

Hub Magazine

SCIENCE FICTION HORROR FANTASY

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ISSUE 99 · 13TH OCT 2009

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Editorial

by **alasdair stuart**

Explosive Decompression

I'm a *Stargate* fan and have been since the original movie. It's an impossibly endearing concept to me, something that speaks to everything from Erich Von Daniken to *The X-Files* and Vinge's constantly imminent, never quite here singularity; aliens are real. Aliens are everywhere and our continual exposure to them is gradually changing us for the better. It's also impossible not to look at some of the wackier conspiracy theories in UFOlogy at the moment and see that *Stargate* has replaced *The X Files* as that benighted field of study's fiction of choice.

So, needless to say, I've been looking forward to *Stargate:Universe* and it didn't disappoint. It's a very different show, far more stripped down, leaner and in some cases a lot darker than what's gone before it but all those factors work in its favour. If you've not seen it yet, do make a point of doing so. This is *Stargate* for people who don't like *Stargate*, a show that stands on its own as well as honouring everything that's gone before and building on it.

It's also a very decompressed series. The pilot stretches over the first three episodes and that extra length not only lets almost all the characters settle in but also establishes what the show is about; a group of people with minimal supplies and conflicting agendas, trapped in the middle of nowhere and struggling to maintain even the basics. It's a brave concept presented in a brave manner and it's not alone. *Flashforward*, the other big new genre show this year adopts a very similar approach and, after a very uneven pilot episode, is doing an excellent job of unpacking its central premise. Each episode explores a different element of the premise but also moves the overall investigation forward and the end result is a series whose pace cleverly matches its characters' realisation that they're playing a game of chess with the future and time is running out.

There's a lesson for writers in this too, and by writers I mean me. I have a tendency to rush to the good bits of a story and whilst it's always nice to eat pudding before you've finished your main course, it ultimately diminishes both. The idea of planned decompression, of structuring character and plot beats is an immensely attractive one and something I'm hoping I can incorporate into my work. So if, like me, you like nothing better than racing to the good bits of your stories, take a look at *SG:U* and *Flashforward*. They're literally fun and educational and you'll be surprised what you can learn.

Competition Announcement

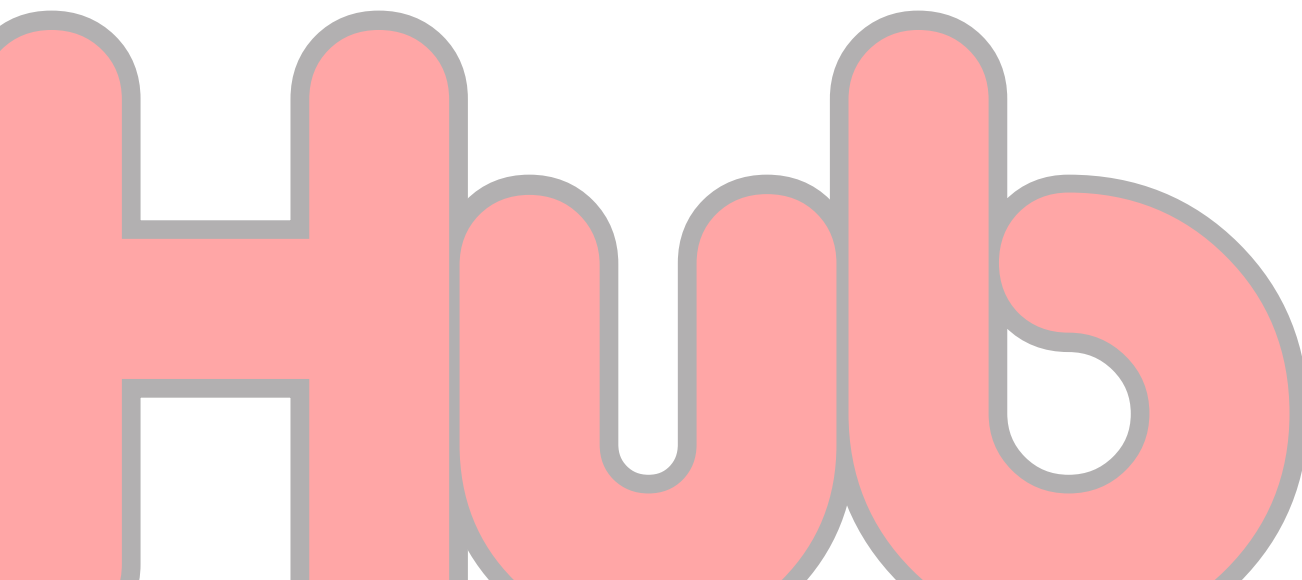
by lee harris

FAQ About Time Travel

Congratulations to the following lucky winners of next week's competition to win a copy of the new DVD *Frequently Asked Questions About Time Travel*.

