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From the Editor

Oh, *there* you are...

Well, I did it again, didn't I? It seems every time I set out to put one of these together, some *something* gets in the way and sends me careening off-track like a shiny silver ball in a pinball machine. And it takes a pinball wizard to get it all back in sync. My Pinball Wizard Mastery classroom-in-a-book got lost in the mail, I think.

I may have to take some drastic time management measures if I'm ever to accomplish most of the tasks on my to-do list. I'm sure some of you can sympathize. I hope you can, anyway....

~ Jason

Publisher George Phillies | **Editor** Jason Hunt

Contributors (alphabetically)

Nic Farey | Jason P Hunt | Heath Row | Duncan Shields | Thomas E. Simmons

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48 Hancock Hill Dr Worcester MA 10609

Contributions welcome.

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Superman

Review by Heath Row

(Originally published in *Faculae & Filigree* #45, part of *The Stf Amateur* 24)

My wife and I had both heard good things about the Superman movie directed by James Gunn. Caitlin doesn't usually enjoy superhero movies—Jonah and I have subjected her to many—but friends whose taste we trust had made positive remarks online, so we went to a local theater in early August to see it.

At the end of the movie, I turned to her and said, "Why did we think this was going to be a good movie?" Caitlin was relieved, because she'd been preparing to bite her tongue in case I'd enjoyed it. Neither of us had. I really thought I would based on online discussion, though I was willing to wait to see *Superman* on a smaller screen.

In addition to hearing favorable comments about the flick, I'd read the comic book stories on which the movie was based. The recently published 360media and McClatchy Media bookazine *DC Comics Presents Superman* reprinted several stories that reportedly informed and influenced the tenor, tone, and approach of the movie: 2005's *All-Star Superman* #1, 1998's *Superman for All Seasons* #1, and 2005's *Lex Luthor: Man of Steel* #1. As I wrote in a "Dollar Box Dilettante" column submitted for *Tetragrammaton Fragments* #280, "You can't go wrong with the writing of Grant Morrison and the artwork of Tim Sale."

Gunn's movie, however, went in another direction. I found the portrayal of Superman to be overly naive and infantile—Captain Everything meets Forrest Gump—suggesting that true goodness can only be the domain of children. The logic applied by one of the most powerful beings on Earth was that of a child: black and white, good and evil, alive or dead. Superman exhibited no higher order understanding of his position in the world, the importance and impact of his otherworldly strength, or the need to work with existing power structures such as world governments or law enforcement.

Even his relationship with Lois Lane smacked of the movie Big. In one telling scene, she didn't give him a cup of tea, but a cup of hot chocolate. Yes, adults can drink cocoa—I do—but that scene suggested a childlike nature and a relationship more along the lines of mother and child than lover or partner. (The almost-silent battle in the distance perhaps representing Starro from *The Brave and the Bold* #28 was wonderful, however.)

Similarly, Lex Luthor was portrayed as entirely bad, even unnecessarily sadistic and cruel. His motivation? Jealousy and spite, as well as bigotry toward alien races. While Luthor pursued the malevolent manipulation of a military action and border incursion because of a profit motive—selling arms for blood money—one could consider him evil rather than merely petty. But that doesn't explain his employees' support and involvement. They didn't seem similarly evil, just... employed. They were hardly henchmen, but temporary staffing for supervillains.

In addition to Superman, Lane, Jimmy Olsen, Perry White (a woefully underutilized Wendell Pierce), Steve Lombard, Ma and Pa Kent, and Luthor—well-known comic book characters all—the movie also features a slew of other superheroes. Those include Mr. Terrific (one of the more interesting characters in the movie), the Guy Gardner Green Lantern (portrayed by Nathan Fillion of *Firefly*, *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, and *A Series of Unfortunate Events*), Hawkgirl, Metamorpho, Krypto, and Supergirl. The first three are apparently members of a yet-unnamed Justice League. The Hall of Justice's echoes of Super Friends were a pleasant touch.

One of my pet peeves about superhero movies is that, when so many heroes are included in a movie that's not a team movie—such as the Avengers or the X-Men series—it's usually done to distract from the fact that the plot or portrayal of the titular hero (ostensibly the focal point) is weak. Case in point: *Batman*

Forever, only that flick stacked the deck with too many villains rather than heroes. (*Telegraphs & Tar Pits* #93) There were far too many crooks in that kitchen.

I think my biggest concern is that Superman fell prey to something I increasingly see in modern movies and TV programs. Rather than actually establish or develop a character, introduce personal characteristics or stakes that make viewers care about what happens to a character, or otherwise evoke and elicit honest emotional responses, the movie resorts to shorthand, employing screenwriting clichés. We aren't shown that Pa Kent is a big softy, Ma Kent tells us he is—multiple times. She even does so immediately after the one time he might actually be showing us. (Lest we miss it.) He ends up a cartoon. Even Pa Kent's motivational speech to Superman about the importance of his inherent goodness is a quickly delivered slap-dash affair. Instead of filmmakers showing us something is important or characters actually saying something meaningful, characters say something in the shape of something meaningful—and that's supposed to be sufficient. Check that off the beat sheet. I could go on.

