Two Chairs In Print

Issue 3
Don't Ever Leave

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Season 2 Episode 3: March 24, 2025

Colophon

Two Chairs in Print is published by David Grigg and Perry Middlemiss. It is based on transcripts of our regular podcast *Two Chairs Talking.*

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Acknowledgement of Country

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Introduction

David:

Hello and welcome to the third episode of the new season of our podcast *Two Chairs Talking*. My name is David Grigg and I'm joined by my co-conspirator, Perry Middlemiss. How are you, Perry?

Perry:

Pretty well, pretty well. Thank you, David. The weather has changed. We've moved away from those hot days because as we're recording this, it's just past the equinox in March. Getting to those lovely autumnal days or the cool mornings and warm afternoons.

David:

Very nice.

Perry:

But we're about to lose daylight saving, which is a bit of a nuisance. I quite like the old daylight saving here and sit down later on an afternoon and have a glass of wine outside and contemplate the universe and get a couple of little bit of extra minutes.
But, well, all things must pass, David. We must move on.

David:

Yes, I'm finding that it's a lot darker in the morning again when I wake up now.

Perry:

Oh, yes. Yes, it turns very, very, very quickly. But we're also turning into the cooler weather. So more time for sitting inside by the fire, reading with a glass of whiskey or whatever it is that you would like to abide by.

David:

Sounds like a good plan.

Perry:

Or a cup of tea or staying inside and watching things on the multitudinous streaming services, which seem to be getting...

David:

Too much, there's too much.

Perry:

Well, there is too much and there seems to be getting more and more streaming services turning up all the time. So we have to be a little bit careful about what we subscribe to, because it could end up costing us a bit of money, if we're not terribly careful.

David:

There's got to be some sort of rationalization of all that happening. Surely in five years, I reckon there will be a lot fewer streaming services.

Perry:

Well, that's in five years, but you're going to end up paying quite a shedload of money in the period leading up to that.

David:

You just have to pick and choose, that's all.

Perry:

I think it's best... I think it's far better for people to just basically watch a streaming service for a while and then drop it and then come back again at a later date. Wait until there's a deal and grab the deal and go on to that. They're always trying to get new subscribers and they're always offering deals all over the place. So make use of them. It's like everything else. I mean, it's a commercial arrangement. You're not being nasty about it. Purely and simply is you're trying to save yourself a bit of money and get the best value for your dollar, which we all need these days, David.

Discussion

David:

I think that's true. Shall we get going? Are we going to explain what we're going to be doing?

Perry:

Yeah, okay. You can do that.

David:

Well, we have a cunning plan. Our cunning plan is that each episode we'll choose a book which we've both read and a film that we've both seen and we'll discuss those, which is what we're about to do. And we'll do that each episode and see how we go that way. Just get a bit of back and forth. And at the end of the episode, we might discuss a few of the things we've been recently reading and which we've been watching as well.

Never Let Me Go (film and novel)

David:

So our choice for this time around, we'll start with the film, is the film *Never Let Me Go*, which is based on the 2005 novel by Kazuo Ishiguro, which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize.

The film was made in 2010. The director was Marco Romanek, who among other things directed *One Hour Photo* with Robin Williams, if you remember that.

Perry:

Oh yeah, okay.

David:

He also directed the TV series, which I was very fond of and I talked about on the first season of our podcast, the series *Tales from the Loop*, which I thought was fabulous. And the screenplay was... see, I've been doing research here, Perry.

Perry:

Smart man.

David:

The screenplay was by Alex Garland, who later wrote and directed *Ex Machina*, the film which we both watched and enjoyed.

Perry:

Yes. And he also did an interesting film, last year's *Civil War*, which we didn't actually get to talk about because we weren't doing episodes at that time, but certainly one that people should have a look at.

David:

That's interesting. We'll talk about the cast later on and how they performed. So I'll just give a summary of the book and the film, I suppose.

So the book is a fantastic, really good book. It's basically an alternate history story, I suppose. The basic premise is that a radical breakthrough in organ donation occurred in the 1950s, leading to great improvement in human health.

At the start of the story, we are introduced to Kathy H., a young woman who describes herself as a carer, and in the film we see her watching someone being wheeled into an operating theatre, about to be operated on. And as she stands there she reflects back on her life. We have a flashback to her childhood at a school called Hailsham.

At school she makes friends with two other children, a girl called Ruth and a boy named Tommy, who is an awkward child, often made fun of by other children.

But while they're still at school, if you remember the premise of the story, while they're at school, a new teacher (against the rules, and for which she eventually gets sacked), actually makes clear to them that the fate of all the children at Hailsham is to grow up to be organ donors. They will never have full adult lives, they'll never marry, they'll never have jobs, never have children. And that's the

essential tragedy of the story, and I guess you have to call it this moral horror.

To bring home the inhumanity of this, the author sets up this love triangle between these three kids at school as they grow into adulthood. So at school, Kathy falls in love with this boy Tommy, but Ruth somehow becomes more involved with him and they begin a relationship in their teenage years.

I won't say a lot more about it, but other than say that the story and the film are both heartbreaking. It's not often that a novel brings me to tears, but this one certainly did, and I was in tears at the end of the movie too.

So, yeah, it's a very, very sad story and it has this background of this—moral horror is all I can call it—the idea of you actually raise children in order to be organ donors.

So that's, yeah, I just thought it was wonderful.

So what do you think, Perry, of both the book and the film?

Perry:

I agree. I think that one of the major things that I was impressed by with this particular story, novel and film is the point of view that is taken.

I was actually talking to a friend of the podcast, Chong, the other day about this, mentioning this, and I was talking about how I was impressed by the fact that you actually don't get any explanation, nor any major discussion about the morality or ethics of what it is they are doing. It's just, it's part of the world.

So as you said, you know, the breakthrough comes through in the 1950s. I think the film first starts somewhere around the 70s?

David:

Yes, yes, yes, quite a bit later.

Perry:

Sometime in the 1970s. So 20 or 30 years later. So these young kids basically start in school. When you first come across them, they're basically in their teenage years, so, you know, mid teens.

There's no discussion amongst them, nor between them and their teachers, nor with anybody else, but you don't really see many other people. The only people that ever turn up at the school are those delivering things or doing a bit of work.

