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INTRODUCTION
VANCE K

In 2012, after who knows how many backyard barbecues where we talked on and on about sci-fi and fantasy (and different styles of barbeque sauce), my neighbor asked if I'd like to start a nerd-themed blog with him. So The G had this idea and I jumped aboard, and it has been a joy to watch **nerds of a feather, flock together** grow ever since. Now, for the second year, we have been nominated for a Hugo Award, which is a staggering honor, and one that I never could have foreseen while just gabbing about Alfred Bester over cheeseburgers.

It's easy for me to be proud of the site and the role we play, however humble, in the larger conversations about sci-fi, fantasy, horror, comics, film, video and board games, and fandom in general. It has opened the door to rewarding friendships and partnerships, such as with our newest editor, Joe Sherry. I am a legitimate fan of all of our writers, which makes even our disagreements rewarding. Being able to disagree and to be presented with opposing views is one of the great joys of being involved with this site, and it is, in my mind, a model for the kinds of interactions I like to have more broadly in fandom.

As an example of that, in this packet we've pulled together a number of posts by different contribut-ing writers in response to **The Last Jedi**, which was arguably the most divisive genre work of 2017. None of our team outright disliked the film, but there was certainly a range of opinion on the film overall, as well as many of its component parts. Taking these kinds of conversations from the backyard to the broader web community was one of the main reasons The G and I decided to create a collaborative fanzine in the first place.

We need our fanzines, you know? One of the reasons why I love cult cinema and will usually find something worthwhile in watching even some of the "worst" films ever made is that these works were made by people who didn't have the resources of major stu-dios or even, necessarily, any particular qualifications to embark on a weird filmmaking odyssey in the first place. But they did it anyway, and usually out of a) an unstoppable love for the genre and b) an idea to make the kind of movie they'd like to see, themselves. As the fanzine landscape continues to evolve and genre blogs close up shop all over the web, I feel our site is kind of like that. As a fan, it's the kind of site I want to read, full of passionate nerds that will dump way too much thought into obscure or esoteric topics just because they love the stuff.

I hope that this collection of some of our work from 2017 will serve as a thorough introduction for those of you who are less familiar with **nerds of a feather, flock together** and the work of our team of writers. For those of you who are already fans of the site, I want to convey my deep gratitude because you're the reason I have the opportunity to write this introduc-tion in the first place. Hopefully this packet can serve, for you, as a reminder of the breadth of topics on which we try to engage: the fiction reviews that form the bulk of our content, the conversations with other creators on wide-ranging topics from electronic music to genre scholarship to Kickstarter, our occasional and recurring series looking at new releases (New Books Spotlight), comics (Thursday Morning Superhero), short fiction (The Monthly Round), genre foundations (Dystopian Visions, Horror 101), or the occasional deep-dive into a particular, narrow topic (Fright vs. Fright, looking at horror remakes).

It's a ton of stuff. But, luckily, we've got a crack team of nerds on the case.

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SECTION 1: FICTION REVIEWS

As The G puts it, "in a world where every new Christopher Nolan movie immediately lands in the IMDB Top 250," our scoring system was designed to avoid grade inflation. Ideally, that means our scores would 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 practice, that means the majority of our reviews land in the 6-9 or 1-3 range, since we tend not to devote too much of our limited personal bandwidth to works we feel are simply "meh." In the site's history, we've only given out around a dozen 10s.

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

THE STONE SKY BY N.K. JEMISIN
JOE SHERRY
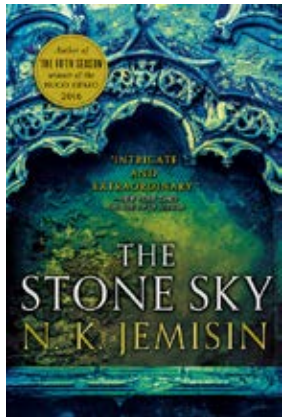
The Stone Sky is the culmination of the best fantasy trilogy written today. And that might be an understatement.

The Stone Sky is a novel in conversation with the two Hugo Award-winning novels which precede it, it is a novel in conversation with the fantasy genre as a whole, and it is a novel in conversation with the culture in which it was written. That's a lot for one novel to take on, but N.K. Jemisin is more than up to the task. The first two volumes of The Broken Earth trilogy set the bar so incredibly high that it would take a remarkable novel to even approach that level, let alone meet it. **The Fifth Season** and **The Obelisk Gate** were masterworks. Jemisin has set an impossible standard for herself, but her control in telling one unified story shows off the skill of an author at the height of her powers. The Stone Sky more than lives up to the promise and standard of those first two Broken Earth novels.

Each novel in The Broken Earth requires a moment of centering, a moment to process and figure what sort of story Jemisin is telling – because even though this is truly a cohesive whole, each novel has its own distinct and tight focus, setting it apart from each of the others.

> *"Imprisonment of orogenes was never the only option for ensuring the safety of society." I pause deliberately, and she blinks, perhaps remembering that orogene parents are perfectly capable of raising orogene children without disaster. "Lynching was never the only option. The nodes were never the only option. All of these were*

choices. Different choices have always been possible."

When I wrote that **The Stone Sky** is a novel in conversation with the culture in which it was written, I did so will the full understanding and recognition that I may not be the most appropriate commentator for this. Jemisin is writing about race and power and privilege; I'm an upper middle class white male. It's not that I do not get to have thoughts and opinions about this, but my understanding of the systematic oppression Jemisin is writing about is necessarily limited.

The Stone Sky is a novel about the consequences of oppression, about how a utopia is built on the backs of a persecuted race and a persecuted class. "Utopia for whom?" is a great question. Even mentioning utopia in commentary on The Stone Sky is absurdity because readers at all familiar with the first two novels of the trilogy know there is no utopia here. There is nothing close to a utopia in The Broken Earth.

Like **The Obelisk Gate**, the primary viewpoint characters of **The Stone Sky** are Essun, her daughter Nassun, and the stone eater Hoa. Hoa, we find out in **The Obelisk Gate**, was the narrator not only of his own chapters (it is a while before we know this), but also is the one telling Essun's story. This was incredibly important because, even though I didn't question it for far too long, who was telling the story mattered, and it changed the shape of the narrative I thought I was reading.

In **The Stone Sky** we learn early on that Hoa is, remarkably, more than forty thousand years old and has memories stretching all the way back to before there were cataclysmic Seasons. Through Hoa's first person narration we discover the utopian, continent-spanning city of Syl Anagist. Syl Anagist is, in just a handful of chapters, one of the great cities of speculative fiction. It is a city of wonder and amazing technological developments. It is on the cusp of moving to a post-scarcity economy.

It is also built on the back of genocide and persecution and oppression and manufactured hatred.

Perhaps it began with whispers that white Niess irises gave them poor eyesight and perverse inclinations, and that split Niess tongues could not speak truth. That sort of sneering happens, cultural bullying, but things got worse. It became easy for scholars to build reputations and careers around the notion that Niess sessapinae were fundamentally different, somehow - more sensitive, more active, less controlled, less civilized - and this was the source of their magical peculiarity. This was what made them not the same kind of human as everyone else. Eventually: not as human as everyone else. Finally: not human at all.

It is all too real and fresh. It is reminiscent of recent world history and of the tendrils of a rotten past still rolling through America's present. While **The Stone Sky** is not necessarily about directly engaging with American history, readers can't help but bring that knowledge and background into the narrative.

I may be putting too fine of a point on this aspect of **The Stone Sky** and, ultimately, I think the corollary to the real world is subtext, though perhaps very pointed subtext. Throughout the story, Jemisin offers an examination and a condemnation of how the privileged and powerful treat those deemed "other", especially when that prejudicial classism and racism and prejudice just happens to protect their own power and position. That's the story of the fall of Syl Anagist, and throughout **The Stone Sky** we see how that fall resonates and directly impacts the stories of Essun and Nassun.

Don't worry, I didn't forget about Essun and Nassun. As she has done with every other aspect of The Broken Earth, Jemisin completely nails the parallel stories of mother and daughter.

Following the destruction of Essun's temporary refuge, the Castrima comm that very effectively showed a way for orogenes and to live in harmony with "regular" humans, Essun is on the move with the remnants of the comm looking for a new home offering safety during the Season. After the events of **The Obelisk**

Gate, Essun is much like her mentor Alabaster was - she overextended the use of her powers and now additional use of orogeny will cause her to more rapidly turn to stone. The problem is that she can't just follow Castrima and not use her power, because Essun's true goal is to find her daughter and, oh yeah, pull the moon back into proper orbit with the planet.

When we say that "the world has ended", remember - it is usually a lie. The planet is just fine.

Nassun, on the other hand, is hell bent on using her prodigious power to destroy the world Essun is hoping to save. She is only ten years old but has experienced pain and loss and horror the likes of which can scarcely be comprehended, and she's got the righteous and focused anger of a child and the raw power to do something about it.

As with so much of The Broken Earth, the stories of Essun and Nassun are as wrenching and compelling as anything in fiction today. While perhaps nothing in **The Stone Sky** is as brutal as that scene in **The Fifth Season** where Syenite kills her own child rather than allow the Fulcrum take him and enslave him and use him up to feed the nodes stabilizing the Stillness, the revealed origin story of the orogenes is filled with equal amounts of pain and horror that calls complicit all those who benefit from the oppression of others and do nothing to alleviate that oppression and suffering.

The world is broken and you can fix it; that's what Alabaster and Lerna both charged you to do. Castrima is more reason for you to do it, not less. And it's time you stopped being a coward, too, and went to find Nassun. Even if she hates you. Even if you left her to face a terrible world alone. Even if you are the worst mother in the world . . . you did your best.

Essun is one of the remarkable and notable characters in fantasy literature. She has endured so much, suffered so much, and she has come out still pushing to make a world better for her daughter. She's not a hero, at least not in the generic epic fantasy sense of the world. Essun is a woman with incredible power and though the whole world is not her responsibility, her daughter is. Even as impossibly difficult as Essun's life has become (again) and how impossible the Season has made long-term survival, the focus never gets too far away from Essun finding a way to find Nassun.

Normally we would say "rescue" Nassun, especially given that her daughter is only ten years old, but Nassun comes across as so preternaturally assured and powerful that it's so easy to forget she's so young. She is running a parallel course with Essun because the nexus of power Essun needs to pull the moon back into course correction with the world is the same nexus Nassun needs to finish the work of the emergent Season.

The Stone Sky caps off a stunning epic fantasy trilogy, one which began with the threaded narrative of three orogenes and concludes with the story of a woman and daughter finally coming back together. If you think there's going to be a truly happy ending, you haven't been paying attention. That's not the story N. K. Jemisin is telling here. **The Stone Sky** weaves deep personal drama and trauma with the overarching racial commentary that underpinned the entire trilogy.

The Broken Earth is a monumental achievement in fantasy fiction. **The Stone Sky** is the culmination of the best fantasy trilogy written today and that might be an understatement.

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 8/10

Bonuses: +1 because Jemisin somehow makes Schaffa somewhat sympathetic and that's absolutely amazing given where Schaffa started in The Fifth Season

Penalties: None.

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

*Posted by Joe Sherry - Co-editor of **nerds of a feather**, 2017 Hugo Award Finalist for Best Fanzine. Writer / Editor of the mostly defunct Adventures in Reading since 2004. Minnesotan.*

THE ONLY HARMLESS GREAT THING BY BROOKE BOLANDER

SHANA DUBOIS

There is not a single wasted word in this treatise of perfection.

I love going into a book, or in this case a novella, knowing as little as possible. I might know the general premise, a plot point or two, but generally that's about it. Occasionally, I'll have only seen a title recommended by people with similar reading tastes.

In this instance, I tuned into Brooke Bolander's writing later than most. I first came across it when I saw her story, "And You Shall Know Her By The Trail Of Dead," in **Lightspeed**, February 2015. I knew then I'd be a fan for life and to keep an eye out for any and all new stories.

When I started hearing talk surrounding **The Only Harmless Great Thing**, I knew even less than I normally would because I purposely wanted to go into the story and be surprised. I'd heard references to the radium girls and elephants but I dipped out of any conversation going beyond that. But I should tell you a bit more, that is why you're here after all.

This is an alternate history novella set in Newark, New Jersey, taking two historical events, the radiation poisoning of female factory workers and the public execution by electricity of an Indian elephant on Coney Island. Bolander weaves these events into something wholly new and heart-wrenching.

With Bolander's writing, you never know quite where she's going to take you but one thing is always certain, the journey is going to be exquisite.

Bolander's prose is some of the best I've ever read. Period. It is artful and sharp as a razor's edge. Allow me to give you a visual representation of Bolander's writing in my mind:

That's right. I needed a picture from the Hubble telescope. Her writing makes me feel grounded and weightless, as though the ending she provides seems the only possible ending while at the same time I feel the world is nothing but endless possibility.

This novella is not typical anything. It is not a standard sci-fi adventure, it isn't a literary gem, it isn't any one thing because it is everything.

There is not a single wasted word in this treatise of perfection. Sometimes you read a novella and lament it is not book-length. **The Only Harmless Great Thing** could only ever be what it is, and Bolander nails it. Despite its brevity, you get to know Kat, the scientist, Regan, one of the radium girls turned elephant handler, and Topsy the elephant. My cherished Topsy.

The cast is kept at a minimum to tell Topsy's story and we jump between the narrative timelines as the story progresses. It is never jarring as we switch between points-of-view and timelines, the prose flows like a river.

It might not be the story most genre or sci-fi readers expect when they pick up a novella from Tor.com, but maybe it should be. Maybe we need more gut-punching, heart-wrenching, definition-defying stories in the world. I know I'm hoping for more.

The Math:

Baseline Assessment: 10/10

Bonuses: Read it!

Penalties: None from me!

Nerd Coefficient: 10/10 — this novella is my new gold standard for what a story can be and do.

Posed by Shana DuBois – extreme bibliophile and seeker of raindrops.

THE LADY OF THE LAKE BY ANDRZEJ SAPKOWSKI

THE G

All great things must come to an end.

I've agonized over how to write this review of the final chapter in a fantasy series that I can say without hesitation is the best I've ever read. To be frank, I'm not even sure I could adequately summarize the plot- -not without giving something away that's best left to the joy of discovery. But here goes nothing.

The Lady of the Lake is the fifth and final volume in The Witcher Cycle, a series first published in Polish and then translated into Spanish, French, Russian, etc. Though an international sensation, English readers are getting it late. The only reason we are getting it at all is because CD Project Red adapted the series into a successful game franchise.* As they say, though, better late than never.

The book begins with Geralt on the trail of his erstwhile protege Ciri, the prophesied "destroyer of worlds." She is also being pursued by agents of the Nilfgaardian Empire, who seek to marry her off to the Emperor; renegade sorcerer Vilgefortz and his hench-man, Bonhart, who seek to harness her power for their own nefarious ends; and the Lodge of Sorceresses, who seek to restore a balance of power between the Empire and the Northern kingdoms (presently in the midst of a cataclysmic war). Ciri enters the Tower of the Swallow and promptly disappears...

...and ends up in an Elven dimension that exists in parallel not only to the Witcher's world, but also to our own. The elves have their own designs on Ciri, namely, to give birth to the child that will restore elven greatness. She escapes, with the help of interdimensional telepathic unicorns, who help Ciri discover that her true gift is, essentially, the power to melt spacetime.

Yes, you read all that correctly.

Once back in the real world (not ours, but the Witcher's), the main actors in this drama begin to converge on Stygga Castle, where Vilgefortz holds both Ciri and Yennefer captive. As this unfolds, the Imperial and Northern armies meet in a battle so intense and bloody that it makes the Blackwater look like a back alley slap fight. I'd say more, but you really should just read the damned thing.

The Lady of the Lake is an immensely gratifying, yet deeply unnerving, conclusion to the series. There are moments when it is touching, romantic, funny, and just plain fun. At others, it is unbearably sad and utterly terrifying. It is a deeply political book, as I've discussed earlier. Sapkowski deconstructs the archetypes of good and evil that Tolkein modeled for the genre, but without resort to the tired "everyone is terrible" canard. Racism plays a central role in the narrative, as does misogyny. In both cases, it feels like Sapkowski is way ahead of the curve for 2017; then you remember that these books were written 15 years ago.

Another appealing element of the book, and the series, is the moral ambiguity of its powerholders. Nilfgaard is an oppressive, autocratic and megalomaniacal power; yet the Northern kingdoms--which would be coded as "Western" (and thus "good") in tradition-al fantasy, are monstrously violent and cruel places, where nonhumans are forced to live in ghettoes where they are defenseless against pogroms and other, more mundane indignities. Meanwhile, the Elven Scoia'tael, who resist by force of arms, are straight-up terrorists who seemingly take joy from violence against defense-less civilians. Does this dynamic sound familiar? It sure does to me.

Sapkowski clearly draws from the darker side of Polish and European history, using his fantasy setting to explore various aspects of human behavior (socio-logical, psychological, etc.) in a strikingly sophisticated manner. Like I said, this is a smart book.

The Lady of the Lake is not, however, the kind of monotonically grim fantasy that has proliferated over the past decade. There is goodness in the world, as well as in all but the very worst actors in this drama. And people surprise you – just when you think you've got things figured out, someone does something unexpected. It may be an unexpected kindness from a character who has hitherto appeared cold and calculat-ing; or someone Geralt or Ciri came to trust demon-strates why trust, in this world, should be conferred selectively.

The overarching theory, then, isn't that the world is inherently dark and foreboding, and human nature irredeemable in the face of naked self-interest. Rather, it is of corruption by ignorance, jealousy and the pur-suit of power, and redemption through personal bonds of friendship, love, and loyalty. These are timeless concepts, and by no means original to the series; yet they are striking nonetheless, by virtue of their flawless execution, and the degree to which we come to care about what happens to Geralt, Ciri, Yennefer, and the others.

The Lady of the Lake is also stylistically daring. As in **The Tower of the Swallow**, narratives are often fragmented across several timelines and character perspectives. However, it works better this time. The epic Battle of Brenna shifts between the perspectives of various combatants, and the doctor running a field hospital in its midst. Throughout, Sapkowski intersperses vignettes, often centered on peripheral characters, which themselves may link back to events occurring elsewhere. Keeping everything straight can be a challenge, but when the book concludes, the payoff is considerable.

The book ends on a curious note, which I will not mention. But suffice to say it raises as many questions as it provides answers. I have my theories, but will have to read the cycle again in order to see how they

are borne out.

I could go on, but in the interests of brevity, let me just say this: **The Lady of the Lake** is, without any doubt, the best and most profound fantasy novel I have ever read. It is hard to put down, yet also a challenging and deeply rewarding book. And it is genuinely moving. I have never read a fantasy series like this, and suspect I never will again.

*Note: the games have a different plot from the books. It has been suggested that they are a sequel to or alternate version of the Saga, though Sapkowski says this is not possible.

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 10/10.

Bonuses: None. You can't top perfection.

Penalties: None.

Nerd Coefficient: 10/10. "Mind-blowing/life-changing."

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

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

As 2017 nears its end, November gives us a chance to look back. Not just at the past year, but at history, both personal and societal. Perhaps that's why all the stories in this month's Round come with a look at the past, whether it's the tragedies of war and politics, or those of family, love, and death. The stories all share a sense of characters dealing with the weight of their inheritances, whether it comes from their ancestors, their friends, their lovers, or themselves. As winter begins to take hold and the chill to set in, it's time to look back to remind ourselves both what we're still fighting for, and how far we've come.

So please, take seat. The flavors on tap this month are perfect for those looking to unwind by the fire, to shed a tear for those who have not made it this far, and to reaffirm a commitment to pushing forward into a future that is not mired by the same harms and dangers as the past. Each pint today comes with a special side of memories and a tendril of shadow creeping just out of view. The only remedy is to drink deep, share the moment with those you care about, and look for ways to escape the familiar cycles of hate, loss, and fear — together.

Cheers!

Tasting Flight – November 2017

"The Summer Mask" by Karin Lowachee (Nightmare)

Notes: With a color of sepia, of forgotten pictures of forgotten faces, the nose is dust and the smell of old books, the flavor equal parts longing and sacrifice, grace and betrayal, bitterness and hope.

Pairs with: Session Ale

Review: David is an artist tasked with making masks for soldiers who survived massive war, but bear physical scars. He meets Matthew, a man who can barely see and who has severe facial damage, and sees in him something beautiful and captivating. It's a story of obsession and sacrifice, love and miracles. And, of course, beauty. The story does an amazing job of showing how these two men come together – Matthew because his injuries have made him an outcast and dependent on others, David because his nature and his drive to create something beautiful. And so much of what I like about the story rests on how it treats this idea of beauty, not as something redemptive or healing, but as cold and in many ways cruel. What the two men share while each is flawed might not be physically beautiful, but it comes from his place of care and love. And David, in trying to give a beautiful face to what they have, ends up inviting a distance and darkness on himself, and proves that beauty doesn't need to be compassionate, doesn't need approval or permission or justification. And in that, it reveals a dark heart of beauty, the difference between beauty that can be captured in stone or clay, and the beauty that exists in human interaction and love. It's a difficult and complex story, but one that captures the shape and fragility of

beauty, and the price it can carry.

"The Sound of His Voice Like the Colour of Salt" by L Chan (The Dark)

Notes: Everything old is new again, ancient methods creating a heavy and dense profile that still crackles with static and electricity, the past crashing into the present with violence and storm before calming into something beautiful and delicately sweet.

Pairs with: Ancient Ale

Review: A nameless ghost boy shares a haunted space with a number of other forgotten spirits in this story, which explores memory and connection. When a new ghost appears on the scene, and from a most unlikely place, the main character is suddenly faced with the world outside his home, even as those around him have...mixed reactions to the prospect of freedom. The story shows how history anchors people in place, tying them with bonds that hold even after death, even after everything else has been lost and forgotten. It traces the ways that loneliness and cycles entrench harm, the ways that these ghosts reenact the same things over and over, maintaining the status quo for those in power and never able to reach beyond their prison. Until something comes from the outside in, allowing the main character to attempt to break the cycle, to reach for something new and freeing. It's a story about change and the possibility of change, especially for those who are isolated, who can find no way to escape a physical place. The story looks with hope at the power of technology to bring people together across vast distances, to allow people to throw off the chains of their imprisonment, and to map new frontiers into a future suddenly full of possibilities. It's a story that carries with it a heaviness, the oppression of the situation dragging at the main character and what he can do, but there's also the hope that the drag can be overcome and escaped, and that even death is not enough to stop progress.

"Hungry Demigods" by Andrea Tang (GigaNoto-Saurus)

Notes: Fusing flavors and styles, sweet and tangy and bitter and all points in between, the pour is a muted tan tinged with pink, like a few drops of blood were added for good measure, creating an experience that is triumphant, fun, but undeniably complex.

Pairs with: Grapefruit IPA

Review: Isabel, a blind Chinese Canadian woman, works as a cook in Montreal, where food has always been the family business. When her brother brings in a man with a strange curse and holes in his memory, though, it's her magic that she has to lean on in order to figure out what's going on and if she can do anything about it. Not that cooking and magic are different spheres — with a culinary god for a father, food and spice, legacy and magic, all sort of roll together. And I love the way the story handles inheritance and the weight of family and culture, how decisions that parents make for their children create burdens that are passed down, that can settle and rot. Isabel has to balance the various parts of herself, the different skills and experiences she's had as well as the cultures that have created her, staying true first and foremost to who she is but striving not to lose sight of where she's come from (especially since literally losing her sight when she strayed too far from honoring who she is rather than who some of her family might want her to be). The story builds a great relationship between Isabel and the man she's trying to help, Elias, and creates a subtle romance while managing some stunning parallelism between his mysterious affliction and Isabel's own demons. The tone is fun and swift, Isabel having no patience for fools and a drive toward justice, even when it means some uncomfortable reunions. She's a force to be reckoned with, and I think there's a great mix of action, world building, and plenty of emotional moments to make the story memorable and satisfying.

"A Pestilence Come for Old Ma Salt" by Dayna K. Smith (Lackington's)

Notes: With a bitterness that almost sticks in the throat and a pour inky and concealing, the flavors are a rush of spice and stars, the taste of secrets being dragged into the open and the truth blooming in the night.

Pairs with: India Black Ale

Review: Ma Salt is a healer for an insular mountain community, their first and last stop for most maladies, supernatural or otherwise. It's a place where many people go when they want to get away from the rest of the world, which means that it has its share of loners and more than its share of secrets. When an infant comes down with a cough that turns out to be much more than a simple cold, though, Ma Salt is challenged in ways that push her secrets out from the shadows. The story explores small communities in an interesting way, looking at how the relationships become so twisted, the water so muddy, that it's often difficult to see what's right in front of you. Everyone knows everyone else's business, or at least they seem to, which means people prize their secrets all the more, the little ways that they can be private in a place where privacy is a precious thing. At the same time, it explores how those secrets can act as seeds of corruption, eroding the very thing that communities need in order to function and survive — trust. And trust built on lies and misdirection is no trust, which is something that Ma Salt has to confront as she struggles to save the life of her community's newest member. The story also shows how sometimes rumor is more dangerous than anything, and how even when the truth is hard, or shameful, it is often surprising just how much people have the capacity to forgive, and to accept, and to help those who might stumble, and to celebrate those things that make people themselves. It's a great voice the story establishes, and I like how the plot follows a

sort of exorcism — of deception and prejudice, so that the community can come together stronger than ever and so even the most vulnerable can be accepted and cared for.

"An Unexpected Boon" by S.B. Divya (Apex)

Notes: Pouring a dark brown rimmed with gold, the first sip is deep, subtle, and smoky, like dreams burning, only to reveal newer, sweeter tones underneath, a future still bright despite loss and danger.

Pairs with: Honey Bock

Review: Kalyani is a young (probably autistic) girl who experiences the world quite differently from the rest of her family. It's something that Aruni, her older brother, finds quite difficult to handle, especially when his parents have left him in charge while they are away. For Kalyani, though, it's the rest of the world that doesn't make as much sense, that overflows with threats and dangers, that never makes as much sense as the order of her own mind and the quiet solitude of her thoughts. When a passing holy man observes her quiet, he gives her a gift, an insect that communicates with her, and gives her a tool to help decode the rest of the world. When a different holy man passes through with a much different outlook, though, Kalyani and Aruni find themselves at the center of a situation that could destroy them, especially if Aruni doesn't trust his younger sister. And for me, the story is about family and about communication, about trust and value. Everyone treats Kalyani like she is defective, like she can't survive in this world mostly because everyone else accepts the corruption and dangers of the systems they live in, which make Kalyani even more at risk for being a girl, for now knowing the unspoken social contracts that reinforce all levels of society. For all the darkness that the story uses as its base, though, the

story rejects a trajectory toward tragedy, and the prose shines with the resolve and skill of Kalyani, her ability to function and act, even as Aruni despairs, certain of defeat. To me, it's a story of the value of being able to see the world differently, to be able to come up with solutions that work for everyone, which might only be possible if first you refuse to accept the dominant narrative of the way things are. It's a sweet and moving story full of magic and grace.

"Making Us Monsters" by Sam J. Miller & Lara Elena Donnelly (Uncanny)

Notes: The past reaches forward into the present with a taste of loss and memories bleeding together, a cloudy pour obscuring a golden shine, a mix of spice and distance and old wounds opening to an almost floral finish, a flower placed on the grave of a unknown soldier, finally revealed and put to rest.

Pairs with: Abbey Ale

Review: Borrowing from the historical story of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, this story paints a picture that connects two men across time and across tragedies, as both seek to make sense of a world that refuses to make sense, where who they are makes them vulnerable, and who they must become in order to live in the world makes them monsters. The story is told through letters, letters from Wilfred Owen from the battlefields of World War I to Sassoon, who is dealing with a much different situation in the run up to the second World War. For both men, though, they must deal with their desires and the situation that life has thrust them into — the chaos of war, the dangers of men looking for a "cure" for them. The letters are (to me, incredibly fittingly) one directional, neither man truly able to express himself to the other, time and war and death getting between them, cutting short what they could have meant to one another. What remains are the bruises, the scars, the injuries that never really heal — both on the bodies of those who remain and

on the world as a whole, these losses weighing heavier than stone, just as crushing as any military defeat. For me the story is about loss and about cycles, about how compassion and love become something else when all safety is gone, when discovery and death are so near, and when all these men want is to live, to be free. And it becomes, in many ways, about breaking that cycle, or trying to, of stepping out from safety and trying to learn from the past so that the same injustices do not continue or grow. It's wrenching and it's difficult and it's heartbreaking, and you might end up a sobbing mess, but it is a gorgeous story about history, love, and war.

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

GLUTTONY BAY BY MATT WALLACE
JOE SHERRY
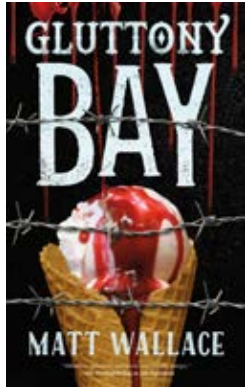
Come for the madcap gonzo writing, stay for the wrenching emotion.

You've got me feeling emotions

Deeper than I've ever dreamed of

-Mariah Carey "Emotions"

When Mariah Carey sang "Emotions" in 1991, I can only imagine that it was because someone traveled back in time and handed her a stack of Matt Wallace's **Sin du Jour Affair** novellas. I'm not suggesting that this is the most likely explanation for the inspiration behind her song. I just think it wouldn't be unreasonable for her to kick even one royalty check Matt's way as an acknowledgment, because he definitely had me feeling emotions.

It's been clear for a couple of books now that Wallace was setting the stage for a conflict that will upend the world and lives of everyone who works at Sin du Jour. I've been fully on board for the full Sin du Jour experience since **Envy of Angels** and with each book, Wallace draws the reader deeper and deeper to the point that these aren't characters, they're old friends. They're old friends who are completely whacked out and perhaps slightly cracked out, they've got scars on the surface and unfathomable depths lurking underneath, and we slip into their stories with ease, like a well-worn pair of pants.

"Mo got to be in a battle between demon clans from hell. He got to go to Hollywood and party with celebs and he was almost burned alive except three tons of vanilla frosting fell from the ceiling. A fucked-up merman puked all over him in front of dragons made of fire and a bunch of Japanese dudes made of gnomes. He met an angel. He got to meet an actual, real angel.

He got to know there was more out there than anyone else ever knows."

There is no doubt that Matt Wallace will deliver an absurdly gonzo story. See the above quote that somehow perfectly encapsulates the previous five books in six sentences better than I could in six paragraphs. This is a given. It's just a question as to what seasoning he'll use as the delivery vehicle for telling a deeply emotional story that is becoming more and more personal for me the farther along in this series.

We're entering the stage where nobody is really safe and it's flat out terrifying, and I found myself actively cursing at Matt Wallace several times throughout **Gluttony Bay**. Come for the madcap gonzo writing, stay for the wrenching emotion.

Gluttony Bay finds the Sin du Jour crew in open conflict with the powers-that-be who finance them and set up their extra-super-special catering work. Well, more specifically, Allensworth (the representative of said powers) is in conflict with Lena and Bronko because they are not falling one hundred percent in line with every one of his plans and that's not something he will tolerate for long.

As such, this is the first novella not directly centered around a catering job, though food remains a central through-line, increasingly so late in the novella.