The movie doesn't build on the legacy of the hero; it craps on it. Jor-El and Lara intend their son to dominate the human race, establishing a harem to continue the Kryptonian blood line. Superman isn't even really that strong; he loses practically every fight, but the movie doesn't explicitly assess the limitations of physical prowess, power, or violence.

Krypto is another distraction: a cute and cuddly funny animal. (Who doesn't love a pet?) Krypto isn't even Superman's dog; he belongs to Supergirl, who's featured in a brief cameo at the end—portrayed as a sort of drunk sorority girl who calls her cousin a bitch. I suppose we can expect a Deadpool-like Supergirl movie in the near future.

What did I like, other than date night with my wife and our theater pizza before the movie? Sean Gunn appeared briefly as Maxwell Lord, which was cool. Luthor built a prison warehouse in a pocket universe accessible only through interdimensional portals. The collapse of one portal almost leads to the destruction of Metropolis and neighboring Bakerline; that impending doom could be reversed by typing in a numerical code. Lane apparently grew up as a "punk rock kid from Bakerline." She and Kent debate who has more punk-rock cred. ("Maybe being kind is the new punk rock.") There's a fictional pop-punk band, the Mighty Crabjoys. And the Teddybears song "Punkrocker," featuring vocals by Iggy Pop, plays during the end credits.

Though I enjoyed those latter aspects, even that is a sanitization of or shorthand for punk. To cleanse my palate upon returning home, I read several issues of *Action Comics* published in the 1940s. Later that weekend, I watched a handful of the Fleischer Superman cartoons from the same time period. There's so much one could do with Superman. I guess Gunn did what he wanted to do. The *Guardians of the Galaxy* series has been so good. I'm perplexed that *Superman* wasn't any better than it was.



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Superman

Review by Jason Hunt

(Originally published at SciFi4Me.com)

This is absolutely most definitely *not* the follow-up to *Man of Steel*. And there was much rejoicing.

James Gunn has given DC and Warner Bros something that they haven't had in a long while: an actual comic book movie. Not a movie based on a comic book, mind you, but a bona fide genuine article. And not only is it a comic book movie, it's a Silver Age comic book movie.

Now, for a lot of you, that might not mean anything, but the Silver Age was a time where continuity was a little more loose, the stories were a little more fantastical and carefree, and there was a true sense of *fun* in the books. This is when Superman had maybe a dozen different variations of kryptonite, when Jimmy Olsen was a turtle, when the Wizard used magic to body-swap the Justice League with the Secret Society of Super-Villains. The Last Son of Krypton visited the bottled city of Kandor and was part of another hero team, Nightwing and Flamebird. The Justice League frequently teamed up with the Justice Society on Earth-2. And on it went....

It was just one of those things where you never knew what kind of story you would get next. Writers like Archie Goodwin, Denny O'Neill, Otto Binder, Gardner Fox... names only the diehard comics readers will recognize now, but those who paved the way for the comics of the 80s and 90s when stories got a little more connected, a little more grounded. Before the Collectible Years, before the Grimdark Years...

Superman has not one grimdark element to be found anywhere. There's color — *real color!* — in the images, and there's an energy on screen that I haven't seen in a Superman movie since *Superman Returns*. And while there are some quibbles to be had on this new iteration, I walked away from both screenings with a sense that James Gunn got the memo and understood the assignment. No more grim and gritty movies *based on* comic books. Instead, we're well past time — especially in DC's case — to deliver a comic book to the theater.

There is also not one ounce of political or ideological messaging in this film, either. I know *Variety* took the Gunn interview with the *Times of London* and tried to create a controversy where none existed. You can even see in the L.A. red carpet footage, that James Gunn was very uncomfortable with the question and tried to answer it with a non-answer.

In fact, if there's any "message" at all, it's that there's always hope, and you choose to be a good person or not regardless of what anyone says of you. Something Jonathan Kent (Pruitt Taylor Vince) points out to Clark in a moment of crisis caused by a situation where Clark (David Corenswet) learns something about his parents — and the jury's still out as to whether or not that was a complete fabrication by Lex Luthor (Nicholas Hoult).

So, let's get into the thick of it. This will be relatively spoiler free because I want you to go see the movie. I want you to be surprised and entertained and thrown into the pages of a comic book from my childhood. This really feels like you've opened up the latest issue of *Superman* mid-battle with the Hammer of Boravia. Luthor is the techno-billionaire who's jealous of the adoration given to Superman, who just showed up three years prior and has gained everything that Luthor has been working towards his whole life — power, influence, adulation, hero-worship — and it leads him to devise a plot that's 1) somewhat convoluted, and 2) totally what I'd find in a comic book.

Meanwhile, Clark is having to navigate this three-months-on relationship with Lois (Rachel Brosnahan), and they're still finding their boundaries. Lois can't turn off her "reporter" brain, and that sometimes gets her in trouble in the personal life. And Clark is trusting to a fault, so when Lois starts grilling him over his

taking unilateral action to stop a small war, it throws him for a loop because in a relationship you're supposed to have each other's back, right?

