

No. 1

# PULP & POPCORN

by Drew McWeeny

**Commander Future!**

**Background!**

**'Fantastic Beasts,'  
'Westworld,' and  
More!**

**Awards Season Mayhem!**

**'THE SHADOW BOX: PART ONE'**

Drew McWeeny's  
**PULP & POPCORN**

Season One, Issue One  
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## M A S T H E A D

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **“What is Pulp & Popcorn?”**

There's nothing subtle about the name. *Pulp & Popcorn*. That's by design. I love many different types of storytelling, but more than anything, I have a voracious appetite for pulp and for popcorn, both considered low art, storytelling for the masses.

That's exactly what I love, though, because there has been plenty of great art created by people who were working in these forms, and so much of what has shaped me over the course of my life as a reader and as someone who watches everything has been the stuff that other people might dismiss. Crime fiction, science fiction, horror, and fantasy have all served valuable roles in my development as a person and in helping me decide what is important to me about art in general.

I've got so many things I want to write, and it finally occurred to me that I don't have to ask anyone's permission to write them. That may seem strange, or it may seem screamingly obvious to you, especially if you've grown up with the Internet as a given, but for most of my life, you had to go through a publisher to reach the public, and it has taken me a while to realize that the revolution already happened. You don't need anyone anymore. You can have a direct relationship with an audience. How you get that audience's attention is the real question, and thankfully, after almost 20 years of writing online and working professionally, I think I've managed to cultivate an audience that will, at the very least, take a shot at reading something I write.

One of the things that I love most as a concept is serialization, and I think it's one of the reasons that television has become so much more fun lately. Once the model shifted to encourage dense serialized storytelling that requires and rewards close viewing, we started to see one classic show after another spring to life. Watching this, I've grown deeply envious of the opportunity it gives you as a storyteller. There is something delightful about telling each of these stories.

Pulp is storytelling stripped down to the most basic parts. It has to work on a brute force level if it's going to be at all effective.

Popcorn is pulp elevated. It's pulp with a wink and a nod, pulp that digs deeper thematically and that has more to say, smuggling it in amidst thrills and chills.

And poetry... that's the stuff that finds its way in among all the rest. It's the magic. The accident. The poetry is what keeps me coming back, and you find it in the unlikeliest of places.

One of the things that I have heard very clearly in the communication you guys have sent since I left HitFix is that it's important to you that I continue publishing criticism, and I will. One of my favorite magazines when I was young was *Twilight Zone*, and I always adored the way they managed to mix criticism and original content so comfortably. It's not a balance I've seen many other places pull off.

I'll be publishing on a regular clock, and it'll take me a few to figure out what that clock is, and for those first few issues, it'll be totally free. Once I've got it up and running, though, it will take considerable time and resources, and I will eventually evolve this into something you have to pay to read. I have to start owning what I publish so no one can ever threaten my archives again or push me to do things I hate doing just to have a platform from which to publish, and the only way to do that is to sell it directly. I don't really want to run a small business, but I don't ever want to find myself suddenly cut off from my audience by someone else, and that means evolving.

What can you expect from *Pulp & Popcorn*?

The basic model is simple. I want to feature one primary story each issue that is part of one of several larger ongoing stories. I'll be rotating through *The Shadow Box*, *Djinn Rummy*, *Noel* and *The Survey* at first, and Commander Future is going to show up with his own ongoing adventures as well.

In addition, I want to feature a backup story each time that is part of a series called *Background*, which takes a look at the characters who normally exist on the margins of the movies and TV shows that we love.

And then, yes, I want to feature a few reviews or pop-culture oriented essays that are similar to the work that you guys already know so well, including an occasional *Film Nerd 2.0* when there's something to share.

Some of the fiction I'll publish here will be based on unproduced screenplays I wrote with Scott Swan, because I love these stories and I'd like them to exist somewhere in some form.

It's a magazine... sort of. In a digital world, I don't know that you'd still call something a magazine, but that's how it feels to me. I even want to feature a regular Ask Drew column because I liked how that worked as a video feature, and it seemed like you guys enjoyed it as well.

You can reach out to me at [drew.mcweeny@gmail.com](mailto:drew.mcweeny@gmail.com) with your feedback after you enjoy this first issue, and I want to hear all of your reactions, good or bad.

For now, let's get right into it, with the first installment of *The Shadow Box*, a horror story I've been thinking about since a trip to Prague to visit the set of a Narnia film. It is also, in small ways, a sequel to the *Masters Of Horror* episode I co-wrote with Scott Swan, "Cigarette Burns." It feels like an unfortunately timely story now, and it deals in large part with the way the past maintains a hold over us, especially when we simply refuse to learn its lessons.

Thank you for taking the time to check in on this new venture, and here's hoping this is the start of something very different for me as a writer, something I hope you'll enjoy as much as I do.

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

I missed so much this year.

As I start writing this, it's 12:58 AM in Los Angeles, Sunday just barely in my rear-view mirror, and it's painfully cold outside for someone with thin California blood like mine. *Miss Sloane* just wrapped up on the 60-inch TV that dominates one wall of the media room in my apartment. John Madden's latest is a portrait of a lobbyist who makes the fatal mistake of actually feeling something, and it's darn good. I can't help but think that the film's writer, Jonathan Perera, is a big fan of *The Usual Suspects*.

Is it “give this movie an award” good? Well, I'm sure everyone's mileage will vary on that point, particularly when I'm sitting in a room in just under a week debating the year's releases with my peers in the Los Angeles Film Critics Association. It definitely won't make my final list of my favorite films, but there were definitely some major to recommend about it, Jessica Chastain's ferocious performance being the primary one.

First, have I mentioned before how proud I am to be a voting member of LAFCA? Because I am. I love being in the organization that was directly responsible for getting Universal to release the version of *Brazil* that Terry Gilliam wanted. If you don't know the story, it's pretty amazing. Terry Gilliam was locked in a fight with the brass at Universal over his film, and the studio prepared an alternative to Gilliam's director's cut. Their cut was significantly shorter but, more than that, it was an entirely different thing. Gilliam's film is about the way the system will crush a dreamer, and it features one of the bleakest endings in film history, an ironic gut-punch that left me speechless when I first saw it. The Universal cut of the film would have destroyed that, somehow shaping what passed as a happy ending out of the original footage.

Horrified, Gilliam took a chance and organized a screening of his cut of the film for the Los Angeles Film Critics Association. LAFCA turned around and awarded the film Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Screenplay. It forced Universal's hand. Once that happened, how could they easily release a radical reworking of that version of the movie? That is one of the best uses of an end-of-the-year vote I've ever seen, and *Brazil* is a film that was hugely important to me at an important moment in my development as a film fan.

Without LAFCA, I might not have been able to see that version of that film, and that would have been criminal. So I take it seriously when I think about how I vote for the awards we give out once a year.

This year has been a tough one for me in many ways, and I've taken a few punches, not the least of which happened on September 20, when I was blindsided by Woven, the company that bought HitFix, the website I helped create in 2008. Being fired over the phone was surreal, but it explained the reason everything had gone so quiet when I tried to get approval for travel to the Toronto Film Festival and Austin's Fantastic Fest in September. By missing those two events, my entire film year was thrown out of whack.

After all, it is my job to see as much as possible each year, to try to bring you a curated view of everything going on in movies. That's not easy, and going to film festivals is a key part of making sure I'm on top of things. I consider it essential to go to Sundance, SXSW, Cannes, Toronto, and Fantastic Fest at the very least. I'd love to add stops like Berlin and Venice and Sitges and Fantasia in Montreal and the Overlook Film Festival and more. I can't do every one of them every year, but if you hit the essentials, then you should be able to fill in the rest of the year's films at a reasonable rate.

But for me, missing those two September stops threw everything else out of whack. On top of that, the screener season that is so baked into the DNA of the hunt for Oscars every year started very, very late. I got 70 films sent to me in the space of five days, the week of Thanksgiving. As a result, I have to have everything seen by the morning of December 4, when LAFCA sits down to make that vote.

So how do you handle it when you have more movies than you can possibly watch and a very short time to watch all of them anyway? I decided to stop sleeping. I figure I did it for almost four years non-stop, so a few weeks won't be an issue. I started watching as soon as stuff started arriving, with my girlfriend Lisa doing her best to keep up with the landslide of titles. I think first up, we watched the documentaries *Tickled* and *The Lovers and the Despot* as soon as Magnolia's giant bundle of movies arrived, and we watched *Julieta* and *Elle* once the stuff from Sony Pictures Classics showed up.



I have huge affection for both Pedro Almodovar and Paul Verhoeven, but this time around, it's Almodovar who is the winner. I thought his film was lovely and wise and had a huge affection for its characters. Verhoeven's *Elle* features a certainly-committed performance from Isabelle Huppert, but I thought it was empty provocation, a movie that is not as shocking or as bold as it wants to be. I've seen some spirited defenses of the film, and I can understand what people are reacting to, but I'm not buying it as a coherent idea. I am happy to see Verhoeven making this kind of movie, and I want him to make more, but this time around, it just didn't work for me.

We worked our way through several other films, like *20th Century Women*, which we watched the night before Thanksgiving. My girlfriend's adult son and his girlfriend were both in town for the holiday, and the film really connected for everyone in the room. I liked *Beginners*, the first film from Mike Mills, but this time around, he seems like he's grown and matured as a filmmaker, both in terms of craft and depth of his writing. He has a novelist's eye for detail, and Annette Bening is so good, so unadorned and real and sweet and vulnerable. He wrote her this beautiful role, and she took it and then filled it with so much more than any filmmaker can hope for. That happened with his whole cast, too. Greta Gerwig is playing the Greta Gerwig role, and that can sometimes lead an actor towards self-parody. Not here. Instead, she flourishes in the part, and her character feels real and lived-in and acutely honest. Same thing with the girl that Elle Fanning plays. No one else in movies right now can play both 11 years old and 48 years old at the same time, but Fanning manages it. There is this wise-beyond-her-years quality to her, but she can't help but remind you how ridiculously young she is with a gesture or a statement or an attitude. Billy Crudup shines in a supporting part, and he gets to play great moments with Bening and Gerwig as partners. Lucas Jade Zumann is the kid at the heart of the film, and the real miracle in his work is how unafraid he is of this formidable ensemble. He's very good, and his honesty grounds the film's big emotional nostalgia.

We're watching so much right now that there's a danger that it's all going to start to blur. That's not to say that I'm giving the films anything less than my full attention. I'm shutting off the phone and closing the laptop and making sure that each film gets the same presentation. I was blown away by *Jackie*, for example, a film I wasn't even sure I wanted to see. I think what Pablo Larrain and Natalie Portman did together is magic.

