



Two Chairs In Print



Issue 9 Children of the Future Age



Children of the Future Age

Season 2 Episode 9, September 30, 2025



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 9, Season 2

Introduction

David:

Hello, and welcome to episode nine of the second season of Two Chairs Talking. My name is David Grigg, and I'm joined as always—or almost always—by my good friend and co-host, Perry Middlemiss.

AFL Grand Final

David:

Now, Perry, I believe that there was some kind of sporting event over the weekend. I don't know about these things. Explain.

Perry:

Oh yes, David. Well, you know, for your non-sporting types. Last Saturday in September in Melbourne is always the Australian Football League Grand Final. And so I had half a dozen friends around for a barbecue around at my place and we sat around and we were actually pretty good this year. We might have overeaten, but we didn't overindulge the alcohol, which is normally it's the other way around. So we did quite well this year, quite circumspect.

Interesting game. My team wasn't playing, so I had no skin in the game, and I was quite happy about that. But it's just one of those sporting cultural events. If you can put sporting and cultural together to describe a football match, I do. I'm interested in sport and I will have arguments to the end of the day, extolling the virtues of what sport can do for you.

David:

There you go. Well, you see, as a non-sporting, certainly non-Australian-Rules follower, I very much feel that I'm on the outer. But then I was born in a different country.

Perry:

Well, this is true. This is true.

David:

So that has to count for something.

Perry:

I'm fully aware that there's a large number of people who are not interested in sport. I just happen to be so, and it is one of the big three, four events, four sporting events in Melbourne every year. So there's the Australian Open Tennis, the AFL Grand Final, the Melbourne Cup and of course the Boxing Day Test match. And I know a lot of people basically find the whole thing incredibly boring, so we won't talk about it any more other than to say that for me, the grand final, last Saturday in September, marks that movement away from winter into spring, the first barbecues. So here it is. Now we move on to warmer weathers and warmer climes, which is good.

David:

So that's a seasonal marker as much as anything else.

Perry:

Yep. It's a seasonal marker for me as much as anything else. Yeah, that's the way I look at it.

So, what else has been going on in the world of things, David?

2025 Ned Kelly Awards**David:**

Well, the Ned Kelly Awards were announced. Ned Kelly Awards, of course, being the premier crime awards given in Australia, named after you-know-who.

Perry:

Okay. Yep.

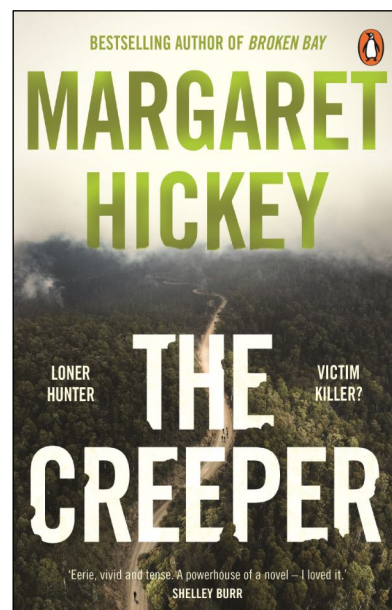
David:

And I just thought we might run over the winners. Now, I have to say that I haven't read any of the winners. In fact, I don't think I've even read anything on the short list, which is perhaps an indication of how little I'm actually reading this year, but never mind.

So so the winners of the Ned Kelly Awards for this year were: Best Crime Fiction was given to Margaret Hickey for her novel *The Creeper*. The best debut novel was *All You Took From Me* by Lisa Kenway. The best true crime was *A Thousand Miles from Care* by Steve Johnson and the Best International Crime was *A Case of Matricide* by Graham McRae Burnett.

I just thought I'd read very briefly what they say about each of the winners. So the best crime fiction for *The Creeper* by Margaret Hickey. The panel of judges praised Hickey's novel for "its chilling story telling, incredible setting, and for seamlessly drawing readers into the dark world of the protagonist". So it sounds good. The best debut novel, which was *All You Took From Me* by Lisa Kenway. The judging panel described her first novel as an original and fascinating exploration of anesthesia—I wonder whether they mean amnesia?—anesthesia and memory following the death of a beloved spouse. Surely that's supposed to be amnesia. Never mind. I should read the book. The best true crime went to *A Thousand Miles from Care* by Steve Johnson. The judging panel described this book as a gripping and heartbreaking story behind the supposed suicide of his brother Scott, a thirty-year quest to overcome discrimination, prejudice, and open hostility from the New South Wales Police to reveal his brother's brutal murder. That sounds very interesting. And the best international crime fiction I've never even heard of *A Case of Matricide* by Graeme McCrae Burnett. And the panel described it as an extremely clever, witty, and moving meditation on humanity. They all sound interesting, but I haven't read any of them. I'll just have to look see if I can read some of them.

The other thing I was going to say was that on the short list, certainly for the best crime novel there were a number of authors, at least, that I'd heard of. *Sanctuary* by Gary Disher didn't get a gong.



You've read that, haven't you, *Sanctuary*?

Perry:

Yeah, I've read that. I enjoyed that.

David:

Yeah. I've read one book by J.P. Pomare, but he or she was nominated for *Seventeen Years Later*. And *Storm Child* by Michael Robotham was also on the shortlist. Yeah, there we go.

Perry:

Okay. Alright, was *Storm Child* by Robotham part of his new series? The one that I spoke about, *Good Girl, Bad Girl*?

David:

I don't know.

Perry:

Hmm, okay. Well, we better check that out and find out.

Reading slowdown and film watching

David:

The thing is, we have to go back to reading. We've got to get back to reading books.

Perry:

So, yes, well, we might have to.

David:

I've started, I think, I've started to get into more of a habit of setting aside time to read.

Perry:

Oh, yeah, I've got to do that.

David:

So that's good.

Perry:

It's been a very bad year for me for reading. I don't even think I'm up to one a week at the moment. That's how badly it's been. I suddenly sit there and think, another month's gone by, and I haven't finished another book yet.

So maybe we've just pushed too hard and for too many years, David, and then it's just a matter of the brain saying, "Oh, we'll go off and do something else".

I have been watching a lot of films, though. I've been watching a lot of films. And so I'm up to about 95 so far this year.

David:

Gosh!

Perry:

Well, yeah, yeah, you know, because as I've said, I've got the cinema nearby, which is pretty good. Tuesdays, \$8 for a film for a new release or an old release.

David:

Very cheap, very good.

Perry:

I've also got a number of streaming services, and so you've got so much stuff that's available to you. It's all there, and you can now pick it up. You know, back in the day when you and I were growing up, David, and we were basically having to say that, well, let's say we wanted to go and follow, I don't know, pick a director, Kurosawa, let's say, because he's on my mind at the moment about a few things. If you were going to try and see his stuff, you really had to wait around for one of those cinemas like the Astor or the old Valhalla to put on a double feature or put on specific showings of them because there was absolutely no way of being able to get to see them.