And they are very reticent to talk to the children. They just say, hello, yes, okay, bye. And that's it. They're gone. They don't want to engage with them at all. It's almost as if, we know you're here, we know you're a necessity in terms of us being able to live longer and longer lives, because they do actually tell you in the film that life expectancy has now moved past 100 fairly quickly because of these simplified organ donations. But the fact that there is no big discussion about why this is actually taking place actually gives it, it leaves it down to the viewer or the reader to be able to come to their own conclusions about this. And in many ways that actually adds to that sense of, as you say, moral horror, that this sense of impending doom that you know is hanging over these young characters.

David:

These kids who you have come to like, they're very engaging characters.

Perry:

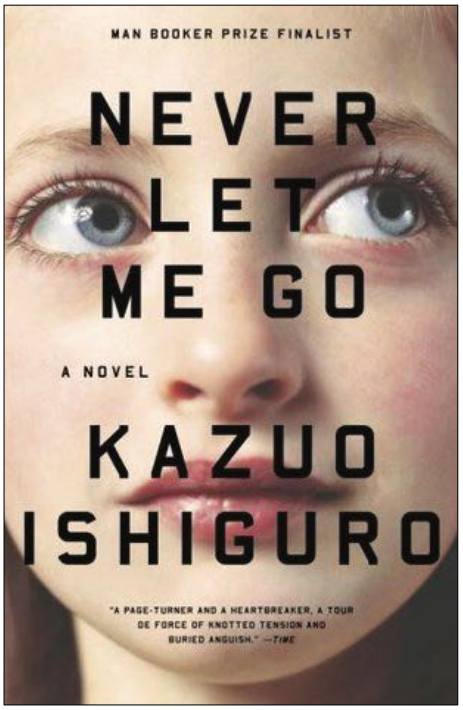
They're fully developed human beings, but they just happen to be clones and grown in a lab. And their life expectancy is like 24, 25, because by then they would have made enough donations to go to... And I thought this was very interesting. The term they use is *completion*. That's a sanitized version of, you know you're going to die because they're going to take so many organs. Like when they get down the stage where the liver goes, well, or your heart or your lungs, you've completed.

Yeah, it's interesting.

David:

Yeah, you're right. It's a good point about the way that the—what would we would say—"normal" adults respond to these kids. And it's interesting between the book and the film, because in the book you get the sense of that, but in the film you actually *see* their responses.

In the book I remember in particular when Madame comes—she's the lady who collects their artworks for this gallery that she supposedly has—in the book it's quite clear that she's actually frightened of the children when she first arrives as they gather at the doorway. You see this in the film, and she's *hesitant* in the film, but in the book it seems clear that she's actually quite *frightened* of them. She feels the need to step back from them a bit.



So you're right. And I guess it's just that being the in-built guilt that these people have, knowing what they're doing. But nevertheless, they're having to accept it because that's the way society is now. So that's a good point.

Perry:

There's a certain difference between the book and the film there as well regarding this whole idea of Madame turning up. Now the whole idea is that the children are encouraged, not so much forced but very heavily encouraged to produce a series of art. Whatever the art is, it could be sculpture, paintings, drawings, whatever. And then that these are presented to Madame when she turns up. And she chooses what she considers to be the best of them from the children and takes them away to

her “gallery”.

Now there's a lot of discussion in the book and in the film as to what the reason behind the gallery is. And there's a whole reason why the author has taken a lot of pains in the book to actually build that up.

Now I've got to tell you, I read the first 120 pages and I'm thinking, God, this book's slow. Oh, is it ever going to get anywhere? It's not really… then they move, because the story is told in three separate parts. It's told first when the kids are at school in Hailsham. So that's in their teenage years. At the age of 18, they graduate from that and they go to live in a community of other donors that are scattered around the country and they live there on their own. They can do pretty much whatever they like, but they have to be available if they get notified that it's time for a donation. They've got to be there and ready to donate.

And some of them basically decide that they are going to become carers, as Kathy does, decides that she wants to get out of that situation because basically there's been a strong relationship developed between Ruth and Tommy. And she feels as though she's the third wheel and wants to leave because it's becoming a bit distressing.

So she goes off and becomes a carer for some of the donors. So she looks after the donors for quite some period of time. And it's not until really quite late in the piece that she gets a notification that she has a donation [of her own] coming up.

So it's told in these three separate parts, which spreads it out. It's only at the very last part that you come to an understanding of why the writer, right at the very beginning, was putting so much emphasis on all this artwork. [When Tommy and Kathy speak to Miss Emily, who had been the school headmistress at Hailsham]. What Miss Emily says is that “we were basically trying to work out if you had a soul”.

David:

In the book it’s a bit clearer that they were actually trying to demonstrate to the public at large that these children did have souls, that they were truly human.

Perry:

So that there's a slight difference between the two. I thought that—it was odd. I read the book and as I said, I thought the first 120 pages were really slow. And when I got to the end of it, I realized what he was doing and he was setting all these things up so that makes a lot more sense. In the film, that's skipped over that reasonably quickly, and I don't really think there's much explanation for why that happens. It comes clearer at the end.

But I'm just wondering, I just wonder whether if you watch the film without having read the book, whether you would have the full picture. And I got a feeling you may not because we're talking about a film that's 100 minutes long for a book that's 250 pages. I mean, in today's world, 250 pages is a shortish book, but it's the perfect size for what this needs to be. You wouldn't want to have any more in there because then it'd just be padding really and it just wouldn't work. So it's really good that Ishiguro kept it down to that size.

I thought that the film could possibly have been a little bit longer, but maybe it could have got another 20 minutes or so. But I don't know. It's hard to tell. You have to look at what you've got. And if we do that, I look at it and I think maybe just a little bit longer in that first section with a little bit more explanation about what was going on, might have been good. But you can't have everything and that's just the way that it goes.

David:

I suppose there's always a question of how much you spoon-feed the film audience. And in fact I thought they did it *too* much. Just because right at the very start, you get that, I think it's just a piece of text on the screen, isn't it, about the breakthrough in medical technology. But you don't get that in the book.

In the book, you get this slow, slowly dawning horror of what's actually going on here. You've got these kids who are just seemingly a normal boarding school kind of life. But there's this underlying thing of where are these kids' parents? Why do they never go home to visit their parents? Why do their parents never visit them? Things like that. So it slowly dawns on you through that.

And then there's that section in the book and in the film where Miss Lucy comes in and actually tells them what their future actually is. And she says that they've been told, but not really told. And she actually makes it really clear to them, which it hasn't been before, exactly what lies in front of them.

