Two Chairs In Print

Issue 6
Exhausting the Realm of the Possible

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Colophon

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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the members of the Wurundjeri Willum Clan and the Kulin Nation as the Traditional Owners of the land on which this publication is produced in Mill Park and Hawthorn, Victoria, and we pay our respects to their Elders, past, present and emerging.

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Transcript Episode 6 Season 2

Introduction

Perry:

Hello, and welcome to this sixth episode of the second season of this little podcast we call Two Chairs Talking. My name is Perry Middlemiss, and I'm here as always with my good friend, David Grigg. Hello, David, how's the weather treating you?

David:

It's very cold, particularly in my house. It's not nice. So I'm rugging up as best I can and closeting off little rooms and having little heaters in that room.

Perry:

Yes, I think it's worthwhile just basically keeping one room nice and warm or just keeping yourself warm. My wife, who works from home, has got into the habit of using an electric throw rug that she puts over her knees, which seems to be working very well and she can keep herself nice and warm using that without having to spend a lot of money heating up the room or in fact the whole house. 'Cause that's getting a little bit too expensive these days to be able to do that.

David:

Sure.

Perry:

And us retired gentlemen have to be careful of our funds, David.

David:

We do, yeah.

Perry:

Yeah, so gotta spend them on good things like going to the movies and books and stuff like that.

David:

Exactly.

Perry:

Which is what we're here to talk about today. So why don't we just dive straight into it and do something a little bit radical and just get on with the show, David. How about that?

David:

Let's do exactly that.

Discussion

Mission Impossible: The Final Reckoning

Perry:

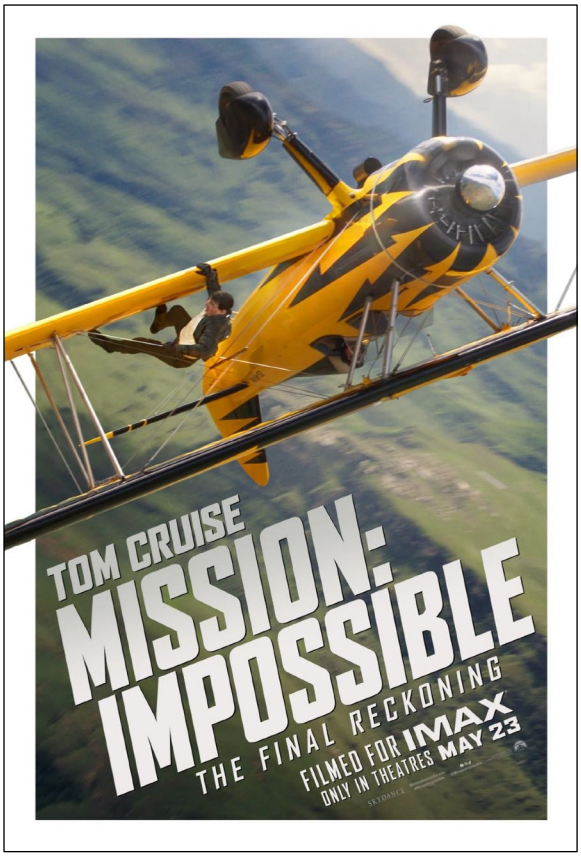
So you're up first. You're going to tell us about the film that we're going to be talking about.

David:

I'm actually going to talk about two films. Well, probably going to talk about *eight* films, really, when it comes down to it. So we'll do that in a sec.

As I've said a few times on recent episodes, I've been going out to my local cinema a lot more frequently than I used to. But it's not one of these nice little art cinemas or even like the one you've got in Hawthorn, the Lido. It's nowhere near like that. It's just one of these Village Cinema things. And so all they ever show is the major blockbuster type of things. But never mind. Anyway, I saw that the new *Mission Impossible* movie was going to be on. And so I thought I'd go and see it. But then I read about it and I realized it was Part Two, essentially, of a continuation of the previous movie, which is *Mission Impossible---Dead Reckoning, Part One*, they called it. So I figured I really needed to see that first. And so I went on to see where I could rent it or whatever. Anyway, so you do the search on Apple TV or whatever, and I realized that there was a boxed set of the first six movies for a really good price. It was about $20, I think, for six movies. I thought it was pretty good. So I thought, "Oh, I'll have that." And the seventh movie, *Dead Reckoning*, was also available for the same price to buy as to rent. So I thought, "I'll have that too." So I now own the first seven movies. And so I sort of binge-watched my way through those, which was really quite an interesting experience, one a night. And that's been quite interesting really as a way of looking at it.

But after all that preamble, I guess my take on the whole series, and of course, way back when we were young, Perry, we used to watch the TV series, which was terrific, on black and white TV. I guess my take on the whole series is that it has a lot of well-done action sequences, some clever, though often very confusing and not always coherent plotting, some very nifty gimmicks and occasionally some good acting. I concur with almost everyone that the worst of the whole series is *Mission Impossible 2*, which is, I think by everybody's agreement, a real clunker. Anyway, after saying all that, I really don't have a lot to say about the final two movies considered as a single very long story. The plot, if I were to sit here



and try to summarize the plot, I would be here all day. So I'm not going to do that. Basically though, the plot is to do with an artificial intelligence which has gone rogue and calls itself the Entity, or they call it the Entity. It starts with a very well-done sequence, this is in in *Dead Reckoning*, number seven, aboard a Russian nuclear submarine where the AI tricks the captain and the crew of the submarine into believing that there's a nearby American submarine which has started firing torpedoes at them. And so they fire torpedoes back and then things go to hell. So I won't try to summarize the rest of the plot. It's just way too complicated. But I will say that all this seems extremely plausible as you're watching it. But on the way home from the cinema or the day after you've watched it, you start thinking, "Hang on a minute, why did such and such happen?", or "But what about…" You just have second thoughts about a lot of these things. But that said, there are some terrific action sequences, particularly in *Dead Reckoning*, I thought. I actually thought that *Final Reckoning*… which they decided *not* to call *Part 2* of *Dead Reckoning*, so it's *Dead Reckoning Part 1* and then *Final Reckoning*.

Perry:

Odd that. I thought that was very odd.