Keep in mind, I hate the '60s as a topic for films at this point. I really do. We've been force-fed '60s nostalgia non-stop since the mid-'80s. I have a shocking amount of knowledge about the '60s considering I was born in 1970, and it almost feels like that's not the case, like I've been alive since the '60s. But what I remember isn't real. It's a manufactured version of that decade, complete with a hit soundtrack made up of the same 30 songs that have been repackaged repeatedly since *The Big Chill*. I am sick of it. Sick to death of it.

And yet, suddenly, here's this film that just slams into me, this new and haunted way of dropping us into the perfectly-chosen shoes of Jackie Kennedy in the immediate aftermath of the gunshots that left her holding her husband's wide-open head in her lap one awful Dallas morning. Following her through the days of planning her husband's funeral and organizing her own exit from the White House to make way for the Johnsons, *Jackie* feels like a waking nightmare, and it is gorgeous and horrible and sad and unlike any other take on the Kennedys that I've seen. Mica Levi, who composed the film's score, is the real MVP here, contributing this breathing, throbbing, tactile score made up of broken fragments of music and sounds that wash over the film. Everyone's work is top notch. I love the huge ensemble cast. Richard E. Grant makes a strong impression in only a few moments, Peter Sarsgaard is apocalyptic as Bobby Kennedy, all broken hearted fury, and Billy Crudup, who is having a very good Christmas onscreen, makes a great sparring partner as the reporter trying to write a story about Jackie with her "help" and "co-operation."

Toshi and Allen, my sons, joined us for Thanksgiving at the house. We took a pause on the screeners to watch *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*. It was the first time for the boys, and it was a huge hit. John Hughes is one of the filmmakers who Toshi and Allen not only know by name, but who they actively ask questions about. They love *Sixteen Candles*, *The Breakfast Club*, *Weird Science*, and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* unreservedly, and each of those films has been part of a special evening the first time we saw them. This year was our first mixed family Thanksgiving, and it went enormously well. Over the long weekend, we covered some good ground with the kids. We saw *Sing* at the Chinese mid-Saturday afternoon, and it was fun. Illuminated Entertainment has a very specific voice for their films at this point, and if you've seen the trailers, you know exactly what you're going to get.

The same is true of *Trolls*, which was sent as one of the screeners, and we watched it at home, along with *Hunt For The Wilderpeople*. The boys enjoyed *Trolls* well enough, although they both called it “the weirdest movie ever” as the closing credits played out. What surprised me was how much they both ended up enjoying *Wilderpeople*. Toshi has already announced his intention to change his gamer tag to “RickyBaker” permanently, and there was a moment in the film (“SHIT! JUST! GOT! REAL!”) that made them laugh so hard we had to stop the movie for a few minutes. It also worked for them on an emotional level, and watching how well the film set its hook and drew them in, I gained an even greater appreciation for it. Taika Waititi is the real deal, and I’m glad to see that Hollywood isn’t sleeping on him. I suspect he’s going to make a wickedly entertaining *Thor* movie, and I can’t wait to see it.

Once Allen went to bed, Toshi watched another film with me, one he’d been asking for since he first went through the screener stack. He saw *Saving Private Ryan* last year, and so he reasoned that he should be allowed to see *Hacksaw Ridge* if he wanted to. I had an out-of-body moment as he was making his argument to me because I remember vividly when I would try to talk my parents into letting me see something. I was so proud of him that I happily gave in. We talked about the ideas of self-sacrifice and pacifism as demonstrated in the film, and he was overall more impressed with the movie than I was. I feel like Mel Gibson is good at certain things as a filmmaker, but he also hovers right on the verge of self-parody sometimes. The early scenes in *Braveheart* with a “young and dewy” Mel Gibson in love are *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* funny, and not on purpose. There is a preposterous level of sincerity to the opening half-hour of *Hacksaw*, and Andrew Garfield is directed to play this so earnest that he almost seems simple-minded. His strength remains the horror and the bloodshed of battle and the way suffering defines a person, and there is much of *Hacksaw* that works on a sheer brute level.

We also watched *Lion* together over the weekend, and it hit everyone in the room in very different ways. For Toshi and Allen, the horror of the situation struck them because they are still young enough that the idea of being completely on their own is terrifying. They’re heading to Argentina for the holiday, and I think they got a little freaked out by the idea of being lost somewhere, away from their parents. It’s a very simple film, honestly, and much of its power comes from the simplicity. By the time it drops the emotional hammer in that last fifteen or twenty minutes, it is devastating because of the frustration of what comes before that.

I had to make time on Sunday night for *Westworld* with my girlfriend because it's freakin' *Westworld*, and we've been hooked since episode one. Even so, after she went to bed, I went back to the movies, and that's where we began this article.

So all of that was before I even hit the last seven days. And then it was like this mad gallop. I was doing six or seven movies a day. I grabbed about four and a half hours sleep in the wee small hours of Monday morning, and then dove right back in. The very sad and anxiety-inducing *Christine* was the first film of the day, and I can't say enough good things about Rebecca Hall's work in the film. *Paterson* was the second movie, and for an old-school Jarmusch fan like me, it does me good to see him in such fine form, making it look easy this far into his filmography. I think he's gotten better, if anything, and I love his voice. There's no one else out there who would pay attention to the people who are the stars of Jarmusch's films, and that is exactly why I love him. *Swiss Army Man* followed that, and I was surprised by how much it didn't work for me. I think it's clever and well made and I certainly want to see more from the filmmakers, but I think it's sort of detestable in the last third. It's a character study of a guy I don't want to study at all, and when it all snaps into place and you realize what you're actually watching as opposed to what you thought you were, it soured me on the film too much to enjoy it. All of that was before my girlfriend got home, and then that night, we did a double feature of *Rules Don't Apply* and *Moonlight*.

Those couldn't be more different, frankly. *Rules Don't Apply* is, of course, the long-promised movie about Howard Hughes by Warren Beatty... only it's not. Not really. When he announced the project back in 1976, the film he started developing was much more of a portrait of Hughes. Along the way, there have been a number of other filmmakers who have been bitten by that same bug, and it's amazing how many filmmakers viewed Hughes as their Great White Whale, only to find themselves crashed on the same rocks as everyone else. Martin Scorsese's *The Aviator* seemed to have turned most of the other competitors off, and for good reason. I'm not sure you're ever going to be able to mount another large-scale biopic covering that same ground. I wonder how Beatty felt when *Hail, Caesar!* and *Cafe Society* were released this year, considering all three films feel like they cover similar thematic and comedic ground, and both of those made it to theaters before him, one of them even starring the same young actor that Beatty used.

I can see why *Moonlight* has been so embraced, and while I think it's a beautifully made movie, I don't think it'll land as high on my list as it will for some other people. It's just one of those personal things. I'm sure there are many people for whom it's a thunderous experience, because *Moonlight* has such a kind, clear vision of these people. It is a movie about being seen, about how important it is to know that someone in the world understands and accepts who you are, and the act of making the film is an act of telling people who do not feel seen that they are. That's kind of beautiful, and I was perfectly happy to see LAFCA ended up giving the film the big awards. It earned it in the room, with enough vocal and passionate fans to push it to the wins in each category.

The next day was ridiculous. I got up early to watch *Eye In The Sky*, which is well-made and tense and, to my eye, absurdly earnest about the moral hand-wringing. I don't buy it. It's certainly a crackerjack exercise in dramatic editing, though, and it works as a sheer suspense exercise. It just takes itself too seriously. My second film of the day was one of the big surprises of the season for me, a documentary called *I Am Not Your Negro*, which brings to life the words of James Baldwin in the voice of Samuel L. Jackson. Near the end of his life, Baldwin was working on a novel called *Remember This House* that he wanted to use to weave together the stories of Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X. Raoul Peck's film uses Baldwin's notes to try to imagine what form that book might have taken, weaving Baldwin's own life in as a fourth thread in what turns out to be an incredible tapestry that lays out a cultural history of the voice that was first given to American blacks, then eventually seized and used to demand real freedom and equality. If you're watching powerful and important films like *Moonlight* and *OJ: Made In America* and *The 13th* and *The Birth Of A Nation* this year, then watching *I Am Not Your Negro* will show you how we got here in the first place. Terrific. Really.

After that, we did a double-feature of *Edge of Seventeen* and *Loving*, and I thought both were very well-made, very smart. Kelly Fremon Craig has a great honest ear, and there's a lot of *Edge of Seventeen* that I would describe as "wise." Jeff Nichols is one of the most subtle writer/directors working today, and that's exactly why I liked *Loving*. He handles that story so well and he avoids the urge to ramp things up into big movie moments. His film feels like it unfolds the way things really do, and Joel Edgerton gives a remarkable, internal performance, a man incapable of much in the way of words but who demonstrates real decency at every turn.

Ruth Negga has had a strong year overall, and I look forward to more of her as Tulip when *Preacher* returns for a second season. What she does here is gorgeous, delicate, and wound completely around Edgerton's work in the way that it has to be, accenting and augmenting what he does in a way that makes it feel like they really are that tightly bound, that deeply in love.

After I tucked my girlfriend in for the night, I watched both *The Girl On The Train* and *Patriots Day*, and I thought they both have things to recommend and things that frustrate. In the case of *Girl*, the only real reason to see it is Emily Blunt, and as always, I find her work really interesting and genuine even though the script for *Girl* is ludicrous. What worked on the page of the thriller is made hilarious when brought to actual life in the film, and that's the fault of the script, the direction. What Blunt does is solid, though, and there's some early stuff where she's still basically just an off-the-rails drunken mess that is sort of wrenching. *Patriots Day* works pretty well for most of the running time, and there are a few sequences that are among the best work that Peter Berg has ever done. I think when he's in Paul Greengrass mode here, the film works. When he tells the story of Mark Wahlberg, super cop, who just happened to be at every major event of the entire situation, it falls apart. The film does such a good job of telling the truth that the phony invention of this one cop to do everything sticks out even more than it already would.

On Wednesday morning, Paramount hosted a screening of *Silence* at the Sherry Lansing Theater on the lot. It was specifically so that LAFCA had a chance to judge the film before we voted, and I am glad we got a chance to check it out. I can't review it yet because this issue will go to press before the embargo is up, but we were allowed to react on social media. I shared a few quick thoughts, basically saying that it is a beautiful and difficult film, and I can feel how deeply it mattered to Scorsese. I don't think it's an easy film to digest, but I think it will fit comfortably on the same shelf as *Kundun* and *The Last Temptation Of Christ*. How you feel about those films will probably be a good indicator as to how interested you'll be in *Silence* overall. It worked out for Paramount and the film, since Issei Ogata ended up taking Runner-up in the Supporting Actor category from us. His work as The Inquisitor is maybe the best, most interesting antagonist work in a film since Hans Landa in *Inglorious Basterds*.