I so often focus on the absurdity Wallace threads throughout each story when talking about Sin du Jour because it's easy to point at something so epic and absurdly awesome and use that as a selling point for the novella. Early on, that was enough. But with each passing novella, it is clear that Wallace's skill at storytelling is more than on-point. Everything here is so tightly and perfectly plotted that it's easy to miss just how smooth of a ride Wallace is taking his readers on and how strong the craft behind all this glorious crazy is. Ultimately, **Gluttony Bay** (and the entire series) wouldn't work and wouldn't resonate so strongly if Matt Wallace wasn't crushing it with everything behind the scenes.

Wallace has set up the relationships between Lena,

Darren, Bronko, Ritter, Hara, Moon, Cindy, and everyone else on the line and in Shipping & Receiving so perfectly that the joys and disappointments and the raw pain are so visceral in **Gluttony Bay** that I can only imagine how poignant the ending of the series will be.

Gluttony Bay is a perfect representative of the Sin du Jour series, laced with razor-edged humor and absurdity and filled with a delectable story that builds to something bigger and more emotional than any individual bite would have suggested. **Gluttony Bay** is fantastic. **Gluttony Bay** is wonderful.

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 8/10

**Bonuses:** +1 because there's this oracle of a clown that could probably scare Pennywise into submission due to his method of divination.

Penalties: None

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

Posted by Joe Sherry – Co-editor of nerds of a feather, 2017 Hugo Award Finalist for Best Fanzine. Writer / Editor of the mostly defunct Adventures in Reading since 2004. Minnesotan.

NEMESIS GAMES BY JAMES S.A. COREY
ZHAOYUN
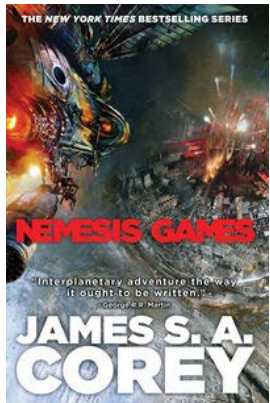
"The gang" (and, you know, everyone else) imperiled — a satisfying ante-upper indeed!

Since there was a bit too much familiarity about the crew of the Roci by book four — a sense that if they pooled their efforts they could somehow triumph against any obstacle, even an alien one — it seemed the series was building to a problem serious enough to jeopardize the synergistic relationship the four had. Sure enough, **Nemesis Games** almost immediately sends all four main crew members off on disparate quests, with little chance to effect each other's situations.

This sort of "scattered to the ends of the Earth solar system" setup entails some risks. Since we have grown accustomed to having the Roci's crew (not to mention the Roci herself, practically a fifth main cast member at this point) demonstrate the importance of interpersonal relations by solving every problem together, how will the story proceed if we, the readers, are denied the pleasure of seeing them work together (and denied any meaningful glimpse of the Roci, out of commission temporarily due to damage sustained in **Cibola Burn**)?

I'm pleased to say that the authors of **The Expanse** did a masterful job of what is essentially back-story exposition – no easy task to avoid the typical sort of "You know I don't like snakes…(and I'm saying this now because lots of snakes are in the near future)" clumsiness, but they managed it!. This gives us a major glimpse into everyone's past (well, everyone but Holden). We learn, in essence, some of the key reasons such a skilled group were on the Canterbury in the first place, what they were running from, and why.

Since the core relationship on the Rocinante is the one between Holden and (Naomi) Nagata, it is only fitting that it is this romance that is most directly imperiled by the reemergence of these shady pasts.

All this might sound pretty small-time — the ghosts of the main characters' misdeeds rearing their ugly heads might be scary to those individuals, but it would hardly measure up to the sort of civilization-ending threat these four (+ the Roci) have faced previously. At the risk of being terribly mysterious (thank you, The Sphinx from **Mystery Men**!), I'll say only that the stakes turn out to be all too high, the threat all too dire. Just when we thought the worst that was in store was the addition of new crew members to the Roci, and the risk that both the diegetic dynamic and the reader's appreciation for the tight-knit crew of four could be shaken, we discover that the true danger is to the core of human civilization itself!

Does the "Holden+Nagata, Alex and Amos too" dynamic survive this dire challenge? Is this, in fact, the best **Expanse** book yet? (Given The G's almost visceral dislike for the first book in the series, one could optimistically say that it must be getting better overall!) You'll just have to read it to find out! (Alternatively, you could check out my forthcoming review of book six, **Babylon's Ashes** — check back here on **NOAF** soonish!)

The Math:

Objective Assessment: 7/10

Bonuses: +1 for masterful exposition, without a single "But you KNOW I can't eat strawberries!" ham-fisted foreshadowing, +1 for successfully upping the ante — with a vengeance!

Penalties: -1 for describing Nagata's protracted ordeal in what struck me as a conspicuously pseudo-scientific manner (in essence, hit stuff with a wrench after a serious physical injury/setback, but still get one's message through without being "permanently damaged," to quote Vader)

Nerd coefficient: 8/10 "A bit of alright," as the Australians say!

SECTION II: DYSTOPIAN VISIONS

For the second time, our writers teamed up for a site-wide survey of a particular sub-genre within science fiction and fantasy. In 2015, we did so for a series called **Cyberpunk Revisited**, which took a look at the birth and emergence of the cyberpunk sub-genre, the books that followed in a post-cyberpunk wave, and the ways in which the cyberpunk aesthetic expanded into film and music, as well as becoming a permanent influence in the broader language of science fiction.

This year, we tackled **Dystopian Visions**, applying the same type of approach to a sub-genre that's having something of a moment right now. We looked at some of the foundational works of dystopian fiction, and through a masterful guest post by Paul Kincaid, we looked at how dystopian fiction emerged from the much older tradition of utopian fiction.

It's something of a given that the writers behind key works of dystopian fiction wrote their stories as a warning against a certain type of societal erosion. Huxley's **Brave New World** and Orwell's **1984** are perhaps the best-known of these kinds of books, and they remain among the few works of pure science fiction that have become key texts taught throughout American schools. As fans of genre fiction, reading these works critically can not only give us a window into the cultures, time periods, and fears that gave birth to them, but help us better understand our own times, our own world, and the impact we might want to have (or avoid having) on it, as well.

INTRODUCING DYSTOPIAN VISIONS
THE G

Dystopianism is back in vogue. **1984** and **The Handmaid's Tale** have both recently topped bestseller lists, with other classics making appearances as well. The reason for this sudden surge of interest should be no mystery; science fiction is, after all, a reflection of our hopes and fears for the future, and fear undoubtedly rules the present.

Yet dystopia — or, more accurately, dystopianism — never really went away. Indeed, in the 96 years since Yevgeny Zamyatin published **We**, authors working inside and out of genre have offered a broad spectrum of dystopian visions. Many are quite distant from the statist nightmares imagined by Zamyatin, Huxley, Orwell, Bradbury, and Atwood. Postapocalyptic fiction, for example, presents readers with a stateless dystopia, in which the collapse of the modern state redefines the human life as nasty, brutish, and short. And gritty or grimdark fantasy is arguably another form of dystopianism, where societies are marked by the arbitrary use of violence and a near constant state of war. Meanwhile, the classic statist dystopia has ruled the burgeoning YA space for nearly a decade — first with the breakout success of Suzanne Collins' **Hunger Games** trilogy, and followed by the popular **Divergent** and **Maze Runner** franchises.

Dystopianism, Broadly Defined

This broad definition may surprise some readers, or strike them as unreflective of established convention, which holds that dystopian fiction relates narrowly to life under oppressive states. This convention exists, however, for strictly historical reasons.

Dystopianism, in essence, emerged as an inversion of utopianism, a fictional style with roots in philosophy (think Plato) that grew in popularity alongside the Romantic movement of the late 19th century. At that time, growth in literacy, global connectedness, and faith in the notion of scientific/technological progress were fueling interest in a broad range of idealistic movements, from the individualized (e.g. liberalism and democracy) to the communal (e.g. nationalism and socialism).

Unsurprisingly, most romantic works of utopian fiction are political treatises barely disguised by their science fictional clothing. Take **News from Nowhere** by William Morris (1890), in which the Victorian protagonist wakes to find himself in a post-scarcity future marked by socioeconomic egalitarianism, volunteerism, and communal rather than state authority. The central idea, then, is to use science fictional extrapolation as a mechanism through which to explore what society could be like if only certain (great) ideas would be implemented.

Zamyatin, who authored the first modern dystopia, simply took this formula and reversed the polarity — telling the story of atomized individuals trapped in a Marxist-Leninist nightmare desperately seeking to assert even the most rudimentary form of individualism. Huxley followed with **Brave New World**, where eugenics, corporate "Fordism" (i.e. labor mechanization), and psychosocial manipulation achieve the same effect. Orwell's **1984**, the most widely read of the three foundational texts, combines elements of both earlier works. And all three reflect the deep anxiety embedded in the 20th century zeitgeist of a mechanized terror that reduces individuals to cogs in the machine.

Later dystopias play a similar role, albeit reflecting somewhat different conceptions of the oppressive state. **Fahrenheit 451**, published at the height of McCarthyism, takes place against a backdrop of anti-intellectualism and the criminalization of knowledge; and **The Handmaid's Tale**, published at the precise

moment when fundamentalist Christianity became a force in U.S. electoral politics, imagines class and gender oppression in a science fictional theocracy. Like their forebears, these books follow the established protocol of juxtaposing the individual against oppressive state and society.

But is statism really intrinsic to the concept of "dystopia?" I would argue that no — it's not. Rather, this is defining a genre by its tropes, which Ian Sales has rightfully critiqued as a rationale for defining genre boundaries. Instead, I'd argue that dystopianism is defined by the extrapolation of our sociopolitical nightmares onto invented worlds, whether they be futuristic or fantastic. Dystopianism, furthermore, exists for the express purpose of theorizing about the present. Thus, dystopianism can and should encompass other forms of extrapolation beyond those portrayed in the classic dystopias.

Stateless Dystopia
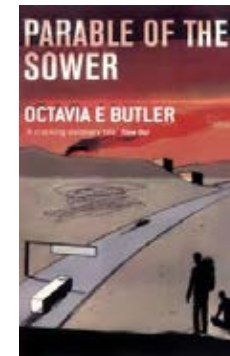
While one group of 20th century writers envisioned futures defined by terrifying, statist modes of oppression, another began questioning what would come after nuclear war, pandemic disease, ecological extinction event or anthropomorphic environmental disaster. These works are commonly labeled postapocalyptic, in reference to their "creation event," but nearly all center on forms of precarity engendered by a breakdown of political and social institutions (rather than their repurposing for oppressive means by a modern state apparatus). In other words, stateless dystopia.

Postapocalyptic fiction is not always straightforwardly dystopian. The subset of "cosy" postapocalyptic fiction, best exemplified by **Earth Abides**, is distinctly utopian — cheerfully (some might say

naively) imagining better worlds built off the ashes of this one. Others, like Octavia Butler's **Parable of the Sower** and Emily St. John Mandel's **Station Eleven**, juxtapose the extreme precarity and threat of living in stateless spaces with the indomitability of the human spirit and its creativity in adapting to circumstances. And other works, like **Alas, Babylon** and **On the Beach**, have too short a time horizon to really explore what comes after.

Most works of postapocalyptic fiction, however, present the reader with straightforwardly bad places where bad things happen as a matter of course, and as a consequence of the collapse of both political and social institutions. Like **The Road**, in which a boy and his father navigate an inherently violent and threatening post-disaster landscape; or Marcel Theroux's **Far North**, where the prevalence of such landscapes enables the would-be architects of a more traditionally Orwellian nightmare to begin construction of such a state out of the chaos. The absence of the state is what defines these envisioned futures as dystopian.

Fantasy Dystopias
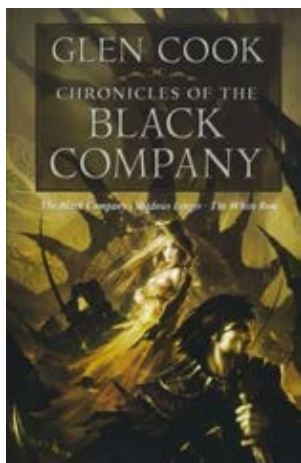
While dystopianism is most commonly associated with science fiction, there is a distinctly dystopian streak evident in fantasy — especially in fantasy's recent, gritty turn. Glen Cook's pathbreaking **Chronicles of the Black Company** centers on a mercenary company warring on the side of oppressive tyranny against a fanatical religious movement. **A Song of Ice and Fire** presents a world in which violence is arbitrary, cruel, and ever-present. And Steven Erikson's **Malazan Book of the Fallen**

is replete with dystopian themes of misery, corrupt, falling societies and cultures, and endemic warfare.

Dystopian themes are also evident in epic fantasy that isn't normally classified as gritty or grimdark. Take Brandon Sanderson's **Mistborn** series, which is set in a fairly classic statist dystopia, or N.K. Jemisin's **Dreamblood** series, with its society focused on harvesting dreams, the most powerful of which are found at the moment of death. Those who are deemed too corrupt or elderly to contribute to society are killed by the Gatherers, their dreamblood extracted in the process.

And one could equally argue that the bulk of traditional epic fantasies, in which stable polities are threatened with the unending terror of conquest and subjugation by malevolence, are animated by fear of dystopia! However, unlike **Mistborn**, few actually examine what life is like under said malevolence. Yet dystopia looms nonetheless.

Dystopianism in Young Adult Fiction

While dystopianism is evident in these corners of adult-focused genre, it practically rules the burgeoning YA space. This began in 2008, when Suzanne Collins' **Hunger Games** trilogy emerged to fill the popular void left by Harry Potter. Though derivative (of **Battle Royale** especially), **Hunger Games** became a bona fide sensation, leading to a high profile film series and numerous imitators — many of which, like **Divergent** or **Maze Runner**, are now multimillion-dollar franchises themselves. And postapocalyptic YA, most of which fits into our category of stateless dystopia, is nearly as popular among YA readers.

Dystopian Visions

This series, conceived of as a sequel to **Cyberpunk Revisited**, seeks to explore questions of what dystopianism is and what purpose(s) it serves. What are the tropes and conventions of modern dystopian fiction? How have dystopian visions evolved over time, both

in terms of approach and theme? And what do dystopian visions about the points in time and space in which they are written?

Equally, we will ask questions about why we like to read about dystopias. Is it possible that we even find them comforting, and if so, why?

Finally, but perhaps most importantly, we will consider dystopianisms's complex relationship to its forebear, utopianism. We will explore works where dystopianism serves to negatively define utopia, as well as those where dystopia and utopia are presented side-by-side. Just how essential or intrinsic is the concept of utopia to that of dystopia?

We will explore these and other questions through a series of essays and dossier-style reviews, including of works not commonly associated with dystopianism, but which present dystopian themes. Our dossiers will have the following subheadings:

Filetype: whether the work under review is a book, film, game, etc.

File Under: whether the work presents a statist, stateless, fantasy or hybrid-form dystopia.

Executive Summary: summary of the plot.

Dystopian Visions: discussion of dystopian themes/content present in the work.

Utopian Undercurrents: whether and to what degree the work's dystopianism underlies a utopian understanding of politics, society, etc.

Level of Hell: a quantitative rating of how terrible the presented dystopia is, from first to ninth — with an explanation of the rating.

Legacy: the importance of the work in question within its field.

In Retrospect: an editorial commentary on how good/not good the work is, from the vantage point of 2017.

Interspersed with these dossier reviews, we and a selection of guest writers will explore how to contextualize dystopia and dystopianism within literature and other media, as well as the moments in time and space when it has surged forward into popular consciousness.

The 1980s represent one such period. The Empire in **Star Wars**, one notes, is essentially a statist dystopia, while George Lucas paid more direct homage to his literary forebears in **THX1138**. For that matter, nearly every action/sci-fi flick from the '80s takes place within, or makes reference to, dystopian futures. So do the most memorable science fictional comics of the day: **Judge Dredd**, **Akira**, **Days of Future Past**, **V for Vendetta**, etc. And cyberpunk is arguably dystopian as well.

Similarly, we will try to understand what social and cultural factors may have fueled the emergence of YA dystopias during the 2000s, or how current world geopolitics might alter our view of dystopianism in entertainment media. Conversely, we will ask whether interest in dystopia necessarily reflects underlying concerns with the direction of the world, or whether one may talk of dystopia in purely aesthetic terms.

In the end, our goal is to come to some sort of understanding – messy as it may be – about what dystopianism is and why we are attracted to it. And, of course, we hope to have fun in the process.

Dystopian Visions will run through March and April, 2017, with stories posted every Monday and Wednesday.

GUEST POST: CAN'T GET THERE FROM HERE
PAUL KINCAID

Dystopian Visions *is excited to welcome noted SF/F critic Paul Kincaid, with a guest post on the relationship between dystopia and utopia. Paul Kincaid is the author of two collections of essays and reviews,* **What It Is We Do When We Read Science Fiction** *and* **Call and Response***, and he is currently working on a book about Iain M. Banks. He has received the Thomas Clareson Award from the SFRA and the BSFA Non-Fiction Award.*

In **Four Voyages**, published in 1507, Amerigo Vespucci reported that, on one of his voyages to the New World, he had left 24 men at a fort on Cape Frio. One of those men, Raphael Hythloday, set out from Cape Frio on a journey south through various curious and unknown countries, until he reached an island separated from the mainland by a man-made canal. This island was a realm called Utopia, after its founder, King Utopus. Raphael spent some time in a country that seemed to him most excellent in its organisation, until, after a few years, he reluctantly decided it was time to return to Europe. There, in July 1515 in Antwerp, he was introduced by the noted scholar Peter Giles to a visiting Englishman who was taking a break from a diplomatic mission. This Englishman, Thomas More, spent time talking with Raphael about his journeys and afterwards wrote it up in a book he called **Utopia**.

There had been perfect places before, of course.

Heaven was the most widely known, the aspiration towards which all Christians (which at the time was assumed to mean all Europeans) yearned. But there were more secular versions, places like Hy Brasil or the Land of Cockaigne, places in which rivers flowed with wine, in which meats and fine food hung plentifully from the trees. A version of Cockaigne became the Big Rock Candy Mountain, known to American hoboes of the Great Depression. They were places of sensual pleasure and repletion, lands marked out by being the diametric opposite of the hard life of famine and disease that was the daily lot of those who dreamed of these places. And they knew they were dreams, they knew they were forever out of reach, that was part of the attraction.

What marked Utopia out from these fantasies of plenty was that it could be reached, and reached in two ways. Reached physically: there was a long, arduous but supposedly practicable journey that could get you from here to there. It was a journey beyond the abilities and wishes of most people, but the idea was established that perfection did not exist only in dreams or upon death, but here in the everyday world we all inhabited. And it could be reached structurally: this perfection was not the province of god or of fairies or some supernatural inversion of the natural world, this perfection was achieved by rational men. If a safe, secure, happy existence could be achieved by sensible human organisation in Utopia, then sensible, rational men could achieve the same here.

Thomas More had been born in a time of war, and had been raised amid the fears and disruptions caused by that war. When he was seven years old, he was part of the crowd watching as the new king, Henry VII, rode into London fresh from his victory at Bosworth. At that point, within his short lifetime, two

Kings of England had died violent deaths. For More, therefore, perfection was always equated with order. After the disorder of war, the order of peace was desirable; and within any society, order was what brought happiness. He went to his death because Henry VIII's repudiation of the Catholic Church was, to More, a repudiation of the natural and proper order of society. Unsurprisingly, therefore, More's perfect society was an ordered society, modelled at least in part on monastic life.

But this was the Renaissance. Printed books, the rediscovery of ancient scholarship either rescued from the fall of Constantinople or found lost amid the stacks of monastery libraries, new technologies, all contributed to the rapid spread of ideas. **Utopia** was printed and reprinted at an incredible rate, mostly in Latin but also in a multitude of other languages. It was read by scholars the length and breadth of Europe. Its ideas were discussed, taken up, developed. "Utopia" entered the language. And writers across Europe produced their own utopias, restructured to reflect their own ideas of perfection or notions of rationality. In an age of religious turmoil – Luther nailed up his 95 theses the year after **Utopia** was first published and thus ushered in nearly two centuries of almost constant religious wars – there were religious utopias (**The City of the Sun** by Thomas Campanella); in an age of scientific observation and experiment, there were scientific utopias (**New Atlantis** by Francis Bacon); in an age beset by plague there were medical utopias (**A Godly Regiment Against the Fever Pestilence** by William Bullein); in an age of agricultural reform there were utopias advocating for precisely such reforms (**Macaria** by Gabriel Plattes).

Utopia was, to this extent at least, a flexible thing, its character ever-changing. As the religious conflicts of the 16th and 17th centuries began to change in character around the middle of the 17th century, becoming more political, so utopias became political. There were, of course, fictional political utopias, as in **Oceana** by James Harrington, but more and more

works of overt political philosophy were taking on a utopian aspect, from Thomas Floyd's **The Picture of a Perfit Commonwealth** to Gerard Winstanley's **The Law of Freedom in a Platform**. The dominant form that utopian writing would now take was political, influencing in particular those writers calling for radical or revolutionary change, from Thomas Hobbes to Karl Marx.

By this time, fiction was becoming less studiedly utopian. Utopias shifted away from unexplored corners of our own world to the moon (**The Man in the Moone** by Francis Godwin), to a parallel Earth accessible at the poles (**The Blazing World** by Margaret Cavendish), into a future in which the Jews have recognised the true nature of Christ thus signalling the Second Coming (**Nova Solyma** by Samuel Gott). But inevitably the nature of these other locations, or the means of getting there, became more interesting to both writer and reader than the utopian situation found on arrival. As the Abbé Raguet observed in 1702, utopias are inherently static because having achieved perfection there is no change either possible or desirable, and hence utopias are boring. Utopias would, of course, continue to be written throughout the 18th and 19th centuries and well into the 20th century, but few writers solved the problem of boredom. Indeed, most of these utopias were polemical in nature, advocating for a particular cause, and these writers weren't particularly interested in solving the problem of boredom since they felt that the cause was of more than sufficient interest for anyone.

But almost as soon as there were utopias heralding the achievement of rational humanity, there were anti-utopias that celebrated irrationality. One of the earliest of these anti-utopias, and therefore a work that can be said to provide a template for the form, was **Mundus Alter et Idem** (**Another World and Yet the Same**) by Bishop Joseph Hall. Published in 1605, it took its protagonist through the grotesque lands of Terra Australis: Crapulia, a land of gross physical

indulgence; Viraginia, ruled by unruly women; Moronia, where the institutions of the Catholic Church are imitated; and Lavernia, a land of thieves.

More's original **Utopia** had been intended, at least in part, as satire, but in fact the form was not well suited to satire. An ideal society can be held us as a contrast to the disorder of quotidian existence, but it is not so easy to shape it into a weapon attacking that disorder. To that end, the absurd and grotesque caricature of the anti-utopia is a far more effective mode for satire. Thus, the great satires of the 18th century, such as Jonathan Swift's **Gulliver's Travels** and "A Modest Proposal," were anti-utopian in character.
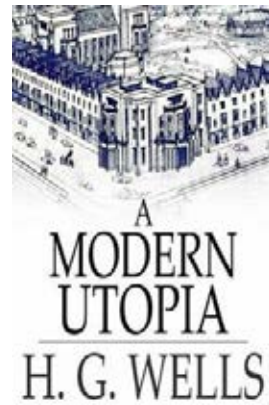
Utopias continued to be written, of course, usually to advocate for some particular ideal. For instance, the rise of feminist and suffragist movements towards the end of the 19th century produced a rash of stories about female-run societies that were invariable utopian in character, such as **Legions of the Dawn** by "Allan Reeth" and **Herland** by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Similarly, the varieties of socialist thought that arose during the latter part of the 19th century each produced their own notions of utopia, from William Morris's bucolic **News from Nowhere** to Edward Bellamy's **Looking Backward**, a work that was so successful that it spawned hundreds of Bellamy Clubs to discuss the utopian ideas it contained. But though forward-looking in their aspirations, these were all old fashioned in their approach, and despite the few that have survived (Gilman, Morris, Bellamy) the vast majority of the utopias written at this time sank without trace. Meanwhile, anti-utopias continued to be deployed satirically, though their excess grotesquerie tended to detach them from reality and from their utopian wellspring.

It wasn't until the early years of the 20th century that utopian fiction was given a new lease on life. In fact, there were two changes that happened just a few years apart. One was a reinvention of straightforward utopian fiction, and the other was a remaking of the anti-utopia into something very different, the dystopia. Both these changes stem, I think, from an encounter with the modern, both the literary modernism of Henry James and Virginia Woolf and their confreres, and the technological modernism that wrought devastating changes upon war and politics.

I should point out that if the reinvention of utopia seems to come largely from literary modernism, it was not without an acute awareness of the effects of war and politics on the modern world. And if the emergence of the dystopia seems to emerge out of the horrors of warfare and totalitarianism, the influence of literary modernism can still be traced through its course.

Let me first and briefly look at the emergence of the modern utopia, before turning to spend a little longer considering the creation of the dystopia.

The reinvention of utopian fiction at the beginning of the 20th century is down to one man: H.G. Wells. A decade before his famous split with Henry James, Wells was a close friend of James, Joseph Conrad, Ford Maddox Ford, and other writers intimately involved with the new literary movements of the age. He was an advocate of Darwinian ideas of evolution, as filtered through his one-time tutor, T.H. Huxley, and therefore believed that all things change. Similarly, the ideas of Freud, which had already informed the fiction of his circle of friends, suggested notions of impermanence. Thus, although Wells was a utopian, the utopia he envisaged could not be the static and absolute structure it had been in previous centuries. Much of his fiction had utopian overtones, but his first major work on the theme was the novel **A Modern Utopia**, in which he began to explore the idea that utopia was not a place, not a destination, but a process. The ideal, the perfect state, is almost certainly unattainable, but utopia is the process of striving towards that ideal.

The horrors of the First World War, the mechanised warfare he had already partly foreseen in "The Land Ironclads" and **The War in the Air**, and the rise of totalitarianism, all fed into the mix from which any future utopia must grow. But, again and again throughout the rest of his career, Wells would return to the image of utopia as process rather than achievement. It was there in fiction such as **The Shape of Things to Come** as much as it was in his non-fiction, such as his advocacy for the League of Nations.

More importantly, all subsequent utopian fictions, up to and including more ambiguous works like Ursula K. Le Guin's **The Dispossessed** or Samuel R. Delany's **Triton**, reflect the idea that utopia is not a final achievement, but a process of trial and error, a striving towards a goal that is forever retreating from us.

But although utopia was reinvigorated by this new sense of movement, by the notion that utopia was not an unchanging monolith about which all the author could ever do was provide a guided tour, but rather something fluid and changeable into which plot and story could be woven, utopia in the 20th century was still overshadowed by its upstart twin, the dystopia.

If dystopia emerged from the horror of modern war and the threat of totalitarianism, then we first have to consider its absence.

The first modern war was the American Civil War, which saw mass slaughter on an industrial scale. In one day at Antietam, more Americans were killed in battle than in all future wars up to and including D-Day combined. There was trench warfare, there were battling ironclads, there was the precursor of the machine gun; yet the Civil War produced no dystopian fiction. Why this might be is not altogether clear, but my feeling is that America was not philosophically prepared for the patterns of thought that produced dystopias. What underlies most dystopias is the idea of an authoritarian body – the state, the military, a cor-

poration – conspiring to rob the individual of rights, of identity or of worth. But in America at the time of the Civil War, transcendentalism still held sway, a philosophy that proclaimed the inherent goodness of people and of nature, and that the institution could not long stand in majesty over the self-reliance of the individual. The popular response to the Civil War, therefore, was largely sentimental: shock at the scale of the slaughter, mourning for the individuals lost, a rash of ghost stories in which those individuals returned. But though the war was seen as an aberration in the natural goodness of the world, there was no perception of the state as a giant machine crushing the individual.

Five years after the end of the Civil War, another war in Europe produced another shock to the system. The Franco-Prussian War, and the events of the Paris Commune that followed it, changed the world order. The unification of Germany under the imperial rule of Prussia ushered a new military power onto the world stage, threatening the existing Great Powers of Britain, France, and Russia, which had maintained the peace in Europe since the defeat of Napoleon. And the German Kaiser was portrayed as exactly the sort of autocrat whose inhuman monstrosity spelled doom for the individual. Allied propaganda during the First World War, which showed German soldiers bayonetting babies, for instance, made Germany out to be the soul-crushing military machine typically found in dystopias. Yet, again, there were no dystopias.

This case is actually more subtle and more interesting than the American Civil War, because what German unification did result in was a mass of invasion stories, typified by George T. Chesney's **The Battle of Dorking**. Such stories remained immensely popular right up to the First World War (**When William Came** by Saki appeared in November 1913). And their popularity was not confined to Britain; variations on the invasion story appeared in France, America (where the threat was sometimes of British invasion), and even in Germany. Such stories are not, strictly

speaking, dystopias, though they might be considered precursors to dystopias, or at least to that branch of dystopia in which Hitler won the Second World War. What they are, rather, is propaganda – a sustained call for increased military spending, for compulsory military service, for rearmament, or for any other plan the author might have to increase readiness for a war that would in time come to seem inevitable. As such, they play a small but not insignificant part in the arms race that characterised the years leading up to the First World War.

Such invasion stories fed directly into both science fiction and spy fiction; **The War of the Worlds** by H.G. Wells and **The Riddle of the Sands** by Erskine Childers both emerged from and in response to the invasion story. Their part in the development of the dystopia is less immediate and less overt.

Two further events were needed for the emergence of the dystopia: the First World War and the Russian Revolution.

The First World War destroyed faith in a way that the American Civil War did not. Yes, there was an explosion in spiritualism immediately after the war, a hunger for contact with the dead, but this was not a spiritual renewal. Every family in Britain, France, Germany, and much of the rest of Europe had been directly affected by the war. So many men were killed that the old social order could not be restored. The First World War put women into the workforce and gave them the vote; it ended the power of the landed gentry, since there was no longer the workforce available to sustain their estates; it generated discontent with the political system that had resulted in the war, and hence gave rise other political forces, notably fascism and communism. The breakup of the Austro-Hungarian and the Ottoman Empires brought disorder and unrest to Central Europe and the Middle East, storing up conflicts that would not be long in emerging. In the immediate aftermath of the war there was an economic boom that made the 1920s into a decade-long party; but the economic consequences of

the war festered long, and resulted in the collapse of the 1930s.

The First World War was not an aberration in the natural world order. It was an evil, a moral, political and social wrong, and someone had to be to blame. Everyone laid the blame on a different group: Jews or bankers, governments or the people, aristocrats or hidden conspiracies. How the blame was apportioned didn't matter; what mattered was that people were now able to think in terms of powerful, secretive cabals running the world according to some hidden agenda, while you and I and everyone else was simply a cog in their machine. When you remember that this image found direct expression in such dystopian films as Charlie Chaplin's **Modern Times** and Fritz Lang's **Metropolis**, it is clear that somewhere in the aftermath of the war and the revolution, the impression had arisen that the worth of the working man had been devalued by those in power. They had been fed into the machine of war, and now they were being fed into the machine of industry.
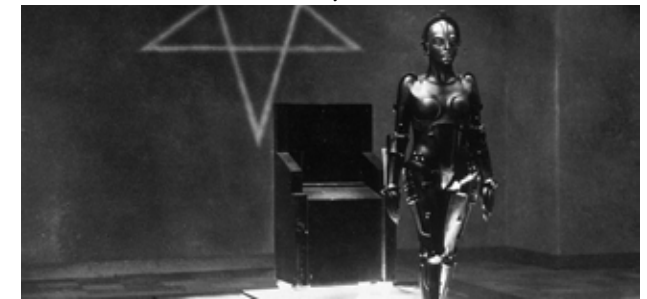
Anti-utopias had used grotesque images to poke fun at the world, but now the world itself had become grotesque and it was not fun anymore. The response, perhaps the only possible response, was to transform the anti-utopia into a form that reflected the sense of helplessness in the face of the horrors unleashed by the modern world.