David:

Very odd. Well, I guess they just changed their minds. Anyway, where was I? In *Dead Reckoning*, I thought there were some really, really good action sequences. I thought that *Final Reckoning* was a bit of a letdown, actually. I thought *Dead Reckoning* was far better. There's some really good stuff, like the sequence where he's fighting the villain on top of a moving train, it's very good. And before that there's a bit where he has to drive a motorcycle off a cliff and then parachute down to get on board this train. And apparently that's a real live stunt, I mean obviously with lots of cinematography fakery in it. With buying this boxed set I got the "making of" extras that come along with it. And according to this anyway, Tom Cruise, because he does try to do a lot of his own stunts, Tom Cruise actually did drive a motorcycle off a mountain cliff no less than about six times in the making of the movie. And presumably also he wrecked six motorcycles in doing that, who knows. I thought that was really good. Then there's a terrific sequence towards the end of that movie where Tom Cruise and the female character played by Hayley Atwell, she's called Grace, are inside the carriage of a train which is just progressively, carriage by carriage, falling off, there's been a bridge blown up and they're falling off into the void and they keep having to try to scramble up to the next carriage before it crashes down and they climb through the kitchen of the train and there's oil everywhere, it's good stuff. I really enjoyed that. But I just felt that the second movie, *The Final Reckoning* itself was

a bit of a letdown really, it wasn't up to the standards.

Maybe I'll talk about the cast: Ving Rhames does a good job as the computer genius Luther, I thought he was good. Simon Pegg is always reliable as this kind of jokey, insecure technical expert, he's there really to add a stream of humour to it I think. Rebecca Ferguson does a great job in these last two movies. She's been in the last four, I think. She was in the last four. She's an MI6 agent gone rogue. But Rebecca Ferguson does a terrific job in almost anything she does. She was in *Dune*, if you remember, [parts] one and two. And she's also the lead in the Apple TV series, *Silo*, again, does a very good job. Hayley Atwell is introduced in *Dead Reckoning* as this brilliant pickpocket Grace. And she's okay, but she seems to me always pretty much acting the same character. You know, she's really the same sort of character that she is in *Captain America* and the series, the Marvel series *Agent Carter*. And whatever virtues Tom Cruise may have, or not, as an actor, I just thought he was completely unbelievable as the romantic lead in these last two movies. I just didn't get any sense that he's really in love with either of these two female characters. And he seems to switch from one to the other. Once one of them gets killed, he switches very quickly to the other one. It doesn't seem like he has any really deep feelings of grief or anything.

Anyway, so I've talked a lot of without a great deal of substance. Perry, what was your take on the movies?

Perry:

Well, the interesting thing about it is that, from what you said was that you've seen all of the ones up all the way right through so you've seen the whole sequence now, which is which is quite good. I watched, last night in fact, the very first one of these and that very first one is actually very important to this last film. There's a very big callback to the very first film in this latest episode in the series. If you recall back in that first film Tom Cruise and his crew have to make an incursion into Langley, the CIA headquarters in Virginia, in order to access a very carefully constructed computer room, which I've never seen or ever heard of. But anyway, they have to go through all this process I think a lot of all of those traps and all the rest of it is all set up. It's a bit like Dungeons and Dragons really the way they have to go through all this. Anyway, so there's a lot of this stuff all set up purely and simply because they have to solve all these problems and it makes it very very interesting. What the bloody hell there was a rat doing in there I've got no idea.

David:

That's right, in the ceiling.

Perry:

Yeah, they throw that in for good measure but the interesting thing about it is the character who plays the computer programmer in that very first film, where they have to basically make sure that he's not in the room so they can get all the information, he realizes that something's happened because one of Cruise's partners has dropped a

knife which has fallen down and stuck in the desk right next to the terminal. Now this character, the computer programmer, has about four lines in the whole of this particular first film. Then he crops up again in this very last one. Same actor, same character.

David:

Yeah, it's good.

Perry:

I looked at him and I thought I sort of recognized him, but I thought "where's he from?", because I hadn't seen the first film then for quite some time. I thought oh, okay. So, oh, that's right. Then they start talking about the fact that he was the guy, you know, all right, okay I remember that. Yep. Yep. Yep. Oh, this is just going to be throwaway stuff. Well, no, it's not and they actually handled that very, very well.

David:

Yeah, I thought so too, yeah.

Perry:

And that was a really well done thing where he's been basically exiled out to this island, Matthew Island in the Bering Strait. And he's out there doing weather recording or whatever, so he's probably been fired by the CIA, found another job, and he loves it out there, absolutely loves it. He's found the love of his life, he's really enjoyed himself, he's been out there for 30 years, and then these guys turn up, and then he suddenly realizes, "Oh, *you're* the guys, oh, okay." And he's not unhappy about it. He thinks, "Well, things worked out for me, so how can I be annoyed?" And it's from that point onwards that this second film starts picking up.

The second film, *Final Reckoning*, is a film of two very distinct halves. The first half, it just seems to be everybody talking to Ethan Hunt saying, "You know, you're the messiah, you're the one, you're the one that can handle this. We have to stop this enigma entity, this AI called the Entity, and we're going to have to sort of store it. But somebody has to control it. Oh Ethan, you're the only one that can do this." And I'm sitting there thinking, "oh, give me the vomit bucket, please." I mean, this messiah, you're the only one. "Oh, I wouldn't trust anybody. Nobody should have that power. Or you're the only one I could trust with this, Ethan. You could do the right thing by humanity." Oh, my God. Can we just stop? I don't know whether this is pandering to bloody Tom Cruise or whether it was just they just got it completely out of control. After they get to this island and things start picking up, they don't do that anymore and thank God for that. It's almost as if somebody came in later on in the second half of the of the filming and changed the script and said "no, we're going to get rid of all that Messiah crap. Chuck all that out the door, let's just make this now an action movie with high stakes." And if you look at it from that perspective the second half of this works. The first half is a slog and this is not a short film. So you've got about, I don't know how long it was it's probably two and a half two and three-quarter hours, and so the first hour or so is oh god, it's a slog and then it picks up and then it's okay.

David:

It's okay.

Perry:

It's not bad. It's not you know, you've got to see it on a big screen and because it's got a lot of things but there are a lot of the action sequences you go through and

you think Oh God, you know, you know you were talking about in the first Reckoning, *Dead Reckoning* I don't know whether they're going to put out an *Ultimate Reckoning*, *Super Ultimate Reckoning*, *Super Great Huge Reckoning*. I don't know if they're going to do any more.

David:

Let's hope not.

Perry:

Anyway, in *Dead Reckoning* they have this fight on the top of a train and they did the same thing in the very first film; that's the train that goes into the Eurotunnel.

