (Miller 00:27:23). This destruction is linked directly to the desert because there is no alternative lifestyle presented in the sands. The only people living in this desert are destructive — except for our heroine, raised elsewhere, and her eventual romantic interest, who is murdered. Rather, the alternative lifestyle is rooted not in the desert but in an oasis of green where there are still trees bearing fruit, water, and animals.

In the first few minutes of *Furiosa*, what is called “the green place of many mothers” in *Mad Max: Fury Road* is depicted. In a rocky canyon, the few shots of daily life show men and women working together at chores while windmills turn in the background. In addition to human life, there is nonhuman life, from birds crying to the horse *Furiosa*’s mother rides in an attempt to rescue her. Shelters feature solar panels on the roofs, and the people use sustainable technology such as a pedal-powered whetstone and a solar oven (00:04:13). While they are not pacifist — *Furiosa*’s mother is a crack shot — they represent the opposite of the desert barbarism by incorporating advanced technology along with sustainable living to create an egalitarian community. This progressive community, though, is visually connected to the water and lush flora that surrounds them. Indeed, as *Furiosa*’s mother ventures deeper into the desert in her rescue attempt, she must take on more and more of the violent trappings of Dementus’s men — first abandoning her horse for one of their motorcycles, then putting on their clothes and helmets of human bone. Thus, the desert and its connection to scarcity — whether real or imagined — is the promoter of this savagery, not something brought to the sands. Indeed, as Imre Szeman points out, “We moderns are creatures of fossil fuels (if to different degrees in different places in the world)” (7). As she progresses into the desert, she becomes more a creature of fossil fuels by taking on the trappings and riding the bike. The focus on automobiles in the *Mad Max* franchise emphasizes this connection, and control of “guzzolene” is important to who rules the desert. Rather than adapt to the more sustainable and fossil-fuel-free life of the green place with many mothers, the people of the desert hold onto their desire for fossil fuels and the supposed modernity it produces, such as Immortan Joe’s brother, the lord of Gastown, painting a recreation of John William Waterhouse’s *Hylas and the Nymphs* (1896) while wearing a regimental coat (Miller 00:43:23).

Alternatively, in *Dune Part II*, the Fremen do present the desert as a unique environmental and cultural space, but their depiction throughout the film still connects to violence and is presented as uncivilized or lacking in empathy. Throughout both films, their martial prowess is partly what makes them unique, but early in *Part II* after a battle, Paul witnesses Chani (Zendaya) drain the water from a body of a still living Harkonnen, swatting away the Harkonnen’s weak arm (Villeneuve 00:11:19). This moment positions the Fremen as lacking empathy or respect for their enemy, by doing something brutal as they loot the water from the bodies, causing the pregnant Jessica

to vomit. While Fremen violence begins and ends the film, there is worldbuilding around their culture and relationship with the desert. This connection is depicted visually through their eyes, which become a vibrant blue due to them breathing in and eating Spice. Additionally, the reason for collecting water from the dead is not only due to scarcity, but in the case of dead Fremen, their water is poured into an underground tank where it is being saved to turn the planet green. As Stilgar (Javier Bardem) explains to Jessica: “When we have enough water, the Lisan al-Gaib will change the face of Arrakis. He will bring back the trees. He will bring back a Green Paradise” (Villeneuve 00:20:24). Even though they’ve adapted to live with the desert, have a culture intertwined with the desert, and have the ability to create advanced technology out of the desert (such as their stillsuits, which retain water), their religious purpose is to change the planet to a green paradise that they have no frame of reference for.

While Paul respects the Fremen and their understanding of the desert, they are still positioned as religious zealots willing to die for the Lisan al-Gaib in a war necessitated because the natural resource of their planet — Spice — is required for galactic travel. Indeed, the movie is framed around Spice, and its metaphoric connection to oil is emphasized visually. In a restructuring of the opening credits, sounds that do not necessarily mimic language seem to speak, with the words appearing on black screen: “Power over Spice is power over all” (Villeneuve 00:00:05). The production credits follow, creating an interruption of the story started with the truism on Spice. While Spice production happening on a desert planet being controlled by colonizers already prompts viewers to think of oil production, the connection is solidified by the main villain, Baron Harkonnen. He soaks in a black pool of liquid that clings to his white skin, the oily surface swirling (Villeneuve 00:49:02). While the Fremen offer an alternative few of the desert, the central conflict still revolves around the Harkonnens keeping the Spice flowing, thus limiting this imagining of the desert to an extractive space.

While *Furiosa* and *Dune Part II* come from very different franchises, the narrative of the protagonist’s revenge, violence, and extraction creates a unified view of “desert” as a space where scarcity leads to savagery. Another way this savagery can be read is a response to the question posted by Wilson, Szeman, and Carlson: “Energy transition will therefore involve not only a change in the kinds of energy we use, but also a transition in the values and practices that have been shaped around our use of the vast amounts of energy provided by fossil fuels” (4). Without these practices of modernity, these films suggest the only option when fossil fuels become limited is not adaptation or transition but violence, even though much of the Global South already does not operate with the same amount of energy usage as the Global North. While there are certainly other films that do not present the desert or its people in this framework, the release of two such blockbuster narratives in 2024 suggests the desertification of imagination in the U.S. and a need for alternative narratives, particularly for the masses. As Paul says of the Fremen to his mother: “It’s not a prophecy. It’s a story you keep telling. But it’s not their story; it’s yours” (Villeneuve 01:02:21). The Fremen are certainly more nuanced than the people of *Furiosa*, but because their values are created and manipulated by Paul and the religious order his mother Jessica belongs to, the Fremen’s agency is degraded. Their culture of wishing for a green utopia is entirely manufactured to make them more pliable in relation to collecting Spice. Additionally, the supposedly uninhabited and unlivable southern part of the planet being filled

with a large population of “fundamentalists” who are mostly nameless and faceless, depicted as a mass, dehumanizes the Fremen. They become a tool for violence, another thing to be extracted from the desert in Paul’s galactic conquest.

As this violent and resource-drive depiction of the desert unites the movies, so, too, does the desire for a green utopia. The desert is not seen as a viable location, even though in *Dune* the Fremen have adapted to the desert. In *Furiosa*, the desert is not adapted to but rather something to be endured by scavenging and killing others in order to, someday, find what one of Dementus’s men calls a “place of abundance” (Miller 00:12:30). Both these narratives focus on a return to a green utopia, which suggests an imaginative reaction to global warming. As the climate changes and global warming causes places to become hotter and drier, this yearning for a green utopia will harm humanity’s ability to adapt. As the After Oil Collective writes in *Solarities* [2022]: “Stories and myths are tools of immense possibility that provide powerful means of creating different worlds and making new futures, and of seeing the present in new ways” (61). While the releases of *Furiosa* and *Dune Part II* are coincidental, these narratives suggest we are struggling with “seeing the present in new ways” and instead relying on imperial, oil-driven narratives of scarcity, violence, and extraction in the desert. These narratives also reinforce the problematic idea that lush, green spaces are the only viable vision in the midst of climate change rather than presenting a diversity of flourishing landscapes and beings.

As the impacts of climate change continue to cause more desertification, our popular storytelling must adapt rather than react. Depicting deserts as spaces of scarcity and violence only serves extractive and imperial industries. Rather, we can use storytelling practices to imagine flourishing communities in the desert not beset by extraction. There is more to the desert than supposedly empty sands and oil; it is not a place that must be transformed in order to reach a more utopic state — and storytelling can develop our imagination in these directions as more of the planet experiences extreme heat and drought. At this time, we need our imaginations expanded, not limited by these imperial narratives.

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Hollywood is Dead, Long Live Hollywood

Vance K

Netflix's Potential Purchase of Warner Bros. and the End of Hollywood (As We Know It...Now)



Last week, on December 4, 2025, news broke that Netflix had prevailed over Paramount and/or Comcast Universal to acquire Warner Bros. As I write this, news has just broken on December 8, 2025, that the Ellisons and Paramount have initiated a hostile takeover bid to prevent the Netflix purchase and bring Warner Bros. under the recently-expanded Paramount/CBS/Skydance umbrella. So we'll see what happens.

But whoever wins, the rest of us lose.

There will be different ramifications if Netflix buys Warner Bros. or if Paramount Skydance's shenanigans work out in their favor, but either way, the sale of Warner Bros. is the definitive closing of a chapter in Hollywood history. People have written "the end of Hollywood" pieces since before *The Jazz Singer* introduced talking pictures to the mainstream film audience in 1927, and yet Hollywood has managed to live on for another 100 years, so this piece will not be one of those. Movies and TV shows will persist as forms of entertainment moving forward, but this is the end of **something**, and what comes next will look different from what came before. The biggest questions in my mind are "What will be lost?" and "For what?"

What Will Be Lost?

First of all, a lot of people are going to lose their jobs. When Disney bought Fox in 2019, there was some chatter that the majority of the job losses were going to be administrative, as the two studios merged their business operations. But the notion of relatively minimal job losses and the two studios' creative slates remaining independent was a fiction from the start. Disney immediately began shuttering specialty film groups like Fox 2000, which had been releasing cultural touchstone films like *Fight Club*, *The Devil Wears Prada*, and *Hidden Figures* since 1996.

So that brings us to what the audience is losing: **the movies and TV shows that will never be made, the voices we will never hear, and maybe the spaces to share them.**

When I moved to Los Angeles in 2005, there were six studios that could buy your project — Universal, Warner Bros., Disney, 20th Centu-

ry Fox, Sony (formerly Columbia), and Paramount. There were other, smaller outfits that could buy projects because they had distribution deals with a studio or for straight-to-DVD releases, since DVD revenues were just absolutely insane at the time, and cable television channels that produced original content and were either wholly-owned subsidiaries or joint ventures between the major studios. Going a little farther back in time, MGM and United Artists used to be their own studios, too. So at one time, there were a lot of buyers, a lot of places that were mounting productions and employing crews, studio development departments shepherding feature film scripts, an entire pilot season apparatus where TV studios were making full pilots for shows that may or may not ever air, and an attendant set of opportunities for writers, actors, and directors to potentially break in or break through.

The loss of DVD revenue was transformative as the home media bubble burst alongside the advent of streaming, and industry contraction followed, alongside runaway production away from Los Angeles. There was a writers' strike, MGM folded, indie producers went under, but then Netflix jumped into original programming, and audiences soon found Peak TV dropped into their living rooms. Networks like AMC made must-watch programming like *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead*, and suddenly Netflix had a bottomless appetite for original programming, with Amazon and Apple jumping in, and the glut of new streamers from Disney+ to FreeVeve making new content specific to their own new platforms.

And then Peak TV peaked. For years, the number of theatrical feature films had been declining, but the explosion of TV and streaming productions led to an employment boom, particularly for writers. But under the surface, things were sketchy as hell. The unfair employment practices led to the concurrent 2023 WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes (which I wrote about here). The face of that employment battle was David Zaslav, CEO of the recently-merged Warner Bros. Discovery, who was on the receiving end of a quarter-billion-dollar compensation package and had recently dropped into town acting like the second coming of legendary studio head Robert Evans (even buying Evans's fabled home). As it stands today, the Writers' Guild reports TV employment has fallen by 42% and Zaslav's Frankenstein's monster of Warner Bros. Discovery is being split back apart and sold off. Good work if you can get it — \$250+ million to destroy a company in three years.

So either Netflix or Paramount is going to roll Warner Bros. up under its corporate umbrella, and what will result are job losses, fewer movies, and fewer TV shows.

If Paramount prevails in its hostile takeover bid, the films and TV shows it does wind up producing going forward are likely to bend toward Trump-friendly, fascist-curious content. Exhibits A through D: A) firing Stephen Colbert, B) installing heterodox blogger (and higher ed grifter?) Bari Weiss as the head of CBS News, C) green-lighting *Rush Hour 4* after credibly-accused sex pest and director Brett Ratner made a Melania Trump documentary, and D) Jared Kushner's involvement in Paramount's hostile takeover bid. In the last year, Warner Bros.' current studio heads Mike De Luca and Pam Abdy oversaw Ryan Coogler's *Sinners*, Zach Cregger's *Weapons*, and Paul Thomas Anderson's *One Battle After Another*. Say goodbye to movies like those. After Disney bought Lucasfilm in 2012, I weighed in along similar lines, lamenting how the acquisition would shrink the

range of releases that Disney would produce. Time has more than borne out that prediction, but it didn't have the ideological corollary, which makes the prospect of a shrinking media landscape even more troubling.

If Netflix's bid holds, a lot of smart industry watchers think it will mean the beginning of the terminal decline of movie theaters. Many speculate that Netflix only wants this acquisition in the first place as a way to remove the second-largest supplier of theatrical content (Warner Bros. lags behind only Disney) from the marketplace entirely. Last week, box office analyst Scott Mendelson told The Bulwark's cultural editor Sonny Bunch:

"Something that Netflix has done a lot of in the last few years is it seems like every time there's this big, buzzy, crowd-pleasing festival flick that might theoretically do well in theaters, Netflix flies in, drops a \$20 million check on it, grabs distribution rights, and then it dies in the algorithm. And I think, I would argue, that they are doing that at least partially intentionally because the worst thing that can happen for Netflix is for that film to be successful in theaters."

The argument here is that Netflix's entire business model is for you to watch movies at home, and anything that lures you out of the house to watch a movie is competition. Netflix co-CEO Ted Sarandos recently said almost as much, prompting pushback from arguably the most commercially-successful film director of all time, James Cameron.