The second, and more immediate, trigger of dystopias was the Russian Revolution, out of which emerged the first significant dystopia: **We** by Yevgeny

Zamiatin. The Revolution was itself a response to the chaos of the First World War, but the nobility of its stated aims, equality for all, was belied by its use of civil war and terror. Moreover, it did not take long before it was apparent that equality was to be achieved not by elevating the individual, but by crushing individuality into a dull uniformity. This is reflected in Zamiatin's novel, in which the protagonist, a number not a name, is subjected to constant state surveillance, and when the power of love generates some individuality in him it is forcibly removed by the greater power of the state.

That **We** was the model for all future dystopias is almost literally the case. When the manuscript was smuggled out of the Soviet Union and published in the West, one of the first reviews of the book was written by George Orwell. And he, of course, re-used the plot of **We** in his own dystopian novel about the power of the state to crush the individual, **1984**. Echoes of **We** resurface also in the great American dystopia of the same period, **One** by David Karp.

The all-powerful state was not necessarily communist, of course. Another version of the soul-crushing faceless state is encountered, for instance, in Franz Kafka's **The Trial**, which perhaps stands as a hybrid between dystopia and absurdist anti-utopia. Nevertheless, the all-powerful and dehumanising state, characterised in Orwell's terms as a boot stamping on a human face forever, did tend to reflect a fear of and antipathy towards communism in many of the dystopias from the middle years of the 20th century. Later, in the same way that utopian fiction came to serve as a platform for particular ideas and movements, so dystopias were adapted for specific causes, the feminist dystopia of Margaret Atwood's **The Handmaid's Tale**, for instance. Even so, the model adopted by these later dystopias is recognisably the same one we have found in **We** and **1984**, so I tend to identify them as part of the same branch of dystopia.

In contrast, there is another branch of dystopian literature that started to appear a little later. The Soviet Union established a totalitarian regime of the left, one that Western governments, particularly after the Second World War, viewed with alarm. It was a world order that, if it got its way, would be all-encompassing and leave the individual no way out of its Kafkaesque coils. So this branch of dystopia tended to emphasise the helplessness of the individual in the face of the all-powerful institution. But for a while, the more successful totalitarian regimes in Europe were on the right: the fascists in Italy, the Nazis in Germany, the Falangists in Spain. And since the atrocities of Nazi Germany in particular were more quickly and more widely known than the Gulags of the Soviet Union, this generated its own form of dystopian fiction.

The earliest of these fascist dystopias appeared even before the Second World War, perhaps the most notable of them being **Swastika Night** by Katherine Burdekin (originally published as by Murray Constantine). While Western governments had identified the Soviet Union as an enemy state from the moment of its inception, those same governments were still trying to appease Nazi Germany, despite Germany's aggression, Hitler's violent rhetoric and his overt, anti-Semitic attacks. In common with a number of other anti-fascist dystopias that appeared in the late-1930s, however, **Swastika Night** argued that Nazi Germany could not be normalised by taking Hitler at his word when he spoke of a thousand-year Reich. This dystopian state is shown to be ruthless, violent, vile in its treatment of women and minorities, but it is also shown to be crumbling from within due to its own contradictions.

Some of the communist dystopias and their ilk, such as **1984** and **The Handmaid's Tale**, include suggestions that the regime within the body of the novel has subsequently collapsed. But that collapse happens outside the timespan covered by the novel; within that focus, the regime is invariably monolithic, unchallenged and unchallengeable. The stories tell us about the tragedy of the individual caught within this trap; and the stories are invariably tragedies, for the individual, there is no escape. The fascist dystopias, on the other hand, tend to concentrate on the fragility of the state, and though the individual caught up in it may go through torments, there is always the prospect of redemption, renewal, escape.

This distinct path in dystopian fiction became more obvious after the Second World War, when Nazi Germany had in fact been defeated, and fascist dystopias transmogrified into a form of alternate history in which Hitler won. The known interest of the Nazi High Command in the supernatural has allowed authors to make extravagant rituals central to their dystopias, the hunting of humans in **The Sound of His Horn** by Sarban, the terrifying Christmas ritual played out in "Weinachtsabend" by Keith Roberts, so that here an element of absurdist anti-utopia creeps back into the dystopia.

In the main, what we take away from this branch of dystopian literature is how easily the Second World War might have turned out otherwise, or (in "Weinachtsabend" or in **Farthing** by Jo Walton) how readily British politicians would have accepted Nazi rule. But no matter how cruel and authoritarian the regime might be, it is patently not the monolith we encounter in the communist dystopias. And where there is fragility there is an opportunity for the hero, who is often portrayed as that symbol of integrity – a detective, as in **Farthing**, **SS-GB** by Len Deighton, or **Fatherland** by Robert Harris, to uncover the secret that could bring down the whole regime, or at least rescue one person from the horrors.

What I am proposing, therefore, is that since dystopia emerged early in the 20th century as a counter-argument to utopia, two main strands of dystopian literature have developed. There are, undoubtedly, other individual dystopias that do not fit fully or easily

into either of these patterns, but for now I think that the two strands I have identified are dominant.

In the one that I have characterised as "communist dystopia" the focus is upon the tragedy of the helpless individual in the face of an all-powerful entity. This entity may be, and usually is, a government, though it could as easily be a corporation, as in **The Circle** by Dave Eggers. Generally, though not always, there is no way out for the individual, to be an individual is to be a victim in the face of what the modern world has wrought.

The other strand, which I have characterised as "fascist dystopia," offers the hope of heroism, the chance of escape, because what we see here is that the institution is never as all-powerful as it pretends to be. The very brutality of the regime is liable to be exaggerated simply because it is disguising a fatal flaw, as for instance in **Azanian Bridges** by Nick Wood, and those who survive the brutality, or find a way to circumvent it, may also find a way to exploit the weakness. Inevitably, as dystopian scenarios have been adopted for Young Adult fiction such as **The Hunger Games** by Suzanne Collins, it is this strand of dystopia that has been chosen, because it allows the focus to be not on the horrors of the regime, but on the heroism of those who find a way to subvert or escape it. Where, in communist dystopias, to be an individual is to be hopeless, in fascist dystopias, and particularly in the YA variants on the theme, to be an individual is to represent hope.

DYSTOPIAN VISIONS: 1984 BY GEORGE ORWELL
ENGLISH SCRIBBLER
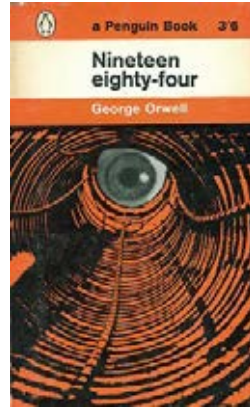
Dossier: Orwell, George. Nineteen Eighty-Four [Martin Secker & Warburg, 1949].

Filetype: Book

File Under: Statist Dystopia

Executive Summary: Winston Smith, a worker for the oppressive Oceania state, helps in the rewriting of history to support the Party's propaganda. The population is divided into the Proletariat and the Inner Party members, whose iron fist bans any rebellion or sedition, even in an individual's mind. An endless war with the other regions on earth and a constant barrage of misinformation on enemies of the state ensures loyalty to the mythical leader, Big Brother. Smith begins small acts of rebellion that psychologically-coalesce into a secret love affair with a young woman from the Junior Anti-Sex League, and he discovers what may be the truth behind the Party's lies. Meanwhile, mysterious Party official O'Brien and the Thought Police close in...

Dystopian Visions: The Party, and, one assumes, its two counterparts in the other regions, have absolute and immortal power over society, through a perpetual police state whose powers extend to controlling our very thoughts and desires. Family members shop each other in for Thought Crimes, work is unrelenting, a pointless charade, and prevents a private life of any note; culture and fun are replaced by rallies and jointly staring in pure hate at a face on a big screen.

Utopian Undercurrents: Even the Inner Party

officials like O'Brien enjoy no seeming freedom of thought, and although they might go off and enjoy a glass of wine behind the scenes, our only viewpoint is from a prole, and for them, life offers no hope or joy (if you don't count a cheeky painting, looking at a field and a few shags before being tortured and beaten for months). Even the gin is crap. Only the human hope in small moments like Julia's note of "I love you" shines through bleakly as a flickering flame of humanity, long after the story is over. I still see Orwell's statist hell as an allegory rather than a real possibility, that humans' individual spirit will out. But then maybe I just need some gentle rat-in-a-cage educating...

Level of Hell: Sixth. Or Tenth. There are no mutants, no everyday threat to life for most, and food (albeit shite) is available. People still hang out washing in the sun. People still make coffee after (illegal) sex. But when thought itself is controlled, does it matter how nice the coffee is or how warm the sun is? Any idea of hope is crushed in the final part, forever. It's almost worse that no physical apocalypse occurred, that it was all the result of power-obsessed politicians and the blind nationalism of the masses. So, Tenth.

Legacy: I was ready to find a disappointment in me at the end of re-reading this, one of the more astonishingly-bleak and impressive books of my childhood years (and I have read all of William Golding, so...). I based this mainly on its legacy. Endlessly-referenced phrases like "two and two make five," "freedom is slavery," and "Big Brother is watching you," and lines such as, "imagine a boot stamping on a human face – forever," had made Orwell's final novel close to a self-parody in my mind. However, the depth and detail of the discourse here, and political world-building, outshine any senses I had that perhaps its originality was buried under its own subsequent fame. Everything from V for Vendetta to The Handmaid's Tale to Children of Men in our season on Dystopian Visions owes a huge debt to this novel, and I would suggest his warning – initially praised (and indeed marketed as in the U.S.)

as an anti-communist one – has influenced us all, even those who have never read it. The fear of loss of individual thought, the fear of the loss of diversity of culture and country, the fear of dictatorial control, all were ancient notions before Orwell even began writing, yet his masterpiece raised the flag of "where-never-to-go" over so many minds that it can only be hoped that his vision will never see the light of day.

In Retrospect: In popular understanding, this is the benchmark of dystopian fiction, and this stems partly from the unrelenting grey hell it promises us. Even as the numerical year of the title is left far behind us, the threat of a time where power wins over individuality utterly and forever is a constant fear.

> "What can you do, thought Winston, against the lunatic who is more intelligent than yourself, who gives your arguments a fair hearing and then simply persists in his lunacy?"

Reading this line again in our current times of false-populism, fake news, revised history, and a revival in personality politics, I shudder with that same fear. "America First," "Brexit means Brexit," and anything by Le Pen et al. Philosophy of almost calming horror fills the pages that Eric Blair ended his days by filling. He was writing not just from the experience of WW2, Nazism, and Stalinism, but of the failure of the British Left to uphold values in the pursuit of power, and his own personal experiences of the totalitarian Soviet machine lying to the people and creating false enemies while fighting in the Spanish Civil War.

On reflection, I discovered a Smith-esque rebellion against the authority the book's renown held over me, an authority ordering me to respect and adore it. I found fuel for this rebellion in its partial, and ultimately slight, failings as literature – the one-dimensional supporting characters, the lack of recognizable, everyday human warmth in interactions (which of course is the point, but the film with Hurt and Burton did much to overcome this through the actors'

eyes) and the determination in its singular purpose – the scream as hope is crushed. However, like Smith toward the end, but without the need for dials of torture, I found the last gasp of my resistance collapse under the sheer excellence in the piece. It is that rare thing – a classic that should by now bore with obviousness due to its novel ideas rendered into cliché, its fame the killer of its verve, but which flares out at you still, even decades on from your first experience of it. More than this, it is greater than merely a dazzling prose exercise, or a political nightmare. It was often mocked as one of those books you "had to" read at school here in Orwell's home country. Yet, like fellow standards of the teenagers' curriculum, such as Lord of The Flies, it shows our darkest natures back at us and dares us to fight the hard fight to resist the darkness. This is a harsh lesson we would do well to hear loud and clear in the coming years.

Analytics

For its time: 5/5

Read today: 4/5, for it cannot help but slightly pale as history and literature catch up and overtake its ideas.

Oppressometer Readout: 9/10.

Posted by English Scribbler, who lives in hope, and in a flat, and has contributed to nerds of a feather since 2013.

GET OUT/SPEAK OUT: DYSTOPIA, VIOLENCE, AND WRITING AS ACTION
CHLOE

When thinking about dystopia on a broader scale — how it works as a genre and as a piece of popular culture — I was interested in exploring the how/why behind these depictions. So I did what all good writers should do and I went to someone who had a better grasp on understanding the rhetoric behind ideas and depictions. In this case, my friend Philippe Meister who is a graduate student studying rhetoric and professional communication at Iowa State University. Our discussion became quite long and layered (it took place over the course of more than a month), so what follows are excerpts that particularly emphasize the previously mentioned ideas. A quick heads up: later in the discussion, we talk about the film **Get Out** *and do discuss aspects from the end of the film. If you haven't seen it, and plan to, avoid this post and come back later.*

PHILIPPE MEISTER: Hi, Chloe. I can talk about everyday language acts in creating healthy or hurtful local cultures, but I'm curious to hear about the act of writing an extended work. If we examine the act of creating and distributing a dystopic or utopic world, what are some effects that ripple outward from that act? An author produces a dystopic world and com-

municates it with written, oral, or visual language to others. Others access the language and reproduce the world in their head. Now, I'm wondering — for the creative writing community — what is the effect of an author and others producing and reproducing this world with language? And, what are the techniques with which they take this world from the book and apply it to a shared lived experience?

CHLOE CLARK: Okay, so in a sense you're implying that all creative work creates a kind of simulacrum, because it produces a recreated product inside the head of the reader? In relation to the creation of dystopic visions, they often easily enter common knowledge -- even by people who haven't read the works. Think of the way that Big Brother is a common phrase now (sort of genericized away from its Orwellian roots). Also, many dystopic visions come down to language, which is actually an interesting side topic. Do people apply it to a shared lived experience? Besides in a language sense? I would like to think that dystopic visions create a sense of warning for us -- like fairy tales for the contemporary world – don't go down this path, don't treat people like this, beware. But, I don't know if they influence our shared experiences beyond that, because they aren't necessarily accessed by everyone.

PM: Yes, I see many people using the term Big Brother when they post on Facebook and Twitter. Oddly, they sometimes post about Big Brother while using the Facebook facial recognition tools, geotagging tools, or live video tools — all of which log data on their characteristics, location, and activities into the Facebook databases. For me, there is a big difference between reading a dystopian novel and understanding the modern technologies with which dystopic situations could arise. It's actions like these — the everyday actions of logging into social media, submitting information to an algorithm that tracks our facial features, or streaming our lives into the cloud — that make me think that "creative" works struggle to provide readers with strategies for action. I put "creative" in quota-

tions because many people argue that all writing is creative. The one who writes a legal document is creating because they are composing language that becomes the reference point from which law officials — lawyers, judges, police officers, citizens — decide how they can act in a society. I, personally, believe that composing practical documents is a creative act because composing documents like the constitution, the declaration of independence, state legislation, city ordinances, and etc. creates documents that are the reference point from which people decide how they can act in a society. The author of a legal document is composing a document that enables or limits certain types of legal action. In this situation, the language and legal action bind with one another. Let's bring it back to storytellers. If we are facing a world where our "sense of warning" may become an actionable platform to resist a government, does creative dystopic writing step up to the plate and hit a home run? Or, what needs to happen for creative dystopic writing to equip people with the linguistic and conceptual resources to fight an unwanted future?

CC: I think the Big Brother problem you bring up is one that directly points to the problem of dystopic literature. Because the knowledge gets recreated and re-represented outside of its original bounds, it loses some of its meaning, right? Like people don't connect the ideas of algorithms and tracking because they're using the term in a more literal sense. Like if we think of dystopias as being literal representations and that's how we apply them to a world that's not yet dystopic, then it doesn't work. We need to create a way for people to take the base lessons and apply them to a world that is real. So we might not be living in the world of the **Hunger Games**, but we should still be able to think about the underlying message about the power of rebellion. And I think on some levels, people do this already: we become more empathetic, we think about heroism in a different light. But when a world is becoming dystopic, it's not these grand actions that are the ones you need to keep your eye on, it's the slow

weakening of human rights or the way smaller laws get passed and open the door to bigger ones. I think dystopia has taught us to look at the big horror, but it's the small horrors that we need to notice so that we're not suddenly facing a big horror. (I don't know if this is making sense, but it does in my head). So maybe we need smaller dystopias --- but then people may not read them because the stakes won't seem to be there?

PM: It seems to me that the most popular dystopic stories and the most enduring sci-fi stories are the ones that contain more technically accurate representations. For example, the stories that work with an accurate internet infrastructure are more technically accurate and therefore more true and more powerful. The stories that work without an accurate technical infrastructure are less technically accurate, and therefore less true and less powerful. Maybe what I'm doing is agreeing that more realistic dystopias let people take the story and apply it to their own life. (Maybe this isn't the job of creative fiction).

*Now that we've set some groundwork for our discussion and the issues we were thinking about, I'm jumping ahead to when we applied these ideas to something more concrete. The film **Get Out** (which I reviewed here) is one that director Jordan Peele labels as "social thriller." We looked at it from this lens as well as a depiction of dystopia. Shortly before where I'll pick up, we were discussing the rhetoric of violence and its depictions in dystopia (and popular culture mediums as a whole). We talked about institutionalized violence and racism and its depiction in the film.*

CC: I guess my overriding question here is whether dystopia requires acts of physical violence (on screen or on the page)? And how that fits in to what we've been discussing about the responsibility of dystopic creators? Could Peele have made a successful depiction of a racial dystopia without ever having shown or even implying physical violence?

PM: Somebody might be able to convince some

cerebrally-oriented people that violence can be non-physical, or that a depiction of violence can be non-physical, but I'm not sure how violence that has no physical manifestations would be experienced by a person. It seems that most experiences have physical manifestations, whether they are neurons firing or skin tearing. Isn't it funny that violence in movies hits us so hard even though we know it is fake and that nobody is in danger? It's all a production of neurons in our brain that gives us bodily sensations of nervousness, disgust, or anger, and can have lasting effects on us so that we experience future situations radically differently. Now, I think a dystopia might be able to be created without physical violence, but non-physical violence will manifest on the body in some way through expressions, vocalizations, or actions.

So, in the sense that depictions of violence do influence the viewer subconsciously or consciously, I think the representation of violence is political, and I think what "counts" as violence is an interesting topic. There are many institutions that have or have become violent that some people talk about as violence, but some don't see as violent. Is an insult violence? Are the psychological effects of systematic policing violence? If we recognize something as violent, then we can name the act, and maybe correct the act.

I think that there could have been a story told about a black man going to a white family's party and having awkward conversations. I don't think that many viewers would understand it as a horror, and I think that is a matter of definition and depiction. And, I think that these types of stories are told all the time, like when a movie made for one audience falls flat with another audience. The other audience doesn't have the experience to recognize and produce the meaning that the target audience can readily produce. What do you think?

CC: I think that's also something that people have a hard time understanding, because it's so ingrained in us that violence = physical pain. Maybe dystopias need to show physical representations of pain/violence

because that's the way to connect most empathetically with the widest amount of audience. One of the elements that most fascinated me about **Get Out** was how it fit into the spectrum of horror. I think it can be argued that it is Gothic horror in a way – young innocent goes to secluded mansion with an alluring/seductive figure, every sensation is heightened to create a tone of the uncanny, and then shit goes down in the last act. Peele uses the uncanny extremely well in the film – the feeling of everything being just off or heightened slightly (from situations that people do go through every day — these subtle — and not so subtle — manifestations of racism). So I think the film needed to have a violent/horror climax to fit into these genre molds. I do think that the first two-thirds play as horror, but maybe only because we know that eventually things will get even more horrific.

Moving from violence and its depiction in the film (as well as the film's genre of horror), we then turned to the film as an example of dystopia. In this case, not science-fiction or fantastic dystopia, but dystopia through the lens of horror and social commentary.

CC: I think it's really amazing how well this film is playing across the spectrum of movie-fans – like I've talked to a few students who don't like horror at all – at all – and they really liked this one. I was just listening to a podcast interview with Peele in which he discusses some alternate endings he had for the film, which included all bleaker endings (including that cop car not being Chris's friend and Chris being immediately shot by cops – echoing of **Night of the Living Dead**). This quote in particular stuck out to me about why he changed the ending: "It was very clear that the ending needed to transform into something that gives us a hero, that gives us an escape, gives us a positive feeling when we end this movie [...] there's nothing more satisfying than seeing the audience go crazy when Rod shows up." If we're thinking about this film as racial dystopia, does this ending fit into that,

or does it change the nature of how we perceive the dystopia?

PM: I think the ending gives some good guidance as to how people can act in the future. In my mind, it's sort of a "think global act local" type ending. The cops who wouldn't listen to Rob were not white, right? So the movie isn't telling the audience to align themselves with a color, the movie is telling the audience to look out for the people they know. I think this does change the dystopia in how we sense the source of the dystopia. That there might not be an evil genius or a malicious plot, but it could be that a culture of people who have generated practices around a brutal activity and whose practices live in more subtle forms are creating dystopian conditions. The enactors of the dystopia are ourselves. What do you think?

CC: I agree, and I think that's a more valuable (or maybe I mean realistic) way of looking at dystopia, actually. Not that there's some evil people who just happen to gain the power and cause dystopia, but rather that there are these systems in place that are supported (often even unconsciously by people) and which create these manifestations of dystopia. I think in some ways dystopia is a hopeful form of science fiction, because it's saying: look at this path you're taking, but there's still time to change. And I think that's even more important to think about when, as you noted, we are the agents of this dystopia. Do you think filmic depictions of racial dystopia can change people's minds? Do you think that the rhetoric behind these depictions has to be done in a certain way in order to do so?

PM: Of course. This type of influence is where I get my initial dissatisfaction for dystopias. I feel that they too often lead people to blame something other as the problem or creator of the dystopia and don't encourage people to see themselves as agents in contributing to or working against the cultural conditions. I think the rhetoric of **Get Out** is very useful. I think, as I claimed before, that the sources of dystopic conditions should be represented accurately. The rhetoric should work to engender in the audience a better understand-

ing of the causes, support a community who understands these causes, create ways of communicating about the causes for the community, and then provide ways toward revision or provoke people in the community to explore ways to revise themselves. This is taking for granted that the media creator wants to do these things. A media creator might just want to scare people or they may even want to spread their own biases or fears throughout the culture. To use trendy terms, I might be proposing the functions of a "socially conscious" dystopian creation. What do you think?

We then discussed different films that have tried similar ways of capturing dystopia in more of a cultural way. Finally, we thought about what we had overall considered in terms of this conversation and how we think about dystopia.

CC: I think for me the takeaways are thinking more deeply about the construction of dystopia in popular media – whether it can or should be used as medium for social consciousness. I think, also importantly, the discussion of violence and how it's depicted has made me think a lot. What about for you?

PM: For me, I think the biggest takeaway is that there is real value in doing analysis of how the page or screen encourages communities of people to enact their lives. Media influences how people re-create or revise cultural practice. Writers who want to engage in these depictions might think more about creative writing to communicate cultural practice, which means engaging in a writing, distribution, and feedback process that is designed to show the audience how they can act. For me, it is about activity, and identifying the textual and social actions that create culture.

I'm curious to open this discussion more to readers of **NOAF** *who are also engaged in thinking about dystopia,* **Get Out***, and the way that dystopias are represented. Please feel free to comment here or to discuss via Twitter (@PintsNCupcakes and @nerds_feather). A big thank you to Philippe for humoring me and engaging so deeply with the topic at hand.*

Philippe is a graduate student in the Rhetoric and Professional Communication program at Iowa State University who has interests in humans, technologies, and human-technology cultures.

DYSTOPIAN VISIONS: FAHRENHEIT 451 BY RAY BRADBURY
VANCE K
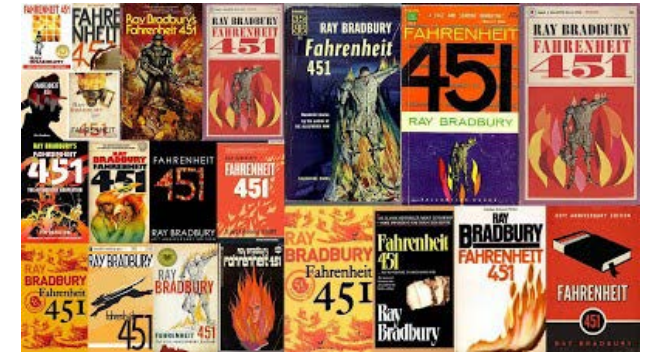
Dossier: Bradbury, Ray. Fahrenheit 451. [Ballantine Books, 1953]

Filetype: Book

File Under: Statist Dystopia

Executive Summary: Guy Montag is a fireman. Long ago, in a time remembered only in rumors, firemen put out fires, but since homes were rendered fireproof, the new vocation of the fireman is to burn — and burn books, specifically. On the way home one night, Guy meets his new neighbor, a teenage girl named Clarisse, who is odd. She doesn't watch the walls — room-sized televisions that constantly feature vapid, incomprehensible, but addictive soap operas — she believes in conversation, and thinks that there is value in experiencing nature. This is all totally foreign to Montag, but she insists he is more like her than he realizes. Montag returns home to find his wife Mildred has overdosed on sleeping pills. He calls the paramedics, who perform this kind of routine nightly, and who assure Montag that she will wake the next day with no memory of what has happened.

Montag spends more time with Clarisse, until she suddenly disappears, and on his next fire callout, he

watches a woman immolate herself rather than have her books destroyed in front of her. Montag, without thinking, secrets a book away for himself and sneaks it home. After witnessing this woman's suicide and stealing the book, Montag begins unraveling. As it happens, he has stolen a number of books over the last year or so, but doesn't know what to make of them or of himself. Montag's fire chief, Captain Beatty, pays a house call on Montag to see why he has missed work, and casually lectures about how books were slowly banned in the name of public happiness, since people increasingly found books to be a troubling source of introspection and led to discontent.

Soon enough, Montag returns to work, but finds his next call to be out to his own home. Montag is faced with the decision to burn his own home and attempt to re-assimilate into a monolithic society he no longer feels he belongs in, or to try to fight back and see what happens next when the game goes off the rails.

Dystopian Visions: Americans read fewer and fewer books every year, but even so, I like to think most people would agree that an outright ban on books would be something to be universally resisted. Nevertheless, Bradbury here constructs a future society where the written word has come to represent certain patterns of thought — discontent, self-reflection, empathy, abstraction — that the government has deemed harmful to the populace. There is a pervasive passivity to the citizenry that echoes that of Huxley's **Brave New World**, except in this case the general numbness of the average citizen isn't engendered by drug use or casual sex, but instead by an addiction to vacuous television programs. In watching "the parlor walls," which utilize software that make them interactive and personalized, so that the people on TV look at Montag's wife and ask, "What do you think, Mildred?" people are made to feel included, loved, and important, and the heavy lifting of thinking about their lives or why bombers are flying overhead every day need

not be undertaken. It is a world that criminalizes thought. And where Shakespeare wrote that "the devil can cite Scripture for his purpose," Bradbury gives us the figure of Captain Beatty, who is well-read and conversant in how the world came to its current form, and he argues eloquently that all is as it should be. "The bigger your market, Montag, the less you handle controversy," he says, in laying out the reasons why the people themselves, not the government, not really, decided that it was in everybody's best interest if we all just put matches to anything that might be in the least provocative.

Utopian Undercurrents: Like so many of the dystopian works we've looked at in this series, our heroes are the outliers, and everybody else is pretty happy. They may be existing only a single rung on the ladder above lobotomized wards of the state, but they're happy enough about it. They don't question, their basic needs are met, and they're comfortable. This fundamental note that sounds across so many volumes and imaginings of future, terrible societies suggests that it is a commonly-held belief that the majority of mankind really don't care about anything outside of their own animal comfort. Bradbury works to undercut this a little, however, in that the vague war hinted at throughout most of the book does make an appearance at the end, and it's reasonable to assume that Montag's "difference," his outsider status or way of thinking, actually prolongs his life, rather than the opposite.

Level of Hell: Seventh. If you're a free-thinker, it doesn't get much worse, but if you're happy to veg out in front of the walls, you're pretty ok. Until the bombs start falling. Easy to imagine a sequel where this same landscape is as hellish as it gets.

Legacy: Simply put, this is one of the foundational texts of the dystopian genre. So many works owe so much to this book that the entire genre would likely be a different animal without it.

In Retrospect: This is a very, very short book that nevertheless manages to weave a compelling story that echoes very clearly with things that are going on today, and that have been going on since its original publication. It's a book that manages to hit square in the zeitgeist, whenever a reader happens to come to it. I read this book twice, probably 25 years apart, and it was as resonant the first time as it was last month. There is a prescience in Beatty's recounting of a society's collapse into illiteracy that still sets off warning bells in the modern reader. There are some limits to the characterization, and in some ways those are improved upon in Francois Truffaut's film adaptation, but it's still a book that earns its reputation, and does nothing to harm Bradbury's inclusion on the Mt. Rushmore of sci-fi writers.

Analytics

For its time: 5/5

Read today: 5/5

Oppressometer Readout: 10/10

Posted by Vance K — co-editor and cult film reviewer at the now-Hugo nominated nerds of a feather, flock together since 2012, musician, and Emmy-winning producer.

DYSTOPIAN VISIONS: WRITING A WAY OUT
CHLOE

When thinking about dystopia recently for an essay (which can be read here), our conversation raised the question of whether writers have a responsibility in how they depict dystopia and apocalypse. Is dystopian writing a "warning system?" The question intrigued me, as both a reader and a writer of dystopian fiction, I wanted to think about it more deeply. I also wanted to take the question to some writers who tackle dystopia. So I sought out some of the most interesting, emerging SFF writers I know, and then barraged them with a series of questions, which they were all considerate enough to answer in deeply thoughtful ways.

The writers I talked to were Kate Dollarhyde (SFF writer and co-editor in chief of **Strange Horizons**), Brontë Wieland (SFF writer and co-editor of the solar punk anthology **Sunvault**), Phoebe Wagner (SFF Writer and co-editor of the solar punk anthology **Sunvault**), and Tony Quick (SFF writer).

The first question I asked tackled the question head on. It was a question I struggle with (as I work on revising a dystopic sci-fi novel that tries to be hopeful): where is the line drawn between being didactic (a quality I hate when I read it) and being honest about what people have done to themselves and others? I also have some pretty hard-drawn lines when it comes to responsibility in terms of horror: violence should never be depicted for strictly entertainment purposes, for example (y'all should hear my very long rant against the torture-porn genre).