David:

That's right.

Perry:

And you think "Gee, they're so they're actually now rolling back through." And there's probably fights on planes as well.

David:

Yeah. Well think about it, the end of *Ghost Protocol* --- I can't remember which number it is now --- the ending of *Ghost Protocol* is almost identical really; it's a helicopter chase in that one and it's the same deal that like he's got to get some device which is going to stop the end of the world. Literally he gets, he bashes the bad guy, and ends up with the device literally with two seconds to go. It's exactly the same as the end of *Ghost Protocol*.

Perry:

That was the other thing that I wanted to say about this. If I get to see another bloody computer countdown of all the numbers going down, where everybody has to get to, down to about the last three or four seconds. I don't know, it happens at least three, maybe four, I lost count of how many times it happens in this film, and it actually got to the point where this just isn't that good. It just isn't that good.

David:

And there also has to be a big red countdown timer doesn't there? Attached to the

device. All those devices always have to have a big countdown timer attached to them.

Perry:

Oh man, they all have to. And I'm sure you get the point, this was a cliche 40 years ago and they're still using it. Okay. Look, I think what we have to look at with this one is that as a whole, it's very formulaic, this stuff. They do it as probably as well as anybody possibly can do it. Really, I'll be glad if they just decided that they've done enough and don't do anymore. Let's move on to something else, you know, somebody else can do something. The one thing that you have to look on with these ones is that it's like the James Bond films. But the James Bond films reinvent themselves by having a new character and if they reboot they restart again. And they find something. But at the moment, of course, they having a lot of trouble finding a new Bond or determining who's going to own it because the franchise has been sold off to Amazon. So who knows what they are they going to do? There's been talk about there being an American James Bond. Well, nah, nah, you just can't, it's quintessentially British. I was going to say English, but he's quintessentially British. So he's either Scots or he's English. It can't be anything else. In this instance with *Mission Impossible*, Tom Cruise has inhabited this role for, what's the first one, 1996?

David:

Yeah, I think that's right.

Perry:

So almost 30 years. Put it to rest for a while and go off and do something else. Surely there are other action franchises that you can run with. I mean, why not go with that? So I think it'd be far better if they just give this up. Now, look, what it comes down to is, I gave this one about three and a half out of five. I think it does what it does pretty well.

David:

Yeah, it's enjoyable.

Perry

Yeah, it's enjoyable while you're there. As you say, while you're there, but geez, it's very forgettable. You know, you come back out and you go, "oh, okay, all right, bits of that were okay, well, I'm not going to bother about it anymore. Maybe I'll watch it one night when I haven't got anything else to watch and have a pizza and a beer or something and watch that and laugh about it." But the first half, the first half is really slow. Really, really slow. It was not going to get a very high rating from me if it had stayed like that. It would have been down the threes, even not in the low threes, even in the twos, because it was just becoming bloody tedious. But in the end, well, as you say, they refer to these things as good popcorn movies. It'll do mega business in the States because it's summer. This is probably the big summer blockbuster that they all want. Tom Cruise says he wants to try and save cinema to get people back into the cinemas. Well, Tom, I don't really think this one is it, to be frank. I think there are others around that probably could do a lot better. But there we go.

David:

Will you go and see *F1*?

Perry:

Yeah, because there's a lot of advertising around for that. Yeah, I think that's

going to be another one where it is probably worthwhile going to see on a big screen. I mean, from the looks of it, the plot, the story seems fairly mundane, but you're hoping for a little twist or something that's going to come out of it. But yeah, look, I think I probably will go and see that.

David:

Yeah, I mean, I probably will too, even though I'm not at all a fan of the sport.

Perry:

I'm not either, but I find myself this year, 'cause being a retired gent, I can stay up as late as I want, and the sports streaming service that I have actually carries Formula One. And of course, this year, we have a local boy, Oscar Piastri, from Melbourne, leading the championship. So, I've been following it a bit. And there's a lot of intrigue going on in the background, there are some real villains in this, even in real life. So it'll be interesting to see what *F1* looks like. And I think I probably will go and see it. I will.

David

Yeah, I'm interested in a sense, just because it is an Apple movie, you know, Apple haven't had much success with movies. They've produced some terrific TV series, really, really good TV series, but they haven't had a lot of success with movies. Did you see *Wolfs*? Don't. It's very missable.

Perry:

Oh, very missable. All right, okay.

David:

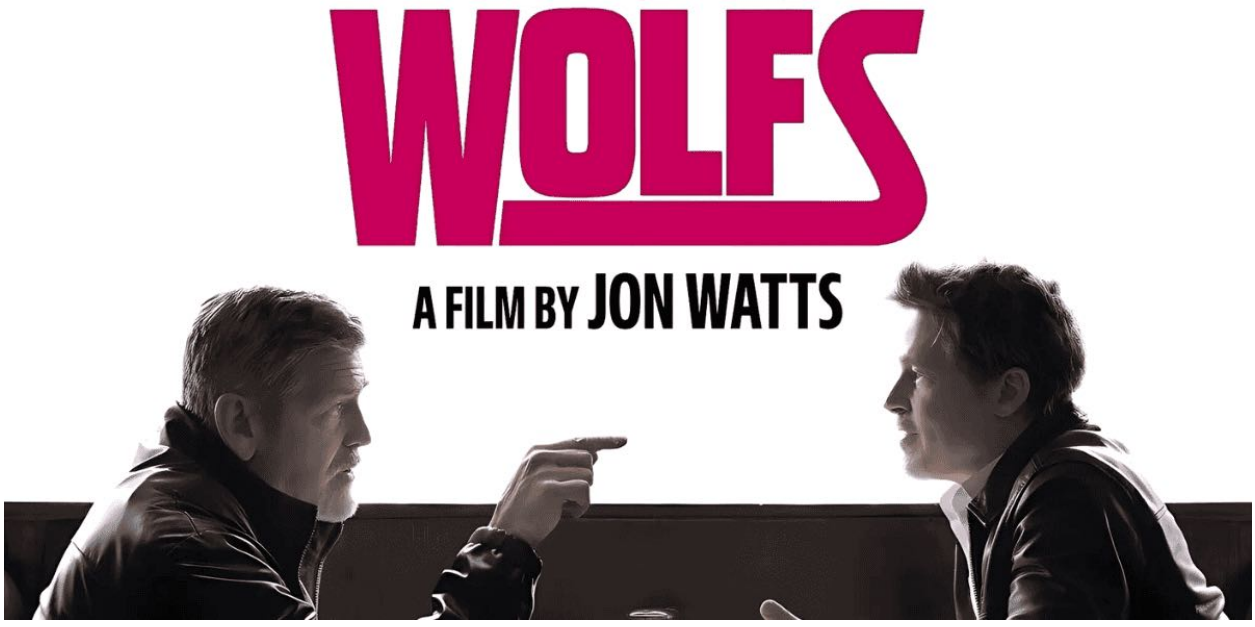
That was another, that was the previous Apple feature which featured Brad Pitt.

