

# NERDS OF A FEATHER FLOCK TOGETHER

2017 HUGO AWARD  
VOTER INFORMATION





# NERDS OF A FEATHER



# FLOCK TOGETHER

## INTRODUCTION

### The G

In 2012, Vance Kotrla and I decided to start an all-purpose nerd blog. The concept was simple: write about what we like and what we don't, and keep the subject matter diverse enough that we would never get bored. We were entering a rich and vibrant ecosystem, where both traditional fanzines and their online descendents played an important role by linking fans to authors and publishers, while providing reliable sources of news and opinion on topics that the mainstream media (still) rarely touch upon. This was fandom's fourth estate, if you will — and it was awesome. I remember reading sites like *A Dribble of Ink*, *The Book Smugglers*, and *SF Signal* and thinking, "Can we do that too?"

The site's guiding principles were to avoid "grade inflation" to the best of our ability, and to cover as many pockets of fandom as possible. This first principle is reflected almost daily in our review scoring system, which is designed to distribute normally around a theoretical mean score of 5, so that a 7 is pretty darn good and 10s are reserved for works of transcendent quality. In five years, we've given out less than a dozen 10s.

To put it another way, in a world where every new Christopher Nolan movie immediately lands in the IMDB Top 250, we wanted to be a place where fans could expect a little less hyperbole, especially when discussing

new works.

The second principle, to cover as much of fandom as possible, found expression in our growing team of contributors. Vance and I each had areas we specialized in (SF/F novels and cult cinema, respectively), but we recognized there was no way we two alone could do justice to the tremendous work and innovation taking place in short fiction, comics, video and tabletop games, television, and so forth. So it is a tremendous point of pride that as our readership has expanded, so have our voices.

The many recurring series featured on our site have become one of our signatures, I think. Thursday Morning Superhero, which runs weekly, takes a look at the new comics that arrive in shops every Wednesday. Beyond that, we have: the We Rank 'Em and 6 Books listicle series; New Books Spotlight, which highlights upcoming books we're excited about; The Monthly Round, which pairs the month's best new short fiction with adult beverages; Essentials, which aims to serve as an introduction for those readers who may be new to a particular area of fandom; annual Summer Reading and Holiday Gift Guide series; and two forms of roundtable discussion (Blogtable and Perspectives).

We also run special post series, such as 2015's Cyberpunk Revisited, and the currently ongoing series Dystopian Visions. One of my personal favorite moments from the past five years came when Rudy Rucker, Bruce Sterling, Pat Cadigan, and Paul



DiFilippo all agreed to participate in an open conversation on cyberpunk and its enduring legacy.

Five years on, and we have been nominated for a Hugo — the ultimate sign of having “arrived.” Only, the ecosystem does not feel as vibrant as it once did. Some of the best sites have closed shop — including both *A Dribble of Ink* and *SF Signal*. Meanwhile, the landscape has been affected by institutional-level changes, with conversations about blog posts largely migrating to Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and so forth.

None of this is bad, per se — just different. And in a few cases, we’ve been able to provide an online home to talented writers moving on from these, or from other sites. All the same, fandom still needs its fanzines. So while we are excited to be nominated for a Hugo, we are even more excited to keep fighting the good fight alongside our fellow nominees and all the other great fan blogs out there.

In the end, we are just a group of opinionated people writing about what unites us in giddy nerd joy or reduces us to puddles of apocalyptic nerd rage. Most importantly, we do it out of love.

What follows is a small sampling of what we’ve done over the past year. I hope you’ll enjoy reading it as much as I’ve enjoyed contributing to its production.

### **About Microreview Scores:**

- 10: mind-blowing/life-changing
- 9: very high quality/standout in its category
- 8: well worth your time and attention
- 7: a mostly enjoyable experience
- 6: still enjoyable, but the flaws are hard to ignore
- 5: equal parts good and bad
- 4: problematic, but has redeeming qualities
- 3: very little good I can say about this
- 2: just bad
- 1: really really bad
- 0: prosecutable as crime against humanity

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# STRANGER THINGS: A NEW DRAMATIC ANIMAL?

Vance K

Within two days of **Stranger Things** appearing on Netflix, I had three separate friends reach out to tell me they'd binge-watched it and I had to see it. That I would love it.

So I did. And I did. But...

I want to be very clear at the outset and say this isn't a review. I'm not going to say bad things about **Stranger Things**, and I'm going to try to avoid spoilers. What I'm really interested in is more of a formal analysis.

One of the biggest appeals of **Stranger Things** is its retro-80s vibe. I mean, just look at this poster! It's amazing.



That font, which looked out at me from the cover of so many Stephen King paperbacks as a kid gives me all kinds of warm fuzzies. By the end of the first episode, I was hooked. But I turned to my wife and said, "If Hopper winds up in the Black Lodge at the end of this thing, I'm going to be pissed."

See, **Stranger Things** doesn't just have a retro poster and a retro vibe, it actually seems to be made up of Lego bricks taken from 80s and early-90s touchstones. It's really not enough to say that it's "inspired" by **E.T.**, **Twin Peaks**, **Akira**, **The X-Files**, and the music of John Carpenter. It appears to actually be constructed of those things. There are moments lifted directly from **E.T.**, dynamics transposed whole cloth from **Twin Peaks**, a key character and plotline from **Akira**, and at one point there was a scene so reminiscent of Stephen King's **It** that I was able to tell my wife what was going to happen before it played out onscreen.

I love all of those movies and stories. Seeing them all in one place was pretty cool. But I felt an odd pull I've never experienced before — part of me felt that warm, familiar nerd glow of spotting references from beloved hallmarks I grew up with, but I felt a difference between spotting the posters for **Evil Dead** and **The Thing** on the walls in characters' rooms, and saying "oh, this scene is from..."

Now here, to me, is the really interesting thing: this is a Netflix show, and with the exception of **Akira**, every other work I've mentioned here has been available for streaming on Netflix. Netflix was very clear when it launched **House of Cards**, its first original, scripted show, that [its programming decisions were based on user viewing patterns](#). So it's probably safe to assume that people are watching the hell out of **E.T.**, **The X-Files**, and **Twin Peaks** on Netflix. And maybe Netflix's development team said, "Can we get a show that's just all of those things, but a mini-series?"

This could be a one-off thing, or it could be a harbinger of a new phenomenon that is a direct result of the time we're living in. With viewership metrics available on a level like nothing we've ever seen before,



the slow demise of the traditional network television model, and a trend toward limited series, rather than 22-episode-per-season non-serialized dramas or comedies, there is a very real possibility that **Stranger Things** is something like a new narrative form. The G referred to it in conversation as a bricolage, which may be correct. Or a four-dimensional version of Picasso's early experiments with collage.

I suppose part of me is fighting the urge to be dismissive about a work that in some ways lacks originality, but the fact that I really enjoyed it is telling. I think it will be interesting to see where this goes. I argued in 2013 that **Breaking Bad** was [the signature show of our time](#) not just because of its content and narrative qualities, but because of the way it used streaming services and social media to expand its audience and change viewing patterns. Maybe something similar is happening right now.

Maybe we'll have a Western to look forward to where a Civil War veteran with deep hatred of the Comanche (**The Searchers**) gets wind of a coming confrontation, and when he can't get anyone in town to stand with him (**High Noon**), he must confront his racism out of desperation and recruit a team of seven Comanche braves to help him defend the town (**Seven Samurai/The Magnificent Seven**). Who knows?

Also, I'm available for meetings, if anybody wants to talk about setting up that project...

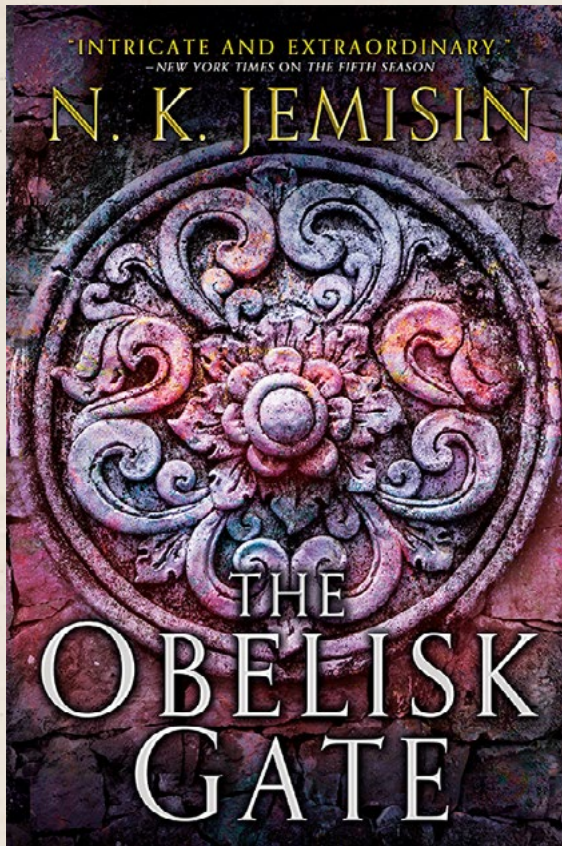
*Posted by Vance K — co-editor and cult film reviewer at nerds of a feather since 2012. Emmy award-winning producer, and Netflix subscriber since 2004.*



# THE OBELISK GATE

by N.K. JEMISIN

Joe Sherry



## Epic Fantasy Does Not Get Better Than This

Well before **The Fifth Season** was awarded a Hugo for Best Novel, the only concern I felt about **The Obelisk Gate** was in regards to whether or not it could possibly be as good as **The Fifth Season**. Could Jemisin meet the high standard she set with the first novel, let alone surpass it? **The Fifth Season** wasn't just good, it was exceptional. Time has only strengthened my thoughts and feelings on **The Fifth Season** ([my review](#)) and the more distance I have from that first experience of reading and discovery, the higher my regard for what Jemisin accomplished in **The Fifth Season**.

I needn't have worried. In some ways, **The Obelisk Gate** is necessarily a different novel. **The Fifth Season** opened with a world-breaking cataclysm on a world that is well familiar with cataclysm, but somehow

Alabaster's breaking of the world paled in comparison to the three deeply personal stories of Damaya, Syenite, and Essun and their respective heart-wrenching tragedies. **The Obelisk Gate** remains deeply personal, but Jemisin brings two things with global consequences to the forefront.

First, the world-breaking volcanic destruction Alabaster caused in **The Fifth Season**? The impact of that dark, choking ash becomes paramount as Essun pauses her search for her missing daughter to stop at the comm Castrima, although just to write that is an insanely gross simplification of Essun's storyline. The pause in Essun's search comes from the knowledge that her old lover and mentor, Alabaster, was at Castrima and he was dying, turning to stone.

The appendices of both **The Fifth Season** and **The Obelisk Gate** detail all of the different "Seasons" the world has had over thousands and thousands of years, those world-killing events used to mark time and that cull humanity again and again, wiping out progress and civilizations until humanity could rise again (only to be choked back down). The resultant ash from Alabaster's destruction heralds the arrival of a new Season, and through Castrima, we see how a comm begins to tighten and hunker down in the hopes of outlasting and outliving a Season — except the unnamed narrator throughout both books has told us that this isn't a Season which will last just a couple of months or years, but thousands. Essun knows how bad it will be, but what choice does she have but to survive?

Second, there are hints very early on in the novel that the moon is going to come into play, and just the bare mention of this, just the idea that this is a thing that could be possible (and how it could be possible) is both jarring and awe inspiring.

This is not to say that **The Obelisk Gate** is not as deeply personal as **The Fifth Season**. It is. Through both Essun's and Nassun's storylines we learn of the actual relationship between mother and daughter and having read **The Fifth Season**'s portrayal of Essun's desperate search for Nassun, it's heartbreaking. Jemisin reveals so much



of how Essun's life and training as an orogene at the Fulcrum has shaped her — not just how it led Damaya to become Syenite to become Essun and all the tragedy that story entailed, but how all of that truly shapes a person deeper into the relationships they form with their families. How it all matters. **The Obelisk Gate** is not specifically a story about family, but then Jemisin is not telling a story of just one thing. She's weaving a rich and brilliant tapestry that pulls from family and destruction and loss and hope and love and disappointment and oppression and earth magic and everything else that can be mixed in with individual threads forming larger weaves and all coming together into something far greater and far more beautiful than a description of any individual thread could get across.

There are so many different aspects of **The Obelisk Gate** to talk about. There are the viewpoint chapters of Nassun, which expand on everything we think we know about the world and how her power and her journey will shape everything to come. It is through Nassun that we learn so much more about Essun and Jija (the father that murdered Essun's son / Nassun's brother) than we ever could have through Essun's eyes. The viewpoint chapters of Schaffa, the guardian who trained / abused Essun are a revelation, especially in the context that everything we know of him comes from Essun's perspective. This doesn't touch upon the new explorations of orogeny and the ideas of how different methods of training lead to different uses of the power and different beliefs about what uses are even possible in the first place.

One question that I did not ask while reading **The Fifth Season** but which came to mind early in **The Obelisk Gate** is "just who is narrating this book, anyway?" It matters and it matters far more than I had anticipated because Essun's chapters in **The Fifth Season** were presented in the second person and this choice continues with **The Obelisk Gate**. Inattentive reader that I am, I assumed and accepted that Jemisin's use of second person perspective for Essun was mostly a stylistic choice used to subtly distance the reader from Essun and that distancing was

also partly reflective of the severe trauma she had just been through coming across the murder of her son by her husband, let alone the traumas we didn't yet realize she had also been through.

This time, however, something tipped me off there was something else going on and this wasn't just the story of Essun, that there was another very important story being told through the narration of Essun's story. That narration builds not just greater background for the world itself, but also hints at a larger conflict that moves beyond just the lives Essun and Alabaster and Nassun think they are living. They might be pawns. They might be more.

There is so much going on in **The Obelisk Gate** and Jemisin has so many balls in the air that a lesser writer would have begun to drop them by now. Not Jemisin. She is fully in control of **The Obelisk Gate**.

Epic fantasy does not get better than this.

### **The Math**

*Baseline Assessment:* 9/10

*Bonuses:* +1 for living up to and arguably surpassing the excellence that was **The Fifth Season**

*Penalties:* -1 because some might find issue with the slower pacing.

*Nerd Coefficient:* 9/10 "Very High Quality / Standout in its category."

*Posted by Joe Sherry — Writer / Editor at Adventures in Reading since 2004, nerds of a feather contributor since 2015, co-editor since 2016. Minnesotan.*



# THE MONTHLY ROUND: A TASTER'S GUIDE TO SPECULATIVE SHORT FICTION

Charles Payseur

SEPTEMBER 2016

Happy Beerthday! With this installment, The Monthly Round is officially two years old! That both doesn't seem like that much and seems like a hell of a lot. That means that I've looked at 216 pieces of short SFF and paired them with booze and reviews. That's...well, that's something, I guess. Anyway, thanks to all of those who've enjoyed the Round!

September is a strange time where I live. A mix of autumn and summer. And when I say a mix I mean that one day will be over eighty degrees (F) and the next day will get downright cold. Storms abound as farmers scramble to try and string enough dry days together to harvest. In town the river threatened to overrun its banks with all the rain we got. And always in the back of everything there is the whispering figure of winter smiling from the distance. Won't be long now, its smile says. Best get ready.

So maybe it's no surprise that the fiction I've selected for this month's Round is a bit on the dark side. About death and injustice, resistance and revolution. About ghosts and about corruption. Maybe it's no surprise that this time of year sees me reaching for the darker beers and the lighter wines. The contrast speaks to me, and is reflected in my picks this month. Because there might be a crispness in the air that promises the cold isn't far off, but that doesn't mean a strong drink and an excellent SFF story can't help me forget, at least for a little while, and focus on what's here and now.

So kick back and don't worry about the dirt on your boots. Or the blood. Instead, let your trusty storytender pour you something to take the edge off. Cheers!



## **“Unauthorized Access” by An Owomoyela** ([Lightspeed #76](#))

Threading together activism and corruption, whistle-blowing and hacking, An Owomoyela's "Unauthorized Access" tastes like a Red IPA to me, fun and brash and up front and with the feel of something smoldering, ready to fully ignite. The story follows Aedo Lang, recently released from a stint in jail for presumably hacking but really for being poor and for pissing off the government. Now free, Aedo wonders exactly what to do next, how to get involved again but perhaps not in a way that will lead to prison. Except that she stumbles right into the thick of things when a government employee approaches her with suspicions of corruption that reach much deeper than what Aedo had uncovered before. The story is equal parts ethics and espionage with a little education thrown in about hacking and how people are supposed to be protected for whistle-blowing and often are not. And I love Aedo as a character, practical in her desire for food, protection, and an income, and yet also idealistic, believing that justice should be applied to all, even when it seems so often to favor those with means. It's a story that opens up



a complex and interesting future where renewable resources aren't the only green energy the government uses. Money pushes the story along. The lack of it for some and the super-abundance of it for others. It creates a landscape where Aedo is never truly safe trying to walk the line between revolutionary and upstanding citizen. And like a Red IPA the story shows that revolution can have a bit of sweetness to go with the bitter truth, but that in order to get to a just system sometimes the old one has to burn.

**“Toward the Luminous Towers” by Bogi Takács** ([Clarkesworld #120](#))

“Toward the Luminous Towers” by Bogi Takács is a story about conflict and war, soldiers and soldiering, and damage of many different kinds. To me, it comes across slow and deep, surprisingly dark and dense but with a glow to it of hope and action, which feels like an Amber Bock, a drink that pours a deep brown and tastes like forgotten war songs. The story reveals a neuroatypical soldier who is valuable for the very reasons that in civilian life they were marginalized. Who can network into computer systems and organize troops, coordinate attacks and defense. They are paired with a handler in a war that is slowly being lost, a war that is slowly devouring everything in its path. And the trajectory of the main character is that of a weapon being used by their government, no different than a bomb being dropped on an enemy encampment. They are used. They are pushed into something dark and draining towards an inky bottom of total dissolution. And like a bomb or a gun dropped in surrender, there is no care for the character after the conflict subsides. They are used and in many ways deliberately broken, and despite the fact that they could be fixed, that they could at least be brought closer to whole, instead they are forgotten and shelved. It is a wrenching and difficult read, heartbreaking in its tragedy. And yet even so there is a warmth to it, a movement toward something that isn't war, that is beyond war and violence. That can't be reached by war and violence, which is the problem that the main

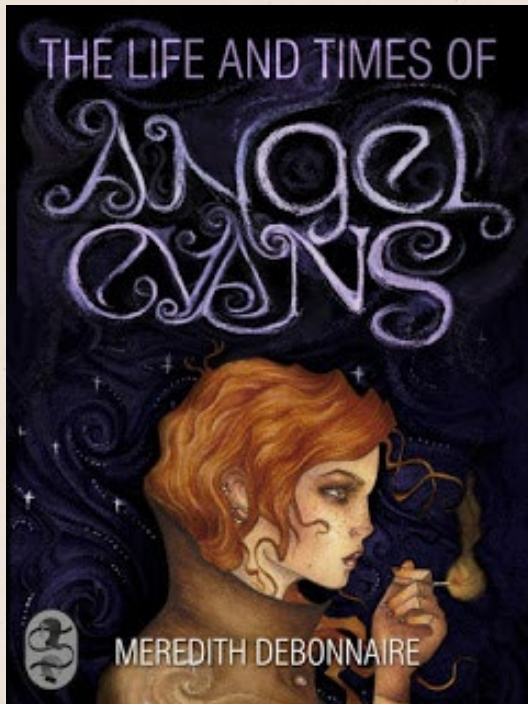
character realizes too late. And yet even so there is a hope that will not die, a strength that is never crushed despite how much the main character suffers. Like an Amber Bock there is the feeling of something rising out of the darkness, a will and a power that the darkness cannot erase.

