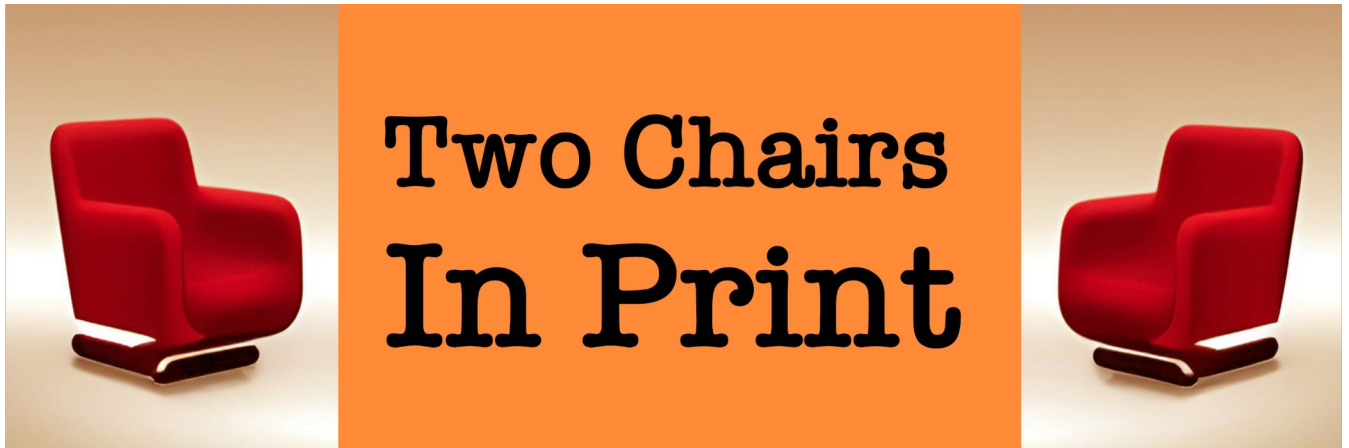
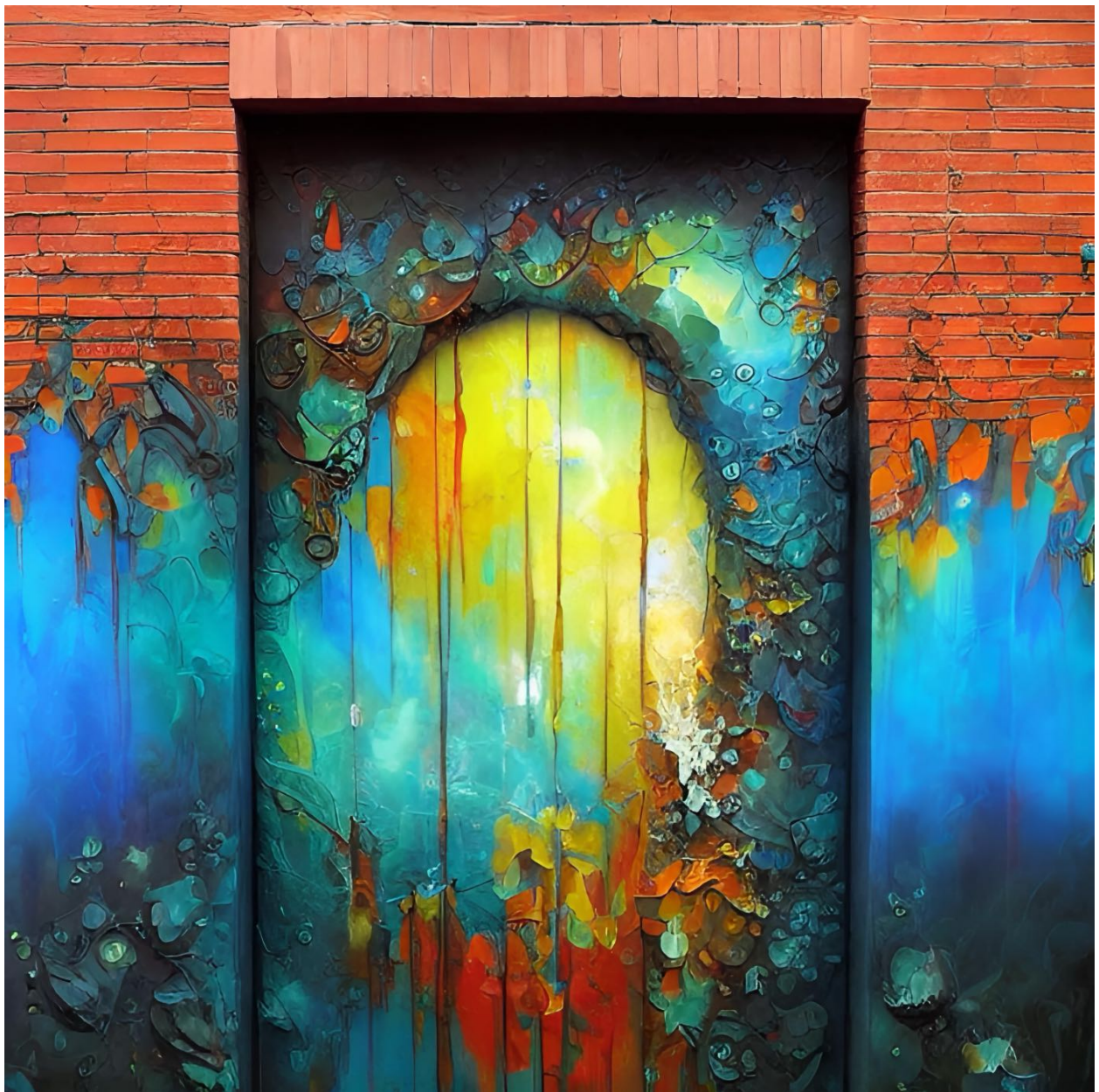




Issue 8
Cleansing the Doors of Perception



Cleansing the Doors of Perception

Season 2 Episode 8, September 2, 2025



Colophon

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Transcript Episode 8 Season 2

Introduction

Perry:

Hello, and welcome to episode 8 of season 2 of this 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 world treating you?

David:

How is the world treating me? Um pretty well on the whole, I would say.

Perry:

I had a chat to somebody recently who said that we went on far too much about the weather, David.

David:

So, we're not going to talk about the weather.

Hugo Awards 2025

Perry:

No we're not going to talk about the weather at all. So why don't we just jump straight into a bit of news that's come out recently, and that is the 2025 Hugo Award winners, which were announced at the WorldCon held in Seattle a week or two back. Shall I list those? Maybe that'd be a good idea. That's a good way to go.

David:

Yeah, Perry, you have the jump on me because I don't even know what was nominated, let alone what won.

Perry:

Okay, so the best short story was "Stitched to Skin Like Family Is" by Nghi Vo. Best novelette, "The Four Sisters Overlooking the Sea" by Naomi Kritzer. Best novella, now, this is one that you will know something about, David. [The Tusks of Extinction](#) by Ray Nayler.

David:

Oh, yes, well we read that and talked about it, didn't we, on the podcast?