Perry:

Oh, no, no, this is the one with Clooney and Brad Pitt.

David:

Yeah.



Perry:
Oh, no, I did watch that.

David:
You did watch that? I didn't think it was very good.

Perry:
I did. *Wolfs*, yes, okay, not wolves. Wolfs, W-O-L-F-S. There's a reason why they call it that. No, I, while it wasn't great, I enjoyed it. Although I thought the ending was very *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. But I believe that they were going to make a sequel to it, but something fell over and Clooney said, "Well, if I don't get my way over this..."

David:
Because they got completely pissed off because they closed the cinema release really quickly. Or it didn't go to the cinema,

Perry:
Yes, that's right. Or didn't even have it. Or if they had it, it was so quick.

David:
That's right, I think that's right. It was very limited anyway, yeah.

Perry:
And yeah, so he was not very happy about that. And I can certainly understand it. I mean, what's wrong with putting it out into the cinema? I mean, you've got Clooney and Pitt, two of the big draw cards. Why wouldn't you use it? Anyway, oh look, no, I did watch that and I actually enjoyed that, David.

David:
Well, I mean, yeah, I'm sorry, but it was, you know, it wasn't great.

Perry
Forgettable, no, forgettable. As I said, it's basically rather, It's got a lot of Butch Cassidy stuff.

David:
Yeah, yeah, particularly the ending, yeah.

Perry:
Yeah, absolutely. But anyway, there we go. Well, speaking of films, I watched last night, *Warfare*, the new Alex Garland film, which is based in Iraq in 2006 and tells the story of a SEAL team that goes into a particular part of the city at night and sets up in a building to do some observations of the people around them. But they get discovered by some of the insurgents and then get attacked and they have to get out. And it's told basically over the course of a day. So it's a movie that runs for about an hour and a half. I love those warnings they put up now, you know, like the new warnings. Used to be graphic sex and ultra-violence and all this stuff and swearing. Now they say "smoking depiction". They always want to put that up just in case it triggers you that you're, oh, I've gotta go out and get some smokes, go back and smoke again. This one was a "severe injury" depiction.

David:
Oh dear.

Perry:

And yes, there is a leg that's lying in the street for most of the film. But look, that's worth having a look at. I missed that on the cinema screen. I wanted to go and see that there, but that was one that was in for a couple of weeks and then just gone, just gone. I don't know whether it didn't find an audience, but Garland's stuff, as we've discussed previously on this podcast, he's an interesting guy. He has written and directed some very interesting stuff. I mean, he wrote…

David:

Ex Machina.

Perry:

Oh, *Ex Machina*, yes, *Annihilation*. He wrote *Never Let Me Go*. And he also wrote the screenplay for *28 Days Later*, and now coming up for the *28 Years Later*, that he's back with Denny Boyle working on that. I believe that they didn't work on the *28 Weeks Later*, which is the middle one. So, yeah, maybe later on we should talk about *28 Years Later*.

David:

I haven't seen any of those. [Are they] Zombie movies?

Perry:

You should go back and have a look at the first one first that's really quite interesting it's got Ralph Fiennes and Brendan Gleeson. Certainly worthwhile having a look at. Oh, it's got a Cillian Murphy in it as well.

David:

Oh, wow.

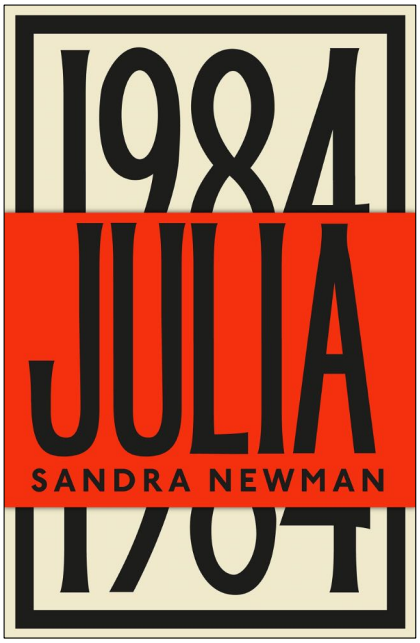
Perry:

Yeah, and so I don't know whether he's in the most recent one. Anyway, but Alex Garland and Danny Boyle are back together doing this one, and they're going to make a good film. They're just going to make a good film, and it's worthwhile checking their stuff out. So, but anyway, obviously, this *Mission Impossible* is

really there for just people to go along and enjoy, see it, and then just instantly forget it, like all the rest of them, don't they?

Julia by Sandra Newman

Perry:



So let's move on to the book, the one that you chose, which is *Julia* by Sandra Newman from a couple of years back.

Now, I was a bit dubious about the novel before I started to read it. I was just wondering what it was for and what it was trying to say or do. Now, I knew that it was related to George Orwell's *1984* and that it told the story of that novel from the point of view of the main female character in it, namely Julia, hence the title of this book. But apart from that, I knew nothing really about this book. I didn't know whether I was going to be presented with some sort of mashup like *Pride and Prejudice with Zombies* or a reforming of the original story. I just had no idea. Now, we've had books written about minor characters other novels before. I think here are the very successful series of novels by George Macdonald Fraser, based on the character of Harry Flashman, who originally appeared as a school bully in *Tom Brown's School Days*. Now this is a wonderful series of novels about a coward who always seems to fall on his feet while navigating his way up the ranks of the British Army in the 19th century. Every single major incident that the British Army in the 19th century was in, Harry Flashman finds himself there. Now, we've also had novels featuring major characters like Sherlock Holmes, because they've fallen out of copyright, and some of those are good and some of them are just woeful. And lately we've seen stage productions like *Wicked*, which tells the story of the Wicked Witch of the West from *The Wizard of Oz*, casting her as actually a good person, just misunderstood, I'm just not really interested. But here we have something which is a bit in-between, a character from a major novel who plays an integral part in that story, but who most readers would consider to be secondary to the main roles of Winston Smith and O'Brien.