**“Applied Cenotaphics in the Long, Long Longitudes” by Vajra Chandrasekera** ([Strange Horizons](#))

Despite it being solidly autumn, “Applied Cenotaphics in the Long, Long Longitudes” by Vajra Chandrasekera feels like a Winter Ale to me, a story of layers and masks that mirror the spiced and hopped subtlety that makes winter ales memorable. The story unfolds as a conversation of sorts, archived at this point with references interspersed through the text to create a more interactive experience. This is fitting, as the voice of the story is a questionably-sentient computer program that exists to be interacted with, to be questioned. It's a mix of a game and a history lesson and art and more, this person captured but not really. There is a distilling of the person that was but guided by an author, by intent, curated and manicured and crafted to exist as art and person both. The effect is interesting, a story that blends art theory with a history of revolution with the technology that allows people to create “smart” masks. I love how the character of the narrator, of Satka, emerges in an absence, emerges in the face of Satka-the-art, Satka-the-program, and yet through both the viewer (and the reader) have a chance to touch an aspect of the person who was Satka, and the new entity that is also Satka. There is commentary on continuity and interface and the role of the audience to observe. And I feel that the story led me to thinking about art and about stories, about the urge to write about history as a way to preserve it. Not the events, not the facts of what happened, but to crystallize a feeling that can be passed down, that can be remembered. And by creating a mask the story seems to acknowledge the construction, the illusion that art gives, while also saying that it might not matter. That the representa-



tion is important, and that art can be uplifting and transformational even if it's fiction, even if it can't actually reproduce a human mind. Like a Winter Ale, I feel the story slows things down, layers spices and flavors to create a mosaic of experience that is beautiful and meaningful.



**“The Life and Times of Angel Evans” by Meredith Debonnaire** ([The Book Smugglers](#))

I have a thing with white wines where sometimes they taste a little...hollow. Light. Except that sometimes I find a white that is anything but, that is bold and dry and bracing. And so, for me, Meredith Debonnaire’s “The Life and Times of Angel Evans” is a good Chardonnay, one that defies expectations by challenging the conventions of the superhero story, of the Chosen One trope. Because in the story Angel is a survivor. Of a disaster, yes, but more of fate. Because it was fate that cast her in the role of Chosen One, of savior of every world. Except the world she grew up in. The choice that she had to make was something that broke her spirit, that set her fleeing from the gratitude of a universe that suddenly was in her debt. And I love the way the story teases out the pain and the quest for healing. How the story shows Angel trying to move on, unsure if she can, knowing that for her the story always ends

at the choice, and the choice has been made. She’s been vomited back out by fate and has no endgame now, no rapidly-approaching crisis. What she has left is the weight of the world that she lost, that she chose to lose, and the magic and power that seems almost pointless without a destiny to match it. The world-building of the story is rich and vibrant, and the character work is amazing. Angel and her ghost-girlfriend make for an incredible couple and I love the how much is put into conveying the feeling of loss and isolation that Angel feels. The pressure and also the freedom. The power and the responsibility. It’s a fun story but also a difficult one, one where the reader can be almost seduced by the way that Angel buries the pain, pushes through it in various forms of self-destruction. And yet the story doesn’t give up on her, and there is a sense of slow recovery, of getting to a place where she can be comfortable with what’s happened and begin to move on, to heal. It’s a gripping story and, like a Chardonnay, comes in a big container (nearly a novella) that begs to be passed around among friends, dry and crisp and full of life in all its complexities.

**“The City Born Great” by N.K. Jemisin** ([Tor dot com](#))

With a taste of the streets of New York and a breath of new life and lurking dangers, “The City Born Great” by N.K. Jemisin feels like a Double Black IPA to me, rebellious and unwilling to compromise on what’s important, and strong enough to beat the shit out of anyone or anything looking to start trouble. The main character is black, queer, and homeless, living in a New York that’s always on the verge of killing him. And yet, for perhaps that very reason, he becomes the avatar of New York, the midwife for a city that’s just being born. Or that hopes to be born, because without protection and guidance the city might easily slip into catastrophe, might be devoured and lost in disaster. And it’s up to the main character to stop that from happening. The world that is set is basically our own, only it’s populated by cities that are stealthily sentient, and beings even more vast



and ancient, looking for any opportunity to feed. And it's a story, to me, about visibility. About this main character who can embody an entire city not because he is the loudest and most obvious champion, but because he is unseen, as the city is unseen. I mean, people see the buildings and the parks, the streets and the rivers, but the living part of the city is concealed, ignored. Invisible. Like the main character, the city is vulnerable and there are those who would exploit that, who would victimize it because it's unseen. And yet the main character and the city show their strength, the strength that has had to grow in adversity, that has had to develop on its own, solitary and hard. It's a story about breaking out, about finding a power within and using it to do some righteous damage to those predatory forces hoping to get away with murder. It's an affirming and lifting story with a serious kick, and like a Double Black IPA is bitter but triumphant, dark but beautifully so.

**"Some Breakable Things" by Cassandra Khaw** ([The Dark #16](#))

Cassandra Khaw captures a slow kind of horror and pain in "Some Breakable Things," a story of family and death and damage that tastes to me like a Vanilla Porter, smoky and deep with a lingering darkness that subverts the sweet vanilla overtures. The main character is being haunted by their father. Their father who abused them, physically and emotionally. Who forced his child to justify his existence, to be a reason not to die, not to commit suicide. The story is in some ways about how damage can be passed along, how it doesn't end when an abuser dies. Something remains, some ghost of them that lives in the mind of the victim. A ghost that can't seem to be exorcised, at least not always, and especially not without help. A ghost that becomes more and more demanding, more and more disruptive. I love the way the story echoes this desperation to escape, the main character trapped between familial responsibility and their own need to be away from it, to have moved away from it. It's a beautiful picture of grief and guilt.

Of hurt. It is horrifying and heartbreaking in how the ghost is able to move with impunity, how the main character is powerless in the face of it, how there is such love mixed with such pain. The story plays with the boundaries of ghost and living person, the ghost of the father more real the more wraith-like the main character becomes, the more isolated and tormented. It's a powerful story that, like a Vanilla Porter, takes a relationship that is supposed to be sweet and twists it, drowning the relief under a tide of darkness.

## SHOTS

**"Muse" by Nicola Belte**  
([Flash Fiction Online](#))

Examining the idea and disease of consumption, this story feels like a Ghost Girl to me, a layering of equal parts dark rum, Irish cream, and grenadine, the sweetness hiding something dark underneath. It paints a picture, rather literally, of children gripped with disease. Being slowly killed on purpose to emphasize their frailty, to reveal the beauty that only arises from the proximity to death. It is a deeply uncomfortable read, one that shows ghosts lingering at the place of their death, unable, even then, to flee what has happened to them. It shows a system that values class and wealth and power and men. That sees these girls as objects only and ones that can be given a disease expressly to make them seem more beautiful. So they can be painted. So they can become objects in truth, their flesh and blood discarded, their ghosts chained to this grim reminder of their exploitation. It's chilling and visceral, the children stripped of their voices, erased, the history of art the history of consumption, the history of women consumed by powerful men who never even thought of them as human. It's tragic and it's disturbing, but I feel it's also important to see, to watch the mechanisms by which lives are consumed. Like a Ghost Girl, it seems pretty and sweet, and yet under that there is the red of blood and a strong and stirring darkness.



**“The Exemption Packet” by Rose Eveleth**  
([Terraform](#))

This story, framed as a packet of information explaining why one person doesn't have neural augmentations, tastes like a Head Rush, a mix of one part rum, two parts sour apple vodka, and a splash of lemon juice, an experience that is nearly overwhelming and quite memorable. The story reveals a world where mental augmentation is the norm in education, allowing students to go beyond their baseline senses so that they can see different spectra of color, can interact with computers, can have access to so much additional information. The main character is applying for a job and the company she applies to wants to check out why she isn't augmented. They get her file, which builds her situation and the world, the pressures to conform and adopt this technology and the way that it assumes that everyone will react the same way to it. And yet the piece also shows how there is no such thing as a universal educational system. What works for some can't work for others and this is especially true when a person is neuroatypical and doesn't experience the world the way other people do. The character has to defend this constantly, and is used to the judgments that people have of her. Yet she spells out in clear, moving language why she doesn't want augmentation. Why she would risk the scorn and the institutional bias. I love the way that it confronts the reader with the limits of technology, not only within a science fictional future but right now, how it shows that we need to rethink education to get away from standardization and toward something that can actually benefit everyone. And like a Head Rush, the story shows how the world can be an overload of information at times, and there's a lot to be learned in slowing down and trying to draw out each unique flavor.

**“The Old Man and the Phoenix”**  
by Alexandria Baisden ([Apex #88](#))

A touching story exploring friendship and mortality, pain and celebration, this one

seems like a Phoenix to me, a mix of equal parts Rumchata and cinnamon whiskey, creating a burst of fire and flavor, a joyous song of life. The story takes place as an old man is dying, a magician who has lived a life of adventure, who has built a lifelong friendship with a phoenix, who has died many times but, of course, always comes back. There is no such comfort in this death, though, no coming back, and the story explores how that makes it different, how this friendship has meant so much to both man and phoenix. There's a touch of melancholy running throughout the piece, that this is an ending and also a beginning, but an ending all the same. That for the man it might mean rejoining other loves who have gone on ahead but that there will be no reconnecting with the phoenix, that there will always be the wall of mortality between them, always the question of what comes next that the phoenix cannot know because it never is allowed to go far enough. The story is quiet and moving, the characters tired after long lives and in some ways ready and in other ways not ready at all. Like life in general, this new chapter is one they can't map out, that they can't see, and they won't have each other to lean on. It's a beautiful piece, a beautiful friendship, and like a Phoenix, somewhat bittersweet, a fire of remembrance and grief and hope.

*Posted by Charles — avid reader, reviewer, and sometimes writer of speculative fiction. Contributor to Nerds of a Feather since 2014.*



# THE TOWER OF SWALLOWS

by ANDRZEJ SAPKOWSKI

The G



## Bridging chapters are a flat circle.

The Witcher Cycle, as I've argued before, is a grand subversion of fantasy tropes — and written before trope subversion became a trope in and of itself. Problem is, whereas Polish, Spanish, Russian and other readers have enjoyed these books for quite some time, English-language readers are just getting getting them now. That means we can only retroactively grant Sapkowski's epic the canonical status it deserves. Better late than never, though, at least as far as this reader is concerned, because this darkly humorous yet also deadly serious work of fiction, with its elliptically structured narrative that draws as much from Latin American magic realism as it does from Tolkein, is truly special.

If you haven't guessed already, the Witcher Cycle is a fantasy epic with literary ambitions — or perhaps it's just literary by

accident. Either way, it exists on a different plane from most of its fellow series — both in terms of quality and the challenge it presents to the reader. Even in that context, however, **The Tower of Swallows** is a difficult book to define, or even to recap. It is often disjointed, with stories told across several timelines and by multiple interlocutors. It often feels as if it is about to fall apart, until it finally manages to come together — with monumental effect.

Of note, **The Tower of Swallows** isn't really about the eponymous witcher, Gerald of Rivia. He has his moments, but really this is Ciri's tale. It's also one of those tricky "get to Mordor" volumes that bedevil so many authors. Unsurprisingly, this is the weakest volume in the series so far. On the one hand, this is not Sapkowski's **A Feast for Crows** or **A Dance with Dragons**. Yet there is clear direction here.

Most real estate is devoted to Ciri telling the story of how she escaped Bonhart, a deeply menacing bounty hunter of unclear motivations; his erstwhile employer, Nilfgaardian coroner Stefan Skellen; and the Archmage Vilgefortz, who appears to be the series' Big Bad. Eventually she leaves her hiding place to make her way to the tower, followed by said pursuers, who are determined to catch her before she can enter the tower and reassume her powers. Geralt, Dandelion, Milva, and Regis, meanwhile, are trying to make their way to Ciri, or to where they believe Ciri might be. Yennefer and Triss are also on Ciri's path, albeit on different timelines, and likely for different reasons.

The character narratives contained within **The Tower of Swallows** are not always linear, or even told straightforwardly in the close third person favored by the genre. Yennefer's story, for example, is told over several timelines, with crucial parts related by individuals who may not be reliable narrators. More often than not, the stylistic gambit works, but there are instances in which **The Tower of Swallows** would have benefitted from more conventional plotting. For example, there is far too much space given to the spy Dijkstra's visit to a far-flung (and newly introduced) kingdom — a plot point that doesn't really develop and, frankly, isn't nec-



essary. Meanwhile, several great characters from earlier volumes – Yennefer, Regis and Milva in particular – get too little screen time, so to speak.

It's also worth noting that **The Tower of Swallows**, like its predecessor **Baptism of Fire**, is an extremely violent and at times disturbing read. You need to have a high tolerance for that kind of thing, but the violence is highly purposeful. Political commentary is central to **The Tower of Swallows**, and Sapkowski is a clearly a keen observer of politics. Similarly, the series continues to satirize the questionable politics of traditional fantasy (something I commented on extensively in reviews of the last two books). These are, in my opinion, major points of strength — for the book and even more so for the series writ large.

All in all this is a flawed volume in a superlative series, which makes it pretty good by my standard, but just short of excellent.

### **The Math**

*Baseline Assessment: 7/10.*

*Bonuses: +1 for experimenting with narrative structure; +1 for a picture perfect ending; +1 for Bonhart.*

*Penalties: -1 for the digressions; -1 for not paying enough attention to good characters.*

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

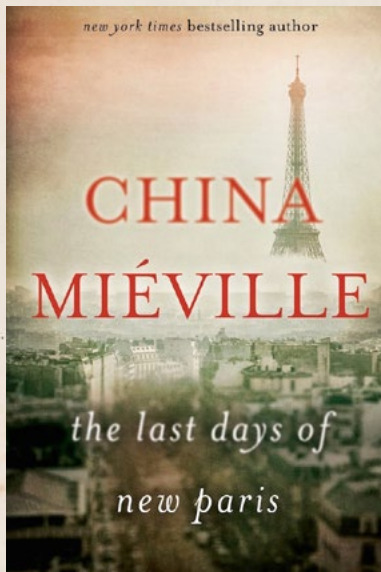
*Posted by The G — purveyor of nerdliness,  
genre fanatic and nerds of a neather founder/  
administrator since 2012.*



# THE LAST DAYS OF NEW PARIS

by CHINA MIEVILLE

Chloe



## Is Surrealism destructive to a beloved author's reputation?

If you see the words “surrealist” and “exquisite corpse” and “alternative history” and immediately think dreamily of China Miéville, then this book may be for you. Miéville’s latest is **The Last Days of New Paris** and it takes place in an alternate version of Marseille that exists within a never-ending Surrealist nightmare landscape where Nazis and Resistance fighters battle it out eternally. Now, first things first, let’s get my bias out of the way: I love China Miéville. Like when I picture perfection (and I mean this in a very broad way, not just writing), I picture him. But, I’m not going to lie, lately I’ve been feeling let-down by him. His most recent story collection, **Three Moments of an Explosion**, was amazing and wonderful and there was a story in there about magical playing cards and so I’m not talking about that book. However, his last novella, **This Census-Taker** was disappointingly flawed (though, I keep going back to it in my head. So maybe there’s more there that I need to go back to) and **The Last Days of New Paris** is equally flawed if, also, equally interesting.

Miéville cannot be accused of not experimenting and trying new things, where so many other authors would not. There’s a lot to admire in **TLDNP**: from the incorporation of different Surrealist visuals to the way Miéville plays with reader’s perceptions of fact/fiction and the interchangeability between them in writing. Plus, there’s a Notes section, which is all I ever ask for anything. On the other hand, I wish there was more to love within these constructions. Of all Miéville’s books, this feels the most like an outline instead of a fully fleshed out novel. Some of that comes down to how he’s constructed it: the almost fragmentary and plain language in parts makes sense in context of the book’s “Afterword,” for example. However, it also doesn’t connect in the emotional way that I want it to: the characters read as far less realized than the art pieces that Miéville describes so lovingly.

In the end, there’s a lot to admire here: the risk-taking, the fairly brilliant incorporation of the idea of what “exquisite corpse” truly means (I can’t wait to read a scholarly article on how the book itself acts as one, honestly), and the layering of the storytelling. However, this feels more like a book that’s important to read if you’re already a fan of Miéville, and want to get a full view of his writing and ideas, rather than for a passing fan or someone looking for an engaging, fantasy read. If you’re the latter, I’d suggest checking out one of his earlier novels, such as **The City & the City** or **Un Lun Dun**.

### The Math

*Baseline Assessment:* 6/10

*Bonuses:* +1 for Surrealism

*Penalties:* -1 if you’re not a fan of Surrealism, it will make the book even harder to follow

*Nerd Coefficient:* 6/10 “still enjoyable, but the flaws are hard to ignore”

*Posted by Chloe — speculative fiction fan in all forms, monster theorist, and nerds of a feather blogger since 2016.*



# MY FAVORITE STORIES DON'T GET NOMINATED: A HUGO LOVE STORY

Joe Sherry



I began work on my [Hugo Longlist](#) early last year and only “finished” when I hit “post.” But even then, it’s not really done because I never stop discovering awesome things I hadn’t previously read, and which simply must be considered for the Hugo Award — it is forever a work in progress.

So I build my list, and I wait for the nomination period to open. I make my nominations, and then I wait.

I love the Hugo Awards. I spend far too much time thinking about nominees and nominations, finalists and works that really should be on the ballot over the ones that made it. I think about how I don’t understand why certain authors continue to be nominated for work I find tedious at best. I think about how I don’t understand why the authors and novels and stories I truly love best are seldom (if ever) nominated. I think about how happy I would be if my nominating ballot decided exactly who would and would not be a Hugo Award nominee. I think about how I love discovering new work and

new favorite authors from the list of the actual nominees.

I love the Hugo Awards.

I love the Hugo Awards even though most of my nominees never make the ballot. I don’t know if the Hugo Award is really the most prestigious award in science fiction and fantasy, or even who is making the claim that it is. I know that it has prestige, it is viewed as notable, and it is a major genre award in which I can participate. I suppose if I wanted to, I could help create the “Feather” award given by the flock here at Nerds of a Feather, but despite Pornokitsch [coming up with their own award](#), I’m not sure if that’s something I really want to do. I participate because I enjoy the process. I participate because it is an opportunity to help recognize the best of science fiction and fantasy, through the wisdom of a self-selecting crowd.

That’s the thing, isn’t it?

The Hugo Awards are presented and administered by the World Science Fiction Society at their annual convention: Worldcon. To nominate, you need to be a Supporting or Attending Member of either the previous year’s Worldcon, or that year’s Worldcon, or the following year’s Worldcon. We often think about “paying money to nominate,” but that’s not entirely what’s happening here. What’s really happening is that we are paying membership dues to the World Science Fiction Society. We are joining the WSFS as a dues-paying member. One of the privileges of membership just happens to be the right to nominate for the award administered by the organization. To vote on the finalists, you have to be a member specifically of that year’s Worldcon. This year it is [MidAmeriConII](#).

I bring this up because I think it’s easy to forget what we’re actually doing when we hand over money in order to nominate and vote. We’re becoming members in a particular organization, whether we plan to attend the convention or just support it.

I digress.

I love the Hugo Awards because in becoming part of the WSFS I get to add one small voice to the multitude and help pick the nominees for the five best novels/stories/



whatevers. In 2014, artist Joey Hi-Fi was one nominating vote from making the final ballot for Best Professional Artist and becoming an official Hugo Award Nominee. One vote.

My favorite stories seldom get nominated. While I am disappointed that other people don't see what I see, I am part of the conversation and I am part of the process. Sometimes being one more voice matters. I want to share with other people the science fiction and fantasy that I find to be awesome each year. I love those occasions when someone mentions to me that they read a novel I wrote about and yeah, I was right, that book was awesome. Maybe that person goes on to also nominate my favorite book for a Hugo Award and maybe they recognize that an artist produced some fantastic work and maybe something I love is nominated for the Hugo. Maybe.

I mentioned earlier that participating in the Hugo Awards is "an opportunity to help recognize the best of science fiction and fantasy, through the wisdom of a self-selecting crowd," and that's really how I think about this. I love thinking about the Hugo Awards and I participate because I personally find value in doing so. Collectively, a bunch of people who love science fiction and fantasy come together and say that these, these novels and stories and artists and fans — this is the best of what I read and watched last year. These are some of the best of what the genre has produced.

Then, when the nominations come out and also after the awards are given, we can all sit back and think...what the hell is everyone else thinking? Why are they so wrong? That book is terrible and this book that I loved is so much better.