It does make you wonder in both film and book, why do these children or why do these clones not actually try to escape their fate? Is there some kind of pre-programming in them that just makes it so they don't try to fly flee to another country or anything like that? There's never any sense that there's an escape from their fate, except this business towards the end—we're going to give away spoilers here—of the young people who feel they're deeply in love with each other. They've heard this rumour that there's a way of getting, not an escape, but a deferral. They don't have to start their donations immediately, but they have maybe two or three years where these two people that love each other can be together and actually experience their love. And that's only a rumour, but that's the story that they try to follow.

It's Kathy and Tommy, because Kathy's been in love with Tommy all her life since childhood, but Ruth [deliberately] stepped in between.

I think it's interesting too, in the film, Ruth explains to *both* of them that she deliberately has come between the two of them. That happens in the film, but I

think in the book she actually just tells Kathy that, towards the end of Ruth's life. You know, without Tommy being present at the time. I think, I can't remember now.

Perry:

I think you might well be right.

I came across a recent interview with Ishiguro where he's asked this question, or he starts talking about the fact that he has been thinking about why didn't the children run away. And I got the impression that it almost hadn't occurred to him while he was writing the book, that the children were well committed to their fate, if you like. They were just, they were brought up this way, this is the way they were going to stay. He basically thought his way through this afterwards, and he's come to the conclusion that it's very hard for people to break away from a whole community or a whole lifestyle, in the same way that it's a bit like people that end up in cults, why don't they run away? Well, some do, but it's not, you know, it's very, very difficult to do. You've got to break away from all of your conditioning for the whole of your life. You've got to leave everybody that you know, and you have to go to an outside world that you know nothing about at all. And so you have no way, you have no means of making any money. You don't know anybody. You don't know where to go. You don't know what to do. And so you stay because that's what you know, and you stay in that.

David:

You know what it's like. It's like slavery. Why didn't every slave pick up and leave their plantations in America, or take up arms and kill off their white overseers? I mean, some did, but the majority of people born into slavery pretty much accepted their fate, I would say.

Perry:

Well, I guess in that instance, though, that there was a fairly overriding indicator that you were, especially in the American South, you were a slave if you were out wandering around. The colour of your skin gave things away a bit, whereas these children would just basically look lost because they look exactly like everybody else.

David:

Well, they look like everybody else *in the film*.

I did wonder in reading the book whether maybe they might—it was that scene where Madame comes in to the school and she's a bit, she's just a bit put off by them—I actually wondered whether they might look a little bit different, perhaps a little bit like Down syndrome children or something like that.

You never really got that impression?

Perry:

No, I hadn't picked that up at all. It is something that I hadn't considered nor picked up.

David:

It's a thought, though, isn't it?

Perry:

Yeah, yeah.

David:

And presumably there'd be some kind of legal situation where if one of the clones did try to escape, they'd be a legal, the whole legal system would be against them because that's their whole life has been given to them for this

purpose. And presumably the law would be, would be applied to them.

Perry:

Yes. Some of them do learn how to drive. And so there is a situation where they're going to have to be registered from that point of view. But there is a point where, when Miss Lucy tells the children about what their fate is that they're never going to travel to America, they're never going to go to Hollywood, they're never going to go anywhere.

And you get the impression that yes, you might be able to drive around, but you're never going to get a passport because we're not going to allow you out of the country.

David:

And you're never going to own five horses.

Perry:

No, you're never going to own five horses. But the other thing is that there's no indication that this is happening anywhere else in the world. It's purely [in Britain] and that gives that whole sense that it's all happening in a very, very enclosed environment where nobody can get in and nobody can get out. And so there is a big sense of doom in all of this. And I noticed—maybe I'm reading too much into this—I thought that in the early parts of the film, the colors were very muted. They're all very sort of beige-y. There's no bright colors for the kids. The uniforms are beige-y, normal looking.

David:

In fact, that whole school feels like it's in the 50s, doesn't it?

Perry:

Yeah, it does. It really feels like it's very old. The uniforms, the building, it just feels, it doesn't feel like the 70s or the 80s. The desks they sit at, the way they have to basically sit and have the assembly in the morning, teacher up on the stage, basically talking. Yep, it reminds me very much of my time back in the 60s.

David:

Indeed, there's no technology. They don't have mobile phones, obviously, and things like that. There's no computers.

And the other thing which is a real hit to the heart is that business where they have the sale and they've got a bumper crop of things that are brought in. So they have this sale there. They collect these tokens which allow them to buy things at this sale, which in fact is where Kathy gets her… Tommy buys Kathy the tape of [the song] "Never Let Me Go," which she holds onto as a precious thing.

But all this stuff that's brought in for the kids to sell, it's just obviously rubbish. It's discarded dolls with broken, without arms. It's just total crap.

Perry:

I didn't get that impression in the book, but in the film it's bleedingly obvious because you see it and there it is. You're looking at it and you're looking around and you go, "This stuff's all crap." It's like it's cast off from somebody else, from an op shop, which the op shop has chucked out as well.

David:

Which tells you what society thinks of these kids, really, doesn't it?

Perry:

That's right. They're over there. We know you're a necessity, but we do not want to know about you. And so it's a very, very interesting approach. I really like, as I said earlier, I like the way that the point of view is taken from within the society, not outside looking in, but inside… And not even looking out. It's just completely internal. And that builds up the tension and builds up the emotions of it.

This is… Look, I think this is certainly a film that people should see. It's available on Disney, so it's available on streaming services. Interesting to note that Garland is a friend of Ishiguro, and I was reading a bit about this, and that he actually had read the book in manuscript and had said, "Oh, I want to make a film of this." Because Garland does, you know—like *Ex Machina* that we saw and talked about, and *Civil War*, which is set in a future US—Well, he's one of these script writers who realises that we basically live in a science fictional world, and you're going to have science fictional aspects in it. And while Ishiguro would have written this as a straight literary work, it's a science fiction novel as well.

David:

Oh, it is, yeah.

Perry:

And so Garland has picked up on this and started writing the… I think they basically had a script before the book even was published.

David:

Right? That's interesting.

Before we leave the topic, I think we've had a good discussion about it, but before we leave the topic, we should actually talk about the film and the cast, I thought. Because I thought that all the acting was very good. So I'll just briefly go through the cast.

So Carey Mulligan plays the adult Kathy, and apparently she wanted that part. She was a fan of the book, and she desperately wanted to play that particular part. She does it very well. She plays it with great empathy, and she portrays this character's loneliness—because she's the one who's fallen in love with Tommy,

and her love has been frustrated, and eventually it is cut short at the end.

Keira Knightley plays the role of the adult Ruth, and I thought it was really interesting because she's played so many parts where she's this great beauty. But in this film, both her character and her appearance is really quite unattractive. Wouldn't you say? She really doesn't look attractive in this film at all.

