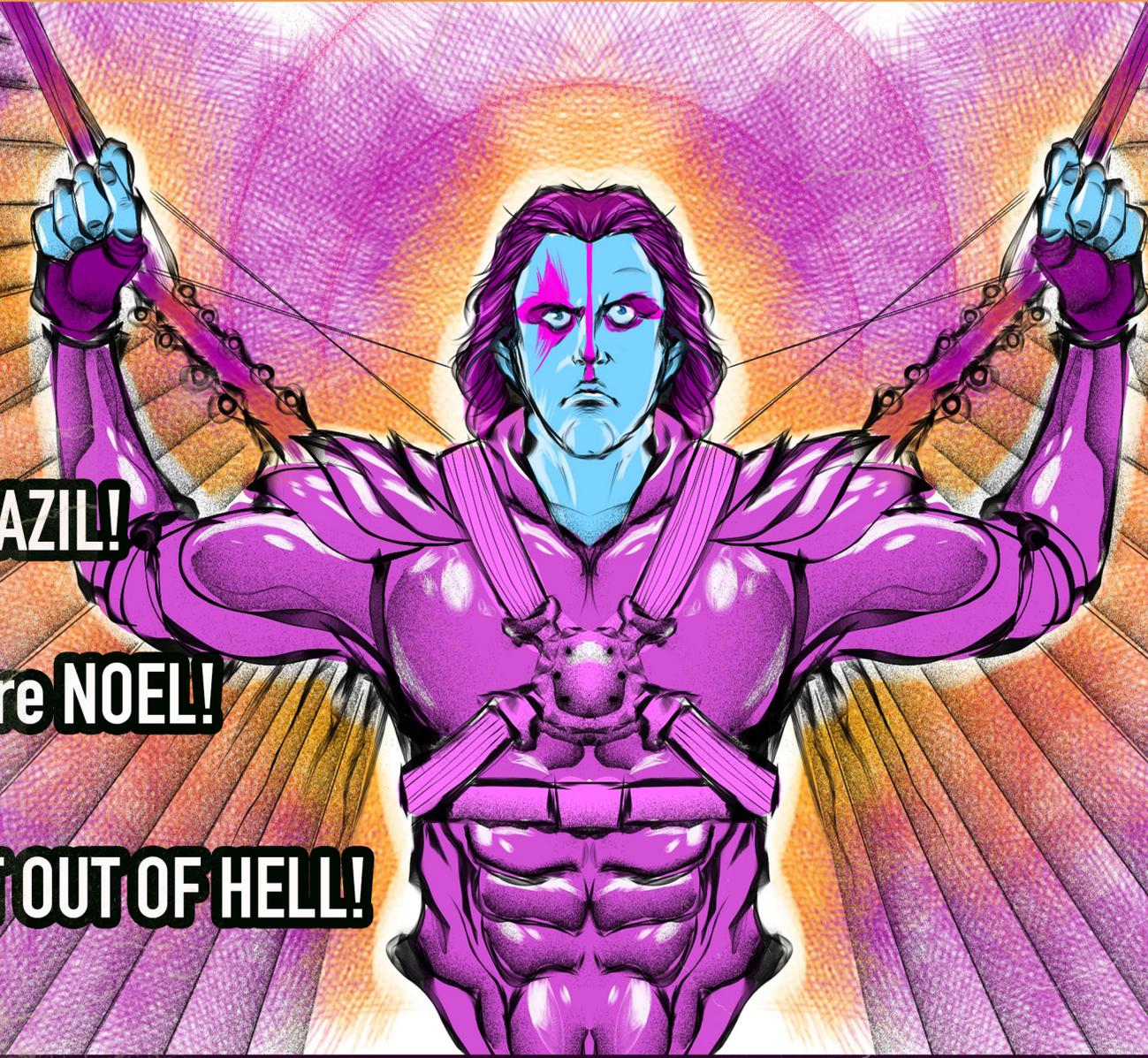


no. 3

PULP & POPCORN

by Drew McWeeny



BRAZIL!

More NOEL!

BAT OUT OF HELL!

AND THE VERY BEST OF 2016

Drew McWeeny's
PULP & POPCORN

Season One, Issue Three
January 11, 2017

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M A S T H E A D

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INTRODUCTION

“Rubber, Meet Road”

So here we are. Issue #3. It's a week later than I originally intended, but that's because of the way production works on both this and *'80s All Over*, the podcast I'm doing with Scott Weinberg and Bobby Roberts. Those shows take a fairly massive amount of research time for me for each episode as I rewatch movies, put together my notes, and then even sometimes reach out to filmmakers. I can't record one of those on the Monday of the week that I'm publishing this. They each require a certain amount of focus.

It's one thing to say, “Hey, I'm going to write original fiction each issue plus put together film criticism that is worth reading,” and it's another thing entirely to actually do it. I've let one of my muscles as a writer go soft over the last few years, and part of the reason for the format here is to force me to actually do it. No excuses. I have to have content, and I have to be happy with it, and that requires re-writing, and that means I can't put off the actual writing. Even so, I don't feel mentally exhausted all the time right now, the way I did the last few years. I had reached a point where most of what I did was a reaction, and that's no way to live as a writer. Everything was a reaction to some piece of “news,” and most of the news was marketing, and just having to muster some sort of coherent thought about the seventeenth piece of marketing for the fourth film in the third franchise to cover identical ground becomes an exercise in bullshit.

I wrote thousands and thousands and thousands of words every year, and I can tell you exactly where you'll find my most honest work during that time. You'll find it in the reviews, you'll find it in *Film Nerd 2.0*, and you'll find it in pieces I wrote about larger ideas at play in pop culture or fandom. I think I do very good interviews when I'm given time with someone, but I don't think the system is set up to allow for those types of interviews for the most part. Everything's oriented towards the sound bite, and the shorter the format, the better.

The one thing that HitFix offered me that I have grown accustomed to is security. Right now, there's nothing secure about my world. I moved into a new apartment this summer, just before HitFix fired me, and it's a fairly hefty rent. It's a rent that made perfect sense with the salary I was earning, but it became a sort of terrifying weight the moment I was without a steady income. More importantly, I have kids, and I'm suddenly unable to give them the health insurance and the stability that they rely on me to provide. That's the kind of thing that cuts very deep if you're a man in our society. We are told from the time that we are young that our worth is based on our work, on what we do, and on how much we make. The better we can provide, the better we are as people. When I was a young man, moving from one job to the next wasn't a big deal. It was expected. And I did ask to work in an industry where you are often moving from one unrelated job to the next. There is no security in being someone working in a creative field, and in the year 2017, I am less sure than ever how you set out to make a living doing any of this.

One of the things you'll see is that there's a store here at the site. We'll add merchandise for *'80s All Over* and *Pulp & Popcorn* over time, we'll run Amazon links to things we're talking about, and I'll be offering some e-books. For example, if you want a copy of *The Film Nerd 2.0 Guide To Star Wars*, which is simply a collection of those articles from our first viewing of the six films, then you will be able to get that later this week, and hopefully it's something you'll be able to share with people. I'm going to be experimenting with how I can self-publish things that you guys will be willing to pay for, as well as offering some things for free for those who aren't particularly interested in ponying up. I can't just lock everything behind a paywall, but I have to make sense out of the hours it takes me to put anything together at this point. When I picked up *The Hamilton Mixtape*, I hadn't heard anything off of it. I'm such a fan of the *Hamilton* soundtrack, though, and it's clear that Lin Manuel Miranda has been having a blast with the responses people have shared with him, particularly other artists. I was surprised how much I liked the *Mixtape*, though, and there are a few tracks in particular that nailed me. First and foremost among those is "I Wrote My Way Out," and I've gone back to that and "Audition," the exhilarating final track from *La La Land*, because both of them manage to express the urgency I'm feeling right now.

I'm not sure how many more times I'm going to be able to try to build something of my own. I'm not sure how long I can do this and stay afloat. I have responsibilities to my sons and to my girlfriend that outweigh my need to do something that is a personal expression of who I am and where I am as a writer in the year 2017, and while they're all rooting for me, and they've all been supportive of me, I still feel like I'm either about to fly or get crushed.

I've moved around some of the plans I had for what fiction to publish and what order to introduce things, but that's because I've been hoping to put my best foot forward. I originally mentioned that I'd be introducing *The Survey*, a science-fiction story, but I'm going to back-burner it instead, and I'm moving *Bat Out Of Hell* into the rotation. What, you may ask, is *Bat Out Of Hell*? Welllllllll... it was very nearly a Joe Dante movie, and there was a chance it might star Michael Clarke Duncan at one point. It did not get made for reasons I am still discussing with a therapist, but it's not because anyone had a problem with the script. Working with Joe and with his legendary producing partner Mike Finnell was a real honor. We didn't spend enough time with them, but working through a couple of drafts and getting a look at how Dante approaches material was enough for me to feel like the final draft reflected me, my co-writer Scott, and Joe as well, all in equal measure.

You've got chapter two of *Noel* here this week, as well as a new *Background*, and then *Bat Out Of Hell* wraps things up. Next week, we get chapter two of *The Shadow Box*, and I'll be curious to see how you guys feel about where that one's headed. It's one of the darkest things I've worked on, but hopefully for good purpose in the end. I feel like between *Djinn Rummy*, *The Shadow Box*, *Bat Out Of Hell*, and *Commander Future*, you get a good idea about where my interests lie as a storyteller. That's a whole lot of me on display all at once, and I'd love to hear from you about how you're reacting to it. Good, bad, curious... whatever. If I'm going to put the pedal to the floor on this idea and turn out all of this work, then I'm certainly open to the conversation with you guys about what you like and where things are going, especially if I'm going to start sticking price tags on things.

Finally, there's something I'm doing this week that I know many of us try to do as working film critics. I want to write about older films. Specifically, I want to write about older films that I love. In many cases, there are films that I refer to almost constantly that I have never reviewed. That's got to change, and I don't necessarily want to pretend that every film I want to write about is what I would call an essential or part of the larger canon of great films. All I know is that there are films I should review that I haven't, and I am kicking that off this week with *Brazil*, which was my favorite film of all time for a while. It was eventually supplanted by *Lawrence of Arabia*, but *Brazil* holds a very special place in my heart. I don't think I've ever really explained why, though, and I decided to kick off a new column called *Hindsight* with my review of what I still consider Terry Gilliam's most special creation. To celebrate writing about *Brazil*, Austin artist Neil Cook has contributed the illustration for this issue's cover, and I love it.

I appreciate every letter you guys have sent and every single one of you who has downloaded and read the work so far. I want you to know that I don't take a single reader for granted, and more than ever, I am viewing this as a back and forth. I'm hoping you enjoy these new things I'm doing, because I feel like they are transforming me as a writer, and it's exciting to get that kind of buzz from putting pen to paper again. Dig in. There's plenty here, and I'm dying to share it all with you.

BAT OUT OF HELL
based on a screenplay
by Drew McWeeny & Scott Swan

1 / BUDDY

It is safe to say that on the list of the thirty worst places on Earth, LAX will always place in the top five and, depending on traffic and construction, could easily take first. Considering it is supposed to be an airport servicing one of the largest cities on Earth, that's not good.

When Buddy Kitchens pulled up to the departures curb, he hesitated for a moment, knowing that the moment he opened the door, everything was going to be different. He would never be able to take things back. Until he opened it, he still had options. He could try to win back everything he'd lost. He could find some way to clear his name, and he would do whatever penance it took, and he would get it all back. He laughed at the thought, though, knowing that was a fantasy, and whether he opened the door or not, everything he used to be was gone.

Even before he opened the door of the Lamborghini, people were looking. After all, it was a beautiful car, and he'd had it tricked out so it sounded like a dragon. Then he opened the door and he climbed out, one lizard-skinned cowboy boot at a time. The smokers gathered outside, stealing one last cigarette before they had to fly, glanced over, and Buddy couldn't blame them. He knew what a striking figure he was. That was something he had worked on for most of his career, and even though that was over now, he couldn't just switch it off. After all, Buddy stood 6'9", weighed in at just under 300 pounds, and his muscles had muscles that had muscles. He had sculpted his body with care, and he dressed to make sure that no one missed any of it. He was just shy of his 40th birthday, but he was in the best shape of his life.

That wasn't the main reason people were looking, though, and as he walked around to the back of his car to retrieve his carry-on, he heard various whispers from people who were using their cell phones to take pictures and video of him. He heard his name. "Murderer." "Disgusting."

He pretended not to hear any of it, but the words stung, and when there were a few flashes, he had a moment where he felt out of time, where he felt like he was back in the ring, his blood and sweat running down his face, in front of a crowd. Then there was another flash, and he was being led away from his house, handcuffed, blood on his shirt, but this time, it wasn't his, and then there was one more flash, and Buddy was back, standing on the curb at the airport, and he had to push everything else out of his mind. No time for that.

As he started to walk away, he saw one old smoker standing by himself, paying no attention to Buddy, savoring a Winston. "Hey, old dude," Buddy called out.

The smoker looked over, annoyed. "Who, me?"

Buddy gestured at the car. "Whattaya think?"

"I think you're gonna get towed if you leave that there."

Buddy threw his keys, and the smoker caught them, surprised by his own reflexes.

"What do you want me to do with it?" he asked.

Buddy shrugged. "Whatever you want. It's yours now."

Inside, things were finally winding down for the night, but it was still busy as people caught the last wave of flights for the east coast. People checked bags, claimed their boarding passes, complained their way through heavy lines. As Buddy swept into the terminal, people moved out of his way, with plenty of double-takes and dirty looks. When he got in line, he was keenly aware of the way the family a few places in front of him couldn't stop staring. He tried not to stare back. He knew it was going to be bad, and he had to just suck it up and take whatever abuse anyone hurled his way. It was all part of the plan.

When it was finally his turn, Buddy stepped up to the TransAmerican desk and handed over his passport. The ticket clerk, Janet, read his name before really looking up at him. As soon as she did, she started trembling, freaked out. “Mr. Kitchens, would you... would you wait here? Please? For a moment?” Even as she asked, she was already backing away.

“Oh, come on. Just check me in.” He sighed, knowing what was next, and sure enough, when Janet returned, she was with her supervisor, a narrow-faced balding guy who looked like he was smelling something bad. He tried a smile, but it did not look like it belonged on his face.

“Hi, sir. How are you tonight?”

Obviously not fantastic, Buddy replied, “Fantastic.”

“I just need to check a few things.”

“It’s a ticket. I bought it. I’m flying. I just want to check in and go to my gate.”

The supervisor ran through a few different screens, not even looking at Buddy’s ticket. Janet looked over his shoulder, and the two of them spoke in low, hushed tones. Finally, Janet pointed at something. “You see? He’s not on the no-fly list.”

“Go figure.” The supervisor shook his head as he handed Buddy’s passport back to Janet. She printed out his boarding pass, then circled his seat assignment and handed everything back to him.

Buddy couldn’t believe she bothered smiling as she did so. “Have a nice flight, sir.” She practically snarled that last word, and Buddy started to walk away.

As the couple that was in line behind him stepped up, he heard the guy ask nervously, “What flight is he on?”

Buddy didn't hear Karen's answer, but he did hear the guy continue. "Well, is there any way we can change our tickets?"

As Buddy got in line for security, the flight crew for TransAmerican 7340 were checking in as well. Bill Wheeler, one of the pilots, rode an escalator up, taking the opportunity to check out the stylish young Japanese woman in front of him. When she glanced back, he didn't make any special effort to avoid getting caught. Instead, he smiled. "Taking the red eye?"

She nodded and smiled back, and he pressed his luck. "Try to get some sleep. Always works for me." When her smile erupted into a laugh, he joined her.

The TSA lines at LAX may actually qualify as one of Dante's circles of Hell, and even at the end of the day, they're often jammed for a half-hour or more. Matthew Collins, a burly guy in his early 50s, wrestled a large steel sample case up onto the conveyer belt. He waited until he was motioned through the metal detector, and went to retrieve his case.

The TSA worker facing him was a bored girl in her late 20s, but even paying as little attention as possible, she couldn't miss his weird twitchy manner or the sweat on his brow. She looked over at the scanner where his bag showed up as an x-ray negative. Cynique looked at Navid, who sat at the scanner, and he shrugged, unsure what they were looking at. She had no choice. She called over Hugh, her supervisor, and showed him the image on the screen.

Hugh turned to Collins, with his broad friendly face trying desperately to hold onto a casual smile. "Sir, I need to open your bag."

"Really? Why?"

Hugh didn't like that answer at all. He lifted the bag off the belt, stepping in front of Collins to do so, and walked to a nearby table. Collins stayed close, another thing Hugh didn't like. "Sir, please... stand back."

Cynique pointed where she wanted Collins to stand, and he reluctantly stepped a few feet away, watching as Hugh opened the bag.

Inside were several rows of crucifixes. Different shapes and sizes and styles. Some plastic. Some heavier. Hugh lifted out a few of them to inspect them closer. “So... you really like Jesus, huh?”

Collins handed over a folder, and as soon as Hugh opened it, he realized he had overstepped. “I filed all the TSA paperwork. These are registered historical objects, and I can’t check them. These are carry-on only. And you’re not supposed to be handling them,” Collins pointed out, even as Hugh was already putting everything back and closing up the case.

“Sorry about that,” Hugh said.

“It’s fine,” Collins said, and he still looked twitchy, nervous. Now it seemed less sinister to Hugh, though.

“I would imagine flying with those gives you some sense of confidence, right? Must make you feel safe.”

“What would really make me feel safe is not flying, frankly,” said Collins as he lifted the case and started to walk away. “But at 20,000 feet, I’ll take any help I can get.”

On the tarmac, planes taxied around to find their place in the queue while baggage handlers shoveled piles of luggage into the cargo holds. Mechanics made their last minute adjustments, and delivery fans came and went in little flurries of activity. As one van pulled up to TransAmerican 7340, Erin Bloom climbed down from the driver’s seat. In her early 20s, she was a spry brunette with a ponytail and glasses, and she was well aware of the way the rest of the delivery crew watched her ass as she started to move the food and beverage carts from the van to the plane.

Finally, annoyed, she turned to look directly at them. “Hey, fellas, how ‘bout a hand?”

That spurred them into action, and they hurried to help her.

One guy noticed the bumper sticker on the back of the van as he closed the doors. “My other car is a Tardis.” He looked over at Bloom, curious.

“I wish,” she said. The guy took the paperwork from Bloom and made sure everything was in order, trying to be subtle about stealing looks at her as he did so. When he handed the paperwork back over, signed, she could see he was steeling his nerve and she resigned herself to what was coming next.

“So, uh, when you’re done here, what are you doing? Some of us like to...”

“I’m going hunting with my boyfriend,” she said, still smiling, as she took the clipboard and climbed back into the van.