We're getting a Superman who still has to find a balance between his hero work and his life as Clark Kent, and the relationship with Lois is one factor of that, along with his work at the *Daily Planet*, all of which gets thrown into a tizzy by the media storm that Luthor uses to manipulate the general population into turning against Superman. No less so for Lois, who's trying to figure out the relationship question at the same time trying to figure out Luthor's involvement in the conflict between Boravia and Jarhanpur.

I like the fact that we're not dancing around the question of why a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist would be so blind that she doesn't see what's right in front of her, and the relationship feels genuine and authentic, especially when you get to a situation where reality doesn't quite meet the expectation for either of them. And instead of inserting a Gunnism Comedy Moment, Gunn lets the scene breathe and be the dramatic beat that it needs to be, fueling Lois' arc in coming to terms with the fact that she's dating Superman and all that comes with it.

But then we get Guy Gardner (Nathan Fillion) spilling the secrets of just how that disguise works — and I wish to note for the record that this particular bit of lore, which appeared in *Superman* #330 (Dec 1978) was quickly dismissed by DC Comics as taking place in a different arm of the multiverse, never to be referenced again. But here we are in 2025, and the hypno-glasses are back.

I still maintain that Fillion is the wrong guy to play Guy, but his Guy is very much perfectly Guy. This is the Guy Gardner from *Justice League International*, and I'm looking forward to the One Punch™ that's sure to be coming at some point. In the meantime, we can enjoy the smug self-satisfied jerk in all his glory, even though the costume isn't right. And it's nice to see Green Lantern constructs that are actually *constructs* and not blaster beams or any other variation of pew-pew.

Edi Gathegi's Mr. Terrific steals every scene, even the dumb one with the garage door gag. He's got a presence and a confidence that has you believing that he actually *is* one of the most intelligent people on Earth. He's slick and cool and doesn't have time to listen to Lois' relationship issues — that's why we have Cat Grant (Mikaela Hoover) — and he dominates the room when he enters. Gathegi gives him just enough swagger to mean business without leaning into parody or annoying arrogance and speaks with economy (although I could do without his quoting Frank Miller's *All Star Batman and Robin...*).

Hawkgirl (Isabela Merced) gets short-changed here. She's got some decent banter with Guy, but she doesn't really have much to do outside the action sets, which has me wondering if there's material on the cutting room floor that would add to her presence in this story. And while I appreciate just being dropped into a story very much like picking up a random comic book, I would have liked to have more here to give me a sense of 1) which Hawkgirl this is — it's Kendra Saunders — and 2) what her power set includes. The Canary Cry isn't hers, at least as far as I'm aware, but I haven't read a comic book in a long while.

And yes, when I saw *That Building*, I heard Ted Knight in my head saying, "Meanwhile...."

Some have made the comment that the film is over-stuffed with a cast of characters that's too big for a two-hour movie. I disagree. Especially in the case of the *Daily Planet*, these characters exist in the comic books to populate Superman's world, and most of the time they wouldn't be getting major attention there, either. Cat, Steve Lombard (Beck Bennett), Ron Troupe (Christopher McDonald), and even Perry White (Wendell Pierce) are here to interact with our heroes, both Clark and Lois, in ways that give us insight into their respective character arcs as well as provide dimension in *how* they interact, plus add to the world-building without excessive exposition. They're there because they belong there.

Kind of a waste of Wendell Pierce, though.

I was pleasantly surprised by Jimmy Olsen (Skyler Gisondo, the first on-screen canonically-accurate redhead to play the part). He's got much more to do here than I expected, although his camera is conspicuously missing. The fact that he's supposed to be Lois' photographer would have gone a lot further to explain how he figures out a certain thing he figures out near the end of the movie. And I am now patiently waiting for the spin-off, *Superman's Pal Jimmy Olsen*, perhaps with an appearance by the Newsboy Legion.

Gunn's usual sense of humor seems to be tamped down here just a bit, and I've made the observation that his usual humor is more "Brat Pack" where here it's more "Rat Pack" — a little more sophisticated, although not by much. And yes, a few times in the story, Gunn gets in his own way and drops a joke where it might not be the best fit. Some of them don't land very well, but most of them perform to spec and keep the movie well away from any Snyderverse vibe.

Which brings me to Krypto...

I've been surprised at how divisive Krypto has been. He's not the white Labrador of the comics, and he's a lot more rambunctious and undisciplined — Gunn himself says Krypto's behavior was inspired by his own rescue dog — but if you watch carefully, you can see that even Krypto has an arc. He starts out destructive, trashing the Fortress of Solitude. But then Superman figures out a way to channel that energy and give Krypto a chance to be part of the solution to his problem with Luthor; namely, stopping the destruction of Metropolis because Luthor was reckless enough to open a rift in the space-time continuum, or thereabouts.

