

Hub Magazine

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by **alasdair stuart**

The World of Tomorrow

We had take out last night. Ordered from the internet. From a takeaway that had its own Twitter account and it was all I could do to not follow them. Why? Because it's information, new information and new information is power because, like Cosmo once said, the winner of the next world war won't be who has the most bullets, but who controls the most information.

Except of course, the information can't be controlled. Look at how commonplace spoilers have become for every major TV show and film. Spend ten minutes online and you'll be able to find the primary story beats for Iron Man 2, onset photos of the new Doctor Who and leaked photos from Chris Nolan's top secret new film, Inception. The information wants to be free, the planet has been well and truly hacked and we can get all of it, instantly, on any number of devices.

It's the World of Tomorrow. We live in the future and whilst it's fashionable for us to complain about how we don't have jet packs and understandable for us to complain about the diseases that still haven't been cured the simple truth of the matter is this; the future is now. It may not be the future we want and it's certainly not the future we expected but it's here and we've never had better tools to mould and shape it into something we want, something closer to what we were expecting.

So go and do something fun with the future. Then tell us about it.

FICTION

The Locked Room

by gaie sebold and martin owton

The door, dark heavy oak, is locked as it has always been. I have never been in the room beyond. It is sizeable; that much is evident from the layout of the rest of the house, though curiously it has no windows.

I was eight years old when I asked my grandfather what lay behind that heavy door, and got my first insight into the personality that had made him one of the most successful corporate raiders of the late twentieth century. He fixed me with those pale eyes - I remember them even now, the very shade and temperature of a frigid January sky - and raised one eyebrow the merest of fractions. "You found it, then," he growled. "Or perhaps it found you. Wait until you're older, young man."

I looked into those eyes for a moment and then turned and ran for my mother.

I should have asked Father. Now he too is dead, of a stroke at the absurdly young age of 51, and I am master of this cavernous and chilly pile, Bradsworth Hall. My childhood home. Father had a falling out with Grandfather Bradsworth, over what I don't know, and we left here years ago. It surprises me how much I recognise, and with what fondness, ancient and gloomy though it is.

Susannah, of course, has never been here before. She is happily enough engaged elsewhere, exploring bedrooms and bathrooms, exclaiming over quaint inglenook and carved rood-screen, vowing the preservation of history and the elimination of darkness and gloom. But I, remembering my childhood curiosity, made straight for this room. In my hand I hold the heavy old-fashioned key that was returned along with Father's other personal effects by the hospital. I had not realised he wore it around his neck until I opened the bag and found the key and the chain. It must have been a weight, but perhaps he grew used to it.

The key turns smoothly in the lock. I push the door open. The room is dark. I recall that there are no windows. I grope for a lightswitch and cannot find one. My curiosity has to simmer as I go in search of a torch.

Everything useful disappears when one moves house. I cannot find a torch. I return instead with a lamp and an extension lead. I enter the room, my footsteps sounding unnaturally loud on the bare boards. The harsh unshaded light shows unadorned walls, a coat of whitewash over bare plaster. The air smells of mould and dust. In the middle of the floor is a wide stone table, a strange ugly thing that is surely too large to have come through the door. In one corner stands an ornate lacquered cabinet and in the far wall is a fireplace; that is all the room contains. The pale stone surface of the table, patched with dark stains at its centre, is grooved and slopes gently like a draining board. On the lower side there is a wide gutter. I open the cabinet and find a set of dark metal candleholders, a bundle of thick candles and, wrapped in dark cloth, a knife, black bone-handled and with a six inch blade. The cut on my finger attests to its sharpness. I put it back and retreat, sucking my finger and wondering what to tell my wife Susannah.

Perhaps I should not mention it. She has been so much better of late, after that dreadful time last year, the loss of the baby, the nightmares, the endless sobbing...No. Why trouble her? It is nothing but a room.

I sleep poorly; tossing and turning so much that Susannah eventually insists that I go and make up the bed in the chilly guest bedroom. What little sleep I manage is broken by dreams tainted with the half-heard whispers of some dry sibilant voice. By morning I have as bad as headache as if I had mixed Guinness and red wine. I swallow paracetamol with my coffee.

"Are you sure you don't want something hot to eat?" Susannah asks. She is fussing around the kitchen in the manner of a bird that cannot decide where to roost, rearranging drawers, sipping at a glass of apple juice. I force down my irritation. Finally, she stops, and sits down. I expect her to ask me about the locked room, but she has other things on her mind.

"Mike."

"Yes, dear?"

She looks at me with a strange little smile; a smile that is full of delight, yet uncertain, and I know she has something big to tell me. "I'm pregnant."

God forgive me, my first thought is, not again.

I sit up in bed and grope for the light switch, the image still blazing in my mind. I have been sleeping poorly, prompting my permanent departure to the guest bedroom, and the disturbed dreams have continued, but this is no mere subterranean suggestion of unease, it is clear and hard-edged as a documentary.

The man is in his thirties, tall and athletic, clad in a white robe. I recognise my Grandfather, though I never knew him this young. The hard-cut features, those wintry eyes, are unmistakable.

He carries a naked, sleeping child across the locked room and dumps him onto the stone table. The child, dark-haired and wild-eyed, perhaps eight or nine, wakes at the touch of cold stone, stares up, draws breath to scream. My grandfather covers the boy's mouth, lifts the black-handled knife.

The knife slashes through the boy's throat. The blood leaps in the candlelight. Such a small body, so much blood. Most of it drains down the table's grooves into the gutter, to be caught in a wooden bucket. Working fast, his white robe now a butcher's apron, my grandfather carves into the abdomen, under the ribs, and cuts out the heart. His face is not twisted, not distorted with rage or madness; it holds nothing but the serious concentration of a businessman completing a deal.