Buddy stopped by one of the newsstands on his way to his terminal, hoping to kill a little time. He wasn’t really seeing the covers of the magazines as he browsed. He was thinking about everything he still had to do tonight, thinking about how many things would have to go right and how many things could possibly go wrong. He glanced over at the cashier, who was staring directly at him, any pretense at being subtle long since gone.

Buddy grumbled, “Can I help you?” but even that didn’t dissuade her. He walked further down the magazine rack, and as he picked up a Maxim, someone tapped him on the back. Buddy could tell from the angle that it was a kid, and when he turned around, he found a ten year old kid named Jason standing there. “What do you want, little man?”

“Are you Buddy Kitchens?”

Anyone who wasn't already looking in his direction turned when the kid asked the question, and Buddy grimaced. "Mmm-hmm."

"That's awesome. Can I have your autograph?" Jason held out a tabloid with two photos of Buddy on the cover, side-by-side.

One was a photo of Buddy in court, wearing a suit, looking more conservative than Buddy had ever looked before in his life. The headline on that one read "HOW BLOODY BUDDY FOOLED THE JURY!" Next to it was a photo of Buddy in the ring during his stint as a WWE superstar, wild-eyed and smeared in blood and sweat, and on that, the headline "AND HOW WE KNOW HE'S GUILTY!"

No matter what he did next, Buddy knew people would tell the story, and they'd probably bend it to fit their version of things anyway. He tried to make it sound polite as he said, "I don't have a pen, kid." He set down the magazine he'd been looking at and started to walk away.

"Hey, Buddy," the kid said, and he had no choice. He looked back, hoping the kid wouldn't say anything too awful. "I believe you."

He looked the kid in the eyes, and he could see that the kid really meant what he said. This time, when Buddy smiled at him, he meant it as well.

Instead of leaving the airport, Bloom drove her van into one of the parking garages that made up the center of the LAX semi-circle. She parked and climbed into the back, then quickly set to work shedding her uniform and dressing in street clothes. She pulled on jeans and a t-shirt and started to pull on her Chuck Taylors when the back door of the van flew open with a bang, making her jump.

Jim Tacket, permanently pissed off and prematurely balding to boot, climbed up next to her and closed the door.

"You scared the shit out of me," she said as she laced up the shoes.

“I like your outfit.”

“Well, that’s my first concern, Jim. I really want you to be happy with the shirt I picked.” He could hear the edge in her voice. “You get the tickets okay?”

He held up their boarding passes and smiled. “Good to go. See?”

She caught him looking at her chest more than the t-shirt pulled over it, but this time, she wasn’t upset by it. “You know this might be it, right?”

“I know.”

“We might not come back from this.”

“I know.”

She waited for him to say something, then let loose an exasperated sigh. “That’s kind of hot.”

He nodded. “I know.”

Both of them feeling the same tension and fear, hoping for some sort of comfort, they reached for each other, and as they kissed, it felt like goodbye.

Terminal 45A was fairly busy, with at least 50 people standing and most of the seats taken by everyone waiting for the flight, with the adjoining restaurants all full. Buddy walked in and looked around, sizing up the other passengers. Collins found two empty seats together so he could put his case up on the seat next to him. There was a guy with an irritating man-bun working on a laptop sitting by himself, skinny, well-dressed but rumped. Buddy was surprised when a very striking Japanese woman walked up, carrying coffee for herself and for Mr. Man-Bun.

Jen Shimokawa sipped her coffee as she looked over Tim Hawk’s shoulder at the screen of his laptop. “Is that tomorrow’s schedule?”

“Yes. Working on the order for the arrivals tomorrow night.”

“Make sure you e-mail whatever you’ve done so far to Terri before we leave. She has to coordinate transpo on her end.”

Buddy smiled as he walked by, figuring that only business would give a woman like that a reason to talk to a guy with that haircut. He found an empty seat next to a buttoned-down businessman, but hesitated when he saw the guy’s jacket there.

Warnock retrieved his jacket and gestured for Buddy to take the seat without taking a break from his phone conversation. “Right. Right. Well, listen, I have to go. I love you. I’ll call you when I get there. Right. Okay. Bye.”

Buddy dropped into the seat, and every other chair in the row shook from the impact.

Tacket and Bloom walked into the terminal, but separately, not looking at each other, staying as far away from each other as possible. They stood, waiting to check in, each of them completely alone.

The gate clerk perked up as she saw two pilots approach. Douglas, the older and fatter of the two, was bright red, face flushed from walking. Next to him was Wheeler, his younger co-pilot, who couldn’t resist taking a look at Shimokawa as he walked by, never pausing in his conversation. “So I get the call two hours ago about your co-pilot coming down with some stomach flu...”

“Don’t worry about it,” Douglas said. “This is a cake run. We’ll have you back tomorrow.”

“Hey, it is what it is. I’m on call. They called. Whatchagonnado?”

The pilots headed out the loading doors and onto the plane, and the gate clerk picked up her mic for an announcement.

“We’re about ready to begin our pre-boarding procedure for Flight 7430, and we’d like to invite anyone requiring special assistance or traveling with small children to come on up. Our first class and premium class luxury passengers will begin boarding in just a moment. Welcome aboard.”

Warnock stood and shrugged on his jacket. He looked at Buddy, expectantly, and Buddy shook his head. “No more first class for me, man.”

“That’s a shame,” Warnock said. “It’s the only way to fly.”

Onboard the plane, the first-class chief attendant was Randi, still in her 20s but determined to make management in the next few years. She had her uniform tailored specifically to show off her shape, but also so she was strapped down, impossible to muss. She greeted Wheeler and Douglas as they stepped aboard, helping them stow their carry-ons directly behind the cockpit. Douglas headed into the cockpit as Wheeler stopped for a moment, checking out the plane. It was the standard layout for a wide-body A300. He stood there in the mid-ship galley at the entry doors, and he looked back at the sixteen rows of coach, six seats in each row, divided by the middle aisle. At the very back of the plane was a rear galley and the coach lavatories. He looked forward at the sixteen-seat first class, four rows of four, divided by the same center aisle. There were four first-class lavatories, and then the cockpit. Wheeler retrieved his glasses, then headed up and dropped into the co-pilot’s seat next to Douglas.

For a long moment, Douglas just sat silent, considering Wheeler as he began to run his pre-flight checks. Douglas sat silent long enough that Wheeler began to get uncomfortable.

Finally, in his most somber voice, Douglas asked, “You’re not a farter, are you?”

Wheeler wasn’t sure how to respond, and the look on his face made Douglas laugh.

“I only ask because the last sub they sent me was a farter. Even worse... he was an *onion* farter.”

Wheeler laughed as well. “No. No, I am not.”

“Then we’re going to get along just fine.”

As passengers began to file in, only a few of them turned left and headed up into first class. There was plenty of room for each of them. Hawk and Shimokawa took seats together in one row. Warnock walked in and gave the two of them a familiar glance that no one else noticed, taking a seat one row behind them. When Tacket walked into first class, he walked up to the front row and tucked his bag into the overhead bin. He smiled at Randi. “Excuse me, miss, can I get a water and a pillow? I want to take my sleeping pill before we take off.”

She went to get it, and Tacket watched her go, then looked over and caught Warnock watching her just as closely. Muldoon, a brawny guy in his 30s wearing an expensive sweater and old torn-up jeans, settled into the back row, spreading out immediately and getting comfortable.

The coach passengers began to board by zones, and as they filed on, one tightly-wound businessman stopped, looking at the empty seats in first class. He tried to get Randi’s attention as she grabbed a cold bottle of water for Tacket. “Miss,” he kept saying, and just the way he said that one word was enough to make her grit her teeth. “Miss, this is bullshit. It really is. I got bumped from first class. I can see there are seats available. Please. Miss?”

Only after she handed the water to Tacket did she bother even looking at Sloan, who was practically in tears he was so upset. “I’m supposed to be in first!”

She looked at his ticket. “No, sir. That’s row six. That the first row of our economy cabin.”

“But that’s not what I paid for.”

“It’s what you have on your boarding pass, sir, and that’s really all I can judge. That says you sit in there, and that’s what we’re going to go by, okay?”

Sloan looked at the open first class seats, and he heard the grumbling from the people waiting to get on the plane behind him, and he gave in, furious, and snatched his ticket back from Randi, heading back to claim his window seat.

A badly-dressed fat man in his 50s pushed his way past everyone and settled into the very last row of the plane. Vaughn was used to flying, and he made sure to stow his bag and get his seat first, getting out of everyone else’s way. A few rows ahead, a dapper old man settled into his seat. On the other side of the aisle from him, ten-year-old Jason sat holding a stack of just-purchased comic books. He appeared to be traveling alone. Collins found his seat midway back in the cabin, all the way over towards the left-hand wing. He had two seats to himself.

The dapper old man smiled as he watched Collins try to get comfortable. He was still nervous and sweaty, trying some deep breathing to get control of things. “Not a big fan of flying, eh, son?” the old man asked. Collins didn’t respond. He was too focused on his own panic to realize the old man was speaking to him. More passengers filled in around them, including Bloom, who took her seat directly behind Collins.

The old man tried again, leaning over towards Collins. “At least it looks like we’ll have room to get comfortable, right?” Collins finally looked over at the old man, so cleanly-pressed and well-kept, and he knew he must look horrible, clammy and pale.

“It’s not the flying that worries me. It’s the possibility of that sudden not-flying. I’ve seen the footage. And I’m fine until I’m onboard, and then that’s all I can see, right?” He took a series of deep breaths. “Thank you. It’s nice of you to give a shit.”

“We’re all in it together.”

As Buddy finally stepped onboard, almost everyone else was already in their seats. The effect on the passengers as he entered was palpable. Everyone got quiet. Buddy filled the entire aisle as he made his way along. He had to bend to keep from bumping his head. Everyone wanted to see where he was going to stop, who was going to be stuck next to him.

He stopped at the end of a row. Checked his boarding pass. On one side of the aisle, two guys sat, one in the window seat, one on the aisle. They both looked at the empty seat between them, anxious about it. On the other side, it was just Sloan, sitting in the window seat. He looked over, already annoyed, but when he saw just how big Buddy was, he went a little green.

“You’re on the aisle,” Buddy said.

“No, I’m not,” Sloan whined. “I’m supposed to...” He looked at Buddy and stopped himself from saying anything further.

“You’re on the aisle,” Buddy said again, and Sloan stood up and moved to the aisle.

Buddy waited until Sloan was seated, and then he pushed past him, practically crushing his legs as he did so. Finally, Buddy dropped into the window seat, but enough of him spilled over that Sloan was crushed into his seat.

Sloan looked around at the completely empty aisles elsewhere on the plane, waiting for someone to speak up on his behalf. No one seemed interested in provoking Buddy, though.

The best he could muster was a sigh that said this was the most inconvenient thing ever.

Buddy pushed his carry-on under the seat in front of him, then put on his seatbelt, pulling the poor thing as far as possible without breaking. As he tried to get comfortable, he leaned into Sloan, and once again, Sloan sighed loudly to try to make it clear how big a problem it was.

Quietly, Buddy said, "Better knock that off."

Sloan replied, "I'm not doing anything."

Buddy took off his sunglasses and looked at Sloan, and just that was enough to make Sloan flinch back, suddenly nervous. "Do you have a problem with me sitting here?"

"No. No. It's not you. It's just..." He looked around, trying to pick his next words carefully. "... there are so many open seats."

Buddy held up his ticket and pointed at the seat number. "My ticket says this is my seat."

"Yeah, but..." He realized that there was nothing he could say that wasn't going to end terribly, so instead, he just sighed again.

When Buddy spoke again, he was even quieter, and Sloan had to lean in a bit to hear him. "You make that sound again, and I'll punch one of your lungs flat."

Without another word, Sloan stood up, grabbed his bag from the overhead, and then moved to an empty row on the other side of the cabin. Buddy glared after him until he was gone, and then put his sunglasses back on and settled into his chair.

In the rear galley, two flight attendants stood together, watching the ripples that Buddy Kitchens sent through the rest of the cabin. Camille was the more experienced of the two, but Arlene was far more strident in general. She shook her head, disgusted. "I heard he paid his lawyers 3 million dollars," Arlene said. "Bet he's never flying first class again."

“That is so sad,” Camille said.

“Sad? He killed his family,” Arlene said, practically spitting it out.

“He was found innocent.”

Arlene made an exasperated sound. “They don’t find people innocent, Camille. He was acquitted. All that means is that they couldn’t get the jury to send a famous person to jail.”

“Seems like a good reason to get famous.”

In the first class cabin, Randi picked up the mic and turned on the speaker system. “Good evening, everyone. Welcome aboard our nonstop flight to New York, and thank you for choosing TransAmerican Airlines.” She smiled out at the first class passengers, who were all already wrapped up in their own bubbles.

In coach, a college-aged stoner kid with visibly red eyes and a perma-grin, unpacked his iPad, his iPod, his Kindle, and a big Ziploc freezer bag filled with munchies, setting it all on the seat next to him. He glanced over at Bloom, who sat across the aisle from him, and saw that she was lip-synching everything Randi said over the loudspeaker. “We have secured the cabin doors and we are cleared for take-off. Make sure your carry-on luggage is stowed, your seatbelts are fastened, and your chairs are in their full upright position.” The stoner laughed and Bloom looked over, suddenly self-conscious.

“Sorry,” she said, smiling. “I fly waaaaaaaay too much.”

As Wheeler and Douglas finished the last of their instrument checks, Wheeler ran through the final back-and-forth with the tower. Finally, he turned to Douglas. “Ready to go. Runway six is open.”

Randi took a quick walk through first class, making sure everyone had their seatbelts fastened. In the economy cabin, Camille ran through the safety demonstrations, bored and doing her best to get through it quickly.

The plane rumbled slowly out onto the runway.

Randi took the jump seat in the front while Camille and Arlene buckled into their seats in the aft galley.

Then, with little fanfare, the plane lifted off, leaving LAX behind.

As soon as they reached their cruising altitude, Randi was up and checking in on the first class passengers. In the aft galley, Camille and Arlene prepared the beverage cart to get ready for the first drink service. The moment the seatbelt sign was off, Collins was up and in motion, still sweaty and uncomfortable. He had to push past them to get to the bathroom, and Camille flinched back when he actually dripped sweat on her. As he locked the door, she turned to Arlene.

“That guy is seriously tweaked out. I’m getting a bad vibe off of him.”

“Great,” Arlene sighed. “Just what we need.”

Randi made another pass up the center aisle. She saw that both Warnock and Muldoon were asleep. Hawk and Shimokawa spoke softly to each other, discussing something on his laptop screen. Tacket lay with his seat reclined completely, blanket on. Just as she walked by, the alarm on Tacket’s watch went off. BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

And in the cockpit, another alarm went off at the same time. BEEP. BEEP. BEEP. This was Wheeler’s watch, though. He shut it off, smiled over at Douglas. “Okay... if I’m going to stay sharp, I’m going to need some of that coffee.” Wheeler leaned back to where there were two coffee cups waiting on a small fold-down table.

He glanced at Douglas, who wasn't paying attention, and with a quick, practiced motion, he pulled a syringe out of his sleeve, uncapped it, and started to depress the plunger to empty the contents of the syringe into Douglas's cup.

Douglas looked over, about to speak, and spotted the syringe.

Wheeler saw Douglas saw him, and before Douglas could even speak, Wheeler swung his arm around and tried to stab the syringe directly into Douglas's leg.

Douglas caught his wrist and twisted it. In doing so, Douglas also opened the mic to the tower just in time for Wheeler to bark, "MotherFUCKER!" Wheeler smashed the button to turn the mic off again and they struggled for a moment. Wheeler yanked Douglas out of his chair and both of them collapsed to the floor, leaving Wheeler on top, pushing down with his full weight. Wheeler managed to stab the needle into Douglas's neck and then pushed the plunger all the way down, clapping his hand over the pilot's mouth as he tried to scream.

It was only a matter of seconds, but Wheeler felt like everything was out of control, and he panicked. He snapped the needle off in Douglas's neck trying to pull the syringe free. Douglas bit his hand, and Wheeler pulled it away.

"You're not taking this plane!" Wheeler yelled, and he reached out and hit the controls to dump the fuel. Wheeler punched Douglas savagely in the back of the head and the side until he blacked out, and then he hit the same buttons. Almost half the tank had dumped in that one moment, though, and Wheeler cursed under his breath. He pulled out a Nextel and typed a quick message.

Throughout the plane, a series of similar devices went off, a single tone to announce an incoming message. Bloom got the message. Collins got his in the bathroom. Tacket as well. Each of them looked, read the same thing.

Pilot dumped fuel. Won't make it till dawn. PLAN B.

This changed everything, and each of them had to make their peace with what it meant, knowing it was going to be worse than they originally planned. Wheeler checked to make sure the cockpit door is sealed. He took out a crucifix and a rosary and hung them from the co-pilot's controls, settling into the pilot's seat instead. It was his cockpit now. It was his plane.

As the lights of the plane went into sleep mode, much of the main cabin went dark. Individual reading lights snapped on, and some passengers opened their laptops or turned on the small screens in the back of the seat in front of them. Many of them were already asleep or on their way there.

Jason was restless in that way that only ten-year-old boys can be restless. Awake and exhausted in equal measure, not sure if he wanted to watch something or get up and run around the aisles. He finished his final comic book, then looked around for a fresh distraction. He saw that the dapper old man was reading a paperback. "What's that?"

The old man smiled and held up his copy of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Love In The Time Of Cholera*.

"Wanna trade?" Jason chirped. He held up his Hulk and Devil Dinosaur comics. At first, the old man just kept smiling, sure that Jason was kidding. When he realized the boy was serious, he considered it for a moment, then handed over his book. Jason handed him back the comic books, then turned to the start of the book and started reading.

Collins was still in the bathroom, splashing water on his face periodically. "Don't think of it as a plane," he told himself. "Think of it as a big bus. There's no reason to be afraid of a bus, right?" As something made some mechanical sound deep in the guts of the plane, Collins cursed and crossed himself. "It's just a big bus. It's just a big bus. It's just a big bus."

There was a sound from the darkness of the coach cabin, and it took a moment for Sloan to make sense of what he was hearing. CHKT! CHKT! CHKT!

Then there was a sudden warm swell of light and he realized it was someone striking a lighter. Sloan stood up to look, unable to believe what he was hearing. Then he saw a smaller warm glow in the darkness, the cherry on the end of a freshly-lit cigarette. “Are you kidding me?” he said, more to himself than anyone else.

When the ember stoked again, he got a better look at the smoker, and he wasn’t even slightly surprised to see that it was Buddy Kitchens, just openly enjoying his cigarette. Sloan looked around to see if anyone else was offended, but almost everyone seemed to be asleep. Buddy took his time, savoring each draw. Finally, Sloan couldn’t resist. “You know that’s against Federal law, right?”