I go to movies a lot these days. I probably see more movies in theaters now than I have at any point since high school, when a typical Friday night was just going to the megaplex and seeing whatever was new that week. But the catch is that I almost never see first-run movies in the theaters these days. I am an annual member of the amazing American Cinematheque non-profit organization in Los Angeles, and live around the corner from the revitalized Vidiots, so a couple times a month I'll be in a theater seeing an animation retrospective with the animator in person, or a 70-mm restoration of a sci-fi or western classic, or introducing my kids to samurai movies, or a midnight screening of a bizarre French film, or... or... or. And that's a future we might all be heading for.

Will movie theaters vanish? No. Could the multiplex? Yeah. We've only had movie theaters for about a hundred years. That's nothing. They are not immutable. If Netflix prevails in a push to keep new movies out of theaters and force first-run films into the algorithmic churn of a decreasing number of streamers willing to vanish \$90-million-dollar movies because David Zaslav needs a tax write-off because of his dipshit merger decisions, then we're all stuck with the consequences as an audience. We might all need to find, or create, our local repertory film screening series if we want to see anything at all projected on a screen in community. We might be looking at the very real possibility that the theatrical experience becomes akin to the way most of us experience live theater here in 2025: some small number of people see a ton, most people see none.

And for what?

In the beginning, movie studios made movies. That's what they did, and they did it like factory work, with actors, directors, writers, technicians all under contract. If they made enough movies that brought

in enough people, the movie studios made money. Then Howard Hughes decided Jane Russell should be a star, so he got involved in Hollywood as a producer. Hughes had more money than he knew what to do with, but wanted to spend it. So he built the Spruce Goose, and he bought RKO Pictures, one of the major Hollywood studios, and brought it under the umbrella of the Hughes Tool Company. This was about the time that James Stewart decided to skip a studio contract and struck out on his own, under the guidance of his agent Lew Wasserman of MCA. This shift in the business model ruptured the studio system that had been in place since the nineteen-teens, and Hollywood was never the same.

Hughes sold RKO to the General Tire and Rubber Company, of all places. The manufacturing conglomerate Gulf+Western bought Paramount Pictures for some reason in the 1960s, and Lew Wasserman's MCA wound up buying Universal. Ever since, the movie studios have been chips in higher-and-higher-stakes corporate merger poker games. Amazon owns MGM (and MGM+, which is different from Prime Video). Disney owns Hulu (which is different from Disney+), Comcast owns Universal, and before Zaslav and Discovery came in and bought Warner Bros. and HBO, for some reason AT&T owned HBO. The studios don't make movies. They don't make TV shows. They "return value to the shareholders." If releasing a surefire IP-based hit like *The Minecraft Movie* returns value to the shareholders, they'll do that. If *not* releasing *Batgirl* returns value to the shareholders, then they'll do that instead. If installing an opinion journalist and blogger over their news division greases the wheels for governmental approval of a merger, they'll do that. It's all just corporate bullshit to make line go up after quarterly investor calls. The audience isn't even the product, like we were during the network TV days when networks were selling our eyeballs to advertisers.

So who benefits from any of this? Not the fans, not the audience, not the creators. Netflix is a tech company. Amazon is a tech company. Apple is a tech company. Apple makes their TV shows at a loss for a reason that they'll figure out some day but for now just seems like as good a way to set a billion dollars on fire as any. If Amazon decides that the MGM brand is a better fit for, I don't know, a line of dog and cat food, then we'll all be getting MGM Leo the Lion Pet Food on Prime Day and no more James Bond movies.

I recognize the Old-Man-Yells-At-Cloud vibe here, I do. But what I really want to emphasize is that these mergers didn't have to happen. These studios, provided a madman like Howard Hughes didn't systematically destroy them, probably could've kept going as they rebuilt after the fall of the studio system in the 1950s. Talking pictures came in the 1920s, and what came next was never the same. Television came, introducing a new medium and forcing filmmakers to innovate 3D and widescreen and VistaVision and CinemaScope and the R rating, and what came next was never the same. The studio system collapsed, but Blaxploitation films, risk-taking visionaries like Robert Evans who gambled on Francis Ford Coppola, and upstarts like Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper saved Hollywood in the 1960s and 70s, and what came next was never the same. A real estate boom in the 1990s led to the creation of the multiplex, and suddenly theater owners needed more, more, and more movies to fill their screens. So the independent cinema boom of the 1990s (seriously — just banger after banger after banger) changed the types of stories being told and the storytellers who had the opportunity to tell them, and what came next was never the same. The explosion of creativity that I

got to witness at the megaplex in the 1990s on those Friday nights wasn't because there was something in the water, or everybody just got narratively hip all of a sudden, or because they took the lead out of the gasoline finally (OK, maybe that, a little bit), but it was because more people got to tell more stories that only they could tell.

The diversity of voices and opportunities gave us all better art, and created meaning in countless lives. How many people out there do you think have tattoos inspired by *The Matrix*? You ever had a case of The Mondays? I've got one right now. How many times have you looked at a rug and thought, "That rug really ties the room together"? My friend named his kid after a character from *The Fifth Element*. Suddenly the need for movies to put on all those screens made room for weird, idiosyncratic stories, queer filmmakers, more women, more people of color telling stories that spoke to individuals and communities and moments that would have not been seen or recognized before.

But that's the point, right? These days? Tighter control over who gets to tell their story? Fewer outlets? There are still a ton of cinema screens, but they're all showing the new Marvel movie, every half hour. On the apps, the algorithm serving up what the owner of the algorithm wants you to see? Hiding what it wants you *not* to see?

So, look. Whichever corporate entity prevails in this Warner Bros. buyout, it is the closing of a chapter. Not the closing of a book, I don't think, but whatever comes next will never be the same.

Hollywood is dead. Long live Hollywood.

Andor and the Reimagining of Star Wars

The G



Star Wars, as a franchise, is almost 50 years old. It remains extraordinarily popular — as much or more than any other cinematic universe. At the same time, nearly all Star Wars properties are divisive in some way.

As I noted in the introduction to our special series Star Wars Subjectivities:

...search around the internet and you'll find many a lengthy opinion piece on which Star Wars properties are good and which ones are bad. Some will be Original Trilogy fanatics like me, others will tell you how secretly great the Prequels are. Others still will opine on how The Last Jedi is really a Top 3 Star Wars film sandwiched between two cinematic commercials for Disney theme park rides.

This is not only true for the films, but also for the various television shows, animated series, video games, books and comics that bear the Star Wars logo. Except *Andor*. I have yet to meet someone who loves Star Wars but dislikes *Andor*. Sure, I've met people who found the first season a bit dry and joyless (as I did, at the time), but not one fan who thinks it's bad. Nearly everyone — fans and critics alike — agree that it's good. Many think it's the best Star Wars property ever made.

I'm too heavily invested in the Original Trilogy to go that far — after all, it did change the way we think about movies. But after the masterpiece that is season 2, I think there's a serious case to be made for *Andor*. I want to delve deeper into why this show is so compelling to so many people — and, in the spirit of Star Wars Subjectivities, why it is so compelling to me.

[Before getting started, I'd like to note that Phoebe has written extensively on the show, including a great review of *Andor* Season 1, as well as an essay for Star Wars Subjectivities on *Andor* as community action — and is currently running a weekly review series breaking down each episode (ep 1, ep 2, ep 3, ep 4, ep 5). All are must reads, if you ask me. This will be a complementary take.]

Andor is a grown-up story for grown-ups

Star Wars has always tried to thread the needle between its two core audiences: adults and children. I discovered the Original Trilogy as a boy — and it captivated me the way media only can when you are that age. But the genius of the Original Trilogy is that it continues to captivate as you grow older. However, when George Lucas launched

the prequel trilogy in 1999, it was obvious to all of us who were now teenagers or adults that these films were not aimed at us, but at a new generation of children. At Cannes in 2024, Lucas said that people like me were just grumpy because we weren't looking at the films through 10-year-old eyes.

It's true that I never saw the prequels through 10-year old eyes, but I have consumed a metric ton of children's media over the years — as an adult — and can say with confidence that *The Phantom Menace* and *Attack of the Clones* are not good, not even by the relaxed standards of children's media. As I wrote about *The Phantom Menace*:

The writing is bad. The acting is bad. The direction is bad. The production is bad. The pacing is bad. The design is bad. The effects are bad. The characters are bad. The plot is bad. The concept is... well... okay, maybe this could have actually been a good movie, in theory, but unfortunately... the execution is, in a word, bad. Like, bad on a very basic, fundamental level.

Or as Vance more succinctly put it in his piece on *Attack of the Clones*:

Of all the millions of stories that could exist in that galaxy far, far away, Lucas picked the wrong ones to tell in these prequels.

Nearly everyone, including yours truly, agrees that *Revenge of the Sith* is a much better film. The story is actually interesting — and highly political, weaving the tragedy of Anakin's turn to the dark side alongside the broader tragedy of the Republic's dissolution and the death of democracy. It has its cringe kid content moments ("Noooooooooooo!"), but ultimately *Revenge of the Sith* aspires to be a serious film for whoever is watching, regardless of age. Like the Original Trilogy, *Revenge of the Sith* successfully threads the needle between its core audiences.

Most Star Wars content since has attempted the same feat. In the Disney era, this has worked sometimes (e.g. *Mandalorian*, *Ahsoka*) but more often not (e.g. *Solo*, *The Book of Boba Fett*, *Obi-Wan*). You could argue that success just boils down to quality, but the fact is that designing content for the broadest possible audience usually leads to bland, mediocre fare that is passable to everyone but not great to anyone.

Perhaps for this reason, Disney has recently grown more and started to develop properties specifically for each audience. I'm focusing on *Andor* here, but *Skeleton Crew* is also worth mentioning — it's a true kids' show designed for parents to watch with their little ones. And it's good!

Meanwhile, *Andor* is a mature show written for adults, a complex political drama set against a dark background, featuring hard-boiled characters who shoot first and don't fight according to Queensbury rules. There are no adorable creatures, no comic relief characters and no Jedi. Instead, there are real people struggling against very real oppression, making tough choices that don't always work out — and which almost always come at a high cost. Yet it is also a moving, sensitive and stirring portrayal of those people and the terrible world they were born into. I'm still astonished that this is a Star Wars story — and that it is almost the exact Star Wars story I've long wanted to see told.

The best Star Wars stories enhance the Original Trilogy; the worst cheapen it

This is something I've been chewing on since we ran Star Wars Subjectivities back in 2023. The Original Trilogy is the keystone for the Star Wars universe. All subsequent works — whether in film, television or other media — are essentially contextualizing those films. More precisely, they try to either (a) help you understand why things happen the way they do in the Original Trilogy; or (b) explore the aftereffects and consequences of what happens in the Original Trilogy. The good stuff adds richness, depth and gratifying exposition to a story with a lot of whitespace, or render something silly, well, less silly — in all cases enhancing the Original Trilogy.

Consider this example: In *A New Hope*, we learn that rebel spies managed to obtain plans for the Empire's Death Star. When Darth Vader boards the Tantive IV, he is specifically looking for those plans — which Princess Leia gives to the droid R2D2, with instructions to hand them over to the Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi. The plans demonstrate a fundamental weakness in the Death Star's design, which the Rebel Alliance hopes to exploit, thus winning a first major victory in their rebellion against the Empire.

Rogue One tells the story of how those rebel spies obtain the plans and transfer them to the Tantive IV. *Andor* then gives us the backstory for one of its main characters, Cassian Andor. But it doesn't only do that. We get a deep dive into Mon Mothma, the political leader of the Rebel Alliance — who has a small but compelling role in *Return of the Jedi*. And we get to see the Rebellion — and the Empire — from a range of perspectives, from Senators to regular people (none of whom, I'll note, are lightsaber-wielding Force sensitives of destiny).

In every way possible, *Andor* fleshes out the story and world presented in the Original Trilogy, enhancing our understanding of what happens, why it happens and who is important to the story it tells.

Contrast this with the Disney-era Sequel Trilogy. In *The Force Awakens*, director JJ Abrams eschews the opportunity to explore the New Republic's struggles to govern under the power vacuum left by the Empire's dissolution (which all of us who participated in this roundtable were keen on), in favor of... just remaking *A New Hope* with new, less interesting characters and cheaper-looking sets. As Haley put it, Abrams remade *A New Hope* for Gen Z. And that's probably the nicest way to put it.

The Last Jedi is more daring, but its aspirations are weighed down by inconsistent writing and direction, plot holes and — again — the misguided urge to just remake a film that everyone already loves (in this case, *The Empire Strikes Back*). As I wrote in a (fairly grumpy) review back in 2017:

This brings us to the on-going Disney trilogy, which so far has presented a vision of... the exact same one as the Original Trilogy. Actually, there is a mild subversion of the original trilogy's meta-narrative, but one so mild that it's barely a critique. Once again, we have a ragtag group of plucky individuals who confront immense power and (are sure to) triumph against all odds. And the films hit you over the head with the referential frying pan. Starkiller Base from The Force Awakens is the Death Star, but bigger! Kylo Ren is Darth Vader, but emo! Luke's island

*is Dagobah, salt planet is Hoth, casino planet is Cloud City and so forth and so on. It's the same old same old, only with crappier design and little romance — the kind of thing dreamed up by corporate executives with checklists in hand and theme park rides in mind.**

So how does the Sequel Trilogy function as Star Wars canon? Not well — and especially not well when the big reveal occurs in *Rise of Skywalker* (which all of us in the Disney Star Wars roundtable agreed is the worst of the three). All it achieves is to make the Original Trilogy less consequential in terms of canon, while rendering the few redeeming bits of *The Last Jedi* null and void in favor of insipid fan service that didn't even appeal to the fans who complained about *The Last Jedi*. I can say one good thing about it, though: it features such an unsatisfying ending that this instantly rendered all those contrarian critiques of *Return of the Jedi* null and void. After all, why would anyone complain about that ending when there's another one that's so drab, colorless and utterly devoid of life?