Then, of course, video came in in the 80s, and then DVDs, and then Blu-ray came in. And then streaming services came in, and suddenly it all opened up. But if you go looking to try and find where some of these films are, you find that they're not actually on any of the streaming services. And suddenly you're back to the point of "Oh how do I get this? Well, I have to go and buy it. Or maybe, hopefully, I can find somewhere where one of the streaming services will allow me to rent it." So, you know, so it's still a bit of work, but it's a lot easier now than it used to be 40, 50 years ago. And so I'm, as I've said previously, catching up on a lot of the stuff that I've missed over the years, or I'm going back and watching it again for the last time, because I don't think I'm going to have enough time left in my lifetime to go back and wander through things yet again.

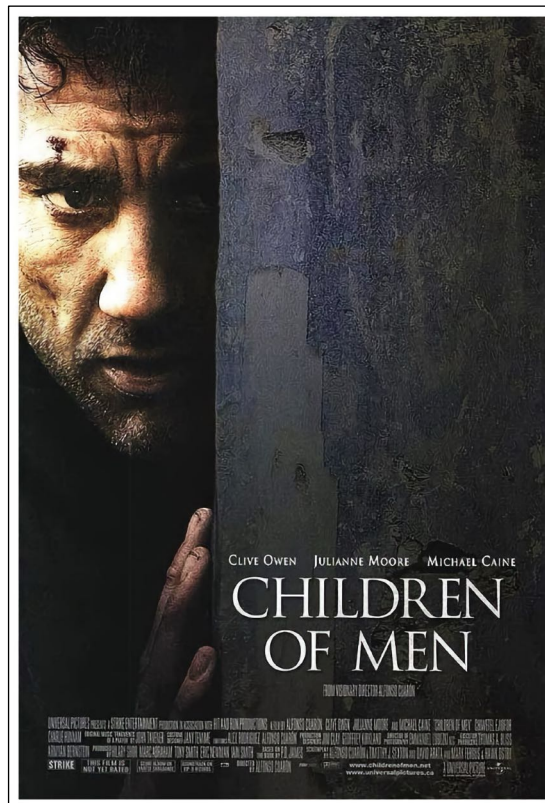
So I went back and I watched all the three *Lord of the Rings* films. So being able to get and watch those three of those in a week because they were on one of the streaming services. It was good. I could do it late at night, turn all the lights off, sit and watch it, go to bed, don't have to worry about trying to trek home from the cinema. It was good. Makes things a heck of a lot easier. And it makes it a lot easier just to sit and catch up with those films. And as a result, you have a tendency to watch a lot more. It's a good thing.

Discussion

Children of Men, directed by Alfonso Cuarón

And so that's actually a nice segue into our reviewing, David for this month, because we are talking about a film and a book again, the film being *Children of Men*. Now, normally, David, when I'm reviewing a film with a screenplay that's an adaptation of a novel, I tend to read the novel first and then watch the film because I want to basically see how it all fits together. It's just a personal preference. We did this a couple of months ago, a few episodes ago, back with Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*. I read the book and then saw the film, and that way you can get a bit of an idea of how the filmmakers put it all together.

The trouble is that way of doing things tends to colour your perception of a film as you compare it to the original novel. You know, you have to ask yourself: Is this a true adaptation? Would you have done it this way? Is it faithful to the book's intentions and what's been left out and what's been added? And so questions like this tend to run through my head as I'm watching the film. And frankly, I don't really think that it's all that fair on the film version. So I thought, well, why don't I just watch a film in isolation? You know, knowing full well that its screenplay is an adaptation, but also knowing nothing about the original source material.



David:

Same for me.

Perry:

And so, with my review this month of the film *Children of Men*, I decided to do just that. So, first the background on the film, David. It was directed by Alfonso Cuarón from a screenplay by himself, Timothy Sexton, David Arata, Mark Fergus and Hawk Ostby. Remember those names, I'll come back to them in a minute.

Now it was adapted from the novel *The Children of Men* by P. D. James. And note the slight title change there. I don't know why they chose it and dropped the "The" out, but anyway they did. It features actors Clive Owen, Julianne Moore, Michael Kane and Chiwetel Ejiofor. It was released in September 2006, so 19 years ago. Wow. Wow, almost twenty years ago. And nominated for three Academy Awards: Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Cinematography and Best Film Editing. It didn't win any of those, although I can understand after watching the film why it was nominated for them. Now it did rank as number 13 in a BBC Film Critics poll of the best films released between 2000 and 2016, and was ranked



highly in quite a number of top ten film lists for 2006. So it does have some level of pedigree. It got reasonable reviews when it came out.

Alfonso Cuarón is a Mexican filmmaker who also directed, amongst other films, the films *Harry Potter and The Prisoner of Azkaban* in 2004. And that was the film that he directed immediately prior to this one, *Children of Men*, and *Gravity* in 2013, which came immediately after, so there was a seven-year gap. Now, I like both of those, though I'm aware that some people didn't think very highly of *Gravity*. In any event, Cuarón is a filmmaker of some talent and no little style.

David:

Yeah, I thought it [*Gravity*] was good. And in fact, of the Harry Potter movies, I think the third one is probably the best. The one that he did.

Perry:

Okay, there you go. Alright. Not sure whether we should ever go back and have a look at all the Harry Potters and work our way through. No, probably not. Don't go there. Don't go there.

Of the screenwriters which I mentioned earlier, Sexton, Arada, Fergus, and Ostby, the only names that seemed familiar to me were those of Mark Fergus and Hawk Ostby. Now, a bit of research indicated that these two work as a screenwriting duo, David, and have been responsible for the scripts for such films as *Iron Man*, that's the original *Iron Man*. And *Cowboys and Aliens*, which had Daniel Craig and Harrison Ford. One good, one so-so. So I thought *Iron Man* was good.

Cowboys and Aliens so-so. Enjoyable, but so-so. But they were also responsible for the creation of the TV series *The Expanse*, based on the novels of James S. A. Corey, which provides a reasonable indicator of the duo's interest in SF. So we can see what it is they're doing and where their interest lies. Now as I said earlier, I've not read the original novel by P.D. James, who was mostly known for her crime novels, featuring Adam Dalgleish and Cordelia Gray.

David:

Yes, for sure.

Perry:

As far as I can ascertain, this is her only novel that might be considered to fit within the genre of SF. So, rather like Ishiguro again in that regard, though he's written quite a few more that might fit under the SF umbrella.