After this, things get fuzzy. I couldn't even keep track anymore. I made notes on the films, and I certainly retain images and ideas and impressions from many of them, but the honest truth is that I'm going to re-watch a number of things before I actually write a top ten list. I know I liked *Life, Animated*, even though I was shocked to learn it is actually a different movie than *Floyd Norman: An Animated Life*. *Captain Fantastic* plays like *The Mosquito Coast Part 2: Mosquito Coaster*. I didn't care for *Florence Foster Jenkins* at all. I like several things about *The Founder*, but want to wait until release to get into them. *Krishna* hits like a fist. One after another after another.

*Fences* really worked for me, even though I feel like it's a bit of a relic. The August Wilson play is a lovely piece of writing, but when it was written in the '80s, it was already a look back at a time that was somewhat burnished by nostalgia. Wilson adapted his own work here, and the result feels very much like an adaptation of a play. Makes sense, because Washington and Davis played this on the stage together, and much of the work between them to build this relationship was done there. There is a heightened quality to it, a slight artifice, and for a good chunk of the film, it felt like it distanced me a bit. But by the time the credits ran at the end, that artifice actually worked to help sell the film's big finish for me. Denzel Washington is a sturdy director, but not a particularly inspired one. The thing he does best is set a tone for the rest of the performances, and the cast is uniformly strong.

All the way until the last possible moment, I feel like I kept adding one more film to the stack, then one more after that. More movies showed up in the mail, and they went right onto the pile or, in some cases, directly into the player as soon as they came out of the envelope. *Nocturnal Animals* was one I didn't see until fairly late in the process, and I loved it. I was surprised, frankly, because I didn't care much for Tom Ford's first film. I think the final film I saw was *Toni Erdmann*, which I kept putting off because of the 2:45 running time and the oxymoronic description of it as a "German comedy." In the end, that description turns out to be very apt, because Erdmann is a comedy, but not one I've seen before. There is a sadness to the humor that goes past what we think of as cringe comedy into pure yawning existential dread, and that ends up being funny in the "I have to laugh or I might cry" way, not in a conventional set-up/punchline way.

One of the last films we watched was Friday night, I think. I had set Andrea Arnold's *American Honey* aside for a few reasons. Again, running time was a consideration. At just shy of three hours, it seemed daunting. Also, while I liked her early work, I really, really hated her *Wuthering Heights* a few years ago. This time around, I am once again in love with her eye, her sense of time and place. I think *American Honey* is a great film, and I got lost in it. The three hours flew by, and thinking back on the film, it left some of the most vivid impressions of the entire marathon sprint of movies.

When I finally walked into the LAFCA room, I had my full list ready to go. The way it works is that we each nominate three films for each category. We go around the room and say our picks out loud, listing our three point pick, then our two point pick, then our one point pick. The two titles with the highest number of votes are then chosen, and we vote by written ballot on one of those two final titles. So it is possible that in many categories, I ended up having to choose between two nominees that weren't on my list of three at all. It happened a few times this year, and that's fine. That's the process. There were certain names that I didn't expect anyone else to remember, and they ended up winning, and in the end, that balance is the best you can hope for. You can go in, fight for things that were important to you, and then vote on the best compromises that the group reaches.

Here is my full ballot, each category ranked with my favorite pick at the top. As you can see, there are lots of films I was passionate about that the rest of LAFCA just didn't share my enthusiasm for, and so be it.

At least the long shot of Lily Gladstone for *Certain Women* somehow came together. That one category and award makes me happy enough to validate the entire process for me this year. If you haven't heard of her or the film, that's fine. Keep your eye out for it, and when you do get a chance to see it, you'll know who she is immediately. She gives an amazing performance in a segment where her main scene partners are Kristen Stewart and some horses. Gladstone is the real deal, a terrific, expressive performer who plays quiet longing and heartbreak in a way that pierced deeply.



## **Picture**

3. *American Honey*
2. *Arrival*
1. *Jackie*

## **Director**

3. Pablo Larrain (*Jackie*)
2. Park Chan Wook (*The Handmaiden*)
1. Andrea Arnold (*American Honey*)

## **Actor**

3. Casey Affleck (*Manchester By The Sea*)
2. Ryan Gosling (*La La Land* and *The Nice Guys*)
1. Jake Gyllenhaal (*Nocturnal Animals*)

## **Actress**

3. Natalie Portman (*Jackie*)
2. Amy Adams (*Arrival* and *Nocturnal Animals*)
1. Krisha Fairchild (*Krishna*)

## **Supporting Actor**

3. Issei Ogata (*Silence*)
2. Jack Reynor (*Sing Street*)
1. Mahershala Ali (*Moonlight*)

## **Supporting Actress**

3. Lily Gladstone (*Certain Women*)
2. Viola Davis (*Fences*)
1. Michelle Williams (*Manchester By The Sea*)

## **Screenplay**

3. Eric Heisrerr (*Arrival*)
2. Kenneth Lonergan (*Manchester By The Sea*)
1. Mike Mills (*20th Century Women*)

### **Cinematography**

3. Rodrigo Pietro (*Silence*)
2. Robbie Ryan (*American Honey*)
1. Natasha Braier (*The Neon Demon*)

### **Production Design**

3. *Jackie*
2. *The Witch*
1. *The Handmaiden*

### **Editing**

3. *American Honey*
2. *Jackie*
1. *Hunt For The Wilderpeople*

### **Music Score**

3. Mica Levi (*Jackie*)
2. Jo Yeong-wook (*The Handmaiden*)
1. Justin Hurwitz (*La La Land*)

### **Foreign-Language Film**

3. *The Handmaiden*
2. *Aquarius*
1. *Julieta*

### **Documentary/Non-Fiction Film**

3. *I Am Not Your Negro*
2. *OJ: Made In America*
1. *Cameraperson*

### **Animated Film**

3. *Your Name*
2. *The Jungle Book*
1. *The Red Turtle*

### **New Generation**

3. Robert Eggers (*The Witch*)
2. Trey Edward Shults (*Krishna*)
1. Sasha Lane (*American Honey*)

As I conclude this, the LAFCA vote finally in the rearview, I feel good about having done my due diligence. Even so, I've got at least two weeks of fairly steady movie watching to do if I expect to see everything that was sent to the house, and I eagerly embrace the challenge.

## **“The Shadow Box”**

### **1. Overture**

Dani Sweetman adored her big brother, although she barely knew him. Her earliest memory was also one of her happiest. She was a small girl, no more than four. Her brother, smack-dab in the middle of his surly teen years, was the coolest person on Earth. He kept his bedroom dark, and when she walked in, he had a projector set up, screening a 16mm print of something on his wall. She couldn't really figure out what she was looking at, and she didn't care. She found the entire experience compelling. It called to her. She wanted to do what he was doing. She wanted to be part of whatever it was, and he saw that in her. He made a place for her to sit down, and he talked to her about the movie, and she was so happy she could hardly breathe.

They were uncommonly close. As soon as she could speak, her brother was right there, waiting, ready to listen. They were a team united against their parents, something that gave them pause. They loved the boy, certainly, but they felt like they were more prepared for the girl, and she got the love and attention and affection that the boy never did.

He barely noticed. Instead, he lost himself in his interest. He upgraded that interest to a hobby. That hobby evolved into an obsession, and at that point, Kirby was off and running, chasing after the only things he cared about. Women. Drugs. And more than anything else, movies. If you count movies as a drug, which Kirby did, then there are only two things he cared about.

She was six years old when he moved out of the house to attend college, and it felt to her like he disappeared. Up till that moment, he was the guy who showed her movies, and she loved the way he talked to her, the way he treated her, the way he seemed to genuinely listen to her. They grew up just outside Minneapolis, but Kirby chose to go to school in Los Angeles.

She wasn't surprised. Even that young, she could see that Kirby's love of movies was so strong, so all-consuming, that he didn't care what their parents said or thought. His father was convinced that anyone who worked in or around movies had to be a degenerate, and the relationship between Kirby and him deteriorated so much that Kirby only came home from school once in the whole four years he was gone.

On Thanksgiving when she was twelve, Kirby came home, and he brought someone with him. Dani was horrified by Annie at first. She was outraged that Kirby would bring someone home, someone to take his time and attention when clearly the only reason for him to come home was to spend time with her. She considered Annie's presence a fundamental betrayal of their agreement.

Even worse, it was clear that Annie and Kirby had a bond that was more than just boyfriend/girlfriend. They both had dark circles under their eyes. They were sweaty and twitchy and even though Dani had no experience with hard drugs and no real understanding of what was happening, she understood that something was wrong when she saw it face-to-face. The Kirby who sat across the table for the first half of the meal was a stranger to her, and she found herself simmering, furious at him but equally pleased by just how upset her parents were.

As Kirby started to wake up, though, Dani saw signs of the brother she loved so much, and he started to poke and jab at their father, looking for ways to irritate and offend. It worked, too, and when Annie started to nod off, Kirby could see how close to eruption his father was. She tried telling a story, but she was drifting off mid-sentence, and Kirby's mother kept trying to steer Annie back on-topic, desperate to head off what she saw brewing between father and son. When Annie finally went out completely, she was already lost in a thought. "The thing... what it was... it happened... it just... it happened... and I was... I was..."

Annie tilted sideways against Kirby, and a sweet soft snore replaced the story. She was gone. Kirby looked at his father, already bug-eyed with anger, and he laughed like a gunshot. Kirby had this hyena laugh that would drive anyone crazy anyway, but doubly so if they were mad at him. His father yelled at him to knock it off, and as he yelled, he ripped wind like a chainsaw, like he couldn't hold his anger in at either end. That only made Kirby laugh harder, and then, finally, Dani could resist no longer.

Dani laughed at the fart, laughed at Kirby's addled delight in their father's fury, laughed at her mother's transparent need to calm things down, and laughed at her utter failure to do so. It was a glorious Thanksgiving, and even as a pre-teen, Dani felt acutely how much better things were when Kirby was home.

Dani remembered the way her parents ganged up on him at dinner, demanding he give up his "silly fantasies." Their father had been red-faced, and no matter how many good times there were (and certainly their parents doted on her as a way of compensating for what they saw as their failure with Kirby), she always had that image of her father, spit on his chin, shaking, so angry by the end of the meal that he started to cry. She'd never seen him cry about anything, not even when her grandparents died, and more than anything, that had shaken her. The worst thing her brother did, as far as she could tell, was decide for himself how he wanted to spend his life, and she wondered what she could expect when she became an adult herself.

In the meantime, she got to know her brother through two boxes full of movies that he left behind, boxes she claimed as her own, boxes filled with books about movies and, more importantly, the movies themselves. Left to her own devices, Dani wasn't sure she would have gotten around to seeing *Les Enfants Du Paradis* or *Cannibal Holocaust* or *A Clockwork Orange*, but Kirby left her this ongoing living breathing map to follow, a map that detailed a world so large that she suspected a fear of it was what truly made her parents react so badly to her brother.