Geoff Pinny from Milton Keynes
Mike Marris from Tadcaster
Owen Waist from Cambridge

Why not check out the competition they'll win/have won/are winning in next weeks issue and see if you can defy the laws of physics and change the outcome!



FICTION

Extra Time

by vaughan stanger

I stood in front of the heavy oak door, too terrified to grasp the handle. Anywhere else, I could not have said for sure whether the muffled sounds I heard were shouts of joy or screams of despair. Here, despair seemed inevitable.

My host gave a discreet little cough, making me gag. His breath smelled of rotten meat.

"Here we are, Mr. Jenkins."

He pointed a skeletal finger towards the door, which opened with a screech so loud it briefly drowned out the noise coming from within.

"Ah, I see that the game has just started," he said.

His tone was pleasant enough, though I guessed that I would soon regret my decision. I hesitated on the threshold, before pushing into the crowd. Every touch of sweaty skin made me shudder. Gritting my teeth, I jostled my comrades-in-sin in the hope of obtaining a clear view of the wall-mounted television. But wherever I stood bobbing heads somehow managed to get in the way, while the chorus of groans and jeers ensured that I could not hear the commentary.

Realising that I had little choice except to drown my sorrows, I forced my way to the bar. A group of men stood there, pleading with the buxom barmaid. Her disdainful expression suggested that I'd have to outwait eternity before she'd served me, or anyone else, with a pint of beer.

My host coughed again. "They do say that 'Hell is other people'."

"They do indeed," I muttered.

I should have known better, of course. My host's menu of torments had offered a long list of options; all but one of them had made me retch. In contrast, "Watching Football" had sounded perfect. That, of course, was the trap.

My host smiled sympathetically.

"Perhaps you would prefer more intimate surroundings."

"Anything would be better than this!"

"Then follow me, Mr. Jenkins."

The denizens of the sports bar parted like the Red Sea before Moses, as my host glided amongst them. Once outside, we walked in silence along a corridor of crimson walls and steel doors, which seemed to stretch to infinity, and probably did. An hour might have passed or even a day; it was hard to tell. When at last we halted, the door facing me looked identical to the countless others we had passed already.

"I'm sure you'll feel quite at home here," my host said as the door clicked open.

I stood on the threshold, gaping at the familiar cream-painted walls, shabby leather sofa and rickety bookshelves laden with football videos. Once I'd got over the shock, I smiled for the first time since my arrival. There were doubtless worse places I could spend eternity than in a replica of my living room, particularly given that my host had seen fit to equip it with a wall-sized flat-screen television.

"I thought you would approve," said my host.

I nodded while reaching for the remote control, eager to find something better than the blood-red static that currently filled the screen. Unpleasantly phallic in look and feel, the remote offered ten numeric buttons and an eleventh shaped like a stubby arrow. I pressed one of the buttons at random. When nothing happened, I thumbed the arrow. Inky uniformity obliterated the crimson blizzard, and a "7" flashed on and off in the top right-hand corner of the screen. After several seconds, the blizzard returned.

"Try entering a year," my host suggested. His voice had acquired a distant quality, as if we were

separated by some unbridgeable gulf. I turned and found him gone.

Excited by the possibilities offered by my new television, I pondered which year to select. Might as well start where I left off, I told myself, and tapped the year of my death into the remote. After all, my heart attack had deprived me of the chance to enjoy the final stages of the World Cup. I grunted with relief when a recognisable image formed on the screen. It seemed my host had kept his word: Channel 2010 was showing football.

Now all I needed was a beer. I walked into the kitchen, but discovered that the refrigerator offered no such creature comforts; in fact its implausibly hygienic interior offered nothing at all. With mounting dread, I walked back into the living room and picked up the telephone receiver. I heard no sound, not even the faintest hum or click. So, no room service here to be had here, then.

I slumped onto the sofa, depressed by the prospect of a teetotal eternity. Still, beer or no beer, I could at least watch football. And I could scarcely complain about channel 2010's selection, for this was a World Cup semi-final, with England playing Germany. The fact that I'd died during the penalty shoot-out that decided England's previous match didn't bother me at all.

What did bother me, however, was that England were losing 2-1 with less than ten minutes of normal time remaining. For all their undoubted commitment, Lampard and Gerrard too often squandered hard-won possession in midfield, while Wright-Phillips flattered to deceive on the right flank. Up front, Rooney chased the ball as if his life depended on it, but could not outfox the brawny German defenders.

"Bring on Walcott!" I shouted in desperation.

The manager obliged.

"Yessss!" I screamed, as Walcott levelled the score with a superb volley from thirty yards out, mere seconds before the final whistle.