But getting back to the film itself, to the background of the film story. The year when the film is set is 2027, and two decades of human infertility have resulted in no live human births in that time. The UK, where this film is set, has morphed into a totalitarian state where refugees and immigrants, including those from other European countries, Germany and France as well, are arrested, imprisoned in concentration camps, and then deported or executed. The country is in a total mess, and it's really reflected well in this film. Terrorist groups carry out bombing campaigns. The streets are filled with rubbish. The buildings are covered in graffiti and people basically just live without hope. It's a really nasty place that has been depicted here. Rapidly sliding to a rather ignominious end, you assume. Now, the lead character in this film is named Theo, Theo Faron. I can't remember ever hearing his name.

David:

Yeah, Faron, I think you're right.

Perry:

Faron, yeah, he's called Theo all the way through. Played by Clive Owen.

He's an ex-activist who has now settled down for a boring corporate life after the early death of his son. After an introductory sequence in which he's almost blown up in a cafe, Theo is kidnapped by a militant refugee rights group known as The Fishes, run by his ex-wife Julian Taylor, who's played by Julianne Moore. Julian wants Theo to use his contacts within government—because he's got a cousin who's a government minister—to obtain some transit permits for a refugee that Julian wants to get out of the country. Doesn't tell him why, just wants to get this, it doesn't even tell him who this person is, just wants to get this person out of the country.

Now, Theo needs the money. and actually offers to get the papers and also to provide himself as an escort for a larger sum because he just wants the more money that he can get. And Julian agrees to this arrangement. The person Julian wants transported is a young African woman named Kee who we later find out is pregnant and this is a bit of a shock because of course there haven't been any pregnancies for 20 years. Julian's aim is to get Kee out of the country and to an organisation called the Human Project based in the Azores. There, Kee can have a child and be protected while work continues in trying to find a cure for the worldwide infertility.

But things start going wrong from the very start. Julian is killed in a random attack by an armed gang as they're travelling, and then others of Julian's group plot to get rid of Theo and take Kee for themselves. She's the symbol, and that's where the power is. What follows for Julian and Kee is a harrowing journey to freedom, into a concentration camp, and through a lot of armed conflict all over the place. Cuarón has stated that he wanted to explore the single-point hypothesis of human origins, you know, Adam and Eve, even Joseph and Mary maybe, and the status of dispossessed people. This last point is particularly relevant in our own time, David, as we've got troubled times as immigrants and



refugees around the world are being treated with such disdain and brutality just about everywhere.

The film also examines the themes of hope and faith, both being the only things that Theo can hang on to in the face of the despair and desolation that he finds around him. Now, if you have a mind to, you could read this film as an allegory of the birth of Christ. And there are many, many aspects of the film that would tend to emphasize that reading. So there's a lot going over here, a lot of depth. You've got two people, one child, yeah, it's Joseph and Mary's story in a big way. You can read that. I mean, you've also got the point that there's been a deliberate point of choosing an African woman as the mother of the first child. You know, that's the old Out of Africa theory for human origins, so that's interesting.

It is interesting also to note that the filmmakers make absolutely no attempt to explain the reasons why this infertility crisis came to be. And I really don't think one is needed. It just doesn't need it. Spending any time on that would have slowed the flow of the action, diluted the message, which examines a what-if scenario. What if our society no longer contained any children? Nor had the possibility of seeing any in the future? How would that impact the everyday lives of the general populace? And there's a midwife who follows Kee and Julian at one point. She's staring at a playground and says she just misses the sound of children in a playground. It seems like the world's empty without that.

Of the actors in the film, Clive Owen does an incredible amount of work here. He's in practically every scene in the film. There may be one or two where he's not, but I'd be hard-pressed to remember where they were. Cuarón later acknowledged Owen's creative input into the overall film. Basically sent him

information as Cuarón and his writers were writing the scenes and getting Owen's feedback. So he had a lot going on all the way right through this. Julianne Moore comes and goes rather quickly. You really don't get much of an indication of what she's like. Michael Caine, who's in the film also, plays an old friend of Theo's who lives off the grid and provides the group with some respite and supplies, and puts in a typically solid Caine performance. He's not there for very long.

David:

It's very much Michael Caine being Michael Caine, isn't it?

Perry:

Oh, very much. But it's just funny. He plays an old hippie who's always doped out of his brain, but he's got a wife who's got dementia and he's contemplating using the suicide kits that the government supplies to everybody.

Now, as a pure piece of filmmaking, there's much to appreciate and dive into here in this film. There's almost a documentary feel to the grime and filth of the streets. The long, long single camera shot when Theo must rescue Kee from a building which is under attack from the British Army is really quite excellent. Real cinema verite, where the cinematographer follows through the streets, there's gunfire going around him, explosions going all over the place, people being shot around him.

There's many, many different parts of this film that really stand out. Cuarón knows how to set up a scenario and really holds the interest, the viewers' interest, really well. So, I was really impressed with this, probably more so on this second viewing, because I think I got more out of it this second time round. And I gave it a good, solid 4.2 on my five-point scale for this one. So, what did you think of it, David?

David:

Oh, I loved it. I thought it was fantastic. In fact, I watched it twice. In three days.

Perry:

Okay, good move.

David:

I like to do it with a movie that really appeals to me. There's so much going on in this movie that it really repaid watching. Similarly to the way I dealt with *Parasite*, which we talked about a few episodes ago, seeing it the second time, you pick up a lot of stuff which which I thought was...

My starting point is I thought it was excellent. You know, I really, really liked it. I thought Clive Owen does a really terrific job throughout. I've written a few notes about it. So I really like the way that the film starts, which, if you remember, is about everyone is mourning the death of the world's youngest person.

Perry:

Baby Diego is it?

David:

Baby Diego. And if you knew nothing at all about about the concept prior to that, that sets you right immediately there. How can there be a world's youngest person? Who is eighteen years or something like old? How *can* there be? And you think, oh, well, you know, there can't have been any other children born. So that's a very clever way of getting into the concept, I think.

Perry:

Well, it's a nice turnaround, because all the time you're hearing about the world's *oldest* person. And this is the flip side. This is the world's youngest.

David:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. So I thought that was really really clever. And I thought the cinematography was fantastic. There's these long, long takes, there's long, long shots, some of them incredibly difficult to do. If you read the Wikipedia article about it, that some of them they thought were just going to be impossible, but they found a way to way to do them. And I liked, as you say, I like the gritty, grotty look to everything. Even when you're in the city, everything's filthy and dirty. There are garbage bags piled in the street which haven't been collected. All the colours are muted.

And then this is huge contrast when Theo goes to visit his cousin who's the Minister for the Arts. This guy's apartments is filled with all these world classic artworks that they've rescued from the rest of the world or stolen from the rest of the world. You know, it's a bit like the Elgin Marbles. He's got the *Guernica*, Picasso's *Guernica* in his dining room, on the wall and the statue of Michelangelo's *David* with a broken... with a leg part portion replaced. I thought that was great.

