

SF Gospel Appendix: Guests posts.

[Note: Dates on several Religion Dispatches pieces given in the RD headers pasted below are incorrect, presumably due to content migration.]

June 6, 2006 – The Revealer:

The End of the World, Again (Plus a Cute Kid)

06 June 2006

The Omen, *Left Behind*, and Christian cultural terrorism in big media.

By Gabriel Mckee

The remake of *The Omen*, opening today (6/6/06), is the latest in an endless line of '70s horror remakes that have recently invaded theaters. Where new versions of brutal slasher films like *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and *The Hills Have Eyes* have sought to bring the nihilistic atmosphere of the originals to a new generation, *The Omen* is a Christian film: It draws its scares from the resurgence of apocalyptic spirituality driven by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkin's *Left Behind* novels.

Apocalypticism was also in the air when the original film was released in 1976, largely because of Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* -- the best-selling non-fiction book of the '70s. Like *Left Behind*, *The Late Great Planet Earth* predicted an awful fate for those who haven't been born again when the world ends, as Lindsay said it would, soon.

The bleak films of the underground horror genre can be seen as a reaction to this conservative faith, and *The Omen* -- like *The Exorcist* and *Rosemary's Baby* before it -- was an attempt to transcend the boundaries of the genre by replacing mundane villains with supernatural ones. The new *Omen* film plays much the same role in this cultural dichotomy as did the original, by bringing Revelation to the multiplex. It is simultaneously an attempt to cash in on the popularity of apocalyptic belief and a proselytizing tool that uses fear of evil to drive its viewers toward Christian belief. It is terror with a message -- terrorism, literally if not physically.

The Omen is the story of Robert Thorn, the American ambassador to Britain, who comes to believe that his little boy, Damien, is the Beast of Revelation. Three sequels followed the original, telling the continuing story of the Antichrist: *Damien: Omen II* in 1978, *Omen III: The Final Conflict* in 1981, and the made-for-TV remake/sequel *Omen IV: The Awakening* in 1988. To this day, the film's depiction of evil affects popular culture's understanding of the Antichrist, the Mark of the Beast, and even the name Damien. Robert Munger, the evangelical who originally pitched the film and who is credited as a "religious advisor," was pleased with the film, and particularly with the number of people who converted to Christianity after seeing it. Judging from the new film's website, HeedTheOmen.com -- which includes a FAQ ("Fearfully Asked Questions") about the Antichrist and the coming tribulation -- this religious message is even more clear in the remake.

But despite its spiritual themes, *The Omen* has a distinctly secular approach to religious ideas. Screenwriter David Seltzer has stated that he had never read the Bible before writing the screenplay, and it shows. The film repeatedly paraphrases Revelation, but never directly quotes it. Indeed, the infant Beast himself is the only element of John's apocalypse that appears in the film. *The Final Conflict* eschews the canon altogether, inventing a book of the Bible -- complete with faux-King James linguistic flourishes and an "it shall come to pass" -- to contain its plot-driving prophecy. *The Omen* gives us an Antichrist with no doctrinal or scriptural strings attached, diffusing from the complexities of apocalyptic spirituality a single element, a sinister figure who is evil in the broadest sense.

Nowhere is this secular approach to Biblical prophecy more clear than in *The Final Conflict*. Damien, all-grown-up, is the head of Thorn Industries, a multinational corporation that has a stranglehold on the world's economy and food supply. In the film's climactic scene, Damien is betrayed and stabbed by a former lover, dying as the Second Coming occurs. The moment is somewhat anticlimactic, giving us a ghostly image of Jesus, a musical flourish, and a lighting cue -- a far cry from the universal transformation in the closing chapters of Revelation. Jesus' return occurs in secret, in the isolated ruins of a church, and we are left with the sense that not much has changed beyond the ouster of a sinister CEO. With the Antichrist out of the way, the world can get back to business as usual. *The Omen*'s Jesus brings not final judgment, but a return to the status quo.

The key Christian element missing from *The Omen* films is the presence of Christians. Aside from a handful of histrionic priests and scheming monks who become fodder for the films' grand guignol death sequences, there's nary

a believer to be found. Early in the first film, Father Brennan, a priest who knows of Damien's true origins, tells the boy's father that he must "accept the Lord Jesus, drink His blood." But Thorn ignores this advice, and doesn't set foot inside a church until he attempts to kill Damien on consecrated ground in the film's climax. As *The Omen* films would have it, all Christians are Catholics, all Catholics are clergy, and none of them can stop the Antichrist. The heroes, by contrast, are secularists, right up to the woman who finally kills Damien.

Richard Donner, the director of the first *Omen* film, sheds some interesting light on this conundrum with his non-supernatural interpretation of the story. Damien, he says, is not evil, and the deaths around him are coincidental. But the misguided faith of priests like Father Brennan lead Thorn, otherwise a rational man, to believe that his son must die. The movie, in this light, becomes a warning about the dangers of religious mania. The absence of Christians in the film underscores this statement about the dangers that radical faith can pose for secular society.

The same absence of Christian characters that is a weakness in *The Omen's* religious vision is also evident in a more recent popular interpretation of Revelation -- Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins' *Left Behind* novels. But here, the dearth of Christians is by design -- they have been taken up to heaven in the Rapture. This peculiar bit of end-times belief was a minority opinion in American Christianity, the Biblical descriptions of which are vague at best. But following the explosion of evangelical Christianity in the '70s and '80s-- and with it the "literal" interpretation of Biblical prophecy put forth by the likes of Hal Lindsey -- the idea was popular enough for LaHaye and Jenkins to spin it into a series of best-sellers. *Left Behind* is now a mini-industry in Christian publishing, with 12 books in the main series, plus multiple spin-off series and graphic novels, three movies, and a forthcoming **video game**, not to mention countless non-fiction volumes detailing the finer points of apocalyptic belief. (Interestingly, one of the most recent volumes in the series -- last year's *The Rising* -- is an *Omen*-like story of the Antichrist's childhood).

Following the Rapture in the opening pages of the first volume, it's up to the "tribulation saints" -- those who became believers after the Rapture -- to stand against the Antichrist and prepare for the "glorious appearing" of Christ to signal the final judgment. The satanic villain of this story is Nicolae Carpathia, a member of the Romanian government who, with some supernatural guidance, becomes a world leader overnight. He is soon chosen as the head of the U.N., the leader of a new world church, and *People Magazine's* Sexiest Man Alive (a title with which the authors have a bizarre preoccupation). From this position of power, Carpathia begins a reign of terror that makes Damien Thorn's food-hoarding seem humanitarian. Outlawing Christianity, he kills those who refuse to acknowledge him as a god.

The Omen uses the Antichrist to create a generic sense of fear, the idea that the devil exists and wants to kill random people in gory set-pieces. But LaHaye and Jenkins use Carpathia to elucidate a very specific set of fears, foremost amongst them the fear of international cooperation and religious tolerance. The United Nations, they argue, is simply a precursor to an evil, Babylonian world government. Similarly, Carpathia's world church is initially characterized as a generic faith, led by former liberal Christians, that makes few specific truth-claims. It's a sort of derogatory Unitarianism, but it paves the way for a fanatical church that slaughters those who refuse to accept its founder. In the *Left Behind* stories, any idea presented by a non-Christian becomes its opposite: tolerance is persecution, peace is war. Social good is the tool with which the Antichrist consolidates his power. Where Damien's evil rarely reaches beyond a general sense of spookiness, Carpathia is a bogeyman carefully constructed from evangelical Christianity's most conservative conclusions.

Both *The Omen* and *Left Behind* seek to turn Revelation into a horror story through a selectively literal reading. In both, the Antichrist is essentially a straw man whose defeat has been foretold and approaches inevitably. For *Left Behind*, this defeat means final judgment and eternal salvation or damnation. For *The Omen*, it is a return to the peaceful, prosperous status quo following the economic upheaval created by Damien Thorn. But both stories base themselves on the same type of interpretation of the Bible's most difficult book. They read Revelation as a story that is strictly about the future, about a linear series of events that will come to pass as God overthrows the established order.

But the key phrase of John's Revelation has nothing to do with the number of saints who will survive the tribulation or the methods by which the Antichrist will persecute them. The key verse of Revelation is God's warning to the church not to be tricked and caught up in the dealings of the Whore of Babylon: "Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins, and so that you do not share in her plagues." (Rev. 18:4) Babylon, in the revolutionary reading of Revelation, is not some imagined future dictatorship, and the Beast is not a single world leader. Rather, both symbolize the entire sphere of worldly power, the world of buying and selling, the world of making war, the world of writing best-selling novels and making blockbuster films. Unlike many other Christian texts of its time that encouraged integration with Rome, Revelation orders all Christians to reject any authority other than God, no matter if that authority is the Roman Empire, a conservative president, or the Hollywood studio system.

Gabriel Mckee is a graduate of Harvard Divinity School and the author of two books on religion and science fiction:

the forthcoming *The Gospel According to Science Fiction: Forging the Faith of the Future* (*forthcoming* from **Westminster John Knox**) and **Pink Beams of Light From the God in the Gutter: The Science-Fictional Religion of Philip K. Dick.**

February 5, 2007 – Nerve:

[[“Sex and the Single Superhero” – Not indexed by the Internet Archive and no longer hosted at Nerve.]]

March 25, 2007 – Nerve Film Lounge:

Re-Animator

Starring: Jeffrey Combs, Bruce Abbott

Directed by: Stuart Gordon

Runtime: 86 min. **Rated:** R

DVD Release date: March 20, 2007 - [More Info](#)

READER RATINGS:

7.4

OVERALL

Smart 8.5

Sexy 4.7

Funny 8.3

Rate this film

Review this film

THE NERVE REVIEW

When *Re-Animator* was released in 1985, reviewers like Roger Ebert and Pauline Kael praised it as transcendent trash, a film that dared to elevate itself beyond its genre of origin. Nowadays fewer critics believe in a barrier between trash and art. Genre is no longer an impediment to acclaim, so twenty-two years after its release, it's clear just how good — and how influential — *Re-Animator* really is.

The film follows arrogant young medical student Herbert West, who has discovered a chemical capable of reviving dead organisms. His relentless drive to test his theories pulls his roommate into madness and, by the movie's end, turns most of Miskatonic University's faculty into zombies. Much has been said about the film's envelope-pushing black humor (and especially the notorious severed-head sex scene). But the true strength of the film is Jeffrey Combs' performance as consummate mad scientist West, which assures *Re-Animator's* place as the high-water mark of '80s horror film. His arrogant, geeky swagger, which carries the film from its opening scene, recalls Vincent Price as much as it presages Anthony Hopkins's Hannibal Lecter. *Silence of the Lambs* often gets the credit for tearing down the barrier between high- and lowbrow, but *Re-Animator* is the movie that started the demolition. — *Gabriel McKee*

DVD EXTRAS: Most of the special features here, including two commentary tracks and over an hour of interviews, are cannibalized from earlier DVD releases. The main new feature is a seventy-minute documentary, *Re-Animator Resurrectus*, that gives a concise and palatable history of the movie, but spends a bit too much time analyzing the

film with statements of the obvious. The best extra isn't on the disc at all — the set comes packaged with a green highlighter in the shape of Herbert West's reagent syringe.

May 08, 2007 – Holy Heroes:

[Spider-Man 3 And Venom's Ecclesiastical Roots](#)

There are certainly some things to say about the religious themes in *Spider-Man 3*, but most of them have been said elsewhere already. In addition to the review by Holy Heroes' own [Sci-Fi Catholic](#), I found some intriguing reviews (of varying depth) on [BeliefNet](#), [The American Papist](#), [The Dallas News'](#) religion blog, and [BeliefNet again](#). There's even a [Bible Study Guide](#) for the movie, written by Craig Detweiler of the [Reel Spirituality Institute](#). The reviews tend to focus on the film's sin/redemption themes, and I don't have too much to add to those points. (Though I should probably add that many of these reviews are a little overly kind to the movie's many faults, such as the fact that those self-same redemption themes are occasionally shoehorned in at the expense of coherent characterization.) So instead of talking about those well-discussed themes, I'll give some background on one of the key moments in defining the film's religious landscape: the bell tower scene.



Here's what *Spider-Man 3* gives us: our hero, who has been turning into an insufferable jerk on account of being possessed by alien goo, goes to a church steeple to brood. (In movieland, it's probably supposed to be a Catholic church. But sharp-eyed New York-savvy viewers will note that the exterior is actually [Grace Church](#), which is Episcopal. Not that it matters much, especially since the interior is another church entirely.) And lo and behold, his rival Eddie Brock, another insufferable jerk, has picked precisely this moment to go to the same church to pray for Peter Parker's untimely death. As the bells toll, we discover that the aforementioned alien goo really, really doesn't like loud noises (or at least not church bells), and Parker is able to separate himself from the evil symbiote, just in time for it to descend the bell tower and answer Brock's prayer.



This scene is lifted more-or-less directly from the pages of [Web of Spider-Man #1](#) (1985) and [Amazing Spider-Man #300](#) (1988). *Web #1* (written by Louise Simonson with art by Greg LaRocque and Jim Mooney, and a truly incredible cover by Charles Vess) was the original conclusion to the saga of the alien costume, and it's interesting to see that the story concludes with the same sort of redemption motifs we see in *Spider-Man 3*. In this story, Spidey enters the bell tower of a yet-nameless church during a battle with some C-list villains (The Vulturions, if you must know), and the sound of the bells separates the costume from him. But separation from the symbiote, combined with the overwhelming sound of the bells, nearly kills Parker himself. The costume, in its final moments, redeems itself by pulling Parker to safety before finally disappearing in a puff of smoke. As the costume took control of Parker, it absorbed some of his humanity and compassion, and in its final moments it atones for its sins.



...OR DOES IT?

It turns out the question of why the symbiote saved Parker does not "haunt him for the rest of his life," as the final caption in *Web #1* states. In fact, it was retconned out of relevance three years later when Venom was introduced in *Amazing #300* (written by Dave Michelinie, with art by the anatomically-challenged Todd McFarlane). The symbiote did not, in fact, die in the church (now dubbed, somewhat generically, "Our Lady of Saints"), but simply rested their, recuperating until another suitable host appeared. It finds such a host when Eddie Brock, a [Catholic](#) newspaper reporter who became a laughing stock over some shoddy reporting on the Sin Eater case*, goes there to pray about his desire to commit suicide. Like the film's Brock, Venom's appearance answers his prayer—but

the religious symbolism doesn't end there as they do in the film. When Venom finally traps Spider-Man, the manner in which he attempts to kill his rival takes on a decidedly liturgical tone. Webbing Spidey inside the bell that had allowed him defeat the symbiote three years prior, Brock transforms the costume into a priest's robes.



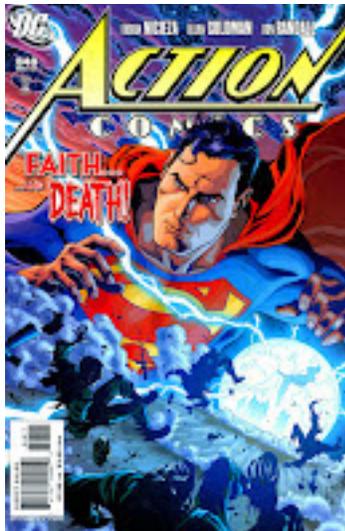
It's tough to say how much significance there is to the religious trappings of this scene—are Michelinie and McFarlane trying to make some greater point about the misuse of religion for violent and worldly ends, or are they just being ironic? In any case, Venom's origins are rooted in religious symbolism that survived the transition to the big screen. (Too bad we can't say the same for the characterizations of, oh, the entire supporting cast. But that's another can of fish that I won't get into here.)

*You think *this* origin is convoluted? Don't get me started on Cable.

Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) at [2:29 PM](#)

May 13, 2007 – Holy Heroes:

[Action Comics #848](#)



Action Comics #848

"Redemption, Part One: If You Believe, a Man Can Fly"

by Fabian Nicieza (writer), Allan Goldman (pencils), and Ron Randall (inks)

DC Comics

Fabian Nicieza—who, with Kurt Busiek, cowrote an excellent parable about faith and responsibility in [Superman #659](#)—takes a different approach to the same questions in Action Comics #848. The results, sadly, are frustrating at best. In the story's opening pages we learn of a powerful metahuman named Redemption who serves as a protector to Christian missionaries in Nyasir, a small (imaginary) African country. The missionaries—members of the “First Church of Redemption”—have converted the Sakira tribe, but the government of Nyasir uses troops to systematically threaten and harass them. Redemption—whose powers stem from the faith that others have in him—accidentally kills several of these troops, prompting Superman to investigate the new superhuman and the church to which he belongs. When Nyasir's government eventually kills the missionaries, Redemption attempts to avenge them, and Superman intervenes.



Unfortunately, the story is quite muddled, and its message is obscured. The setting—both temporally and geographically—is unclear. We know next to nothing about the missionaries, the Sakira tribe, or the government troops who threaten them. The story is structured as if we are supposed to view Redemption as the villain, but he is nowhere near as reprehensible as the jackbooted thugs he opposes. Superman muses that

"There is a fine line between having a belief, sharing a belief and imposing it. What happens if a metahuman crosses that line...?"

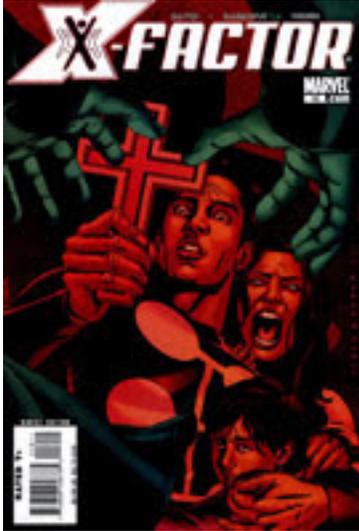
But is that what Redemption does? He's not attempting to convert the Nyasirian troops, but rather to protect unarmed civilians from them. After he accidentally kills them (in self-defense), Superman states that “I don't care to see carnage enabled behind the excuse of religion.” But given what the readers have witnessed, that's a severe misinterpretation of what's going on. Redemption seems to be, like Superman, a champion of the downtrodden; his only crime is lack of training. At the issue's close, Superman confronts Redemption—who has just disarmed the Nyasirian troops without harming them—and declares “this ends now.” In this moment, Superman looks for all the world like the protector of a tyrannical dictatorship. How, exactly, does protecting unarmed missionaries from armed militias make Redemption a supervillain?

It's possible that this story is intended to be a continued exploration of the themes so elegantly portrayed in Superman #659. But by neglecting to give us background, by failing to adequately explain the central character's moral approach to the situation at hand, Nicieza turns this exploration into a confusing mess. The next issue will conclude the story, and it's possible that some much-needed explanation follows. But given the bafflement of this issue, I have little faith that the saga of Redemption will reach a satisfying conclusion.

Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) at 7:47 PM 5 comments:

Labels: [Action Comics](#), [comics reviews](#), [superman](#)

X-Factor #16 Revisited



[My review](#) of X-Factor #16, in which mutant private eye Jamie "The Multiple Man"

Madrox tracks down a duplicate of himself who has become an Episcopal priest, immediately preceded the foundation of Holy Heroes!! I was quite impressed with the story's strong characterizations and theological depth. And it looks like I wasn't the only one: in the lettercol of X-Factor #18, Rev. Jeff Jackson, an Episcopal priest from Savannah, GA, writes in to praise the story:

Dear X-FACTOR,

I cannot thank you enough for writing such a thoughtful story in issue #16. I am an Episcopal priest myself and Jamie Madrox has become one of my favorite characters, so to see Jamie & John's "dilemma" was a treat. But more than that, it was so good to see a religious character depicted in such a way. Usually, religious folk are portrayed as fanatical, or strict, or "holier-than-thou." John Maddocks was refreshingly real. A faithful person, sent to learn what he can about religion, and who finds the truest meaning in the bonds of his family life. I imagined what I would do if a duplicate of myself walked through the doors of my church, hoping to reabsorb me, and the sorrow that John experienced became so real.

On the other side, Jamie's character is only deepened by his acceptance of this dupe to continue what he's doing as a priest and as a husband and father.

Also, thank you for writing a piece that was theologically sound. Instead of John or Jamie raging at God because of this predicament, you kept the story within the bounds of a stewardship sermon, no less. Nothing is ours, not even our lives. What right to we have in taking another person's?

Keep up the great work.

Peace,

*The Rev. Jeff Jackson
Savannah, GA*

Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) at [6:49 PM](#)

May 16, 2007 – Holy Heroes:

[Wolfskin #3](#)



Wolfskin #3

by Warren Ellis (writer) and Juan Jose Ryp (artist)
Avatar Perss

In this, the last issue of Warren Ellis's ultraviolent Conan homage, the eponymous barbarian antihero sees god. Having been severely wounded in #2, Wolfskin eats the flesh of his tribal god—that is, he takes some hallucinogenic mushrooms—and has a face-to-face encounter with the bloodthirsty deity. He's not named, but it's safe to assume that it's Odin, since he's only got one eye (and Juan Jose Ryp draws him without an eyepatch, so it's a pretty ghastly sight). Following an oddly Job-like dialog (and an offhand revelation about the torments in Wolfskin's past), the barbarian awakens into a berserker rage that lasts the remainder of the issue. The story just kind of *ends*, which is a bit unfortunate. But Wolfskin's disturbing encounter with his patron god lends the series as a whole a greater depth than many of the sword and sorcery stories to which it pays tribute. (Speaking of paying tribute, was this series intentionally based on [Red Harvest](#)/[Yojimbo](#)/[A Fistful of Dollars](#), or am I imagining things?)



Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) at 5:34 AM

June 4, 2007 – Holy Heroes:

[Action Comics #849](#)



Action Comics #849

**by Fabian Nicieza (writer), Allan Goldman (penciller), and Ron Randall (inker)
DC Comics**

As many of you may remember (and the rest of you, [click here](#)), a couple weeks ago I reviewed *Action Comics* #848 with more than a little frustration. The story was about religion, but in a largely incomprehensible way, attempting to paint Christian missionaries as supervillains. It didn't work, but as it was the first half of a two-parter, I was willing to grant that it could start to make some more sense in the second half.

Well, it doesn't.

Where to begin? First of all, there's this doozy of a page at the book's beginning, when Superman faces off against the newly-minted religious superhuman Redemption:



Dang, Superman. The dude asks you to help the helpless and you dislocate his shoulder? That is *cold*. Even worse, on the next page he decides that maybe Redemption is right, so he flies back to Nyasir to help the missionaries himself. We don't see it happen, instead getting a caption between panels: "He was right. I liberated the Sakira. They've been placed under United Nations protection." Well, hallelujah to that. Good thing their protection wasn't delayed by any unnecessary superhero brawls. Now when are you planning to apologize for the dislocated shoulder?

Following this, Superman goes to visit the elderly woman who thought he was an angel in *Superman* #659. Remember that one? The one I called [the best Superman story in over 20 years?](#) The scene tries to

bring some of the poignancy of that story across, and to its credit it's the most interesting scene in the book. But it's also tough to see where it fits into *this* story. There's some pontificating about faith being relative, but I simply fail to see how it ties in with Redemption's attempt to protect unarmed missionaries from an oppressive government.

The moral of the story seems to be that missionary work is wrong by definition. No matter how great the good done, no matter how unjust the obstacles to that work may be, the risk of "imposing one's beliefs" outweighs them all. Here it is in Superman's own words: "All of those good works come with strings attached—and often an intrusion into the culture or laws of other lands." And Redemption, who has been converted to Superman's view by the story's end: "We don't need to be in Nyasir." I'm not saying that missionaries never act unethically, and I'm particularly disturbed by the belief, held by [many prominent evangelicals](#), that [it's better to give a starving person a Bible than a sandwich](#). But this sort of isolationism is unspeakably dangerous. Take Darfur, for instance—the oppression of the Sakira in Action #848 looks an awful lot like a Janjaweed raid. Is Superman really encouraging isolationism in reaction to this sort of oppression? In the end, the story seems to say that it is better to do nothing in the face of injustice than to do something in the name of religion.

As [Paul noted](#) a few weeks ago, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster created Superman to be a champion of the downtrodden, and "Redemption" is an egregious betrayal of that spirit. It's not just a bad story—it's downright irresponsible.

Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) at [5:00 PM](#)

June 4, 2007 – Holy Heroes:

[Religionlink On Superheroes And Religion](#)

Religionlink gives a primer on [Superheroes and spirituality: the religion of the comics](#). It gives a good list of sources, including the always-handly [Adherents](#) superhero database. But where's Holy Heroes!?

Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) at [1:58 PM](#)

June 26, 2007 – Holy Heroes:

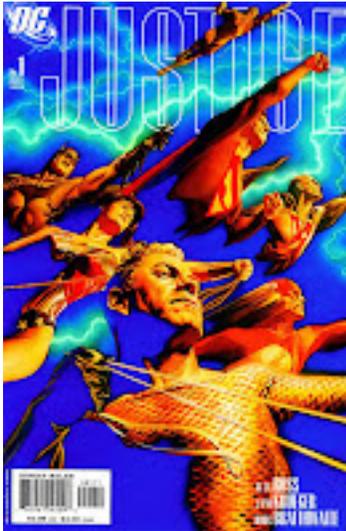
Superheroes And The "Utopian Problem": Justice, Black Summer, Miracleman



My favorite superhero story is Alan Moore's (and later Neil Gaiman's) [Miracleman](#). It's become a bit of a cliché to describe this kind of story as an exploration of "what it would be like if superheroes existed in the *real* world," but *Miracleman* rises above some of the pitfalls that such stories can fall into by unabashedly devoting itself to its utopian themes. By the conclusion of Moore's story, the eponymous hero directs his energies not to apprehending petty criminals or foiling dastardly plots, but to actually making his world a better place. In *Miracleman* 16, the book's heroes

remake the world in their image, ending war and famine and granting superpowers to all who desire them. It's become popular to refer to the series as *Marvelman*, the title under which the first few chapters were published before a certain publishing company took issue with Eclipse's use of the name. But I prefer to call it *Miracleman*, because by the time Moore wrote his conclusion, and especially during the later Neil Gaiman issues, the word "Miracle" takes on a key role in the story's world. The superhero creates an Age of Miracles (not Marvels) because he is a god, a redeemer, the founder of an earthly paradise.

Miracleman is hardly the only story in which superheroes create a perfect world. Interestingly, though, these stories inevitably blur the line between utopia and dystopia—the *Squadron Supreme* brainwashes their friends and enemies alike; the archvillain of *Watchmen* baptizes his new age of world peace in innocent blood; the heroes of Warren Ellis' *The Authority* are perhaps the definitive flawed messiahs. Generally, the stance of these stories is that the superhumans, in remaking the world, rob ordinary humans of their free will. But despite this criticism, the nagging thought remains: if superheroes truly cared about justice, would they allow famine, poverty, and war to exist?



In their recently-completed Justice League saga *Justice*, Jim Krueger, Alex Ross, and Doug Braithwaite give voice to the "utopian problem" of superhero stories. In #4 of the 12-issue series, Lex Luthor declares his intention to solve the world's most persistent problems, and challenges his world's heroes on their negligence:

"But we're also wondering why they never tried to do what we've been doing. Why they never attempted to use their powers and abilities to make this world a better place. I believe that their inaction is as criminal as those felonies we went to prison for. Preserving the world and not daring to change it means keeping food from the hungry. Keeping the crippled in wheelchairs. Bowing to the status quo of human suffering. And still, they call us the villains... Sure, the Justice League may save us all from a giant alien starfish in the middle of the ocean from time to time. But they save us only to send us back to our old lives. Back to our bills, back to our useless jobs, back to our suffering. If they were really the heroes they claim to be, they'd save us from those same lives as well. They're the monsters, really, to have allowed things to go on the way they have.

In light of this challenge, the villains set out to create a utopia: Captain Cold creates icebergs that bring water to deserts. The Toyman builds prosthetic limbs for landmine victims. In short, the villains step up and do what the heroes of the DC Universe have refused to do: solve their world's problems for good.



A similar idea forms the starting point for Warren Ellis' forthcoming series [Black Summer](#), which takes a highly politicized approach to a similar idea. In this series, a 20-page preview of which was released earlier this month, a superhero kills the president and demands that the American people rebuild their government. In an essay in the preview issue, Ellis explains the extrapolation from costumed crimefighting to political assassination:

"If we invite or condone masked adventurers to fight crime outside the law, do we get to draw a line where they stop? Condoning their activity is much the same as giving them carte blanche to fight crime wherever they perceive it to be... If a self-identified crimefighter lives in a country where a President can be said to have prosecuted an illegal war and therefore can be said to have killed a great many people in the enactment of his criminal enterprise... What does that masked man do?"

Ellis' essay is remarkably similar in tone to Lex Luthor's critique of the status-quo-upholding superheroes of the DCU in *Justice*. Crime, justice, and legality can be quite difficult things to define, and so why wouldn't (or shouldn't) beings as powerful as Superman fight the greater ills of their world as well as the lesser?

Of course, later issues of *Justice* reveal the sinister motives behind the villains' plan. But regardless of the flaws of the messenger, Luthor's question remains valid: Why don't the heroes fight for true, lasting justice? Why do they permit suffering to go on when they could eliminate it? Sadly, *Justice* doesn't provide a very satisfying answer. In the closing pages, Batman asks us to imagine "a world transformed," but doesn't give an explanation for why he hasn't already made it a reality.

The prosaic reason for the lack of true change in the DCU involves publishing schedules and audience accessibility—the world the superheroes inhabit needs to be readily understandable by new readers; the imaginary world must match the real world up to a point. More importantly, a true superhero utopia would lack drama, and the imperfections of these universes makes room for the conflict that the stories require. (Admittedly, Gaiman's *Miracleman* issues challenge this last argument). Most of the stories of superheroes taking over their worlds are standalone stories or limited series. But these concerns have been worked into the metaphysics of superhero universes: if Superman exists, there must also exist supervillains powerful enough to keep his world at equilibrium. While reading an issue of *Spider-Man* a few years ago, I realized a certain absurdity in the ease with which superheroes are able to find petty crimes to fight. In Spider-Man's New York, an hour of web-slinging will reveal muggings on every streetcorner, car chases in Times Square, and a handful of broad-daylight bank robberies. Our world simply isn't like that—there's much, much more crime in a superhero universe than in the real world. They have powerful protectors, to be sure, but they also have far more danger to protect against. Between Spidey, the Fantastic Four, and the Avengers, I'm amazed Marvel's New York has any crime at all—perhaps it's more stupidity than evil that leads to the aforementioned daylight robberies. The good of superheroes is counterbalanced by the evil of supervillains. New York will always have the Fantastic Four, but Latveria will always have Dr. Doom. Superman reigns in Metropolis, but Black Adam is king in Khandaq. Superhero worlds are not utopias because their evil is strong enough to limit their good.

*For more on the religious aspects of superheroes (including *Miracleman*), see chapter 6 of [The Gospel According to Science Fiction: From the Twilight Zone to the Final Frontier](#).*

Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) at 2:55 PM

July 10, 2007 – Holy Heroes:

Zombie Faith

Quick quiz:

According to recent horror comics, a zombie invasion:

- a) is a sign of divine election
- b) proves that God does not exist
- c) heralds wedding bells
- d) all of the above

Find out the answers at my main blog, [SF Gospel](#):

[What place does religion have in a world conquered by zombies?](#)

Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) at 4:16 PM

July 11, 2007 – Holy Heroes:

Better Late Than Never Dept.

Two old posts recently discovered on other blogs:

- Douglas Wolk's week-by-week review of DC's universe-spanning series *52* includes an exploration of the "religion of crime" practiced by some of the DCU's villains in "[Black Adam and Grey Theology](#)."
- Glen O'Brien's review of Ang Lee's *The Hulk* was more positive than most, largely because he sees the character as an embodiment of sin: "[The Theology of the Superheroes I: The Incredible Hulk](#)."

Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) at 12:51 PM

July 17, 2007 – Holy Heroes:

"On the subject of Batman's religious affiliation, there is some disagreement among fans as well as among writers about whether the character is a mostly lapsed Catholic or a mostly lapsed Episcopalian. There is universal agreement that the character is not an active churchgoer in any faith."

Read more about [The Religion of Batman](#) at Ain't Christian.

Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) at 7:19 PM

August 22, 2007 – The Screengrab:

[[One-Star Cinema: Hannibal – Not indexed by the Internet Archive and no longer hosted at Nerve.]]

August 31, 2007 – Nerve Film Lounge:

Invasion of the Body Snatchers

Starring: Donald Sutherland, Brooke Adams, Jeff Goldblum, Veronica Cartwright, Leonard Nimoy

Directed by: Phillip Kaufman

Runtime: 115 min. **Rated:** PG

DVD Release date: August 7, 2007 - [More Info](#)

READER RATINGS:

6.7

Smart 8
Sexy 6
Funny 6

OVERALL

Rate this film

Review this film

THE NERVE REVIEW

The latest remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (*The Invasion*, starring Nicole Kidman) is the fourth version of the film, but it's not too surprising that the story has seen so many updates — its anticonformist message can always be made to resonate with the times. Though it's difficult to top the suburban paranoia of Don Siegel's 1956 original, which symbolizes both McCarthyist hysteria and Communist docility, Philip Kaufman's 1978 remake transfers the story into a new context brilliantly.

In this version of the classic sci-fi/horror hybrid, Donald Sutherland plays Matthew Bennell, an inspector for the Department of Health who notices strange behavior in some of his fellow San Franciscans. His co-worker Elizabeth Driscoll (Brooke Adams) becomes convinced that her boyfriend has been replaced by a doppelganger. They turn for help to a cynical poet (Jeff Goldblum) and his health-spa-owner wife (Veronica Cartwright), and pop psychologist David Kibner (Leonard Nimoy). Before long they uncover a spreading conspiracy of pod-born alien impostors slowly taking over the city. Kaufman's update of the character's relationships captures the atmosphere of the time in which it was made, and the combination of claustrophobic camerawork and truly creepy effects brings it into line with the best horror films of the decade. But the real daring move is moving the action from the suburbs to the center of San Francisco, where the film's message becomes an attack on the self-involvement of the Me Generation. The most inspired touch is Nimoy's performance as Kibner, whose books about emotional healing echo the soulless aliens' world without feelings. The original *Body Snatchers* truly embodies the '50s zeitgeist, and this version is just as effective. It ultimately comes across as a meditation on a nation's transformation from the Summer of Love to Morning in America. — *Gabriel McKee*

DVD EXTRAS: This new release is a two-disc set, though it doesn't need to be. The second disc contains just over thirty minutes of featurettes on various aspects of the film; the piece on cinematography is the most interesting. The audio commentary by director Kaufman is occasionally insightful, but slightly too obsessed with technical details.

August 1, 2007: The Screengrab:

[[One-Star Cinema: Pootie Tang. Post is not archived by Wayback Machine and no longer hosted at Nerve.]]

August 19, 2007 – Holy Heroes:

As a new feature for Holy Heroes!!, I will scour Previews for forthcoming books dealing with religion and give everybody a heads-up on books that may be of interest to readers of this blog. First up:

SENSATIONAL SPIDER-MAN #40

WRITER: Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa

PENCILS, INKS, COLORING, & COVER: Clayton Crain

LETTERED BY: Chris Eliopoulos

THE STORY:

Above all else, Peter Parker is a decent man. With a good heart. Who has given his life over to the service of others. And in exchange...what has he gotten? Tragedy after tragedy after tragedy...His Uncle Ben, Gwen Stacy, the list goes on and on...And why? In his darkest hour, Peter demands answers. And the only person who can give them to him is...God?

32 PGS./Rated A ...\$2.99

IN STORES: August 22, 2007

Peter Parker has definitely gone through some Job-like suffering (does he have *any* family members left that haven't died at least once?), so a spiritual showdown makes sense. I don't really like the dark direction the character has taken lately (and this from a guy who loves [Kraven's Last Hunt!](#)), but if this issue is good it may make up for it.

[See preview pages here.](#)

Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) at [7:28 PM](#)

EX MACHINA #31

Written by Brian K. Vaughan

Art by Tony Harris and Jim Clark

Cover by Harris

DC/Wildstorm

"Ex Cathedra," Part 2 of 4. Summoned to Vatican City by the Pope himself, superhero-turned-mayor Mitchell Hundred must cross the line between church and state in a thriller that will pit him against a terrifying new group of villains.

Wildstorm Universe | 32pg. | Color | \$2.99 US | Mature Readers

On Sale October 17, 2007

DC was coy about a "major world leader" in the solicitation for #30 (part 1 of this story), but they showed their hand here. This is one of my favorite books right now, and I'm definitely curious to see how Vaughan writes the Pope.

Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) at [7:28 PM](#)

Hellblazer #233

by Andy Diggle (writer) and Leonardo Manco (artist)

DC/Vertigo

Five issues in, Andy Diggle's run on *Hellblazer* is well on its way to becoming the stuff of legend. The opening two-parter proved that Diggle understands John Constantine's character, and the second story displays both knowledge and affection for his history. But the real strength of *Hellblazer* #233 for me is its development of a truly interesting metaphysics.

Diggle's goal with #232-233, set in the Ravenscar asylum where Constantine spent some time following his first experiments with magic, is to clean up the character's history. In his early appearances in Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing*, Constantine constantly referred to Newcastle, where some mysterious, horrible event had happened years before. In *Hellblazer* #11, Jamie Delano revealed what had happened at Newcastle. It was a story that needed to be told, perhaps, but it symbolized the main difference between Constantine's *Swamp Thing* appearances and the required paradigm of a solo book: he lost much of his mystery.



In this story, Diggle metaphorically undoes some of the messy continuity that has built up in the 222 issues since the secrets of Newcastle were revealed. In the character's 20-plus year history, he has damned, indirectly killed, or otherwise screwed over everyone in his life. That's led to a lot of guilt—the accumulated sin of two decades as a bitter antihero. Diggle physicalizes that sin, making it manifest so that Constantine—and the book—can purge themselves of the baggage. The catharsis is fascinating, and it shows more attention to metaphysics than *Hellblazer* has shown in a long, long time. Add the always-incredible art of Leonardo Manco, and this is easily the best *Hellblazer* has been since Warren Ellis' unjustly-truncated run.

Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) at 7:05 PM

Chronicles of Wormwood #4, 5, and 6

By Garth Ennis (writer) and Jacen Burrows (artist)
Avatar Press

The second half of Garth Ennis' miniseries about the Antichrist starts strong. The "afterlife road trip" announced on the last page of #3 ends up being the best bit of the whole series. It culminates with a heartbreaking scene in which Jesus (who would be the true Second Coming if he weren't brain-damaged) expresses his sorrow at the world's pain. Of all the things I expected from this series, a moment of honest to goodness *Christology* wasn't on the list, and it's a pleasant surprise.



Elsewhere in the issue, there's a clever take on church history as Satan reveals that he was the inspiration behind the conversion of Constantine:

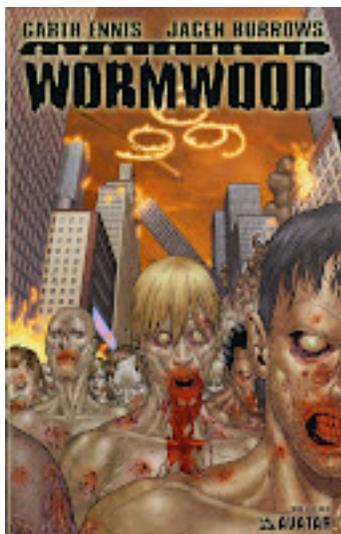
"By that point, you see, the Christians were obviously here to stay. Crucify them, boil them, throw them to the lions—for every one you did away with, a hundred signed up to take his place. People love the idea of martyrs. The idea of something grand, something spiritual inspiring sacrifice—which is the point I made to Constantine. Adapt and survive, I told him. If you can't beat them, join them. Or lead them.

Declare Rome Christian. Take the whole empire over to Jesus. Re-brand: once the taxes are tithes and the wars are crusades, you'll get away with more than you ever did."

Add a hilarious scene involving the Beast of Revelation and you've got the makings of what I wish this series had been for all six issues: a clever critique of religion that doesn't descend into nastiness for its own sake.



A pity, then, that Ennis spoils it in the last pages of #5. When God finally shows up, he's an idiot who can neither speak nor keep his hand out of his robe. The thing that irritates me isn't the ugliness of the image (though it is more than a little ugly)—it's the *unoriginality* of it. Ennis is retreading old ground with this caricature, which is essentially the same thing as the inbred heir of Jesus that appeared in the pages of *Preacher*. It doesn't bother me overly much if Ennis wants to say nasty things about God—that's what I expected from page 1 of this series. But I hoped it would be much, much more clever than this. (Not to mention the fact that it doesn't make a whole lot of sense, logically. If this is what God is like in this universe, how could he have devised *any* kind of plan for Wormwood to oppose? But I digress.)



Anyway, the conclusion mostly makes up for it, with Jesus and Wormwood refusing to give into their parents' plans. In spite of everything, Wormwood ends up delivering a message of hope. He gives an inspiring speech to Jesus that concludes: *"You have to hope things'll get better. D'you know why? Because it's exactly the kind of hope in the face of unimaginable despair that you've always asked of everybody."*

Though Ennis paints a truly ugly picture of God, he obviously has a great deal of affection for *Jesus*. The dual defeat of God and Satan at the book's conclusion is presented as a victory for humankind. Despite its intention to blasphemy, *Chronicles of Wormwood* ends up delivering a moral message that's almost... well... Christian.

Exasperated, nitpicking note: Dear comics industry, Hollywood, etc. The Book of Revelation IS NOT PLURAL. Please leave out the final "s" from now on.

Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) at [5:48 PM](#)

Sept. 17, 2007 – The Screengrab:

[[One-Star Cinema: Jersey Girl. Post is not archived by Wayback Machine and no longer hosted at Nerve.]]

September 22, 2007 – Holy Heroes:

I mention this primarily for Elliot's amusement and/or frustration: *Countdown* #37 contains a jab at door-to-door evangelism when stage-magician-themed heroine Zatanna shows Mary Marvel around her mansion:



Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) at [5:08 AM](#)

October 4, 2007 – Holy Heroes:

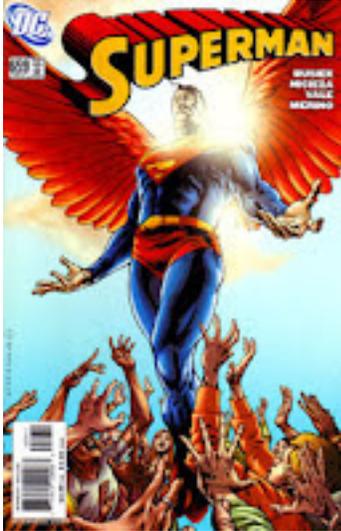
Courtesy of [BeaucopKevin](#), Garth Ennis (should I say "of all people"?) writes Superman as an omnibenevolent demigod. From the pages of *JLA/Hitman*, here it is:



Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) at 8:01 PM

October 12, 2007 – Holy Heroes:

Have 3 issues of PREVIEWS piled up already? Dang, I'd better get posting. Some of these are probably even out already. It's a long list, for which I apologize in advance. In no particular order:



SUPERMAN: REDEMPTION TP

Written by Kurt Busiek and Fabian Nicieza

Art by Walter Simonson, Carlos Pacheco and others

Cover by Al Barrionuevo

Collecting Superman #659 and #666 and Action Comics #848-849! The Man of Steel travels to hell and back in this collection of stories that touches on the supernatural side of Superman.

Advance-solicited; on sale January 2 • 112 pg, FC, \$12.99 US

Oh, the conflict: This collection contains Superman #659, which is one of my favorite Supes stories ever. (Read my review [here](#).) But it also contains Action 848 and 849, which were dreadfully bad. (Read my reviews [here](#) and [here](#).) Were they bad enough to want to stick on a bookshelf as a sterling example of how not to do religion in comics?

INDIA AUTHENTIC VOLUME 1: THE BOOK OF SHIVA TP

Virgin Comics

Created by: Deepak Chopra

Written by: Saurav Mohapatra

Art by: Virgin Illustrations

Cover by: Abhishek Singh

Acclaimed author Deepak Chopra and Virgin Comics invite you to a world of exotic legends and alluring myths, a land called India. Featuring the origin tales of some of the iconic deities in the Indian pantheon like Ganesha - The God of endeavors; Kali - The primal facet of the Indian Mother Goddess; Indra - The King of Gods; Uma - The All-Mother; and last but not the least, the enigmatic and powerful Shiva - The Great Destroyer.

Collects issues #1 thru #5 of the groundbreaking and critically acclaimed series from Virgin Comics. Featuring an introduction to each tale by Deepak Chopra, every foreword enumerates the significance of the myth to the modern world and explores the archetypes and themes with respect to current times. Volume 1 - THE BOOK OF SHIVA is written by Saurav Mohapatra (DEVI, SADHU : THE SILENT ONES) and features art by Abhishek Singh (RAMAYAN 3392 AD) and Satish Tayade (KAMASUTRA, RAMAYAN 3392 AD).

SC, 7x10, 144pgs, FC \$14.99

Has anybody read any of these Hinduism-Reloaded things from Virgin Comics? And are they any good at all? And does Deepak Chopra's name really bear any weight with your average comics fan? (Or anyone else?) A couple more collections (Ramayan 3392, Devi) are due out later.

MYSTERIUM FIDEI HC

Last Gasp

by [Daniel Martin Diaz](#) & Michael M. Brescia

Mysterium Fidei, Latin for "Mystery of Faith," is the new collection of art from Daniel Martin Diaz. In this collection of oil paintings, drawings, and prints, Diaz contemplates human suffering and one's undying faith in the afterlife. His mystical imagery reflects the influences of Byzantine iconography, Retabalos, Ex Votos, the Illuminati, ephemera, alchemy, and 16th-century anatomical engravings. Collected in a beautiful clothbound hardcover. (C: 0-1-2)

MATURE THEMES

HC, 10x10, 184pgs, FC SRP: \$39.95

Intriguing. I hadn't heard of this artist before reading this solicitation, but he's pretty interesting, especially if you're into medieval art (I am).

CHRONICLES OF WORMWOOD: THE LAST ENEMY GN

Avatar Press

by Garth Ennis & Rob Steen

Wormwood, Jimmy, Jay all return and the world hasn't gotten any better since their last adventure. Wormwood still produces questionable TV shows and pines for Maggie, his lost love. The boys all share drinks at their favorite pub and try to get on with their lives, but Pope Jacko has his own plans for Wormwood. In order to dispatch the Anti-Christ once-and-for-all, he dispatches his finest Holy assassin, Brother One, the Killer Eunuch! If you loved the original series, then you don't want to miss the next chapter of Garth Ennis' new sacrilegious masterpiece!

MATURE THEMES

SC, 48pgs, FC SRP: \$7.99

I've been cutting back my comics budget, and Garth Ennis is one of the first writers under the knife—I'm increasingly convinced that he doesn't have another Preacher in him. Still, if this series must have a sequel, I'm glad to see it's a standalone graphic novel rather than another miniseries.

DEATH OF THE NEW GODS #1-2

DC Comics

Written by Jim Starlin

Art and covers by Starlin & Matt Banning

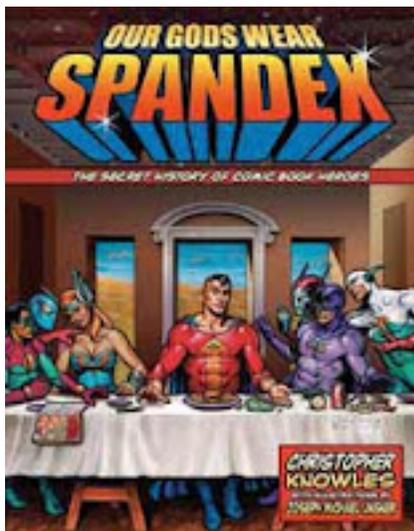
Variant cover issue #1 by Ryan Sook

The title says it all! For months now readers have witnessed the unimaginable and unthinkable as New Gods across the DCU have seemingly died, with Lightray's death in COUNTDOWN the biggest of them all. Now, the carnage continues but the mystery and adventure is just beginning! Jim Starlin — master of the cosmic odyssey — writes and illustrates this epic tale of death and destruction on a scale never seen before. With a cast of hundreds and cameos by the entire DCU, this intergalactic 8-part series cannot be missed!

Retailers please note: Issue #1 will ship with two covers that may be ordered separately. For every 10 copies of the Standard Edition (featuring a cover by Jim Starlin & Matt Banning) ordered, retailers may order 1 Variant Edition (featuring a cover by Ryan Sook). Please see the Order Form for more details.

Issue #1 on sale October 17; issue #2 on sale October 31 • 1 and 2 of 8 • 40 pg, FC, \$3.50 US

I never got into the New Gods, but this and the recent Eternals revival have convinced me that Jack Kirby's wacky '70s cosmic theology is probably worth looking in to.



OUR GODS WEAR SPANDEX SC

by Christopher Knowles; illustrated by Joseph Michael Linsner

Was Superman's arch nemesis Lex Luthor based on Aleister Crowley? Can Captain Marvel be linked to the Sun gods of antiquity? In *Our Gods Wear Spandex*, Christopher Knowles answers these questions and brings to light many other intriguing links between superheroes and the enchanted world of esoterica. (6962/1-578634-06-7) (C: 0-1-2) SC, 7x9, 224pgs, B&W SRP: \$21.95

A book about religion in superhero comics? Why would that interest the readers of this blog? We may need to look into doing a full review of this one, methinks. It looks like they didn't take the approach I would have—which is fine, since I eventually want to write a book of my own on the topic, and don't want to retread too much ground.



GRAPHIC UNIVERSE: ARTHUR AND LANCELOT HC

by Limke & Yeates

GRAPHIC UNIVERSE: BEOWULF HC

by Storrie & Randall

GRAPHIC UNIVERSE: ODYSSEUS HC

by Jolley & Yeates

GRAPHIC UNIVERSE: SINBAD HC

by Croall & Hilinski

GRAPHIC UNIVERSE: THESEUS HC

by Limke & McCrea

GRAPHIC UNIVERSE: HERCULES, THE TWELVE LABORS SC

by Storrie & Kurth

GRAPHIC UNIVERSE: ISIS & OSIRIS, TO THE ENDS OF EARTH SC

by Limke & Witt

GRAPHIC UNIVERSE: KING ARTHUR, EXCALIBUR UNSHEATHED SC

by Limke & Yeates

GRAPHIC UNIVERSE: THOR & LOKI IN THE LAND OF GIANTS SC

by Limke & Randall

GRAPHIC UNIVERSE: THE TROJAN HORSE SC

by Fontes, Fontes & Purcell

Lerner Publishing Group

Hardcovers: \$26.60; Softcovers: \$8.95

A Classics Illustrated-style take on assorted myths. If you've heard of the artist, it's probably only available in hardcover, so these are almost certainly too pricy to consider. PS: This is one of 3 versions of Beowulf coming out this month. Only one of them has anything to do with the Neil Gaiman-penned movie. Just convenient timing, I suppose.

LEGION GN

IDW Publishing

Salvador Sanz (w & a)

Bloody rain is falling over the city of Buenos Aires. The sky opens, dropping demons on the city. It's the legion: the dead

and their destruction. The architects from Hell build a huge tower of human remains on the city's horizon. Why have they come? What do they want? Nobody knows, but only Felix—a guitar player from a local band—has the key to find out. Presenting a special standalone tale of demons and destruction, courtesy of film director/writer/artist Salvador Sanz (Gorgonas).

FC • 48 pages • \$7.49

Sounds kinda like [The Six-String Samurai](#), which is a great movie that nobody's seen.

THE ATHEIST #4

Desperado

by Hester & Volley

Sharpe and Nguyen face the horrifying reality that our world is being invaded by the restless spirits of the dead. The only thing capable of stopping this ghostly army is a doomsday device so terrible that even the Department of Defense has tried to destroy it. Sharpe does not share their compunctions, but will he be able to use it if it means the death of those closest to him? By the new creative team for the upcoming 2008 series sequel Antoine Sharp.

RES. from Previews Vol. XV #8 (AUG051667)

32pgs, B&W SRP: \$3.99

I was intrigued by the title when the first issue of this came out a while back, but I haven't actually read it, so I don't know if it has any real bearing on the content. Anybody out there read it?

CRIME BIBLE: THE FIVE LESSONS OF BLOOD #2

DC Comics

Written by Greg Rucka

Art by Jose Saiz

Cover by John Van Fleet

The Dark Faith spreads throughout the DCU as the Daughters of Lilith take the forefront in a recruitment drive to convert people to the Religion of Crime through the Lesson of Lust. And only The Question, who must work under cover, can stop a United States colonel from sacrificing his life — and his country.

On sale November 7 • 2 of 5 • 32 pg, FC, \$2.99 US

The Crime Bible was one of the more intriguing ideas to come out of 52, but it didn't have much room to develop within the cramped pages of that series. Perhaps this will give it some room, though my faith in Rucka is not as high as it could be.

JUDAS VOLUME 5

Tokyopop

Creator: Suu Minazuki

Judas, cursed for his sins, is the spirit of Death--he is without form, and has enslaved young Eve to carry out the most heinous of acts. Together in spirit and body, they must slay 666 people so that Judas can regain his humanity. Using Eve as his vessel of destruction, the dark, blood-soaked journey will leave a trail of sin, death, and--hopefully for Judas--redemption. Salvation may be at hand, but now is the time for prayer...

ISBN 978-1-4278-0204-0 \$9.99

The description above is from the first volume of this manga series; this is the final one. Intriguing concept with a LOT of room to turn into something dreadfully bad. Has anybody read it? Is there any point to the religious symbolism, or is it just "blood-soaked"?

RAMA TP

Arcana Studio

by Dr. Barbara Jackson & Ashok Bhadana

Ramayana is not just a literary monument, it is held in such reverence that the mere reading or hearing of it can set individuals free from sin and grant every desire to the reader or listener. In this retelling of Ramayana, author Dr. Barbara Jackson enlightens and enables the reader to understand the righteous path - dharma - for the life on earth."

Another comic based on Hindu mythology. Lest you be confused, this is the one that doesn't have Deepak Chopra's name on it.

Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) at [11:25 AM](#)

October 21, 2007 – Holy Heroes:

NPR's Studio 360 covers *The 99*, a comic about 99 heroes who each embody one of the 99 attributes of God (AKA Asma' Allah al-Ḥusná, or [the 99 most beautiful names of God](#)). Conceived by Naif Al-Mutawa, founder of [Teshkeel Comics](#), *The 99* is written by Fabian Nicieza and illustrated by John McCrea and James Hodgkins. A preview issue (and a long one, 68 pages) is available as a free PDF [here](#).

Hear Studio 360's coverage [here](#).

Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) at [5:22 PM](#)

October 22, 2007 – Holy Heroes:

I have not yet received my copy of *Ex Machina* #31, in which Mayor Mitchell Hundred meets the Pope. But Don McPherson has, and he reviews it at [Eye on Comics](#):

Really, this story arc is about the fundamental differences between the secular and spiritual worlds and how they hide common ground. Serving as a symbol of that approach to the storytelling is the story arc's title — "Ex Cathedra" — which is a religious play on the title of this series; it's different but similar.

Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) at [7:13 PM](#)

December 20, 2007 – Holy Heroes:

Via [BeaucoupKevin](#), a snippet of the documentary [Masters of Comic Book Art](#) in which the King discusses the religious inspiration for Galactus, the Silver Surfer, and the New Gods:

"I went to the Bible, and I came up with Galactus...And there I was in front of this tremendous figure, who I knew very well because I have always felt him, and I certainly couldn't treat him in the same way that I would any ordinary mortal. And I remember in my first story I had to back away from it to resolve that story And of course the Silver Surfer is the fallen angel... They were figures that had never before been used in comics. They were above mythic figures. And of course they were the first gods. And I began thinking along those lines. And the New Gods evolved from those lines. And I began to ask myself, everybody else had their gods. What are ours? What is the shape of our society in the form of myth and legend? Who are our gods? Who are our evil gods and who are our good ones?"

January 17-18, 2008 – The Screengrab:

The Top Ten Action Heroes Who Deserve A Comeback, Part 1

Posted by Peter Smith

This week's top ten comes to us from guest writer Gabriel Mckee, friend of Nerve and author of [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#). Read his fantastic blog [here](#).

Recent years may well be remembered for bringing back the over-the-top action hero. New sequels to *Rocky*, *Die Hard*, and *Rambo* have revived long-dead franchises, and the trend is continuing. *Indiana Jones 4* has started filming, and a fourth *Mad Max* film would have wrapped by now had scheduling conflicts not led director George Miller to make *Happy Feet* instead. Though it's an easy trend to mock, it opens the door for other action heroes to be resurrected — here are some top candidates.

10. Scott McCoy (Chuck Norris), *The Delta Force*

Before he was a meme, before he was *Walker, Texas Ranger*, even before he was a Karate Kommando, Chuck Norris was Maj. Scott McCoy of the Delta Force. This elite antiterrorist strike force, led by Lee Marvin, consists of some thirty soldiers who are highly trained in standing around in the back of a cargo plane while Chuck Norris rides around on a motorcycle killing terrorists. *Delta Force* came out in the pre-*Die Hard* world, before we expected our action heroes to have pathos, depth or family troubles. There's not much character to this character, but when it comes to straightforward ass-kicking, Norris is the undisputed master. Norris is ripe for a Stallone-style comeback, and in the end in the age of the War on Terror, a new entry in the *Delta Force* saga is the perfect vehicle for his revival.

9. Axel Foley (Eddie Murphy), *Beverly Hills Cop*

Remember when Eddie Murphy made movies that people enjoyed? Barring *Dreamgirls*, his film career has been on a losing streak for over a decade, putting him just below Robin Williams on the list of actors who need to be rescued from their own careers. A return to the role of Axel Foley, the detective/con man of *Beverly Hills Cop*, might be the best way to ensure that *Norbit* never happens again.

8. Jack Carter (Michael Caine), *Get Carter*

Michael Caine has made a major comeback in recent years, but in most of his recent roles — in *Batman Begins*, *Children of Men*, and *The Prestige*, for instance — he's played the Kindly Old British Guy. It's easy to forget that he made his name playing jerks — first a heartless cad in *Alfie*, then a brutal-but-suave thug in *Get Carter*. This story of a London gangster who travels to Newcastle (Britain's equivalent of South Jersey) to investigate his brother's murder isn't as flashy as more recent tales of the U.K. underworld. But Guy Ritchie and Jason Statham nevertheless owe everything to *Get Carter's* blueprint and Caine's cynical performance. A return to the character of Carter would give Caine a chance to recapture both the grim violence and the effortless sexiness of one of his greatest roles.

7. Jimmy "Popeye" Doyle (Gene Hackman), *The French Connection*

The most successful action film of the '70s didn't star Clint Eastwood, Bruce Lee or any other established veteran of the genre. *The French Connection* owes much of its success to Gene Hackman's performance as hot-headed bad cop Popeye Doyle (which earned him his first Academy Award). More than just a tough guy, Doyle is a contemptible bully, and instead of an invincible supercop, his temper makes him a bit of a screw-up. Hackman is still more than capable of this kind of complexity (as proven by *The Royal Tenenbaums*), and it would be thrilling to see what he could do with this character after thirty-five years.

6. Foxy Brown (Pam Grier)

The 1973 film *Coffy* established Pam Grier as the undisputed queen of '70s blaxploitation. *Foxy Brown* (originally intended as a sequel entitled *Burn, Coffy, Burn!*) justified her ascension — whether infiltrating a high-end call-girl ring, shooting her drug-dealing brother in the ear, or hijacking a drug runner's crop duster, Foxy is "a whole lotta woman." At turns smiling and sneering, she violently opposes an oppressive society symbolized by a white-operated heroin syndicate. Grier has had a slightly higher profile since Quentin Tarantino reintroduced audiences to her charms, but it's been far too long since she's kicked ass like she did in *Foxy Brown*.

Read [PART 2](#).

The Top Ten Action Heroes Who Deserve A Comeback, Part 2

Posted by Peter Smith

5. Alan "Dutch" Schaefer (Arnold Schwarzenegger), *Predator*

When it comes to sheer coolness, few action movies can top John McTiernan's *Predator*. The uncomplicated tale of a Special Forces unit being stalked by an alien trophy hunter has little time to waste on anything that doesn't involve an explosion. Though the Predators themselves have returned to the screen several times (most recently in this year's *Aliens vs. Predator: Requiem*), Dutch Schaefer has yet to be granted a rematch with the beasts. The role of the wisecracking soldier who transforms into an instinct-driven animal is one of the roles that put Arnold Schwarzenegger on the map. The sooner his political career ends, the sooner Arnold can get back to doing what he does best — punching extraterrestrials in the face.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NoRHcyf3lv0>

4. Snake Plissken (Kurt Russell), *Escape from New York*

John Carpenter's *Escape From New York* is set in a bleak near-future in which Manhattan is a prison colony. The film is a bare-bones affair with little budget for flashy set-pieces, which may be why the film's fans feel so much affection for megacool antihero Snake Plissken. In 1980, Kurt Russell was best known for Disney's *The Computer Wore Tennis Shoes*, and his portrayal of the grim Plissken changed the trajectory of his entire career. The 1995 remaquel *Escape From LA* is oft-mocked, but it's both more

showy and more fun. Its conclusion follows the nihilism of the bad-guy action hero to its furthest extreme: Plissken single-handedly destroys civilization and plunges the world back to the Stone Age. It's a great setup for further adventures in an even wilder setting, and with Russell riding a wave of newfound respect after *Grindhouse*, the time is ripe for Plissken to return.

3. William Bonney/Billy the Kid (Emilio Estevez), *Young Guns*

Jack Torrance and Hannibal Lecter are certainly great screen maniacs, but for my money, one of the greatest psychopaths in film history is Emilio Estevez's Billy the Kid. In this flashy revisionist western, Billy turns a gang of would-be heroes into a group of coldblooded killers. He takes obvious glee in bloodshed, often toying with his victims before pulling the trigger. His stated reason for killing his first victim: "He was hackin' on me." The framing sequence of *Young Guns 2* reveals that Billy survived well into the twentieth century, so there's plenty of room for continuing adventures.

2. Casey Ryback (Steven Seagal), *Under Siege*

For a brief period in the early '90s, Steven Seagal was the king of the action flick. In 1992, following a string of generically-titled bloodbaths, he made the best film of his career: *Under Siege*. Much of the film's charm comes from its over-the-top villains, portrayed by Gary Busey and Tommy Lee Jones, whose scheme to hijack a soon-to-be-decommissioned battleship comes straight from the Bond villain playbook. But the film's real strength is Steven Seagal's ebullient performance as Casey Ryback, a demoted Navy SEAL serving out his term as a cook — "a lowly, lowly cook." Ryback is calm about the hijacked ship; he only gets *really* angry when Busey insults his cooking. Seagal's films never stopped being fun, but he's never had another character anywhere near as entertaining as Ryback.

1. Harry Callahan (Clint Eastwood), *Dirty Harry*

With *Dirty Harry*, Don Siegel created the standard by which action films would be judged for decades to come. The film's story of a cop whose hunt for a serial killer is hampered by red tape and the Bill of Rights led to four sequels and a legion of imitators. Subsequent action heroes owe a lot to Harry, from Kurt Russell and Steven Seagal's gruff whispers to Axel Foley and Popeye Doyle's refusal to play by the rules. In the years since *The Dead Pool*, the fifth and final *Dirty Harry* film, Clint Eastwood has gained a reputation for both sophistication and simplicity, both as an actor and a director. A return to the character of Callahan would almost certainly become a meditation of the nature of violence and the lingering ghosts of past carnage. But it would also be *fucking awesome*. There are rumors that Eastwood has retired from

acting, but for the sake of action films past, present, and future, Dirty Harry deserves a swansong.

Read [PART 1](#).

January 20, 2008 – Religion Dispatches:

BY [GABRIEL MCKEE](#) APRIL 16, 2009

CLOVERFIELD: SIN & REDEMPTION, WITH MONSTERS

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In Hollywood, apocalypticism sells. Audiences delight in seeing our world destroyed, and recent films have sought to cash in on that oblique eschatological hope. *Southland Tales* and *The Omen* tripped over their own quotations of Revelation, but other stories drew more subtly from apocalyptic tradition. *Children of Men* and *V for Vendetta* were cryptically anarchistic depictions of Babylon's destruction. By comparison, this year's *I Am Legend* was an oddly patriotic tale of end-times survivalism, while *Aliens vs. Predator: Requiem* took a cynical glee in the symbolic destruction of middle America. All of these stories fit into previously established subgenres well-suited to apocalyptic themes, but *Cloverfield* is the first to venture into the most apocalyptic of them all: the giant monster genre.

Cloverfield owes much to Japanese giant monster films, or *kaiju eiga*. The monsters of these films are wrathful gods, either figuratively or literally. Godzilla, of course, began his life as a terrifying embodiment of nuclear holocaust, presiding over the 20th century's Final Judgment. Ishiro Honda's 1954 film launched a genre, and it wasn't long before the monsters became gods in a much more literal sense. Mothra and Varan the Unbelievable are both worshiped by rural villagers, and when modern, urban society intrudes on their turf, they take revenge. Kaiju films take a certain pleasure in unleashing this destruction, and lurking at the dark heart of that pleasure is a sense that, somehow, we deserve it. The kaiju bring punishment; the human drama explains the sin. Godzilla wouldn't attack Tokyo if humankind didn't awaken him with nuclear weapons. Mothra wouldn't attack California if greedy capitalists didn't kidnap his miniature priestesses. The monsters symbolically destroy our human world, and we cheer because we think it's all our fault. We deserve it, this says—a theology of sin and divine retribution.

The kaiju-as-divine-wrath theme is nowhere as clear as in *Gamera 3: Awakening of Irys*, possibly the genre's best film since the original *Godzilla*. Early in this film Gamera, the giant fire-breathing turtle of the title, decides that humanity isn't necessarily worth protecting. After all, his official title is "Guardian of the Universe," and if humankind is going to harm the universe with wars and pollution, then why should he bother with us?

We're not quite the threat that other, evil giant monsters are, but if we get in the way of a stray fireball here or there, it's no concern of Gamera's. This cynical philosophy is embodied in the form of a 10-minute rampage through a city in which buildings fall, fireballs explode, and hundreds are killed—and the audience, of course, loves it.

The focus of *Gamera 3* is on the human impact of this sort of tragedy, and *Cloverfield*, shot in shaky, first-person video, is all about human impact. But what is the sin that the monster is punishment for? In short, it's self-absorption: the characters in this film search for cell phone chargers while the world falls down around them. In one key scene (that appears in the trailer), the monster hurls the head of the Statue of Liberty, which crashes down a few feet from the POV camera. Within seconds, people have lined up in front of it to take pictures with their cell phones. They're distanced from what's happening around them, oblivious to what it really means. Many reviewers have made the obvious connection to 9/11, and it's certainly true that the monster's initial rampage eerily evokes that day's images. But there's a deeper level to it. At one point, the characters are caught in the middle of a firefight between the monster and a National Guard regiment. Make no mistake: this is a movie about the invisibility of the Iraq war. We live oblivious to the reality of war, and in *Cloverfield*, that chicken comes home to roost. We deserve it, the film says, because it's already happening and we pretend it isn't. Late in the film one character exclaims, "I don't know why this is happening"—that very obliviousness is the reflexive cause.

Of course, the movie isn't all Pat Robertson polemic. The characters whose self-absorption the film decries are redeemed by the monster's presence—that search for a cell phone charger becomes a selfless quest to save a trapped friend, with dozens of selfless acts along the way. In the midst of judgment, we see glimpses of a New Jerusalem. But the creature is a cleansing fire without which that redemption would be impossible. Ultimately, *Cloverfield* is a movie about how tragedy can bring us out of ourselves and into a greater community; its only hope is that this communion should occur without such tragedy.

February 11, 2008 – Religion Dispatches:

BY [GABRIEL MCKEE](#) APRIL 16, 2009

***RAMBO* & CHRISTIAN FELLOW TRAVELERS**

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The missionary group Christian Freedom International issued a [call](#) this week for renewed humanitarian aid to Burma. The impetus for the announcement was the success of Sylvester Stallone's *Rambo*, which depicts the brutal oppression of Burma's Karen people. There's a certain irony in this fusion of missionary and mercenary; namely, that the entire point of *Rambo* is to argue *against* humanitarian aid.

At the film's beginning, the eponymous warrior, living in seclusion in Thailand, is approached by a group of Christian missionaries who are seeking river transport into Burma. The missionaries are bringing food and medical aid to Karen villagers, and at first Rambo refuses, telling them that their aid is useless. If you're not bringing guns, he argues, "you're not changing anything." Before long he relents, but there is more moral conflict during the journey when Rambo kills a group of river pirates and the leader of the missionaries berates him for his violence. Inevitably, the missionaries are taken prisoner by government troops shortly after their arrival in Burma, and their church's pastor hires Rambo again, this time to bring a group of mercenaries on a rescue mission. Much mayhem ensues, but by the time the last drop of CGI blood hits the ground the good guys have won. The truth didn't set the church group free, but the huge machine gun did.

In the end, *Rambo* upholds the statement that non-military, humanitarian aid to oppressed groups is useless. The missionaries are presented as naive and ineffectual; a handful of well-armed soldiers, the film claims, can do far more good. But the story's message cuts deeper than that: it's ultimately a repudiation of the core of Christian ethics, a 90-minute argument against turning the other cheek. The film's moral climax comes when the leader of the missionary group, who earlier scolded Rambo for killing the river pirates, brutally kills a government soldier with a rock. Pastor Erik, a blogger, calls this "the violence we cannot commit but we need for our own protection."

Conservative reviewer S. T. Karnick sees this character's violent transformation as a cheerily synthesizing statement about "the practical need for protectors and warriors in a sinful world." They couldn't be more off-base. *Rambo* doesn't depict a synthesis of humanitarian and military responses to oppression; it wholeheartedly rejects the former in favor of the latter. It isn't about helping the helpless, but about hurting the hurtful—the inverse of the Sermon on the Mount.

Christian Freedom International is right to seek greater visibility for the humanitarian crisis in Burma. Broader humanitarian aid is needed there, and there's no doubt that one of *Rambo's* goals was to raise awareness. But CFI and other missionary groups should be careful about whose wagon they hitch themselves to—in this case, the messenger undermines the basis of their message.

February 21, 2008 – Religion Dispatches:

BY GABRIEL MCKEE APRIL 16, 2009

THE *ATLANTIC'S* RELIGION ISSUE GIVES MIXED MESSAGES

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The *Atlantic Monthly's* March issue includes several features on the future of religion worldwide. Walter Russell Mead's editorial on recent changes in American evangelicalism, Eliza Griswold's investigative piece on Christian-Muslim conflict in

Nigeria, and Alan Wolfe's essay forecasting the decline of religious radicalism all predict a resurgence of moderation, a future where religion comes in bigger portions, but with fewer calories. Interfaith conflict can't sustain itself, they argue, and lasting peace is a fortunate inevitability.

Why, then, did the *Atlantic's* editors choose to contradict their own message with hysterical cover copy? Cooperation may be the message of these articles, but conflict is the medium, as the cover demands: WHICH RELIGION WILL WIN? The way in which these articles are packaged perpetuates a narrative of conflict between monolithic religions, in direct contradiction to the articles' apparent message of growing tolerance. Even Wolfe's article, which makes the case that the secular principles of the Enlightenment are inexorable historical laws, appears under the incongruous title "And the Winner Is..." Toward the end of Griswold's article she describes internecine struggles in Nigeria's Muslim community, warning against "any facile notions of a global clash of two monoliths," but that's precisely the message the magazine as a whole tries to impose on its contents.

Which isn't to say that the articles themselves are blameless. Despite Griswold's warning against oversimplifying the nature of conflict in Nigeria, at several points her piece veers in that direction. The article opens with lengthy descriptions of the riots and massacres that have devastated the town of Yelwa, but when we begin to learn more of the complexities of the religious picture in Nigeria, it sheds little light on that story. Are the Christians of Yelwa Pentecostal? Anglican? Are the Muslims Sunni, Sufi, or Shi'ite? And what does the phrase "self-proclaimed Shia" in the article's next-to-last paragraph mean, anyway? The piece contains some intriguing glimpses of a growing religious syncretism in Nigeria, particularly in the section on NASFAT, a Muslim group influenced by the Christian Prosperity movement. But ultimately that syncretism goes unexplored. Griswold's piece is riddled with questions unanswered and, more frustratingly, unasked.

Alan Wolfe's essay suffers from similar limitations. Much of his evidence is drawn from a Pew Research poll correlating wealth and religiosity, but a closer look at the survey reveals some severe flaws that impact Wolfe's argument. Most important is the question of how the Pew poll defines "religiosity," a term that can't help but be problematic in a cross-cultural survey. The survey boils down the nature of religious devotion to three simple questions: Is belief in God necessary for morality? Is religion important in your life? Do you pray at least once a day? Obviously, these questions are intended to measure a certain kind of religiosity, and that inevitably skews the results. The questions simply don't apply in some cases, and apply too broadly in others. The belief that one can be moral without belief in God is implicit in classical Protestantism's preference for faith over works. But how is a Buddhist, for whom the idea of God may be inapplicable, to respond to the question? And how can a Muslim *not* respond affirmatively to the question about frequency of prayer? Prayer punctuates the workday in Kuwait City just like lunch breaks do in America; it's as if Pew asked if lunch is important in Westerner's lives. What it means to be a Muslim or a Christian or a Hindu differs, and differs in ways that directly affect the response to these questions. Wolfe's prediction of growing

moderation is ultimately based on a poll that ignores cultural factors—it's a pretty house, but its foundation is built on sand.

So does the *Atlantic* want us to believe in peace between faiths, or ongoing war? Sadly, they don't seem to know. But one thing is certain: we won't see an end to religious conflict if we can only view interfaith encounters in terms of strife. The *Atlantic* can only see winners and losers, but in those terms, we all lose.

February 26, 2008 – Religion Dispatches:

BY [GABRIEL MCKEE](#) MARCH 9, 2009

BELIEFNET'S OSCARS

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The winners of the [2008 Beliefnet Film Awards](#) were announced this week. I couldn't help feeling bemused at the list of nominees, which seem more than a little random. In each of the three categories—Best Spiritual Film, Best Spiritual Performance, and Best Spiritual Documentary—there are some puzzling choices, and some even more puzzling omissions.

Take the Best Spiritual Performance category. The judges picked Emile Hirsch for *Into the Wild*, which is a pretty sensible choice, though his character's spiritual quest ends in tragedy. But the People's Choice winner was Will Smith for his role in *I Am Legend*. Beliefnet judge Todd Havens writes in his “case against”:

The arc of his character is, to me, as spiritually redemptive as the Marquis de Sade writing a children's book on his deathbed.

That may be a bit hyperbolic, but I didn't see much spirituality in Smith's atheistic survivalist. One gets the sense that this film won the People's Award in this category not because of its intrinsic spirituality, but simply because more voters had seen *I Am Legend* than *Into the Wild*.

There are fewer obvious puzzlers in the Best Spiritual Film category, but there are some glaring omissions. *Juno* and *Atonement* made the list, but where are *There Will Be Blood* and Danny Boyle's mystical science-fiction film *Sunshine* (which, for the record, would have gotten my vote)? There are five nominees arranged in each category, split into two rows. The empty space at the end feels like a placeholder for the movie you want to vote for.

In their defense, Beliefnet's panel of judges have written pro-and-con arguments for each entry. But in several cases, the “con” argument comes down to “What makes this ‘spiritual,’ anyway?” The fact is that you can make a case for the spiritual message of *any* movie, especially when it comes to documentaries, which always have a moral message even if their subjects are purely secular. (Last year, the judges picked *An Inconvenient Truth*.)

And that's the real problem here. "Spiritual" means something different to every person, which, when it comes to awards, doesn't look too different from meaning nothing at all. It's great that Beliefnet wants to reward films that explore moral and religious questions with depth and intelligence. But for the award to mean anything, they need to apply a more rigorous, less subjective standard for nomination. Otherwise, their readers and voters will be left scratching their heads and wondering what it all means—not the most rewarding kind of spiritual inquiry.

February 27, 2008 – SF Signal:

MIND MELD: Which SciFi Movie Ending Would You Change?

Posted on February 27, 2008 by [John DeNardo](#) in [Mind Meld](#), [Movies](#) // 49 Comments

Common sense and statistics say that, even when you think you're watching a decent SciFi film, you should refrain from celebration until after the end credits – because sometimes movie endings suck. We asked a host of luminaries the following question.

Q: Which SciFi movie ending do you wish you could change?

***** SPOILER WARNING! *****

Some of these answers (and accompanying videos) contain spoilers. But in this case, the answers are more entertaining than the end of the movie anyway, so...spoiler warning redacted.

Mike Brotherton

[Mike Brotherton](#) is the author of the hard science fiction novels *Spider Star* (2008) and *Star Dragon* (2003), the latter being a finalist for the Campbell award. He's also a professor of astronomy at the University of Wyoming, Clarion West graduate, and founder of the Launch Pad Astronomy Workshop for Writers (www.launchpadworkshop.org). He blogs at www.mikebrotherton.com.

*First, what makes for a good ending? The hallmark of a great movie ending is that it's impossible to anticipate while watching it, but seems like the only ending possible in hindsight. It shouldn't fall prey to sentimentality, at least not overly so, and should follow through with the power of the premise. Surprising, inevitable, memorable; some examples that come to mind include: *A Boy and His Dog*, *12 Monkeys*, *The Thing*, *Planet of the Apes* (1968). I guess I like the shocking sci-fi horror ending! A lot of sf movies have conventional endings, a little too pat and expected, but not weird or ugly.*

*I decided to start with a list of movies I think have endings flawed one way or another, a list that includes a lot of movies I truly like. *2001* is pretty confusing. *Contact* is a bit of a let down and the government cover-up seemed unnecessary. *AI* goes for the weird alien happy ending. *The Hulk* ending is a dark mess. The finale of *Sphere* sucks. Changing the ending of *Armageddon* sure couldn't hurt it. *Return of the Jedi* is full of Ewoks and happy happy joy joy Darth Vader. Ridley Scott himself has changed the ending of *Blade Runner* several times.*

And then there's the movie I finally settled on: **Signs...**

Signs isn't exactly a rigorous science fiction movie. It's more of a horror movie masquerading as science fiction, all in service to a bigger message about whether or not there's purpose in the world. I think some of the scenes in the film are terrific, and the movie sets a great mood. I usually have to watch a few minutes of the film when I find it on TV. But then comes the ending, and it literally makes me scream out. WTF? WTF? Water burns alien flesh?! Water?! This is so, so dumb, I can't even make sense of it. Maybe there was a purpose in this, some biblical allusion or something, but it's so stupid I can't see it. Even going with this crazy development, we're supposed to believe that the aliens would like to invade a planet where acid falls from the skies, and the native children carry it in toy guns.

Signs has the worst ending of a movie with some otherwise redeeming qualities, and I wish I could change it.

[Editors Note: Couldn't find the verbatim ending of Signs, but this video does contain scenes from the mentioned ending.]

David Gerrold

David Gerrold is in training to be a curmudgeon. Approach at your own risk. You've been warned.

I'd change the ending of E.T. I'd show Elliot barbecuing the little animated baseball mitt for his family. Enough with this feel-good crap! Next thing we'll have sci-fi writers adopting Martians.

Gabriel Mckee

Gabriel Mckee is the author of **The Gospel According to Science Fiction: From the Twilight Zone to the Final Frontier**, published in January 2007 by Westminster John Knox (and thus, *ahem,* eligible for this year's Locus and Hugo Awards), and of the blog **SF Gospel**. He is also the author of **Pink Beams of Light From the God in the Gutter: The Science Fictional Religion of Philip K. Dick**, and has written for *Religion Dispatches*, *The Revealer*, and *Nerve*. He is a graduate of Harvard Divinity School and currently works in Bobst Library at New York University.

*I would love to see a different ending for **Star Trek V: The Final Frontier**.*

Let me begin by explaining something: I think Star Trek V gets picked on unfairly. Sure, it's not the best film in the series, and it may in fact be the worst. But one of the worst films ever? I wouldn't go nearly that far. It has some wonderful character moments, and some of the design and effects are gorgeous. People like to beat up on it, but it isn't that bad.

But there's that ending: After hearing Spock's hippie brother Sybok tell us about the impassable barrier at the center of the galaxy, the Enterprise sails right through it with no problems at all. On the other side they find Sha Ka Ree, a planet that supposedly houses the origin of the universe. It looks like a quarry, which is par for the course for television SF like the original Trek or Doctor Who, but a bit of a let-down for a feature film. And then God – yes, God, depicted as a glowing, rear-projected guy with a beard – demands the surrender of the Enterprise and starts zapping people with beams from his eyes. And then – well, then they ran out of money. There's a somewhat nonsensical spaceship rescue (God can be defeated by a couple disruptor blasts, apparently), Kirk delivers a platitude about God existing "right here, in the human heart," and the credits roll. It's a mess, but

there are some parts of the ending I truly like. In particular, Kirk's inquiry about what God needs with a starship is legitimately classic line and a key bit of Star Trek theology (on which more below). But on the whole, the ending feels a bit off.

In a way, it's a good thing that the film went over budget. The original plan was to have God summon an army of rock monsters to fight the Enterprise crew. Test footage of a monster suit is included on the special edition DVD, and the full scene made its way into the DC Comics adaptation. Judging from that evidence, the ending wouldn't have been better, and could very easily have been a great deal worse. (What do rock monsters have to do with God, anyway?) It wasn't just running out of money that made the ending a failure. The ending we got was a bit of a mess, but the ending they wanted could have been a complete fiasco.

*When I was writing **The Gospel According to Science Fiction**, I had a small dilemma over this film. I knew that I needed to discuss it – after all, it's Star Trek's clearest (or at least loudest) statement about religion. But what does it mean? After struggling with it for a while, I had an insight: Kirk's interrogation of God is an awful lot like Abraham bargaining over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Despite McCoy's protests, Kirk wants to be able to challenge, question, and haggle with God. Buried in the murk of that ending is a plea for a humanistic religion, but we simply don't get enough of it. I realize that a feature film needs to end with an action sequence, but did God have to jump to the eyebeams so quickly? An additional 30 seconds of dialog would have done wonders for bringing more sense to this scene, but apparently fully fleshed-out ideas are even more expensive than monster suits.*

*The real problem is that I had to struggle to find something thematically interesting here, that I had to put so much thought into this movie to figure out what it was trying to say. Trek usually packages its philosophy much more clearly than this, but this film just doesn't try hard enough to be interesting. It ends up being just a rehash of the original series episode "**Who Mourns For Adonais?**", which isn't the best episode to begin with, though it did reveal the interesting fact that Starfleet ships have religions specialists on board. Star Trek V could have gone further and done something more original, but it didn't, and that's a shame.*

Kevin Maher

Kevin Maher is the host of American Movie Classic's **The Sci Fi Department**. He is also an Emmy-nominated comedy-writer whose work has appeared on Nickelodeon, Comedy Central and HBO's *This Just In*.

*1972's **Conquest of The Planet of the Apes** is my favorite of the original Apes films, but man, that ending blows.*

For those of you who haven't seen it (or don't remember which movie it is)...Caesar spends the entire movie organizing and executing a bloody ape revolution. At the end of the film he delivers a stirring speech, with the city of Los Angeles burning behind him.

But then, he changes his mind and says apes and men must live together in peace.

This change-of-heart speech was tacked-on, using close-ups of Roddy McDowell's eyes and a rough voice-over. Apparently test audiences disliked the revolution ending, so this was added at the last minute. I would prefer to see the original ending.

Gary Westfahl

Gary Westfahl, who teaches at the University of California, Riverside, is the author, editor, or co-editor of nineteen books about science fiction and fantasy, including the Hugo-nominated **Science Fiction Quotations: From the Inner Mind to the Outer Limits**, the three-volume **The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy**, and **Hugo Gernsback and the Century of Science Fiction**. He is a regular film reviewer and commentator for the **Locus Online** website, and in 2003 he earned the Science Fiction Research Association's Pilgrim Award for lifetime contributions to science fiction and fantasy scholarship.

*It probably never would have been considered a masterpiece in any event, but one science fiction film ruined by an absolutely wrong ending was Ivan Reitman's **Evolution** (2001). Having depicted tiny alien organisms that landed on Earth and rapidly generated more and more advanced creatures, up to and including primates, the film should have properly concluded with the development of intelligent humanoid aliens, who would calmly introduce themselves, apologize for all the problems caused by their more ferocious predecessors, and announce plans to gather all of the alien beings together and depart to another world that is not already inhabited by a thriving biosphere. Such an ending would not only have been logical, but it also would have provided a worthwhile commentary on the process of evolution, which was after all the film's title: the idea that, whatever value fierce competitiveness might have in the advancement of species, the best strategy for ultimate success is usually cooperation. Unfortunately, since such an ending would not have provided the spectacular special-effects fireworks and improbable heroism which contemporary Hollywood lore insists is essential in concluding a sure-fire box-office success, the filmmakers instead opted for the inane emergence of an enormous one-celled organism which could somehow be exterminated, as I vaguely recall, by the desperately improvised application of some Head and Shoulders shampoo – foreshadowing, it seems clear in retrospect, that a lot of investors were going to take a bath, and the film was going down the drain.*

Paul Levinson

Paul Levinson, PhD, is an author, professor, and media commentator. His first novel, **The Silk Code**, won the Locus Award for best first science fiction novel of 1999. *Entertainment Weekly* called his current novel, **The Plot to Save Socrates**, “challenging fun”. His eight nonfiction books have been translated in a dozen languages around the world, and have been reviewed in *The New York Times*, *Wired*, and major newspapers and magazines. Levinson appears on *The O'Reilly Factor*, CNN, MSNBC, and is interviewed every Sunday morning about the media on KNX 1070 all-news radio in Los Angeles. He is Professor and Chair of Communication and Media Studies at Fordham University in NYC.

*I would change the ending of **Star Wars III: Revenge of the Sith**.*

Now, I actually loved most of this movie, and for that matter, Stars Wars I and II, and I hate to offer any criticism of this saga, lest it give comfort to its critics, and/or be seen as taking candy from a baby.

But...the way Padmé dies was a real letdown. What do you mean, she lost her will to live? What kind of limp fish way is that to go out?

If I could change the end of that movie, I'd have Padmé giving birth to Leia and Luke, then going down in a blaze of glory, fighting off the clone army to save her children, with perhaps Vader even trying to come to her assistance at the very last moment, failing, tortured, and not knowing what became of his children.

End with Padmé fighting with her last breath to save what was best in her universe...

But, then again, I'm always an optimist when it comes to these things...

Adam-Troy Castro

Adam Troy Castro's film/DVD reviews appear regularly on [SciFi Weekly](#). His book reviews appear in SCI FI magazine. Several of his award-nominated short stories are available for download on [FictionWise](#). For further updates, check out www.sff.net/people/adam-troy.

*I'm certain that there are any number of possible answers, but the first to come to mind is **Contact**. Too many members of the audience wholly misunderstand the nature of the first encounter at the end, and believe the point of the movie is than an atheist gets heaven shoved in her face and is forced to change her mind. Second choice: **2010**. Audiences thought the end of the movie was a greeting card, when in actuality it was an event of cosmic importance. Both endings needed clarification.*

Paul Di Filippo

Paul Di Filippo has been writing professionally for over 25 years, accumulating close to 150 stories and twenty-five books in the process. His newest book, **Cosmocopia**, will soon appear from Payseur & Schmidt, with art by Jim Woodring. His website can be found at www.pauldifilippo.com and he blogs at <http://community.livejournal.com/theinferior4/>.

*I want to rewrite the ending to **2001: A Space Odyssey**, and make the revelation be that HAL'S AI consciousness is downloaded into the Star Child's wetware, and the Singularity is upon us!*

Jay Maynard (Tron Guy)

Jay Maynard (also known as the **Tron Guy**) is a professional computer geek who became famous on the Internet for the first costume he ever made for a SF convention. He spends a lot of time reading, and most of that is SF.

I can't think of any SF movies whose endings I'd like to see change. By and large, they've all worked for me. I do have to say that I haven't seen every SF movie out there; in particular, I stay well away from the horror stuff (Aliens, Predator, and the like), and a lot of the rest I just haven't caught up with.

Michael L. Wentz

Michael L. Wentz is a writer and filmmaker. He blogs over at RealHonestFilm.com and PhantomReflections.com. He's also been known to dress up as The Doctor at costume parties.

This was a tough question for me to answer. Most of the time if I don't like a film I come to that realization well within the second act and the ending is just the final little bit of suffering I have to endure before leaving the theater or ejecting the DVD. The thing about the film industry is that when it comes to making a movie there are so many cooks in the kitchen that a film's tone and watchability are cemented consistently throughout the picture by the time any of us see it. Chances are if the beginning stinks, the ending will follow suit.

*So if I really had the opportunity just to change the ending of a film I would have to tinker with **Serenity**. I know I can hear the collective groans of the fans right now, because we all know that Joss Whedon is awesome and can do no wrong, but there was one thing that bugged me about the film—the death of Wash. It seemed to come at the wrong time and for apparently no reason. He didn't die fighting—he was just sitting in the pilot's seat after a masterful flight through a huge battle between the Alliance and the Reavers. It shocked the heck out of me and I couldn't get past it for the rest of the movie, which was sad since I couldn't initially appreciate some of the wonderful things about the ending because I was so disturbed by his sudden death. I can maybe understand it as a mechanism to allow River full acceptance into the crew, but I still didn't like it. If I would redo the ending, I'd let Wash live and leave the rest of it as is, because Whedon is awesome.*

Rob Bedford

Rob H. Bedford is a longtime genre fan who works and lives in New Jersey. He has held various marketing and publishing positions, building up the diverse background (he hopes) required for becoming a published writer all the while plugging away at various stories and novels. He also writes book reviews for [SFFWorld](#) and moderates the [forums](#) there.

*The easy answer would be Star Wars Episode III, but that ending was almost a multiple choice with George Lucas providing viewers with all a few different options. I don't think I'd change the ending(s) he gave us though. The ending I would change, though, would probably be **Signs**. I was really into the "ride" of the movie, going along with the tension that built up over the course of the story. Then it turns out the aliens were basically clones of the Wicked Witch of the West. Water? Freaking water is their kryptonite? These aliens, who can travel across galaxies decide to land en masse on a planet whose surface is over 70% of their version of kryptonite! Asinine. I thought Mel Gibson's character's return to the Church was a bit ham-handed. There were other holes in the plot, but what movie doesn't ask viewers to take some sort of logic leap? The water though, was too much and threw the whole movie into the light of parody.*

March 17, 2008 – Religion Dispatches:

BY GABRIEL MCKEE MAY 4, 2009

THE CONFESSIONS OF HANEKE

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Not long ago, Austrian director Michael Haneke wouldn't have seemed a likely candidate to jump across the Atlantic to create English-language remakes of his own films. The past has shown the move to Hollywood to be a tricky one for European directors, particularly when they attempt to translate their own work for an American audience. (If you don't believe me, compare the menace of Dutch director George Sluizer's *The Vanishing* with the pulp camp of his own American remake—or, for that matter, take a look at Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Alien: Resurrection*.) Following the success of his 2005 film *Caché*, he could have gone the Sluizer route, remaking his biggest hit, or taken a page from Jeunet's book and adapted his post-apocalyptic *Le Temps du Loup* into a big-budget spectacle. But Haneke, whose films treat their characters with uncompromising emotional brutality, could hardly be expected to compromise now. For his first English-language project, Haneke has revisited *Funny Games*—arguably his least palatable film, and certainly his least compromising.

It makes sense, really, considering that American attitudes toward violence are *Funny Games*' target. [Full disclosure: this reviewer is housebound with a two-week-old baby, so the following comments are based on the 1997 original and not on the new version.] The film's story is simple: a family vacationing in a lake house invites two young men (who claim to be friends of the neighbors) into their home. The two begin terrorizing and torturing the family in a broadening circle of violence, and before long they're winking to the camera, making the audience complicit in the onscreen brutality. It is (as if it needed saying!) a powerful and disturbing film, particularly to anyone who enjoys action or horror films, genres to which violence is essential. In one key scene (perhaps *the* key scene) one of the victims wrestles a gun from an attacker and shoots him. It gives the viewers, who have been watching this unjust violence for two reels or so, a real thrill—finally, the bad guy gets it! But that's precisely where Haneke pulls the rug out from under us. The other assailant scrambles for a remote control and rewinds the film, preventing the shooting and returning to the torture.

At first glance it seems Haneke is tormenting the audience as he torments his characters, taking away our last glimmer of hope by denying us redemptive violence. That guy *deserved* to get shot, we think. But what Haneke's really doing is underscoring the brutality of the very concept of "redemptive violence," the story logic that requires *anyone* to deserve it. Liberal viewers who oppose the death penalty, for instance, still expect the black hats to get killed in the final shootout. As much as we contend that no one deserves to die, we all throw our personal ethics out the window when we enter a movie theater. We're all hangin' judges.

The real reason it makes so much sense for Haneke to remake this film, then, is that its attitude toward sin is so thoroughly Puritan. The film essentially adapts Matthew 5:28 to a different sin: "Everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart," Jesus states. Haneke is basically saying: "Anyone who watches *Saw IV* has already committed murder in his heart." He makes the case for a direct link between watching torture porn and being complacent to real torture, if not actually committing it.

For a thoroughly progressive filmgoer who is nonetheless a big Dirty Harry fan, that can be a tough pill to swallow. But it's not exactly a new argument: after all, the early Christian church objected to the theater as much as the gladiatorial arena. In book III of his *Confessions*, Augustine of Hippo writes regretfully of his youthful passion for tragic plays:

In my wretchedness I loved to be made sad and sought for things to be sad about: and in the misery of others—though fictitious and only on the stage—the more my tears were set to flowing, the more pleasure did I get from the drama and the more powerfully did it hold me.

What happens in a film is false, but the emotions we direct at the screen are real, and it is the shared argument of Haneke and Augustine that those emotions are potentially dangerous.

It's little surprise that Haneke's game has sparked the ire of many American film critics. Roger Ebert states that "Haneke's essay fails because he hasn't a clue about what makes American movies tick"; A.O. Scott's *New York Times* review accuses Haneke of being a hypocrite who approaches violence "with mandarin distaste, even as he feeds the appetite for it." Many have been the comparisons between *Funny Games* and Eli Roth's *Hostel* (and, indeed, there's a telling similarity between the poster for Haneke's film, which shows a weeping Naomi Watts, and similar images of Elisha Cuthbert advertising the film *Captivity*). But Haneke's critique goes much deeper, cutting to the very heart of how American films work. The critics haven't taken kindly to that attack, and their response says: Say what you will about our foreign policy, our cuisine, our tax law—but *don't mess with our movies*.

It's difficult to look at a film like *Funny Games* in the traditional terms of a film review, or even a casual discussion. You can't really *like* or *dislike* a movie like this; it doesn't work that way. In that regard, it's similar to another recent film that is both about the depiction of violence and an example of it, a film that similarly seeks to make its audience complicit in the brutality onscreen: Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. As with Gibson's film, there are those who will hate *Funny Games*, but that's generally because they're looking at it as a movie among other movies. Ebert is onto something when he states that "this isn't a movie, it's a thesis," but by that token it's difficult to discuss in the terms of a movie review. Its goals and its methods are entirely elsewhere. But it's not exactly a thesis—it's a sermon. Haneke admonishes us to hate sin; unfortunately for him, it's a sin that most of us Dirty Harry fans aren't willing to give up.

March 26, 2008 – SF Signal:

MIND MELD: Is Science Fiction Antithetical to Religion?

This week's question was suggested by Lou Anders, who not only received extra Mind Meld credit redeemable at imaginary nerd shops everywhere, but who also must serve penance by answering his own question:

Q: Two of the most highly regarded fantasy authors - Tolkien and Lewis - were also Christians, whereas the fathers of science fiction were atheists, and SF itself, it could be argued, grew out of Darwinism and other notions of deep time. Is science fiction antithetical to religion?

Mike Resnick

[Mike Resnick](#) is the author of 50 novels, 200 short stories, a pair of screenplays, and the editor of 50 anthologies, as well as the executive editor of [Jim Baen's Universe](#). According to *Locus*, he is the leading award winner, living or dead, of short fiction. His work has been translated into 22 languages.

You can't generalize about this large a field. For every atheist or agnostic author you can name, I'll name a religious one. For example: Gene Wolfe is a devout Catholic. Ray Lafferty was a devout Catholic. Avram Davidson was an Orthodox Jew. Michael A. Burstein is an Orthodox Jew. Etc, etc, etc.

In 1984 I wrote a very controversial novel titled **The Branch**, in which God and the true Jewish Messiah (not Jesus) were the two villains of the piece. The poor producer/director who optioned and made it got excommunicated from his church and thrown out of his country (Andorra)...and yet if you do not accept the existence of God and the truth of the Old Testament, there's no story. So was it irreligious, or was it simply Politically Incorrect religion?

I am an atheist, yet I have given God speaking parts in four or five humorous stories, and have treated religion with respect in literally dozens of stories and novels. On the other hand, I know many devout Christian and Jewish science fiction writers whose religious beliefs are deeply personal, and who choose not to share them fictionally with their audience. Are they irreligious because they do not evangelize in print?

You can't judge a book by its cover...and you can't necessarily judge an author's (or a field's) religious beliefs by that book's contents.

Lou Anders

A 2007/2008 Hugo Award and 2007 Chesley Award and 2006 World Fantasy Award nominee, [Lou Anders](http://www.louanders.com) is the editorial director of Prometheus Books' science fiction imprint Pyr, as well as the anthologies **Outside the Box** (Wildside Press, 2001), **Live Without a Net** (Roc, 2003), **Projections: Science Fiction in Literature & Film** (MonkeyBrain, December 2004), **FutureShocks** (Roc, January 2006), **Fast Forward 1** (Pyr, February 2007), and the forthcoming **Sideways in Crime** (Solaris, June 2008) and **Fast Forward 2** (Pyr, October 2008). In 2000, he served as the Executive Editor of Bookface.com, and before that he worked as the Los Angeles Liaison for Titan Publishing Group. He is the author of **The Making of Star Trek: First Contact** (Titan Books, 1996), and has published over 500 articles in such magazines as *The Believer*, *Publishers Weekly*, *Dreamwatch*, *Star Trek Monthly*, *Star Wars Monthly*, *Babylon 5 Magazine*, *Sci Fi Universe*, *Doctor Who Magazine*, and *Manga Max*. His articles and stories have been translated into Danish, Greek, German, Italian and French, and have appeared online at SFSite.com, RevolutionSF.com and InfinityPlus.co.uk. Visit him online at www.louanders.com and www.pyrsf.com

While I am personally always amazed at (deeply) religious people who are also science fiction readers - and even moreso at those of faith who are writers - I would have to say that SF is not antithetical to religion. It is, however, analogous to religion in that both science and religion are attempts to grapple with the mysteries of existence and the wonders of the universe. Now, leaving aside the oft-cited example of C.S. Lewis SF trilogy (**Out of the Silent Planet**, **Perelandra**, **That Hideous Strength**), which were really fantasy disguised as science fiction (Ransom does travel to Venus on a floating coffin, buoyed by angels, after all), there are certainly a number of committed religion folk working in our genre. And always have been.

Just as there are scientists who are capable of harnessing their faith to motivate them in the exploration of the creator's handiwork, there are science fiction writers who are capable of imagining a divine clockmaker behind the wonders the universe has in store - Dr. Frank J. Tipler's **Physics of Immortality**, though it relies on a Closed Universe ending in a Big Crunch - is just one such example of how one can reconcile an afterlife and a god with a totally material view of the universe. (It is also, by the way, a major source of inspiration for both Ian McDonald's **Brasyl** - a harder work of SF you'd be hard pressed to find this past year - and Chris Roberson's

forthcoming **End of the Century**.) I am sure there are many more such examples if we cast about.

I will say that my friends in the science fiction community who are religious tend to be of a more relaxed and liberal bent. Karl Schroeder once observed that science fiction was where the universe conformed to natural laws, but that fantasy was where the natural laws conformed to moral ones and where nature would arise to punish transgressors. (This is why Pat Robertson lives in a fantasy universe, not a science fictional one like the rest of us.)

What I do think is antithetical to science fiction is fundamentalism and extreme orthodoxy. The scientific hypothesis, which is the basis of all legitimate science, and thus, the bedrock for fiction framed in a scientific mode of thinking, is predicated on the notion that observation informs, shapes and expands our comprehension of reality. If you believe that you already know everything there is to know, that you have the nature of reality handed to you in the form of carvings on stone tablets, and are utilizing your observations to confirm rather than test your presuppositions, you are not a scientist. And any fiction that flows from these presuppositions will be propaganda, not art. Theodore Sturgeon said that science fiction's job is to "ask the next question." As long as you believe that there IS a next question, and are prepared for any answer, even one you might not expect, then you are okay in my book, whether you believe those questions arise solely in the mind of the observer, or are puzzles set up by an infinite mind lurking behind the complexity of the cosmos.

But tell me you've got a direct and irrefutable line on truth, and I'm afraid I'll stop reading. Personally, I'm not so concerned with final answers. For me, the real fun lies in finding more questions.

Ben Bova

Ben Bova is the author of more than 100 futuristic novels and nonfiction books about science. He first appeared in *Amazing* in 1960. He has been the editor of *Analog* and *Omni* magazines.

There has been comparatively little science fiction that deals directly with religion. Arthur C. Clarke's short story, "The Star," comes to mind. As do several of James Blish's works, including **Black Easter**. In my own **Grand Tour** novels, part of the background is based on the concept that ultraconservative religious movements gain political control of most of the Earth, with deleterious results for human freedom. However, in novels such as **Jupiter**, I try to show that a person can have sincere religious convictions and be a working scientist at the same time.

I don't know that most of the "fathers of science fiction" were atheists. But clearly they were more interested in exploring the future of science, technology, and discovery in their stories than in religious themes.

Is there an inescapable conflict between science and religion? If there is, I believe the basis for the conflict lies in this: The scientific attitude is to search for new knowledge, and to understand that all of our ideas and views are subject to change, based on new information. Science depends on testing, and measurement. Religion, on the other hand, usually takes the attitude that the believer knows all he or she needs to know, and that any challenge to reveal truth is dangerous and should be rejected.

Science tries to find the truth, knowing that we can never be satisfied that we hold the truth in our hands. Religion believes that it has the ultimate and complete truth, and anyone who disagrees should be shunned - or worse.

Science fiction, stories based on science and technology, usually follows the scientific frame of mind. Evidence is more important than revealed "truth." Science fiction writers by and large believe that scientific investigation has given us a clearer understanding of the world than the writing of ancient apologists and mystics.

Gabriel Mckee

Gabriel Mckee is the author of *The Gospel According to Science Fiction: From the Twilight Zone to the Final Frontier*, the blog [SF Gospel](#), and *Pink Beams of Light From the God in the Gutter: The Science Fictional Religion of Philip K. Dick*. He has also written for *Religion Dispatches*, *The Revealer*, and *Nerve*, and is a graduate of Harvard Divinity School.

Is science fiction antithetical to religion? Of course not! Samuel R. Delany wrote, and I agree, that "virtually all the classics of speculative fiction are mystical." Regardless of the stated beliefs of its authors -- who [aren't all atheists](#), by the way -- SF works best as a genre about the Big Questions of being and meaning, and any halfway-satisfying answer to those questions has to have a bit of religious flavor. Critic Darko Suvin has argued that any SF story that takes religious concepts seriously becomes a "fairy-tale." But this view belittles or ignores the work of truly great authors in the genre -- Robert Silverberg, Olaf Stapledon, Octavia Butler, Philip K. Dick, Robert J. Sawyer -- whose writing is great in large part because of the intelligence and understanding with which they consider religious and metaphysical concepts. Don't let the name fool you -- there's more to science fiction than science, and without philosophy, theology, and myth, it wouldn't be the genre we love.

That's not to mention the fact that ideas can sometimes get out of the hands of their authors, too -- witness the late Arthur C. Clarke's disclaimer that the opinions expressed in *Childhood's End*, a mystical novel if ever there was one, "are not those of the author." In fact, SF isn't just *not antithetical* to religion -- it's probably the best venue we have for theological speculation. Like theology, SF is all about exploring the unknown, and some of the most dynamic theological concepts of the past century have found their best expression in SFnal forms. SF has a whole toolbox of techniques for

pondering the infinite, describing the indescribable, and building paradise. This doesn't diminish the importance of 20th century theologians like Alfred North Whitehead or Pierre Teilhard de Chardin -- but I'll wager that Philip K. Dick has more readers than both of them combined.

Richard Dawkins may be convinced that a certain ultranconservative, anti-science fringe is the core of all religious thought, and that every Martin Luther King is really a Jerry Falwell in disguise. But it simply ain't so. Science (and SF) may exclude a certain close-minded branch of religiosity, but there's plenty of room for both scientific and theological speculation in other wings of religious belief, and SF fits quite well in the overlap.

Jay Lake

[Jay Lake](#) lives in Portland, Oregon, where he works on numerous writing and editing projects. His 2008 novels are **Escapement** from Tor Books and **Madness of Flowers** from Night Shade Books, while his short fiction appears regularly in literary and genre markets worldwide. Jay is a winner of the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, and a multiple nominee for the Hugo and World Fantasy Awards. Jay can be reached through his blog at [jaylake.livejournal.com](#) or his Web site at [www.jlake.com](#).

Not at all. Speaking as a Low Church Atheist, I am quite comfortable saying that religion is a core component of the human experience. Science fiction is more than any other genre the literature of the human experience, taking "human experience" to mean our species as a whole.

There's certainly that classical strain of technocratic SF which lies at our Silver Age heart, that bears a deep assumption about the irrelevance of religion in a world ruled by logic. Us at our Apollonian best, as it were. But science fiction has a deeply Dionysian side as well, stretching all the way back to Mary Shelley at least, on through Ellison and Zelazny and into a large swathe of what's being published today.

Religion in a formal sense sits away from the center of our banquet, but even there we have books ranging from James Blish's **A Case of Conscience** to Mary Doria Russell's **The Sparrow** that deal with religion in a supportive manner, as well as such lateral commentaries such as James Morrow's **Towing Jehovah**. We're all about the religion, us, even if we won't be caught dead walking past the church door.

James Wallace Harris

[James Wallace Harris](#) is a life-long science fiction fan. With Olivier Travers, he created SciFan.com in 1999 and he programmed the database system. Since the early days of the web, James has maintained [The Classics of Science Fiction](#), which was based on his article from the fanzine *Lan's Lantern* back in the 1980s. He quit SciFan to study fiction writing and he attended the Clarion West Writer's Workshop in 2002. He now practices blog writing at [Auxiliary Memory](#). James has been happily married for thirty years to his wife Susan. He works as a programmer and sys admin but dreams about space exploration and writing a SF 2.0 novel.

Is religion and science fiction mutually incompatible? Are they in direct opposition? Once, on my blog I wrote "[The Religion that Failed to Achieve Orbit](#)" describing science fiction as a minor forgotten religion of the 20th century. If the question is simply: Are science fiction stories for atheists like Bible stories are for the faithful - then yes, but not in the way the question

expects. Plenty of people love both religion and science fiction. But the question also asks about Darwin and deep time, and that brings up another idea.

There have been four major inventions for explaining reality: fiction, religion, philosophy and science, and I think they evolved in that order. Fiction has always absorbed elements of the other three, and science fiction claims to combine two of the four to make a unique form. I've always considered religion a descendent of fiction - men and women a long time ago came up with a lot of ideas about reality and some people said: Let's pick some stories to believe.

Fiction tries to tell the truth by lying. Religion attempts to find the truth through believing. Philosophy wants to tell the truth through logic. And science works to find the truth through observation and experimentation.

All four mental disciplines have the same goal of describing what's real. By that standard religion and science fiction both fail miserably. Here's the big difference. Religion and science fiction express what people want from reality, whereas philosophy and science express what is. Both religion and science fiction want to alter the habits of people and both often scare their believers with end of the world themes. Immortality and fantastic worlds in the sky are common elements to both. Each practice the art of world building. What's really very Freudian is both disciplines love stories about super heroes with non-human powers.

Like I said, I believe religion is a branch of fiction, and science fiction is just another branch. I don't know if they are in opposition or just competition for the same pool of believers. The older I get the more I try to evaluate the origins of my science fictional beliefs and I've concluded that as a child I didn't accept Jesus but Heinlein.

Carl Vincent

Carl Vincent is the proprietor of the eclectic [Stainless Steel Droppings](#).

Is Science Fiction antithetical to Religion? At the risk of being crucified (pardon the pun) I would have to say 'no'. If anything science fiction can be a great proponent of religion, religious thought, and the exploration of the vast mysteries inherent in the most well known religious text in the world, The Bible, as well as other religious texts.

Before I go any further, I have to admit that though I initially wanted to be able to take a step back from my own belief system, Christianity, I found myself coming back to this time and again, fascinated by all the paths my meditation on this question took me down. I also want to make it clear that when I refer to religion I am not referring to a negative societal view of

religion as a rigid set of rules and regulations put forth to control the masses, nor am I envisioning the stereotypical hard-headed, science-damning, Bible-thumping Christian. Instead I hope to speak from the standpoint of the educated, intelligent person who defines religion as a relationship with a Higher Power. For the 'religious' person whose set of do's and do not's are more important than relationships, I believe science fiction, like any fiction whatsoever, probably is antithetical to religion. I am not that type of person nor are most religious folks with whom I associate.