Half an hour of extra time ratcheted up the tension to an unbearable degree but did not produce a goal. I watched the penalty shoot-out through a fence of fingers; screamed in all-but-physical pain when Walcott kicked the crucial fifth penalty high over the crossbar.

"Bastards!" I yelled, as the German players celebrated their victory.

The picture dissolved into the familiar crimson blizzard before the studio pundits could begin their post-match recriminations. Moments later, the screen flickered and then presented a vista of pristine turf bathed in sunlight, disabled children swapping tiny flags, and the England team miming the National Anthem. Shortly after the kick-off, I realised that I was watching a repeat of the previous match.

Feeling unutterably depressed, I wandered around my apartment, testing the fixtures and fittings. I swiftly discovered that, with the exception of the television, nothing worked. Even the light switches and the toilet flush were inoperative. And when I opened the front door I found it led not into the corridor, but straight back into my living room. I stood on the threshold, looking back and forth at the pair of identical, impossible rooms. Finally, I slammed the door shut with all the force I could muster, but gained no satisfaction from doing so.

Eventually I gave in to the inevitable and sat down in front of the television. With grim determination, I tried one channel after another. It didn't take long to figure out the system. All of the odd-numbered channels were blank, likewise some of the even-numbered ones. The rest looped through recordings of notable England football matches. Depressingly for me, a sadist had programmed the selection. Thus channel 1990 showed the World Cup semi-final against West Germany, complete with Waddle's dreadful miss during the penalty shoot-out. Similarly, channel 1996 allowed me to relive the Euro 96 semi-final against Germany, when Southgate's incompetence ensured defeat in another penalty shoot-out. If that wasn't enough, there was the World Cup clash with Argentina on channel 1998, featuring Owen's fabulous solo goal, Beckham playing the fool and, once again, England losing the penalty shoot-out, this time thanks to Batty.

But these disappointments paled into insignificance compared with channel 2012. Forty-six years after the euphoria of Wembley, England once again faced Germany in the final of a major competition, this time the European Championship. Ten minutes before half time, a crunching tackle left Walcott with a broken leg. Some callow England fullback I'd never even heard of scuffed the decisive penalty into the arms of the goalkeeper. I beat my fists against my forehead in frustration.

The unvarying diet of English failure had become intolerable, so I switched to channel 1966, hoping to relive one of my earliest memories. But instead of the familiar black-and-white footage of England's triumph over West Germany, the crimson digits flashed in the centre of the screen, blinking balefully against a jet-black background. On the fourth blink, a sharp jolt of electricity caused me to drop the remote control. Rubbing my arm, I looked on, puzzled, as the "1" slid under the tail of the "9" and levered it into a new orientation, before disappearing. The three sixes winked on and off for a while, then they too vanished. Finally, a familiar face filled the screen.

"Ah, Mr. Jenkins. I wondered whether I might hear from you again." My host consulted a leather-bound book as wide as his arms. "I take it you feel completely at home?"

"Oh, absolutely," I replied, witheringly. "It's as if I've been here all my life!"

"Which is the general idea," he said, a smile puckering his lizard lips.

"I don't suppose you'd let me change my mind?"

My host scratched absent-mindedly at his face with a talon. A bead of blood formed on his cheek. He mopped it up with a deft flick of his forked tongue.

"Would you prefer to try one of the other items on the menu?"

I shuddered. "No, but--"

My host sighed. "Mr. Jenkins, our records show that you spent most of your leisure time watching television, preferably football. Which is why you subscribed to every available sports channel. And now you have chosen to spend eternity in the same way. Not a bad choice, in my opinion, assuming that you did actually derive some pleasure from your viewing.

Thinking back, I found it hard to tell. There had been at least as much pain as pleasure. But in any case my host was being unfair.

"I did do other things, you know."

"Such as?"

I trawled my memories, but nothing specific came to mind.

"This and that."

My host sighed as if this was a tale of woe he had heard many times before.

"The saddest thing of all, Mr. Jenkins, is that you actually felt more alive when you were watching football than at any other time. Only then did you experience the full range of emotions, from elation to despair. Even so, your experiences paled in comparison with the real thing. Not for you the camaraderie of life-long supporters cheering their local team on a freezing Wednesday night. You couldn't bear to rub shoulders with the real fans, those people who spent their hard-earned pay on tickets for every league match. No, you were the typical middle-class football fan, only interested in the 'big' matches; content to worship your heroes from an armchair."

"Was that *such* a sin?"

"About as big as they come," he replied, winking at me. "Made even worse by your persistent abuse of the power of prayer."

Not that my prayers had ever worked...

"Be fair," I said. "If ever there was a team that needed help, it was England!"