Perry:

It's interesting. There was something that I should have gone back and watched that again, because I do remember him saying something like, "Oh, yeah, we were able to rescue this from Madrid," or "We were able to get that, and we missed some other things." So it's almost alluding to the fact that there's been some conflagration or big fight somewhere. I didn't quite pick up exactly what that was.

David:

Well I'll come to that because there's a way to understand all that.

Perry:

Okay.

David:

So on a second of viewing I could pay attention to all the advertisements and things that were going on, the signs that are up everywhere, and you pick up a lot from that and all the warnings to people and it's reminiscent of what's happening in America at the moment. [Warnings] of illegal immigrants, report anyone you know who [might] be an illegal immigrant. It's a federal crime not to cooperate with the authorities. And it's very, very much on point today. But there's a point where Theo has first been abducted and they take him, do you remember where they put him? He's actually inside an old newspaper booth, a newsagent's stand, and all the walls are plastered with newspapers.

Perry:

Oh, okay. Yep. Yep.

David:

And if you take the moment with the pause button on your control, if you read these headlines, it really gives a very good impression of what's been going on in the world.



Perry:

Okay, okay.

David:

You know, "Armageddon Begins, Russia Bombs Kazakhstan" is one of the headlines. You know, "Millions Dying in Africa from Radiation Poisoning." You know, there's all these different headlines which are really worth having a look at. So I do recommend that if you can pause it. Oh, there's another one, which is really great. "Charles Should Be Throne out". Thrown spelt T-H-R-O-N-E. Charles Should Be Throne out. That was good. And it's not pushed down your throat. It's just there in the background and it's subliminal. So I thought that was good.

Oh, the one the other thing I really wanted to say was was that I really admire Clive Owen's acting in this, particularly the point where Kee has him brought into the barn and she disrobes and he doesn't know what the hell she's doing. He's wondering whether she's trying to seduce him or something. She takes off her clothes and reveals her pregnant belly. And the look of astonishment on his face, which he just holds for a huge, huge long time, he's just mind blown. Which I thought he did that very, very well.

And the other thing I wanted to say was about these long takes, which were very, very cleverly done. This is again from the Wikipedia page, but I noticed it on the second viewing. There's a point where they're doing these long, long, long, long takes during all the conflict when there's all the shooting and going on. There's a bit where fake blood gets splattered onto the lens of the camera.

Perry:

Hmm, yep, [and they] keep going, yeah.

David:

And it stays there. They don't stop shooting. They just keep going. There's these drops of blood on what you're seeing for quite a while until they move to another shot. So that was really well done.

But the one long, long shot which I thought was: I don't know how the *hell* they did it, and that's where Kee is giving birth. They're in the refugee camp and she gets taken into this room and there's a bed. And there's actually one single take

there, which goes for about three minutes, according to Wikipedia. I didn't time it, and she gives birth to this baby. Now, that baby that she gives birth to, I would swear to God that it's a real live newborn baby.

Perry:

Oh, yeah, yeah. It really looks like...

David:

Now, how the hell they did that without any cut away, with a single shot, continuous shot, they didn't cut away from it. How the hell they did that, I've got no idea. It's astonishing. So I just I thought it was great.

It's very moving to at the very end. It's very very sad, but it's... yeah, I loved it. I would give it, I don't know if out of five 4.5 maybe for me. I really liked it.

Perry:

Okay. Yep.

David:

Yeah, but watching it a second time was very very rewarding. Absolutely.

Perry:

Oh, okay. Well, that's well, that's good, because a lot of films don't necessarily pay you to go back and watch it a second time. But in this one, I think, as you said, there's so much been set up around the scenes, around the edges of where the actors are, that you're obviously getting a lot of information there that, as you say, was subliminal and I missed out on.

But yeah, look, I thought there was a lot of really, really interesting things going on in this film. And I would heartily recommend people watch it. It's not a vision of, it's not a *Blade Runner* vision. It's described as a dystopia, but I think that word has been misused quite a lot. I just think it's a really good depiction of a society that's basically collapsing around people because there's no hope for them any more. People [saying], "Oh, I don't really feel very well. I'm really impacted by the death of Baby Diego. I want to go home because I don't feel well." And people are crying over the death of somebody they knew about, but have had no contact with at all, that would be what happened to people because this is the death of their life as well. It's very well done and I would recommend it to anybody.

David:

Yep.

Perry:

Okay, I think we've done the film.

David:

I think we have, well and truly.

Perry:

All right, shall we move on to the novel that you're going to review for us, David?

Ghost Cities by Siang Lu

David:

All right, so the novel that we're going to talk about is in fact the winner of this year's Miles Franklin Award, which of course is Australia's leading literary award and it's called *Ghost Cities* by Siang Lu.

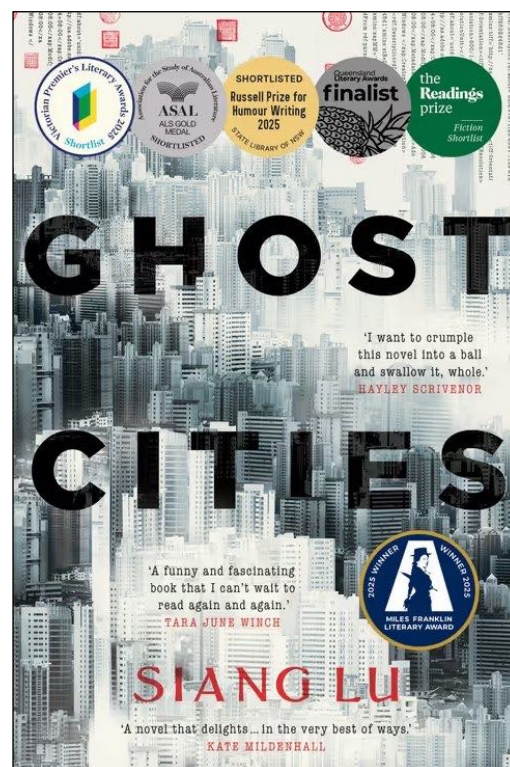
Now usually I like to start with a bit of a brief biography of the author, a bit of background. But Siang Lu doesn't seem to have shared very much of himself that I can find online. He has a website, and he's got a photo on the website, and it looks to be in his late twenties, early thirties. It says that he's based in Brisbane and also in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. And he's obviously ethnic Chinese. But apart from that, there's very little I can find on him. When he was born or where he was born, don't know. Maybe it's not important.