So my question is, did we really need this book? Didn't we already have a good view of Orwell's world of "Airstrip One" and "Big Brother"? Maybe the best view that we were likely to get. So what was the point of this new novel 74 years after the original? And how do you go about reviewing such a novel? Do you undertake a page-by-page comparison between the two books, seeing if Newman has taken Orwell's prose and adapted it or reused it? Or do you review it as a book in its own right, knowing the connection with the previous novel, but viewing it as a standalone, if you like, if you want to use that term? Well, I originally decided to use, to take this latter approach. The other path just seems too long and winding, the road not taken perhaps, though one I think that I would like to see explored at some point by someone, but not me. I'm not going to go back and do that. But even looking at the book in its own right implies that you have to acknowledge the connection between the two books, this one and Orwell's original. That much seems obvious to me at least. Though I did decide to

not read Orwell's work again before coming to this novel. I wanted to see if my memory of it helped or hindered in any way. Now as an aside, this memory probably comes about as a combination of my reading the novel some decades ago, mashed in with the *1984* film adaptation, directed by Michael Radford and featuring John Hurt as Winston Smith, Susanna Hamilton as Julia, and Richard Burton as O'Brien. And Richard Burton's just a stunner in that role, as you recall. And John Hurt is perfect. You know, it just seems to me, I couldn't get John Hurt's face out of my head when I was thinking of Winston Smith as I read this. Not so much Richard Burton, but I couldn't get John Hurt's face out of my head.

Now, as I said, I wanted to review this book as a standalone and to think of it as being written with the best intentions, with the idea of offering something new, a different way of looking at the Orwellian totalitarian world. But I just couldn't separate the two of my mind as I was reading this. The original novel has too powerful a pull on the intellect and imagination, and as a result I was disappointed by this book.

Now let me explain, David. I know you probably think something completely different. As I said earlier, this novel follows the character Julia, who is a mechanic working in the Ministry of Truth, taking care of the novel-writing machines that pour out pornography and propaganda for the masses. Smith initially despises Julia, thinking that she is a spy. Then one day Julia slips a love note into his hand and the two begin an illicit love affair, firstly in the countryside and then in a rented room above an antiques shop run by a Mr Charrington. Now O'Brien, that I mentioned earlier, the part that was played by Richard Burton, is a member of the Inner Party of the state. One who lives a life of luxury, while Smith, Julia and the other proles eke out a meagre existence on whatever the Party decides to provide them. For some reason, Smith believes that O'Brien is secretly a member of the Brotherhood, an organisation that aims to overthrow

Richard Burton and John Hurt in the movie 1984

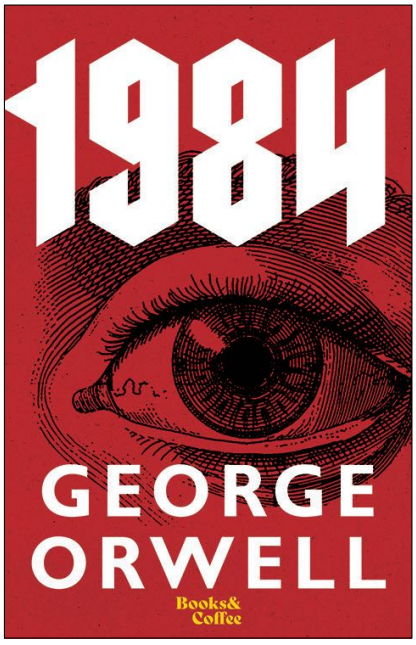
the Party in the totalitarian state. In the original novel, Smith is invited to O'Brien's flat where he is presented with a copy of a forbidden text that outlines how the Party came to be and how it could be overthrown. In this novel, Julia is also invited to O'Brien's flat, where she is offered promotion within the Party if she will act as a spy, extracting information from Smith and others, using sex as a bait. Julia is also singled out at a later time and artificially inseminated with Big Brother's child, or so she is told. She firmly believes that she is on the inside running for a better life, but that is not going to ever happen at all. Smith and Julia are captured one day and it's revealed that Charrington is actually a member of the Thought Police. Julia thinks this is just a ruse when they're being captured and that she'll be released later when her identity is discovered. Smith is tortured by O'Brien and others in order to bring his thinking into line with Party doctrine. This we know from the original novel. Here we learn that Julia is tortured as well, till she is broken and then released from custody with a paper stamped "PENDING EXECUTION". Great. How would you be wandering around everywhere showing your papers, "Yes, you're a criminal pending execution. Don't know when that's going to happen." So that was pretty tough.

Now, in its favour, this novel, without any reference to another work, would have seemed like a feminist dystopia, rather like *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. And I suspect that many reviewers will compare it to that 1985 novel. I can't. Atwood's novel felt fresh and innovative. This one feels somewhat derivative. As to the main character, I just couldn't sympathise with Julia at all. She seemed to be the architect of her own destiny here, seeking a better life in the inner Party and falling for O'Brien's ruse. Was she naive or did she make a conscious decision to seek what was offered? Newman has deliberately drawn Julia as a character with enough determination and control, agency if you like, to draw her own path through life. The author wants us to come to the realisation that Julia is a major player in this plot and that she is taken advantage of, but you can't have it both ways, so we have to accept that whatever happens to her was foreseeable. That doesn't make me empathise with her in any way. Coming back to my original query about whether or not we need this book, I can only conclude really that we don't. I don't see how it adds anything to the original, though I can say that it prompts me to go back and read it again. So maybe that's its saving grace, David. Maybe that's what I need to do. Go back and read the original. Your thoughts?

David:

Well, in fact, I *did* go back and reread the original after reading *Julia*. And after doing that, then I realized I really needed to go back to *Julia* as well. So I actually skipped my way through a kind of rereading of *Julia*. I didn't reread the whole thing.