And if the 2012 final were anything to go by, the same would be true in the future. Was it possible that England's atrocious luck would continue forever? I felt compelled to ask even though I dreaded his answer.

My host smiled enigmatically. "Let's just say there's always hope."

It was at this point that I started to cry, the prospect of never-ending disappointment finally too much to bear.

My host sighed. "That's eternal life for you, Mr. Jenkins; it distils the essence of its all-too-brief precursor."

I rubbed my eyes with the backs of my hands, only to find that there were no tears to wipe away.

"Is there anything else I can help you with?" asked my host, ever polite.

I could think of only one thing that would help me endure an eternity of disappointment.

"Could I have a pint of beer whenever I watch a football match?"

"Are you sure you could actually drink one?"

My host's question seemed absurd, but when I licked my lips they seemed neither moist nor dry. Even more peculiar, when I tried to swallow, nothing happened; it was as if the reflex had been deleted from my repertoire of bodily functions. Like tears, come to think of it. Finally it dawned on me that thirst, and indeed hunger, were sensations that I would never experience again. No wonder the toilet didn't work -- I'd never have a reason to use it!

And if I didn't need to eat, drink or pee, then perhaps I no longer needed sleep. Thinking back, I realised that although I'd watched several football matches in swift succession, I didn't feel the slightest bit tired. Apparently I'd regained my World Cup stamina just when I needed it most.

My host glanced at his book. "Will that be all?"

"Yes, I think so," I replied. "Superb television, by the way. Best picture I've ever seen."

"I like to do right by my guests," he said as his face dissolved into the familiar crimson blizzard.

So I resumed my favourite pastime with renewed enthusiasm, if low expectations. I made myself watch every England game in sequence, expecting to continue in this vein until... well, indefinitely. It came as a shock, then, to discover that the last World Cup proper was held in 2066, when, needless to say, England lost to Germany in the final. After that came a long hiatus, which I attributed to World War Three. When I asked my host about that he smiled enigmatically and admitted that there had been "a bit of an influx".

My channel surfing soon revealed that international football began again in 2566, with the inauguration of the Solar System League. Hardly any of the original countries had survived the cataclysm, but I was delighted to find that some enterprising soul had renamed one of the Trojan asteroids Ingerland and established a football team there. A century later, the inhabitants converted the asteroid into a starship and set out on an interstellar tour.

Prompted by my host's helpful if agonizing hints about channel numbers, I followed Ingerland's progress in the Galactic Cup, despite group stages that spanned millennia. The last game I watched was shown on Channel 69966. Ingerland lost 6-5 on penalties in the quarter-final against Metatarsal Three.

It was ever thus -- and presumably would remain so forever more, amen.

Despairing, I thumbed "1966" on the remote control.

My host winced on hearing my piercing shriek, but gave me his usual exhortation.

"Onwards and upwards!"

Previously, I'd assumed he meant the higher channel numbers, but now it occurred to me that maybe my punishment wasn't supposed to be eternal after all. Could it be that my host was referring to a different metaphysical domain altogether?

"So, is there any way out of here?" I asked.

My host sighed for so long it made me think that eternity had no beginning as well as no end.

So that was that; I really was condemned to channel-surf futurity in search of football, safe in the knowledge that the game would be played until the Heat Death of the Universe. Even then, I'd doubtless watch some quantum life form or other improvising goal posts from the baryonic rubble. Given long enough, I'd find the right channel.

As in life, so in death.

But what if I behaved differently in death? Would that change things? Obviously, I couldn't resolve to give up drinking beer while watching football, as I'd already been deprived of that option, but who said I couldn't have some company? After all, my host was clearly a bit of a football fan on the quiet.

For the first time since arriving, I smiled back at him. "What do you say to watching a match or two with me?"

My host bared his fangs and snarled.

"Okay, I'll save you a place on the sofa," I said.

This time I caught a wink.

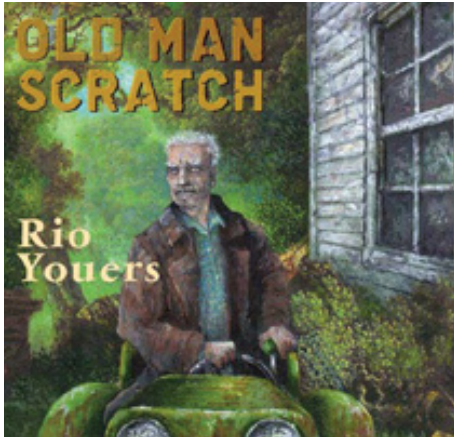
Onwards and upwards, just maybe.