Perry:

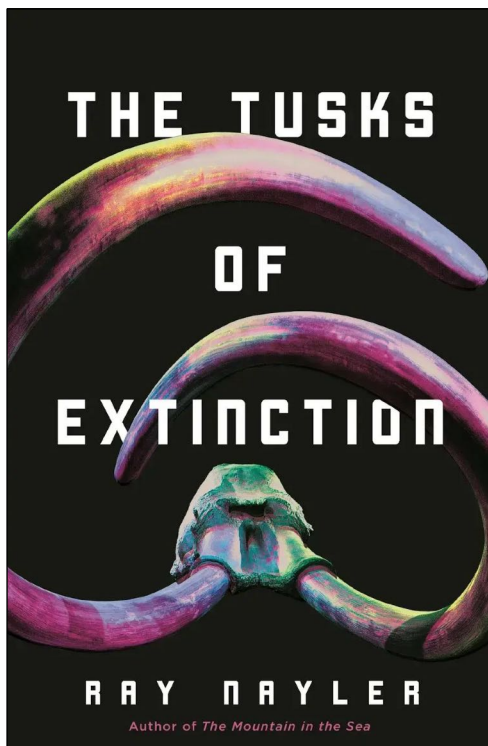
Yep, that was the one we read and talked about, which was good.

David:

Yes.

Perry:

And for the August Meeting of the Nova mob we did a run-through of the short fiction for the Hugos. And I went through the novellas and I



chose *Tusks of Extinction* by Ray Nayler. So it's, you know, should have had some money on it, maybe. No, no, we're not gamblers, so we can't do that. *The Tusks of Extinction* by Ray Nayler, excellent novella. As we said at the time, I think he's a writer to watch. The best novel, *The Tainted Cup* by Robert Jackson Bennett. I know of this author, but I don't believe that I've ever read anything by them, and I certainly haven't read that novel. Best dramatic presentation long form *Dune Part Two*. Hardly surprising.

David:

Oh yeah, fair enough, I suppose.

Perry:

Yeah, I think that's fair enough. Whether you think it's a good representation or adaptation of the novel is neither here nor there, because you've got to look at it from the perspective of what was the film like. Some people liked it, some people didn't. I thought it was pretty good.

David:

Yeah, I thought it was pretty good. And you know that I don't much like the book, so that's that's pretty pretty good praise from me that I thought the film was pretty good.

Perry:

I mean I know there's a lot of problems with the book and yeah, happy that we could go through that at some point with a fine-tooth comb. Probably don't want to anymore 'cause we've read it all. Yeah, I know there are problems with it, but I like the adaptation and the way that it looked. There was a lot of good stuff in that. Best Dramatic Presentation Short Form: *Star Trek Lower Decks*. And the episode was "The New Next Generation".

David:

Right, that's the animated series, isn't it?

Perry:

I have absolutely no idea because I'm not keeping up with them all. There's way too many of them popping up all over the place now, so I just don't have time. I've got other things that I'm interested in. I haven't been keeping track with it. Neither that nor the Star Wars stuff that keeps on popping up on Disney either. So there's a hell of a lot of this stuff that you just got to cover if you can. And, you know, if I could get to it, it'd be great. But sorry, I've got other things I've got to do and I'm even now I'm running out of time, so I never seem to have enough time to do anything. Which seems a bit strange because I've got a whole week to do whatever it is I want. But yeah, you'd think you'd start slowing down about now, but it doesn't seem to work.

David:

Yeah, it it all gets eaten up. I realize I've been retired now for nearly fourteen years. And I still don't have time to do things.

Discussion

Asteroid City, directed by Wes Anderson

Perry:

Anyway, all right, shall we dive straight into the episode, David, and start off with the film review that you're going to look at, which is *Asteroid City*, directed by Wes Anderson.

David:

Now how do you pronounce his name? I've heard it pronounced "Wes" rather than "Wez", with the "s" like an "s" rather than a "z". What do you reckon? It's short for Wesley.

Perry:

I just say Wes [Sounds with an "s"].

David:

So Wes. Yeah, anyway, Wes Anderson.

Wes Anderson is an American director and screenwriter. He was born in 1969. His films have been nominated [or he has] won various awards for them. I must confess though that I'm new to his films. *Asteroid City* was the first of his films that I've seen.

And so because of that, I thought, well, I've got to do my research for the podcast, and so over the last week I've been trying to catch up on a few of his other films. And so in fact, as it turns out, most of his films are available on Disney Plus, which I currently subscribe to. So over the last week, I've been watching, it's been like a Wes Anderson festival or something. So I've seen *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, *The Royal Tenenbaums* and *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*. And as well as directing, Anderson wrote or co-wrote the scripts for all of these. They're all what would you call whimsical comedies with some serious things to say and some serious themes to be explored.

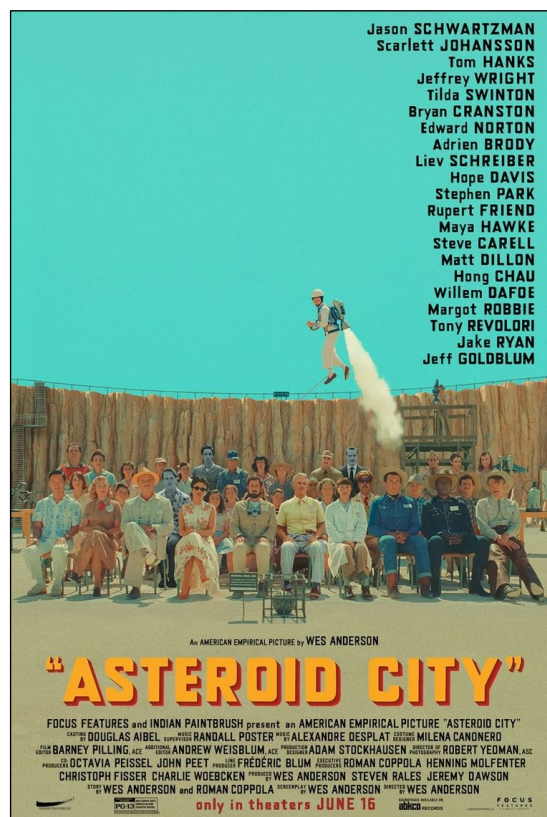
Now there's a certain style to Wes Anderson films, and it's so characteristic that there are a number of really quite funny parodies on YouTube imagining various well-known films as though they'd been remade by Wes Anderson; you know, such as *Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings*. So *The Lord of the Rings* [parody], for example, has Bill Murray as Gandalf.

Perry:

Ooh, that'll be nice.

David:

It's all done with AI, I think, with all this modern AI, you know, video generation stuff. But the style is fairly easy to parody because it's very characteristic. So it's the use of a particular color palette, the choice of fonts and graphic design. Usually there's a voiceover narration, the use of models and generally unreal sets, the casting of particular actors that Anderson favours. For example, Bill Murray



features a lot and Willem Defoe, etcetera, seem to be in all his films. And the use of pop songs in the soundtrack and so that sort of thing.

Anyway, that style is certainly in full force in *Asteroid City*, which was released in 2023. I guess if you had to characterize the film—it's very hard to describe really—but if you had to characterize it, it's a science fiction comedy, though the SF elements are completely tongue-in-cheek and not meant to be taken seriously, or meant to be believable. But that's all kind of several levels down because the main story is portrayed as the visualization of a play written in the 1950s.