Of course my opinions are right and everyone else is wrong. Of course this is true. Unfortunately, a whole bunch of people who are just like me except that their taste in great fiction isn't quite the same disagreed. Or, maybe what I loved was their sixth favorite story and they can only nominate five. Or maybe they just never read it because holy crap there is a lot of stuff published every year. I read a LOT and I don't even scratch the surface of what's out there. What the

Hugo Awards allow me to do is be part of a group where everyone looks at what they read and tries to figure out what the best of that is — and then collectively, the numbers come together and a ballot is produced.

I love the Hugo Awards even when everyone else obviously gets it wrong because at its heart, the Hugo Award nominees are selected by a group of fans who are passionate about science fiction and fantasy. It's a group of fans who, ideally with no agenda beyond love of genre, point to something they love and say "this, this is awesome."

That's pretty cool.

Sometimes enough of them even love the stuff that I love and my favorite things make the ballot. That's even cooler.

*Posted by Joe Sherry — Writer / Editor at Adventures in Reading since 2004, nerds of a feather contributor since 2015, co-editor since 2016. Minnesotan.*



# MYSTIC VALE

Mike N



## A Card-Crafting Gem

**Mystic Vale** is a card-crafting game that generated a lot of buzz this summer at both Origins and Gen Con. This title from Alderac Entertainment Group (AEG) is not only stunning on the table, it is a game that will leave you wanting to immediately reshuffle and play again as soon as the game is over.

In the game, you assume the role of a druid who is attempting to heal the suffering lands of the Valley of Life. While playing the game, you call on various powers and allies to help you save the forest. I would agree with other reviews that have complained the theme feels a bit tacked on, but that is a minor complaint in one of the most mechanically solid games I have ever played. In addition, it allows for some of the most stunning cards that have ever graced my table.

When I first saw the clear cards and the term card-crafting, I was sure this was simply going to be a gimmick. After playing the game, though, I knew that designer John D. Clair had stumbled upon something brilliant that will be used in many different games in the near future. Similar to what **Dominion** did for deck building, **Mystic Vale** will likely do for card crafting.

In **Mystic Vale**, players start with identical decks of cards. These cards are all sleeved, and throughout the game you will purchase new cards, or enhancements, that you sleeve into your starter deck. These enhancement cards are printed on a clear plastic base that allows them to sleeve into your starter card and modify its effect the next time it is in play. There are many com-

binations of enhancements that you can craft and, by not adding to your deck size, you are able to reap the rewards of your new purchases much quicker than a deck builder. Whether you want an efficient deck that turns over more frequently, or you want to earn spirit symbols to buy Vale cards, or you want to increase your spending, the way you craft your cards is up to you. In addition, each turn has a push-your-luck element that really builds tension and adds another layer of strategy to an already exciting game. When you are drawing your starting hand, you can always attempt to gain one more card, but if you reveal a card with decay, then you “spoil” and you lose your turn.

Once the pile of victory points has vanished and the final tally is calculated, a victor is crowned and you will immediately think about how you could have crafted a card slightly differently, and what combinations would work really well together. It is rare to play a game with a mechanic that you have never experienced before, but one that is so intuitive and familiar.

AEG has also just released an expansion to **Mystic Vale**, **Vale of Magic**, which adds cards that provide greater rewards at a greater risk — powerful cards that add to the decay and can increase your chances of spoiling on your turn. It is a great addition that adds a lot of really interesting cards.

## The Math

*Baseline Assessment: 8/10*

*Bonuses:* +1 for an amazingly intuitive and new mechanic; +1 for high quality components with stunning artwork.

*Penalties:* -1 for a theme that feels a little tacked on; -1 for a box that is too big for the game's britches (although more expansions are always welcome!).

*Nerd Coefficient:* 8/10 (well worth your time and attention)

*Posted by Mike N — aka Victor Domashev — comic guy, proudly raising nerdy kids, and nerds of a feather contributor since 2012.*



# ARRIVAL

## European Scribbler



### Astonishing, humane sci-fi, respectfully adapted from the Chiang story

Given all the largely positive reviews already out there on the deeply disturbing internet, I'm wary of merely placing another stone on the cairn of praise (the more readers that look up what a cairn is online is a reduction in the fake-news searches, so go for it). However, given **Arrival's** cautious, fearful, complex and yet ultimately, beautifully warm message, I feel in this world of, well, 2016, no urge to seek out such stories can be strong enough.

A guarded love letter to a daughter (with one hell of a spin on that conceit), Ted Chiang's original short story "Story of Your Life" is a sublime piece of writing. Despite what is often known as info-dumping at points (indeed, the film's adapters were concerned not to just make "he world's most expensive Ted Talk"), these mines of explanatory description of language both written and verbal are the bedrock to the plot, and

to its protagonist. It is a tale based firmly in Chiang's own academic viewpoint, but with a love of fantasy and good, old-fashioned human drama as well. What it does with these starting points is profound and moving, and yet, surprisingly contained and subtle.

I highly recommend this story; it is one of the finest ones I have read over the years. Yet I suggest in very strong terms that you read it after seeing the film. Enough time had passed for me to have submerged my memories of the plot detail, but the film is faithful enough that it could undermine the experience, and I don't think the film's revelations weaken the enjoyment of reading the novella afterwards.

The chief reason I worry about the film being spoiled is, I think, it is finer than the work it is based on. Some elements taken out or replaced I missed, but like **Shawshank** and **Blade Runner**, so much more comes from the cinema experience than the short stories they are based on. **Arrival** is one of the very best reasons to fork out for a cinema ticket this year and makes me more confident in its director's success in his next project, the sequel to **Blade Runner**. Denis Villeneuve slipped up on **Sicario** in my eyes, stumbling with a flawed script, yet even there he brought such exquisite foreboding and tension with a seeming flick of the wrist. His smoothly powerful work continues here, with the shot of our hero arriving on site being up there as cinema's best moment in some time.

Much credit for Villeneuve's results must go to the dazzlingly score by Jóhann Jóhannsson. It's been on my music player frequently since, and is a fine album in its own right. Equally vital, of course, are the sound (which is near-flawless despite Forrest Whittaker being often indecipherable) and photography (which is as superb in low and natural light as Deakins's work in **Sicario**; bravo Bradford Young, who will no doubt shoot the best-looking **Star Wars** film yet when he does the young Solo movie).

The cast, meanwhile, although as sparse as a one-act play, is predictably excellent. It is a joy, pure and simple, to watch a mainstream sci-fi led, no, dominated, by a smart woman who, as played with such gen-



tle force by Amy Adams, lives by her intelligence and by her own (sometimes selfish) emotional desires. **Arrival** is entirely her journey and Adams should be award-laden for a genuinely great performance, yet she probably won't be as it doesn't involve the weak emotional displays so seemingly required to win a Best Actress (this is no Bull-ock cry fest).

As for the reasons relating more directly to why I'm writing about this on this site, the alien craft and occupants are refreshingly different-enough to make this feel like original sci-fi fare. Sure, Kubrick shadows much of the imagery in the craft, and some of the sound. The aliens themselves and their chamber occasionally reminded me of Lynch's **Dune**. Yet this is a vision boldly innovative enough to give that sense of wonder so needed in sci-fi, particularly these days.

"Story of Your Life" offers a much simpler and more practical interaction with the aliens, who are far more creature-like than the strange knuckles of the film. But what fires the mind on the page can be laughable on camera, and Villeneuve and his writers wisely keep the complete physical nature of the aliens elusive. The original story is also more deeply engaged in what one could imagine as a more everyday and realistic set-up surrounding the governmental reaction and procedures, whereas the film decides on propulsive, time-is-running-out movie plotting, including an actual ticking countdown at one point, compared to the weeks or months the source material hints at. There are also moments of pointlessly obstructive military resistance to Adams and fellow scientists in both versions, yet the movie perhaps takes them to extremes. with shouty CIA people and twitchy soldiers.

Quibbles all these things remain, however, in the face of such a lovely piece of filmmaking. Sci-fi is rarely this thoughtful, nor breathtakingly exciting, nor, ultimately so touchingly human.

And that twist. What a twist.

Never have the words to a Madonna chorus been coincidentally so heartbreakingly used. When Adams exclaims them, my popcorn-embattled heart broke.

## **The Math**

*Objective Assessment: 9/10*

*Bonuses:* +1 for the ultimate antidote to the idea of macho posturing being the way to resolve conflict, which sci-fi and politics are too full of lately.

*Penalties:* -1 for some uneven lurches in pace at times (one sudden shift into rapid voice-over montage in particular), and possibly too much of one emotional tone despite some causal humour, from Renner especially, to offset the sombreness .

*Nerd Coefficient:* 9/10 which is what we here class as "very high quality / standout in its category"

*Written by European Scribbler, who believes in the better aliens of our nature, nerds of a feather contributor since 2013*



# ABOUT THAT NEW STAR WARS MOVIE...

The G and Joe Sherry

*Now that the spoiler-ban has expired, it's finally time to talk about **The Force Awakens**! So today, Joe and I present you with our thoughts, opinions, and lingering questions. WARNING: Some heavy-duty spoilers follow, so don't read on if you haven't seen the film (and plan to). — G*



## The G

First off, let me just say that I really enjoyed **The Force Awakens**. Yes, it's basically a remake of **A New Hope**, and yes, there are too many references to the original. But here's a Star Wars film that actually gets why people love Star Wars! Gone are the corny CGI effects, stilted dialogue and tedious plot devices that turned George Lucas's prequels into a running joke, and in their place we have something that looks, sounds, and feels like the genuine article. Plus, Abrams and company have brought the franchise into the new millennium, not least by centering action on a diverse cast of likable young actors. It's not in the same league as **A New Hope** or **The Empire Strikes Back**, but **The Force Awakens** is orders of magnitude better than the prequels.

One thing I particularly enjoyed was how the film declined to infodump the political context, instead letting viewers fill in the blanks. I mean, remember when Obi-Wan Kenobi casually drops that line about the Clone Wars? That needed no explication, and

frankly, the Clone Wars were much cooler when they were just an abstract concept. Similarly, we don't really know what the First Order is, what kind of threat it poses, or why it's being opposed by "the Resistance" — a relatively small and poorly-equipped insurgent force — rather than the New Republic and its rather more imposing fleet. That's just how things are.

Prior to seeing the film, I had expected the First Order to be the insurgents — similar to how things work in Timothy Zahn's Thrawn trilogy. And that role reversal might have injected some appealing moral grayness into the narrative. But Star Wars isn't really about moral grayness, and so the creation of the Resistance may have been driven by a desire to avoid exactly that kind of scenario.

At the same time, it does raise the question of why, exactly, the New Republic is a passive actor in this drama. My pet theory is based on the end of **Aftermath**. The remnants of the Empire abandon their remaining territory among the core worlds for the Outer Rim, where galactic power — whether Imperial or Republican — has historically been thin. The New Republic, which presumably is still in a process of consolidation, would likely be disinclined to risk deploying its fleet in such uncertain space, and might be satisfied funding a smaller force to act in their stead. Sound familiar? It should, as real-world powers often prefer to operate through proxies than deploy ground forces for a direct confrontation, for example in Syria.

That got me thinking about how the analogy of ISIS, while imperfect, might be a better lens through which to understand the First Order than Nazi Germany, regardless of how much Abrams wants to remind us of the latter (and the imagery is not exactly subtle).

Symbolism aside, the First Order doesn't really have much in common with Hitler's mass-scale, industrialized fascism. Rather, like ISIS, it appears to govern an amorphous parastate with minimal institutions. And while the First Order does rule by fear, it is not the fear of an inexorable, ever-present and all-seeing panopticon, but fear of punctuated, ad hoc demonstrations of violence and repression by a marauding force



of religious extremists. On Jakku or Takodana, for example, the First Order does not keep a garrison or collect taxes so much as use lightning raids to periodically take what it wants or needs — a function of its small scale and limited means. And this smallness is reflected in its wannabe Sith Lord, Kylo Ren, whose ragequit adolescence contrasts starkly with the cold, calculating ruthlessness of Darth Vader.

Arguably, **The Force Awakens** just reflects the zeitgeist of Western society in the twenty-first century, and the embedded fears of virus-like zealot movements that respect neither territorial boundaries nor the established rules of engagement.\* Of course, it then does what popular art generally does to political complexities: reduce them to a more easily digestible “good guys vs. bad guys” dynamic. Which is not to say that there’s much of a gray area when it comes to ISIS, an organization that specializes in snuff films and rape slavery, but there certainly is when you consider the Syrian (or Iraqi) civil war holistically, and the range of forces and interests involved there. The battle between the Resistance and First Order, then, is an idealized version of battle between the Western-backed YPG/Free Syrian Army and ISIS — just without the Assad regime, al-Nusra Front, Hezbollah, Iran, Turkey and Russia also pursuing their own complex agendas in the same space.

Oversimplifications aside, civil war is a concept that people who don’t and never have lived through it should grapple with, rather than just write it off as something happening “over there.” **The Force Awakens**, at least, has the potential to get people thinking about the world around them — to a far greater degree than its predecessors. And while it would be very problematic to interpret Syria or another civil conflict using the binary moral spectrum of **The Force Awakens**, the film *might* lead people to read the news differently. Or not. Either way makes for a more interesting and timely narrative than the rote megalomaniacs, illuminati and Hitler/Stalin stand-ins that populate most explodovision blockbusters.

On the other hand, this brush with

sophistication underscores just how profoundly disappointing it is that the film ends with an assault on the planet-killing superweapon, Starkiller Base. It isn’t just that this is the third time our Sith legatees have decided to build a superweapon that can be defeated by a small band of plucky individuals with heart, or that this fact renders **The Force Awakens** entirely predictable. Rather, it’s also because there are so many dramatic possibilities without the planet-killer — real, human drama that unfolds daily in our world. Besides, the First Order is already pretty terrible, running around and massacring civilians whenever they want something (and regardless of whether the massacre actually advances their interests). The Resistance probably doesn’t need any more reasons to knock out their base, and neither do we.

\*A set of standards that everyone ignores, to a degree.

## Joe

Here’s what you really want to know, since **The Force Awakens** begins to set up Star Wars: The Next Generation (you can roll your eyes at me at any time): the new characters in **The Force Awakens** are just as awesome as the old ones we’ve known for thirty years. They might even be better.

Rey, Finn, and even Poe are characters you can build the franchise around as we begin to move forward. Rey begins the movie pretty much where Luke did in **A New Hope**, except that she’s had to survive on her own for a number of years and develop skills that Luke only had to scratch later. She’s like a weird mix of Han, Luke, and Anakin. Actually, maybe she’s a touch more like Anakin if you roll with the idea that her piloting skills comes as much from the Force as it does from natural ability and practice. Hell, Anakin was podracing from the age of three — something that I find baffling, but okay. I love her personality and...

I almost wrote that I loved her chemistry with Finn. While that is true, what I love is the chemistry everyone has. Poe and Finn is a friendship destined for the, ahem, the



stars, Finn and Rey is likewise a wonderful friendship in that brother/sister vein of Luke and Leia. Poe feels like the character that Wedge would have been in the original trilogy had we only seen him more on screen (rather than just in the books, also — go read the X-Wing series from Michael Stackpole, I don't care if it isn't canon anymore). He's idealistic and competent and is one hell of a pilot. I hope we see much more of him in **Episode VIII**.

Han, Leia, and Chewie helped give the movie shape and dimension, the newbies carried the movie and did so admirably — to the point that while I can't imagine how I would have felt if Han and Leia weren't in the movie, I would be perfectly content if we had a Star Wars movie without any of the Big Three characters. The New Three can do it. I'm sold. I want more Rey, more Finn, more Poe, more BB-8, more Maz Kanata. More of the new. More.

### Thirty Years Gone...

If you are anything like me you have probably wondered what in the galaxy has happened to our heroes in the intervening thirty years since the second Death Star was destroyed at the end of **Return of the Jedi**. Now, if you are anything like me, you've also read any number of the related Star Wars Expanded Universe books, story collections, and comics which have filled in the gaps both between the movies as well as continuing the stories of Leia, Han, and Luke for decades following **Return of the Jedi**. You know what happens next.

Except you don't, because two years after Disney's acquisition of Lucasfilm, most of the Expanded Universe was no longer considered canon or official. So, unless they forgot to mention a couple of kids in **The Force Awakens**, Han and Leia now only have one child, not three.

But we're not here to rehash any old and tired arguments about the original Expanded Universe, now known as Legends.

What I actually want to talk about first is Family. Here's what we know: Han and Leia stayed together for a time after **Return**

**of the Jedi** and had a kid together, Ben Solo (a name that doesn't make a whole lot of sense, but we'll move on). Ben, with other kids, trained under Luke to become part of the new order of Jedi until, we don't know how or why, he turned to the Dark Side and killed most or all of Luke's apprentices and became Kylo Ren. There's probably an article to be written about Kylo, but let's stay with Han and Leia for a moment.

This broke them.

My assumption is that Kylo turned ten years ago or so. Han admitted that he didn't know how to handle it, how to stay with Leia with all that pain, so he had gone back to smuggling with Chewie. Chewbacca, it should be noted, is quite clearly done with all of Han's shit and has far more personality in **The Force Awakens** than in the previous three movies combined. He's ready for Han to just go home to Leia. Everyone wants that. Leia wants it. Chewie wants it. Han even seems to want it, but is so obviously scared.

What crushes me is Han's persistent pain of losing his son. Han knows he's alive, but views Ben as being dead — and there's a quiet grief that was probably a giant rage fountain ten years ago.

Leia has had a never-ending war to fight, though we can imagine that there was a period of time — maybe ten years maybe not — that she spent more time in helping build the New Republic and less time fighting the remnants of the Empire before the First Order began to rise from its ashes with Supreme Leader Snoke at its head. The rest of that time? I have a sneaking suspicion that Leia has been fighting one war or another, no less than the one inside her as her son turned to the Dark Side and became a mass murderer (like her father) and her husband/partner/love left because they couldn't work out how to exist together with their son gone. That war is far harder than the one against the Empire.

Kylo's turn also broke Luke. To the best of our knowledge, Luke has gone from the idealistic young "Jedi Knight" who was able to return Darth Vader back to the Light to a man who probably views himself as having failed so badly that everyone would be



better off if he just went into hiding for the better part of ten years.

But I have to wonder about this, because what's going on with that old man on Jakku who has part of the map showing how to find Luke? Has Luke been randomly popping into the galaxy to guide a small priesthood that now exists around the Force? If the old guy knows, something more is going on there. There's a story there.

### **I like it, I love it, I want some more of it...**

One of the things that I like best about **The Force Awakens** is there are so many little things left introduced but unexplored. Jakku feels lived in, hardscrabble.

I want more of Captain Phasma. She's a bit of an enigma character, but she's just cool-looking enough to make her the new Boba Fett. Think about it, Boba Fett barely does anything in the original trilogy. He follows the Falcon to Bespin, but really all he does is collect the bounty even though it was Vader that really captured Han and then he delivers Han (unseen) to Jabba. Then he gets thrown in the Sarlacc pit. So much of the rest of Boba's legend seems to come from the books and the other ancillary material. I want Phasma's legend. Also, that armor is...stellar.

Maz Kanata is awesome, and I hope she survived. Her temple/bar is great. I love her character and personality and the heart that was shining through. Such a wonderful new character. I would say she's slightly underused (much like Phasma), but she shouldn't be a main character in this movie. What she does is help fill out the galaxy and show just how big and varied it is.

I love how Kylo Ren just keeps getting angry and smashing things — like he's the uncontrolled "give into your anger" that Palpatine kept talking about — except yes, this is what giving into your anger actually looks like. It looks like a petulant child smashing things. Which is why the scene with the stormtroopers noticing the rage in the other room and then just turning around is so awesome. They've seen this before.

I love Han's delight in using Chewie's bowcaster. Apparently in all the decades

they've been together, Han has never picked up that bowcaster and fired it. This seems odd, but Han's always been about his blaster and you can argue that he may never have been in quite as tight a spot as he was in **The Force Awakens**.

On the other hand, I equally love Han's exasperation with Finn when he exclaims "That's not how the Force works at all!" I suppose after thirty years, Han might actually know something of the Force he once denied.