I liked it a lot. I think it does add to the original. I think what it does do is it's kind of like an almost a mirror image view of the original. And it gives, it gave me anyway, a lot of potential insights into the original book. I think it's significant that at the start she calls, she sees Winston Smith, she comes in contact with him through her work, and she sees this guy, and although he's reasonably attractive looking, she calls him "Old Misery". He's always looking miserable and down and so on. And I think that's interesting because if you think about it and having reread the original, *he* is definitely the architect of his own destruction. I mean, the whole idea of him deciding to write a diary, which is full of all these confessions, he almost has a death wish. Well, that's certainly what *Julia* made me think of, which I hadn't before. He really is, he really does almost have a death wish to go through the process, be tortured, be killed by the state. He keeps



saying to her, "We are the dead." And so, yeah, he kind of has this death wish, again, from the point of view of this new book. And that's why he swallows that infamous line, which is, I'll quote, which is said by O'Brien. O'Brien says, "If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—forever." Winston Smith is predisposed to accept that as being inevitable, there's no hope. But Julia isn't, Julia is much more pragmatic. And even after being tortured, she's disposed to seek escape and a positive future for her child because she's now pregnant.

There's some really interesting parallels. She does use quite a bit of Orwell's original words, or she paraphrases them very closely. And certainly all the incidents that are in *1984* which involved Julia are in this new book. There's an interesting bit where if you read the very ending—and as I say I've just reread it—if you read the very ending of *1984*, it's basically, he's been completely broken and he ends up realizing that it's taken him all his life to come to the point of loving Big Brother. He loves Big Brother now, after all he's been through. There's an almost identical passage in *Julia* where she, who's never been able to get involved in these hate rallies and so on and really feel any real hate for anyone, there's this almost identical passage where she now has realized that through the whole course of her life, she has come to the point where now she *hates* Big Brother with a vengeance. So I thought that was good. So I thought it was interesting, and of course, it has a much more positive ending than *1984*, so it really is opening up the idea that maybe the Party is going to be overthrown. But on the other hand, the very ending of *Julia* is actually a bit ambiguous. As I say I've kind of re-read it just recently. It's because they start asking her all these questions, which are, what is she prepared to do to overthrow the Party? Which is exactly the list that Winston Smith was asked to agree to, and she was asked to agree to, by O'Brien, when he was trying to trick them. So I just wasn't sure about the ending, whether the ending is meant to be positive or negative. But she certainly escapes from the Party, which, spoiler here, it is a more positive ending. So I really liked it, and I think, to me, it does add to the original. Perhaps not add, it makes me rethink the original and look at it from a different point of view, which I think that's a valuable thing to be able to do. So no, I quite liked it, which is why I picked it. And I thought we might disagree.

Perry:

I think it does prompt me to go back and reread the original. I won't be coming back to read this one again. Your last point about what she, the questions that she gets asked by the new people that she comes to after she has escaped. Yes, it was like "meet the new government, same as the old government".

David:

Yes, I guess that's the feeling.

Perry:

It's exactly the same but just a slight different twist. You know, we are trying to save everybody and you have to do this. And it's like, well, wasn't that what I was doing before? Exactly the same thing? And where's the difference? So yes, I saw

that and I thought, oh yeah, that was interesting. And that was different. Look, I can understand why a lot of people would like this. I just didn't see the point.

David:

Yeah, fair enough. Yeah, fair enough. Just one last thing I'll say is that I did like the way that it kind of expands the background of *1984*. If you read just the original of *1984*, it's really just, it's a set piece within the time and space of that book. You don't really get any sense of how this state came about. Whereas there's a lot more in *Julia* which expands both the world and the history. You get more of a sense of how things came about. There's a flashback at one point where she thinks about her childhood which was in this camp in the country, which basically got to the point where all the adults are starving, in fact all the children are starving too. And it's very reminiscent of course of the famines that were caused by Stalin during his reign in Russia. So yeah, I thought that was a good part of the book too, the fact that it does expand the world and the timeframe.

Perry:

Yeah, well it's about twice as long as the original novel.

David:

Yeah, yeah, that'd be about right.

Perry:

This propensity to go on and on and on in modern novels, it sort of, can we just tone it down a little bit and just…

David:

Mind you, there's some very tedious bits in *1984*.

Perry:

Probably are.

David:

Of course, having just re-read it. There are bits where he actually quotes from, he reads the book which is supposed to be by Goldstein, the arch-rebel. And there's all this political stuff about how the world has been set up the way it is and it goes on and on and on and on. And in fact, then he reads it out aloud to Julia when they're in their little hideaway and she goes to sleep. And I'm reading the original, I thought, I'm going to go [to sleep too], I skipped all that. It was really very boring. It's great slabs of quote from this supposed book, which I just didn't think added much to the original at all.

Perry:

Yes, I can understand that that is going to be a problem. This one, there's a whole lot of detail that is put in really to give the background for Julia and I don't really think it adds much as far as I'm concerned. I think that it's better for a lot of it to be left to your imagination.

David:

Yeah, yeah. I guess the bits which I felt were a bit much were the fact that you do have to, she does have to go through all the original events from Julia's point of view, but if you are familiar with the original book, then you think, yeah, yeah, get on with it. So anyway, yeah. But still, I enjoyed it.

Perry:

Yeah, I did a bit of reading around about this when I started to work out and I started thinking, why was this done? How did it come about? And it actually seems that the Orwell estate asked her to write it.

David:

Oh, wow.

Perry:

Which I thought was very weird, very weird indeed. I mean, if you were to get to the Tolkien estate and ask, they don't want anybody writing anything.

David:

Yeah.

Perry:

As far as they're concerned, Tolkien's the only one that's canon, you don't touch it.

David:

It's interesting that Dorothy Sayers' estate was quite happy to let, what's the name of the author who wrote a continuation? There was a partially finished Dorothy Sayers novel about Lord Peter Wimsey that was unfinished when she stopped writing about him. And, oh, what's the name of the author? I'll get it in a sec. But they authorised this woman to to continue it. And then that author wrote another couple of books in the Wimsey series, I think three or four, and did a reasonable job of it, I thought. So that's the difference, that they were, obviously the estate of Sayers was quite happy for someone to continue the work.

Perry:

I think the same thing happened with Ian Fleming's estate as well. Didn't Kingsley Amis write a, did he write a James Bond novel? But anyway, a number of other people have written James Bond novels. But of course, everything changed with Bond. It's not really the, what you see on the screen is not really the original at all, but anyway.

David:

Jill Payton Walsh is the author I'm thinking of.

Perry:

I can see why people would want to go and read this particular novel to fill in the background of *1984*, to get a different view of it. I didn't think it was necessary from my perspective. So there we go. That's just the way I feel about it.

David:

Fair enough.

Perry:

There we are. All right, what else you been reading or watching?