Science Fiction has long been touted as the genre that looks to the future and attempts to postulate what life may be like either 'out there' or 'in the future' or a combination of the two. Science Fiction, in one aspect, allows the author and the reader to actively wonder about just what exists beyond the bounds of earth as well as beyond the bounds of life. Just as scriptures like Genesis 6:1-4 can be mined for tales of folklore, fantasy and mythology:

"And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, that the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they [were] fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose.

And the LORD said, My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also [is] flesh: yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years.

There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare [children] to them, the same [became] mighty men which [were] of old, men of renown."

Scriptures like 1 Corinthians 2:9

"But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him."

The entire Book of Revelations, and many other Old and New Testament scriptures are ripe with possibilities as far as exploration in the science fiction genre. In fact I believe that all of the various religions are an untapped resource of paths down which science fiction could blaze new trails and postulate interesting theories. Talented authors could (and many probably already have and I am just ignorant of their work) theorize many amazing science fiction scenarios that explore the many aspects of religious thought.

Perhaps it is the old **Inherit the Wind** mindset that leads those who do not practice a particular faith to believe that religious people are closed minded

in regards to science, scientific discovery, and by extension science fiction. I certainly see that stance projected in many of the anti-religious rhetoric I come across in my travels down the information superhighway. I personally believe that most educated people of all faiths see science as an enhancement to their belief systems. All the minute detail and order that scientific study reveals actually enhances many peoples' belief that only a divine Creator could have made all that the universe contains. Scoff if you must, but I truly believe that science (which wasn't the topic, I digress), science fiction, and religious faith need not be antithetical at all.

Interestingly enough as I traveled around looking for specific scripture references during the writing of this post, I came across an essay from a Rabbi, examining the significance of the two trees (The Tree of Life and The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil) in the book of Genesis. With a nod to Quantum Physics he theorized that before their choice to eat from that second tree, Adam and Eve were in an undetermined state, between mortal and immortal. As I read that my mind went wild with science fiction scenarios.

While I certainly see and have read a great deal of science fiction whose aim, or at least a particular plot thread, was to prove that God does not exist or that the future with all its advancements will eventually produce a world in which religion no longer exists, I do not think this alone makes science fiction antithetical to religion. This only demonstrates that this is one of the more explored aspects of science fiction's predictions for the future. Speaking entirely from personal experience, one of the things that science fiction drives me to do over and over again is to step outside and look at the night sky. While doing so I not only dream of space travel and daydream about whatever world I was just reading about, but I also stand in awe of my Creator and the wonder of the universe He created. Science fiction has never been antithetical to my personal religious experience, it has always enhanced it. Science fiction makes me think, makes me question things, and makes me not only evaluate my universe but also makes me evaluate my place in it. My great joy is that it will continue to do this as long as I continue to open the covers of books and allow myself to be taken on amazing journey after amazing journey.

Adam Roberts

[Adam Roberts](#) was born two-thirds of the way through the last century; he presently lives a little way west of London, England, with a beautiful wife and two small children. He is a writer with a day-job (professor at Royal Holloway, University of London). The first of these two employments has resulted in eight published sf novels, the most recent being **Splinter** (Solaris 2007) and **Land of the Headless** (Victor Gollancz 2007). The second of these has occasioned such critical studies as **The Palgrave History of Science Fiction** (2006).

I feel a personal investment in this question. A few years ago I wrote [a critical history of SF](#), the main thesis of which was that science fiction as a genre has its roots precisely in the religious conflicts of the Reformation. The

first thing that I noticed when I sat down to research that book was just how extraordinary and varied was the wealth of SF predating Verne and Wells (hundreds and hundreds of stories about travelling to other planets, about robots and imaginary technology, about future societies). In my history I trace the lineage of these sorts of stories back to about 1600. I suggest that it is no coincidence this new mode of literature, engaging the new scientific thinking about the cosmos, arose at the same time as the great intellectual and theological debates of the Reformation. In other words I challenge the premise of your mindmeld question: I don't agree that the fathers of science fiction were atheists. On the contrary, I'd argue that the fathers of science fiction were either Protestants (seventeenth-century writers like Kepler, Godwin, Wilkins and eighteenth-century writers like Swift) or else more-or-less freethinking Catholics (people like Cyrano de Bergerac and Voltaire). In a nutshell my thesis is that Fantastic Literature (which is of course as old as humanity, going back at least to Homer and the Gilgamesh poet) bifurcates during the Reformation: one branch begins to predicate its fantasy upon the possibilities of the new sciences, discourses largely condemned by the Catholic Church (who burned Giordano Bruno to death for positing an infinite and inhabited universe, and who forced Galileo to recant) but important for the developing Protestant separatists; the other branch stays within the conceptual framework of traditional religion, predicates its fantasy upon 'magic' in the fullest sense, and becomes the tradition of the fundamentally sacramental, anti-technological and at base religious mode of contemporary Fantasy exemplified by Catholic writers like Tolkien. But this is not to argue that SF is atheist. Despite being godless myself I don't think the genre I love is atheist at all. I think its a complex and evolving discourse still determined by its Protestant roots, a mode of art that is trying to articulate a number of core fascinations essentially religious in nature: questions of transcendence ('sense of wonder' as we sometimes call it, or 'the Sublime' in the language of literary criticism); atonement and messianism in particular. This is a very crude version of the argument I make: you'd have to read my History to see how I join the dots...available from all good booksellers etc.

Larry Niven

[Larry Niven](#) is the author of the multi-award-winning **Ringworld** series, the co-author of **The Mote in God's Eye**, **Lucifer's Hammer** and **Fallen Angels**, the editor of the **Man-Kzin War** series, and has written or co-authored over 50 books. He is a five-time winner of the Hugo Award and has received numerous wins and nominations for other awards.

C. S. Lewis was considered a science fiction writer too.

Some science fiction writers lean away from religion. Some don't. Jerry Pournelle's characters are likely to be religious. So are Poul Anderson's, and he dealt with basic religious questions ("The Problem of Pain"), as did James Blish and Lester Del Rey. Pournelle and I wrote two sequels to **Dante's Inferno**.

In fact, generalizations in science fiction usually spark exceptions, as writers try to answer other writers' questions.

Andrew Wheeler

[Andrew Wheeler](#) has been a publishing professional for nearly twenty years. He spent sixteen years as an editor for various bookclubs (most notably, working for the Science Fiction Book Club the entire time), ending as a Senior Editor. He is currently a Marketing Manager for John Wiley & Sons.

That's cherry-picking names, though, isn't it? Plenty of the classic SF writers weren't atheists, and even the ones with sanguine views towards organized religion (such as Arthur C. Clarke) believed, or wanted to believe, in some kind of transcendence, even if it wasn't direct experience of some Godhead.

Science Fiction often does think religion will mostly go away, or will settle down quietly - let me mention Clarke again, who in several books has the whole world think better of religion after some major event - but that's just part of the general classic SF tendency to put the world into a neat, easily-defined box. (Psychohistory also comes to mind in this context; classic SF often thought all of human knowledge would eventually be as rigorous and predictive as classical physics - though they were clearly wrong about that.)

The only real, died-in-the-wool *atheist* of classic SF that I can think of is Asimov, who utterly epitomizes the idea that pure thinking can reduce the world to a set of axioms. Science has since proven - actually, science was *already* proving, back then, but classic SF didn't pay as much attention to real cutting-edge science as some people like to pretend these days - that the world is much stranger and more complex than the layman thought.

Smart SF writers, the ones who understand how real human beings think and feel, don't discount the effects of religion (and other forms of irrationalism and wishful thinking) on humanity. Clarke may have hoped that we'd outgrow it, and newer writers like Egan (in "Oceanic") may argue that we can and should engineer religiosity out of humanity, but they still take its role in human culture seriously, and know they have to account for it.

SF does have a tendency to explain things away, and religion is one of the biggest targets there - and "those closed-minded religious fanatics" are a common villain type for all kinds of SF - but there are plenty of SF writers who actually believe, to one degree or another. SF isn't necessarily anti-religion...it's just anti-irrationalism. The more rational a religion is, the more likely it is to be treated positively in SF.

Michael A. Burstein

[Michael A. Burstein](#), winner of the 1997 Campbell Award for Best New Writer, has earned ten Hugo nominations and three Nebula nominations for his short fiction which appears mostly in *Analog*. Burstein's first book, **I Remember the Future**, is being published by [Apex Books](#) in September 2008. Burstein lives with his wife Nomi in the town of Brookline, Massachusetts, where he is an elected Town Meeting Member and Library Trustee. When not writing, he edits middle and high school Science textbooks. He has two degrees in Physics and attended the Clarion Workshop. More information on Burstein and his work can be found on his webpage (<http://www.mabfan.com>) and blog (<http://mabfan.livejournal.com>).

Science fiction is only as antithetical to religion as science is.

In other words, science fiction is as antithetical to religion as its practitioners make it. And the range of practitioners means that science fiction is in no way antithetical to religion by its nature alone.

It is true that many of the early writers of science fiction saw themselves as great rationalists, and they viewed religion as irrational. From this perspective, science itself would be the new religion. This attitude is strongly found in works such as the H.G. Wells novel and movie **Things to Come**, in which a group of scientists form what is considered the first truly benevolent government in history. From that perspective, science fiction would appear to consider religion in the same way as Marxism does, as an opiate for the masses.

The attitude has continued to be shown throughout the history of science fiction, particularly in media science fiction. For example, the TV show *Star Trek* presented its fans with many quasi-omnipotent beings who had the powers of gods but acted like spoiled children. Clearly, the lesson there was to eschew religion and embrace rationality. More recently, *Stargate:SG-1* featured a set of villains, the Ori, who used advanced technology to convince the humans of the galaxy that they were gods to be worshipped. Again, it would appear as if science fiction was taking a stand against religion.

And yet science fiction has also produced works that show great respect for religion and religious people. Walter Miller's novel, **A Canticle for Leibowitz**, by showing generations of monks working to preserve human knowledge after an apocalypse, can be seen as an argument that religion and religious practice has a role in saving humanity.

Babylon 5, a TV show created by an avowed atheist, portrayed religious people in a positive light as well. In fact, an early episode, "The Parliament of Dreams," implies that humanity's strength lies in our diversity of religious beliefs, and not in our ability to discard them. (It can even be argued that the universe of *Babylon 5* includes definitive proof that a god of some sort exists.)

I've incorporated religious themes into my own work, and some of those stories have proven to be the most popular ones among my readers. In fact, the readers of *Analog*, the bastion of rational, hard science fiction, voted one of those stories, "Sanctuary," as the best novella the magazine published in 2005. Clearly, the readers of science fiction are willing to accept religious themes into their stories. (And many science fiction writers, including me,

are perfectly able and willing to incorporate religious practice into their own lives.)

The question you asked arises only because so many atheists fall into the same trap as religious people do -- they assume that one day, the human race will have the scales fall from their eyes and they will accept their beliefs as obvious and correct. Who knows what belief is the true one? I doubt that the world will suddenly "see the light" and convert to any one monolithic belief, and science fiction would betray its vision if it banned religion from its works. No matter what anyone might hope or believe, religion is a uniquely human practice that will accompany our race on our journey to the stars.

(By the way, if anyone out there is interested in learning more about why a technically-minded person might embrace religion, I recommend they check out the new book **God's Mechanics: How Scientists and Engineers Make Sense of Religion** by Brother Guy Consolmagno, a Jesuit astronomer who works at the Vatican -- and who is a science fiction fan.)

D.G.D. Davidson

D.G.D. Davidson is an archaeologist and writer who manages the blog [The Sci Fi Catholic](#). He firmly believes, for the love of all that is holy, that sf writers should stop mislabeling the Book of Revelation as "Revelations."

The answer is no. Science fiction writers have explored religion from every angle. Religious people (including C. S. Lewis) have written science fiction, just as atheists have written fantasy. At its core, science fiction is a loosely connected body of tropes that allows writers to write certain kinds of stories. It is not beholden to any one philosophy or theology, nor should it be.

Even hard sf, which merely refers to that kind of science fiction that seeks to be as true as possible to real science, is no more off-limits to religious people than is real scientific study. Educated religious people today are aware of such things as deep time, evolution, and the vastness of the universe, and most do not consider such things incompatible with their religions. In fact, religious people were aware of the vastness of the universe even when the Ptolemaic system was generally accepted; they just weren't aware of its shape.

Many science fiction writers have incorporated religion into their fiction, successfully or unsuccessfully depending on their personal talents and inclinations. Arthur C. Clarke, an atheist, and Gene Wolfe, a Catholic, have made good use of science fiction as a vehicle for addressing metaphysics and religious issues. Connie Willis often incorporates religion into her stories. John C. Wright, who has made a much-publicized conversion to Christianity, clearly feels that writing sf is compatible with his new religion. And in my experience, a great many religious people are sf fans: the Catholic blogosphere, for example, is teeming with them.

Religious themes are an entrenched part of the genre. If they were not, science fiction would never be able to move beyond the level of gee-whiz technophilic sf; to explore the genre's scope, writers must address the nature of humanity, our place in the universe, and the moral implications of technology. In other words, they must address questions that are properly philosophical and religious, and there is no reason to suppose that they must address these questions from only one angle.

L. E. Modesitt, Jr.

[L. E. Modesitt, Jr.](#), is the author of more than 50 novels - primarily science fiction and fantasy, a number of short stories, and various technical and economic articles. His first story was published in *Analog* in 1973, and his latest books are **Natural Ordermage** and **Viewpoints Critical**, a short-story collection.

Generalizations are dangerous because they're mostly true, but inapplicable in enough cases that anyone can mount enough examples to prove that they're not valid for whatever issue to which they are being applied. So it is with the proposition that science fiction is antithetical to religion.

Yet...science fiction is at least *theoretically* based on the logical applications of peer-reviewed and tested science in a fictional narration. Religion may or may not have a logical construct, but belief, rather than tested accuracy, is at the heart of all religion. There's a reason why followers of a faith are called believers. Even so, I don't see religion and science fiction as necessarily antithetical, but I do see science fiction being at least perceived as hostile to any form of blind belief that rejects demonstrated scientific findings on the basis of belief.

John C. Wright

[John C. Wright](#) is the author of **The Golden Age Trilogy**, **The War of the Dreaming**, **Chronicles of Chaos** and the upcoming **Null-A Continuum**, the authorized sequel of A.E. van Vogt's **World of Null-A** books. His short fiction has appeared in **Year's Best SF 3**, **The Night Lands**, **Best Short Novels 2004**, **The Year's Best Science Fiction #21**, **Breach The Hull**, and **No Longer Dreams**.

Short Answer: No. Science fiction is not necessarily antithetical to religion.

Long Answer:

Science Fiction has two figures I would call the fathers of science fiction: H.G. Wells and Jules Verne. Since we cannot survey all science fiction writers, let us glance at these two, and assume they represent the schools they founded.

H.G. Wells was a socialist, a progressive, a eugenicist, and an atheist, and some of these ideas are strongly reflected in his writings, which dwelt more on the "soft" sciences of politics, sociology, and the humanities. Since religion touches the soft sciences of sociology and politics, religion becomes a matter for the soft SF tales.

Jules Verne was not an atheist; he was a French Roman Catholic. His religious ideas are invisible in his tales, for those tales dwelt on fantastic voyages and fabulous machines, such as submersible ironclads or airborne clipper ships or shells shot to the Moon. Since he dealt with hard science,

physics and engineering, religion was immaterial to his plots, and never came up.

Vern was the hardest of all hard SF writers. His meticulous details (unfortunately lost in some English translations) give his tales a verisimilitude and an accuracy still remarkable. Some day soon, even non-science-fiction readers might come to believe that a moonshot is possible, or a rotary engine, or a heavier-than-air flying machine, or a submersible vehicle capable of sailing under the Antarctic icecap! - I'm sorry, what? These things were actually invented? Decades ago? Well, sciencefictioneers are just dreamers, right? Just a lucky guess by Verne.

The guesses of H.G. Wells were not so lucky, because he was not playing that particular hard-SF guessing game. His speculative fictions were veiled social commentaries. Ironically, while time machines and invisible men, Cavor's antigravity metal or invaders from Mars, remain dreams no less fantastic now as in the Victorian Era, the Wellsian fiction remains more timely than Verne's more accurate predictions, because the comments on society, on man's place in the universe, always remain pertinent.

Let us look at **The Island of Doctor Moreau** by H.G. Wells. The impact of the tale rests on the delicious blasphemy that Moreau, like Frankenstein before him, is playing at God. The scientist is breathing into the beasts a rational soul. After the death of Moreau, Edward Prendick, the narrator, attempts what can only be called priestcraft: he tells the beast-men that the Master is still alive, that the Law said by the Sayer of the Law is still in force, and that the House of Pain will return. Nonetheless, the beasts-men strip away the bandages, discard human clothing, grow hair, and return to all fours.

The real point of the story is in its final paragraphs, where Prendick suffers from the same kind of melodramatic and suffocating horror we recognize from H.P. Lovecraft. Prendick (like Gulliver at the end of his travels) finds he cannot tolerate the sight of his fellow men: they seem like beasts, beasts inflicted by a disease called reason, not truly rational creatures are all. He is haunted by the idea that all human notions of right and wrong come from some source as cruel, human, and arbitrary as Doctor Moreau, and that Christian hope in the Second Coming is as foolish as the fear of the beast-men that Moreau is not dead, but will come again to enforce his Law. Prendick is terrified that mankind will ignore their own Sayers of the Law and degenerate back into shambling bestiality before his eyes.

Let us call this the "Horror of Darwinism." It is the disorienting sensation the world felt when Copernicus yanked the world out from the center of a

Ptolemaic cosmos. It is the disorientation of the weirdness of quantum mechanics and general relativity. The narrator is shocked to find that Man is not the center of the universe.

Science fiction thrives on the Horror of Darwinism. That sense of weirdness is a twin brother to the Sense of Wonder of American pulp fiction. We science fiction people like it when Copernicus yanks the world out from under our feet: to us, it is like a roller-coaster ride.

Is the disorientation of Darwinism antithetical to religion? Maybe or maybe not, but H.G. Wells, *Progressive*, is antithetical to religion. The last line of the book is telling. The narrator is looking up at the stars. "There it must be, I think, in the vast and eternal laws of matter, and not in the daily cares and sins and troubles of men, that whatever is more than animal within us must find its solace and its hope."

In other words, the soul of man (that which is more than animal in us) can find solace and hope, not in religion, but in the vast and eternal laws of matter, i.e. in physical science. Even though the book never mentions God, the moral atmosphere of the tale is rich with those odors that waft from Victorian notions of Progress, Eugenics, Darwinism, Materialism. The Progressives will instinctively recognize the scent and smile.

Progressives, let us not forget, regard religion as one of those things to be left behind on the junk pile of history, along with monarchy, slavery, femininity, personal property, marriage, death and taxes, and whatever else will not exist in the Brave New World of our loving Big Brother.

If H.G. Wells represented all, or even most, science fiction, the antipathy of Science Fiction to religion would be plain.

But compare Doctor Moreau to *Robur the Conqueror*.

In **Master of the World**, Jules Verne describes a remarkable machine, called "The Terror", which, powered by a rotary engine, can act as a horseless carriage, a boat, a submersible, and even a flying machine. It achieves speeds of upwards of ninety miles an hour, so that when traveling down roads, branches are snapped off and birds yanked out of the air by the hurricane of its passage.

I am sure there is some sort of plot in there somewhere, something about a treasury agent trying to track down the inventor of the machine. The story ends when Robur, the inventor, in defiance of the powers of heaven, flies his machine into a raging electrical storm above the gulf of Mexico. The

machine, once it reached the height exactly equal to the tower of Babel, is struck by red-hot lightning, and plunges like proud Lucifer aflame into the raging deep. Only the narrator survives, or, I should say, "I alone survived to tell the tale." Now, if there is a religious parallel or point to that scene, I cannot see it. It looks like a normal boy's adventure story to me.

The religious parallel is so slight you have to squint to see it. However, the moral atmosphere of Jules Verne does reflect the values and assumptions of Christianity, and the moral atmosphere of H.G. Wells is hostile to them.

Now, here is my question: is the hubris of Dr. Moreau, and his downfall, one iota different from the hubris and downfall of Robur the Conqueror, or, for that matter, of Dr. von Frankenstein? Wells the story teller, not anything in the story itself, chooses to make a pro-Progressive and anti-Religious point, using science fiction as his weapon. Verne tells an almost identical story and does not so chose.

Which one of them is really the father of science fiction? Both.

But the difference is that Wells can put his irreligion in the forefront of his story, because the disorientation of Darwinism, the speculation that man can mock (or replace) God with Science is new and disorienting; whereas the religion of Verne is in the background of his story, because the theme warning against hubris is old and familiar.

Criticism of religion is an SF theme, because it is speculation. If Jesus turns out to be a Martian, or the Bethlehem Star turns out to be a supernova, that is speculative. Defense of religion is not an SF theme, because the idea that our ancestors were right on this point is not disorienting. It is not speculative.

Let us not misunderstand this point. It is not that religion is unscientific ergo science fiction is irreligious. That argument is beneath contempt. It is that science fiction readers love the roller coaster of new ideas.

When the Gray Lensman Kimball Kinnison marries Red Lensman Clarissa MacDougall on planet Klovia, the biggest wedding in two galaxies, we can assume the marriage ceremony is some sort of nondenominational vaguely Protestant rite carried out by the chaplains of the Galactic Patrol. But these things are in the background. The religious ideas are not on stage, not part of what makes SF science fiction. You read a Lensman novel to hear about the psychic powers of the Lens, the grandeur of the galactic war. If they worship atom bombs, or Vaal, or Landru, or the Great God Finuka, those religious ideas are on stage because they are strange and novel. If the

people living beneath the Planet of the Apes worship the same God your grandparents did, where is the speculation in that?

Let us not exclude from the discussion the third father of science fiction, a man as inventive of basic tropes and ideas of our genre as Wells, but woefully neglected: Olaf Stapledon. He typifies the third way science fiction tales deals with religion. He was also not an atheist; he merely was not a Christian.

In **Starmaker**, the combined race-wide consciousness of all sapient worlds, stars and nebulae, at the end of the universe join in a telepathic union and attempt to achieve understanding of God. God, in this background, turns out to be an Artist indifferent to the fate of His creation, and He smites the combined universal mind for its presumption. Unlike in Christian mythology (where the Creator loves even those men who hate Him), the created beings have an unrequited love for the indifferent and cruel Starmaker. God is cruel because Darwinism, or perhaps the Artistic mind, requires clumsy experimentation, trial and error, and remorseless culling of the stock, to achieve evolution.

This theological speculation (that man's proper relation to God is the relation of a battered but clinging wife to a cruel and indifferent husband) appears in other works by Stapledon. The dying races of mankind in **Last and First Men** regard life as a tragic waste, and pointless, and yet they salute the darkness of the indifferent universe with joy.

No one seriously will claim Stapledon, one of the founders of Science Fiction, did not write science fiction. And yet, in **Starmaker**, God Himself comes on stage as a character, no less than in Milton's **Paradise Lost**, and the meeting with God is the climax of the book. It is merely not the Christian God. The book is speculative fiction: in this case, theological speculation.

Stapledon's approach to religion is not the Progressivism of Wells nor the Christian moral sentiment of Verne: it is something that gilds Darwinism with the glitter of religion. One can see a similar sentiment in **Dune** by Frank Herbert.

Any non-Christian spirituality in SF follows in the footsteps of Stapledon. The moral atmosphere of Ursula K. LeGuin is religious, but in her case the religion is Taoism rather than Christianity. **The Lathe of Heaven** is a Taoist parable about the virtue of quietism. **Left Hand of Darkness** and **Wizard of Earthsea** are redolent with Taoist thought. Ironically, no matter how ancient eastern religion is in the East, in the West it has a new (or even

'New Age') odor to it, and so it can be a source of sciencefictional novelty and wonder to a Westerner.

The most egregious example of this anything-but-Western one-sidedness is in **Variable Star** by Spider Robinson. In this tale, we learn that only Zen Buddhists can pilot starships, because the quantum uncertainties involved in the star drive require transcendental meditation in the observers. Or something. This is marketed and sold as science fiction. Yet imagine if Mr. Robinson had written **Variable Saint**, and it was the same story with one detail changed: in this future, it was discovered that the laws of high energy physics required that a Roman Catholic priest in full canonicals, with miter and alb, had to bless the drive core and sprinkle it with holy water out of an aspergillum before it could ignite!

I assume most readers would not regard that as a proper science fiction speculation. Eastern mysticism is not more scientific than Western, but it is more novel to us, so we wonder at it.

It is telling that there is not a single science fiction story where Eastern gods or Eastern mysticism is treated as false and contemptible. In *Star Trek*, if an Indian, excuse me, a Native American, introduces a starship captain to his "spirit guide", this spirit never turns out to be a computer in disguise or a lying energy being. On the other hand, if anything remotely like the Christian God shows up, Spock shoots him with the forward phaser battery. This is because Progressives do not (as yet) regard any religion as antithetical to their world-view aside from Christianity. Perhaps Christianity is hard to tame.

Progressives can, and always have, use science fiction as a tool to put across their social commentary and satire. Religion is part of society and is fair game for comment and satire. But they are arrogant if they claim that science fiction is necessarily loyal to Progressivism.

Other writers, not of that faction, can and always have used science fiction to put across their world-views as well. We would have to narrow the definition of Science Fiction artificially to exclude the science fiction stories that take place in a religious moral atmosphere.

I am currently reading **In Green's Jungles** by Gene Wolfe: there are both godlike beings in this tale and ghostly visitations, and other things that may or may not have a scientific explanation. Whether this tale counts as "science fiction" depends on your definition. But the moral atmosphere is hauntingly, even majestically, religious; nay, it is specifically Christian, both the acute pessimism and the otherworldly hope of that ancient faith are

present, even though no Christian deity or doctrine is ever named. A book, science fiction or not, that breathed the same atmosphere would be Christian, even if nothing supernatural ever happened in the tale.

But if we fiddle with the definition of SF merely to throw out Gene Wolfe as a science fiction writer, then we Science Fiction writers lose the single best writer in our field today.

We also have to throw out Cordwainer Smith and the stories of the Instrumentality of Man.

And, while you are fiddling with the definition to exclude the Christians, what will you do with Robert Heinlein? Oh? You do not think that **Number Of The Beast** or **Stranger In A Strange Land** are religious science fiction?

They are not Christian, I grant you, but a tale where a solipsist discovers he is God, or where the dead are alive in Heaven wearing halos and angel-wings cannot fit anywhere into a materialistic or scientifically-understood universe.

If **Stranger In A Strange Land** is not science fiction, please tell me, because I would be glad to write in that genre instead.

Let us be honest. Science fiction is not necessarily about the science. It is about the wonder. Any writer man enough to portray religion as a source of wonder, as Gene Wolfe does, can make it a fit matter for science fiction.

James Morrow

In praising **The Philosopher's Apprentice**, [James Morrow](#)'s recent novel about a young ethicist hired to implant a conscience in an adolescent amnesia victim, *Entertainment Weekly* concluded that the author "addresses controversial topics without being heavy-handed and infuses the narrative with a wit that pragmatists and idealists alike will appreciate." Morrow's earlier works include **The Last Witchfinder**, a postmodern historical epic about the coming of the scientific worldview, as well as the **Godhead Trilogy** - **Towing Jehovah**, **Blameless in Abaddon**, and **The Eternal Footman** - dark comedies spun from the conceit that God has died for the greater good of humankind.

The notion that fantasy accords with religion while SF remains intrinsically secular is a simple enough argument - but it's not simplistic. This hypothesis has many virtues, not the least of which is its potential to spark interesting conversations. As the French say, "Yes, it works in practice, but will it work in theory?" And the question before us works marvelously well in theory.

To the degree that science fiction is the literature spun from human insights into the laws of nature, then it is indeed the last place a person should look for corroboration of the Christian worldview or any other frankly religious perspective. For better or worse - better, in my opinion - science has yet to provide a single molecule of evidence for the supernatural, and so far every attempt to make the empirical substantiate the ethereal, from the laboratory testing of the Shroud of Turin to the crude appropriation of particle physics

by various self-styled mystics, has come to nothing. How appropriate that I should be composing this essay in the shadow of the death of Arthur C. Clarke, who spent so much of his creative energy reminding us that neither conventional theists nor "New Age nitwits," as he called them, will find any genuine comfort in science qua science.

As always, however, the gritty observable is more complicated than the airy ontological. One thinks immediately of Michael Bishop, Gene Wolfe, and Orson Scott Card, three unapologetic Christians who've written novels and stories that are manifestly science fiction. No sane critic would argue that any of these authors has betrayed the genre's heritage or compromised the integrity of his artistic vision by filtering it through a spiritual persuasion - indeed, I suspect that something like the opposite is true for Bishop, Wolfe, and Card: their faith may give their fiction its edge. On a more personal note, let me add that, in addition to Bishop, I am pleased to count among my most beloved literary friends a half-dozen SF writers whose beliefs are by no means synonymous with my own unqualified atheism.

Does this mean that future James Morrow novels will serve up some sort of cozy conciliation between religion and science? I certainly hope not. Religion has far too many things wrong with it, and science far too many things right with it, for me to adopt such a stance and still keep company with myself. May God strike me dead if I ever cast my lot with the kumbayahoos and Francis Collins schizoids who assert that Charles Darwin poses no genuine problem for faith. As far as I can tell, the only deity compatible with the evolutionary evidence would inevitably evoke the famous couplet from Archibald MacLeish's verse drama *J.B.*: "If God is God He is not good / If God is good He is not God." I would contrast MacLeish's hard-won humanism with the legerdemain of all the major theodicies - the move whereby, when the Supreme Being putatively relieves some portion of our suffering, this becomes evidence for his boundless loving grace, and when that same Supreme Being permits the suffering to persist, this also becomes evidence for his boundless loving grace. Such "heads I win, tails you lose" logic should be exposed for the shoddy thing it is, and we must not allow its inarguable consolations to trump the post-Enlightenment arguments that today remain our only defense against exterior and interior theocracy.

I can perhaps make this point best in reference to the late, great Stephen Jay Gould. Gould was a terrific writer, a first-rate thinker, and an all-around bodhisattva, but I was saddened to pick up his 2002 manifesto and discover that he'd stopped fighting the good fight and instead embraced a kind of intellectual apartheid. In **Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life** Gould makes his case for NOMA or "non-overlapping magisteria," a model that would have us, in the name of détente and

common sense, confine scientific discourse to the material universe, while we simultaneously cede the moral universe to religion. I'm sorry, Professor Gould. I love you, but that dog won't hunt. A Martian encountering the NOMA solution would come away assuming that religion and science are commensurate in their achievements, so that, just as science can point to breakthroughs within the empirical realm, so can religion boast astonishing accomplishments in the ethical sphere. Alas, when our naïve Martian turns from Gould's book to the bloody pages of human history, he will find that religion has hardly shown itself to be uniquely competent to deal with moral issues. Au contraire, its contributions to that conversation have often been ugly in the extreme. But how could it be otherwise? Both science and religion are almost certainly nothing more, and nothing less, than the creations of flawed and fallible human beings, with the infinitely nontrivial difference that the claims of the former are answerable to the court of nature and the claims of the latter are answerable to no one.

If intellectual apartheid is a questionable strategy in the ethical domain, it makes even less sense in the arts. My own career happens to throw this problem into high relief. Two of my novels have won the World Fantasy Award, and yet the secular-humanist sensibility underlying *Only Begotten Daughter* and *Towing Jehovah* could not be further from the supernaturalist teleology of J.R.R. Tolkien, a writer I admire on grounds other than his Catholicism, and the allegorical apologetics of C. S. Lewis, whom I detest on every ground I can imagine. Did the custodians of this award make a category error in singling out my theological speculations for such recognition? I don't think so. The World Fantasy judges might have suffered a lapse in their critical faculties, but they were within their rights to adopt a liberal definition of fantasy.

Genre labels have their uses. At a certain point, however, we have to stop blood-typing our favorite books and recognize that the value of literature lies not in its ability to fulfill readers' expectations but in its potential to help us reimagine the mystery of it all. Whether our private pilgrimages bring us to the transcendent rationalism of Clarke, the numinous heresies of Tolkien, or anywhere else on the continuum that stretches from *Spaceship Rama* to *Middle Earth*, we find ourselves in "magisteria" that rarely, if ever, operate independently of their ostensible opposites. Science fiction and fantasy: long may they overlap.



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Posted by [John DeNardo](#) at Wednesday March 26, 2008 at 12:51 AM

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May 19, 2008 – Religion Dispatches:

BY GABRIEL MCKEE JULY 3, 2009

ARE GOD AND ALIENS COMPATIBLE?

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José Gabriel Funes, director of the Vatican Observatory, recently stated in an interview that the belief in aliens is compatible with belief in God. This isn't exactly news—another Vatican astronomer, Guy Consolmagno, published a pamphlet on the matter three years ago, and Vox Nova points us to a treatise by Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) that says essentially the same thing.

Some of Funes' comments, like his statement that "The Bible is not fundamentally a work of science," are as old as Augustine. That's not to mention the fact that, Vatican position aside, Funes isn't speaking for the whole Church, and his statements in an interview are a far cry from a papal encyclical. His ideas are nevertheless interesting, particularly in light of other past theological and science fictional writings on the spiritual status of beings from other worlds.

Funes states, for instance, that:

"God became man in Jesus in order to save us. So if there are also other intelligent beings, it's not a given that they need redemption. They might have remained in full friendship with their creator."

That's the concept at the heart of C.S. Lewis' first foray into science fiction, *Out of the Silent Planet* (1939), in which voyagers from Earth land on Mars, which never experienced a fall and whose inhabitants have no difficulty discerning the will of their creator. But, unlike Funes, Lewis thought that meant we should stay out of space entirely. In a 1963 interview, Lewis gave perhaps the strongest statement of that attitude:

"I look forward with horror to contact with the other inhabited planets, if there are such. We would only transport to them all of our sin and our acquisitiveness, and establish a new colonialism. I can't bear to think of it. But if we on Earth were to get right with God, of course, all would be changed. Once we find ourselves spiritually awakened, we can go to outer space and take the good things with us. That is quite a different matter."

Lewis took a grim attitude to the exploration of space, but he wasn't above humor on the subject: In a letter to Arthur C. Clarke, then Chairman of the British Interplanetary Society, Lewis offered the group "good wishes... as regards everything but interplanetary travel." (The full correspondence between Lewis and Clarke is collected in the recent

volume *From Narnia to a Space Odyssey: The War of Ideas Between Arthur C. Clarke and C.S. Lewis*, edited by Ryder W. Miller.)

Years later, James Blish tackled a similar concept in his 1958 novel *A Case of Conscience* (recently [reviewed](#) by the Guardian). Like in *Out of the Silent Planet*, this novel's hero, a spacefaring Jesuit, finds a planet that knows no sin, and finds the prospect terrifying. The reptilian inhabitants of the planet Lithia have an innate (and atheistic) sense of right and wrong. They have no need for religion or moral philosophy—and, Ruiz-Sanchez fears, no means of spiritual growth. He ultimately concludes that Lithia was created not by God, but by Satan; which opens up a theological can of worms in the novel's second half, even as the Lithian envoy to Earth seems to prove him right by instigating an anarchist revolution.

The moral status of aliens is an old topic in science fiction, explored in stories from H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* to Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow*. Alien theology—exotheology—has a complicated history. Pope Zachary (741-752) condemned a priest named Virgil for teaching that a race of men not descended from Adam inhabited the moon. Protestants weren't keen on the idea either, as Philip Melancthon illustrates:

“Our master Jesus Christ was born, died, and resurrected in this world. Nor does he manifest himself elsewhere, nor elsewhere has he died or resurrected. Therefore it must not be imagined that there are many worlds, because it must not be imagined that Christ died or was resurrected more often, nor must it be thought that in any other world without the knowledge of the son of God, that men would be restored to eternal life.”

(The idea of an alien Christ has shown up in several Sci-fi stories, most famously Ray Bradbury's "The Man," and most vividly in Michael Bishop's "Gospel of Gamaliel Crucis," which describes an insectoid alien savior.)

It wasn't until Copernicus that the concept of "the plurality of worlds" became widespread, and even then it was a touchy subject for centuries. There's a lot at risk in the proposition that life exists elsewhere. If we're really just a single species among billions, what basis do we have for thinking ourselves special in the eyes of God? Funes, channeling Lewis again, hints at a biblically-based answer: "We who belong to the human race could really be that lost sheep, the sinners who need a pastor." It's a nice introduction to speculative theology—and what better place for speculative theology than speculative fiction?

[All of the science-fiction stories mentioned above are discussed in greater detail in chapter 5 of *The Gospel According to Science Fiction*.]

June 2, 2008 – Religion Dispatches:

BY [GABRIEL MCKEE](#) JULY 9, 2009

CHURCH OF JEDI TAKES ADVANTAGE OF TURMOIL

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Nick Street's recent essay on *Battlestar Galactica* viewed the show as a harbinger of the future of religion whose fans' immersion in media and technology becomes a sort of spiritual practice in itself. One of the strangest religion stories in recent memory also involves a science fictional religion: the Church of Jediism, whose co-founder Barney Jones, a.k.a. Master Jonba Hehol, was recently attacked by an inebriated critic in a makeshift Darth Vader costume. There's not much detail in most of the press coverage of the odd event, which was generally treated as a simple news-of-the-weird item. But the Vader attack opens a window into an international new religious movement that, like *Battlestar Galactica*, may show us the shape of faith to come.

Of course, neither *BSG* nor *Star Wars* is the first science-fictional religion to gain prominence. The hedonistic Martian religion described by Robert A. Heinlein in *Stranger in a Strange Land* was a direct influence on late-60s communes, and Scientology was launched with an article in an issue of *Astounding Science Fiction*. But the Jedi church is in many ways a more striking movement because it basically started by accident, when 390,000 people listed "Jedi" as their religion on the United Kingdom's 2001 census. Among those thousands were brothers Barney and Michael Jones, who took their census statement seriously. According to the Church of Jediism's official Web site, Daniel (Master Morda Hehol) dedicated himself to the Jedi way in 2003, and started an actual ministry with his brother Barney in 2007. The group claims 30 members in the UK, but has links to similar organizations in New Zealand and the United States.

The Darth Vader attack occurred while some of these members were filming a lightsaber battle in their backyard. Arwel Wynne Hughes, wearing a garbage-bag cape and swinging a metal crutch (lightsaber), leaped into the yard shouting "Darth Vader! Darth Vader!" He struck Barney on the head and punched his cousin, Michael Jones, on the leg. In a court appearance, Hughes claimed not to remember much about the incident, owing to the box of wine he had drunk beforehand. A Welsh court sentenced Hughes to two months in prison (suspended) and a fine. But the facts of the case obscure the real story, which is the impact this coverage has had on the Church of Jediism itself.

In the wake of the attack, *Time* magazine and NPR interviewed Daniel. Despite the interviewers' thinly-veiled mockery, this level of coverage offers an unprecedented legitimacy to the group, and they know it. ("I don't know if [George] Lucas even knows about it, to be honest with you," Daniel says, but: "I'm sure he will after this.") The interview is an example of denizens of the Long Tail subverting traditional media for their own ends. Regardless of *Time*'s mockery, the Joneses know that the interview will reach thousands of like-minded seekers, many of whom may find in the Church of Jediism a spirituality they can understand. There has always been a spiritual element to science-fiction fandom that appeals to many of those who, like 16.1% of respondents to the Pew Forum's Religious Landscape Survey, have no religious affiliation. In the NPR interview, Daniel Jones explains that he belonged to "none of the above" prior to founding the Church: he had no faith beyond "just being myself, I suppose. Atheist is the best way to describe it." The Church of Jediism shows that many members of the growing unaffiliated contingent find greater spiritual satisfaction in pop culture than in traditional religion.

You would expect the group's leaders to welcome the increased attention, but Barney Jones—Hughes' primary victim—has reportedly stepped down as the Church's leader. A WalesOnline [report](#) is vague about whether he has left the faith entirely or simply wants to avoid the limelight, but the Vader attack has clearly caused him to reconsider his role as a spiritual leader. The impact of the incident on the fledgling faith is mixed: it will likely gain new members, but at the cost of one of its founders.

Time will tell what place Master Jonba Hehol's sacrifice will take in the mythology of the Church of Jediism. But this small story gives us a taste of the future of religion, in which groups that know how to use pop culture and the media to build myth will guide speak most clearly to our spirits.

June 12, 2008 – Religion Dispatches:

BY [GABRIEL MCKEE](#) AUGUST 11, 2009

TAKING IT TO THE STREETS: ANONYMOUS VS. SCIENTOLOGY

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This Saturday, thousands of young Internet users will take to the streets dressed as buccaneers—and it has nothing to do with Talk Like a Pirate Day. The online protest group Anonymous has organized a day of international demonstrations against the Church of Scientology (its fifth in as many months) and for this one, they're dressing as pirates. [Operation Sea Arrrgh](#) takes its name from the Sea Organization or Sea Org, Scientology's nautically-themed ruling elite. Anonymous, a group of actual and would-be hackers who frequently wear Guy Fawkes masks inspired by the comic book and film *V For Vendetta*, makes no secret of its final goal: the complete dismantling of the Church of Scientology in its present form.

It's difficult to trace the history of the amorphous, leaderless Anonymous, but users of message boards like [4chan](#), birthplace of the lolcat, have long used the term as a collective name. A Fox11 [news report](#) in July 2007 announced the existence of a sinister group of domestic terrorists and “hackers on steroids” called Anonymous. 4chan's users turned mockery of the news report's tone-deaf sensationalism into a meme. Within hours, they began to turn themselves into an ironic caricature of the sinister hacker mafia Fox11 described. The birth of Anonymous as a group is a chicken-egg scenario, but there's no doubt that Fox11's report was a vital step in its creation.

It took Scientology to turn them into a movement. In January, the Church of Scientology's attempt to suppress a leaked [video](#) of Tom Cruise discussing the religion galvanized Anonymous and gave them a cause. In [“Message to Scientology,”](#) a YouTube clip posted on January 21, a computer voice reads a declaration of war, declaring that the Church of Scientology “should be destroyed” and announcing the group's intention to “expel [Scientology] from the Internet.” The result has been “Project Chanology,” a series of monthly protests at Scientology centers in dozens of cities. Each of these events

has been attended by as many as 8,000 demonstrators worldwide, and Sea Arrrgh may be the biggest yet.

Anonymous has not issued any kind of statement of purpose, or manifesto. And as the group has no leaders, anyone can claim to speak on its behalf, regardless of their level of involvement. But Anonymous' mosaic of Web sites and YouTube clips tend to present the group as a guardian of free speech standing off against a litigious juggernaut that thrives on prior restraint. The group's first free-speech martyr is a 15-year-old London boy known as "Epic Nose Guy" to whom police issued a summons for displaying a sign declaring the group "a dangerous cult" at a protest on May 10. (The charges were later dropped.)

The real picture is more complex, however. There's no doubt that the Church of Scientology has used litigation and intimidation to silence its critics. (A 1996 decision from the US Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit stated that the Religious Technology Center, which owns and licenses Scientology's trademarks and copyrights, has a "documented history of vexatious behavior.") But opposing Scientology on the grounds that their acts are censorial doesn't make Anonymous a group of First Amendment purists. Prior to any of its public protests, members of the group conducted distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks on Scientologist Web sites. The weekend before the release of the "Message to Scientology," these attacks briefly shut down Scientology.org. In addition to DDoS attacks, Anonymous has plagued Scientology centers with prank calls and "black faxes," in which an all-black sheet of paper is sent through fax machine and taped end-to-end to form an infinite loop. (According to a Church of Scientology video, many of the prank calls were threatening in nature.) And in late January, a Google bombing campaign made Scientology's main Web site the top result for the search term "dangerous cult." In conjunction with this, leaked Scientology materials have been increasingly available online—most recently *Revolt in the Stars*, a 1975 novella/screenplay by L. Ron Hubbard containing Scientology's rumored creation story about nuclear weapons, volcanoes, and the galactic warlord Xenu. *Revolt* has been available online for some time, but the current version, hosted on Wikileaks and Gawker-owned science fiction blog io9, has broader exposure. Anonymous hopes to cut into Scientology's income by making these materials available for free (which otherwise Church members must spend significant time and money to obtain), while shutting down official channels like Scientology.org.

The anti-Scientology movement has been around for decades (at least since the publication of Paulette Cooper's *The Scandal of Scientology* in 1971), but the early Anonymous demonstrations had little if any connection to existing groups. On January 22, Andreas Heldal-Lund, founder of anti-Scientology Web site Operation Clambake, issued a press release criticizing Anonymous' techniques, particularly its DDoS attacks:

Attacking Scientology like that will just make them play the religious persecution card. They will use it to defend their own counter actions when they try to shatter criticism and crush critics without mercy... People should be able to have easy access

to both sides and make up their own opinions. Freedom of speech means we need to allow all to speak—including those we strongly disagree with. I am of the opinion that the Church of Scientology is a criminal organization and a cult which is designed by its delusional founder to abuse people. I am still committed to fight for their right to speak their opinion.

Mark Bunker, founder of the anti-Scientology Web site [XenuTV](#) issued a similarly-disapproving [YouTube clip](#), stating “you shouldn’t be doing things that are illegal. You just shouldn’t.” But it’s not as if Anonymous didn’t realize the irony in its attitude toward censorship at the time of the DDoS attacks; they simply didn’t care. Their stated intention of “expelling Scientology from the Internet” is inherently censorial. The “Message to Scientology” video states:

We are cognizant of the many who may decry our methods as parallel to those of the Church of Scientology, those who espouse the obvious truth that your organization will use the actions of Anonymous as an example of the persecution of which you have for so long warned your followers. This is acceptable to Anonymous. In fact, it is encouraged... Over time, as we begin to merge our pulse with that of your “Church,” the suppression of your followers will become increasingly difficult to maintain.

Moreover, Anonymous is happy to fit into the Church’s narrative of persecution. Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard dubbed the enemies of his organization “suppressive persons” or “SPs,” defined in Scientology’s *Glossary of Terms* as “a person who possesses a distinct set of characteristics and mental attitudes that cause him to suppress other people in his vicinity. This is the person whose behavior is calculated to be disastrous.” Calculated disaster: 4chan’s users couldn’t have described their ambitions in better terms. The “Message to Scientology” proudly proclaims: “We are your SPs.”

Nevertheless, Anonymous took the criticisms of the old guard to heart, particularly Mark Bunker’s suggestion that the group attempt to have the Church’s tax-exempt status in the United States revoked. (In the UK, where Chanology protests have drawn hundreds of protestors, Scientology is not officially recognized as a religion, but does have some tax protections.) Bunker received what might be considered the group’s highest honor when he became a meme—dubbed “Wise Beard Man,” he is now Anonymous’ father figure. Operation Clambake has show signs of support as well: the [main page](#) of the site now displays an image of a protester wearing the group’s signature *V For Vendetta* mask. Interaction with these longtime critics of Scientology has focused and directed the Anonymous’ anger, finalizing its transformation into a true movement.

Following Bunker’s suggestions, Anonymous has adapted a new means of preventing Church from casting itself as the victim of religious persecution: denying that Scientology is a religion at all. An [intriguing](#) YouTube clip from the May 10 protests

shows a Scientologist film crew interviewing members of Anonymous. The clip's creator alleges that these interviewers want sound bites of protesters calling Scientology a religion:

Sound bites of people saying Scientology is a religion is something useful to the cult. Getting that on camera will help them keep tax exempt status and define those who oppose them as 'religious bigots'... They want to get critics to mention Anons and law breaking in the same breath and to say that Scientology is a 'church'... This is part of a plan to position themselves in the public mind as being 'victims' of 'religious bigots' and 'cyberterrorists' that might come after Christians next.

The effort to redefine Scientology as a non-religious organization hinges on the use of the word “cult”—a problematic term, as explained in Catherine Wessinger’s recent Religion Dispatches [article](#) on the Fundamentalist Latter-Day Saints. Wessinger states that the word “cult” “can inhibit careful investigation of what is going on inside a religious group and its interactions with members of society; broadly speaking, it is assumed that people ‘know’ what goes on in a ‘cult.’” Anonymous is interested in making the truth about Scientology known to the public, but branding the organization as a “cult” may actually limit that effort. People “know” what goes on in a cult—but much of what goes on in Scientology may be far stranger, particularly given the Church’s international reach and corporate infrastructure. Referring to Scientology as “the cult” gives Anonymous a useful shorthand, but it conceals the *sui generis* nature of Scientology.

Religious groups frequently face internal criticism and former members, but Anonymous’ war on Scientology may be the first time an unaffiliated, secular organization has protested a whole religion. What is it about Scientology that has made it such an attractive target to Anonymous? Given that the core of the hacker ethos is the belief that “information wants to be free,” it’s no surprise that the group is so angered by Scientology’s pay-to-pray structure. The Church relies on tightly-guarded copyrights and trademarks, and that defense has made them an inviting target for Anonymous’ information pirates. Time will tell how successful the campaign against Scientology will be, but history has shown 15-year-old hackers to be every bit as adept at unrelenting harassment as Scientology’s lawyers are. As Anonymous strengthens its ties to the old guard of the anti-Scientology movement, it is creating a synthesis between the pranksterism and a more principled, informed style of protest. With each monthly demonstration, Anonymous becomes more and more a force to be reckoned with. Could this be the unstoppable force to Scientology’s immovable object?

June 19, 2008 – Religion Dispatches:

BY [GABRIEL MCKEE](#) JANUARY 12, 2010

***RDBOOK*: THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT**

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Wastelands: Stories of the Apocalypse

Edited by John Joseph Adams

(Night Shade Books, 2008)

One might well imagine that the stories in an anthology called *Wastelands: Stories of the Apocalypse* might be nothing but a couple dozen writers attempting to out-depress each other. How much can there really be to explore in post-apocalyptic scenarios? How much ground is there to cover between *The Road* and *The Road Warrior*?

Pleasant surprise, then, that editor John Joseph Adams has chosen stories that show so much variation, not just in setting but in tone. There are several elegiac tales here, to be sure, but there are just as many optimistic ones, and even one or two comedies. It's far from a tedious series of stories about savage motorcycle gangs—there's real diversity here, and you're hard pressed to find two stories that are alike.

The contributors to *Wastelands* find an amazing array of ways to bring about the end of the world. There's the old Cold War standby of nuclear war, of course, but there are also deadly viruses (Stephen King's "The End of the Whole Mess"), runaway pollution (Paolo Bacigalupi's "The People of Sand and Slag"), and general economic collapse (Jonathan Lethem's "How We Got In Town and Out Again"). In Cory Doctorow's "When Sysadmins Ruled the Earth"—probably the anthology's best story—it's a synchronistic series of unconnected acts of terrorism. The most original set-up is in Octavia Butler's "Speech Sounds," in which a virus wipes out the human race's ability to use and comprehend language. Elsewhere the cause of the apocalypse is ambiguous—something best illustrated in Gene Wolfe's "Mute," in which two children watch news reports about a mysterious disaster on a television with no sound. They know the world is falling apart, but they don't know how or why.

Despite this parade of nightmares, there's a pervasive sense of optimism in these stories—an optimism that, paradoxically, lies at the heart of all post-apocalyptic fiction. The fact that there are any stories to tell means that something has survived. In a way, these aren't end-of-the-world stories at all, because the world doesn't really end—or rather, the world ends, but humanity carries on. These are *post*-apocalyptic stories, and their focus is not on destruction, but rebuilding. That hopefulness sneaks its way into most stories in the subgenre. Cormac McCarthy sneaks it into the last few paragraphs of his oppressively bleak novel *The Road*, but it forms the backbone of definitive stories like Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle For Leibowitz*—not to mention *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*. The overriding narrative in most post-apocalyptic fiction is the emergence of order from chaos. The religious nature of this enterprise is nowhere so clear as in Orson Scott Card's "Salvage," in which Mormons forge the culmination of the

American dream in a post-nuclear desert. The title of Jack McDevitt's entry in *Wastelands* is telling: "Never Despair."

Nevertheless, there's a specter haunting *Wastelands*: the specter of *Left Behind*. Inherent in the postapocalyptic story (as with the giant monster movie) is the idea that the world deserves what it gets, that whatever disaster has occurred is the fitting punishment for the sins of military or scientific hubris. For all the hopefulness displayed in stories of reconstruction, there's a sense that what has survived has been made pure in the crucible of cataclysm. And that, of course, is the approach of premillennial dispensationalists like Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, whose *Left Behind* novels delight in meting out righteous punishment just as much as *Wasteland's* authors enjoy painting glimpses of the depopulated New Jerusalem. But in both cases there's a perverse delight in the overthrow of all that has come before, something of the sentiment of Elvis Costello's "Waiting For the End of the World":

"Dear Lord I sincerely hope you're coming / 'Cause you really started something."

The means by which the better future is wrought mark the key difference between these progressive apocalypse scenarios with LaHaye's regressive one. In *Wasteland*, humankind creates its own future; in *Left Behind* only God can actually set things right. LaHaye and Jenkins' stories aren't *post*-apocalyptic, but simply apocalyptic; their focus is on destruction first, with divine rebuilding consigned to a few chapters of the final volume. Jerry Oltion's "Judgment Passed" (incidentally the only story original to this volume) deals directly with *Left Behind*, describing the experience of a group of astronauts who return to Earth after a general rapture has removed every human from the face of the earth (presumably to be sorted out elsewhere). Oltion's story has a certain smugness, which Adams encapsulates in his introduction to the story: "Oltion has strong views on religion—namely that it's a scourge on humanity—that led him to write this story, which speculates on whether or not being 'left behind' would be such a bad thing." For all its desire to set itself apart from fundamentalist apocalypticism, "Judgment Passed" ends up giving the same sort of us-versus-them message, complete with the idea that the destruction of society is ultimately a Good Thing.

A more nuanced approach shines through in Dale Bailey's "The End of the World As We Know It," which interjects metafictional thoughts on the nature of the post-apocalyptic subgenre into the story of the proverbial Last Man on Earth. Bailey views the destruction of human civilization through a very different biblical lens, considering not Revelation, but Job. He questions the justice of the conclusion of Job's restoration:

[Job] keeps shoveling down the shit. He will not renounce God. He keeps the faith. And he's rewarded: God gives him back his riches, his cattle. God restores his health, and sends him friends. God replaces his kids. Pay attention: Word choice is important in an end-of-the-world story.

I said "replaces," not "restores."