### **It's not dark yet, but it's getting there...**

Kylo Ren's struggle to fully accept the Dark Side is interesting to me. You've got a kid who is quite clearly emotionally stunted and only in control when things are going his way. He was (presumably) raised by loving parents who (may) have sheltered him a bit before sending him off to Jedi Boarding School with Uncle Luke who (again, presumably) did not shower him with admiration and full acceptance that Ben is the best thing of all time and when he met (somehow) Snoke — he was convinced to turn from the Light and go to the Dark. He changed his name like any good Sith, murdered his classmates, and possibly chased Luke away within an inch of his life.

But with all that, he struggles because somewhere deep down, he's a good kid who just wants to please his master, no matter who his master is. So he has to convince himself to fully accept the Darkness.

This is all speculation, of course, but one of the great things about Star Wars is thinking far too deeply about it.

The thing is, I don't want them to fill in the gaps of why Kylo is so angry. I'm not even sure I want a meetup with Leia, I think that will break my heart. I think he's just angry and his parents were too much of a legend for him to feel like he could ever live up to it but he almost doesn't want to be "bad" but that's what he chose as a teenager. It's obvious, I think, so don't explain it. It would diminish the story to know too much.

So I don't question quite so hard exactly why The First Order built Starkiller Base, but I do think about how there is a notice-



ably stronger sense of menace coming from The First Order than from the Empire. Part of this could be because The First Order have already destroyed several planets during the course of the movie, rather than just Alderaan, but we also get to see Stormtroopers slaughtering a village. Our heroes were at real risk of being killed by Stormtroopers on Takodana (Maz Kanata's homeworld).

The movie was dark. It was revealed that Stormtroopers are no longer clones, but are rather kids taken as children and raised to be brainwashed into being perfect soldiers. Also, I swear there was a line about bringing in Clone Troopers if the non-clones can't do the job. I'd love to see that explored. Regardless, it's amazing that Finn was able to get out at all, but given the concerns of reconditioning, maybe it isn't quite so surprising. It's all these kids know. It's also reminiscent of the Jedi of old, taking children because they're easier to train. Remember, Anakin was deemed too old to be trained when he was nine because he had already formed attachments.

But let's talk about some of that darkness, most notably Kylo Ren's murder of his father, Han Solo. I'm not sure anyone who knows about some of the history of Star Wars was surprised here because Harrison Ford wanted Han Solo to die in **Return of the Jedi**, and having his son kill him does permit some of that final push to the Dark Side. How can Kylo possibly be redeemed after that? Can Leia let that go? We're getting ahead of ourselves.

Kylo Ren is a villain living under the emotional shadow of Darth Vader (his grandfather). He tries so hard to be amoral, to be the baddest bad in the galaxy, but he almost prays to Vader's helmet asking for help. He almost needs Han's permission to kill him. But now that he's killed his father (something that I don't think Kylo is going to accept easily, mind you), what won't he do?

Sure, Kylo Ren was ultimately defeated by Rey, and saved by a convenient crevasse opening between them, but that has me wondering. If Rey was able to face down and kill Kylo in anger, would she have started down the path to the Dark Side? Will that be one

of her struggles? Even if it isn't, I think we're still in store for an even angrier Kylo Ren to go darker and deeper.

Also, The First Order is a great name.

### **If you build it, they will come...**

One of the main criticisms leveled at **The Force Awakens** is that the framework of the film is that of **A New Hope**, as if JJ Abrams looked at the first movie and then tried to figure out how to make it new. This is fair, I think. All of my rather limited issues with **The Force Awakens** had to do with how strongly it aped **A New Hope** at times. I suppose Starkiller Base makes sense, from the perspective of the remnants of an empire pissed off that the rebels kept blowing up their planet-destroying weapon. After **Return of the Jedi**, however The First Order came about, the people in charge looked at the Death Star, saw what went wrong, and decided to level up and go Crocodile Dundee on the galaxy. "Death Star? *This* is a Death Star."

Of course, my annoyance with that has less to do with Starkiller Base being the Death Star injected with steroids and more to do with how it went down. The scene with Captain Phasma being told to get into a trash compactor is funny because we can see Han relishing the sense of payback there, but the quest to get the shields down so that the X-Wings can start their bombing run and then yes, we do get a short bit with the fighters flying into a trench, that bit is far too on the nose with the callback to **A New Hope**.

If you're going to do Starkiller Base, okay, let's do it. But then maybe it doesn't go down exactly the same with the planet blowing up. Maybe it's just crippled. Of course, once you introduce the base, it probably does need to be destroyed. Imagine the weirdness of a scene with Leia having finally defeated The First Order and then taking control of Starkiller Base. Do we worry that she'll be corrupted and consider using it?

The same goes for Leia telling Han that there is still good in their son, that she can feel it. It's too close to Luke's insistence on being able to redeem Darth Vader.



There's a lot to love here, though. Actually, most of the movie is smiling love.

First, **The Force Awakens** felt more like what we remember Star Wars to be than any of the prequel movies ever did. Yes, I know, I just wrote about how that's because Abrams dropped the plot of **A New Hope** into **The Force Awakens** and then changed the window dressing, but the feeling of Star Wars is nostalgic love. Nostalgia isn't bad, and so many of us have seen Star Wars so many times and can scarcely remember a time when we hadn't seen the movie. By the time we hit our teenage years, watching Star Wars was already an exercise in nostalgia.

The thing is, nostalgia gets us in the door — Rey and Finn keep us there. Add in a dash of Poe as the Wedge we always wanted outside of the books and never got, and we've got the future of Star Wars right here. The future is bright.

### **Final Thought...**

They're bringing Lando back in **Episode VIII**, right? Right?



# SNYDERISMS

Dean E.S. Richard

Do you remember **Iron Man**? The first one? When we were all “Robert Downey Jr. is still alive? Will he stay sober on set? Yeah, right, a good Marvel movie lololol.” That turned out okay, didn’t it?

Well, the DC Cinematic Universe, which had the MCU template to go off of, is off to something of a less than a stellar start. Three entries in, and DC fanboys are trying to shut down Rotten Tomatoes (which is just an aggregator, you idiots) because all three have received universally low reviews. There are myriad reasons for this ice-cold reception, but I want to talk about the biggest one (in my semi-humble opinion).

It has to do with Zack Snyder.

While I fully realize that a ton of blame can and should be placed at WB and DC’s door, I want to focus on where Snyder fails in basically all of his films, because that failing has essentially crippled the DCU.

Although he can make a very pretty movie that looks exactly like his source material brought to life, Zack Snyder, simply put, does not understand subtext.

I was equal parts excited and apprehensive, as I’m sure many were, about an adaptation of **Watchmen**. As the excellent Honest Trailer points out, even today this remains an incredibly divisive film. It is, in my opinion, a beautiful film, with some excellent touches, such as the soundtrack. It lifts scenes directly from the comic. In fact, Snyder carried a copy of **Watchmen** with him at all times on set. This gave me loads of confidence in what he was doing. So why is it not beloved, then, when it was a visually faithful adaptaion of one of the best comic stories of all time?

Because Zack Snyder does not understand subtext. **Watchmen** is a deep, complex story about a lot more than just superheroes, and is almost completely satirical. None of that made it into the film. It was pretty, sure, and was a decent action romp — but that’s not going to cut it when you’re adapting the

best graphic novel of all time.

**300** is garbage, so we’re not even going to talk about that. And I don’t think I could have been more disappointed with a movie than I was with Snyder’s **Sucker Punch** — the previews looked amazing, the action, the depth of...the...story...was like jumping off a high dive into a kiddie pool. It had no depth. Nothing about trauma, about rape culture, any actual exploration of the human condition. Even the actual action in the movie didn’t live up to the glory the trailer presented.

Then comes the ostensible beginning of the DCU, **Man of Steel**, which was admittedly better than **Superman Returns**, but



only by virtue of not being a non-stop snooze-fest. Except...remember how in **Man of Steel** Superman, paragon of virtue, just suddenly killed Zod?

I don’t even like Superman all that much, but woof. I though he stood for “truth, justice, and the American way,” although, in fairness, the way America is these days, murder \*is\* the American way. But Supes offing his nemesis is not exactly what he’s known for. There might be in-universe reasons for it (Zod \*was\* about to torch a family), but it’s still out there. Add in the fact that Batman — whose express edict is to *not* kill — murders with abandon in **Batman vs. Superman**.

Which, hey, I don’t care. I’m with Punisher, if we scoot over to the MCU for a bit. Daredevil and Batman are half-measures when it comes to stopping these baddies. Evil henchmen dying isn’t such a bad thing — in my opinion.

But it’s not my opinion that counts. The idea behind Batman and Superman is that they represent the best in humanity, and



no one has accused me of being that. Batman and Superman are supposed to have the ability to be forces for good without taking lives.

This is what made Nolan's Batman trilogy so good — he truly understood the character, not only of Batman, but also of Gordon, Dent, and the Joker. **The Dark Knight** was an exploration of that — not just a bunch of action set pieces and big moments.

There is tremendous depth to Ledger's Joker, and a slow momentum building to the big moments. The Joker leaning out the window of the captured police cruiser, his plan in motion, having been executed to perfection and followed by the unwitting pawns of Batman and the police force, epitomizes the character.



He is gleefully mad and glad to let Batman kill him, taunting him to “hit me,” just to get Batman to break his code. That is the Joker — and that is Batman. The Snyder-verse Batman has no such conflict. Killing the Joker would be a matter of course, since he has no problem killing criminals. One of the central conflicts of the character just isn't there. It's what makes Moore's admittedly flawed **Killing Joke** so powerful — Batman finally crosses the line, so does the Joker win? That's a question, for as much as I enjoy Affleck's Batman and Leto's Joker, that core conflict will never — can never — be addressed in this universe, simply because it is not a question Zack Snyder seems at all concerned with presenting or exploring.

In the end, what is wrong with these films under Snyder's direction and larger influence is not the dour tone, or even the fact that the so-called Justice League is fine killing people out of hand, it is that there is

nothing beneath. There is no depth to them, their motivations, or their conflicts. A battle between these two powerful beings is undone by a name. Martha. It's simplistic and boring. The films leap from big moment to big moment, with nothing between with lower, more human stakes — when every moment is big, none of them are.

WB placing Snyder in the Kevin Feige-MCU role overseeing and shaping the entire DCU This causes a ripple effect even in the films Snyder doesn't direct. Look at **Suicide Squad**. I think, like **BvS**, the movie we got in theaters is not the movie we were supposed to see. There are painfully obvious reshoots, done to add humor because **BvS** was too dark. Guess what, WB? **Suicide Squad** should have been dark. So Snyder and WB seemingly reacted to the perception that **BvS** wasn't light enough, and assumed that making **Suicide Squad** funnier would be the solution — not, say, actually exploring what makes bad guys bad, or giving them anything, like, say, character development.

DC is stumbling out of the gate, hard, and it's not because the movies aren't funny, or pretty, or because they lack action. It's because they lack depth.

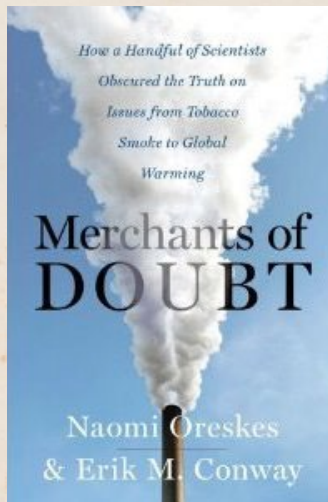
*Posted by Dean — the author of the 3024AD series of science fiction stories. You can read his other ramblings and musings on a variety of topics (mostly writing) on his blog. When not holed up in his office tweeting obnoxiously, he can be found watching or playing sports, or in his natural habitat of a bookstore.*



# STRANGER THAN FICTION: MERCHANTS OF DOUBT

by NAOMI ORESKES AND ERIK M. CONWAY

Vance K



**A true story of organized disinformation that takes on Shakespearean proportions**

*I have to preface this review by saying that when it comes to American politics, I am non-partisan — Ed.*

Written by two science historians, **Merchants of Doubt** is a deeply unsettling account of the organized campaign against science in order to achieve political or financial gain that has been going on in the United States since the 1960s. It begins with the cigarette industry hiring former Manhattan Project physicists to cast doubt on the then-emerging scientific consensus that smoking causes cancer and other diseases, and the book continues through organized misinformation campaigns waged in favor of the Strategic Defense Initiative (a space-based anti-missile defense system dubbed “Star Wars” in the 1980s), against nuclear winter, acid rain, the hole in the ozone layer, the ban on DDT, and climate change. What all of these campaigns have in common are, a) the same cast of characters, chiefly retired government physicists, b) the same playbook,

and c) their stunning effectiveness.

This is, flat-out, the most Orwellian true story I’ve ever read. Through extensive (and boy do I mean extensive) research and citations, authors Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway assembled essentially a timeline of scientific knowledge on each of these topics, and then chronicled the well-funded and strategically-orchestrated attempts to cast doubt on that knowledge by using an arsenal that included:

- a pattern of bypassing the scientific peer-review process by taking spurious (or completely unfounded) scientific claims directly to the mass media
- exploiting a residual media bias left over from the “Fairness Doctrine” to ensure coverage
- accusing scientists of “politicizing” their findings (which is what the accusers were, in fact, doing themselves)
- publicly asking incriminating questions whose answers were known in the scientific community but not by the lay public
- accusing dissenting voices of being enemies of freedom, and
- mounting ad hominem attacks on scientists whose work they could not discredit

The book details how, starting in the Reagan White House and continuing through every Republican administration since, the strategies established to confuse the public about the dangers of smoking have been employed to, increasingly, discredit science itself, and the idea that facts are superior to opinions in general. This was all done in the name of free market economics and making U.S. domestic policy more business friendly (read: de-regulated). If you really pull this thread, it becomes truly terrifying — and illuminating — to think how far the ripples from these stones have extended. Of course US students lag behind those of other developed nations — business interests have spent two generations working to show that science is a leftist, subversive attack on freedom. Of course an increasing number of Americans deny scientific knowledge in favor of religious explanations — business interests have spent two generations equating scientists with



“godless” communists. Of course the American public thinks there is still no scientific consensus on man-made climate change — business interests have spent two generations trying to confuse them.

I realize that this sounds like anti-GOP propaganda or a liberal agenda masquerading as science reporting. But that’s kind of the point. That reaction is how we’ve been, for lack of a better word, programmed. Despite the extensive citations and references, I didn’t want to believe that this book’s argument was legit, so I did my own brief research before writing this review just to confirm that the reporting behind the book was sound, and it sure seems to be. I even wrote to the authors, and they wrote back. If there is a problem with this book, it is that some of the chapters are so dense with blow-by-blow chronologies of events, reports, review comments, internal memos, meeting minutes and the like that the read does get a little bogged down. But I think that level of minutiae was necessary to protect the book’s contents from partisan attacks, as well as simply casual denials. “That can’t be true. That strains credulity. No way that happened.” But it did. And it’s all documented.

Ok, so terrifying-dystopian-nightmare-is-actually-terrifying-reality. That’s bad. But that’s only one aspect of the book. If you think a little outside the lines — pull the thread a little bit, like I said before — and think about the guys behind these long cons, the story takes on epic, Shakespearean proportions on a human level. What would prompt decorated scientists who spent their entire careers working for the U.S. government to spend their retirement as consultants who actively undermined the very field that they had given their entire professional lives to? Well, money, sure. But I think it goes beyond that, and the authors do, too.

Some of these guys feel like classic villains in that they didn’t receive the accolades they felt they deserved from the larger scientific community, so they took their revenge later by discrediting that community. Ok. But for the rest of them, they feel more like tragic heroes. These guys won the Cold War, and they did it with science. More than

giving their lives to science, they gave it to Freedom. And once the Cold War was won by these men who were assuredly warriors, what was left to fight? I was reminded of **Richard III**, who opens his eponymous play by saying that while others may enjoy the fruits of a hard-earned peace, he is not shaped for such pleasures, and “since I cannot prove a lover...I am determined to prove a villain.” Late in **Merchants of Doubt**, we see specific examples of how, starting in the 1980s as actual communism loosened its grip on Europe, people began claiming that environmentalists were actually communists in disguise. They brought out the old saw of the “slippery slope,” saying that anyone who wanted to regulate anything only did so out of a hidden, communist agenda. So the Cold Warriors went back to fighting. The sad irony is that their lasting legacy was one of undermining their own life’s work.

But in **Richard III**, we see the comeuppance, the realization by the tragic figure of his own failure, and what it has cost. “My kingdom for a horse” has lived for four hundred years because audiences relish watching a man who has caused so much misery and bloodshed to possess power offer it all away for a horse. In reality, though, there was no comeuppance. These men (those who have now died) went to their graves wealthy, thinking they had fought the good fight. The ones left bleeding, shot full of arrows, were us.

## **The Math**

*Objective Quality:* 7/10

*Bonuses:* +1 for the extensive research; +1 for the conclusion, which really puts a human face on what has come before; +2 for being a Really Important Book

*Penalties:* -1 for being quite tedious in parts; -1 for depressing the shit out of me

*Nerd Coefficient:* 9/10. This is essential reading.

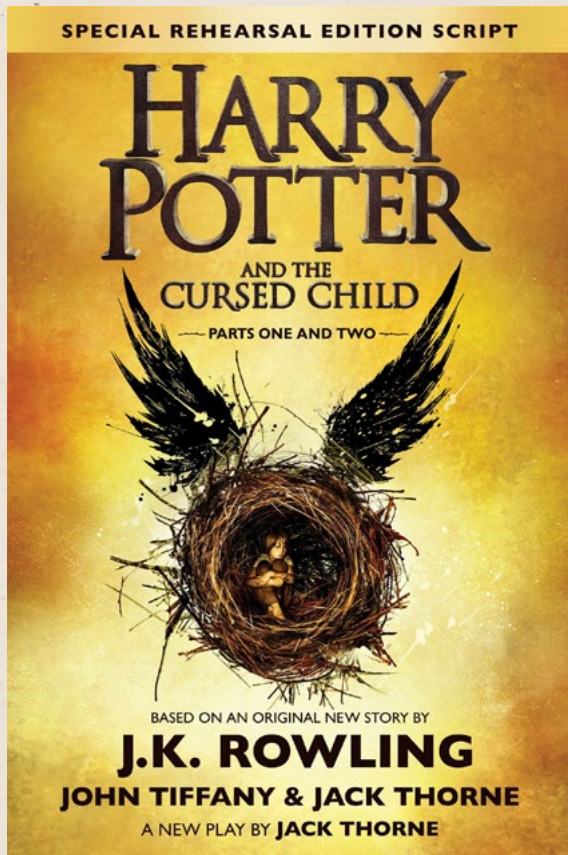
*Published by Vance K — cult film reviewer, occasional book reviewer, and co-editor of nerds of a feather, flock together since 2012.*



# HARRY POTTER AND THE CURSED CHILD

by J. K. ROWLING, JOHN TIFFANY, & JACK THORNE

Tia



a.k.a. **Harry Potter and the Cursed Child Parts 1 & 2, Special Rehearsal Edition Script**

a.k.a. **Harry Potter and the Plot of Convenience**

a.k.a. **Harry Potter and His Lighting-Shaped Plot Device**

This review contains spoilers for **Harry Potter and the Cursed Child**, but if you haven't read it yet, don't worry. You're not missing much.

It is no secret that I am [not a huge fan of what Rowling has been doing with the Potterverse](#), but after some soul searching, I decided to approach **Harry Potter and the Cursed Child** with an open mind and an

open heart. Because, like nearly every other Harry Potter fan out there, I would love nothing more than another Harry Potter book. But as I'm sure you know by now, **Cursed Child** is not actually a book – it's a script (to a two-part play that the vast majority of Harry Potter fans will never get to see) – and it was not actually written by J.K. Rowling, despite her name being plastered across the cover.

Surprisingly, the fact that **Cursed Child** is a script is likely its best feature. Good dialogue is very hard to write and Jack Thorne does a great job of advancing the plot almost solely through dialogue, with only small snippets of set direction throughout. Although I found the overuse of the word “discombobulated” off-putting, perhaps discombobulated is a British-ism that this American isn't used to (European Scribbler? A little help?). Personally, I'd have gone with disoriented.