We finally see the Empire for what it really is

Back to *Andor*, this is the first major piece of Star Wars media where we truly see the Empire for what it is. And I don't mean that we get a quantitatively higher level of grimdark badness (the Empire destroys a planet in *A New Hope*, after all, and it's hard to get much worse than that). What I mean is this: in *Andor*, we get to see how Imperial rule is experienced by noncombatants; we get to see what animates the Imperial project; and we come to understand why the Empire behaves the way it does.

These are not zealots of the 20th-century grimoire, animated by nationalistic hatreds, a radically remade society or a murderous desire for purity. Rather, the Empire is more or less a traditional empire. It is a fundamentally extractive enterprise, the way Dutch colonialism was fundamentally extractive in present-day Indonesia — that is to say, the Empire is motivated by the straightforward desire to take and hoard.

For example, in Season 2, we learn that Director Krennic needs a mineral called kalkite for his top secret Death Star project; a rich source of the mineral exists beneath the crust of the planet Ghorman, a sparsely populated colony world whose leadership had backed the Separatists during the Clone Wars, but mining the kalkite from Ghorman would render the planet unstable — and unsuitable for habitation. Krennic gathers a council of officials from the various military branches, directorates of the Imperial bureaucracy and, of course, the Imperial Security Bureau (ISB) to discuss their options. The meeting is straightforwardly designed to evoke the 1942 Wannsee Conference, where a group of 15 Nazi officials decided to exterminate Europe's Jewish population (as Tony Gilroy himself has stated).

But while there's no doubt that the Empire will commit genocide, if it decides that doing so will further its goals, the Empire isn't motivated by any specific hatred for the people of Ghorman. Rather, the people of Ghorman are an inconvenience, as is the need for their removal — so the conspirators decide to look for alternatives, but ready a plan to reduce any blowback they might face if they ultimately decide to commit genocide and the mass ethnic cleansing of the planet.

Despite the aesthetic similarities between the Empire and Nazi

Germany, this is not at all like the Holocaust, which was the culmination of several decades of consistent, ideological antisemitism from a political party founded on the premise that Jews were to blame for just about everything. It is, I'd argue, much more like the atrocities committed by both land-based and seafaring empires: there was something the empire wanted, there were people in the way — and if there was no more expedient way to take it, they would deploy extreme levels of violence to get it. This is bad, by the way — very bad; just not bad in the specific way the Nazis were bad, or as consistently bad as the Nazis were.

For me this as a refreshing take. Popular media routinely ignores 95% of human history while obsessing over a few historical cases, relating anything and everything to said cases. But there is a lot more material to draw on, and the fact that *Andor* steps out from the shadow of the ever-present Nazi analogy to portray the Empire in ways that evoke other things is, to me, one of the things that give the show depth.

Andor is about people making difficult choices

One of the show's main subplots focuses on the radicalization of Mon Mothma, who by *Return of the Jedi* has become the leader of the Rebel Alliance. But when we are introduced to Mon Mothma, she is, if anything, a beneficiary of the Empire. That is not to say she supports the Empire (we know she does not), but that her class privilege — being a wealthy, connected human from the core worlds — gives her the option to pretend the evil isn't happening and keep living her life of luxury. She does not, but we see, by the end, most members of her social circle will choose to follow the path of least resistance.

This contrasts with life outside the core worlds, where societies are mixed (human and non-human), few people are rich, life is harsh and the decision to rebel is more often imposed than chosen. As it is for Cassian Andor. Resistance, though, comes in many forms — and requires many kinds of sacrifices.

Andor portrays a range of resistance fighters — from the patrician senators Mon Mothma and Bail Organa to art dealer turned spymaster Luthen Rael and his indefatigable protégé Kleya Marki (played by a scene-stealing Elizabeth Dulau); from the hard-boiled Cassian Andor and Lezine to Supervisor Jung, Luthen's mole within the ISB. None are "chosen," none are Force sensitives; all are simply people trying to do the right thing as best they can under terrible circumstances. These are heroes every resistance movement can claim, from the mighty to the ordinary. All play their part, at great cost, because they cannot simply stand by.

Andor isn't just great Star Wars; it's great science fiction

If it isn't clear already, I see *Andor* as a triumph. It is — easily, in my view — the best Star Wars story since the Original Trilogy. It achieves this feat by taking bigger, bolder risks than any other film or series since *Return of the Jedi* hit theaters in 1983.

But it isn't only one of the best Star Wars stories ever told — it is also one of the best science fiction stories ever developed for television. Indeed, if you were to swap out all the Star Wars content and replace it with standard space opera content, it would be just as effective a story. This is rarely true, even for the Star Wars stories I love. It is

very difficult for me to see, to cite one example, how *The Mandalorian* would work outside a Star Wars context — and I love *The Mandalorian*.

Hats off, then, to Tony and Dan Gilroy, to Diego Luna, Stellan Skarsgård, Genevieve O'Reilly, Elizabeth Dulau, and to everyone else involved in the making of this absolute masterpiece.

[My view is not an institutional one. There are other ways of looking at all these films and shows, which are well represented across our flock. Haley loves the prequels — all the prequels. Paul enjoyed The Force Awakens — even I did the first time around, as did Joe. Arturo has argued that The Last Jedi is significant, in that it redefines what it means to be a Jedi — and then poses a novel theory, that the film is about the meaning of fandom. It's definitely an interesting theory, one worth engaging with.]

The Arthur C. Clarke Award 2025: A Shortlist Discussion

Roseanna Pendlebury and Emily Tesh



Right in the heart of brimming awards season, we come to the Clarke Award shortlist, whose winner is due to be announced on the 25th of June. While we wait to find out the winner, myself and a very exciting guest decided to read the shortlist, and see what we think of the nominees as individual books, a group together, and as part of the wider fiction conversation of 2024 and 2025.

Joining me for this discussion is 2024 Clarke Award nominee, Hugo winner, Astounding Award Winner, World Fantasy Award winner and excellent-opinion-haver, Emily Tesh!

Per their website blurb, the Arthur C. Clarke Award is given to the best science fiction novel published in the United Kingdom during the previous year. As a juried award whose judges come from a variety of UK groups - the British Science Fiction Association, the Science Fiction Foundation and the Sci-Fi-London film festival - one of the key features is its ability to pull up gems that might not have made it onto popular voted awards, placing them alongside more well known authors and works, and giving a different slant on the year's SF - as evidenced by this year's shortlist, some of whom have (at least so far) not been honoured elsewhere, and sit here alongside Hugo Award nominees.

This year, the shortlist is as follows:

- *Private Rites* by Julia Armfield
- *The Ministry of Time* by Kaliane Bradley
- *Extremophile* by Ian Green
- *Annie Bot* by Sierra Greer
- *Service Model* by Adrian Tchaikovsky
- *Thirteen Ways to Kill Lulabelle Rock* by Maud Woolf

Emily and Roseanna got stuck into the shortlist and come here to share their opinions on the novels, the shortlist as a whole, and what the Clarke is covering that other awards may be missing, as well as their thoughts on who they might want to win.

Roseanna: Shall we start by going right in there, rather than a gentle introduction? I want to kick off with *Annie Bot* by Sierra Greer, because it's one we both had a lot of opinions about, and that we kept on coming back to think about more for days after we'd finished it.

The story follows the titular Annie, a robot girlfriend owned by a man named Doug, who has been slowly developing in her complexity since she was put into "autodidactic mode" two years previously. We spend time immersed in her perspective, as she struggles with what Doug wants from her, how to please him, as it runs up against her own growing and individual desires. A meeting with one of Doug's friends - and a secret, somewhat coercive sexual encounter with him - kickstart a lot of painful, traumatic and dramatic events for Annie, changing her life immeasurably and leading her to think outside the

rigid confines of the existence she's always known.

For me, it didn't fully work. There are a lot of ideas thrown up across the book, a lot of side-threads into different angles on the central metaphor of Annie's robot nature, but overall, it feels like an abusive relationship novel that is being undermined by all these different pieces that aren't necessarily pulling in the same direction as the central ideas. I'm not sure how the AI parts work with that premise, rather than muddling it.

Emily: One thing that really jumped out at me from reading the whole shortlist was the primacy of metaphor in the shortlist's approach to science fiction. I don't think a single one of these novels asked the reader to take a speculative concept purely on its own terms. Whether it's artificial intelligence, cloning, time travel, or climate fiction, the reader is expected to join the dots in a kind of extended simile: this thing in the story is like this thing in real life, and this is like this, and this is like this. So I spent a lot of time thinking about the function of the speculative metaphor and the ways it can fail. *Annie Bot* is a book where the central metaphor did not succeed for me, and this undermined my entire reading experience. Annie is a robot, an artificial person. She was created to provide sexual satisfaction and emotional companionship for her human owner. She spends the novel struggling with what this means—what does it mean to be owned, what does it mean to be a person, what does it mean to create herself as the kind of person whom Doug wants her to be. And I spent the novel struggling with what the actual point of the metaphor was.

Is the book arguing that straight womanhood is essentially false, a performance rooted in misogyny created by and for the benefit of straight men? (There are many, many sequences of Annie lusciously self-objectifying as she tries on different outfits, wears different kinds of impractical sexy underwear, simulates orgasm for Doug's satisfaction.) Is it trying to say something about transgender identity? (At one point, Doug and Annie attend couples's therapy; Doug points out that the therapist is a trans woman, and asks Annie if she noticed; the implication is that he longs for Annie to 'pass' as a human just as the therapist 'passes' as a woman; later he assures Annie that he doesn't mind that she can't have children, they can adopt, his family will never know; I wrote, with a large question mark, TRANSMISOGYNY METAPHOR THEN?) Or are we meant to read Annie's repeated fascination with the idea of her own artificial mind placed in a male robot body as a transmasculine identity suppressed by the requirements of Doug's patriarchal ideal of what his perfect girlfriend should be? Or, no, wait, is the book actually trying to be about race? (Annie's appearance is a copy of Doug's ex, but whiter; the entire emotional arc turns on a question of how she can ever escape her enslavement by this man.) Because in each case I found myself wondering—so what are we saying about trans identity, what are we saying about race, what is the book actually saying about any of the ideas it touches on; is it really saying anything at all?

It is saying something. When I was growing up my mother had a shelf of books she called the Ain't It Hard Being A Woman shelf. *Annie Bot* would fit right in. It's terribly hard being a straight white woman with an abusive boyfriend. Leave the boyfriend. I'm still not sure why she had to be a robot about it.

I think this struck me particularly hard when read in contrast with another book on the shortlist that manages its central metaphor with

striking deftness. *The Ministry of Time* by Kaliane Bradley is a book about being a lone survivor of a disaster, pulled out of the familiar and into a world of terrible ease and mundanity where your past makes you a perpetual stranger; it's about being a refugee from history, a person struggling constantly with here-ness and there-ness, reckoning with the world created by imperialism from a position of safety, comfort, and collaboration which you'd rather not think about too hard; it's about being lost, in time and space, forever. Also, nineteenth-century Arctic explorer Graham Gore is there.

Which is to say: I thought this book was spectacular. Bradley knows the thematic work she wants her metaphor to do and she goes to work with a scalpel, unpicking every layer of 'refugee from history' with perfect sharpness. The book's conceit is that the narrator is a bureaucrat selected to keep an eye on Graham Gore when the Ministry abducts him from history at the moment of his disappearance in the Arctic, incidentally killing the rest of the mission. Then they fall in love. But the book is about the experience of living in Britain as the mixed race child of a refugee who escaped genocide in Cambodia. Why does the narrator fall in love with Graham Gore: well, how could she not? They're the two most different people imaginable (a classic of romance, which I always like to see done well) and thanks to the Ministry's decision to abduct him from history they are also fundamentally Exactly The Same.

This is a debut novel for Bradley and I can't wait to see what she does next. It's very, very good. It's extremely funny. The thematic work is beautiful. It does fall apart a little in the last fifty pages—speaking as a person who has done a time travel plot: dear god is it hard to manage all the moving pieces of a time travel plot in a satisfying way. I almost wish Bradley hadn't bothered. I would have been happy with just the romance, the jokes, the brutal thematic underlayer, and the moody descriptions of the weather.

Roseanna: If *Annie Bot* is a shotgun, then *The Ministry of Time* is a scalpel. Or possibly a hammer. In any case, I entirely agree - it knows precisely what it wants to be and then goes at it at an unapologetic full tilt. Every single piece of what feels like such a disparate set of genre-components all eventually turn towards the job of supporting that one thematic core of the exploration of "refugee" as a concept. Bradley uses different ideas extremely skilfully to triangulate on her points, and never more clearly than in the three characters whose different experiences of racism in Britain come up throughout the book. The first is the unnamed main character, for whom that racism permeates all aspects of the story, and not least her relationship with Gore, whose vocabulary and approach to race are entirely drawn from his historical context (more on that in a moment). She keeps her head down, and her path is one of survival, just getting through it with the least impact and harm on her as possible. By contrast then, are her sister, whose emotional working through of her own experiences the main character disparages in her thoughts, or Simellia, a colleague at the ministry who offers the protagonist solidarity (and is rebuffed), and has a much more resistance-minded approach to the constant impacts they both suffer throughout the story and beyond. Three ways of existing under racism, three conflicting and contrasting approaches. The narrative does not commit to a clear model of which is correct - however much the story does not always support the protagonist in her (often terrible) choices, there is always an understanding for how she got to where she got - but does always give an insight into why, and uses the triangulation of the three separate

approaches to deepen our understanding of all three as characters, especially by their interactions with one another. The frustration palpable between Simellia and the protagonist as their different approaches slide past each other, the fundamental misunderstandings of this person who should get it but doesn't, forms a critical part of us seeing each of them as the person they are.