He dunks the heart in the bucket and carries it to the fireplace where coals glow yellow-orange and drops it in. There is a violent hiss and cloud of pink-tinged steam. He stands for a moment watching the heart shrivel and blacken then turns back to the body. Expertly, he carves it into pieces which he dumps into a dark sack. He strips off his white robe and puts that too into the sack before tying off the neck. Then he strides to the door and the scene cuts out, as though the projector had been switched off.

I go downstairs and pour myself a glass of brandy. I desperately crave sleep, but I know what I will see if I close my eyes. I sit in the study cradling my glass. Lying on the leather top of the desk is a book, "The Devil's Own Luck"; my grandfather's autobiography, ghost-written of course. He was too busy making money to waste time writing it himself.

He certainly had the gift of timing; he sold before all the major market crashes, and bought early into most boom sectors. It had made him very wealthy. Timing, and the Devil's own luck.

I pick up the book. The cover is chilly, like everything else in this house. It falls open at a set of photographs. One depicts my grandfather looking very much as he did in the dream, though he wears not robes but the elegant tweeds of the country gentleman. The date is 1940. His father has just died, leaving him master of Bradsworth Hall. The background is the old stable block that was the first building that he tore down in his remodelling of the Hall; in its place he built a garage to hold his collection of cars. Grandfather was called up in December 1941. The next picture shows him, after the war, outside the front entrance. His face shows no emotion. Already repairs are visible to the façade of the Hall.

If it is real, if I am not suffering from some sort of hallucination, then somewhere between November 1940 and December 1941, he killed the child. But surely there must have been inquiries, searches? I think about the timing of it; when children were evacuated from the cities to sometimes unwilling homes in the country. A time when a child could disappear with fewer questions than today.

I remember Grandfather. I remember his eyes. Perhaps I am still half-asleep, but somehow I find it all too easy to believe that what I saw was not mere dream, but history. My head aches. It is very cold in this room. They were tougher in those days, without central heating to thin the blood.

I think of blood leaping, like salmon, in the candlelight. I put the book aside and return to my bed.

I sit in the archives of the local newspaper. Staring at the juddering print of the microfilm, running through local news stories decades old, worsens the headache that seems to have taken up permanent residence just behind my eyes.

My grandfather is mentioned, occasionally, in respectful tones. A contribution to the building of a new Town Hall, the laying of a keystone. The articles mention his war-record, the tragic early loss of his wife, but nothing else. I do not know what else I am expecting.

Eventually, staring through the pounding pain, I find him. A boy of nine, one Herbert Temple, an evacuee from Stepney, was reported missing in March 1941. Herbert was not found, and the reports grew progressively shorter as the weeks went by. They tailed away, until the Chief Inspector (one can almost hear him shrug; the child was, after all, only some stray East End brat) opined that the boy had run away back to London.

It was real. He did it. I double over with nausea, clutching the edge of the desk.

Once I have myself under control, I return the microfilm cassette to its place in the file and thank the librarian. I pause to put on sunglasses before I leave the library. Outside it is a dull winter day, but I cannot bear the light. The headaches are so bad, painkillers are almost useless.

I have lied to my wife. I have told her that the room was my grandmother's bedroom and, by the terms of the trust, it must remain as it was when she died. I have told her that my grandfather's lawyer holds the only key. I do not want her to discover that stone table or the black-handled knife. I do not want her to dream as I do.

The headaches continue undiminished by any medication. The doctor has referred me for a brain scan and my father's fate presses on me like a mountain. Is this what caused his stroke? I remember all too well the change in him. I thought it was Grandfather's death, but now I suspect that he entered the locked room and found what I found. I wish I had talked to him more, though I doubt he would have told me what he was going through. We had our own troubles then, after Susannah's miscarriage.

I was so young when we left the Hall, which I loved. I did not understand why we left; so abruptly and in such a thunderous atmosphere. He broke so entirely with his father. I never asked him about it. Did he learn the secret? I suspect so. Did my grandfather press him to wield the knife himself? He must have refused. He must have. Had he not done so, his life perhaps would have been luckier – and not so short.

I try to push the thought away, but it recurs, endlessly: how many others have there been? The builder of Bradsworth; his son, my great grandfather? There was money in the family before my grandfather, and sound financial judgement, or is it more? How many innocents have died under that knife so that I can live in comfort?

It horrifies me to realise that I am thinking in these terms. Surely I cannot believe that my family have been murdering children to bring them luck? And yet...the dreams I could possibly dismiss as the product of a stressed mind, but not the contents of the room.

"Mike, look." Susannah sits up in bed, smiling, surrounded by a barricade of paint charts and fabric samples. "This is what I want to do to the upstairs hall. Aren't these lamps gorgeous? What do you think?"

She has come to love the house with a deep passion, as I used to do when I was a child. She has planned out every room in detail; colour scheme, furniture, lighting. A five-year plan for transforming the house that would have done credit to the Soviet Ministry of Central Planning. I smile, and nod, and agree with everything, through the pounding in my head.

The headaches continue. The doctors have found nothing; they say it is stress. With poor Father's death, and Susannah's fragility, there has been certainly been stress enough. I have not told Susannah my fears about a stroke, I dare not, not now when she seems so stable.

I have found someone who may be able to help. He is an exorcist. His website says that he was ordained a Catholic priest, but left the church some years ago. It does not say why.

I encouraged Susannah to treat herself to a long session at the health spa in town: I said it would be good for her. After all, we can afford these things, now. She will be there all afternoon.

I have seen the exorcist's car coming up the drive; a battered red Citroen; I wait by the front door. Tyres crunch on gravel and I let him in. He is older than I had expected. His craggy grey-haired appearance reminds me of my old headmaster; an image both alarming and reassuring. He does not look like a charlatan. I proffer my hand and invite him in.

I begin, hesitantly, to tell him of my problem. To begin with, he listens gravely, but as my voice rises, he waves me to silence and says, "show me the seat of the manifestation."