**Harry Potter and the Cursed Child** begins right where **Deathly Hallows** left off, with the (god awful) epilogue where the children of the original series' characters are now heading off to Hogwarts. And here is where begins an entire play of nothing but cheap plot devices. For example, the children are all overly familiar with and fond of reiterating the events of the series proper, which is an unnecessary stating of the obvious, thank you very much. It begins with Rose Granger-Weasley telling Albus Severus Potter (ugh) that it is VERY important with whom you sit on your first Hogwarts Express ride because that is how their parents all met. The two of them end up sitting with Scorpius Malfoy, Draco's son, and in an obvious reversal of **Sorcerer's Stone**, Albus decides to be friends with Scorpius (who is the opposite of his father at that age) and Rose un-approvingly leaves the compartment. As you might remember from the epilogue, prior to boarding the train, Albus expresses concern that he'll be sorted into Slytherin, and he is, which of course makes him a terrible human being and everyone hates him for it. Not really, but it is the source of much resentment throughout the story, as Albus spends most of it moody and irritable, a la Harry in **Order of**



**the Phoenix**, but without the moldy Voldy connection to excuse it all.

The story then jumps ahead to the students' fifth year, where the major plotline is an attempt to go back in time to save the life of Cedric Diggory, of all people. This is orchestrated by Voldemort's daughter and yes, you read that right. Apparently Voldemort got it on with Belletrix in the back of his tour bus nine months before the Battle of Hogwarts. Anyway, the product of the Voldastrange ship apparently needs Albus and Scorpius to fulfil one of the lamest prophecies ever:

*When spares are spared, when time is turned, when unseen children murder their fathers: then will the Dark Lord return.*

I mean, now we're not even trying anymore.

Anyway the boys get their hands on what is supposedly the last time-turner in existence, which Hermione hides in her bookshelf using a series of crappy puzzles. Their first attempt to save Cedric results in an altered timeline where Ron and Hermione do not get together, which causes Hermione to become a shrew. Ya know, like all women do when they don't find a man. Wait a minute **Cursed Child**, I have something here for you...



The second attempt to save Cedric involves Albus and Scorpius blowing him up like a balloon which apparently humiliates Cedric to the point that he drops out of the Tri-Wizard Tournament and becomes a Death Eater extraordinaire, resulting in an altered timeline where Voldemort reigns supreme.

"But you mentioned Hermione!" I can hear you saying. "What about Harry, Hermione, and Ron?" Well, don't tighten your nostalgia strings yet. The trio are now in their 40s, and despite having been married for like what, 20 years, Harry and Ginny still have zero chemistry. Ginny is sports editor at the *Daily Prophet*, Harry is the Head of Magical Law Enforcement (and not an Auror), Hermione is Minister of Magic of course, though she doesn't really get much respect, and Ron is such a joke that he literally runs the joke shop but for some reason is never there and is always at the Ministry of Magic to conveniently be involved in all important conversations. Very rarely do any of these characters seem like their old selves. This is either a lack of understanding or of execution (or both) by the author.

When Albus disappears, Harry's scar starts hurting again and, for some reason, it shows him exactly where Albus is. Rita Skeeter has published what seems to be **The Goblet of Fire**, which all of the kids have read front to back so they know exactly what to do and where to go to find Cedric. Dumbledore has a portrait in Harry's office, because... actually I have no idea why he would have a portrait in the Head of Law Enforcement's office, and so on with the cheap plot devices.

I could go on, but I won't. The play is just not very good. The plot sucks and is not at all original. It doesn't take much imagination to give your beloved characters children and have those children basically relive the events of the original characters, and that is pretty much what is going on here. I know there were convenient plot devices in the series proper, but they were enveloped by extraordinary world building and character development. It just doesn't work here. I'm sure the production is very beautiful and well-acted, but I, like you, will probably never get to see it.

We can, however, thank **Harry Potter and the Cursed Child** for two excellent Potterverse revelations: 1) the Hogwarts Express trolley witch is a knife-handed warden ninja warrior, and 2) even wizards have to worry about floo-ing while intoxicated.

Oh, and by the way, I have no idea who



the 'cursed child' is supposed to be – Delphi (Voldy's kid)? Albus? Scorpius? Theodore?

After reading this, it has become clear that we really don't need any more Harry Potter books. I agree that his story is over. But that doesn't mean we can't have more books in the Potterverse. In particular, I think **Fantastic Beasts**, with a well done (read: put some effort into it) American wizarding world could make a fantastic (sorry for the unintentional pun) series of novels. Fanfictioners unite!

### **The Math**

*Baseline Assessment:* 8/10 because it starts with **Harry Potter and the..**

*Bonuses:* +1 for being surprisingly easy to read for a script

*Penalties:* -2 for making Hermione miserable without a husband; -1 for Harry's scar serving as a missing child beacon; -1 for completely devaluing Ron to the point where he serves no purpose except poor comic relief; -1 for not even trying to create unique new characters or plotlines; -1 for dropping the ball with the only potentially good new character of Scorpius who is mostly just lame jokes and self-proclaimed geekiness which is defined only by reading books; -2 for using the names Harry Potter and JK Rowling to promote this as the eighth Harry Potter story but producing nothing but lazy drivel

*Nerd Coefficient:* 1/10 — especially bad considering what it claims to be and for playing on fan emotions to make money because you know that's why they published this crap.



# THURSDAY MORNING SUPERHERO

Mike N

November 17, 2016

Since next Thursday is Thanksgiving and one of my only weeks off each year, I thought I would open this week's post with the comic book creators I am thankful for. I am thankful for the duo of Joe Hill and Gabriel Rodriguez who introduced me to the magical world of **Locke and Key**. I am thankful to Jeff Lemire for making me a better father by reading the complicated father/son relationships that tend to remain central in his stories. I am thankful for Brian K. Vaughan for continuing to push the boundaries and for gifting us the epic that is **Saga**. I am thankful for Matt Kindt and his ability to cause me to question reality and to look for hidden clues beneath the surface. There are many other creators that I am thankful for, but I feel I am starting to ramble. I will finally say that I am thankful that smaller publishers are continuing to thrive and companies like Image, Dark Horse, IDW, and many others have provide creators the freedom to create such wonderful works of art.



## Pick of the Week:

*Ether* #1 — It is a happy day when we have a new Matt Kindt comic, and it should come as no surprise that it involves a mystery. In what appears to be a classic whodunit set in the magical world known as the Ether, I feel that there is much to unravel about our detective and some of the interesting characters that populate the magical city. Boone Dias is a scientist who has been traveling to the Ether's capital city, Agarthia, in an attempt to gain a scientific understanding of knowledge. On his most recent trip, his presence is requested by the mayor, who needs his help solving a murder. We learn that Dias has solved other mysteries by using the logic that is found on Earth. In classic Kindt form, we are introduced to a series of interesting characters and magical objects. Among them is a bird known as the bloody screecher, and a bullet that can change course mid-flight. While this side of the tale is enough to capture my interest, what Kindt reveals about Dias' life on Earth is what has me intrigued. This is truly a story about two sides of a coin, and it is going to be a blast learning about them both.

## The Rest:

*Thanos* #1 — I cannot think of a better fit for a new Thanos story than having it penned by Jeff Lemire. In the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Thanos is a power-hungry Titan and a force to be reckoned with. This is true in comic book form, but his past is filled with unrequited love and his familial relationships are a great fit with Lemire. Thanos has returned to the Black Quadrant to reclaim his throne and restore his order once again. His son and a couple of other Titans, teamed up with Death of course, have a plan to take it away from him. Lemire wastes no time demonstrating Thanos' power and setting the stage for a family throw down. Seems fitting with Thanksgiving only one week away.

*Old Man Logan* #13 — I hope you are all feeling as happy as I am that this week's entry includes back-to-back Lemire titles. In the fitting conclusion to this series, Logan channels his time in the wastelands after



he had given up everything to live a normal life. While I love seeing Wolverine break out the claws and go berserk, it is always a nice change of pace to be reminded about how much he craves a simple life. By channeling that desire and how truly caring he is, Logan is able to calm the young boy who has been leading the Silent Order in one last chance at setting things right. Despite some very intense moments, the beauty that Lemire is able to inject in this final issue is a nice way to wrap things up. Even if everything isn't fully resolved.

*Batman #11* — While I wasn't feeling the last issue when Batman and Catwoman were scheming to break Psycho Pirate out of Bane's prison, I must say that this issue provided a pleasant surprise. Things don't quite go according to plan and Tom King provides some nice surprises for his readers. I will say that having more Catwoman is always a good thing, and I am intrigued to see how the Ventriloquist will pan out in the next issue. I will admit that the last issue fooled me into thinking this was a simple heist, and I thoroughly enjoyed how things panned out. Looking forward to issue #12.

*Posted by Mike N aka Victor Domashev — comic guy, proudly raising nerdy kids, and nerds of a feather contributor since 2012.*



# METAL GEAR SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN by KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS

Brian



## The man who sold the world

I have a love/hate relationship with the Metal Gear series; I loved **Metal Gear Solid**, and I hated every other game in the series. That's not true. I haven't played all of them, and I also love **Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance**, but that is a game whose gameplay is so out of place with the rest of the series that it's hard to include it in the same breath. The point is that I feel **Metal Gear Solid** struck a perfect balance between excellent gameplay and over-indulgent creator nonsense that the other games in the series did not. I didn't get excited for **Metal Gear Solid V** when it was announced as two games, didn't get excited when it reviewed well, and really paid it no notice until it was selected as Giant Bomb's #2 game of the year. I always buy their game of the year, but I don't have a WiiU, so I deferred to the number two choice. I set my prejudices aside for a moment, and

jumped into **Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain**.

You are codename Punished "Venom" Snake, the legendary Big Boss, and it's 1984. Your Mother Base has been destroyed, your forces killed, and you've been hospitalized with critical injuries you received in the escape. After an explosive wake up, you're reunited with your lieutenants, Ocelot and Miller, and start about the task of rebuilding your private army (the Diamond Dogs), and tearing apart Afghanistan and the Angola-Zaire border to exact your revenge on the man who nearly killed you, Skull Face.

**MGSV** has a lot of interconnected systems in it, but for the sake of the "micro" in microreview, let's focus on the core gameplay loop. Storyline missions are broken into episodes. Each one starts you at one point in the open world map, and gives you an objective or two. How you achieve those objectives, such as eliminating an enemy commander or rescuing a POW, is up to you. At your disposal are a huge number of weapons (lethal and non-lethal) and utility items, ranging from the standard Metal Gear cardboard box, to inflatable decoys and smoke grenades that can summon your attack helicopter and fire support team. What works so well in these missions is that they encourage stealth and doing things quietly, but if you screw it up and have to shoot your way out, it doesn't really punish you in the way other Metal Gear games will. There are a ton of tools at your disposal. You can, should, and will need to use them all.

The sheer variety of missions and objectives and ways to accomplish them means **MGSV** rarely feels repetitive, arbitrary, or boring. Sometimes I was carefully scoping out enemy positions, creeping through their defenses, and quickly slipping out, POW in a fireman's carry, without a trace. Sometimes I would try to be sneaky, fail, and finish my objectives only after killing every single person in the area. In one mission, I was having trouble sneaking in, so I shot a rocket at an enemy position. It created a diversion, so while they were all facing in the direction of where I shot the rocket from, I was able to sneak around behind them and finish the



mission. With the exception of the very noisy rocket, I was neither seen nor heard.

There is a lot more going on, including side ops (side quests in other games), buddies and their relationships to you, base building, online mission dispatches, item and weapon research, and regular open world exploration and collectible finding. It's all great, and none of it is jammed down your throat too fast. In fact, I'd estimate a solid 1/3 of the game is a steady tutorial ramping up to having all of your systems online and moving.

What doesn't work so hot is the story. It's less nonsense than some Metal Gears, but the conclusion is extremely underwhelming. It feels cut off, like the development team suddenly ran out of time or money, or both. It leaves a lot of loose ends that aren't remotely addressed by the next game in the series timeline, which would be the original **Metal Gear Solid**. It does one thing right at the end, but a dozen different things wrong.

I went into **MGSV** extremely skeptical, and was absolutely engrossed by it. It's hard for me not to be effusive about it. I just enjoyed this game so, so much. If I had played it earlier, it would've easily been one of my favorite games of 2015. Not quite good enough to unseat **The Witcher 3**, but it's excellent and they do have a lot of similarities. It's good enough to make me want to revisit those previous Metal Gear games that I didn't put a lot of time into. It's a real shame that Hideo Kojima has parted ways with Konami, and thus the Metal Gear series. The series may be at a functional end, but it went out on an extremely high note.

Side note: If you're likewise not a huge Metal Gear fan and not willing to jump headfirst into the full **The Phantom Pain**, check out **Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes**. It is more-or-less a demo for that excellent core gameplay loop, and it's a quarter of the price of the full game. Yes, it's a paid demo, but it contains an area not seen within **The Phantom Pain**, gives some backstory to the full product, and offers some items to carry over.

## **The Math**

*Baseline Assessment: 9/10*

*Bonuses: +1 extremely Solid (ha!) gameplay that rarely feels tedious or not fun*

*Penalties: -1 rushed ending undercuts dozens of hours of build up*

*Nerd Coefficient: 9/10 (very high quality/standout in its category)*

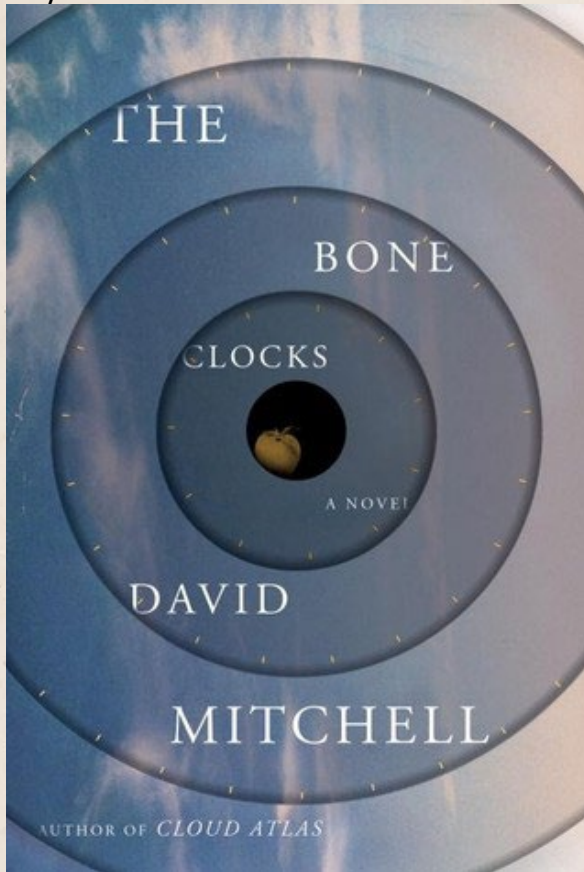
*Posted by brian — sci-fi/fantasy/video game dork and nerds of a feather contributor since 2014*



# THE BONE CLOCKS

## by DAVID MITCHELL

Zhaoyun



**Magic realism the way it should be — read it and weep, Murakami!**

I've long been a fan of David Mitchell, even when he was perpetuating irritating stereotypes about Japan/Asia as some sort of inscrutable land of mystery and weirdness. Whenever his stories ranged beyond the Orientalist East, I found even more to like. **Cloud Atlas**, for example, was a wonderful book, though [as The G has ardently argued](#), the movie adaptation didn't quite live up to the magic of the original — to put in charitably. But I had such a powerful liking for the book that even the serious problems of the film, most notoriously the “yellow-face” problem, didn't totally ruin the experience for me (and you can put that on your promotional materials, Wachowski sisters: “it didn't totally ruin it for me!” may be the most spectacular example of damning with faint praise I can imagine). But anyway, I was doubly excited

to see what Mitchell, the Murakami Haruki of the U.K., would manage with a British setting.

This weirdly wonderful novel did not disappoint. It's almost impossible to say anything of substance about the book's plot without revealing key details, or philosophical perspectives, but suffice to say it's a strange, and strangely satisfying mystery involving two kinds of others living side-by-side with humans and fighting an ideological (and occasionally physical) war through the ages. It's (as always) well-written, and at times, the book achieves an almost poetic level of lyrical beauty; most of the characters are quite vivid and hold the readers' interest with ease.

Best and rarest of all, to the extent it's about any one “main” character, it follows the entire lifecycle of a woman, breaking with fantasy, and practically every other genre, to go beyond just the maiden-to-mother stage. We are introduced to Holly Sykes as a teenager, and see her at all the major stages of her life thereafter. Moreover, just when it seems that from a magical point of view she's no longer “useful” (or, to put it in pop culture terms, she's become a “Muggle”), Mitchell gently points out, in a manner I found actually more compelling than, say, Ursula Le Guin's overcompensatory pivot towards an older woman in Tehanu (and continued in her more recent fiction), that a) she's got many major roles to play still, and therefore b) people can't become “useless” even if they seem powerless. Yes, all in all it was a most satisfying story.

On the other hand, my one major dissatisfaction with the story, ironically, lies in this visceral reaction of satisfaction after digesting it. Why, I wondered, did the story satisfy me so? The answer, I believe, is in the melodramatic clash at the story's heart. I mean “melodrama” in the more abstract sense, or in other words, the restitution of injustice, the delivery of “comeuppance” to the bad guys. The reference to Rowling was intentional, since for all the care Mitchell poured into the crafting of the story and its three-dimensional characters, the bad guys, with one Snape-like exception, are about as three-dimensional as a paper Slytherin



banner. Taken en masse, they are utterly remorseless and cruel, and as such, it's not hard to figure out who is "right" in the age-old conflict between the two sides. One side is practically saintly, living in harmony with nature (whatever that means), and the other is a bunch of vampiric predators, living in a way that is utterly unnatural, a violation of nature. When they lose (no spoilers here, since no novel would dare let such black-hearted villains triumph in the end!), the reader cannot fail to rejoice, to crow in savage triumph at the melodramatic, vengeful resolution of the injustice.

That strikes me as a bit of a cheap emotional payoff. Is there really anyone or anything in the world so utterly evil as to deserve a Voldemort-like annihilation?

Luckily for both Mitchell and his readers, the story is not solely about this magical battle between the hippies and the psychopaths: it's also about how human beings weather the ravages of time, and it's here that the novel is most successful. Watching Holly as she grows, and rages, and loves, and grieves, and accepts what comes, is a delight, even if a bittersweet one. The same expansive treatment of time that characterizes many of Mitchell's other novels works especially well here, in the chronicle of one person's life in all its tremendous complexity, so fans of his other books will doubtless love this one as well. In fact, he included plenty of Easter Egg-style tie-ins to his other work, with familiar characters showing up now and then, suggesting this book is very much a part of his MLU (Mitchell Literary Universe). Yet, this novel is never merely "more of the same;" even longtime fans might, like me, find themselves in tears a few times, so poignant is the pathos, so haunting the lyrical writing. But I suspect it will appeal also to the first-time visitor to the MLU—so no matter who you are, consider scheduling a visit!

### **The Math:**

*Objective\*Assessment:* 8/10

*Bonuses:* +1 for being beautifully enough written, and carefully enough designed, to bring me to tears several times (the terror of

the parents at the sudden disappearance of their child was especially poignant); +1 for depicting the life of a person diachronically, beyond just the glamorous parts, and showing the value of a human life, the eternal grief of loss, the lasting glow of love, etc.

*Penalties:* -1 for giving the villains, for the most part, all the emotional complexity of Lucius Malfoy, and pounding the bejeezus out of them in the denouement

*Nerd Coefficient:* 9/10. Standout in its category, and even a standout within Mitchell's oeuvre

*(You might be wondering, "All that praise, and only a 9/10?" But the truth is, for us here at NOAF, 9/10 is rare as a unicorn, and 10/10 as rare as a turtle surfacing once every gazillion years and happening to appear at precisely the point, on the surface of the ocean, a single egg yoke is floating, so in fact this is high praise indeed!)*

*Posted by — Zhaoyun, magic realism aficionado, longtime David Mitchell fan (in fact, he's better at Murakami's game than Murakami himself!), and contributor at nerds of a feather since 2013.*



# WISCON: MY HOME CON

Charles Payseur



So WisCon 40 is done and gone. And over a week late I'm finally getting around to assembling my thoughts on it. My thoughts on everything that's happened and everything I was lucky enough to hear and participate in. WisCon, since I started going three years ago, has been, well, the one con I go to each year. Money and work mean that I just can't get too far away from where I live and WisCon...WisCon makes me momentarily not ashamed to live in this state. And this was a big one. Three Guests of Honor, including Sofia Samatar, Nalo Hopkinson, and Justine Larbalestier. Plus just regular awesome people in attendance like K. Tempest Bradford, Mark Oshiro, & many more. For the 40th anniversary of the con, people pulled out all the stops.