And that's the crux of the story: Superman, through his interactions with the other characters, inspires them to be better, from Krypto to Guy to the people of Jarhanpur to Miss Tessmacher to Metamorpho and everyone in between. Every day, Superman makes the choice to do good, to be better. Whether that's inspired by what he *thinks* is his parents' message or not, he's making a deliberate choice to use his powers for good. And that also means restraining himself and *not* doing the other thing, because in a world of cardboard and tissue paper it would be so easy for him to use his powers to dominate the Earth and become a despot in the name of "what's good for everyone" or some such misplaced good intentions. And that gets back to the interview at the beginning of the movie, where Lois plays devil's advocate and shows Clark how his unilateral actions could be taken as a step toward that end. It causes Clark to have some self-reflection, and he has to figure out the best way to be that good person that his parents — Jonathan and Martha — taught him to be.

I'm not going to spend a whole lot of time on the Kents, as I'm still processing how I feel about how Gunn portrays them here. It's a very different take, and it surprises me to hear them sound like they're from Georgia or Alabama and not Kansas, especially considering that Gunn is from St. Louis and should know how Kansans sound.

One thing about the sound, or rather, the music: while John Murphy and David Fleming have delivered a solid soundtrack, although there could have been more use of John Williams' theme. While it's integrated into the score, and Murphy riffs with it on the guitar, you never get that one big payoff where the orchestra goes fully into the March. This piece of music is akin to "The James Bond Theme" as what started out as the theme to *Dr. No* became so associated with the James Bond character that it became the character's musical signature over the next sixty years. Williams' "Superman March" is in the same way associated with the character of Superman to the point where it's expected anytime there's a Superman movie. It should be there, and Gunn missed his opportunity to really give fans a moment of "One of Us".

Aside from the parental quibbles, along with a few elements I won't spoil here, I thoroughly enjoyed this movie, and I highly recommend it for anyone who'd like to see a comic book movie that remembers what it's like to read a comic book. James Gunn has delivered a love letter to comic book fans everywhere. But

perhaps most of all, above everything else, James Gunn has achieved a crowning victory with a 47-year-old blink-and-you-miss-it callback as he finally gives a last name to Otis (Terence Rosemore): **Berg**.

I kid you not. Otis Berg. You won't hear it in the dialogue, but it's there in the credits, and I almost didn't see it. When I did, I laughed out loud because I immediately heard Ned Beatty's voice: "It's only a little place..."

Well played, Gunn. Well played.



[Editor's note: I include two reviews of *Superman* mainly to illustrate the fact that the film has been receiving wildly divergent reactions. You can see for yourself that even within a shared fandom, not all of us will agree. And that's OK.]

V For Vendetta

Review by Nic Farey

(originally published in *This Here...* #90)

Idly browsing Netflix (or was it Apple TV?) the other night I notice this'un tagged as "leaving soon", so I clicked on for a rewatch, and as it turned out Jen had never seen it at all - that, and I don't think I'd ever rewatched it since it came out almost 20 years ago (Blimey!). Noted at the time for Alan Moore having a grump and ordering his name taken off the credits without having even seen it, having got the arse over his experiences with *LXG* and *From Hell*.

In some ways I can see Moore's point that the transition from page to screen is less than fully representative of the original work, but then again with almost any adaptation it can't be - you just have to hope that the compromises and alterations made don't fuck it all up too badly. Illustrator David Lloyd had no such qualms, complimenting the Wachowski's script but also saying that Moore would only ever be happy with "a complete book-to-screen adaptation". Fucknose how long that might have run, though, with the movie over two hours as is. There's no doubt some of the nuance (and stylistic tricks) of the graphic novel didn't make it to the screen, but it's perhaps a question of which nuances you leave out innit?

I think I'll argue that, while entire chunks like the Adam Susan (Sutler in the movie) backstory and mental decline are out, and he's reduced to a caricature - with no disrespect to John Hurt really, who does what he can with what he's given - the big beats in the story are still in place, as simplified as they are in the movie context. Present are the first meeting of V and Evey Hammond (under slightly different circs), the Larkhill origin framing of the year between blowing up the Bailey and then Parliament and V's testing of Evey with the letters from Valerie and her transformation into "next V".

Now then, I definitely preferred the original ending confrontation between Finch and V. Stephen Rea really conveys the detective inspector very well in the movie but seems to be left behind as a bit of an afterthought. Creedy (Tim Pigott-Smith) is also pretty much reduced to a cardboard cutout fascist, absent his arc in the book. Like just about everyone (and Alan Moore very loudly) has noted, the flick misses most of the moral ambiguity preferring, I suppose, to portray V as the clear "hero" rather than a soulless-when-required anarchist agitator as written by Moore - the extreme opposite of the fascist ruling class.

Anyway, enough blather, this is late already. I can and do enjoy both versions of the story, so there...