What responsibilities do we, as writers, have in depicting dystopia and apocalypse? Should we spend as much time considering the socially conscious aspects of our work as much as the narrative aspects?

KD: I believe writers have a responsibility to reflect an experiential truth in their stories, whether real or imagined. The reality we depict is, I think, a combination of the dystopia or apocalypse the writer is working with and the social reality of their point-of-view characters.

If a writer's apocalypse is one based in climate collapse, for example, the resonance of the depiction of that event or its aftermath depends so much on the position — both physically and socially — of the protagonist. A rich white man in post-water California and a working-class Cuban woman in post-coastline Florida will experience wildly divergent realities, both valid as points of narrative inquiry, informed as much by their social position as by the lack or abundance of water in their particular setting. The reader might not have any experience with climate collapse, but they know what it's like to inhabit a social reality, and one well-crafted will only make more relevant and vital the narrative.

All of that is a roundabout way of saying that if a writer is considering the narrative aspects of their work, they should by necessity be considering the socially conscious aspects of their work. Calamity fiction is about the collapse and radical restructuring of social order. It's my opinion that the writer can't really have a coherent dystopic narrative that leans hard on one and not the other.

BW: I believe that our responsibility is to create depictions of the world as we see it, as we feel it, as we want it to be, and as we believe it may become. Often the issues facing us feel incalculable and insurmountable, and that's where I believe dystopia has its roots: those moments when the world is overwhelmingly shitty and we begin to believe there's no other path than something so dark. In that way, yes, I think we are responsible for telling these stories, for depicting the world how it presents itself to us.

The narrative and social aspects of our stories are inseparable, and we should always consider the impact our writing will have.

TQ: I want to be careful about assigning any specific "responsibility" to authors because I'm afraid litmus tests can be limiting. The dystopian and apocalyptic subgenres include grim, somber novels in the vein of Cormac McCarthy's **The Road** or José Saramago's **Blindness**, but also include chaotic carnivals such as Kurt Vonnegut's absurdist novel **Cat's Cradle** or the psychedelic dreamscapes of J.G. Ballard's novels **The Unlimited Dream Company** and **The Drowned World**. We're standing under a wide umbrella here. We should definitely give serious thought to the socio-political underpinnings of our works, but contemporary fiction shouldn't be a soapbox. The contemporary audience becomes defensive and closed-off once they sense unpolished propaganda. As artists, we're challenged with hitching our larger societal concerns to plots featuring smaller, intimate narratives our audience can relate with. Fiction challenges us to show readers the ramifications of our society's slow decline and turn statistics into stories.

PW: That's the balance isn't it – which comes first, social issues or narrative? How does one balance those ideas? I don't know. I'm always fighting with being preachy. Dystopia seems to do that well, though. **Mad Max: Fury Road** always comes to mind when thinking of social consciousness and narrative. While there are differing opinions on **Fury Road**, I loved the film for its high-octane moments balanced with critiques on everything from gender, human trafficking, capitalism, big oil, environmental issues – the list goes on. I personally believe writers have a responsibility in all their work. If I'm reading a dystopia and they aren't taking into consideration that yes, while rape or torture or INSERT AWFUL THING HERE might happen in

an apocalypse, the writer must consider how those ideas will impact the reader. If the writer is casually using the horror of an apocalypse landscape just for its shock value without considering the social implications, I won't keep reading. Conversely, a dystopia offers a canvas to explore the dark side of humanity, which if done ethically and with empathy can be an enlightening experience.

The next question I asked went back directly to something Philippe had asked me in the previous essay: is the technical accuracy of these depictions important? Again, it's a question that I struggle with in terms of my own writing. My thought is that good science fiction should be able to see the steps of how we got to the point depicted, even if those steps are not directly spelled out on the page.

How much realism (in terms of how the dystopia/apocalypse comes about, but also the fallout of it) is needed in a dystopic depiction? Why?

KD: I think the writer only needs so much reality as is required to make a dystopia feel truthful to the reader. The rub there is that every reader has a different threshold for what feels true based on their own social reality and how similar to or divergent from the social reality of the point-of-view character they are.

Reality is, I think, an argument the writer makes to the reader. A woman living in the United States today might not need much of an argument — that is, injection of reality — to find **The Handmaid's Tale** convincing; Atwood can take her dystopia to extremes of plausibility because her audience doesn't need much help to follow her there. But a cisgender, progressive man might take more convincing. (Incidentally, I think that's why Atwood's **MaddAdam** trilogy has such broad appeal — everyone who lives under capitalism recognizes bits of their life in that dystopia.) You could, I think, make a similar argument for white

people in general and Butler's **Parable of the Sower**. Could things really get that bad? To convince a reader who might ask that question, who might doubt, the writer needs a more exhaustive argument.

So, in short, I believe the level of realism required in a dystopic narrative is answered in who the author is writing for.

BW: For me, a dystopia is most effective when I can see clearly how it was once related to the world we live in. In the sense that I want the dystopias I read to be believable extensions of the society they stem from, I think writers should take great care to connect to a world their readers understand. In apocalypse narratives, I think there is greater leeway in the origin of the disaster event, but I still need to feel the way that the apocalypse informs and impacts our idea of the present and its trajectory.

TQ: Realism is subjective. When I read 20th century fiction, I'm constantly reminded how alien the stories seem in our present-day context. Look, I was born in the 20th century but when I read about these characters whose misunderstandings could be cleared up with a text message, or when I read plots that would be resolved with a high-speed internet connection and a search engine, I wonder if I have more in common with the science fiction protagonist who navigates a society transformed by new, disruptive technologies. Beyond that, social media has revolutionized how much insight and communication we have with people outside our immediate orbit. We are learning via Facebook and Twitter and comments sections across the internet that many of us don't share the same reality.

But despite the age of "alternative facts" that dawns orange on the horizon, we all should be able to agree that our actions have concrete consequences. Chloe, I think you hit the bull's eye with the word "fallout." More important than adhering to an imaginary consensus of realism, we should aim to provide the audience with a sense that the character's actions matter. By proxy, the audience may come to believe their

actions have an impact, and maybe we can avoid the hammer's fall. Maybe.

PW: I see that decision as belonging to the writer. Dystopia/apocalypse settings can fall under any of the three major genre branches (fantasy, science fiction, and horror) in my opinion, so the level of realism depends on what the reader needs in order to believe the story. As a reader and writer, I do need realism when it comes to the characters' reactions to the landscape. The environment needs to influence them. If the environment isn't impacting the characters, then why write a dystopia at all?

Finally, I asked the question that gets to the root of all good writing. Why do you do what you do? Why is this important to you? Dystopia is important to me because it shows a path not to take, a warning. It also shows that we do go on – despite all of this, we go on. Dystopia to me has always been a hopeful genre, because it shows that we keep trying.

Why do you choose to write about dystopias?

KD: For me, dystopia's appeal lives in the braiding of hope and hopelessness.

Every person's present day — from 50,000 years ago to right now — is all fucked up. Our societies teeter always on the edge of ruin. Our individual lives teeter always on the edge of death. One person in the right place needs only to make one wrong choice to send us careening over the edge of oblivion. Someone launches a nuke. Someone mows me down in a crosswalk. Dystopias reflect that reality, that ever-present possibility of the end of everything. Dystopias say your hopelessness is not insane. You are not alone in being afraid.

But dystopias are not a nihilistic surrender to the uncaring smackdown of the universe, because hope is as much baked into their narrative structures as hopelessness. A successful dystopic narrative is, to me at least, in part a promise: we can fuck everything up

and still make it out alive. Even **The Road**, the most relentlessly depressing apocalypse story I've read, ends with hope. Not hope that everything will be as it was, or that everything will be okay, or that we won't lose everything that matters to us along the way, but that it's possible to keep going.

BW: When I write dystopia, what's on my mind is usually a single action or behavior or sight that has struck me as unexpectedly and scarily oppressive. Often, it's an everyday occurrence that presents itself in a new light, or it's something I haven't stopped to think about before, and I try to see the extension of the action and its consequences. Where will we go if we never stop to consider the ways we behave and let ourselves be influenced? That's the question I try to answer in writing dystopia.

TQ: There's this quote by William Gibson I keep coming back to time and again: "Nobody can know the real future. And novels set in imaginary futures are necessarily about the moment in which they are written." Despite my tendency to draw dark futures, I'm actually optimistic about humanity's chances of survival. We are a stubborn species who have harnessed nature to the point that survivalist tales are our entertainment rather than, you know, our daily lives. Whether we continue on as tribes of neo-cavemen scattered across a bombed-out landscape, as space-faring refugees colonizing the solar system, or genetically altered shades of ourselves retrofitted to fit our new environment, we are not going down as a species without a fight.

I'm concerned about our immediate present and near future, what ways we might maim ourselves on our road to that future and how we might rise above ourselves. Recently, one of my advisers expressed his exhaustion with the sheer pessimism of post-apocalyptic science fiction and a desire to see a return of optimism in the genre. There's something to be said for this: writers can lean heavy on diagnosing society's issues and genre's unique capacity to imagine alternatives allows our fiction to do more. But that

said, I don't see dystopia and apocalyptic settings as a popular, waning trend, but instead a subgenre that speaks to a wartime generation raised on Y2K scares, 9/11 fallout, 2012 Mayan calendar predictions, random acts of domestic and foreign terrorism, 24-hour doomsday prophets, and seismic societal changes, all streaming to us live. Why are we surprised the generation who has been told "the end is nigh" since we were knee-high write about futures where those predictions bear fruit?

Our contemporary society has a number of pressing issues: institutional racism, indoctrinated sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, class inequality, violations of rights, and so on. No one science fiction writer could ever tackle all these issues with depth and sincerity: we need an army. Science fiction is a useful tool for indirectly interrogating how society is organized without limiting ourselves to what "is possible" and "isn't possible." Those who are most impacted by society's problems and are only now gaining a foothold from which we can speak aren't ready to abandon the dystopian genre when it's so useful to portraying shades of our unacknowledged reality.

PW: I write about dystopias as a way to explore the near future, a future which seems to be coming closer and closer. What happens when humanity is pushed to the end of existence? What breaks down, what survives? Now, working backwards from those depictions, how can I as an individual work to stop that degradation of society? For me, dystopias aren't fun and games, but a way to explore big problems -- climate change, the collapse of capitalism, gender, human and nonhuman relationships. If my dystopia isn't dealing with social issues, I usually avoid the setting. There's enough depressing literature out there, I'm not interested in adding to it unless some good might come from it.

So dystopia creators and consumers, what are your thoughts on these questions (and the thoughts on them here)? I'd love to hear other voices on this, commenting here or discussing on Twitter (@PintsNCupcakes and @nerds_feather). You can also tag in any of the lovely writers above (Kate is @keightdee, Tony is @tonyquick-pov, Bronte is @beezyal, and Phoebe is @pheebs_w).

SECTION III: THE LAST JEDI

REVIEW: STAR WARS EPISODE VII: THE LAST JEDI
DEAN

Why are you even reading this?

We here at nerds of a feather are apparently not cool enough to be invited to **The Last Jedi** premiere, so you get this review now. I'll try to avoid spoilers here, in case you are yet to see it. Ready? Here it is:

IT'S STAR WARS.

I mean, seriously, has there been anything worse than all the reviews over the last week? What is the point of them? There are three categories of people in the world right now:

1. People who have seen **The Last Jedi**
2. People who are going to see **The Last Jedi**
3. People who don't watch Star Wars and make sure everyone knows it, like the movie equivalent of a cross-fitter.

Nothing I can say here, or anyone else has said over the last week, would change anyone's mind or course of action one iota. I could tell you, right now, that Rian Johnson is a brilliant filmmaker and **The Last Jedi** will be held up forever as the apex of human achievement, and GUESS WHAT, you either already saw it or are going to. I could, conversely, tell you that **The Last Jedi** makes **The Phantom Menace** look like **The Godfather** and Leia is a hideous mashup of puppetry and CGI for the entire third act and will retroactively make you hate Star Wars, movies, and your parents, and you're still gonna watch it.

I could say literally anything – glorbleflath splooth-

noorp – and yeah, it's still Star Wars. And the things people are saying about it! "It wasn't what I expected;" "I didn't like it, but I can see how others might;" "It was amazing;" "It doesn't live up to the hype" (<--- why is CNN even reviewing movies?).

YOU'RE NOT EVEN TRYING. If you are going to review it, actually review it. Don't just throw some word salad out there because your editor told you "We need **Last Jedi** content!" Or, if you do, at least make it funny, like I'm trying to.

I mean, I get it, writing a review of a brand-new Star Wars movie is hard. If I was to score **The Last Jedi** right now, on our scale on 1-10, I would give it eleventy bajillion. But you can't trust me right after I walk out of the theater. It's Star Wars. I can't be trusted with such things. When I saw **The Phantom Menace**, I thought I was looking into heaven, seeing the face of God and all his angelic beauty.

Time has given some perspective to this. So, **The Last Jedi** is out. You already have tickets. You probably already saw it. So don't listen to me, because it doesn't matter what I say.

(it was really good)

Dean E.S. Richard is the author of **3024 A.D.***, and a* **nerds of a feather** *contributor since before we had any…new hope…of more Star Wars.*

SOME EXTENDED AND SPOILER-FILLED THOUGHTS ON THE LAST JEDI
JOE SHERRY

This should go without saying, but please do not read this article if you have not seen **The Last Jedi** and have any intention of going into the movie without having everything spoiled. I'm about to spoil everything. If you want a non-spoiler review, please check out what Dean has to say. If you want something specific and non-spoilery from me, let's just say that I thought it was great and I'm trying to sort out just how high to rank the movie based on one viewing and spending too much time thinking about it. Alright. Let's do this.

When I walked out of the theater two years ago, I was giddy and energized by just how much I loved **The Force Awakens**. I'm not one to bag on the prequel trilogy, but **The Force Awakens** was refreshing for how much it felt like Star Wars and brought back all of the joy of discovering Star Wars as a child and watching the movies over and over again. It may have been a touch on the nose for echoing the original movie, but the joy of Star Wars was back.

There are far worse comparisons to make for **The Last Jedi** than **The Empire Strikes Back**, given that **Empire** is one of the greatest films of all time, one whose reputation continues to grow with each passing year. I'm not quite so bold as to claim **The Last Jedi** will be regarded on the same level as **The Empire Strikes Back**. Only time will give answer to that question. I do wonder, though, how moviegoers felt walking out of the theater having just experienced **The**

Empire Strikes Back for the first time. It's a bit of a downer tinged with just enough hope that maybe our heroes have a chance to overcome the Empire, even if there's no clear path to victory.

The Last Jedi is something like that. The Resistance has been crushed to just a handful of survivors and, while there is hope and belief flames of a new rebellion will fan from the embers this one, things may be as dire as they've ever been. So dire, in fact, that my assumption is that **Episode IX** will take place a number of years, if not at least a decade, later. The Republic is gone. The Resistance is in tatters. If The Resistance was a sports team, reporters would describe them as being in rebuilding mode. They'll hope to contend in a number of years with some additional draft picks, if they can keep the nucleus of the team intact.

Something I find interesting is, despite being the second movie in a trilogy, **The Last Jedi** resets the deck for the Star Wars story. This is something we can argue should have been done in **The Force Awakens**, but that movie was a reintroduction and a making of the old new again. **The Last Jedi** turns the franchise into something subtly different.

For seven movies, Star Wars has been the Skywalker Family Saga. For all the galactic war, and cool shit blowing up, and lightsaber battles, and Yoda flipping around like a muppet on speed, and stormtroopers having the least precision aiming skills around, and everything else, Star Wars is really about one family and their oversized impact on the galaxy. Even in **The Force Awakens**, we're left with a pining for Luke to return and Kylo Ren anguishing over being able to live up to his grandfather's (Anakin Skywalker / Darth Vader) legacy of darkness.

The Last Jedi takes that and twists. Kylo owns his own darkness, destroys Supreme Leader Snoke, and wants to destroy the remnants of the Jedi, Sith, and any other legacy of Stars Wars past. Luke, on the other hand, is a somewhat broken Jedi who wants nothing more than to live out his life on an isolated island on an isolated planet and die alone, one without

the Force. Luke recognizes his legacy of being a near mythological "legend" and rejects it. He knows that legacy brought him nothing but failure and a moment where he was so confident of his rightness that he considered murdering his nephew in his sleep, in fear that young Ben Solo could turn into another Darth Vader.

That moment of being so perfectly wrong shaped the rest of Ben's life into embracing Snoke's teaching, murdering his fellow students, and eventually murdering his own father, Han Solo. Everything Luke feared came to pass, except it was Luke looking down into the eyes of a frightened young man who saw his beloved teacher and uncle with murder in his eyes. Yes, Luke knows about being a legend and he's done with it.

But those years of isolation have turned Luke into his own version of Yoda, bounding up and down a mountainside, milking some animal with a half impish / half mad glint in his eye, taunting Rey with his mastery of that island. We see Luke's X-Wing under the water, echoing its burial at Dagobah, but the teachable moment here isn't Rey lifting it for future use.

The role of the Legend of Luke Skywalker here serves two primary purposes. The first is for Luke to finally figure out how to live with that legend after all these years, without letting it define him. It takes most of the movie, with nudges from Rey and a renewed Force connection with Leia. When Luke truly returns, he is as close to being at peace as he can possibly be, which gives his confrontation with Kylo Ren echoes of the Darth Vader / Obi-Wan Kenobi confrontation in the original **Star Wars**. It is one of many echoes of earlier movies running through **The Last Jedi**, except each of those echoes are being subverted. Luke tells Kylo "strike

me down in anger and I will become more powerful than you can imagine" and throughout that entire fight sequence, we're waiting for the mirror of Vader striking down Kenobi. But then, when it happens, it's not what we thought.

Luke doesn't embrace his own legend, but he comes to peace with it and recognizes that it can be used as a tool. Stories of that fight with Kylo are spreading throughout the galaxy and the Crowning Moment of Jedi Awesomeness is that Luke wasn't even there! Luke was meditating on his island, projecting himself onto the salt planet, and he was such a badass Jedi that nobody knew, except perhaps Leia. The legend becomes a tool, used to help continue the Resistance and foster a new spirit of excitement and defiance.

And then. The legend dies, fading away with only a Jedi robe whipping into the wind. It's a fitting end for Luke Skywalker, better than we could have asked for, and better than we dared hope for.

This is also where I stop focusing on Luke because I did claim **The Last Jedi** wasn't about the Skywalker Family Saga, and then I spent an additional six paragraphs talking about THE Skywalker.

Where **The Last Jedi** truly reshaped the focus of Star Wars is that – Luke's return and demise aside – ALL of the heroes of the movie are women. Rose Tico, the maintenance engineer who has spent her time in service to the Resistance, working with her head down, fixing pipes and keeping stuff running? She's also spent her time stunning deserters trying to steal escape pods and, when finally faced with one of her heroes (Finn), she has to stun him, too, when she realizes that her hero is a deserter. From that, Rose herself becomes a hero of the Resistance, adventuring with Finn to Canto Bight (more on this later) in a last-ditch effort to find the only bit of hope left for the survival of the Resistance and, even there, it is her empathy and skill and sacrifice that even gives them a chance to be successful in their mission.

Then there's Rose's sister, Paige Tico. Paige was a bomber on a run to destroy a First Order Dread-

nought. In the end, it was her heroism and the sacrifice of her life that ultimately won the battle and saved the Resistance from being eliminated right then.

We'll come to Leia at the end, because there are a lot of things to say about Leia, so let's talk about Leia's second-in-command, Vice Admiral Holdo. Holdo steps up when Leia is incapacitated (much more on that later), assumes command, and immediately earns the scorn and derision of Poe Dameron, our otherwise heroic X-Wing pilot and burgeoning leader in the Resistance. He recognizes her legend, but comments on her appearance and then when her apparent plan of inaction doesn't meet his approval, he verbally reprimands her in public and eventually mutinies. We're so trained as viewers, and perhaps as Star Wars viewers, that because Poe is a hero, he is correct and right and she is wrong. That Vice Admiral Holdo is the ineffective leader that will lead to the slow destruction of the Resistance. That's the story the movie is setting up, and also what predicates Rose and Finn's mission to Canto Bight. Despite Leia's leadership throughout this movie and the last, there is also a sense of "here's the man correcting the woman once again."

Readers, Vice Admiral Holdo is not wrong and Poe is not right. It is Poe's continued impulsiveness that, several times, almost costs the Resistance everything – and both times has weakened the Resistance, despite achieving a minor victory. Vice Admiral Holdo does not explain the minutiae of her plan to Poe Dameron because, well, she simply does not need to as befitting her rank compared to his, and the crisis situation at hand. Holdo's heroism is quieter, but powerful and in the end, sacrificial.

We see Maz Kanada, in a cameo appearance, giving the Resistance hope while engaged in her own fight. We see the women in all levels of the Resistance, from the pipe fitters to the pilots to the communications experts to a powerful Force-user and the General holding the whole thing together. They are not just props and window-dressing, either. They are given prominent and important roles, and – more importantly –

screen time and character development. Their actions on screen matter.

I'm not sure if Rey is the heart of the this new trilogy of movies and Leia is the soul, or if Leia is the heart and Rey is the soul. Either way, the combination of these powerful and important women is the driving force of both **The Force Awakens** as well as **The Last Jedi**. Leia is the rock around which the Resistance exists. She has spent her life fighting. Every moment Leia was on screen was one rooted in command and power and heart, and knowing this was the last movie we have of Carrie Fisher playing General Leia was a weight over the movie. There was a sadness and a wistfulness that I felt in the first moment of each of Leia's scenes, never knowing what the last one was and needing to savor each moment.

Rey, on the other hand, is the driving force not only behind getting Luke to even show up again, but also in pushing her own need to do something that matters. She knows that with Luke on the sidelines, she's the one who has to step up and put down Kylo Ren and Snoke. She's the one with the ambition to return Ben Solo to the Light, with the dedication to rebuke Snoke to his face. She's the light the Resistance will be following for years as the legend of Luke Skywalker fades even deeper into the past.

I think that's why Kylo Ren's reveal that Rey's parents were nobody important and they just abandoned her is so important. This is where the Skywalker Family Saga turns. It doesn't matter that Rey isn't a Skywalker or a Solo or a Palpatine or the daughter of Mara Jade. Or, rather, it does matter that her parents were nobody of consequence, because The Resistance is a meritocracy. Be good enough, care enough, step up when everyone else steps aside, and you can rise and do great things. As we saw throughout The Last Jedi, anyone can be a hero. Despite Kylo Ren having taken over the First Order, you don't need to be a Skywalker to make a difference and to matter. Anyone can dream, even if they don't have the right name.

Someone else can write an essay about the relation-

ship between Rey and Kylo Ren. They are, in some ways, mirrors of each other. Kylo, as Ben Solo, had everything (on the surface). Famous and powerful parents, love in his life, presumably, an uncle committed to teaching him. Rey had none of it. Abandoned by her parents, she lived on stories of legends and scraped by to survive. But Rey was committed to doing right, and Ben, seeing his master and uncle betray him, went the other way. Rey's story is of the plucky underdog with a strong sense of justice and the power to do something about it, if only given the opportunity. **The Last Jedi** is that opportunity.

Let's go back to the closing shots of the movie. I'm not thinking so much the last shot of the boy Force-grabbing a broom and looking into the sky, dreaming of the legend of Luke Skywalker and of a rebellion already in his heart, but the scene just before, centered on Leia and Rey having a quiet moment with all of the noise around them. That scene showed that the heart of **The Last Jedi** is the women, Leia and Rey, but also Vice Admiral Holdo, who faced down the insubordination and mutiny of the generally heroic Poe Dameron, and also Rose, the engineer who twice kept Finn on the right path.

Of course, we do need to talk about the biggest bit of what-the-fuckery in the entire Star Wars saga, and that includes Bea Arthur's singing bartender in the **Star Wars Holiday Special**, which is Space Leia. After the bridge of the command ship is attacked and destroyed, Leia is ejected into space and is, presumably, dead. We see her body freezing and Leia is still. Leia is dead. Leia is gone. I'm processing all the emotions I can in as quick a manner as I possibly can while sitting in the theater and then, Leia opens her eyes – which are magically not frozen. And then she Force-pulls herself back into the ship in

time to be rescued. She then slips into a coma (leading to Holdo's ascension).

Seriously, what the hell was that? I have a more-than-healthy suspension of disbelief in most movies, and even greater than that in a Star Wars movie – but vacuum survival seems unlikely, given there is an extended period of time between the attack and when we see Leia revive herself long enough for self-rescue. While I loved having more Leia in the movie – and the reunion scene of Leia and Luke – Space Leia felt so out of place, even for Star Wars and the use of the Force. This, more than anything else, was my biggest problem with **The Last Jedi**.

My smaller problem with **The Last Jedi** is the entire sequence at Canto Bight, which is either a casino planet like Coruscant is a city planet, or it is just the name of an intensely exclusive casino. The Canto Bight subplot seemed to fit more into a side-movie out of the main Star Wars sequence. Finn and Rose are a wonderful pair (and if Finn needs to have a romantic relationship at all and it's not with Poe, it might as well be Rose), but it was a complete digression from the main thrust of Rey / Luke, Resistance Proper, and First Order ship. There was perhaps one more storyline in **The Last Jedi** than the movie could hold, and the movie might have been better served with tightening it. The scene with the boy and the broom at the end would have worked just as well without most of Canto Bight.

With that said, Canto Bight did provide a small bit of nuance to the movie. It suggests that the ul-tra-wealthy are all war profiteers, which seems unlike-ly, but it notes that at least one of them are selling to both the First Order AND the Resistance. The profit is in continued war, and that raises a small question if part of the rise of the First Order could have been supported by arms dealers, besides just the rise of the remnants of the fallen Empire.

That small nuance isn't quite worth the rest of the Canto Bight sequence. We get more than enough of that nuance in the Rey / Kylo Ren relationship, as

well as Luke's character development. Canto Bight is visually interesting, and I love the fathiers (the horse creatures) and how they appear to be far more sen-tient than they are treated, but the real exploration of Canto Bight I would like to see will take place in the recently published story collection, and perhaps in an off-year movie (or future animated series). Here, it's a distraction.

The Last Jedi wasn't the Star Wars story of giddy excitement and renewal (that was **The Force Awak-ens**), but it built and weaved the threads of story into something that was far stronger than the initial thir-ty-to-sixty minutes of the movie suggested it could be. It pays just enough homage to the past, while showing off what Star Wars is likely to look like going forward. Only time will tell if **The Last Jedi** will share a level of esteem and regard anywhere near that of **The Empire Strikes Back**, but it was definitely on the right track to reshaping the vision of Star Wars, and doing it exceptionally well.

Psted by Joe Sherry - Co-editor of **nerds of a feather***, 2017 Hugo Award Finalist for Best Fanzine. Writer / Editor of the mostly defunct Adventures in Reading since 2004. Minnesotan.*

YET ANOTHER SPOILER-FILLED TAKE ON THE LAST JEDI
THE G

This is now the third take on **The Last Jedi** we've posted. First, there was Dean's ebullient review of the film, followed by Joe's tempered praise. Now I enter the fray, Tarken-like, to rain on everyone's parade.

I jest, of course. I didn't hate the film; I just didn't love it, either. To me, **The Last Jedi** is perfectly medi-ocre. Indeed, if I were to rank all the Star Wars films, I'd put it third from the bottom, beating only the ex-ecrable **Phantom Menace** and **Attack of the Clones**. Thankfully, **The Last Jedi** isn't that bad of a film. It is, at least, good at being a film. It's just not great at being a Star Wars film. As far as the Disney franchise goes, I prefer both **The Force Awakens** and **Rogue One** by a significant margin.

WARNING: spoilers.

First, what I did like: the characters. The core trio of Rey, Finn, and Poe are likeable, relatable, and well-de-veloped, while Kylo Ren's angry-teen-with-issues adds a unique and compelling new villain mold to the Star Wars pantheon. I also enjoyed Phasma's limited screen time and, of course, I love BB-8 (who doesn't?). This is a good cast, and Rian Johnson does a solid job of putting the actors in position to succeed. This con-trasts with the prequels, where the new characters were either bland (Bail Organa, Qui-Gon, Padme Amida-la), offensive (Jar-Jar, the Trade Federation), criminally underused (Darth Maul, Count Dooku) or weighed down by poor acting (Anakin).

I also enjoyed Luke's arc. Here we have the former

hero, whose training you will recall was cut short by crisis. Now he is the master, and clearly could have used a bit more of Yoda's wisdom and patience. Things don't go well when training a powerful and troubled Ben Solo, akin to how they didn't go well for Obi-Wan, training a powerful and troubled Anakin. Luke reacts poorly, creating a crisis; he becomes so consumed by guilt that he abandons the cause he once championed.

This was a smart take. "Power corrupts" is a cliché, but we don't often dwell on those who grow uncomfortable with wielding great power, or the burden it places on the individual. His ultimate redemption is, in my opinion, the high point of the film. The way it plays out is genuinely surprising, and it packs an emotional punch.

Unfortunately, those are pretty much the only things I liked. It's worth mentioning that only some of my issues with **The Last Jedi** are specific to the film, while others are legacy issues from **The Force Awakens**. A third category are likely casualties of the switch from mystery-box-loving J.J. Abrams to the decidedly unsentimental Johnson.

Some of my just-this-film issues are also scene-specific. Space Leia is cringeworthy, while the detour through Canto Bight feels tacked on and half-baked. I'm also decidedly not a fan of salt Hoth, which simply reshoots an iconic scene from Empire with cute dog-like creatures and far less majesty. Luke's denouement aside, the whole scene feels lazy and derivative. Oh, and I wish they'd done a better job writing new character Rose Tico. I like Kelly Marie Tran in the role, but the screenwriters don't give her much to work with--a more compelling pathos would have been appreciated.

The Last Jedi as Episode VIII

The rest of the film, if considered on its own, is fine. But you can't just consider it on its own; it is part 2 of a trilogy, and part 8 of a nexus. And it is in this frame-

work that **Episode VIII** failed to impress me.

The Force Awakens presents viewers with two mystery boxes: (1) who are Rey's parents? and (2) who the fuck is Snoke? The answer to (1) works for me — it goes against the grain of Star Wars tradition, but it's not a tradition I put much stock in. It's nice to see that she's basically a nobody, and that nobodies can be heroes too. But the answer to mystery box (2) is deeply unsatisfying, because it isn't an answer.

Granted, the tie-in novels tell us that Snoke is a Sith dude floating around the Outer Rim, who had standing orders from Palpatine to come lead the fight in the event of the Emperor's death. But who reads the tie-in novels? One percent of the people who watch the films? Two? Bottom line, this really should have been answered in the film, and failing to do so essentially tells hardcore fans that they were wasting their time thinking about it over the past two years. Worse, developing the mystery surrounding Snoke would have been a fantastic opportunity to imbue the film with an air of enchantment. Johnson could easily have taken out the tedious detour to Canto Bight, or the downright awful Space Leia scene, and given us some extended Snoke exposition—something that would have made his death climactic, rather than anti-climactic.