REVIEWS

Old Man Scratch

reviewed by *sandra michaels*



by Rio Youers
PS Publishing,
£12 (hardcover), £25 (jacketed hardcover), late 2009

Remember when you first discovered Stephen King's short stories and novellas? Reading *Old Man Scratch* will take you back. A beautifully-written novella, again telling the story of the loss of a loved-one due to cancer, but told in a much different fashion.

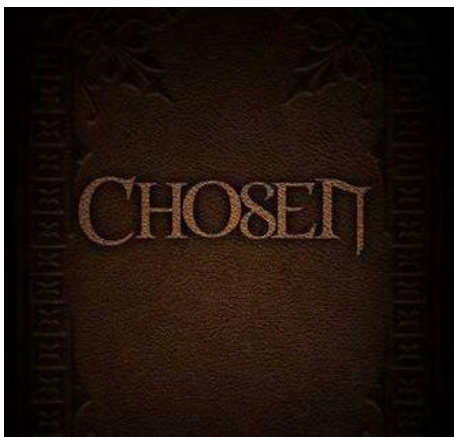
Our narrator – Johnny Gregson - lives next door to “Scratch” Clayton. Old Man Scratch is the coldest-hearted, meanest son of a bitch you could ever hope to meet. Retired, he gets up at 5.00am every day to mow his lawn, taking delight in the fact that it wakes - and annoys the hell out of - his much more reasonable neighbours, who only want to live their own retirement years in peace and quiet.

When Johnny's wife dies, her final weeks made deliberately uncomfortable by Scratch, Johnny decides to do something about his ornery neighbour, and perhaps the thing that lives at the bottom of the lane can help...

A highly enjoyable tale of wickedness, and revenge, *Old Man Scratch* is the perfect introduction to Youers' work.

Chosen

reviewed by *sandra michaels*



by Jerry Ibbotson
Media Mill,
£6.99, out now

Magic books, undead vicars, God and fondue forks are brought together in the story of Alex Preston: a grumpy, daydreaming office worker who finds a tunnel in the basement at work. It leads to a land full of magic and fantasy. Armed with a sleeping bag and a small torch, Alex leaves his family behind and sets off to explore.

It's not long before his adventure begins to unravel rather alarmingly and the story builds to an explosive climax. Alex finally discovers the meaning of real magic and learns that when love is stronger than fear, marvellous things can happen.

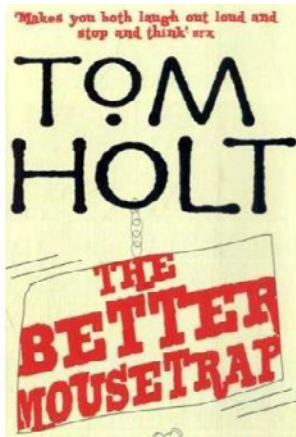
Well, that's the book blurb out of the way, and to be fair, it's a pretty good summary of the novel. Ibbotson has crafted a solid urban fantasy, and it's an enjoyable read. One gets the feeling that the author may have benefited from a little more editorial input (some passages – while well-written – would be improved by the liberal use of the delete key) but for a first novel it impresses.

Hub doesn't usually review self-published works, but we felt this title deserves more exposure.

Available direct from the author's website at: <http://www.jerryibbotson.co.uk/>

The Better Mousetrap

reviewed by martin willoughby



By Tom Holt
Orbit
Rrp £7.99

The light brown cover and the minimalist drawing on the front do not do this book justice. Neither does the blurb on the back, especially when it names the female lead as Jane, when in the book her name is Emily.

It's hard to discern whether this book is an SF comedy or a Fantasy comedy, but that doesn't matter as it is a fun read. It doesn't have the 'laugh out loud' moments of Terry Pratchett or Toby Frost, but it is endlessly amusing and inventive.

The title refers to a method of killing someone that, as far as anyone knows, can't be got round in any way shape or form, though how it works is not described. Unfortunately for the people using it on Emily/Jane, there is someone who has been hired to save her life who finds a way round it's mathematical perfection. He does so by using his portable door to...Nah, I'll let you find out.

Our man, Frank, realises in the course of saving her life that he's fallen in love with her. It's not a situation that he's comfortable with, or knows how to deal with. To be honest, neither does Emily/Jane.

Emily/Jane is a professional killer...of magical creatures. You would think that this involves all manner of derring-do, swords, magic spells etc. Not so. It more often involves a couple of small spells and lots of poison, though a magical sword does make an appearance later on.

How do they get to meet? I'm glad you asked as it revolves around life insurance.

Frank is hired by an insurance consultant to save his company millions of pounds in insurance payouts, and does so by going back in time, via his portable door, preventing the accident, saving lives and money. For this, he gets paid 10% of the payout that isn't actually paid out, but would have been paid out if the accident or death had occurred, but didn't because...I'll stop there.