Reviews by Duncan Shields

(originally published at Letterboxd)

Gamera: Guardian of the Universe (1995) – A modern reboot of the Japanese Gamera series of movies. Gamera is a giant, tusked, island-sized turtle kaiju monster that can fly by shooting energy out of the appendage holes in its shell. The effects aren't great but it's good clean Japanese monster movie fun and it tries hard. Giant pterodactyls terrorize Fukuoka and Gamera shows up to fight the birds and then....well, I could go into the plot but it's a kaiju movie, y'know? I was entertained and it's worth a watch if you want to chill with one of these types of films.

Brainscan (1994) – Edward Furlong and Frank Langella star in this inventive and halfway decent 90s horror. I've always been curious about this one after seeing the VHS cover in the horror section back in the day. Furlong plays a creepy loner metalhead teen who loves horror movies and video games. He signs up for an immersive and interactive DVD horror video game called *Brainscan* only to be visited by a tech demon named Trickster who involves Furlong in real-life murders while detective Langella is on the case. It delivers. Could have used a bit more gore and a smidge more cheese and Furlong is not a great actor. However, I quite enjoyed the ride here and it was more or less exactly what I was hoping for. Recommended for forgiving 90s horror fans.

The Vourdalak (2023) – Interesting take on the 1839 Tolstoy quasi-vampire story of the same name. A French aristocrat is stranded in the woods and holes up with a family in their house. Before long, there's a 'vourdalak' in their midst, a blood drinking undead demon in the body of their grandfather. Very French and Russian with some cool Mike Mignola style puppetry and vibes. Alas, I was pretty bored. The film making is excellent and the Gothic nature of it and the art production are lovely. But it's a French art film based on a dated-past-accessibility Russian novella so, like, it is what it is. It was pretty but a test of patience for me. I can be a filthy casual sometimes and this was one of those times. I respect it but I did not care for it. Your mileage may vary.

The Slumber Party Massacre (1982) – Now you're talkin'! Starts with the title graphic. Boom. No "produced by, directed by" or whatever. Then it's first nudity is at the two-minute mark. This movie cuts to the chase. Is there an all-girl slumber party? You bet there is! Do they wear cute pajamas? You know it! Is there a massacre? No spoilers! A random maniac is on the loose murdering folks. A staple of the genre with that sweet 80s aesthetic and soundtrack and one of the best video covers/movie posters. Directed by Amy Jones and written by Rita Mae Brown. Originally written to parody slasher films but it ended up just being an enjoyable horror film. It spawned two sequels and a bunch of other sorority/cheerleader/etc "massacre" horror films. Everything you want from this kind of movie. Good clean fun.

Handling the Undead (2024/Sweden) - Based on a John Ajvide Lindqvist novel. He also wrote *Let the Right One In* and *Border*, both of which I loved. In a small Swedish suburb, a strange atmospheric disturbance reawakens the dead. They're not brain-eating monsters but they're definitely not okay. The movie focuses on relatives to three of the deceased. Visually beautiful and fantastic sound design and score. Slow and beautiful. Immersive and hypnotic. I wish I'd seen this in the theater. It's more about the emotional repercussions of having a zombified loved one show up again. At first you might be stoked but maybe that feeling probably won't last. Some fantastic zombies here. Deeply creepy and very well done. Really enjoyed this. It's got a very slow and contemplative pace, though. Just know that going in. - Streaming on Crave. Available for rent/purchase from YouTube, Prime, GooglePlay, and AppleTV. Also check out Video Cat on Cambie.



Jurassic World: Rebirth
Review by Jason Hunt
(originally published at SciFi4Me.com)

June 2025 had three big-budget tentpole films coming out, and *Rebirth* is the first before *Superman* and *Fantastic Four: First Steps*. It may also be the safest bet out of the three, but being part of a pretty well-received franchise isn't a guarantee of success.

Indeed, several commentators and pundits in my circles have come down on both sides of this one, with some saying it's "OK" while others call it girlboss hot garbage, or something to that effect. Your mileage may vary, and a lot of it depends on you actually watching the movie.

I'm going to say right now that you should make up your own mind which way you're going to go, but watching the movie will definitely help you decide whether you like it or not.

Now that we've gotten that aside, I'll say I enjoyed it. Junior Boss James enjoyed it. And as I ruminated a bit on it afterward, I came away thinking that 1) it's got the DNA of the first *Jurassic Park* in it; 2) it's not too overly ambitious; and 3) it's not full of ideological messaging. Those last two points are important, and I'll circle back to give them each some attention momentarily.

The basics first: In/Gen, the original company that grew the dinosaurs in the first movie, has gone defunct. Another Big Pharma outfit has bought up all the assets and is now looking to develop a new heart wonder-drug using DNA from the three largest dinosaurs that currently still exist. Except the expedition to retrieve said DNA will have to be off the books, as the dinosaur zone near the equator is now forbidden territory. Turns out that now it's about the only place on the planet that's close enough to their original climate for them to survive. They've died off everywhere else due to temperature, oxygen levels, and disease.

This is where some are trying to say that there's an environmentalist message there. Personally, I don't see it, as the story is pretty consistent with scientific assumptions that the equatorial zone is actually for-real the closest thing to a dinosaur-friendly habitat we still have in modern day. At any rate, it's a throw-away line that serves only to lampshade why the expedition has to go to a tropical island rather than just get some dino-DNA out of Central Park.