Buddy didn’t answer, but he did blow a near-perfect smoke ring that rolled lazily across the cabin before dissipating in Sloan’s face.

Nearly gasping in disbelief, Sloan began to mash the call button for the flight attendants.

Arlene and Camille, who were busy preparing the meals they would have to serve within the hour, heard the call button go off, and just the way it was going off made them both look up. Arlene shook her head. “That can’t be good.”

From his vantage point in the back row, Vaughn watched Sloan mashing the button repeatedly. He heard it going off in the galley behind him. He watched Buddy sit and casually smoke. He saw Camille poke her head out of the galley. When she stepped back into the galley, she was laughing. “Oh, my god, he’s smoking.”

Before Arlene could answer, Vaughn stepped into the galley. “I’ve got this, ladies.”

He walked up the aisle and took a seat across from Buddy, unbuttoning his sports coat as he sat down. He didn’t even look over as he spoke to Buddy. “Hey, champ... let me show you something.”

Vaughn took out a Federal Air Marshall badge and flashed it so only Buddy could see it. “You know what this means?”

“You fly for free?”

Buddy could see that Sloan was desperate to intrude and learn what was happening, but Vaughn kept his voice low so that only Buddy heard him. “It means I get to shoot you. See, I don’t care who you are. I’m not sure if you’re trying to make a point or you’re just the stupidest person who ever got a plane. Whatever the case, put that out and hand it over.”

Buddy considered his options for a moment, then smiled. He put his cigarette out on the seat in front of him, then handed it over, along with the lighter. “Sorry. I didn’t know there was a rule.”

“Shut up. Go to sleep. Don’t cause any more trouble. You make another peep, the entire rest of this flight, and I will take you into custody. Understand?” Buddy nodded at him, still smiling. “Good boy.”

Vaughn got up and walked back to his seat, and Sloan gave Buddy the most insufferably smug look possible, pleased to have gotten Buddy in trouble. Standing at the threshold between first-class and economy class, Tacket watched the entire thing go down, and he quickly typed a message into his own Nextel and sent it.

AIR MARSHALL. BACK ROW. FAT GUY. CHEAP SUIT.

The same group of people glanced down at Nextels of their own, quickly taking in the information, filing it away, each of them still bracing themselves for what was about to happen. As drink service moved through the coach cabin, nothing else happened, and both Camille and Arlene relaxed a bit. Then Camille noticed the lavatory door finally open. Collins stepped out, pale but more composed than he had been.

“Can I help you with anything, sir?”

Collins shook his head, already worn out from the emotional turmoil of the flight. “No. I just need to shut my eyes for a bit.”

Wheeler had just started to relax when there was a squawk, and he heard the sound of Air Traffic Control calling. “TransAmerican-two-three-lima-golf; this is Denver Tower. Please respond.” They repeated the call sign. “Are you there?”

Randi worked alone in the fore galley, preparing a few meals. Most of her cabin was asleep, but she had a few people she was paying attention to, and she loved this kind of flight. She turned from the microwave to find Tacket standing directly behind her. She jumped, and then yelped at the sting of something in her stomach.

She looked down and saw a syringe sticking out of her, and she was confused by it. She looked at Tacket, puzzled as much as anything. “What... did you...”

She pitched forward into his arms, and he looked to see if anyone else from first class was paying attention. He quickly dragged her to one of the first class lavatories and then stepped in with her.

He worked fast, binding her hands with a zip tie. She wasn’t out completely yet, but the drug was working on her, and she was fading fast. She kept trying to talk. “Why... why did you...”

He shushed her. “It’s not about you. Quiet now.” She was gone, though, and he simply leaned her in the corner, made sure she wouldn’t be too uncomfortable, and then stepped back out. He closed the door and saw the “occupied” light come on.

In the cockpit, the ATC tower kept calling, and Wheeler finally answered. “This is TransAmerican-two-three-lima-golf. Go ahead, La Guardia.”

“La Guardia? What are you talking about?”

“Go ahead, Denver. Sorry.”

“Did you toss the f-bomb out over the air?”

Wheeler grimaced. “Yeah. Sorry about that. I spilled coffee in my lap. I must have hit the switch when I stood up.”

“Okay, then. Just surprised me. Gotta watch that, or the FAA’s gonna crawl up your butt and mine. Everything else okay up there?”

Wheeler was ready to crawl out of his skin with each word of the conversation, worried he’d say the wrong thing. “Oh, yeah, we’re fine. Thanks, Denver. Good day.” Before they could say anything else, Wheeler shut the radio off and leaned back, his nerves jangling.

Tacket checked each of the beverage carts in the forward galley. One of them had a bumper sticker on it that matched the one Bloom had on the back of her van. “My other car is a Tardis.”

Collins stood and started towards the front of the plane. A moment later, Bloom also stood and she stepped out into the aisle as well.

Tacket turned the cart around, looking at each panel of it. He spotted a small yellow smiley face sticker and pressed on it. There was a soft click and a hidden drawer slid open. Behind Tacket, both Bloom and Collins stepped into the galley, neither of them particularly surprised to find Tacket there. He retrieved several small camping axes and thin metal tent stakes from the drawer. He gave Bloom and Collins each an axe and then several of the stakes, and took the same for himself.

Collins was the first of them to speak. “This was supposed to be easy. Fly the plane till sun-up. This...”

Bloom cut him off. “This is what we discussed. We knew it might have to be this way.”

“So who’s going to do it?” Collins asked.

They all looked at the axes in their hands, the reality of all of this setting in, and for a moment, none of them moved. Finally, Tacket stood up, exasperated. “Fuck it. This is why we’re here.” He tested the weight of the axe in his hand, then walked out into the first class cabin.

Warnock looked up as they walked in, and immediately noticed they were all holding hatchets. He was about to say something when Tacket stepped forward, raised his axe, and then swung it down with all of his strength.

The blade stopped three inches into Shimokawa’s skull.

Hawk jumped up and shouted, shocked by the sudden violence. Bloom shoved him back into his seat, her axe up and ready. She put the blade to his throat, murder in her eyes. She snarled at him. “Stay. Down.”

Collins loomed over Muldoon, making sure he couldn’t stand up. Muldoon could see how nervous Collins was, how he kept adjusting his grip on the axe.

As Tacket tried to pull his hatchet loose, he ended up pulling Shimokawa completely out of her chair. He let go of the handle, and she fell to the floor, convulsing now.

At the sounds of conflict, Vaughn stood up from his seat in the back row. “What now?” he grumbled. He couldn’t see into the first class cabin well enough to see anything more than some sort of commotion.

When he stood, Bloom looked back and saw him, and she moved so she had a direct line on him, pointing now. “YOU! SIT DOWN!”

Vaughn reached into his jacket and this time, he pulled out his handgun, and before anyone could react, he had the gun up, cocked, and trained on Bloom.

“FEDERAL MARSHALL! ON THE FLOOR NOW!”

While Bloom stayed still, holding Vaughn’s full attention for the moment, Tacket tried to pry his axe loose from Shimokawa’s head. It held firm, and all Tacket got for his efforts were small, wet, sucking sounds. Nauseated, Collins moaned, a small noise that escaped him without him realizing it.

“Hey, Professor, snap out of it,” Tacket said. He could see that Collins wasn’t hearing him, that he’d checked out to some degree. Tacket snapped, right in front of his face. “Collins? Are you cool?”

Collins looked at him, coming back from wherever he was. He nodded once. “Yeah. I am. Do it. Finish her.”

Vaughn inched forward, gun still up. “DROP YOUR WEAPON AND GET DOWN!”

Bloom stood still, not flinching at all. “THIS IS NOT WHAT YOU THINK IT IS!”

By now, everyone was awake, and the rest of the passengers were unsure what they were supposed to do. A few of them screamed. Most of them stayed still, waiting to see it play out.

Vaughn took another step forward. Bloom also stepped forward, cutting the distance between them so she was right at the divider between coach and first class. She looked at Vaughn, unafraid, and that calm is what made him freak out. “I MEAN IT! ON THE FLOOR NOW OR YOU GET A BULLET!”

As soon as he finished speaking, Vaughn felt the world lurch out from under him and he was moving, on his way to the floor, his gun yanked out of his hand, and Buddy Kitchens stood above him, the gun now in his hand.

Tacket put his knee against Shimokawa's head and pulled with both hands on the axe handle.

With a surprising amount of grace and force, Vaughn pushed himself back to his feet, slamming into Buddy, and the two of them started to grapple. "Don't fight me, man. I don't want to hurt you," Buddy said. Vaughn grabbed the gun and pushed it towards Buddy, and Buddy was startled when Vaughn actually pulled the trigger. The sound was concussive in the closed space of the cabin, and it left Buddy's ears ringing.

Buddy used all his weight to suddenly yank up, and Vaughn's arm broke with a snap that was loud enough for Buddy to hear it, even with his ears still ringing. Vaughn shrieked, a sudden involuntary noise, and Buddy stripped the gun out of his hands. While Vaughn was still standing there, shocked, Buddy punched him in the face, several times, hard enough to send him to the floor out cold.

Jason popped up in his seat, and with all the tact and poise that a ten-year-old could muster, yelled, "Holy shit, that was INSANE!"

As Buddy turned to face the rest of the coach passengers, Vaughn's gun in his hand, Tacket finally pried his hatchet loose. He stood up over her, red-faced from the effort. "Okay," he said. "Let's wrap this up." He grabbed one of his stakes from his pocket. Blood pumped from the wound in Shimokawa's head onto the carpet of the cabin floor. Her eyes opened and rolled wildly, not seeing anything.

Tacket kneeled next to her and ripped open her silk shirt, exposing pale white skin and an expensive bra. Outraged, both Muldoon and Hawk forced their way to their feet, determined not to just sit passive as this happened. Bloom raised her axe to them and bellowed, "STOP IT! SIT DOWN!"

Muldoon yelled back, afraid but determined not to show it. "ARE YOU INSANE?!"

Collins tried to threaten them with his axe, but he didn't look remotely menacing. Hawk clenched his fists and took one step forward. "She wasn't doing anything to you."

"You have to stop," Collins said, backing up a step.

"She WASN'T DOING ANYTHING!" Hawk yelled, furious now. He was about to lunge when Warnock reached out and stopped him with a hand on his arm and a gesture towards the door to the coach cabin, where Buddy Kitchens now stood, gun in hand.

Hawk and Muldoon backed off.

Tacket put his stake against Shimokawa's chest. He turned the axe around so he could use it to drive the stake in, and he hesitated, looking around at everyone else.

Warnock regarded him coldly. "Whatever this is about... you'll never get away with it. Once the pilot figures out what's going on, he'll land the plane, and then what are you going to do?"

Buddy Kitchens walked by Warnock, all the way up to the cockpit door. He knocked a quick shave-and-a-haircut, then walked back so he could keep an eye on the first class passengers.

The speaker system crackled to life. "This is your pilot speaking," came the voice. None of the passengers knew it was Wheeler instead of Douglas. They listened, hoping for some explanation that would make sense of the lunacy unfolding around them. "I think you all know Buddy Kitchens. And unless you've been on Mars for the last few years, you also know that he was accused of killing his own family with his bare hands. Imagine what he'll do to you if you don't give him your full attention."

Smiling, Buddy walked back to where he could see coach. As he passed Warnock, the man sagged, realizing no one was going to show up to save them.

“Do what we say,” Buddy said loudly, “and we’ll land in New York safe, sound, and on time.” The passengers reacted, not sure what to make of this information, and Buddy continued. “We are here to save your asses. In order for us to do that, four of these motherfuckers in first class have got to die. Don’t pity them. If you believe in evil, that’s exactly what they are. And anyone who tries to stop us is gonna get an asshole where their face used to be.”

Tacket finally swung, hitting the stake hard, but hitting it in the wrong place. It slid sideways and gashed Shimokawa’s chest instead of penetrating. Shimokawa cried out in pain.

Tacket blanched, unnerved by how different doing it was from when they had discussed the plan. Warnock felt like he was going crazy as he watched everything unfold, and he cried out, “Please, stop this!”

Sloan spoke up, not even meaning to do so. “When you say evil, you mean like attacking and murdering some innocent woman on an airplane? Like that kind of evil?”

“We’re not evil, dickhead,” Buddy replied. “They are. They’re vampires.” Whatever reaction Buddy expected, it wasn’t laughter, but that was the response from a number of the passengers. Sloan snickered as well, but he could see that Buddy wasn’t kidding.

“No, I ain’t crazy, and I ain’t kidding. I know how it sounds, but all you gotta do is wait a minute. Once my buddy there drives that stake in, you’ll see.”

Tacket hit the stake again. WHACK! This time he was dead on, and the stake was driven three inches into her chest. Tacket had to fight his gag reflex as he did it again, driving it deeper. Then he hit it one more time, so it was almost halfway buried.

Sloan stood up, feeling like everyone else had gone crazy. “So you’re killing people because you think they are vampires?! Seriously?!”

“Sit down,” Buddy said.

“Or what? You’ll kill me, too?”

“I’d prefer not to.”

Sloan considered Buddy carefully, then sat down.

Shimokawa convulsed on the floor of the plane, blood pouring out around the stake. She screamed, in terrible pain, and then, with one final spasm, simply died. No flames. She didn’t turn to ash or dust. She didn’t implode. She just died, blood pooling on the floor around her torso and her head.

Tacket stood up above her, waiting for something else to happen. It felt like everyone in first class was holding their breath, Tacket included. Finally, he shook his head. “What the hell? Is she supposed to... you know... do something?” Tacket looked around at the rest of the first class passengers, at his fellow hijackers. All of them had that same look of dawning horror.

Buddy leaned in, agitated now. “What does this mean? Professor? What’s going on?”

They all looked at Collins, and he felt for a moment like he couldn’t catch his breath, like he was about to black out. He managed a single sentence, and even that felt like he was about to be overwhelmed.

“Oh, god... what have we done?”

**BAT OUT OF HELL will continue
in PULP & POPCORN #5**

THE VERY BEST OF 2016

Once again, we have reached the end of an arbitrary unit of measurement of time, completing one trip around the sun, and as a result, I am legally obligated to write about things in a list format.

Perhaps that sounds cynical. But rest assured... this is anything but a cynical year-end list. In fact, the very act of sitting down to write this may have reconnected me to something that I have felt fundamentally disconnected from ever since September 20th. When I got fired from HitFix, it felt like a shotgun blast right to the skull of my love of movies. It's hard to explain, but I actually found myself unhappy at the thought of going to the theater. I didn't go to any press screening or public screening for a few weeks, and even talking about movies made me feel agitated. That's the opposite of the way it's been for most of my life.

I vanished into books and into my own writing, and I couldn't even think about writing about a movie. Part of what made it complicated to start looking for work was the feeling that I had reached a place where I didn't see myself moving forward doing the same kind of work. I just couldn't imagine it. Little by little, I've started to thaw, and if you've been here at Pulp & Popcorn, then you know I'm starting to build a very different type of space to talk about films. When I thought about doing an end-of-the-year list, I wondered if my heart would be in it.

Could the act of sitting down to look back at the way the films of the last year unfolded be enough to rekindle my love of movies and art?

Maybe. Let's see. There are going to be a few different sections here. I'm not just going to talk about movies, because my year is not just made up of movies. There are plenty of other ways that I ingest my media, and I think it's only fair I point out my favorites in some other forms as well.

The entire way I've approached this is different this year, and that difference is part of what I think will distinguish *Pulp & Popcorn* from the work I did on HitFix and Ain't It Cool. I'm a different person now, and it's a different publishing landscape. Most importantly, though, for the first time ever, I'm thinking about each and every thing I publish and asking myself, "Is this something I really want to read?" And in the case of this list, yes, I think this is something that I can offer up that will offer some real value, especially since I missed a chance to review a good number of these films. But I'm doing it differently, because I think there's plenty of room to improve the things I do.

We'll start, appropriately enough, with these...

THE BEST MOVIES

(in no particular order)

As I said in the last issue of *Pulp & Popcorn*, I have been doing a lot of thinking about how I want things to work, and part of that is realizing that I'm past the point in my life where I can pretend that there is a hierarchy to the way I love films. When I love a film, it just gets added to that Great Imaginary Shelf, the archive where I keep all the art that I have loved over the course of my life. Every book, every TV show, every movie, every play... all of it gets added to the list of the stuff that matters to me, and how I feel about each of them really just depends on the day and my mood and how I'm feeling and what is going on in the world.

I'm going to change things up this year. I'm picking the 20 films that hit me the hardest this year, and I'm listing them in no special order. There is no number one. Maddening, isn't it? I'm also never writing another "worst-of" list, because I'm tired of writing a snarky pile-on at the end of the year, designed simply to kick a group of filmmakers in the face one more time. I think it's perfectly fair to write a negative review, and even a scathing negative review. But at a certain point, constantly piling on whenever people mention something goes beyond criticism into being a willful killjoy. It doesn't bother me if other people enjoy a film I didn't. For example, is there a lost generation of broken human beings who were raised with the horrifying, disastrously false impression that Steven Spielberg's *Hook* is a good film? Yes. Am I mad at them? Of course not. They can't help it if they were conditioned to believe this ugly lie. And if they want to revisit the film, I wish them a Merry Bangarang. I do not need to remind them of how terribly, terribly wrong they are at every possible moment. I don't need to bring it up as an example in an article that has nothing to do with *Hook*. Right? I can let it go. See? That's me! Letting it go!

Wait... what? I can already see you're getting fed up. *That's chaos! That's bullshit! I demand a recount or a do-over or something!* After all, for as long as I've been writing online, I've written lists at the end of the year. A ten-best. A runners-up. A worst-of. That's the way things work, and that's the way they will always work... right? And what's with the ridiculous title? Either it's a "best of" list or a "favorites" list, right? So pick one and call it what it is and don't reframe the conversation just because you're tired of the arguments that always surround year-end lists!

That's exactly what I'm going to do, though. These films all gave me something I needed at a moment I needed it. These films will linger with me, and I'll revisit them.

In some cases, I already have, two or three times. I have all 20 of them here in the house now, and I feel like I could marathon all of them, back to back, and make a case for how rich and wonderful a snapshot it would be of a year that many people, myself included, felt as a giant kick in our softest spots. I hate 2016, but I can't stay completely mad at it because of these films, this cascade of characters and circumstances, all of which made my year better in some way.