Emily/Jane is insured for £11m and the insurance man, George Sprague, doesn't want to pay out. To avoid this he hires Frank, as he has so many times in the past, to prevent the death occurring. After several attempts to get round the Better Mousetrap, Frank saves her life. He is then called upon to save her again when she gets eaten by a spider. Someone desperately wants her dead. Who? You'll have to read the book to find out...MWAHAHAHAHA.

The main back story is about bauxite mines in New Zealand and an evil woman's plan to control the world price of bauxite. And she is nasty. She uses goblins, dragons and her own pathetic looking dog to win, but reckons without Frank's incompetence, Emily/Jane's professionalism and Tom Holt's desire to let the good guy/gal win.

The last half of the book is a rollercoaster ride of ups and downs, deaths, reincarnations, time travel, multiple portable doors and the dog being turned into a human being, but with a dog's loyalty and desire to run after sticks.

Throughout the book you'll come across several fantasy creatures, such as Dragons, and several SF concepts, such as Time Travel, all effortlessly melded into one coherent story.

All in all, it was an excellent read, funny and with a happyish ending that involves two teenagers, Frank, Emily/Jane, a mobile 'greasy Joe's' in New Zealand and £40m.

Zombieland

reviewed by richard whittaker



Directed by Ruben Fleischer

Written by Rhett Reese and Paul Wernick

Starring: Woody Harrelson, Jesse Eisenberg, Emma Stone, Abigail Breslin

When the zombie apocalypse comes (oh, and it will come), then if *Shaun of the Dead* taught us one thing, it's that English people will head to the pub. If *Zombieland* teaches us one thing, it's that Americans will find the same kind of comfort and succor in amusement parks.

Envision it as a psychotic sequel to Jesse Eisenberg's breakthrough comedy, *Adventureland*. He plays Columbus (not his real name – in the United States of Zombieland, the few survivors are known only by where it is that they are trying to reach, in his case Columbus, Ohio). He is, he admits, an unlikely survivor of the rising of the undead (“With my phobias and my irritable bowel syndrome”) but his introduction – and that of the film – is through his simple but obsessive rules for survival: All 47 of them. For example, fast zombies mean that cardio is very important, but even the slow ones mean that checking the back seat is always important. Oh, and always, always, always take a gun to the bathroom.

This is the nebbish take on the genre, and it's Eisenberg's dry narration that binds the film together and gives it a charming sense of the ridiculous. Take it out and replace it with the kind of dour, grumbling “We were the last of humanity blah blah blah” commentary that is the plague of so much end-of-the-world cinema and *Zombieland* wouldn't be half so much fun. Well, maybe an eighth less fun, because seeing a horde of walking corpses take an SUV in the face is always a blast. That's where arch-shit kicker Tallahassee (Harrelson) comes in, a man that has really found his niche in decapitating, demolishing, shooting, blasting, disemboweling, smashing, crashing and splatting zombies in the most entertaining way possible. Hey, everyone has a skill.

Out on the road, this odd couple has only each other and, of course, they hate each other. Columbus is dictionary-definition OCD, Tallahassee is a gleefully obnoxious goon. In fact, the only thing that they can agree on is that they have found two people even more annoying – Little Rock (Breslin, back on a twisted road after *Little Miss Sunshine*) and Wichita (Stone), a pair of free-wheeling grifters with trust issues and an annoying habit of stealing their guns and trucks. The only thing that binds them all together is the zombie holocaust.

This is the pure Americana of the road trip. In this case, the magical city of Oz at the end of the Yellow Brick Road has been replaced by the hokey cotton-candy pleasures of Pacific Playland. While Columbus wants to head home to find his parents, Wichita is the one holding the metaphorical cards and the very real guns, so she gets to dictate their direction. As for Tallahassee, well, anywhere there's a zombie to beat to death with a banjo, he's OK. Like Dorothy and her own oddball crew, everyone has their own quest to fulfill. The tough-but sensitive Wichita just wants to regain Little Rock's childhood by taking her to the most fun place she knows; The painfully virginal Columbus just wants to stroke the hair from over Wichita's ear; And Tallahassee would kill for a Twinkie (which, as he accurately points out, actually have a very short expiration date, and so he may be eating the last one in the universe).

But that's where *Zombieland* rises above the majority of zombodies (zombie-comedy and, yes, there are enough of them to merit their own mash-up genre name). There's just enough of a hint of loss to remind the audience that, for all the gore-splattered comedy, these are still probably the last people alive, clinging

to some sense of normality. It's carefully balanced amongst the laughs and carnage, but for an after school special-level message, it's done with enough delicacy to gnaw on the audience's heart strings once in a while.