So Big Pharma exec Krebs (Rupert Grint) hires Zora (Scarlett Johansson) to lead the expedition, as she's an ex-spook of some sort. This is left vague enough that you don't come away with a particular set of expectations, I guess? They head over to the museum to pick up Dr. ~~Daniel Jackson~~ Henry Loomis (named for Donald Pleasance's character in the *Halloween* films), who's studied dinosaurs all his life — even name-dropping Alan Grant as a teacher — but he's never seen one up close and personal. Zora assembles the rest of the expedition crew, led by Duncan Kincaid (Mahershala Ali), who's an old friend of hers. And they're off!

Meantime, Reuben Delgado (Manuel Garcia-Rulfo) leads the family boating trip with his two girls, Teresa and Isabella (Luna Blaise, Audrina Miranda), along with Teresa's stoner boyfriend Xavier (David Iacono). Some may question his judgment, taking the family so close to a quarantined area, but I gathered from the dialogue that this was a semi-regular thing, so perhaps they didn't expect the danger? Back to this shortly.

Those two threads are the setup for the third act, as we spend a lot of time (a *lot* of time) on the boats, establishing relationships, some character depth, etc. so people can get to know this brand new cast of characters, some of whom we know won't be coming back.

The third act is, of course, dinosaurs and running and screaming and dying. Along the way, ~~Daniel Jackson~~ Loomis has questions as to the nature of the expedition. Why should just a small set of people benefit from the research? Thus introducing Zora's moral quandary: take the Big Pharma money and retire from a job that just recently killed a colleague (lover? best friend?) or Do The Right Thing and deal with the consequences later.

If David Koepp's scripts suffers from anything, it's timidity. This story feels like they're playing it safe with some Greatest Hits from the first movie. There are visual callbacks to several elements peppered throughout this one, and it almost feels like the production is trying to remind people where this whole thing started while at the same time trying to tell a somewhat new story. And it works, for the most part, although there are some quibbles.

What, exactly, was the nature of this facility on this other island? Because what's inside the tin doesn't quite match the label. And only a Dennis Nedry type could design a security and containment system that can be compromised by a simple Snickers bar wrapper (although those in aviation will point out that it doesn't take much at all to screw up an engine; Foreign Object Damage can be tremendously costly) ... And what about those ruins in the cliff where the flying dino makes her nest?

It's by no means a perfect movie, and there are a couple of places where the CGI is less than fully cooked. But it's not the disaster that some are making it out to be.

For one thing, Johansson is not Ms. Mary Sue Girlboss. She doesn't run in heels. She doesn't outshine her male counterparts. At no point does she snap her fingers and claim to need no mansplain'... In fact, if it wasn't Scarlett Johansson's name over the title, you could put pretty much any fit actress in the role. The fact that it's Black Widow, I think, has some critics filtering their perception. Zora isn't anything special. She doesn't put Kincaid in his place. She doesn't dress down ~~Daniel Jackson~~ Loomis for being a nerd. I do agree that the recent loss of her partner-in-crime should have played more in the third act, but there's a lot going on in the third act — the aforementioned running and screaming and such.

Nor is Kincaid sidelined as the token Black Horror Sidekick. Mahershala Ali doesn't get near enough to do, but what he does get puts him on equal footing with Zora. They're both suffering losses, both looking to get out of the business and start over. And he gets to make his choices that aren't driven by his skin color or his place on the call sheet.

Speaking of skin color... the Delgado family isn't there to score diversity points. Nowhere in the story do they even mention their ethnicity. This is just a divorced dad with his two girls and the stoner boy on a boat in the middle of the ocean surrounded by big swimming orca-dinos. Remember what I said earlier about *Jurassic Park's* greatest hits. The Delgados are there to put kids in danger on the island. It raises the stakes, because maybe this time, one of them gets eaten. Hammond's grandkids, Malcolm's daughter, the Kirbys' kid, Gray and Zach... it's a *Save the Cat* scenario that gets the audience slightly more invested in who lives or dies. Surely, they won't kill the kid? Or the dog?

(No, there's no dog in this one...)

As an additional aside, I like the fact that Gareth Edwards and cinematographer John Mathieson shot this on film. There's something about light hitting the various layers of emulsion that digital will never be able to fully replicate. Kudos to them. Film needs to make a comeback.

I will say, as a nod to those very vocal critics, that the plot is pretty thin, and it starts to show the cracks if you stare at it too hard for very long. But this isn't an intellectual exercise. It doesn't require *Oppenheimer*-level focus to all the details of the dialogue. Gareth Edwards has delivered a summer tentpole movie about dinosaurs with a little DNA from *Jaws*, *Return of the Jedi*, and *Skull Island* thrown in. Sit back and enjoy it with your two buckets of popcorn.



Films Fantastic is a fanzine collecting reviews of movies and mini-series in the science fiction, fantasy, and horror genres. If you'd like to submit your film review for inclusion in our pages, please send it to Jason Hunt: jphunt@scifi4me.com.