This was also my first year on programming. I got to be on two panels right away on Friday, at both of which I got to feel completely outclassed by the rest of the panelists. The first, on The Art of the Book Review, kicked off the con for me, and featured a great discussion about the nature of book reviews and their changing role in the fan and publishing landscape. And okay, I apparently have some not-incredibly-popular opin-

ions when it comes to spoilers and negative reviews and comparing works to other works, but it was still a very respectful panel and it was a great way to get started.

My second panel was a bit more...well, it was a lot more fun with a lot more swearing. The Baby Writer panel featured writers with five or fewer pro sales and was addressing that particular place in a writer's trajectory (which for many lasts a lot longer than for others). But it was a great, cathartic experience to talk about the struggles of starting out and facing...a bit of an uphill battle when it comes to getting work out and accepted at pro markets and dealing with managing expectations, pushing back against negativity demons, and trying to focus on both the business and the craft of writing. Really, this was the panel that revitalized me a bit, that got me excited to keep going and writing. Or maybe that was the con as a whole. I always leave WisCon feeling equal parts inspired and intimidated, but it's an amazing experience, like cramming some sort of college course into a single weekend.

Now, other people have written much more intelligently about WisCon and it's history and "the way it's been going." [Go read this piece by K. Tempest Bradford](#). I have less experience with this because this WisCon has always been more my WisCon. Having only gone the last three years, I've seen some shift but haven't experienced how it was before. What I know is that I've loved WisCon each year I have attended, and each year's conference just keeps getting better. As much as I am a complete social idiot when it comes to saying hi to people, I've felt welcome at WisCon and really look forward to going back. But there is a discussion going on about who is welcome and if there was a theme this year that I could pick out, it's probably one that revolves around the idea of Nice.

There were a few excellent panels about the pitfalls of Nice. The #KeepYANice and Other Tools of Oppression was a great discussion of that, where how people talk about Nice and who is expected to be Nice was dissected and examined. Many other panels came back to this as well, looking at things like code switching and the intersec-



tions of race and class and how Niceness is something that is often used to mean “the right kind of Nice” which is the Nice expected of people who are being punched from above. And there were calls both to resist the pressure to be Nice and there were also calls to shift the conversation away from Nice as an attack and more toward using Nice to celebrate real, human kindness. The proposed Lemonade Award was the culmination of that, put forward by GoH Nalo Hopkinson. It’s an interesting idea and I’m excited to see where it might go.

In the end, WisCon remains a great place to go and to talk but, for me, mostly to listen. To bask in the voices of so many amazing people and writers and learn something. And also buy a lot of books. But year after year it continues to provide excellent panels and discussions and speakers and just all the good. If you’re in the Wisconsin area around Memorial Day, definitely stop in. Say hi. See you next year, WisCon!

*Posted by Charles — avid reader, reviewer,  
and sometimes writer of speculative fiction.  
Contributor to nerds of a feather since 2014.*



# WE RANK 'EM: THE STAR TREK TV SERIES



It should go without saying that Star Trek is one of, if not the, most influential franchises of all time. In celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the first episode, the team here at Nerds of a Feather put our heads together to determine the all-time best Star Trek TV series. Naturally, no one person rated the series the same, so we resorted to our trusted group rating system, where we each rank to our liking and then take the group average.

## 6. Enterprise

- This is not Star Trek. There is no better world offered here, just a hodgepodge of the worst of the previous Treks: arrogant and paternal white dude captain, thin moralizing of us vs. them total war, confusing time travel bullshit, and a twist ending that...did not work in the slightest. This was the wound that killed Star Trek as I knew it. *Charles*
- Deeply flawed but finally found a soul in the fourth season, just in time to get canceled. I can't recall much of the series, but I'll never forget that it started the fourth season with alien nazis and that's when it started to get really good. It had the absolute worst opening theme. *Brian*
- Overall: 0/10. This is one of the worst shows ever. Bonuses: None. Penalties: ALL THE PENALTIES. IT IS THE PRE-QUELS OF STAR TREK. *Dean*

## 5. The Animated Series

- I know that limited animation (cost- and time-saving shortcuts, familiar from shows like **Scooby-Doo: Where Are You?**) isn't for everybody. But the original cast in stories that are at least as solid as an average **TOS** episode makes me tremendously happy. And the flashes back to Spock's youth in the episode "Yesterday" I think formed the basis for a lot of the flashbacks in the 2009 **Star Trek** reboot, and at least one lyrical reference in a Weezer song, so consider me a fan. *Vance*

- I wish I had a cartoon like this growing up. It has not aged well at all, but the crew is all there (plus some interesting additions) and the adventures are pulled directly from the **Original Series**. While it doesn't stand well on its own, it has some big names attached to it and it certainly keeps the spirit of the Original burning bright. *Charles*



## 4. Voyager

- Overall: 7/10. I love **Voyager** because it is basically a pure adventure with great characters. Bonus: +1 for Janeway. *Dean*
- In the nature of Star Trek, **Voyager** embraces diversity in its cast. What stands out most to me are the female characters in more traditional male roles, like Janeway the captain and B'Ellana the chief engineer. I recently re-watched an episode the dealt with pregnancy and childbirth. Relatability is important in genre TV, and **Voyager's** diverse cast and overall premise — feeling trapped and lost but not giving up hope — is relatable to



many. *Tia*

- This show took a complex political situation and then shot it to a remote corner of the galaxy, surrounded by deadly enemies. The hook was brilliant, and yet some of the complexity Trek was known for fell away in favor of looking at what these people would do to survive and to get back home. *Charles*



### 3. The Original Series

- There is some cognitive dissonance for me here because I don't think **TOS** is the best Star Trek show, but it is my favorite. I remember seeing **Wrath of Khan** in the theater, and I was only four years old when that came out, so Kirk, Spock, Bones, and the original crew simply are Star Trek to me. The hits on this show are some of my favorite sci-fi stories ever, even though the lows are just terrible. But "City on the Edge of Forever" more than makes up for "Spock's Brain" and "The Way to Eden." *Vance*
- The original boasted a delightful dynamic between Kirk, Spock, and Bones, with

some episodes and a vision of the future that were revolutionary at the time. To say that the series has aged well, though...some episodes have, and some most certainly have not. *Charles*

- Watching **TOS** is like reading classic literature. At times the plot doesn't hold up well, but hearing "to boldly go..." is like reading "wherefore with thee came not all hell broke loose." The dramatic acting is my favorite part of the show. It has the passion and feel of an old-time movie and surprisingly deep themes and dialogue. And okay, I'll say it: Kirk is dreamy. But those pants. I just can't handle the pants. *Tia*

- It's the groundbreaking start of the franchise. The highs are very high, but the lows are real low. It's not the most even series, but it's still a classic. *Brian*
- Overall: 6/10. Bonuses; +1 maybe this rewards hindsight more than I should, but it gets a bump for doing what it did for sci-fi. Penalties: -1 for only being OK when you really watch it. *Dean*

*(It's worth noting that the difference in ranking averages between DS9 and TOS was one tenth of a point. - Ed.)*

### 2. Deep Space Nine

- This show, more than any of the others, pushed the boundaries of how Star Trek could be told, spinning vast mythologies and character arcs that paid off in tremendous ways while weaving episodic mysteries and series-spanning storylines. It stripped away the pearly veneer of the Federation and yet still made it something worth fighting for, something worth dying for, in ways that I never felt the earlier shows managed to capture. Still my favorite show of all time. *Charles*
- I love **DS9** so much because it feels different than the other Star Trek Series while still feeling like Star Trek. I really like the space station dynamic which gets us off



the bridge and into the lives of civilians, but we still get the traditional upper level Star Fleet characters too. Bonuses: +1 for POC captain, +1 for Dax. *Tia*

- It broke the mold by focusing not on a ship, but a space station and the incredibly diverse group inhabiting it. It also escaped the episodic nature of all other series. *Brian*
- Overall: 6/10. **Babylon 5** is the best show ever, and I love **DS9** because it feels a lot like **Babylon 5**. That doesn't sound like the high praise I mean it to be — the trade and politics of the show are great. Bonuses: +1 for being brave enough to depart the standard formula. Penalties: -1 for just kind of being there sometimes, -1 for the cast not always being strong. *Dean*
- If I needed to recommend this show to anybody, I would simply have to tell them about the episode "Trials and Tribulations," and I think the show's greatness would be self-evident. *Vance*



## 1. The Next Generation

- Best crew, best stories, best ship. This is my generation's Star Trek for a very good reason. I rewatch it yearly. *Brian*
- Aptly named, this show took much of the promise of the original and offered more characters, more complexity, and a more vibrant and connected universe (and it lasted for more than three seasons). So much was established in this series, and yet it often suffered because of its strictly episodic structure and its unwillingness to question certain key problems with the Federation. *Charles*
- This was the series I grew up with on TV, and I readily admit it is a better show than the original. The crew is fantastic, the inclusion of Worf on the Enterprise speaks to the welcome optimism of the Star Trek universe, and I have never not wanted a holodeck. *Vance*
- Where **TNG** wins for me is when the cast are experiencing things that are foreign to them but normal to us. Right now I'm thinking of them being trapped in a Casino and them eating scrambled eggs. Other times I find this show kind of boring (gasp, I know) and can't really bond with the characters. Bonuses: +1 for Worf, Penalties: -1 for the ugliest Enterprise interior ever. *Tia*
- Overall: 7/10. Real talk: This is the best crew. Every single character is fantastic — I could go on, but you know it as well as I do. Bonus: +1 for Picard being the best Captain. -1 for every stupid episode where they get stuck in the bloody holodeck in some 20th century setting gaaaaah stop. *Dean*



# NERD MUSIC: INTERVIEW WITH MAKEUP & VANITY SET'S MATTHEW PUSTI

The G

*Today NERD MUSIC is thrilled to present an interview with synthwave artist extraordinaire Matthew Pusti, aka Makeup & Vanity Set! If you missed my profile of Makeup & Vanity Set, trust me — this is some of the most exciting electronic music out there. Please join Matthew and I as we talk music, gear, film and science fiction. - G*



**Thanks for “sitting down” with me! I’d like to start by asking about the history of Makeup & Vanity Set. What’s your “origin story,” so to speak?**

I grew up in Cleveland, Ohio. I started making music with computers in 1996. I started working with synthesizers in 97. I used to get down with lots of mod tracker freeware. Now it’s a mixture of lots of things. The ski mask and the name and all of that happened in 2004.

**Your sound seemed to undergo a major evolution between the *Charles Park III* and *88:88*, both sonically and conceptually. What was going on at that time?**

**Charles Park I + II** are more thematic records rather than true concepts. I didn’t

really conceptually tackle an album until I made **Never Let Go**. **Charles Park III** and **88:88** ended up feeling like a natural arc to me. They came from different places conceptually, but I felt like I was working to support something that I felt like I needed to say with the album as a whole. Every record I make, even with things I’m doing now, it always feels like I’m sort of feeling in the dark when I start producing. I don’t have a set way to do things. I just feel it out. If something feels different sonically, it’s probably more happenstance and progressing over time instead of some new, learned behavior.

**Your latest album, *Wilderness*, is a conceptually ambitious double album that, to me at least, strongly evokes cyberpunk and other dystopian currents in science fiction. How would you characterize the influence of science fiction on your work?**

I feel like I grew up in a weird era where the world was finally starting to realize ‘the future.’ Like the future that people were dreaming up in the 80s was grittier because the times were grittier. I remember the first time we logged into the internet from home; the idea that the sounds coming out of our modem represented data and information. All of those sounds meant something. As a kid I was obsessed with that. And all of my music is an extension of that. **Wilderness** certainly was part of that. I don’t know if everyone really understood it when it came out. It’s sort of like that modem. Mortality has a strange way of distorting reality. I kept thinking about how technology is woven into everything now; wherever you go, everyone is logged into something. We’re to that degree where people literally struggle to survive without it. That’s interesting to me.

**“Turning/Sequence” strongly evokes William Gibson’s classic 1984 cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* for me. That could just be me projecting, but have you read it? There’s a lot of common ground — both thematic and aesthetic — between *Neuromancer* and *Wilderness*.**



Joey Ciccoline told me to read **Neuromancer** after I laid out the concept for **Wilderness** to him for the first time. The first half of the original concept became the basis for his short film, **Eidolon**. The book certainly had an impact on me as far as the music was concerned. By the time I read it, I had already written out the narrative of the record, so it was less of a direct influence there. **Neuromancer** is one of those weird things that has influenced so many things, that by proxy it had likely already crept into my work long before I had actually read it. The bigger influence was probably Andrei Tarkovsky, specifically his films **Solaris** and **Stalker**. I think that films are probably the biggest influence on my work, more than anything else; even when the work is tied into my actual life experiences, as **Charles Park III** or **Wilderness** were, it is always filtered through a the lenses of films that deeply affected me.

**Speaking of film, I know that 88:88 also began as the soundtrack to Ciccoline's short film of the same name. How collaborative was that experience? Did he tell you what he wanted, or did he just give you a video file and say "do whatever you think works?"**

A little of both. Joey's really smart. He knows what he wants but he also trusts me enough to let me work. **88:88** was more about us figuring that relationship out more than anything else. In the beginning, he was pretty diplomatic about things but he was definitely willing to let me know what didn't work, and that shaped how dark the score became. The album was directly influenced by the path the film was on.

**I've got a crazy fan theory, by the way. I noticed that the opener to the album 88:88 ("A Glowing Light, A Promise") plays over the film's end credits, and the ending is quite ambiguous — you know it's just the beginning of a big, untold story. At the same time, the album has a distinctly cosmic feel to it. So I'm thinking that the album is actually telling that story — the story of what comes after the credits roll.**

**Am I crazy?**

The album was what I envisioned happening to Val after the film ends, yeah.

**So I'm not crazy! Okay — now, Makeup & Vanity Set is often categorized as synth-wave, but 88:88 and Wilderness feel pretty different from what other artists in that scene are doing. How would you characterize your relationship to synthwave?**

I'm not really sure where I land in all of that. I make music everyday. It's all over the map. In the end, I try to make dark music that means something to me. And hopefully someone else can find something meaningful in it too. Most of the time I feel like I'm the outsider.

**What other groups or artists are you into these days?**

Dallas Campbell. His last record, **City I**, was so great. I'm patiently waiting for the new Lazerhawk record. I loved the Tek album from last year — Phaserland is incredible. The Troxum record, **Gaia Lesson**, that was amazing. I feel like his stuff is pushing boundaries that need to be pushed. The last Gost album was really heavy. I feel like I always gravitate towards the stuff that is.

**How about your upcoming projects — I've listened to some of your works in progress on Soundcloud, and have also heard that you are working on a full-length collaboration with singer Jasmin Kaset, who features on two of my favorite Makeup & Vanity set tunes. What can you tell us about this or any other upcoming projects?**

I have a 12" coming out on Data Airlines soon. They reached out to me while I was working on **Wilderness**. It's interesting. It's really digital and harsh. It's a lot more in your face than **Wilderness** was. It's got a really hard edge to it. Jasmin and I are working on a full-length album together. We've to 6-8 songs for it. They're really great. I wrote a bunch of music for an ARG tied to the video



game **Soma** — and I'm scoring a film that ties into that. And of course the ever-expanding **Brigador**, a game from Stellar Jockeys. That should be out in April. At this point, there's something like two hours of music in that.

**Finally, I need to nerd out here...88:88 and Wilderness have this really distinct, massive sound. What kind of gear/software do you use?**

Typically everything is written in Ableton Live and mixed there or in Logic. I tend to sequence albums with Logic. I think my most-used software plugins are probably Native Instruments Reaktor and the Arturia V Collection. I don't really lean too hard on the common ones though. I think their ARP 2600 sounds really good. Same for the Oberheim and the Moog Modular. I like stuff that's more complex. All of my musical training was in synthesis, so I probably spend too much time engineering things as opposed to writing and arranging things. That's probably why **Wilderness** took as long as it did.

Hardware-wise, I use a Moog LP2 almost all of the time. I just bought a Mother-32, which has been really eye-opening. I don't have any eurorack modular stuff, so the flexibility involved in that has been really nice. They compliment each other well. I use a Yamaha DX7 quite a bit, as well as a Roland HS-60, which is a consumer-model Juno 60. Mine is a bit beaten-up, but it sounds great. I have a DSI Mopho, which gets used in really weird ways but is always super-refreshing and really opens up tracks. I started using Elektron gear — the Octatrack and the Analog Rytm — about a year ago and they continue to blow my mind. I bought them thinking they'd be useful live, but they are like little Pandora's boxes. There's so much going on inside. The Octatrack especially. I was an MPC guy for years, but I don't see how I could go back after using the OT. I have some effects stuff, delays and reverbs. Reverb is a big part of what I do. I've been using a new reverb by Meris Audio called the Mercury7, which almost feels like it was built for my brain. Every synth I put through it just melts into the

ether. It's pretty haunting.

**Thank you!**





# HOLIDAY GIFT GUIDE: GADGETS, ELECTRONICS, & APPS

It's that time of year again, where we struggle to buy the perfect gift for that special [fill in the blank] in your life. This year, the **Nerds of a Feather, Flock Together** crew is teaming up to bring you their favorite books, toys, entertainment, and gadgets, etc. to help make the process easier.

Stop by each day this week to see our suggestions.

Today...Gadgets, Electronics, and Apps!

## Card Crawl

*The G: "For the solitaire lover in your life"*

For me to play a game on my phone, it needs to essentially be some form of solitaire — the kind of thing you can play in 5- to 10-minute sessions, doesn't require much concentration and, as such, lends itself to endless replay while waiting for person X to arrive or event Y to start. But I also want something more than just solitaire, and that's exactly what **Card Crawl** provides. It's fantasy-based with addictive gameplay and a reward system that lets you trade in points (accrued by success and not by in-app purchases) for special cards. And the game itself is both simple and deep. Basically, there are five kinds of cards: monsters, which hurt you; swords and shields, which hurt monsters; potions, which heal you; coins, which give you points; and special cards, which can do all sorts of fun things. The trick is trading in as many swords, shields, and potions as possible for coins, but not so many that you can't survive a hand full of monsters. It's a lot of fun. And free! (Available for iOS and Android.)



## Philips Wake-Up Light with Sunrise Simulation

*Tia: "For the not really a morning person in your life"*

Chances are you've stayed up way too late reading or playing video games (or maybe even doing something responsible like homework or caring for a child) and have struggled to get out of bed the next morning, hitting the snooze button numerous times. Or, perhaps you're one of the unfortunate souls that must rise in the dark, before the sun has reared its beautiful head. Personally, I used to have 6 alarms set on my phone in various increments and would often sleep through many of them and then awake startled at one of the awful sounds. Well, that dragon has officially been slayed and my magic weapon is the Phillips Wake-Up Light. It's not a miracle-worker, mind you, but I no longer need alarms on my phone, and I now often awake before the soft subtle beep that this golden egg exudes. The reason is the sunrise simulation the device offers. Around half an hour before the alarm is set to go off, the Wake-Up Light starts gradually brightening to prepare your body for waking up the natural way (triggering your circadian rhythm), and by the time the beep sounds, you are already almost fully awake. Now, I don't wake up singing and I am still tired in the morning, but it is no longer the vicious battle of slapping my hand around my night stand to silence whatever evil demon is screaming in my ear. There are many different models to choose



from, but I just went with the bottom-of-the-barrel, and it was the best money I spent in a really long time. I purchased this as a gift for my brother this year (who also inherited the 10-phone alarm gene), and I recommend you get one for yourself and any other non-morning person in your life.