Manchester By The Sea

dir./scr. Kenneth Lonergan

Lonergan is a smart writer who has made movies in the past that I have loved in part. This time, though, he made something that worked for me from start to finish, a genuine, hard-earned emotional powerhouse about what happens when we are unable to move past grief. The work that Casey Affleck does here is remarkable, nuanced and rich and honest. Lee Chandler is a guy who was so ruined by a mistake he made that he caved in as a human being, and yet he has to keep moving forward. He isn't "living," per se, which makes him question the wisdom of being left in charge of Patrick, his nephew, when his brother passes away. Lucas Hedges is terrific as the nephew, and one of the things that makes this movie work is the way humor plays such a huge part in the storytelling. Lonergan writes these characters with all the rough edges and contradictions that define real people, and he never makes the easy or the obvious choice with the storytelling. He writes character so well that even actors who show up for a few short scenes, like Kyle Chandler or Gretchen Mol or Michelle Williams or Matthew Broderick manage to communicate whole lives and real experience.

What haunts me about the film is how stark it is when it looks into the darkest corners of Lee's grief. There's a short scene in a police station that I've thought about at least once a week since I saw the film a year ago. It upsets me deeply because I understand it completely, and I am unnerved by how clearly I can see why Lee makes that choice. When the film reaches its finish, I think it leaves the characters in a place that I find emotionally impressive. So many movies feel the need to put the bow on things, to heal everyone, to fix everything. But in life, that process is never simple, and it's never finished. We move forward in whatever way we can, and more than anything, Manchester seems to be about how no two people can ever really feel the same grief. It hits each of us in different ways, and we carry whatever burden we carry. The older I get, the more I see the people around me affected by truly monumental tides, and art that helps us understand someone else's pain or sorrow is valuable, as important now as it's ever been.

La La Land

dir./scr. Damien Chazelle

Oh, this film vexes me mightily, and that's part of why I love it.

As with all of us, part of my reaction to a film is wrapped up in how I see it and where and when, and with *La La Land*, it was a very specific context. The day I saw it, I got up early with my girlfriend and we walked down the street from our apartment building to our polling place. We both voted, and then she took off for work. At the end of her work day, I picked her up and drove her to the screening room where we saw *La La Land*, and we were both feeling good about how things were going with the polling numbers. After the movie, we stepped outside and checked our phones as we drove over to the house of our friends, who were making dinner. We planned to watch the election results together and celebrate, but by the time we got to their house, it was pretty clear that we weren't going to be celebrating any time soon. By the time I went to bed that night, all the optimism and joy of that morning were gone, and I wasn't able to really put my finger on what struck me odd about the lingering sensation of the movie. I've seen people talk about how joyful it is, but I think there's more to it than that. There's also a very real sadness, and I think that sadness is where the honesty in the film lies. Yes, it is a musical, and there are moments where it sings and dances with joy, but Damien Chazelle is not afraid of the melancholy, and the film is better for it. I remember how much some people hated the opening act of *Moulin Rouge*, and I never had that problem. Here, the first act is filled with so many things that I dislike about this city and this industry that I started to worry that this was going to be one of those "all about Hollywood" films that just didn't work for me.

For the first thirty minutes or so, I find many of the people we meet in *La La Land* almost insufferable. That opening number on the freeway pushes every single button I have as someone who lives in Los Angeles. I know that musical numbers are meant as expressions of emotion, heightened moments where we see inside the characters, and they're not meant to be literal. I love musicals for that precise reason. Even so, when I see a bunch of actors singing and dancing on their cars singing about auditions, it makes me want to build a punching machine. I have empathy for anyone who moves to LA to pursue their dreams, of course, and I would be a truly awful person if I couldn't identify with that. Of course I can. I wrote a whole series of pieces for HitFix about my first twenty-five years in Los Angeles, and writing about that journey not only put me back in touch with the idealistic and somewhat naive kid who first moved to LA, but also focused me in a way, reminding me of what I really do want to produce as a writer.

Ryan Gosling and Emma Stone both give movie star performances here, and again... I was worried at the start of the film. It felt like they were being used more as cut-out dolls rather than flesh-and-blood performers. Stone, in particular, is in danger of being a parody of herself. It feels like the “adorable” thing is just ladled on, and easy for her, and not much of a stretch at this point. As the film opens, she’s fetching in every way, cute on top of cute on top of cute, and it almost feels oppressive. Gosling is all heavy-lidded oh-so-carefully-rumpled moody musician, and it feels, again, like someone doing a Ryan Gosling impression. Little by little, though, they both start to peel back the intentional layer of artifice in search of something genuine, and watching them work through the characters like that, it became clear that Chazelle peopled his Los Angeles with lots and lots of futile dreamers on purpose.

This is not a film about being famous and living all of your dreams. This is a film about how the burden of those dreams takes pieces of you along the way, and even if you’re wildly successful, that is no guarantee of happiness being part of success. It is a bitter pill wrapped in candy, and, oh, what candy it is. As the film wears on, Chazelle gets better and better at staging the musical numbers and committing to the tone, and the characters begin to reveal the things that make them more than just dewy-eyed cardboard cutouts. Gosling’s Sebastian reminds me of the various real jazz musicians I know, talking about the purity of the form and how he wants to help save it, and that arrogance (“Only I know what the REAL good stuff is”) is a big part of many musicians. He is convinced that only he can safeguard “true” jazz, but when he does lean into his job playing with Keith (John Legend), he gets caught up in it. Likewise, Mia (Emma Stone) has that same sense that it is so urgent to share her personality with people that she writes a self-celebratory one-woman show, and I like how the film doesn’t try to sell us on the idea that her show is this beautiful perfect show that people just didn’t understand. Instead, it’s presented as largely self-indulgent, but it works just enough as a showcase to get her the audition that eventually changes her life. That scene suggests that the entire reason Mia has her breakthrough is because she’s finally lived enough to have something worth saying in her work, and that’s where the movie gets me. This isn’t a film about overnight success; it’s a film about the long haul and the toll that it takes, and I find the double-back during the film’s final stretch to be heartbreaking.

Chazelle is clever, something that can often keep a filmmaker from being emotional, but he has a huge heart, and that’s one of the reasons his films burrow in and grow as we think about them. His characters only know one way to live, throwing themselves into their art with such force that they leave bruises, and if *La La Land* is the result, then it’s worth it.

Arrival

dir. Denis Villeneuve

scr. Eric Heisserer

based on a story by Ted Chiang

One of the hardest parts of being a divorced parent is having to continue to co-parent with someone you have enough of a problem with that you cannot live together. The way I make my own peace with it is by telling myself that the reason I have my sons, who I love more than I ever thought I could love another person, is because I met their mother, and because of that, I can't let anger or hurt drive those interactions. It is an ongoing exercise in empathy over emotion, and it felt to me like *Arrival* helped me articulate something that has been eating at me for a while now, this strange combination of regret and acceptance. The best science-fiction asks us questions about who we are as human beings and what our place in the universe is, and *Arrival* is built around a central question that I certainly asked myself during the darkest moments over the last few years: if you knew something would give you enormous pain, but only after giving you the greatest pleasure of your life, would you still do it?

In the first issue of *P&P*, I wrote about how it felt like JK Rowling was trying to find a new way to define heroism with *Fantastic Beasts & Where To Find Them*, and how important that is for pop culture in general. At this point, I think we've gone about as far as we're ever going to go thematically with movies that inevitably build to two characters beating the hell out of each other to make their points. While *Beasts* doesn't work as a whole, I liked the notion of empathy being the weapon that Newt Scamander brought to the table, and it feels to me like Louise Banks is the same sort of character. There is something profound about the idea that genuinely learning a language is a form of cultural empathy, and offering up a language specialist as the point person on our first contact with an alien intelligence makes sense once you see how it plays out.

What really strikes me about the way *Arrival* comes together is that it represents the best efforts of each of its primary collaborators, and the way they complement one another's strengths is a big part of the film's impact. Eric Heisserer has been a hard-working screenwriter for a while now, and he's worked primarily in horror, and with pre-existing material in the form of sequels or remakes. This year, though, we're getting a look at who he is when he pursues his own passions, and looking at how he took this beautiful short story by Ted Chiang and then transformed it into this script, so meticulous and careful and controlled, it's clear that Heisserer is so much more than he's been able to be in film so far.

Denis Villeneuve has been building in terms of both craft and voice from film to film, and one of the threads that runs through each of his films is that he is drawn to material that demands something of the audience. His films aren't interested in offering you an easy pre-digested experience, and he's not afraid to push the audience to some uncomfortable places. He is drawn to films that offer him a chance to create striking, surreal imagery that is grounded in something emotional and relatable. He must have flipped when he read this script, and it's the combination of Villeneuve and Heisserer that makes this work. Heisserer carefully lays out the structure here so that each new piece of information you get pushes you forward, and Villeneuve takes advantage of that structure by staging each big set piece in the film as a discrete emotional arc. The encounters between Louise (Amy Adams) and Ian (Jeremy Renner) and the aliens are dreamlike and they don't follow the shape of traditional dramatic scenes. The rest of the movie is built on somewhat more recognizable dramatic foundations, but when you realize what game it's been playing since the very first scenes, it's an all-time great movie moment because it's not just an empty trick. The "trick" is actually part of the narrative itself, allowing us to experience things the way Louise does. She is changed by the encounters she has, as is our entire world, and she is willing to accept the sour with the sweet because she knows they are always joined. Whatever good we have in our lives, we have to celebrate it and embrace it and savor it, because there is always pain. There are always shadows. There is always sorrow ahead. The trick is seeing all of it at once, and *Arrival* offers us a way to do exactly that, a vantage point that uses the prism of science-fiction to speak a truth that is central to every single one of us.

Jackie

dir. Pablo Larrain

scr. Noah Oppenheim

For much of my life, I genuinely believed there was something wrong with Jacqueline Kennedy. Watching footage of her, especially in the era when she was in the White House with JFK, she always seemed disconnected, like she was either dim or drugged, and I could never get my head around that strange breathy baby voice of hers. It was only in the last decade or so that I've read enough about her to look at that footage and see something else, this enormous sadness lurking behind those surfaces. Even so, I was not prepared for the emotional impact of this extremely unconventional approach to painting a portrait of a famous person. Pablo Larrain's film feels like you're given a chance to actually slip into the skin of a person having to survive the most catastrophic possible experience in public with the entire world watching you, and it shook me, left me wrung out and exhausted and deeply impressed.

Natalie Portman is the absolute perfect choice to star in this film, and it has nothing to do with her physical resemblance to Jackie. That helps, sure, but Portman occupies a particular place in pop culture that I wouldn't wish on anyone. When she was young, it was immediately apparent that she had a gift as a performer, and she gave mature, nuanced performances in films like *The Professional* and *Beautiful Girls*. Unfortunately, the exact thing that made her work so strong also made her a magnet for the creepiest attentions from men, and our pop culture spent the remainder of Portman's childhood essentially counting down to the moment she was of legal age. It's a grotesque ritual that many young women endure as an exchange for being allowed to work as an actor, and in Portman's case, it appears to have given her a very real need to protect some core part of herself. She holds it private, and even when she acts, she always seems to be keeping something in reserve, something she's not willing to share. That is the essence of Jackie Kennedy, and Portman plays every level of Kennedy with a brilliant, perceptive focus. There's the woman she shows to the world, there's the controlling woman she only shows some people, and then there's the girl, way down inside, who simply wants the time to cry and scream and mourn the loss of a man.

I am tired of '60s nostalgia, and I approached this film skeptically, not sure I needed anything it might offer. By keeping the window tight and simply looking at the way Jackie reacted to the assassination of her husband from the moment it happened to when she had to leave the White House to make room for the incoming Johnsons, *Jackie* is allowed to breathe. This doesn't feel like it's recreating a time so much as it feels like it is soaking in it. This is not a film about nostalgia, and it certainly doesn't feel like a surface-level reconstruction of things. It is so carefully designed that it almost feels like virtual reality. In addition, the film is structured in a way that mimics the fractured, hollowed-out reaction we have to tragedy, so you're meant to feel like you're lost in it. While I think the framing device about the reporter (Billy Crudup) who comes to write a profile of Jackie feels to me like an unnecessary flourish, it does anchor the film in a way, and it allows Larrain to drift backwards and forwards through the worst event in this woman's life. Mica Levi's score is this drunken, haunted, lurching calliope that sets a perfect tone against the blasted-out rot of Stephane Fontaine's photography, both of them married expertly by Sebastian Sepulveda's masterful editing. It feels like a small mountain of footage must have been shot to be able to build something like this, and there's not a false note to be found. The sheer command of the filmmaking on display leaves me dizzy, and by the end of the movie, I found myself also devastated by this audacious, original portrait that offers a close-up glimpse of someone who valued her privacy as much as any legend ever could.

20th Century Women

dir./scr. Mike Mills

In the end, it does not matter to me how closely the new film by Mike Mills hews to his own autobiography. What's important is that every scene in *20th Century Women* feels honest, deep down, drawn from a life spent in careful observation, and taken as a whole, it may be the most tender and delicate film of the year, built around a towering central performance by Annette Bening as Dorothea, a single woman doing her best to raise Jamie (Lucas Jade Zumann) in the late '70s. The period stuff never overwhelms what really matters in the film, but Mills does a great job of using pop culture as an emotional signifier, not just as shorthand for "Hey, do you remember this, too?" Jamie's coming-of-age is certainly informed by the era in which it takes place, but it's a universal process, and much of the power of this movie comes from watching Jamie and his mother try to figure each other out.

Dorothea turns to two other women in her efforts to give Jamey whatever tools he's going to need to become a man, and it's clear that both Julie (Elle Fanning) and Abbie (Greta Gerwig) have a huge impact on Jamey, and in ways that manage to change them as much as him. Dorothea rents space to Abbie and to William (Billy Crudup), who also helps out with the restoration work that's being done on the house, and as Jamey really starts to stretch into adulthood, there's all this unruly life happening around him that can't help but influence him. Dorothea is nobody's idea of a textbook mother, but she's a tremendous person, and she views raising Jamey as something far more than just an obligation. She sees the man he could be, and she knows that she wants him to get there, and she also knows that she has no idea how to make that happen. Because of that, she has to give Jamey room to make mistakes, to get hurt, and to grow on his own, and that is shown here to be the enormous act of faith that it really is for parents. I wish I could shelter my children from every bit of sorrow or pain that they might ever feel, but I know that's not healthy. I am defined by my scars as much as by my successes, and I made plenty of my own mistakes. Hell, I'm still making them, and I consider myself blessed to have people in my life who can carry their end of things on those occasions that I stumble.

Mills has a novelist's eye for detail, and *20th Century Women* takes its time, meanders, and lands every emotional punch that it throws. He's come a long way since *Thumbsucker*, which showed promise. This is the work of a confident adult artist who not only knows exactly what he wants to say, but can express that to his collaborators and to his audience. This is an act of love, dedicated to the women who helped shape Mills, and it made me reflect on how I want my own sons to learn about this world and who I hope they become.

There's something particularly powerful about this film coming out this year, when we're seeing a push back at every part of progressive culture, and I hope people absorb how perceptive the film's portrait is of the role that strong women can play in a young man's life. In every part of our culture, there is a sudden surge of ugliness that feels like a direct reaction to whatever progress we've made, and the more we discuss the ways our ideas of masculinity can curdle into something toxic and dangerous, the better we are for it. There are people who reject that, though, and I wish people like that would watch this film and really try to understand what it is that Jamey gains as a person because of all of these women helping to shape his personality. They challenge him. They frustrate him. They inspire him. More than anything, they support him, and the film stands as a celebration of the way we can build family and community, and the way those connections shape our entire personality. The more we listen to others, the more we try to see things from someone else's point of view, the stronger we are. Jamey may get horribly frustrated with his mother at times, but the film makes it crystal clear that he ultimately knows what a special, nurturing soul she was, and the film's final lines have destroyed me both times I watched it. It's as open-hearted a film as you'll see in 2016.

Sing Street

dir./scr. John Carney

If there was any justice in the whole awards show circuit, and everything was truly given equal consideration, then John Carney's ridiculously charming look at a group of young friends in Ireland who start a band together would be in contention any place they're handing out statues. This is the time and place that gave us U2, and Carney was smart to make up his own band instead of trying to tell a real band's story. His films have all been about the role that music plays in the lives of the people who make it, but he's not just making the same film over and over. *Once* was a film about the way these two people collide creatively, fall into a romantic relationship, and then struggle to keep the creative thing afloat when they decide they can't be together, and *Begin Again* is about the way people throw themselves into their art in the moments when they are hurting the most. Carney's films benefit from the fact that he has a great ear for music, and the original score and songs in *Sing Street* are just great. Emotional, perfect for the period, leaning on the style of various superstar bands of the era. The music really sticks here, and so do the performances by all of the kids. Ferdia Walsh-Peelo stars as Conor, a kid who is watching his world implode. His parents (Aiden Gillen and Maria Doyle Kennedy) are falling apart, and there's no money for Conor to continue in his private school. They send him to the free state school, and for Conor, it's like being thrown into a shark tank. He's not ready for it, and it looks like it's going to destroy him at first.

There's a particularly nasty bully named Barry (Ian Kelly), a sadistic principal named Brother Baxter (Don Wycherley), and nothing really makes sense to him at first. Then he sees a girl outside the school, and she looks like she stepped straight out of an MTV video or a 1985 film starring John Cusack. Raphina (Lucy Boynton) says she's a model and she'll be leaving Dublin soon, but seeing her convinces Conor that he has got to start a band so she can star in the video for their song and he can meet her and they'll fall in love. That's as good a reason to start a band as any, and at first, Conor sort of stumbles around blind with his new friends Darren (Ben Carolan), Eamon (Mark McKenna, Ngig (Percy Chamburuka), and Larry (Conor Hamilton) and Garry (Karl Rice). Darren's the manager, and at first, they just play covers. It's Brendan (Jack Reynor), Conor's older brother, who starts to push them to be something more than just an excuse to impress a girl, and Reynor's performance is one of the best things I saw in any movie last year. He's great here. It's an all-timer, one of those performances where you suddenly see the full potential of an actor, and he makes you feel something so deeply that you know you're going to see this guy work forever. Reynor's got that ability to really pierce when he's got the right material, and if he was the best thing about the movie, it would still secure a place on this list. He's not, though. I think the best thing is the way Carney charts the growth of these guys as actual artists. Each new song they write teaches them something else, and Carney's pretty great at working in a variety of early '80s musical forms. There's a moment near the end of the film where Conor imagines a video for "Drive It Like You Stole It," and it's such a beautiful, hilarious, sincerely felt fantasy that what defenses I might have dropped completely. This is one of those movies that I love in a way that would make me super-defensive if I thought someone was attacking it. I love this young cast. I love the recreation of Dublin at that particular moment in time. I love the soundtrack. And I love that John Carney is going to keep making movies where music is such a defining part of who the characters are. Few films this year felt like more fervent acts of love than this.

American Honey

dir./scr. Andrea Arnold

Hey, if I like this movie, does that mean I understand young people now?