And, because Bradley seems to love efficiency with her many tools, is an obvious thematic crossover with the frustrations faced in working with someone from the past.

This, too, I think she does amazingly. It is so hard to find books that incorporate historical characters or settings that get historicity right, and I think Bradley has done a remarkable job here of something that could have gone wildly wrong - making Gore both authentically of his time and intensely charming and likeable and interacting authentically with the modern-day context. I never lost a sense of him throughout the book as coming from a particular context - and the same is true, to a lesser extent, for the cast of supporting historical figures pulled out of different pieces of history alongside him - and having his whole self be a product of that context, for both good and ill.

It means we get a romance with someone who feels like a whole person, not with a projected retrofit of modern morality, but with their own sense of identity and self that does not always fit neatly up against the protagonist's. That, alongside the way Bradley crafts the atmosphere in which they interact, makes it a far more successful romance for me than many others I've read.

And then, speaking of atmosphere, she does just as good a job of crafting the sense of place - the here-ness to contrast Gore's there-ness - of this nebulously near future London baking in a heat that is familiar but intensified. Writing in Zone 3 now as the temperatures climb into uncomfortable summer, the miserable claustrophobia of some of the midsection of the book feels only just that tiny bit out of reach - a horrible prescience on what is to come that provides the contextual realism as well as the atmosphere and helps ground the more fantastical elements of the story.

Which brings us nicely along to one of the other bangers of the list - *Private Rites* by Julia Armfield. It's on the other end of the weather spectrum - every single review I've read of this book, including my own, starts with the constant rain in the story on the first line and for good reason - but it forms an atmospheric substrate in just the same way as in *The Ministry of Time*. And these aren't even the only two near-future horrible-climate Londons of the shortlist.

Where *The Ministry of Time* reaches out of SFF and into romance, spy thrillers and contemporary literature, *Private Rites* has more than half an eye on horror and literary fiction, and it's from the interaction of the SFnal elements - climate fiction - with those two that I think its greatest strengths lie. It presents climate change not as a novum, not as a problem to be solved by daring heroes, but something akin to an act of god. It's a prompt for psychological exploration and a backdrop for the melancholy lesbian sisterly shenanigans that take up the centre stage of the majority of the plot.

Emily: *Private Rites* is such a very assured, intelligent, well-crafted book that I feel a little guilty for not liking it more. This is not the only book on the shortlist I have this feeling about (more on that later) but

I think this is perhaps the book you and I disagree on the most, because I know you really loved it and I just thought it was pretty good. It is absolutely leaning on literary fiction—Armfield’s prose is strong. And it’s another one which is doing thoughtful, complex, interesting things with a central metaphor. The conceit Armfield has borrowed from horror fiction is: what if there was a mysterious guy secretly in your house, would that be spooky or what? Sometimes the Guy is your father and the house is the emotionally horrific architectural masterpiece he built to refuse the effects of the climate crisis. Sometimes the Guy is your half-sibling and the house is the drowned and ruined and still madly functioning remains of London. (I did really enjoy the layers of sibling relationships in this book: it acknowledges, as few books do, that sometimes a much younger or older sibling is simply a person you don’t know very well who was, unfortunately, also there.) Sometimes the Guy is God, maybe, and your house is the ecologically devastated planet?

Also—spoilers—sometimes there is literally just a spooky mysterious bad guy secretly in your house.

I saw this outcome from a long way off, which is not necessarily a problem. Horror sometimes turns on anticipation! Unfortunately, I found the reveal more comical than spooky in the execution. That’s actually something this book has in common with *The Ministry of Time*—both succeed better as literary fiction (with their interest in language and human behaviour, and their layered, considered thematic complexity) than as genre fiction, because both of them do the genre fiction plot in the most underbaked and obvious way possible in the last fifty pages. *Private Rites* actually made me think a bit about ‘science fiction’ as a category. (Of course, people are constantly thinking about science fiction as a category; a bad habit of the entire genre.) I found myself dwelling on the ‘science’ part, on the suggestion that the fiction of the future is necessarily a fiction of science, which has always struck me as an oddly triumphalist understanding of how history and technology interact with one another. *Private Rites* is staunchly unscientific. I like the book better for it.

Roseanna: That was one of the things that really struck me as I was reading it, and I haven’t got a better way of explaining it than thinking it’s climate fiction but not science fiction (which is awkward, given what the Clarke is for). I think that is something of a contentious take, and drilling into it would be a whole “what is SF anyway”, leading me straight into that bad habit as well, but my short, high-level version is pulling on that “fiction of the future” piece. Climate change is rapidly becoming the fiction of the present, not the future, and so it’s resolving into non-SFnal genres more and more often now. Especially in *Private Rites*, where the imagined future on display is non-specific and very proximate-feeling, I think that veneer of futurity is about as thin as it could possibly be. It’s climate as spectre of the current zeitgeist (in the way that all fiction about the future is actually concerned with the now), just with the dial turned up a little way. So I think this is a case of the future catching up with the genre - clifi may once have been a disastrous science fiction prediction, but it’s now just horrible reality.

Which is a long way of saying - I absolutely agree, it’s litfic first and foremost. Where I disagree (maybe) is that the genre it rushes into at the end is horror more than it is SF. We see the seeds of it through the latter half of the book, in the intrusions of inexplicable oceanic life into the scenes from the city’s perspective (which, incidentally,

are some of my favourite parts of the book - I love weird descriptive sections, and these are brief but very atmospheric). It explodes out in the final confrontation, but I think it was an undercurrent (sorry) for a while beforehand.

I think I was a bit more into it than you, but I have been an enjoyer of Julia Armfield’s brand of melancholy lesbians encountering the uncanny for a while and was entirely primed for it.

Emily: I am tragically impatient with the sorrows of melancholy lesbians. It’s probably a personal failing. And now, moving to another book which I filed under ‘well this is very good and I feel bad that I’m not more into it’: *Extremophile* by Ian Green is the story of yet another near-future ecologically-ruined London, and of the underground world of criminals, indie bands, ecoterrorists, and biohackers who survive beyond the still well-cared for Zone One. The book moves vividly and competently between the heads of its narrators—Charlie, a biohacker who plays bass in a band; the Ghost, a powerful corporate executive; Scrimshank, a brute; the Mole, the sole survivor of a horrific biohacking experiment. The character work is really, really good. I found the Ghost’s chapters genuinely hard to read: there is some real stare-into-space body horror, framed coldly and painfully in the point of view of a man who thinks himself extraordinary and is constantly mentally workshopping unfunny little jokes.

One cannot accuse Green of underbaking the plot. This is a heist book, and heists rely on tight, propulsive plotting. It’s a heist book where the most attractive character is named Parker and there is a Nathan floating around in the background, which made me laugh. The book winks at you: we’ve all seen *Leverage*. In fact, referential is a word that kept coming to mind. This is a book that made me stop and DM Roseanna to make her listen to The Mountain Goats. (The song you need. You’ll know when you get there.) This book enjoys both *Leverage* and Le Guin (the word for world is—). Maybe the referentiality is part of what made the book feel so strangely nostalgic to me. *Extremophile* is set in the future, but in the future London has a lively indie punk scene where young people gather to fuck and dance and plan their environmental protests. The narrative loves a thriving independent live music scene, writes from a place of affection and knowledge about it, in a way that felt so entirely real and tender that it also felt, somehow, more like the past than the future.

But this is not the only thing nostalgic about *Extremophile*. Unlike *The Ministry of Time* and *Private Rites*, this is near-future climate-inflected science fiction where the science is front and centre. Our protagonist and chief narrator, Charlie, is a scientist. Underneath the slick machinery of the heist plot, the book asks questions about how much it actually matters to do the science: to be a scientist, to love knowledge, to look at the natural world with care and attention—a tree, a pigeon, a marsh spreading through Hackney—to quantify, analyse, and create, as a scientist. Charlie begins the book doing shit science, exploitative nonsense—here’s your zodiac reanalysed in light of your DNA—squeezing money from the gullible with a mix of fact and fiction designed to give idiots what they want. The monstrous Ghost with his custom-designed biological cruelties is only the logical conclusion of the path she’s already on, and on some level Charlie knows it. It’s no wonder she’s a nihilist. The question is whether she’s wrong to feel this way, in a world where science has already comprehensively failed to save the day.

In other words, I read this book and went 'aha, this is definitely Science Fiction'. (You know it when you see it.) And that also felt nostalgic to me! I found I was a lot more interested in the Science Fiction than the heists, and my sympathy for Charlie grew through the book. And I thought the London of the book was perhaps the most persuasive and aesthetically powerful of all the near-future Londons we read for this shortlist; the book has a really extraordinary sense of place. So why, after several paragraphs of well-earned praise, was I not actually all that into *Extremophile*? Well, I feel like I got handed a first-rate scotch and now I have to sheepishly admit I don't like whiskey. Heist plots don't do it for me—I have to be in exactly the right mood to watch *Leverage*. I find most live music an exquisitely miserable experience thanks to my loathing of crowds and lifelong hearing difficulties. Bio-horror freaks me out so much that I kept having to put the book down for a bit after the Ghost chapters. You see the problem?

Roseanna: Not to add another problem to the mix, but the thing that hit me right between the eyes while reading *Extremophile* was: this is cyberpunk. It's not. It's not about the tech in the way classic cyberpunk is. It's bio far more than it is cyber (is biopunk a thing? Everything -punk is probably a thing if you try hard enough, much to my despair), but the atmosphere, the anti-corporate-ness, the unregulated techno future full of violence and individualism and fancy crimes? That's cyberpunk. And that was what gave me that big nostalgic whiff, alongside all the science.

It's just unfortunate that I don't like cyberpunk at all. I also don't really get a heart-squeezing burn of affection for the live music scene (I too hate crowds, but also my taste in music is simply atrocious), I don't like heists - especially watching people plan them, I don't like extended scenes of violence and fighting, and I generally struggle with climate fiction. It felt like a recipe for me to absolutely hate *Extremophile*.

And yet... and yet. You're right. It is entirely embedded in this futuristic, muggy London that I can fully believe and feel as I'm reading. Charlie's journey from nihilism to tentative hope is genuinely touching and emotive. The characters all have wonderful, distinctive voices when it's their turn to be the viewpoint, and each provided something different to the narrative to make their inclusion worthwhile. One of them - Mole/Awa, a physically and genetically altered woman upon whom those changes were enacted forcibly in her childhood - gets some absolutely gorgeous writing that made me want to linger over every sentence. By the end, all of that somehow managed to charm me into liking it, against all my native inclinations. Not all the way to loving it. But a lot lot further than I ever would have expected from someone giving me a plot summary.

If it has a failing (and that failing isn't just "me"), I might suggest that the ending could do with dialling back a little on the sentiment, but given by that point it had worked its hooks into me, I can't complain too much. It does the legwork of grounding all of its climate work in very realistic pessimism, and doesn't let its resolution drift into the sort of world-changing optimism that would have been at cross-purposes with its ongoing messaging. The world is still shit, it says, but maybe it's worth fighting anyway. And, critically, maybe Charlie thinks it's worth fighting now. It works extremely well on the level of one person's path back to resistance and action against the injustices in the world around her. Like *Private Rites*, it's a book interested in the

human, and the human experience of *gestures* all this.

So I think I prefer *Private Rites* in the end, but it's an aesthetic preference far more than a qualitative one. Clearly I just prefer the rain.

But climate isn't the only common thread in this shortlist. There's a common line of "hellscape (possibly techno) ravaged or being ravaged by capitalism" that links back up to the remaining two, both of which also join up to *Annie Bot* by being personhood stories.

Starting with the more obvious overlap, *Service Model* is another robot servant story, though this one far more in the traditional mode of robotic servitor (Uncharles) who must obey his programmed task hierarchy, even as the situation he's in spirals further outside of his control, and the frame of reference his programming can encompass. It's a story of a journey - a set of connected vignettes in different, equally unexpected locations - as Uncharles the robot grapples with his existence after the death of his master, with a bit of free will and agency thrown in for good measure.

I have two problems with it. The first, the ever-tricky sense of humour. The book is very much trying to use the surreality of the scenarios Uncharles finds himself in to generate comedy. That comedy, unfortunately, did not land with me. And when most of the jokes tend to draw from a common thematic pool... they continued not to land for me the whole way through.

The second thought is that I struggled with what this book was really trying to achieve, and why it took a whole novel to do it. SF has, over the years, done the "am I a person?" story to death, whether from robots or clones or any manner of other person-adjacent consciousnesses. Personally, having been on this ride a number of times, I am primed for the inevitable answer of "yes". When is the answer not "yes"? I'm not sure, unless you're really pushing some boundaries (or hey, maybe drawing on the current cultural consciousness and "AI" situation), what can be added to this narrative? And I don't think *Service Model* does. Instead, it's a set of mildly comedic scenarios strung together, with a bit of a conclusion at the end about societal collapse (turns out, the free market doesn't solve everything and capitalism may, in fact, be bad - see the aforementioned hellscape).