### **Gogogate2 by Gogogate**

*Brian: "for the too-connected homeowner in your life"*

I got a Gogogate 2 to solve a dumb problem, but it turned out to be really neat. It allows you to control and monitor your garage door (among other types of outdoor gates) via your smartphone. It connects directly to your garage door opener and wifi network. With some setup, you connect it to an app on your smartphone, slap a sensor on your garage door, and now you can see on your smartphone whether it's open or closed, and then open or close it. Big deal, but you can also allow remote access (using strong passwords, obvs), and now you can check on your garage door, open, or close it from your smartphone anywhere. No more sharing your garage door code with family or friends, you can just open and close it for them from your phone! It can be configured to send you alerts when your garage door is open for more than 10 minutes, or whenever it opens or closes. You can also do neat (dumb) things like tie it in a roundabout way to an Amazon Echo and now you can open and close your garage door using just your voice! I wouldn't necessarily call this a "fun" device, but it does useful things and I never fail to enjoy opening my garage door from a block away with my phone.

### **Monument Valley**

*Joe: "For lovers of calm and beautiful games"*

After recommending **Prune** last year, I'd like to recommend another mobile game. Originally released in 2014, **Monument Valley** is a beautiful and quiet game filled with puzzles featuring optical illusions and manipulation. These puzzles allow the player to find their way through paths blocked by weirdly creepy crow people. **Monument Valley** is a touch on the short side, and it's not the most difficult of games, but it is a fun and calming piece of art.





# TURBO KID

The G



## Back to the Future

**Turbo Kid** is another entry in the semiserious/semi-ironic '80s retro movement linking artists working across multiple media. This one, specifically, is a cinematic homage to the cheap **Mad Max** ripoffs that only ever seemed to play at the one surviving drive-in left in town, but took up significant real estate at your local video store. I remember, at a young age, holding the fat, laminated boxes — marveling at the disfigured faces of post-apocalyptic mutants and foam spike armor of the inevitable raiders, wondering what thrills I might receive if my parents would just let me rent something with that much gore. But when that glorious day arrived, I would inevitably realize, as Peter Sobczynski notes, that these were films whose boxes “always promised more than they ever came close to delivering.”

This is the story of the Kid (Munro Chambers), a teenager who rides his bike across the post-apocalyptic wasteland of 1997, scavenging junk to trade for water. While out in the field, he meets Apple (Laurence Lebouef), a very manic pixie dream girl who follows the Kid to his hideout and, through her irrepressible joie de vivre (this is a French-Canadian production, after all), wins over the initially suspect Kid.

Then shit starts to go south. Local badman Zeus (Michael Ironsides) first kidnaps the area protector, Kiwi cowboy and

arm-wrestling champion Frederick (Aaron Jeffery), then Apple. All seems lost when, in the midst of trying to escape Apple's kidnappers, the Kid discovers an underground military vessel left over from humanity's catastrophic war with the robots (i.e. the apocalyptic event). Inside, there is a jumpsuit complete with a Nintendo Power Glove, which — if fully charged — can instantly disintegrate a human being. He goes to save Apple (who it turns out can take care of herself quite ably), and in the process, he sets up a confrontation with Zeus and his gang of foam spike-clad marauders.

Standard '80s B-movie fare, right? On the surface, yes — and **Turbo Kid** does a good job of reinterpreting its source material with a good balance of satire and appreciation for what makes grindhouse film fun to watch — not least of which is the hilariously over-the-top gore, which gets more and more absurd as the film goes on. Oh, and it sports a phenomenal soundtrack by synthwave group Le Matos.

What makes **Turbo Kid** really stand out, though, is its emotional core — propelled by its central relationships, and especially the friendship between the Kid and Apple, it is surprisingly heartfelt and affecting. In the end, **Turbo Kid** isn't really about action or '80s nostalgia — it's about lonely people finding friendship. In this, the film doesn't play for laughs, winks or nudges. Sure, Apple starts off as your standard manic pixie dream



girl (albeit extra manic), while the Kid doesn't even merit a name. Still, by the end of the film I realized how deeply invested I'd become in what happens to them — in a way I rarely am with unserious films made after 1990.

I guess that's the thing about '80s culture that people in 2016 find so attractive, whether we're talking action schlock, John Hughes romances or the digital keyboard sounds used by Billy Ocean — there's a sincerity about all of it, even when that sincerity is corny as hell. And **Turbo Kid** does a fantastic job capturing that. It's funny and silly, but also distinctly bittersweet, and deeply romantic. Just as importantly, **Turbo Kid** is the kind of film you can't wait to watch again.

### **The Math**

*Baseline Assessment:* 8/10

*Bonuses:* +1 for the highly resonant emotional core of the film, which is what separates it from other attempts to pull off this kind of thing; +1 for the fantastic Le Matos soundtrack, which really accentuates everything the director is going for.

*Penalties:* -1 for the first 10-15 minutes of the film, which are a bit awkward relative to the rest. ‘

*Nerd Coefficient:* 9/10. “Very high quality/standout in its category.”

*Posted by The G — purveyor of nerdliness,  
genre fanatic and nerds of a  
feather founder/administrator, since 2012.*

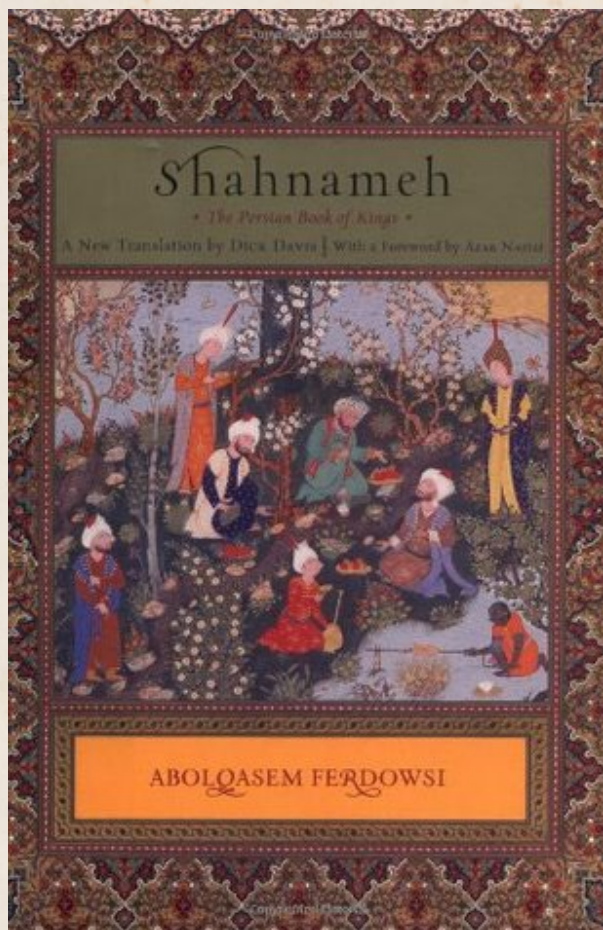


# 6 BOOKS WITH KATE ELLIOTT

Joe Sherry

*Kate Elliott is the author of twenty five science fiction and fantasy novels and one retrospective collection of her short fiction. Her fiction has been nominated for the Nebula (**King's Dragon**), World Fantasy (**The Golden Key**), and Andre Norton Awards (**Court of Fives**). Her most recent novels are the brilliant **Black Wolves**, and the first two volumes of the excellent **Court of Fives** trilogy.*

*Today she shares her 6 books with us...*



## 1. What book are you currently reading?

I'm a tag-team reader which means I'm always reading about six books at the same time, but for the sake of brevity I will focus on the **Shahnameh, the Persian Book of Kings**, by Abolqasem Ferdowsi. This poetic retelling of a prose original was composed in the 10th century by Ferdowsi and became the national epic of Persia (Iran). The

story is exactly as advertised by the title: the legendary and historical reigns of various Persian kings. I'm reading it with Tessa Gratton in weekly chapters which we then discuss in a blog post each week at my blog. This September we are reading through the history of Sekander (Alexander the Great). It is fascinating to see how he is portrayed in this version of his story. There are familiar tales told in a slightly altered form as well as completely new episodes not present in the Western history. Also, amusingly, this history claims that Sekander's father was a Persian king who married a Greek princess. Highly recommended, and very long. We're reading the Dick Davis translation, done in prose, but there are other versions.

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

Honestly there are so many upcoming books I am excited about because I really feel we are living in a golden age of sff & YA writing at the moment with more books I want to read than I possibly have time to read. So, having said that, I had the good fortune to receive an ARC of Ken Liu's **The Wall of Storms** (the sequel to **The Grace of Kings**) and it was fabulously epic. So I'm excited about that (it releases in October) and I'm eager to read book three which I hope Ken is working on even as I type this. Are you, Ken? Is it done yet?

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

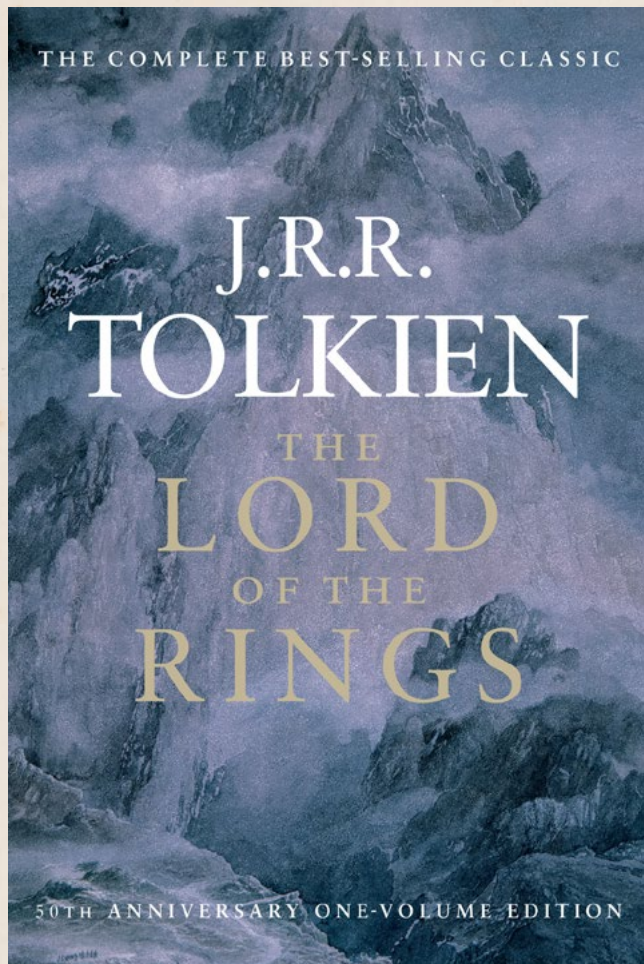
I don't have time to re-read. I just have too many books I haven't read for the first time yet.

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

I avoid re-reading books I loved when I was young for precisely this reason. While some may hold up, others, I fear, will not, and I would rather not lose my rosy affection for them. For example I picked up Robert



Heinlein's **Red Planet** as an adult and almost immediately had to set it down again because of how heavily 50s-USA gendered and acculturated it was.



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

I first read JRR Tolkien's **The Lord of the Rings** when I was thirteen. Its mythic scope strongly impressed me, and its map made me yearn for unknown lands. I write sff today because of Tolkien, both because of what **LotR** included in its epic story that I wanted to emulate and because of what it left out that I wanted to center in my own stories.

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

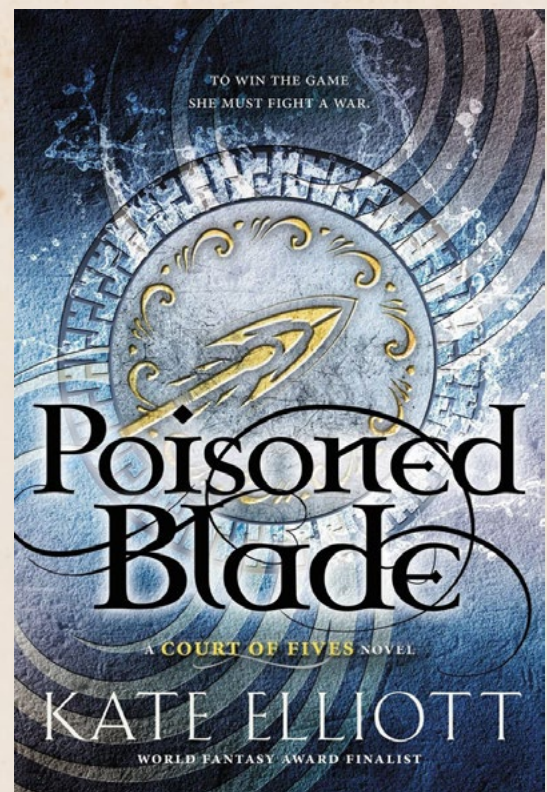
**Poisoned Blade** is the second book of the Fives trilogy (which starts with **Court of Fives**).

The story is set in the country Efea, which was conquered 100 years earlier by a

people called the Saroese. Jessamy, our protagonist, is the second of four biracial sisters born to a father and mother who can't legally marry because he's Saroese and she's Efean. The Fives is a game played before large crowds. It's like a big obstacle course with four obstacles around the outside and a fifth in the center (there's a greater mystery about the Fives but that is revealed over all three books).

Competing in the Fives is what Jes has always wanted to do (I wanted to write a story about a girl who's an athlete), but because the sisters have been raised with the father's rigid cultural expectations she's not allowed to. In the course of sneaking out to do it anyway she gets caught up in major political intrigue. The story contains generous helpings of my four favorite narrative food groups: determination, love, action, and treachery. Also giant mechanical spiders.

When asked for a pitch, I call it "**Little Women** meet American Ninja Warrior in a fantasy world inspired by Cleopatra's Egypt."



*Posted by Joe Sherry — Writer / Editor at Adventures in Reading since 2004, Nerds of a Feather contributor since 2015, editor since 2016. Minnesotan.*



# ESSENTIALS: 24 CULT FILMS FOR LATE, LATE NIGHTS

Vance K

I feel like I should preface any list of “Best” cult films or “Most Important” cult films with the disclaimer that there is no list. The thing that makes cult films memorable is that they are a representation of a unique voice, and different voices appeal to different people. Plus, there are just so, so many movies out there, nobody can see them all. If you’ve got a film that you (or you and your friends) love and quote and everybody else thinks you’re nuts, I think you’re doing the thing right, and it doesn’t matter if that movie’s on a list anywhere or not.

The other key thing about cult films is that they are usually produced outside of the mainstream, so a lot of lists of “Best Cult Films” that I see online are rehashes of movies like **The Big Lebowski** or **Office Space**, which were box office flops, but gained a second life through word-of-mouth after their disappointing theatrical runs. I love both of those movies, and they certainly have cult followings — **Office Space** prompted Swingline to actually make a red stapler, and **The Big Lebowski** spawned a real-life religion — but now they’re so well-known I don’t need to invoke them here.

Since I get to make this list, I wanted to focus on movies that didn’t show up on the other lists. I also wanted to stay away from “The Worst Movie Ever” kinds of films (plus, I [already covered that ground](#)), and try to share movies that I think are legitimately good, or moving, or compelling, even if you can see their seams sometimes.

These are in no particular order, but they are all perfect for late nights or rainy days:



## 1. Carnival of Souls

*After a traumatic accident, a woman becomes drawn to a mysterious abandoned carnival. - IMDb*

Mistakenly thought to be in the public domain for decades and widely available in grainy, garbled versions, **Carnival of Souls** has a new blu-ray release from Criterion with restored picture and sound that really shows off this movie for what it is. It’s a legitimately eerie movie, beautifully shot, full of evocative imagery and intelligent subtext. This movie also has special significance for me, because seeing the original Criterion Collection release of this movie alongside films by Renoir, Godard, Kurosawa, and Bergman was the first time I really understood that cult films didn’t have to be a guilty pleasure. That release made me realize that there were other people like me who loved both art house cinema and outsider cinema and took them equally seriously.



## 2. Chimes at Midnight

*The career of Shakespeare's Sir John Falstaff as roistering companion to young Prince Hal, circa 1400-1413. - IMDb*

For many years, the crown jewel of my DVD collection has been a DVD-R of this movie, which was only briefly released on VHS and was extremely difficult to find and even more difficult to own. But this is another movie that Criterion has recently rescued from the pit of abysmal picture and sound quality. And good thing, too. This movie and the never-completed Don Quixote were Orson Welles' dream projects. Constructed from texts pulled from four Shakespeare plays, Welles made John Falstaff, who has more lines than any other character in Shakespeare, the tragic hero of his own movie. The larger-than-life Welles plays the larger than life mentor to Prince Hal, later King Henry, and the thread of wasted talent and unbri-dled excess that runs through the film cannot help but reflect on the former boy-wonder of Welles himself. It is a movie that was financially and logistically hard to make and it shows, but it is full of stunning images, and a truly heart-rending conclusion.

## 3. A Bucket of Blood

*A frustrated and talentless artist finds acclaim for a plaster covered dead cat that is mistaken as a skillful statuette. Soon the desire for more praise leads to an increasingly deadly series of works. - IMDb*

I will go to the mat with anybody who says Roger Corman isn't a good director. He's certainly known as a producer of exploitation films and [for launching the careers of people who went on to be iconic directors](#), but his directorial work (which he pretty much stopped doing in the late-1970s) was extremely sharp, both in terms of visual style and intelligence. **A Bucket of Blood** is one of the best satirical take-downs of the art scene I think I've ever watched, and it wraps it inside the costume of a schlocky horror movie. It's funny, full of gentle social commentary,

and has just enough of an "ick" factor to create some intentionally cringe-worthy moments. If you've ever wanted to see the Beat Generation get some comeuppance, this one's for you.

## 4. Faster Pussycat, Kill Kill

*Three go-go dancers holding a young girl hostage come across a crippled old man living with his two sons in the desert. After learning he's hiding a sum of cash around, the women start scheming on him. - IMDb*

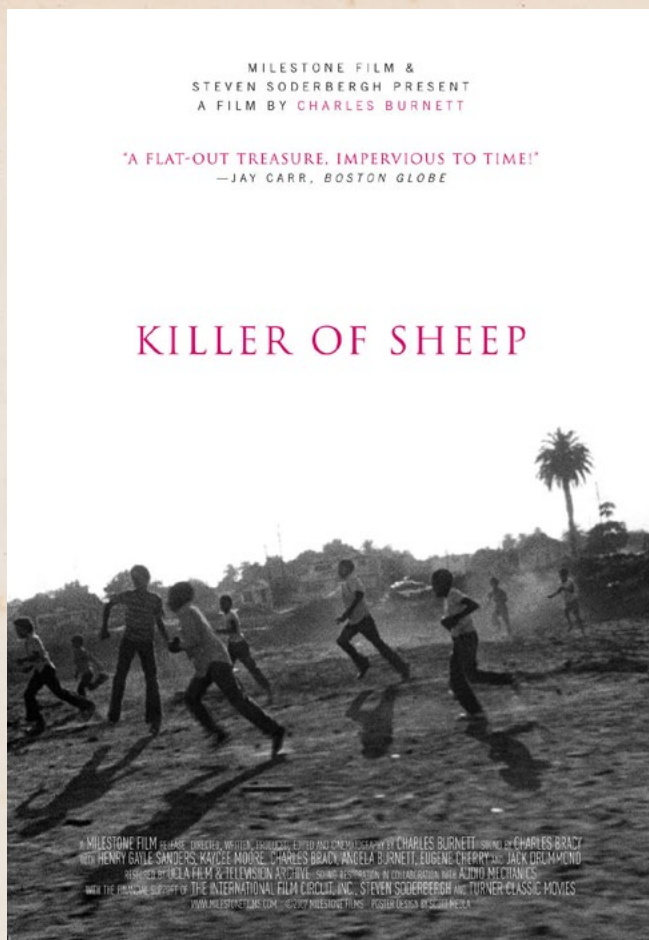
I'm much more of a Corman guy than a Russ Meyer guy, but when it comes to exploitation films, you have to give Russ Meyer his due. Meyer is most closely associated with busty women with quick tops, but there's actually no nudity in this, his best-known movie. Busty women, sure, and car races, and inexplicable danger aplenty. This movie is also notable for being the source of most of the movie dialogue samples used in White Zombie's breakout album **La Sexorcisto: Devil Music, Vol. 1**. That's actually what got me to watch this movie in the first place.