Anyway, *Ghost Cities* is his second novel. His debut novel, *The Whitewash*, came out in 2022 and it won an ABIA award for its audiobook version, which I thought was interesting. He's also the co-creator of something called The Beige Index, which tracks the ethnic representation of people in movies. Which I had a bit of a look at, which is very intriguing.

So, *Ghost Cities*. I enjoyed reading *Ghost Cities*, but I'm finding it very hard to describe and to know what to say about it. I guess I can say above all it's a *playful* book, playing with history, culture, and ethnicity, and examining to some degree what it means to be of Asian heritage in a country which is majority Anglo-Saxon, I suppose still, a majority country like that, to be of Asian heritage in a country like Australia.

At times the book is very amusing, though never laugh-out-loud funny, I thought. And there are also some very grim passages in it.

It's essentially told in two parallel streams, told in alternate chapters. Now one of these streams, with which the book begins, is a fanciful historical narrative apparently of a particular emperor of China, or of a China-like country. I don't know that it's ever explicitly said that it is China. Anyway, a particular Emperor. And there's a good deal in these historical sections which remind me of the works of Jorge Louis Borges and other commentators have mentioned writers like Italo Calvino, particularly his book *Invisible Cities*. Much of this historical narrative centres round the Emperor and his obsessions, and there's a kind of plot to do with the treatment of his younger brother, who is the heir to the throne, if the Emperor doesn't have any children. And the Emperor is so concerned about his brother possibly usurping him—though he doesn't have any evidence that his brother's going to do that—but nevertheless, he's paranoid that his brother will try to do this, so he names his brother as the Imperial Traitor, and he incarcerates him in a vast prison nicknamed the Six Levels of Hell. And the Emperor then takes his brother's wife, his brother's beloved wife, as his own consort. He eventually installs her in a complex labyrinth which he has built



beneath the palace. So that's the grim side of the story, but there's also a good deal of humour and just plain absurdity in these early chapters. Whole complicated bit about the taster, you know, his father died choking on a on a chicken bone and the Imperial Taster is executed because he didn't prevent the old emperor from doing this. And they ban all chickens in the empire. But then they appoint the Imperial Taster's child as the new Imperial Taster. But the Imperial Taster's child is only six months old, and so it doesn't actually turn out to be such a great... Anyway, there's this kind of absurdity to a lot of it, which is quite funny.



Siang Lu

The second stream of the narrative is set in modern-day Sydney, and then in modern-day China, I guess. And it's told from the first person point of view of a young man called Xiang Lu. Who as the story opens is working as an interpreter for the Consul General of the People's Republic of China. There's only one problem: although he is of Chinese ethnicity, Xiang Lu doesn't actually speak or understand any Mandarin, and he's managed to get by so far by cutting and pasting text to and from Google Translate. But his subterfuge is discovered and he's fired. Little does he know, however, that the staff at the Consulate have been posting his bad translations on social media with the hashtag #BadChinese. and these have become viral in both the local Chinese community and in mainland China. He's a laughing stock.

And it's at this point that he receives an unexpected invitation to attend a screening of a new film called *Death of a Pagoda* by the director Baby Bao, who deliberately makes bad films, or but so bad that they've become an art form. Xiang Lu, on the basis of his reputation as #BadChinese, is employed by Baby Bao, who is embarking on a huge epic to be filmed in one of China's ghost cities. These are whole cities that have been constructed from scratch in China in anticipation of future need, but which are currently empty.

I'm trying hard not to go into too much detail, so as briefly as I can. Xiang Liu falls in love with Baby Bao's official translator, a young woman named Yuan, who does speak Mandarin like a native. She is a professional translator. And they are eventually flown to this ghost city which is called Port Man Tou, and the director begins to fill this city with actors. All these actors are playing roles as the inhabitants of the city. You know, there's an actor playing the policeman, an actor playing the worker in the street, and so on. But things begin to blur because it's this entire whole city that they've taken over. Are the actors *actually* playing roles or are they just *being* the inhabitants? And as time goes by, the director begins to announce more and more restrictive rules controlling the actors or inhabitants, what they can do and where they can go. And so the film production begins to resemble a totalitarian regime. And as the novel rolls on with these alternating chapters, you start to see the increasingly strong parallels between the historical story and the modern story, with Baby Bao becoming the equivalent of the Emperor.

So look, I did enjoy reading it, but I think I definitely need to read it for a second time to really appreciate it. It's a very puzzling book in some ways. But as I said, it's often very amusing, and you do finish it with a smile. It's not basically a book of humour, but as I said, it's definitely a *playful* book. Do I think it deserved the Myles Franklin Award? I can't say. I didn't read anything else on the shortlist. What did you think of it, Perry?

Perry:

Well, I think I'm coming to the conclusion rapidly, David, that my literary tastes do not align with prize givers in this country very much. There is a lot to like about this book, but overall, I don't know. I got nothing out of it at the end.

David:

Yeah, I don't know what point it was trying to make.

Perry:

I don't know what point he was attempting to try and make. I was firstly not convinced at all about the #BadChinese translator setup. I mean, how the hell are you going to get past the first initial interview where they're going to walk in and they're going to start talking to you in Chinese and then somebody's going to slip into English and then back to Chinese again? Just to see what whether you can actually translate and know what you're talking about. And this guy speaks no Mandarin at all. A few words like "please" and "thank you" and "hello" and that's about it.... I couldn't get that out of my head about how the hell he got that job in the first place. So that was a bit of a problem. Okay, so get over that. Get over that, Perry. Just put that aside. You know, you didn't worry about why the infertility was there in the film. Why should you be worried about this? All right, okay, get past that. And then things start getting interesting. And I'm thinking, oh, yeah, this is okay. This is, this is going places. He's going to go and they're going to do this film in this ghost city. Well, yeah, that's good. And then you've got the story of the ancient emperor, as you say, going in the alternate time stream. And as it keeps going along, you think "Something different's got to happen here". So, this guy's just a despot who basically is despotic. I mean, all he does is he just is paranoid and kills people, puts out edicts which make absolutely no sense. And in the end, you think nothing new's happened here. So, this is for me. I'm only saying this is for me. Nothing new happened there. And then we get through back over to the film [they are making], and you think that something's interesting going to happen there, and that degenerates as well into another stream, as you say, of a dictator taking over. I got to the end and I thought, why did I bother? I'm not going to remember this. I am not going to go back and read this again, David. Not at all.

David:

Okay.

Perry:

I cannot think of a single reason why I would want to go back and read this again. Yes, I have read it. I don't know what he was getting at other than to say, well, look, people in their modern world are not much different from people in the old world. Yeah, okay. Anything else? No, not that I could think of. And so that leaves me with... I just felt disappointed with it.

David:

Uh-huh.