Perry:

No, they've made her up to look very, very plain.

David:

Almost a little bit ugly, which is really interesting. But a testament to her acting, too, I think.

And Andrew Garfield plays the adult Tommy, who's this very gauche, awkward young man. His limbs are all over the place.

Perry:

Yep, that's good. Look, it's a fantastic cast. And you think of those three who've gone on to do great things. And this was made in 2010. So, yeah. The guys that did the casting have done it very, very well with this one, I reckon.

David:

And all the children, the child actors are good, too, of course.

One last thing I want to say is that in the film, the last few words that Kathy speaks seem to me to let the tension down a bit. She suggests that her life is not all that different from the life of ordinary people. Everyone is going to have to die anyway. But that doesn't happen in the book. She doesn't say those words at the end of the book.

Perry:

Do you think that's a bit of a sop put in by the director and script writer? We know this is a really tough concept and you don't really want to spend too long thinking about it. So, maybe it will just, you know...

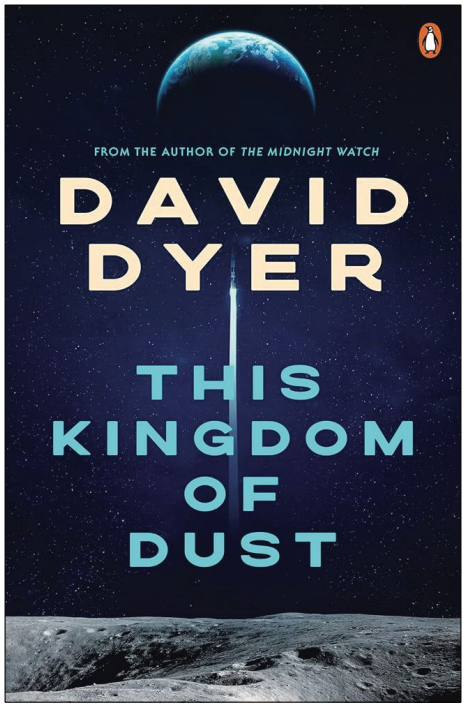
David:

It eases you off at the end rather than such a bleak ending. Anyway, that's...

Perry:

It is a bleak ending. It's an emotional film, but it's certainly one that's worthwhile for people to watch. I think it's a good thing to do.

This Kingdom of Dust by David Dyer



Perry:

Okay, so we move on to our book discussion for this episode. And the book we're talking about is *This Kingdom of Dust* by Australian author David Dyer.

Now, I didn't know much about Dyer at all before I read this book. This is only his second.
The first book that he wrote was something called *The Midnight Watch* in 2016, which tells the story of...

David:

I have a copy. I haven't read it yet.

Perry:

Yeah, well, I actually will go and read it after having read *This Kingdom of Dust*, but we'll get to that. *The Midnight Watch*, I believe, deals with the ship that went past the *Titanic* and ignored the SOS or didn't hear it or something or other, and may well have helped save a lot more lives. Don't know. Anyway, on the basis of this novel, I think he's a very interesting writer, and certainly somebody that we should be watching.

So anyway, let's get into this particular book.

Now, in the book it's a hot day in July 1969, in Houston, Texas, and Joan Aldrin, that's Buzz Aldrin's wife, is feeling trapped. She's watching the press and visitors coming around her home while they're all waiting for news of Apollo 11, which is now basically in orbit around the moon, and is about to take her husband, Buzz, down to the lunar surface.

Standing nearby and watching her and watching everybody else is this guy who calls himself Aquarius. Strange name, and we'll maybe talk about that a little bit later. Now, he's a novelist who's in Texas on assignment from *Life magazine* to write about the moon landing. He's supposed to be concentrating on the nuts and bolts of the mission, you know, the spacecraft, the launch, the technology, the complex orbital maneuvers, all that kind of stuff. But he's become rather fixated on Joan, the woman that he sees in the house.

To him, machines are treacherous, and as he says, "the killers of nature and destroyers of the human spirit." So he'd much rather write about Joan than he would write about the machines, but that's what his job is, so he's got to do it.

Now, up in lunar orbit, Neil and Buzz and their lunar lander are separated from the command module, containing their colleague and friend, Mike, and have begun their powered descent down to the lunar surface. Now, unless you're an Apollo mission aficionado, as basically I think you and I are, David, most people would have probably forgotten that this descent wasn't all clear sailing at the beginning. I mean, it was portrayed later on as, "Oh, yes, everything went down, everything went hunky-dory."

Basically, most of the landing or the landing approach was done automatically. But as they were getting close, as Armstrong and Aldrin were getting close to the lunar surface, Armstrong realized that where they were due to land was a very,

very rocky area, and there was a chance that they could land on something, tip over, and that would be the end of it. So he took control of the landing and was moving it around and trying to find a better spot to be able to come into land.

And I think there's a line somewhere along the lines of, in one of the recordings, after Armstrong says,"Houston, this is Tranquillity Base. The Eagle has landed."

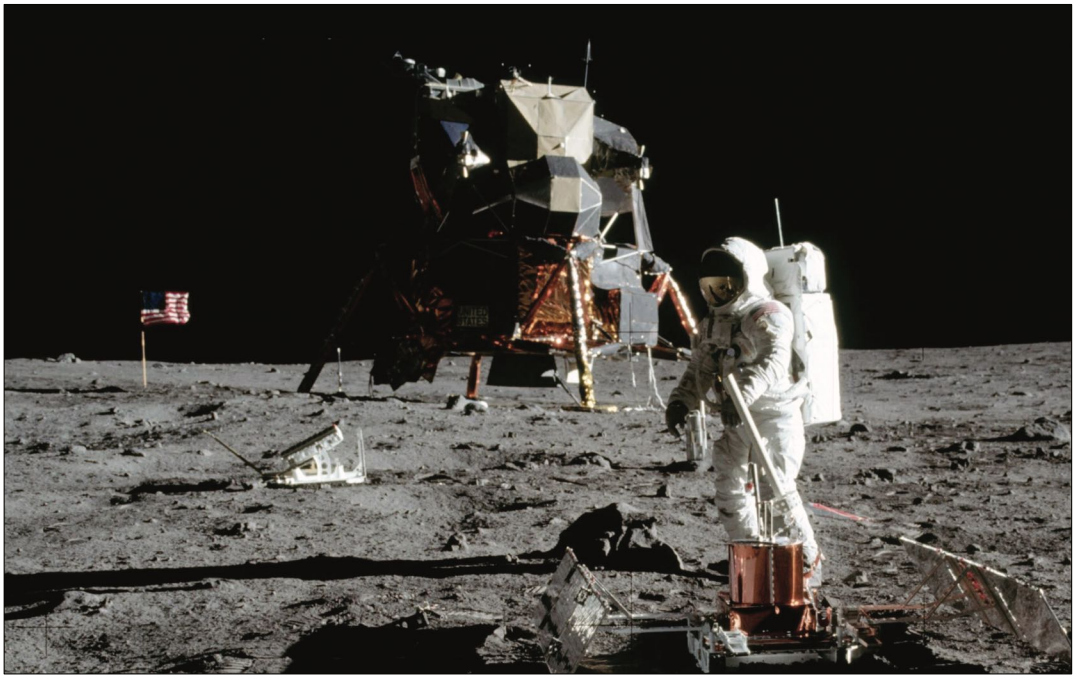
"Oh, thank you, Eagle. Some of the guys down here were turning blue." They were turning blue because they were holding their breath because basically he was down to about 30 seconds worth of fuel left.