The silence is maintained as we walk through the house to the room, my hand shakes as I turn the key in the lock. He enters the room. I move to follow, but he motions me to stay outside. Long minutes pass. I can hear his breathing and the distant squabbling of rooks. He comes out, still silent, and we go downstairs.

He asks me many questions; first about the house then about myself. I answer as honestly and clearly as I can. Finally he pronounces his verdict.

"I can feel no spirit presence in the room or in this house, so I cannot help you. I believe that the solution to your problem lies in another direction." His voice is warm and sympathetic. "Believe me," he says, "these things can seem very real." He clasps my hand, smiles, passes me a sheaf of leaflets. Helplines, advice centres, pictures of anxious faces and smiling ones. "I will pray for you."

He thinks I'm mad.

I cannot respond to his kindness. I hear the car drive away. The gravel under its wheels sounds like the crunching of some gigantic beast, crushing me in its maw.

Perhaps if I can get far enough away from this house I will be free of the pain, able to sleep again without hearing that insistent rasping voice, without dreaming of the knife opening the boy's throat. I have spent some days away, staying at our flat in London, but it has done nothing other than rouse Susannah's suspicions about my fidelity.

I have thought about leaving altogether; selling Bradsworth, but the terms of the family trust set up by my grandfather are specific. The money is tied to the house, the house to the money. I have and re-read the paperwork; ancient yellowed documents and modern solicitor's letters. If I sell up, I must forfeit the entire fortune. Susannah would never agree to it. I could try to explain, but she is a rational woman. What would she make of these shadowy fears, these insane musings? Even I, sometimes, doubt it all. I wonder if perhaps the whole thing is not the product of these endless headaches, a hallucination of the weary mind. To her, with things at last seeming so settled, so happy, with a new baby on the way, it would seem as though I were trying to sabotage our lives for some insane purpose of my own.

The old devil has snared me. I believe the terms of the trust were set up to entangle my father; to force him to accept the knife. But it has caught me.

I think we should go away. Travel while we can before our child is born. It is something I have always wanted to do and now that money is no longer a problem, it is a desire given a sharper edge by circumstance. Susannah agrees. I was doubtful given her previous instability, but this pregnancy seems different. She blooms with health and energy. Her doctors raise no objection and the designer can handle the remodelling of the house; we're paying her enough. The place would be barely habitable while the work is going on anyway.

I have a desire to visit India. The ancestor who built this house came back from India with a fortune after the Indian Mutiny. What else did he bring with him? Perhaps there are wise men there who will be able to help me. There must be someone who knows how to banish this horror and where better to look?

While Susannah spent her time wandering blissfully through the bazaars, purchasing curtain material by the acre and enough carpet to cover the Oval, I have sat at the feet of gurus, I have visited ancient shrines and stinking modern tenements to speak with holy men. They do not despise me, dismiss my fears as ramblings. They tell me things.

The evil has a name: it arose from a sacrifice, a balidhan, that demands the life of an innocent for a baleful god.

I have fasted, telling Susannah that I was suffering the traditional traveller's stomach. I have burned incense and chanted mantras to break the spell. I have prayed to Vishnu, the bringer of Life, to

intercede for me, to banish this terrible thing. Now as I pack my case I am ready to return home with hope. The headaches have gone and I have not dreamed of the rasping sibilant voice for a month. Susannah continues in the best of health. It does me immeasurable good to see her so happy.

Please God, please Vishnu, let it be over.

I am not free. I am not free. Last night, my first night back in the house, I went to sleep as easily as a boy after a day at the beach, but the dreams are back. The pale stone table, a struggling naked child. Only this time the hand that held the knife was my own and as I dropped the heart onto the coals I felt the power surge through me. As if I were a surfer, riding upon a wave with all the great ocean behind me, riding to the edge of the world. I felt like a god.

There was another dream after that, strangely mundane - a horse race. The Derby - I recognised the grandstand at Epsom. The winner, by two lengths. I remember the horse. I awoke with the name burning in my mind.

I have checked the runners for the Derby. The horse I dreamed of is third favourite. I could get 5-1 if I backed it now. It is relentless; it assumes that power and money will work, must work. After all, it has so often been right.

It seems not remotely daunted by the prayers and the chanting, the rituals I underwent; it is as though it never noticed them at all. Perhaps it has been gone from India too long, and the rules of its former home no longer apply. Yet what can I do? I cannot bring in some wholesome Church of England clergyman to perform an exorcism - the outcome would be the same as before. They would be far more likely to suggest I needed therapy, drugs, even committal. Perhaps they would be right.

The horse won, by two lengths. I watched the race on television. I did not put a bet on it. It seemed to me that to do so would have left me in its debt. Since I returned to the house the dreams have filled every sleeping hour; alternately offering me glimpses of things to be and replaying my grandfather's bloody deed. The headaches continue, and I now hear that soft hissing voice just below the threshold of comprehension throughout the day. I have lost so much weight that my clothes are hanging off me - I layer myself in jumpers so Susannah will not notice. Thank God she is utterly absorbed in happy argument with the designer and plans for the nursery.

I feel wretched and weak yet unable to find peace. I see children in the village and shrink from them, as though my thoughts, the dreadful sights I see every night, might contaminate them. As though they might turn on me and shriek accusations.

I fear I exhausted the doctor's patience. I badgered him into another brain scan but it showed nothing abnormal. He suggested referral to a psychiatrist, and I am almost tempted to accept. They would undoubtedly think me delusional, which would mean medication, and perhaps, finally, peace. I watch Susannah's swelling abdomen with none of the delight I should feel, but only a dull, endless terror that grows even as she does.