Andrea Arnold's movie is not meant as an all-encompassing cultural snapshot, but I could see a conservative person in his 50s watching this and melting down and the thought of an entire generation made up of these damaged kids, pinballing their way across America. Basically plotless, the film follows Star (Sasha Lane) as she walks away from the life that she views as a prison, hitting the road with a mob of kids who sell magazine subscriptions door to door. She's drawn to them by Jake (Shia LaBeouf), but she quickly finds herself swallowed up by this new tribe, and without any regret.

First and foremost, Sasha Lane is magnetic and compelling for the entire running time. It's an incredibly difficult role to summarize, and there's such a sprawling, loose structure to the film that it almost feels like an act of anthropology by Arnold. I loved her earlier films, *Red Road* and *Fish Tank*, but was left almost completely cold by her take on *Wuthering Heights*. Her work as a director in *American Honey* is so beautiful, so generous, and so alive, so vibrant, that I feel like she just leveled up. She is able to paint Star's life quickly, so when she gets in that van and leaves home and never looks back, we get it. We understand what she's running from, and Arnold doesn't have to belabor the point. There is such a casual sense of destruction and abuse in Star's home that you know it's never going to stop. It's just the way things are. She sees Jake and she sees the way he behaves, and that's all she wants. She wants to be part of something. She wants to belong with a group. She wants to be free the way these kids all seem to be free, and she wants to just get in a car and go and go and go. I am amazed by LaBeouf's work in the movie, and it's a reminder that he didn't start as an actor with the big popcorn movies that turned him into a specific kind of pop culture punchline. He blends right in with the other kids in the film, many of whom feel like they're just real kids that Arnold found in a mall somewhere. The same is true of Riley Keough, who plays the boss of the crew. She is so real, so scathingly unworried about how terrible she comes across, that it feels like documentary. There's not a major story arc. Instead, it's just a look at how Star struggles to find her place with this group, and Arnold does remarkable work peeling back the swaggering outer skins these kids wear like armor, revealing the soft, terrified children they are at heart. They hold on to one another as they weather each new day like a storm, and Arnold makes it all feel not only real but urgent. For a film that runs nearly three hours and that eschews conventional narrative shape, *American Honey* still manages to constantly entertain. It is a film to get lost in, the way Star gets lost in the backroads of America with his new family of hers, all of them just thrilled to have one more day of freedom.

Hunt For The Wilderpeople

dir. Taika Waititi

scr. Taika Waititi

based on the book by Barry Crump

My eleven-year-old film-crazy son Toshi informed me recently that *Hidden Figures* is his favorite film of 2016. He was incredibly moved by it, and he's watched it a few times now. "That's definitely the best of the year," he told me, "but *Hunt For The Wilderpeople*? That's, like, the best of all time."

While I might not rank it quite that high, I can see why he's smitten with it. Waititi's last movie, the brutally funny *What We Do In The Shadows*, made it clear that he is a very talented trickster, but with this sweet and funny adventure story about Ricky Baker, played by Julian Dennison, Waititi makes the case that he can do it all. There's a genuine sweetness to the film that is undeniable and quite effective, and he tells the story at this great breakneck pace, daring you to keep up. Sam Neill is so great as Uncle Hec, and his chemistry with Dennison is key to making sure the film works. If they don't click as a couple, then the film doesn't work, and the two of them are brought together by Aunt Bella (Rima Te Wiata), who is basically this big beating heart with feet. The way she immediately sets out to make foster child Ricky Baker comfortable in her home is beautiful, and she may not have a lot of screen time, but she makes every minute of it worthwhile. Rachel House gives one of the most dedicated comedy performances of the year as the relentless head of the foster care program, Paula, and she's so absurd that she keeps the film from getting too heavy. At heart, it's about some very big things, and it's not a joke. Ricky Baker has been bounced from place to place, unable to ever settle in, and it's starting to really affect him. This could be just one more stop along the way, but Bella decides that's not going to be the case. While I doubt many people have ever had an adventure quite like the one that Hec and Ricky share, the things that drive them are so relatable and real. Dennison gives a great performance, full-stop. It's not a great performance "for a kid," but a considered, carefully-constructed character who he occupies fully. I love Ricky Baker, and one of the things that is most satisfying about *Hunt For The Wilderpeople* is watching Hec gradually come to understand what a great kid Ricky is. The relationship between the two of them in the film is warm and funny and bumpy and real, and it ends up feeling like a fable for any child who has ever been shuffled from home to home, feeling unwanted, building to a well-earned happy ending.

The Witch

scr./dir. Robert Eggers

It's not often that I get to put an overt horror film on my list, and that's because I feel like lots of horror filmmakers refuse to aim high. Robert Eggers brings so much filmmaking muscle to this debut feature, and he puts so much of the weight on the actors, that it feels to me like *The Witch* is the kind of big swing that people are often reluctant to make when working in one of the more fantastic genres. This is powerful, primal filmmaking, all brought to bear with a single goal: scaring the shit out of an audience. I am not often genuinely frightened by things I see in movies, but *The Witch* has lingered in a very real way for me. While the film certainly plays with ambiguity, there is a very sharp edge to it, and when it cuts, it cuts very deep.

I am not threatened by anyone's faith. I think faith is an important part of the human experience, and there are so many positive things that come from communities built on shared values and beliefs that I would never make any sort of sweeping comments against the idea of faith. But zealotry, the sort of blind and dangerous faith that is shared by the family in *The Witch*, scares the hell out of me. When people give themselves over completely to faith in the way that these people do, anything is permissible. Anything can be excused or explained through the filter of faith by simply bending facts to fit the idea you're trying to prove. "God's will" is a very vague thing, and you can attribute anything, good or bad, to that idea. William (Ralph Ineson) and Katherine (Kate Dickie) are too intense for a Puritan colony in the 1630s, which is an early sign that things aren't going to go well here. They are forced to live on their own, away from other people, and they build their farm on the edge of a great dark forest. Their oldest child is Thomasin (Anya Taylor-Joy), and she's just on the verge of adulthood. Caleb (Harvey Scrimshaw), a boy, is a few years younger, and then there are the young twins Mercy (Ellie Grainger) and Jonas (Lucas Dawson) and the baby, Samuel. William and Katherine both depend on Thomasin to help with the younger kids, and in a quietly terrifying early sequence, baby Samuel goes missing while in Thomasin's care. The scenes that play out afterwards are so crazy, so visceral and ugly, that they feel like they're the worst imagination of poor Thomasin, not something we're meant to take literally.

Things start to go sideways for the family. Caleb vanishes, then shows back up, and there's something terribly wrong with him when he does. Has he been possessed? Is he cursed? He seems to be in the grips of some kind of powerful, awful enchantment, and the twins also seem to be affected by whatever it, leading William and Katherine to suspect that their oldest child has fallen under the influence of evil. The film wrings long sustained stretches of almost excruciating tension through nothing more complicated than performance, and the entire cast deserves the highest praise possible. Scrimshaw has to do some very difficult physical work once Caleb has become infected by evil, and the twins radiate some very real malice. Eggers manages to create some very powerful nightmare imagery, and there's a goat in the film called Black Philip that is one of the strangest and most upsetting characters in a horror film in recent memory.

By the time you hear Black Philip's voice, you have tumbled into some very dark territory, and I love just how far Eggers pushes things in the film's final moments. There is something powerful and transgressive about the worldview of *The Witch*, and I'm excited to see if Eggers brings this same keen controlled intelligence to everything he makes. If so, then *The Witch* is the announcement of a major new voice, indeed.

The Nice Guys

dir. Shane Black

scr. Shane Black and Anthony Bagarozzi

This movie is sort of miraculous in the sense that it shouldn't really exist. Joel Silver no longer has the influence he once had on the Warner Bros. lot, and *The Nice Guys* feels like the kind of film that the studio only lets you make right after you've had a big hit. Shane Black, who has been steadily building this lovely wise-assed filmography for himself, managed to strike pure gold by casting Russell Crowe and Ryan Gosling opposite one another in a mismatched buddy comedy set against the backdrop of LA porn, the auto industry, and the last '70s. Drawing from *The Three Stooges* as much as Raymond Chandler, the film builds a head of screwball steam that is truly impressive. There are things about this film that remind me both *The Last Boy Scout* and *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*, both also written by Black, but it feels like he's taken all these things he's tried before and honed them to a razor sharpness. Take the relationship between Holland March (Gosling) and his daughter Holly (Angourie Rice). You can easily point at the relationship between Joe Hallenbeck and his daughter as the prototype for this, but there's a kindness that exists between Holland and Holly that feels like a more generous Black is at the wheel this time.

When you watch the film, watch Russell Crowe watching Ryan Gosling. I visited the set of the film, and having interviewed Crowe before, I was astonished by what we saw. Crowe was practically giddy when he talked about what Gosling was doing in the film. He laughed his way through takes and through the conversation, and he kept hugging Gosling and just collapsing in mirth. It was hilarious, and that carries through right into the film. Jackson Healy is the perfect role for Crowe, who gets to be sort of fat and goofy until the moment he's got to be dangerous, and I think Fat Russell Crowe is the new official Best Russell Crowe. There's a scene here where Holly gives him a Yoo-Hoo, and he's so clearly delighted by it that it makes perfect sense he would show up in the next scene carrying an entire case of it. The film follows its own weird circuitous logic, which makes it doubly surprising when it all makes sense at the end of the film. Like the best LA detective stories, it tells a story about the characters, but it also tells a story about a key moment in the life of the city itself. The final set piece here shows off Gosling's skills as a physical comedian, and in general, this is the kind of performance that redefines how you think about someone. I know that everyone's excited about *La La Land*, but this is the Gosling performance of the year for me. He is just as nimble with the fast and funny dialogue as he is with the precise physical work, and he makes the perfect foil for the hyperviolent Healy. The only thing wrong with this film is that it didn't kick off a massive franchise with 30 more films, which means we'll have to make do with this one lunatic gem.

TIE: ***The BFG***

dir. Steven Spielberg

scr. Melissa Mathison

based on the book by Roald Dahl

TIE: ***Pete's Dragon***

dir. David Lowery

scr. David Lowery and Toby Halbrooks

based on a screenplay by Malcolm Marmorstein

That's right! I'm a big fat cheater! I put a tie on the list, which means it's really 21 films long, and this entire thing is ruined now and I'm leaving! Sorry. I just keep outraging myself with my nonsensical decision making. But bear with me. Putting Steven Spielberg's *The BFG* and David Lowery's *Pete's Dragon* side by side on this list makes perfect sense to me, because both of them were beautiful, gentle family films that refused to play by the story-in-a-box rules of most kid movies. Both of them were overlooked by audience for the most part. And both of them are going to endure and be discovered by family audiences in the future, and at that point, they will be duly celebrated.

Forget about the CGI Tarkin in *Rogue One*. For me, the real milestone in performance this year for a computer-generated character is the title character in Spielberg's adaptation of the Roald Dahl book. As performed by Mark Rylance opposite the delightful Ruby Barnhill, the BFG is sweet and slightly scattered and utterly believable. The two of them have this very real, beautifully performed relationship, and there came a certain point where I had to stop thinking about the effects work altogether because I simply couldn't keep up with everything Spielberg had to be juggling to bring these things to life. It is a dazzling work of imagination, with a rich, beautiful palette, and I particularly love the way the scheme to bring in the Queen for help unfolds. There are so many lovely little details here, and underneath all of it, there's this relentless kindness that feels like it's important.

Pete's Dragon feels like one of the best films ever about the bond between human and pet, and the team who brought Eliot to life did a terrific job of making him feel like a real animal. For me, the real key to great character animation comes from the way they make decisions about character. Both Oakes Fegley and Oona Laurence do great, knowing work, and because they believe in Eliot, we believe in him, too. Neither of them feels like a typical movie kid, and that works in the film's favor. They don't telegraph any of what you're supposed to feel, and David Lowery earns every tear you'll shed honestly.

De Palma

dir. Noah Baumbach and Jake Paltrow

How can a documentary that's just about a filmmaker discussing his work make a top twenty list at the end of the year? Isn't this just the kind of fluff piece you'd find as a special feature on a Blu-ray release?

Nope. Not really. For one thing, Brian De Palma doesn't seem to be the kind of guy who tells stories simply because they make him look good. Instead, as he talks his way through almost every one of his feature films, he tells stories about how he made creative choices, how his collaborations unfolded, and what he hoped to communicate with his work. I have been a De Palma fan pretty much as much long as I've been a film fan, and one of the reasons I considered Pauline Kael an important voice in my own development was because her love of De Palma ran counter to the conventional mainstream wisdom. I would read her reviews and see how adamantly she would defend her perspective on him and his work, and it made me realize that you don't have to agree with anyone else as long as you can explain your thinking. When I take a position on a film or a filmmaker, I can do so knowing that it doesn't matter who agrees with me. My job is not to land on the side of the consensus, but rather to explain the context in which my opinion was formed. As I watch De Palma's work now, I marvel at the idea that there was any real division in opinion over his work. I think he had one of the strongest picture-for-picture runs of any of the film brats of the late '70s, and he has an amazing voice, one that I have enjoyed in film after film.

What I didn't know until now is that De Palma is just as entertaining talking about his films as his films are to watch. That is not always true, but co-directors Noah Baumbach and Jake Paltrow managed to get him to open up, and the results are wonderful. I feel like I learned new things about the films I already loved, got some perspective that might change my mind on the films that I didn't love, and saw all the reasons I already loved his movies reinforced. It might not play the same way for someone who has no interest in De Palma's work, but then again, why would someone like that even watch this in the first place?

Everybody Wants Some!!

scr./dir. Richard Linklater

One of the things I love about Richard Linklater is how many of his films feel like they started from a super-clever or meta idea, only to flourish into something genuine as part of his process.

For example, you could easily lay out a chart in which you could make the case that *Everybody Wants Some!!* is an almost mechanical inversion of the structure of *Dazed & Confused*, simply pushed forward a few years in time, but that would miss the point. Yes, this film is very much a response to that film, just as each of the films in his *Before* series feels like a reaction to the one before it. But Linklater has always favored the small, the intimate, the honest, and I think it means his films are going to have greater shelf life than many of the flashier films made by his peers. The film follows a group of incoming freshmen in the final days before the school year begins at the University Of Texas in Austin, and it does a terrific job of capturing that weird anxiety that starts to settle in as we realize that we're not kids anymore and that what we do may actually matter for the rest of our lives. Because most of the main characters are members of the school's baseball team, Linklater's able to dig into the weird competitive thing that drives these kids, and it's written from a place that isn't all about judging these athletes or mocking them. And even though there is great affection in the way he writes his characters, he's also not just canonizing them. He wants to understand what it is that drives them, and he always writes his characters with a real curiosity about the way they think. As with *Dazed*, Linklater depends on a huge ensemble of young actors here, and there are a number of stand-outs. Blake Jenner is a gently charismatic lead, while Glen Powell seems determined to bulldoze everyone else with his hilarious work as Finnegan. Wyatt Russell seems to be possessed of the same dynamic presence as his legendary father, and he makes a strong impression as a dope-smoking pitcher with a secret. I love the way the film winds down, and as with *Dazed*, there is a sense that we leave these characters at a moment of great change, and the time we spend with them turns out to be critically important to who they not only are, but will be. Linklater has become a master at juggling this kind of portrait of an entire community at once, and I think people will be kind to this one as it ages.

Green Room

dir./scr. Jeremy Saulnier

When was the last time a movie made you break a sweat? It's not easy, because you're talking about an involuntary reaction, something that a filmmaker can't really count on. When the first *Jurassic Park* started screening in Los Angeles a few weeks before it opened, I saw it with a crowd that was so lost in the T-rex attack sequence that the temperature in the theater actually went up, leaving everyone flushed and sweaty. I thought maybe it was just a one-time thing, but when I went to see the movie again opening weekend in Westwood, the same thing happened. Sometimes, a filmmaker is so good at creating tension that it stops being something you're just watching on the screen and it becomes something you actually experience.

Green Room gave me that kind of full-body panic attack, and it marks Jeremy Saulnier as one of the best orchestrators of tension working today. His earlier film *Blue Ruin* was a wonderful exercise in revenge drama, small and restrained and tastefully made. Macon Blair was the star of that one, and he shows up here as a guy working at the small punk club in the middle of nowhere that turns out to be a terrifying trap for a band that was just looking to make a few extra bucks. When we meet the Ain't Rights, they're on the road and just barely scraping by. Pat (Anton Yelchin), Sam (Alia Shawkat), Reece (Joe Cole) and Tiger (Callum Turner) are an old school punk outfit, and when they lose what was supposed to be a great gig, they end up scrambling to make up some gas money, and that leads them to an armory in the middle of nowhere that happens to be a skinhead bar. When the band opens with a cover of "Nazi Punks Fuck Off" by the Dead Kennedys, it's pretty clear that they are in the wrong place. Even so, everything might be fine if they didn't happen to walk back into the green room at the exact moment that Werm (Brent Werzner) kills his girlfriend. Along with her friend Amber (Imogen Poots), the band finds themselves trapped there while the skinheads try to decide what to do. What unfolds is an amazing example of how to use geography as a filmmaker. We learn every inch of that building, and the characters make a series of attempts to escape, each time genuinely trying to figure out how to make it work. Saulnier keeps ratcheting up the anxiety by showing us how good the idea for escape is, then cutting that option off completely. Patrick Stewart shows up as the head of the skinhead group, and it's a quiet, menacing performance that never feels like Stewart trying to ladle it on. I hate it when you can see an actor trying to be scary. What makes him genuinely terrifying is how reasonable and normal he seems even as he commands some truly awful things. I miss Anton Yelchin already, and having met him several times, I feel like I got a glimpse of the real person behind the onscreen persona. He gives an amazing performance here, as does Imogen Poots, and for both of them, this feels like they're just starting to show off how good they can be. It seems doubly cruel that Yelchin would be taken from us just as he starts to really come into his own. At the very least, we get a performance this great in a film this good to remember him by.

The Handmaiden

dir. Chan-wook Park

scr. Deo-kyeong Jeong and Chan-wook Park

based on the novel *Fingersmith* by Sarah Waters

Oh, that's right, Chan-wook Park is a lunatic, and his movies are like hand grenades filled with broken glass that he rolls into a theater for his own deranged entertainment. I almost forgot.

When South Korean cinema started to break internationally, it put a spotlight on a group of filmmakers who have gone on to varied degrees of success. It can be a terrible thing for an international filmmaker to have American success sometimes because they come to Hollywood looking to work and they end up having everything that made them special sanded off by the system. Chan-wook Park made arguably the biggest splash of any of the South Korean guys with *Old Boy*, and it felt like he spent much of his time after the release of that film chasing it, trying to come up with something that would land the same kind of punch. I am very fond of *Stoker*, the film he made in 2013 with Mia Wasikowska, but it didn't really connect for most audiences, and it felt like Park was starting to fade. Well, that's not something we have to worry about because his latest film is a rip-roaring return to form, one of the craziest and most outrageous things released anywhere this year, and a genuinely moving love story to boot.