## 5. Blacula

*An ancient African prince, turned into a vampire by Dracula himself, finds himself in modern Los Angeles. - IMDb*

There are a lot of 1970s blaxploitation movies you can watch and have a pretty great time with, but the thing I love about **Blacula** is how William Marshall's performance really elevates this movie way past what you think it would be from the amazingly schlocky title. Marshall was primarily a Shakespearean actor, plays the character of Prince Mamuwalde totally straight, and sells it. This movie is at its heart a love story, and despite some \*ahem\* lines that ring out particularly jarringly to modern sensibilities, the performances in this movie should earn it far more prominence among horror fans than I think it currently has.





## 6. Killer of Sheep

*Stan works in drudgery at a slaughterhouse. His personal life is drab. Dissatisfaction and ennui keep him unresponsive to the needs of his adoring wife, and he must struggle against influences which would dishonor and endanger him and his family. - IMDb*

This underground film shot in south Los Angeles in the early 1970s is not to be confused with a blaxploitation film. This is a poetic and deeply touching movie that went unseen for over two decades because of rights clearance issues with the music in the film. The picture of daily life in Watts that it shows is both stifling but also affirming and moving. When it was added to the National Film Registry in 1990, that helped raise awareness for the movie, and ultimately led to a limited theatrical release in 2007. It is now available on DVD.

## 7. I Bury the Living

*Cemetery director Robert Kraft discovers that by arbitrarily changing the status of plots from empty to occupied on the planogram causes the death of the plots' owners. - IMDb*

I came across this one on a Public Domain movies site years ago, and I was pleasantly surprised. What the description here doesn't include is that the director doesn't want to be killing people, and begins thinking that he's descending into madness. As this starts to happen, there are a couple of visual effects sequences that are really striking, and take on the air of a twisted re-imagining of Fitzgerald's "eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckelburg." The film suffers a little from a Scooby-Doo ending, but there are rumors that there was a different ending originally shot. That's going to have to be one for the angels, though, because in 1958 nobody was keeping alternate endings of B-pictures around for archivists to find later.

## 8. Billy the Kid vs. Dracula

*Dracula travels to the American West, intent on making a beautiful ranch owner his next victim. Her fiance, outlaw Billy the Kid, finds out about it and rushes to save her. - IMDb*

I reviewed this movie before, and you can [read that at your leisure](#), but for our purposes here I will simply quote one line of that review: "At some point in 1965 or '66, some actual human being must have had this thought: 'Let's get John Carradine to play a vampire again, but this time we'll stick him in the Old West, name the movie after two characters not actually appearing in the movie, and shoot the thing for a nickel in, say, my back yard in Encino!'" The IMDb description is actually not correct: Carradine is never identified as Dracula because they didn't want Universal suing them, and "Billy" in the film did not have a previous career as a notorious outlaw. So if this sounds like it's up your alley, it probably is. If it doesn't, man, you've been warned.



## 9. Plan 9 from Outer Space

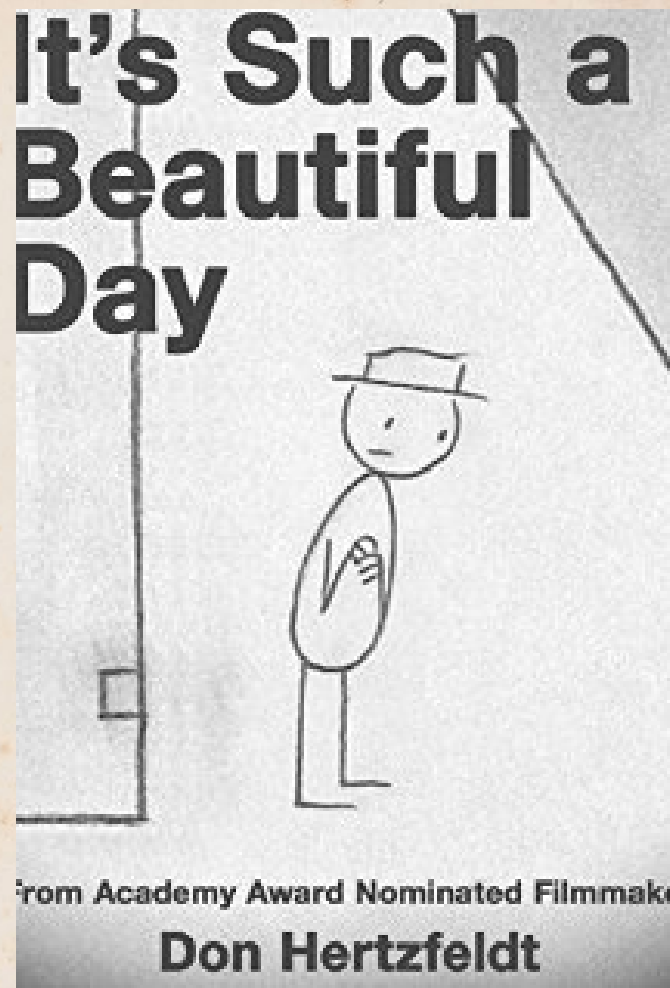
*Aliens resurrect dead humans as zombies and vampires to stop humanity from creating the Solaranite (a sort of sun-driven bomb). - IMDb*

This is also an objectively bad movie, but Edward D. Wood Jr. deserves a place on this list if for no other reason than that **Ed Wood** is maybe the greatest movie ever made about movies. **Plan 9** is also, and I don't know anybody who would argue with me on this, the closest Ed Wood ever got to making a decent movie. The idea of a bomb made out of the sun's rays is not the worst sci-fi idea ever, and the story is more or less coherent. As opposed to, say, **Glen, or Glenda?**. Plus, the reach of this movie has been remarkable, from the Tim Burton biopic to the name of Glenn Danzig's record label, so it's worth watching if you haven't actually seen it. May I recommend watching **Ed Wood** and then **Plan 9** as a double-feature?

## 10. Primer

*Four friends/fledgling entrepreneurs, knowing that there's something bigger and more innovative than the different error-checking devices they've built, wrestle over their new invention. - IMDb*

Of course, if you'd actually like to see a good sci-fi movie made for no money, you might want to skip ahead a few decades to **Primer**. This movie has a reputation for being quite the mind-bender of a time-travel movie, and it does not disappoint. I would argue that only with (many) multiple viewings and some graph paper could you actually untangle what's happening in all the different timelines, but at a certain point, it doesn't matter. The storytelling is dizzyingly complex, but you get the impression director Shane Carruth knows what's going on, and that he's going to take you somewhere worthwhile, so you go along. It's a tense and confusing ride, but I'm not aware of another movie like it. I actually prefer Carruth's poetic, disjointed follow-up **Upstream Color**, but start here.



## 11. It's Such a Beautiful Day

*Bill struggles to put together his shattered psyche, in this new feature film version of Don Hertzfeldt's animated short film trilogy. - IMDb*

As long as we're talking about bending minds, let's also dip our toes into the animation end of the pool. Don Hertzfeldt bends minds with the best of them, and I am truly at a loss as to how he is able to tell such elliptical stories with stick figures and still elicit powerful emotional responses from me. I am a big fan of Don Hertzfeldt, and this re-packaged collection of three of his related short films is a perfect example of why. Bill seems to be emotionally falling apart, but then it seems like he's actually mentally falling apart. His journey yo-yo'ing closer to and farther away from "sanity" and "reality" is both tremendously imaginative and tremendously moving. Hertzfeldt's **World of Tomorrow** short film was absolutely robbed of an Oscar, too, for whatever that's worth.



## 12. Sita Sings the Blues

*An animated version of the epic Indian tale of Ramayana set to the 1920s jazz vocals of Annette Hanshaw. - IMDb*

Animator Nina Paley made this animated feature film on her own. By herself. Alone. Feature film. Bill Plympton does the same kind of thing, and I am simply in awe of these artists. Paley's movie tells the story of Sita and her lover Rama from the Hindu epic Ramayana, and intertwines that tale with the story of the dissolution of Paley's own marriage. It's simply a beautiful, enthralling piece of work that not only explodes with imagination, but is full of beautiful visual design, too. It blurs the line between myth, fiction, and documentary, and is set entirely to torch songs. What's not to love?

## 13. The Beaver Trilogy

*It begins in 1979 with the chance meeting in a Salt Lake City parking lot where filmmaker Trent Harris is approached by an earnest small-town dreamer from Beaver, Utah. - IMDb*

And speaking of blurring lines...this one's something. As quick as I can tell it: Trent Harris was working at a TV station in Utah when they got their first video camera. While testing it in the parking lot, a guy called "Groovin' Gary" spotted him and came over. Gary always wanted to be on TV, and had his car adorned with images of Olivia Newton-John. He invited Harris back to Beaver, Utah, for a talent show that Gary wanted recorded. In it, Gary dressed in drag and performed \*as\* Olivia Newton-John, to the befuddlement and ridicule of the small, conservative town. That really happened. Years later, Harris moved to LA, fictionalized the story a bit, and shot it as a short with a pre-**Fast Times** Sean Penn. A couple of years later at USC film school, he made another go at the story with a pre-**Back to the Future** Crispin Glover. If you can't find this amazing, unique gem, track down the new documentary **The Beaver Trilogy, Part IV**, which tells the whole story in stunning fashion.

## 14. The Sid Saga

*Spurred by house guests Bob Sandstrom and Karlene Sandstrom leafing through his scrap book and asking about photographs in it, Sid Laverents begins to tell his life story. - IMDb*

This is simply one of the crown jewels of amateur cinema. I don't know how to find it, except UCLA shows it sometimes and it occasionally airs as part of the sporadic TCM Underground series. But it is truly unforgettable, with Sid Laverents taking viewers through a stunning, three-part filmic biography that not only tells the story of Laverents, but of 20th Century America, too. It begins in poverty and vaudeville, goes through World War II, the 1950s and Cold War, the aerospace boom and introduction of the space program, and finally the rise of amateur film and videography that put storytelling tools into the hands of everyday people. And it's all told first-hand from Laverents, who lived it all. [I reviewed this film](#) a couple of years ago, and it is absolutely worth tracking down.

## 15. Head

*The Monkees are tossed about in a psychedelic, surrealist, plotless, circular bit of fun fluff. - IMDb*

Whoever wrote this IMDb summary can suck it. This is anything but "fun fluff." This is the weirdest damn thing, and as far from the Monkees TV show as I can really imagine. It's a smart, self-indulgent, self-reflexive piece of meta-storytelling made by Jack Nicholson and Bob Rafelson, who would immediately after this project go on to collaborate on **Five Easy Pieces**, with Nicholson exploding into the mainstream world in **Easy Rider** in between. The Monkees got a bad rap at the time, and I think it persists, that they were just a slapped-together attempt by a record company to make an American version of the Beatles. That may have been their genesis, but their songs are great, the guys were interested in things beyond the show, which came through in songs like "Randy Souse Git" and this film, which was reportedly the



first time Americans had seen the now-famous footage of the South Vietnamese Chief of Police executing a handcuffed Viet Cong prisoner. Fun fluff, right? This was Tor Johnson's final film, and also, in a restroom, Peter Tork gives Davy Jones the advice that, "Nobody ever lends money to a man with a sense of humor."

## 16. The X from Outer Space

*The spaceship AAB-Gamma is dispatched from FAFC headquarters in Japan to make a landing on the planet Mars and investigate reports of UFOs in the area. - IMDb*

In the 1960s, the Shochiku studio in Japan, which was known for more serious, art-house films like those of Yashujiro Ozu, decided it wanted to get in on some of that sweet Godzilla money that Toho was pulling down, and this film was their attempt. In it, some swinging astronauts jet back and forth between Earth, the moon, and Mars for reasons that are clear, but don't make any logical sense. While exploring, they get some goo on the ship, which hatches into a giant space chicken called Guilala. The English dub of this movie is legitimately terrible, but the original Japanese version, subtitled, is wonderful. It is everything I love about silly, 1960s monster movies, and may even exceed some of the Godzilla movies with shady aliens in them.



## 17. Suspiria

*A newcomer to a fancy ballet academy gradually comes to realize that the school is a front for something far more sinister and supernatural amidst a series of grisly murders. - IMDb*

This movie, by Italian horror icon Dario Argento (who also co-wrote the unmatched **Once Upon a Time in the West**), is the real deal. It's creepy, scary, grisly, bloody, mysterious, and atmospheric. It hits all of my favorite notes of horror movies, and has an ending that is serious nightmare fuel. Emerging from the giallo scene in Italy, it took things a step farther, and is really not for the faint of heart. But man, this is such a great horror movie. I've written before about [the line that connects certain films between the 1950s and early 60s](#), ultimately resulting in **Rosemary's Baby**, and I think **Rosemary** in turn made **Suspiria** possible.

## 18. Bay of Blood

*An elderly heiress is killed by her husband who wants control of her fortunes. What ensues is an all-out murder spree as relatives and friends attempt to reduce the inheritance playing field, complicated by some teenagers who decide to camp out in a dilapidated building on the estate. - IMDb*

Staying in Italy with a giallo contemporary of Argento's, we have Mario Bava's **Bay of Blood**. Bava was making his mark a decade before Argento hit the scene, so a lot of what Argento would build on [came from Bava](#). And it goes way beyond that. Because **Bay of Blood** is not a "proto-slasher" movie, it is a full-bore, perfect example of a slasher movie, made almost a decade before slasher movies were a thing. You could pretty much take the cliched rules laid out in **Scream** that govern slasher movies and apply them one-for-one to this movie, but if that's the case, that means this movie invented those rules. I don't know if American filmmakers in the early 1980s looked at this movie and drew inspiration, or if Bava was simply ahead of his time, but this movie is about as good as



straight slashers get, and it accomplished that while creating the lexicon, so I think that's one hell of an achievement.

## 19. The Wicker Man

*A police sergeant is sent to a Scottish island village in search of a missing girl whom the townsfolk claim never existed. Stranger still are the rites that take place there. - IMDb*

When I was in college and found 1) the Internet and 2) a pair of amazing video stores near my dorm, I spent some time combing a bunch of lists to find movies to rent. **The Wicker Man** consistently showed up on lists of "the scariest movies ever made." So I rented it and I thought it was stupid. But I just sort of missed it — there's something sticky about this movie. Even though I didn't think I liked it, something made me want to revisit it, and when I did, a switch flipped and I fell in love with this movie about the collision of modern life, Christianity, and very, very old pagan beliefs that have still never really gone away. It's a movie with a lot going on under the surface, and that was also plagued for decades with a "the movie that could've been" legend that told the tale of how we never got to see the director's real vision of the movie. That has since been solved, despite the original camera negatives being used as fill underneath the M1 motorway connecting London to Leeds. And for what it's worth, my copy of **The Wicker Man** DVD actually came in a wicker box.

## 20. Equinox

*Four friends are attacked by a demon while on a picnic, due to possession of a tome of mystic information. Told in flashbacks by the sole survivor. - IMDb*

To be honest, this movie is mostly remarkable because of the people that worked on it. As a film on its own, it's only ok, and the present-day framing device of a police detective interviewing a survivor of all that went down is...clumsy at best. So you've really got to have some patience to get to where

the movie begins to cook. This film was created by friends who met through Forest J. Ackerman (Uncle Furry), who founded **Famous Monsters of Filmland** in Los Angeles, and decided to make their own film. These friends, including Jack Woods and Dennis Muren, went on to become transformational figures in Hollywood through their contribution to sound and visual effects. It's truly remarkable to see their first film, knowing that they went on to redefine the modern cinematic language. No hyperbole. There are entire passages of **The Evil Dead** and **Evil Dead 2** that are cribbed directly from this film, and while the humans-talking-to-each-other portion of the movie is clunky, the finale, made from stop-motion, rotoscoping, and glass mattes, is legitimately badass.

## 21. Incubus

*On a strange island inhabited by demons and spirits, a man battles the forces of evil. - IMDb*

You notice how vague the plot summary for this movie is? That's about right. I mean, what I remember from this movie is William Shatner and some girl hiding in a barn, and then I think they ran for a bit...and maybe one of them was briefly possessed, but I couldn't swear to that. This movie is totally forgettable except for one kinda important thing: it was spoken entirely in Esperanto. You know what Esperanto is, right? It's an invented language that blends elements of the Romance languages, English, and probably a few other languages into what was hoped to be a universal language. Created in the 1880s, it took almost 100 years to make a movie in the language, and that was **Incubus**. So if you want to watch a movie where Bill Shatner speaks a made-up language, this is your only option, folks. Who gives a shit if it is entirely, and utterly, forgettable otherwise? But look: I have friends who have learned Swedish to watch Bergman movies in the native language, and friends who have learned Japanese to watch anime in its native language (I have undeniably awesome friends), so if you want to be able to turn the subtitles off in **Incubus**, you can currently



learn Esperanto in the free language-learning app Duolingo on your phone.

## 22. Venus in Furs

*A musician finds the corpse of a beautiful woman on the beach. The woman returns from the dead to take revenge on the group of wealthy sadists responsible for her death. - IMDb*

This is definitely an outsider kind of film. I haven't seen any other of Jesus "Jess" Franco's films, but from what I know, a number of his films have veered into the more hardcore elements of mixing sex and cinema. **Venus in Furs** certainly has sex and nudity, but what it has more of, and in spades, is atmosphere and intrigue. The story is told through the eyes of Jimmy, a jazz musician, who sees a beautiful girl at a swanky party, then finds her murdered body on the beach, then sees her again, walking around. There's a wonderful current of **I Spit on Your Grave**-style cosmic retribution for sexual violence that runs through the movie, but mainly it's just sort of out-there and entrancing. Like the jazz musician at the center of the movie, you're never quite sure what's going on, and you're kind of ok with that because it's a unique ride you want to get to the end of.



## 23. The Masque of the Red Death

*A European prince terrorizes the local peasantry while using his castle as a refuge against the "Red Death" plague that stalks the land. - IMDb*

To be honest, I didn't realize this was my favorite of the [Roger Corman/Vincent Price/Edgar Allan Poe movies](#) until I wrote songs about a bunch of horror movies, and the one I wrote for this one turned out to be my favorite. Like in **Bucket of Blood** above, where Roger Corman is a good director, and in **Blacula**, where performances can elevate an otherwise straight exploitation film, for me Hazel Court makes this movie. There are a number of wonderful things in this one, from the dwarf circus performer who murders a friend of Prince Prospero (Vincent Price) to avenge an insult to a girl he loves, to the amazing set design that was the apotheosis of the Corman/Price/Poe look. So if I have to let this one movie stand in for all the wonderful films in this series of movies, I'm happy to do so. If you can only watch one Roger Corman movie this Halloween season, I recommend this one.

## 24. Perversion for Profit

*This anti-porn short film shows a flood tide of filth engulfing the country in the form of newsstand obscenity. - IMDb*

This is maybe a bit of a cheat. This isn't a narrative film or documentary, but I guess you could say it's a sort of outsider cinema. This instructional film was created in 1965 to warn America of the dangers of the secret filth hiding in the newsstands in the form of comics, men's, and women's magazines. This film is amazing in many ways. There's the slice-of-life sense of giving the modern-day viewer a picture of what life was like in the mid-1960s, and what people could see walking into the corner drug for a magazine, but mainly it's a totally un-self aware look at the hypocrisy of the morality police. The fact is that this movie is a half-hour of words talking about how terrible the



“smut” problem is in America, while showing the “smut” in question in full detail. There are very tiny black bars over nipples or eyes, but it’s clear to see that this film became, in a sense, exactly what it beheld. By damning pictures of nude women while showing pictures of nude women, today this seems like a way to get soft-core porn into the hands of moral crusaders who could only enjoy nude bodies if they felt they were also condemning them. This movie is a really interesting artifact that says a lot more about the people who made and watched it than it does about the people they were trying to denigrate. It’s a fascinating time-capsule that conveys a very different message these days than it was originally meant to.

*Posted by Vance K — Emmy-winning producer, folk musician, and cult film reviewer and co-editor of nerds of a feather, flock together since 2012.*