What Else We've Been Reading and Watching

The Songs of Penelope by Claire North

David:

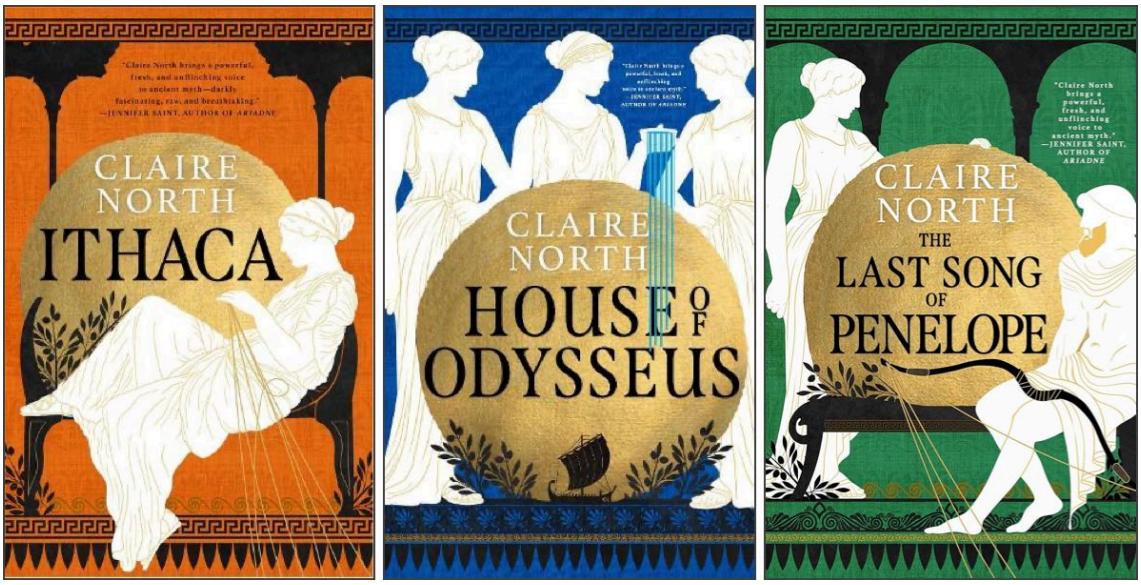
I finished reading the trilogy by Claire North, the *Songs of Penelope* trilogy. That's a feminist retelling of the story of Odysseus out of the epic poem by Homer. And the overall approach she takes is to take the well-known story and look at it not from the point of view of the male heroes, who are well celebrated by the poets, but from the point of view, of course, of the *women* in the story. Particularly, of course, Penelope, who is left back on the island when all the men of the island go off with—all of the able-bodied men—go off with Odysseus to fight in Troy. And so from her point of view, she really has to take charge and look after the needs of the island and help in its defence and so on without very much help at all from any men because the only men left in the island are the young boys who are too young to take up arms or old men who are too feeble to fight. And it's cleverly done. You might say it's a bit strange because each of the three books is narrated by a different Greek goddess. But it's, look, I enjoyed the whole, I won't talk about it at length, but I enjoyed the whole trilogy. I thought it was very cleverly done. It generated a good deal of food for thought. So that's, I guess it's like, like, like *Julia*, really, it's a taking of an existing story and doing a different spin on it. So, but it's, it's a very clever spin.

Perry:

But I can understand that because Penelope is way off stage for the vast bulk of the time that Ulysses is basically trying to work his way home. So I don't really have a problem with that. Here with *Julia*, she's a major secondary character, if you like, helping to turn the plot. Anyway, it's interesting that you're reading this because I'm not sure if you're aware, but in 2024, there was a film called *The Return*, featuring Ralph Fiennes in the lead role, directed by Uberto Pasolini, which is a retelling of the last sections of Homer's Odyssey as he returns back to the island after all this time.

David:

Well, that's in the last book in the series [by Claire North].



Perry:

Because as you'd be aware, the thing is that when he comes back, nobody recognises him except for his dog, who finally sees him again after 20 odd years. But I haven't seen this film. But if Ralph Fiennes is in it, it's probably...

David:

Yeah, it's probably pretty good.

Perry:

Juliette Binoche, obviously, is playing Penelope, I think. So, yeah, it was, oh, it was released in the United Kingdom only a couple of months back.

David:

Oh, there you go.

Perry:

So I haven't seen it doing the rounds. I knew it was out, but I haven't seen it doing their rounds. I don't know whether it's been shown in Australia as yet. And of course, Christopher Nolan, his next film is *The Odyssey*. So that would be a completely big telling of the whole of the Odyssey thing.

David:

From the male point of view, from his point of view anyway.

Perry:

But you seem to have picked the zeitgeist here, David. It seems to be Ulysses and the Odyssey seems to be in the air.

David:

Indeed, indeed. Anyway, they're very good. We both enjoy Claire North's books.

Perry:

Yeah, that's right.

David:

Well, most of them anyway, and this is very different. It's a fantasy rather than science fiction, but it's cleverly done, and she's a great writer.

Jurassic Park series

David:

The other thing I did was, because I got into this mode of [buying] boxed sets, I actually ended up buying the boxed set, this is like a digital boxed set, of the whole of the *Jurassic Park* series and I've been watching those.

Perry:

You've been working your way through that?

David:

I have worked my way through that. Basically, they're a lot of fun, but basically the plot of every single movie in the series is: one, there are dinosaurs in captivity; two, due to human stupidity, the dinosaurs escape; three, everyone runs away screaming as the dinosaurs chase them. That's it, that's the plot of

every movie.

Perry:

Yep, well, if you're on a good thing, stick to it. I mean, the original was pretty good. How do the special effects look these days? 'Cause I haven't been back to see it again for a long time.

David:

They improved every year.

Perry:

Yeah, I know, they improved, but how does the first film hold up?

David:

Oh, it still holds up pretty well, I thought. Yeah, it still holds up pretty well. The pacing of that is very well done, I thought. And it's constant thrills once it gets going.

Perry:

Well, say what you like about Spielberg, he is a consummate filmmaker. He knows how to put things together. And I would think that he would have been sitting over the editor's shoulder the whole time, making sure that all of the points and all of the cadence of the film, the rhythm of it just flowed the way that he wanted it to.