Okay, so they do land. It's all successful. It's successful in that reality and it's also successful in this particular book. And while they're there, and basically the book's moving backwards and forwards between what's happening on the moon, what's happening down in Houston, Aquarius is trying to ingratiate himself with Joan and to get more information from her so that he can end up writing it up.

Back on the moon, the successes continue. Armstrong and Aldrin exit the lunar module as they did. First man on the moon, great speech, though he left one particular word out, but that's okay. Let's just say that he fluffed that a little bit, but he did pretty well and gets down. They collect the rocks. They get everything done. Everything's fine. They get back into the lunar module that's sitting on the surface and they have a bit of a rest. Now the idea is now that they're trying to line up for the launch to leave the moon and take off.

In this scenario, nothing happens. The lunar module does not launch. It gets stuck and stays there. This is where we have almost another alternate timeline or alternate history. In the film that we were just talking about, we were talking about a slightly adjusted form of reality and a different timeline. Same thing that we have here.

So what we have is everything works perfectly well up to the point where they push the button to say, "Right, okay, we're going to launch" and nothing happens. Now there's a lot of detail given in this particular book about the mechanism that the lunar module would actually use to be able to take off from the moon. And that's vitally important because that's where the problem lies. Basically, the astronauts now try to work out what's going on, why it hasn't started. There's a



David Dyer

couple of little things that have gone wrong with the lunar module leading up to the landing, but they're not sure whether that's involved in anything.

So what you end up getting is they're going through the whole process. You get it almost like a lunar version of *The Martian*, the film that was made featuring Matt Damon in the lead role. Now in that film, the recovery of the stranded astronaut was successful. And spoilers here, in this one, they aren't getting out. They find out that one of the fuel tanks has been ruptured and allowed all the precious component of the reaction systems, one of the propellants, to escape. And no matter what they attempt to try and do, there's no hope of rescue or recovery. They cannot get the lunar module to launch and make a rendezvous with the command module that's up in orbit.

So we then get a situation of, "So what does NASA do in this situation?" What planning have they done for this? This possible eventuality. We do know in our world that it's come out that Richard Nixon had two speeches that he'd been written for him. One for them when he rang them up and said, "Yep, okay, you've done a fantastic job." Or when they've come back, "You've done a wonderful thing." And the other one was if they didn't make it back. So the contingencies were made from that perspective.

So you would have to think that the NASA made contingencies for just this situation. What do you do for these two poor guys who are going to be stuck on the moon's surface and are going to die? They're going to die from lack of oxygen. So if you get carbon dioxide poisoning. I've done a bit of reading about this since, I've gone through the scenario. It's not really very, very nice. It's not a very easy death. It's a rather slow death. You're better off basically going from lack of oxygen. And the two of those are quite different scenarios.

David:

It's an important plot point, isn't it?

Perry:

It's a very big plot point here about that whole thing. Now, we've given spoilers a bit about that. I'm actually not going to give any [more] spoilers. You can if you want to.

David:

I'm not going to give any spoilers.

Perry:

All I'm going to say is that they start wondering, people back on Earth and also up there, up on the moon, you start wondering whether NASA has provided them with suicide pills so that they can basically take these pills and just basically go to sleep and just not wake up, which you would think would be pretty much what NASA would have done.

The difficulty that you've got in this instance is that you've got two very different men up in the lunar module. Armstrong, although he's the clean-cut American hero, he's not religious at all. Now, he doesn't really come out and say that he's an atheist. I don't think. But that's really the impression you get. He's not putting his faith in any God or any external agency at all. He is only relying on himself and

the machine that he's got with him.

Aldrin, on the other hand, is very religious and has actually basically gives himself communion when he first gets to the moon surface. And his problem is...

David:

No suicide.

Perry:

His religion does not allow him to commit suicide. So how is this dilemma going to be solved? Armstrong's fine. Well, Armstrong's just stoic. He's just going to say, "Well, I'm not going to die in agony. I'm going to take this pill and I'm going to be fine." Though he doesn't state that out loud, but you know that's what he's thinking. Aldrin, on the other hand, is completely different. And so a solution has to be found for Aldrin to fit with his religion.

And I can tell you it is, and the solution is found and it is very, very interesting.

David:

Very clever, yeah. It's really a novel—even though it's set on the Moon—it's really a novel of character, isn't it? It's about these characters. It's interesting actually that you use their surnames, which the author never does in this book. It's just Buzz and Neil and Mike. And a lot of it is this focus on the wives, or certainly one particular wife, Buzz's wife, Joan, and Aquarius, as you say, who's trying to get the basis of a story he can write by knowing her much better. And she has a very important part to play.

And I believe this is all quite accurate. The wives always had this what they call a squawk box, which allowed them to listen to what was going on between Houston and the astronauts on the surface, or in orbit or whatever they were. But when something starts to go wrong, NASA cuts the feed to the squawk box, it goes silent. And so the wives are left in limbo. They don't know what's going on.

In the book, Joan reacts very strongly against this and is going to do something about it. Because she has, as you say, she has a mission, knowing Buzz, being the kind of person he is. She has a mission of what she needs to get across to him. And that's a whole really interesting subplot there.

So a lot of it is this on the earth study by Aquarius, who's quite an annoying character. I think he's a really annoying person and not a very nice character.

So it's a really interesting book.