The other kids? They stay dead, gone, non-functioning, erased forever from the earth, just like the dinosaurs and the 12 million undesirables incinerated by the Nazis and the 500,000 slaughtered in Rwanda and the 1.7 million murdered in Cambodia and the 60 million immolated in the Middle Passage.

That merry prankster God.

That jokester.

Bailey will not accept a divine justice that requires *Left Behind*-style suffering. And, though *Wastelands* has its share of truly downbeat stories, the anthology gives a stronger sense of that humanism. Even in Card's Mormon fantasy, it is humanity and not God who creates a livable future. *Wastelands* is a dare to the concept of divine antipathy to humanity. Do your worst, it says; we will survive.

June 17, 2008 – Religion Dispatches:

[[Report on the Anonymous protest of the Church of Scientology in New York, with photographs. The piece is no longer available from Religion Dispatches and is not archived in the Wayback Machine.]]

June 27, 2008 – Religion Dispatches:

BY [GABRIEL MCKEE](#) JANUARY 13, 2010

OBAMA NOW A HINDU?

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If charges of being a “secret Muslim” weren’t enough, Barack Obama may now need to prove he’s not a secret Hindu as well. According to the *Times of India*, a group of supporters in New Delhi have sent Obama a two-foot, gold-plated statue of the monkey god Hanuman. According to Indian politician Brijmohan Bhama, “Obama has deep faith in Lord Hanuman and that is why we are presenting an idol of Hanuman to him.” The apparent source of this pronouncement of Obama’s newly-discovered faith is this [photo](#) from *Time* magazine, which shows a collection of lucky charms Obama carries with him, including a small Hanuman charm. They mean well, to be sure, but it’s another example of the world’s inability to let Obama define his own faith. *Say what you want—we know what you REALLY believe.*

Where did the whole idea of “secret Islam” come from, anyway? The whole concept of holding a secret faith brings to mind the Marranos—Jews who pretended to convert to Christianity during the Inquisition, but continued to practice their true religion behind closed doors. The unintended implication of all those [slandorous e-mail forwards](#) is that America is in the midst of its own Inquisition; and the existence of Gitmo doesn’t exactly help matters.

Obama can prove once and for all that he's not a Muslim, secret or otherwise, by accepting the Hanuman statue. Opposition to idolatry is the bread and butter of Islam, after all. Of course, you can't expect the kind of person who would forward an e-mail declaring (for example) basic falsehoods about what book a member of the Senate took his oath on to understand the sin of *shirk*. But with accusations this ridiculous, perhaps there's only one logical response: take the monkey and run.

June 10, 2008 – Religion Dispatches:

BY [GABRIEL MCKEE](#) JUNE 10, 2009

PRAYING LIBERALLY LAUNCHES

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Last week the progressive umbrella group Living Liberally announced the formation of a new project called [Praying Liberally](#), the purpose of which is to host meetings where “faithfully-minded liberals could talk politics, say a collective prayer for ‘the least of these’ in our community, our country and our world, and build community to organize around our common causes.” Thankfully, the existence of a Christian left isn't news in itself anymore, but Praying Liberally emphasizes some key factors of the nature and organization of liberal religion today.

Living Liberally is a largely decentralized organization. Though it lends its name to 260 chapters nationwide, the actual agenda of each group is defined locally. It has national leadership, but strives to maintain a grassroots atmosphere. And that, in a nutshell, is the main difference between today's religious left and the early days of the religious right. The Christian Right was a patchwork of organizations with easily identifiable leaders, but it's hard to name any leaders of the emerging Christian left. (Barack Obama counts, I suppose—but Al Sharpton probably doesn't.) On one level, this is a good thing, and groups like Praying Liberally want to retain that kind of populist decentralization. But how sustainable is a movement with no recognizable voice at its front? Alternately, if memes are the 21st century's answer to television sermons, is the concept of leadership just a relic of the past?

July 18, 2008 – Religion Dispatches

BY [GABRIEL MCKEE](#)

BALDWIN BROTHER'S APOCALYPTIC COMIC

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Indie comic publisher BOOM! Studios has announced a new comic series conceived by actor-turned-evangelist Stephen Baldwin, [Comic List](#) reports.

BOOM!'s press release describes *The Remnant* as “A supernatural thriller in the vein of 24,” but the title suggests it'll be more of a *Left Behind* knock-off—indeed, it shares its Revelation-inspired title with the tenth book in the *Left Behind* series. Baldwin states of the series:

“I wanted to do a comic that asked the big questions but answered them in little ways... Philosophy and spirituality are complex beasts, but I believe literature’s purpose is to contextualize these tricky subjects into entertaining stories that speak, not preach, to the reader.”

That may prove a tough claim for Baldwin to live up to—the most complex thing about his preachy book *The Unusual Suspect* are his truly nonsensical extended metaphors. (The one about the football field, the pit bull, the steak, and the herd of cattle—that’s a doozy.)

BOOM! will be releasing a preview book at Comicon San Diego later this month. In the meantime, they’ve released the preview issue’s cover and a sample page, which suggests that the book will start involve with some heavy Katrinasploitation. Subtle tale about the “big questions,” or train wreck in the making? We’ll know for sure after Comicon.

July 24, 2008 – Religion Dispatches:

BY GABRIEL MCKEE JUNE 11, 2009

AMERICAN VIRGIN DOESN'T QUITE GET IT

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When it comes to satirical comics about religion, the menu is generally pretty limited. They tend to break down into two camps: comics in which Jesus has superpowers and fights demons (*Loaded Bible: Jesus Versus Vampires, Jesus Hates Zombies*) and comics in which the Pope (or some other major religious figure) has superpowers and fights demons (*Battle Pope*).

Virgin, written by Steven T. Seagle with art by Becky Cloonan, is the story of Adam Chamberlain, evangelical youth minister and author of the chastity memoir *Save Yourself to Save Yourself*. He’s a superstar on the Christian-speaker circuit, and his stepfather—a smarmy televangelist with some skeletons in his closet—is grooming Adam to succeed him as the head of “the Chalice Channel.” The other members of Adam’s family paint a dark picture of the private lives of outspoken moralists. His mother is power-hungry and domineering; his brother Kyle, also a youth minister, is a promiscuous pothead when he’s not preaching. Adam is a unique animal in the world of *American Virgin*—despite his fame and wealth, he remains humble and honest while all those around him descend into hypocrisy.

When we first meet Adam, he is in his element: speaking before a school group. He opens up his entire life to a roomful of strangers as he describes his eternal love for his fiancée, Cassandra: “God told me Cassie is the woman I am meant to be with, only her and no one else. Forever.” It’s a perfect send-up of speakers like Eric and Leslie Ludy, whose abstinence ministry revolves around their “God-written love story.” The Ludys urge teenagers to constantly consider the feelings of their future husbands and wives.

The main story of *American Virgin* kicks off with a cynical response to this idea when Cassie, who is working as a missionary in Africa, is murdered by terrorists. He begins to experience visions of Cassie, speaking from beyond the grave in a possibly-divine voice, and calling into question everything he's believed about his sexual destiny. Adam faces a worldview-shaking dilemma: what do you do when your divinely-ordained future spouse dies before you can get married? There are signs of a critique of the ultimately selfish nature of Adam's faith—when he first learns about Cassie's death, he demands: "Why would God let this happen to me? ...I mean her." That critique hovers in the background throughout the series, but it soon becomes clear that Seagle's real interests for the series lie elsewhere. The quest for answers about Cassie's death leads Adam on a world tour that explores ideas about sex in a plethora of other cultures. In the twenty-three issues of the series Adam visits no fewer than 10 countries—a big reason why *American Virgin* ultimately doesn't work.

The series sets up Adam's world briefly, in a sort of shorthand. We get intriguing glimpses, and we want to learn more about him, his followers, and his family. But the series' first international trip—Adam's trek to Mozambique to retrieve Cassie's body—feels like a detour. Adam periodically returns to America between trips, but the book can't seem to get him out of the Bible Belt fast enough. It soon becomes apparent that the book's goal isn't to satirize Adam's world, but to put him in different environments for fish-out-of-water stories—what happens when we put the youth minister in an Australian gay club? In Rio for Carnival? In Japan for Kanamara Matsuri, the Festival of the Steel Phallus? But doing so means taking the character out of the milieu in which he works best—and, worse, presenting whitewashed portraits of cultures whose sexuality isn't necessarily as healthy as Seagle would have us believe. *American Virgin* tries to give Adam a complex odyssey, a sort of sexual hero's journey. But the world they leave is far more bizarre and ultimately more interesting than anything that their author can throw at them. There's also an undercurrent of unintentional irony to Adam's quest after his visions tell him that Cassie wasn't really the woman he was supposed to be with for eternity. His quest for the real girl of his dreams—it's not exactly a spoiler to say that he finds her—ends up reinforcing Adam's moralistic concept of relationships.

These story problems are exacerbated by some character inconsistencies. It's difficult to buy Adam as a conservative Christian once we've seen him in bondage gear in issue #7. Like the evangelical world he comes from, Adam's own faith is drawn in shorthand. He begins questioning his beliefs as soon as the series begins, so that before too long the "conservative" label doesn't really stick. It's hard to tell if Seagle is trying to get us to question the assumptions we make about public and private faith or if he's just as unsure about who Adam is and what he believes as we are. It's not just the evangelical world or Adam's past that's described in shorthand; it's Adam himself. Issue #19, for example, provides some clues when we learn rather late in the game that Adam's theology isn't conservative at all. We learn that he's never believed in hell, and, more importantly, that he's "not sure" about Jesus (which I assume means that he doubts the Incarnation, though it's not entirely clear). These are pretty big bombshells, but they make us question whether or not we know Adam at all.

More importantly, it makes us question the extent to which the book's creators really understand evangelical Christianity. After all, the cornerstone of evangelical theology is a personal relationship with Jesus. There's another wrong-note moment in the following issue when Adam argues, in contradiction to Acts 15 (and everything after on the subject), that circumcision is a sign of a Christian covenant. And that t-shirt he wears throughout the series that reads "save yourself"—it might seem a clever means of underscoring the self-righteousness that lurks beneath Adam's message, but you'd be hard-pressed to find an evangelical speaker urging his audience to "save themselves." The entire evangelical concept of salvation relies on the absolute impossibility of saving oneself—that's God's job. The series has a number of clever takes on the surface of evangelical Christianity, but after a few of these wrong notes we begin to wonder how deeply Seagle looked into the culture he was lampooning. Is this picture of spirituality complex, or just confused?

Even so, *American Virgin's* cancellation after a mere 23 issues was a minor tragedy. The events of the final issue fly past—it seems likely they were intended to take up 5 issues instead of just one. It's a particular shame because it's in the pages of the final issue that Adam's religious experiences throughout the series come to a head. Cassie's spiritual appearances throughout the series give the story a nice air of mystery, but the high-point of Adam's visionary experiences occurs in a flashback to his baptism, where the voice of God called him to his abstinence mission. The final issue contains a mysterious theophany as Adam converses with the divine—first a disembodied voice, then a burning bush, and ultimately a serpent. There are some truly intriguing moments, but they don't have much room to breathe as the story rushes to its conclusion. Whatever problems the story may have had, Seagle still deserved a bit more room to finish it.

Ultimately, *American Virgin* is a missed opportunity. It never lives up to the promise of its opening pages, which hint at a thoughtful, complex critique of American religion that never really materializes. And a thoughtful, complex critique is exactly what is needed—the gun-toting messiahs and sneering preacher-villains that have become go-to clichés for comics that deal with religion are well-past their sell-by date.

American Virgin avoided those pitfalls and pratfalls, though it was still not the outstanding satirical comic it could have been, but is this near-success that renders the failure that much more frustrating.

October 17, 2008 – Religion Dispatches:

BY [GABRIEL MCKEE](#) OCTOBER 17, 2008

SATAN HAS A POSSE (OF BATS)

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Posters like this one recently began appearing around Manhattan:

Pray in mind a few minut a day

Go church

Mary Mary Mary beautiful gorgeous Mary

The Devil makes bats of 2 million people children every year. In America

You must keep the Ten Commandments

Listen Christ Radio 56 AM and Christ will protect yous

Religious crackpottery is hardly new to the subways and sidewalks of New York, of course. But is this the...

legitimate work of a lone anti-bat prophet? A few quick Google searches reveals that similar posters have appeared in Philadelphia:

...and Chicago:

Were the posters simple black-and-white photocopies, I would have no problem accepting them as legitimate paranoid ravings, proof that somebody out there really believes Satan kidnaps children and turns them into bats. But the combination of their wide geographic dispersal and the amount of care taken to make each poster unique makes me question their authenticity.

It seems more likely these are a new street art project—a spiritual heir of Andre the Giant's posse:

...and Neckface:

...infused with some of the satirical edge of Banksy:

Then again, it could just be a remarkably strange advertising campaign for Christian talk radio.

October 24, 2008 – Sojourners:

Why Does God Need a Starship?

by **Gabriel McKee** 10-24-2008

[Editor's Note: In *Sojourners'* newest issue there's an [interview with author Mary Doria Russell](#)—whose Jesuits-in-space books *The Sparrow* and *Children of God* are runaway favorites amongst the Sojourners editorial team—and some [capsule reviews of our favorite spiritually inflected science fiction](#)

[of the past decade](#), with [more blurbs online](#). But wait, there's more! To celebrate, we asked Gabriel McKee of the [SF Gospel blog](#) to put in his two cents.]

One of the biggest problems I encountered while writing *The Gospel According to Science Fiction* was *Star Trek V*. The film is the franchise's most explicit statement about religion, but it's also held in generally low regard—partly because of its finale, in which the Enterprise crew meets a being that claims to be God and wants to steal their spaceship. I knew I needed to say something about *Star Trek V*, but I didn't know what—its religious ideas seemed too shallow and unsubtle. Finally it hit me—in his confrontation with the malevolent God, Captain Kirk grills the deity, demanding to know: "What does God need with a starship?" That question sums up the entire attitude of science fiction toward religion: science fiction wants a God from whom we can demand answers.

Most SF about religion questions and reinterprets spiritual matters, seeking new interpretations of old ideas. The goal of the genre in general is to build the future, to envision possible worlds to help us deal with imminent changes in the real world. That often means leaving behind theories that no longer fit reality, and this puts the genre in opposition to traditionalism and fundamentalism: It's hard to imagine the religion of the future if you're bound to the past. There are some theologically conservative authors of SF—Orson Scott Card, for one—but even Card's orthodoxy is subordinate to his chosen genre's emphasis on making things new. In his non-fiction and op-ed pieces, he is a near-reactionary Mormon, but you'd never guess that from the liberal Catholic characters of *Speaker for the Dead*.

This doesn't mean, however, that SF is opposed to religion itself—just to religion's most closed-minded expressions. The exemplar of SF faith is Earthseed, the religion described in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*. According to Earthseed, "God is change"—and embracing that change is essential to a healthy spirituality. Earthseed develops in a postapocalyptic setting, a world where nothing is permanent. The second novel pits this flexible faith against a rigid, theocratic fascism, driving home the point that hidebound fundamentalism is unsustainable. The future needs a faith that is open to change.

That's also the message of Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow*. When this novel's Jesuit astronauts set out on a mission to an alien planet, they express an optimistic faith that God is guiding their expedition, that they will do well because "deus vult... God likes it that way." What does it mean, then, when the mission begins to go wrong? Emile Sandoz, the final surviving member of the party, is a tragic figure, but Russell gives his story a theologically satisfying conclusion. His experiences force him to be flexible in his beliefs, and by the story's end, his faith, which torments him for much of the novel, becomes an essential part of his healing. In Rose Marie Berger's interview with Russell in the November issue of *Sojourners* (which [you can read here](#)), the author reveals that *The Sparrow* was part of her decades-long journey from Catholicism through atheism to Judaism, and Sandoz's tortuous path shows evidence of all three. The novel was part of Russell's own interrogation of the divine, and the methods of SF — extrapolating from an idea and theorizing about where it might lead — led her to a faith that she describes as "Hardheaded. Pragmatic. Poetic. In that order!"

[For more of Gabriel McKee's takes on religion in science fiction -- and to share your favorites -- see the recent blog post [Spiritually Inflected Science Fiction](#), and scroll down to the reader participation section.]

Gabriel McKee writes the blog [SF Gospel](#), which explores religion in science fiction and popular culture, and is the author of [The Gospel according to Science Fiction: From the Twilight Zone to the Final Frontier](#)

(Westminster-John Knox) and [Pink Beams of Light from the God in the Gutter: The Science-Fictional Religion of Philip K. Dick](#) (University Press of America).

Categories: [Books](#), [Culture Watch](#), [Film](#)

November 4, 2008 – Religion Dispatches:

- [ESSAY](#)

◦ November 4, 2008

- Election Day: Hope, Heartbreak, Naiveté, and Studs Terkel

[Solicited comments on the 2008 election from RD's regular contributors. My entry:]

No Moral Surrender

The core of the Republican criticism of Obama comes down to one basic charge: all that talk about hope and change is naive. But increasingly it seems that the ire being stirred up isn't simply because Obama believes he can change things; it's because he wants to try in the first place. From McCain's attacks on Obama's willingness to use open diplomacy to the repeated mockery of community organizers at the Republican Convention, the Republican Party has framed itself as the enemy of making the world a better place. It's an idea with roots in the evangelical idea of original sin, encapsulated most bluntly by Sarah Palin's favorite Baldwin brother, Stephen: "If you got all six billion people on the planet together and went to work on all that plagues this earth, all of us collectively still couldn't do enough to fix it because this world and its problems are too big." Why fight poverty, when there will always be some economic unfairness? Why end one war, if there will simply be another?

This belief that because we can't solve everything we shouldn't really try to fix anything is an immense moral surrender, but it's been the core of evangelical support for the likes of George W. Bush.

I believe that America wants and needs better. I believe that Barack Obama's spirituality—one that privileges justice over personal gain, peace over binary conflict, building a better world over accepting a broken one—is a better option. And I believe that we will elect Barack Obama today because of that. If that kind of hope is naive, it can hardly be worse than the cynicism that's led us for the last few years.

December 3, 2008 – Religion Dispatches:

Ex-Scientologist Shot Dead in Church

By [Gabriel Mckee](#)

December 3, 2008

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Samurai sword-wielding Mario Majorski blamed his problems on the Church of Scientology—and he may have been right.





Asword-wielding chicken came home to roost at the Church of Scientology last week. Mario Majorski, a former Scientologist from Oregon, was killed by security guards when he entered the Church's [Celebrity Centre](#) in Hollywood wielding a pair of samurai swords.

Majorski had been a fervent enough member of the church to file a lawsuit on its behalf: in 1993 he sued UCLA and Louis J. West, a professor of psychiatry and an expert in brainwashing and mind control. Majorski's specific reasons for attacking the Celebrity Centre may never be known, but it's clear that he blamed the Church for his problems—and he may have been right.

The sad thing is that the attack isn't remotely surprising. The Church of Scientology isn't just attractive to mentally disturbed people; [it thrives on them](#). It makes no secret that it offers its courses and auditing sessions as a replacement for psychiatric care, and Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard saw psychiatrists as his arch-nemeses. Two of the Church's biggest recruitment programs, Narconon and Criminon, target drug addicts and criminals, discouraging them from seeking help for their problems outside the Church. Scientology needs mental illness to survive, but its techniques are controversial—and some, including Louis J. West, feel they do far more harm than good. The entire organization is a pressure cooker, and the real mystery isn't why Majorski's frustration with the Church turned into violence; it's why it doesn't happen more often.

Tags: [cults](#), [psychiatry](#), [scientology](#)

December 24, 2008 – Religion Dispatches:

Doubt v. Predator: A Vatican II Parable

By [Gabriel Mckee](#)

December 24, 2008

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The film adaptation of this Pulitzer Prize-winning play, set in the midst of Vatican II, pits the age-old male hierarchy against the secrecy of the recent molestation scandals. And the winner is...

Meryl Streep and Philip Seymour Hoffman in *Doubt*.



The Pulitzer Prize-winning play that the film *Doubt* is based on bears the subtitle “A Parable,” which begs the question: what’s it a parable *about*?

The priests and nuns of this tale are people, to be sure, but they’re also symbols, while the axis around which the story turns is ecclesiastical power. John Patrick Shanley’s first film since the Tom Hanks/Meg Ryan vehicle *Joe Versus the Volcano* addresses many of the American Catholic Church’s gravest concerns of the last 50 years; most obviously the abuse scandals, but also the shrinking priesthood, the changing role of women, the civil rights movement, and the cross-pollination of secular and religious cultures.

Set in a Bronx Catholic school in 1964 (taken from Shanley’s own childhood experience), the school’s principal, Sister Aloysius (Meryl Streep), is almost comically tyrannical. The parish priest, Father Flynn (Philip Seymour Hoffman), is unconventional, almost hip, peppering his sermons with jokes and hugging students. The setting is ripe for tension, though it doesn’t explode until Sister James (Amy Adams) notices Donald Miller (Joseph Foster), the school’s only black student, acting strangely after a private meeting with the priest.

After expressing her concerns to Sister Aloysius, the principal reaches a bleak conclusion about what has happened: Flynn gave the boy communion wine and then molested him. When the two nuns confront Flynn, he grudgingly offers a tight-lipped explanation: Donald was caught drinking communion wine, and Flynn, fearing that he might be removed from the altar boys or even expelled, hoped to keep the matter quiet. The boy had expressed interest in becoming a priest, and Flynn didn’t want the punishment to deter him from pursuing that goal. The message, or the mystery, is

clear: Sister Aloysius' prying may have deprived the Church a potential leader. But if she's right, if Father Flynn is a sexual predator, her ends—protecting other children from harm—justify her means.

On the surface *Doubt* is a torn-from-the-headlines story about the abuse scandals that have rocked the Church over the last decade. At its heart, however, Shanley's story is a parable of Vatican II. It's critical here to point out that *Doubt* is set in 1964, in the midst of the Second Vatican Council; in that context the story reflects the Church's growing pains. Sister Aloysius is the old church, authoritarian and inflexible. Father Flynn is the new order, the jocular, friendly face of a Church whose pastors no longer turn their backs to the congregation. All of this is humorously encapsulated in a scene in which Sister Aloysius counsels the novice Sister James to hang a picture of a pope on the blackboard so she can watch her class reflected in the glass. Sister James doesn't have a picture of Paul VI, or even John XXIII, so instead she puts up a picture of a dour Pius XII. Sister Aloysius draws her power—the eyes in the back of her head—from the pontiff of an earlier era, the last pope before Vatican II. The film excises an explicit reference to the Council made in the play, but it's still clear: *Doubt* paints a picture, from the cheap seats of the Bronx, of the Church in mid-transformation.

But things are even more complicated than that, as the story is also an elaborate critique of the way power is wielded in the Church—and the fact that Vatican II managed to change very little.

Sister Aloysius is paralyzed by her position, unable to do anything about Father Flynn directly because the Monsignor will protect him. In their final confrontation, Father Flynn reveals this reliance on male hierarchy as he admonishes her: “You have taken vows, obedience being one! You answer to us!” He then attempts to reposition himself between her and higher powers by evoking the language of the confessional, asking her to ponder her own sins rather than his. He tries to reclaim his place of masculine privilege over her, but within seconds she has done the same to him: she knows that every priest was once a nun's student, and speaks to him as she would a student who has been sent to her for discipline. But as tempting as it is to see this as an embodiment of the cliché about women holding the real power in the Church, the story, like the real world, doesn't bear this out. In the end Flynn suffers no consequences from Sister Aloysius's suspicions. The changes of Vatican II, embodied in Father Flynn's cheerful face, are simply whitewash. The real power structure—the hierarchy that continued to protect known predators for decades—is still in place. Sister Aloysius's power within her domain is absolute, but the borders of that domain are unchanging.

It's tempting to view this story as a mystery—did Father Flynn abuse his student, or didn't he?—but Shanley doesn't want us to walk away with an answer. Father Flynn's explanation is plausible enough, but his behavior is strange enough to hint that Sister Aloysius is right, and both characters are convincing. Ultimately, the truth is unknowable. The student is Schroedinger's cat, existing in two states simultaneously, both abuses and not abused depending on whose argument we're listening to at any given moment. In this regard, the movie contains some misleading additions to the play: things that Sister James describes after the fact in the stage play are presented in the moment in the film, leading the audience to think of them as evidence. But we shouldn't have any evidence; our judgment, insofar as it's possible to have one, needs to rest entirely on the ex post facto arguments of Father Flynn and Sister Aloysius. The event, or nonevent, must be a mystery of faith.

Which is where the title comes in. In his introduction to the play, Shanley describes the existential question that was the seed of the play:

Have you ever held a position in an argument past the point of comfort? Have you ever defended a way of life you were on the verge of exhausting? Have you ever given service to a creed you no longer utterly believed? Have you ever told a girl you loved her and felt the faint nausea of eroding conviction?

The central doubt in the story belongs to Sister Aloysius. She became a nun after her husband was killed in World War II, and it's clear that she saw in the Church the stability, the certainty, that his death took from her. After years in her order she's beginning to see the cracks in the foundation. She's irritated by the lack of discipline reflected in Father Flynn (and with him the post-Vatican II church), but she's even more frustrated by the conclusions she's reached about her place in the hierarchy. She needs the structure, but it's turning against her. The character is exceedingly complex, at once despotic and sympathetic, and from her troubled mind Shanley draws forth a powerful critique of the 20th-century Catholic Church's stagnation.

Tags: [catholic](#), [child abuse](#), [corruption](#), [doubt](#), [education](#), [film](#), [gabriel mckee](#), [male chauvinism](#), [play](#), [pop culture](#), [priesthood](#), [sexual abuse scandal](#), [vatican](#)

February 2009 – Internet Review of Science Fiction:

February, 2009 : Review:

Wrong on Religion; Wrong on Science Fiction *A review of James A. Herrick's Scientific Mythologies*

by [Gabriel Mckee](#)

Scientific Mythologies: How Science and Science Fiction Forge New Religious Beliefs

by James A. Herrick

(Downer's Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2008)

978-0830825882

James A. Herrick is almost my evil twin. The subtitle of his book, *Scientific Mythologies*, is "How science and science fiction forge new religious beliefs," and on the bare facts of that matter we agree—right down to the use of the word "forge". (My original subtitle for *The Gospel According to Science Fiction* was "forging the faith of the future," which didn't make it to the finished book but is still on the back cover copy.) Like Herrick, I see SF as a place for new religious ideas, but unlike him, I think that's a good thing. *Scientific Mythologies* is an extended polemic against SF and speculative science, which Herrick, a conservative Christian, accuses of seeking to establish "a second pagan era".

Herrick structures his book into descriptions of seven "myths" that he believes are drawing modern culture away from its Christian roots: the Myth of the Extraterrestrial, the Myth of

Space, the Myth of the New Humanity, the Myth of the Future, the Myth of the Spiritual Race, the Myth of Space Religion, and the Myth of Alien Gnosis. The boundaries and arrangement of these myths are unclear—I'm unsure why the "new humanity" and the "spiritual race" weren't treated in a single chapter, or at least grouped together—as is Herrick's definition of the term "myth". In particular, he seems to think that Christianity—presented as monolithic, unchanging, and, above all, "traditional"—doesn't have a mythology of its own. Given the compelling nature of the Christian narrative, this is a big mistake—he sells the faith short on one of its biggest strengths, just so he can cash in on the pejorative sense of the word "myth".

Come to think of it, his definition of "Christianity" comes across as a bit shaky, too. It's clear early on that his faith is conservative, but there's no explicit doctrinal disclosure, which renders his blanket statements about "the Judeo-Christian perspective" and "traditional monotheistic religious perspectives" frustratingly vague. Further complicating matters is his citation of some Christian writers, like Russian Orthodox theologian Seraphim Rose, who flatly contradict his own view. Herrick mentions these writers' ideas, but doesn't make any account for how these contradictory ideas fit into "the Judeo-Christian perspective". We're left with the impression that Herrick doesn't think those who disagree with him are really Christian. He may, in fact, believe this, but if he does, it's truly unfortunate.

Similarly frustrating is his discussion of "the Myth of Alien Gnosis", in which he excoriates the idea that there exists salvific knowledge—"the account of what *really* happened, where we *really* exist, who we *really* are"—immediately after describing the core of Christian faith as a divine narrative that does precisely those things. Herrick fails utterly to draw a clear distinction between salvific knowledge and salvific faith. The issue of gnosticism (with either a big or small "g") is an academically thorny one, and Herrick's discussion needs a much more extensive treatment than he gives us. Many of the ideas he presents in his discussion of "alien gnosis" have precedents in Christian neoplatonism and even in the New Testament itself (i.e. the prologue of John and some of Paul's letters), but Herrick insists on treating them as if they are purely pagan—another thorny term. This is most frustrating to me, personally, in his discussion of Philip K. Dick. In addition to getting facts wrong—for instance, Dick never claimed that his 8,000-page Exegesis was "dictated" to him—Herrick focuses exclusively on Dick's references to the gnostic Nag Hammadi library, ignoring his much more extensive uses of—dare I say it?—"traditional" Christian sources. (1) The real problem, of course, is Herrick's desire to cover up or ignore the extensive interplay between historical Christianity and some of those nasty "pagan" myths that he accuses SF of resurrecting. The lines are blurry, and he refuses to unblur them, leaving us with the idea that the main distinction between Christian and gnostic systems is that Christianity presents a "simpler and infinitely more reassuring situation." Is this really what he wants to argue—that Christianity is better just because it is simpler?

Herrick also turns a blind eye to aspects of modern Christianity that fall within the scope of his criticism. For instance, when discussing the desire, on the part of some believers, for science that bolsters religious claims, he complains that "the line between religious narrative and fantastic scientific agenda has blurred." But his example is an obfuscating one: he recounts a secondhand anecdote about Hindu scientists seeking to confirm aspects of the Ramayana, ignoring the much more obvious double-headed beast of creation science and intelligent design. There are a much greater number of better-documented Christian attempts at religion-based science, and one wonders why Herrick chooses so distant an example. This isn't the only such instance: the book begs an awful lot of questions, and promptly ignores them. Herrick is obsessed with the lack of proof for alien intelligence, but when the question of his own religion's historicity comes up he hurries the matter along, betraying his (willful?) ignorance of Biblical scholarship and criticism.

It's clear from the beginning that Herrick doesn't like science fiction, and that's perfectly acceptable. But what soon becomes clear is that he doesn't respect it either. *Scientific Mythologies* is filled with errors both large and small. For instance, it's riddled with spelling errors: the villains of *Battlestar Galactica* are "Cyclons"; the director of *2001* is "Stanley Kubric"; the star of *Contact* is "Jodi Foster". There are also a number of factual errors regarding the release dates of novels and films. If Herrick can't be bothered to spell "Kubrick" correctly, what does that say for the attention he gives to the actual content of the works he's discussing? Not much, as we see in his discussion of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. His interpretation of the final scenes is somewhat odd:

Moreover, these aliens actually vaguely resemble some, though certainly not all, of the members of the gathered and adoring humans. Spielberg's camera lingers on an alien face, and we notice its childlike high forehead, large eyes and small chin. The director's camera now focuses on particular human faces in the crowd. Again we are struck by the large eyes, the high foreheads and the receding chins of these special humans.



Now, I may be mistaken here, but I've seen *Close Encounters* many, many times, and I never thought that Spielberg was trying to compare Richard Dreyfuss to the briefly-glimpsed grotesque alien in the film's final scene. (If he is, maybe the similar reaction shots in *Jurassic Park* are intended to suggest that Sam Neill is destined to become a triceratops.) Similarly, he misrepresents the history of *Battlestar Galactica*: his statement that "the television series, written by veteran television writer and producer Glen Larson, a devout Mormon, began in 1978 and continues in movies, books, video games and on television" is somewhat true, if you ignore the fact

that there was a 24-year gap in which there was no *Galactica* whatsoever...and that the revival's producers claim total ignorance of the influence of Mormonism on the original series.

Elsewhere, Herrick makes a bald statement that H.P. Lovecraft's influence on Arthur C. Clarke is "especially evident," something that might come as a surprise to a number of Lovecraft and Clarke scholars. Herrick seems unaware of the existence of serious SF scholarship, and his lack of knowledge about the genre and existing critical work about it casts the entire book in doubt.

Those are hardly the only errors. James McGrath's [lengthy review](#) points out a misquote from H.G. Wells that comes as a result of Herrick's reliance on secondary sources for easily-obtainable primary quotes. A more bizarre example is Herrick's apparent reliance on an unpublished paper for all of his information on The Bahá'í faith. Herrick's entire attitude toward quotation and citation is sloppy: whenever he is summarizing a story or an idea, he peppers the paragraph with essentially random, fragmentary quotations until it becomes difficult to discern which ideas originate in the source and which he has added. The book's generally sloppy proofreading adds to the problem: some quotes open but never close. This kind of thing betrays a basic disrespect for everyone involved: SF authors, SF readers, even *Herrick's* readers. When he's paying so little attention to the SF that is the *raison d'être* of his book, it leads the reader to wonder if he's being just as sloppy when he discusses theology.

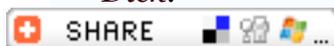
It's not just inattention to detail: Herrick doesn't seem to know much about SF at all. Virtually all of the books he discusses were published before 1960, with a disproportionate amount of pre-Golden Age stories. One assumes Herrick means to be looking to SF's origins, but many of the stories he cites simply weren't very influential—if they were, the Golden Age might have come a few decades sooner. By ignoring written SF from the last half-century, Herrick ignores a number of (quite radical) changes the genre has undergone in that time. Herrick does

discuss more recent films, but with a couple of exceptions—*Destination Moon*, *The Thing From Another World*—there is very little on pre-*Star Wars* SF film. Herrick's spotty choice of sources suggests a belief that filmic SF has completely supplanted written SF—which is a case that might be made, but Herrick doesn't even bring the subject up.

Even worse, this scattershot treatment leads to some major misrepresentations of the genre. In his section on "the Myth of the New Humanity", Herrick discusses eugenics, genetic modification, the Singularity, and posthumanity. Throughout the discussion, he presents SF as uniformly "suggesting that an improved human is either desirable or inevitable," and failing to examine the ethics of technology. He completely ignores the fact that much, if not most, SF about these matters is entirely driven by ethical questions. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is the mold for a plethora of SF about the abuse of scientific knowledge, but Herrick's few brief mentions of that (*extremely* influential) novel suggest a misreading of the creation of the monster as a *good* thing. The need for a guiding ethic for technological advancement is a major concern of SF, but Herrick ignores it, opting instead to focus on the less-critical attitude of Golden Age works like Philip Wylie's *Gladiator*. Given this kind of selective discussion, the entire book is basically an extended straw man argument.

To briefly descend into *ad hominem* territory, it's worth noting that Herrick's previous work includes books entitled *The History and Theory of Rhetoric, Argumentation: Understanding and Shaping Arguments*, and *Critical Thinking*. In that context, *Scientific Mythologies* is a superbly ironic failure: poorly written, poorly argued, and poorly thought-out.

1. That's my own axe to grind, of course, and grind it I do in my book *Pink Beams of Light From the God in the Gutter: The Science-Fictional Religion of Philip K. Dick*.



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March 2, 2009 – Say It Backwards:

[[Post not available in the Wayback Machine.]]

Superman disguises himself as Clark Kent. Right? It says it right there in the opening of the George Reeves TV series. "Disguised as Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter for a great Metropolitan newspaper." Kent is the mask, and Superman is the identity.

Or is he?

With Batman, this is certainly the case. Bruce Wayne is an elaborate

charade designed to disguise Batman-- the creature born out of a child's anger over his dead parents. Grant Morrison, for one, subscribes to this view, which is why his JLA run virtually never shows Batman out of costume. "Costume" isn't even an appropriate term in this case-- it's Wayne who is the costume; Batman is Batman 24 hours a day, regardless of what he's wearing.

Things aren't like that with Superman. He has incredible powers, but at heart he's a Kansas farmboy. Lois Lane, who knows him best, still calls him "Smallville." That's who he really is: a shy, nice guy-- you could even say "mild-mannered"-- who still calls his mother on the phone every night (when he's not flying back home to help her make dinner). We see this most clearly in the relationship between Clark and Lois in the first two Superman movies. Lois falls for Superman instantly, but he doesn't immediately reciprocate, even though we know he's interested. No, before he lets her into his heart she needs to accept not Superman, but Clark. Superman is a tough facade protecting the fragile kid from Kansas, a guy who's never been able to fit in.

In Superman's brief appearances in Alan Moore's Swamp Thing, it's this not-fitting-in that's emphasized. Superman is a lonely god, unable to connect with the inhabitants of the planet he protects because he is too far above them. He can count the atoms in our atmosphere-- we can never understand a being that possesses that kind of power, and he can never be one of us. It's an intriguing interpretation of the character, and it's probably one of my favorite bits from his entire run on Swamp Thing-- but it's wrong. Superman's abilities do set him apart from humanity, but that hasn't made him into the distant alien that Moore presents. Instead, Clark makes active attempts to make himself more human, kind of like Data on Star Trek: The Next Generation. And, like Data, it's the quest that completes his humanity. Clark Kent is set apart from humanity, but that results not in distance but emotional vulnerability-- which is his most human characteristic.

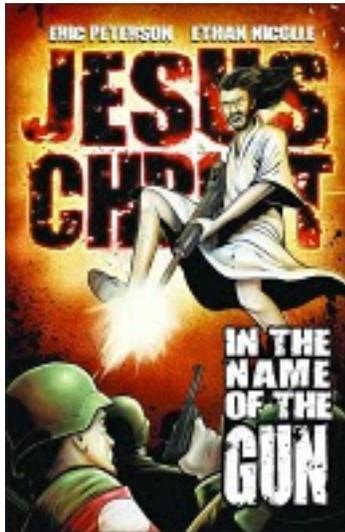
I can't talk about Superman without talking about incarnational theology-- that's just the kind of geek I am. Alan Moore's idea of Superman is a gnostic one. In gnostic Christian writings, Jesus is all God, and not human at all, to the extent that he doesn't even have a physical body. He is so far above us that he is purely spiritual, without any physical aspect. The strains of Christianity that became dominant argued against these gnostic ideas by emphasizing that Jesus was "wholly God and wholly man," that his divine aspect does not eclipse his humanity. Jesus may have had amazing abilities, but at heart he was just a kid from a small town who loved his mom. Just like Clark Kent.

April 6, 2009 – Holy Heroes

Spiritual Solicitations Backlog Explosion!

I've been tearing pages out of Previews of things I've wanted to post here for four months or so now, but Assorted Factors have kept me from posting them until now. Some of these have been out for weeks or even months now; some won't be out until May. So now, in the order they are piled up on my desk (which is no order at all), here 's another batch of Spiritual Solicitations!

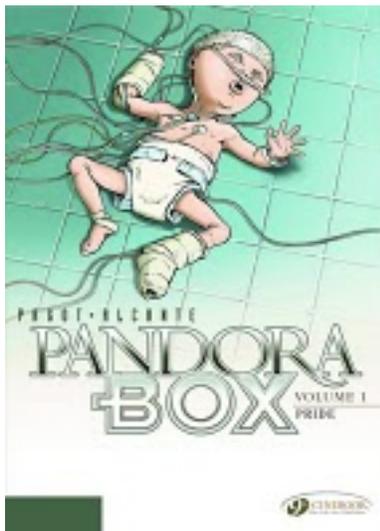
Solicitation links courtesy of Comixology, from whom Diamond could learn a thing or two about presentation!



[Jesus Christ: In the Name of the Gun](#)

Bad Karma Productions
Written by Eric Peterson and Ethan Nicolle, art by Ethan Nicolle

Jesus Hates Zombies. Loaded Bible: Jesus vs. Vampires. Jesus Christ: Vampire Hunter. And now, Jesus Christ: In the Name of the Gun. One wonders if the creators of edgy, irreverent comics about a butt-kicking Jesus know about the Christian men's movement, which is basically this minus the "edgy" and "irreverent"? In any event, I blame Garth Ennis. (Garth Ennis has been responsible for a lot of unfortunate things lately...)

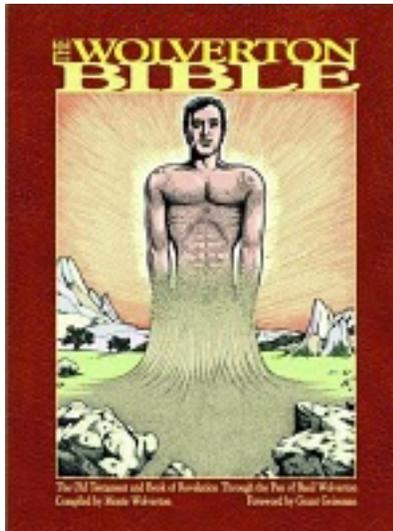


[Pandora Box Vol. 1: Pride](#)

Cinebook

Written by Alcante, art by Didier Pagot

This is the first volume in a seven-part series about Greek mythology and the seven deadly sins; the "Pride" volume involves mysterious conspiracies, cloning, and the dangers of hubristic technology. I'm intrigued-- but not twelve bucks worth of intrigued, alas.



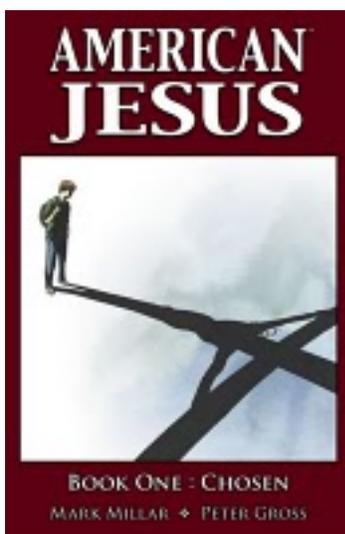
[The Wolverton Bible](#)

Fantagraphics Books

Art by Basil Wolverton; Introduction by Grant Geissman

Now *this* is exciting. Basil Wolverton, the delightfully deranged mind behind some of the strangest SF comics of the Golden Age and the most grotesque material from the early *Mad Magazine*, "was also a deeply religious man who over two decades created over 550 drawings illustrating the Old Testament." *Awesome*. But the real prize here may be 20 images illustrating the Book of Revelation, which must look pretty darned interesting through Wolverton's eyes. (But minus 10 points from Fantagraphics for calling it "Revelations" in their catalog copy!) I never would have guessed Wolverton was a closet Doré, but as someone who's a fan of the weird, the religious, and the weird religious, it's more than welcome news.

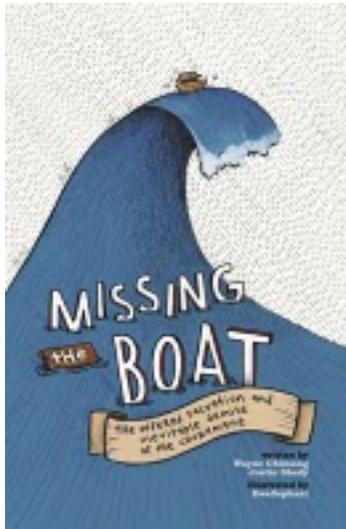
Fantagraphics has made the book's introduction available online; you can read it [here](#).



[American Jesus Vol. 1: Chosen](#)

Dark Horse Comics
Written by Mark Millar, art by Peter Gross

This is a collection of Millar's 2004 miniseries *Chosen*, which presents the story of a young messiah as a sort of origin story for a teen superhero. The book was an enormous missed opportunity-- but I can't say why without spoiling the ending. (I *will* say that "spoil" is an appropriate term when describing this story: the ending completely spoils what should have been a great story. It's still worth reading, but I can only really endorse the first two-thirds.) I've been hoping to write something about it here to expand on what I wrote in [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#), and now it looks like I may have good reason to-- that "Volume One" in the title makes it virtually certain that Millar will be returning to the young savior soon. I'll hold off saying more for now, but I will have more to say on this soon.



[Missing the Boat](#)

Image Comics/Shadowline
Written by Wayne Chinsant and Justin Shady, art by Dwellephant

The subtitle of this cute-looking tale is "The Offered Salvation and Inevitable Demise of the Churamane." The Churamane are a lazy species of animal that are invited aboard Noah's Ark, but arrive too late and are doomed to extinction in the Flood. Sounds fun, right?

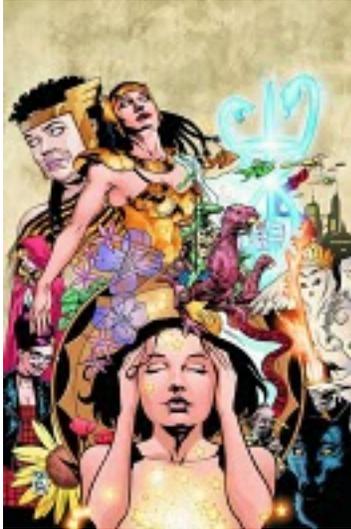


[Rapture #1](#)

Dark Horse Comics

Written by Michael Avon Oeming and Taki Soma; art by Michael Avon Oeming

The Rapture is about as overused an idea as butt-kicking Jesus (see above). But I really, really like this take: this series, helmed by Powers artist and all-around cool guy Oeming, takes place in a superhero world from which all the superheroes and villains have vanished. After a century of good and evil battling it out in public, just-plain-folks are left to sort out their confusing world. What happens when the gods no longer walk the earth? Yeah, I'll be reading this one.



[Absolute Promethea vol. 1](#)

Wildstorm

Written by Alan Moore, art by J.H. Williams III and Mick Gray

Promethea is a darned good series. Not only is it Alan Moore's ultimate statement on magic, religion, art, and the nature of reality, it also features some of the best art ever to sport word balloons. (Have I mentioned lately that I own the original art for the [Moebius strip page](#) from #15? Sorry-- I periodically need to brag about that.) So I'm pretty excited about the prospect of this series getting the oversized, super-deluxe Absolute treatment. What I'm not pleased about is doing it in three volumes instead of two-- compare this volume (twelve issues and 328 pages) to the first volume of Absolute Sandman (20 issues and 612 pages)-- both with the same \$99 price tag. I'd hope for a slightly higher page count-- but it's hard to complain too much, given how great *Promethea* is going to look in this format. [See also: [Absolute Death](#). Which sounds like a metal compilation, doesn't it?]

I DID IT **HIS** way

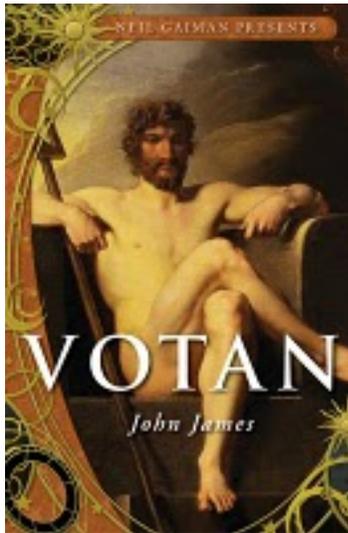


A collection of **B.C.** Religious comic strips
by Johnny Hart

[I Did It His Way: Classic B.C. Religious Strips](#)

Thomas Nelson Books
by Johnny Hart

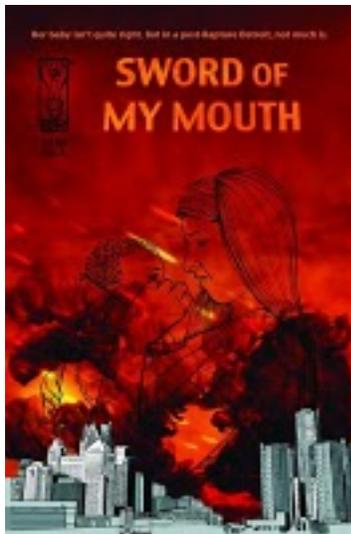
How can I put this diplomatically? I've always... been a non-fan... of Johnny Hart's religious strips. (And his non-religious ones, for that matter.) I'm tempted to read this book, if only to try to decide once and for all if their worst crime is being simplistic, offensive, or just plain unfunny.



[Neil Gaiman Presents: Votan](#)

Dark Horse Comics
by John James

Not-actually-comics alert! The "Neil Gaiman Presents" series is "devoted to returning to print long-unavailable works... chosen by Gaiman to represent the origins of his views on classic heroic literature." This one sounds like a pretty good satire; it's the story of a traveling Greek nobleman who is mistaken for a Norse god, and decides to play along.



[Sword of My Mouth #1](#)

IDW

Written by Jim Munroe, art by Shannon Gerard

Like Oeming's *The Rapture* above, this might be another exception to the general overdone-ness of the (did I mention it's not scriptural, but was invented in the 19th century?) Rapture as a plot device. It's a sequel to Munroe's acclaimed-and-I-haven't-read-it-yet-but-I-want-to story from last year, *Therefore, Repent!* I've made an interlibrary loan request for the beginning of the story; if it's good I will definitely be checking out this sequel.

Posted by Gabriel Mckee at [5:53 PM](#)

May 6, 2009 – Read the Spirit (interview):

May 06, 2009

424 Star Trek as the original "Nones"? Conversation with sci fi's Gabriel Mckee

Here's a provocative idea: What if the heroes of "Star Trek," starting way back in the 1960s were the original "Nones"?

What are "Nones"? Well, [jump back and read our report on "10 Secrets"](#) of the massive new Pew study on religious life in America. The main headline of the Pew report is confirmation that the fastest growing population in America is made up of men and women who answer a question about their religious affiliation with—"None." If you're a person of deep faith, don't worry. The vast majority of Americans still salute the traditional religious affiliations and church attendance is not slipping. In fact, Americans are overwhelmingly spiritual. Go back and read our overview of the data.

BUT tens of millions of Americans—a significant minority—don't feel any anxiety anymore about saying they don't adhere to a specific religious group at the moment. In fact, millions of people are willing to take their own spiritual quest in their hands

without giving it any kind of specific name, these days.

This week, we're helping you prepare for the newest "Star Trek" movie this weekend—an "origins" story that could restart the entire franchise. Along the way, this insight about "Nones" popped to the surface in a Conversation With Gabriel Mckee, author of, "The Gospel According to Science Fiction: From the Twilight Zone to the Final Frontier."

You can buy a copy of his book via the Amazon link with our story today. [You also can visit his Web site](#) to read more of his own wide-ranging analysis of sci-fi-spiritual connections.

So far, Gabriel's own writing is not specifically connecting the Star Trek influence with today's millions of "Nones"—but the idea makes a lot of sense and [we welcome all of our readers to tell us what they think about it.](#)

The idea isn't crazy. For example, social historians argue that the influence of Davy Crockett in the mid 1950s shaped the back-to-nature movement of Baby Boomers in the late 1960s and early 1970s. For a while, young men and women even dressed a bit like Davy.

Why not a similar influence from Star Trek?

Gabriel does argue that there is a distinctively brave and optimistic core that runs throughout the Star Trek franchise, guided by Gene Roddenberry ([jump back and read Monday's story that includes a fascinating statement by Roddenberry](#)). Star Trek's fearless pursuit of the basic meaning of life—and the show's many optimistic answers—are a basic part of its enduring charm with viewers. This upbeat theme ran on for so long, in fact, that Gabriel says it actually sparked a backlash. The show's hopeful optimism fueled the frightening and pessimistic responses of later TV series like the recent [Battlestar Galactica](#), Gabriel argues.

Maybe in the end, Gene Roddenberry influenced millions with his distinctive style of optimism as well. He was famously an agnostic and a philosophical seeker of human values.

"Gene Roddenberry had the central vision for the show," Gabriel said in a telephone conversation this week. "There aren't many shows on TV where you can talk about a creator with a single vision guiding it. A lot of shows are thrown together by a bunch of executives. But with Star Trek there was Roddenberry and he was ultimately in charge of everything. The show was one man's vision of what the future should be."

What does that future look like? "The Gene Roddenberry vision is a utopian vision," Gabriel said. "It's a very positive, optimistic view of the future. Battlestar Galactica is the flip side of that vision where terrible things happen to the characters in that series."

Is "agnostic" the right way to describe Roddenberry? Gabriel thinks so.

"There are a lot of layers to that question," he said. "You'll often hear people say that Gene Roddenberry was an atheist. Any time that a god appears in Star Trek it's usually a bad god or a fake god. But the answer is more complicated than that. He really was an agnostic. I think it's rewriting history to say he was an atheist.

"In fact, what he said in interviews was more like, 'I believe God is in humankind.' That's a far cry from saying, 'I don't think God exists.'

"And if you understand that about his approach to the question of God, then you can see that he really was interested in something much more complicated."

What Gabriel is saying makes a lot of sense to me and it helps to explain why the series has remained popular for so many years. The two sophisticated themes Star Trek keeps exploring in relation to God are: opposing idolatry and supporting the principle that humans should be able to vigorously question God.

"I think this is best symbolized by the film Star Trek V: The Final Frontier, which is the one where they actually wind up going to look for a planet where there is a creature that calls itself God," Gabriel said. "Then, they find that this thing that claims to be God is evil and it demands the Enterprise be given to him as his chariot."

In Gabriel's book you can read a section of dialogue between Kirk and "God" from the film. Here are a few lines:

***KIRK:** Excuse me; I'd just like to ask a question. What does God need with a starship?*

***"GOD":** Bring the ship closer.*

***KIRK:** I said, what does God need with a starship?*

***"GOD":** Who is this creature?*

***KIRK:** Who am I? Don't know you? Aren't you God?*

As it turns out, Kirk's brave questioning leads to the smashing of this idol—a pretender to divinity. Even beyond this particular run-in with a fake god, Gabriel writes in his book that, throughout the series, "Kirk wishes to speak with God as Abraham did when he bargained for the lives of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18:23-25 ... Star Trek V argues for a God that can be challenge and questioned."

In our conversation this week, Gabriel expanded on the point and said, "We're talking about the ability of humans to skeptically interact with God, to confront God, to demand the right to be heard—regardless of how incomprehensible the answer might be."

In the end, "that's the kind of thing Star Trek wants to do. It's unafraid to pose a challenge."

Is this sounding a lot like the Godfather of the Nones?

"Star Trek wants us to claim the right to challenge God—and all the extremely powerful entities in the universe, including those that claim to be gods," Gabriel said.

"We are called to fearlessly face the great powers whether they are alien—or otherwise."

PLEASE TELL US WHAT YOU THINK:

[This is a good time to sign up for our Monday-morning ReadTheSpirit Planner by Email](#)—it's free and you can cancel it any time you'd like to do so. The Planner goes out each week to readers who want more of an "inside track" on what we're seeing on the horizon, plus it's got a popular "holidays" section.

Not only do we welcome your notes—but our readers enjoy them as well. You can do this anytime by clicking on the "Comment" links at the end of each story. You also can [Email ReadTheSpirit Editor David Crumm](#). We're also reachable on Twitter, Facebook, Amazon, YouTube and other social-networking sites as well.