She read notes that Kirby made about the films, she read books by guys like Jonathan Hoberman and Danny Peary and David Thomson, and she read stacks of old film magazines. *Video Watchdog*. *Sight and Sound*. *Film Comment*. She was smitten with Pauline Kael, she wished she could have dated young Francois Truffaut, and she adopted Joe Bob Briggs as her patron saint. She dragged her best friend to a screening of *Jules et Jim*, was furious when her friend didn't seem to get the appeal, and then made peace with the fact that she could not share this thing that Kirby had given her with just anyone. It was a private madness, and it only made her love her absentee brother even more.

Dani was fifteen when Kirby died.

She was lying on her bed, reading *A Biographical Dictionary Of Film*, watching a wobbly VHS of *Band Of Outsiders* and lip-synching along to the film in perfect learned-from-movies French. She was at the end of her bed, her head hanging off so the film, so familiar to her, was upside-down, making it feel new and wrong and familiar all at once.

Diminutive and bookish, Dani wore her hair tied back and dressed for comfort and to entertain herself. She found that her dark hair and her dark eyes, so bright and curious, were not particularly compelling to boys her own age, but she also found she didn't care. Boys chased a different type of girl than her, and that was fine. She had movies to see, and she would spend an entire evening making a list of things she wanted to track down. She was thinking about going on a Frank Tashlin binge when her father knocked on her bedroom door.

He didn't wait for her reply. He just opened the door and leaned in. "Baby, please come downstairs."

Irritated, she shot back, “When this is over, *Phil*.” She had recently learned the delicious power of calling her father by his first name and driving him insane in the process, but when she looked at him to see his reaction, she instantly regretted it. His eyes were red, and he looked like he was about to collapse. Something was terribly wrong. She rolled over and sat up and, without thinking, changed her tone completely as she said, “Daddy?”

She sat on one side of the kitchen table and her parents sat on the other side, and they tried to explain it to her. “The police say he killed himself.”

That one phrase erased everything that came after it. She could hear her parents conveying some details about some rich guy’s house and other dead bodies and a fire, but she didn’t really take in anything. She couldn’t imagine that her brother simply wasn’t out there somewhere, waiting for that moment where they would finally be able to get together more often and be friends and watch movies together. She had nursed that fantasy along for so long that it was impossible for her to understand how his death fit into the bigger picture. He couldn’t be dead, because they still had so much to do together. It wasn’t possible.

“And of course, it was one of his weirdo customers. That’s whose house he was at. Some guy who wanted a movie, and now... what? WHAT?” Dani was surprised by how loud her father had gotten, and it was clear he had even surprised himself. For the second time in her life, Dani saw her father begin to cry, but this time, it wasn’t anger. It was something deep, something she couldn’t even name. It seemed like he was angry one second, and then the next, like a switch was flipped, a sob tore loose from him, hurting him, crushing the breath from him.

“My boy. My boy is dead.”



Dani remembered running for her room. She remembered her parents calling after her. And she remembered catching sight of a picture of Kirby she had on her wall, one of the few where they were together, and they were at a movie theater. He'd taken her to see a revival of *House Of Wax*, and they both had on the cardboard red-and-blue glasses. She was five. She didn't remember much about the movie except for the crazy sensation of things coming out of the screen at her, and fire. Much fire. And for a moment, looking at that photo, she got a flash of Kirby, but a much older, much seedier version of that happy, vital big brother she remembered. She got a flash of fire. Of blood. Of her brother sitting in a theater seat, crying, unable to look away from whatever was happening onscreen. And it felt real to her, more than a passing image. She caught a full-sensory whiff of it. She could smell the fire, could taste the copper-penny blood and the heavy, suffocating smoke. Just for a moment. Just for a flash.

And then she remembered throwing herself into her bed where it felt like she spent weeks, pounded flat by loss. And nothing else. Not for a while.

The first thing that brought Dani out of her self-imposed interruption of service was the arrival of several large crates at the house. They weren't boxes. They were bigger and more durable than that. There were seven total, delivered in two installments, and they took up the entire three-car garage easily, something that did not seem to please Dani's father. There was an envelope that came with the crates, and on the front, a single word: "*Monkey.*"

It was what Kirby had always called her. "When Mom and Dad brought you home, I expected this perfect beautiful little girl, a little baby-doll princess. And instead, they walked in the door with this hairy, dark little thing that just howled and pooped and seemed like it was at least 84% monkey. And, of course, that was SO MUCH BETTER." Her parents were outraged when he would call her that, but Dani loved it. She knew he meant it with pure, unabashed affection.

She opened the envelope when she was alone, and she never let her parents read the letter, no matter how many times they asked. It was for her. It was one more sign that Kirby had always had a place for her in his heart, even when he couldn't physically come home to spend time with her.

*"Dear Monkey...*

*Are you too old for me to call you that now? I don't think so. I suspect you're as hairy and noisy and stinky as ever. Seriously. You stink, stinker. Oh, and I miss you like I would miss my hands. I miss talking to you. Things have been really bad since Annie died, and while I love the theater, it hurts too much to be there these days. That was our dream. She was supposed to run it with me so we could grow old watching double-features we programmed for each other every night. That was the deal. I had this picture in my head, and now that's gone.*

*It was probably crazy of me to expect a happy ending in the first place. I've seen too many movies. It's warped my sense of how things are supposed to work. I wish I believed that God was an all-powerful director, some benevolent Francis Ford Coppola determined to get 'Apocalypse Now' right even if it kills him, but I suspect that he is far more Michael Bay, capable of some genuine sound and fury but completely checked out from taking any moral responsibility for the way things work. Life may be a movie, but it's a bad movie with a bad script, and I'm tired of it.*

*I may be starting over. Trying something new. And I know that if anyone will make good use of my film library, it's you. You'll watch the great stuff, you'll laugh at the terrible stuff, and you'll keep the things that are important to you. All of this is yours now. I regret only one thing, and that's checking out before I got a chance to steer you through the weirdest wilderness of this collection. Remember, Monkey, that I loved you, even if I could never get the hang of loving myself.*

*Your big brother forever,  
K."*

The casually dashed-off "K" is what finally did it, brought hot tears to her eyes. She was angry at him, but she was also broken, suddenly and deeply, by the realization that she would never see him again.

She had not realized just how much she depended on him as her lifeline within the family, and she couldn't imagine a lifetime of Thanksgivings where there was no chance Kirby would make her father so mad he farted, and she let out a sound, somewhere between a sob and a laugh, and she hurt in a way that left her bent in half, breathless.

That night, after she cried herself to sleep, inconsolable and unwilling to speak to either of her parents about the grief that settled on her like a blanket, she heard Kirby laughing. She opened her eyes slowly, savoring the sound that she assumed was a memory.

But he was there. In her room. Sitting at her desk. And he had her journal open, reading from the last few entries. She hated the word "diary." She thought it sounded girly and ridiculous and childish. She kept a journal. She wrote ideas for movies in it, observations, bits of dialogue she overheard and wanted to preserve.

She also wrote film reviews she would never let anyone read. They were for her to work out her own dizzying love affairs with movies, not for anyone else's entertainment. They were confessions, breathless admissions of undying devotion. They were passionate missives that went unsent, and she was embarrassed to have Kirby looking at them.

"What are you doing?"

"You've been busy, Monkey."

"So have you."

Kirby laughed that jackass laugh of his again. "That is true. Good point."

“I’m mad at you, Kirby. You can’t leave me alone with Mom and Dad.”

“Fuck Mom and Dad. You’ll be out of here in a few years. They’re worn out. Take what you need, coast until you’re ready to go, and then run, Dani. Never look back.”

“That’s easy for you to say now.”

“No, actually. It’s not. It’s not easy for me to say anything now. You know why? Because when I killed myself, I put the barrel of the gun right against the soft palette at the top of my mouth. Angled up. And when I pulled that trigger, it tore a hot, immediate hole the size of a grapefruit out of the top of my head. So it’s only through considerable effort that I am speaking to you now, baby sister, something you should consider when asking yourself why I am here.”

“You’re not. Not really.”

“Sure I am. I’m here to give you a message.”

“I don’t want your message. I want you back. I want you not to have killed yourself.”

“I had to. I had to pay the price. And I don’t regret it. I had to see it for myself..”

“See what?”

“You’re going to find clues in my papers about what I was working on. You’re going to find a path that you can follow if you’re curious enough, and you will be. You can’t help it any more than I could. But I’m telling you right now... you are not to follow me. You are not to track the movie down, and you are certainly not to watch it.”

“What movie?”

“There is a whole world out there for you. Explore all of it. But my work was rotten. Whatever I did, whatever I worked on, leave it alone.”

“Kirby...”

“I mean it, Monkey.” He looked at her, seriously, and raised one hand. He made a gun of his fingers and tucked the barrel into his mouth. When he pulled the trigger, it was as if he had really done it.

There was a sudden flash, a boom that left her ears ringing, the smell of cordite in the air, and the violence done to the top of his head was so sudden, so awful that even after she closed her eyes tight, she could see it burned in there, hanging in the darkness, her brother’s final moment a frozen horror for her to study.

By the time she left high school, she had digested all of the films and books and magazines that Kirby left to her, including his journals. She read about his final job, searching for a movie that was supposedly cursed or evil or some such nonsense, and she did exactly what he told her to do. She ignored it. She kept the research, but she did it as a way of holding on to a piece of her brother and his complicated history, not because she was ever going to follow up on it. She thought he had likely lost his mind out of grief for his girlfriend, out of guilt, a chemically-driven breakdown that seized on this ridiculous fairy tale about a haunted movie that made people go crazy, and he had killed himself as the punchline to the sad joke his mind played on him.

She made her peace with that, and she chose to remember all of the great things she did with Kirby, all of the great things she saw because of him, and she loved all the movies he left for her even more because she knew that he thought of her when he saw them, set them aside specifically for her. It felt like he was talking to her.

When she watched *Near Dark*, she could hear Kirby telling her “Check out how much of this cast was in *Aliens* just before this. Look at how much fun they’re having playing such radically different roles this time. Paxton’s practically tapdancing his way through the film.” When she watched *Withnail & I*, she heard him laughing his ass off at the Camberwell Carrot. Movie after movie, it was like he was explaining the world to her, giving her things she’d need later.

She knew she wanted to work with film, but not as a filmmaker. She wanted, instead, to help preserve films. She put herself through school, working two different waitress jobs and selling freelance writing as much as possible. She worked overtime and managed to get her Master’s of Science in Information from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She loved that it was Roger Ebert’s alma mater, and she was weeks away from graduation, everything already turned in and finished, when she was approached about a job.

The future was the last thing on her mind. She wasn’t thinking much farther than the weekend ahead and the Ozu mini-festival she had curated for the student union. She was walking across campus with Doug, a guy she met at the Overlooked Film Festival. She wasn’t sure she was prepared to upgrade him to boyfriend yet. He was cute, a big gangly guy with shaggy brown hair, and he knew enough to hold his own in a conversation about most directors.