Perry:

And I'm glad it was only 300 pages because I was struggling at the end. I was really struggling to get through it. I could see, yes, okay, this seems humorous and that seems humorous, and so is this one, but they were just bits all put in a row, and I didn't really feel there was any cohesion to the whole thing that got me to the end. And at the end I thought "Oh thank god that's over" rather than "Oh well I've learned something new here" So you know, basically, no, look, if I was rating this, I'd be down in the twos, David.

David:

Yeah, yeah, okay. That's fair enough, that's fair enough, yeah.

Perry:

I really I'd be down that low.

David:

Okay, yeah, I obviously I enjoyed it more than you did.

Perry:

Yeah, obviously.

David:

And I can imagine going back and rereading it just to pick up some of the parallels and things, which you finish reading the book, and then you think, "Oh, hang on, now I see what was...". So there's some clever things, but again, I don't see the point of a lot of it. And so there's some amusing bits which are worth looking at. That's about it, really, yeah. I don't know, I don't know why it won the award, but then I've no idea what else was on the list really. Because this year we're both reading so little.

Perry:

No, neither do I. But well that's right.

David:

So certainly I haven't tried to tackle the awards.

Perry:

Well that's that's right. Well I've never actually set out to try and well, I think maybe once I tried and set out to read the Miles Franklin shortlist, but they don't really give you very long. You know, they only give you two or three weeks, and I think, well, I've got to stop everything else I'm doing and read these five or six novels in this period. Because there's sometimes when they come up with books on the short list and you think, mm, okay, I've either never heard of it or it doesn't look like a one that I would want. I mean, I've had, there's been a few over the last few years of the Miles Franklins that we've read and really enjoyed. Really, really enjoyed it. This one, nah. No. I mean, I don't put this one down as, in my view, as in inverted commas as bad as *Cold Enough for Snow* that was out a few years ago. Because that was one where absolutely nothing happened at all. This one, at least *some* things do happen, but it just doesn't go anywhere enough. For me, it just doesn't cohere at the end. It just finishes. Oh, okay. All right. Good. Thank God for that. Bye. So let me not put you off going back and reading it again because, as I said, there are certain parts of it which actually come across really well.

David:

Oh well, we've put it in its grave, I think.

Perry:

And as you said, some parts of it are very humorous when you're reading it. Yeah, that's actually a funny situation. But how does it fit in with everything else? To me, it just didn't. Anyway, there we go. That's the way that we are.

David:

Indeed.

What Else We've Been Watching

Perry:

So, what else have you been watching lately, David?

David:

What else have I been watching? Well, the thing I've enjoyed the most, I suppose, over the last month or so is I've been watching *Alien: Earth* which has been on Disney Plus. And there were eight episodes which I've now finished. And this is not produced by Ridley Scott, but it's certainly *backed* by Ridley Scott. He's listed as an executive producer. And what I liked about this is how faithful it is, particularly at the beginning to the original *Alien* movie which came out in 1979, [directed by] Ridley Scott.

I'm not a fan at all of *Aliens*, which is the James Cameron-directed second movie. I know people seem to love it. I don't at all because I think it misses all of the subtlety of the original, 1979 *Alien* movie. But I liked this. I thought this particular series was very faithful to the original.

Without going into the whole plot, but there's obviously been another spacecraft which is deliberately being going out to try to find alien creatures. And the world at that stage is run by five major corporations, and you can imagine that turning out to be the case one day. And so this ship has been sent out and the ship is identical really to the *Nostromo*, which is the ship in the original movie. And so all the interiors, all the interior iconography and so on, it's all the same as the original movie. The slow sleep, the cold sleep, terminals, all of that is very similar. Even down to the control booth where the guy talks to "Mother". It all looks identical to the original.

And one of the things I thought was very clever was that one of the things, if you look back and re-watch the 1979 movie, is that the thing which dates it like mad is all the computer displays. Because you know, they're really crude, and by today's standards, they're *incredibly* crude. And so it dates that movie. But in the TV series they use the same computer stuff, but now it appears like a deliberate design choice of the spaceship designers. I thought that was very clever.

Anyway, I don't want to talk about it forever, but I really enjoyed the series. So there's that one element of this, the ship which has gotten on board a whole



bunch of these alien creatures. including those egg pods that the original alien comes out of. But there's a whole lot of other things too. So that's one thread.

The other thread is on Earth, where one of these corporations, led by a guy who is like Elon Musk on steroids. He calls himself the Boy Genius. I can't remember his name actually now. But he's this laid-back [young guy]. He knows he's the cleverest guy in the entire world, sort of thing, but he runs this corporation. But what they're doing is that they're taking young children who are dying of cancer and they're transferring their identities into "synths", synthetic beings. They're kind of like robots, whatever. Think of Ash in the original movie. (Although I think Ash might have been a slightly different kind of construct). But anyway, they're taking these dying children, they're saving their lives apparently by putting them into the [synths] but the bodies that they give them are *adult* bodies. Because they're not going to change, you know, they're not going to change and grow. So they have to take these children's minds and put them into these adult bodies. But they're still children, mentally. So this whole thing, the whole ethical thing of, is this a good thing that they're doing or not? Very clever. And that all then interacts.

The last thing I'll say about it, I know I've been going on way too long for about it, but the last thing I'll say about it is that the interesting thing I thought was that the original alien monster out of the original movie is probably the *least* scary monster in this series. There's like one particular other one which is... urg! So it's good. I really recommend it. Anybody who gets the chance to see it, I think they should, particularly if you're a fan of the original movie.

Perry:

So how does it fit in the timeline of the *Alien* movie?

David:

It's actually set a couple of years before the original movie. And so you say to yourself, well how come nobody on the *Nostromo* knew about these aliens and so on. And I think that if this *Alien Earth* series continues, I think that will be explained. Because I think it's all down to the fact that nobody *publicly* knows about these aliens. these aliens in this new series, nobody publicly knows about it. Only the heads of the corporations are aware of what's going on, and they're not going to tell the public about it.

Perry:

Okay, well, because in the original film, you're led to believe that the *Nostromo* is going through space, coming back to Earth with its cargo of whatever precious metals that it's got. And it picks up a signal, which then it wakes up the crew, and then they go off to find where the signal is coming from. So you're led to believe that's all accidental. But later on Ash says something about the creature. So Ash knows about this particular creature. And it knows, because "it" being the cyborg that's there. It knows that that creature is probably on that spot. And that's why the crew has been woken up to actually go there and investigate.

David:

Yeah, that would that would actually fit in quite nicely.

Perry:

Yeah, and so that's a bit subtle in the film, but you do pick it up and you realize that there is that back story that's gone there, and that's obviously what this is picked up on.

So eight episodes. Which streaming services is it on?