My biggest gripe with **The Last Jedi**, though — or rather, with the Disney trilogy as a whole — is its lack of vision. The original trilogy, of course, tells an old story, one that's common in global mythology as well as central to fantasy literature: the ragtag band of plucky individuals who confront immense power and triumph against all odds. This is now thoroughly cliché in sci-fi film. I mean, think about the major YA franchises of the past decade — **Hunger Games**, **Maze Runner**, **Divergent**, etc. They are all deploying the Star Wars formula. So it's easy to forget that it wasn't a cliché yet in 1977. There are also extra layers to the story, which give it richness – about the arrogance that military power breeds and the redemptive power of love, specifically, that of a father for his child.

For all their many faults, the prequels also house a compelling vision: of how — in pursuit of security — free societies underwrite their own demise. There's been a lot written over the past year on how citizens in democratic states can recognize creeping authoritarianism. Whenever I read these, I am reminded of Padme's line toward the end of **Revenge of the Sith**: "so this is how liberty dies; with thunderous applause."

This has happened – and is happening – in many parts of the world, as elected officials consolidate power in their persons and stack the deck against would-be opponents. There are many Palpatines in our world, most of whom do not take power so much as convince their citizenries to give up freedoms and protections in the name of security, prosperity, and the chance to blame some bogeyman or another – usually ethnic minorities, foreigners, or class enemies – for every slight, real or imagined. Lucas put this to film a full decade before most Westerners realized the danger was also a danger to us, and not just to "those people over there." Too bad, then, that the prequels are so bad at being movies.

This brings us to the on-going Disney trilogy, which so far has presented a vision of...the exact same one as the original trilogy. Actually, there is a mild subversion of the original trilogy's meta-narrative, but one so mild that it's barely a critique. Once again, we have a ragtag group of plucky individuals who confront immense power and (are sure to) triumph against all odds. And the films hit you over the head with the referential frying pan. Starkiller Base from **The Force Awakens** is the Death Star, but bigger! Kylo Ren is Darth Vader, but emo! Luke's island is Dagobah, salt planet is Hoth, casino planet is Cloud City and so forth and so on. It's the same old same old, only with crappier design and little romance – the kind of thing dreamed up by corporate executives with checklists in hand and theme park rides in mind.

The creative decision to track the original trilogy isn't just unimaginative; it's also a missed opportunity to use the Star Wars platform to make a statement.

Think back to where we are at the end of Return of the Jedi. Emperor Palpatine and Darth Vader are dead, the new Death Star has been destroyed, and much of the Imperial fleet is toast as well. As both the now-moribund expanded universe and Chuck Wendig's **Aftermath** novels describe, this is followed by a period of intense chaos, where the New Republic steadily gains ground against a demoralized and scattered rump Empire, which is increasingly relegated to the outer systems.

There are residual elements of this narrative in **The Force Awakens**. We learn that the New Republic is disinterested in a new confrontation. The First Order make their move against the New Republic anyway, committing planetacide, only to be stymied by the Resistance (i.e. the ragtag band of plucky individuals), who blow up Starkiller Base and First Order HQ (and presumably a lot of First Orderinos). Thus, one assumes that the First Order has been dealt a significant blow and the New Republic is now aware of the serious threat they pose. Thus, we might expect a shift of focus to the New Republic – weak and fractured, but still the biggest player in the game. What challenges might the Resistance struggle to overcome? A risk-averse, war-weary leadership? Incompetent governance, or an inability to mobilize a restive galaxy? Perhaps a traitor in the midst, sowing discord from within? Nope, nope, and nope. Instead, in the text crawl that introduces **The Last Jedi**, we learn this:

The FIRST ORDER reigns. Having decimated the peaceful Republic, Supreme Leader Snoke now deploys his merciless legions to seize military control of the galaxy. Only General Leia Organa's band of RESIS-TANCE fighters stand against the rising tyranny, certain that Jedi Master Luke Skywalker will return

and restore a spark of hope to the fight.

So. The New Republic is inexplicably gone, and the First Order reigns supreme, despite its seemingly catastrophic losses. This serves one purpose, and one purpose only: to make sure we understand that this series is about a ragtag band of plucky individuals who confront immense power and (are certain to) triumph against all odds, and none of that other stuff.

What bothers me most is that I don't need to see this story again, not when it's been done so many times (and, in my opinion, done better in the original trilogy). What I really would have liked to see is a story that takes place amid the New Republic's struggles to consolidate its authority, to present a more just and equitable system than its predecessor — and to do so in a context of deep economic uncertainty, institutional collapse and an ongoing insurgency.

This story is common in our world. Think about the various outcomes of the 2011 Arab Spring protests, from the mostly successful introduction of democracy in Tunisia to the retrenchment of military rule in Egypt, civil war in Syria and utter chaos in Libya. There are a few references to this kind of context in **The Force Awakens**, but only the tiniest glimpse of it in **The Last Jedi** (i.e. the allies who never show up). Yet this could have been the centerpiece in a unique and compelling grand vision, namely, how difficult it is to build something just in evil's wake, and not accidentally underwrite new forms of dystopia.

I can't help but wonder if the recourse to "fighting tyranny against all odds" reflects a peculiarly Western gaze, one in which there is only liberty (good) and tyranny (bad). The reality is infinitely greyer. There are party states, which take the form of democracy but whose elections are neither free nor fair; and elected strongman systems, where the skeletal form of democracy legitimates illiberal forms of governance. There are rational authoritarian states that do a better job delivering services than most, if not all, democracies; there are democracies that just seem to work, despite the deck seemingly being stacked against their

long-term survival; and there are states that regularly swing back and forth between democracy and military authoritarianism. Even Western democracies, long assumed to house stable institutions and robust systems of checks and balances, seem a lot less stable and a lot less robust than they once did. In fact, we may all exist in some insterstitial space between idealized liberty and demonized tyranny.

…but wait: why does Star Wars have to adopt a "realistic" morality? Isn't it inherently about archetypes of good facing those of evil? Can't we just enjoy those kinds of stories for once?

To a degree it does, disembodied voice — but less than some people presume. Darth Vader exists in the grey area between good and evil, as does Kylo Ren. So, one might argue, do Luke and Rey — tempted as each has been by the dark side (even if, ultimately, they reject its siren call). In the end, Star Wars is still mostly about good and evil, just not quite as starkly as it is sometimes framed. It's about good people with good intentions making difficult choices and not always choosing right, but finding a way, in the end, through sheer force of will and love for the people who love you back.

There is, of course, some of that in **The Last Jedi**. I just wish the new films explored those choices from the perspective of the power holders in the post-Imperial period, those burdened by the exercise of power and lack of clear-cut choices. Imagine how well that would have complemented the other two trilogies. It would have been original, it would have been compelling, and it might just have been something we'd still revere thirty years from now. Perhaps I'm just yelling at clouds here, but to me, that would have been a story worthy of Rey, Finn and Poe...

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

SECTION IV:
CONVERSATIONS

THE ROGER CORMAN INTERVIEW
VANCE K

This is an excerpt from a longer interview, which can be seen online.

Roger Corman has been, arguably, the single most important voice in the history of independent cinema. It was an absolute honor to be able to sit down with him in his office to discuss his new film, **Death Race 2050**, and specifics from a career that spans seven decades.

For the uninitiated, Roger Corman began writing, directing, and producing in the mid-1950s. He launched the careers of actors like Jack Nicholson and Peter Fonda, and revived or reinvigorated the careers of Vincent Price, Peter Lorre, Boris Karloff, and others. As a producer, he gave directors like Ron Howard, Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Joe Dante, and James Cameron their starts in filmmaking. He worked extensively with writers such as **Twilight Zone** alumni Richard Matheson and Charles Beaumont, who were also seminal sci-fi and horror writers in their own right. His distribution company won foreign language Oscars for the films of Ingmar Bergman and Federico Fellini.

But at the end of the day, this is a guy who just made a lot of great movies. From the 1950s beatnik satire **A Bucket of Blood** to the 1960s Edgar Allan Poe adaptations, to the 1970s punk hallmark **Rock n Roll High School** and beyond, Roger Corman may have spent a career working with low- and medium-budget films, but he managed to create lasting art, documents of the times, and just goddamn fun movies, and he continues to do so.

If you haven't, check out **Death Race 2050**, streaming on Netflix and on DVD and VOD, or watch the original, **Death Race 2000**, on DVD or streaming on FilmStruck. And enjoy the interview. I sure as hell did.

Vance K: What is it that gets you most excited about still doing this job?

Roger Corman: What gets me the most excited is still the original idea; coming up with an idea that is, I think, as original as you can be – you can never be 100% original, but as original as you can be – that is exciting to me, and I hope will be exciting to the audience, and then to develop that into a screenplay, and work from there through production.

VK: You've said elsewhere that you first sort of got involved in film by reviewing for the Stanford paper. I'm wondering, was there a particular film either in that experience – or before or after – that really made you fall in love with movies?

RC: I think one of the first pictures I reviewed for the Stanford Daily was a John Ford Western. I think it was **My Darling Clementine.** I was really impressed with the fact that it was so beautifully photographed – he photographs in a famous place up in Utah, I think – and the performances, the action, the framing of the shots all came together. Probably it wasn't necessarily better than anything I'd seen before, it was the fact that I was examining that now carefully, whereas before I was just sitting watching the film.

VK: Now, I I love your directorial work and I will fight anybody who tries to dismiss it. Your framing and your camera movements – you just talked about that a little bit with **My Darling Clementine** – I admire the hell out of how you shot your films. I'm wondering did you have any particular directorial influences that shaped your approach to camera movement and framing?

RC: I had no particular individual influence, it was the influence really of all the films that I had seen.

One of the things I was very interested in, or that was important to me, was trying to get a sense of depth on a low budget. On a bigger budget film, you will have bigger sets, so you'll have great depth. And what I came up with was to have some sort of foreground composition – say, in this part of the frame – the actors there, and then behind them something moving, so that I was working in three dimensions.

VK: That is really interesting. I teach acting and I coach directing a little bit sometimes, and one of the core pieces of advice that I always give people is to compose your shots in depth. So, have as many layers to the camera as possible. That's really nice to hear. I'd love to talk about a couple of the Poe films. For me, **The Haunted Palace** is the best HP Lovecraft adaptation that I've ever seen, and I'm curious how **The Case of Charles Dexter Ward** became an Edgar Allan Poe film.

RC: I had been making a series of Edgar Allan Poe films with Vincent Price as the lead, and I always liked Lovecraft. And I liked **The Case of Charles Dexter Ward**, so I convinced American International to let me move away from Poe. After I had made the picture, they decided that Poe was a selling name, and there was something in a poem or something about a haunted palace that fit that picture, so they changed the name of the picture to **The Haunted Palace**. Nobody ever said that your advertising had to have any particular relation to the picture.

VK: My kids' favorite of the Poe films is **The Raven**. So in that one, you had both Peter Lorre and Boris Karloff, and then in **Tales of Terror** you had Basil Rathbone. When I think about all those people, they probably first all made their mark in the 1930s, when you would have been very young. I'm curious, was there any special significance for you in being able to direct these actors that you would probably have seen on screens for as long as you'd seen anybody on screens?

RC: There was a certain difficulty and significance. I knew these were all very good actors, far more expe-

rienced than I was, and the question is, "How can I direct them?" And what I decided to do was to work with them, and respect the work they had done, and the fact that they were veterans and I was a young person. So, defer to them as much as possible but get my thoughts forward as politely…I don't know if "deferential" is the word…but in that manner.

VK: On a kind of tangential note, I was wondering what your experience with Peter was.

RC: My experience with Peter Lorre was very good. I particularly liked the fact that he used a lot of improvisation. He'd been with Bertolt Brecht in the Berliner Ensemble, which specialized in improvised acting, and the only problem – if there was one and it was a slight problem – was that Peter was improvising, and he was very, very funny. I loved what he was doing. Boris Karloff, on the other hand, came from a classical, English theatrical tradition, and Boris said to me on the morning of the second day of shooting, "I come in, I've learned my lines, I'm ready to give the performance, and Peter is improvising all over the place and I don't know what to say!" So I brought everybody together and we discussed it. And I said, "Peter, what you're doing is wonderful, but stay a little bit closer to the script." And essentially – I didn't say it this way – "Boris, loosen up a little bit." The net result? From then on in, we got along very well.

VK: For as long as I've been aware of Vincent Price, his name has always been synonymous with horror. But kind of looking back at the actual filmography, he'd been working since the 30s, and before **House of Usher**, he had done **House of Wax** and maybe a couple William Castle movies. But I didn't get the sense that he was sort of a known quantity as a boogie man. So I'm wondering what you saw in Vincent to make him the backbone of this horror franchise.

RC: Well, Vincent had started as a leading man – a slightly romantic leading man, but more of a character leading man. He was a very complex and intelligent man, and as he grew older and couldn't play the leads anymore, he made the move into more character-driv-

en roles. Bill Castle had put him in one of his films – Bill was a good friend of mine and I was aware of Vincent's background. I knew that he had done something in horror, and the fact that he was such a good actor and he had had a name for such a long period of time. The first picture was **The Fall of the House of Usher**, and I thought he was perfect for Roderick Usher.

VK: It's really interesting that you say that you were close with William Castle, because I was going to ask, "Did you ever hang out with William Castle?"

RC: I used to play tennis with Bill Castle at his tennis court. And the main information I could give you, which is a little late now, is Bill was a little heavy, and if you were playing tennis, hit from one side of the court to the other, and keep him running.

ROGER CORMAN
Producer, Director, Writer, Distributor

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

A CONVERSATION ABOUT DYSTOPIA WITH MALKA OLDER
SHANA DUBOIS

Malka Older was kind enough to spare some time for a Google Hangout session so we could chat about all things Dystopia.

SD: Let's start with your basic concept/definition of a dystopia.

MO: So, my concept of dystopia differs quite a bit from the common usage, and I fully understand that people may see it differently, but for me the idea of dystopia builds off the idea of utopia, and so I see them as opposite, but equivalent. If a utopia is impossible to fully realize, and probably pretty boring and static once you get there, a dystopia should be the same: a state that is the opposite of perfect, so hopelessly bad that it is almost impossible for it to occur and more or less static and depressing if it does

I can make allowances for "utopian" and "dystopian" as being societies that don't fully reach those states, but kind of lean that way. And certainly, thinking about the terms in those kinds of absolutes somewhat limits their usefulness (because how many books/ideas really go that far, in either direction?). But for me, the devaluation of the term dystopia in recent popular culture, where any future that is remotely authoritarian or has experienced any kind of mass disaster event is called a dystopia, is more problematic.

Categorizing those scenarios as extreme and all but impossible future imaginings obscures the degree to which they are 1) easily imaginable results of the dynamics of where we are now and/or 2) occurring in some form (without the futuristic technology, with different names and locations, etc) in the present.

SD: I like your distinction about utopias and dystopias being the static extreme ends of a spectrum, and therefore connected. If we removed the limiting lens of those terms as they are commonly accepted today, how would that open up pop culture ideas, from a creation standpoint? Or do you think we're already too steeped in a preconceived, and limiting, concept when it comes to dystopian elements in media (books/movies/games/etc)?

MO: I can only speak for myself, but I imagine those terms rarely come in at the creative process. I mean, maybe there are people out there who think, "Now I'm going to write a dystopia," but I think it's more common for a creator to have an issue of particular concern, or a terror of some specific outcome, and write it out. Those labels usually get put on in marketing (or reviews), so I worry more about their impact on consumers than on creators. Such distinctions serve a role in directing people to what they feel like reading (a cheerful future or less so, and that's a choice I respect and make all the time, based on mood), but like I said, they make it easier for people to distance themselves from the real implications of those works.

SD: Excellent point regarding creator-versus-consumer and how/when the terms come into the mix.

MO: They are also very broad terms, as the Kincaid essay on **nerds of a feather** notes. So, again on the critical side, there's room for a lot of interesting work about the kinds of so called dystopias (and, much less commonly, utopias) we come up with. Some of that is already going on, but more recognized flexibility in the terms would be nice.

SD: For work categorized as dystopian, or even utopian, what role does illusion, or a constructed reality, versus reality play? Is such a break required to reach those extreme ends?

MO: The issue I see is that it is a work of science fiction, or occasionally fantasy, that is categorized this way. If a fictional work set in the present (or the recent past) describes a horrible system, it is described as "realism" – which is pretty interesting, when you think

about it. But add a few genetically modified birds and futuristic fashion, and suddenly it's a made-up dystopia. Now, of course it's normal to take speculative fiction with a grain of salt, but for me, the power of writing in a speculative way is that it gives us a different perspective with which to examine the here-and-now.

"Realism" in literary fiction can be very powerful, but it can also give readers a way to say "that specific person is not me, that specific country is not mine, how sad this is and how beautifully written. So, glad I'm not involved in this story." What we often hope for in speculative fiction is for readers to be enjoying (or horrified) by the story, and suddenly have a realization partway through, where they recognize themselves, and their lives, through the funhouse mirror: if this were different, if that were different, if I change the names, oh, she's talking about us. Of course, it doesn't always work, and I'm not arguing for speculative fiction to the exclusion of literary realism, rather that we need both, because people's brains and empathy mechanisms work in different ways.

SD: Continuing that train of thought, how much does your background and experience with humanitarian aid/development come into play with your writing and the story growth? And the desire to create a connection between the reader and the world around them?

MO: That is really important to me, maybe because I've had the experience so many times of being hired to go somewhere that I knew of only through stories – referring to the stories of news reports and the myths of common knowledge and connotations – getting there and finding that it is a reality like any other. When I was hired to go to Darfur, I was of course scared, because we're taught to be – of course, some very terrible things have happened there, but they have also happened in places we're not taught to be scared of – but I was confident enough to go because at that point I had enough friends in the business that I knew some people who had worked there. When I

got there and was in the place, working next to people who lived there, for whom it was their daily life, it suddenly became real and much less frightening (I was briefly scared only a couple of times while I lived there, and all were because of misunderstandings). At the same time, though, it makes the terrible things that happened –and happen – there much more real to me, because they are no longer abstract, terrible things happening in an already abstractly terrible place, but awful, unwarranted disruptions in ordinary lives of ordinary people, some of whom now happen to be my friends. That process, of moving from an abstract idea to something concrete and familiar and therefore meaningful, is what we'd like fiction to do: creating empathy and broadening our experience of places where we can't personally go.

This is why I worry about the label "dystopia;" I think it makes it easier to continue to say this is not a real place, these are not things that really happen, they are impossible. Usually they are things that happen, at most slightly exaggerated or slightly adjusted. Even if the writing is effective at putting the reader in that place, the label can allow them to distance themselves again.

SD: What do you think about your debut novel, **Infomocracy**, often finding the label dystopia applied? The events in that novel don't feel terribly far-removed from the world we live in now, and yet it is often discussed as a far-future and extreme possibility.

MO: First, I want to repeat what I said at the beginning, that I know my definition of dystopia is not the common usage; I'm not here to convince everyone that I'm right. You do you. Also, I'm perfectly fine with the idea that other people experience my novel in a different way than I do. In fact, I think that's pretty awesome (and really interesting).

So, I don't have a problem with people calling **Infomocracy** a dystopia. I do find it a little baffling, and fascinating, and I wonder why it has been so pervasive. After all, this is a book that's set about 50-60 years in the future, that shows few signs of scarcity or impending apocalypse (there are some signs of climate change impacts, but nothing suggesting massive disaster), has some cool and effective new tech, and is not only mostly democratic, but mostly micro-democratic. So why is it so scary, why is it a future we would want to avoid? (I should note I'd be almost as baffled with people calling it a utopia. I didn't mean for it to be one or the other, but on balance I do see it as slightly more hopeful than not).

I could be wrong about this, and I'd love to hear from people about it, but I suspect that it has a lot to do with the pervasive surveillance in this world, even though that surveillance is not in the service of a single government, and almost all of it is available to be seen by anyone (so, very different from Big Brother-type surveillance). If that's the case, it opens up a really interesting discussion about real-world surveillance, not just by governments, but by companies and individuals, and how far that is from what is described in the book, and how we get lulled into ignoring additional surveillance as it becomes normalized. Do people find it scary as a possible future, or as a slightly tweaked version of our present, in which companies follow where we go on our phones and track not only our purchases but our searches, and there are cameras not only on the streets but on our most commonly-used devices, pointing at us all the time?

This brings me to something I found really interesting about Kincaid's essay. In that history of utopias and dystopias, there's a common element: order. The original utopia was, as Kincaid described it, about order: "it could be reached structurally: this perfection was not the province of god or of fairies or some supernatural inversion of the natural world, this perfection was achieved by rational men [...] For More [...] perfection was always equated with order. [...] within any society, order was what brought happiness." But the later dystopias are also about order achieved by rational men: about utter control and regimentation. This odd similarity in the dichotomy suggests something about how and why these terms are so popular. They reflect our struggle with the (relatively new) concept of a government that creates order in our lives. Much of the recent history of political science and government is looking for ways for us to govern ourselves through rules and order that protect us from the worst of what humans are capable of.

It's a paradox, because no number of rules can completely protect us from abuse or autocratic take-over; in fact, the more rules there are, the more dangerous it becomes when the wrong person/people are in power. We try and try and try to rationalize and order everything, and yet there is always the human element in determining how it works – and in fact, dystopia tells us, it is when we succeed in exorcising the human element that we are in the most danger of oppression. So rather than a linear range, we're looking at more like a circle where, at their edges, the extremes of utopia and dystopia are not so far apart.

This is especially true because, except in the most perfect examples of these extremes, the experience is not the same for everyone. That's something else that tends to get flattened out by diluting the concept of dystopia: that in the modern concept they include a lot of inequality. For those people at the top, it's not a dystopia, it's closer to a utopia. Everything's working fine and ordered exactly the way they like it!

That's an area that could use some more discussion in understanding what we're really afraid of.

Also, that is related to a problem I have with Kincaid's essay. **The Handmaid's Tale** is not a feminist dystopia. Yes, it is feminist, but there's no need to qualify the label. For one thing, as I recall, things were not so great for most men in that world either. It's like calling **1984** a worker's dystopia or something.

SD: You brought up the power of the human element. In a lot of dystopias/utopias, we see a world where conformity has become a standard and individuality eroded. How does the disappearance of choice lead to the erasing of the individual, thus leading to a dystopian/utopian environment?

MO: Again, this is something that comes up in relation to **Infomocracy**. In fact, there's a scene in which Mishima wonders whether it is the idea of its many nameless bureaucratic workers that makes people uncomfortable about Information. Similarly, I wonder if people see some kind of uniformity in the book that makes them label it a dystopia, even though the basic idea is about offering more choice in a democracy. So interesting how one person's choice is another's tyranny.

But I do think you're hitting on a really key concept. We want the bad people to be controlled, but the good people to be free. Since it's hard to define bad and good, and definitions differ from person to person, it's an impossible problem; hence the closeness between utopias and dystopias.

SD: Do you think this fascination with dystopian works is a very American, or Eurocentric, concept, specifically because privileged, developed countries view themselves as approaching utopian ideals and the rest of the globe as a dystopian existence?

MO: I don't feel like I'm an expert on this, but my impression is yes, very much so. I've had conversations with people about, for example, T**he Hunger Games** (which I loved, btw, speaking strictly about the books) and how I don't think it's a dystopia because it describes, with flourishes and fictionalization, things that have certainly happened throughout history, and are happening to some degree RIGHT NOW in various places, and the answer comes back "well yes, but it's set in the United States, so part of the dystopia is linked to things going so badly that it happens here."

First of all, the US is not so far off from many of the concepts in the book, and if there's anything we've learned from history it's that if it happens somewhere, it can happen anywhere (seriously, name me a country/region/people that hasn't committed

"dystopia"-like atrocities in its history). Secondly, in my opinion, dystopias aren't about something bad having happened: they're about the systems that allow oppression and exploitation. If those systems exist somewhere, then this is not an extreme, impossible ideal: it's a commentary and a way of looking at the world we know.

Also, and this is where I don't feel like an expert, I don't think the label is applied as readily to books that come from outside of US/Europe. Is it because we believe those places are already that bad? But I haven't done a comprehensive-enough review of what has and hasn't been called a dystopia to say that with any certainty.

SD: With resistance often being a large element within dystopian works, why do you think we keep the application so narrow? For example, **Lord of the Rings** is centered around a very focused resistance to what would be the end of the world as they know it, and yet I've never seen it categorized as a dystopian work.

MO: Well, the flip side of it is, besides resistance, the oppression has to be somehow systematic, tied into government (I'm not sure when this became a part of the definition, but it does seem to be, and that distinguishes dystopian from, say, apocalyptic fiction). So, while Mordor presents a picture of what dystopia could look like in effect, the fact that it's created/managed/ruled via magic (or whatever you want to call it, elemental forces that are different from the ones in our world), it is harder to connect with it in that way. That, I think, tells us something about what we are concerned about with these labels.

But it is interesting that fantasies – I'm thinking of the **Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe** too, and many others – often take a very similar form: the way the bad magic is defeated is often similar to the way oppressive government is defeated, and the way it's used has the same effects, so there are some parallels there. And then you have the fantasies that don't involve magic per se (like **Baru Cormorant**) but do exist in other worlds, with different place names and customs, and those I think are unfairly excluded, because they often provide very sharp analysis of these mechanisms.

Maybe that's why the **Hunger Games** feels like fantasy, because initially you don't know that it's set in a future United States: initially you are dealing with made-up names and a seemingly made-up place, with a future technology that's a little hard to distinguish from whimsical magic. It's a nicely done twist, actually.

SD: How would you like to see either the definition and/or genre of dystopian/utopian works grow moving forward?

MO: Honestly, I'd just like to see both words – but especially "dystopian" – used much more sparingly. I don't have any problem with the books they're used to describe; as I said, the labels usually come after the fact. I do think there might be some interesting work to be done in questioning and pulling apart some of the assumptions built into them, whether that work is done through fiction or through criticism.

SD: Any additional parting thoughts you'd like to share with the **NoaF** readership?

MO: Just to say again that even though I disagree with the broad application of the word "dystopia," that phenomenon itself is really interesting, and can tell us a lot about both literature and our society, so I'm glad **NoaF** is digging into it!

I'd like to thank Malka for taking the time for such an engaging conversation!

Psted by Shana DuBois — extreme bibliophile and seeker of raindrops.

FIRESIDE CHAT: CECILY KANE OF MANIC PIXIE DREAM WORLDS
THE G

Welcome to our latestFireside Chat! This time I "sit down" with Cecily Kane, reviewer of short fiction and proprietor of the blog **Manic Pixie Dream Worlds**. Like me, Cecily is a refugee from the world of literary fiction – or rather, is someone who questions whether there should be a boundary between imaginative and literary fiction. You can find Cecily on twitter, where she is most active these days.

G: Thanks for "sitting down" with me in front of this lovely virtual fireplace! I'm going to start by going big: what do you look for in science fiction or fantasy? What does a story or novel need to do in order to get and sustain your attention?

CK: Thanks for inviting me, G!

In some ways, this is an easier question to answer with fantasy, though that answer might be more nebulous. My favorite genre actually isn't SF/F – it's transformative literature (most but not all of which is SF/F). Principally retellings, whether of myths, fairy tales, histories, epics…but when you get down to it, I think fantasy is almost inherently transformative literature, since its suite of tools draws from the world's existing mythologies and folklores. Regardless of whether it's a secondary world or not, I'm much more interested in fantasy that interacts as an open system with this one than fantasy that is having a conversation strictly with "genre."

Though perhaps it's more complex than that. A favorite story of mine, Ruthanna Emrys' "Seven Commentaries on an Imperfect Land," opens up

Narnia, both to religions besides Christianity and, as Jonah Sutton-Morse pointed out to me, in a dynamic sense with this world; Emrys' Narnia changes. It's an open system, while the original Narnia is a closed one. Though I do think portal fantasies can illustrate things about this world if by showing what you'd be escaping – "The Dancer on the Stairs" by Sarah Tolmie comes to mind.

With science fiction, I'm increasingly drawn to stories that reimagine ways of living that don't replicate horrors of this world, such as Octavia Butler's **Parable of the Sower** (which is also a retelling of the Biblical gospels, a fact that seems oddly omitted from most discussions of it) or Xia Jia's "Tongtong's Summer," which envisions a near future in which life is much better for elderly people. Though, to be honest, these days I'm really digging anything that doesn't replicate empire. Two recent (to me) favorites are "So Much Cooking" by Naomi Kritzer and "State Change" by Ken Liu, which benefit from (and are refreshing in part because of) a sharply reduced sense of scale; they're about how people live.

I'm also a sucker for relatively unusual literary techniques. **The Three** by Sarah Lotz would be a forgettable post-apocalyptic novel but for the fact that it's not only epistolary but is so in multiple formats – blog posts, chat logs, e-mails, self-recordings for a memoir – almost mixed media. Jennifer Marie Brissett's **Elysium** is striking because the computer resets that change the genders and relationships of the characters start to break down, and they change your cognitive processes; human thinking is largely associative, so removing the link between, say, a woman's power and a man probably takes more than representation. Her "A Song

for You" works similarly, but as an illustration of how colonialism and apocalypse are two perspectives of the same story, and that fact is not one of distant worlds or times, but this one, right now.

So now that I've written them out, those look like pretty similar answers, huh?

G: I also tend to like experimental narrative structures, though it has to be executed well. I liked the nonlinear narrative in **Station Eleven** by Emily St. John Mandel, and the front-to-back-to-front structure of **Cloud Atlas** by David Mitchell. My favorite novel format is probably the short story cycle, where each story is self-contained but reveals more pieces of an evolving meta-narrative. A few of these were really important to me when I was discovering contemporary fiction. Mainly **The Things They Carried** by Tim O'Brien, **Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven** by Sherman Alexie and **Jesus' Son** by Denis Johnson.

Come to think of it, there aren't a ton of short story cycles in SF/F. **The Martian Chronicles** by Ray Bradbury and **Stone Mattress** by Margaret Atwood are the only ones that spring to mind. **The Last Wish** by Andrzej Sapkowski and **Four Ways to Foregiveness** by Ursula LeGuin are two more, but they are more stories that fill in the blanks for novel series, rather than proper short story cycles. **The Human Division** by John Scalzi might count, though it was more episodic than anything – I'm not sure the stories can be read on their own, and I was pretty lukewarm on it anyway. I'm sure there are more examples. There should be more, given the cohort of talented short fiction writers we have at the moment. I'd love to see Alice Sola Kim or Karen Tidbeck do a short story cycle.

It's interesting that you mention your frustration

with science fiction and fantasy that's hidebound to the horrors of the present. I have a related frustration with science fiction and fantasy that's hidebound to the social relations and political institutions of the present. The United Space of America trope is an egregious example of this, the ridiculous idea that the political institutions and conventions of the United States will not only extrapolate far into the future, but will also be the only system that makes it. It's unimaginative, for one, and strains credulity for another.

There are many others, like fantasy books that reconstruct modern notions of race, nation, and gender in an allegedly medieval context. Or space opera that projects them into the far future. This is made more egregious when the discourse centers on the supposed "realism" of these worlds. Fantasy is never realistic; nor is space opera. I do get that imaginative fiction reflects the hopes and anxieties of the present, but it's also called imaginative fiction for a reason. More and more, I want fantasy and far-future worlds to be weird and different, to explore radical ideas of how societies could be organized and to untether themselves from modernity or modern interpretations of pre-modernity.