The first time he’d come over to her house, he practically fell to his knees in front of her movie collection, a full room of shelves that were overflowing with VHS, laserdiscs, DVDs and Blu-rays from around the world. When he said “I love you,” he was talking to the movies, not her, and she was fine with that. She told him a little bit about her brother, about how he left her the collection, and about how she had chosen her work because it felt like the right way to follow in his footsteps.

“Maybe one day I’ll find something genuinely rare, some lost movie, some one-of-a-kind print or a badly damaged camera negative, and I’ll be able to restore it and bring it back to life and it will have value. Someone will see it, and that film will mean everything to them, and the only reason it will have survived is because of that restoration work. That seems like the kind of thing I could feel really good about doing.”

“You have your very own film nerd superhero origin story,” he told her, and then he kissed her for the first time, completely smitten with her on his end. He knew she was going to leave him behind at some point; she just seemed too big, too alive, too destined-for-whatever, to spend her life with him. He was just grateful to get to be with her for a while, and he took every opportunity to spend the night with her, one movie after another playing them into the wee hours of every morning.

Doug was wearing his t-shirt with HERZOG written in the logo of DANZIG, one that Dani had every intention of stealing from him before they broke up, and they were walking across campus together. He broke in as Dani was explaining her theory that *The Goodbye Girl* was a secret sequel to *Jaws*, something he would normally never interrupt. “Hey, hold that thought for a minute. Are you a spy or a terrorist or something?”

Dani laughed at the question. “No. Not that I know of. Why?”

“Because I think the Secret Service is following you, man.”

Dani stopped and turned around, shocked to realize that Doug was right. There were two men in suits about five yards back, clearly following them, making no effort to hide that fact. She had a moment where she almost turned to run, but she realized that was ridiculous. She wasn’t in any trouble.

Indeed, when the men introduced themselves, it was on behalf of Colin Daniels, a fairly well-known archivist who had worked on several major collections, making a reputation for himself as someone who could handle sensitive historical material with discretion and care. Her conversation with the two men moved from the sidewalk to a nearby coffee shop, and Doug took the hint, making himself scarce so she could find out what they wanted with her.

Two days later, she sat across from Colin in a Steak & Shake near the campus. As he put away a truly impressive amount of french fries, she studied him. He wasn't what she expected, oversized, egg-shaped, and apparently laundry-phobic. She managed to set that aside, though, as he told her that he wanted her to skip graduation and leave immediately with him to be part of his team for a job in France.

“What kind of a job? And why me?”

“I've read several articles by you, and I like the way you think about restoration. You consider it as something that exists inside a moral framework. You approach your work with a thought to the ethical implications of what you do. I want people on this job who are going to consider the moral import of what we're doing. It will be an imperative. This is not like any other job I've ever done.”

“What's the job?”

“What can you tell me about Perchoir d'Aigle Studios?”

In a flash, Dani had an idea what Colin was planning to do, and she had a moment where things slowed down, like the color left the room, and she felt like she might fall over or just fly away, like the world might erupt. She had considered the ethics of this very situation as a hypothetical, and it had given her a stomachache that lasted two full days.



“You wrote about it,” he prompted her. “Did you actually go there?”

“No. I just put together various texts and comments and papers, and I posed a question.”

“You posed the right question. And I’d like an answer to that question. Wouldn’t you?”

She considered her answer carefully.

“I don’t know. Are you saying I was right?”

“Tell me what you know, and I’ll tell you if you’re right.”

“It was built in the early ‘20s by the French government in the Haute Savoie region of the French Alps, and it was always meant to be a technical marvel. It was far enough away from everything and everyone that artists felt free to work there, and several of the movies made there in the first twenty years were important ones. Jean Epstein’s sets for the *House of Usher* were said to be one of the most impressive builds of the era, and Abel Gance called the studio ‘a palace of dreams’ in an interview midway through production on *Napoleon*. When the Nazis occupied France, one of the first things they did was eject everyone from Perchoir d’Aigle. They announced that they would be using it as the cornerstone of a new kind of German film. And... that’s all anyone knows about whatever they did up there. There are no records. There were only two short films ever released from several years worth of occupation, and those were years after the war, discovered in a truck.”

She could see that Colin was happy with her answer, enjoying it, so she pressed on. “The government left the studio empty after the war, and in severe disrepair. It was the mid-’50s when they finally decided to pour money into using the studio again. They made it better than ever, and it’s still in use now. But there is one original building left there, running the full length of several soundstages, and on the third floor of that building, one entire side of the floor is taken up by cabinets.”

She hesitated again. From the way he was looking at her, she was fairly sure he already knew what she was going to say. She was being tested. “Huge metal heavy cabinets... all locked. And they’ve been locked since the Nazis left Perchoir d’Aigle. No one’s sure what’s in there.”

“What do you think is in there?”

“Nothing.”

He gave her a sly smile that told her he didn’t believe that for a moment. “That’s not what you wrote.”

She continued, feeling like she was being trapped. “One person who was part of the initial renovation in 1953 said that they opened one of the cabinets one time and saw can after can after can of film, some of it developed, some of it still just raw negative stock. And that’s evidently all still there because everyone’s too afraid to see what it is. If it did belong to the Germans, what sort of things did they shoot at that studio, and why hasn’t anyone seen any of it? Ever?”

“Would you look at the film in those cabinets? Would you be willing to be the first person to lay eyes on it? Would you be prepared for whatever you might see on that film?”

“I doubt you’d find much of it in any condition to watch, even with the most tender of TLC. By now, it has to have mostly turned to...”

“If it was fine, would you watch it?”

“Well... if I was the person who was in charge of cataloging the material... then yes. I would.”

“Even if you were afraid there might be terrible things on the film?”

“If they did do something awful and they filmed it... then isn’t that something we should know? Isn’t that a part of history that we should understand and absorb instead of just leaving it locked in a cabinet, pretending it never happened?”

Colin smiled.

“That’s exactly the answer I was hoping for,” he said. “How soon can you be ready to leave for France?”

“For how long?”

“For however long it takes. They’re giving us Perchoir d’Aigle. And you’re part of the on-site team.”

It was a simple decision for Dani. It was not a conversation she had to have with anyone to know she’d go. It was like the job had simply been waiting for her to be ready. It was perfect for her, and while she may have barely known Kirby, in a very real sense, he was right there by her side as she signed the paperwork, just as he would be there when she opened what she hoped would be her way of making a mark on film history.

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

There is a larger conversation to be had about heroism on film and the very narrow definitions that we seem to accept, and it’s a conversation that we should be having.

After all, how many movies have you seen in the last decade that have involved a hero who has to run around and disarm a glowing doodad on a rooftop before it can (A) destroy the city (B) destroy the world (C) enslave everyone or (D) some variation on the above? I have reached the point where I check out as soon as I see things start to head that way, and even the films I’ve enjoyed that have done it, I’ve had to dock them a bit for leaning on what has rapidly become the laziest “big movie” ending out there.

Video games have a real problem that they’re facing right now involving guns and the seeming omnipresence of them in games for all ages. Game designers find themselves asking how they can create conflict and drama and urgency without leaning on the trappings of the FPS, and game audiences seem hungry to hear what answers, if any, the designers come up with.

While I like and respect the *Harry Potter* series, they definitely build over the course of the series into what becomes a full-fledged war. It feels earned in the books and, to a lesser degree, in the films, but in the end, it comes down to wizards throwing spells at each other and a battle to the death, and that’s by design. That is the kind of story that Rowling set out to tell, and she told it very well. It doesn’t break convention or redefine anything, but that wasn’t the point.

I certainly feel like Jo Rowling deserves her spot atop the pyramid made of all of the various authors, successful or not, who have courted the YA dollar over the last decade or so. She deserves it because she is, simply put, a delightful writer, and she deserves it because of the deeply human sensibilities embodied by her work. She believes in the best of people, and she is well aware of the worst of them as well, and her work has a profound belief that the good will and must prevail. As much as I admire her work on the *Harry Potter* series, it was only with the publication of *The Casual Vacancy* and the advent of the Robert Galbraith mysteries that I was able to really judge the range of her voice.

With *Fantastic Beasts and Where To Find Them*, she is returning to her most famous creation, but attacking it from a very different angle, and again, the results are revealing in a number of ways. I think she is a talented writer with a nimble grasp of characterization, first and foremost, and she has an appetite for the nuts and bolts of world-building, something that eludes many authors who try to work with this sort of material. She is also a keen observer of the way class plays a part in modern society, and class differences are a constant presence in her work. Considering she's lived as a poor person and as a fantastically wealthy person, she is comfortable writing from either perspective, and it gives her work a grounded reality that works well to support the fantastic.

Anyone who walks into *Fantastic Beasts* expecting another *Harry Potter* will most likely be disappointed, because they are fundamentally different types of stories. There was a profound commercial genius to the design of the *Potter* series, each one representing a year in the emotional development of the lead character, each book growing steadily more mature in terms of themes and ideas and storytelling. Rowling raised an entire generation of readers, and there's no way to overstate the importance of that. She made books cool for the kids who discovered her work, and that audience moved on to digest the ocean of YA junk that was published simply to keep them coming to bookstores. Very few authors have been able to find as strong a hook as Rowling did, and even fewer of them show the natural tendencies towards storytelling that she does.

This should be a terrific test of her audience's interest in her, though, because while it seems like a slam-dunk at first glance, Rowling did not just create a simple retread here in order to keep her brand alive. Instead, she's created something that is clearly set in the same world but that has a totally different set of interests at its heart. Heroism in the world of Newt Scamander (Eddie Redmayne) looks very different than heroism in the face of Voldemort's return, and Newt Scamander is no Harry Potter. He is quiet, withdrawn, odd, and doesn't seem to be particularly good with people. However, he is possessed of a deep empathy for magical creatures, and that empathy is what defines his heroism. I can't think of a more 21st century value to idealize, and the entire film seems to be built to make the point that it is empathy that will save us, while the lack of it will destroy us utterly.

Just as Newt represents the heroic ideal of empathy, the fate of Credence Barebone (Ezra Miller) is what happens when someone is shown no empathy at all. He is the curdled, damaged result of being raised by Mary Lou Barebone (Samantha Morton), whose rabid hatred of all things magical blinds her and twists her. Credence has to hide his nature, and that repression backfires, turning him into the Obscurus, the dangerous force that threatens New York. Instead of pitting Newt in a head-to-head battle with Credence, the film first features him trying to reach out to Credence. That's how Percival Graves (Colin Farrell) is able to reach out to Credence and win him over in the first place. He shows Credence kindness. He makes him believe that he is seen for the first time for what he truly is, and in that moment, Credence thrives. He wants to believe it because he needs it. He's so afraid of what will happen if Mary Lou, his adoptive mother, learns his true nature that he is essentially destroying himself to keep it a secret. What makes Rowling's work so resonant is the way people can find themselves in it, different people responding to the subtext in different ways.