In fact, the film starts with a sequence shown on a grainy black and white television screen, introduced by an unnamed show host, played by Brian Cranston. And it's presented as though it's one of his regular series of documentaries about modern playwrights; I mean, modern for the 1950s. In fact, we start even one level higher than that actually, because it starts in the control room of the TV studio before focussing in on the show host.

And we're told by the host that tonight's episode is about the famous playwright Conrad Earp, played by Edward Norton. He's written a play called *Asteroid City* and after he's introduced and a little bit of other business going on Conrad Earp steps forward to the front of the stage to set the scene and introduce the actors. And only then does the screen shift to a widescreen colour view of a freight train rolling across the largely empty plain in the middle of America somewhere as the leading credits roll. It's very reminiscent of where the credits used to be placed in 1950s movies, at the *start* of the film, rather than at the end. So we follow this train until it reaches the fictional town of Asteroid City.

The town consists of one diner, a motel, a gas station, an unfinished section of a highway overpass, and its only tourist attraction, a large crater gouged by a meteor many years before. Attached to the crater is a small research building for the scientists who are investigating the crater. So, because of this framing element of it being a visualization of a play—within this outer frame of the play—we get screen slides at the beginning of different sections of the film, of the movie, of the story within the story. So, you know, it starts with Act 1, Scene 1. And this kind of technique seems to be common at least to a couple of the other Wes Anderson films that I've seen. In both *The Royal Tenenbaums* and *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, the story appears to be told as if being presented in a book, with periodic slides coming in showing chapter headings in the book, in





the associated book, as the sections of the film unfold. We're always at least one level away from reality.

So at the start of Act 1, I'm not going to give you the entire plot, too complicated. But at the start of Act 1, Scene 1 of *Asteroid City*, you see a station wagon being hauled into the gas station by a tow truck, and on board the car are Augie Steenbeck, played by Jason Schwartzmann, who is a photographer and a one-time war correspondent. And with him is his family of a teenage son and three little girls. Also arriving in the town are Midge Campbell, played by Scarlett Johansson, who is a famous movie actress—guess what? she is a famous movie actress—and her daughter. And there are a variety of other families who turn up. They're all turning up to this particular place because they're visiting Asteroid City for a space camp, which is done in the meteor crater itself.

Now, during a presentation to these families in the meteor crater, the speeches are interrupted when a flying saucer, glowing green, descends. A lanky alien emerges. It looks around shyly, grabs the meteor, which is about the size of a basketball, takes it away back up into its flying saucer, and flies off, much to the astonishment of the crowd, of course. Now, once this event is being reported, and a photograph of the alien which was taken by Augie Steenbeck gets released to the media, the whole town is placed in quarantine. No one can leave and no communication is meant to be sent to the outside world. And during the quarantine a kind of romance springs up between Augie Steenbeck and Midge Campbell.

So I suppose in general the stories are about dysfunctional families and dysfunctional relationships, I guess. But that's this core story, which is the play, the content of the play itself. But then we have frequent breaks where we go back up one level and we're back in the theatre where the play is being put on. And so we see a discussion between the actor playing Augie Steenbeck and the play's author, [Steenbeck is] asking questions about whether he's doing the role correctly and why his character has to carry out a particular action in the play, apparently for no reason, which causes him great pain. And we have a discussion with an actress who was meant to play Steenbeck's dead wife, but her scenes have been cut from the play. There's a scene where the playwright appeals to a class of acting students whose teacher is played by Willem Defoe, to help him portray something which happens or to convey a particular effect while the character is sleeping. So the overall theme seems to be an intricate kind of meta-narrative about the whole process of theatre and film. The fourth wall is

constantly being broken through. And these various levels of the film push us to think quite a bit about the interplay between writing, acting, and reality.

So, look, I enjoyed it, but I didn't enjoy it as much as I enjoyed *The Royal Tenenbaums* and *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. But it was better than the *Life Aquatic*, though, which really wasn't all that good. What did you think of it, Perry?

Perry:

Yeah, well before I go on to talk about this specific film, I am interested in the fact that you've seen some others of Anderson's fairly recently. According to my list, he's done about thirteen feature length films. I've seen about six of them and I reckon that you're right that *The Grand Budapest Hotel* and *The Royal Tenenbaums* are the standouts. [His work] sort of fits into layers. The stuff that works really well, like as we said, the *Tenenbaums* and the *Budapest Hotel*, they're fantastic. And then there's a semi level, next level down, and I think this film fits into that. And then there's another level below that, where things just don't really come together all that well. And I'm thinking here of the couple that I've seen, *The Darjeeling Limited*, and to some degree *The Phoenician Scheme*, which is his most recent film that was out in cinemas this year.

Look, there's a whole lot of really interesting stuff that goes on with these things all the time in a Wes Anderson film, but you just feel as though you're not sure how it all fits together. And one of the questions that I did want to ask you, specifically now that you've seen some quite a number of them in a quite short space of time. Do you think all these films are somehow related to each other? I mean, do they exist in the same universe? And are some of the characters of one film actually related? To characters of another? Maybe maybe it's more to do with, I don't know, product branding inside the films themselves because you don't ever see things that you would normally see in a real world.

David:

I can imagine that being the case, but I don't think, it's certainly not explicit. I'm thinking of the time frames of when the action is supposed to take place. So the *Royal Tenenbaums* really is contemporary to when the film came out. Pretty much. *Asteroid City* obviously is set in the 1950s. It's explicitly said it's in 1952, I think. Certainly, the 50s, anyway. *Grand Budapest Hotel* is during the war or prior to the Second World War. So there's quite a big difference, and I don't know about the *Life Aquatic*, that's, I guess, contemporary too.

Perry:

All the products there have all got their own little quirky little names and company names and logos. It just seems so peculiar and so different from everybody else that's doing anything. It's always arresting in terms of watching it from a visual perspective. It's phenomenal to look at. And a friend of mine that I went to, we went to see *The Phoenician Scheme*, and when we were talking about it later on, he said he does like things to look very flat, doesn't he? There's that 2D flatness where the color is really, it's not high technicolour bright colours that you get, but everything looks like it's absolutely perfectly placed exactly where he wants it to be, and the colours are exactly the way that they want it to be. I mean the clothing that the characters wear is where's it's all very weird. You get some very weird fashion styles going on here. Look, the films are arresting to watch and to look at, but sometimes I think the stories just don't really hold up, and I don't think this one sort of comes together. Well, I mean, there's the alien that comes in and then comes back again with the piece of the asteroid, but this time it's actually had some markings etched onto this little asteroid, and as somebody

says, it looks like it's been inventoried. So, you know, the the aliens come down and said, "Oh, yep, we know it's there, right, we better make a note of it," and then just put it back again and then shoot off. Yeah, odd. Very odd. I don't mind the fact that he has an ensemble cast that he keeps on going back to, because obviously he's decided that there's a lot of these characters, Tom Hanks, Bryan Cranston now, Scarlett Johansson, Jason Schwartzman, all these people, Bill Murray, as you say, all these people continually keep turning up and they seem to want to keep doing the work that they must do.

David:

Obviously, they like working with him.