Another thing I want is immersion: in the world and in character perspective. There are many ways to go about this. **Parable of the Sower/Talent** is a great example of doing this by keeping things tidy – one perspective on the world, where the changes from our own are subtle but profound. The **Malazan** novels take the opposite approach – the world and character building is downright baroque. But they are immersive, and blessedly free of info-dumping. Nothing crushes my suspension of disbelief like a narrator breaking the fourth wall, or the shift out of perspective to an encyclopedia-style infodump on the political history of Narvothos, the inner workings of a warp drive, or whatever.

The last thing I want, strictly with regards near-future science fiction, is some kind of meaningful extrapolation from the present. What changes, how does

it change, and why? I realize this runs counter to what I said I want from fantasy and far-future SF. But this is a unique strength of near-future science fiction, and sometimes I fear the genre has moved away from this and toward a more trope-forward approach. Just to be clear, I'm not talking about "hard" SF where there are lengthy explanations of how warp drives work. A lot of that stuff, in my opinion, is pretty unimaginative – especially when it comes to political institutions and social relations. I'm thinking more along the lines of Pat Cadigan, William Gibson, Octavia Butler, and so forth. Okay, I don't always want this, but it's often a plus for me.

CK: "Social and political institutions of the present" is better wording (we're talking about the same things, I think).

17776 | a story about the future of American football transmitting July 5th-15th from SBNATION

Insofar as SFnal short story cycles are concerned, the only two recent ones I can think of are from outside the systems and structures of this field. Insurrections by Rion Amilcar Scott is a series of short stories in Cross River, Maryland, a fictional town founded after a successful slave revolt; **17776** is set in a post-scarcity far future, superficially about football, but thematically about existential anxiety. What I like about these, and perhaps you would as well, is that they are straightforward Americana, about their investment in America-specific concerns, without being this sort of The United Space of Empire, promoting or at least assuming this sort of American hegemony and dominance.

It seems there are two planes to the distinctions

we're discussing in SF's relationship to our world. The textual: to what extent its world is reflective of or divergent from "this world;" and the meta-textual, to what extent the narrative is conscious of the associated why's and how's. Perhaps its failures in the second that lead to most failures in the first, whether by not sufficiently interrogating its perspective, or not even being aware that narratives have a perspective in the first place.

So I'm not sure you're necessarily countering yourself; perhaps "hidebound to" and "extrapolating from" is neither the same thing, nor dichotomous? Something I've been thinking about lately is how SF likes to both consider itself "the literature of ideas" and also "totally fake, made-up, not about this world." I am suspicious of each, but particularly so of when and why it does each; the latter, for example, likely being an excuse to posit empire as a neutral (or heaven forbid, aspirational) entity, and the former being a justification for a sort of literary/intellectual parochialism that encourages these tropes to flourish.

But perhaps I'm getting ahead of myself. I hear you on being frustrated with the lack of imagination in "pseudo-medieval Europe." Two things I think we've talked about before, and that I think are both distortions of capitalist ideology. The first is how godawful the worldbuilding of **Game of Thrones** is; I don't want to derail into what is certainly a TL;DR mine, but the fact that it changes the entire climate system of its world and doesn't consider how that might impact its agriculture, when social systems are inherently agricultural – I mean, it's feudalism! For the gods' sake! – well, how is that "realistic"? (I am increasingly aware of "realism" implicitly meaning "reaffirms existing power relations that I find favorable and comfortable.") And the second, which I think is more interesting, is how much near-future and apocalyptic SF assume competition rather than cooperation. Two of the books discussed so far, **Parables** and **Station Eleven**, are hybrid approaches; I'm increasingly attracted to SF that focuses on community-building.

"Police Magic" by Brent Lambert and Andrea Hairston's "Saltwater Railroad" come to mind.

(Side note: it puzzles me that capitalist ideology frames competition over resources as the primary behavioral driver, but in post-apocalyptic fiction in which the huge majority of humans have died, it becomes more rather than less fierce. Logic does not compute.)

Perhaps my favorite near-future SF of recent years is Aliya Whitely's **The Beauty**, in which competition is not over resources, but rather collective identity; the group fights not over food or weapons, but rather whether their story be framed as a beginning or as an ending. Speaking of extrapolation from the present day and its anxieties, isn't the fight over our story one of the most dominant of our age, at least in the U.S.? And **The Beauty** brings me to the last, but perhaps most significant, literary aspect I look for, narrative voice and language:

I can remember this is not how they were; I knew them, I knew them! Only six years have passed and yet I mythologize them as if it is six thousand. I am not culpable. Language is changing, like the earth, like the sea. We live in lonely, fateful flux, outnumbered and outgrown.

I'm glad I discovered small presses and short fiction, because in the world of big 5 novel imprints, language like that is almost wholly absent; on the occasions it moves beyond an invisible narrative voice that carries the plot along quickly, it tends to be some sort of stilted pseudo-medieval imagined pattern rather than language that uses poetic or prosodic devices.

G: Thanks for the short story cycle recs! Both Insurrections and **17776** sound right up my alley. I also

need a break from the **Malazan** books: I'm midway through book 5, and am flagging a bit. They are very good, though I don't love them uncritically – there's a decent amount of stuff I don't like, though, on balance, it's a very impressive series, both in its imaginative-ness and ideationally. That said, a 10-book series is a tall order, and my original idea to read them all in one go probably isn't going to happen. It probably shouldn't happen; I need a break.

What impresses me most about the books is a point of contrast to Martin's **A Song of Ice and Fire**. You're absolutely right to bring up weather: there are regions on Earth that largely correspond to "years of summer" or "years of winter," but they sure as hell don't look like temperate, medieval Europe. Weather affects everything: what you eat, what you wear, how you build things and so forth. I don't mind that Martin changed the temporality of seasons, but there's zero attempt to design from that premise. This contrasts with his careful approach to the internal logic of cultural practices in Westeros (though not so much in Essos).

Erikson's world, by contrast, reads like a purposeful rejection of "realism." The world is positively dripping with magic in ways that can be weird and confusing but refreshingly different. The internal logic is less that of "modern person bases world on modern interpretation of medieval societies," and more "modern person invents mythological world that adheres to multiple mythological logics." Does that make sense? I guess what I'm trying to say is that I love how untethered the Malazan world is from rote expectations of medieval-ness.

This is especially striking with regards to race/ethnicity and gender. The Malazan Empire is multiethnic and multiracial, ruled by a blue-skinned woman and featuring an army where half the soldiers are women. Some of the other societies portrayed are patriarchal, but others are matriarchal, and others still are neither one nor the other.

I don't love everything about the books. A couple entries get splatterpornographic, and I'm not a fan of

that. But unlike a lot of other grimdark fantasy, the overarching narrative is one of redemption through loyalty, kindness, and charity. That's another point of contrast with **ASOIF**, where it's more about getting to the finish alive and never trusting anyone, unless they're a blood relative (and even then, not entirely trusting them).

More broadly, I like your distinction between the textual (the world) and the meta-textual (how and why the world came to be what it is), and agree that in SF, failure to think about the latter likely explains a lot of failures in the former. That ties to the notion of trope-forward SF: who cares if the setup makes no sense, because fun! Or because it's just a metaphor.

This is something that came up in my conversation with Megan. I'm not against books or stories or films that aspire to be good entertainment and nothing more; nor am I against books or stories where the science fictional is confined to literalized metaphors. Both can be done really well. What does concern me, as an observer of genre, is a sense that – increasingly – that's all anyone wants to do with SF. Outside the dreary, hidebound world of stories where libertarians describe warp engines, that is.

That's a bit unfair – there is a lot of good SF, still. And agreed – you need to look at small presses to find a lot of it. Or, increasingly, to non-genre imprints. The big genre imprints seem to be moving farther and farther from the kind of SF that I find exciting, and towards the safety zone of trope-forward SF.

But enough of me yelling at clouds. You are a prolific reviewer of short fiction, so I'd like to ask: which short fiction writers are most exciting to you right now? And who would you be most excited to read in novel or series form?

CK: Short stories and novels are such different art forms that I don't hold longform aspirations for short fiction writers. (In fact, something I often tell people looking for where to start with shorts is not to begin with their favorite novelists; I don't think that's generally the best way to go about it.) But as far as series are

concerned, I'd love to see series set in Malon Edwards' alt-history Chicago and Ruthanna Emrys' Tikanu. More fairytale retellings by Veronica Schanoes are always good. Some of Wole Talabi's stories read like short story cycles unto themselves – "A Short History of Migration in Five Fragments of You" comes to mind. And recent debut authors whose careers I'll be watching closely include Ian Muneshwar and Tlotlo Tsamaase.

I haven't been able to keep up with the field this year; of what little I did read, probably the most memorable story, "Control Negro" by Jocelyn Nicole Johnson, I found outside of it, in Guernica. It's ostensibly realist, and uses the tropes of literary fiction, but the tools it uses are absolutely speculative. So, I hope to see more SFnal work from the author.

FIRESIDE CHAT: DAVID ZUCKMAN OF OBSCURE REFERENCE GAMES
MIKE
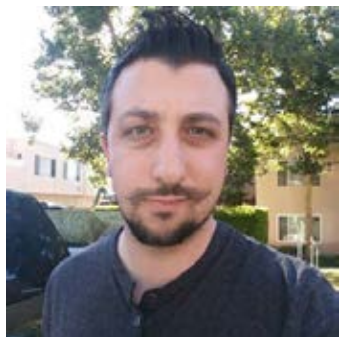
Welcome to another installment of our Fireside Chats! Today's special guest is David Zuckman, the founder of Obscure Reference Games, who just successfully published its first game, **Overlords of Infamy**. *Please join us as we talk Kickstarter and the booming board game industry.*

MN: What motivated you to create **Overlords of Infamy** and start your own board game publishing company?

DZ: As with most good ideas, **Overlords of Infamy** started out as a joke between friends. I had the thought that it would be hilarious to have Super Villains doing dastardly things like "Making people's socks damp," and "stealing candy from babies." I shared this with some of my close friends, and we spent most of the day joking about it, coming up with more and more ideas. By the end of the day, I had a nagging idea to turn it into a game. The rest, as they say, is history.

MN: The board game industry has been growing rapidly over the past four or five years. How does this impact you as a game publisher and what role does a small publisher like Obscure Reference Games play?

DZ: I feel like the industry is in the best place it has been, probably ever. Right now, there is nothing stopping unique and interesting ideas from smaller publishers from seeing their way to market, and the general public. Avenues like Kickstarter and Indi-eGoGo remove a lot of the restrictions and gateways that previously held back independent designers and publishers. Many people can argue about the virtues of allowing scores of new games coming out each year, but I think it is fantastic. There is truly something available for every gamer at this point.

MN: I don't think many people appreciate how much time and energy goes into creating a game. What was the most frustrating part of the process, and what advice would you give someone wanting to attempt a similar endeavor?

DZ: The most frustrating part of creating this game was finding artists that worked well for the ideas we came up with. Ultimately, we were very happy with the artists that we ended up with, but it took a lot of time and money to get to that point. I would recommend that when you are early in the process of making the game, don't worry about including intricate art. You likely only need just enough artwork to make sure your ideas are properly presented. Worry about artwork when you are closer to having a completed game and are ready to show it to strangers.

MN: Even though your Kickstarter was successful, what lessons did you learn from using the crowdfunding route to publish your first game?

DZ: I learned a lot about how we present our project. The artwork that we used on Kickstarter was almost entirely replaced for the final game. I am certain we would have earned even more during the campaign if we had the finalized artwork back then that we do now.

MN: Overlords of Infamy features a variety of gameplays, including resource management, tile laying, and worker placement. Was it difficult to integrate all of these systems into one game?

DZ: I really thought it would be, but they honestly work really well together. I had been playing a good deal of games with similar mechanisms, so I had them fresh in my mind while designing **Overlords**. I am very pleased with how the mix of mechanisms flow during game play.

MN: I love the idea of playing as the bad guy. It reminds me of playing **Dungeon Keeper** on the PC way back in the day. What inspired you to flip the role and put the bad guys at the front and center?

DZ: I think the popularity of **Grand Theft Auto** and similar games show that people in general really enjoy taking on the role of the bad guy, in instances where there are no real-world effects and consequences, and I am no different. It's an escape from the real world and gives a perspective that we would not get otherwise. However, the most alluring thought I had about this concept was making the Evil Overlords believe they were doing truly evil things, when in reality, most things they were doing were just simple annoyances. That just makes the entire situation hilarious to me!

MN: From watching your video on Kickstarter to reading the profiles of Obscure Reference Games, it seems that humor is important to you. What types of humor influences your staff, and what obscure reference are you most proud of in your first game? Did I catch a **Mr. Show** reference in terms of blowing up the moon?

DZ: Humor is incredibly important to us. If I can make someone laugh, I feel like I have done a good deed for the day. Dry humor, physical humor, and sarcasm make up quite a bit of our repertoire. We love obscure references, as our name implies, and it is hard to pick just one. If pressed, I would have to say my favorite would be "Build a Wall and Make the Kingdom of Good Pay for It." Or one of the **Princess Bride** references. Or a Spaceballs reference. Or the **Dodgeball** reference. It's so hard to pick!

To your last question....maybe.

MN: I know you just got back from Origins. Was

this your first board game convention you attended as a publisher? What was that experience like? Are you planning on attending any other conventions?

DZ: We've been doing conventions since early 2015, and during those early ones we would just bring our prototype and let people know it would be on Kickstarter "soon." We went to several local conventions in LA, such as Strategicon, which is a fantastic con that happens three times each year. We've been to many others since then, such as Wondercon, and San Diego Comic Con.

Origins 2015 was our first major convention though, and we have been back every year since. I can safely say that Origins is my favorite convention to attend, and I look forward to it every year. I'll be going to Gen Con this year as well to help out Leder Games with **Vast** and **Deep**!

In the future, I hope to be able to exhibit at BGG Con, Dice Tower Con, and others!

MN: If you could acquire any creative license to create a board game, what license would you use and why?

DZ: Oh this is a tough one...I think I would have to go with **Spaceballs**, mainly due to my deep love of all things Mel Brooks and **Star Wars**. If I could design a game that captures even a fraction of the fun I have with those movies, I would be ecstatic.

MN: What does the future hold for Obscure Reference Games?

DZ: We are working on our next games right now. We have a lot of ideas we are fleshing out, but the one that is furthest along is **Dimensions of Discord Online**. **DoDO** is a tabletop game, using mostly just cards, in which you are a guild leader in an MMORPG, such as **Final Fantasy XI** or **WoW**.

The goal is to be the most reputable guild on your server. To do so, you will recruit players to your guild and send them into Raids, or after Monstrous Foes (world spawn bosses) to collect reputation and "loot," the two currencies of the game that you use to recruit players and buy items from the Auction House. Mon-strous Foes and Raid Bosses also have the potential to yield equipment items and mounts that you can give to your Guild Members to make them more effective and worth more reputation when you add up your score at the end of the game. I am also including a PvP arena, and Guild Halls that you need to upgrade to increase the size of your guild and number of items you can hold at one time.

One of the concepts I am really excited about is that each Member you can recruit is only "online" at certain times of day, so you can only group together guild members who share at least one block of time online.

This one is still in the early stages, but I will be talking a lot more about it in the future, especially when I start public play tests.

MN: Thanks for taking the time to chat and I look forward to checking out **Dimensions of Discord Online** and maybe meeting up at San Diego Comic Con!
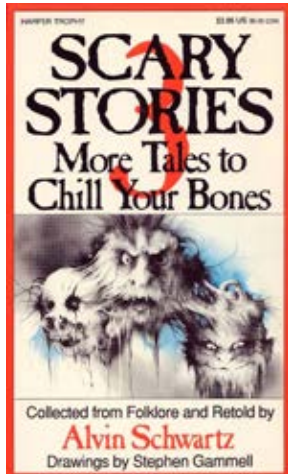
Posted by Mike N. — aka Victor Domashev – comic guy, proudly raising nerdy kids, and **nerds of a feather** *contributor since 2012.*

SECTION V: SPOTLIGHT ON HORROR

HORROR 101: AN INTRODUCTION TO FEAR

CHLOE

What makes horror work?

Welcome to Horror 101. This will be an ongoing series of essays about the horror genre: from analysis about the elements of horror to using monster theory, to in-depth looks at individual works of horror. While I have some plans already, please let me know on Twitter (@PintsN-Cupcakes) if there are specific horror texts/tropes/or monsters you think I should tackle!

For this first essay, I thought it would be helpful to illuminate why I'm doing this (and why I begged the lovely Powers That Be at **NoaF** to allow me to do it). Horror is deeply subjective, so it's possible my analysis and thoughts about horror won't agree with everyone. Thus, this might be helpful in gauging whether you wish to follow me on this journey into darkness.

I was drawn to the scary story at an early age — like think a three- or four-year-old watching **Aliens** on repeat — but it rarely bothered me. I wasn't a child who got nightmares — as much as I am a coward, trust me I am not the person opening the basement door where a weird noise has been coming from. So it wasn't the fear that drew me to them, but rather the feeling of safety that they brought. I loved horror because it was contained. Close the book, turn off the movie, and the world was bright again. Even as a child, this struck me as a power we don't often have in life. I also appreciated that horror showed that people can fight against the darkness in their lives. It said, "be afraid, but be hopeful as well."

I read the Alvin Schwartz **Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark** series (aka the greatest books of all time) over and over again. Their reliance on folklore and almost fairy tale-like logic certainly was an early spawn for my love (and eventual study) of lore. I joined the **Goosebumps** book club, and then graduated from those to reading every single **Fear Street** and Christopher Pike book the library owned (as a voracious and fast reader, the time between school ending and me getting picked up from the library was often enough time to read an entire book). By age ten, I moved on to Stephen King (who I'd already heard in audiobook form on family car trips), and a new idea about what horror could teach its readers.

King often wrote of the underdog overcoming horror. Bad stuff happens over and over in King's books, but the characters almost always won. One of my fondest childhood memories is reading the entirety of **The Stand** while home sick from school. It was a novel that tapped into my direct fears (me, with a bad cold, reading about the plague), while also illuminating the idea of people working together to fight evil (my favorite of all story types and one I'll return to in future essays).

As a child who loved to write, I also found myself returning to horror again and again for my own creative purposes. When I got to college, I'd often come up against the same question again and again in creative writing workshops: why horror? Can you do anything other than monsters? Ugh, ghosts, again. But more interesting to me were the questions people asked that showed no sense of reality: everyone in workshops wanted the horror to be happening because people deserved it. The idea of horror as morality tale is certainly one that we see all over (horror's links to fairy tales is evident for a reason). But it's a misguided one. To me, the power of horror is that it can reflect reality: i.e. bad shit happens to good people all the time. Maybe it's not monsters, but it's the monsters of everyday reality: illness, violence, systems set up to mistreat. Horror can serve as a veil to describe life (something **Get Out** did recently in a masterful way).

So as a writer and reader, I loved what horror could give me. As a teacher and scholar, though, I wanted to look under the hood. I became interested in exploring how horror operates on a level of mechanics as well as how it operates as a means of communicating ideas. What was the rhetorical value of horror? After studying monster theory, a fairly new form of critical study that looks into monsters and horror from the analytical perspective, I began to think even more deeply about the value of monsters and using them both in writing and in teaching. I'm lucky to teach at a university that allows me to shape my composition courses, and this allowed me to create a class that teaches multimodal composition and communication through the theme of Monsters. Monsters are a fun way to get students thinking about much deeper issues. By exploring the ideas of monstrosity, we're able to look at acts of othering and monstering that permeate history: racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, and the list goes on. My students began to pick up on these ideas and tropes in various media they consumed. They realized it wasn't just a "genre" thing, as they could point to the language of othering and monstering in the speeches of politicians.

So horror has rhetorical value. It has value to me as a writer and reader. But what makes horror tick? To me, there are several key features to great/successful horror. I'll be diving deeper into those in essays to come, but they include dread, the use of the uncanny, private versus global horrors, terror, awe, horror as masks, and more. Throughout these essays, I'll be pointing to specific, textual examples of successful deployment of these ideas. My horror taste runs the gamut from ghosts to zombies, supernatural thrillers to horror comedies, but as a head's up, I won't be diving into torture porn such as Saw and its friends (which to me is not only not good entertainment, it's also ethically questionable).

Finally, I hope you'll stick around with me as we

enter Horror 101. You might not be a horror fan, but you may find that it has more to offer than merely goosebumps.

Chloe, speculative fiction fan in all forms, monster theorist, and **nerds of a feather** *blogger since 2016. Find her on Twitter @PintsNCupcakes*

FRIGHT VS. FRIGHT: INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS
VANCE K

Fright vs. Fright is a series of comparisons between classic horror films and the lesser-known works that inspired them, or subsequent remakes that stand on their own merits.
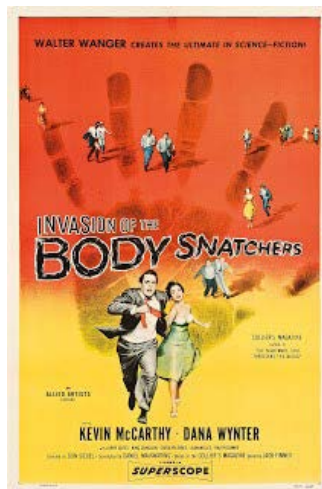
The Film: Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956)

The Plot: Dr. Miles Bennell stumbles into a police station raving about not being insane, and needing people to listen to him. A psychiatrist arrives and agrees to hear Bennell's story. It goes like this: Miles returned from a medical conference to news that many of his patients had called and made appointments in a panic while he'd been gone, and then a day or so later, all called to cancel. When a friend says that she thinks her uncle isn't really her uncle, Miles is concerned for her. But then when a little boy comes in with his grandmother saying that his mother isn't really his mother, Miles begins to worry more generally. Stuff gets really weird when Miles gets called to his friend Jack Belicec's house because Jack's wife seems to have found a…body. It's a strange body. Sized and shaped like Jack, but without distinct facial features or fingerprints. Miles remembers his would-be girlfriend Becky saying she thought her dad was behaving strangely, and he darts to Becky's. In the dark basement, he believes he sees a doppelganger body of Becky in a locker down there, but afterward can't be sure. When he and Becky return to the Belicec place, though, the four of them discover giant alien pods in the greenhouse, each pod growing a copy of each of them. They've uncovered an alien plot to replace humans with unfeeling clones, and now they have to try to get away…and stay awake.

The Good, The Bad, The Indifferent: Invasion of the Body Snatchers is about as good as 1950s horror/sci-fi gets. There's not a lot of "guilty pleasure" here — this is lean, taut storytelling that is maybe not as visceral today as it would have been in 1956, but it is no less thought-provoking. That this movie can be claimed as both a tacit endorsement of McCarthy-ite Red Scare paranoia and a rejection of that very same ideology speaks to how engaging it is. The filmmakers all went to their graves insisting that there was no political motivation or didactic intent behind the film, but there's no denying that it is a product of its zeitgeist. Can we be saved from the threat of secret Communist infiltration? Or, can we be saved from the reactionary forces in control that insist on homogeneity? This is in many ways the best of genre storytelling — a metaphorical treatment of existential forces that a society is wrestling with.

Fun bit of connective tissue: Carolyn Jones (later Morticia Addams), was in last week's installment, **House of Wax**, and also plays Teddy Belicec in this movie.

Remade As: Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1978)

How It Stacks Up: I'm not sure which of these two version is "better," so suffice to say that when it comes to the daunting task of remaking classic movies, this is about as good as they come. There are some elements that are a little dated — like the super-fake nosebleed on the pod-body of Jack Belicec (this time played by Jeff Goldblum) —

but on the whole the practical effects hold up, and Philip Kaufman's film does a great job of painting on a broader canvas than the original film. Set in San Francisco, instead of a small town, the stakes begin much higher, and the barriers to stopping the alien pod-people from spreading are much more daunting. The ick-factor is ratcheted up in this version, and one additional characteristic added to the pod people in particular really heightens the creepiness. It's the shrieks. The shrieks of the pod people. It's unsettling and kind of chilling, and such a great reminder of how the well-chosen little things can be used to much better effect in horror than gore-for-gore's sake.

Worth a Watch? Absolutely. I think it's hard to go wrong with either of these two versions. There are more versions out there, but these two I can recommend without reservation.

Posted by Vance K — cult film reviewer and co-editor of **nerds of a feather, flock together** *since 2012. Perennial watcher of dozens of horror movies each October. Not a pod person. As far as you know.*

HORROR 101: THE UNCANNY
CHLOE

For this entry of Horror 101, I thought I'd dive into my personal favorite kind of horror: the uncanny. While we often think of horror as something viscerally frightening, the uncanny builds its horror through the use of the slightly wrong and, through this, creates a far more convincingly real and terrifying world. The uncanny as a psychological idea refers to the idea of something being "strangely familiar" or what I like to think of as the "falsely known."

The uncanny to me is a crucial element of horror: not being able to pinpoint exactly what makes us scared. While the extreme can be terrifying (the xenomorph in Alien is a category crisis — it's something we can't classify/is not instantly knowable — but it's not uncanny because we shouldn't be able to know it/classify it, as it's something completely new to the human experience). However, even more terrifying is that which is just a little off: pod people who may look like your lover, but they smile in just a slightly different way. A man with fingers just a little too long. Women with hair in front of their faces so that their expressions are unknowable.

In technology, we refer to the "uncanny valley" (a term coined by Masohiro Mori in the 70s) when dealing with robots and computer-designed images of people. A robot who looks human-like but not realistically so (think Bender in **Futurama**) wouldn't trigger the uncanny valley, but a robot who looks extremely close to human, but has some tiny bit of off-ness, such as the more and more realistic robots we have currently, would fall into it and create a sense of slight fear, revulsion, or distrust. In the film **Ex Machina** (which on its surface is a film about a Turing test go-

ing very wrong, but in its heart is a take on the tropes of Gothic literature and the Bluebeard fairy tale), Alicia Vikander portrays Ava brilliantly by making the robotic elements include both Ava's movements (more perfect than an average person's) and speech (carefully clipped and enunciated) — this heightens the uncanny valley feeling while going against the entirely human looks of her face (which wouldn't necessarily fall into the uncanny valley).

In literature, the uncanny is prevalent in ghost stories and Gothic narratives (Madeleine in the "Fall of the House of Usher" clearly falls into an uncanny category of being, even before she turns into something more monstrous). Haunted houses, in many ways, are examples of place as uncanny: the familiar sounds of a house settling become othered when the house is not one's own. The uncanny also often coincides with liminal spaces (a subject I'll explore in even more depth in a future Horror 101), and how these shift our perceptions of what is going on: for example, the nostalgia for childhood mixed with a sense of unease in Neil Gaiman's **The Ocean at the End of the Lane** falls clearly into the uncanny. The uncanny also shows up in more contemporary horror and monster films, as well.

Slasher films oftentimes build off of the idea of the normal turned terrifying: a phone call (the **Scream** franchise) or a shower (**Psycho** and so many films since), for example. This twisting of what we should consider safe is a form of uncanniness (who didn't look askance at their VHS collection after watching **The Ring** or wait an extra ring to pick up the phone after **Scream**?). However, even more interesting (to me) is when the uncanny creates monsters from the known.

In films with pod people or other variations on this theme, the uncanny is allowed to truly shine by raising our distrust in those we love (the ultimate kind of terror, really). From the shape-shifting thing of **The Thing** who could be right next to you, looking just like your longtime colleague, to your lover in **The**

Invasion of the Body Snatchers. In pod people films, they look exactly like the person they've transformed into and yet they trigger the uncanny valley through their inability to do a trick with their eyes, a slowness to smile at a joke you've shared for years, a shift in their speaking tone. This is horror summed up: even the ones you love may not be the ones you love after all. If horror is, at its roots, often about loss, what greater horror than a loss that no one even believes has happened?

What are your favorite examples of the uncanny? Have a horror topic, style, or monster, that you'd like me to focus on? Let us know in the comments or on Twitter: @PintsNCupcakes or @nerds_feather.

Posted by Chloe, speculative fiction fan in all forms, monster theorist, and **nerds of a feather** *blogger since 2016. Find her on Twitter @PintsNCupcakes*

REMEMBERING GEORGE A. ROMERO AND MARTIN LANDAU
VANCE K

Yesterday hit us with a double whammy: we lost both Martin Landau and George Romero. Fun fact: Martin Landau played "Leonard," the henchman to James Mason's "Vandamm" in **North by Northwest**, and a young George Romero worked as a gofer or production assistant on that film. I don't know that their professional lives ever crossed again, but I wanted to take a minute to say thank you and celebrate these two artists, both of whom had a profound effect on me, personally, and on countless others.

I heard about George Romero's passing first, so let's talk zombies. It's hard to imagine a time in pop culture without zombies, but it wasn't that long ago. Richard Matheson, whose excellent novel **I Am Legend** has been made into movies several times, none of which particularly pleased him, felt that the best adaptation of his book was an unofficial one — **Night of the Living Dead**. I think Matheson's claims were a little overblown, but one thing both writer and filmmaker had in common were the focus on and exploration of humans making destructive decisions in the face of constant assault by the murderous victims of the... plague, or cosmic rays, or whatever. The great innova-

tions of **Night of the Living Dead** that make it totally distinct from **I Am Legend** are the mindlessness of the zombies — they are unthinking, unfeeling forces of malevolence that cannot be reasoned with, spoken to, dissuaded, or deterred — and the realization that you may bar the door, but when you look around at the people in the house with you, you've just locked yourself in with monsters, too.

As an independent filmmaker and low-budget director, I certainly have my heroes like Roger Corman, but it's mostly individual movies that stand out to me as brilliant, innovative, creative battles fought against a paucity of resources and in which the filmmakers managed to make something enduring. **Night of the Living Dead** is one of those movies. I have raved to many people about the scene where Ben nails boards over the doors and windows. It's a loooong scene, and all you see is a guy hammering nails into boards. It's visually boring. It breaks the "show, don't tell" rule that every film professor and directing book ever has held up as a mantra. But when you have zero dollars, sometimes you don't have the luxury of "showing." What Romero did is not only brilliant and inexpensive, but it is far, far more effective than the alternative you've seen a million times since, where you watch ranks of shambling zombies closing in. He plays the radio in the background. That's it. The unfolding news reports ratchet the dread up, and up, and up. **Night of the Living Dead** is masterful filmmaking. Romero was also on record as saying he drew inspiration from **Carnival of Souls**, one of my favorite films, so he'd have a warm, fuzzy place in my heart just for that.

An editor friend of mine also pointed out that Romero not only created the template for zombies that has now arguably reached its zenith, but he also created a template for independent filmmakers. Romero worked making commercials and even **Mister Rogers** segments to make his own films on his own time. This is how we all roll these days, but it was new stuff in 1968.

Most of the remembrances and obits I've seen or

heard on Martin Landau say "best known for the 1960s TV series **Mission: Impossible**," and that may well be, though I've never seen it. As a young actor, Martin Landau was absolutely chilling. Watch him in the **Twilight Zone** episode "Mr. Denton on Doomsday." I've already mentioned his role in **North by Northwest**, which prompted one of my favorite Hitchcock stories. As Landau told it, he was nervous working on the movie — it was his first film, for God's sake! — and particularly nervous because he had decided to play Leonard as a gay man. So there he is on set, playing his scenes, having made this huge (especially in 1958) choice, and Hitchcock isn't even talking to him...just not acknowledging him in any way. So finally, Landau approaches Hitchcock and asks if there's anything he needs to change, or any notes, and Hitchcock says (please read in your best, however-er terrible, Alfred Hitchcock voice), "Martin, when you're doing something I don't like, I'll tell you."