What I thought was interesting was how the ending of the film is handled. Yes, there is a battle between the Aurors from MACUSA and Credence, and then between Graves and the Aurors, revealing that Graves is not who he claims to be. But the real conclusion of the film is when Newt calls on the Thunderbird to erase the memories of the entire city. This is the biggest single heroic act in the film because, by doing so, Newt suddenly gives value to this animal that needs protection, that desperately needs to be understood. And in doing that, Newt establishes that his mission is a worthwhile one, and that the other animals he is collecting are also worthwhile and valuable. This is the beginning of a radical transformation of the entire wizarding culture, something that will have long-term impact. Newt's compassion for these creatures and his determination that other people see their value may end up simply becoming a textbook by the time of the Harry Potter films, but it is an act of extraordinary faith in the time frame of this movie.

The entire film seems to be built to support this idea. The entire arc of the relationship between Newt and Tina (Katherine Watson) involves her gradual understanding of why he does what he does. It's not enough that she allow Newt to get away with it; she has to eventually understand the genuine import of his work. The idea that Newt's entire mission is simply to create a great understanding of living creatures sets him apart from many film heroes, although there is another example this year of a similar hero.

Amy Adams in *Arrival* literally has to learn how to understand an entirely alien way of thought, not just their language, if she has any hope of saving Earth. In that film, she makes a personal choice that complicates things far more than the typical conversation about heroics, and that choice is the entire point of the film. *Arrival* asks the question, “Would you do something that would give you enormous joy and happiness if you knew at the start of it that it would also cause you enormous pain?” Weighing that question for yourself is an intensely personal thing, but that’s what makes *Arrival* less of a typical film about heroism. *Fantastic Beasts and Where To Find Them* is designed like a big franchise movie, and it’s got all the glitz and slick of your typical superhero effort or big action vehicle. But at heart, the film dares to pose questions about what it means to put others first and it dares to imagine that kindness can change the world more profoundly than violence.

I dare Hollywood in general to dig deeper with these films because it is possible, and it was bold of JK Rowling to try to prove it with the stakes as high as they are on this series.

*One of the things I find most interesting in movies is perspective. When you're telling a story on film, one of the key questions about the story you're telling is 'Whose perspective is this, and how that impact the way I tell this story?'*

*Inevitably, someone in almost every story told becomes lost in the background, collateral damage in the decision about the focus of attention. In a James Bond movie, James Bond is always the person who leads us through the story. James Bond's perspective is what matters, and if you're just some dude in a red jumpsuit working in a volcano lair for a bald dude with a cat fetish, you are pretty much invisible. What we know about movies is that the only people who matter are the main characters in the story... right?*

*Because how many of us want to really consider the lives of the characters who are just window dressing in movies? I was watching 'Independence Day Resurgence' recently (I am as confused by that statement as you are, trust me) and I found myself getting almost immeasurably sad watching the destruction of Singapore and a bunch of other places. I was sad because of how careful Emmerich was to make sure we saw people in peril and then dying in massive numbers. We have turned the end of the world into an algorithm that we run over and over and over and over, and who gives a shit about these millions of digital lives all snuffed out? The filmmaker certainly didn't. They were just window dressing.*

*But none of us are truly window dressing. We are all the stars in our own movies. In our movies, the most famous people in the world are just faces that flicker by on a television or headlines in a newspaper or just plain noise. They are the ones who are almost invisible. These stories you will read in this series are a way to give voice to those invisible people, shining a spotlight on them.*

*For once, they are not merely BACKGROUND.*

## **“Knight Ride”**

I never thought this sort of thing would ever happen to me.

I wish this was a sex story, because I would love to follow up that opening sentence with something worthy, but that sort of thing really hasn't ever happened to me, and so instead, I'm going to tell you something that I was 100% convinced was bullshit yesterday.



But it's true. I swear to God it is.

You have to understand... I'm just like you. I'm just like everyone else. I've heard the stories and I've seen some of the collateral damage around the city, and I've even seen that light in the sky from time to time. But even so, it's one of those stories that's impossible to take seriously, and so I didn't. Who does, right?

Yesterday, I had to drive my friend Earl out to his place with a bed that he bought, and in order to do that, I had to borrow my buddy Jim's van. Jim never drives it, and he really only keeps it at this point because people borrow it to move things, so it's kind of a shitheap. Earl moved out of the city a few weeks ago, and his place is in the middle of nowhere. By the time I went out there, picked him up, drove to where he was picking it up, then got him all the way back out to his place, it was already dark. I don't know about you, but when I move some furniture, I want a few beers. It feels like it's part of the deal, and Earl agrees, and so it had to be ten, ten-thirty, before I finally got back on the road.

Out where he is, it's mainly just narrow two-lane roads, and most of them are cut right into the side of the mountain. I made sure I had the high beams on, and I did my best to keep it under 40, even when things straightened out for a few minutes. I wasn't buzzed anymore, and as I worked my way down the mountain, I was so nervous about the road that whatever effects I was still feeling burned off completely. I'm telling you that so you know I'm being honest, and so you understand that what I saw, I saw. No question about it.

It was the sort of thing you feel before you hear.

It registered as a rumble, but the kind of thing that traveled through the frame of the car into my arms and straight up into my teeth. By the time I realized what I was feeling, the tires of the van seemed to almost be sliding over the surface of the road, knocked loose of whatever grip they had by the force of whatever was coming up that mountain towards me. I started to wrestle to stay on the road, and that's when the noise suddenly swelled up and it felt like it was everywhere, like it went from silent to deafening at once.

The machine was larger than any vehicle I've ever seen on the road, and I'm not sure it would be fair to call it a vehicle. Built out of some metal that was so black it almost seemed to absorb light, it took up almost all of the road, and it raced up so fast, coming out of the darkness without warning, that I had just enough time to pull the steering wheel hard to the right before the world, for all practical purposes, ended completely.

When the axle sheared in half, I heard it a split-second before the entire thing heaved and screamed and part of it dug deep into the asphalt surface of the road, pushing the van up and flipping it sideways across the narrow mountain road.

Outside, everything turned into a wash of color, and I let go of the wheel, aware that there was going to be an impact and it was going to hurt like a son-of-a-bitch, and relaxed as much as you can relax as you brace for, at the very least, pain or even death. There was a rough sudden bounce and the car was sent in a new direction, but much slower, the promise of possible carnage suddenly sapped by that first bump.

With the grinding sound of a ruined paint job, metal shredding away from the van all across the road, I came to a stop, only slightly bruised, astonished by my luck. That sound still surrounded me, and it felt like fists raining down on me as I hung sideways in the van, each thrum of that insane engine powerful enough to shake the ground, the trees, the very air around me.

For a long moment, I waited to see what was going to happen next. I still couldn't even figure out the shape of this thing across from me. It blocked out everything behind it, and that sound was so intense that it made it hard for me to concentrate. Then, ominously, it went silent all at once.

There was a sound like a pressure seal being broken and then a quiet mechanical noise. I couldn't figure out either of them, but the next thing I heard was familiar enough: a voice.

“Are you okay?”

I almost laughed. Whoever it was, he sounded like his voice was running through a filter of some kind, comically gruff. It was the most threatening question I'd ever heard, although I didn't imagine that was the intent behind it.

“Yeah, I think so. I'm stuck, though,” I called out.

The only response was silence. At first, I thought whoever it was had not heard me, until they spoke again and it was clear that they were much closer now, and capable of moving without making any noise. “If I can get you out, can you walk?”

I tried wiggling my feet, and they both seemed to work with no pain to warn me of any damage. “Should be fine.”

Suddenly he loomed up right next to me. There was a flash, something bright and sharp, and I fell three feet, landing awkwardly on my side. He grabbed me by my forearms and pulled me out, and there was nothing gentle about it. He dragged me right through the shattered glass, and I turned to look back at the van, ruined and destroyed, amazed at my dumb luck.

When he turned me loose, I tried to twist so I could get a good look at him, and he stepped back, blending into the shadows despite my efforts. I couldn't even get a sense of his size or his shape. Not really.

"I am sorry. This road is rarely used and I made a foolish assumption that I had it to myself tonight. I could have killed you." His voice seemed to come from more than one direction at once, almost like he was piping it through speakers on the machine, like he was projecting it. "I will replace your van."

When he said that, my first thought is that Jim is the luckiest sonofabitch I know. I'm the one who gets hit and almost wiped out, and he gets a brand-new van in place of his rusted-out shitbox. Unreal. "It's okay," I said, even though no part of me thought what had happened was okay. "The van belongs to my buddy. It was on its last legs."

I pushed myself up to a sitting position, and for a moment, there was a savage, ugly throbbing at my temple, and I felt like I should lay back down. But it passed, and after a few moments, I managed to climb to my feet. I took a few tentative steps and, indeed, seemed to be mostly intact. "More than anything, I need a ride back to the city. There's nothing out here."

There was a stirring of the darkness by the back end of the hulking thing parked across the road, and I caught a glimpse of part of a face, the first recognizably human thing about him. He did not look happy about the prospect of putting me into his car, and I stepped forward to say something else, but he was already gone.

After a moment, he stepped up from behind me, one massive hand clamping closed on the back of my neck. "Fine. But you're going to sit with your hands in your lap. You will not touch anything. And you will not look at me. Do you understand?"

He wasn't trying to hurt me, but just from the way he was holding me, I felt like my shoulders were starting to cramp. "Yeah. Yeah. Definitely. I got it."

He pushed me forward and I found myself by the side of the tank. That was really the only word that seemed to fit. It wasn't a car. It dwarfed any truck I could name. The metal that made up the entire outer shell didn't feel like the steel I'd felt in any car I'd ever encountered. It was coarse, and when I ran my hand along it, there were no seams, no obvious connections. It felt like one big perfectly milled piece. Then I found a deep recess, and another above it, and I realized they were stairs set into the side.

Standing on the top of the tank, looking down into it, I could hear the interior controls, and I could see the cool lights of a number of screens. There were four total seats inside, but it wasn't laid out the way I expected. I climbed down, and I'm telling you... it was like being inside a spaceship or something. The smell of it was crazy, like expensive leather and freshly molded plastic, but with something else as well. None of the panels or screens or sticks or wheels I saw looked like a typical steering set-up, and there was no actual window. Instead, there was a projected image of the outside, and the image kept running through various visual spectrums, like heat vision and some kinda purple filter. It was hypnotic, and it made it easy for me to focus on something other than him as he climbed in, the overhead hatch closing automatically behind him with that same stealthy whirring sound. I kept my eyes on the screen as he shut even more of the interior lights down and took his seat, his back to me. He might as well have been a wall for all I could see even if I looked directly at him, and I didn't dare.