Perry:

I read a report that Scarlett Johansson worked on this film for two months, so let's say eight weeks. And she was paid \ \$4,000 a week. That must be base rate scales.

David:

Absolutely, yeah.

Perry:

I mean, you know, they must be doing this stuff almost like an art house film. Just a change from all the big blockbusters that they would do elsewhere. And, you know, so there must be something going on here. I'm just not terribly sure I know what it is. That's the problem.

David:

No, no, it's certainly a hard film to talk about, really. Of all the ones that I've seen, this is probably the hardest to talk about.

Perry:

Some of the others, I mean like *The Darjeeling Limited* which has got Owen Wilson in it. He seems to have done a fair bit of work with Owen Wilson as well.

David:

Wilson seems to be in all of his films, yeah.

Perry:

Yeah, and so, but that one just doesn't work. Just doesn't work very well at all, that one, as far as I'm concerned. And you know, *The Phoenician Scheme*, the most recent one: No, again. You come out and think, he didn't quite make it again, but he keeps on making films about every year these days, you know, since um ... there was a gap between 2018's *Isle of Dogs* and 2021's *The French Dispatch*, but you could put that down to the pandemic. Everybody had a big gap. And there was a couple of other gaps earlier on. But now he's just putting out one a year. You know, I keep on thinking, I keep on thinking all the time when I go and see his films that yes, I'm going to get, and I hope I'm going to get another *Royal Tenenbaums* or a *Grand Budapest*. It just doesn't seem to quite get there, which is a bit unfortunate. But look, I think he's one of these filmmakers that, well, you absolutely know that when you go and see a Wes Anderson film, you know you're seeing a Wes Anderson film.

David:

Yeah, absolutely.

Perry:

You know there's nobody else making them exactly like this. And from that perspective, you have to basically give him a bit of credit for the fact that, you know, he's out there on his own. He is unique and he is doing stuff that is interesting. And if you only ever get to the point where you come out of a film and it's something for you to talk about. There's always plenty to talk about in his films. You may not be convinced that he's achieved what he wanted to do. But you know that it's been, from a technical standpoint, really, really well made. I just sometimes wish some of these directors would get somebody else to write it for them. And I think that might be a better way of doing things for somebody like Anderson. You know, he can maybe adapt it around the edges, but I think he'd be better off. Than if he's either the writer or the co-writer. It's a bit like Christopher Nolan. I always find Nolan's work far better when he's actually basing his work on somebody else, like *Oppenheimer*. If he's doing that rather than writing his own stuff, I think he's a lot better off.

Anyway, there was a film that came out earlier this year, *The Phoenician Scheme*. I went to see it. If one comes out early next year, I'll go and see it in the cinema. Because I just want to see what this guy's doing. And I just keep hoping that he hits another high point. But even if he doesn't, at least the film's interesting to go and see.

David:

Oh yeah, certainly not boring.

Perry:

Nobody else is doing this sort of stuff. And it is certainly worthwhile going to see. Absolutely. Yeah. All in all though, I can say I wasn't overly impressed with it, but I will go back and watch more.

David:

Hm, sure.

Perry:

So anything else about the film?

David:

About the film? No, no, just I guess what you were saying about the colours and the look the look of those films is very, uh very distinctive. I keep coming back in my mind to the scenes in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* in the elevator. Remember the elevator? It's got this absolutely fantastic cherry, I guess, a dark cherry-colored back to it.

Perry:

Yeah.

David:

It's just absolutely plain. But it's just so striking. Every time you see it, you go, oh, wow.

Perry:

Ralph Fiennes in that is just stunningly good.

David:

Oh, he's brilliant, yeah, yeah.

Perry:

I think he's just absolutely brilliant in that lead role. I thought it was just wonderful.

David:

And you don't often see him in a comedy role, do you?

Perry:

No, no, no, you don't. No, he's very much the dead-set serious type. So that was quite excellent, that one. Hm. All right, okay, so moving on.

***The Saint of Bright Doors* by Vajra Chandrasekera**

Perry:

So we'll go on now and have a talk now about the book that we decided we were going to to review and I'll look after that one. The book that we're talking about this month is *The Saint of Bright Doors* by Vajra Chandrasekera, Sri Lankan author. This novel won the 2023 Nebula Award for Best Novel. It won the 2024 Crawford Award, which is given for the best first fantasy novel of the year. It also won the 2024 Locus Award for Best First Novel, and was a finalist for the 2023 Hugo Award for Best Novel. So it made a fair bit of a splash, David, when it came out. Got onto rather a lot of awards lists. So that's why we wanted to read it.

David:

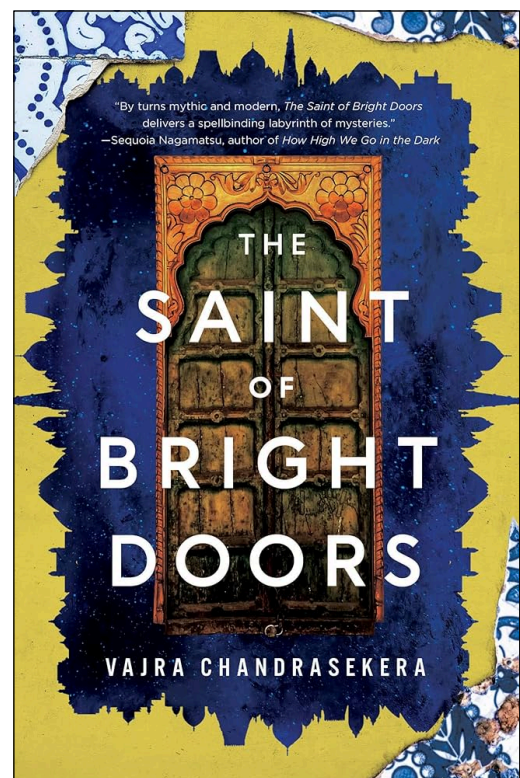
Which is why we wanted to to read it.

Perry:

Now, the question that I had to ask myself after I finished this is, is it possible to fully appreciate a novel if you're only vaguely aware of what its structure is attempting to mirror? I'll explain all this. Uh can you uh fully understand a novel if you have little or no knowledge of the cultural background against which it is set? 'Cause we're talking here about a Sri Lankan author. Now you might be able to figure this out, but I would argue its a struggle in both cases, really.

I know struggled with this 2023 debut fantasy novel by this Sri Lankan author. And that's certainly partly my fault. Or it may also be partly the fault of the author if they can't bring you along on the journey to fully appreciate what they're trying to achieve or if the work is overly ambitious, as we'll see. And I think this one is overly ambitious.

Now, at the start of this novel, in an unnamed Asian country, okay, if you know that the author's nationality, let's assume that it's maybe Sri Lanka, maybe southern India. Now, at the start of this novel, a boy is born, and at the moment of his birth, his mother, who's known as Mother-of-Glory—interesting name—pins his shadow to the earth and tears it from him, to quote from the book. Now, this act will impact the rest of his life. It allows him to defy the law of gravity and drift into the air



and to fly. It may also allow him to see the demons in the world, the invisible creatures that others cannot see. Though if there's a connection between this demon vision and his lack of a shadow, then I missed it somewhere, if it's there. I didn't get it.