But the thing that puts Martin Landau on my own personal Mount Rushmore is his portrayal of Bela Lugosi in **Ed Wood**. It would probably be hard to overstate the impact that movie had on me. I'd been interested in old horror movies from a very young age. I remember the local TV station (there was only one... ABC, NBC, CBS, and local Channel 20) showing tinted prints of **Frankenstein** and **Dracula**, as they were sometimes shown on their initial theatrical releases, when I was maybe 7 or 8 years old, and I was transfixed. But until I got into high school and was able to hit video stores on my own, there wasn't a ton

of access to old horror or sci-fi movies. The Million Dollar Movie was often a spaghetti western or action movie, and we didn't have anything like Vampira or Elvira's late-night shows featuring those old public domain movies. It just so happened that **Ed Wood** came out my first year in high school, and White Zombie's **La Sexorcisto: Devil Music, Vol. 1** came to national prominence within the same few months. The profundity of Martin Landau's performance as Bela Lugosi, introducing me to a performer's previously unknown second act, hit me at the same time as an album full of samples taken from **Night of the Living Dead**, F**aster Pussycat, Kill, Kill**, and the Boris Karloff-starring **The Mummy**. Those two things helped cement in me a fascination with B-movies, independent film, outsider cinema, horror...you name it. **Ed Wood** remains the greatest movie about movies ever made. Don't even talk to me about **The Player**. I don't give a damn about your Wellesian long-take at the beginning of your movie if you don't have Martin Landau-as-Bela Lugosi in a puddle of water flopping around the arms of a rubber octopus as he pretends its killing him.

It would probably be wrong to not mention Landau in Woody Allen's **Crimes and Misdemeanors**, in which the avuncular, mild-mannered personality we had sort of come to expect from Martin Landau masked the awful, vengeful aspect that he also had inside as a performer, on display back in those early **Twilight Zone** episodes. But his Bela Lugosi is everything. I have been directing films and videos for almost twenty years now. I guarantee that on more of those shoots than not, either I or somebody else in the cast or crew has said either, "Let's shoot this fucker!" or, "Bullshit! I'm ready now!" Many are the times during our annual October horror-a-thons my wife or I have looked at each other and said, "Karloff? Sidekick? FUCK YOU!!!"

One of those October viewing parties gave rise to the EP I released a few years ago called **October**, where I wrote a song inspired by **Ed Wood**. No other song on the album was inspired by any film more re-

cent than 1963. As good as Johnny Depp is as Edward D. Wood, Jr., it is Landau who has always spoken the most clearly to me in that film. And on the EP, I sequenced it (of course) right after "Dracula, 1931."

Both of these men had long lives, and left tremendous bodies of work behind. I feel their loss, but mainly, I celebrate all that they gave as artists. It's one thing to be able to enjoy stuff like **The Walking Dead**, which owes so much to Romero, or to be able to enjoy the many, excellent performances Martin Landau gave over his long, long career in front of the camera. But these two guys had a material impact on the course of my life, and I'm just so, so grateful that they were willing to stand up on the side of outsiders and weirdos and iconoclasts and help show a way forward for more of them.

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

SECTION VI: OTHER COVERAGE

STRANGER THINGS: THE LOST WORLD OF HAWKINS, INDIANA
THE G

Someone on my Facebook feed posted a really interesting article on **Stranger Things** and the enduring pop cultural appeal of '80s nostalgia. Unfortunately, I can't find it now, but one of the more notable tidbits was the observation that the current wave of '80s nostalgia, which traces back to the late '90s, has now been around almost twice as long as the '80s themselves.

In truth, it's phased in and out, but never gone away. Now, in 2017, it is in full bloom: we've gotten a remake of **It**, a sequel to **Blade Runner**, an '80s-themed entry in the Thor movie franchise and, most importantly, a second season of Netflix's unabashedly nostalgic sci-fi horror show, **Stranger Things**. Meanwhile, synthwave – the overtly retro '80s music that I make (shameless plug) – is more popular and visible than ever.

I've long wondered why I'm so attracted to '80s nostalgia, why I've always been attracted to it, but also why I'm so particularly attracted to it now. The simple answer is that I grew up in the '80s, but that's only part of the story. I was a teenager in the '90s, so you might think I'd be nostalgic for that cultural moment. I probably will be at some point, but I'm not right

now, not really. So there's clearly more going on there, and I suspect that's the case for most people. What follows is an attempt to make sense of it all, with special emphasis on **Stranger Things**.

An Evolving Aesthetic

In 1997, VH1 debuted what would become its signature program in the post-video age: **Behind the Music**. Though not limited to '80s musicians, episodes that featured that decade's more ridiculous figures were instant hits. In 2002, VH1 adapted the British program **I Love the '80s**, which surveyed the decade's pop culture landscape a year at a time. (**I Love the 70s** and **I Love the 90s** followed soon thereafter.)

These programming decisions both reflected and contributed to the wave of nostalgia for '80s pop culture that, according to Simon Reynolds, cast its shadow over the entire decade. Indeed, if you look at independent music in the early '00s, it's positively drenched in the stuff: from the "punk funk" aesthetics of LCD Soundsystem, Franz Ferdinand, and Datarock to the new wave revivalism of Ladytron, Fisherspooner, and Scissor Sisters. And it wasn't limited to music either. The cult TV show **Freaks and Geeks** (1999-2000) was, in a sense, the **Stranger Things** of its day. And **Napoleon Dynamite** (2004), though not technically set in the 1980s, had a distinctly '80s nostalgic aesthetic. So why does the current round of '80s nostalgia feel different?

In 2005, VH1's Michael Hirschorn had this to say about the '00s wave of '80s nostalgia:

> *[It] applies to a specific kind of Gen X, self-mocking, slightly ironic thing. For this group of people, you can't give them straight nostalgia of the sort of baby-boomer, "everything was wonderful and great when we were kids" feel. People Gen X and younger know that things weren't that great. We never thought that Motley Crue was saving the world. We identify with them passionately, but with a certain wink.*

The ironic take still holds, to a degree, but it's never been the only thing going. Revivalists from the '00s, such as Daft Punk and Ariel Pink, described their approach in decidedly unironic terms, as less an attempt to recapture a specific sound (with the addition of a wink and a nudge) as to recapture the "blissfully indiscriminate" way in which music was consumed at that time, something that evaporated with the decline of radio and MTV's switch to scripted programming. And if anything, the current wave of retro enthusiasm feels much less ironic and much more earnest than it did in the '00s.

There are plenty of haters, who dismiss the current wave of '80s nostalgia as insipid or emblematic of cultural exhaustion. But I think those people vastly miss the point, namely, that '80s nostalgia in 2017 is purposive, and says more about where we are today than it does about the moment it portrays. And nowhere is that more apparent than in the lost world of Hawkins, Indiana.

The Lost World of Hawkins, Indiana

When I first starting watching **Stranger Things**, I was struck by how familiar Hawkins, Indiana, felt. I grew up in a place more or less like that, an old Northeastern mill town. It was a twenty-minute drive from a small city, and just under an hour from a big one. But it was also a self-contained universe. Most people worked in factories, making calculators, school uniforms, or costume jewelry. Others worked in supporting industries – one friend's father owned a small metal-treating company, which served the factories. There was a vibrant main street, and a great diner that got so packed on Sundays you could think the whole

town was there. There was little crime, and it felt like everyone was looking out for everyone else. It was the kind of place where you knew the police and firefighters by name. The real locals, by which I mean those with roots in the community, probably knew them all from school or little league.

A lot has changed since then. Most of the factories have closed, with the work they once did (and the work that supported them) outsourced to cheaper labor markets. Main Street, like so many across the US, is a dilapidated shadow of its former self. The town as a whole is still okay – its proximity to the aforementioned cities meant it was able to transition from a place that made things to a commuter suburb. And the diner's still there. Many factory towns have not been so lucky.

But when I see the town of Hawkins, Indiana, it feels like I'm looking back at the place I grew up in, as it once was, but which no longer exists in the same form. This feels important. Stranger Things isn't just a celebration of pop culture from a previous moment, but a window into a lost world – one where things that have become deeply uncertain are rendered certain again.

The appeal of peeking into this world makes a lot of sense when you consider the political trend, both in the US and globally, toward economic populism. Strikingly, this trend is evident across the political spectrum, though it manifests differently on each end. Both sets of populists want to turn back the clock on several decades of globalization, outsourcing, and the financialization of the economy. They just apportion blame differently. Left-wing populists are angry over the dissolution of what George Packer calls "the Roosevelt Republic," a 50-year period of state-regulated economic security and egalitarianism, which was broken up in wake of late '70s stagflation to encourage faster growth, which in turn has disproportionately benefitted the richest of the rich. Right-wing populists, by contrast, blame mass immigration for driving down wages and labor unions for driving out

the factory owners. Both blame free trade for making it cheaper to build things abroad, though left-wing populists also stress its negative effects on emerging markets.

The window to Hawkins shows a place where none of these things have happened yet. Though deregulation was already well underway by 1983 (when season one of **Stranger Things** takes place), the effects were not yet evident. We are looking at a place that hasn't experienced the financial crises of 1987, 2000, and 2008 or the cancerous spread of Walmart – a place where economic security and a middle-class standard of living are still assumed. I imagine that most people who watch **Stranger Things,** regardless of their politics, find this comforting.

Another aspect of Hawkins that strikes me is its whiteness. I don't mean that in strictly racial terms; after all, Lucas is black, as are some other town residents. Rather, I mean it in cultural terms. No one in the town listens to hip-hop, funk, or R&B, just rock and country. Aside from this season two's California transplants, no one seems to come from anywhere except Hawkins. There are no immigrants. There doesn't even appear to be a Chinese restaurant.

I also recognize this aspect of Hawkins from my own childhood, when we had to drive to the city for decent Chinese, or to the big city for Thai. That started to change in the '90s, when the area grew more diverse. In 1983, it wasn't very diverse at all. As part of a multilingual household and with an immigrant mother, I was basically the diversity.

This is not something I'm nostalgic for. Even at a young age, I found the hegemony of the monoculture oppressive. The '90s felt like an awakening to the world, with all the promise that entails. I am decidedly not nostalgic for the days when everyone died where they were born.

But I'm sure other people are. In 2016, pundits spoke at length about economic anxieties related to uneven globalization, but surveys have shown that more people have what you might call cultural

anxieties. In extreme form, these manifest as racism, xenophobia, and other exclusionary ideas that divide people into categories and then rank them by acceptability. More often, though, it isn't so much about accepting people from other backgrounds as accepting other cultural practices as valid and normal. It is possible, from this view, to accept individual people who look different as long as they don't act different. As long as they don't challenge the hegemony of the monoculture.

It would not surprise me to find out that some people are attracted to this element of Hawkins, Indiana, and more specifically, its portrayal of a world before multiculturalism and a time when the myth of strict assimilation still ruled supreme. Hawkins, one could argue, is a utopia for the culturally anxious, a place where the few non-white residents are perfectly comfortable within the monoculture, which in turn makes everyone perfectly comfortable with them. Put another way, Hawkins is exactly what people mean when they use "I don't see color." It means, "I don't want to think about difference."

I don't fault the Duffer Brothers for portraying Hawkins this way. Not everything has to center race, and I appreciate the fact that Lucas is treated as just another kid by everyone in the town. But as I examine my own feelings for this show, and for the place and time it portrays, I have to be honest about what I'm looking at, and how that makes me feel. **Stranger Things** is portraying my own lost world accurately, but there are things you lose and wish you could get back, and other things that are better left in the past.

The Lost World of Personhood Beyond Politics

Yet there are plenty of things I do wish we could go back to. Among those, the days when political identities were not so much a defining feature of your personhood as an element of color. Now, politics have always mattered, as have political disagreements. I remember the strong differences of opinion in the

'80s: on welfare and taxes, on nuclear weapons and the threat of mutually assured destruction, and so forth. But life was not as polarized as it is now. My dad and my friend's dad used to joke on election day that they were canceling out each other's votes. Can you imagine that now – not only saying it, but saying it to a friend and both of you thinking it's funny?

The shift in attitudes is widespread. As Pew noted in a 2014 report:

> The overall share of Americans who express consistently conservative or consistently liberal opinions has doubled over the past two decades from 10% to 21%. And ideological thinking is now much more closely aligned with partisanship than in the past. As a result, ideological overlap between the two parties has diminished: Today, 92% of Republicans are to the right of the median Democrat, and 94% of Democrats are to the left of the median Republican.

> Partisan animosity has increased substantially over the same period. In each party, the share with a highly negative view of the opposing party has more than doubled since 1994. Most of these intense partisans believe the opposing party's policies "are so misguided that they threaten the nation's well-being."

The causes of this effect are multiple. Partisan gerrymandering has disincentivized median voter strategies, while unlimited campaign financing means politicians are more beholden to the wishes of individual donors than their districts. Concurrently, the decline of the newspaper and rise of both shrill partisan media and social media all contribute to the emergence of parallel echo chambers, which generate internal solidarity and views of the other as intrinsically threatening. What political polarization has done, then, is transform every political disagreement into a zero-sum game, when in past days it might not have been treated as such.

You might be wondering where I'm going with all this; Hawkins, after all, is not a political world. In the series, the only political markers in the town are a solitary Reagan/Bush '84 sign on Mike's yard, as well as

his father's bland statement to the men in black, "we're all patriots here." But that's exactly the point. We know very little about anyone's politics – no one even talks about it. So instead, we form our opinions on the goodness of people through other means. And that's when it struck me: can you imagine deciding whether you think someone is a good person or not without knowing their political worldview? This was possible at one time, but it feels weird and alien now.

Some issues bely compromise – of that there can be no doubt. But today, it often feels like everyone is fighting everyone on everything and are so hideously polarized that they can't even think of the other side as equally human. Hawkins provides a comforting antidote to that paradigm, a glimpse back to a moment when people weren't as likely to other the political other. We don't know who Hopper or Joyce vote for; all we know is that they do right by people.

The Lost World of Childhood

Most strikingly, **Stranger Things** captures the freedom accorded to children in days past, and the lack of freedom accorded them today.

I'm a parent now, and I'm clear-eyed about of how different it is to raise a child now compared to when I was a kid. Some things have improved – there's much more awareness of bullying, for example, and parents (dads especially) are a lot more involved in day-to-day child rearing than they once were. And, as mentioned above, I see immense value in exposing children to different cultures – something much easier to do now

than before, especially if you live in a Hawkins. But I do lament the fact that my kids don't have the freedom I had as a child. The freedom to roam, explore and learn by doing.

Partly that's because I no longer live in a Hawkins. Since college, I've chosen to live in big cities. I've chosen that path on purpose; I find them more stimulating and exciting. But big cities come with crime and traffic, and their populations are transient. There is more to worry about, and fewer people around who you can trust implicitly. It is not possible to simply let your kid roam free at a young age the way you can in a small town. If you did, someone might even report you to the police.

But it's also cultural – not in the sense of ethnic or religious culture, but the prevalent culture of the moment. The zeitgeist. In many countries, the US included, the lives of children are increasingly structured. As journalist Hanna Rosin writes:

> I used to puzzle over a particular statistic that routinely comes up in articles about time use: even though women work vastly more hours now than they did in the 1970s, mothers — and fathers — of all income levels spend much more time with their children than they used to. This seemed impossible to me until recently, when I began to think about my own life. My mother didn't work all that much when I was younger, but she didn't spend vast amounts of time with me, either. She didn't arrange my playdates or drive me to swimming lessons or introduce me to cool music she liked. On weekdays after school she just expected me to show up for dinner; on weekends I barely saw her at all. I, on the other hand, might easily spend every waking Saturday hour with one if not all three of my children, taking one to a soccer game, the second to a theater program, the third to a friend's house, or just hanging out with them at home. When my daughter was about 10, my husband suddenly realized that in her whole life, she had probably not spent more than 10 minutes unsupervised by an adult. Not 10 minutes in 10 years.

It's hard to absorb how much childhood norms have shifted in just one generation. Actions that would have been considered paranoid in the '70s — walking third-graders to school, forbidding your kid to play ball in the street, going down the slide with your child in your lap — are now routine. In fact, they are the markers of good, responsible parenting. One very thorough study of "children's independent mobility," conducted in urban, suburban, and rural neighborhoods in the U.K., shows that in 1971, 80 percent of third-graders walked to school alone. By 1990, that measure had dropped to 9 percent, and now it's even lower. When you ask parents why they are more protective than their parents were, they might answer that the world is more dangerous than it was when they were growing up. But this isn't true, or at least not in the way that we think. For example, parents now routinely tell their children never to talk to strangers, even though all available evidence suggests that children have about the same (very slim) chance of being abducted by a stranger as they did a generation ago. Maybe the real question is, how did these fears come to have such a hold over us? And what have our children lost — and gained — as we've succumbed to them?

Rosin presents a theory of how this happened: the largely irrational fear of child abduction, combined with well-intentioned attempts to reduce the risks children face in their daily lives (for example, a largely ineffective campaign to reduce playground accidents). The end result is a safer, though in some ways less stimulating, environment. Hawkins, by contrast, is a place where kids still roam free and only go home for meals. In so doing, it shines a light on all our misgivings with overprotective helicopter parenting in 2017.

You may or may not buy Rosin's argument; I do, at least in the abstract. I see my own childhood in a place like Hawkins and lament that my kids may never experience those endless days spent on bikes, exploring in the woods or climbing around house construction sites. All done as a matter of course, of course – as long as we were home for dinner. But in practice, I

find it very hard to let go in that way. Clearly, so does Rosin, and I assume this is true for many parents who grew up the way I did but now find the world changed around them. We appreciate the things that have changed for the better, but we mourn the loss of things we once took for granted. And so, we look through the window into the lost world of Hawkins, Indiana, a place we can see but not touch.

Endless '80s

Stranger Things exemplifies the purposive dimensions of '80s nostalgia in 2017. But how long can it last? By all rights, it shouldn't have lasted this long. Only, rather than fade away, it appears to have metastasized.

The fact is, we are no longer locked into pop culture moments the way we once were. Recall that the '80s themselves were nostalgic for both the '50s and '60s, embodied in everything from The Stray Cats to **The Wonder Years**. **Stranger Things** is, itself, an homage to the way these earlier decades were reinterpreted in the '80s, through the form of the late '50s/early '60s monster movie that's really about fear of communism or McCarthyism. And then there's Steve's haircut…

The genius of the '80s was to mash its nostalgias up with a heady dose of futurism and neon. At a time when the future is scary as shit, the dead futures of past times can be comforting, even when they themselves are re-imaginings of even older futures.

Meanwhile, the microgenrefication of music and other entertainment media mean that popular culture can sustain all nostalgias at any given moment. Plus there's the fact that a lot of retro stuff is actually pretty creative. Synthwave, for example: this isn't '80s music made today, but rather a modern style of music that draws as much on incidental soundtrack and corporate music as it does on pop or indie stuff.

Or compare the pastiche of references in **Stranger Things** to those in Ernest Cline's 2011 novel **Ready Player One**. The references never overwhelm the narrative in **Stranger Things**, nor are they ever made explicit. In other words, if you haven't seen **ET**, **Poltergeist**, or **Aliens**, you won't know the winks and nudges are there. Rather, they are window dressing on what is, at its center, a compelling human drama. **Ready Player One**, by contrast, hits you over the head with its unending stream of '80s references – delivered through a series of encyclopedia-style infodumps that are as jarring as they are unsubtle. Now, I realize that **Ready Player One** has its legion of fans; but I've tried to read it twice and found myself unable to suspend disbelief. With **Stranger Things**, by contrast, I practically live in Hawkins for each 45-minute episode.

All this is a longwinded way of saying that, while it's possible that '80s nostalgia will recede from popular view, I don't see it going away. Not as long as we still dream of lost worlds.

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

A #BLACKSPECFIC 2016 REPORT RESPONSE
CHARLES

The numbers are in. In case you haven't checked them out, definitely go and read the report by Cecily Kane over at **Fireside Fiction**. The response pieces are also amazing and really help to flesh out the issues. In my opinion, it's all required reading if you care at all about speculative short fiction. For what follows here, it's more my own (quite white) opinions and observations on the report and the state of speculative short fiction. Needless to say, the numbers themselves continue to be rather awful, if slightly up from last year. But there's something of a story being told underneath just the numbers, and if anything, it makes the report even more worrisome.

The report takes a snapshot of the last two years of original short story publications from 24 different (mostly) pro-paying markets. Abyss and Apex is something of an outlier in that respect in that it pays pro for flash fiction and less for anything longer. Technically **The Book Smugglers** also falls into this category, though it pays pro to a higher word count. Of perhaps more interest is to look at the age of the publications. Most of these publications, as pro-level markets, have been around a while. But there are some that are on the young side, having launched since the beginning of 2015/late 2014. These include: **The Book Smugglers**, **Mothership Zeta**, **Shattered Prism**, **Terraform**, and **Uncanny**. **Fireside** itself isn't too much older, and **Diabolical Plots** is another fairly new fiction venue. But let's look first at those first five. Of them, **The Book Smugglers** has the second least amount of stories out of any publication on the list, and no stories by black writers. **Shattered Prism** has the least amount of stories, and a fairly good percentage, but really only one story by a black writer. **Mothership Zeta** has more stories out, and one of the better

percentages on the list. Similarly, both **Terraform** and **Uncanny** put out a fair amount of stories and maintain a percentage well above the average. So at first blush, the young blood's doing pretty good, yeah?

Okay, so the bad news. **Shattered Prism** hasn't had an update since last year and looks pretty done (though hey, it could be resurrected). **Mothership Zeta** is on permanent hiatus. And **Terraform** hasn't put out new fiction content since March. Taking those three publications out of the mix might not seem like much, but they actually represent ~20% of the stories by black writers over the last two years. Not included on the list was **Fantastic Stories of the Imagination**, which I imagine would have stacked up pretty well, actually (at least in the context of the list...it looks like they published at least 2 stories by black writers between 2015-2016). They, too, have closed. Given that pretty much all of these publications were pulling the averages up, their loss to the field is more troubling than just losing some quality publications. I don't think this is a fluke, either. The younger publications seem to have more invested in reaching toward justice, perhaps at the expense of solvency, but whatever the reason, there was more reason to trust those publications based on their track record. What remains is... well, even bleaker than what we had a year ago.

But that's probably just me doom-singing, right? Well, I want to touch on something else briefly. Of the newer publications, only one averaged publishing over fifty stories a year (**Terraform**). There are eight other publications that put out at least that much: **Analog, Asimov's, Beneath Ceaseless Skies, Clarkesworld, Daily Science Fiction, Fantasy and Science Fiction, Lightspeed**, and **Nature (Futures)**. Of those, all but **Clarkesworld, Daily Science Fiction**, and **Lightspeed** have published more than one story by a black writer in the last two years. Only **Lightspeed** has published more than five. Let that sink in. These are the largest venues by sheer quantity of stories published. And they are among the worst statistically and numerically. This points to a problem at the heart of

speculative short fiction. At the top. So...what?

Well, it's not like the field is doing absolutely nothing about this. But what is it doing? To me, it looks like venues are going a number of routes, but they seem to fall into certain categories. For publications like **Fantastic Stories** and **Apex**, there has been a push to include more issues with guest editors. **Fireside** has also done this. This has certainly helped publications like **Lightspeed**, and I'm sure that it will help with Apex's numbers come 2017. I often hear that this is Not Good, that special issues are just gimmicks that don't actually help get at the root of the problem. My reaction to that is to say there is likely no better way for entrenched publications to help their numbers than to have a special issue replace a regular issue. Like **Apex** and **Lightspeed**, their guest-edited issues were also regular issues. If more publications did likewise, and managed to replace one month (or one issue) of "regular" content with the same amount of guest-edited content, then from a strictly numbers standpoint, there would a huge improvement. Of course, the numbers are very important. "But it doesn't do enough" I hear when this comes up. No, but you know what, it does get people paid. It does give writers publication credits. It does get their stories in front of eyes. It's valid. As someone who has been in a special issue in this sense, it helps.

But what else can publications do? Well, if guest editors aren't a good option, then bringing on permanent editors who have a better track record of publishing widely would be even better. I'm not going to say it's the only reason for it, but **The Dark** seems to be publishing a bit more widely since restructuring at the top. There have been editorial shifts at a number of publications, and I'm curious to see what **Strange Horizons'** numbers will be next year, and Fireside has recently made a shift as well. How those moves will pan out is anyone's guess right now, but changing things at the top seems to have much more an impact than, say, adding first readers. Not that having a representative group of first readers is a bad thing.

The other thing that will be interesting to watch is what new publications crop up to take the place of those that have shuttered. I know that people will point at **Fiyah** and **Anathema** (and perhaps **Arsenika** and **Mithila Review**) to say that the field is taking steps to change. But...none of those publications will qualify for the report. Having solid semi-pro and token markets is vital, don't get me wrong. Omenana is still going strong, but it doesn't excuse the core, SFWA-qualifying markets and their failure to make progress in this area. Even if the report looks at newer pro-level markets like **Gamut**, **Liminal Stories**, **Persistent Visions**, and **Orthogonal** (if all of those publications are even around in a year), there's simply no way for a handful of publications putting out 20-40 stories to have enough of an impact on the field to really drive change. Not that even that isn't necessary. But looking to new publications that likely won't last more than a few years to patch the holes in a field where the largest and most secure publications are doing nothing to help is only continuing the marginalization that led to the problem in the first place.

But what can we do? As readers. As fans.

I hesitate to say we need to drop our support of those publications that are awful with their stats. Not, mind you, because I think those publications are doing a good job. But because I know that there are enough people that Do. Not. Care. that if people who cared started dropping their subscriptions, the publications hurt most would likely be those already trying to do better. We'd lose the 4%-6% publications (because they are more vulnerable) while the >2% publications would continue on. The answer to problems is not only to break away and form our own, separate thing. It's part of the answer, certainly. But the other part is to be loud. You know how people are calling and writing in to their politicians? Well, letters to the editor are a long tradition in publishing. Maybe send off a (polite, non-harassing) email asking if the editors have seen the #BlackSpecFic report. Most publications have contact info. Maybe ask if they have

strategies for doing better. Maybe ask for them to make a statement. The change, I believe, has to come from within. Which means that those at the top now have to feel the pressure to change. To do better. They have to be told that their readers want more stories by black writers. Because otherwise they can pretend they just didn't know. So take away that willful ignorance. Ask questions. Check to see how the publications allow feedback. Contact them.

Otherwise, do try to support good actors. Do try to reward publications for taking risks and striving to do better. I know that money is not unlimited. It's not the case that we can just grow a better, bigger field out of all that extra cash we just have lying about. We do have to change what's here already, what's entrenched. But we can help publications that are trying to continue their work. So keep informed, and do what you can. Subscribe, or donate to fund raisers, or write reviews, or share links. Try to widen cracks in the walls keeping marginalized writers out of SFF. And listen. The #BlackSpecFic content that Fireside is releasing is a great place to start. But seek out more. Educate yourself. And hopefully we won't be back every year with the same numbers and the same issues.

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

WESTWORLD: PIANOS, PLAYERS, AND MURDER
DEAN

If you want to name great things about **Westworld**, you can start pretty much anywhere. The writing, acting, plot, set design – the list goes on and on. It is rich with small details, the kind of details which are more rewarding with repeat viewings – a feat, in and of itself, given the cyclical nature of the timeline within **Westworld** itself. And the best detail is one we see quickly, and often, and likely, never even notice it.

The first time we see it is in the main titles, the skeleton playing the piano. But in the course of the titles, we are informed by that very instrument of what is in store, as the fingers lift off the keys, yet the keys play on. The player piano is an easily overlooked detail, yet it shows up at some of the most important moments in the entire series.

NOTE: from here on out, I assume you have watched all of Westworld. There will be no restraint on spoilers. You have been warned.

Player pianos are the sort of relic which belong in a place like Westworld – their use is limited, serving no real function outside of that era. We have all manner of devices that will play music for us now, and we needn't rely on a bulky, mechanical piece of furniture, so its niche existed in a narrow slice of history just like, say, an Old West brothel.

This is where we find the player piano within **Westworld**, plinking away amidst the mayhem of tourists wreaking havoc. It's drawn some notoriety for the songs it plays – covers of "No Surprises" (Radiohead) and "Black Hole Sun" (Soundgarden). These are thematically relevant to the show, certainly, but hardly add immense gravitas on their own.

What does, however, is how the songs are played – or, rather, not played, since that is the whole point of the piano. Aside from the main titles, we don't

see it played by anyone. We see the cylinder turning, playing the notes it is programmed to play. And when – when – we see it is what really matters.

The first two times in the first episode – "The Original" – we enter Mariposa's, we don't even see the piano. But later, as some-thing is off with Maeve, we see the cylinder before she comes downstairs. In E02 "Chestnut," we see more: the cylinder and the keys being depressed all by themselves. We pan out as Maeve says "You can hear it, can't you?" "No Surprises" here, by itself, would be one thing. But the phantom keys, Maeve's cryptic words, and the fact that the surprises have only begun makes it far more significant.

In 04, "Dissonance Theory" we get a slow pan across the working of the still-unattended piano before cutting to Maeve, lost in thought. This was the point in the show that it really grabbed me how much the player piano is like the Hosts.

They are there to appear as if they are real – have real reactions – but they aren't. They gloss over references to the "real" world, trips, visitors, and the like. Just like the piano, they are programmed. Until the hosts begin to play themselves, as the piano has done all along.

For all the brilliance in this show, the small cues it gives us, like the piano, are my favorite. In 05, "Contrapasso," when the Man in Black and Ford meet, Ford simply snaps his fingers and the piano starts playing, showing he is still in total control of the situation. Throughout the series, we see more of the piano the more the Hosts learn. We hear it up close in 08, "Trace Decay," hear the poor quality of the dingy piano.

There is also, significantly, one in Ford's office – always with a host seated at it, ostensibly playing it.

But, of course, he isn't. Or perhaps, he actually is, but is programmed to do so. We see this in 03, "The Stray." This time, the piece is on the nose – "Reverie" by Claude Debussy, the significance of which is im-possible to miss. But we hear a string version in 06 as Bernard remembers his son – a true reverie. We finally hear a full piano version in the finale, behind Delores' narration, as we witness her creation.

And then we hear it, finally, as Arnold kills himself, playing over a gramophone this time, telling us it was Charlie's favorite, and repeats yet another phrase we have heard before – "these violent delights have violent ends." It sums up the show in so many ways, beyond the base violence which is its facade. **Westworld** is a story about storytelling about stories – that is a hard story to tell…and tell well. It adds another layer of difficulty, by that very cyclical nature, like the rotating cylinders used in the player pianos. The same day is played over and over, with only sensitivity to initial conditions (or more commonly, "the butterfly effect") to change what happens. This means we see and hear the same thing over and over again. But **Westworld** embraces that challenge, that restriction, and uses it to its advantage, because we don't just see and hear the same things over and over again in the park, we hear phrases repeated outside it, about it, about the Hosts and about humans. Their violent delights do indeed have violent ends.