Today I became a father and held my son in my arms for the first time. I looked on that tiny face, so fresh, so utterly innocent, and instead of joy I felt despair - and a terrible hunger. That dry voice, louder than ever before, snarled in my ears. I had to pass my son back to the midwife and dash from the room to heave my guts up in the sluice. I heard the women laugh, thinking me overcome with emotion, too much a man to let them see my tears.

If only they knew. I hover in the corridor outside the locked room, chewing the skin around my nails, cursing the thing that lurks there.

It wants my son. I have refused to give it what it desires, and it will take my son. What does it matter to the creature if the family is destroyed? Some other fool will buy the house, and be ensnared.

I could have done it. Even in these paranoid days, there are children who wander unwatched; on the city streets there are eight-year-olds selling themselves for food or drugs. But I would not. I would not.

Perhaps I should burn the place. But the modern fire investigators are too good; they would catch

me, we would lose everything. I would be in prison.

I am in prison now.

That sibilant whisper in my mind never ceases. Its hunger tears through me, dominates my every minute. Susannah sits in the next room, happy, absorbed in feeding our child, unaware. Unaware of the dam that threatens to burst and sweep my sanity away. I barely sleep, but still I dream. Endlessly, horribly, of blood and a dry whispering. I can no longer leave the house. I weaken, daily.

My son is quiet in my arms as I turn the key in the lock. The door opens. I drop the key back against my chest, a cold weight. I pick up my lantern and step over the threshold. The room is cold. I pull the blanket up around his tiny head, to keep the chill from him, and gently push the door closed. The dry sibilant voice is raging in my head like fever. The smell of dust and mould fills my nose. I lay my son on the stone table, he stirs briefly but does not wake. One small pink hand emerges from the blanket and clutches at some passing dream.

From the cabinet I fetch candles and the black-handled knife. As I pick up the knife the voice changes; slides to a satisfied sigh. I light the candles and place them around my son. I lift the key-chain over my head and place it around his neck.

My head is suddenly clear, so clear. The relief from pain is like the promise of heaven.

"You wanted an innocent life," I say, and I hold the knife point-first to my chest. For who is more innocent in this than me? Let my blood shield my son.

Susannah, my sweet, I'm so sorry. I should have done better.

I hope my son will have better fortune in his life than I.

I'm sure he will.



REVIEWS: BLOCKBUSTER ROUNDUP

Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince

reviewed by alasdair stuart



Directed by David Yates

Starring: Daniel Radcliffe, Rupert Grint, Emma Watson, Michael Gambon, Jim Broadbent, Alan Rickman, Tom Felton, Bonnie Wright and Helena Bonham-Carter

Harry Potter's sixth form begins much as each previous year has; an unusual request from Professor Dumbledore, a clash with Draco Malfoy and a warm welcome from old friends Hermione and Ron. But this year, everything is different; Voldemort's attacks are becoming bolder, an old professor has returned to Hogwarts with a dark secret and romance is blooming in very unlikely places in Hogwarts...

The sixth Harry Potter arguably has the toughest job of the series. Whilst each previous film has been able to rely on its central plot and move the overall arc along in doing so, this is the hinge point, the moment where the series pivots and everything changes. There's a palpably darker air to this movie as a result and it's a very different darkness from the equally impressive Prisoner of Azkaban and Steve Kloves' screenplay cleverly combines the personal, private horrors of adolescence with the end of the old world order. It's heady stuff, relying more than ever before on the characters instead of the plot and it works extremely well. One moment in particular, a tiny, subdued conversation between Harry and Hermione is superbly written and acted, the one moment in the entire series that its two most competent, most troubled characters let their guards down. This sense of personal responsibility, of the children of Hogwarts feeling the yoke of responsibility settle over their shoulders is where the film is at its darkest and consistently most impressive.

With this engine of hormones and doom powering the film, Yates is able to extract the best from his cast. Broadbent in particular turns in much more than the charming buffoon the trailers portray him as. Horace Slughorn is a tragic and contemptible figure, a man whose emotional complexity mirrors that of the film itself. Some of the regular cast also really shine, especially Tom Felton as the increasingly tortured Malfoy and Mark Williams, who brings a distanced curiosity to Mr Weasley. It's Radcliffe though who really comes into his own here, playing Harry with a combination of arrogance and intelligence that's uniquely adolescent and adds a real sense of tragedy to the film's final scenes.

Half Blood Prince is not, by any stretch of the imagination, a perfect film. The series' perennial problems of having to hit the signature events of the books remains along with the fact the world remains oddly nebulous and untouchable. That aside however, this is one of the best entries so far, a dark, frequently funny story about people on the edge of adulthood and a world on the edge of chaos.

GI Joe: The Rise of Cobra

reviewed by alasdair stuart

Directed by Stephen Sommers

Starring: Channing Tatum, Marlon Wayans, Sienna Miller, Rachel Nichols, Ray Park, Adewale Akkinuoye-Agbaje, Christopher Eccleston, Sienna Miller, Lee Byung-hun, Said Taghmaoui, Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Dennis Quaid, Jonathan Pryce and Arnold Vosloo



In the near future, James McCullen (Eccleston) sells NATO four experimental nanotech warheads capable of everything from destroying an individual building to dismantling an entire city and enhancing combat troops to superhuman levels of endurance. When the convoy is ambushed, Duke and Ripcord, the two officers in charge of security find themselves allied with GI Joe, a top secret multi-national special operations unit. As they struggle to qualify for full time duty, the two men are drawn into a clash with McCullen and his plans for world domination.

This is not a remotely smart film, make no mistake. In a year which has seen blockbusters run the gamut from the flawed but interesting (*Watchmen*) to the genuinely outstanding (*Star Trek*) to the flat out awful (*Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*), *GI Joe* is an open goal. It is, after all, film based on a toy line and directed by a man whose name is almost as synonymous with empty spectacle as Michael Bay. It's popcorn entertainment in the most literal sense, an empty, vapid piece of entertainment that erases itself from your memory almost as you're watching it.