(Originally published at <http://www.ReadTheSpirit.com/>)

Posted at 12:11 AM in [Film](#), [Science](#), [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

June 7, 2009 – Religion Dispatches:

Evangelical Stephen Baldwin's *Imitatio Christi* & “Reality” TV

By [Gabriel Mckee](#)

June 7, 2009

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The initial rush of schadenfreude is gradually replaced with a genuine affection for the “good guys,” and righteous frustration at the machinations of the villains.

It's so bad. I can't wait for the next episode.



Over the last year or two, I've become an unironic, unapologetic fan of reality TV. I know the criticisms—they dumb us down, they elevate public humiliation—but what I'm really interested in is the way shows like Spike's *Joe Schmo Show* or VH1's *I Love Money* turn into morality plays about the value of friendship and loyalty. In the best reality shows, the initial rush of *schadenfreude* is gradually replaced with a genuine affection for the "good guys," and righteous frustration at the machinations of the villains.

I'm also fascinated by the villainous machinations of [Stephen Baldwin](#), the D-list actor turned A-list skateboarding evangelist who covers a very old brand of conservatism beneath a veneer of "radicalism" that is less than skin-deep—indeed, the only thing "radical" about it is that that skin is tattooed, and occasionally utters such beyond-the-pale words as "crap." So when I learned that Baldwin would be a contestant on NBC's jungle-themed reality show *I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here!*, that initial rush of *schadenfreude* hit me bigtime. (As with most reality shows with "Celebrity" in the title, it's a bit misnamed, but it wouldn't bring in as many viewers if they called it *I'm Marginally Famous... Get Me Out of Here!*) The man who embodies the polar opposite of my own approach to religion, trapped in the jungle for three weeks with the likes of Janice Dickinson and Sanjaya? And it's live, four nights a week? Sign me up.

Baldwin is no stranger to reality TV; he's previously appeared on everything from *Celebrity Apprentice* to *Ty Murray's Celebrity Bull Riding Challenge*. But *I'm a Celebrity* has given him an unprecedented opportunity to bring his current evangelical career to the forefront. The reality shows on which he appears generally downplay his high degree of visibility as a professional Christian in

favor of his past acting career, which includes appearances in *The Usual Suspects* and *Bio-Dome*. But on *I'm a Celebrity*, he's had ample opportunity to evangelize, mostly thanks to the unlikely spirituality of *Hills* stars Spencer and Heidi Pratt (collectively known as "Speidi").

Spencer, who has made clear his intentions to be the show's villain, is a recent convert to a very Hollywood sort of Christianity. Spencer sums it up best by recounting his first prayer: "God, please, the one person I want to go on a double date with is Miley Cyrus. If you're so powerful, make me hang out with Miley Cyrus.' He did it within a month." Mysterious ways, indeed. When Baldwin learns that Spencer has not yet been baptized, he launches into a sermon that shows (or has been edited to show) some dubious scriptural knowledge: "John 3:16: What does Christ say to Nicodemus? You must be born again." Heidi helpfully adds: "Jesus was baptized!"

Baldwin invites Spencer into his form of faith—"Non-denominational, born again Christian, spirit-filled, charismatic"—and Spencer, no doubt misunderstanding the specifically religious meaning of "charismatic," replies: "This is so me in, like, two years." Before long Baldwin is baptizing his protégé in the river near their camp. Janice Dickinson is an unlikely voice of wisdom: "You're hurting the religion. Stephen is not an ordained minister... I think he's a joke." Spencer claims to be a new man after his baptism, but his attitude—which had previously included such statements as "I could care less about anybody at that camp eating tonight"—seems unchanged. The Pratts quit the show immediately after the baptism, but by the following episode were begging to be allowed back on; their fate will be determined on Monday's episode.

Baldwin, however, is in for the long haul, and his faith is likely to remain visible. It comes out in his apparently honest concern for the well-being of his fellow contestants, but even that can quickly turn from friendly neighbor-loving to paternalistic smothering. Witness his advice to a fellow contestant making her way over some slippery rocks: "The more you worry about falling, the more you gonna fall. So what you do is just walk." The concern seems genuine, but that is without a doubt the worst hiking advice I've ever heard. Perhaps more telling is his homophobic discomfort at Sanjaya's offer to give Lou Diamond Phillips a foot massage; one wonders what he thinks of foot-washing.

On a deeper level, his performance on the show has involved a lot of physical suffering—he burned his hand on a pot sitting near the campfire, and has twice been bitten by bullet ants, so named because their bite is as painful as a gunshot wound. Are these unfortunate accidents, or is he deliberately seeking out public suffering as a vain form of *imitatio Christi*?

Like most prime-time network reality shows, *I'm a Celebrity* is obsessed with deliberate humiliation, primarily in the form of insect-eating (something its cable counterparts, which I prefer, tend to avoid). Are the bizarre self-abasements of shows like this some kind of public expiatory suffering? Does it heal the body politic to see Patti Blagojevich—without a doubt the strangest name on the show's roster—trapped in a tank filled with snakes? It may be too early for that kind of deeper-meaning analysis—for now, let's all just sit back and enjoy the *schadenfreude* stage. I wonder what exotic jungle creature will bite Stephen Baldwin next?

I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here! airs Monday through Thursday on NBC, and is also available on [Hulu](#).

Tags: [reality tv](#), [stephen baldwin](#), [tv](#)

August 26, 2009 – Religion Dispatches:

BY GABRIEL MCKEE AUGUST 26, 2009

DEFYING GRAVITY DEFIES SCI-FI CONVENTIONS

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In a 1972 speech, science fiction author Philip K. Dick expressed his concern over the increasing dehumanization that 20th century culture forced upon its inhabitants. He feared that, just as we were beginning to reach toward the stars, we were becoming emotional androids. “Our flight must be not only to the stars but into the nature of our own beings,” Dick wrote. “Because it is not merely *where* we go, to Alpha Centauri or Betelgeuse, but what we are as we make our pilgrimages there. Our natures will be going there, too. *Ad astra*— but *per hominem*.”

That, in a sense, is the fundamental concern of ABC’s hard-SF soap opera *Defying Gravity*. The show follows the crew of the spacecraft *Antares* on a mission to Venus, intercut with flashbacks to their training a few years earlier. Set in 2052, it’s a pretty daring form of hard science fiction that’s a far cry from the fun-but-implausible space opera that most television viewers think of when they hear “science fiction.” There are no phasers, warp drives, or stargates here— just chemical rockets, spacesuits, and lots of calls back to Houston. There’s even a (only slightly unsatisfying) explanation for why everybody sticks to the floor instead of floating around the ship. Any show that takes itself — and the “science” half of SF — so seriously is faced with an uphill battle.

The show is the brainchild of *Grey’s Anatomy* writer James Parriott, and its focus is precisely on how our very human natures play out against the backdrop of interplanetary space— but not necessarily the noble, compassionate elements that Dick had in mind. This is very much a primetime soap opera. The show’s [Wikipedia page](#) puts it best: “romantic entanglement will occur.” Come for the spacefaring science, stay for the melodrama. (Or is it the other way around?)

But *Defying Gravity* isn’t just concerned with the characters’ “entanglements.” As in the work of Philip K. Dick, our earthborn religion is a concern as well, particularly in the pilot episode ([available on Hulu](#) through September 7th). As the show begins, astronaut Maddux Donner (Ron Livingston, a.k.a. the guy from *Office Space*) laments the fact that he has not been chosen to serve on the *Antares*. Despite being one of the best astronauts there is, he’s chosen as an “alternate,” in no small part because of his involvement in a crisis during a previous mission on Mars that left two of his crewmates dead. He feels that space is where he’s meant to be, and it’s denied him. He discusses this in a conversation with another alternate, Ted Shaw (Malik Yoba), who was “raised Buddhist.” The two attempt to bolster their ambivalent existentialist arguments, concluding that the concept of fate as “total garbage,” but it’s clear they have a hard time

believing it. There's nothing they can do to get themselves onto the *Antares*; that decision is in the hands of a higher power (be it supernatural or administrative).

Contrasted with Donner is Ajay Sharma (Zahf Paroo), who's been chosen to lead the *Antares* mission. A Hindu, he believes that space travel is his *dharma*. But when he's stricken by a mysterious ailment, he's switched out and Donner takes over, and two concepts of destiny— Donner's secular instinct and Sharma's spiritual vocation — are put at odds. Sharma's response to being taken off the mission is a bit unbalanced, but rooted in his faith — he climbs into a spacesuit and sits on the hull of the ship with a statue of Ganesha in his lap. Donner talks him down by convincing him to reconsider his understanding of his *dharma*, but that doesn't mean spiritual direction is abandoned. Sharma comes back inside and returns to Earth, but the Ganesha statue remains in place on the prow of the *Antares*, a provocative symbol of *Defying Gravity*'s attitude to matters religious.

And it looks like those questions of destiny will be a recurring theme— in a later episode, a crisis is averted by a character we later learn was nearly booted out of the space program in the first week of training. The show points to these moments of synchronicity in a manner that suggests an underlying plan— one that probably has something to do with the *Antares*' mysterious cargo, known only as "Beta." The guidance may not be explicitly divine, but there is certainly some sort of providence at work in *Defying Gravity*. The show's been struggling in the ratings, but hopefully some kind of guiding hand will keep the show alive long enough to reveal some of those mysteries.

Sept. 9, 2009 – SF Signal:

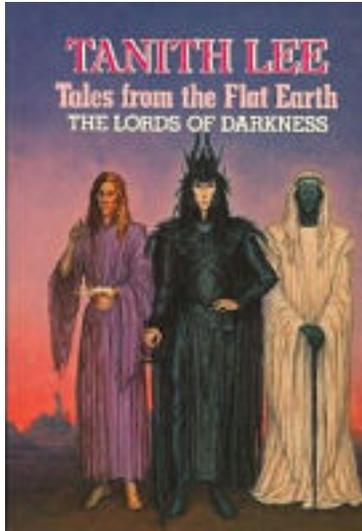
MIND MELD: Bad Guys We Love to Hate: The Best Literary Villains in SF/F/H

Everyone loves a good bad guy, so we asked this week's panelists the following:

Q: Who are the best bad guys in science fiction, fantasy, and/or horror literature?

Read on to see the responses...

Cecelia Dart-Thornton

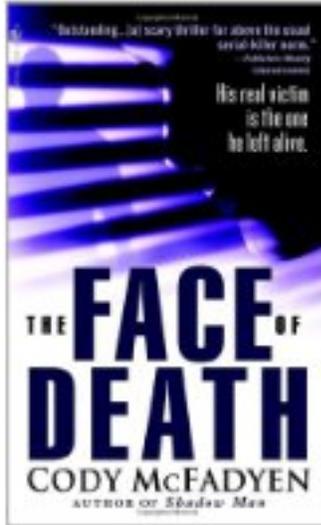


Australia author [Cecilia Dart-Thornton](#) was born and raised in Melbourne, Australia, graduating from Monash University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in sociology. She became a schoolteacher before working as an editor, bookseller, illustrator and book designer. She started and ran her own business, but became a full-time writer in 2000 after her work was 'discovered' on the Internet and published by Time Warner (New York). Her novels include **The Bitterbynde Trilogy** (**The Ill-Made Mute**, **The Lady of the Sorrows**, and **The Battle of Evernight**), and **The Crowthistle Chronicles** (**The Iron Tree**, **The Well of Tears**, **Weatherwitch**, **Fallowblade**) among others.

For me the best bad guy (aside from Tolkien's Morgoth and Sauron) is Tanith Lee's 'Azhrarn the Beautiful, Prince of Demons, Master of Night, one of five Lords of Darkness.' While reading Lee's **Flat Earth** series you can't help loving him and hating him simultaneously. He can be totally despicable, yet frequently you find yourself on his side. Such ambiguity is refreshingly intriguing!

Adam-Troy Castro

[Adam-Troy Castro](#) is author of the Philip K. Dick Award-winning novel, **Emissaries from the Dead** and the sequel, **Third Claw of God**. His upcoming books include the alphabetic guides **Z is for Zombie** and **V is for Vampire**, illustrated by Johnny Atomic and due from Eos in 2010.



The villains in Spider Robinson's science-fictional **Very Bad Deaths** and Dean Koontz's horrific **Intensity** come to mind, but the most memorable bad guy I've encountered, by far, is the killer in the horror-thriller **The Face Of Death** by Cody McFadyen, whose persecution of his chosen victim takes the form of killing everybody who ever tries to be friend or family to her, beginning when she's a very small child and continuing until she's a very traumatized teen. I note in the book's defense something that's also true of the others I mentioned, that it's not just a wallow in cruelty and offers goodness every bit as powerful, every bit as mysterious (indeed, downright breathtaking), as its evil. This is key, I think. Despite the contemptible cliché, proffered by some critics, that villains are more interesting than heroes, I prefer to think that evil functions best, in a storytelling context, as the catalyst that defines what our heroes are capable of, and possesses an advantage only in that it's usually well into its working day while good is still putting on its shoes. (That is, if they're not different sides of the same coin, as per Shirley Jackson's classic short story, "One Ordinary Day, With Peanuts.") The one exception would be stories where good people make a moral compromise for expedience, and then steadily damn themselves by chasing after it: the slippery slope phenomenon where there are no heroes and no villains, just imperfect people on a path of progressively worse decisions: this may have the most to say about the realities of human nature, and the best science-fictional example would likely be Frederik Pohl's *Jem*, where explorers from Earth land on a new planet and in very short order commit all the same mistakes that made a hellhole out of the old one.

Edward M. Lerner

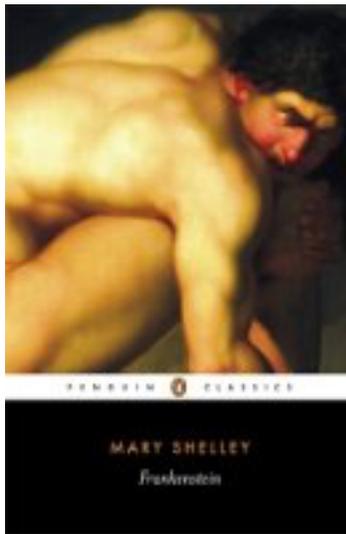
[Edward M. Lerner](#) worked in high tech for thirty years, as everything from engineer to senior VP. His latest novels are the near-future cyberthriller **Fools' Experiments**, just re-released in paperback, and (with Larry Niven) the far-future interstellar epics **Fleet of Worlds** and **Juggler of Worlds**. Lerner blogs at [SF and Nonsense](#).

Ah, bad guys. Stories need bad guys, because without them who needs a good guy? (For the record, *guy* here is a gender-nonspecific. Heroes and

villains come in both genders. Or, as our context is speculative fiction, *all* genders. Or none.)

The villains we love to hate are *worth* hating. Occasionally they're so evil we can't help but hate them. Think Sauron, of **Lord of the Rings**.

But who among us is Tolkien? It's hard to pull off a villain who is believably pure evil. Done badly, the pure-evil villain becomes a cardboard cutout, a mere plot device. My favorite villains have noble sides or extenuating circumstances. They don't see themselves as evil. We most care about stories when we can empathize a bit with *all* the protagonists.



To go back to the historical roots of SF (and vintage horror, too) consider Mary Shelley's **Frankenstein**.

Who *is* the villain in that book? The creature? Certainly he kills innocents, but consider: His creator, the "good" doctor, abandons him. When the creature - by then painfully aware all humanity finds him abhorrent - prevails on Dr. Frankenstein to make him a mate, the doctor reneges, dooming the creature to a life of loneliness. When the creature heads into the polar wastes, to isolation and eventual death, Dr. Frankenstein pursues the creature to exact vengeance. While we take note of Dr. Frankenstein's anguish, and the deaths of Frankenstein's innocent relatives and associates, we also pity the creature.

Now *that's* writing.

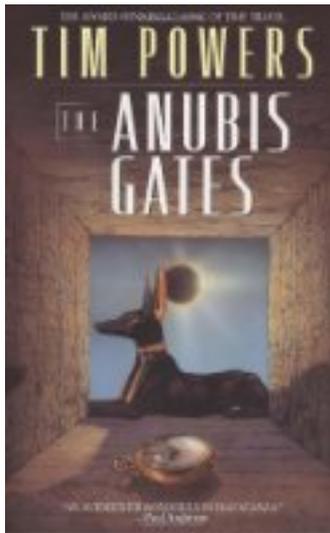
My novel **Fools' Experiments** arose, in part, in my quest for an SFnal monster. (The other part? A Charles Darwin quote: "I love fools' experiments. I am always making them." The line could have been [but wasn't] written for **Frankenstein**.) My new monster had to be sympathetic.

Neither supernatural nor a freak of nature, it's an artificial life, bred and evolved - and too often mistreated - in a computer lab. And like all abused monsters, the AI strikes out ...

Who are the best bad guys? Those we root for.

Sarah Monette

[Sarah Monette](http://www.sarahmonette.com) wanted to be a writer when she grew up, and now she is. Visit her at www.sarahmonette.com.



- Saruman (J.R.R. Tolkien, **The Lord of the Rings**)
- Horrabin (Tim Powers, **The Anubis Gates**)
- Randy Flagg (Stephen King, **The Stand**)
- Annie Wilkes (Stephen King, **Misery**)

A. Lee Martinez

[A. Lee Martinez](#) is a writer you probably haven't heard of but really should have. He is the author of **Gil's All Fright Diner**, **In the Company of Ogres**, **A Nameless Witch**, **The Automatic Detective**, **Too Many Curses**, and **Monster**. He credits comic books and Godzilla movies as his biggest influences, and thinks that every story is better with a dash of ninja.

Any list like this is arbitrary and random by its nature. So I'm just going to go ahead and roll with it, and divide villains via random categories.



BEST COMIC BOOK VILLAIN: Doctor Doom, hands down. I know plenty of people will disagree. I expect the Joker will be most people's preferred villain of choice. But the Joker isn't really a good villain at all. He's just a nutjob, fell in some acid, decided to become a supervillain because . . . hey, that makes sense in a comic book world. But crazy characters without any clear motivation never really do much for me. I can't relate to them. More importantly, I find they're usually only created to give lazy writers a chance to do something "evil" without any justification. Why did the Joker blow up the orphanage? Cuz he's a loonie!

Doctor Doom, on the other hand, is the classic evil genius. He's smarter than you, and he expects you to acknowledge it. And if you don't accept your position under his heel, then he's more than happy to build an army of robots to put you in your place. The guy wears power armor with a green tunic and he makes it work! Doom is evil, but not in that eat-your-face-for-fun sort of way. He's evil because he's sick of your idiocy, and he knows everything would just be fine if everyone would just acknowledge him as their lord and master. And, y'know what? He just might be right. I mean, the guy builds time machines for fun. He probably has so many death rays cluttering up his attic that he's getting ready for a two-for-one garage sale next week. And if he felt like it, he could probably take some shoelaces, some tin foil, and a can of creamed corn and make a rocket that could hurl the earth into the sun.

Haven't we all been there, surrounded by dunces who can't be bothered to pull their heads out of their asses long enough to know what day of the week it is? Sure, we have. And haven't we all wished for a giant robot to disintegrate those morons who populate our universe? Sure, we have. The thing about Doom is...that's his whole life. That's every single person he runs into, every single day. It's a miracle the guy hasn't atomized us all out of sheer frustration. Doctor Doom is the man, and while I'm glad he's not running things, I also gotta say I'd sign up with Doom in a second if I got a jetpack and raygun out of the deal.

BEST ROBOT VILLAIN: No surprises here. Megatron. There's just no arguing this one. Megatron is Dr. Doom if Doom wasn't troubled by the spark of a conscience. And Megatron has his own army of killer robots, except all those killer robots want to kill Megatron and take his place. We might sometimes wonder why the leader of the Decepticons puts up with so much crap from his minions. Particularly that passive-aggressive second-in-command Starscream. It's because everybody who works for him (and I mean EVERYBODY) is a complete and total jerkwad. So The Autobots are out to get him. The Decepticons are out to get him.

But he's still standing. Long live, Megatron.

BEST CARTOON VILLAIN: Mojo Jojo. You can't go wrong with an evil monkey. Runner up: Lord Monkeyfist, who uses ninja monkeys as minions.

BEST FILM VILLAIN: George Lucas. For obvious reasons.

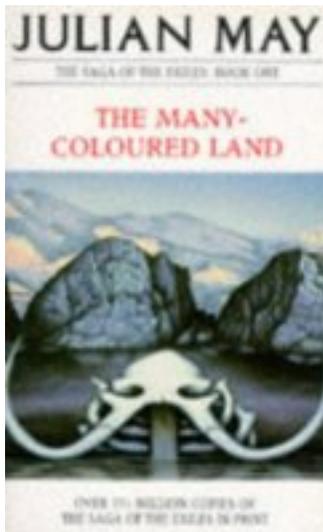
BEST KAIJU VILLAIN: Look, when we humans have a picnic, we don't walk around the anthills, do we? When hornets have the gall to build a nest under our stoop, do we say live and let live? And if grasshoppers built little tiny tanks and started blasting you every time you went for a walk across the front lawn, you'd sure as heck begin stomping them underfoot and roasting them with your radioactive fire breath. It's time to own up to this one. The real villain of kaiju cinema?

Humanity!

Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to train my robot ninja monkey army to fight off the endless squads of bee-piloted jet fighters that are buzzing at my windows.

Peter F. Hamilton

[Peter F. Hamilton](#) is the author of the **Greg Mandel** trilogy (1993-1995), **The Night's Dawn Trilogy** (1996-1999), **Fallen Dragon** (2001), **Misspent Youth** and **The Commonwealth Saga** (2002-2005) and, most recently, **The Void Trilogy** (2007-2011).

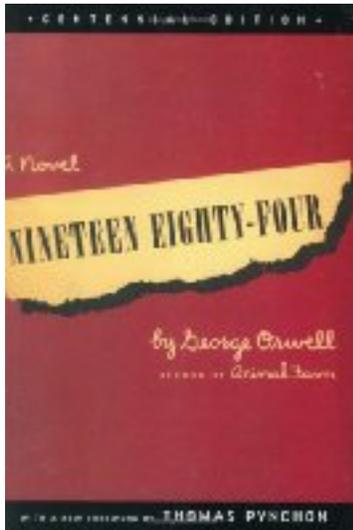


Difficult one to choose. SF has produced some greats over the years. If I could narrow it down to three, in no particular order.

1. The Tanu in Julian May's **Saga of Exiles** - beautiful and deadly, unhampered by anything approaching our morals they hold a dark fascination for so many humans they ensnare.
2. The Hood in *Thunderbirds* - sorry, but he scared me crapless when I was a boy.
3. Alien / Alien Queen - Oh come on, you knew that was going to be on the list.

Kay Kenyon

[Kay Kenyon](#)'s latest work from Pyr is a science fiction series with a fantasy feel. **Bright of the Sky** was one of *Publishers Weekly's* top books of 2007. The series has twice been shortlisted for the American Library Association Reading List awards. *The Washington Post* called the series "a splendid fantasy quest." Rounding out the quartet are **A World Too Near**, **City Without End** and **Prince of Storms** (Jan. 2010).



I'm afraid I am not very disciplined as a thinker. I'm including villains who perhaps are great because of the story in which they are embedded--although of course, they contribute to these stories' high caliber. Nor are all my picks human; or necessarily individuals. Here goes:

1. I start with Big Brother in Orwell's **1984**. Massively influential; perhaps the best known force of antagonism if not strictly a "bad guy."
2. Some of my favorite villains are from Stephen King: These include his brilliant renderings of possessions by evil: Jack in **The Shining** and;
3. All the Tommyknockers of King's book by that name. I don't know if it's that he is often describing *writers* that grabs me so.
4. My favorite ensemble cast of bad guys in any novel: In Michale Swanwick's **The Iron Dragon's Daughter**, there is an amazing assemblage including the rusted old dragon Melancthon, the elf lord Galiagante, the snotty delinquents and so many more. All bad to the bone, and more fun than should be legal.

5. Hal in Clarke's **2001: A Space Odyssey**; perhaps just technically a book.

Recent examples:

6. The thing on the ice of Dan Simmons's **The Terror**. One of the most horrifying/unexpected creatures I've ever read about.

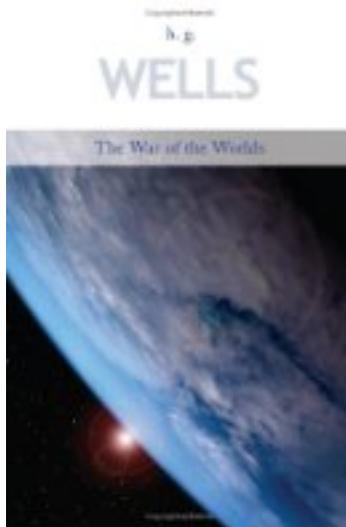
7. Glokta, the delightfully self-aware torturer in Joe Abercrombie's **First Law** series. Glokta brings us to the realm of dark protagonists and reformed villains, and I decided not to go there, except this example is just so good.

Dying to add, so I will, with the indefensible position that today it would be considered fantasy: Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost* who famously said, "Better to rule in hell than serve in heaven."

Gabriel McKee

Gabriel McKee is the author of **The Gospel According to Science Fiction: From the Twilight Zone to the Final Frontier**, the blog [SF Gospel](#), and **Pink Beams of Light From the God in the Gutter: The Science Fictional Religion of Philip K. Dick**. He has also written for *Religion Dispatches*, *The Revealer*, and *Nerve*, and is a graduate of Harvard Divinity School.

In my opinion, the best villains in SF literature tend not to be individuals -- cackling mad scientists and dark-robed overlords work better in visual media than in print. Instead, the strongest bad guys tend to be groups, governments, or even concepts.



The mysterious Martians of H.G. Wells's **War of the Worlds** are the ultimate evil aliens, setting the tone for over a century's worth of invasion stories. The Martians, those "intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic," are terrifying because they're obviously intelligent, but they have not desire whatsoever to communicate with us, to share their knowledge. For whatever reason, they want to destroy us, and their anti-morality is at the core of pretty much every invasion story you can think of, from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* to *Independence Day* to *Mars Attacks!*

Dystopian governments are particularly good at riling a reader, and Octavia Butler's **Parable of the Talents** contains perhaps the worst of them-- a fascist religious movement called Christian America. Andrew Steele Jarret, the demagogue that leads the movement, crushes all opposition mercilessly. *Parable of the Talents* starts in a peaceful religious community led by Lauren Olamina, an empath who founds a faith called Earthseed; Jarret's troops turn this idealistic village into a concentration camp for "heathens" and "witches." There are other great bad guys representing dystopian governments-- O'Brien in Orwell's **1984**; Ferris F. Freemont in Dick's *Radio Free Albemuth*-- but none has ever made me as *angry* as Jarret.

I'd be remiss if I didn't mention Weston, the foil to Ransom, the not-at-all-allegorically-named hero of C.S. Lewis's **Space Trilogy**. In **Out of the Silent Planet** he wants to wipe out the peaceful inhabitants of Mars to make room for humans; in *Perelandra* Lewis makes him a direct mouthpiece for Satan who tries to introduce sin to the Eden of Venus. Weston has often been seen as an embodiment of Lewis's demonification of science-- he's introduced as a physicist-- but his real sin is colonialism. (And without Weston, we probably wouldn't have Philip Pullman's Ms. Coulter-- certainly one of the best villains in fantasy.)

And then there's Tom Godwin's story "The Cold Equations," in which the laws of physics themselves are evil: mass and momentum conspire to create a moral dilemma in which an astronaut must choose between letting a colony die without medical supplies and tossing an innocent girl out of an airlock.

On the horror side of things, Thomas Ligotti does Godwin (and, more importantly, Lovecraft) one better-- his stories posit that reality itself is a conspiracy against the human race. Lovecraft's protagonists go mad because they discover evil beings lurking beyond the veil of everyday experience, but the artists and white-collar drones of Ligotti's stories find no such evil beings. What drives them mad is the simple discovery that the darkness may be the only thing that exists-- and it passively hates us. This basic concept of ontological horror underlies most of Ligotti's stories, but it's perhaps most clear in "The Shadow, the Darkness," the final story in his recent collection **Teatro Grottesco**.

Sandra McDonald

[Sandra McDonald](#)'s novels - **The Outback Stars**, **The Stars Down Under**, and **The Stars Blue Yonder** - are about an Australian military lieutenant, her handsome sergeant, and their adventures in deep space. She also writes short stories that have appeared in *Asimov's*, *Strange Horizons*, *Realms of Fantasy* and other magazines and anthologies.

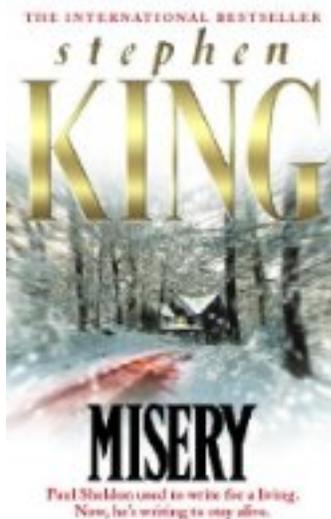
Instead of the bad guys, let's talk about the bad gals! Strong villainesses in fantasy, horror and science fiction literature are, unfortunately, not as prevalent as their male counterparts. Often they are queens of some sort, because as every effective tyrant knows, you can't misuse power unless you wield it in the first place.

One of my favorite evil queens is someone who commits a heinous act against our hero and then, through her guilt and regret, becomes a wonderfully strong heroine. She's Irene, the Queen of Attolia, in Megan Whalen Turner's novel of the same name. Young, isolated, and in a precarious position of power, Irene makes decisions that she thinks are in the best interest of her people. And if that means cutting off - well, read the book! The Turner books are often sold as young adult but they have everything an adult reader could want, and more - a daring thief, warring kingdoms, complex politics, and a Mediterranean-like setting of ancient civilizations. Totally recommended.

Phillip Pullman's **His Dark Materials** series features another strong villainess - the elegant, mysterious and dangerous Mrs. Coulter, who is no doubt a queen in her own mind. Her horrible acts against children, in the name of saving them, still make me shudder. I won't give away spoilers

about Mrs. Coulter's fate but suffice it to say that Pullman, like Turner, is interested in writing characters whose evil nature can be turned permanently or temporarily to good, given the proper motivation.

Of course, evil is often a matter of perspective. One of the quotes hanging above my computer is from Kahlil Gibran - "For what is evil but good tortured by its own hunger and thirst?"



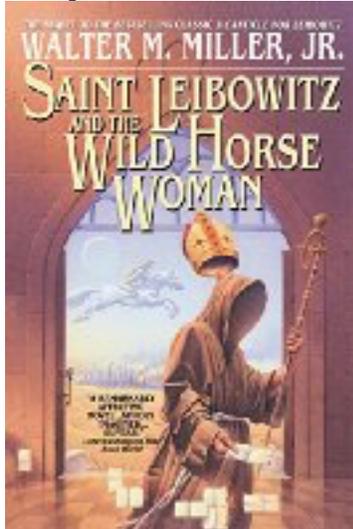
Torture is the hallmark of one of horror literature's great villainesses - Annie Wilkes, from Stephen King's **Misery**. Annie tortures the writer Paul Sheldon in memorable, horrible ways, but she herself is tortured by the enemy within. You couldn't pay me to be in the same room with Annie but how responsible is she for her actions? Unlike Irene or Mrs. Coulter, she clearly suffers from one or more mental illnesses. In her mind, of course, Paul is the villain for killing off her favorite character. Like I said, perspective.

Also in horror literature we find Claudia, Anne Rice's little girl vampire who can never grow up. The first Rice novel I read was **Queen of the Damned** but Akasha, the title character, never quite grabbed me. Claudia, however, is a vicious and haunting character. Over the course of seventy years her emotional and intellectual development go unmatched by her body, and she yearns for what she can never have - a woman's body, with height and breasts and the power to seduce men to her side.

Sexuality is, of course, one of the things most feared about in women whether we think of them as good or bad. And that brings us back to queens, in the form of Cersei Lannister in George R.R. Martin's epic series, **A Song of Ice and Fire**. Cersei is just about everything "ous" that you can think of - dangerous, curvaceous, incestuous, ambitious, and of course murderous. Tortured by a prophecy and her own unquenchable thirsts, she's

a woman to be reckoned with. It's that reckoning, and all the frights and dangers therein, that brings me back to these bad gals of literature time and time again.

Terry Bisson

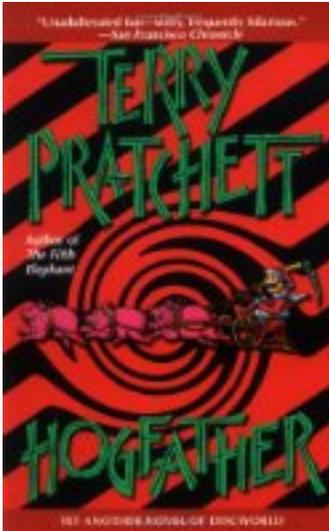


[Terry Bisson](#) is the author of seven novels, most recently **Planet of Mystery** from PS Publishing. He is perhaps best known for his numerous short stories, including "They're Made out of Meat" and "Bears Discover Fire," which won both the Hugo and Nebula awards.

Cardinal Brownpony in Miller's **Saint Leibowitz and the Wild Horse Woman**. The best (worst) bad guys are the ones who think they are doing good.

Stacie Hanes

[Stacie Hanes](#) studies 19th-century fantastic literature at Kent State University and has written a number of articles about Terry Pratchett.



- **Mr. Teatime and Carcer:** Jonathan Teatime and Carcer are the same sort of ultraviolent sociopaths as Alex from **A Clockwork Orange**, but in bursts. They're frightening because unlike Alex, who is exceptional but runs with a gang of similar sociopaths, neither is just another hooligan in his own city. Ankh-Morpork is not a near-future dystopia; there isn't anyone like Teatime on the Discworld, until Carcer, who manages to be just a little bit more psycho. Teatime really doesn't know the difference between offering you a cup of tea and stabbing you in the eye with the teaspoon, but he really only kills people (however messily) in the natural course of his duties. Carcer is a predator who hunts and carries grudges.
- **Hannibal Lecter:** Hannibal Lecter fascinates people. Back when **The Silence of the Lambs** had just come out, and most people online were still on AOL, I studied profiles to see how many people made fictional profiles as Lecter, and how many made profiles as Clarice Starling. There were two or three times as many Lecters as Starlings.

I don't know about everyone else-I like Starling, myself, and the appeal of the story is the conflict between them, but if Lecter has an appeal for me it's that he's so smart he's almost untouchable. And part of Starling's appeal is that she's almost as smart. I think people wonder why someone with every advantage can be so evil, and that is why Thomas Harris was criticized for writing **Hannibal** Rising: by explaining Lecter's pathology, he ruined it for many fans. It was no longer a pure story of human or, as I have occasionally supposed,

post-human evil, but simply abnormal psychology in a brilliant mind. Still scary, not so absorbing.

- **Victor Frankenstein:** Shelley gave the genre an original in Victor Frankenstein. Many critics, of whom I am one, argue that **Frankenstein** is the first fully realized science fiction novel. The rationales for that vary, but starting a genre is not something you see every day. **Frankenstein** has remained in print since its initial publication in 1818.

There are a lot of reads on why **Frankenstein** is so enduring and fascinating. But many of them revolve around the conflict between Victor and his creation. While the creature becomes monstrous, it is Victor's tragedy that he not only created a being with the potential to be good, but by his monumental and continuing failures helped make him monstrous.

- **Pennywise:** Stephen King has written a *lot* of books. He's written books with demons, pets that return from the dead, aliens, maniacs, Lovecraftian *things*, obsessive fans, pyrokinetics, vampires, and dozens of other nasty customers.

But **It** was the book that tried to hit all the buttons at once. It wakes up every 27 years and causes an atrocity, and between times makes children disappear.

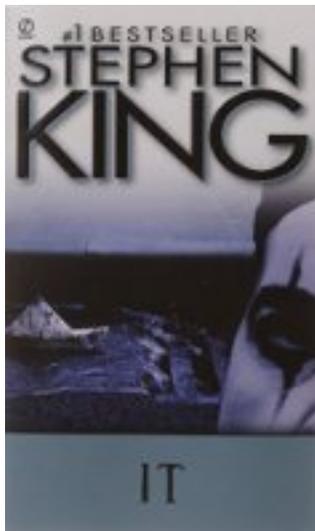
The villain is the thing each character feared most-except that its truer form is that of a sinister clown. We're talking about literature, but Tim Curry may have helped with that. It is guaranteed to creep out anyone not scared by one of the forms that the characters find frightening. But wait, behind the clown is an interdimensional spider-thing of incomprehensible evil that originated millions of years ago in the void that surrounds the universe.

Lovecraftian child-eating spider-clown for the win.

[Ysabeau S. Wilce](#) is the author of the **Flora Segunda** trilogy, the second volume of which, **Flora's Dare**, won the Andre Norton Award in 2008; her short stories have appeared in various anthologies and magazines, including *Fantasy & Science Fiction Magazine* and *Asimov's*.

Who are the best bad buys in science fiction, fantasy or horror?

My first nominee is a bit unorthodox: Richard III, from Shakespeare's **Richard III**. Though Richard III is usually characterized a history play, I read it as full bore horror. There are ghosts, both benign and terrible; murder galore; and, oh the delicious evilness of Crookback Dick, who will stoop at nothing in his quest to gain the English throne. The scene where Richard woos the Lady Anne, over the corpse of her husband (who Richard himself killed), wins her hand, and then turns to the audience and explains how he is going to kill her, too-well, try to top that one Sauron!



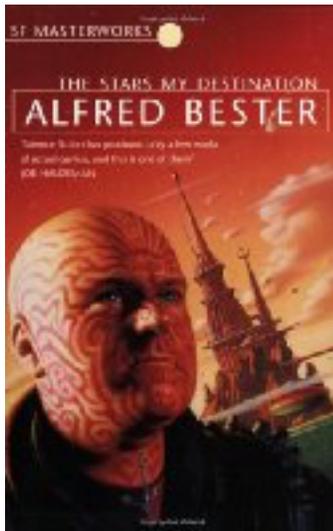
Next up I offer, Mr. Robert Gray, better known as Pennywise the Clown from Stephen King's **It**. The Ur-Killer Clown, all face-paint and fangs, the horror that lives in your closet-or in your drains. The evil that only kids can see coming. We've all had a run-in with Pennywise one time or another: he's a very familiar face.

Lastly, I offer up a bad guy that needs no justification for inclusion here: Hannibal Lector, from Thomas Harris' **Red Dragon** and **Silence of the Lambs**. Liver, Chianti and fava beans: yum! I just wish that Harris hadn't succumbed to the temptation to flesh out Hannibal's back story; sometimes evil is best left a bit mysterious.

Extra bonus bad guy, or rather bad little guy: Gage from King's **Pet Semetary**. Don't we all have nightmares about a loved one coming to us malevolent, changed-and it's all our own fault? There's nothing quite as evil as innocence turned.

Suzy McKee Charnas

[Suzy McKee Charnas](#) surfaced in the mid-seventies with **Walk To The End Of The World** (1974), a no-punches-pulled feminist SF novel and Campbell award finalist. The three further books that sprang from **Walk** (comprising a futurist, feminist epic about how people make history and create myth and how both are used) closed in 1999 with **The Conqueror's Child**, a Tiptree winner (as is the series in its entirety). In addition, her varied SF and fantasy works have won the Hugo award, the Nebula award, the Gigamesh Award (Spain), and the Mythopoeic award for young-adult fantasy. A play based on her modern monster novel **The Vampire Tapestry** has been staged on both coasts. Her latest book, **Stagestruck Vampires** (Tachyon Books), collects her best short fiction, plus essays on writing feminist SF and on being right there in the room as your first ever play script becomes a professionally staged drama. Visit at www.suzymckeecharnas.com, or check *Suzy Says* on Live Journal/Dreamwidth for political musings, reviews, and opinionated discussion



In SF, I love horrible Gully Foyle, of **The Stars My Destination** because he's a complex, driven creature. Oh, wait -- maybe he's the "hero"? Too? Well, why not? You root for him even though he's a killer and a rapist and a completely selfish being. I like Q, Capt. Picard's arch enemy from time to time because he is so childish, with all his power -- a big, spoiled baby, like so many "evil" people.

In horror, its Hannibal Lecter, hands down, even though as a character he makes no sense whatever. He's sure as Hell no psychiatrist, and probably only a fair-to-middling cook (fava beans? Get out!). But as an actual devil, he's great -- playful, snide, smooth -- on the page and again on the screen, thanks to Sir Anthony Hopkins' brilliant portrayal.

In Fantasy -- I don't read much of the heroic stuff, it's just war, war, war, not interesting to me, but I do like Gollum: nasty little thing, and it's selfishness again -- but that's pretty much always the key to villainy, isn't it? *I* want, *I* need, and the rest of you don't really exist (not with *my* degree of reality) so who cares what happens to you?



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Posted by [John DeNardo](#) at Wednesday September 09, 2009 at 12:29 AM

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October 20, 2010 – Religion Dispatches:

Weird Testament: The Bible Gets the R. Crumb Treatment

By [Gabriel Mckee](#)

October 20, 2009

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Legendary underground comics artist R. Crumb has produced a surprisingly reverent Book of Genesis. For real grotesquerie, you need to look back to the Bible of Basil Wolverton, an evangelical illustrator whose work dwelt on the bizarre and violent.

God as the artist's cranky Jewish father



The Book of Genesis Illustrated
by R. Crumb
(WW Norton & Co., October 19, 2009)

There is nothing sacred to underground and alternative comics creators. Irreverence has been a defining characteristic of the movement since the 1960s, when creators like R. Crumb and Gilbert Shelton began using the words-and-pictures medium to create scathing, sex-and-drug-filled satires

of square culture. No subject was safe from the savage pens of these cartoonists, and religion—or, more specifically, sanctimoniousness—was a common target.

Yesterday, October 19, was the official publication date of Crumb's *Book of Genesis Illustrated*, a work five years in the making. Far from the sharp satire that one might expect from the creator of *Fritz the Cat* and *Mr. Natural*, *Genesis* is a remarkably straight, even reverent, adaptation. In his introduction, Crumb explains that he avoided adding interpretation or clearing up confusing passages, leaving the Bible as is “rather than monkey around with such a venerable text... I approached this as a straight illustration job, with no intention to ridicule or make visual jokes.” He notes the irony that devout, didactic Bible comics creators are more willing to play around with scripture by inserting “completely made-up narrative and dialogue,” while he, a non-believer, lets the text speak for itself.

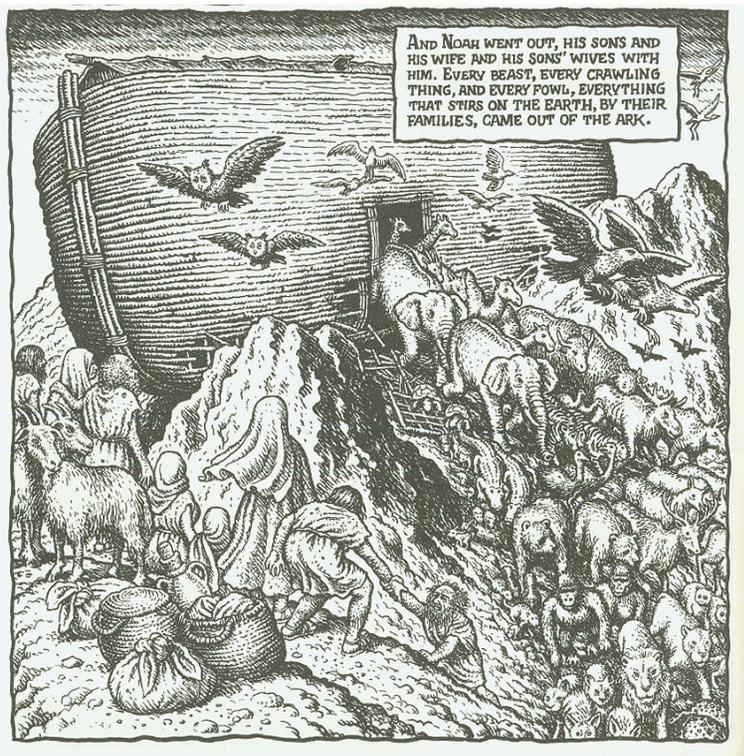
But, as every student of the Bible knows, there's no such thing as a reading without interpretation. A big challenge from the start: how should God be depicted? In an [interview](#) with *Time*, Crumb explains that he considered rendering God as a light emerging from a cloud, or coyly recontextualizing him as a black woman, but in the end settled on a more pedestrian bearded and robed figure that he says resembles his father: “if you actually read the Old Testament,” he told *Time*, “he's just an old, cranky Jewish patriarch.”

The choice of translation is also a matter of importance. Crumb states that his text is compiled from several sources, including the King James version, though it is primarily drawn from Robert Alter's recent translation in *The Five Books of Moses*. Clearly, Crumb is more interested in liberal biblical scholarship than evangelical fervor. His purpose here is not to make the text “relevant for modern readers,” but to return it to its Jewish roots from a Christian interpretive framework that refuses to let it stand on its own.

The Matriarchy Hypothesis

The eight pages of notes at the end of the book suggest another agenda, as Crumb reveals his preoccupation with the idea of a pre-Jewish matriarchy hidden beneath the text of Genesis. He frequently refers to “biblical scholars” who support his arguments, but hardly names any (the notable exception being [Savina J. Teubal](#), whose name finally surfaces toward the end of the annotations; it seems that her book *Sarah the Priestess* was one of Crumb's major sources).

But Crumb isn't a scholar, and it's not entirely fair to ask him to spend too much time substantiating claims that, after all, only appear in the endnotes. The important thing is his visual interpretation of the story, and with a few blink-and-you'll-miss-them panels showing goddess idols, the matriarchy hypothesis doesn't break through into Crumb's visual narrative. Where he does insert footnotes directly into the adaptation, they tend to offer either etymological explanation or curious gee-whiz excitement, as in his exclamation that “Noah was credited with being the first man to make wine! See chapter 9.”



The design of the book's jacket belies the seriousness of its contents. The back cover places portraits of the major players into captioned circles in homage to the design of EC Comics' horror titles like *Tales From the Crypt*. The front, though, which features a customarily serious image of Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden, also offers pulpy blurbs ("All 50 chapters—nothing left out!") and a coy recommendation: "Adult supervision recommended for minors." The boards themselves, which show only a stately, gold-embossed title that mixes gothic blackletter and Crumb's own underground-comix typography, is a bit truer to the nature of the contents.

Despite the moderate interpretive philosophy behind the adaptation, there's no doubt that this is a Crumb comic. His Eve is a typically *zaftig* seductress, and his panel illustrating Rachel's "comely features" is as rear-end-focused as one might expect. And because he provides so straight an adaptation, he doesn't shy away from either the sex or the violence present in the text. But neither does he linger on these moments; the story of Lot's incestuous encounters with his daughters, which the '60s Crumb would surely have stretched to at least four lascivious pages, is completed in six panels.

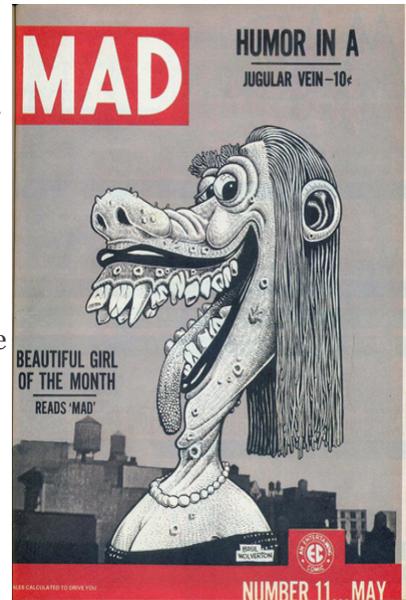
If there's a weakness in the adaptation, it's that the visual splendor of events like the creation story and the Flood overshadows the more down-to-Earth sections of the narrative. We keep waiting for something big and exciting to happen. Instead, the panels seem to become smaller as the book goes on, as if the worldly tales of the patriarchs need to humble themselves within smaller panels than the grandly cosmic creation. The result is a bit of visual tedium as we wait for an event that's big enough for a wider panel.

And yet there's great beauty in the down-to-Earth depiction of the post-Flood stories. This is not caricature; the faces are drawn in a strikingly realistic style. The genealogy sections, featuring dozens of thumbnail sketches to a page, come across as sketchbook pages drawn from life. The plethora of faces hint at the stories that didn't make it into Scripture: who was Areli, the youngest son of Gad, or Asher's daughter Serah? Genesis doesn't tell us, but Crumb's fine imaginary portraiture brings character to these unstoried names.

Basil Wolverton's Bible-as-Bizarre

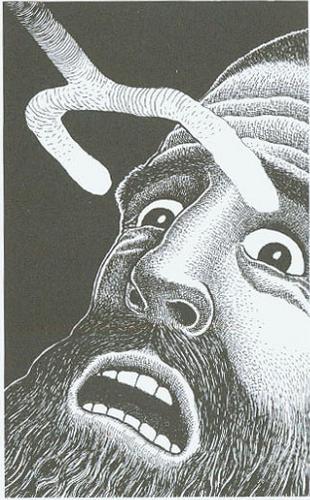
Crumb's *Genesis* is hardly the first instance of an indie comics artist drawing from the Bible. Chester Brown has been slowly releasing dark adaptations of the Gospels since 1987 (Mark is completed, Matthew is still in progress); Kyle Baker's *King David* presented the audacious violence of the Hebrew Bible's hero epic as a bloody cartoon; and underground comix pioneer Frank Stack cut his teeth—and produced the first true underground comic book—with the first issue of *The Adventures of Jesus* in 1963. But the forefather of underground comics had already built an impressive body of biblical illustration *years* before Crumb began truckin'—and that work was anything but satirical.

Basil Wolverton was a major influence on Crumb, who has said that Wolverton's cover to *Mad* #11 [image right] “changed forever the way that I looked at the world.” His famously grotesque style can be seen as the starting point for all of the bizarre excesses of the underground comix scene. It's a bit surprising, then, that Wolverton himself was rather conservative, and undertook a decades-long project of evangelical illustration for Herbert W. Armstrong's Radio Church of God (later renamed the Worldwide Church of God, and now known as [Grace Communion International](#)). This Adventist offshoot was fervently pre-millennialist, and Armstrong saw in Wolverton's grotesque style the perfect means of capturing and communicating the horrors of the tribulation.



And horrific the illustrations are—with their crashing planes, erupting volcanoes, boil-stricken sufferers, and monstrous whirlwinds—Wolverton's literalist depictions of Revelation are powerful, shocking, and above all grotesquely beautiful. And though their overall style is more realistic than his more famous work for magazines like *Mad*, these images are instantly identifiable as Wolverton's. Much of their horror comes from the fact that his usual monsters are depicted against a realistic background instead of a humorous one.

Following the success of the Revelation illustrations, Armstrong hired Wolverton to collaborate on *The Bible Story* (collected in print, along with the earlier illustrations as [The Wolverton Bible](#)), a retelling of the entire Old Testament that ran from the late '50s until 1972, two years before a stroke ended Wolverton's career for good. Though Wolverton's approach to these stories was somewhat more matter-of-fact than his apocalyptic panoramas, there is still a passion for the bizarre evident in the *Bible Story* illustrations. Many of the most intriguing images in this series feature outlandish pagan idols depicted with a sense of joy and whimsy that suggest Wolverton's delight in the more *outré* aspects of scripture. A more gruesomely playful example is a terrifying image of the blinding of Samson: given the demonizing of the “injury to the eye motif” in Frederic Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* and the Senate hearings on violent comics that it produced, one wonders if this image wasn't a sly comment on the broader cultural meaning of violent art.



Apocalypticism is present here, too. The depiction of the Flood, in proper dispensationalist style, is drawn out and extreme. Unlike Crumb, who depicts the death of most of the human race in a single panel, Wolverton has a didactic reason to linger on the scriptural moment—of the 62 pages illustrating the book of Genesis in this volume, the story of the Flood takes up 26. (By comparison, the creation narrative takes up six pages; the story of Joseph seven.) Many of these images depict in gruesome detail the sufferings of those left off of the Ark. The Flood is an important story for pre-millennialists, and thus it served Armstrong’s purposes for Wolverton to linger on its more horrific aspects.

For Wolverton, there was no conflict between his secular comics work and the ministry of his biblical illustrations, and Armstrong had no objection to Wolverton’s sense of humor—indeed, he also hired Wolverton to do humor pieces and wacky spot illustrations for WCG’s publications. Wolverton’s Bible illustrations sit on the border between sacred and profane, and that unique placement is what gives them such power. Despite its very different agenda, Crumb’s *Genesis* offers a similar sort of pious irreverence.

Ironically, although Crumb’s work is not intended as an evangelical tool, it seems likely that it will reach more people than the average [Jack Chick tract](#), and that reach is directly attributable to its creator’s iconoclastic roots. Read together, Crumb’s *Genesis* and *The Wolverton Bible* paint a fascinating picture of outré spirituality—a Weird Testament.

Tags: [basil wolverton](#), [bible](#), [comics](#), [genesis](#), [graphic novel](#), [r. crumb](#), [robert alter](#), [scripture](#)

November 9, 2010 – Religion Dispatches:

Scientology Woes Continue with Fines and Homophobia

By [Gabriel Mckee](#)

November 2, 2009

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A church/business model like Scientology relies on good PR—something in short supply lately.

The religion of Battlefield Earth has suffered a big defeat in Battlefield France. Earlier this week a French court [fined](#) the Church of Scientology some 600,000 euros for fraud, claiming that the organization’s operations in France pressured members into paying exorbitant fees and used “commercial harassment” against recruits. The decision wasn’t quite as harsh as it might have been—the prosecutors called for the complete dissolution of Scientology in France—but the PR blemish is a big hurdle for a group that prefers to sweep its problems under the rug.

It was a rough week for Scientology in the U.S., too. Screenwriter Paul Haggis, a thirty-five-year veteran of the Church, left due to its regressive attitude toward gay rights. Haggis describes the church as “an organisation where gay-bashing [is] tolerated.” The Church puts a lot of stock in its

celebrity members. One of the group's biggest operations is the Los Angeles-based Celebrity Center, the main purpose of which is to pamper famous members. The very public defection of an Academy Award winner isn't as big a defeat as the French fraud case, but it seems likely that some heads will roll over the loss of this million dollar baby. Haggis' letter of resignation from the Church can be read [here](#).

On top of all of that, the protest campaign of the Internet-based non-group Anonymous is still going strong after nearly two years. RD [reported on Anonymous's activities](#) last summer, finding that the protests perched on the border between pranksterism and more sober "awareness raising." Last month *Wired* published its own [overview of Anonymous's activities](#), arguing that the application of internet troll tactics to principled protest could prove to be the movement's downfall. Pulling outrageous stunts at "raids" on Scientology's offices is central to Anonymous's existence— but is coating oneself in vaseline and pubic hair before running through a Scientology building trashing office supplies going to win points in the arena of public opinion? *Wired's* article expertly explores Anonymous's internal struggle between order and chaos, principle and anarchy, moral duty and the [lulz](#).