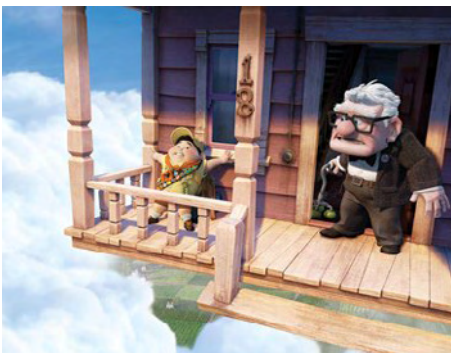
As for the bloodshed (and there's a lot of it, and it is hilarious), *Zombieland* has attended the *Dead Rising* school of zombie killing – anything with an edge or heft is suitable for undead-dispensing. That's where Harrelson comes into his own. This isn't just the former *Cheers* star channeling his inner Hillbilly: Instead, it's like Mickey Knox from *Natural Born Killers* finally found a world that's even nutsier than him and likes it. "What do you think?" he grins childishly to the rest of the survivors after a particularly wicked head shot, "Zombie kill of the week?"

For a Hollywood horror-comedy, the brakes are completely off, and there's a slick but devious glee to the mayhem. With a more pedestrian director, it could have peaked at the opening sequence, where humans are dispatched in a series of entertaining and slow-motion fashions courtesy of the recently departed (trust me, you'll never look at nipple tassels the same way again). But Fleischer keeps up the gumball joy, and then elevates the film at its midpoint with a remarkable celebrity cameo. It would be a cinematic sin to spoil the identity, but be satisfied in knowing that it's an appearance so gorgeous and unexpected that it probably has only been matched in recent years by Jean Claude Van Damme's career redefining turn in last year's *JCVD* – and probably before that it was Marcel Marceau in *Silent Movie*.

And, just remember: Zombie nipple tassels.

Up

reviewed by richard whittaker



Written and directed by Pete Docter and Bob Peterson

Starring: Ed Asner, Christopher Plummer, Jordan Nagai, Bob Peterson

Remember the old urban legend about the guy who went flying when he attached a few hundred helium balloons to his garden lounger? Make that lawn furniture an entire house, and you have the story of *Up*, the latest animated feature from Pixar.

With only one arguable clunker under its belt (the misfiring *Cars*) Pixar keeps raising its own bar. So while *Up* is another quantum leap in the technology of cinema, it has the challenge of making viewers care for a character as much as they did for Woody or Buzz or Nemo or Sully.

It's oddly fortunate then that the first twenty minutes of *Up* are amongst the most emotionally harrowing in cinematic history. On paper, Carl Fredricksen is a hard sell for the audience: A 78 year old man who communicates through grunts and mumbled cusses. He looks how Ed Asner sounds: A stocky, stodgy old guy who has spent his entire life selling balloons at the local zoo. But once upon a time, he was a little boy who met a little girl called Ellie, and they fell in love, and spent decades together in the little house that they bought together, and they always talked about flying away together, and then she died of old age. And the entire cinema bursts into tears.

Raised on the tales of two-fisted daredevil Charles F. Muntz (Plummer), Ellie and Carl always planned to run away to South America on a grand adventure. Muntz cut a Lindbergian figure in his aviation jacket and self-designed air ship, and couldn't be further from the earth-bound Carl. But a lifetime dream is a lifetime dream, and a promise is a promise, and he uses his leftover balloons to raise his home up, up, up into the air and off to Venezuela. Of course, nothing ever goes easy: First he picks up a couple of strays in the form of tubby Junior Wilderness Explorer Russell (Nagai), and Dug the talking dog (director Peterson

pulling double duty as the hound with the collar that translates his every SQUIRREL thought into sound). Then there's Kevin, a huge flightless bird who provides the comic relief of movie as Woody Woodpecker to Carl's Droopy Dawg. His bigger problem is that Muntz is still alive, still up in his air ship, and hunting the illusive giant bird that has evaded him for decades. So Carl has to rescue Kevin, protect Russell, and drag his house around with him on the end of a garden hose.

At its brass-plated heart, *Up* is a loving homage to classic adventure novels and pulp, complete with zeppelins, lost plateaus and mysterious creatures. In the Pixar canon, it's probably closest to the super hero action of *The Incredibles* (just without the disturbing Ayn Rand subtext). Yet heart is what this film really has going for it. Directors Docter and Peterson have been responsible for Pixar's most emotionally textured and bittersweet movies (Peterson scripted *Ratatouille* and *Finding Nemo*, Docter helmed *Monsters, Inc.*) and that's what they bring to *Up*. This is a movie where pretty much the first thing that happens is a young girl growing old and dying. This is *Love Story* sad, and that colors every frame that Carl is in. While it looks like a two-hander between a grumpy old man and an overly-enthusiastic child, it's really a conversation between Carl and Ellie. She's what he's dragging around with him, not the house.