The piano doesn't murder the player if it doesn't like the music, as Ford says. Season 2 – perhaps – will reveal if the Hosts can change the tune, or if they con-tinue being played – even if no one is sitting before the keys.

Dean is the author of the 3024AD series of science fic-tion stories (which should be on YOUR summer reading list). 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~~ writing, he can be found watching or playing sports, or in his natural habitat of a bookstore.

THURSDAY MORNING SUPERHERO
MIKE

I'm not sure if you've heard the big news this week, but Brian Michael Bendis signed an exclusive multi-year deal with DC. A staple for various Marvel titles since 2000, Bendis' impact on the Marvel universe is immense. He helped launch the MAX imprint and put Jessica Jones in the spotlight, and was one of my favorite authors for **Daredevil** and others. DC sales have lagged behind Marvel in recent months, so the move isn't too shocking. I feel that DC is still figuring out where to go after the New 52, Rebirth, and the issues on the big screen (**Wonder Woman** is the ex-ception). Congratulations are in order for Mr. Bendis. DC landed a great talent and I am curious to see the impact.

Pick of the Week:
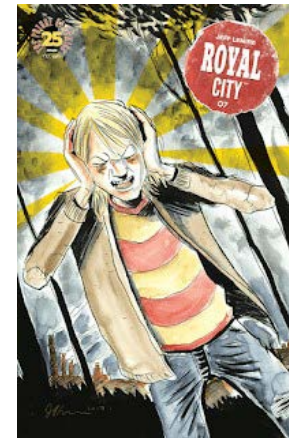
Royal City #7 - It bears repeating, but this series hearkens back to older Jeff Lemire titles **Sweet Tooth** and **Essex County**. **Essex County** even gets a nod on the first page of this issue, and it brought a huge smile to my face. Lemire gives us a sneak peak back to when Tommy was still living. We learn that he has some irregular patterns in his brain, and we are given some hints as to why some of the other characters are currently hearing him over the radio waves. There is still a lot to unpack in this series, but it is one of the rare series where all of the characters are real and I am able to connect with each one. Lemire excels at writing parental and spousal relationships, and this series reflects that. Definitely a

phenomenal series that would be a good gateway book to bring in non-comic book readers. Really breaks the mold in terms of what normally graces the pages of a comic book.

The Rest:
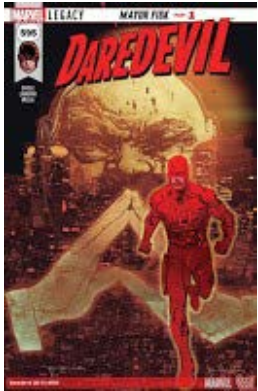
Daredevil #595 - Kingpin has been elected Mayor, and Daredevil is not too happy. One of Mayor Fisk's first tasks is to restrict the authority of the masked vigilantes roaming the streets. This is part of the Marvel Legacy series, and it oozes the classic tension that exists between legal authority and superheros. Despite Murdock successfully arguing his case in front of the Supreme Court, Fisk is not backing down and is using his resources to build up cases against Daredevil and his buddies. Interesting start to a new arc and a definite throw-back that fits well with the legacy framework.
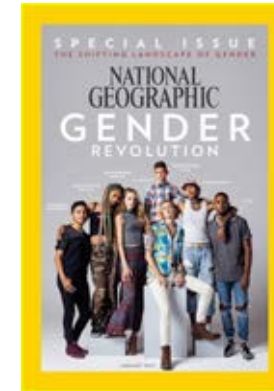
Birthright #28 - Is Joshua Williamson pulling a fast one on us? After painting a pretty one-sided picture of Lore – the evil overlord who Mikey is trying to save Terrenos from – he just healed his greatest foe and is shows us his vision of peace in Terrenos. This was a twist I didn't see coming, and I am very interested to see how this pans out over the next two issues in this arc. It seems that there is a lot more to this story than I initially thought. It has been an up-and-down ride for me personally, but I definitely

want to wrap up this arc before making my decision to continue the series. Very interesting development this week.

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

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC GENDER REVOLUTION
TIA

Gender nonconformity is the major civil rights movement of our time. As members of this one and leaders of the next generation, it is so important to become educated on the rapid and radical shifts in societal thinking, regardless of our personal opinions or beliefs. **National Geographic**, realizing this, developed a special issue to look at cultural, social, biological and personal aspects of gender. Now, as unprecedented (IMO) as this is, it is important to remember that just because a new movement begins, doesn't mean the old fights are over. Take the cover of the issue, for example. It identifies individuals in a range of gender identities, but somehow neglects to include a female. I am not the first to point this out, and you can read a deconstruction of this and the alternate cover here.

I originally thought this issue would be devoted primarily to developing an understanding of the transgender community. However, it addresses gender across the spectrum, which is even more pressing, since shifts in the gender norms effect everyone, not just those in specific communities. The issue opens with a short Q&A with writer and activist Gloria Steinem and author, activist, and tech executive Sheryl Sandberg. I found Sandberg's commentary more poignant than Steinem's because it was less existential and more direct, but both had great things to say. The next section of the magazine is a glossary of gender-related terms, developed in consultation with scholars of the subject. This is a great and informative section that gives a good background on the foundation of the

movement. An even more important section follows, called Helping Families Talk About Gender, which is a must-read for anyone who interacts with children. I was really excited to read about Girls, Boys, and Gendered Toys, but this section takes up less than one half of one page, and only barely touches on issues like that fact that "girls" puzzles have fewer pieces and the girl-oriented product line **Lego Friends** focuses on playacting, not construction. I think this is a really important issue and I'm disappointed to see it given so little space in this Special Edition.

National Geographic Gender Revolution continues on to look at how gender is defined by children and for children. A good excerpt from this section can be found here. The magazine also interviews several nine-year-olds to find out how they think their lives might be different if they were a boy or girl. The answers are often disheartening, but not at all surprising. We also get a wonderful(ly depressing) infographic on the gender gap index (determined by health, education, economics, and politics) across the world, where we see that there is not one country where females are even close to reaching equality with males. The next 25 pages focus on Rethinking Gender, primarily among adolescents. This is also a terrific read for parents or anyone who interacts with children, because it fosters understanding of how children and adolescents are defining their gender identity in today's society, where terms like gender nonconforming are replacing terms like tomboy, and how to help children and adolescents navigate this already confusing time in their lives, when they are expected to balance personal feelings with societal pressure.

We next get an exposition on defining masculinity and then a rather lackluster section on females. Tucked away at the end of the magazine, the section devoted to women takes up 50 pages, 30 of which are photographs. Now, this is more space given to females than males, but the discourse on masculinity, particularly men in western society, is much more nuanced. The American Girl section is given six pages of text, all

six of which are devoted to body image. In highlighting body image as the most important cultural issue among females in today's Western society, **National Geographic** is essentially still contributing to the problem by implying that body image is the only thing important to women. Of course, body image is an important issue that girls in the US and other Western cultures face, but it is not by any means the only one. There is no analysis of other primary female gender-related issues in today's society – like wages, education, politics, workplace dynamics, etc. – except for the aforementioned infographic and another pictorial noting international statistics and titled: It's Hard to Be Female, but there is no exposition on what that actually means.

Overall, I commend **National Geographic** for devoting an entire issue of their iconic magazine to this important discourse. I wasn't able to find any good statistics on their reader demographic, but I presume there were more than a few subscribers who were shocked to see this in their mailbox. I hope they read it, and honestly, I hope you read it to. As I've said numerous times, many sections of this edition are must-reads for anyone who interacts with children, as the cultural landscape is shifting so rapidly in terms of defining gender. I think it's a great thing, personally, I just hope that the existing gender problems don't become overlooked as we expand into a new era. However, if we can achieve a gender non-binary society, these gender-based differences should cease to exist all together.

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 9/10

Bonuses: +1 just for creating this special edition, +1 for examining gender throughout the spectrum

Penalties: -1 for leaving a female off the cover, -1 for not further exploring the influence of gendered toys on children, -1 for reducing the primary discussion on

female gender in western society to body image

Nerd Coefficient: 8/10 "well worth your time and attention" primarily because it exists, but don't forget about its flaws

PS's: National Geographic provides a downloadable discussion guide for parents and teachers if you are interested in more information. There will be an accompanying TV program airing on Feb 6 at 8/7c on the National Geographic Channel. You can see a sneak peak here.

Posted by Tia

MASS EFFECT: ANDROMEDA
BRIAN

A Distant Star

Regardless of how well or poorly you personally received the ending of the original **Mass Effect** trilogy, following those games with a non-reboot, non-sequel game in the same universe is going to be a tall order for anyone. **Mass Effect: Andromeda** (as reported by Kotaku) had a difficult development, and it shows. But the biggest factor for whether or not you'll get some enjoyment out of this game can be boiled down to a single question: what did you think of **Dragon Age: Inquisition**?

In the non-reboot, non-sequel **Mass Effect: Andromeda**, you're a pilgrim, a passenger onboard the human ark sent to colonize the distant Andromeda galaxy. The trip takes 600 years of cryo-sleep, and everything goes wrong when you finally wake up. A coral-like space growth called The Scourge inhibits space travel and wrecks ships. The Nexus, a space station sent ahead of the arks, is barely functional and none of the other species' arks have arrived. Worst of all, none of the "golden worlds" surveyed in advance of the voyage are suitable for colonization. Something horrible happened over the 600-year trip.

The Mass Effect and **Dragon Age** series are linked by more than just having a common developer. They were largely developed in parallel, and they borrowed gameplay mechanics from each other on numerous occasions. When **Dragon Age 2** came out and it felt like **Dragon Age** shoehorned into **Mass Effect**, with a greater focus on a smaller-scope story and action over tactical combat, it was a disappointment to me. But the problems I had with that game were mechanical. Enemies warped in from thin air (with no particular in-game reason), and it overly reused game environments.

Mass Effect: Andromeda feels like **Mass Effect** shoehorned into **Dragon Age: Inquisition**. This time around, I'm not that mad about it. I loved **Dragon Age: Inquisition**, despite the game having too many collect-a-thon quests, and too many fetch quests that added nothing to the game. This one suffers from the same problems, but the gameplay loop itself is enjoyable. The combat in the **Mass Effect** series has continued to build upon itself and become more fluid over the stop-and-pop **Gears of War**-esque combat of the original **Mass Effect.** Planetary exploration is done with the Nomad, a six-wheeled vehicle that's far more fun to drive than the Mako. Here's a piece of advice that carries over from **Dragon Age: Inquisition**: if something isn't a core quest, or a companion quest, and it doesn't interest you from the start, don't bother doing it. There are tons of quests that are meaningless. Do what seems like fun, unless you're a completionist and a masochist.

What hurts **Andromeda** is that it doesn't take the conceit of being a different galaxy, 600 years into the future far enough. It adds a couple of new Andromedan species of sentient aliens, but their designs aren't exactly inspired, and it brings with it the core species from the original series, and none of the cool edge species. Of course, there are going to be Salarians, Turians, and Asari, but we've gone to a different galaxy. There should be more than two sentient species here when the Milky Way had handfuls of aliens. It even leans too hard on an ancient, technologically advanced species that influences the present.

Playing this game months after release has turned out to be the best way to experience it. Early reviews noted a plague of technical issues within the game. I saw none of that. The chief complaint was that faces were poorly or weirdly animated. I never noticed anything particularly out of place.

Over the course of 53 hours, I enjoyed my time with **Mass Effect: Andromeda**. While I'm not inclined to buy DLC, I would look forward to a second game in this series. **Mass Effect: Andromeda** has more in common with the first game of the original trilogy than the other two, and that was my personal favorite of the three. It's a more optimistic game, even if it suffers from borrowing too heavily from the original trilogy and **Dragon Age: Inquisition**. It's hard for me to say whether or not a newcomer to this series of games would enjoy Andromeda more without playing the original trilogy, but it's at least a competent game.

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 6/10

Bonuses: +1 Eschews grimdark and dread for optimism and a brighter future

Penalties: -1 Feels too much like a Mass Effect side story

Nerd Coefficient: 6/10 (still enjoyable, but the flaws are hard to ignore)

*Posted by brian – sci-fi/fantasy/video game dork and contributor since 2014*

6 BOOKS WITH MATT WALLACE
JOE

*Matt Wallace is the author of T**he Next Fix**, **The Failed Cities**, the novella series **Slingers**, a lucha-libre buddy-cop novella called **Rencor: Life in Grudge City**, and the absurdly good **Sin du Jour** novella series from Tor.com Publishing.*

Today he shares his 6 books with us...

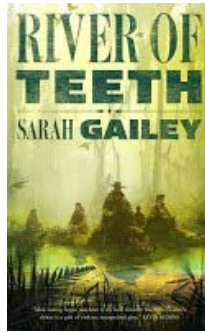**1. What book are you currently reading?**
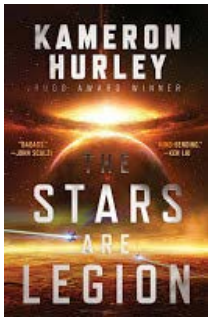
I'm in the middle of **The Stars Are Legion** by Kameron Hurley, which I already think is her best work to-date. It's exciting as hell watching an author fully become themselves in a novel, and that's what **Legion** is to me. I adore Hurley's **Bel Dame Apocrypha** series and her **Worldbreaker Saga**, and she did a lot of striking and original stuff with both, but they're still anchored in the familiar waters of their genres. **Legion** reads like the next level of all of that, Hurley writing exactly who and how and what she wants to write without any concern for what's come before in the field. It feels free and new and horrifying and I fucking love it.

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

Tor.com just announced Brooke Bolander's first book, **The Only Harmless Great Thing**. I'm super stoked for that. I think Brooke is one of the freshest and most unique voices out there right now, but she produces at a very slow pace (a lot of great writers did and do). Every story is a straight-up iconoclastic gem, but you're immediately like, "MORE!" So a whole book of hers, even if it's a short one, is like discovering gold. I can't wait. I'm also eager to read **River of Teeth** by Sarah Gailey, who is another author coming at SFF like a coked-up spider monkey from angles you've never seen before. The next novella in Cassandra Khaw's Persons Non Grata series, **A Song for Quiet**. The first novella, **Hammers on Bone**, was one of my favorites last year. **Null States**, the sequel to Malka Older's **Infomocracy**, which I thought was one of the best and smartest novels of 2016. There's just so much amazing shit out there right now in SFF. We should all be making so much more money than we do.

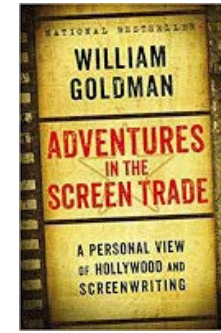**3. Is there a book you're currently itching to re-read?**
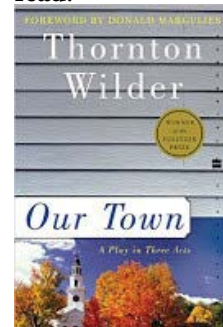
I kind of want to re-read **Our Town**, which is obviously a play, but who the hell has time to go to an actual physical theater? But I've been thinking a lot lately about being present. Time just seems to evaporate. My fiancée and I are both so busy with our careers and what free time we have is spent thinking about and planning for the future that we really have to work to be in the moment and enjoy and experience what's happening right now. And being present is obviously one of the big themes in **Our Town**. I've also always found something wonderfully sinister about the Stage Manager. I end up writing a lot of weird fanfic about him in my head.

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

When I was a young punk dreaming of becoming a screenwriter, I read William Goldman's **Adventures in the Screen Trade** book religiously. I thought he was the guy that had it all figured out and the screenwriter I wanted to be (after all, he's responsible for one of the definitive statements about the movie business, "Nobody knows nothin'."). When I got older, started actually working in the entertainment industry, and became a little more aware, I re-read Goldman's books and realized that while he is clearly a very nice, extremely talented guy, he's also, professionally, an incredibly timid, even cowardly star-fucker and not at all who I want to be. I'm much more a **Devil's Guide to Hollywood** by Joe Eszterhas screenwriter now. It's also still one of my favorite all-time novels, but **Dune** has not aged well. Both its style and a lot of its tropes have become bracingly difficult for me. But it's still an epic novel in which the political, economic, ecological, and spiritual fate of the entire known Universe is decided in a knife fight. I mean, c'mon.

5. What's one book, which you read as a child or a young adult, that has had a lasting influence on your writing?
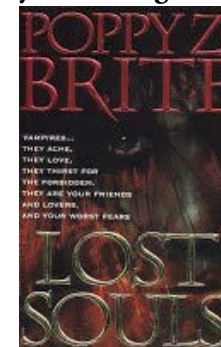
I read **Lost Souls** by Billy Martin (writing then as Poppy Z. Brite) when I was 13 or 14, and it completely changed my perception of prose writing. I wanted to create sights, sounds, and smells that practically dripped off the page the way he did. I wanted to describe my worlds with the same kind of vivid language. And the characters and their relationships just broke my fucking heart. I think I grew up a lot, as a person and as a writer, when I read that book.

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

My latest is **Idle Ingredients**. It's the fourth book in my **Sin du Jour** novella series about a catering company in Long Island City that plans and executes events for the world of the supernatural co-existing with our own. It's funny, foodie, and fucked up, full of chefs and mercenaries and magic and monsters. Each book is named for and shot through with the theme of a deadly sin, and each story centers around an event the crew is hired to cater. The first book, **Envy of Angels**, had them tasked with preparing an angel for a demon banquet and having to scramble to avoid killing and serving said angel. The second book saw them planning a royal Goblin wedding that goes horribly awry. There's also a big overarching plot that unfolds throughout the series in true serial fashion that changes all of their lives and the company forever. I'm really proud of the series and I'm really lovin' writing it. We've got three more books coming after Idle Ingredients (seven deadly sins, seven books). The next one, **Greedy Pigs**, which is probably the most timely and topical of the series, drops May 16th.

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

TABLETOP PILE OF SHAME: NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION UPDATE
MIKE

Moving forward, I need to make all of my New Year's Resolutions board game-related. One of my resolutions this year was to play 10 games from my pile of shame and I am happy to report that I am writing my third entry in this series and have crossed the half-way point!

In my first entry, I played **Abyss** and **Colt Express**, my second entry featured **Carrotia** and **Codenames**, and I am pleased to report that my third entry features **Just Desserts** and **Machi Koro: Bright Lights, Big City**. Hopefully I will be able to chime in soon that I have played games number seven and eight.

Machi Koro: Bright Lights, Big City by Pandasaurus Games

If you have read any of my board game-related posts, then you should be aware that my family and I are a big fan of the **Machi Koro** series. I have included it in previous holiday guides and feel that it should be on everyone's shelf. It is, in my opinion, the best gateway game on the market. About a year ago I saw that Target had an exclusive version of **Machi Koro** and was curious, but I was good with our current copy and expansions. **Bright Lights, Big City** is no longer exclusive to Target and should be available at your FLGS. Even though I never planned on picking up a new version of **Machi Koro**, I heard in various gaming groups and from some friends that this was the definitive version of **Machi Koro**. After

having a copy for a few months, I decided to give it a whirl with my nine-year-old son, and we instantly fell in love with it. It takes all of the good elements from the expansions, eliminates some of the cards that can get overpowered, and introduces some new elements to provide a quicker, more polished **Machi Koro** experience. The experience reminds me of the first time I played the base game with the Harbor expansion. **Bright Lights, Big City** randomizes what cards are available, but organizes them in a way to provide a balanced pool of cards to select from. It also introduces the third dice, which is a literal game-changer. Some people are bothered by randomization, which I feel **Machi Koro** hedged effectively from the beginning, and the Moon Tower grants you even more control. It also allows you to pretend that you are in **Dazed and Confused** and that everything is alright, alright, alright.

Just Desserts by Looney Labs

My wife got this game for Christmas and it sadly collected dust on my pile of shame for nearly six months. I had heard this was a light card game that was a good filler, and I thought that she would enjoy the dessert theme. In the game, you assume the role of a server trying to provide desserts to your guests. There are a series of guests of different suits with dietary needs, and you collect cards on your turn to try to gather the necessary ingredients to serve them up a tasty treat. There are bonuses if you have the specific dish they are looking for, and you can try to focus on one particular suit of guests or serve a variety of hungry patrons. **Just Desserts** is a good filler game that is appropriate for the entire family. I would recommend it if your family is just starting to get into the hobby or are looking for a quick game to take on the road or play during a busy game night.

ENOUGH BAD MOVIES
DEAN

Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Blockbuster

Summer blockbuster season is almost upon us, and there are some great movies on the docket. There are some...not so great movies as well, and we need to talk about those. A common refrain these days is, "No more remakes! No more sequels!" But no one is complaining about **Spider-Man: Homecoming**, are they? It looks like a good movie. At the same time, no one asked for another **Transformers** movie, yet there it is, in all its explodey glory, trotting out the same crap Michael Bay has since Bruckheimer let him off the leash.

If you've read any of my missives on this site before, you know that I find mediocrity more a crime than simply being bad. There are a lot of bad movies out there that tried. Ed Wood may have made terrible movies – and terrible they are – but he tried. It drives me bonkers that Michael Bay gets handed hundreds of millions of dollars to roll out (that was unintentional) Megan Fox look-alikes while junkyards mash into each other.

I just want to matter.

Then you are in the wrong franchise

This leads me to question my own hypothesis here – what is it that separates a bad movie from a good one, or from a mediocre one?

(This is the part where I realize this should be a video essay)

The first thing that a movie should do is tell a story.

That may seem an obvious statement, but if it is, a lot of people missed the obvious. What story, exactly, do any of the **Transformers** movies tell? Or any of the DC movies? **Suicide Squad** felt like six different movies spliced together into something entirely unintelligible. Compare that to, say, **Arrival**, which told a brilliant story that was, for being complex, easily understood and explained. There are a lot of aspects to making a good movie, but if it has no story, or the structure is terrible, none of them matter. All the flashy effects and A-list actors mean nothing without a skeleton for the meat to hang on.

Which ties nicely into another essential element – originality. We live in the age of reboots and sequels. For that matter, though, nearly everything is an adaptation. Sure, every bestseller with the word "Girl" in the title gets a blockbuster adaption, but **Arrival** was a story first, and so is nearly every movie. That's no crime, though – as long as something original is brought to the story. Take comics, for example. **Watchmen** was basically a shot-for-shot adaption of the comic, with a tweak to the end, yet it managed to have exactly zero substance. The current run of **Star Trek** films (of which I am a huge fan) are rehashings of old **Star Trek**, but with glitzy effects.

There are boundless options for these adaptions – especially in the era of 90's nostalgia and comic book movies. The ones that work, though, are the ones which use the format of a movie to bring a new dimension to those stories – **Spider-Man: Homecoming**, **Logan**, and **The Dark Knight** leap to mind. All draw heavily on the source material, but are not limited by it, or by simply trying to copy it. That originality and creativity is what sets them apart from the dour affairs which are, say, **Batman v Superman**, which has rich source material that it recycles into incomprehensible garbage.

"But DESR, I just want to go shut my brain off for two hours," I hear some people saying. "It's just a dumb popcorn movie." Fair enough – it is entertainment, after all. But this is like skipping a steak dinner

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

for McDonalds. It's pretty pointless and unhealthy. Jaws is responsible (largely) for the summer blockbuster, but it is still a damn good movie. What makes it a great movie? It is creative, it has stakes, and it has a ton of depth to it. It's a better way to spend a few hours being entertained than many of the interchangeable, forgettable affairs the come out every summer.

Because, let us be honest, it's about money. You and I only have so many dollars to spend going to movies, and movie studios have many many many dollars, but still only so many, to invest into making them. Where we spend our money, however, actually counts for more than where they spend theirs. The best example of this is this year's Oscar drama with **La La Land** and **Moonlight**. Now, **La La Land** was a serviceable film, but aside from being well-acted and directed, it was completely uninspiring. Sure, it had some emotional moments, but none of them were original. It fell victim to [DIGRESSION ALERT] one of my biggest directing pet peeves, and that is "paying homage" to another movie or director. Except it's not that, it's literally lifting the shot/plot point/camera move, and putting it in your movie and then the audience is all "OMG he did the same thing Spielberg did!" It's not clever, it's cheap, and it needs to stop. It's also 98% of **La La Land**. [END OF DIGRESSION ALERT].

By contrast, did you SEE **Moonlight**? Go watch it. I'll wait. Back? Yeah, that's how you make a movie. Only one of those movies is truly original, emotional, inspiring AND entertaining, and it's not the one where the white dude saves jazz.

But what drove it was money – $1.5m budget for **Moonlight**, with very little marketing. Word of mouth did most of the work. **La La Land**, on the other hand, $30m for **La La Land**, and it was marketed

and shown everywhere. It made tons of money, as one would expect – and that's the difference. **Moonlight** wasn't expected to make the money it did – but the fact that it did, that people went to see it, that word spread like wildfire around it, lead to its well-deserved Best Picture award. More than that, it will hopefully lead to more movies like it being recognized and being put forward in place of the cookie-cutter blockbusters to which we have become accustomed. It won't just happen with one movie, though. So, please, I beg of you, when you consider how to spend your movie-going money and time, spent it on something worthwhile, something meaningful, and something original.

-DESR
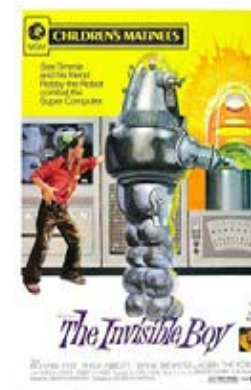
Oh...boy. Just, yep. I'm gonna leave the pun right there.

Forbidden Planet is an undisputed classic of sci-fi film. At the time it was produced, it was a tremendously expensive film, and a disproportionate amount of that budget went to pay for a single prop: Robby the Robot. That sure must've seemed like a good investment when the breakout star of the film was not sexpot Anne Francis, or strapping, not-yet-gray Leslie Nielsen, or even venerable actor-with-gravitas Walter Pidgeon. Nope, the breakout star was Robby the Robot.

And with good reason. Robby is amazing. Robby is better than Gort, and I love Gort. I don't even care. We can fight. So given the success of **Forbidden Planet** and Robby, the studio wanted a sequel, naturally. That sequel was **The Invisible Boy**. Now, **The Invisible Boy** is bonkers, so rather than write a straight review, I wanted to try something different. Here, then, is "An Imagined Conversation Between Screenwriter Cyril Hume and the Producers of **Forbidden Planet** and **The Invisible Boy**."

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The scene is a small, executive
office on the MGM lot. A PRODUCER
sits behind a mahogany desk.

It's nice. Swanky digs, sure, but
it's second-class fancy, for Gold-
en Age Hollywood. The really nice
offices start a floor up. But this
producer's doing ok. We'll give him
a cigar. Because 1956.
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In walks CYRIL HUME, screenwriter. He's in a suit, also because 1956, but you can tell. It's the 1956-everybody-wears-suits equivalent of a Foo Fighters concert-T.

Still, this has been the biggest year of his professional life — three hits. **Ransom!**, with Glenn Ford (big star), **Forbidden Planet**, and **Bigger Than Life**, directed by Nicholas Ray right after **Rebel Without a Cause.**

PRODUCER: Cyril, baby. Have a seat. Have a seat! You want a cigar?

CYRIL HUME: Scotch and soda? Just, Scotch with a ray of sunlight that passed through a bottle of Schweppes.

PROD: That's a writer for you! I'll have my girl mix it right up for you.

He pushes a button on the intercom.

PROD: Stella, mix up a, er? Is it "Stella"?

VOICE ON INTERCOM: Sheila, sir. But keep trying.

PROD: Great. Listen, baby. I need a Scotch and soda for our writer friend, and that's Scotch with a... what was it?

CH: It's just Scotch and soda. Just...really?

PROD: That's just Scotch and soda,

Shirley. In a glass. With ice, maybe.

(ANNOYED CLICK FROM INTERCOM)

CH: So...?

PROD: Right. Listen, baby. This **Forbidden Planet**, it's a humdinger. It's doing gangbusters. We need a sequel, ready to shoot, right away.

CH: I told you a science fiction version of Shakespeare's **Tempest** would work.

PROD: Whatever, whatever. This Shakespeare guy, friend of yours? If he's got other ideas, great. But listen, we need another movie with Robby the Robot, right now. Like, yesterday. Something real...science fiction-y. For the, uh, for the geeks and stuff.

CH: Yeah, that's great. Making a film on such a huge canvas was fantastic. We could explore other worlds...maybe on their way back to Earth...

PROD: You kidding me? No, they're on Earth. Jesus, that fake planet cost me a fortune. And black-and-white. Color film was a nightmare. I chewed through three pillows in my sleep just from seeing the lab bills.

CH: So...a black-and-white sequel, on Earth, to a Technicolor space tragedy that takes place 300 years in the future?

PROD: On the nose, baby! And present-day. No space cities, or future science, or none of that. Just put the robot in it.

CH: The robot won't be invented for 300 years.

PROD: Then make it come back with time travel or something. That's a thing, right? People from the future? All that?

CH: Wow, yeah. There's never really been a serious time travel film. This could be pretty amazing.

PROD: Yes! There you go! But don't spend too much time on that part. We don't want to have to build any fancy time machines, or go to other times, where the costuming...oh the costume costs, just give me an antacid. So it's now, but there's a robot from the future. Go! Oh, no wait! Listen, I got this cousin... or, second cousin? I don't know. But they got this kid, he wants to be in pictures, he's, whatever, he's kid-aged. Like, we'll say 10. Put him in it.

CH: Look, not to tell you your business, but "dogs and kids," you know? Never work with them?

PROD: He doesn't have to be in the whole thing. Just, I don't know, make him invisible halfway through and then forget about him.

Sheila enters, gives the screenwriter his Scotch and soda. It

disappears in a single toss of the head.

CH: Two more, please.

Sheila cocks an eyebrow, then looks at her boss. Gets it totally. She leaves.

CH: So it's a black-and-white picture about a time-traveling robot and a little kid who turns invisible halfway through?

PROD: Solid gold. We'll call it... The See-Thru Kid! Or, something like that. As long as it's eight reels long.

CH: What if, and I'm just thinking out loud, what if the sequel to the fantastic, futuristic space picture took place in space. In the future? We could re-use the ship from the first movie, we could --

PROD: Cyril, baby. We already sold the ship to CBS, and they're going to use it in a bunch of TV shows this cat Rod Serling is making. The ship is gone. Damn, sailed. The ship has sailed. Let's pretend I didn't flub that joke, ok? Where were we?

CH: You had just put my career in a time machine and sent it backwards twenty-something years to when I was writing Tarzan movies.

PROD: Right, right. You know what else is hip these days, is computers, and aliens. I have definitely seen those words on the covers of magazines.

CH: So you want eight reels about a kid who plays with a space robot from the future, but then turns invisible halfway through, with a computer that may or may not be from another planet?

PROD: Perfect. You're a genius.

Sheila appears with two more Scotch and sodas.

And...scene.

Let me just say that our hero, screenwriter Cyril Hume, accomplished everything that was asked of him in this imagined meeting. If you think that sounds like it'll make a good movie, then **The Invisible Boy** is right up your alley. I will say, and this is no B.S., the movie has one of my most favorite lines of dialogue ever from any movie. I will sometimes put this movie on at home just to watch that moment. And if that's not a cult film punching above its weight, I don't know what is.

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