Religious fraud is one of the most ancient pitfalls of faith. The *Didache*, one of the earliest ecclesiastical texts, warns the first Christian communities against itinerant prophets who demand money in the name of the Holy Spirit. The Church of Scientology has built a business and a religion on that kind entrepreneurial charlatanism. But their business model requires good PR, and good PR requires a tight lock on secrets. At the moment, Scientology doesn't have many secrets left, and it's beginning to feel the impact of that liberated information.

Tags: [anonymous](#), [homophobia](#), [scientology](#), [wired magazine](#)

February 17, 2010 – SF Signal:

MIND MELD: SciFi TV Shows That Deserve A Remake (with Videos)

This week, we turned our attention to SciFi television when we asked our panelists this question:

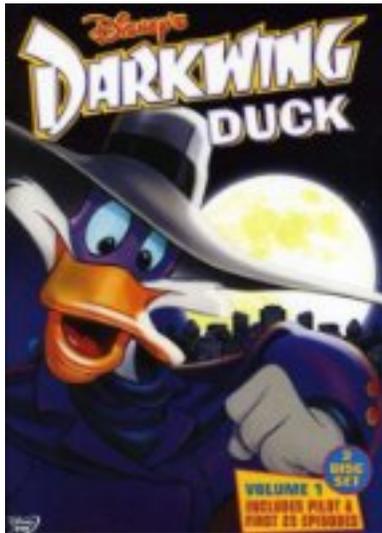
Q: Which off-the-air science fiction television show deserves a remake? What changes would you make to update it?

Here's how they responded...

A. Lee Martinez

[A. Lee Martinez](#) is a writer you probably haven't heard of but really should have. He is the author of *Gil's All Fright Diner*, *In the Company of Ogres*, *A Nameless Witch*, *The Automatic Detective*, *Too Many Curses*, *Monster* and the upcoming *Divine*

Misfortune. He credits comic books and Godzilla movies as his biggest influences, and thinks that every story is better with a dash of ninja.



I thought long and hard on this one, and with so many great candidates, it wasn't easy. *Manimal? The Night Stalker? Misfits of Science? Century City?* Oh, the delightful possibilities. How can one man make such a controversial decision? Well, after much soul searching, meditation, and hours of telepathic communion with my ancient Martian spirit guide (his name is Jack), I can only find one worthy answer.

Darkwing Duck.

How would I update this classic show? Good question. I probably wouldn't change it much. I'd give it a more action oriented update that wouldn't lose the humor of the original. Something like *Batman: The Brave and the Bold*. Fun, retro, and sharp. I'd also expand Darkwing's universe to include more superheroes and villains. In addition to the classics such as Liquidator, Bushroot, and Megavolt, I'd introduce new characters. And of course, you could never go wrong with a Gizmoduck team up on a fairly regular basis. All of this would inevitably lead to my ultimate spinoff series:

Justice Ducks Unlimited.

But one step at a time...

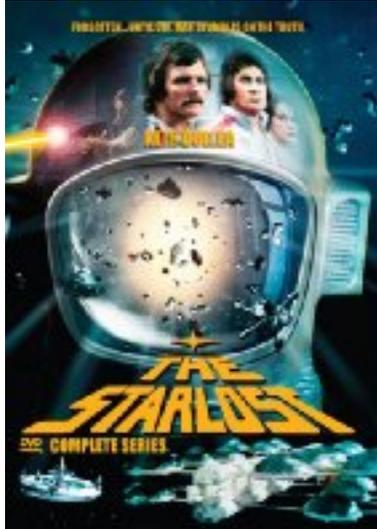
John Scalzi

[John Scalzi](#) has opposable pinkies.

None and none. The world needs another scifi TV zombie resurrection exactly as much as I need to jab spoons into my eyeballs and keep scooping until I hit gray matter. New ideas, please, kthxbye.

Jeffrey Thomas

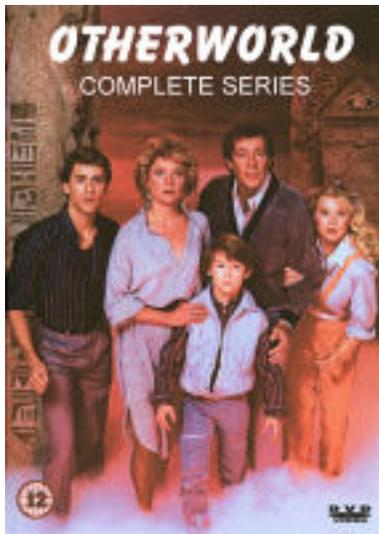
[Jeffrey Thomas](#) is the author of such novels as **Blue War**, **Deadstock**, **Health Agent** and **Monstrocity**, and the acclaimed short story collection **Punktown**. His new novel, **The Fall Of Hades**, will be available from Dark Regions Press soon. His blog can be found at www.JeffreyEThomas.com



My favorite science fiction program, *The Outer Limits*, was already remade, and my other choice for a favorite, the original *Star Trek*, sort of remade via movies and its spinoffs. I'm reluctant to choose any such classic programs, anyway, so my choice would be 1973's syndicated Canadian series *The Starlost*, created (and later disowned) by Harlan Ellison. It had a much more ambitious premise than most other SF series to date have attempted, concerning a gigantic space ark adrift so long that many of its occupants don't even realize they're on a spacecraft. The effects (by Douglas Trumbull) were okay for the time, but I think this series could benefit from being reborn with more advanced effects and more adherence to Ellison's original vision, which apparently was "dumbed down" somewhat. So can *The Starlost* ever be found again?

Matthew Sanborn Smith

[Matthew Sanborn Smith](#) is a speculative fiction writer whose work has appeared in *Chiaroscuro*, *Albedo One* and *Challenging Destinies*. His ongoing **Fiction Crawler** series can be heard on the StarShipSofa podcast. Learn about his less-than-epic life at his blog, [The One-Thousand](#) and his podcast [Beware the Hairy Mango](#).



The first program that popped into my head was *Max Headroom*, but that was a ridiculous knee-jerk. I adored *Max Headroom* and any remake would just piss me off. Same goes for Filmation's *Flash Gordon* cartoon of 1979-1980 which I loved, loved, loved. The type of show that should be remade is one that wasn't very good to begin with. You can go nowhere but up with a ball of crap like the original *Battlestar Galactica*. The problem there is that the Wasn't Very Good category includes most science fiction television. How does one choose? I won't even approach *Quark* or *Small Wonder*. I *should* pick 1977's *Fantastic Journey*, a ten-episode series which hooked me as a kid. It concerned adventures on a mysterious island (is there any other kind in speculative Tville?) accessed through the Bermuda Triangle, on which gathered people and cultures from throughout past and future history. I'm sure it must have been awful and could benefit from a major overhaul, but I'm not the guy to rework it because unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, I remember next to nothing about it. So here's my choice. Check your tomatoes at the door.

[Otherworld](#) (1985).

In brief: A family is transported by pyramid power to another world which is separated into 77 different zones, each with a distinct culture (and science fictional premise). No one but Zone Troopers (The Fuzz) is allowed to travel between the zones. As soon as they show up, our hero family gets into a scuffle with a big shot trooper, steals his access crystal (Key to everything on the planet) and roams around from zone to zone while being chased by the trooper and his cronies. I really liked the show as a greasy teen, but it could definitely stand a little work. What would I do to update this baby, programming guru that I am?

Edgier? Haven't we had enough edgy? If we get much edgier we may slice something off that we wanted to hold onto. I want to keep the family

because it feels like most action shows are about groups of single people who have had bad childhoods and share loads of sexual tension. Action with a family would be a nice change. There's real fear and something on the line when you're dealing with endangered family members

What would make this fun show more fun? An over-arching story line, *not* of the *VR5*, *X-Files* or *Lost* kind wherein the writers build the ship as they're crossing the ocean, but the *Babylon 5* type in which not only has the ship been built before the show starts, but *someone* knows where the hell it's going and gently steers it right into its destination port. And if that means it's just a single season long, I'm okay with that. Just tell me a good story.

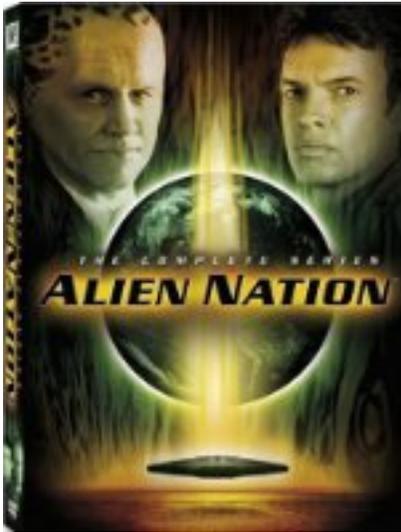
There would be exploration initially as the family got their footing in the world. There would be real, non-cryptic information so they could figure out how to get home and develop a plan. There would be alliances on both sides, a gathering of forces, cranking tension and an actual final episode which wrapped it all up in a satisfying conclusion.

Each episode would also have to be able to stand on its own, so we'd have more than just a soap opera. I'd bring on authentic fleshy science fiction writers to explore cool new ideas and not stuff that science fiction writers were thinking about forty years ago rehashed by lame television writers today.

I realize all of these updates are generalizations, full of "No Duh" wishes, but I'm not doing a treatment here. Besides, how long do you want to keep reading this answer? Many of this post's readers have already skipped to the next answer. Those people, however, have missed out on the delicious ice cream that you and I are sharing right now. We giggle at them as our icy-cold spoons slip from between our closed, smiling lips.

Gabriel Mckee

[Gabriel Mckee](#) is the author of *The Gospel According to Science Fiction: From the Twilight Zone to the Final Frontier*, the blog [SF Gospel](#), and *Pink Beams of Light From the God in the Gutter: The Science Fictional Religion of Philip K. Dick*. He is also a graduate of Harvard Divinity School, a librarian, and an obsessive collector of Ace Doubles.

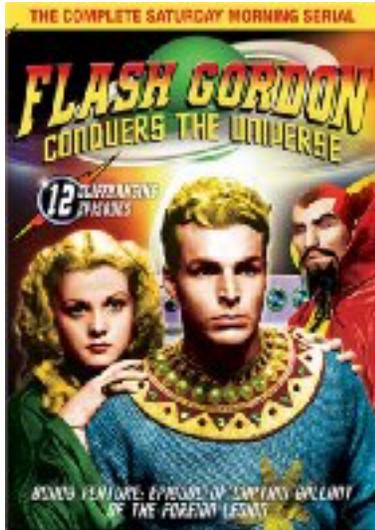


I would love to see a remake of *Alien Nation*! One of the earliest of many great SF shows unjustly canceled by Fox, this show took the gritty SF setting of the James Caan/Mandy Patinkin film and ran with it: what would happen if LA received a massive, sudden influx of alien refugees from a crashed starship? The show's alien Newcomers became a powerful, malleable SF metaphor for lots of thorny issues about race, class, gender, and religion. The more we learned about the Tenctonese, the more fascinating they became, both as a species and as individuals. Strong writing and acting made the show great, and it was truly bold with its SFnal concepts-- George Francisco's pregnancy remains one of the most daring things ever shown on network TV. None of this stopped Fox from axing the show, not only robbing the audience of a second season but even leaving a dangling cliffhanger that wasn't resolved for four years.

Alien Nation was the finest creation of Kenneth Johnson, which is saying something: he's also responsible for the likes of *The Incredible Hulk* and *V*. And with the latter show's recent revival, the time may be ripe for an *Alien Nation* comeback as well. The great thing is that the show wouldn't even need to be changed much. Issues of immigration and intercultural (mis)understanding are, if anything, even more current than they were in 1989-- just look at the success of *District 9*. Perhaps, instead of a pair of homicide detectives, the show's leads could be part of a *24*-style anti-terrorism task force, but beyond that, I see little that would need to be updated. The import thing is the exploration of an alien culture and its interaction with our society, and that idea feels every bit as fresh as it did 20 years ago. The cancellation of *Alien Nation* is Fox's second greatest crime against SF (the worst being the cancellation of *Firefly*, of course). It's time to set things right-- bring back *Alien Nation*!

Kevin Maher

[Kevin Maher](#) is an Emmy-nominated comedy writer and the host of [Kevin Geeks Out](#). You can [read about his pitch](#) to re-invent *The Lone Ranger* as a post-apocalyptic western.



Flash Gordon has always been a beloved fantasy epic. Well, right up until the bland SyFy series from a few years ago. Now it's time for a darker, funnier take on the story.

Dig this: Flash is not the blue-eyed polo champ from Yale - instead he's a disgraced NFL hero: a delusional has-been, facing charges of steroid use, tax fraud, recreational dog fighting, and funding a corrupt religious cult. His trip to the Planet Mongo is a second-chance. (On the one hand Flash escaped his bad press, but at the same time he's pissed that he doesn't get the star treatment.) In the course of his adventures, Flash is unpredictable, ultra-violent, and prone to bouts of depression, cowardice and two-faced betrayals - the likes of which have never been seen in previous incarnations. Like so many sports heroes, this Flash Gordon is a grandiose anti-hero who gets away with murder because he's extremely charismatic and fueled by psychotropic drugs. He fights the good fight, but often for the wrong reasons. Flash wants to defeat Emperor Ming not to save the Earth, but to displace him as the Tyrant of the Galaxy. (This character-driven series should feature Ming as a second-generation Emperor, a moron who inherited the throne and uses his power to work through some Daddy-issues.) To put it in industry terms: It's *Eastbound & Down* as a post-modern space opera.

James Bloomer

[James Bloomer](#) has a PhD in particle physics (he worked at CERN) and has probably forgotten more physics than most people ever learn. He has been running the SF blog [Big Dumb Object](#) for 242 internet years and writing Science Fiction for more than a decade in the real world. His optimistic Science Fiction story *The Rules Of Utopia* will be published in *Daybreak Magazine* in March.

My answer is: none of them.

Yes, I know that sounds like I'm dodging the question, but let me explain.

I like new TV programmes to be, well, new. They don't have to be original in every single aspect, they can riff on a trope or play with older ideas, but there has to be something new, and really that newness should be at the core. I really don't understand the point of remaking something old, because most of the time it will never exceed the original. Because the original was: original!

I expect everyone will point at *Battlestar Galactica* as an exemplar, and I admit that the first two seasons were good. However imagine if those ideas, that style and that effort had been put into something completely new and fresh. It could have been mind-blowing. (And whilst they were at it they could have come up with a decent ending too.)

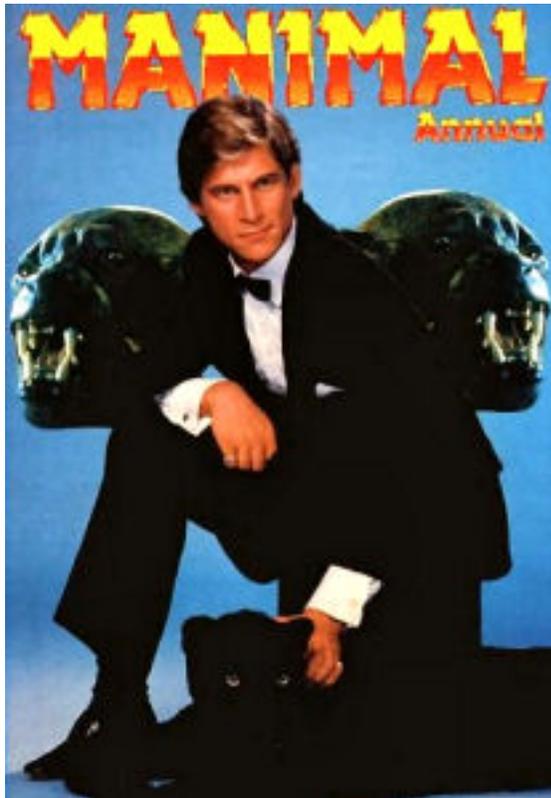
More often than not the remakes seem to be hatched because they are seen to be a safe idea. It's not about art it's about the money. "We can suck in the old fanbase." Nothing amazing will ever be made that way.

Was there a need to remake *V*? Or *Knight Rider*? Or in films *The Dukes Of Hazzard* and *The A-Team*? Really? Or even more bonkers, *The Prisoner*? Iconic TV programmes of their time. They should be left as they are. LEAVE THEM ALONE. FIND SOMETHING NEW. Arrrgghhhhh!

And don't even get me started on remaking UK TV programmes for US audiences....

Joe Crowe

Joe Crowe is the lead writer and editor of RevolutionSF.com, an online magazine of science fiction commentary, criticism, and comedy. He comments on nerd-related news in RevolutionSF Newsblast and wrote the parody [Lord of the Rings: The Novelization](#). At conventions, he hosts the game show *Stump The Geeks*.



Manimal.

That's right. *Manimal.*

It ran for six episodes in 1983. It was a typical 1970s and 1980s detective show, with a detective tracking down balding white men in tweed suits. Like every 70s and 80s action hero, Manimal saved mom and pop grocery stores from land barons, and stopped mobsters from selling guns to orphans. Or something like that.

But the difference was the detective *changed into animals.*

The shape-shifting special effects were awesome, by Rick Baker, who did the werewolf stuff in *American Werewolf in London* and *Thriller*. There were only three shape-change scenes. So he became a panther and a hawk in every single episode. He became a snake once, in a scene apparently so expensive it only aired once.

Manimal would have been at home in comic books or pulps. He was a super-smart billionaire playboy, like Bruce Wayne, Tony Stark, or Doc Savage. But Batman, Iron Man, and Doc Savage could not turn into any animals. Not even ONE.

The only update the show requires is the animal-change effects. They were the best part of the show. The update should keep the excellently dramatic shape changes, where Manimal's flesh bubbled, and his skin and bones distended. But a dab of morphing and CGI can make all that easier. So easy that this show not only should return, but it must.

John Anealio

[John Anealio](#) writes songs about Science Fiction & Fantasy. He has released an album of original Sci-Fi & Fantasy inspired music entitled [Sci-Fi Songs](#) and has had one of his songs published by Pyr in the appendix of Mike Resnick's [Starship:Flagship](#). You can download tons of free music and listen to his podcast at <http://scifisongs.blogspot.com>.



The release of the original *Star Wars* film in 1977 can be viewed as the "Big Bang" of modern Science Fiction in popular culture. The early 80's are littered with countless movies and TV shows that attempted to cash in on the success of *Star Wars*. The most notorious figure in regards to profiting from the popularity of *Star Wars* is almost certainly *Battlestar Galactica* and *Buck Rogers* producer Glan A. Larson. 20th Century Fox even went as far as suing the makers of *Battlestar Galactica* for copyright infringement.

Larson had a knack for making Sci-Fi shows for TV. One of his lesser known and shorter lived creations was 1984's *Automan*. Visually, the show borrowed heavily from *Tron*, substituting a sweet phosphorescent blue Lamborghini Countach for the light cycles. *Automan*'s premise was rather interesting and surprisingly; a bit ahead of its time. A nerdy police officer/computer programmer creates a crime fighting program that can materialize as a hologram in the real world to help solve tough cases. The two would even merge into one being to share abilities and knowledge.

Even though there were only 13 episodes of *Automan*, it is ripe for a reboot. From *The Matrix* to Neal Stephenson's **Snow Crash**, the concept of a virtual reality has been thoroughly examined. Why not have a humorous crime

drama that explores the intersection of the real and virtual worlds? Perhaps a MMO character can suddenly appear in the actual world and have to deal with our reality. There seems to be a wealth of potential story lines; busting up gold farming rings, Second Life affairs and murders, fraud. The list seems to be endless.

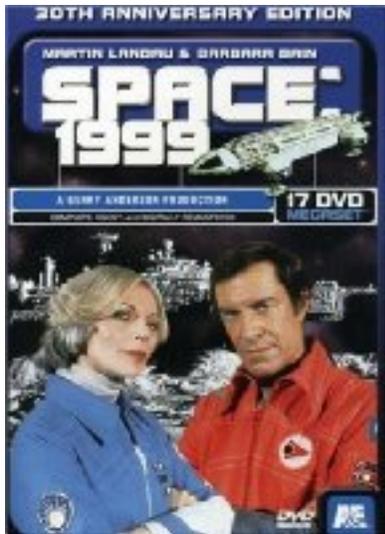
Michael L. Wentz

[Michael L. Wentz](#) is a writer and filmmaker. His young-adult novel **Resurrection of Liberty** was a nominee for the 2006 Prometheus Award and won the 2006 USA Book News Best Books Award. His short film *Dietrich*, which he wrote and produced, was recently sold to a worldwide distributor. He has two films in development including *Atman* and *Dream Raiders*, both slated for production in 2010 and 2011. You can find him on Twitter ([@michaellwentz](#)) and over at his blog [PhantomReflections.com](#).

This was a tough question for me. Anyone who knows me is keenly aware that I don't like remakes. With DVDs and the Internet, our access to old television programs is better than ever. There are so many new and fresh ideas out there. I think it is a cultural benefit and maybe even a moral obligation to introduce new shows, new legacies, and new ways of looking at things. Just about everyone in and around Los Angeles has an idea for a TV show or even a fully developed script, and some are rather good. Yet, it's a lot easier to get a remake produced than a smashing new idea. I think that's a tragedy. Ron Moore remade *Battlestar Galactica* because it was easier to get a remake green-lit than a whole new show, and in this case it worked out in all our favors.

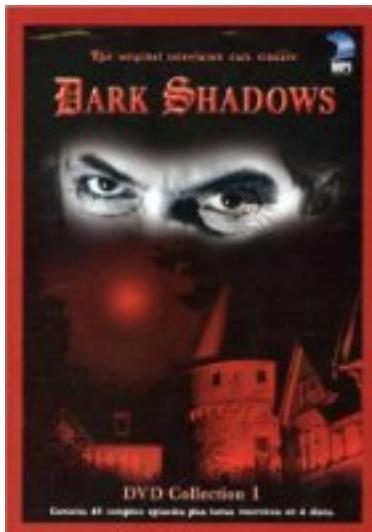
Still, I was tasked with coming up with what show should be remade or re-imagined in the second decade of the 21st century. Surprisingly, I came up with two--not bad for a guy who doesn't really like remakes. I did consider *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century*, but Frank Miller is working on a reboot for a movie slated for 2011.

Let's dig in:



Space 1999

Okay, you can't really call it *Space 1999*, since we're eleven years past that, but you could call it *Space 2099*. I think someone will build a moon base by then... Anyway, I ate up the original series back in the day, and even with all the implausible science, dropped characters in the second season, and other problems that were common in TV series of the time, I dug it. But I think a revival of the series would mean throwing out the original premise of the moon being blown out of Earth's orbit by a huge nuclear explosion. We keep Moon Base Alpha, the cool looking Eagles, and many of the major characters from the first season, but instead have a new catalyst where the Earth befalls a catastrophe that cuts off all those in space from the planet below. It could be a plague, a shift in the magnetic poles, massive weapons release, or anything that would plunge the world into chaos, preventing a return from those outside the atmosphere. A plague would be the most believable and a strong reason why those in space would not want to return. Moon Base Alpha in 2099 would be host to a whole city of settlers, including miners, and deep space exploration platforms. There could be another similar settlement on Mars that conflicts with the Alphans on their way to deal with the problem back on Earth, and the governance of those off world. *Space 2099*, the series, would focus on the struggle of the Alphans to survive being cut off from Earth, all the while trying to save the people back home. It would be a great platform to deal with all types of social issues like food, water, population control, government, commerce, and even the physiological and psychological pitfalls of living on the Moon for long periods.



Dark Shadows

The soap opera-esque *Dark Shadows* ran from 1966-1971 and centered around a wealthy Maine family and their undead relative Barnabas Collins. I know it was remade in the early 90s, but hey, it's twenty years later. It's due! Seriously, vampires are hot right now. You have *True Blood* on HBO, *The Vampire Diaries*, and *The Twilight Saga*. Vampires are the new zombies, and what better vampire to raise from the dead than Barnabas Collins. In order for a remake of *Dark Shadows* to be successful today it would require the pacing to be sped up considerably. The soap opera format of the first two incarnations would be too slow for modern tastes. Also, the setting should move from a small, isolated town to a medium-sized city like Seattle or Vancouver. The story would revolve around Barnabas's quest to rediscover his humanity through love, all the while fighting the demon that's inside him. The Collins family would be the owners of a huge pharmaceutical firm that was started by Barnabas in the late 1800s. What would be ironic is that as Barnabas seeks to solve his condition through medical research, he actually helps the humans that he needs to feed on to survive. There's a potential for a massive character arc; I think doing the series from Barnabas's perspective is a must. Incidentally, what do I think would be the worst remake ever? *The Howdy Doody Show* re-imagined for the 21st century, exclusively starring methane powered robots. But honestly, I don't think network TV is a healthy place right now for any new genre shows. The whole business model is changing and the one they're working under currently is a disaster. The big mid-season breaks, constantly adjusting schedules, showrunner of the week, and lack of network commitment to genre shows doesn't allow for an intelligent program to get off the ground and maintain a following. *LOST* is a notable exception, but they did start out with a bang (literally) and a huge amount of action, which hooked everyone right off the bat. Cable is a different story, and let's be thankful for SyFy, TNT, HBO, and the USA Network. Just, please... no methane powered robots.

Peggy Kolm

[Peggy Kolm](#) combined her years of training in the biosciences with decades of reading and watching science fiction to create the [Biology in Science Fiction](#) web site.



As someone who watched far too much TV growing up, I thought this was going to be a really easy question. But then I realized that most of the shows I watched most avidly as a kid have already been remade. *Star Trek* has already had four different TV incarnations since the original (not to mention nearly a dozen movies). The recent *Bionic Woman* remake wasn't very successful, and it's too soon to try again. *Battlestar Galactica* doesn't need another reboot. And *Doctor Who* is still running. But there are a couple of TV shows from my youth that I wouldn't mind seeing redone.

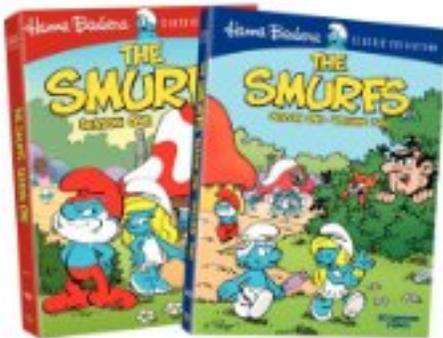
The first that comes to mind is *Space 1999*. That's not so much because of the plots, which I don't think made that much sense (especially the faster-than-light travel in a moon base), but more for the look and feel of the show. So many recent SF TV series have gone for the dark and gritty look, including the current "lost in space" incarnation *Stargate: Universe*, I'm ready for a space exploration series that's more stylish.

I'd also like to see a *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century*-like show, but starring a woman. Why should boys always get to be the ones frozen for a half a century to awake in an adventure-filled future? It could help make up for the serious lack of female action heroes, especially if the new Buck also had a female sidekick. (But there absolutely should not be a goofy-voiced robot. As I wrote this, I felt compelled to bidi-bidi-bidi and my husband is now looking at me strangely. It's like a curse.)

But really what I'd like to see is something new and different rather than yet another remake. There have been few SF TV shows that immediately hooked me as an adult - *Babylon 5*, *X-Files*, the first season of the *Battlestar Galactica* reboot, *Futurama*, *Lost* - and that is in large part because there wasn't any other show quite like them on the air. Give me something fresh to watch!

Ken Ferguson

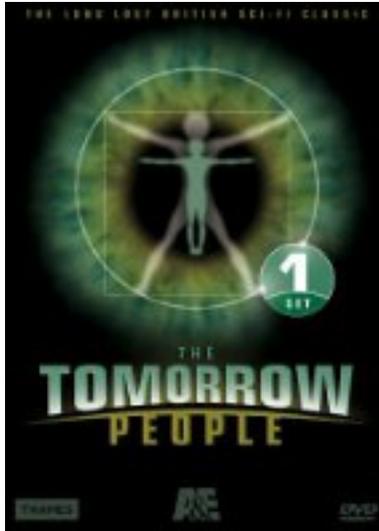
Ken runs the SFF review and discussion blog [Neth Space](#) and participates widely in the world of on-line SFF fandom. Stop on by sometime. As his answer to this question indicates, Ken doesn't actually watch much television and isn't really all that qualified for this particularly Mind Meld, but who wouldn't want blue Smurf sex on TV?



I think that we need a remake of *The Smurfs*. To do it right it should be a late-night series on Showtime or equivalent because it's obviously an adult program with heavy erotic and drug-use themes. Of particular importance is how an entire race of creatures can exist with only one female member - Smurfette is clearly the central figure of this soft-porn remake. And *Avatar* has shown us all the blue-skin is HOT and that blue alien sex sells.

Summer Brooks

Summer Brooks is the Executive Producer for [FarPoint Media](#), and co-host on [The Babylon Podcast](#) and [Slice of SciFi](#). She's contributed to the *Battlestar Galactica* collection **So Say We All** and to **The Complete Guide to Writing Fantasy, Vol 3**, and is hard at work on pulling together guidebooks on a couple of SF TV shows that are close to her heart.



Because of my fondness for the shows, my top-of-the-head answers would normally be *Crusade*, *Firefly*, *Charlie Jade* and *Moonlight*... shows that, in my opinion, either weren't given the time and attention needed to let their audience find the shows, or were simply airing at the right time on the wrong networks.

But after that initial dreamy rush, what I would truly want to see happen with those particular shows would be a continuation of the interrupted shows and storylines, not a remake of what's already been.

So my real choices for remakes or reimaginings fall into the realms of 1970s and 1980s British sci-fi: either *Sapphire and Steel*, or *The Tomorrow People*.

I'm a fan of *The Tomorrow People*, both the original British series and the Canadian remake from the early 1990s that aired on Nickelodeon. It's a series that I think could be successfully updated, and would be a top choice as a project to work on.

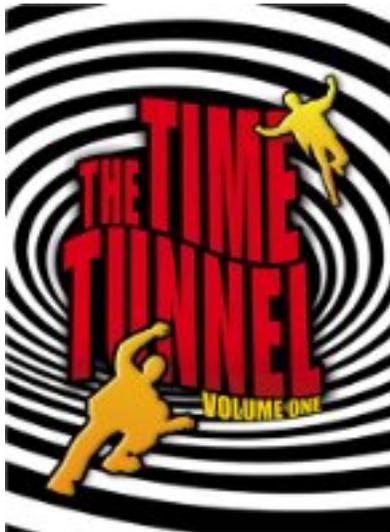
If I were producing a television reimagining of *The Tomorrow People*, first I'd incorporate an international group of players on several fronts, in terms of both the scientific group doing the research and the youngsters beginning to exhibit powers. The scientists wouldn't be limited to one facility, but there'd be several across different countries, linked together to research and track the unfolding phenomenon.

Then I'd set up several different dynamics regarding the teams trying to make contact with the kids, intending to keep the story engaging and the audience on their toes.

The combination of mystery and paranormal is a fond personal favorite, and a reimagining of this story is one I think I would have fun with, from both a creative and a viewer standpoint.

Mike Glycer

[Mike Glycer](#) writes the science fiction fan newszine File 770. Links to PDF copies of the zine can be found on Mike's blog, at [File770.com](#). In 2008 both Mike Glycer and his wife Diana Pavlac Glycer were nominated for Hugo awards: File 770 for Best Fanzine and **The Company They Keep: C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien as Writers in Community** for Best Related Book.



Time Tunnel comes immediately to mind as a candidate for a remake. The theme music made it unforgettable even if the scripts didn't. (Easy to understand - *Time Tunnel's* theme composer Johnny Williams is someone we know better as John Williams.)

It's clear that with just a few tweaks the *Time Tunnel* concept could become a TV series appealing to the booming audience for alternate history stories. Actually that's so clear G.R.R. Martin already did it 20 years ago. (A contributor to this very Mind Meld may be recommending his *Doorways* for a remake.) So I am going in a different direction.

In the original *Time Tunnel*, a secret time travel research project as vast as the space program is threatened with losing its funding. To save it, Tony, one of the scientists, attempts to prove the technology by using the Time Tunnel to send himself back into history. Tony lands on the Titanic *en route* to its tragic rendezvous with an iceberg. The Tunnel staff can't bring him back. Doug, another scientist, has the Tunnel send him back to the Titanic so he can try to save his friend. He doesn't succeed in changing history and the best the Time Tunnel staff can do is save Tony and Doug by

shifting them to another point in the past (and the next week's new adventure.)

They say times change, but that's true everywhere but in time travel shows. Tony and Doug didn't save the Titanic. They didn't prevent Pearl Harbor. With a kind of unconscious satire, the *Time Tunnel* of the Sixties dramatized America's confidence in its ability to fix everybody else's problems and its inexplicably bad results.

And in contrast with other science fiction shows that squeeze countless episodes from the temporary failure of futuristic technology (like *Star Trek's* temperamental warp drives and transporter), time-traveling series always begin with the technology going permanently awry. People can leave the present. They can travel between moments in the past (their lives depend on it!) But it makes a far more dramatic series if the heroes live under the continuous threat of never finding their way home.

In contrast, this *Time Tunnel* is being remade for an audience in 2010 America. Our economy is on artificial respiration. Politics are just a tournament in incivility. The country has become infinitely splintered into identity groups clamoring about their victimization.

That's why the new Tony and Doug *don't* want to come home. Every episode will begin with them using another ruse to gain access to the control room and head into the Tunnel hoping to permanently escape to a golden era of the past. To their despair, they'll always be tracked down by the Time Tunnel staff and forcibly retrieved, along with whatever famous historical figure has given them refuge. Then the project staff will inevitably blab about one of America's infinite problems within hearing of the famous figure so that he or she can respond in surprise, scoffing at how easily that problem would have been solved by their culture of origin.

Imagine General Heywood Kirk dressing down his wayward explorers: "Tony, you and Doug tried to hide out with the Ingalls family. When we dragged you and Pa Ingalls back here somebody told him about our homeless problem. He wanted to go down to Skid Row and organize a wagon train of them to go homestead in South Dakota!"

"And what about the time you hid out with the Duke of Wellington when he was prime minister of England. He was the biggest opponent of Catholic emancipation til that threatened to topple his government and he switched sides. When we got him here Senator Specter and Senator Lieberman couldn't wait to take him to lunch and ask for pointers!"

Today's Americans are conditioned to be accepting of every culture but our own.

Also, experience having blunted the can-do optimism of the Sixties, instead of looking down on people of the past in a kind of chronological snobbery, there's a tendency to wonder why our ancestors didn't seem to have some of these problems - maybe we've just forgotten their solutions.

That's why the motto of the new *Time Tunnel* will be: Those who have not mastered the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them. And so are those who have....



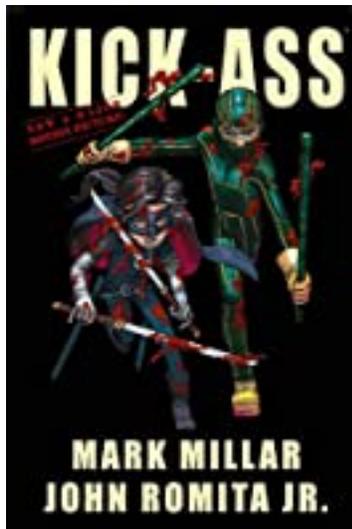
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Posted by [John DeNardo](#) at Wednesday February 17, 2010 at 12:29 AM

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April 15, 2010 – SF Signal:

[GUEST POST] Gabriel McKee on Mark Millar's Kick-Ass...and Why it Stinks



Gabriel McKee is the author of *The Gospel According to Science Fiction* and the blog [SFGospel.com](#), where he explores religious ideas in science fiction. He lectured on superheroes, myth, and justice at the 2009 Cornerstone Festival, and is currently at work on a project exploring the theology of Superman.

"Preview audiences love *Kick-Ass*," says the voice-over in the latest trailer for what is sure to be the biggest superhero movie of the Spring. By all accounts, it's the most faithful big-screen adaptation of a comic book in recent memory, and fans and new viewers alike seem to appreciate the results. The cover of the comic's first issue, which loudly proclaims the

arrival of "the greatest super hero comic of all-time," and most comics fans seem to agree: Newsarama called the original comic series by Mark Millar and John Romita, Jr. "a fantastic piece of visceral, satirical storytelling." BleedingCool.com describes it as "a Tarantinoesque parable [about]... what it takes to be a hero." Everyone seems to agree: **Kick-Ass** was a great comic, and will surely make a great movie.

So how good is **Kick-Ass**? How effective a satire is it? And what does it have to say about heroism, super and otherwise? Unfortunately **Kick-Ass**, despite the enthusiasm that has attended it at every turn, is a hollow exercise, a satire of the superhero genre that completely misses the point about what superheroes are. In short, the comic is not something to be excited about, and the movie is unlikely to be much better.

Kick-Ass is narrated throughout by Dave Lizewski, an average, run-of-the-mill geek. He loves comics and video games, has trouble getting a girlfriend, and is basically the definitive social outcast. He's the type of character that comics fans have been identifying with since Superman first put on Clark Kent's glasses. But do we *want* to identify with him? We spend a lot of time reading Dave's thoughts in the story's captions, and they're not the thoughts of a nice person: he's petty, selfish, arrogant, and, in his personal life at least, passive. Once he puts on a costume and starts attempting to beat up criminals, does he change, gain a new outlook on life, grow? Not at all. Dave Lizewski in **Kick-Ass** #8 is the same petty, selfish, arrogant, and, yes, passive jerk he was in **Kick-Ass** #1. He starts out unlikeable, and stays that way. The character has no arc to speak of: the only change he goes through is when he puts on the costume for the first time, and that happens within the first 30 pages of the story.

Some interesting things *do* happen with other characters. There are a couple legitimately surprising turns involving meta-heroes Big Daddy and the Red Mist, and the prepubescent vigilante Hit-Girl undergoes some extreme changes in the story's conclusion. But that's all strictly B-story. It's problematic for a story's central character to remain so unchanged in the course of a narrative. If anything, Lizewski is even less likable at the end of issue 8, and as a result the whole story feels inconsequential.

But lack of an arc isn't the only problem with Dave Lizewski. It's clear from **Kick-Ass**'s opening scenes that Dave Lizewski is supposed to be, if not an everyman, at least an everyfanboy. What does it say, then, that the character with whom the readers are so clearly supposed to identify is such an unlikable jerk? It's as if **Kick-Ass** is telling superhero fans and comics readers how sad and miserable its author imagines their lives to be. It's not as bad, in this regard, as Millar's earlier series **Wanted**. That story ends with

a direct-to-the-reader sermon about "your level on the pathetic-o-meter," concluding with a splash page of the protagonist's sneering face beneath the caption "This is my face when I'm fucking you in the ass." Reading **Kick-Ass** is a similarly masochistic exercise. The story seems to be saying: "You're just like this guy. He's pathetic. You're still reading? Wow, you *are* pathetic!" It encourages a cycle of self-loathing that attempts to support the ugly picture of fanboys that **Kick-Ass** paints-and the more the readers eat it up, the more correct it becomes.

Moreover, **Kick-Ass** suggests that the entire kind of fantasy that superhero fans enjoy is foolish, that there's something inherently perverse about both superheroes as characters and the people who enjoy them. This is ultimately worse than Garth Ennis's widely-documented dislike of superheroes, culminating in his anti-superhero book **The Boys**, because Ennis made his name in other genres. But Millar wrote, and continues to write, very mainstream superhero comics, many of them quite good. But stories like **Kick-Ass** imply that he despises the entire imaginative exchange between superhero readers and superhero stories. What else could be the purpose of tearing down the genre's mythic idealism and so aggressively establishing so-called "real world" rules in its place?

Of course, we're talking about the comic book here: something else happens in translating this character to the big screen. While it might be fair to assume that the average comic reader is something of a geek (however that term might be described), the same can't be said about the average cinemagoer. Movies are mass culture with an audience comic companies can only dream of, and, inevitably, that means the audience for a movie is more "average," more spread-out, and, yes, less geeky. So the intended identification of a reader of the comic with the "geek" character won't necessarily happen with a watcher of the film. "Me" will turn into "them," and thus the film will reinforce broader culture's ostracization of the geek. Geeky readers of the comic may be entering into a cycle of self-loathing, but at least they can be said, in some sense, to be laughing with themselves; *Kick-Ass* the movie can only laugh *at* them.

For the moment, though, let's give **Kick-Ass** the benefit of the doubt: it's commenting on superhero fans, because its goal is to critique the superhero genre. Right? Unfortunately, it misdefines that genre, and thus misses its target completely. Peter Coogan's book **Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre** explores, in great depth, the defining traits of the superhero. And the first and most central trait he identifies isn't extraordinary abilities, a secret identity, or a cool costume-it's a sense of mission. What makes superheroes heroes is their sense of "great responsibility," a driving need to fight injustice. And it's precisely this trait that **Kick-Ass** lacks. He has no

"trauma" at his origin; as he states himself, "Our origin is we were bored." But boredom and a costume do not a superhero make, and **Kick-Ass's** apparent belief that it is a superhero story is its biggest failing.

The problem is that Kick-Ass wants to be a superhero, but his conception of heroism is all wrong. "We only get one life," he says, "and I wanted mine to be exciting." He sees the thrills, the violence, but not the underlying sense of moral mission. He says himself that he has no real origin, that "It didn't take a trauma to make you wear a mask... Just the perfect combination of loneliness and despair." But Spider-Man or Batman's trauma isn't just a throwaway aspect of their stories; it's the guiding force behind their every action. A hero who begins with nothing but "loneliness and despair," not an all-consuming moral imperative to improve the world, is by definition a nihilistic figure. Dave Lizewski is really not a superhero at all-in genre classic terms, he's Peter Parker after the radioactive spider-bite but before the death of Uncle Ben. His actions aren't altruistic in the least-he continues putting on the costume because he likes to ride the ego wave that comes from his Youtube fame. It would be one thing if **Kick-Ass** excluded this element to explore what happens to the mythic core of the superhero genre when the sense of mission is removed, but that implies a kind of consciousness that just doesn't seem to be there. **Kick-Ass** simply doesn't feel like a complete story, and it's largely a result of the character's lack of any identifiable motivation.

In a [recent interview](#) Millar stated that Kick-Ass dons his costume "because it's the right thing to do. In a weird way, if you push past all the blood and the swearing, it's quite a moral tale." But because the character lacks a complete origin, a *reason* to think that what he's doing is the right thing, it's *not* a moral tale-in fact, it's a decidedly *amoral* one. And without the sense of a moral mission, he's simply not a superhero. Without murdered parents, Batman wouldn't be a hero; he'd just be a guy who dresses up and punch people-which is basically what Kick-Ass is. In short, the book simply doesn't understand the genre it purports to be commenting on. Superheroes work in large part because of the heroic myth at their core. In throwing out this central, defining trait of that myth, **Kick-Ass** loses any resonance it might have otherwise had.

So what happens to a superhero's sense of justice when that moral mission is removed? **Kick-Ass** illustrates it pretty well: his first "mission" is an attempt to beat up some graffiti writers. They're not engaged in a violent crime (until he provokes them, at least). The would-be hero, apparently buying into the widely-debunked "broken windows" theory, enforces white, middle class social order by using violence against the poor and non-white. In short, **Kick-Ass's** first action scene is disturbingly, uncomfortably, and

unavoidably a scene in which a white man attempts to beat three black men with a club-while calling them "homos," no less. That he loses the fight in no way diminishes the inherent problems of racism, classism, and homophobia in the encounter, and, by extension, Kick-Ass's complete lack of the sense of justice that is the defining trait of the superhero.

Don't misinterpret me here: I'm not saying Millar is racist, classist, or homophobic. But he *does* seem to be blind to the undertones of those problems in his narrative. (I *do* think that Garth Ennis is legitimately homophobic, as exemplified in the anal-sex-joke-obsessed **The Boys**, but that's an argument for elsewhere.) And once you've noticed the ugly role that race and class play in **Kick-Ass**, it's tough to "read around" them. (If you'd like to read more on this point, Erin Polgreen's detailed exploration of the role in race and gender in Millar's work goes into far more detail than I do [here](#), and is well worth reading.)

In any event, there's something very *non-heroic* about Kick-Ass's inaugural use of violence. This isn't Superman righting wrongs and championing the oppressed; it's strictly authoritarian violence-disproportionate, mistargeted, and utterly unjustifiable. And yet we're still supposed to think, on some level, that this makes him a hero-and, perhaps worse, that *society* would view this kind of violence as heroic, since it's Youtube videos of these first encounters that turn Kick-Ass into a cultural phenomenon. Works like **The Dark Knight Returns** and **Watchmen** propose that superhero violence may be a little bit fascist, but that kind of questioning doesn't seem to be going on here. We get the authoritarian violence here-but not a considered *critique* of that violence.

As if the above weren't enough, **Kick-Ass** simply isn't *fun*. It aggressively dis-enchants the concept of the superhero, showing the myriad reasons that this particular type of fantasy world could not sustain itself in a "realistic" universe. The first issue opens with a would-be hero falling to his death instead of flying-played in a slapstick style entirely without the pathos that Chris Ware brought to the exact same image in **Jimmy Corrigan**. **Kick-Ass** demolishes fantasy and thinks doing so is funny, that somehow an ugly "realistic" world is inherently better than an idealized fantasy world.

What makes it particularly confusing is that Mark Millar also done the exact opposite. His miniseries **1985**, written at more or less the same time as **Kick-Ass**, presents a comic book geek whose "real-world" small town is invaded Marvel supervillains, and he has to travel into their fictional universe to bring back heroes who can defeat them. It's a beautiful story, one that highlights everything that's good about superheroes, superhero fans, and the idealism of the fantastic-in short, it's the total opposite of **Kick-Ass**, to

the extent that it's difficult to believe they came from the same pen. The setting of that story is telling-Millar had to go to 1985, the year before **Watchmen** and (especially) **The Dark Knight Returns**, to find that kind of idealism. Is **Kick-Ass** nihilistic, ugly, and utterly anti-mythic-the end result of Frank Miller's authoritarian take on superheroes? And does the movie adaptation's inevitable success represent the chickens released by the similarly nihilistic film *The Dark Knight* coming home to roost?

In any event, between its misunderstanding of the superhero genre, its relentless authoritarian violence, and its apparent intention to instill self-loathing in its readers, reading **Kick-Ass** is anything but a fun experience. It's draining to inhabit Millar's ugly conception of a realistic world, and that is ultimately why I consider **Kick-Ass** such an unpleasant mess.



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Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) at Thursday April 15, 2010 at 12:25 AM

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As an RD reader you now have an assignment.

On the western side of the pond, *Doctor Who* has always been a bit of a cult thing. Outside of its appearances on PBS in the late '70s and early '80s, the BBC's longest-running science fiction show in history has rarely been seen in the U.S. It always carried more than a bit of mystique, serving as a sort of secret handshake among the most discerning and dedicated geeks. When BBC Wales resurrected the show after a 16-year hiatus in 2005, word began to spread that the new *Who* was something incredible. Under the guidance of producer Russell T. Davies (creator of *Queer as Folk*), *Doctor Who* quickly transformed from "acquired taste" into "essential viewing."

The new show is sophisticated, witty, and (most importantly) fun. It's been showered with accolades in its native Britain, winning a slew of BAFTAs and turning into a proper cultural phenomenon. Its success brought it back to televisions in the U.S. for the first time in nearly 30 years, airing first on Syfy and now on BBC America. So viewers on both sides of the Atlantic are finally able to see a remarkable science fiction show that doesn't shy away from issues of philosophy, ethics, politics, and theology. For instance, there's the first season episode "Dalek," in which the Doctor's face-off with a

representative of his most hated enemy turns into a meditation on the notions of hatred and endless war.

Then there's second season's "[Gridlock](#)," where the Doctor rescues the oppressed masses trapped in a planet-wide traffic jam, wrapping a bleak political metaphor up with a spectacular re-conception of Plato's cave. And don't get us started on the Biblical imagery of the season three finale "Last of the Time Lords."

In short, *Doctor Who* is just about the best thing on television, and for the duration of the current season, we'll be providing some insight into the themes into which the show delves. The assignment referred to above: watch *Doctor Who* (you can [stream](#) all of this season's episodes for free) and join the conversation in the comments section. There's no better time to jump in—the producers intend this season as an entry point for new viewers.

Doctor Who airs in the U.S. on BBC America on Saturdays at 9PM/8C (and though it's by no means necessary, those interested in watching the first four seasons can find them streaming on Netflix).

Scheduled participants:

*[Gabriel McKee](#): RD contributor and author of *The Gospel According to Science Fiction: From the Twilight Zone to the Final Frontier*. He blogs at [SF Gospel](#);

*James F. McGrath: Associate professor of religion at Butler University. He blogs at [Exploring Our Matrix](#);

*Thomas Bertonneau: Received his Ph.D in comparative literature from UCLA and co-author of *The Truth is Out There: Christian Faith and the Classics of TV Science Fiction*;

*[Joseph Laycock](#): RD contributor and a doctoral candidate studying religion and society at Boston University. He is the author of *Vampires Today: The Truth About Modern Vampires*.

And now, without further ado, James McGrath and I reflect on the first three episodes.

— Gabriel McKee

Gabriel McKee_____

After over a year wandering in the wilderness of a semi-hiatus, *Doctor Who* fans have at last reached the promised land: a new season, with a new actor in the lead role (Matt Smith) and a new executive producer, Steven Moffat. The last few years have been a great time for the longest-running science fiction show in television history. Though older episodes in the continuing saga of the time-traveling Doctor have generally been relegated to "cult" status—at least in the U.S.—the 2005 revival, under the guiding hand of *Queer as Folk* creator Russell T. Davies, brought fast pacing, sharp wit, and thematic depth, vastly expanding the show's audience. The first few episodes of the new season

are a proving ground for Moffat—could he sustain the momentum of Davies’ four seasons?

Some background: The Doctor (his name does not seem to actually be “Who”) is a 917-year-old Time Lord, an alien time traveler. His time machine is the Tardis, which looks like a police box—think phone booth—but it’s bigger on the inside than the outside, can fly, and may actually be a living creature. He adventures through time and space, usually accompanied by one or more human companions who assist him in righting wrongs, liberating the oppressed, fighting alien menaces, and averting unspeakable disasters. His alien origins give him a sharp mind and extraordinary longevity, but his main superpower—and the concept with which the show’s longevity can largely be credited—is his ability to “regenerate” into a new body whenever he dies. He’s met his demise ten times now, each time emerging with a new face and new personality.

The first three episodes of the current season use that regeneration as the jumping-off point for a sort of trilogy exploring the show’s interlocking themes of identity, morality, and integrity. As years pass and more actors step into the role, it becomes increasingly important for each performer to distinguish their version of the Doctor from those that have gone before. It’s not just the Doctor’s body that changes with each new incarnation; his personality is altered as well, sometimes quite drastically. Thus every new regeneration requires a story that considers, at least to some degree, the question of identity: what makes me me? In the Doctor’s case, virtually everything about him has changed since his debut in 1963, from his age and appearance to his mannerisms and behavior. The one thing that has remained constant is his morality, his deeply-felt need to protect the weak from the strong.

In the case of the first episode of the current season (“The Eleventh Hour”), the “strong” are some extradimensional jailers named the Atraxi, who are trying to track down a shape-shifting convict who has escaped to Earth. The “weak,” then, are us—the human race. At the story’s climax, the Doctor positions himself as the planet’s protector, which confuses the Atraxi avatar (a giant floating eyeball): “You are not of this world,” it states. “No,” replies the Doctor, “but I’ve put a lot of work into it.” Perhaps more telling is the episode’s opening scenes, in which the new regeneration’s first appearance is prefaced by a short scene of a child praying. When the Tardis crash-lands in her garden moments later, it suggests the Doctor is... what? An angel? A messiah?

Some clues to that puzzle become clear in the second episode (“The Beast Below”). The Doctor and Amy—the first episode’s praying girl, now an adult—materialize in an enormous city floating through space. This, they learn, is London, thousands of years in Earth’s future and removed from the Earth to space in order to protect its populace from some nasty solar flares. There’s something strange afoot on Starship UK—a strangeness perhaps best illustrated by its “voting booths,” which show the ship’s citizens a video and then gives them two options—to protest what they have seen, or to forget the video’s contents, having their memories selectively erased. The voting booth won’t show the Doctor the video—it can tell he’s not human, and thus not entitled to vote—but he chooses the “protest” button, sight unseen. “This is what I do,” he explains, “every time, every day, every second.” This sums up the Doctor brilliantly—a being who will always,

always push the “protest” button. And his action frees the people of Starship UK from their mysterious bondage, their self-imposed amnesia. The Doctor is an anarchist messiah, a man capable of transforming simple protest into liberation.

There’s something else at play in this episode that digs a bit deeper into the question of moral identity. The Doctor learns the mysterious fact that the city-ship’s populace has repeatedly voted to forget, which is—spoiler warning!—that their city is built on the back of an enormous space whale, the last of its kind, and they are torturing it to keep their city moving through space. This puts the Doctor in a difficult situation—he can’t let the beast go, because it would cause the city to crumble and its inhabitants to perish. But neither can he let it go on in agony. He decides that his only option is to lobotomize the creature, allowing the city to carry on but essentially murdering the last representative of an ancient species. But this is not a decision he makes lightly: he declares that once the task is done he must “find a new name, because I won’t be the Doctor anymore.” Fortunately a last-minute solution is found, but it’s interesting that the Doctor puts his dilemma in these terms: to compromise on an issue of fundamental morality is not simply a question of action, but of identity. To cross a moral line, in this case the exigent use of violence, is to give up one’s true self.

But no sooner is this type of moral dichotomy presented than the show complicates it. The following episode, “Victory of the Daleks,” brings the Doctor and Amy to London at the height of the Blitz. There, they find the Doctor’s oldest and most hated enemies, the Daleks—robotic alien killing machines that, in the past, have sought to exterminate all “inferior” life forms throughout the universe. But they’re not on Earth on a campaign of domination—they’re helping Britain fight off the Luftwaffe. The Daleks have always been evil, and the Doctor cannot comprehend why they might be pretending to be good. “You hate me,” he tells one of them (while beating it with a wrench), “you want to kill me... You are my enemy, and I am yours. You are everything I despise, the worst thing in all creation.”

The Daleks’ response to his tirade is sinister: “Testimony accepted.” The Daleks on Earth—spoiler alert again!—are the scattered remnants of a once-great invasion fleet, but they lack the ability to rebuild their forces. They have a “progenitor”—basically a Dalek factory—but it won’t recognize them as Daleks. They require the Doctor’s statement of their identity to rebuild their fleet. In a sense, the Doctor’s insistence on a sharp moral dichotomy between himself and the Daleks, his absolute statement that he is good and they are evil, is the cause of their evil. His hatred of his enemy becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy—a lesson that the proponents of many an ancient conflict would do well to consider. Here is a case where something that could be considered a “moral compromise”—the forgiveness of a hated enemy—could have averted a potential disaster.