The boy's name is Fetter, F-E-T-T-E-R, which we find out later in the book is fairly apt for the situation that he finds himself in. But in order to be explained, that actually becomes a spoiler, so we won't. Now we also later learn that his father is a messianic cult leader called, and I'll put in this in quotes the "Perfect and Kind". This is classic, ironic, cult fashion, you know, like the "Dear Leader" or, you know, the "Supreme Leader" or the "Great Protector". You know, basically, it's a fairly ironic statement. Perfect and kind, this guy certainly isn't. He abandoned the young boy Fetter and his mother before Fetter was even born. Now, as a response to this abandonment, his mother raises the boy to actually be a killer, to use his talents to be a killer, and in particular to be a killer of his father.

So we learn that early and that's where we think everything's going. But as the boy becomes an adult, he rejects this upbringing and leaves his mother's home for the city of Luriat, a place that is home to many brightly coloured doors that exist only on one side and which cannot be opened, supposedly. Now, Fetter assumes the identity of an acquaintance in order to get close enough to a particular door so he can study it properly. He has to inveigle his way into a small committee who are looking after a particular door to be able to convince them that he can get close to it and actually do some study. So he does sit down to study it properly, and this, you know, becomes an interesting part of the book. He sees a demon exit through one of the doors and realises that they are not as sealed as everybody thinks they are. But only he is able to see these demons, or so he thinks, and therefore he thinks that nobody else knows what's going on.

During his studies, he also discovers an object called "Relic a", odd name, which is actually one of his father's teeth and he later learns that he may be able to kill his father using this relic. Now, at this point in the novel, David, about a third of the way through, we have an idea of where we think it's all heading. We have a problem. What are the doors and what is their purpose? We have a protagonist with the abilities to solve that problem, that is the boy Fetter. And we also have his desperate need to seek that solution. He has to explain the demons somehow, he thinks that they may be coming into this world from another world through the doors and going back out again. So all seems set up for the rest of the plot and we seem to feel as though we know where things are going and where they're heading.

But then Fetter sets off on a strange journey of self-discovery. You know, he gets caught up and he gets thrown into what seems to be this massively huge prison that he has to try and work his way through. And this takes up the bulk, middle part, middle third of the book. And it's a journey, for the most part, that seems interminable and somewhat pointless. It just goes round and round. He just keeps meeting people and talking to them, and moving on, and doing something else, and working here and working there. You've got no real sense of time in terms of how long he's in this place for, or what he's doing, or why he's doing it, or where he's going. He just seems to be moving. And we don't know what's going on.

And so this whole coming-of-age thing resolves itself finally when he's picked up by his father's agents and the two finally meet. Well, this really to me seemed rather circumstantial and rather a letdown. He just happens to be in a certain place and these guys turn up. Oh, you're right, okay, grab you, and off you go. But

he's been in this massively huge prison that goes on and on and on, bigger than a ginormous city. And the guy just finds him somehow. Don't know how.

So anyway, Fetter goes off to meet his father. Is he going to kill him, or is he going to take another path? Is he going to follow his father's cult or return to his studies of the bright doors? And is he ever going to reconcile with his mother? That's probably what I suppose we're all going to figure out. But without giving away any spoilers, I could say the whole thing does get resolved at the end. It just seems to take an inordinate amount of time getting there. And it also discards a number of important plot elements along the way.

So for me, the general rule of a crime novel is that if you introduce a gun in Act One, you have to use it in Act Two. Otherwise you shouldn't have put it there. Here, both the bright doors of the title, and these doors that he's studying, and Fetter's ability to fly are introduced early and really are put to use later in the story. The trouble is, you get the feeling that the only reason they were added to the novel in the first place is so that they can be used later to get the writer and the main character out of a potentially sticky situation. They don't seem to do much else. They don't seem to be integrated into the flow of the story so much as thrown in, used up, and then forgotten. And added to that, I'm not sure why you'd call this novel *The Saint of Bright Doors* anyway. It's the title that Fetter's father offers to him when they do finally meet, but the doors are treated in such a loose manner. It's a good title, which is not the right one for this book because it's not really terribly descriptive of what actually goes on. Yes, there are doors. Yes, he's offered to be a saint. But that's really a minor part of the whole thing, in my view.

I found this book difficult to read. In fact, I kept on falling asleep over it. On a regular basis, I mean, I'd start to read it and I'd get 20, 30 pages in, and then just fall asleep. Now, it's not because of the concepts or the locale or the fact that it's told in the third person present. But also, it just seems to wander all over the place, as if it were trying to fit in more of the story than the story can actually handle. Maybe the book is based too much on the modern history of Sri Lanka, trying to include so much that the story structure can't handle the weight of the book's expectations. I don't know. I feel it'd be better if it been cleaner, more focused, and shorter. Now, I know it's only about 350 pages, which is actually quite short by modern fantasy novel standards, but I think it would have benefited by cutting about another fifty or so pages out of its length, especially that piece in the middle in the prison. I just felt they just kept on going on and on and on and not getting anywhere.

Now, there are some amusing touches along the way to help lighten the load a little. And I especially appreciated the idea that this country is flooded with cults. Cult leaders and, in quotes, "chosen ones". Those young people who are singled out by either birth or ability to be a future leader of a cult. Here many of them have decided to reject their assigned paths, rather like Fetter, and have formed themselves into a Chosen One support group. That Fetter gravitates towards, which I thought was absolutely fantastic. The idea that there's all these sort of gods or semi-gods all sitting around going, "Oh, do I really have to do this? I don't know what to do." It was great. I thought that bit was very funny. And I would have liked to have seen it explored a little more, but if it had, it would have been a very different book and we wouldn't be where we are now. Would it have been a better one? That's not for me to say. That's up for the author to say.

Now on the basis of this work, I can say that Chandrasekera appears to be an interesting writer. You know, from a sentence-by-sentence perspective, they're pretty good. But he does dig down into every single question that Fetter asks

himself about everything. And it slows the flow, in my view. I haven't read any other works by Chandrasekera that I'm aware of. He's written a number of short fiction stuff. But I just think he needed an editor with a sharper red pencil with this one. It just needed a bit of work. I get it. It's almost there, but not quite. I just think it just loses its way in the middle.

David, what did you think?

David:

Um, well, you obviously liked it a lot more than I did.

Perry:

Oh! [Laughs]

David:

All I can say is that this shows me how far my taste has now moved away from Nebula and Hugo Award nominations. I really didn't enjoy the book at all and I really, really, really had to push myself to get through it and finish it because we were going to talk about it here. So I kept pushing and pushing and pushing and I got to the point where I kept turning to the book and thinking, this bloody book, I've got to keep reading this bloody book.

I couldn't make any sense of what the book was supposed to be about. I couldn't get invested in or feel any sympathy at all for the main character. I found that the fantasy elements were both unconvincing and uninspired. Fantasy tropes kept popping up. It just kept dropping in all these new elements, fantasy elements, seemingly arbitrarily, and almost nothing of this is explained. For example, the key concept of these bright doors whose existence is never given any kind of clear explanation or justification or let alone any logic behind them. So I found it inventive, yes, but completely shallow. For me, it didn't have any relation to real people or real things or the real world. And I think all fantasy has to do that. Otherwise, as Philip Pullman says, otherwise it's just a load of old cobblers. And this, to me, was a load of old cobblers. So hated it.