Perry:

I need to talk a bit about Aquarius though. Because he's based very heavily on Norman Mailer. Norman Mailer was in exactly this boat. He was down there in Texas writing. He'd been given a commission to write about Apollo 11. And he actually did come up with a book called, well, it's called *About a Fire on the Moon* or *A Fire on the Moon*. Which is Mailer's reflection of the Apollo moon landing told from Mailer's point of view.

Now we have to remember that Mailer wrote his first, his debut novel published in 1948, *The Naked and the Dead*. It was considered to be one of the all-time great war novels that came out of the Second World War. And Mailer was likened to Hemingway in terms of his writing approach. And I think in the book Aquarius keeps on saying that he's the best American writer since Hemingway. And he basically tries to push that whole macho literary persona forward. This is who I am. I'm the great American novelist. I've had six, eight wives, I've got ten

kids, whatever. So he's hyper-masculine all the way right through.

David:

In his own telling.

Perry:

In his own telling. So that's the way he is in his own mind. But Joan handles him incredibly well. She realises exactly who he is because she's seen that type before. Because she's dealt with these macho guys that are flying jets…

David:

People with the right stuff.

Perry:

..with all the right stuff. These guys are the elite of the elite. They're the top, you know, 1% of the 1%. And she knows about all this hyper-masculinity. And she knows how to handle him. And she basically just pretty much manipulates him around to getting what she wants. He gets what he wants as well. But she gets what she wants out of him. And he acts as a sounding board.

But Mailer was part of that new journalism style, which is reporting using literary techniques and told from the point of view of the reporter itself. And so the other ones [the exponents] of that were writers such as Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, Hunter S. Thompson and Joan Didion, mostly males, you'll understand. And Mailer was one of those exponents.

He, from all reports, he was a bit of a shit. He was not really a very nice person to be around. He's very, very egotistical, thought very highly of himself. And he was quite happy to tell you how good he was and always pushing himself forward. And he got, he was being offered a huge amount of money to write this, write this report. And he does actually get there.

Now, my query, which I wanted to ask you about this, why does he call himself Aquarius? I've got an idea.

David:

Well, I don't know, but the actual fact is, Norman Mailer *did* call himself Aquarius. There's an Author's Note at the back [of the book].

Perry:

Now you see Aquarius is the astrological sign, the water bearer. Now, I could only assume that if he only used Aquarius while he was writing about the Moon, maybe he was writing about it because the Moon really is a kingdom of dust and only dust, whereas he's based on the Earth where there's the water. Maybe I'm stretching things too far.

David:

But it's interesting that the author hasn't made up that name. It actually was one that Mailer called himself.

Perry:

That's right. You get that and you think, oh, that's a bit odd. And when you get to that point, you think, hang on. And at the start, I didn't read the author's piece at the end. So you shouldn't do that. Absolutely don't do that.

David:

Don't do that [until] you finish the book.

Perry:

When you finish the book. Don't do it beforehand. And I was picking up that it was Norman Mailer and I thought it could only be him. And I *thought* that he'd written a book about it. I haven't read this book, Mailer's book about Apollo 11.

David:

I have, but it's a long time ago.

Perry:

But he's a very strong and very interesting character on Earth. And the two characters, in fact, all three characters up around in the lunar region are all very strong characters in their own right as well. So yes…

David:

Yeah, because Mike has an important part to play too, doesn't he?

Perry:

He does. He has a very important part to play. Refusing to follow NASA orders on a couple of occasions. And wanting to do his best that he possibly can to help his mates down on the lunar surface.

I was very impressed with this. I was, I know you chose it. You thought that it had a lot of interesting things to say. And I think it does. I think it says a lot about how we deal with those deaths that happen in the large, out in the open for all the world to see.

So you think about Apollo 13. That was one. We honestly thought those guys were going to die. And there's those kids that were caught in that Thai cave. We thought they were going to die. There was the Beaconsfield miners that were stuck down there for like weeks. And you thought they were going to die. You get this stuff being pounded at you all the time. This would have been a situation like Apollo 13 where it just would have flooded the whole of the news broadcasts. And suddenly there's everybody being pounded with this idea of this death happening to you right in the face. The modern world doesn't talk about death very much at all. As much as, well, [it] probably does now with so many conflicts around. But on an individual basis, we don't really talk about that as much as maybe we should.

So this was, yeah, this is very, very interesting.

David:

Very interesting read. What did you think of the Epilogue?

Perry:

A bit tacked on, I thought.

David:

I thought it was tacked on and I thought he didn't have the courage of his convictions. I don't think it needed to be there.

Perry:

Yeah, I didn't think it needed to be there, but I don't know. I might have to go back and read that last little, probably the last 30, 40 pages again. Just have a bit more of a think about it.

But look, from this, I would have to basically come out and say that I'll be going out and looking for his other book now to find that one. I think that tells as much as we need to say about this particular book that we're going to go back and

check out this [other title]. I'm going to keep up with this bloke now because he's writing some interesting stuff.

...Now we'll get back to the genre again to work out whether it's a literary... I look on it as being an alternate history. I look on it as being, if you want to use that quasi-term that maybe we shouldn't really use, because it's a bit wimpy, which would be "genre adjacent". But it is a form of, this is a reality...

David:

Yeah, that's right. Everybody looking at it would say, oh, it's just science fiction. But it's not, it's actually based solidly in reality.

Perry:

Absolutely. It's just a little twist. And this might well have happened. Really, when you get back and you start thinking about it and you think, you know, the number of single points of failure that were associated on that, a Saturn V rocket and the whole mission to the Moon. You look at that now and you just shake your head and you go, how the hell did they do it? How do they get there without it, without people dying?

I mean, I know people died in the Apollo program. You know, they had the Apollo 1 fire. You did have a number of Russian cosmonauts that died. Though the Russians kept that fairly secret until that came out later on. But I mean, these are the types of things that happen when you're pushing the envelope and getting right out there and trying to do things that theoretically in 1969, you should not really have been able to do with the engineering and the computing power available to you at the time.

I mean, you remember, you remember going back, watching the Ron Howard version of *Apollo 13* and you're looking there at mission control and somebody says, oh, we've got to make a change here. Out come all the *slide rules*. They've got four, they got about eight or 10 guys all checking and they go, yes, yes, that's correct. Yep, I agree, I agree. And it's just astounding stuff. And you know, you look at this and you think, oh my God. Not even a HP calculator at that stage, which came in in the early 70s. There was nothing. And yes, they had computers, but they'd punch everything in and everything had to work. And if it didn't work 100%, they were stuffed.

And in this instance, they *are* stuffed.