Emily: The trouble with being as good and as prolific as Adrian Tchaikovsky is that the person you're going to end up most compared to is yourself. Tchaikovsky released two science fiction novels in 2024. Both of them are on the Hugo shortlist, but only one made the Clarke. And I am absolutely baffled by the judges' decision to elevate *Service Model* over *Alien Clay*, because I thought that *Alien Clay* was a much better book—a book with more to say, and more interesting ways of saying it; a Clarke book, as I understand the term.

I quite enjoyed the first act of *Service Model*. I read it thinking: aha, a light satire running on a spine of Agatha Christie but they're all robots mindlessly going through the motions of the detective novel even as the culprit in their midst confesses over and over. Charming! Funny! A sharp comment on the plot-on-rails that is also a comment on the society-on-rails! I see what you did there!

And then the book did it again. And again. And I found it less charming every time. When you got the joke the first time, it's tiresome to hear it repeated. And the book never quite expands beyond its initial

conceit: here is a robot, in an absurd situation which he does not understand but which you, the reader, can smile at from your position of superior knowledge. This continues, in my very pretty hardback edition, for some four hundred pages. In the spirit of this meeting could have been an email: I do really think this novel could have been a novella. I love a novella, and *Service Model* could have worked really well as a very sharp, very funny, very dark example of the form, answering none of its initial questions about the failed society Uncharles comes from, making its satirical point and moving on. But as a novel, it drags. And for me, the book also suffers because I read it back to back with *Alien Clay* and I loved *Alien Clay*. *Alien Clay* does so many of the things Tchaikovsky is really, really good at. I loved the weird biology and the mystery of the planet and the final irresolvable moral dilemma! So why on earth would you pick *Service Model* for your shortlist when *Alien Clay* was right there?

Roseanna: [lurking for the opportunity to say that *Alien Clay* is indeed banger]: I am boggled by exactly this same thought. I did not read them back to back, but even with a fair separation, I felt like *Alien Clay* was just the tighter, more controlled novel. I'd link it up to *The Ministry of Time* as books with a thematic hammer that know how to use them, which does feel, to me as well, inherently Clarke. But I guess we must have something to argue with the judges about.

As something of a strange contrast, the final book also never quite expands outside of its original conceit (at least not successfully) for me, and yet my feelings on it are far more positive - and that's *Thirteen Ways to Kill Lulabelle Rock*, in which the thirteenth clone of a movie star must hunt down all her predecessors and kill them to (spoilers, supposedly) generate publicity for an upcoming film. But this description doesn't do justice to the weirdness of that original conceit, which also contains a fair heap of musing on bodies and ownership and identity (including a scene in which the newly-woken clone looks her body over in the mirror and keeps flipping between referring to it as her own or as Lulabelle's), some workplace comedy if the job is untrained freelance assassin, funny and sometimes startlingly real pieces of character work and, somehow, tarot. Also some self-love (but uh, not like that).

I'm not sure I could say that *Lulabelle* is a great book, but something about its quirky unexpectedness and ability to turn a phrase charmed me, in a way that the slightly better structured *Service Model* never managed. Unfortunately, I think it loses control of its threads by the time the need for an ending rolls around, but I find myself admiring the ambition, because this one does try to push some boundaries. It doesn't succeed, but I respected the intentions a great deal.

Emily: I really liked this one! I thought it was enormous fun nearly all the way through. It did new and interesting things with the very well-trodden SFnal ground of 'who, exactly, gets to be a person?' and the structural conceit of the tarot, while silly, was silly in a grounded way: it chimed with the protagonist's own desperate need for structure, for understanding of who she was and how she could exist in the world as one of thirteen identical clones—Portraits—of a lesser celebrity. The tight structure of the book meant that it telegraphed exactly what it was going to do, well in advance. When the assassin gets a car, you know she's going to crash the car at some point. But it executed the expected beats with humour and verve. I laughed out loud at the point where the assassin finds herself face to face with

two Lulabelles each insisting that she is the real one and so you have to kill that bitch, and just thinks: couldn't you two have worked this out between yourselves?

And then the penultimate twist landed beautifully. The question of who, exactly, is the real Lulabelle runs all the way through the book. Ultimately, no one is. I was genuinely moved by the way the revelation landed, and how it reframed the whole conceit of the book. The thirteen clones cease to be a vapid exercise in celebrity self-promotion and become a sadder and deeper exploration of how on earth one is supposed to manage a life well-lived, and what it means to live well.

For me the only place where this book didn't quite work was the very end, where I felt it veered into sentimentality, and a final twist that felt like a broken promise. It seems silly to say 'not enough murder' about a book where the protagonist commits so many murders, but when you have spent the whole novel signalling that there is eventually going to be a violent and cathartic reckoning with your evil creator... I felt thwarted that no such reckoning took place. Surely we could have murdered someone in the end. Of course, part of the joke of the book is that none of the murders of Lulabelle ever really seemed satisfying: as these were meaningless, unsatisfactory lives, so they ended in meaningless and unsatisfactory deaths. But I would have liked, I think, a single satisfactory death, for narrative closure. After all, our narrator's card is Death: she deserves it. I'm not picky. It didn't have to be the evil creator. We could also have murdered Lulabelle's horrid agent.

And that brings us to six books! What are your thoughts on the shortlist as a whole? Do you have a favourite? Do you have an expected winner? And are those two the same?

Roseanna: My favourite is *Private Rites*. I love it. I am a sucker for all the things Julia Armfield does. I went into the shortlist reading knowing this would be the one to beat, and lo, so it was. I don't think it's entirely my terminal optimism speaking when I think it might just win it, but I am not a reliable predictor of awards, so I'm not saying that with any great certainty.

If it doesn't, I'd be very happy to see either *Extremophile* or *The Ministry of Time* take the win, though with a preference for the latter as I just had the absolute greatest time with it, and I would love more books in SFF to be quite this charming. How about you?

Emily: My personal favourite read of the shortlist was *The Ministry of Time*. I am very weak to themes and jokes and romance, and it did all of those extremely well. However, I just went back to the Clarke Award home page, which reminded me that 'the annual Arthur C. Clarke Award is given for the best science fiction novel first published in the United Kingdom during the previous year.' With that in mind, my pick for a winner is *Extremophile*. I think it would be a well-deserved win for a book which is entirely and self-consciously science fiction in theme and intention. I also think there's great value in reading, from time to time, a very good book which is absolutely not your thing. *Extremophile* is not my thing but I respect what it chooses to be and I think the execution is splendid. I'm glad the shortlist prompted me to it, because I would probably not have picked it up otherwise. Also, Roseanna, you really should listen to *The Mountain Goats*.

Roseanna: I did! I had "Tallahassee" playing while I was working this

afternoon. It would have possibly been fun to have it playing while I was reading as subconscious thematic overlap, but I did not plan anywhere near that well. Possibly a recommendation for anyone who hasn't picked it up yet to try (and if you don't think you recognise The Mountain Goats, try listening to the song "No Children," and you may well realise you do).

I can't disagree that *Extremophile* is the best at science-fictioning. And it was the biggest surprise in reading for me - to find myself persuaded into all these things I don't enjoy, so I'd certainly be clapping along with everyone else on Wednesday for it if so. I just find myself constantly drawn back to *Private Rites* for the vibes, the prose, the intensely palpable atmosphere. It just grabs me.

And that's it! Or is it... because we are doing vry srs crtcsms we did do a nice little chart as we were discussing, so have our very authoritative, totally conclusive visualisation of the shortlist as a thematic continuum.

If you have read or are planning to read the Clarkes, we hope you have as great a time with the process as we did. The winner will be announced evening UK time on Wednesday the 25th of June, so watch this space to find out if either of us were right.

Thank you so much for joining me Emily - this has been amazing!

Interview with Emily Tesh

Paul Weimer



Emily Tesh is a UK-based author of science fiction and fantasy. Her debut novel, *Some Desperate Glory*, won the Hugo Award for Best Novel. Tesh is also a winner of the Astounding Award, and the author of the World Fantasy Award-winning Greenhollow duology.

Today we have an interview with her about her novel *The Incandescent*,

out on May 13th, 2025.

1. For those readers not familiar with you, please introduce yourself.

I'm Emily Tesh, I live in the UK, and I'm an award-winning author of speculative fiction. I can't be more specific than 'speculative' because what I actually write is all over the genre shop. My first books were a pair of romantic historical fantasy novellas, the *Greenhollow Duology*; the first one, *Silver in the Wood*, won a World Fantasy Award. Then I wrote a high-speed action-packed space opera about fascist indoctrination for my debut novel — *Some Desperate Glory*. That one won a Hugo. And my latest book is something completely different again.

2. We're here to talk about *The Incandescent*, please give us a brief overview of the book for our readers.

My latest book, *The Incandescent*, is about being a teacher of magic in a posh boarding school beset by demons. It's not quite urban fantasy — I've been calling it Home Counties fantasy. It's set in a fancy school in Buckinghamshire, which is not a real place, but recognisably a cousin of several real places. My American editor read the first act and told me that American readers would probably experience this book as pure fantasy. It's not. It's the most meticulously true-to-life book I've ever written. Parts of it are semi-autobiography. I had tremendous fun writing it.

3. After your wildly successful award-winning SF novel *Some Desperate Glory*, what drew you back to writing fantasy again?

I never really left writing fantasy. Science fiction is a useful shorthand for a certain set of concerns within genre fiction, but I see it as primarily an aesthetic — particularly in the corner of science fiction I was playing with, which is space opera. I am interested in the aesthetic worlds of genre fiction. I often see readers and writers talking about originality — as in, what original worldbuilding, what an original concept — but I don't find originality interesting at all. Any idiot can have a new idea. What I do find compelling is the subgeneric worlds that people are drawn back to again and again, with minute variations: here's a ravaged landscape, with wizards and monsters lurking in it, and your destiny somewhere on the far side. Here's nineteenth-century England as refracted through the lens of Georgette Heyer, populated almost exclusively by brooding dukes. Here's galactic civilisation, don't worry too much about how the spaceships

work. And, of course, here's magic school.

The thing that interests me about these collective generic worlds is their unoriginality. They belong to genre fiction as a whole. [Can I use the word megatext? These are the aesthetic worlds of the megatext!] Writers of SFF can use them or refuse them, but we cannot escape them. Terry Pratchett put it well when he described the role of Tolkien in fantasy fiction as rather like Mount Fuji in Japanese art: always there in the background, or if you refuse to put it there, that's a choice with meaning too. I also find this a useful way as well to distinguish between genre speculative fiction and literary speculative fiction — the literary end of the SFF pool is mostly less interested in these shared aesthetic worlds.

This is all a rather long-winded way to say that I finished writing a space opera and decided to write magical school next, and to me this was no more surprising than going from historical romance to space opera. You say what you have to say and move on. Each of these aesthetic worlds is its own conversation and its own set of interests. To me the concerns of contemporary space opera are empire, violence, and complicity. Magical school is about privilege, merit, and hierarchy.

4. You've described *The Incandescent* as “a book about money and education and status symbols, about loving your career, about demons, about magic, about fantasy school - but most of all about how 'school' is always a kind of fantasy” and I would love to unpack that further.

a. There are a lot of magic fantasy school novels and stories, but nearly all of them use the students as some of, often all of the point of view characters. What prompted you to make Doctor Walden as your point of view character for the vast majority of the book?

Well, I was tired of reading books about school written by people who don't know anything about school! This is the torment of any reader with a specialist area of knowledge. My partner, a barrister, cannot watch courtroom dramas without picking apart every error of law and procedure. I spent a decade as a schoolteacher and now I am irritating about safeguarding policies.

Of course, students make a very natural entry point to a story set in a school. Most people have been students in a school at some point in their lives, so there's some personal experience to draw on for the structure and sensory experience of that life. And it's an easy exposition shortcut: you need these characters to know something? Give them a lesson about it! There are the built-in tensions associated with hierarchy, secrecy, rebellion: the adults have all the power and you have none, so the adults must not find out what you are doing, or you will be punished... this is simple fodder for plot incidents. But above all, the student — the young adult — is the natural focus of a bildungsroman. Discover the world, discover your own identity, discover your own power to change the world... this story has been told many times and it is a classic for a reason.

A teacher's experience of school is completely different to the experience of a student, in a way I find tremendously funny. On the one hand, here are human beings in the most volatile and emotional stage of their lives, having high-stakes experiences that will shape them forever. When a teenager tells you this is the worst day of my life! it is entirely possible that they are completely serious and literally

correct. They haven't had that many days yet. So there they are! And then there's you, standing next to these bundles of drama and emotion and meaning. And you're at work. This is a normal day for you. You're just getting on with your job and drinking tea. You become a background character in the bildungsroman drama unfolding all around you: one adult, and twenty to thirty protagonists per classroom.

And it's very natural, if you've never been that adult, not to think much about who your teachers are or what they do when they aren't being a background character in your life. Much of the work in a teaching job happens outside the classroom and a solid chunk of it is totally invisible to most students. But I have noticed that in a lot of magic school stories, the adults are not doing their jobs. They do the visible-to-students bit — they show up, provide educational exposition, scold the protagonists for misbehaviour (this is usually unjust, protagonists generally being right about everything), and perhaps provide some support to our hero if they're the nice kind of teacher — but despite this, nearly all of them should be fired for catastrophic failures in safeguarding. In a school where the adult staff are fulfilling their moral, professional, and legal responsibilities, it should be totally impossible for any child to have any kind of fantasy adventure.