Two things are clear from the opening “trilogy” of *Doctor Who*’s new season: first, that issues of ethics are central to the show’s themes, and second, the program is in excellent hands following Davies’ departure. It’s going to be an exciting series, and I am definitely looking forward to what conundrums unfold in the weeks to come. Once more into the interdimensional breach!

James F. McGrath

Article 142, Section 24 of the Shadow Proclamation:

A time traveler shall not, under penalty of confiscation of his time-travelling equipment, utilize time travel so as to make an impression upon a child, and then travel to the future and enter into a romantic relationship with said individual as an adult, benefitting from a formative influence on the aforementioned person in childhood which must under such circumstances be considered unduly manipulative.

OK, this is not *really* part of the Shadow Proclamation. But *should it be*? Since *Doctor Who* returned to television in 2005, we have seen the Doctor break this rule at least twice: in his interactions with Reinette (Madame de Pompadour) in the episode “The Girl in the Fireplace” and more recently in the case of Amelia (Amy) Pond.

Should this sort of thing be illegal in intergalactic law? Not that anyone would likely be able to track the Doctor down and bring charges against him. But science fiction regularly provides an excellent venue for reflecting on issues like cultural relativity and morality, and this is one example.

If we imagine a race of time travelers like the Time Lords, for instance, it might well be customary and be culturally acceptable to utilize time travel in selecting or seeking a romantic partner. If so, should the moral sensibilities of humans be imposed upon them? And should humans be protected if the last of the Time Lords decides he has no alternative but to look beyond his own species for a companion of this sort?

In the second episode of the new season, we are presented a morality tale. As the earth was dying, Britain escaped into space – on the back of a space whale, the last of its kind. The latter is kept imprisoned and tortured to keep the ship moving through space. The population is asked at regular intervals to vote on whether to continue this course of action – and, at the same time, erase their memory of it. This is a parable, and hardly a subtle one, for the ways civilizations are built less literally on the backs of the enslaved, the exploited, and the oppressed, and the choice that is regularly made to move into the future benefitting from past exploitation, and yet choosing to forget it to whatever extent we can. The message of the episode seems to be that remembering is better, whatever the risks involved, and that we can hope that if we choose not to exploit others, kindness and concern can lead to willing help being offered, for the mutual benefit of all.

In addition to topics of morality and ethics, sci-fi also provides an opportunity to think about religious topics. One of the dilemmas the Doctor regularly faces is not so much *whether* to intervene, as *how* to do so, and to what extent he can get involved without completely transforming history. But apart from the potential confusion it might cause viewers, *why not change history*? When we think about the problem of evil, if we envisage God as in any sense transcending not only space but time, then there is no

obvious reason why God could not intervene in a way the Doctor is unable to, to make the universe the “best of all possible worlds.” And from the perspective of those who view God as in some sense the universe itself, with all that is and all the laws and characteristics of the universe being intrinsic to God, God would still be relevant – and in either case would be the one that ties the Doctor’s hands.

But to the extent that the Doctor himself seems to be able to bend (if not always break) whatever rules determine how history has to play out, while in some instances recognizing that a historical moment must be preserved, a key religious theme that is central to other popular science fiction shows like *Lost* and *FlashForward* is brought to the fore – namely *destiny*. And to the extent that history *has to* play out a certain way at key moments in the universe the Doctor inhabits, doesn’t this in and of itself invite reflection on the nature of the universe and the source and meaning of existence?

BY [JAMES F. MCGRATH](#) MAY 24, 2010

PLANETARY PROFILING: *DR. WHO* PART

II

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Read the first and introductory post to this series [here](#). *Doctor Who* airs in the U.S. on BBC America on Saturdays at 9PM/8C (and though it’s by no means necessary, those interested in watching the first four seasons can find them streaming on Netflix). You can also stream all of this season’s episodes for free [here](#). — ed.

Gabriel McKee_____

At the beginning of “The Time of Angels,” the first half of *Doctor Who*’s latest two-parter, the Doctor and Amy have found themselves in the 51st century, assisting a military mission to recover a crashed ship’s cargo. We meet a military commander who identifies himself as “Father Octavian—Bishop Second Class, 20 clerics at my command.” Clearly there is some interesting church history in the thirty centuries between that future and our present, but the episode doesn’t explore it, beyond a throwaway line to the effect that “it’s the 51st century—the church has moved on.”

Of course, Father Octavian isn’t what’s exciting about this episode. It’s the return of the Weeping Angels, perhaps the most original, and most frightening, villains this series has yet presented. Originally appearing in the third season’s “Blink,” the Angels look for all the world like stone sculptures of heavenly protectors. But they’re actually a sinister alien species that, due to a trick of quantum physics, can only move when no one is looking (even if, as the title of “Blink” indicates, they’re only unobserved for a moment). The Weeping Angels are pretty darned scary, and “Blink”—written, incidentally, by new show-runner Stephen Moffat—was widely acclaimed, winning two BAFTAs and a Hugo. Needless to say, their return was much anticipated.

There's a bit of a parallel in this episode between the Angels and the religious-military hierarchy: both have hijacked religious terminology and/or imagery for decidedly non-spiritual purposes. That's not to say that Father Octavian's platoon are presented as villainous in the least, but I think there's a reason that these bishops and clerics are pitted against the Angels instead of, say, the Daleks.

Given how excited we all are to see the Weeping Angels again, it's a bit surprising how thoroughly the second half of the two-parter, "Flesh and Stone," shows them up, as their threat is upstaged by a series of ontological disruptions to rival Philip K. Dick. An unseen, unknowable force begins taking people away—erasing them from time so thoroughly that no one but the Doctor and Amy notices anything has changed. Whatever this terror is, it's somehow connected to Amy Pond—it emerges from a crack identical to the one seen in the wall of her childhood bedroom in the first episode of the season. My guess is that whatever is causing this temporal-ontological mess is related to Amy changing something in time, somehow destabilizing the structure of reality by her presence—or absence—in some place or time.

This echoes one of my favorite episodes from the first season—"Father's Day," in which then-companion Rose Tyler saves her father from the car accident that took his life when she was a baby. This change causes a bunch of giant, bat-like creatures to show up and start devouring the very fabric of the universe. Of course, the Doctor does change the past; his presence in history changes it—even if that change causes it to be how we already know it to be.

I've gotten a sense that there's a semi-eternal aspect to Time Lords, that part of them exists outside of time, allowing them to make changes that other, temporal beings wouldn't be allowed to make. But mere humans don't have that ability. Thus, an answer to the question posed by James McGrath in our last post, *why not change the past?* might be: because bat-things will destroy the multiverse. Or, in this case, a crack in the fabric of reality will begin to erase the world around you until... what? Well, that's what we're going to find out...

James F. McGrath_____

Some of the obvious religious references in the past few episodes of *Doctor Who* deserve mentioning. The two-part "The Time Of The Angels" and "Flesh and Stone" are particularly full of interesting religious imagery and ideas. We are given a depiction of a church in the far future that has "moved on," with its bishops and clerics being soldiers. And at a key moment the Doctor asks for trust, for faith, from Amy, explaining that if he told her exactly what he was doing, or always told her the truth, it wouldn't be faith/trust. There's a lot there to discuss.

But let's dig even deeper.

In the third, fourth and fifth episodes starring Matt Smith as the Doctor, we see him confronting old enemies: the Daleks and the Weeping Angels. At one point he describes the latter as among the most malevolent forms of life in the universe.

That's problematic language. Can there be a whole species of sentient beings that are purely malevolent? Perhaps the Daleks fit that description—but only because they are the result of a concerted effort to genetically eliminate sentiment and weakness. And of course if the survival and propagation of our genes into the distant future is an end in and of itself, then the Daleks might be deemed highly successful. And so the question of what our long-term aims ought to be as a species is another ethical issue that *Doctor Who* raises.

When it comes to the Weeping Angels, it seems noteworthy that we have yet to encounter a benevolent one. Yet they seem for the most part to displace their victims in time and feast on the resulting energy. They “eat” to survive, as far as we can tell, and their “food” is not actually killed. Yet they are one of the most malevolent species in the universe? It seems that there are ethical issues here that require further investigation and discussion. If a species evolves to feed on other species, as we humans have, then is it unethical to choose the survival of our species at the expense of other species that represent our food supply? Is it perhaps simply good fortune that humans have so many food options that are both non-sentient and delicious?

Perhaps an even more important question is whether there can be sentient beings without the capacity for good as well as evil. That seems to be the presumption quite regularly on the show. Now, to be fair, *Doctor Who* does at least as well as most sci-fi shows at avoiding the “stereotyping of aliens.” But in the end, people and TV shows alike are judged not by how often we avoid stereotypes but how often we fall into them. And to the extent that we today show ourselves capable of thinking of other human beings as though they were demons or Daleks—as being so remorseless and cruel that the only viable option is to exterminate them—we have shown a lack of imagination that may not be particularly troubling on a fictional sci-fi show, but in real life can have dire consequences.

Thankfully, *Doctor Who* has occasionally explored the possibility of redemption even for the Daleks, the Master, and others of the Doctor's archenemies. And that is something genuinely wonderful. If it were not for the Doctor's capacity to look beneath the surface and see underlying goodness, he might not have saved humanity as often as he has.

And so, while at its least creative *Doctor Who* falls into some disappointingly typical modes of human storytelling, in its most creative moments it challenges us to see, in entities which might at first glance seem like creatures from a nightmare, sentient persons with the same capacity for good and evil as you or I have.

BY GABRIEL MCKEE MAY 28, 2010

MAGIC V. SCIENCE: *DOCTOR WHO* PART

III

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Read all the posts in this series [here](#). *Doctor Who* airs in the U.S. on BBC America on Saturdays at 9PM/8C (and though it's by no means necessary, those interested in watching the first four seasons can find them streaming on Netflix) — ed.

Joseph Laycock _____

This latest *Doctor Who* episode contains several elements for vampire aficionados. The vampire aristocrat Rosana Calvierri is apparently based on Elizabeth Bathory, the historical “blood countess” of Hungary, who would have been twenty years old in 1580 when the episode is set. Bathory was accused of murdering young women and bathing in their blood, just as Calvierri preyed on the daughters of Venice. Calvierri even wears an Elizabethan reticula collar, consistent with many depictions of Bathory. The Doctor also explains that Venice was a favorite city of Lord Byron. Byron’s writings formed the basis of the *The Vampire* (1819), widely regarded as the first modern vampire story.

As an antagonist, two aspects of the vampire archetype are especially pertinent to the themes of *Doctor Who*. The Doctor has long protected the earth from alien invaders. However, I would argue that the hostile extra-terrestrials of science fiction are indebted to an older invader—the vampire. *Dracula* (1897), in particular, drew on vampire lore to describe an interloper from Eastern Europe who comes to prey upon Victorian Londoners. Interestingly, *War of the Worlds* (1898), the first alien invasion narrative, was published one year after *Dracula*. But the vampire does not just invade our world; it walks among us to invade our bodies, our autonomy, and our very identities. The loss of identity is a perennial threat in *Doctor Who* that is reinforced symbolically by several antagonists, notably the Weeping Angels.

However, “Vampires of Venice” also plays on a more recent trend in vampire fiction: a de-sacralized vampire that can be pitied. The first writer to re-imagine the vampire as a biological phenomenon rather than a supernatural one was Richard Matheson in *I Am Legend* (1954). Two things happen with this shift: First, the cross has become increasingly ineffective as a deterrent against vampires. (Amy chides her fiancé for even attempting this). Second, if vampires feed to survive rather than out of demonic malice, this raises a question of whether we are right in destroying them. As Matheson’s protagonist mused to himself, “Why cannot the vampire live where he chooses? . . . Why do you wish him destroyed? Ah see, you have turned a poor guileless innocent into a haunted animal.” Despite their hideous appearance, the Saturnynians are pitiable. The Doctor explains that Venice was founded by refugees fleeing Attila the Hun. But the Saturnynians are also refugees whose planet has been destroyed. They do what they do in order to survive. Because of this insight, the Doctor is not a classic vampire slayer, so

much as an ecologist. He stops the Saturnynians for the same reason that environmentalists in North America combat the snakehead fish.

Finally, it is fitting that Calvierri offers an alliance with the Doctor. Like the vampire, the Doctor is also an immortal outsider walking among us. He too has unnatural abilities and is alluring to the opposite sex. The vampire then is the shadow of the Doctor—a theme that will be explored further in the next episode.

James F. McGrath_____

Vampires vs. Aliens, Magic vs. Science

One of the topics that I discussed in my religion and science fiction class last semester was the relationship between sci-fi and fantasy. Some are fans of both, and some prefer one or the other. But how clear is the distinction? The *Doctor Who* episode “Vampires of Venice” provides a good illustration of what distinguishes them—and of what makes the distinction blurry.

What distinguishes science fiction from fantasy is not a genuine absence of “magic” in sci-fi, but the presence of at least a token acknowledgment of science and a claim that there is a scientific explanation for what is going on. The science does not have to be plausible, however, and so it is only the nod to science, rather than a real scientific basis, that distinguishes the Doctor’s TARDIS which allows him to move around in space and time from the time turner or portkeys in *Harry Potter*.

This is illustrated well on “Vampires of Venice”—and is also discussed in a [recent interview](#) with Steven Moffatt on IO9. Here’s a question Moffatt was asked and his reply:

Do you think the fairy tale aspect is at odds with the science-fiction aspect, where everything has to have a scientific explanation? Or do you think those things go together?

That’s just how you justify it. It’s a mechanism by which you justify what happens. There was magic in fairy tales back when people believed in magic. That’s just the machinery of it. That’s not a problem. There isn’t magic in *Doctor Who*—there are sometimes [laughs] token scientific explanations for everything, yes. But I mean, you know, he lives in a box that’s bigger on the inside than on the outside. When he regenerates, he turns into somebody with a new hairstyle and sideburns a particular length. Explain that, science! When *Doctor Who*’s really, really good, there’s a feeling of magic about it. It’s a magical-feeling show. We’ve got a justification for why this

time machine looks like a battered old blue box with all the wonderful panels. But the explanation doesn't matter so much as the aesthetic of it. It makes it feel like a wizard's box.

For whatever reason, we enjoy stories involving vampires and other scary monsters. And so perhaps the question is why some of us find the story more satisfying if the vampires are really aliens, and the magic deep down is supposedly really science. Arthur C. Clarke famously said, “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” But that statement is an affirmation of *faith*—faith that science will one day turn magic into reality, and make the impossible possible.

And so by exploring the relationship between sci-fi and fantasy, aliens and vampires, time lords and wizards, we are given an opportunity to reflect on why even the scientifically-minded in our time often retain a deep-seated desire for the magical, and enjoyment of stories which are, ultimately, full of magic. It also gives us an opportunity to ponder how we may cope if it turns out that science is no more able to accomplish time travel or teleportation than magic is.

Henry Jenkins_____

What disturbs me about “Vampires of Venice” is the breeziness with which the story passes over a potentially devastating moment. The Doctor has the opportunity to save Isabella and fails to do so. She is later killed, and her father sacrifices himself, presumably having lost the will to live.

It is obvious that the Doctor chooses his commitments carefully. If Amy is inhabited by a Weeping Angel, the Doctor will upend the heavens and the Earth to rescue her, and vow to seek unrelenting vengeance against anyone who does her arm. No, he won't promise Jackie that Rose will always be safe with him. But the Doctor will act with incredible resourcefulness to keep his companions safe.

The Doctor has had 37 companions, not counting animation or radio dramas, counting the Romanas and K-9s as one being each, and including only characters who appeared in multiple serials or episodes. 35 lived—94%.

As a side note, the only two companions to ever die both did so in acts of heroism and self-sacrifice. In “The Daleks' Master Plan” (1965-1966), Katarina dooms herself to die in space in order to take her captor down with her. In “Earthshock” (1982), Adric does not die on purpose, but fails to hack a computer system that would have saved his life. Nonetheless, he took on the challenge knowing the risks involved.

By comparison, other humans die in almost every Doctor Who episode, often with little emotional payoff. “Vampires of Venice” is just the most recent and exceptionally brazen example. We do not see the Doctor apologize to Guido for letting Isabella slip through

his fingers when he had the chance to save her. Guido's own death in an explosion only seems to trouble him momentarily.

In reality, this is a writing and production decision. Isabella and Guido's deaths serve useful plot functions, but dealing with the consequences of their loss would darken the tone of this rollicking historical adventure, and bring the lightning fast pace to a near standstill.

One could question whether the writers are defeating themselves by establishing Isabella, from the opening scene, as a point of audience identification, and then failing to reap the fruit of that success. But presumably writer Toby Whithouse and director Jonny Campbell felt the deaths would have an impact without any further commentary from the Doctor.

For the purposes of the story, perhaps the Doctor's lack of a reaction could be read in terms of Rory's far-more piercing criticism in the castle. The Doctor inspires his companions to do stupid, dangerous things to prove themselves for him.

Perhaps what Rory isn't giving the Doctor credit for is his willingness to do stupid, dangerous things to protect his companions. Perhaps he cannot reasonably be asked to take the same risks for every red-shirted bit player he meets. Otherwise he could burn through all of his lives in short order, and save the universe far fewer times.

Alternatively, perhaps the companions' relatively excellent chance of survival is part of the reason he chooses them. He clearly has a knack for choosing exceptional and underappreciated people. Not just every mundane office worker can save the universe with the panache Donna Noble can.

But I'm still left with two troublesome inconsistencies that I cannot resolve within the logic of the story. Why does the Doctor care more about "The Beast Below"'s Star Whale than he does Guido and Isabella? And why don't Amy and Rory seem more upset?

Gabriel Mckee _____

Vampires of Venice

James ponders "why some of us find the story more satisfying if the vampires are really aliens, and the magic deep down is supposedly really science"; Joe considers the villains as "de-sacralized vampire[s] that can be pitied." What's at stake here is the issue of enchantment vs. disenchantment, and shows one of the responses that science fiction has had to the impact of rationalism on myth. The vampires of this episode aren't really vampires, in the sense that they aren't supernatural. They can be explained, they can be described in rational terms, they can be brought under the sway of human reason. But they can't be said not to exist—they aren't what we imagined, but there they are nonetheless. The type of rational explanation offered here for vampires, like so many

science-fictional explanations of impossible things, ultimately serves to reenchant the concept of the vampire: no, they're not magic, but they're real, and here's how!

This is an old conceit in sci-fi, and (for whatever reason) in television sci-fi in particular. The original *Star Trek* episode "Who Mourns for Adonais?" offered a reinterpretation of Greek mythology in which the gods were alien beings with incredible powers. *Stargate: SG-1* took this a step or two further, resurrecting entire pantheons and reinterpreting their mythology as the true history of alien invasion. And *The X-Files* is replete with rational explanations for bizarre phenomena. This kind of rationalism is not content just to debunk and disprove; it finds more joy in making the impossible possible. It does not want to discard myth for science; it wants to re-enchant the scientific world.

And so, as the above-quoted Steven Moffatt interview suggests, science, for *Doctor Who*, is just fancier kind of magic. Another kind of magic, as Henry suggests, is the ease with which the Doctor and his companions are able to avoid disaster and destruction. Given the sorts of trouble they find themselves in, that 94% survival rate is nothing short of a miracle. But that's the universe that *Doctor Who* takes place in: one where the good guys, the side of truth and justice, will always win. That's another kind of magic, one that seeks to transcend the muddiness of morality in the everyday world—and it can also be seen at the heart of apocalyptic spirituality, which hopes to see our world replaced with a divine one (a replacement that is all too often imagined as violent). In the context of a television show, that desire for the good guys to win is simple escapism: is apocalypticism, then, a sort of theological escapism, "magical thinking" that wants to see human evil eradicated without human effort?

I've escaped a bit beyond the bounds of the conversation thus far. But the Doctor is, above all else, a humanist hero, and I think that respect for human capability is a big factor in his choice of companions. But will his companions always choose him? Ah, that's for next week...

BY [HENRY JENKINS](#) JUNE 16, 2010

WHICH IS THE 'REAL' REALITY?: *DOCTOR WHO* PART IV

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Gabriel Mckee
"Amy's Choice"

I have mixed feelings about spoiler warnings. In general, I think a quality piece of storytelling will work regardless of whether or not you know where it's headed, and if the story's no good, then it doesn't really matter anyway. There is a definite twist at the

end of “Amy’s Choice,” and custom dictates that I preface it with a *caveat lector*. Consider yourself warned.

As the episode begins, we seem to be in the future, or a parallel universe, or something, because the Doctor is traveling alone while Amy (who is 9 months pregnant) is living on Earth and now married to her bumbling boyfriend Rory (who now has a ludicrous ponytail). Did we miss something? Suddenly the three fall asleep and find themselves transported to the TARDIS, which is slowly being pulled into a “cold sun.” Before long the full mystery unfolds: The Doctor and his companions are being tested by an impish alien called the Dream Lord, who has presented them with two realities to choose between. Which is real—idyllic life in an earthbound village (itself menaced by hidden aliens) or the more clearly perilous life on the TARDIS (which, of course, offers a sort of family life of its own)?

Ah, but that twist—at the end of the episode we learn that neither of these situations is real. The Dream Lord has presented the TARDIS crew with a false dichotomy. The Doctor’s genius is in recognizing and cutting through these false dichotomies. This is the same sort of thing we saw in the scene back in “The Beast Below” when the Doctor opted, sight unseen, to protest the status quo of Starship Britain. He pushes the “protest” button, but does not simply accept the prescribed consequences of that action—he fights to find a third way. In that episode it was Amy who finally brought the complex solution to the simplified solution, but here—despite the episode’s title—it’s the Doctor himself. In either case, though, the core of the Doctor’s ethics is the utter rejection of black-and-white dichotomies and zero-sum games. He wins the Dream Lord’s game by refusing to play.

Of course, the title of this episode refers not just to Amy’s choice between dream and reality, but also to her choice between the Doctor and Rory as the object of her affections. At the episode’s end she seems to have made a decision (albeit somewhat halfheartedly)—but given the extent to which the episode preceding this decision, and the series in general, rejects either/or choices, can a third option for Amy be far behind? If Steven Moffat is anything like Russell T. Davies, he won’t be content to have Amy be defined simply by her relationship to one man or another.

James F. McGrath **Chuang Tzu’s Butterfly, and the Doctor’s Self-Loathing**

There is a lot that is worth commenting on in the episode “Amy’s Choice” but I’ve chosen to focus on a couple of points. First, a puzzle that the episode introduces early on: a dream and a reality, and the dilemma of deciding which is real.

The Chinese Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu famously wrote about having a dream that he was a butterfly. He asked how he might be able to tell whether he was the human being Chuang Tzu who dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly now dreaming that he was Chuang Tzu.

The dilemma of distinguishing dreams and illusions from that which is “really real” is a key focus both in many religious traditions and in numerous works of science fiction. One famous and very explicit treatment of the topic in sci-fi is *The Matrix* trilogy. In the first movie, there is a scene where Neo pulls some illicit software out of a hollow book. If you freeze the scene and look carefully, the book is in fact Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulations*, and one of the points made in the book is that, once it becomes possible to completely simulate reality, the very distinction between “real” and “unreal” becomes meaningless. By the time we reach the third movie in *The Matrix* series, we can no longer be certain that the supposed “real world” is in any sense more real than the simulation in which Neo had once lived, the matrix.

Common sense, it turns out, is not a helpful guide when it comes to such matters. This is illustrated repeatedly in the history of science as people resist new ideas which run counter to “common sense”—such as the idea that the Earth rotates, or that species change over time. In “Amy’s Choice,” the Doctor tells Amy and Rory to try to figure out which “reality” is the “real” one, to use their common sense. Both experiences feel real when they are in it, and as it turns out (SPOILER ALERT), neither is in fact real. Both are illusions.

The aforementioned points also relate to the romantic dilemma that Amy is confronted with. One of the “realities” is centered on her life of adventure with the Doctor. The other is a quiet domestic existence with Rory. The Doctor calls the latter a “nightmare.” But if Amy were not simply trying to figure out which is real, but which one she wants to be real, then the choice Amy has to make in the episode can be regarded as illustrative of the real-life choice many find themselves confronted with, between a life of adventure and insecurity on the one hand, and a life of stability and potential boredom on the other.

Ultimately, the Doctor realizes who the “dream master” is because “only one person hates me that much.” Based in particular on the detailed criticisms of the Doctor’s behavior towards his companions over the years, the Doctor realizes that the source of the illusions as well as the taunts and accusations is his own mind. In a pair of dream realities, the Doctor stands accused by his own psyche.

Presumably that is the danger of exploring questions about reality and dreams. Sometimes such explorations do not merely confront us with difficult choices about the future. Sometimes they reveal our own self-loathing. And here too we find the Doctor entering a realm intimately connected with religion, both in the sense that religion has often offered both accusation and forgiveness, but also in the sense that often we project onto God the condemnation we feel is appropriate—whether directed toward ourselves or towards others.

And so the latest episode of *Doctor Who* challenges us to reflect not only on the nature of reality and how to identify it, but on the question of what images we make of God (mentally more often than physically), and to recognize that the mask that constitutes our image of God usually bears a striking resemblance to ourselves.

Henry Jenkins_____

When The Doctor ‘wakes up’ in the cold opening he describes the Upper Leadworth dream as a “terrible nightmare,” “scary.” He seems thoroughly wound up, pacing and breathing heavily. But why is The Doctor’s nightmare that Amy will end up with Rory?

Is he jealous? Is he in love with Amy? Surely not. The Doctor has never explicitly expressed romantic feelings for one of his companions before. In fact, he has been notoriously unavailable. But the conclusion of “Amy’s Choice”—that the Dream Lord was a manifestation of The Doctor’s angst subconsciously—adds further ambiguity.

The Dream Lord refers to Rory as a gooseberry, British slang for a chaperone on a date, and later taunts Rory that he knows where Amy’s heart really lies. Apparently The Doctor minimally believes Rory should be threatened, and does come second in Rory’s heart. The Dream Lord further taunts that “He loves a redhead, our naughty Doctor. Has he told you about Elizabeth the First? Well, she thought she was the first,” implying that the Doctor does experience lust towards humans.

One could read The Dream Lord’s dialogue as a kind of embarrassingly revealing look at the things The Doctor doesn’t say, and therefore more unguardedly honest than his conversations with Rose. The Dream Lord’s comments could therefore be read through a moral prism as unburdening the Doctor of thoughts he would normally feel guilty about expressing. Does the Doctor have a guilt-ridden sexuality or romantic feelings he believes are inappropriate?

The Doctor’s lustful side towards humans has consistently played out in Stephen Moffat’s stories (and I include “Amy’s Choice” because he’s the executive producer.) Most notably, River Song has hinted from the beginning that she may be the Doctor’s wife, and River may or may not be human. But in “The Girl in the Fireplace” The Doctor had an apparent romance with Reinette. In “The Beast Below,” Queen Elizabeth X makes a second reference to The Doctor deflowering The Virgin Queen, Elizabeth the First. “The Empty Child” even played with an attraction between Captain Jack and the Doctor.

But why would the Doctor have an adult relationship with French and English historical figures, but not the people he knows best? Is that how he keeps score? Or is he just uncomfortable being intimate with people he has emotions for? Or is the episode almost non-canon, with such comments intended to be dismissed as the perverse self-recriminations of The Doctor’s alter ego?

Obviously an amorous reading would run contrary to the idealistic, platonic Doctor we have come to know and love since 1963, and horrify a large percentage of the audience. But perhaps the ultimate message of “Amy’s Choice” really is that everyone has a dark side like The Dream Lord. The Doctor just keeps his exceptionally well-buried.

BY [GABRIEL MCKEE](#) JUNE 17, 2010

DRILLING WAKES THE HUMANOID REPTILES: *DOCTOR WHO* PART V

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Gabriel Mckee

In a quiet, idyllic little town in Wales, something is amiss. See, there's this enormous drill on the outskirts of town, the outsized hardware of a scientific project that's about to dig deeper than humankind has ever dug before. But this minor milestone is surrounded by odd events—strange rumblings in the ground, unusual archaic minerals scattered around the surface... and whatever has been stealing bodies from their graves seems to be doing so from beneath.

The title of this episode of *Doctor Who*—"The Hungry Earth"—implies that the world itself is at odds with our human cast. The drill does violence to the earth (one needn't belabor the symbolism), and with the mysterious events that the Doctor witnesses, it seems to be taking revenge on the human perpetrators of this violence. Scientific hubris has been a common target in science fiction, dating back at least to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, but having perhaps its biggest heyday in the "atomic monster" movies of the 1950s. My personal favorites from this era are Ishiro Honda's *kaiju eiga*—giant monster movies like *Godzilla* and *Mothra* that frequently present their monsters as angry gods, symbols of divine/natural vengeance that punish human beings for overstepping their bounds.

"The Hungry Earth" fits fairly well into this mold (although its monsters, when they are ultimately revealed, are human-sized). As recent news stories about the creation of the artificial life form "Synthia" show, there is definitely a popular sentiment that there may, in fact, be "lines that science should not cross." It's also an odd bit of prophecy that this episode comes out in the midst of what is rapidly becoming the worst oil spill in the history of human drilling—a case where our cultural concupiscence has pushed us farther than our technology can carry us.

Of course, the argument against scientific hubris can quickly turn regressive, as in C.S. Lewis' opposition to space exploration. And, given the manner in which the revived *Doctor Who* has dealt with most of its moral oppositions, I expect the conclusion of this story next week to thoroughly complicate the problem. The story is a great throwback to the *Doctor Who* of the '70s: its mysterious villains, for instance, had their most prominent appearance in 1970, and the "superdrill" concept comes straight from one of my favorite episodes of the early '70s John Pertwee era, "Inferno." But even in this nostalgic mode, the current *Doctor Who* strives to complicate the easy moral divisions of the show's more formulaic days. Perhaps we can glean another symbol from this episode's drill—a desire to dig deeper and uncover a more complex picture than what we see on the surface.

James F. McGrath

Whose Earth Is It Anyway? Watching Doctor Who During A Week Of Drilling and Fighting

It was interesting watching the *Doctor Who* episode “The Hungry Earth” during a week when violence connected with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been in the news and, as Gabriel also notes, drilling in the Gulf of Mexico has led to a disaster of devastating proportions. In this episode, drilling by humans to an unprecedented depth impinges on an underground dwelling of Silurians, a race of bipedal humanoid reptiles who once dominated planet Earth, long before the emergence of humankind. Although this was only the first part of a two-part episode, we have already been given hints that at least some Silurians may have begun to think that it is time to reclaim the planet.

That sounds all too familiar. There is no need to delve into the realm of fiction, much less science fiction, to tell a story about two groups fighting over the same land, one claiming “We were here first” while the other is the de facto possessor of the land. I am hopeful that the second part of the *Doctor Who* story will not feature either side appealing to its deity in order to justify its claim upon the land. But it is noteworthy that in this episode the representatives of humanity find themselves taking their stand in a church.

The Doctor’s approach to the matter demonstrates the wisdom of one who has seen conflicts rage across time and space, with no real winners when so many sentient beings lose their lives in the process. To the humans, he seeks to explain the Silurians’ point of view. They *were* here long before humans were, and so it is not surprising that they feel they have a legitimate claim to the planet. They are not aliens, the Doctor emphasizes. They are “Earthlians” just as humans are. To the Silurians, he emphasizes that previous occupancy of a land doesn’t give you an automatic right to it in the present. And to both sides he expresses confidence that there is a way to resolve the matter without the need for war. No one has died yet, and no one has to die.

The Doctor’s advice to the humans on how to achieve this also bears repeating: The Silurians are not evil—or at least, no more so than humans. It is important to have hope, to believe that a peaceful solution is possible. But perhaps most important of all is that the representatives of humanity act in a way that reflects humanity at its best. In the midst of conflict, people commit atrocities they never would have thought they were capable of in a time of peace. And so, while there is still time, the Doctor calls on the humans among whom he finds himself to be kind, forgiving, empathetic, and not allow ourselves to be sucked into an escalating cycle of violence and retaliation.

We will see in the second part how things play out. But the biggest question is unlikely to be answered in that episode. The biggest question is why we need a fictional time lord to tell us these things, and why we find his advice, whatever its source, so hard to follow.

BY GABRIEL MCKEE JUNE 29, 2010

EVERY HOMO REPTILIA IS SOMEBODY'S SISTER: *DOCTOR WHO* PART VI

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The Doctor Who episode “[The Hungry Earth](#),” was the first part of a two-part story which concluded in the episode “Cold Blood.” The pun is an interesting one, since the main characters apart from the Doctor and humans are Silurians, “homo reptilia,” a race that inhabited the planet long before humans evolved. Being reptiles, they are literally cold blooded. But this story explores whether they—and whether we humans—are “cold blooded” in the sense in which that phrase is used metaphorically.

In the last episode, hostages were taken by both sides, as each felt threatened by the other. On one side, a human woman had her husband and son taken by the Silurians who responded to the incursion into their realm by a human drill. The same woman’s father had been stung by a Silurian’s venom. On the other side, the humans managed to capture a Silurian who we later learned was the sister of a Silurian military leader.

In her desperation to find her family and save her father, the human woman tries hurting the Silurian prisoner, hoping she’ll provide information. But the Silurian dies.

This is how violence spirals out of control. We act in desperation to help, protect, or save those who are dear to us. But in the process, we harm those who are dear to someone else. Every human being, every sentient being we are likely to encounter in the universe, will almost certainly be someone’s offspring, someone’s sibling, someone’s parent, or in some other way someone significant to someone else.

As a survival mechanism we have a tendency to forge relationships of blood, friendship, or ideology, and then engage in competition with others who are at best more distantly related, and in some fashion “different” from us.

It is for pointing out how morality based on such allegiances breaks down that I appreciate the parable of “the Good Samaritan.” After focus has turned onto the command to “love your neighbor as yourself,” a follow-up question was asked: “Who is my neighbor?” In the story in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus responds with a story in which a man is robbed even of his clothing. Clothing is a key means of identifying ourselves, and stripped of these identity markers, few passersby would know if this half-dead individual was part of their in-group or out-group. And that is the point of the story. If we define our responsibility to help others in terms of shared identity, what do we do when identity markers are missing? And what happens to us when we are in similarly desperate circumstances?

In the Doctor Who episode “Cold Blood” we are asked to see the “humanity” in bipedal lizard people. But that is a much-needed challenge. Sometimes we need to strip away clothing, sometimes even our very skin, in order to recognize a common humanity.

Perhaps one day we will need to apply the same principle to recognize a common sentence.

Intriguingly, the Doctor himself sees the need to bring in religion to assist with his plan. Humanity is deemed not to be ready to share the planet with the Silurians. But they need to be, because the Silurians have every bit as much right to the planet as humans do (in fact, they were here first). And so the Silurians return into hibernation for another millennium, while the Doctor tells the humans who have shared this adventure to use legend, prophecy, religion—whatever it takes—to spread the message: this planet will be shared in a thousand years from now.

Religion in our time has been the focus of much criticism, and not all of it unfairly. Religion at its worst can be just another identity marker that divides some of us from others.

But as the Doctor reminds us, religion at its best can prepare us for a surprising future, and challenge us to look beyond our in-group to see a hates Samaritan—or scaly-skinned Silurian—as a neighbor.

Gabriel Mckee _____ **The Second Letter of St. Doctor to the Silurians**

A bit of behind-the-scenes for you: the subject line on the e-mail thread for “Cold Blood” is “Second Silurians.” At first that just meant that this was the second part of the lizard people two-parter, but given the context of the episode it could just as easily be The Second Letter of St. Doctor to the Silurians. Given the above-alluded-to indication that the Doctor’s message, that “this planet is to be shared,” should be made into “legend, or prophecy, or religion.” More than any episode since “The Beast Below,” this episode was about the Doctor’s ethics of peace, his demand that we abandon our gut need for revenge and violence.

Ambrose, whose son has been kidnapped and father poisoned by the Silurians, threatens to torture a reptilian prisoner unless she provides an antidote. When the Silurian doesn’t answer, Ambrose zaps he with a taser, and the wound soon proves fatal. In the moral calculus of most TV and movies, the Silurian “deserves” it—*24* does this kind of ticking-bomb torture weekly. But when Ambrose’s father Tony enters the room to find his daughter standing over the writhing form of the tortured reptile-woman, he’s furious, even though it’s his life she was trying to save. Through gritted teeth he admonishes her: “We have to be better than this!” I don’t know how this plays in the UK, but for an American viewer there’s a pretty clear message: you may not torture anyone in my name, no matter the reason.

The Doctor later echoes Tony’s moral message, telling Ambrose: “In future, when you talk about this, you tell people there was a chance, but you were so much less than the best of humanity.” His turn of phrase is a bit prettier (as is his later order to “Be

extraordinary”), but I think it’s important—and a sign of Doctor Who’s moral optimism—that this message came from a human being first. The alien Doctor may be this show’s de facto messiah, but the ethical message he brings comes from ourselves first. If it’s just the Doctor telling us to “be better,” we have the opportunity to write off that call to moral improvement as an impossible bit of science-fantasy. But if it comes from an earthbound elder like Tony Mack, then maybe we do have a chance...

There’s another clear parallel to real-world situations in this episode, of course—the humans and Silurians reach an agreement to share the surface of the planet, only to have the process derailed by the violence of extremists—that of the human Ambrose, who has killed her prisoner, and of the Silurian military commander who refuses to forgive that death. Emotions override reason, neither side backs down, and the peace deal is scuttled. It’s not too much of a stretch to conclude that the situation is a science fictionalization of Israel/Palestine (though, in that context, it’s probably best not to take the whole “lizard people” thing too literally).

In this context, though, the Doctor’s suggestion that the idea of sharing the planet should be carried on through the Silurians’ thousand-year hibernation as a religion becomes potentially ironic. I’m not one for the reductionist view that religion is the sole, or even the primary, factor in the Israel-Palestine conflict. But many do so argue, including prominent Brits like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. Are we to read this order optimistically, or cynically? After all, the Doctor of all people should realize how a simple message can be distorted over a millennium. When the Silurians awaken, will they find that this religious message has been carried down faithfully, or twisted, even inverted? The brief opening narration of this episode, in which the Silurian leader speaks from a thousand years in the future, tends to imply an optimistic reading (as, indeed, does the series’ general hopefulness), but the issue still feels unresolved. I certainly hope Doctor Who revisits the future of the Silurian/human conflict; there is certainly more for the show to say about how to communicate a moral message.

BY [GABRIEL MCKEE](#) JUNE 30, 2010

TAKE THE VAN GOGH

CHALLENGE: *DOCTOR WHO* PART VII

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James F. McGrath _____
Art and Religion: Seeing What Others Do Not

I still remember vividly when, many years ago, someone I knew was talking about how they had begun learning to paint, and how had they found to be true a tidbit of wisdom that another artist had passed on to them:

Painting is not primarily about learning to mix colors or make brush strokes, as important as those skills are. Above all else, becoming an artist involves learning to see the world differently. Before you can paint what you see, you need to see it in a way that can be translated into painting.

I found myself remembering this moment from my past as I watched this week's episode of *Doctor Who*, "Vincent and the Doctor." In it, the Doctor takes Amy to an art exhibit of Vincent Van Gogh's paintings, and then, catching a glimpse of something "evil" peering through the window of a church in one of the paintings, they travel back to Vincent Van Gogh's time to investigate.

There they find Van Gogh unappreciated in his time, and struggling with depression, but also able to see a dangerous alien creature that no one else—not even the Doctor—is able to. This obviously proves useful in eliminating the creature, but also seems to be intentionally symbolic of the artist's stance: not only seeing the world differently, but as a result, seeing what others do not.

As I watched the scene near the end of the episode, in which the Doctor takes Vincent on a trip to that very same art exhibit, and gives him an opportunity to eavesdrop on the museum guide's praise of Van Gogh's art from the standpoint of our time, I recalled another artist's famous saying (in this case, a composer, but the principle seems to apply equally well to other fine arts). After his fifth symphony was met with an unappreciative response from critics, Gustav Mahler expressed the desire to be able to conduct its premiere fifty years after his death. Perhaps precisely because of their distinctiveness of vision, artists are often unappreciated in their time, but seem to just as often be valued later on. It is as though they are literally "ahead of their time" in a manner that even a time lord might not be able to make sense of.

While many seem unable to conceive of religion and science as anything other than competitors, it is helpful to reflect on the possibility that religion is far more like art than like science. Like the arts, religion involves seeing the world in a distinctive way. And as in the arts, people of profound religious vision are often rejected by their contemporaries and yet appreciated greatly by later generations.

Science and art are not in conflict. A scientific analysis of the paint Van Gogh used, their chemical composition and reflective properties, is entirely possible. And it is a completely different perspective than that which might ask why we find his art compelling, while the subjective experience of seeing and responding to his art seems to be something else yet again. There are different levels of reality, as it were, different ways of looking at the same phenomenon, and these are frequently neither incompatible with one another nor competing to provide answers the same sorts of questions.

Perhaps it is time to stop asking whether religion or science offers a better explanation of natural phenomena, and instead ask, much as we might of art, whether we find a certain religious vision compelling—and if so, why.

Religion (as I see it—and of course that’s the point!) differs from science inasmuch as it isn’t primarily about describing the world as it is (although it should take our best understanding of the natural world into account), but about depicting the world as it could be, and transforming it into that better vision of reality. And of course, when religion takes a harmful view of the future, it can often contribute to bringing about a minor apocalypse.

This episode ended with the Doctor and Amy not having managed to prevent Van Gogh’s suicide, in spite of the encouragement they offered him. Depression and mental illness are at least as common among artists and in religious communities as in society in general, and perhaps more so. Perhaps having a brain that works in an unusual way facilitates seeing the world differently than others—for better or worse, and perhaps sometimes for both.

In some religious communities, depression is often misdiagnosed as demon possession, or struggled with alone in silence as a spiritual condition. We have witnessed in the news numerous tragedies that have resulted from this state of affairs. And so it was delightful that the episode ended with suggestions on where to go for help with real-life mental health issues.

Religion may be a form of artistic vision of the world. But not every vision should be embraced, nor should all enthusiasm be diagnosed as spiritual fervor rather than a lack of maturity or perhaps even an indication of an even more serious psychological problem. But even art the perspective of which we reject can speak to us and challenge us to find a vision of our own.

And so I encourage you to take the “Van Gogh Doctor Who challenge,” and try to take a small step in the direction of seeing things differently, and of noticing what others do not. Because that’s equally important in the realms of science, art, and religion.

Gabriel Mckee _____ **Vincent and the Doctor**

Earlier in the season, we discussed the ontological constraints placed on time travelers. When he travels into the past, the Doctor walks a fine, thin line between benevolent intervention and disastrous interference. When he crosses that line—as in the first season episode “Father’s Day,” where Rose prevents her father from dying in a car accident—the consequences are generally disastrous. In other cases, it seems, no amount of well-intentioned action can change an unfortunate outcome. Some events are fixed, and no time traveler can determine the proper amount or type of meddling to change them.

That’s the case in “Vincent and the Doctor.” The primary reason the Doctor and Amy travel back to 1890 is to locate and defeat the frightening creature they see in one of Vincent van Gogh’s paintings. But once they arrive in the artists’ era, they can’t help but

interfere—telling van Gogh, the subject of much mockery and derision in his town, that he is to be remembered as one of the greatest painters of all time. It doesn't stop there—when she discovers that he hasn't yet painted “Sunflowers” (a minor historical inaccuracy), Amy not-so-subtly arranges dozens of them outside his home. At the conclusion of the episode, the Doctor goes perhaps further than he's ever gone before into “interfering” territory, bringing van Gogh for a trip in the TARDIS to see his work on display in the Musée d'Orsay.

The artist is (understandably) awestruck—what greater contrast could there be to his day-to-day life, where he is perceived as an outcast, a drunk, a madman, and, worst of all, untalented? The Doctor and Amy hope that this visit to the future will rescue Vincent from despair and stop him from committing suicide a few months after their visit, but they fail—van Gogh dies as scheduled (after completing a painting of some sunflowers for Amy, of course). Was this one of those moments in history—like the demise of the Mars colony in last year's “Waters of Mars”—that is unchangeable, a fixed point that no amount of meddling can alter? Or, more bleakly—did the Doctor and Amy actually create the despair that led him to suicide? Was the disconnect between his bleak life and his glorious afterlife too much for him to bear? Did he begin to wonder if the mysterious time travelers were simply another elaborate delusion, a further stage in his madness?

“Vincent and the Doctor” doesn't really explore those possibilities, but I couldn't help but wonder at their omission. The writers don't pass judgment on the Doctor's actions in this episode, but I see a tension in this story over van Gogh's suicide: it seems to have been either a fated event (in which case the mysterious forces of time were set against the Doctor's goals), or an unintended effect of the time travelers' interference (in which case Vincent is a victim of the Doctor's hubris). In either case, van Gogh is collateral damage in a battle that's in the background of all of *Doctor Who*—the battle between the Doctor and... what? Time? The universe? Fate? Chaos? God? The Doctor has always been a rebel—he always pushes the “protest” button. Most of the time that rebelliousness works out for the best, and he becomes (as I described him earlier this season) an anarchist messiah. But when his attempts at salvation fail, the innocent can suffer.

There was one thing about this episode that made me a bit uncomfortable. “Vincent and the Doctor” fictionalizes the real-life suffering of its subject, coopting the real despair of a real person into a narrative about invisible space demons and time travelers. This certainly isn't the first time the Doctor has set foot in real history, nor is it the last. But for all the episode's sympathy with van Gogh's suffering, I couldn't help but think that it went more than a few steps into romanticizing it as well. There's something a bit too flip about saying that the demons that tormented van Gogh may have been giant, invisible aliens that wanted to eat his neighbors. This episode was all about perception, and there's certainly something to be said for James' “van Gogh Doctor Who challenge.” But there's also a certain irony in the show's suggestion that van Gogh's hallucinations were real. Surely the world caught up to his way of viewing the world as expressed in his art. But the nature in which this episode depicts his mental state could serve to undermine the its intended sympathetic portrayal of mental illness. This is another fine line on

which the Doctor occasionally travels, and in this instance, I don't think he traveled it carefully enough.

BY [GABRIEL MCKEE](#) JULY 6, 2010

OF LOVE AND LODGING: *DOCTOR WHO* PART VIII

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James F. McGrath _____

The (Love) Doctor Gets Relationships and Spaceships Back On Track

Perhaps it is simply a result of writing about this season's episodes in this format, and thus reflecting on them more carefully than I have in the case of seasons past. But it seems to me that in every episode thus far this season, the science fiction element serves as a parable or metaphor for some more down-to-earth problem and its resolution.

In this episode, "The Lodger," the TARDIS finds itself in a "holding pattern," unable to land, and the Doctor manages to get out of the TARDIS and keep in touch with Amy, still on board, while investigating what is preventing the TARDIS from materializing.

The Doctor rents a room in a house which is also the location of the time distortion. The man he rents it from, Craig Owens, is secretly in love with his female friend Sophie. He passes up better jobs so as not to move away from her, but doesn't tell her how he feels. She feels the same way about him, and likewise hasn't told him.

Meanwhile, using a perception filter to disguise itself as a second story to the house he lives in, a marooned spaceship has an automated emergency holographic program, which is looking for a pilot, luring people into the ship and connecting them to it, thus far always killing them in the process.

Craig himself was of no use to the program, as it turns out, because the ship responds to the pilot's thoughts, and Craig was made unsuitable to be a pilot precisely because he didn't want to leave the place where he is, and thus would not have caused the ship to launch. Eventually, in order to get the ship to shut down and disappear, Craig would have no choice but to put his hand on the ship's control and state out loud what he had not managed to until then: he loves Sophie, and wants to stay where she is.

There is a symbolic parallel between the ship and the human characters. The ship cannot leave because it has no one to tell it to depart. Craig wants to stay but is hiding the reason. Sophie at one point talks about leaving to travel and do environmental work with animals, reciprocating Craig's feelings but likewise keeping them secret, and

looking for a reason to stay. And while the Doctor comments on the stupidity of the mindless automated program seeking a pilot for the ship, the human characters likewise run through routines, failing to exercise the freedom that could change their lives, and thus remaining marooned much like the ship. We have in this episode both a literal and a metaphorical “failure to launch” set in symbolic parallel to one another.

This episode perhaps works better as a parable of romance than a parable of religion. But particularly in the past hundred years, popular religion in the Christian tradition has placed a lot of focus on making a decision. Whether one is thinking of the existentialist theology of Rudolf Bultmann or the evangelical Gospel as reduced to a brief tract with “four spiritual laws,” a lot of emphasis is placed on “making a decision for Christ,” taking a “leap of faith.”

It may seem ironic, then, that those same religious traditions that emphasize making a decision, a radical and decisive change and direction, often also emphasize *conformity*. One doesn’t make a radical choice to take one’s own path, but to follow the rules of a different group.

Yet the irony is not as marked as might first appear. Whether one’s decision is about a romantic relationship or religion, it often relates to matters of emotion, of belonging, and of making sense of one’s life and one’s place in the grand scheme of things. And so the need to make decisions and take action, and the desire to belong and relate to others, are both connected to these broader issues of the meaning of human existence—to religion and to romance. And both likewise distinguish us from an automated holographic program, programmed to follow instructions and resolve specific problems, but incapable of creative, original thought.

And so the challenge of this episode is both to “lodge” and to break free, to dare to think and act with courageous independence, but also to dare to commit and to belong.

Gabriel Mckee _____
The Lodger

Last year, I gave a three-part seminar on superheroes and religion at the Cornerstone Musical Festival. (I also did a video-blog of the music festival, which you can watch [here](#).) My seminar was in the “Imaginarium” tent, where the festival’s pop culture seminars and movie screenings are held, and was part of a broader grouping of lectures on heroes, both “super” and otherwise, and the tension between reality and fantasy, extraordinary imagination and ordinary reality. Reading through the descriptions of the other seminars on offer before the festival, I was struck by the extent to which my fellow speakers viewed the core concept of superheroes—individuals with “powers and abilities beyond those of normal men”—with distrust. The majority of the seminars dealing with superheroes questioned the very concept of “specialness” as a Nietzschean seduction away from the Christian exaltation of ordinariness. I talked about Nietzsche too, but I found meekness at the heart of characters like Superman and Spider-Man. For many of my fellow speakers at Cornerstone, there is an insurmountable boundary between the superpowered extraordinary and the meek ordinary.

That same tension between the special and the not-so-special is also at play in “The Lodger.” Craig, the real star of this story, is the ultimate “ordinary,” a shy schlub whose life is about as unadventurous as they come. His closest relationship, with his similarly shy would-be-girlfriend Sophie, is stuck in neutral, and likely to stay that way. Into this supremely ordinary existence breaks the supremely extraordinary Doctor. And the immediate result of this new, spectacular presence is not good, not good at all. Craig begins to fear that this odd new presence, by virtue of his wit, his charm, his downright *oddness*, will take Sophie away from him, either romantically (Sophie makes eyes at the new lodger more than a few times) or geographically (after the Doctor encourages her to become an animal rescue volunteer in a faraway land). The Doctor then shows up Craig with some brilliant plays at his weekly football game (that’s soccer to you), and, when Craig sleeps past his alarm one morning, the Doctor stands in for him at his job (with great success).

Craig’s frustration at this invasion of the extraordinary is palpable. What right has this intruder to underscore how utterly *conventional* he is? The contrast between the two is the meat of this episode, and at first the Doctor comes off as... well, as the villain, really. But after seeing how Craig sees the Doctor in the first half of the episode, the second half begins to show us how the Doctor views Craig, and there things begin to turn around. For all his adventuring in time in space, the Doctor finds as much wonder in the life of a man whose greatest joy comes from “pizza and telly” as he does in the mysteries of ancient alien civilizations or the fires of distant suns. In the closing moments of the episode, the Doctor looks at Craig and Sophie with something like envy, because their lives will be full of things that he can never really have, not least of them love.

In this, we begin to see the broader context of the Doctor’s admonition in last week’s episode, “Cold Blood,” to “be extraordinary.” In Craig and Sophie, we have what appear to be the very definition of “ordinary,” and yet they somehow seem to fulfill his commandment. That’s because the Doctor’s conception of “extraordinary” isn’t the opposite of “ordinary”—he utterly rejects that opposition. He opts for a view that is perhaps a bit more paradoxical, like the simultaneous “lodging” and breaking free that James mentions. Alien spaceships aside, the relationship between Craig and Sophie is extraordinarily ordinary, but that means it’s extraordinarily *human*—and, for the Doctor, that is the most wonderful thing in the universe.

BY [GABRIEL MCKEE](#) JULY 12, 2010

TO BE LOVED OR FEARED: *DOCTOR WHO*, PART IX

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Read all the posts in this series [here](#). *Doctor Who* airs in the U.S. on BBC America on Saturdays at 9PM/8C (and though it’s by no means necessary, those interested in watching the first four seasons can find them streaming on Netflix) — ed.

James F. McGrath
The Doctor Opens Pandora's Box and Steps Inside

*Have you ever seen a miracle/ you couldn't doubt or imitate?
What's it really worth to you to shake the holy hand of fate?*

—Kansas, “Rainmaker” from the album *In The Spirit of Things*

The first of two episodes that together make up the season finale of *Doctor Who* is “The Pandorica Opens.” Although it ends with quite a cliffhanger, the fact that Doctor River Song had already passed through these experiences when we encountered her in a previous episode suggests that all will turn out okay for her and her husband. Time travel can make for interesting plot twists, but it can also take some of the suspense out of the story.

But that is true even without time travel—on most TV shows, regulars survive and “red shirts” are expendable. But this episode leads us to wonder whether Rory was such a “red shirt.” The Doctor travels to Roman-era Earth because the Pandorica is opening beneath Stonehenge. The Pandorica was thought to be a fairy story about a prison in which the most dangerous and powerful warrior is imprisoned. As we’ll learn by the end of the episode, it is indeed such a prison, and rather than already having the individual locked inside of it, it has been prepared to receive the individual in question: none other than the Doctor himself!

There among the Roman soldiers, the Doctor and Amy find Rory. He cannot explain how he got there, nor can the Doctor. And so the Doctor suggests in a surprisingly nonchalant fashion that it must be a miracle: although in his 900 years of life he hadn’t seen one, the universe sometimes does surprising and inexplicable things. And so that is what Rory’s presence there is presumed to be, even though he had been erased from time and space so as to never have existed.