Perry:

Okay, well.

David:

I wouldn't ever read anything by the author again.

Perry:

Oh, okay. Right. Well, that is a strong view. I wouldn't go so far as to say that. But as I said, I think he's bitten off more than he could put into this particular meal, in my view, in this particular novel. There's too much going on in parts of it that don't seem to make any sense.

I agree with you in the sense that things get thrown around all over the place. It reminded me a bit of the worst excesses of that funny sub-genre magic realism, which basically thinks, "Oh, well, I'll just take a fantasy element, drop it in, and I don't have to explain it, it'll just be there". And it just makes no bloody sense. Or you feel as though at times that the protagonist has taken some magic mushrooms somewhere but hasn't told you about them. And you just don't understand why it's gone the way that it has.

I read some reviews afterwards, as we do, you know, you sit there, you make a few notes about the particular thing, and you think, "Well, okay, I wonder what other people have got to say". And I read one where the guy said, "This is the best

book I've read in years. There's stuff going on that I loved on every single page." And I thought this guy's reading a book that I haven't ever heard of. It's not the one that I, that's not the one that I was reading.

And as I said I actually got to the point the same as you that around about a third of the way through, around about page 80 or 100 or thereabouts, I really started to struggle to get through this. I'd pick it up and I'd read 20 pages, and then I'd find myself, oh, half an hour later, I'd been asleep. And that doesn't happen with me very often. There just wasn't enough to keep me interested. And he, the main character, he really doesn't seem to change very much from the start of the book to the end of the book. He's pretty much the same as he was. Yeah. He doesn't change much. He's got this idea—and I don't know exactly why—he gets his real fixation on the doors. There's a build-up there. You know, he's studying the door in intricate detail and looking at all the different parts of the door and seeing it, and then getting a bit closer and realizing, oh, finding out that other people are being sick, where they're feeling ill when they get too close to the doors. He gets a bit of that, but he seems to get himself through that phase. And you think, oh, okay, now we're going to get somewhere. And he just stops and just goes away and leaves it. And you think, well, you had a really good concept there that might have turned into a very interesting take on a portal fantasy, and he just threw it away. And then you come back to it later on and you realise, oh, okay, that's why you had it. And it's purely to kill it, it's purely to fix a plot point written for a very short couple of pages near the end of the book. And I thought, oh, I was let down by that as well. And I thought, no, that's not really good. As I said, it's an element that he just throws away.

David:

Yeah, I'll tell you what I'd also thought was thrown away, and that's this Relic a. They've discovered somehow that this relic, which is turns out to be the old man's tooth, this relic is able to kill the old man if he gets close enough to it. You know, they've got to keep it in some magic, you know, shielding so that it doesn't kill him instantly when he's within fifty kilometres of it. So it's this big deal and before that [Fetter] has to find some documents, they have to break into a building to find some documents which are about this relic. So it's a big deal, it's like a really big deal in the story. And then he turns up to a place where they're actually keeping this thing. And the young woman who's in charge of this precious relic, which is incredibly dangerous, etc., she just tosses it to him. And he grabs it, and it's this tooth. And almost in the next paragraph, she puts it back and she's got white knuckles because she's so tense about it. But you just threw it to him, you know? What's that about? And then you keep going on, you think, oh, well, this is going to be an important plot point, this tooth. He's going to carry it and he'll kill off his father. And that [idea] then is just thrown away. That didn't work anymore. Because the father is able to reconfigure reality so that it never affects him. You know, I mean it's totally thrown away.

Perry:

That's another cop out, isn't it? I mean, oh yeah, your father's reconfigured reality and you know, he could go back and do whatever he wants, but he he just decided he wouldn't do that today. Okay. What? Sorry, um but I don't know. It seems as though the author here is playing, as we said, playing with a whole lot of fantasy themes and tropes and just dropping them in where it suits the story to move it along, just to make sure that there's a flow going.

Yeah, doesn't get there for me. I mean if I was voting on this one I wouldn't have put it, I wouldn't have voted for this for any of the awards because for me it

shows some writing talent, but it needs it needs a real good, strong, guiding hand over the top of his work in order to make sure that he's not just throwing the stuff away.

Superman, directed by James Gunn

Perry:

Anyway, so an interesting point about the tooth that you say, because as you were talking about that I realized, oh yes, okay, that's right. And that reminded me, it's almost like the Superman version of kryptonite, isn't it? Well, sooner or later that Superman's going to be caught out with some kryptonite of certain colors. And I don't know whether you're that close an aficionado of the Superman comics...

David:

I was. I was when I was thirteen.

Perry:

...[but] all the different ones: there's green, there's red, there's gold, there's white, there's black, there's one of them, if he gets even close to it, will kill him instantly, I think, or take all of his powers away completely, and he'll never get them back again. Which always struck me as being a bit of a weirdo one.

How's anybody going to know? How do they prove that? And what the hell is that for, anyway? Because anyway, it doesn't matter. But the interesting thing about that is that the reason why I wanted to mention that as we're carrying on, because we've now finished with that book, in case people haven't realized, is that I went to see the new DC *Superman* movie recently in the cinema. This is reboot of everything from DC, you know, the Batman-Superman stuff, uh,

moving it away from the Zack Snyder dark sort of colours that they had all over the place. And they've brought in James Gunn, who's probably best known as a.. he did the *Guardians of the Galaxy* Marvel films, which came through first off about halfway through the big major run of the first couple of cycles of Marvel.

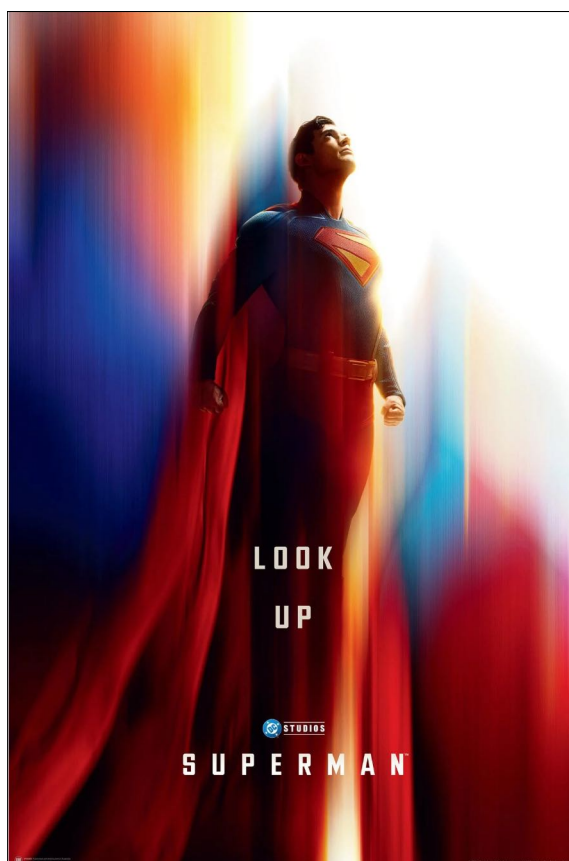
And they were, this is about 10 years ago.