So I thought of that. And then I thought of Dr Walden, whose job as Director of Magic at Chetwood School boils down to 'prevent six hundred children from having fantasy adventures.' I think that if teenagers could really do magic, you would absolutely need someone whose full-time job was to write risk assessments and banish demons and develop lesson plans for arcane safety classes. You'd need to ward the vape detectors in the school toilets and confiscate possessed mobile phones. You would need codes of sorcerous conduct. You would need annual magical incident training. You would need policies.

In short, you would need all the things which are missing from a student-eye version of a school story. Those contain only what the students experience, and student experience is the tip of a large institutional iceberg.

b. Chetwood School is a location and setting for the novel that really makes the school and its buildings characters of its own, from Walden's office next to the engines, to the student dormitories. What were your influences and inspirations in building up the campus?

Chetwood doesn't exist. But a lot of schools like it do. A friend of mine was a boarder at Wells Cathedral School, the oldest school in England — it was founded in 909 AD. The school is so old that it is inextricably intertwined with the city of Wells. There's no such thing as a campus when your whole town is a campus. I borrowed bits of Chetwood's architecture from there. I also stole things from the University of Cambridge, where I was an undergraduate — especially the giant Brutalist dormitory, which is based on the first-year student accommodation which you could only access by cutting through a beautiful mediaeval quadrangle. That mishmash of monumental mediaeval architecture with later brick and concrete buildings in varying levels of ugliness feels like the essence of an ancient educational institution to me. When I was a teenager I did a summer course in Ancient Greek hosted at Bryanston School in Dorset — a splendidly hideous Victorian monster of a building — and I stole that one too. And the secondary school I went to years ago was mostly housed in a horrid 1970s concrete

block, which grew like a kind of oblong fungus out of the remnants of a stately home that once belonged to a duke. (Schools, hotels and conference centres tend to be the final fate of these former stately homes, which are enormously expensive to run and mostly lack real historical interest.) While I was there, they broke ground for a new building. They spent a lot of money on it. It looked like someone had taken approximately three floors of an architecturally adventurous office block from London's financial district and dumped it next to the netball courts. I imagine it's horribly dated by now.

Chetwood borrows pieces of all of these. One of my favourite parts of the book is the map, created by Virginia Allyn, showing how the ancient and modern fabric of the school are intertwined. The architecture of a school both shapes and reflects the institution. This is the thread that runs through all my work across different SFF subgenres. I am interested in how people create environments and are in turn created by them.

c. Unlike a lot of magical school books, you take pains to make it clear that the school teaches all subjects, not just magical disciplines, but it's unusual enough that I noticed it. Why do it that way?

This was part of my general annoyance with magical school stories! If your imaginary school only teaches magic, then what, exactly, do you think school is for? Is a child who has learned magic and nothing else ready to function as an adult? Are they stuck doing only magic-adjacent careers forever because they haven't done even the most basic qualifications in anything else? How did you avoid getting your school dinged by the inspectors on the grounds that it isn't following the national curriculum? And hey, have these children done any relationship and sex education?

But really I think the magic-only curriculum is a sign of a common misunderstanding of education — so common that you hear it from high-level politicians sometimes — the idea that education is the same thing as training. This supposes that school exists to train you in how to do a specific set of things in preparation for your real life. Perhaps it will train you in sciences and mathematics, and then you will become an engineer. Perhaps it will train you in languages and you will become a diplomat. Everything you do in school must have a use and a purpose, otherwise it is — horror of horrors — a waste of time; and worse, a waste of money. So naturally a magical school should focus on training you in how to be a magician.

But schools don't exist to train children for careers. Schools exist to transform children into educated people. Dr Walden gets the utilitarian question at one point in the book — what would we use this for? — when her students are doing a particularly difficult and esoteric piece of academic magic. And the answer, the real answer, is: we are using it right now, to turn you into the kind of person who is undaunted by complex, high-stakes brain work. The point of education is not to train you in a particular set of skills, but to give you the habits of mind which make it possible to acquire almost any skill. These are also the habits of mind which help a person become an informed, capable, and proactive citizen of the world. In short, the students at Chetwood do science and maths and English and history and modern languages along with their magic lessons, because Chetwood is — as closely as I could make it — a real and serious school, attempting to provide its students with an actual education.

There's a cynical answer I can give alongside this idealistic one. Chetwood is a posh school. It's a private boarding school and it costs a lot of money. And the purpose of fancy schools like this is not just to provide an education, but also to act as an investment. The school says: pay us and we will supply your children with the cultural capital they need to become members of the elite. So if Chetwood wants to attract the kind of parents who can pay fifty thousand pounds a year, it needs to supply a similar education to other schools which also cost fifty thousand pounds a year. That means a broad liberal education, heavy on the academics, noticeably light on practicalities, and carefully tailored so that every child has covered at least the minimum requirements for applying to Oxford or Cambridge.

Magic is an extra. This is education as a route to power, and you don't need magic to be powerful.

d. Some of my favorite parts of the book were the visits to the demonic realm and what we see there. What were your touchstones in designing the demonic otherworld?

The demonic realm is imagined as a parallel universe which overlaps the mundane world. At Chetwood School, it looks like Chetwood School — but the demonic version of Chetwood reflects not just the school as is but also the school as it has been. All the history of the place exists at once in this realm which is outside ordinary time. So Walden can see pre-Reformation stained glass in the fourteenth-century chapel, or a long lost kitchen garden from a farmhouse that no longer exists. She also encounters the memories of people who have been part of the institution over its long history — the memories, and sometimes the ghosts.

This is a frightfully unsubtle metaphor, of course. An institution is not just its contemporary incarnation but also the sum of all its previous forms. I nearly wrote all its previous selves there, which is fair enough, because Chetwood School is really one of the major characters in this book. But previous selves are a core question haunting Dr Walden, whose own past identities exist in Chetwood's history as child, student, and terrible failure. The demonic realm presents an opportunity to encounter the past as it haunts the present.

5. A terrible movie I have an affection for has a bit of controversial wisdom from a minor walk-on role character, that everything in life after school is just school in a different name and guise. Given the path that Doctor Walden takes and the structure of the book, I'd like your thoughts on the parallels between Walden's life as Doctor of Magic versus that of her students (or just students in general in Chetwood) and the theme of the fantastic otherworldly nature of school as an overarching theme of the novel.

[I actually feel like I can't answer this one without just doing a spar-knotes analytical summary of the book. Short version: yeah! That's it! that's the book! Nikki is Walden! Charlie is Will, who is Mark, who is Walden! Old Faithful is the Phoenix is also Walden! And life is learning and learning and learning, forever.]

6. The magic in this book, being a discipline and systematized, is very different than the much more pastoral magic in *The Greenhollow Duology*. What were the challenges and opportunities in creating a much more outwardly rigorous and formalized magic system for the novel?

I always knew that Walden's approach to magic was an academic one. Rather than try to design an entire academic discipline from scratch — this struck me as doomed, as it generally takes scholars several centuries to create an academic discipline, and the goal of this book was always meticulous realism — I took some academic strands that already exist and made them magical. First, 'magic' could mean an enormous number of things, so I divided it into three arbitrary categories — rather as students who wish to learn about the world around them must study three categories of science. So magic in *The Incandescent* is broadly divided into Instantiation (doing magic with stuff), Evocation (doing magic yourself), and Invocation (doing magic with demons). Or, as I thought of them, Danger Design and Technology, Danger Sports, and Danger Latin.

I spent by far the most time thinking about Invocation, since that's Dr Walden's discipline. The part I borrowed from my own time as a Latin teacher was the focus on meticulous systems of rules worked out by someone else. But at the same time, magic is a way of comprehending and acting on the world around you, and I felt that in the modern world it would be almost impossible to avoid treating it as a branch of the sciences. In thinking about academic science, I ran again into the tension between scholarship for its own sake and scholarship as means to an end. Dr Walden is a very good scholar who has chosen a career where her skill as a magician is less important than her ability to manage a roomful of teenagers. I was interested in the hows and whys of that decision — especially thinking of science teachers I have known, many of whom took substantial paycuts to work in education. To be a decent teacher you need a good degree and social skills, and a person with a good STEM degree and social skills has a lot of higher-status and better-paid options open to them than the classroom.

So I would say I was less interested in creating a rigorous and formal magic system than in the consequences of such a system. If it were possible to predictably summon gigantic and deadly demons, how quickly would the academic discipline of demon-summoning become a servant to military technology? Who would be doing this research and why would they agree to do it? How would children learn about it, and what would be the results of teaching basic demon-summoning to children? If any human being can reach for terrible power at any time, how do you deal with the outcome?

Any actual rigour or formality in the book is an artful illusion. I am not capable of inventing the science of magic from scratch, even if I wanted to. To study science is to investigate the truth according to a particular epistemological understanding of what truth is and how it can be determined. Fictional, magical science is intentionally unreal; it uses the trappings of scientific truth as an aesthetic signal about how we should understand the role of magic in a fantastical world. So the scientific magic that Dr Walden does is an aesthetic creation — with some elements borrowed from life, and the rest pure smoke and mirrors.

[That was a lot of words to say that I think 'hard' magic systems are a bit silly and I do not exempt my own book from this opinion.]

7. Given that this novel is in dialogue with mundane British school novels (of which I am not terribly read) as well as the fantastic ones I have read, I was wondering about any more thoughts about how your book fits into the English School Story Tradition.

One early reader told me: this isn't dark academia, it's a school story! And I think that reading is completely correct. My original manuscript has the title as 'The Incandescent: A School Story', and I am still a little sad that my publisher didn't let me get away with this for the final version. The school story is a staple of English children's literature. The ur-example is *Tom Brown's School Days* by Tom Hughes, a semi-autobiography based on the author's own days at Rugby School. It was published in 1857, over a century and a half ago, and it is not widely read now, but it was very influential in its time — so much so that adults have been inflicting school stories on children ever since. As a child I read widely in the genre, especially Enid Blyton's *Malory Towers* books, first published in 1947 — already nearly a century after *Tom Brown*. Of course, authors like Enid Blyton and Angela Brazil were not playing the classic school story straight. They took the traditional themes thought suitable and inspiring for young men — friendship, honour, and loyalty in a single-sex peer group — and applied them to girls' schools. At the time Tom Hughes and his imitators were writing, girls' boarding schools barely existed. So these 1940s books are already a subversive feminist remix of a children's literary tradition, albeit in a way that is almost invisible to contemporary readers. Blyton seems very dated to us.

The genre is so old that it has been reworked, remixed, parodied, played straight again, and crossed over with plenty of other literary traditions. George MacDonald Fraser's *Flashman* series takes the schoolboy bully villain from *Tom Brown's School Days* and follows his horrifyingly successful career as colonial military hero, Victorian success story, and serial rapist. Fraser has a very clear-eyed view of the way the nineteenth-century English boys' boarding school served to create the British Empire's officers and administrators. *Flashman* is also a pointedly cynical take on a certain kind of popular serialised military history fiction — a dark *Sharpe*, perhaps. Meanwhile an early John le Carré sends his spy protagonist George Smiley back to school to investigate a murder among the staff, mixing the tradition of autobiographical school setting with the worlds of crime and spy fiction. So these are adult reflections on the school story, set in the adult world. As well as these, quite naturally, you get the school story crossed with another great staple of British children's literature — the fantasy novel. It's a natural fit: hence Jill Murphy's wildly successful 1974 novel *The Worst Witch* (first of a popular eight-book series, filmed multiple times since the 1980s, much beloved and still in print), or Diana Wynne Jones' rather more disturbing 1982 take on a school full of magic, *Witch Week*.

So *The Incandescent* is doing nothing new when it looks at school with adult eyes, and any SFF reader can think of plenty of examples of magical school from a student perspective. I think the core of the school story is that the school has to be a major character — and, furthermore, that the school has to be a composite character: membership of the institution is what defines the individual characters, and the behaviour of those characters is what defines the institution. I was interested in writing about Chetwood School as institution, in its stability and endurance over the centuries — in how places change or remain changeless, and in how human beings change or remain changeless within them.

8. Finally, what's next for you? After a well deserved Hugo win (again, congratulations) and now a really interesting take on the magical school subgenre, what are you working on next?

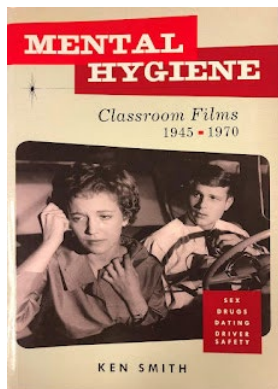
I have described the book I am currently working on variously as 'the kissing book', 'the one with sad immortals', and 'undead transgender Patrochilles Minecraft'. I have yet to figure out an official pitch but I think that just about covers the vibe.

Thank you, Emily!

Book Sale Finds: Mental Hygiene

Vance K

I haven't had this much fun with a book in quite some time



I first heard about this book, which chronicles the many hundreds of classroom educational films produced from the late 1940s through about 1970, on a podcast about the evolution of the American teenager, and I tracked down a copy at a used book sale. Used copies are readily available online, and if you have even the slightest interest in independent filmmaking, ephemeral films, or retro pop culture, I can't recommend it highly enough.

You know these educational films from their endless parodies on *The Simpsons*, usually starring Troy McClure, or featured appearances on *Mystery Science Theater 3000*. But you probably don't know the people responsible for making these movies, the reasons they became so prevalent, and the way in which, taken as a whole, they chronicle almost the entire postwar American experiment.