In some ways, this is a simple con man movie, but it's told in a fractured form that plays games with our expectations, and the way it reveals its secrets means the film always has one more card to play. I was so engrossed in it as I was watching that when the film reaches the end of its first big movement, I thought that was the end of the film. As soon as I realized the film was about to double back to explain some of what we'd missed, I went from liking what I was watching to loving it. There's something so playful about the way the film is built, even though I think there's a lot of this that is no laughing matter. It's not just outrageous to be outrageous. There is an audacity to the storytelling itself, and these characters all have secrets they're keeping. It's not until the last layer is peeled back that you realize what's really going on, and it shifts our sympathies repeatedly because of the way it shares or withholds information. Beautifully designed, exquisitely photographed, and masterfully orchestrated, *The Handmaiden* suggests that Chan-wook Park may actually still be warming up as a filmmaker, and that we have every reason to anticipate more masterworks from him in the future. Thank god.

Moonlight

dir. Barry Jenkins

scr. Barry Jenkin

based on the story by Tarell Alvin McCraney

Every year, as the awards season plays out, there are films that seem to exist solely as bait for the various prognosticators and experts, and while those films often make year-end lists, I don't find myself always agreeing. Sometimes it feels like we're being ordered to like those films simply because of what they are about. They are the movie equivalent of vegetables, and we eat them because they are good for us.

That is not the case with *Moonlight*.

So delicate it feels like it could crumble at any moment, *Moonlight* tells the story of a young man's evolution as a thinking, feeling being over three distinct moments in his life. The first segment, "Little," is all about what happens when this boy meets Juan (Mahershala Ali), a local drug dealer. For whatever reason, Juan takes an interest in the kid, and he and his girlfriend Teresa (Janelle Monae) begin looking out for him. The boy's name is Chiron, but everyone calls him Little, and one of the things that he's most worried about is how the other boys view him as soft. With Juan as one signpost and his own junkie mother (Naomie Harris) as another, Little tries to figure out who he is and whether or not the kids who call him "faggot" recognize something him before he even knows it about himself. In "Chiron," the now-teenaged boy no longer has Juan around to help him sort through things, and he has to find his own way through the difficult landscape of high school. In the final segment, "Black," set a full decade later, Trevante Rhodes plays a post-juvie version of the same character, and notions of forgiveness and grace are introduced for these characters who struggle so hard for every single good thing they have. If you read this description, it might be fair to worry that you're going to get something formulaic that is designed to simply hit a few hot button controversial topics. That's not what Barry Jenkins did, though. Instead, the film unfolds with this very careful, very organic voice, never pushing the big dramatic beats. Jenkins has a remarkable sense of restraint, like he's the anti-Lee Daniels, and as a result, even the smallest gestures feel huge. The film traces the way small acts of humanity can play out through the entire rest of someone's life, and by focusing on the three specific moments that Jenkins uses to tell the story, he is able to be subtle and crystal clear at the same time. You could teach an entire class about the way James Laxton shoots black skin in the film. It's exquisitely crafted, and there's a tactile quality to it, making it feel more like memory than drama. Deeply felt, *Moonlight* gives voice to a character I've never met, and it announces Barry Jenkins as an artist of extraordinary sensitivity.

The Neon Demon

dir. Nicolas Winding Refn

scr. Nicolas Winding Refn and Mary Laws & Polly Stenham

At any given moment, there's always at least one filmmaker working who seems to exist to stick his thumb in the eye of good taste, shocking and stylish and thrilling, and this year, Nicolas Winding Refn is the king of that particular mountain. If you want to double-feature two of the films on this list, watch this right after *De Palma* to get a glimpse at what kind of game Refn's playing here. He's damn good at it, too.

Elle Fanning, who also appeared in *20th Century Women* this year, has become a reliably terrific young actor. She seems like she's 12 years old in one moment, and 45 years old the next. That strange collision of child and adult is hard to play well, and Fanning's work does a tremendous job of charting a very difficult emotional landscape. Here, she's plunged headlong into a surreal version of the modeling world, one where the established talent will quite literally eat a newcomer if given half a chance, and the result is something that feels like a hybrid of *Suspiria* and *The Devil Wears Prada*. Jesse (Fanning) moves to Los Angeles, and right away, the entire industry seems to fall at her feet. Ruby (Jena Malone) takes the girl under the wing, and it's clear that she's got more than a casual interest in Jesse. Ruby introduces Jesse to people who can help her, and it's like she's throwing red meat into a piranha tank. Bella Heathcote, Desmond Harrington, Keanu Reeves, and Christina Hendricks all show up and do strong supporting work, and Alessandro Nivola makes a big impression in a very short appearance.

Special attention must be paid to the performance by Abbey Lee, who plays a tough, sleek, ferocious older model. She was great in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, and she's equally great here. The way she wrests the focus of the film away from Fanning's character is pure metaphysical strength of will, a supporting character who refuses to remain in a supporting role. By the film reaches its jet-black punchline, I was cheering for her just because of how hard she fights for what is hers. There is a reason she is the last one standing, and Lee seems to gradually evolve over the course of the film into something more sports car than human. Refn's co-writers on the film have created some fascinating dynamics here as they practically dare critics to try to deconstruct the gender politics at play. Is Refn exploiting Fanning? Is she a knowing player in the game? Is she even the main character? With detours into long stretches of lush, hypnotic surrealism, *The Neon Demon* seems to reinforce the idea that any mainstream hit Refn ever makes, a la *Drive*, will be a complete accident. He's not chasing that, and he doesn't seem to care if he gets it. He has earned the right to make whatever he wants as long as he's working at a certain budget, and within that budget, he has proven to be almost shockingly unfettered and free. When I look at *Bronson* or *Only God Forgives* or *The Neon Demon*, these are not movies that look small or that seem like they're restricted because he didn't have enough money. They are visually remarkable, the work of someone who has total control over the image you're seeing. There are two films on the list this year that feel to me like David Lynch during his most interesting stretch as a filmmaker, and in this case, Refn taps into a beautiful, wretched dread that Lynch has often utilized. It is mean and funny and unspeakably ugly all at once. It is a waking nightmare, wrapped in *haute couture*, with lipstick the exact hue of blood.

I Am Not Your Negro

dir. Raoul Peck

scr. Raoul Peck

based on the book by James Baldwin

By the time I was old enough to know about the civil rights movement of the '50s and the '60s in America, it had already been trapped in amber, transformed into a story that grown-ups told kids about how hard things were back in the good ol' days. There is a twisted irony to the idea that the more recent something was, the more we have to simplify it for the textbooks if we're ever going to teach it to young students. It's a dangerous thing, because the further we get from those events, the more it will be the sanitized version that becomes the truth. If you are going to tell the story right, you need a writer who is right there in the middle of things, someone who can get it down on the page while it's fresh, someone who is not afraid of the complexity of things.

Enter James Baldwin.

He was publishing work in the '50s that challenged everything about the established power structure, and he was a prolific writer. He generated books, plays, essays, poems, journalism and social criticism. He had a remarkable voice as a writer, and he saw race and class in America with clear eyes and an entirely-appropriate sense of moral outrage. He also wrote about sexual politics with keen insight and a gentle heart. As a gay black man working in mainstream culture in the single most conservative era of the 20th century in America, he managed to find a way to publish material that spoke truth about his identity without turning him into a token and without crushing him beneath the weight of all the outrage. *Giovanni's Room* is an essential text for at least one generation of gay readers, if not two. He grew up hard in Harlem, and his earliest work was already powerfully woke, well before that was a word or even an idea. When he retired to France, it was only after his work here in the '60s came to what felt like a conclusion. When he passed away, he left behind an unfinished novel called *Remember This House*. It was supposed to weave together material about Medgar Evers, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. This movie springs from the idea of finishing Baldwin's work, but in a way that includes Baldwin as an actual character, and hiring Samuel L. Jackson to read the words of Baldwin is a master stroke. The film uses period footage to weave a difficult picture of what it was really like to be a figure in the civil rights movement, and one of the reasons it feels so urgent for people to watch this film is so they can see how the establishment reacted to the various figureheads in the '60s.

Maybe in doing so, they'll see how close we are to making the same mistakes we've made before. There were many great documentaries this year about America and its struggles with race, including *OJ: Made In America* and *The 13th*, but this is the one that hit me the hardest. It's an audacious movie, and an essential one, and I wish to god I could tell you that everything in these films is behind us now, in our past. It's not, of course, so this is instead a provocation to anyone who sees it to stand up and be counted.

Nocturnal Animals

dir. Tom Ford

scr. Tom Ford

based on the novel by Austin Wright

I did not care for Tom Ford's debut film, *A Single Man*, but I did think it showed promise. It felt to me like a film that skipped along on the surface without ever touching anything deeper. With his second film, I am forced to reassess Ford. As both writer and director here, he shows enormous command, and there's even a dark ribbon of humor running through it. The film it reminded me of most is *Blue Velvet*. While I think Lynch's vision is more beautiful and surreal, Ford's film feels like a beautiful veneer over something horrible and hungry. It feels like something designed to wound instead of kill just to make sure it hurts.

Susan Morrow is contacted out of the blue by Edward Sheffield (Jake Gyllenhaal), her ex-husband. He's written a book and he wants her to have a copy. She begins reading it, and she's immediately struck by how lurid it is. As the story wears on, it's clear that Edward is writing about them, about some unsaid something that destroyed the two of them. There's a sort of *Wizard of Oz* thing going on in the film as we see how events from the life that Susan and Edward shared play out in the book, but in funhouse mirror fashion. Edward isn't literally writing about what happened between them. Instead, he's transformed everything that they did, and he's turned it into something else, and only Susan can read that book and know what he's really talking about.

In the book-within-the-movie, a normal family man, also played by Gyllenhaal, is traveling with his wife, played in an inspired bit of casting by Isla Fisher, and his daughter India (Ellie Bamber). Right there, you get a sense of the way the game works. I'm guessing Isla Fisher and Amy Adams have gone up for the same roles repeatedly over the years, and casting Fisher for the role is a great way of showing how the people in Edward's story are meant to be reflections of real life. A minor misunderstanding on a highway in the middle of nowhere escalates, and as soon as Tony/Edward steps out of his car, he realizes he's made a mistake.

Ray Marcus (Aaron Taylor-Johnson) and his crew are just looking for someone to dismantle, and their car just happened to stop, so aren't they lucky? Things spiral into the darkest place possible, and only Tony escapes. Michael Shannon shows up in the film as a lawman who is practically giddy at the thought of gunning down Marcus and his buddies, and the film takes a left turn from where I thought it was going, eventually heading into *Death Wish* territory and playing out as a dark revenge fantasy. Reading Edward's book stirs up some powerful emotions in Susan, and when the reason for the distance between Edward and Susan is finally uncovered, it's that last puzzle piece you need to make sense of Edward's book. There is a very real loss, tempered by very real rage, and when Susan finally realizes what Edward is writing about, it almost destroys her. *Nocturnal Animals* may be wrapped in a crazy crime movie's skin, but at heart, it is a film about living with the choices we've made, even if those choices have hurt or destroyed other people. It may look like a big slick piece of souped-up trash, but the film is built on a fundamental truth: You may be done with the past, but the past ain't done with you.

Paterson

dir./scr. Jim Jarmusch

Here's another artist who seems to just get better as he gets older. I have loved Jim Jarmusch since I first saw *Stranger Than Paradise*, and watching his career develop has been a sincere pleasure. I don't love every single one of his films, but the ones I love, I love with a fierce passion. *Down By Law*, *Mystery Train*, *Dead Man*, *Broken Flowers*, *Only Lovers Left Alive*, *Ghost Dog*... these movies are all beautiful examples of how Jarmusch, regardless of what story he's telling or what genre he's working in, has managed to perfect an aesthetic that is uniquely and completely his. Only he would cast Adam Driver as a bus driver in New Jersey who lives a simple, quiet life as a form of tribute to William Carlos Williams, his favorite poet. Golshifteh Farahani plays his girlfriend, and the two of them share this quiet life full of tiny kindnesses and this general desire to make things that add beauty to the world. She bakes. He writes poetry. They have a routine, a dog, a life they have carefully built. Each day feels like the one before it, and that's fine. Jarmusch lets the film breathe, takes his time to show us the rhythm of the life that they've made for themselves. Once he's done that, then any variation on that rhythm becomes important, and even the smallest changes feel significant. We're so used to the way movies work that it almost feels wrong when no big drama manifests in the film. Even when Jarmusch throws something big at the characters, things still play out in this quiet, muted fashion. It's a gentle film, deep down in its bones, maybe the gentlest thing that Jarmusch has ever made.

I'm trying to imagine anyone else playing Paterson, and I can't. That's a good sign. Jarmusch has given Driver the best material he's ever had, and his performance is absolutely up to the par with the writing. Without ever playing everything on the surface, he is able to etch this fascinating inner life for his character. He walks around, so low-key he's almost invisible, and he soaks up everything people do and say and the ways they behave, and whenever he has a quiet moment, out comes that tiny notebook, and he loses himself in writing his poems. There is a moment late in the film where something happens, and it provoked an immediate visceral response from me. I almost wretched from empathetic horror. I've done what his character does, and it's the worst feeling as a writer. It is always an exercise in futility to try to recapture something you've already written, something that Paterson clearly understands. He accepts his loss with a good grace that I find almost baffling, but it's true to the character. He has found his place in life, and if he has to start over and write new work, then so be it. It is a powerful reminder that art is not just about the impact it has on those who ingest it, but also about the transformative impact it has on the artist who created it.

MORE GOOD MOVIES THAT ARE GOOD

There were plenty of good movies that didn't make my top 20.

For example, I would also tell you that you should see *Lemonade*, *Crush*, *Cafe Society*, *The 13th*, *The Red Turtle*, *Elle*, *Lion*, *Kubo and the Two Strings*, *Toni Erdmann*, *Morris From America*, *Krishna*, *Captain Fantastic*, *Hell Or High Water*, *The Lobster*, *Eye in The Sky*, *Life, Animated*, *Hidden Figures*, *The Birth Of A Nation*, *The Lovers & The Despot*, *Julieta*, *Love and Friendship*, *Tickled*, *In Order of Disappearance*, *High-Rise*, *Christine*, *Miss Sloane*, *Don't Think Twice*, *Hacksaw Ridge*, *The Founder*, *Sing*, *Swiss Army Man*, *The Eyes Of My Mother*, *Rules Don't Apply*, *Fences*, *Allied*, *Loving*, *Doctor Strange*, *Patriots Day*, *The Edge Of Seventeen*, *Silence*, *Miles Ahead*, *Hail, Caesar!*, *Deadpool*, *Zootopia*, *10 Cloverfield Lane*, *Midnight Special*, *The Invitation*, *The Jungle Book*, *The Meddler*, *A Bigger Splash*, *Captain America: Civil War*, *Weiner*, *Popstar: Never Stop Never Stopping*, *The Legend of Tarzan*, *Sausage Party*, *Southside With You*, *Barry*, *Blair Witch*, *Operation Avalanche*, *Shin Godzilla*, *Things To Come*, and *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*.

That doesn't even include all the movies I haven't seen from 2016, and there are enough of them that other people love that I feel like I could make an entirely different list just based on those as I catch up with all of them. It would seem to me that there were plenty of films worth your time and attention this year, and just because these are the 20 that mattered most to me, it doesn't mean they'll mean the same thing to you. I'd love to hear from you about what movies hit you hardest this year.

Looking back at all of that, I can safely say that my love for movies has not waned a bit. If anything, it burns brighter because I am aware now of the ways it sustains me, and how easy it would be to let events beat me down and dull that love.

You can take a lot from me, world, but you can't have that.

Now let's have a great 2017.

*There are plenty of great films that were released before I was writing criticism, and they are movies I consider foundational parts of what I love about movies. Most critics spend the majority of their energy writing about and reacting to new films, and we rarely go back to write about older films, except in passing. We're going to use this space to write full-length reviews about these older films because we often have the clearest perspective on films when we view them in **HINDSIGHT**...*

Brazil (1985)
dir. Terry Gilliam
scr. Terry Gilliam & Charles McKeown

There's a playful quality to the way Michael Kamen runs variations on Ary Barroso's song "Aquarela do Brasil" throughout the score for Terry Gilliam's haunting dystopian vision, which is strange since "playful" seems like a very odd word to use to describe a movie that contains one of the most brutally painful endings in movie history. But there's very little about Gilliam's film that is easy to categorize, which is one of the reasons it must have felt so terrifying to the Universal marketing executives who tried to smother it before being guilted into releasing it as the director originally intended.

Maybe it's appropriate that *Brazil* was not born; it escaped.

Sam Lowry is a dreamer, and dreams are dangerous things, indeed, especially when the world is designed to crush those dreams. Gilliam's not dealing with the real world here, instead offering up a heightened reality that isn't a dystopia so much as it is a morass of bureaucratic inefficiency, an entire society choking to death on paperwork and rules and a total lack of freedom. These people aren't being violently oppressed (for the most part), but rather smothered with mundanity. When Sam Lowry dreams, though, he is free, and as the film begins, he has reached a point where the dreams are starting to affect his waking life because he can't carry around all of this desire anymore without figuring out what to do with it. Jonathan Pryce is terrific as Sam, always looking like he's had a terrible scare, but with a smile that arrives like the sun after a rainstorm. On those rare occasions that Sam Lowry really smiles, the entire film seems to brighten around him. For the most part, though, Sam lives his life in clenched terror, just like everyone else, and he is doing everything he can to stay invisible.

It's not easy. His mother (Katherine Helmond) wants to see him promoted because his status directly reflects on her, and she doesn't understand why Sam would want to remain anonymous, under the radar. When you look at the world she occupies in the film, it seems almost eerily prescient these days. She lives in a bubble that allows her to see the world however she wants to see it. When they meet for lunch in a fancy restaurant, we see them carefully consider their options and order their meals. When they are delivered, they each come with a picture of what the lunch is supposed to be, the pictures standing in stark contrast to the strange multi-colored piles of goo they are actually served. This delusion, the ability to simply not see what is actually happening in front of you, serves them well when there's a terrorist attack during their lunch. They continue to eat and converse even as they are surrounded by fire and screaming and broken glass and blood. If they do not see it, it is not happening, and therefore, it is not a problem. The same thing is true of the running plastic surgery storyline in the film. Sam's mother and one of her friends are both constantly having work done, and we see her friend slowly fall apart over the course of the film as her complications get complications. And no matter what, every time they see each other, they ooh and aah over how wonderful the treatments are and what a huge difference they make, and it's all just nonsense, a willful disregard for reality.