David:

Yes, it's Disney Plus.

Perry:

Disney Plus, right, okay. Alright, okay. Well, I'll have to get to that.

David:

Yeah, I definitely recommend it. I really enjoyed it. I hope I don't know whether there's going to be a second season. There's no indication at the moment there will be a second season, but it would be good if there were.

Perry:

Okay, well we can also have a big argument about *Aliens* because while you don't like it, I do, but I like it for particular reasons. It's not trying to be *Alien*, it is trying to be something else.

David:

It's just an action movie.

Perry:

Well, basically it's a military SF movie, basically.

David:

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Perry:

And so you've already seen the monster from the first film, which you don't see, of course, until right at the very end. Which is good. Now, that's excellent because it's the monster in the cupboard. You get a little bit of a glimpse, and you see somebody looking at it, or you see a little bit of a shadow. Beautifully done. Beautifully done as a horror story. Really well done. But you can't have that in the second film. You can't do that again because you've already used it. So just make it bigger, blow it all up, and have lots and lots more aliens.

David:

Yeah, yeah, what you're saying is exactly why I don't like the second movie.

Perry:

[Laughs] No, that's fair enough. That's okay. That's okay.

David:

Yeah, all right. Well, I've talked for too long. You tell me about what you've been watching.

***Singing in the Rain*, directed by Gene Kelly & Stanley Donen**

Perry:

Okay, okay. Well, I went to see *Singing in the Rain*.

David:

Oh, yeah, yeah, great.

Perry:

From, I don't know, 1950 or 1952 or whenever it was, Gene Kelly, Donald O'Connor. Oh, what a great film this is. It was put on at the local cinema on a Sunday afternoon at four o'clock. They occasionally run musicals there on that particular time slot. And *Singing in the Rain* is my wife's favorite film.

So we went along with the kids. It was cheap. It was like \$10. But it was also, if you recall, David Stratton, the ABC and SBS film critic who died earlier this year, only in the last couple of months. It was his favorite film. And in fact as the film was coming up, you start off and normally you get the logo or the credits and all the film stars. What they had here was an introduction of David Stratton and Margaret Pomeranz from the television program talking about this and him saying that he really liked it. Her saying, "I'm really glad you made me come back and watch this again because this is just absolutely stunning. It was really just a tremendously good film." And then he gives a bit of an intro and it goes into the film. So obviously, he was introducing the film as it was presented on either ABC or SBS television. But here they showed it on the big screen.

Oh god, it looks good on a big screen. Being able to see something like this. I have to admit, I'm not a big fan of musicals at all, but this one, this one goes way above musicals. It just happens to be a wonderful film with some songs in it and dance sequences in it, and the dance sequences are just stunningly, stunningly good.



David:

Oh, yeah, Gene Kelly was fabulous.

Perry:

Well, Donald O'Connor and "Make 'em Laugh". I mean, he's jumping around all over the place, doing prat falls all over the all over the... oh no, absolutely, absolutely stunning.

David:

Yeah, yeah.

Perry:

It's one of those films that really you've got to just basically put any prejudices you have aside regarding whatever film categories you like or don't like and just see it. Because it's generally considered to be one of the top 10, 20 films ever made. Well, it's always up high in a lot of people's estimations of the best film ever made. And you can certainly understand why. Tells the story of a film being made at the time when film was changing from silent into sound. And all the funny problems they have about setting microphones up, and the woman, you know...

David:

And the voice of the actress... [Laughs]

Perry:

Oh, the actress has got a voice that'll cut glass. And so they have to basically get Debbie Reynolds in the background, basically doing all the voiceovers for her, doing the singing. Oh, it's just look, it's just a great film. It's funny. The acting's all good. I know that it has since come out that Gene Kelly was an absolute bastard and dictated to everybody else on the set, and gave Debbie Reynolds in particular a really, really hard time by not being exactly perfect *all* the time. But in the end, the film that comes out is pretty damn good, and it's one of those ones that I'm very glad I went to see on a big screen again. It was just wonderful. Really good. One I can heartily recommend. It's up, you know, right up there: 4.7, 4.8. I mean, it's for me, I'd have it in my top 20 films of all time.

David:

And yet it didn't win an Academy Award.

Perry:

Didn't even get nominated, David. Did not get nominated.

David:

Yeah, it's astonishing.

Perry:

There's a list that I look at occasionally, which is the National Board of Review's Top 10 Films of the Year, which is, the National Board of Review is an American organization. And they list the top 10 films of the year. And most of the time you go, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, okay, okay." Wasn't even in that. And there are some films in that list for that year I have never even heard of. They've just completely disappeared. And here's this absolutely stunning piece of cinema didn't get a mention.

David:

It's hard to explain, isn't it?



Perry:

So now, whether there was politics going on behind the scenes, who knows? But it's certainly one that if anybody ever gets a chance to go and see it on a big screen, go and do so. If you only get it down to your television, that's fine. But if you can, go and see it on a big screen. Great stuff. Really, really good.

David:

Yeah, yeah, that sounds really good.

Perry:

Yeah. So, what else? Got anything else?

The Bear, Season 4

David:

That's about it, I think. I don't think I want to spend any more time talking about that. Oh, I watched the fourth season of *The Bear*, which I thought was okay. People have been down on it, but I thought it was quite good.

Perry:

I haven't quite got to that yet.

David:

Yeah, I think still think it's worth watching. I've seen some criticism of it, but what the hell, I enjoyed it.

Perry:

There's always somebody going to be criticizing it. It seems funny that it gets nominated in the comedy category when well, it's a bit odd because it's not really all that there are comic parts to it, but to me anyway it doesn't.

David:

Yeah. Oh yeah, that's absurd. I really dislike the third season because they I think they tried to to push the comedy elements with those bloody Fak Brothers, which I don't find funny at all.

Perry:

Oh yeah, yeah.

David:

And they pushed that in the third season, but the fourth season that's been downplayed a great deal, so that's good.

Perry:

Peeled it back a bit. Oh, okay.

David:

Yeah.