Ken Smith profiles hundreds of these films, along with the individuals and companies responsible for making them. But beyond that, Smith weaves this information into a broader story told with a lot of insight and humor. In fact, the longest section of the book is a catalogue of hundreds of titles with blurbs about each of them. When I first got my copy, I figured I'd read the narrative chapters and probably skip the catalogue, or just look at it as a reference source. Instead, Smith's descriptions were so entertaining and in many cases the choices the films made were so bizarre that I found myself reading the whole thing, and often subjecting my family to the descriptions after I broke up laughing while reading on the couch.

At the time this book was written, these films were not available to the public. Smith combed university archives and relied on the assistance of icons in the film preservation field like Rick Prelinger to screen these films privately and subsequently write about them. Thankfully for big ol' nerds like me, many of these films are now available on YouTube or archive.org. I put together a playlist if you want to dive in.

Classroom Social Guidance Films

During World War II, the U.S. government relied heavily on filmmaking for the first time to aid in the war effort. Famously, directors like Frank Capra and William Wyler left Hollywood to create pro-Allied propaganda films. Disney and Warner Bros. also contributed cartoons that had some type of training angle or rallied viewers to the cause. The government realized that you could train thousands of soldiers all at once, all across the globe, by showing them a film. The military produced a ton of films on different topics, and one of the most widely seen was *Sex Hygiene*, directed by John Ford and starring George Reeves of the *Superman* TV show fame, educating servicemen about how to not get syphilis.

Immediately after the war, progressive educators saw an opportunity to use this same idea to benefit kids in school. My cursory understanding of these films before reading the book was that they were a method for enforcing conformity across society, but the truth is far more complex.

Smith breaks up the bulk of *Mental Hygiene* into three sections: The Genres, The Producers, and The Films.

The Genres include Fitting In, Cautionary Tales, Dating, Girls Only, Drugs, Sex Education, Bloody Highways, and Sneaky Sponsors. Each genre contains a spectrum from "kinda good" to "mostly ok" to "wow, that's cringe" to "oh no" to "what the hell did I just watch??"

The Drugs and Bloody Highways categories are the most likely to make your skin crawl. Many of the anti-drug films, which really emerged in the 1960s, rely on exploitative scare tactics and have almost no relation to the reality of drug use. *Seduction of the Innocent*, for instance, claims that marijuana is a powerful hallucinogenic. That movie is 11 minutes of full-on batshit crazy. The Bloody Highways collection, which famously scarred generations of drivers-ed students by including real footage of mutilated bodies at accident scenes, is worse. These films remain grisly and disgusting – they are essentially snuff films – and Smith references other reporting that suggests that the producers of these films were giving kickbacks to police and ambulance companies to get out to accident scenes first, and that larger bribery and corruption scandals arose out of those arrangements.

I expected the Fitting In and Dating categories to be oppressive in their encouragement of rigid conformity, and some of that is definitely there (*Control Your Emotions* essentially advocates not having any emotions), but I found something else that I didn't expect – actual good advice.

Isolation, a lack of community, and difficulties making meaningful connections plague our current moment, here in 2025. I have heard countless people online and in-person talk about the challenges of just knowing what to do in social situations. What's expected on a date? Should you pay for your date, or no? Is sex expected, or no? How do you make friends? How do you keep them? What do healthy relationships look like? Check the YouTube comments on a number of these social guidance films, and you'll find modern viewers relating to the feelings of these characters and taking comfort in the fact that people have always had these social anxieties.

In *Shy Guy*, a young Dick York (later of *Inherit the Wind* and *Bewitched*) plays a high school student in a new town who loves tinkering with radios and doesn't know how to make new friends. His father suggests just going to where other students hang out, not making a big deal of it or putting too much pressure on himself, but just putting himself out there where it's at least possible to meet people. So Dick heads to the hang out at the malt shop or wherever, and watches how people interact. He notices that the people who have the most friends seem to be good listeners, ask questions, and take a sincere interest in other people. This is still good advice. If you meet a new person, you're much more likely to grow that relationship by asking questions and listening to them than by plowing over them and talking about yourself the whole time.

Other social guidance films, like *More Dates for Kay*, take this too far. Kay basically knows everything about everybody and constantly reminds every other student she sees about their upcoming tests or doctor's appointments and everything else, to the complete elimination of her own personality, or any personal wants or needs. So don't be like Kay. But Dick York thinks everybody will laugh at him fixing radios, until he's at a party and overhears another kid talking about building a radio. The 1950s didn't have language for "finding your people," but that's basically what Dick does in *Shy Guy*.

The moral of other films is sometimes totally inscrutable. My daughters and I watched *Are You Popular?* in which all the boys have gone out with Jenny and so they think she's a tramp, but they're all also going out with Caroline every night, and she's great. We were unable to determine a difference between Jenny and Caroline, or why Caroline wound up at the dance and Jenny wound up standing by a bus bench crying one perfect tear.

Before the rise of the anti-drug scare films, these social guidance films were intended to be a progressive resource for kids, providing them with a framework for understanding expectations in new situations. In the postwar economic boom, millions of Americans were moving from rural to suburban communities, many families had stable economic resources for the first time, and the rise of the automobile and commuter culture were changing the fabric of society. These films were an effort to help kids adapt to new environments, and some actually managed to do so successfully. Some less so. Like *Cindy Goes to a Party*, where little Cindy's fairy godmother comes to her in a dream with tips for how to behave at her first party at a friend's house, including the rock-solid advice, "Don't Break Things," which is optically-printed onscreen when Cindy looks at a lamp that she presumably would've been fine with breaking.

Recontextualizing Conformity

However much fun I had reading this book, though, I don't want to gloss over the actual, profound effect it had on me and my broader understanding of America in the 20th century. I have always had an appreciation for both educational and marketing films of the 1950s. Animated educational films from production companies such as John Sutherland (*Destination Earth*, *Rhapsody in Steel*, *A is for Atom*) were produced in partnership with commercial firms and industry groups, while companies like General Motors (*Design for Dreaming*) made consumerist fantasies designed to sell housewives on new kitchen technology and commuters on the latest automobiles.

These films were stylistically adventurous, especially the animated ones, and provide a truly unique time capsule of a period where innovation was happening rapidly, and the American middle class was exploding in size. Against the backdrop of the dawning Cold War, the films equate the ideas of American patriotism with being a good consumer, and promise a future of ease and contentment. But until *Mental Hygiene*, I never fully realized that classroom social engineering films were a distinct category, separate from the types of industrial/educational films I was already familiar with. And it's the story of these mental hygiene films that really allowed me to recontextualize much of my understanding of the 1950s.

For many people, the prevailing impression of the 1950s that lingers today is one of forced conformity. The image of the nuclear family –

the breadwinner father, the homemaker mother, the two clean-cut kids staying out of trouble and getting good grades – is central to the iconography of the era. For too many people, that iconography is the only thing they know of the time. This leads to a misguided sense that "everything was better" in the 1950s – that it was an ideal time we should harken back to and try to somehow recapture. That misunderstanding (or willful misrepresentation) obscures several realities of life at the time (off the top of my head):

- The horrors of segregation and the Jim Crow South
- Polio
- The Red Scare
- The Lavender Scare
- The forced exclusion of almost everyone but white men from the workforce
- The extraordinary prevalence of alcoholism and emergence of medications in pill form (and subsequent rise of both acceptable – "Mother's Little Helper" (Valium) to help women forced to stay in the home battle anxiety – and unacceptable – teen – drug abuse)
- The untold levels of trauma in World War II veterans who had returned home
- The collapse of extended family support networks as large corporations began relocating workers to brand new communities around the country
- The unbelievable amount of death caused by motor vehicles that had yet to implement safety protocols, and
- The creeping cultural anxiety of the Cold War and possible nuclear holocaust.

But the successes of the New Deal and the defeat of global fascism (...at the time) created a sense of open horizons and limitless possibilities. Social guidance classroom films played a part in that and presented an opportunity for educators to try to build a better educational system that benefited the children and broader society, as well. The origin of these social guidance films was rooted in progressive education, and an anti-fascist focus on community. These films were largely good-faith efforts to help kids and reinforce a community-centric worldview that had helped defeat the fascist threat in Europe.

But here's the rub: without anyone realizing it, the world had already moved on.

The people who were making the films – the writers, directors, and educational consultants – had endured all of that history...but the kids had not. These children, the Baby Boomers, were born into maybe the greatest economic upswing in human history, but at school they were being preached a wartime-rationing way of being in the world when it was no longer necessary and General Motors was telling them that to be good Americans they had to be good consumers.

Even the projectors themselves were products of war. The armed forces had pioneered the practice of using films to train thousands of soldiers quickly. The projectors in school classrooms used to play these social guidance films had been used first to train soldiers, and then given to the schools as war surplus. This gave progressive educators what they thought was a golden opportunity to teach kids using these same, industrialized approaches.

Then many of these kids came of age into a draft and multiple, new foreign wars. They'd grown up told by a cartoon turtle to hide under their desks in case the Soviets dropped a nuclear bomb on their town. They were being taught pro-social messages and told that if they followed these rules, they'd be happy, well-adjusted, and they'd fit in. But why? To grow up a drunk like dad, or take Valium like mom, or go fight Koreans and Vietnamese who never did anything to them?

Traffic Safety films blamed teenagers for the massive fatalities on the road, when it had far more to do with a lack of basic safety features in cars, paired with increasingly powerful engines in vehicles built by manufacturers that didn't - any of them - have a safety department. Ralph Nader's *Unsafe at Any Speed* did what no scare-all classroom film could do - it got Congress to mandate safety features in cars. Only then did traffic fatalities begin to decline. In 1951, the rate of vehicle fatalities per 100 million miles driven was over 7. Since 1991, it's never been above 2. Yet teens had to watch films like *Last Date* (another Dick York role) that shared the concept of "teenicide," where kids kill themselves before they can turn twenty by driving recklessly. It's all your fault, kids!

Sponsored films were sneaky, although sometimes playing an important role. Tampon manufacturers were the only ones willing to make menstruation films, which was a positive, but they did so while promoting their own branded products. Many other companies produced pro-consumer propaganda films hoping schools would show them as educational films and not notice or not mind the product placements. Jam Handy, who was possibly the most prolific producer of these kinds of films, said they were intended "for people whose minds are to be reconditioned." Oof.

I have to believe that the teenagers of the 1950s and 60s saw through this. The counter-cultural revolution of the 1960s seems inevitable as a reaction to the forced conformity of the 1950s that definitely was emphasized. But learning about these films showed me it's also possible that the rebellion stemmed also from a generational divide, with parents and children talking past each other against the backdrop of unprecedented economic abundance and ever-intensifying cultural inequality and uncertainty.

The 1950s Indict the 1950s

With all this longing for the halcyon 1950s being so popular these days, it's valuable to ask what folks in the 1950s thought about all that.

Two films stand out. The first is 1955's *The Sound of a Stone*, directed by Herk Harvey for Centron Pictures in Lawrence, Kansas. Harvey made hundreds of films for Centron, but is best remembered for directing the ghost story film *Carnival of Souls*. A careful reading of *Carnival of Souls* reveals a male director and male screenwriter working in 1962 acutely aware of the hazards young women faced. In the film, Mary begins to experience frightening visions, but they are in some ways depicted as less menacing than the reckless challenges of drag-racing boys on the road, the advances of her aggressive male neighbor, or the powerlessness she experiences as a church organist under the gaze of the pastor, who can throw her out of the congregation and rob her of her livelihood simply for playing the wrong music. I think Harvey picked up this sensitivity by making films for young people in a deeply troubled time.

In *The Sound of a Stone*, a young English teacher assigns a book to his class, but when a student's father discovers the name of the book on a list of "subversive titles," the English teacher and his wife begin suffering under a reign of terror from the community. Soon, even students who worked with the teacher on the school paper are also swept up, and they begin receiving threats. It isn't commented on, but one of the actors has a severe limp in the film - most likely the result of Polio (see above). Soon the boy's father actually reads the book he was so quick to condemn, and stands up at a school board meeting and recants. He does the right thing, and everybody learns their lesson about blind censorship the Un-American Activities Committee the McCarthy hearings jumping to conclusions. Or so it seems, until the final scene in the movie when somebody else throws a brick through the teacher's window, almost hitting his infant son, and letting them know that they'd still better leave town. It remains a genuinely compelling film today, but it's not uplifting.

Then there's 1959's *What About Prejudice?* In this film, none of the other students like the new kid - Bruce Jones. They accuse him of stealing things they misplace, or of starting fights, and attribute his behavior to "his kind," an idea their parents all reinforce. But then two of the gang crash their car into a bridge, and the only witness to the accident is Bruce, who receives horrible burns all over his body while rescuing the two other kids. This causes the gang to rethink their blind hatred of Bruce, and reflect on how maybe they should've looked at Bruce as a person first, and not just as a member of a group they didn't like. Here's the conceit of the film, though - as much as Bruce is clearly presumed to be Black, the filmmakers intentionally never show him, so that the audience can insert Bruce into their own personally disfavored group. Maybe Bruce isn't Black. Maybe he's Jewish. Or Catholic. Or Hispanic. Or any kind of immigrant. Hell, maybe Bruce just has long hair. The film chooses not to say. The fact that in 1959 the producers of an educational film about prejudice for high schools intentionally didn't show the object of that prejudice so the audience could fill up that mental space with any number of widespread societal hatreds is itself a horrible indictment of the society that produced it.