There are tiny nods to the Marx Brothers peppered throughout the film, not the least of which is all of the weird exposed duct work everywhere, a riff off the "Why a duck?" routine by the boys. That makes sense. After all, this feels like someone asked the Marx Brothers to make their version of Orwell's *1984*. There's an oppressive quality to the world around Sam, and Gilliam takes full advantage. It's the most playful the-world-is-ending movie I've ever seen, and it's one of the reasons the film hits so hard. After all, it's absurd from start to finish. We see arrest warrants being printed out while a guy chases a fly around the room, trying to kill it. When he finally does, the bug drops into the printer, and there's a momentary glitch, changing the name "Tuttle" into "Buttle" on one of the forms. From that single typo, Sam Lowry's entire undoing is kicked into motion, and the film often makes you feel like screaming and laughing at the same time. In a world as crazy as this, Sam's retreat into fantasy makes perfect sense.

The saddest thing about watching *Brazil* this time for me was how it feels like the world around us has not only caught up to the world onscreen but passed it in some ways. One of the problems I've had with dystopian fiction was the inability to imagine how we would get from the world we occupy now to the world glimpsed in these stories. Surely we wouldn't give away our civil rights or our security over fear, right? I mean, just because there's some phantom enemy we can't see out there landing punches on us, we wouldn't flip out and elect lunatics who would strip us of even our most basic rights, would we? Sam's attempts to stay out of everything and simply live his life quietly doesn't work because we don't get to just opt out of life. The only reason he ever agrees to the promotion his mother forced on him is so he can hunt down his dream girl, Jill Layton (Kim Greist), who he spots in real life when he tries to deliver a refund check to the widow of the innocent Buttle. Sam finds his dreams and his waking life are merging, and he eventually just throws himself into it.

I love the film's supporting cast. Robert De Niro plays Archibald Tuttle, the man the government was really after, and we meet him when he responds to a distress call Sam places with Central Services about his broken air conditioning. The idea that paperwork has become such a problem that you have underground plumbers working outside the system is hilarious, and De Niro plays the character perfectly. He's very funny, but you can tell that in his head, Tuttle thinks he's Errol Flynn. Ian Holm plays Sam's boss, and he's a great little shambles of a man. Jim Broadbent makes a strong impression as Dr. Jaffe, the "knife man" who is working on Sam's mother. I especially love the work by Michael Palin here. I've always thought of him as the best actor in the Monty Python troupe, and his work here backs that up. He plays Jack Lint, a friend of Sam's, and whenever Sam runs into him, he's all smiles and handshakes and chatting about the kids. But late in the film, Sam comes face to face with Jack doing his real work, and the moment is terrifying and heartbreaking, and Palin plays it all beautifully. There is a creeping horror to the film. While it is frequently absurd, the forces at play here are genuinely scary. Because of the Buttle/Tuttle mistake, an innocent man is taken from his home in the middle of the night and tortured to death. Even worse, he's charged for the costs of his arrest. When Jill starts poking around, trying to get the government to admit its mistake, all she does is turn herself into a target, too. There are no mistakes, and if there are, they are wiped away and forgotten quickly.

Sam realizes that Jill has put herself in danger, and he sees an opportunity to finally become the hero in life that he's always been in his fantasies. The distance between those things becomes clear, though, once Sam starts actually poking around in things. The system isn't designed to give people what they want. It's designed to crush them, to crush their questions, and to keep everyone in their place. When we see Sam's fantasies, they're beautiful. I think aside from Miyazaki, Gilliam might be one of the few people to ever get flight this right on film. The practical effects work in this film is gorgeous, and the whole thing feels hand-crafted. Gilliam uses every trick in the book to stretch his budget, and it's one of the most beautifully-realized dystopias I've ever seen. It feels lived in and real, everything breaking down and second-hand, and you can see how easily our world could devolve into this one.

Gilliam is given terrific support by his cinematographer Roger Pratt, his amazing production designer Norman Garwood, and especially composer Michael Kamen, who has never written a better score than this. Watch the moment where Sam and Jill finally kiss. The way Kamen holds his score, and holds it, and holds it, and then BLAM! As soon as their lips touch, the score blows back in at full force. It's just one tiny detail, but the entire score is like that. By the time the closing credits roll over a haunting image that I would describe as the happiest sad ending in the world, we are exhausted. Gilliam stages the last twenty minutes of the film as a desperate scramble through Sam's psyche as he struggles to find some way to escape. He does eventually find a way out, and I find that even now, thirty years after I first saw the film, the sight of Sam sitting in that chair, smiling, his eyes a million miles away, is still enough to reduce me to tears. Gilliam wants to believe in happy endings, but the script he co-wrote with Charles McKeown and Tom Stoppard doesn't let us off the hook that easily.

In Gilliam's world, as in ours, sometimes the bullies win.

NOEL
Based on a screenplay
by Drew McWeeny & Scott Swan

2 / Nicolas and The Head

One thousand years later, in a city not too far from here, there was a boy who hated everything about his life.

It was a grey city of glass and steel, and Nicolas was pretty sure it rained every single day. He was a gawky boy of thirteen, whip-thin, all elbows and stumbles and nervous energy. He was the sort of boy who never seemed to fit, and he was acutely aware of it. As the holiday season began, Nicolas was filled with even more dread than normal. He hated holidays and saw no reason to celebrate anything. They were just excuses for noise and skipping school. With Halloween upon him, he knew that Thanksgiving and Christmas were just around the corner. And when it came to holidays, Christmas was the one that Nicolas hated most of all.

Nicolas lived with his family in a grim, cheerless little apartment, dark and poorly decorated with a layer of ash over everything. His real father had died when Nicolas was very young, just before Christmas, and since then, the holiday reminded Nicolas most of all of what he no longer had.

No one could ever replace his real father, but his step-father Earl didn't even come close. Earl wasn't good at much, but he was excellent at a few things. He drank beer like a champ, and he was very good at spending the money that Nicolas's mother brought home. Earl was exceptionally good at hitting all of the kids, but he seemed to be especially gifted when it came to finding ways to hurt Nicolas.

For example, there was a small gold chain that Nicolas was given by his father when he was only three. On it, there was a small gold baseball. One afternoon, Earl sat on Nicolas, holding him in place while he took the necklace off of him. Nic cried and screamed, but Earl was unmoved.

“Your dad wouldn’t begrudge me a little beer money,” he said, and it didn’t just feel to Nicolas like Earl was stealing a thing. It felt to him like Earl was trying to steal everything and erase every sign that Nicolas ever had a real father or had ever been loved by anyone.

Of course, people like Earl hit everyone, and Nic’s mother had her own trouble behind closed doors, raised voices and muffled sounds that made all of the children cry, each of them feeling alone, all of them feeling powerless. On nights like that, Nicolas was pretty sure Earl wasn’t even a person. When he heard his mother sobbing from her bedroom and he heard Earl roar at her, Nicolas was pretty sure Earl was a monster.

Nicolas spent his entire day bracing for an attack, from the moment he woke up to the moment he eventually fell asleep, and it wasn’t just Earl that scared him. Walking home, he would hear someone running along the sidewalk behind him and he would think, *this is it, they’re going to hit me, and when I go down, they’re just going to keep hitting me, and I won’t get up*, and then they’d run past him and Nicolas would feel how tense he was, how clenched each muscle was, and he would be flooded with relief and shame because of just how readily he wrapped himself in that fear.

When he got home on the afternoon of Halloween, emotionally ragged from having to navigate a route crowded with costumed trick-or-treaters, the TV was on and there were empty beer cans everywhere, so he knew Earl was around.

Nicolas was careful to lock the door (Earl would let him have it if he didn’t) and leave the TV alone (Earl would let him have it if he didn’t) and he didn’t even consider going for a snack because no doubt Earl would have eaten them already, and if he hadn’t, he would later, and if there wasn’t a snack waiting for him, Earl would let him have it. In short, he was devoted to the idea of making it to the end of the day without Earl letting him have it in any way.

Nicolas shared his bedroom with all four of his brothers. David was the oldest at 15, a hulk of a kid who was twice the size of Todd, the youngest at 9. Darren, 14, sat at the desk drawing a hot rod, something he spent hours doing every day, while 11-year-old Tom bounced on his bed as he put on his Frankenstein costume. Todd was already dressed as a pirate, but Nicolas wasn't sure that had anything to do with Halloween. The costumes were all shabby and well-worn, having been road tested by the older brothers, over and over.

Tom was the smallest of them despite Todd being younger, and that's why he was putting on the costume that he clearly didn't like. He looked put out, nearly in tears. "I don't wanna be a Frankenstein!"

Darren growled, "Well, too bad. You're the only one who still fits in it." Darren was starting to sound more like Earl every day, and that scared Nicolas more than anything. He felt like they were forgetting their father's face, his voice, his jokes, and the way he loved them. It felt like they were losing him all over again.

As Nicolas threw his book bag onto the bed he shared with Todd, David reached out and gave him a gentle kick. "Where you been, Nicky?"

"Nowhere." Nicolas dropped onto the bed and tried to make himself as small as possible.

David set aside his magazine and he and Darren both stood up and approached Nicolas, who immediately tensed up. "What?"

"We all got here forty minutes ago."

"I missed the bus."

David nodded. "You miss a lot of things, don't you?"

"What do you mean?"

“I mean you forget stuff. You don’t pay attention. You make a lot of mistakes, don’t you, Nicky?”

Nicolas ran a private checklist, trying to imagine what he could have screwed up, already resigning himself to whatever punishment was about to take place.

Darren wasn’t smiling at all. “You really oughta pay attention.”

Nicolas tried to stand and David pushed him back down on the bed. Nicolas looked over at Todd, who was just as angry as the older boys. “You left the refrigerator open.”

Nicolas shook his head, relieved. “No. No, I didn’t. I mean, I don’t think...”

David thumped Nicolas on the chest with his knuckles, a hard sound that Nicolas knew would leave a bruise. “It don’t matter if you think you did or not, Nicky. Earl says you left it open, and since you weren’t home, guess who got shook for it?” He raised his fist and Nicolas flinched back. David shook his head, disgusted with all of it. He punched Nic in the arm, twice, hard. “Two for flinching, and you’re lucky it’s just two.”

As the older boys backed off, Nicolas curled up into his corner, hurt more by how his brothers were looking at him than by the punches. And as he lay there, he noticed that the door to the bedroom was open, just a bit, and he could see Earl’s shadow. He was standing outside, listening. When he moved, Nicolas got just a glimpse of him, and he could see that smug satisfied smile, and he knew that Earl was happy with the way things rolled downhill, happy with his place at the top.

When Nic’s mother got home, she was the one who had to get everyone ready for trick or treating, and Earl studiously avoided helping her in any way, even by accident, insisting that she take time to cater to him even as she juggled everything else. Nicolas waited until everyone was out of his room before he got his own costume together. He was a king, complete with crown and robes, and he had spent weeks quietly assembling the various pieces of the costume.

Just as he finished adjusting everything, Earl stepped in and closed the door behind him.

Nicolas got very still very quickly.

“Hey, Mary. Whatcha doing?”

Nicolas hated this game because he knew that there was no answer that would satisfy Earl. There was nothing he could say or do to change what was coming.

When Earl spoke again, he was quieter. Not a good sign. “I asked you what you’re doing.”

“I’m getting ready to go.”

“You think you’re going out with us tonight? Really?”

Nicolas considered the expression on Earl’s face. He considered his clenched fists. He considered the earlier conversation. Finally, he answered, “No.”

“That’s right. You stay here. And you hand out the stinkin’ candy.” Earl waited to see if Nicolas was going to say anything or protest, and when he didn’t, Earl nodded once. “That’s right.”

Even when Nicolas heard the front door close, he stayed where he was, amazed that the violence had blown past him for once. He was fine staying home by himself, watching bits and pieces of scary movies on TV, answering the door every ten minutes or so. He saw some good costumes and plenty of terrible ones and he gave out most of the cheap gumballs Earl had brought home. As he was finishing up with a tiny Peter Pan and an equally tiny Captain Hook, he heard something from down the hall and stepped out to see what it was.

Someone came lurching down the hallway slowly, bouncing off of doors and walls as if walking blind.

Wanting no part of whatever that was, Nicolas stepped back inside and closed his door. He was on his way back to the couch when there was a BANG! against the door. Just one. Nicolas wasn't sure what to do, but he knew that if he didn't go back and look, he would never be able to relax. He was still considering his options when someone began to knock. They rocked the door with heavy, thudding blows. One after another, like they were trying to take it off the hinges.

Now Nicolas was worried, acutely aware that he was alone. As much as he hated Earl, he couldn't imagine anyone trying this while Earl was home. He walked closer to the door, hoping it would stop, but finally unable to wait. "QUIT IT!" he yelled, and to his surprise, the knocking stopped.

He reached out and touched the doorknob. He listened, but could hear nothing. Just when he was sure the person had finally moved on, there was another loud BANG! against the door, and Nicolas almost jumped out of his skin. Furious now, he yanked the door open.

Standing just over six feet tall, a massive broad-framed Body filled the doorway. Aside from noticeably missing a head, the Body was otherwise totally normal, and stood motionless. "Aren't you kinda old for trick or treating?" Nicolas asked.

In response, the Body dug into its pockets, trying to find something. Nicolas looked closely at the place where the Body's head should be, trying to figure out the trick to the costume. "That's really cool," he said. "How'd you do that?" The Body finally came up with the note it was looking for and held it out to Nicolas, who opened it.

Written in a barely-legible scrawl was one phrase: *WHERE IS MY HEAD?*

Nicolas looked at the back of the note to see if there was anything else written there. He felt like someone was making a joke he didn't get. He offered the note back to the Body. "Do you want any candy or not?" he asked, annoyed more than scared by this point.

As if infuriated by the question, the Body charged at Nicolas, knocking him off balance, and rushed past him into the apartment. Nicolas couldn't believe what he was watching. The Body began to gallop around blindly, smashing into things, knocking over furniture, with no regard for what it was doing. Nicolas finally realized it wasn't going to stop and he looked around for something he could use. He had to duck around the Body and run back to his bedroom to find a baseball bat.

"Get out of here now! I mean it!" The Body continued to work its way around the room like a tornado, and Nicolas had no choice. He stepped in and swung once, a perfect shot to the ribs, and there was a thunderbolt CRACK! in response.

The Body staggered back a few steps. Nicolas moved in close and swung again, and the Body fell sideways towards the front door. "Leave, alright? I don't want to hit you again." It was like the Body finally just gave up, and it staggered all the way out into the hall. Nicolas threw the door closed and locked it immediately. When he turned and saw the condition of the house, a small, terrified sound snuck out.

Almost three hours went by with Nicolas in his room, all the lights in the apartment turned out. He sat curled around the baseball bat, ready to use it if he had to. From the other room came knocking, but Nicolas refused to answer the door. He refused to move again. If he didn't open the door, nothing else could get in, and nothing else could happen. It was simple. The knocking went on for a few moments and then the door was thrown open loudly.

Nicolas shook, afraid the Body was back. "Goawaygoawaygoawaygoaway" he repeated, low, afraid to give away his hiding spot. He heard heavy footsteps pounding down the hallway, and he could hardly stay still. His door flew open and Nicolas exploded off of the bed, swinging the bat with his full strength.

Earl caught it, mid-swing, and stared at Nicolas like he had turned purple and grown gills. “Are you crazy?!”

Earl dragged Nicolas in and threw him to the ground in front of Darren, David, Tom, Todd, Tracy, Christie, and Mom, all of them in their costumes, all of them holding bags heavy with candy they’d collected. They all looked shocked, and for good reason. The apartment was destroyed. Everything was broken. It was as if the Body had taken careful aim at every single functional item in the room and made a concentrated effort to make sure it was ruined.

“It wasn’t me,” Nicolas said, so quiet that Earl leaned in, sure he’d heard him wrong.

“WHAT DID YOU SAY?”

“It wasn’t me.” Nicolas was a little louder, but he couldn’t look at Earl. Instead, he looked at his mother, spoke directly to her, but he could already see that she wouldn’t look back at him. Like everyone else, she looked at the ground, afraid to somehow engage Earl and become involved. “There was this Body... and he came in... and...”

Earl grabbed Nicolas up off the floor and shook him so hard that Nicolas couldn’t even cry. He couldn’t catch his breath. It felt like he was going to come apart. “WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT? WE LEAVE YOU ALONE FOR FOUR HOURS AND YOU TURN INTO BABE RUTH? WITH MY STUFF?”

“I DIDN’T DO ANYTHING,” Nicolas finally yelled, and Earl stopped shaking him, surprised.

“You pull a stunt like this and you grow the nerve to start yelling at me? You smoke something tonight, worm? Or did you just wake up stupid today?” Before Nicolas could answer, Earl yanked his arm and sent him spinning, slamming into the wall hard enough that he bit his tongue, his eyes filling with tears as his mouth filled with blood. “Apologize to your family, right now.”

Nicolas stood where he was, afraid to turn around, and spoke directly into the wall, muffling his voice. "Sorry."

"You tell them so I can hear you and you'd better mean it."

Nicolas turned now to face his family, but he stared at the ground, just as they had. "I'm sorry."

"That is pathetic. You don't even know what you're sorry for."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry I ruined Halloween. I'm sorry I ruin everything." Nicolas walked past Earl, down the hall, and into his bedroom, and Earl watched him go with his jaw hanging slack in disbelief. He watched Nicolas close the door and he turned to look at everyone else.

"He's going to clean this up tomorrow. The first one who touches anything or helps him in any way gets twice what he gets."

Earl stormed down the hall and followed Nicolas into his room, closing the door firmly.

At the sound of the first muffled slap, Nic's mother started crying.

At the sound of the second slap, she wasn't alone.

The next morning, Nicolas found himself moving slowly, each step a fresh reminder of the night before. He was wishing there was a way to make himself disappear, feeling like things would never get better, and when he looked at his watch, he realized he was running late. He hurried, knowing that if his school called home to talk to Earl, things would be even worse for him. He cut through a vacant lot, hoping to make up some time, heading past the burned-out remains of an old brick building. He made sure he was alone, which is why he found it particularly disturbing when he heard a voice call out to him.

“Wait, boy.”

Nicolas looked around, but he still saw no one.

“I want a word with you.”

Nicolas hated the feeling of someone watching him. “Come out where I can see you.”

“I’m not hiding, boy. You’re just not looking in the right place.”

Frustrated but freaking out, Nicolas walked around some of the rubble, trying to pinpoint the location of the voice. “Don’t call me, boy.”

“Okay, then. Look down, Nicolas.” When he did, he grew very still. He felt like he had just been given the final piece of a puzzle, but even so, the picture made no sense. There was a Head on the dirty ground, and while Nicolas had no way of recognizing the Magician who had led Noel astray, somehow he had not aged at all in that thousand years. Here was his head, still separate from his body, and Nicolas tried to understand how the head could be alive. He did not understand how the Magician’s eyes rolled towards him, nor how he spoke.