That's what's special about this movie: It has something profound yet accessible to say about loss and mourning. Amidst the hilarity and whimsy, much of it courtesy of the Weeble-esque Russell and the Loony Toons antics of Kevin, Carl's emotional journey from widower to proxy grandfather may be the most tender journey Pixar has ever travelled.

The film also has a frickin' huge zeppelin which, as any fan of the pulps knows, is the coolest way to travel. Plummer adds a dashing air to Muntz, making him into a slightly senile version of the kind of mustachioed gallants that made Errol Flynn famous. In voice and design, he's the perfect antithesis to the squat Carl, but they remain aging duffers, trapped in their respective obsessions. In a medium that still remains child-friendly at heart, a movie about two old men dueling when one needs a walker to stand up may seem a tough sell. But instead everyone will root for the grumpy old grandpa when he sets his square jaw for adventure.

Up has probably pushed the art of contemporary 3D to a new level. So far, its use has been pretty gimmicky (and yes, we are looking at you, *The Final Destination*). What *Up* does is avoid having anything come out of the screen: Instead, it gives depth, making this the most immersive digital 3D film to date. That title may be snatched away in December by James Cameron's *Avatar*, but for UK audiences (who have had to wait an extra five months since the US release) this may be the best advert for shelling out for the polarizing glasses yet. When Muntz's airship glides over the rain forests, or when his cadre of talking dogs are stalking Kevin, what the effect does is add weight and believability to the events. Yes, you'll really believe that a house can fly.

Igor

reviewed by martin willoughby

Director: Anthony Leondis

Starring: John Cusak, Steve Bescemi, Eddie Izzard

I'm sitting here, watching the sun rise over the houses, the white cirrus clouds sitting placidly in the bright blue sky. The birds are singing and I can just about hear the sounds of the early morning traffic as commuters wend their way to work. Why? I've spent the whole night trying to think of something positive to say about Igor.

The animation is very good, flawless you could say. The vocal performances are mostly of a high standard and the ideas in the story are also above average. The story itself, about a hunchbacked servant



who wants to be more, is reasonably well told and although not new, is no worse than many others. It's also just over an hour long.

That's all I could come up with after spending six hours staring out of the window. The things I do for you lot.

Now for the bad points... oh where do I start? How about this: if I was given the choice of having my toenails pulled off by a sadist with a pair of rusty pliers, or watching Igor, I would watch Igor. It's not that bad, but it missed the mark in so many ways it was almost painful.

It's meant to be a comedy and it has amusing moments, but there are no sudden, 'hit me between the eyes', laugh out loud moments as the comedy takes too long in coming. Between the moment when the punchline is signposted and the event taking place I could read a novel. Or at least the leaflet telling what other films are on at the cinema that week. That is the fault of the director.

The characters are hardly going to be original in a movie about mad scientists, but that is no bad thing in my view, it's how you use them. The two side characters associated with Igor (Scamper and Brain) are woefully underused and could have made the film a lot better. Igor is pretty well covered, but the leading lady, Eva may as well not be there for all the screen time she gets.

The script is not wonderful, but the direction and the editing of it leave a lot to be desired. As for the actors, at the top end of the scale we have John Cusak and John Cleese, at the bottom end we have Mylene Klass. Yes I did say Mylene Klass.

Now, I have no personal grudge against the overpaid, obnoxious cow, but surely they could have done better, even if the part is only for a few seconds on screen. Hell, I'd have done it for fifty quid (forty at a push) and I do a reasonable female voice.

But she was far from being the worst. Eddie Izzard takes that accolade. Eddie is a fine comedian and a competent actor, but in this film he gives one of the worst vocal performances I have ever heard. It's almost as if he is trying to sound like Sacha Baron Cohen as King Julian in the two Madagascar films, but fails completely. What makes it worse is that he is playing a villain. He is not scary and sounds more like he wants to be your friend than the creepy, evil villain he's playing.

Whilst the animation is very good, in some aspects it seems to be paying homage, or ripping off if you prefer, 'A Corpse Bride', but in other ways it is a standard animation. The Igor character is what you'd expect in any other film, but several characters, including the King, look as if they have been dragged, kicking and screaming no doubt, from Tim Burton's mind.

I won't carry on listing faults and problems as it would make me weep.

The film has many shortcomings, and it isn't worth renting, let alone buying. However, if you are the last person in the queue at Blockbusters and the kids are desperate to watch something, rent it as it's better than nothing.

If you want to buy it and can get it for a pound, it's better than watching the rain slam into the windows on a wet Sunday in November... just.



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