It's also a lot of fun. Sommers is easy to hate but he puts action sequences together which aren't just big, they're remarkably comprehensible. The Paris chase scene here is a prime example, starting small and building into a demented combination of hand to hand combat, car chase, gun fight and disaster movie. The attack on The Pit is, if anything, more impressive as Sommers shows us the scale of the attack by focussing on four individual fight scenes which frequently interact with and influence each other. It gives the film an unusual sense of scale whilst still keeping things personal and comprehensible, something that *Revenge of the Fallen* fails to do.

The huge cast also help, especially Wayans and Miller. Wayans manages to be funny without being annoying whilst Miller, freed from her seemingly endless parade of respectable roles, cuts loose and has a huge amount of fun as the Baroness. Akkinuoye-Agbaje also does good work as does Nichols, Taghmaoui and Byung-hun, all of whom bring something unique to their characters and all of whom, like Wayans and Miller, play to the material instead of trying to rise above it.

This is about as brash, stupid and big as blockbusters can get and still be something you can connect with. It's also worth pointing out, in amongst all the critical hits the film has taken that this is a mainstream action movie with two black leads, neither of whom are the bad guy and one of whom is responsible for one of it's big moments of heroism. It also features a middle eastern character who isn't just a hero, he's the techie without whom the heroes simply can't engage with the plot. Oh and two ninjas fighting on top of a laser cannon that's exploding. Underwater. It's not clever, but it's certainly big and definitely fun.

Terminator Salvation

reviewed by richard whittaker

Directed by McG, written by John D. Brancato & Michael Ferris

Starring: Sam Worthington, Christian Bale, Bryce Dallas Howard, Moon Bloodgood, Anton Yelchin, Helena Bonham Carter, Michael Ironside

There's probably never been a film franchise that has metamorphosized as much over its duration as the *Terminator* series: From a tiny, grimy mid-80s horror that catapulted Arnold Schwarzenegger into the big leagues, to a studio leviathan that draws high-caliber actors like it was an Oscar-bait script about the



human condition, garnished with free puppies. Cute, cute puppies.

Of course, there were tremors in the Internet community that the long-awaited fourth installment in the franchise had been handed over to McG. A Brett Ratner-esque debacle was anticipated of formless style and LOUD NOISES from the man that inflicted *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle* on the world. But if the franchise seemed burnt out after *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*, he's given a good reason to re-attach the jumper cables to its nipples and get the killer flesh-wrapped robotic endoskeleton on the big screen again.

First up, he's given the audience the gear change for which they've always pushed. In the *Terminator* movies, the viewer has never seen the future: It has been recounted, or shown in time-travelling terminator-killer Kyle Reese's dreams. For *T4*, McG shows the other side of the conversation, a big, mucky, wreckage-strewn future. John Connor (Bale) has survived the nuclear holocaust known as Judgment Day, but isn't the leader of the resistance as predicted. He's a field commander, frustrated by a hierarchy caught up in strategy and ignoring the tactics of keeping individual soldiers alive. Plus, as the only person that had any indication that supercomputer Skynet would become self-aware and obliterate all human life, a little peeved that he's being sidelined. After a raid on an uplink array results in a nuclear blast, he seems to be the sole survivor of the attack: Until one more human scrambles from the ashes. Which is interesting, since the last time the audience saw Marcus Wright (Worthington), he was being executed in 2003 after donating his body to researchers over at Cyberdyne Systems – the corporation responsible for bringing about the end of the world.

It seems that a cancerous Dr. Serena Kogan (a strangely gaunt and ravaged Bonham Carter) has somehow orchestrated his survival, but he's sent scampering off the blasted wastelands, trying to find someone who knows what's going on. In one of those odd coincidences, he runs into Kyle Reese (Yelchin) – or rather a teenage Reese, who is years away from being the seasoned warrior that time travels in the original *Terminator* and gets Sarah Connor knocked up.

So in the tradition of *Terminator* films, there's a woefully confusing and arguably nonsensical plot, wrapped around a temporal anomaly and held together with bailing twine. But it's still watchable, and not just because of some high-end whizz-bang. Notoriously, Bale told McG to “fuck right off” until the script could be performed on an empty stage and still be regarded as a good piece of drama. It may not quite be there, but it's undoubtedly a bit of a work-out for some acting muscles (much of the credit for that, McG has said in interviews, should go to an uncredited script polish by *Dark Knight* and *The Prestige* co-scripter Jonathan Nolan.) Bale has stripped away all the beat-down charm that Nick Stahl brought to the John Connor role in *T3*, replacing it instead with a ruthless fury. But surprisingly, this isn't really his film. It could have been, if the script had given Bryce Dallas Howard a little more to do as his pregnant wife Kate Connor. She replaces Stahl's *T3* co-star Claire Danes, and the few moments she does have are pretty strong argument for continuing the franchise – if just to see her back.

Instead, the emotional core is built around Wright, the suicidal survivor dumped into this future war, and Worthington adds enough brooding depth, tempered with a callous streak, to show why the studios are giving him plum rolls like the lead in the upcoming *Clash of the Titans* remake. Wright's journey is really the heart of the story, and tinged with enough moral ambiguity (by summer blockbuster standards) to drive the film forward.

But the other part of a *Terminator* film is the action sequences, and this is the first full-blown war movie of the franchise. Long-time writing duo Brancato and Ferris are used to dealing with unwieldy tanks - they wrote *Catwoman*. Ba-dum-cha. Actually, they were responsible for *T3*, which is probably a good thing. Yes, while it was in many ways a feeble excuse for Arnie to get his aging robotic rump handed to

him by a plasma-powered Kristanna Loken, it had an interesting central conceit: That the war between humanity and the machines was inevitable. It was predicated on the fact that technology had changed since Cameron's micro-classic: Skynet, circa 1984, was a mainframe; Circa 2003, no-one would buy that a system that complex wouldn't have off-site redundancy. The future has changed, and this is a different war between organic and metallic.