David:

Yeah, they're quite fun, aren't they?

Perry:

Oh, they are. They were completely stepped to one side, really, instead of the, you know, the big, "we're here to save the world". It was like, oh, "I'm here to steal something and go away and sell it", you know, sort of stuff. And it was just basically a lot of fun. And they had a lot of weird and interesting characters, and it was it was really quite good stuff. They had a light feel to it, and that's basically what Gunn has now brought to *Superman*, the colours are a lot lighter. There's a new



actor, forgive me, I can't remember the actor's name, but seems to do a good job. I really liked Henry Cavill, so I thought he was great because I think he looked the part and he had the gravitas to be able to play Superman, but also enough of a dweeby look about him to be able to do the Clark Kent side of it as well. This guy does a pretty good job. *Superman* itself is, oh yeah, it's worth seeing. You'll probably see it because it's in the trailer, there is a superdog as well, which I thought was hmmm. When I saw the super dog, I thought, oh, I'm not going to like this. I spoke to my son about it. He went to see the film first. And he said that he thought the dog was the best part of the whole film.

David:

Okay, right.

Perry:

I thought, oh, this doesn't augur well.

David:

Well, there you go.

Perry:

But I went along and I know the dog's all right, actually. It's handled pretty well. And yeah, you find out a bit more about the dog as the whole film goes along. But, pretty reasonable stuff. Oh, and I actually quite liked this *Superman*. Yeah, I enjoyed it. I enjoyed it a lot.

What Else We've Been Watching/Reading

Perry:

Have you seen anything or read anything else, David?

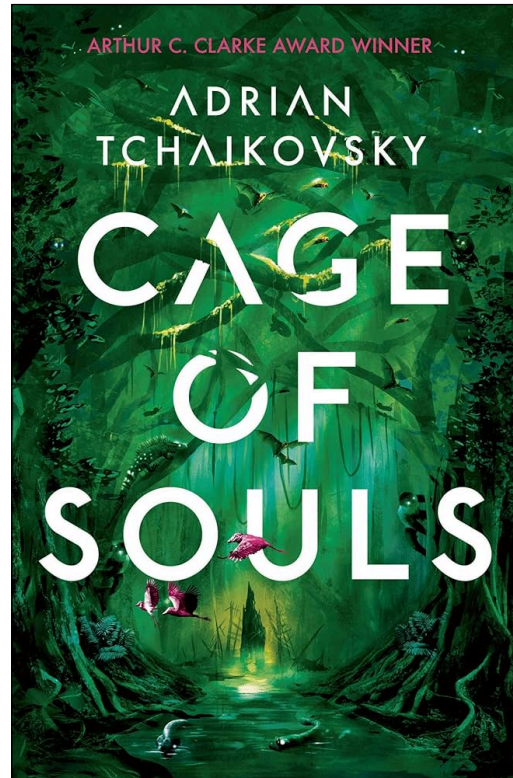
Cage of Souls by Adrian Tchaikovsky

David:

I thought I might talk about a couple of books that I've finished, because I've been reading so little as I say and then there's a couple of movies I'll talk about.

So I read another book by Adrian Tchaikovsky. This is called *Cage of Souls*. That was interesting I thought. It's set on Earth, so it's SF, of course, science fiction set on Earth, but it's in the far future and they've never developed any kind of interstellar or even interplanetary travel. It's all on the Earth. And there's only one city left on Earth. Everything has become degraded and degenerated over time.

Humanity is pretty much all the same, but evolution has worked its way on lots of other animals. And so there's these quite scary sort of monsters that have evolved. It starts in a way which is very reminiscent, probably deliberately so I think, very reminiscent of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in that the protagonist, at the very beginning of the book, the protagonist is on board a ferry chugging its way up a river through dense jungle to reach a place called The Island, which turns out to be a floating prison. And the rest of the novel deals with events both on The island and how the protagonist came to be there, how he came to be imprisoned. I thought it was very well done. I enjoyed it quite a lot.



Perry:

He's another author that you need to keep an eye on.

David:

He always writes good stuff, yeah.

Perry:

He's always putting out interesting material. How long was *Shroud*? That was probably 350 pages.

David:

Yeah, that's about that sort of length.

Perry:

And that, that had something going on all the time that kept your interest.

David:

Yeah, yeah, no, it was good. I can recommend it.

Perry:

Yep.

***Let Me Tell You* by Shirley Jackson**

David:

Talking about favourite authors, the other book I finished reading, was a collection of previously unpublished, or obscurely published, short stories by the American writer Shirley Jackson who was writing in the late 1940s up until her death in 1965 at the tragically early age of 48.

During her short life she wrote very prolifically. She squeezed in time to write between looking after a household and raising four kids, so she did a darn good job. I'm a big, big fan of her writing, and so it was wonderful to have this collection of new material, well, new to me material, which was put together, researched, and selected by two of her children. And a great writer, terrific writer.

***Firefly* (TV Series) and *Serenity* (film), directed by Joss Whedon**

And then for watching, I watched the whole of *Firefly*, of which there was only ever one season. That was on Disney Plus. I've never seen it before, but it's considered a classic TV series. It came out in 2002, but was infamously cancelled by the studio, Fox Studio, even before the last few episodes were aired. I think they only showed 12 episodes and there'd been 14 made. But when the full season came out on DVD, it became a real sort of viral hit, and fans of the series campaigned for it to return. But they didn't put it back on on TV. But instead, a movie, *Serenity*, was made to carry on the story.



So just a basic outline of the story: Nathan Fillion is the actor who's the captain of the Firefly-class spaceship *Serenity*, which has a motley crew. This had very low production values, really low production values. The spaceship model work is like—the *Thunderbirds* puppets did it better, you know, really. And all the settings on so-called alien planets are obviously just dusty parts of America somewhere. But the concentration of the characters in the storyline makes it really, really well worth watching. So, having seen this TV series, I then went and found the movie *Serenity*, which is a very smooth continuation of the *Firefly* story, continues straight on from the story and the last episode of the TV series. All the same cast and same background. I thought it wrapped it up really, really, very nicely.

***Fantastic Four: First Steps*, directed by Matt Shakman**

Um I went to see *Fantastic Four: First Steps* in the cinema. I thought it was okay.

Perry:

Oh good. Yep, I saw that as well. So what did you think of that?

David:

There have been lots of attempts to do the Fantastic Four characters, but none of them have been very good. This is probably certainly the best so far, I think. I like the sort of retro science fiction look to it, like the 1950s version of the future.

Perry:

Yeah, it's all a bit weird. You get this sort of retro-futurist where one family seems to have, you know, everything going for it in terms of faster than light travel and yet they haven't got anything like solid state drives or everything's on tape or disc or it's you know, it's all a bit weird, you know..

David:

Yeah, the robot the robot with with with tape for his eyes, yeah, it's very clever.

Perry:

But I also found it a bit strange that they decide that they have to go and investigate something that's happened to the world. So they get to the spaceship and they take it off from the Hudson River, which is just next door to New York. And everybody sits here, oh, look, there it goes. Isn't that wonderful? Yeah, but what happens if it bloody blew up? I mean, what's going on there? I find that really weird.

David:

If it was an Elon Musk special. Yes, yes, well.