David:

But the dinosaurs are completely believable still in the first movie, even compared to the later ones. The later movies really just add finesse and [for example] they're able to add feathers to a dinosaur in the last one. And so that's really a great improvement in digital technique, that that's the only difference really but the first movie holds up pretty well I thought. Even only in terms of excitement it's probably it's still the best.

Perry:

All right. Okay Well, I'll probably have to go back and watch it again. It's been

heck of a long time since I've seen it. So I should get back and have a look.

David:

Yeah, well, that's 1993. That's a long ago.

Perry:

Oh, 30 odd years ago. Yeah, okay. That *is* a long time.

Murderbot Series

Perry:

All right. Well the major thing that I've started watching over the last week or so is the new *MurderBot* series based on the first novella by Martha Wells called *All Systems Red* I think it's called, which tells the story of this android, sometime in the future. These androids are mostly mechanical but with like a human flesh shell around them, but they spend most of their time in their armor and they act as security units—Sec Units—and this particular security unit, who calls himself MurderBot just because it sounds really, really strong and tough. Not because he's actually murdered anybody or maybe he has, because he got reset at some point and he can't quite work out whether some of the memories that keep on popping up are his memories or something that is cropped up from all of these soap operas that he likes to watch because, whenever he's offline and not doing anything, he watches huge numbers of these romantic soap operas. In this particular first series, he is employed as a security unit for a small group of explorers that have the rights to check out the mineral… well, they're doing some research into the mineral capabilities of a particular planet, and he acts as their security unit. But they discover that at some point when he's really badly injured, and they have to go in and make sure that he's all okay and reset him and make sure that everything's ticking along properly, they realise that he has been able to override his governing module and he can do whatever he wants. He now has free will. There's a lot of discussions as to whether the free will is such that he's going to take that free will and kill them all. But he's shown in the past that he actually puts up with it. He thinks humans are terrible, absolutely terrible things. He, can't understand why they do everything the way they do. But he sticks with them and he's got a job. So that's what he does.

And so he slowly becomes a member of the crew. It's a bit weird this one. It's on Apple TV. Each episode is really rather short. They run with ads to about 26 minutes. And so the total amount of stuff you get is around about 20 minutes an episode, and they're putting them out one a week. And there's 10 episodes to fill out this one particular novella, so, you know, a bit odd. But certainly worthwhile watching. I would recommend waiting until it all comes out and then watch it all

in one big hit. Because it's broken up into half-hour episodes, it's going to take you about five hours, you can watch it over two days and you're done. And it's really, it's quite enjoyable. And if you liked the original Martha Wells novella, which I did, I know some people didn't, but I did, there's going to be people that are going to enjoy it. I don't think you did, did you David?

David:

I did not like the first one. I never read the others because I didn't like the first one so much.

Perry:

I enjoyed it. I keep going back to them and catching them up again, but it's been a while and I've forgotten what the original one was all about, except that from what I can read, this *Murderbot* series does seem to follow that original novella pretty well. So, good thing, a good thing.

Warfare directed by Alex Garland

Perry:

That's really about it. My other stuff has been reading and watching stuff for this particular [podcast].

Although, as I said, last night I did watch *Warfare* directed by Alex Garland. That's interesting. If you're not into lots of shooting and war scenes, I wouldn't be watching it. It's quite harrowing. It would have been good to see it on a big screen, I think, because it would have been giving you that big immersive, all-in view of about what happens to grunts on the ground who get caught in a situation that they have to try and get themselves out of without dying, which is a bit of a problem. But they end up getting there, so good. That was all right.

Wind-up

Perry:

All right, I think we're done for this week, David.

David

I think we're probably done, yeah.

Perry

So what are we up to next time? We've got a book and a film again. So the book that we're going to be looking at is *Shroud* by Adrian Tchaikovsky. And the film that we're going to be looking at is from 1998, *Dark City*, directed by the Australian director Alex Proyas.That is one that you chose because it's one of your all-time favorites. I've seen it, but I haven't seen it for a very very long time. And I'd be interested in going back and having a look at it again now. But *Shroud* … I'm still thinking about *Shroud*. Yeah, I read it I read it three or four weeks ago, and I'm still thinking about it because it's, it's got a lot going on in that book, a lot, a lot indeed. Anyway, we shall talk about that next episode sometime in July, and we'll be back then, David.

David:

We will.

Perry:
Thanks very much. Talk to you then. Bye.

David:
Bye.

Letters

We heard from*: Mark Plummer*

Mark:

Hiya,

(Notice, by the way, the cunning way in which I avoid Mark Nelson's dilemma of whether to address the two of you alphabetically by first name or surname --- although it's just occurred to me that it's the same either way.)

Thanks for **TCIP #4** and indeed its three predecessors and now its successor. I wouldn't say I'm personally podcast-averse, but I do see a number of real benefits to the print version, especially when it comes to writing to you where it's a good deal easier to go back and double-check that you did indeed say what I thought you'd said. Let's go with that as an obvious benefit rather than the perhaps less welcome observation that it also makes the material more easily skimmable.

Personally, I think if it were me I'd be inclined to edit it a bit more, to make it more of a written work and less a transcript of a spoken conversation. But it's not me that's doing it.

Perry:

It's a delicate balance between editing too little and us reading like idiots, or too much and taking way too long to get the transcript out. Chong tells me that we shouldn't edit it at all, but I can't come at that. The result would be close to unreadable.

Mark:

But my main reason for writing was that I wanted to say something about the *The Tusks of Extinction*, and as it so happens that's also a handy demonstration of the point about going back and checking because I had thought that was what you (Perry) described as "the perfect length really" but I see you were actually talking about *Typhoon*.

But you did say *Tusks* has "got enough in it without going too far" and I think that's broadly right. I certainly think it's the right length, the best length, for its content although I can easily envisage it being longer without the equivalent of '40 or 50 pages of descriptions of going into the typhoon'. I'm not a fiction writer but it seems to me that there's plenty already in *Tusks* that would allow it to be longer without adding whole new plot strands. the scope is there to expand the hinterland of the characters and the various aspects of the story that are dispensed with in a few sentences. I'm now wondering whether that's always or at least usually the case with novellas and for some reason it was just more obvious to me in this case. I do though think that while *Tusks* could have been longer it likely wouldn't have been better, and really it's a remarkable piece of concision.

Perry:

Maybe that's a better way of looking at it. Some novels are obviously way too long and suffer as a consequence. I'd prefer to have read something and wished there was more of it than less.

WAHF: Bruce Gillespie, Heath Row