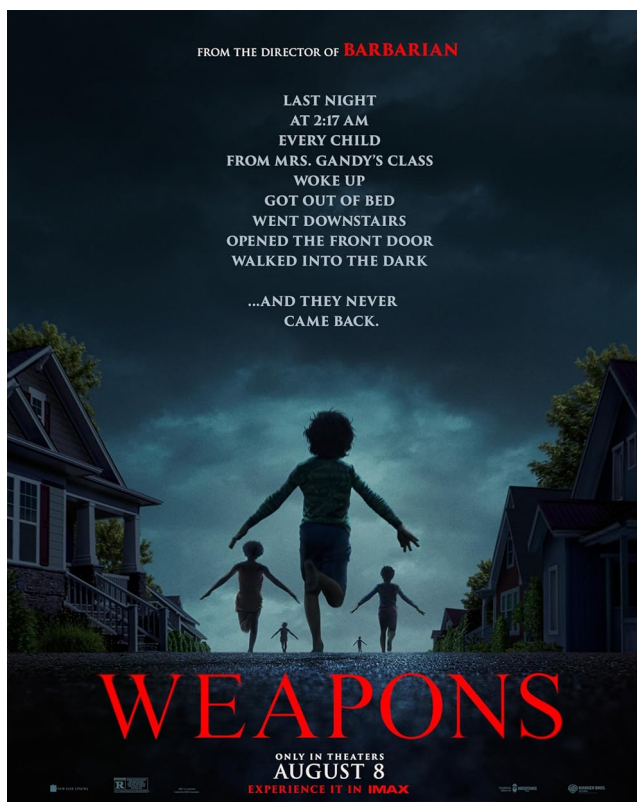
Weapons, directed by Zach Cregger

Perry:

All right. Well, I do want to talk also about one new film that's come out this year, which you might well hear a bit about, and that's *Weapons*. which is a horror film.

Talk about shades of Stephen King in this. I picked up references, I think, to well, *Salem's Lot* in particular, a horror in a small town—well, small town from American sense is a small city from our point of view—*It* and *The Shining*. So there's lots of little bits of early King floating around in this particular film.

The first opening sequence shows a whole lot of kids who are all from one class who are 8, no [say] 10 or 11, who basically wake up in the middle of the night at 2:17 a.m. And that number is very important because 217 was the number of the room that Denny in *The Shining* in the book was told not to go into. And in the film they changed it to 237, I think. Don't quote me on that, but I think that's what happened. But 217 is the number of the room from the book. And at 2:17 a. m., all these kids get up, they go downstairs, because all this is like Midwest suburbia, where everybody's got two-storey houses and big front yards and all the rest of it. They go out



and they just start running and they take off and they run with their arms out to the side, just running as if they were like an aeroplane, all going off and running off.

They all come from the one class and when the teacher of the class comes back in the next day, because she doesn't know what's happened, she finds out that there's only one kid left, and he's sitting there, and all the rest of them have basically disappeared. So she reports it, and then there's the whole of the town, of course, all these kids have gone missing. So they go off and run off, and nobody can find them. And so Julia Garner is the young teacher in the school. And people—well, they don't come right out and start blaming her, they say, "Why is it only from her class that all these kids came [from]?"

The only problem with the script really that I can see is that the police force in this particular town are the dumbest police force you've ever possibly come across in the universe. They don't pay any attention to where the real problem lies and what the real clue might actually be, which I'm not going to give to anybody. But I recommend you go and see this.

Now, it's a horror film, but the horror really doesn't start until the middle of the film. And then something happens, and then there's a person running down the street who's running towards the Julia Garner character while she's having an altercation with one of the parents. And this guy just jumps on her and tries to beat her to death out of nowhere. And so that becomes very weird. And then it starts working out why this has happened and what's going on and how it all fits together.

Yeah, I'm not a really big... I don't like body horror much, I don't like big splatter movies much. But this one was pretty good. There's one violent scene at the end where you can just go, put your hands over your eyes and look through your fingers a little bit so you don't need to see the whole lot. But in general, worthwhile going to see. You will see this appearing in some of the best of the year lists. It's not as good a horror movie as *Sinners*, which I spoke about a couple of episodes back, because that's really going to be up on the best films of the year. This one will get bits and pieces. I mean, Julia Garner might end up getting a nomination for an award somewhere.

Now, there's a very interesting thing that I remember. I just happened to be seeing somewhere on a film clip somewhere, probably on YouTube or Facebook, about Martin Scorsese saying that cinema is not only about what you see on the screen in the frame, but also what happens just slightly off, outside the frame. And in a horror film like this, there is a bit of that, where she, at one point, Julia Garner's character, is in a car. Sort of staking out this house, and she falls asleep. And you see somebody walk down the street behind it, The camera just holds on her on the front seat. And then the back door opens, and you think, "Oh, God, something bad's got to happen here." And then you see these hands come out with a pair of scissors and just go [snip]. And go off. It's just beautifully done. Beautifully done. You're lead right up to the point you think this has got to be... Oh, okay, that wasn't so bad after all.

Wonderfully done in terms of the director. Certainly, his second film. My son's seen his first one and thought it was good. This one's very interesting. There's a lot of discussions about how this is an allegory for school shootings in the US where all the kids go missing and all suddenly are all gone. And there's mass grief in a particular town, everybody is grieving at the same time. I mean, I don't get that because we don't have that in Australia. So we don't have that problem here. So it wasn't, unless it had been pointed out to me, I would not even have picked that up all the way right through. So it just goes to show you that there are

some things that people in certain parts of the world are going to be able to get out of films that we in another parts don't necessarily, don't necessarily get. But worth seeing. I can understand that if you don't like horror, you might not like this. But it's one that's worthwhile to consider, I would have thought. I enjoyed it. You know, "enjoy" it with inverted commas. You know, you can really appreciate how well it's made. And I enjoyed it for that. And, yep, recommend it.

David:

Excellent. Okay.

Windup and Next Episode

Perry:

All right, that's it.

David:

All right.

Perry:

I think we're about done.

David:

I think we're wound up, yep.

Perry:

Yep.

David:

Now, well, next time, in fact, you're going to be overseas.

Perry:

What's happening next time?

David:

You're not going to be here.

Perry:

No, I'm off overseas at the end of this week, so and I'm away for a month, so I won't be able to do anything because I'll be in South America and time zones are going to be absolutely horrendous. And the last thing I'm going to be thinking about, David, is *you* when I'm over there in South America.

David:

[Pretending to be miffed] That's fine. I see. I know how I count.

But anyway, now I'm very fortunate that I'm going to be joined by Lucy Sussex.

Perry:

Okay, good.

David:

A friend of the show and academic and all-around brilliant sort of person. And she's going to talk to us about her recent trip, I think.

Perry:

Or talk to *you*, not going to be talking to *me*.

David:

Well, talk to *us* implying the listener as well, you know.

Perry:

So, all right, okay, so she's she's had a couple of books out this year and she's done a bit of touring over to the UK, went to Bloody Scotland and also to a literary convention over there as well.

David:

So that should be fun.

Perry:

So that should be interesting to listen to. I'll be I'm happy to listen to that when I'm away, when you make it available...

All right, David, I think we're done.

David:

Alright. See you. See you when you're back.

Perry:

Yeah, I'll see I'll be talking to you in a couple of months then. All right.

David:

Indeed.

Have a good trip.

Perry:

Will do. Thanks, David.