As loud as it had seemed on the outside, I didn't hear any of it inside. He turned the tank on, and very quickly, we were on our way, moving faster than I would have driven even at my most confident, in bright daylight, with assurances that no one was on the road ahead.

If I had to, I couldn't tell you how he was driving it. He wasn't giving me any way to see around him, and I figured I had no right. I kept my eyes on that screen showing the outside world as it raced by, and about halfway back to the city, I made a decision: I'm moving. I'm getting the fuck out of here. I don't know much about anything, but if there's a dude wearing armor racing around in a tank beating the living shit out of criminals, then things are so far out of control here that there's place for the kind of life I want to live. You know what matters to me? I do my job. I cook hamburgers in a fucking shack, and that is fine. I go home, and I play music on my stereo and I go out and I see shows and I hang out with my girlfriend sometimes and sometimes she's annoyed by me so I go see the shows without her and I love it. I love that life. I don't want to have to worry about the idea that I might be walking across the street after I see a band play, holding her hand, and this fucking crazy goddamn military weapon built around a jet engine designed to break the sound barrier might suddenly appear and leave us like stains there in the crosswalk all because some weirdo with a gun that melts things is trying to rob a bank.

No. No thanks. Sure, he drove me to a bus stop and he dropped me off and he gave me a phone number to call, and when I called it this morning, I was told that it was a lawyer's office, and he was already prepared to make arrangements for Jim's new van. I was also told that I could purchase a car of my own, and I am many things but I am not stupid so hell yeah, I'll take a car. And I'll pack it up and I'll strap a U-haul to the back and I'll point it west and drive. And if you know what's good for you, you'll do the same thing. This is no place to live. Not for normal people.

Bottom line: I don't feel safe in a world like this.

And honestly? You shouldn't, either.

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

Time is an important element in the work of Jonathan Nolan so far. It may, in fact, be the single most important element of the way he approaches material as a writer, and it's interesting because he never seems to use it the same way twice.

I've seen people write about his work through the prism of his brother Christopher's contributions as director, but with the conclusion of the first season of HBO's sprawling new science-fiction series *Westworld*, Jonathan Nolan has come into focus in a major way as an artist, and it is clear that he has a relationship with chronology that is tenuous at best. That's by design, though, and he is obviously trying to do different things to the audience each time.

He works with many collaborators, and, of course, they also bring things to the table. But there is a similarity, a focus that is at play in his work that suggests at least some degree of authorial intent with him as the common denominator. I would set *Westworld* next to *The Prestige* and *Memento* on a shelf as part of an unofficial grouping, and the things that are different about them are as interesting to me as the ways they are alike. In all three stories, time is fractured in a way that conceals things from the viewer as well as the characters, and in all of them, there is a point to the fracturing of those stories.

*Memento* is an enormously affecting piece about trauma and the lengths the mind will go in order to avoid dealing with trauma head-on. There are some things that are simply too much for us, and there are defensive mechanisms in the brain that can be triggered that are so extreme that they can reorder who we are on a fundamental level. By reversing the chronology of the way the story was told, he put us into the position to be this person who is constantly approaching the defining trauma of his past, trapped in a terrible cycle that leads to fresh trauma, over and over, a sort of self-imposed hell for his own perceived sins.

*The Prestige* tells the story of the greatest magic trick of all time, and in order to do so, it has to move backwards and forwards in time, hiding things and revealing them in a way that makes us appreciate the theatrical flourish of each stage of the trick. You could tell *The Prestige* in a whole different order, and the story would still make sense, but the emotional punches wouldn't land the way they do. There is a haunting final shot in that movie that echoes the opening shot of all the hats on the ground, and the things we learn between those two images are enough to totally alter our understanding of those hats and what they mean.

One of the reasons I haven't had much to say about *Westworld* so far is because it felt from the start like a show that would require you to see all of a season to really understand, and sure enough, the 90-minute season finale dropped all sorts of new information on the viewer, basically confirming all of the suspicions that had been growing for me all season long. Instead of feeling like I had outsmarted the twist, though, or feeling upset because it was "obvious," I feel like that's exactly the experience you were supposed to have. This time, it feels to me like the show was structured in a way that was meant to simulate the experience of being one of the hosts. While there is plenty of material in the show that happens away from the hosts, the overall experience of being disjointed in time and not having all of the information about what we're experiencing is absolutely meant to put us in the same position that the hosts are in, and it's enormously effective.

Most importantly, though, when Jonathan Nolan bends time, he does so because he is hoping to be able to create the greatest impact on the audience, and that paid off with *Westworld* in ways that felt like an evolution of things he's tried before. For me, the best moment of the entire season was the one where young William finally find Delores after searching for her for so long, and as he starts to approach her, she drops that can again, and someone else picks it up, kicking off a performance loop that William recognizes. In that moment, everything shatters for him.



After all, he was so sure that he had found something real, that Delores was feeling something genuine, that he staked his entire life on it. His behavior is all dependent on that truth, and suddenly it's revealed to him that he fell for it. He believed the great lie of Westworld. And in that moment, he not only fell in love with the park, he also decided that he was going to keep pushing up against the reality of it until he found that thing that he was so sure he sensed somewhere in there. Here's where the time thing paid off for me, because the memory of that moment is the point where William broke, and the moment that Delores connects the dots and realizes who he is is also the moment where she restores some small bit of hope to him, because of what she said as she was begging. "Someone's coming for me. Someone who really loves me." She was remembering William, remembering that first adventure, remembering the force with which he fought to find that something real within her. And it clearly meant something to her. It was something she had fought to remember, something that she held on to for strength.

There are many other thematic things at play in *Westworld*, many other reasons that I loved it and that I look forward to another season of it. But more and more often now, if I see Jonathan Nolan's name attached to something, I can expect that he will further push into his explorations of the way we are shaped by memory and time and the ways in which those forces work on us. It's a rich and powerful way to dig deep into his characters, and I think he may be second only to Richard Linklater right now as a director who recognizes the almost limitless potential film offers for the ways time can be bent to a filmmaker's purpose.

**Commander Future: A Reporter's Notebook**  
**An insider's look at the most controversial figure of our times**

**By Peter Underhill**  
**(with additional reporting by Drew McWeeny)**

**Introduction**

Long before he made his debut on the website *Popcorn Fiction*, Commander Future had already made his presence known. I'd been keeping notes on him for several years, and my intentions for him were very simple: I wanted my very own Doc Savage or Superman, a pulp hero I could do anything with, without any fear of upsetting fans with a preconceived idea of who he was or what they should expect.

I spent a few years taking notes on the Commander, his adventures, his adversaries, and other characters in the same world, and I really loved a lot of what was in that notebook. I'm a bit of a Luddite, and I still hand-write most of my first drafts of everything, including the work I do online. I can't help it. I work better in longhand, and always have. I write by hand, I edit with the computer. Bizarre for a character as rooted in technology as the Commander, but that's just how I work.

And then I lost that notebook. It was full. A hard-cover Moleskine that was packed with all sorts of notes about Commander Future. I was taking the boys out one day, and I had the notebook with me, and as I was putting them in their car seats, I set the notebook on top of the car. I drove away, didn't think twice about it, and when I tried to find the notebook later that afternoon, I immediately flashed on the moment when I set it on the roof, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't remember picking it back up. I searched the neighborhood, I searched the streets in our area where I'd driven, and there was no sign of it anywhere. Gone.

For a while, I assumed this was a sign, and I figured the Commander was never going to happen. Then one afternoon, there was a small quiet voice, the same one I hear every so often, saying, "Get a notebook. Try some voice." That's where so many projects have started, with voice exercises, and in this case, I realized that I needed a Watson to my Holmes, someone to tell the stories of this outsized character. And the voice exercise I wrote in the next three days was "The Interview," the short story that ended up on Popcorn Fiction, the introduction to the Commander for me as well as anyone who read it.

There is a new notebook now, and it belongs not to me, but to Peter Underhill, a former celebrity interview/puff piece specialist from Triumph City. It's full of first-person observation, transcripts of conversations, news articles, and more. He's given me permission to publish excerpts from his notebook, some of which you've read before, some of which are new.

On that note, I'll hand it over to him.

## **CHAPTER ONE: "The Interview"**

I know you're not reading this because you're interested in me.

You're reading this because you want to know about him.

I get it. I was the same way at first. After all, we're not just talking about some movie star or sports hero, some puffed-up politician or titan of industry. There's famous, there's iconic, and then there's whatever he is.

For me to explain him to you, I should explain how I met him.

He picked me.

I've always been proud of my interview skills. I'd better be good at this by now. It's how I've made my living for the better part of twenty years. Most of what I cover is fluff. I write about theater and music and books and movies and TV shows. I interview celebrities and scientists and momentary figures of interest. I get paid to act interested in things that bore me silly, pop culture detritus, and I'm good at being glib about it all. Over the course of my career, I've gone some amazing places, and I've done some unexpected things. I have used the ever-lovin' shit out of my passport.

Still, I have no idea who gave him my name or how I caught his eye. I am sure there was a list of some sort, but I can't imagine how the actual decision was made. All I know is one day last month, I walked home with headphones on, the music loud, enjoying the crisp October air, and I found Commander Future sitting in my living room.

Have you ever seen him in person?

TV doesn't count, even if you have high-def or 4K or the best VR set-up there is. That suit of his makes this weird sound that you can feel in your stomach. If you look at the surface of the suit closely, it's alive. It trembles. It ripples. The guy stands at least seven-foot-three, no exaggeration. His head is the size of a watermelon. He filled my living room as he stood to face me, sticking out this Christmas ham of a hand for me to shake.

"You must be Peter."

I was so busy staring, trying to wrap my head around the reality of him, that at first I didn't realize he wanted a response. As he shook my hand, I understood the term "man-handled" for the first time. I felt like a child being walked to school by his father, except I'm 43 years old and anything but small. Six-foot-two, two-fifty-five, and some of it is even muscle. I'm not used to people being exponentially larger than I am.

Finally, I realized I was just staring at him. "I'm sorry. I just... when I came in..."

"I surprised you."

"Yes. I didn't expect..."

"I couldn't wait out front. You understand, don't you?"

"Sure." Commander Future is the most famous person on the planet. At this point, he's an industry. He's an entire scientific field of study unto himself. Can you name anyone more famous than he is, or more unlikely than him? Can you picture my neighbors looking out the window and seeing this parade float sitting on my porch swing? "I don't mind, but..."

I stopped and realized I had no idea what to ask him or what to say. Me. The question guy. I'm handed a situation most reporters would kill for, and my tongue suddenly turns up tangled.

"... but what am I doing here?" he asked.

I nodded. Relaxing. Grateful.

"I'm here for an interview, of course."