“Don’t be afraid of me.”

“I’m not.”

“Good.”

“Because you can’t be real.”

“I am very real, Nicolas.”

“How do you know my name?”

“I’m a head. Isn’t that more interesting than how I know your name?”

Nicolas looked around to see if there was anyone watching him, if this was a joke that had been set up specifically to make him look stupid. Still, he thought of the night before, and he couldn’t help but make the connection. “Are you...” He stopped himself.

“What?”

“It’s stupid.”

“The only way to learn anything is by asking questions.”

“Are you looking for your body?”

“As a matter of fact... I am.”

Nicolas laughed, and it was a wild sound, out of control. He managed to stop himself just as quickly, but he felt like he could lose control again with the slightest nudge. “I knew it.” He backed off, looking around some more, then stepped closer and looked down at the Magician. “I saw it. Last night. He came to my house. He was looking for you.”

“Will you take me there?”

Nicolas considered his options. If he carried his books in his arms, his book bag was just big enough for the Magician’s head. Without thinking, Nicolas scooped him up, put him in the bag, and ran. Nicolas rushed home, knowing the Magician would have trouble breathing in there. He practically flew up the stairs.

When he got to his apartment, he had to be careful. He knew that Earl liked to spend the day out of the apartment, but on no set schedule.

He listened before he stepped into the apartment, and he hurried back to his room after locking the front door again.

Nicolas knelt in front of his bed and unzipped the bag, revealing the Magician's head. He set the head up against some pillow, propped up so they could look at one another and converse. "I feel like I'm crazy or dreaming or something. How can you be alive?"

"I have great power, Nicolas." The Magician seemed remarkably calm, all things considered. "I also have enemies whose magic is nearly as strong as mine. They couldn't kill me, so they did this instead."

"Did you do something back to them?"

"I did the same thing you'd do to Earl, given half a chance." The Magician saw how much Nicolas reacted to that, and he continued. "The world is not what your teachers and your parents tell you. It's both better and worse than you've been allowed to know."

"You know, though, don't you?"

"Yes, boy. I know."

"Then tell me everything."

The Magician laughed. "Where would I even begin?"

Nicolas shook his head. "Tell me anything."

"What do you know of order and chaos?"

"I don't know. Nothing, I guess."

"How about good and evil?"

“You mean like Batman or Luke Skywalker or God? They’re all good, right?”

“Look at me, Nicolas. This is the good your God does.”

That alarmed Nicolas, and he backed away suddenly. “God did that to you?”

“No. But there is no God the way you mean it. There are simply opposite forces pushing against one another. We call one good and we call one evil. We could call them order and chaos. Or light and dark. All that matters is that they oppose one another and that there is constant tension.”

“Why?”

“To advance nothing. To please no one.”

“I don’t get it.”

“That’s because there is nothing for you to get. The universe is random cruelty, brief flights of joy, all stirred together in the soup called Chaos. God and all of his agents are cooks with hands on the spoon of Fate. This wrong they’ve done me... just another carrot, forgotten as soon as it was added.”

Nicolas considered this, considered everything that was implied by this philosophy, and shook his head. “No. I don’t believe you.”

“Then explain why your father died.”

That was like a physical hit, a punch right to his throat. And the Magician kept pushing. “Explain why a decent man would be replaced by a monster like Earl. Explain those bruises on your mother. If that is not proof that all creation is a joke, played with blackest intent, then what is?”

Nicolas felt an emotion that wasn't anger and it wasn't sorrow and it wasn't grief, but it felt like all of them at once, and it felt like he was being turned inside out by it. "How do you know all of this?"

"I am one of the few to stand in the path of this wave of destruction, my hands up to stop the tide. My efforts bring nothing but pain upon me, but at least I go knowing I tried."

Nicolas took that emotion, so big he felt like he was riding it, and he did his best to push it down. "Then I'll try, too."

The Magician demurred. "I could never ask you to do that."

"I want to. I have to. I... I miss my father. Every day. I miss him so much I wake up sometimes wanting to cry or scream. I hate what my life has become. If I can get back at whoever made it this way... I'll do it."

The Magician smiled, that same smile he gave Noel, that same smile he gave to anyone who agreed with him. "You have a lion's heart, boy. It was truly fortune that brought you to me."

* * *

Somewhere far north of that city, Noel's castle began to awaken, as it did that time each year. What was once grand and beautiful was now covered in dust and dulled by age, and everything was carved from rock and ice, cold and unforgiving. Noel's bedchamber was like a freezer, with the only warmth under the covers of the massive bed where Noel and Greta were curled together.

Shadows flickered into the room, thin grey people, hunched and twisted, their small black doll eyes barely visible in the deep shadows of the castle. They circled the bed as the heavy curtains over the single window in the chamber was pulled back. A flat grey light filled the room, but no warmth came with it.

Noel dreamed, as he did much of the year, of the ride he had taken before and that he would take again. He dreamed of open skies and the lights of cities that sprung up around the world in the years he had been trapped in this cycle of service. The dream would begin a few weeks before he woke up, and by the time he opened his eyes, he was ready for what he had to do.

In the darkest corner of the castle, in a dead and dirty room, Black Peter was already awake when Noel came calling. He sat at a wheel, sharpening a blade, and when Noel stepped into view, he stopped. "I would speak with you, brother," Noel began.

"Why? How long since last we spoke? A hundred years now? Two?" Noel did not respond. He knew Black Peter was right, and he had no interest in arguing with him. "You lost the right to call me brother when you brought this life upon me."

"You are not alone in your pain."

"Oh, really?" Black Peter stood, and Noel saw that he was clad, as always, in living darkness. "Do you share my torment, King? When you deliver presents to each slumbering tot, do they feel sorrow at your passing? Because that's what I enjoy as I make my rounds, my load of switches and coal heavy on my heart as well as my back."

"I want to invite you to sup with us."

"People want. It is the way of things." Black Peter went back to his task, finished with Noel, who stood there frustrated and mute.

Noel struggled to find the right thing to say, the right way to bridge the distance in the room, and then finally offered, "I only try because I am sorry. I try because I love you. Because I still hope that someday.. somehow.."

In a flash, Black Peter was on his feet, his sword up under Noel's chin, the two of them nose-to-nose.

Noel looked at the twisted ruin of Black Peter's face, and he continued, despite Black Peter's violent anger. "... you will forgive me."

"Be certain of one thing, King. I will never forgive you."

When Noel joined Greta in the dining room, once designed to hold multitudes, the table was set for just the two of them. The sight made Noel sad, as it did each year, as he remembered the life that once filled the room. She could see the sorrow he carried with him, and she knew that once again Black Peter had rejected his amends. "Still nothing?"

"His hatred for me does not ebb one bit. I cannot imagine the solitude of his ride each year, each bad child waking to the disappointment he leaves behind." Noel sat, and she served him, her own appetite a fierce and howling thing after their months of slumber. "When I was given this curse, I thought a thousand years some impossible mark of time. But now it draws closed..."

"Was this too quick for you?" she asked, half kidding, poking at him, but he reacted with a flash of real anger to her surprise.

"Quick? I will finish my obligation and I will be free, and then I need never concern myself with the wants or dreams of a single child for what remains of my years."

Greta sat in silence for a moment, considering Noel's words, amazed at how little he seemed to have learned in their years of solitude and punishment. "You sound exactly like the cruel and little man who caused this misery, speaking of curses and obligations. There are days when I wonder if any of this has served any purpose."

"I did wrong, and I paid a price. Do not ask me to rejoice over it."

She pushed away from the table. "Ask yourself this, King, about your desire to return to your life as a free man. The world you knew has been dead for eons. What are you in such a rush to reach?"

* * *

When David and Darren got home from school, followed closely by the rest of the brothers and sisters, they were furious.

“I’m gonna kill him. I mean it,” Darren said, fuming, and David tried to calm him down, even though he was plenty angry himself.

“Maybe there’s a reason.”

“Yeah, I’ll tell you the reason. Nicolas only thinks of himself.”

Nicolas came walking out from the back bedroom and spotted them, instantly picking up on their mood. David snarled, “Where were you?”

“What do you mean?”

“The school’s gonna call tonight. They’re gonna talk to Earl. They’re gonna tell him that you skipped today. And what do you think he’s going to do?”

“I don’t care.”

Darren and David stared at Nicolas, agog, sure that he had lost his mind. Maybe the beating the night before had finally broken him in some permanent way. David practically moaned, “Well, I do!” He shoved Nicolas, and Nicolas fell awkwardly. “I can’t keep doing this, Nic.”

“And you shouldn’t have to.” Nicolas stood up again and glanced back towards the bedroom. “None of us should have to put up with this.”

David felt himself getting angrier. “What are you looking for? Huh? You think someone’s going to save you? You think anyone’s going to save any of us?”

“I want to make things right, David...”

David couldn't resist. He punched Nicolas hard, and Nicolas went down, his nose already squirting blood.

“... but if you want to do it this way...” Nicolas continued as the Body stepped out of the back bedroom. Darren froze first. He was petrified, but he managed to reach out and slap David's shoulder. The Body walked past all the other kids and lifted David off the ground by the back of his shirt. Nicolas once again climbed back to his feet. “I'm tired of people hitting me. I don't want Earl to do it, and I don't want you to do it, either.” The Body threw David across the room, hard enough to bounce him off the wall.

David landed wrong, and he didn't move for a moment, moaning. Nicolas walked over to stand over his brother, as the Body went to a shelf to retrieve the Magician's head from where it had been watching. None of the rest of the kids knew what to do or what to say. “Hurts pretty bad, doesn't it?” Nicolas looked at him dispassionately. “Unless you want it again, you're gonna stop, okay?”

David looks up at Nicolas and nods, trying not to cry.

“You're my brother, and I love you as much as I love Mom. But from now on, I say how things work. Got it?” David nodded again, and Nicolas looked around at everyone else, daring them to say different. The last person he looked at was the Magician, who was smiling with pride.

* * *

In a place that stood outside both time and space, Noel stood alone in a sea of pure white, having called for the Agent of Order to meet with him. When the Agent of Order appeared, Noel saw that he looked exactly the same as he had a thousand years before.

“There is much for us to discuss,” Noel said to him. “My time in your service is at an end.”

The Agent of Order considered him, his face impossible to read. “You have not finished anything yet. Now is not the time to speak of reward. You know your task, so what is there to discuss?”

“My future. When I finish this year’s ride, I shall be rid of this burden.”

“You sound sure of yourself.”

“Only that confidence has allowed me to endure. Still, there is one thing I wish to discuss with you.”

“You have been living for the promise of tomorrow, but you do not know the world you will return to.”

Noel was surprised that the Agent of Order got it so right, but realized he shouldn’t have been. The Agent of Order knew everything, it seemed. “Exactly.”

“You wish to see the world, to get some sense of the place. You want a taste of the freedom you dream of.”

Noel exhaled shakily. “More than anything.”

The Agent of Order took a long moment before continuing, enough that Noel felt he had overstepped. “You do not know what you ask for, Noel. Your trials are just beginning, and you have many mistakes ahead of you.”

He considered the king for another moment, then smiled as much as he ever smiled. “If you want this thing so badly, then go. Take your bag with you. It will provide all you may need.”

At first, Noel wasn't sure he had heard correctly. The Agent of Order continued. "Never forget who you are, or the last thousand years will have been for nothing. Break those things that tie you to your past. Only this will deliver you from fear. And keep in mind the most basic rule there is. By sunrise Christmas morning..."

"... one present for every good child, no matter what. Yes, yes. I understand," Noel said, thrilled by the Agent's agreement.

"No, King, you do not. But you will... or you will pay the price."

* * *

When Earl finally arrived home, it was late and he had been drinking, a combination he had perfected. It took him a few minutes to find his keys, something that was not helped by the lights in the hallway having been smashed, something Earl was too drunk to notice. He finally got the door open and stepped inside, and that's when he spotted Nicolas standing in the middle of the room, waiting for him to show up.

Slurring his words, Earl asked, "Where's your mother, worm?"

"Out."

Something about how calm Nicolas was irritated Earl in a way he couldn't quite articulate, not that Earl was good at articulating anything. He noticed that Nicolas had his hands behind him, and he grunted at him. "Whattaya you got there?"

"What do you mean?"

Earl wasn't in any mood to play games with the boy, so he grabbed him and twisted his arm, enjoying the quick sound of pain Nicolas made as he let go of the present, wrapped in black paper, which was about the size of a toaster. Nicolas smiled at Earl, in spite of the pain. "It's for you," he said.

Earl shook the box. "What is it?"

“It’s a surprise.”

“You tryin’ to kiss up to me? You do something wrong you’re worried I’m going to find out about?”

“You mean like skipping school today? Me? No. Nothing like that. No way.”

Earl eyed the boy suspiciously. “Better not have.” Having reached the limits of how long he could stand unassisted, Earl dropped into his recliner. He was curious in spite of himself, and he set to work opening the box.

Nicolas took a few steps back.

Once Earl got the paper off, he started tearing at the box itself, working the top of it open. He peered inside, puzzled, as a warm light began to pour out. “What is that?” he asked. When he looked over, Nicolas was still backing away. “What is that, boy?!”

Before Nicolas could respond, there was a blast of wind from inside the box, and suddenly Earl found himself bathed in a glow that felt unhealthy, wrong. There was a roar from inside the box, a sound made by something far worse than wind, and Earl began to scream a single word over and over. “WHY?!”

Nicolas tried not to sob as he yelled his response. “For my mother!” He stopped backing away, and he refused to look away, knowing he would want to remember this. “For my dad’s baseball!” He stood now, stationary, and he yelled back, hoping Earl could still hear him. “For making my brothers hate me! For every night I’ve been afraid to sleep! FOR EVERYTHING!”

As his brothers stepped out of the bedroom, drawn by the horrible sounds, they all watched. They could not have described exactly what they saw, but at the end of it, there was a sound like a reverse thunderclap and then the room was quiet, and the box lay on Earl’s chair, the cheap imitation leather around it melted and smoking.

Nicolas stepped in, picked up the lid, and replaced it, sealing the box up tight. As he did, he smiled very slightly and said, so low that only he could hear it, “Surprise, Earl.”

It was later still when Nic’s mother finally returned home with a few of the youngest kids in tow. She found Nicolas sitting alone on the couch, and Earl’s chair and all traces of it gone. She was immediately unsettled by the quiet. “Hi, honey. Are you by yourself?”

She could smell something in the air, something burnt, fried ozone and something worse. “Where’s Earl?”

“He was here. Now he’s not.”

She didn’t like that answer, and she didn’t like the looks she got from David and Darren as they stepped into the room and she didn’t like that burnt smell, not at all. “What’s going on, Nicolas?” She saw slight scorch marks on the carpet where Earl’s chair had been, and that worried her even more.

“You know what he’s like. He hurt you. He hurt me. He hurt all of us.”

“Nicolas... what did you do?” She wasn’t sure she wanted to hear his answer, but he just shook his head, as did David and Darren. Whatever they had done, they weren’t going to answer her.

“Things are going to be better. I made sure.” He stood up and Nic’s mother actually shrank back from him, suddenly scared and not fully sure why. “You just wait and see,” he said, holding back the tears in his eyes.

In Nic’s bedroom, the Magician and his Body sat waiting patiently. When Nicolas stepped in and dropped onto his bed, the Magician watched him with hungry eyes. “You have done magnificently so far, boy. The hard part is behind you know. All that is left is deciding how you want to live. You can shape your world any way you desire now.”

Nicolas looked over, cheeks wet, emotions boiling. “Hey, Head, no offense, but could you shut up for a while?”

The Magician let the boy cry himself to sleep, content in the knowledge that important steps had been taken, fate once more in motion around him.

**NOEL will continue
in PULP & POPCORN #4**

IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF PULP & POPCORN...

All four stories are up and running. *Noel*. *The Shadow Box*. *Djinn Rummy*. And now *Bat Out Of Hell*.

If you've read them, then you've got some idea about whether or not you want to see where they're going. And if the answer is yes, then starting next time, it's going to cost. I'm taking the magazine behind a subscription paywall. You'll be able to buy single issues, and you'll be able to buy a subscription as well.

Next time, you'll get a new edition of *Background*, a trip to a major city that has to contend with a very particular problem, and you'll also get the third chapter of *Noel*. I'm excited about that because you'll see how the first two radically different parts start to come together.

When we head to France for the second installment of *The Shadow Box*, you'll get to meet the rest of the team that's joining Dani Sweetman as she sets out to uncover some long-buried ghosts. Some she brings with her, and some she finds waiting. Things are going to get ugly, and fast.

There's plenty more *Commander Future* ahead as we leave behind the reprints and head into brand-new material for the first time, and it's going to be exciting to see the Commander's endgame begin to reveal itself. Can a man whose very existence seems to disrupt the rules of time and space ever truly find peace? That's a question that Commander Future and his personal biographer are both struggling to answer as the story continues.

Hindsight is going to be back, and there's a *Film Nerd 2.0* coming very soon, as well as an exclusive interview with one of our best working filmmakers as he unveils a radical revised cut of one of his movies.

We'll have *Djinn Rummy* back in *Pulp & Popcorn* #5, where you'll also see *Bat Out Of Hell* #2, and in the meantime, I want to hear from you guys. Please e-mail me at drew.mcweeny@gmail.com and you can tell me what you love, what you hate, and what you want to see as we continue this strange experiment.

See you back here in two weeks... I hope...

PREVIOUSLY IN PULP & POPCORN

Issue One

“What Is Pulp & Popcorn?”

“Can You Fit An Entire Awards Season Into One Week?”

THE SHADOW BOX #1 / “Overture”

“Does ‘Fantastic Beasts’ Point The Way To A New Kind Of Hero?”

BACKGROUND / “Knight Ride”

“For Jonathan Nolan, Time Is More Than A Twist”

THE COMMANDER FUTURE NOTEBOOK #1 /

“The Interview”

Issue Two

“So That Happened”

“Can You Dream At 120 Frames Per Second?”

DJINN RUMMY #1 / “Shuffle”

NOW THAT YOU’VE SEEN IT /

“Rogue One: A Star Wars Story”

NOEL #1 / “Is Santa Claus Real?”

REVIEW / “Silence”

THE COMMANDER FUTURE NOTEBOOK #2 /

“Moving Day”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Drew McWeeny was born a long-ass time ago.

For the past quarter-century,
he has been living and working in Los Angeles.

He is an award-winning playwright,
and he is the co-author of two films by John Carpenter
and one film by Larry Fessenden.

He thinks that's pretty cool.

Almost by accident,
he helped create the modern movie Internet,
and he hopes you will not hold that against him.

Between Ain't It Cool News and HitFix,
he has been writing about films for your entertainment
for two decades now,
and he is a member of the Los Angeles Film Critics Association.

Pulp & Popcorn is entirely his fault.