For a start, the humans are pretty well armed. They're not skulking in caves with burning TV sets for entertainment. A prepared Connor has a well-organized para-military force at his disposal, with heavy ordinance, A-10 Tankbusters and Michael Ironside in a Russian nuclear submarine. Yes, roll that round your head and realize that this is pure nerd-bait. The terminators have changed as well. The classic H/K's and tanks are back from the first film, as are the T-800s (courtesy of some heavy CGI work). But there's a bunch of new hardware, like the eel-like Hydrobots and the two-wheeled Mototerminators, and a strangely gruesome addition in the form of the primitive T-600s, a machine's poor impression of what a human is like.

It's not all big, hollow booms. One of the more memorable scenes involves Connor and his lieutenant Barnes (Common) sitting on a mountainside, waiting to take a potshot at an H/K on patrol. The scenery, the slow pace, and even the choice of weapon (an old RPG) invoke images of the Mujahadin forces in Afghanistan, waiting for Russian tanks – or the Taliban stalking US forces. It's a darker and more morally ambiguous moment than might be expected in what's superficially a lump of brainless mid-Summer multiplex fodder.

It helps that McG has, amidst all the CGI, paid sufficient credit to the franchise's roots by using practical effects, giving it a gritty feel in the right places. That said, since *T2* spearheaded the CGI revolution, it would be a bit churlish to gripe about the software. It's also one of those movies that it pays to see in hi-def: Comparing the experiences of viewers who saw it on a regular screen, and those who saw it in 4K digital projection, the technology-enhanced were much more impressed by the special effects and saw fewer of the meshing and pixilation flaws that others have reported.

Yes, it's all set dressing, but part of the appeal of the franchise has always been watching people with heavy kit pummel away at annoyed machines. In that sense, this is a pretty fine addition to the franchise. It's not perfect, and whoever it was that edited the widely-seen trailer should be beaten with old copies of *Piranha II* for giving away the film's main plot point. There's also a deeply frustrating component to the final resolution that shrieks of studio interference: But there's robots hitting humans, and humans hitting back, and just enough of a lithe and intelligent script to make it worth staying to the end.

Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen

reviewed by richard whittaker



Directed by Michael Bay, written by Ehren Kruger, Roberto Orci and Alex Kurtzman

Starring: Shia LaBeouf, Megan Fox, Josh Duhamel, Tyrese Gibson, John Turturro, Ramon Rodriguez, Peter Cullen, Hugo Weaving

There is a new sport amongst film critics. It's not *Transformers*-trolling. It's not Michael Bay-bashing. It's trying to find answer to the question posed by Robin Williams in *Good Morning Vietnam*: "Vat da hell vas dat?"

Having sat through the entire two hours and 30 minutes of this ... well, film, I suppose is the best way to describe it, I can honestly say I have no idea what happened. I clearly recall sitting down, and the screen yelling at me for a long time, and the warming tones of Peter Cullen as good guy Autobot leader Optimus Prime, and Hugo Weaving shouting through some corrugated iron as the menacing Decepticon chief Megatron. Beyond that, it was the purest, emptiest form of mid-

Summer Hollywood fluff yet.

Simmer down, anime kids, this is exactly the movie you wanted. After all, *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* is amazingly close to the original source material. It's an incoherent series of loosely-connected set pieces, draped over the barest skeleton of a script whose cracks are plastered over with pages ripped out of *Spirituality for Dummies*, all in the name of selling more toys. So it is exactly like the original franchise.

Let's deal with the positives first. This movie proves that Michael Bay is the *idiot sauvant* of contemporary cinema, a visual genius that can drag together an amazingly visually complex and sweeping picture with not even a passing nod to the basic rigors of narrative or character development. It's easy to imagine him laboriously setting up a shot in the ancient rose-red city of Petra, wearing a t-shirt that proudly proclaims that "Three-act Structures are for Wimps."

Secondly, Shia LaBeouf proves he can survive any plot-sucking extravaganza and still play off that goofy charm that has seen him rise from kid's TV star to marquee name. He's back as friend to the Autobots Sam Witwicky. He's joined later on in events by John Turturro, returning as the now-disgraced alien-hunting Agent Simmons, who seems to have finally worked out how to play the sweaty manic obsessive without disappearing into goggle-eyed excess. Kudos to any man that can deliver the line "Gentlemen, I am positioned under the enemy's scrotum," and not drink himself to death straight after.

But to describe this as being anything more than a sequence of events is to miss its strange, vapid charm. Sam's girlfriend Mikaela (Fox) leans over a bike in cut-off shorts, then Sam goes to college, then Rampage vomits up some ball bearings, then we find out Transformers can pee, then Megatron breaks a submarine and flies to Cybertron, the home of the Transformers (which is apparently easier than getting a cab on a wet Wednesday), and then there are lots of both Autobots and Decepticons, and then it turns out they've been here for a few thousand years, and there's something about turning off the sun, and a whorebot, and a vacation in Paris. Whether these events were in that particular order is of little importance, since the story has all the narrative coherence of a teaser trailer.

The script was possibly constructed by writing random words on a Rubik's Cube and spinning the sides. Half of Shanghai explodes and no-one seems to notice. Characters come and go, with no impact on the plot. Other characters die and are resurrected with a near-tedious regularity, and for no good purpose. Megatron, for example, returns from being dumped at the bottom of the ocean at the end of the first film in order to stand near The Fallen, who seems to have an old-man beard.