***Battle for the Planet of the Apes*, adapted by David Gerrold**

Review by Thomas E. Simmons

The film *Battle for the Planet of the Apes* (1973) was the fifth and final entry of the original franchise's series. The movie posters announced it as "The Final Chapter."

Paul Dehn was the English screenwriter responsible for the screenplays for the previous three sequels. (Dehn also wrote the screenplay for *The Spy who Came in From the Cold* (1965) and won an Academy award for a story he co-wrote with his partner.) But he was suffering from medical issues (and died in 1976) so could not finish the script. Instead, John William Corrington and Joyce Hooper Corrington (who also scripted *The Omega Man* (1971)) completed it.

This movie tie-in novel, by David Gerrold, was based on their screenplay and was published the same year that the film was released. Gerrold is no hack. He authored *The Martian Child* (1994), a novelette (later expanded into a novel) which won both the Hugo and the Nebula. He also contributed scripts for *The Land of the Lost*, *Star Trek*, and *Babylon 5* television series. This thin paperback is no award-winner, but it's far from trashy.

The film opens with an orangutan lawgiver (played by John Huston (!)) lecturing on POTA history to an unseen audience. The lecture is delivered in "North America, 2670 A.D." It outlines some key points of the prior films. Exposition always tends to be clunky, but is often necessary.

The orangutan returns in the film's final scene and a wide shot reveals a mixed audience of apes and humans. The lawgiver narrates that although it has been over six hundred years since the chimpanzee leader Caesar's death, society still awaits a day when weapons will no longer be needed. The film closes with the camera focusing on a single tear falling from the eye of a statue of Caesar.

The novel uses the same brackets. It quotes from an unnamed text that might very well have been delivered by such a lawmaker, but it omits the hoey of the single tear image. The last narrated chapter of the book contains a commentary on the Alpha-Omega bomb (the same bomb that will detonate at the end

of the second film (itself set in the timeline following the original POTA.)) Mandemus, a pacifist orangutan, tells Caesar: “if a weapon is made, it will be used. I do not think we have won the war. The weapons have.”

Such gloominess pervades nearly all the pages of this book. Much of the novel is a critique on nuclear weapons and warfare. It’s full of nicely phrased pacifist sentiments, too, but the unavoidability of violent conflict takes the upper hand.

The more effective elements of the book comment on civil rights and slavery. Gerrold reprints a statement by Abraham Lincoln, circa 1851, “that if there was to be a difference between the black race and the white race, he, Abe Lincoln, would much prefer that the white race be superior.” Both the apes and the human have the same preference – avoidance of slavery if possible, but security in the role of master if not.

Furthermore, the subtext suggests that the institution of slavery can be only wiped away in the end by the destruction of the world when the button is ultimately pushed by mutant humans centuries after the conclusion of the book. A cinder of a planet as a solution to slavery and civil rights shortcomings is far from rosy. This is a book which manages to be post-apocalyptic and pre-apocalyptic at the same time, but it remains grimly pessimistic about the promise of a world without weapons or injustice.

Gerrold dedicated *Battle for the Planet of the Apes* to “Harlan Ellison, who will appreciate the thought.” I’m sure that he did.



We welcome your feedback!

If you have comments, suggestions, or articles to share please send an e-mail to jphunt@scifi4me.com and let us know how we’re doing!

Thank you for taking the time to read and respond.

James Batman

Review by Heath Row

(Originally published in *Telegraphs & Tar Pits* #170, part of *The Stf Amateur* 23)

Inspired by a conversation with a friend about *Argoman the Fantastic Superman* (The Brass Hat Mind #12) and similar movies, another friend and I watched this 1966 black-and-white Filipino spoof of James Bond and Batman: *James Batman*. The flick features two Filipino comedians, Dolphy as Batman and James Bond (a somewhat awkward dual role) and Boy Alano as Robin. Dolphy, who died in 2012, is reportedly considered the country’s King of Comedy. In 1965-1966 alone, he made at least 15 spy film parodies.

There’s a lot going on in the movie—and sometimes, nothing at all. That makes the movie a bit of a durational exercise. If there’s not a fight scene underway, it can be a bit of a slog. Regardless, when there is something happening—either a fight scene or other involvement of the movie’s many villains—*James Batman* is a confusing delight for the eyes.

Villains include Drago, who's partially masked, similar to Doctor Doom—my friend said he looks like Sun Ra—Black Rose, a Catwoman stand-in my friend dubbed Ghoulie Newmar; the Penguin (much taller, slimmer, and scruffier); and another character who seems to have been inspired by Frank Gorshin's turn as the Riddler. We called him the Giggler.

The movie's storyline is simple. A mysterious, evil organization, CLAW, gives world leaders five days to submit to its rule, or they'll "destroy all life in the free world." Rather than work together, Batman and James Bond compete to fight crime, jousting, playing pranks, and otherwise interfering with each other's efforts. Bond fancies himself a ladies' man but becomes ticklish when women canoodle.