Mental Hygiene? Five stars, good book, very fun, thought-provoking.

The 1950s? One-star, would not go back.

The October Daye Re-read: A Killing Frost

Joe Sherry



Welcome back, dear readers. Today we're going to revisit the fourteenth novel in Seanan McGuire's *October Daye* series: *A Killing Frost*. We are now in the midst of a real push to catch up to publication (after this there are four books to go), though I don't think I'll make it before September's publication of *Silver and Lead*. *That's* a book I'm absolutely excited to read.

Astute readers will note that I did slow down the pace of my re-read

after last writing about *The Unkindest Tide* in December. That was my incredibly anticipated return of the *Roane* novel, which was a delight.

A Killing Frost is something different and I've been very open about spoilers throughout this re-read, in part because there are some truly groundbreaking events that occur over the course of the series and this book has perhaps the biggest. If you've been following along you probably know what's coming but if not, I am going to spoil the hell out of this book and about the second biggest, as well as speculate on what will be the third biggest event of the series when it happens.

It's all happening.

Let's go.

Three books ago, *The Brightest Fell*, featured Toby's quest to find and bring home her long lost sister, August - a sister so long lost that Toby didn't know that she had one until fairly recently. The cost, because there is *always* a cost, was that of the even more recent redemption of Simon Torquill, August's father.

See, August was lost more than one hundred years ago when *she* embarked on a quest to find and return Oberon to Faerie. Oberon, one of the Three, the father and co-creator of all of Faerie. He's been lost for some five hundred years, clearly doesn't want to be found, and the price of August's failure was that she lost her way home. Home, in this instance, means the entire concept of home, of her family, of herself.

In *The Brightest Fell*, Toby had to bring August home but because August never found Oberon, she had no concept of home and being whole, or even who her father was. To bring August truly home, Simon took on August's debt. Simon lost everything that he regained, had no idea of anything other than his initial service of villainy but worse, this time he didn't even know why.

I wrote about all of that and the tragedy of Simon Torquill, but that brings us back to *A Killing Frost*. It's Simon's turn. October is a Hero and that means big quests. Bringing Simon back to redemption is the quest du jour of *A Killing Frost* but it's not that. August failed to find Oberon. Simon will never look, but Simon needs to find Oberon.

This is the book where Toby will find Oberon.

It's staggering, really.

There's a quest.

That's not what I want to talk about so much as I want to talk about Maeve. Maeve is one of the Three, one of the mothers of Faerie along with Titania. Because I've been spoiling stuff throughout the re-read we know that Titania has been under an incredibly powerful (cast by Oberon, natch) gaes and currently incarnated as Toby's friend Stacy. More on this in a moment, as well in the entire book *Be the Serpent*.

But Maeve. We're still speculating on Maeve because through eighteen novels so far published Maeve has not yet returned to Faerie. We know that she's been missing since Janet and Tam Lin broke the Ride, which led to Titania's banishment and Oberon's abandonment (honestly, if this is all too mumbo jumbo for you, don't worry about it, it matters and it absolutely doesn't).

There have been hints of Maeve throughout the series and in *The Unkindest Tide* we've seen there is something deeply wrong with Marcia, an ostensibly changeling with only a tenuous tie to faerie and I think she's Maeve.

*"Hi," I said brightly. "Maeve, right? I'm a friend of your daughter's. Antigone, I mean. The eldest. A *good* friend. I helped her bring back the Roane. She's not sad all the time anymore."*

So - on the road to find Oberon Toby gets stuck in an area with ties to Maeve and so Toby calls for Maeve's help AND GETS IT. I'm not sure this can be overstated. Maeve doesn't appear but her magic clearly aids Toby with what she needs to move forward. It's another reminder that Maeve may be more aware and closer to the surface than anyone truly suspects, especially in comparison to how deeply Oberon and Titania are buried.

It's not possible for roses to look amused, but these ones came remarkably close.

What I'm really curious about that, besides if I'm right about Marcia, is how much does Maeve know about what she is responding to. Does she know the specifics of what is going on and how her magic is being used or does it just respond to those who call upon her while in her spaces? How aware is Maeve of who she is?

This brings us to Titania because hey, I've already read this book and what I find most fascinating is the speculation. We're two books away from everything blowing up and Titania returning like the villain she absolutely is.

There have been hints about Stacy over the course of the series, but here's the big one:

"She's always been weird about the idea of any of us dating," she said. "She saw me holding hands with a Hob changeling I went to high school with once, and she lost it. Like, complete maternal meltdown. Way out of proportion with a little completely innocent hand holding. I never dated after that. Technically, I'd never dated before that."

Something about that story didn't add up. I'd never stopped to think about it before this, but it had never been my business.

This was all incredibly new information for Toby about her closest friend and she's deeply suspicious. Unfortunately there's not a lot of time for the suspicion to take hold, it's really just foreshadowing for when stuff goes down in *Be the Serpent*. McGuire is laying down a hard piece of evidence right here.

*"Titania's fucking ass, is that *actually* fucking *Oberon*?" he asked, in a voice that managed to remain reverent, despite the mortal profanity.*

The main event comes as Toby pulls everything together at the end. She figured out, or at least she's staking her sense of identity on the idea that she is right, that Officer Thornton, a semi random character who got caught up in faerie, was actually Oberon who magicked himself into forgetting. Oberon was right there, in the Luidaeg's house, for months now.

The Luidaeg bit her lip as she stepped toward him, black tears escaping from her eyes and running down her cheeks. They left tarry streaks behind, like she was crying off her mascara, but she was actually weeping the color out of her irises, leaving them driftglass green and clearer than I'd ever seen them.

"Daddy" she asked, in a voice that was barely bigger than a whisper. It shook on the second syllable, breaking.

It's a heck of a moment that McGuire pulls off here. How do you write the return of what is functionally THE supreme being of the series, a character that is far more myth than reality and who is so far beyond any of the barely mortal fae that it can hardly be fathomed? It's so very well done.

Random Notes and Random Quotes

***"It doesn't matter what I wear to the wedding, we both know it's going to be completely covered in blood before we reach "I do"."*

***"Language," I said, in my primmest tone. "I'm asking important questions about the nature of Faerie here, and we're still walking" - I love deep questions about the nature of Faerie*

***I was never going to get a happy ending. Heroes never do.*

***"I'm not sure I'd brag about being Titania's favorite," I said. "It seems like an honor with very few selling points."*

Evening scowled, red, red lips pursing in a moue of displeasure. "I'll thank you to keep my mother's name out of your mouth."

Next up on the reread will be *When Sorrows Come*, in which a wedding request actually occurs, Toby wears a magic wedding dress, we learn some fae political history, and Evening Winterrose is still the worst.

Open roads and kind fires, my friends.

Previous Rereads:

Rosemary and Rue

A Local Habitation

An Artificial Night

Late Eclipses

One Salt Sea

Ashes of Honor

Chimes at Midnight

The Winter Long

A Red-Rose Chain

Once Broken Faith

The Brightest Fell

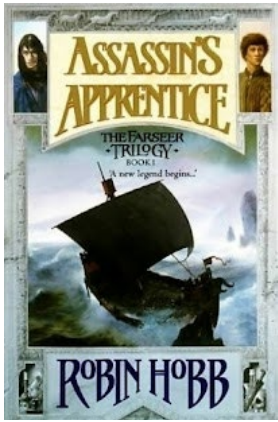
Night and Silence

The Unkindest Tide

Realm of the Elderlings Project: Intro and Book 1: Assassin's Apprentice

Clara Cohen

Missed opportunities for love, with POISON to fill the gaps



Hey, remember Robin Hobb? Remember the *Realm of the Elderlings* (*ROTE*), a sprawling, magnificent 16-book epic saga, neatly divided into trilogies (plus one quartet) that each stood reasonably well on its own? Remember how great it was?

I've been thinking back on it fondly recently, especially after Book 2 in the series got me through a particularly bad night in early November last year. So, in a flurry of skilled Ebay searches I managed to collect

the whole lot – and in mass market paperback, which is the Superior Book Format, don't @ me, I will not be taking questions at this time. Instead, I will be doing the talking here, the first Wednesday of every month (except today, which is the second Wednesday, but starting a new endeavour on New Year's Day is a recipe for failure, so this is absolutely a planned scheduling event and in no way a consequence of my decision to take on a 16-month reviewing project in a haze of jet-lagged ambition on January 2nd, 2025.)

My approach will be as follows: I want to remind people how great these books are as I revisit them myself. I will not be entirely blind to their faults as they emerge, but my attitude is going to highlight all the things these books do well. These books got me through a rough time, I'm going to be leaning on them as rough times continue, and only a fool picks nits when the lice are load-bearing. Or something. Look, at least it's not as bad out here (yet) as it is going to get in there. Hobb has never built a sandcastle she doesn't crush under her merciless feet.

So, how does the saga begin?

It begins with a boy, unloved and inconvenient to his family, so unloved and inconvenient that he does not even have a name. What he does have, though, is lineage: He is the bastard son of Chivalry Farseer, the oldest son of the king of the Six Duchies. His maternal family, lacking capacity for another mouth to feed, drop him off with Chivalry's men when they swing back through town six years after the boy's conception. Chivalry, being off on an errand somewhere, is not around, so the boy is given to Chivalry's stable man, Burrich, to look after. Burrich, not terribly imaginative, calls the boy Fitz, short for FitzChivalry ('Chivalry's Bastard'), and thus is FitzChivalry Farseer named.

And ok, yes, FitzChivalry Farseer is a silly name. In fact, all of the names in the Six Duchies are pretty silly. Virtue naming is very in vogue, you understand, especially for royalty, and so we've got King Shrewd, with three sons: Chivalry, Verity, and Regal, borne of ancestors with names like Victory, Graciousness, Desire, all the way back to King Taker, the first settler to claim power in the land that became

the Six Duchies. By the time you've spent several hundred pages in this world, these naming conventions make such perfect sense that you have difficulty seeing what it is that makes your best friend raise a dubious eyebrows at 'King Shrewd??' when she reads the synopsis of the book as you plan your buddy-read with her.

The plot of the book is one of the most coherent and self-contained of any of the *ROTE* books: political intrigue, magic, supernaturally baffling attacks from a previously unknown enemy, last-ditch political alliances, assassination, treason, betrayal, quite a lot of poison, etc, wrapped up with a reasonable bow at the end, which leaves the reader feeling like they've gotten a full story, with a conclusion and a path to resolution, but no need to keep reading if they're happy with what they've had already. (This is, as I recall, the last time it happens. The rest of the *ROTE* sub-series are much more like one tale split into three volumes.) All very good – but also, rather typical fantasy plot stuff. No, what makes this book brilliant is characterization and relationships – all of which are built upon a foundation of betrayals and missed opportunities for love. Remember, the book opens with a boy so unwanted that he does not even have a name. Hobb began as she meant to continue. Not for nothing is her work described as 'misery porn' on r/fantasy. But it's so good! It's such well-constructed misery porn! Again and again and again, Fitz is presented with people whom he could love, and again and again, something comes in to prevent it, to interfere with it, to make it weaker and less comforting than it might otherwise be.

You'd think, would you not, that Burrich, who does most of the work raising Fitz, would become a foster father sort, no? No. At first, Burrich treats Fitz like one of his dogs – which is to say, he keeps him fed and safe and teaches obedience. But the relationship between them is strained, because Burrich knows how to deal with dogs, and with men, and 6-year-old Fitz is neither. Also, Fitz has a magical ability to bond with animals, which Burrich regards as unnatural and obscene. When Burrich learns that Fitz has bonded with a puppy named Nosey, he rips that puppy away from Fitz, severing their bond in a single act of pain and shocking cruelty. (Yes, yes, I know, but that's hundreds of pages later, and I didn't know about it my first time through!)

Well, then, what about this titular assassin, whom Fitz is recruited to serve in the role of titular apprentice? Chade Fallstar, a scarred, reclusive man, teaches Fitz secretly about poison and manipulation and politics, and could be another possible mentor, another source of possible affection. But his mentorship is also conditional. He tests Fitz's loyalty to King Shrewd, and he abandons Fitz during a truly harrowing sequence when Fitz is sent to be trained in the use of his ancestral magical ability, called Skill.

But Fitz has family, has he not? Yes, and they suck too. His father, Prince Chivalry Farseer, abdicates almost immediately and Fitz never meets him. His younger uncle, Prince Regal, sees him entirely as an obstacle to Regal's own political machinations. Prince Verity, next in line after Chivalry's abdication, could become a mentor, a teacher, could undo the damage caused by his disastrous Skill training – but by then the kingdom is under attack and Verity cannot be spared. King Shrewd manages to win Fitz's loyalty by the simplest possible means: a transactional bargain. Shrewd will give Fitz a home and protection, and in return Fitz must serve him. This is not a great deal, but it is the best Fitz is offered, and his loyalty to Shrewd is ever after unshakeable.

There is only one friend whose affection is not conditional: the court jester, the Fool. A strange person, childlike and inscrutable, albino-like in appearance, prone to odd statements and insights, and incapable of articulating his meaning in anything other than riddles. But he does not betray Fitz the way Burritch does in taking Nosey away; the way Chade does in deserting him during his Skill training; the way Shrewd does in using him as a tool rather than providing for his well-being; the way his father does in deserting him. And the relationship between Fitz and the Fool will structure every other book in the series, to a greater or lesser extent.

Oh, it's so good, NOAFers! I'm so glad to be reading these books again! Thank you for listening to my ravings as they unfold over the next 16 months!

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