Perry:

You know, they do like putting space stations or spaceports, launch facilities well away from everything else because if they blow up they do have a tendency to make a bit of a mess, and you don't want to be around them when that happens. But you know, oh, well, this is going to work, so that's all right, and off they go. Take off, and it's all you know, one-stage rockets and all that sort of stuff until they get into orbit and then they go off. But all that aside, I'm being a bit facetious and picking holes in it. It took me a while to get into it because I was thinking, oh, this is not going to work. No, this is. Actually, this is working all right. This is actually not bad. And you get slowly get to the point where you realize that, even right back to the very beginning of this Marvel movie, if you remember normally what happens in the Marvel movies, and you've watched a lot of them over the last couple of years. Well they do those that comic flickering at the front, you know, flicker flicker and the Marvel logo comes up.

David:

Go over the comic Marvel comics there.

Perry:

They didn't do that with this one. It was a completely different logo. And you look at that and you think, oh, okay, so they are trying to take a step to one side and do something slightly different.

David:

That's interesting. Yeah, yeah. Refresh the whole thing.

Perry:

Well, refresh that part of it, because you learn that this particular Fantastic Four are living in another parallel universe somewhere called, I don't know, eight twenty eight or something, which is supposed to be um Jack Kirby's birth date, I think, August twenty eighth, so eight twenty eight. But we're in another named world, not number one, some other big number, which I'm yeah, and so there's there's thousands of these bloody things, and so they can jump around all over the place.

David:

Different timeline, yeah, yeah.

Perry:

Which is a bit of a problem because then it starts becoming the stage where you can do whatever you want and move it all around and doesn't make a lot of sense. Although, of course, then people would say, well, how can you say that Marvel movies make any sense anyway? But really, but you have to get to the point where, a bit like going back to *The Saint of Bright Doors*, you want to get to the point where you want things to be internally consistent and you want them to be there and sort of semi-explained and have a particular reason for being there.

Not just as, oh, beauty, I can use this like a penknife and open it up and get something out, and then I can just discard it and nobody will notice. But you spent ages, you know, bringing up this particular plot element as though it's going to be an important part of it, and then you just throw it away. You don't want that. And they don't do that here. But if they move off to other worlds, well, then maybe it'll get a bit, get a bit strange. But there we go.

David:

Have you seen the movie *Thunderbolts*?

Perry:

No, I haven't seen that one yet.

David:

Ah, because there's something at the end of that links into the *Fantastic Four*.

Perry:

Yeah, there's always these things sort of linking along. I'm trying to work my way gradually through all the Marvel stuff again, one film a month, just to sort of get up to the point where I've seen them all and reviewed them all. It's an interesting exercise going back and seeing them again after about ten or so years and you realize that the special effects they were using were pretty damn good and they hold up really quite well. Some of the movies look like they were thrown in just to fill a gap in the schedule and really not all that flash at all, but they just are there to introduce another part of the [story], so that later on in the next film they can use it. So it's all chunking together. But they go up and down in quality. Also, you've got to keep in mind that there are these post-credit sequences and there's...

David:

Yes, you've got to wait for those. Yeah, you really have to sit through the credits to see the end.

Perry:

And there is actually a post-credit sequence in *Superman* as well, right at the end, which doesn't foreshadow anything else that's going to be coming up, but it's just there.

***Heretic*, directed by Scott Beck and Bryan Woods**



Perry:

But the other one that I wanted to have a talk about a little was the film *Heretic*, which is a horror movie starring Hugh Grant, where Hugh Grant plays the, for what a better term, the monster. This is on Amazon Prime. I'm not sure if you're aware of the film. Came out last year or the year before. He plays a man that lives alone in an old house on the edge of a town, and he's visited by two young Mormon missionaries. And they ask him whether he would like to know more about his Saviour Jesus Christ and he says, Well, yes, actually, I would, and invites them in. And they're a bit dubious about going in. No, I'll just give you that. No, no, no, I'll get you in. I'll go and get the wife. Oh, okay. So there's a wife, so that's all right.

So in they go. Only to find out, of course, there is no wife, and he now has them in the house. Now, you can tell that Hugh Grant just loved playing this role, you know, completely against type. He's no longer the young romantic lead. He's probably close to 60 now. And when he smiles, his face just sort of has lots of lines all over it now, David. He's not the smooth young guy from *Notting Hill*, but he's obviously having an absolutely great time. It's not a splatter movie. There are bits of violence in it, but nothing terribly over the top. Only a couple of sequences where I had to close the eyes a little bit because even then I'm a little bit, as I'm I'm not great on knives entering flesh, put it that way, shall we say? So there's one small sequence where he cuts a girl's arm open just to try and find something. It's no good. But, you know. Anyway, he does seem to find what he's looking for. Excellent film. I'd suggest if you're got even a mild interest in horror that you go and you go along and have a look at it. And as I said, it's on Amazon Prime. So the stuff rolls out in the end. It finally gets out there and gives us all an opportunity to watch it on streaming services rather than having to wander down the cinema.

But you must have been going to the cinema, which is good to hear, David.

David:

I have, but not in very recent weeks, but yes, uh earlier on uh on this year I was certainly going a lot more.

Yeah, your link to horror though just reminds me that I didn't actually give the name of that collection of Shirley Jackson stories, and that the title of the book is *Let Me Tell You* by Shirley Jackson. So I thought I'd get that in. Mind you, I never understand why she's considered to be a horror writer, because she doesn't write horror.

Perry:

Okay. I think people just try to put labels on them and they don't know what else to...

David:

Well, there's like one book which is *The Haunting of Hill House* which people think is a horror story, but in fact it isn't. I don't believe it is.

Perry:

You know what the problem is when that happens, people get fixated on it. I mean, rather than looking at what the book is and what... so it used to be that all of Stephen King's books, regardless of what they were, were chunked into horror. Now, because some of the books that he's been writing over the last 10 years or so, I mean, pure crime novels, all of his books end up in crime. And you go, what's that doing there? But, you know, they've got, oh, I've got an author, I've got to put him somewhere, because all he ever writes is the same stuff. Well, authors don't. You have to allow for the fact that they're going to write something in one genre and something in another. And let them do that. But then they say, well, then the customer can't find them. Look, if the customer is going to go looking for Stephen King, they're going to find them. If they're going to go and do a bit of work to try and find Shirley Jackson, they will find Shirley Jackson regardless, and all you need to do is basically go and ask if you can't find stuff in a bookshop.

David:

Absolutely. Yeah.

Perry:

All right, David, I think we're about done for this particular episode.

David:

I think we're done.

Perry:

So next month...

David:

Did we decide what we were going to talk about? I've forgotten.

Perry:

Yes, we're doing one film, one book again. So the film that we're going to be looking at next time is *Children of Men*.

David:

Ah, yes, yes.

Perry:

Based on the P. D. James novel, so I should read the novel again as well watch as the film. And the book that we're going to be looking at is **Ghost Cities**, which won this year's Miles Franklin Award by Siang Liu. So I know very little about it at all, but because it won the Miles Franklin Award, it is worth our attention. So we'll have a bit of a look at that, see how that goes.

David:

Indeed.

Perry:

All right, David, good talking to you.

David:

Okay. Indeed.

Perry:

See you next month.