Oh, yes, The Fallen. Mentioned in the title, that one. It turns out that, before the current civil war between the robots, there was another one, thousands of years previously, that was also fought on Earth. Now he's old and angry about something, and doesn't like humans. Which is fortunate because, beyond LaBeouf and Turturro, the humans are pretty much set-dressing (and, in an ominous indicator for her future career, Fox can't even manage that for the full movie). Sure, they get to shoot some robots, but when the US military does finally turn up (in a slow-mo montage sequence that is taken almost shot-for-shot from the last Marine Corps recruitment ad) it's supposed to be some kind of gun porn (Bay has a notoriously good relationship with the armed forces). In fact, they kinda look goofy by comparison to what the audience really turned up for: Whacking great big robots tonking away at each other.

And there is undoubtedly a massive amount of that. Amazingly, it's actually a little dull.

Part of the problem is that there is no character development whatsoever. There are so many Transformers that the only way to work out who is who is to buy a tie-in book, and most of them never transform anyway. There are two exceptions, both of whom turn out to be the comedic core of the movie. Jetfire is voiced by Mark Ryan, who genre fans of a certain age will remember as Nasir the Saracen in the 1980s Robin of Sherwood series. Coincidentally, like those fans, Jetfire is mostly senile, an ancient Decepticon bounty hunter turned Autobot rebel disguised as the SR-71 Blackbird in the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum, and entertainingly rambling. Wheelie (animation veteran Tom Kenny – yes, the voice of Spongebob Squarepants himself) is much smaller, being a toy truck to which Sam accidentally gives life,

and fans of the franchise will detect some of the dry, panicky humor of Rattrap from the *Transformers: Beast Machines* series. This little CGI creation gives Fox her only moment of humanity when he humps her leg like a Chihuahua on a Viagra binge.

Oh, yes, the CGI is gorgeous and complicated. The movie probably would be a more rewarding experience if Bay had followed his obvious first instinct, fired the writers, and just issued a script that said "Page 1: Robots go blammy. Page 2: Repeat." True, there is a raw, visceral thrill of watching several massive Constructicons join together to become the even more massive Devestator, and then watching him demolish a pyramid, but the only times anyone can work out what's going on are the rare moments of slow-mo. Beyond those rare interludes, it's all just like being beaten around the face with a day-glo car fender.

Orphan

reviewed by richard whittaker



Directed by Jaume Collet-Serra, **written by** David Leslie Johnson and Alex Mace

Starring: Vera Farmiga, Peter Sarsgaard, Isabelle Fuhrman, Aryana Engineer, Jimmy Bennett, CCH Pounder

If Joseph Campbell had decided to tackle the tenets of myth about horror movies instead of heroes, it's a safe bet that he would have tackled the cuckoo in the nest as one of the core tales. The idea of the outsider child, be it the inhuman changeling or the usurper bastard, always gets the blood pumping. After all, who can strike deeper at the heart than the one who is pressed willingly to your bosom? The big guns in the genre – *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Omen* – have always depended on something demonic. But the creepiest, most unnerving entries haven't used the get-out of the supernatural. Instead, they admit that, well, children can just be plain nasty. And that's where *Orphan* comes in.

As cuckoos go, Esther (Fuhrman) is more 'other' than most. A shy, polite, slightly precocious nine-year-old from Russia, she gets taken into the home of the Colemans, a nice middle class American family with a gap in their lives. Months previously, Kate (Farmiga) miscarried what would have been their third child, and now they decide to adopt, to give the space and love they had provided for the dead baby, Jessica, to another child. Which would be fine, if Esther wasn't a murderous, duplicitous, manipulative little monster who knows an opportunity when she sees it.

Hollywood and the BBFC are often squeamish about portrayals of truly terrible children: Back in 1993, *The Good Son* got clobbered with a box-office-quelling 18 certificate for its mostly-implied violence. Hard to predict what fate this film would have suffered them, because it matches its tension and shocks with some hard-to-watch acts of violence and gruesomeness. The film opens with Kate's fever-dream recollection of her own bloody miscarriage, and the crack it has opened up in her relationship with husband John (Sarsgaard) is exactly where Esther first puts her knife to twist and twist and twist again.

The interloper's intentions are, initially, unclear. She attempts to ingratiate herself with her new brother Daniel (Bennett, who between this, his role as mini-Kirk in *Star Trek*, and his performance in Robert Rodriguez' upcoming kid-fantasy *Shorts*, is this year's Culkín). She bonds with her little sister Max (Engineer, whose deafness is a key plot driver). She's a little too perfect, and when things slip out of her control, she's prone to temper tantrums. So far, so average emotionally damaged child. But she's also a little too capable of brazenly manipulating the adults around her, explicitly and to their faces. When the realization

of what the Colemans have let into their house finally dawns on them, she's already set John and Kate at each other's throats with alarming speed and glee.

Speaking of unnerving prodigies, Fuhrman is three years older than Esther is supposed to be, but that still doesn't explain her unnaturally well-rounded performance. If she hadn't already turned in such a defining horror role as Esther, she'd be a slam-dunk for the role of Eli in *Let Me In*, the planned US remake of radical vampire reinvention *Let the Right One In* (reviewed in Hub #78). Her grasp of how to dominate the screen is as complete as Esther's understanding of which buttons to push with the Colemans. What's possibly most disturbing for viewers is that she can flip between calm violence and screaming breakdown so fluidly, then pat her dress down and become perfect Esther again.

Her foil in all this are Kate's maternal instincts. In that respect, it's very much a second bite at the cherry for Farmiga, who was in similar territory as the mother in 2007's child-slaying sleeper *Joshua*. If she'd have phoned in a typical running-screaming movie heroine role, this wouldn't have been half the film it is. Instead, her Kate is a brittle mess whose motherhood is pivotal to her performance, both physically and emotionally. It's not often that a C-section scar is so plainly shown in a movie, but when she trails her hand along it, it's a little moment that sums up many of her self-defeating urges, and why she fights and fears Esther.