But it's certainly an interesting book and one that I would recommend.

David:

Yeah, I think we'd heartily recommend it to anyone to read. Certainly anyone who has an interest in science fiction, even though we've just agreed this isn't science fiction, they should read it.

Perry:

Or in the Apollo space program. If you got any interest in the Apollo space program, and why wouldn't you have? Because I mean, I was not quite fourteen when that happened. So a fairly major time, early teens, you're about a year or two older. But you and I remember this vividly, absolutely vividly.

David:

I had a huge map of the moon on my bedroom wall.

Perry:

Oh yeah, I had a big scrapbook of all the stuff I was cutting out of the papers, all

this sort of stuff. So this is a major part of our life and a major event in our lives. And it's worthwhile going back and having a look at it again.

But if you have any interest at all in any of those parts of the 1960s. Because there's the 60s that comes into it as well. The role of women is really heavily emphasised in this book. You're the wife. You do what a wife does.

David:

Particularly what a NASA wife does.

Perry:

Yeah, you don't have your own life. You're there to make cups of tea and support. Yes, I'm very happy for my husband. I'll do everything. There's no feminist rewrite of this particular history here. And people might say, "Well, maybe it should have."

David:

But at the same time, Joan is a very powerful character.

Perry:

Very. She is actually, the more I think about it, that she is the most powerful character in the whole of the book. She basically, while she doesn't go out of her way to wrap Aquarius around her finger, she gets from him what she needs. And then she's able to do what she believes is absolutely essential for her husband's soul. And she achieves it. And I think that's a wonderful piece of work. So I think he's handled her very, very well.

David:

So just simply as a piece of literature, as a series of character studies. It's well worth reading just for that alone.

Perry:

Good. So we'll keep an eye on him, which is great.

All right. Okay. I think we're finished.

David:

We just want to have a brief chat about some things we've been reading.

Perry:

Yes. So just a couple of things that you'd like to mention that you've either read or seen recently, David.

What We've Been Reading and Watching Recently

Julia by Sandra Newman

David:

I've actually just finished reading a book last night, but which I wouldn't like to talk about. I think I'd rather wait for it to sink into my mind a bit and let me think about it a bit more, which was *Julia* [by Sandra Newman], which is basically another take on George Orwell's *1984* from the point of view of the woman, Julia. But anyway, I won't talk any more about that because as I say it needs to sit in the brain a bit more.

Intermezzo by Sally Rooney

David:

No, the best book I've read so far this year is *Intermezzo* by Sally Rooney. She wrote a book called—well, she's written several books—I first got to know her by reading her book *Normal People*, which I thought was excellent.

I think Sally Rooney's focus is, she seems to specialize, in the two books I've read, in these intense personal dramas between fairly ordinary characters. And so that's the situation here.

We've got two brothers, Peter and Ivan, who live in Dublin. And it's about really about their strained relationship with each other and with women. I won't do any detailed description, but it's a really interesting study of these characters and their relationship with women. The two brothers are separated in years by quite a lot. I think Peter's about 10 years older than Ivan. Maybe a little more. And so, yeah, I won't describe the book in any detail, but I really enjoyed it.

It's very intense and it's quite often emotionally taxing. I actually had to take breaks from it from time to time to say now I'm going to put this down for a bit.

It's like that scene in the TV series *Friends*, where Joey has to put the book in the freezer. What was the book? *Little Women*, of course, he has to put the book in the freezer because Beth's about to die.

There was a bit of a sense of that occasionally. So anyway, that was the best book I've read so far this year.

Dusk by Robbie Arnott

Perry:

OK, well, while it might not be the best book I've read so far this year, one of the interesting ones is the new book by another Australian author that we've covered on this podcast in the past, Robbie Arnott. And this is his latest novel called *Dusk*.

Arnott's now moved away from Text Publishing. Now, he's gone elsewhere and he has written a book. Well, most of the previous ones we could almost say were "genre adjacent". They used elements of the speculative fiction or the fantastic genre. This one also does, but not the fantastic genre. It actually uses a lot of memes and tropes from the Westerns.

So it's set in an indeterminate time. Let's say, I don't know, early 1900s, late 1800s, seems to me like it's Western Tasmania. The "Dusk" of the title is a puma, an Argentinian cat that has been introduced into Tasmania to kill the feral deer that had been introduced for hunting. And of course, the puma decides that the deer are a little bit too hard to take. So it goes after the sheep. Then the farmers

who are farming the sheep decide they don't want the pumas anymore. So they start killing the pumas off until there's one left. And this is the big old matriarch of the pumas.

And it's the story of how a set of twins, brother and sister, come together with somebody else or two other people actually in different times to try and track down this puma and kill it and get a big bounty. So it's got all of these different tropes from Westerns. Interesting, a very interesting novel.

I don't know whether he's progressing all that far because he doesn't seem to be going on very much. I think this one's marking time. He's still excellent in terms of his landscape descriptions. He's just absolutely wonderful. And he's fantastic on sibling love because he does that a lot. He's got a lot of brothers or brothers and sisters in his novels that he deals with the relationships with those.

But I need to think about these a bit more and I need to think about it a bit more in comparison with the other books that he has written. Because I'm going to be giving a talk to the Nova Mob about Robbie Arnott's novels coming up sometime in May or June. I'm not sure exactly which one. I think it might be May now that it got moved a bit. So we'll have a bit more information about that a bit later on. [Eds: This talk will actually take place in July 2025.]

But Arnott is certainly somebody, another Australian author that people should be reading.
And I think we've both liked the stuff that we've read previously. *Flames*, *Limberlost*, *The Rain Heron*. We've liked all of those three and this is another one along those lines. As I said, probably not as good as *Limberlost* and maybe not as good as *Rain Heron*, but it's good. It's up there. So it's worth having a look at.

David:

I will, I do have a copy of it.

Perry:

Yep, yep, get to it.

Conclave (directed by Edward Berger)

David:

As for films, so for the first time in probably 12, 13 years, I actually went to the cinema of my own volition. It's not quite true because I was taken to the cinema by my daughter and her family when we were in Sydney [last year]. But that wasn't a film worth talking about.

But I actually decided to go to the local cinema and see a movie. So I did that and that was *Conclave*...

Perry:

Good choice, too.

David:

...featuring Ralph Fiennes is the main character who's, I think, his role is the Dean of the Vatican. I'm not sure quite what that role normally entails. But what's happened is that the Pope, who's a pretty much a fairly liberal minded person like Pope Francis, has just died peacefully in his sleep. Then the issue is who is going to succeed him.