There are a couple of science fictional elements in the film. In the movie's version of the Batcave, a hand emerges from some sort of technological device to offer Batman and Robin food. They snack actively before first emerging to challenge the villains. And a large mechanical hand fires some kind of beam from its fingertips, obliterating foes. Similar special effects come into play when Drago gestures menacingly.

While the fight scenes are relatively well, if sloppily, choreographed (sans Batman's exclamatory onomatopoeia), the performances generally tend toward the comedic: straightforward silliness and mugging. The movie occasionally becomes confusing, primarily because of Dolphy's dual role and Batman's civilian alter ego wearing clothes not unlike that of the Bond character. In one scene, Bond evades attackers by hiding under a palm tree branch—James Frond? We actually thought it was Batman's alter ego because Batman-like music was playing during the scene. The movie also utilizes the TV show's distinctive spin frames to transition between scenes.

Not much has been written about the movie—or similar Filipino parodies. *James Batman* rates only a passing mention in the Foreword to the Michele Brittany-edited *James Bond and Popular Culture*—similar to Thom Shubilla's fleeting reference in *Primetime 1966-1967*—and slightly more contextual consideration in the Roberta Pearson-, William Uricchio-, and Will Brooker-edited *Many More Lives of the Batman*. Iain Robert Smith's *The Hollywood Meme: Transnational Adaptations in World Cinema* proves even more promising, and the Kate Egan- and Sarah Thomas-edited *Cult Film Stardom* might also merit exploration. References are also available in periodicals such as *Video Watchdog*, *Cult Movies*, and *Psychotronic Video*, primarily in advertisements. The movie is a pleasant oddity, an intriguing example of transnational parody or knockoff, and a rare example of metamedia crossover.



Killing Mary Sue

Review by Jason Hunt

(originally published on SciFi4Me.com)

On the surface, it's a silly premise: Mary Sue Harper (Sierra McCormick) is the troublemaker step-daughter of Senator Bradley Weiner (Dermot Mulroney), who's re-election campaign is suffering because Mary Sue keeps getting into all manner of trouble with her sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll lifestyle. So he decides the only way to eliminate the political problem is to eliminate Mary Sue.

But it turns out, Mary Sue is remarkably hard to kill. Because... well, Mary Sue.

It's an action comedy straight out of the 80s, with tongue planted firmly in cheek as Mary Sue uses her *Fortnite* skills to fight off the various assassin squads, facilitated by Knox (Martin Kove). Starting with the legendary assassin Cable Henry (Sean Patrick Flanery), the attacks escalate to the point of the ridiculous. The bullets and the blood (copious amounts, mind you, all fake) fly as Mary Sue takes matters into her own hands to fend off danger at every turn.

Made with a very low budget, shot just weeks before the actors strike, *Killing Mary Sue* is a throwback to those over-the-top straight-to-VHS flicks we had in the 80s, like *Lovely But Deadly* or *Ninja III: The Domination* — drive-in schlock with heart and a sense of fun driving all the performances. It's a pretty good bet everyone had fun on this shoot, even the ones who did it for the paycheck before the strike kept them from working.

Oddly enough, it's Jake Busey who gives an unexpectedly low-key performance as the Senator's campaign manager Wes, who would happily off the little brat himself. Well, it's low-key for Busey, anyway...

The idea of a Mary Sue character originated in *Star Trek* fan fiction many moons ago, and now has several iterations and variations, but essentially the core definition of the type has remained the same: a female character who seemingly has all of the skills and abilities, which she hasn't earned, and no discernable flaws or weaknesses. Originally written as a parody of a trend Paula Smith noticed while editing the fanzine *Menagerie*, the concept has transcended fan fiction and now applies to those female lead characters — usually a self-insert — who can do pretty much anything all while being protected by Plot Armor.

Writer/director James Sunshine deliberately leaned into the absurdity of the Mary Sue archetype, giving his lead character an uncanny ability to escape death with ease, handle weapons better than your average Navy Seal, and spout F-bomb laden snark with the best of 'em. *Of course* she's the best at everything.

But to balance that, she's got a major flaw, and it's almost her undoing. That gives this Mary Sue an added layer that you normally don't find in the Kathleen Kennedy self-inserts of the world: a vulnerability that someone learns to exploit. You start out rooting for the girl because of the absurdity of the premise, and it's just silly fun, but then you get a chance to see that emotion-driven layer.

As the danger mice continue to circle Mary Sue, escalating the danger, at the same time tension is rising for the Senator, who finds his own situation growing more and more dangerous as his step-daughter continues to be Not Dead. What would happen if his opponent found out he's been using Mary Sue as a go-between with the Russian banana farm oligarch Volkov (French Stewart)?

It's absurd. It's a little more f-bomby than I usually care to see. The violence is cartoonishly over the top with the guns that almost never have to reload... But it's a fun stomp through a style of filmmaking that's almost not done anymore, and it's well worth the trip.

Thank you for reading! Letters of Comment can be sent to jp hunt@scifi4me.com.