While this might not be the most original conceit for a movie, it's undoubtedly one of the freshest executions to come out of the Hollywood gruel machine in a long while. Collet-Serra almost washes away the taste of his direction of the dreary and pointless 2005 *House of Wax* rehash (hey, it had Paris Hilton in it: For that level of cinematic sin to be fully expunged, he'd have to go to every viewer's house and clean their windows, walk the dog, and top up their petrol tank). Similarly, Johnson's taut little script takes the edge off the fear concerning him being signed to tackle the Hollywood adaptation of the astounding low-budget Australian mockumentary *Lake Mungo*. In fact *Orphan* is elegant and brutal enough that it may reverse the cinematic trend of the last few years and see a foreign knock-off: After all, what audiences want is a good idea (did you know there's a Japanese remake of wine-related dramedy *Sideways*?) and this provides exactly that.

For all that storytelling strength, it may be cinematographer Jeff Cutter and editor Timothy Alverson that deserve the biggest behind-the-camera plaudits. It's a perfect pairing: Cutter turns the Ohio winter into a slushy, slippery obstacle course and garnishes every shot of the Coleman's house with something that could snip, stab or splinter, while Alverson sets a tempo that leaves every half-open door filled with potential juvenile malice. Between the two of them, it's never quite clear when something nasty is going to happen, but it's obvious something will. What's more, they do it while avoiding too many cheap theatrics, instead ramping up the tension.

But why it truly works is the grasp of family dynamics. This is a nuclear unit on the edge of self-destruction, held together by the fact that they won't talk to each other about the internal tensions. Farmiga and Saarsgard dance around each other's secrets, giving a bruised credibility to their relationship and all its scarcely-buried skeletons. Amongst the children, Fuhrman's prodigious talents are surprisingly almost matched by the infant Engineer, who gives a performance that small children aren't supposed to be able to manage (in fact, the last time a child of that age gave an equally gripping horror performance was probably Harvey Stephens as the infant Damien in *The Omen*). Together, they recreate that eerie little shared world of confidences that little girls create. Just be glad you only have to visit it.

FEATURES

Bleeding Words

Bleeding Words #6: Fear and Loathing in the Independent Press

by gary mcMahon

What my writing means to me is that I can breathe for another day if I can just get those next hundred words down on the page. It means that the constant hum inside my head can be vented for a little while. The idiotic irony of a rich life ending in decay can be kept at bay for another night.

What my writing means to me is that things like beauty, honour, morality, courage and the simple will to survive do exist, if only in my stories. It means that I can meet people I actually like, and watch as their lives unfurl like pearl-white wings across a greying sky.

What my writing means to me is that I don't go insane when I read about a 6 year-old girl being taken from the bathtub in her parents' house and sexually assaulted in a car before being dumped naked in the street. It means that I don't murder the first ignorant slouching layabout who looks at me the wrong way when I'm having a bad day.

What my writing means to me is that I can at least try to make some fictional sense out of the chaos of existence. It means that in the absence of a benevolent God, I can create my own cruel deities, and believe in them. Completely.

What my writing means to me is that I can stick a knife in the gut of my dead father. It means that I can see my grandparents again. I can pretend that true love is real and not a fallacy created to sell greeting cards on Valentine's Day.

What my writing means to me is that, at least on the page, I can see light at the end of a tunnel I have no recollection of entering. It means that I can put up a meaningless fight against the dark tide that is engulfing the world. That I can leave something behind for my son to read when I go; and that he might know me that tiny bit better for having done so.

What my writing means to me is a moment of mental equilibrium. It means that I'm still alive and haven't lost the taste for the fight. That some things – like family and art and freedom – are worth more than anything else; and perhaps they are even worth dying for.

What my writing means to me means nothing at all to anyone else: It's mine, all mine. And when I write I remember that the things I'm writing about mean fucking everything to me.

#

I wrote that about four years ago (maybe even longer) and it went on to be used as the introduction to a rather splendid small press anthology called **Dark Doorways**. A lot of things have changed since I wrote those angry, heartfelt words: time has moved on, feelings have altered, ideals have been pissed on.

In much the same way, I feel that my writing has also changed – and that's a good thing. Instead of

rants against society in the form of horror fiction, my stories now hopefully display a new maturity and have become more subtle, more sophisticated pieces of work. Yet still that anger remains; it's just better hidden.

I'm currently straining at the small press leash and trying to sell novels to the mass market. Now, the small press is the perfect home for driven, rage-fuelled fiction, but the mass market calls for something a little more refined to offer to its wider audience. Part of the learning process for a writer is, I think, to understand how to fuse a personal vision with a story that might appeal to the masses – to create something which retains whatever it is that makes your writing your own yet still manages to have a broad appeal. This isn't a compromise, by the way; it's a maturing process, a natural progression. You are still telling the stories you want to tell, but you are trying to find a way of writing them that makes more than you want to read them. After all, isn't that exactly what writing fiction is all about: communication?

I seem to have gained a reputation for writing very bleak fiction. I like this reputation; it shows that people are getting what I do. But if I just wrote bleak, that would be boring. You need to temper the darkness with light; the bleakness must be counterbalanced by compassion and insight. If nothing else, this ensures that it hits the reader harder and hurts them in all the right places.

So I guess the topic of this somewhat rambling article is growth: growth as a person and as an artist. It's part of the life-long challenge of being a writer, and if you wish to produce anything at all of worth before you die, you simply have to embrace the changes, and use them as meat for the beast. Growth hurts – it's supposed to. But so does (horror) writing. If it doesn't hurt, then it isn't coming from the right place. If the words don't bleed, then they aren't true – but blood comes in different shades of red, and some wounds are deeper than others. Sometimes we experience paper cuts, and other times we are cut right down to the bone. A horror writer's job is to examine these wounds and taste the blood that flows from them – and to make his or her readers taste it, too.

Hopefully, if we get it right, more than a handful of readers will connect with the story and the themes. That's the real trick: making them bleed with you. All of them. Not just a few.

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