And of course, they have to have a conclave for this, which is where the title comes from, a conclave of all the Cardinals who will vote and decide. And it's

really just the story of this process of deciding who the new Pope is going to be.

So we've got this, this Pope who's just died, who's been a fairly liberal person who eased up on a number of strictures of the church. But one of the people who's quite likely to supplant him, and is definitely aiming to get the job, is another Cardinal who really is *much* more conservative and wants to put back all these strictures and so on. And so there's a tussle.

So the whole story is really just the tussle between all these different Cardinals. And in the background, there's some terrorist activity happening in Rome, including a couple of very startling moments in the film when the Ralph Fiennes character very much against his will feels he might be obliged to put his own name into the barrel to be chosen as the Pope. And the moment he does that, quite a shock happens.

So I really liked it very much. I thought Fiennes did a brilliant job of the character, a very conflicted person. And yeah, that's it, I very much enjoyed it.

Perry:

Yeah, I did as well. I find it interesting that the director, Berger, who's a German director, the previous film that he did was *All Quiet on the Western Front*. And so what you have [there] is these big wide vistas of battlefields and open spaces and men attacking each other. And here you come down to very enclosed areas because, am I right in thinking that it's all shot, all the scenes are inside the walls of the Vatican. There's nothing outside.

You might have some open spaces inside a cloister inside a building. But in general, it's all enclosed spaces. And there's some wonderful pieces of work here, you know, John Lithgow, Stanley Tucci doing some fantastic stuff and nice little twist at the end that I didn't pick.

David:

Yes, I didn't see it coming either.

Perry:

I didn't see it coming and we're not going to tell you, nope.

David:

It was nice that there's quite a bit of Italian spoken. It's obviously some Latin and quite a bit of English.
But there's quite a bit of Italian spoken without translation. I can't remember whether there were captions or not.

Perry:

Probably would have been.

David:

Yeah, but I'm used to seeing captions on films because I always have captions on at home [so maybe I didn't notice them here].

I actually survived pretty well with this in the cinema without the captions. I thought the dialogue was clear and easy enough to understand. The volume was loud enough. Trouble with the cinema is that the volume is always very loud, and it was here. So yeah, I followed it pretty well.

Perry:

Well, at least you can't complain you can't hear it. And this doesn't, you know, doesn't have those big massive sound effects that are going to blow you away and

think, oh, that's way too loud, I'm going to put my fingers in my ears. It is mainly a conversational, quiet conversational film.

Certainly worth seeing. It won the BAFTA for Best Picture. I actually thought it was better than *Anora* that won the Academy Award, but I can understand why *Anora* did win because I've seen that. Certainly one of the best films of 2024, whichever way you look at it, I think.

The Conversation

Perry:

The film that I want to talk about is from 1972, I think somewhere about 1972. So over 50 years old and a bit relevant recently because the lead actor in this particular film was Gene Hackman, who has recently died.

And the film I'm talking about is *The Conversation*, which was made by Francis Ford Coppola just after *Godfather* and was released in the same year as *Godfather Part II*. So he had a really big year that year.

The Conversation is a wonderful piece of work because it deals with the problem of monitoring people from a distance to record their conversations. So the main character [played by Hackman] is requested to record a conversation of two people who are walking around a square in a city, New York. And he basically does it with directional microphones and a couple of people walking around and one guy sitting still and one walking around. So they basically record all this, then he patches it all together.

When he hears it, plays it back, he realizes that he's giving it off to somebody to listen to, and he becomes obsessed with the fact that he thinks that the two characters are going to be murdered because this happened to him on a previous job sometime, some time ago. So he becomes obsessed with it and wonders whether he should really give it up or not.

I look on this as being a companion piece to a later film that Hackman made, *Enemy of the State* that he made with Will Smith. Again, surveillance style. But *The Conversation* is part of that early 1970s American paranoia genre of films that was around. *Three Days of the Condor*, *Parallax View*, *Manchurian Candidate*, all those sorts of film where there was something going on inside the organization, government organizations that you can see, referred probably now as the Deep State, but that's all crap. So we're not going to talk about that. But really that's part of that paranoia. That's where this is all comes from, I think.

But *The Conversation* is certainly one that people should see. And it's got an uncredited role by Robert Duval in it. And it's got an early role played by Harrison Ford.

David:

In my recollection, he's a villain in it.

Perry:

Yeah, he is. He's not a very nice character at all. He plays the off-sider to the guy that's commissioned the recording.

Certainly worth seeing. You'll get a lot out of it. 50 years old, but it still has a lot of relevance even now. And one of those ones I just really enjoyed watching.

David:

It's a long time since I saw it, I'm looking forward to seeing it again. But that scene at the end is just...

Perry:

No, don't give it away. Just astounding.

It's a simplistic character-driven film, but it's got some very, very interesting ideas as I said, that are still applicable in today's society. So well worth having a look at.

Windup

Perry:

All right, David, I think we're done for this particular episode. Yeah, so we'll wind it up and...

David:

It's been fun.

Perry:

Yeah, it has.

Next month, we're going to be doing pretty much what we did this time. But with a slight little twist to it. So we're not actually going to deal with one novel, David. We're going to be looking at two novellas.

We're going to look at an old one, and we're going to look at a new one. So the old one is *Typhoon* by Joseph Conrad, which dates from 1902. So that's 120 years old.

And the other one is *It Lasts Forever, and Then It's Over* by Ann De Marcan and recently won the Ursula K. Le Guin Fiction Prize. So we'll have a bit of a look at that one and see how that one goes.

And for the film, we are going to watch *Birdman* from 2014, directed by, hopefully I get this right, Alejandro I–‡rritu, Mexican, Spanish, and featuring Michael Keaton in the lead role. This film won the Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Original Screenplay at the 2015 Academy Awards. So when you pick up the Best Picture, Best Picture, Best Director, Best Screenplay, you got a big solid film that you really need to see.

And I've actually never seen this.

David:

Oh, I have. So yes, you'll enjoy it.

Perry:

Oh, you have watched it. I haven't seen it yet, to my chagrin. This [came out] at a time when my kids were a bit younger and I wasn't going to the cinema. And if I was, I was going to see Pixar films and films with the children, rather than going to see stuff that I might have necessarily wanted to watch.

But I'm looking forward to catching up with this one in the next month and having a look.
And we shall discuss it next time we meet in about a month, David.

David:

In about a month. All right. So we'll see you then. Thank you very much.

Perry:

Thank you. See you then.