\* \* \*

Commander Franklin Adams did not hold that rank when The Incident happened. He wasn't even in the military at the time. He was a private researcher, engaged in the same frustrating work for eleven years without any result. Then he crossed a wire in his lab one day and, in plain sight of forty-seven people and three HD cameras, he disappeared.

Twenty-three minutes later, he reappeared two feet to the left.

The only comment he's ever made in public is that he leapt forward in time to the year 3175, that he survived there for six years, and that he found a way back. He has never told anyone what he saw or did there. He has frequently claimed that he never will.

What is obvious is that the six years he was gone took an extreme toll on him, both mentally and physically.

For one thing, he was not the size when he left. He's like a big perfect action figure now, custom-built.

And then there's that suit of his. That crazy living all purpose tech suit. Even if you don't want to believe his story, once you meet him, you'll see what I mean. It's not anything anyone anywhere has ever built.

Yet.

\* \* \*

I scrambled off to my office to find my audio recorder, thrilled and suddenly very nervous as well. As I searched my desktop, Commander Future stepped in through the wall of my office.

Just phased right through it. Amazing move, actually. I flinched so I got tangled in my desk chair, and I went down. Hard. Right in front of this legendary hero I'm about to interview. All I could think was, "At least you didn't shit your pants."

Gathering what little dignity I had left, I got up, refusing his help to get to my feet.

"What are you doing?"

"I'd like to record this conversation if that's okay with you."

"This is not the interview."

"It's not? Okay. Um, when did you want to..?"

"Tomorrow. 8:00 PM. Be in front of the Triumph Tower."

I started to respond, but he turned and ran through another wall. Gone. Just like that. He wasn't going to wait for me to confirm, because that was a given. Of course I'd show up where and when he told me to.

\* \* \*

"You're lying."

"I'm not."

"There's no way that happened."

"Word for word."

"This just drops in your lap."

"Yes. This just drops in my lap."

"You're lying."

"I'm not. This is real, Artie. And we've got until 8:00 to put together a list of things we want to talk to him about."

"You're sure this is happening?"

"Yes."

"This is a front page top story."

"This is the only story. As soon as the interview's over, I'll come back here to get it ready for publication."

"I'll be ready."

\* \* \*

On the way to Triumph Tower, I was sitting on the L Train uptown, thinking back to the first time I saw him, because it is impossible to live in Triumph City and not see him. Typically, it's just from a distance and just for a second or two, or on some video shot by someone who got lucky.



For me, the first sighting of him was about three weeks after The Incident happened, when people still didn't quite understand what he was. That was just under two years ago, and I had just put a column to bed. I was standing outside this shitty little dive bar where they had dollar beers and all the free chicken wings you could eat during happy hour. I had a wicked buzz, grease from the wings still on my fingers, and I was digging in my jacket pocket for my cigarettes.

Across the street, the bank building disappeared. All thirty-three stories of it.

A moment later, there was a sound like thunder, but not distant. It was everywhere, surrounding me, the loudest thing I've ever heard, and I was just suddenly laying down about six feet from where I'd been standing, and in that empty space where the bank building used to be, Commander Future stood, glowing as if lit from within, eyes alight with what looked like white fire.

Before I could stand up to run, there was a rumble, more felt than heard, and Commander Future reached out and touched his belt. Another sound, like that first thunderclap but turned inside out, and both my ears popped.

Commander Future was gone.

The bank building was back. Someone else had to point out to me later that the building had been turned exactly backwards. Amazingly, no one inside was reported hurt. To their mind, no time had passed at all.

That sort of thing happens more and more often since Commander Future's initial incident. There were people who followed him back from wherever it was that he went, people like the Fate Pirates, or the Singer of Forever, or that strange pure-energy being called Zero, people and beings who have changed the fabric of space and time for the rest of us.

And as crazy as all of that sounds when I take a step back and write it all down, you get used to it. Things that were unthinkable twenty-one months ago are routine now. We adjust. Our world views shift. Reality bends. And for the most part, Commander Future is ground zero for all of it.

The sound of the L Train's brakes startled me from the memory, and I joined the rest of the people heading out to Triumph Plaza.

\* \* \*

By the time I reached the front of Triumph Tower, it was six minutes till 8:00. The air was crisp but not cold, and there were families enjoying the Plaza, playing and dining, and as I waited, I watched two little boys, about seven and five years old, taking turns chasing each other. The little one was making me laugh, all serious and determined, so I didn't realize at first that Commander Future had arrived.

"Why are all of these people here?" He sounded quietly furious, which startled me.

"I'm not sure what you're asking."

"Why hasn't this area been evacuated?"

"You didn't say anything about evacuation. Was I supposed to do that?" I was gripped by sudden panic. What could make this wildly powerful being act so suddenly anxious?

"I didn't? Are you sure?"

"Fairly."

"This is going to be more difficult than I expected." He looked around, sizing up the crowd, the Plaza, and his options.

"Commander, what's happening?"

Overhead, there was a sudden silent flash of violet light, bright enough to make it day again, and everyone looked up to see the source.

Commander Future sighed. "Just a little tear in the universe. Let's see what we can do about it."

I took a step back from him as his suit began to shift color to a perfect reflection of the overhead hue. "I'll just get out of your way, then."

He reached out and grabbed me by the scruff of the neck. "I said we."

And for the first time in my life, I flew.

The next forty-five seconds passed in a blur, complicated by the way my stomach dropped and my inner-ear balance suddenly flipped. In less time than I would have thought possible, we found ourselves at the point in the sky where the light originated, and this close to it, there seemed to be a glass barrier in the sky, and where it was cracked, that awful violet lithe was pouring in.

There was a move that Future made, using only one arm since he was still holding me with the other. He managed to cut a wider window into the barrier, and he held me up to it so I could see the other side.

I heard a sound from faraway, and gradually became aware it was my own scream as I looked, trying to digest the scene before me. Finally, he held his other arm out straight, sections of his suit realigning so his entire hand was a gun barrel. Pointing his hand into the crack he'd made wider, he finally moved me aside.

"Close your eyes."

As I did, there was a loud thrum, one bass pulse, and I felt like my entire body bulged as the air around me superheated and blew past me.

Then we were falling, and I opened my eyes to see the barrier was gone. The crack was gone. All was well again.

In celebration, and because of the twisting flip Commander Future made to slow us down, I convulsed, vomiting and bellowing at the same time.

There was a jarring snap as we reached the ground, and Commander Future dropped me the last two feet. My legs, not sure how to process the sensory overload, gave out and I ended up seated, trying to catch my breath.

As he stood over me, looking down, I felt a sudden surge of anger. "Hey, why did you fly me up there with you? I could have been killed."

"The whole city could have been killed. That was the point."

"But you could have done that by yourself. You certainly didn't need my help."

"What did you see?"

I was thrown by the sudden shift in gears. "What? When?"

"When you looked through that crack. What did you see on the other side?"

"I... I can't explain."

"Try."

"It didn't make any sense. How could it be that different on the other side of a piece of glass? What I saw..."

It had only been a few seconds, but even discombobulated like that, four seconds was enough to give me a clear view of a rolling field, a killing field, a vast plain of human suffering, with strange creatures attending, four-dimensional things that hurt to remember. I could see how much Future needed to understand what I'd seen. So I started trying to describe it. The sounds of the dying, terrible machine noises slick with blood. I told him about the rending machines lined with parts filled with that violet light. I told him about the horizon that seemed too sharp, that made my fillings ache when I looked directly at it.

And when I finished, when I'd spent every observed detail, I realized how much I needed to describe it, to give name to that madness, that random awful impossibility.

"What was that place?"

"I can't tell you that."

"That's no fair. I told you everything."

"You did, and in impressive detail. You are a born reporter. You notice the right kinds of detail. In short, you're hired."

I wasn't sure I'd heard him right. "Hired for what?"

"I told you this was an interview."

"Yes... and I have a hundred questions to ask you. More, maybe, after what just happened."

For the first time, he smiled. Just a little, but it was enough to shock me.

"You misunderstood," he said. "You're being interviewed. For a job. And you passed."

"I have a job."

"Now you have a better one."

"I'm a prize-winning reporter at one of the best papers in the country. What job is better?"

"My official biographer."

I am not speechless often.

I waited for the punchline, but he just stood there looking at me expectantly.

"Okay, first help me up," I said, trying to buy myself time to answer, to process the question. Future pulled me to my feet easily, and I looked around. Families all over the Plaza were huddled together, still trying to understand what had just happened, looking over at us, afraid to approach.

"If I do that, will you answer any question I ask you?"

"No."

"But you'll answer most of them."

"No."

"Okay..."

"I'll tell you stories. And starting now, you'll travel with me. You handled that very well."

"I puked."

"But just the once."

"I have a job."

"You mentioned that. If you're worried about money, don't be. How does a million a year sound?"

"Insane. It sounds absolutely mad. This whole thing does."

"Then you'll do it."

"I didn't say that."

"How can you resist?"

"... I can't." I knew he was right. I do what I do searching for good stories to tell. And here was this mythological figure offering me his story to tell.

"Yes. I'll do it."

"Of course you will."

"When do I start?"

"How soon can you move into my building downtown?"

\* \* \*

"That is the worst letter of resignation I've ever read."

"It's a great last story and you know it. It's all yours."

"You can't quit."

"Of course I can."

"Okay, then, please don't quit even though you can."

"Run the story, Artie. I'm sure I'll stay in touch."

"No, you won't. It's okay. I wouldn't either."



## **IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF PULP & POPCORN...**

We're going to kick off our second ongoing story, and this one's a period piece set in 1948 Los Angeles. I am a huge fan of detective fiction set in Los Angeles, and I think the city's history is rich and fascinating. The chance to write my favorite kind of story set in a city I have called home for more than half of my life now is a delight. It's called *Djinn Rummy*, and I kind of love it after living with it for the last few years, working with it in several different forms.

We're going to have another *Background* for you, and I'll be reviewing Martin Scorsese's new film *Silence* as well as *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*. My *Ten Best Of The Year* list, along with all of my other end-of-the-year thoughts, will not show up until the January 4 issue, which should be the third one.

There will definitely be more from *The Commander Future Notebook* in every issue, as well another ongoing serialized story based on an un-produced script I wrote with my longtime creative partner Scott Swan. Appropriately enough, that story will be holiday themed. I really am dedicated to getting you a new issue every two weeks until I've at least introduced all of the revolving serialized stories. *The Shadow Box* is one. *Djinn Rummy* is another. The holiday-themed story is called *Noel*. And perhaps the most sprawling and ambitious of these is *The Survey*.

Once we've done that, gotten all the plates up and spinning, it'll be time for you to be brutally honest with me and tell me what you think. You can send your email directly to me at [drew.mcweeny@gmail.com](mailto:drew.mcweeny@gmail.com), and you can tell me what you like, what you hate, and just how badly you think I've screwed up my life by trying something crazy like this.

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

## **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.