At this point, we are presented with one scientific approach to the seemingly miraculous: infinity. In an infinite universe, everything will happen sooner or later. And so the miraculous will happen—indeed, it is *inevitable* that it will happen—but only because in such a universe (or multiverse) *everything* happens. And so the miraculous becomes simply an unlikely event.

Another approach to explaining the miraculous can also be found in science fiction, including *Doctor Who*: technology. Arthur C. Clarke’s third law is famous, but it deserves to be recalled here alongside the other two. Clarke said in his essay “Hazards of Prophecy”:

1. When a distinguished but elderly scientist states that something is possible, he is almost certainly right. When he states that something is impossible, he is probably wrong.

2. The only way of discovering the limits of the possible is to venture a little way past them into the impossible.
3. Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.

And so science regularly shows that what was thought to be impossible is possible, and when it has advanced sufficiently, it becomes indistinguishable from magic, able to do almost anything. This statement of faith in technology has often been interpreted as also implying its converse: anything indistinguishable from magic (or miracle) is advanced technology. In this case, it seems that someone (presumably the Doctor's enemies) worked to fabricate a fake reality, using memories and items from Amy Pond's past, and thus they produced an artificial Rory, somehow managing to duplicate not just his appearance but his memories—in spite of his being erased from history and never having existed.

And so perhaps there is a “real miracle” in the episode: that, in spite of the odds and the laws of physics, Rory is *remembered*. And perhaps the act of remembering those who had passed from life among us is indeed something more marvelous and miraculous than the creation of a copy of a deceased individual using technology.

Gabriel Mckee _____ **The Pandora Opens**

Be warned: spoilers abound ahead.

Stonhenge is an appropriate setting for an episode with so mysterious and ominous a title as “The Pandora Opens.” Following a message sent through the centuries by River Song, the Doctor and Amy arrive in Roman Britain. There is strange energy around the famous standing stones (that much is to be expected in a sci-fi show) and the time travelers find a staircase beneath one of the stones, leading to the “underhenge.” There, they find the Pandora—an enormous box designed to trap the most dangerous monster in the universe for all eternity. The Doctor doesn't know for sure what's inside, but he speculates: “There was a goblin or a trickster or a warrior, a nameless, terrible thing soaked in the blood of a billion galaxies, the most feared being in all the cosmos. And nothing could stop it or hold it or reason with it. One day it would just drop out of the sky and tear down your world.” The Pandora is the perfect prison—and, as that ominous title suggests, it's opening.

So what happens when the universe's most elaborate prison is about to open, presumably releasing its most dangerous prisoner? The universe's many alien species are aware of the Pandora's imminent opening, and the Doctor's most hated villains—the Daleks, the Cybermen, the Sontarans, and dozens more—have turned up to witness the events. The Doctor thinks they want to claim the Pandora and use its evil

inhabitant as a weapon. As for the Doctor himself, he's mainly just curious to see what's in there.

And when it does... well, I wish I could say the surprise is too good to spoil, but much of what follows hinges on it, so I've got to. The Pandorica was constructed to contain a "nameless, terrible thing," "the most feared being in all the cosmos"—but those words describe the Doctor himself perfectly, don't they? To his enemies, the Doctor *is* the most feared being in the cosmos, and they've teamed up to do something about it, devising the Pandorica as an elaborate trap for the time-traveling do-gooder.

The Doctor—in this incarnation in particular—has deliberately cultivated this fear. Back in the first episode of this season, "The Eleventh Hour," he stared down alien invaders who were poised to destroy the earth, and *fear* was precisely the emotion that he invoked to drive them off. "You're not the first to have come here," he tells the Atraxi. "Oh, there have been so many. And what you've got to ask is, what happened to them?... I'm the Doctor. Basically—run." "The Pandorica Opens" features a remarkably similar speech to the assembled masses of his greatest foes: "If you're sitting up there in your silly little spaceship with all your silly little guns, and you've got any plans on taking the Pandorica tonight, just remember who's standing in your way. Remember every black day I ever stopped you. And then, and then, *and then*—do the smart thing. Let somebody else try first."

Fear is what the Doctor hopes to inspire in his enemies, and he succeeds all too well. He's made his enemies so afraid that they do the unthinkable, putting aside their differences to unite against a common foe who they are convinced will destroy the universe. When the final reveal comes, it's a moral reversal that forces us to question the Doctor's attitude toward his villains. Is fear the best emotion to instill in the unstable, the power-mad, the violent? This has been a season replete with this kind of turnaround—think of the Doctor's inadvertent resurrection of his most hated enemies in "Victory of the Daleks" by his insistence that they be villains, his inability to see a third option to save both space-London and the starwhale in "The Beast Below," or the unseen multiples in "Amy's Choice." I don't think we're meant to see the Doctor quite as his enemies see him at the end of this episode, but I *do* think we're supposed to question the wisdom of some aspects of his brand of interstellar diplomacy. When you make yourself feared, this episode tells us, you make yourself a target, and if that fear is extraordinary than the plots against you will be extraordinary as well. It might be asking too much for the Doctor to seek for the Daleks and the Cybermen to love him, or even to trust him—but after this episode's moral reversal, I suspect we may see him looking for a "third way" in the show's future.

BY [GABRIEL MCKEE](#) JULY 20, 2010

REBOOTING THE UNIVERSE: *DOCTOR* *WHO* PART X, SEASON FINALE

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Read all the posts in this series [here](#). *Doctor Who* airs in the U.S. on BBC America on Saturdays at 9PM/8C (and though it's by no means necessary, those interested in watching the first four seasons can find them streaming on Netflix) —ed.

James F. McGrath --- **The Big Bang, Take Two**

For those who may not remember, the Doctor actually was involved in the original Big Bang. In the episode “Terminus” from the Peter Davison era, the space-and-time ship after which the episode was named had jettisoned fuel in an emergency and caused “Event One”—what we refer to as the Big Bang. The Doctor was also involved in the events that provided the spark to life on Earth. In the Tom Baker episode “City of Death” we discover that a crashed spaceship (the pilot of which the Doctor confronts in later eras in human history) caused life to begin to evolve on our planet.

In both those cases, however, the Doctor was merely on the fringes of the events in question.

In this episode, however, the Doctor attempts to repair space and time itself, and reboot the universe, as it were—with Big Bang Two. Would it be a spoiler if I mentioned whether he succeeds? Does anyone really doubt that the Doctor, somehow, will find a way?

We should not be surprised to find the Doctor involved in starting the universe and, when necessary, restarting it. The Face of Boe called the Doctor a “lonely god” and in “The Pandorica Opens” the Doctor’s future wife, River Song, used his school nickname “Theta Sigma” (ΘΣ) in her graffitied message to him. In New Testament manuscripts, Theta Sigma is a frequent abbreviation for the Greek word *theos*, meaning “God.”

Like many depictions of deities, the Doctor has always had a certain ambiguity about him. From the original pilot episode, he had an unusually high degree of arrogance and irritability for a TV hero.

But then again, heroes without limitations or flaws can become uninteresting. A truly all-powerful god or hero might be expected to simply make evil disappear, instantaneously, with no need for struggle. That doesn’t make for an interesting story.

Limiting a hero’s (or a villain’s) power in time travel scenarios can be particularly challenging for writers. When time travel is involved, one can be the cause of the universe and thus even of one’s own existence. Although the Doctor says at one point in the episode, “We all become stories in the end,” the time traveler is uniquely poised to not merely live on as a legend, but to actually appear all throughout history, almost as though actually *eternal*.

But there are some genuine challenges which confront the Doctor in this episode, and perhaps the greatest of these is not rebooting the universe, but managing to survive being wiped away from ever having existed in the universe at all.

What power could accomplish *that*? The answer given was already hinted at in previous episodes: memory. As long as something or someone is remembered, they aren't really gone. And somehow Amy Pond proves capable even of remembering that which has been deleted from ever having existed—as she did with Rory. Apparently living next to a crack in the universe has made her special in this way, and her recollection will be the key.

As this story element played out, it was delightful to see the forethought that had been given to plot elements involving this season's time-travelling storyline. Earlier this season some viewers already wondered about the Doctor's departure and sudden reappearance in the episode "Flesh and Stone," speaking to Amy when her eyes were closed and saying things that seemed not to be germane at that time. In the season's finale, we learn that this was indeed the Doctor from the future, popping up in various places along the crack in the universe before disappearing. But Amy could hear him, and he left her with some clues, some memories. And that led to a very clever device, as the Doctor embedded himself and his TARDIS in Amy's memory in connection with that famous bit of wedding lore. Because as Amy says at her wedding, the TARDIS is indeed "something old, something new, something borrowed, and something blue."

That memory could bring a time lord and his TARDIS back from non-existence may seem like a stretch—although not more so than many other plot devices on Doctor Who. But the true power of memory certainly does deserve close attention. It is not merely that "when we forget our history, we are doomed to repeat it," as the old adage goes. Memory, recent work in psychology has shown, *creates* the past from stored information, rather than retrieving it as though it were recorded on a DVD or in a photograph. If we try to remember some person, place, or event, it does not appear in our mind as a complete snapshot, nor a filmstrip that begins when we hit the "play" button on our memory. From fragments of data, not always placed in our memory at the same time, we put our past together. And it is precisely because of this that what we recall cannot always be relied on for accuracy.

This is relevant to religion in numerous ways. One of the subjects I study is the historical figure of Jesus. I have encountered with surprising frequency the fringe viewpoint which claims that Jesus is unlikely to have really existed, having been concocted from earlier myths and stories (although why anyone would try to pass off a figure based on dying and rising gods as a crucified Jewish Messiah is never adequately explained by those with such views). On the other hand, there are many who assume that Jesus really was in history as he would later be "remembered" by the church not only in its Gospels but in its creeds and its ongoing experience of worship.

And the challenge to the historian, as James Dunn in particular has recently emphasized, is to deal with the fact that we do not have access to Jesus "as he really was" almost 2,000 years ago, but only to "Jesus remembered"—and that not the direct memory of eyewitnesses but the collective memory of the Christian church which preserved but also transformed the memory of Jesus as it transmitted it. Memory is indeed powerful. I don't know that it can do what the Doctor Who season finale suggests, but it certainly can turn a nation from one of freedom to one of repression, or

vice versa. It can turn fact into fiction or fiction into fact in the collective memory of a nation. Likewise we can choose to “remember” the meaning of sacred texts as this or that, and conveniently forget those texts that do not say things we want to hear.

And so however much a time traveler such as the Doctor may seem like a deity at times, the Bible itself recognizes that even deities depend on being remembered, and remembered in a certain way.

Perhaps this is a particularly fitting theme for the end of a season, as we will seek to keep the memory of our enjoyment of and reflection upon this season alive in the coming months, and eagerly await the story’s continuation in the not-too-distant future.

Gabriel Mckee _____
The Big Bang

Well, that was the cliffhanger to beat ’em all, wasn’t it? “The Pandorica Opens” concluded with the Doctor imprisoned, Amy dead, and every star in the universe simultaneously exploding. Then the curtain drops, and looks like it will never rise again. What could possibly be behind it?

As it turns out, quite a lot can go on after the demise of the universe, and the first half of “The Big Bang” brings out quite a bit of ingenuity in bringing us back not merely from the brink, but from six feet over it. Doctor Who thrives on giving us the impossible—the Doctor always pulls a Gallifreyan rabbit out of his hat *just* at the right moment. It’s a kind of storytelling that could drive its viewers nuts, if not handled carefully—ultimately, every story relies on a *deus ex machina* (or, picking up from James’ suggestions about the Doctor’s limited divinity, a *machina ex deo*). But that’s precisely where much of the show’s charm and drive and sense of sheer wonder come from—the ingenuity of the Doctor, and the ingenuity of his writers in making us believe the impossible.

So what happens in “The Big Bang”? Well, yes, the universe has ended, except for Earth, which is kept going due to some residual energy from the Pandorica (and the replacement of its sun with something wonderfully impossible). The stars are gone—and there’s a great throwaway line about “star cults” that believe in invisible lights in the sky, led by a shady figure named Richard Dawkins—but the Earth abides. And, nearly two thousand years after the destruction of the universe and the imprisonment of the Doctor, a young girl named Amy Pond prays to Santa Claus for help closing the strange crack in her wall. (I loved that scene when it opened “The Eleventh Hour” way back at the beginning of the season, and I still love it now that it’s been reimagined for the finale.) Then there’s some ingenious impossibilities and the Doctor is back, and some more ingenious impossibilities and he re-creates the universe afresh, and it’s all grand and cosmic and just a bit deliberately over your head.

The most striking thing to me about this episode is that, with all the grand cosmic goings-on, all the talk about infinite time-loops and rebooting universes, and all of the

ingenious impossibilities in play, the thing impresses me the most in this story is perhaps the smallest and most insignificant: the love story between Amy and her fiancé Rory. Rory died back in “Cold Blood,” shot by the Silurians and then sucked through a crack in reality that made it so that he had never existed at all. We watched as Amy’s memories of him slipped away until finally she didn’t even remember what she was upset about—shouldn’t they be trying to get away from the lizard-people and back to the TARDIS?

Rory returned in “The Pandorica Opens,” an event that the Doctor was at a loss to explain—he actually described it as a miracle, which is saying something on a show where the impossible occurs every week. Rory found himself stationed with the Roman legion at Stonehenge, and had full memories of two lives—one that of a bumbling 21st-century medical student, and the other that of a first-century Roman centurion. By the end of that episode we got an idea of what had happened. This wasn’t really Rory, but an Auton—a plastic alien android programmed with Rory’s memories. He was also programmed, it turned out, to awaken his alien side and kill Amy when the Pandorica finally opened, which he did, despite his conscious, human mind’s protests.

At the opening of “The Big Bang,” Rory, now revealed as a machine, is cradling Amy’s lifeless form, his human grief having overtaken his android heartlessness. When the Doctor finds him, the Time Lord downplays that grief in light of the complete destruction of the universe: “Do you know how many lives now never happened, all the people who never lived?” the Doctor asks. “Your girlfriend isn’t more important than the whole universe.” Whereupon android-Rory rises up and clocks the Doctor in the jaw, shouting “She is to me!” and thereby passing the Time Lord’s test: in the Doctor’s eyes, he has now proven that he’s the real Rory Williams. For the Doctor, there is no qualitative difference between the real Rory and an android programmed to believe he’s Rory, provided that android displays appropriate, human emotions.

With this scene, *Doctor Who* finds itself firmly in the territory of science fiction author and theologian Philip K. Dick, who wrote dozens of stories on this very theme: appropriate emotion, and more importantly love and *caritas*, as the defining characteristic of the authentic human being. For Dick, evil is this android coldness, a complete lack of empathy. His stories are full of human beings who are de facto androids because they are unable to feel for their fellow organisms. Empathy and love, not biology, designate humanity—these can be expressed by machines as well as organic lifeforms. (Witness the kindly robotic taxicab in *Now Wait for Last Year*, or the wise Abraham Lincoln robot in *We Can Build You*.) Dick drew much of his understanding of love from 1 Corinthians, a text on which he drew throughout his career, though he perhaps best summed it up in an interview in the late ’70s: “St. Paul said, ‘If I have not love than I am jack shit... or something like that.’”

Doctor Who’s writers seem to share Dick’s understanding of the blurry line between the android and the human. This is not the first time the show has featured a machine that proves itself the equal of human beings—in this season’s “Victory of the Daleks,” for instance, we had Bracewell, the Dalek-made bomb who thought he was a man. The Doctor was able to convince Bracewell that he was more human than machine, hence

averting his detonation. To me, that scene felt like a commentary on Philip K. Dick's early story "Impostor," a story about an alien bomb dressed up as an very convincing android, who explodes when he learns his true nature. In the face of this kind of mechanical determinism, *Doctor Who* loudly proclaims that machines, even those designed only to kill, can will themselves into humanity with the right amount of caritas.

Indeed, *Doctor Who*'s androids may even be better able to love than we biological humans, as demonstrated by the superhuman lengths to which Rory's android body allows him to carry his love. The Doctor deposits Amy in the Pandorica, which has the ability to restore her to life—but it's going to take nearly two millennia to do it. Rather than hop through time with the Doctor, Rory insists on staying behind to stand watch over her. Amy's devotion to the Doctor lasted a decade and a half or so, earning her the occasional sobriquet of "the girl who waited"—now Rory, after standing watch over his fiancée for 1,894 years, is "the boy who waited." By the episode's end, Rory is back to his biological self, but it seems he still carries the memories of those two thousand years. That longevity may be superhuman, but the emotion it represents is human to the core—or, rather, a kind of superhumanity that we are actually capable of achieving.

All of *Doctor Who*'s season finales have involved ever-increasing crises and disasters. And all of these averted apocalypses have pulled me in, from the massive Dalek fleet of the first season to Davros' theft of the earth in the fourth. With the actual destruction and recreation of the universe, this season may well have the grandest scale yet—but it says something about this season that, for me at least, the apocalypse pales in comparison to the human, and android, drama.

Fall 2010 – SFRA Review:

Selected Letters of Philip K. Dick

Gabriel Mckee

Philip K. Dick. *The Selected Letters of Philip K. Dick, 1980–1982* (Volume 6), ed. Don Herron. Nevada City, CA: Underwood Books (PO Box 1919, Nevada City, CA 95959), 2010. Hardcover, 288 pages, \$49.95, ISBN 978-1887424264z3988.

Seen any flying pigs lately? After a 15-year wait, the sixth and final volume of *The Selected Letters of Philip K. Dick* has finally been published. Originally scheduled to be released in 1995, the 1980–1982 volume, spanning the last 26 months of the author's life, ran into a number of delays before collapsing into limbo after the dissolution of Underwood-Miller. (A note inserted in the published volume states that the dust jacket, but not the book, was printed a decade ago.) The original publisher's successor, Underwood Books, has finally completed the project, and in so doing has completed what is destined to be a major source for Philip K. Dick scholars.

Those familiar with the previous volumes of Dick's letters will know, more or less, what to expect of this one. Dick is still exploring and expounding upon his religious experiences of early 1974, and much of this volume consists of extended philosophical speculations. (Indeed, most of the book's first hundred pages are a single series of letters sent to Patricia Warrick, author of *Mind in Motion: The Fiction of Philip K. Dick*, in January 1981). But philosophical exegesis is not all that was going on in Dick's life and mind in this period, and this volume presents vital information about other aspects of his work as well. Dick's final two novels—*The Divine Invasion* and *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*—were written during this period, and several letters shed light on their composition. A pair of letters to Ursula K. Le Guin (137 and 150–151) show Dick reflecting on the often-problematic nature of his female characters, and even suggest that Angel Archer, the protagonist of *Transmigration* and undoubtedly Dick's most

carefully thought-out female character, grew at least in part in response to Le Guin's criticisms. Two letters (to Russell Galen, 89–92, and to David Hartwell, 154–156) contain detailed plot outlines for novels that were never written. Elsewhere, we can glean information about Dick's knowledge of William S. Burroughs (145), Alfred North Whitehead (148), and Martin Luther (251). Other letters show Dick's thoughts on the publication of *VALIS* and his response to the novel's reviews, his shifting opinions on the film *Blade Runner*, and his brief love affair, a mere four months before his death, with a young woman known only as "Sandra." Needless to say, there is much to reward the PKD researcher in this volume.

That's not to say that the book is without its frustrations, however. It seems that the "selection" of these letters is serendipitous rather than conscious; it's not stated outright, but it certainly seems like they've printed every letter extant. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but it does beg the question of why the letters are "selected" instead of "complete." There are also some conspicuous gaps: there are a mere 24 letters from 1980, spanning 28 pages, compared to 174, nearly 300 pages, in 1981 (25 of those letters in January alone). Did Dick really write no letters for 4 months in 1980, or did he simply not retain copies of those letters? If the editors know, they're not saying, and that means we may never know.

The volume could also be better-placed within the overall context of its author's biography. There is a brief timeline of Dick's life at the beginning of the book, but there is no internal timeline for the years 1980–1982. The general timeline is somewhat useful, but most of the information contained in it is likely already known to anyone serious enough about PKD to read his correspondence. Volumes 4 and 5 (1975–76 and 1977–79, respectively) each had such an internal timeline, which proved enormously helpful in drawing the connections between correspondence and biography.

Furthermore, aside from the timeline and a brief introduction, the letters are presented without much in the way of context. Some recipients are briefly identified by the editor's headers ("David Hartwell, editor, Timescape Books"), but far more are identified by name only. It's wise of the editor to avoid interjection, but it would be nice to have footnotes explaining, for instance, that the "Ben Adams" to whom the letter on 72 is addressed was a high school student and the editor of the *Yorba City High Times*, and that the "short-short story" Dick sent him was "The Alien Mind." And what were the contents of the letter Dick forwarded to the FBI on April 15, 1981, of which he writes "I have never received a letter like it... I hope I never get a letter like this again"? (145). The answer to questions like that might be lost to the ages, but that level of one-sidedness can be a source of frustration.

The greatest lack—in this volume and in the *Selected Letters* as a whole—is a comprehensive index. Given the extent to which Dick discussed his own works in the letters, the number of other writers to whom he refers, and the general breadth of content contained in these volumes, they desperately call for an index to facilitate research within them. (The first volume published—volume 3, covering 1974—contained a brief index of PKD titles referred to, but no topical or name index.) The note laid into the final volume states that paperback versions of the entire series are in preparation, and Underwood would do well to consider including indices (and detailed timelines) in the reissue.

Given its specificity, this volume is not likely to have much use in the classroom. For courses covering the specific works discussed in this volume (*The Transmigration of Timothy Archer* in particular, but also *The Divine Invasion*, *VALIS*, and *Blade Runner*), individual letters could provide valuable insight. Of course, the volume's primary audience is PKD scholars. Given the ever-increasing critical attention Dick has received in the last decade or so, this volume and the series it completes are sure to be an invaluable resource for current and future researchers.

Nerve.com, March [11?], 2011:

Ranked: Philip K. Dick Adaptations from Worst to Best

GABRIEL MCKEE



WE COMMISSIONED A PKD EXPERT TO REVIEW *BLADE RUNNER*, *TOTAL RECALL*, *THE ADJUSTMENT BUREAU*, AND MORE.

Philip K. Dick's mindbending science-fiction writing has inspired many Hollywood projects, including this month's The Adjustment Bureau. Said adaptations have ranged widely in fidelity to their source material; they've also ranged widely in quality. To assess them, we brought in critic [Gabriel Mckee](#), author of [Pink Beams of Light from the God in the Gutter: The Science-Fictional Religion of Philip K. Dick](#).

10. Next (2007)

Based (nominally) on "The Golden Man" (1954)

When adapting a story, this is what *not* to do. Dick's story is about a silent, golden-skinned mutant who can foresee and choose between the infinite possible outcomes of his actions, but has utterly sacrificed his humanity to animal instinct. *Next* somehow turns this into a story in which Nicolas Cage plays a psychic stage magician on the run from the FBI. The film throws out every single aspect of the story it's ostensibly based on, including the title; it's a mystery why they bothered paying for the story rights at all. This would be forgivable if it were a good movie. It's not.

9. Paycheck (2003)

Based on "Paycheck" (1953)

Ben Affleck plays an engineer who has his memory erased every time he finishes a project; it's the ultimate confidentiality agreement. He wakes up from a particularly mysterious assignment to find he's signed away his savings, leaving himself only an envelope full of what appear to be worthless items. This naturally makes him curious about what the project was, so he infiltrates the corporation that hired him, a task for which he needs — aha! — the assorted detritus he left himself in that mystery envelope. In the process, he gets chased a lot, and some things explode. *Paycheck* isn't so much bad as drab, but maybe it's appropriate that a movie about erased memories should be so forgettable.

8. *Impostor* (2002)

Based on "Impostor" (1953)

Spencer Olham (Gary Sinise) is a government official who designs weapons for use in a war against vicious alien invaders from Alpha Centauri. The aliens have started using an insidious new tactic: sending android bombs that look and act human to the planet's surface, where they can infiltrate sensitive targets and explode. The military thinks Olham has been replaced by one of these bombs, so he goes on the run and tries to prove he's human. If the film feels a bit uneven, it's because it was expanded from a forty-minute short intended as one third of an anthology. Sinise is a believably Dickian everyman, but the movie doesn't dig quite deep enough into its questions about identity.

7. *Screamers* (1995)

Based on "Second Variety" (1953)

Peter Weller plays a military commander on a distant mining colony where robots have teamed up and turned against their human creators, decimating the population and laying waste to the planet's surface. The few human survivors have taken to hiding out in underground bunkers, which means the robots have started getting devious. They've designed new android bodies for themselves that the humans will trust — that ten-year-old boy clutching a teddy bear is actually a robotic killing machine. In other words, this Canadian-produced action flick is a B movie. But it's a pretty good one, and it adequately translates the menace of Dick's original story.

6. *The Adjustment Bureau* (2011)

Based on "Adjustment Team" (1954)

Politician David Norris (Matt Damon) has just lost his first Senate campaign. A chance encounter with an impulsive young woman (Emily Blunt) inspires him to improvise an unforgettable concession speech that sets him on a path to the Presidency. He encounters her again a few days later, but it seems the forces governing our world didn't intend him to see her again. Before he knows it he's being followed by mysterious figures in fedoras who can bend reality to their will. Norris has deviated from "the Plan," and his dogged insistence on following his heart may be putting the future of the world at risk. *Adjustment Bureau* bears little resemblance to its source material, but it's definitely clever. Still, at points it gets a bit silly — the aforementioned fedoras have magic powers, for one thing — and it can't escape feeling a bit like a rom-com remake of *Dark City*.

5. *Total Recall* (1990)

Based on "We Can Remember It For You Wholesale" (1966)

Construction worker Douglas Quaid (Arnold Schwarzenegger) longs to visit Mars, but can't afford it. So he heads to Rekall, a company that implants false memories, to give him the imagined experience of a trip to Mars. The wrinkle is that he actually *has* been to Mars before: he was a secret agent who had his memories erased when he ran afoul of the sinister corporation that administers the planet's settlement. Cue chase scenes, bloody shootouts, exploding eyeballs, and a memorably grotesque mutant named Kuato. It's hard to call the movie miscast, since the finished product is so quintessentially Schwarzeneggerian, but it would have made more sense were its lead a henpecked salaryman instead of a burly action star. (An unfiled version under a different director is rumored to have had Richard Dreyfus attached.) Still, Paul Verhoeven's first film after *Robocop* is inventive and unpretentious, and probably the most fun PKD adaptation ever made. "Get your ass to Mars!"

4. *Radio Free Albemuth* (2010)

Based on *Radio Free Albemuth* (1977)

A writer named Phil narrates the bizarre story of his friend, music producer Nicholas Brady, whose mind has been zapped by an alien satellite. Brady becomes aware of an underground conspiracy called Aramcheck that has existed for millennia and is dedicated to overthrowing the government of a near-future police state run by Richard Nixon. Oh, and the satellite might also be God. The bizarre-sounding story gets only more intriguing when you consider that it's based on Dick's real-life religious experiences in the mid-'70s. This independently produced film has not been officially released yet, but has had some festival screenings. When it finds a distributor, audiences will be treated to what is easily the most faithful Dick adaptation to date.

3. *Minority Report* (2002)

Based on "The Minority Report" (1956)

Tom Cruise plays John Anderton, a cop in a future where crimes are predicted by precognitive mutants, and the perpetrators arrested before they can commit their crimes. The system seems to work — there hasn't been a murder since Precrime was implemented — but when the precogs predict that Anderton will commit a murder, he goes on the run and tries to prove his (future) innocence. *Minority Report's* unconventional five-act structure makes it feel either epic or sprawling, depending on your opinion of the finished product. But it's a well-crafted chase movie with a strong sense of atmosphere, and does a reasonably good job of transferring Dick's speculations about free will into the action-movie format.

2. *Blade Runner* (1982)

Based on *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968)

Bounty hunter Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) is tasked with tracking down and "retiring" a group of android replicants from an offworld colony that have killed their masters and snuck back to Earth. Cinema's first PKD adaptation is certainly the most influential, and its prescient, bleak cityscape has been an influence on three decades of dystopian science-fiction futures. The story is almost willfully opaque, but it's so gorgeously designed and shot that it doesn't really matter. *Blade Runner's* total aesthetic is unparalleled, and it's no surprise that it's still the most recognizable reference point for Philip K. Dick's writing.

1. *A Scanner Darkly* (2006)

Based on *A Scanner Darkly* (1977)

Bob Arctor (Keanu Reeves), smalltime drug dealer/addict, is secretly an undercover narcotics officer named Fred. But the drug he's using — Substance D — has split his mind in two, and neither personality is aware that they're the same person. Fred is informing on himself, and doesn't know it. Richard Linklater's adaptation of what Dick called his "anti-drug novel" is especially notable for its visual technique — it was shot with live actors, then painstakingly computer animated to produce a distinctive sense of altered reality. The end result captures the novel's mood perfectly, and if Reeves' performance is a bit flat, it only makes sense — after all, his character's emotions have been deadened by drugs. No other adaptation so thoroughly translates the unsettling atmosphere of Dick's writing to the screen.

SF Signal, Nov. 7, 2012:

MIND MELD: The New Future For Star Wars

Posted on November 7, 2012 by [JP Frantz](#) in [Mind Meld](#) // 10 Comments



[Do you have an idea for a future Mind Meld? [Let us know!](#)]

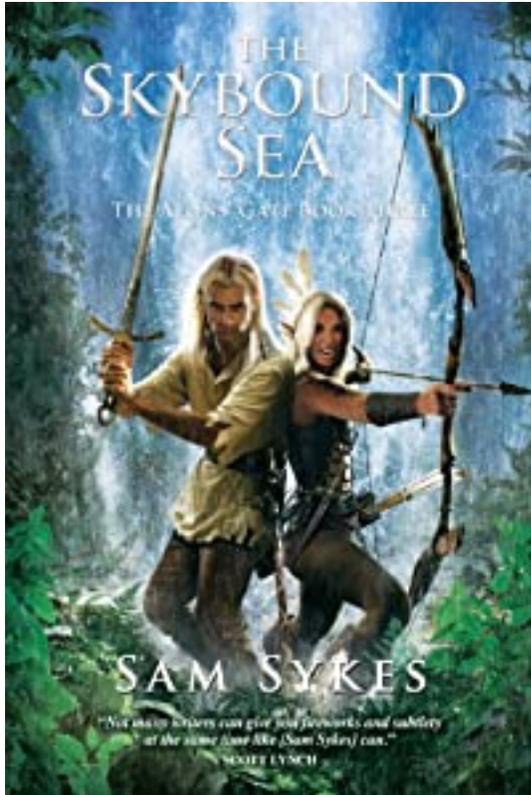
The big news from last week was the acquisition of LucasFilm by Disney, giving the Mouse control of Star Wars and many other properties. While fans everywhere cheer the idea of no more Lucas mucking about with the films, another bit of news dropped that doesn't seem to be getting as much play. Several decades after Lucas first floated the idea, Disney will be making three more episodes in the *Star Wars* saga, with episode 7 slated to land in 2015. Since this is apparently going to happen, our question is:

Q: What do you want to see from the new Star Wars movies in terms of stories? Do you have anyone you'd like to direct the movies or star in them?

Here's what they said...

Sam Sykes

It was [Sam Sykes](#), author of *Tome of the Undergates*, who brought down Napoleon.



If you've ever been a part of a creative process, the term "fresh eyes" may mean something to you. I don't mean, necessarily, "fresh look," a phrase often reserved for justifying the craven process of redesigning an idea so that it is unrecognizable from what it once was while at the same time refusing to use it as its own, new idea.

What I mean is that, when one becomes close to an idea, when one has been working on that idea from the beginning and has seen it go from Point A to Point B, one can only ever see it as that idea, that journey, that point-to-point. You can hear this concept explained by John Cleese's video on creativity (look it up on Vimeo) in that we are at our most creative when we are at play, when we are free to say "what if" and "why not."

Star Wars can't do that anymore. It's an idea that has a shared stake in Lucas, in its fans and in its obligation as a money-making product and no one can agree on whether it's going to Point A or Point B, but they're each convinced that they have the right idea where it's going and everyone else has the wrong idea.

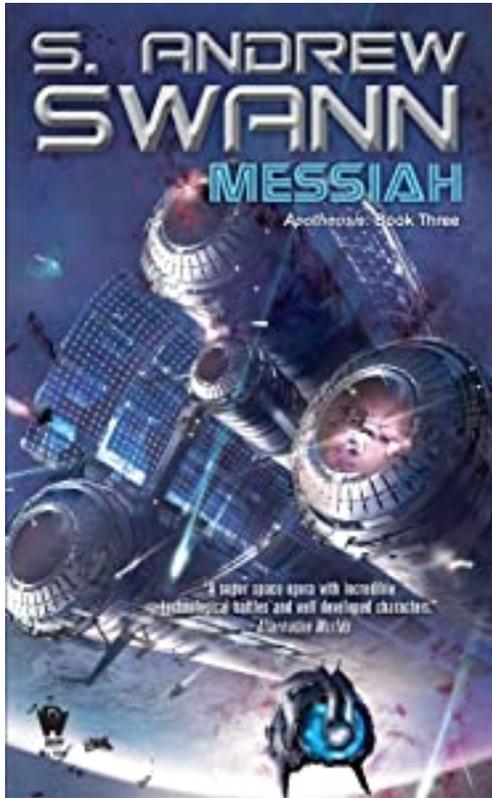
What I'm looking forward to is the notion that *Star Wars* is dead. *Star Wars* is dead, gone and left behind a disgraced memory that makes people ill just thinking about. It has no more preconceptions, no more rules on what it "has" to do, no more Point A's or Point B's. It has a legacy, sure. It has a compelling backstory, yes. It has a lot of meaning, absolutely.

But it doesn't have a reputation. Not anymore.

And now, it's free to do something interesting without someone else telling it what to be.

S. Andrew Swann

S. Andrew Swann is the pen name of Steven Swiniarski. He's married and lives in the Greater Cleveland area where he has lived all of his adult life. He has a background in mechanical engineering and -besides writing- works as a Database Manager for one of the largest private child services agencies in the Cleveland area. He has published 23 novels over the past 18 years, which include science fiction, fantasy and horror.



What I'd like to see from new *Star Wars* films? Let me ignore all the other properties associated with *Star Wars* for the moment (novels, cartoons, comic books) and focus just on the six films we have already. The existing moves have good points and bad, and there seems to be a good amount of consensus that the bad began outweighing the good at around the halfway point of *Return of the Jedi* (cough*Ewoks*cough).

The good: An inventive visual style. A universe that started out larger than the screen. Iconic heroes and villains. An epic sense of scale.

The bad: Camp. Aliens that look like racially-insensitive Muppets and get worse as CGI improves. Three prequels that introduce the kind of continuity snarls that DC comics took half a century to create. Writing that is, at times, Manos-level bad. Turning iconic characters into woobie caricatures out of bad fan-fiction (cough*Annikin*cough)

Disney has some choices to continue on with the property. They could go plodding along, Muppets and continuity intact, and continue driving the franchise into the ground. Or they might try and build on the good parts, and pretend certain movies never happened. (Call this the *Superman Returns* gambit.)

If it was my call, I'd take a radical third option: Reboot the franchise entirely. Wipe the slate and redo the first three movies. (You know what I mean by the first three movies, damnit!) Use some decent writers. Get some good, believable alien designs so that the non-humans are as well-designed as the spaceships. Film the three rebooted films at once ala *Lord of the Rings*. (And, hell, have Peter Jackson direct.) And I'd make the following changes: The Force returns to being a quasi-religion, and the Jedi to being warrior monks ala the Knights Templar. Darth Vader is a villain again, and we DO NOT redeem him at the end. (The guy destroys planets. It's like redeeming Hitler, and the prequels make this worse.) No, the redemption we need to see is Luke's. We take the tragic fall theme of the prequels, and we give that storyline to Luke in the reboot. From the "Luke, I am your father" scene forward we get to see Luke go over to the dark side (not just symbolically, but in actually, which would make the new *Return of the Jedi* much darker/better), and unlike Anakin in the prequels, we'd actually care. Luke takes up Vader's offer to rule the galaxy together and they kill of the Emperor at the start of the new *Return of the Jedi*. The climax of the third movie would be Han and a Jedi-trained Leia going up against the father/son tag team. Picture this: the climatic Luke/Leia lightsaber duel. When she's about to lose, Han takes the hit that would have killed her. He dies in her arms, she's sobbing, finally broken, and Luke's looking on in horror, and in a righteous fury goes on to kick serious Vader ass.

Jennifer Pelland

Jennifer Pelland's first novel, **Machine**, was released by Apex Publications at the beginning of the year, and she has a story in their recently-published **Dark Faith: Invocations**. She's a two-time Nebula loser, and a not-even-vaguely-award-eligible bellydancer.



When I finally got power back after twenty-six hours of Sandy-related darkness, I thought my friends were pulling a fast one on me when they told me

this news. But once I realized that it wasn't an elaborate hoax, I was actually heartened. Lucas shouldn't be allowed to make *Star Wars* all on his own. The best movies of the six were *A New Hope* and *The Empire Strikes Back*, because for both, he actually had to listen to other people's opinions and take their creative feedback. But by *Return of the Jedi*, the man had more money than god and could do whatever he wanted, which was a problem. The re-releases and the prequels only underscored that, big time.

So if *Star Wars* is going to continue, it needs to continue in the hands of a creative team rather than a single person with horrifically bad judgment. We've already got proof that it can be done. *The Clone Wars* animated series is currently producing intelligent and entertaining stories, and Lucas has absolutely nothing to do with it (except for cashing the checks they send him). I'd like to hope that if Disney had been involved in *The Phantom Menace*, someone would have said, "You know, people are going to call us racists unless we do something about Jar-Jar Binks and the Neimoidians." I'd also like to hope that someone else, upon reading through the next two scripts, would have said, "Wouldn't it be nice if Anakin's fall was tragic? I kinda feel like people will be rooting for him to hurry up and turn into Vader so he'll stop whining."

Plus, they need to hire a continuity nerd and LISTEN TO HER. Ugh.

As for stories, I hope they stay away from all the expanded universe stories and give us something new. At the end of the last film (chronologically), an oppressive empire has just been overthrown. As we're currently seeing right here on Earth, there's plenty of unrest after something like that happens, and the government that springs up in the old one's place isn't necessarily a huge improvement. There's a lot of fertile ground to play with there. And as much as I like to root for the Sith, if they come back, I desperately want them to be better written. Everyone's the hero of their own story, but it's really hard to try to figure out how Sidious and Vader could see themselves as heroes. So I nominate Kenneth Branagh to direct the next one. After watching how he handled the incredibly complex machinations of Loki in *Thor*, I'd love to see him tackle the Sith. (Plus, I want to reward him for introducing me to the delightfully photogenic Tom Hiddleston.)

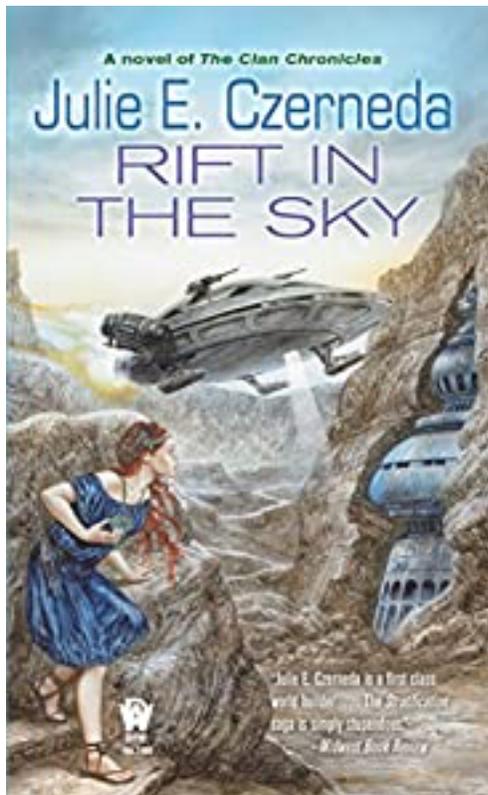
I would also love to see a woman's story be told for once. While Leia was huge in the original trilogy and Padme was her equivalent in the prequels, the original trilogy was about Luke, and the prequels were about Obi-Wan and Anakin. The women were there to support the men's character arcs. Let's tell a woman's story this time, and let's not have it end with the world's most inept medical droids shrugging their shoulders and declaring that she's lost the will to live. That's a malpractice suit if I ever saw one.

One other thing I liked about the original trilogy was the way it cast little-known actors for many of the main roles. It made it so much easier to fall into the world of the movie. I'd love it if Disney did that this time around. And while they're at it, if they could make the future a whole hell less white and male, that would be lovely. There's just too much tokenism in the trilogies. Making it less straight and gender normative would also be nice, but I suspect Disney's less likely to want to go there, what with all the fuss narrow-minded parents would raise.

Of course, I would not mind one bit if they cast Tom Hiddleston to be their token white male. Thank you again, Kenneth Branagh. I owe you one.

Julie E. Czerneda

Canadian author and editor Julie E. Czerneda transformed her love and knowledge of biology into science fiction novels (published by DAW Books NY) and short stories that have received international acclaim, multiple awards, and best-selling status. Her latest works include the Aurora-nominated **Tesseract Fifteen: A Case of Quite Curious Tales**, co-edited with Susan MacGregor, and **Rift in the Sky**, the latest installment in her SF series, **The Clan Chronicles**. Coming March 2013 to bookstores everywhere is Book One of her new **Night's Edge** series, Julie's debut (and really fat) fantasy novel, **A Turn of Light**. There are toads. For more about Julie's work, including installments from Turn, please visit www.czerneda.com.



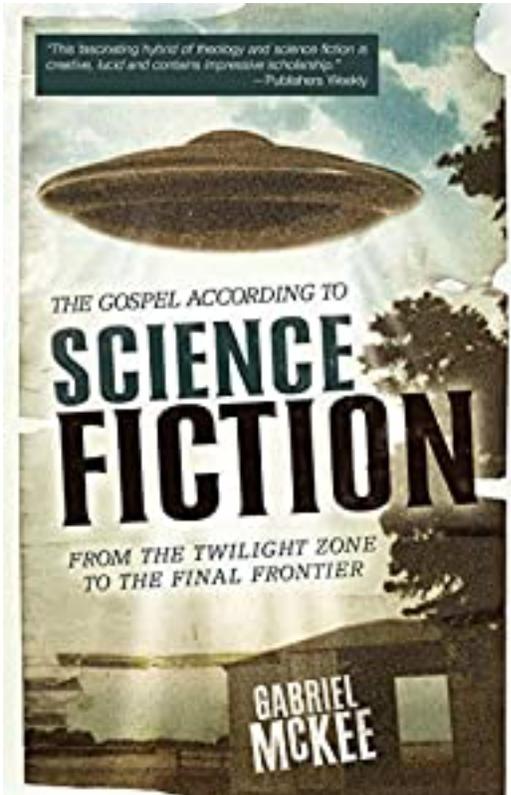
Oooh Shiny!!! I want to see more discovery – more wonder – as opposed to more battles. Love the battles, don't get me wrong, but what's always grabbed me by the heart-strings were the moments in *Star Wars* where we encountered the alien and the marvelous (and insanely fun and weird). I'd like to see the characters experience another first encounter, as they did with the Ewoks. Maybe not quite so cute. Sweep me away with exploration, even if Evil must be Vanquished. Make room in the story for amazement too.

While I've no particular actors or directors coming to mind, and I'm no expert anyway, if Harrison Ford isn't available (or no longer age-appropriate – happens to everyone but Sean Connery) I'd love to see Nathan Fillion take the role of Han Solo.

I'm looking forward to the new three – to not knowing the destination. *Star Wars* has transported me into a universe far far away. Enchant me again, if you please.

Gabriel Mckee

Gabriel Mckee is the author of **The Gospel According to Science Fiction: From the Twilight Zone to the Final Frontier**, the blog [SF Gospel](#), and **Pink Beams of Light From the God in the Gutter: The Science Fictional Religion of Philip K. Dick**. He is also a graduate of Harvard Divinity School, a librarian, and an increasingly obsessive collector of Ace Doubles.



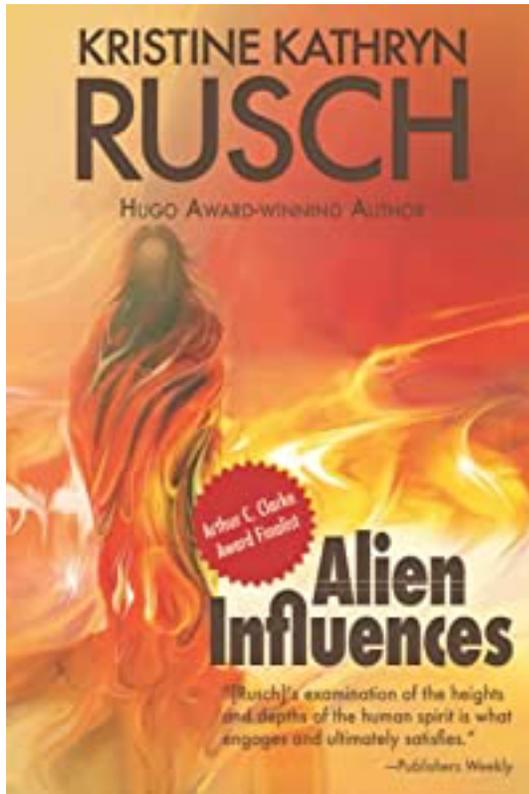
When I heard the news about the sale of Lucasfilm to Disney, my first thought was: *Star Wars without George Lucas—finally!* I suppose one no longer needs to belabor the point that Lucas is a visionary whose vision ran out long ago. The “expanded universe”—over which he’s exercised very little personal control—is where all of the interesting stuff has happened in the franchise post-*Return of the Jedi*. My favorite corner of the *Star Wars* universe has always been the merely quasi-canonical Marvel Comics series, so I wouldn’t object to seeing, say, a character like [Shira Brie](#) pop up, or maybe even a [hoojib](#). But more important than what I *do* want in the future *Star Wars* films is what I *don’t* want in them: the word “midichlorians.” The idea that the Force somehow needed more explanation than was given by Obi-Wan in the original film is kind of like the idea that we really needed to know Boba Fett’s angsty backstory. A change of leadership means a chance to get *Star Wars* back on track, and though it sounds a bit hokey to say it, restoring some mystery to the Force would be a good place to start. And hey, a certain amount of hokiness is part of the religious world of *Star Wars* anyway—just ask Han Solo.

As for who should be involved, it’s tough to say—the universe is wide open, so it all depends on what story they want to tell. I’d be interested in seeing an older Luke Skywalker, it might be a bit sad to see an elderly Han Solo—“grizzled veteran” could veer a bit too easily into “doddering curmudgeon.” So I’d love to see Mark Hamill in the cast, but I don’t think I’d shed too many tears if Harrison Ford were not on board. Behind the camera, I don’t have much to add to the ever-growing speculative list of directors, but I think either Joss Whedon or Brad Bird would

surely create something excellent, with an appropriate mix of action, emotion, and thematic depth. J.J. Abrams, of course, has already made a *Star Wars* film— he called it *Star Trek*— but it was a pretty good one, so he could probably turn in a solid entry as well.

Kristine Rusch

Kristine Kathryn Rusch just won the Endeavour award for the best sf/f novel published by a Pacific Northwest author for **City of Ruins**, the second book in her **Diving** universe series. Her next sf novel is **Blowback**, part of her **Retrieval Artist** series, which will be out in December.



All I want is for the new movies to stay true to the *Star Wars* mythos. I want the movies to build on what has come before, not toss it out. I'd say it's a vain hope, but the *Star Trek* franchise managed it with the reboot. So maybe *Star Wars* can do the same.

As far as casting goes, the young Harrison Ford, Mark Hamill before the accident, the young Carrie Fisher—oh, never mind.

Karin Lowachee

Karin was born in South America, grew up in Canada, and worked in the Arctic. Her first novel **Warchild** won the 2001 Warner Aspect First Novel Contest. Both **Warchild** (2002) and her third novel **Cagebird** (2005) were finalists for the Philip K. Dick Award. **Cagebird** won the Prix Aurora Award in 2006 for Best Long-Form Work in English and the Spectrum Award also in 2006. Her second novel **Burndive** debuted at #7 on the Locus Bestseller List. Her books have been translated into French, Hebrew, and Japanese, and her short stories have appeared in anthologies edited by Julie Czerneda, Nalo Hopkinson, and John Joseph Adams. Her current fantasy novel, **The Gaslight Dogs**, was published through Orbit Books USA.



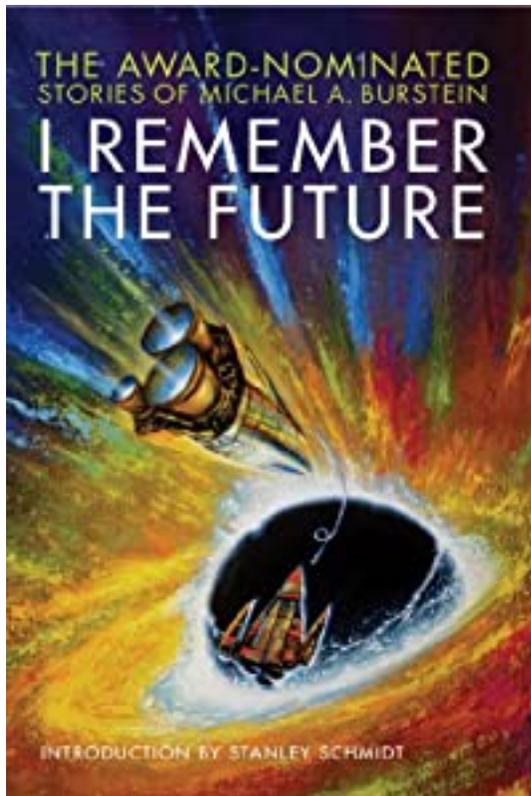
I'm excited for this new era in the *Star Wars* universe and I think it's in good hands with Disney. I'd like to think that they would still respect Lucas and keep him in the loop...though what do I know, it's Hollywood.

As for future *Star Wars* films that pick up post-ROTJ, I'd really like to see the fallout of the crumbling Empire in as realistic a way as they can manage it while still staying true to the spirit of the first 3 films. Surely not every Admiral and General is going to pack it up and bow to the Rebellion and its allies just because the Emperor and Darth Vader are dead. I'd like to see how the rebuilding of the Jedi Order happens. Admittedly I haven't read the numerous novels that take place after the movies, or any of the other transmedia depictions, I'm going solely off of the movies which are what I consider the prime canon.

I'd like to see an unexpected director take the reins, just like how Sam Mendes tackled the new James Bond. What if David Fincher picked up Episode VII? Maybe Alex Proyas who directed *Dark City*. Christopher Nolan even? Someone unexpected could bring something new and interesting to the series. As for stars, I hope for new discoveries. Not anyone very established, unless it's in supporting roles. Or unless they're already character actors. Most importantly though, I want to see a strong script so that even good actors aren't left flailing.

Michael A. Burstein

Michael A. Burstein, winner of the 1997 Campbell Award for Best New Writer, has earned ten Hugo nominations and four Nebula nominations for his short fiction, collected in ***I Remember the Future***. Besides [his own blog](#), Michael blogs regularly at [Apex Blog](#). Michael lives with his wife Nomi and their twin daughters in the town of Brookline, Massachusetts, where he is an elected Town Meeting Member and Library Trustee. When not writing, he edits middle and high school Science textbooks. He has two degrees in Physics, attended the Clarion Workshop, and served for two years as Secretary of SFWA.



The short answer to your question: I'd like to see another trilogy of movies, this time focusing on the rebuilding of the Republic. Also, I'm actually delighted that we'll be getting more *Star Wars* films.

The long answer:

I still remember seeing the first *Star Wars* movie as a kid and getting caught up in it along with the rest of the world. At some point, I know I came across a book or an article that mentioned George Lucas's grand plan, to create three separate *Star Wars* trilogies. *A New Hope*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, and *Return of the Jedi* would be the middle series, showing the rebellion against the Empire. Lucas then planned (remember I was reading about this in the 1970s or 1980s) to back up and film a trilogy about how the Empire came to be, and then he would follow that up with a trilogy about the rebuilding of the Republic.

Well, we all know what happened. After the first trilogy was complete, Lucas moved onto other things, and it took about two decades until he got to the flashback trilogy of movies, starting with *The Phantom Menace*. And those three films, well, they weren't as good as the original. Even accounting for the fact that there was no way *The Phantom Menace* could live up to the hype, when all is said and done it's simply not as compelling as *A New Hope*. (Of course, that didn't stop me from seeing it opening weekend, and staring at the screen in wide-eyed childlike wonder.)

Part of the reason the films weren't as good was probably that Lucas had spent the two decades in between becoming a master of special effects (cf. Industrial Light and Magic), but he was still stuck in his older mannerisms as a writer and director. The second set of films probably would

have benefited from more input and earlier input from other creators who love *Star Wars* as much as Lucas does. (I even have an idea of how Anakin's story should have gone; in fact, I was expecting his descent into the Dark Side to be based more on a desire to free his mother from slavery than anything else. Sort of a "road to hell paved with good intentions" kind of story. But I digress.)

I think what we need for a third set of movies is a writer/director who has a clear track record of creating his own appealing original works, but also the ability to plumb the depths of previously envisioned worlds to present to the audience a compelling story. There are a few directors who might be possibilities, but the first one that came to my mind was Joss Whedon.

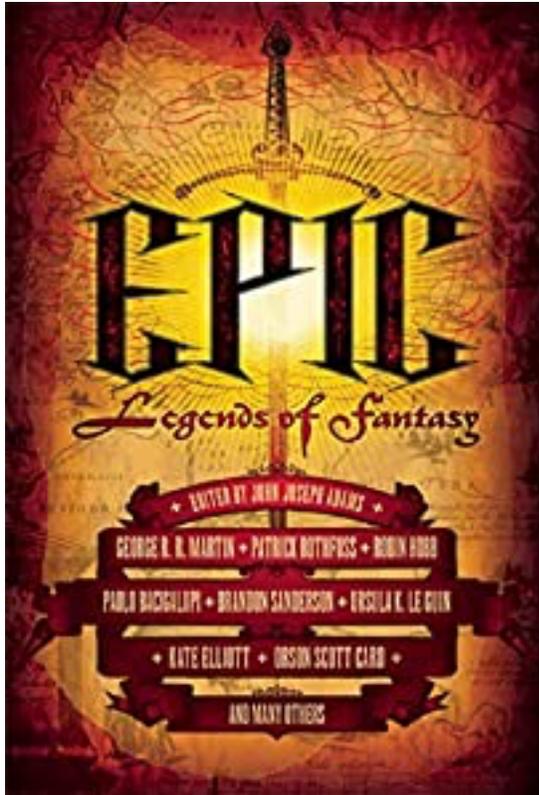
Whedon, as I imagine most readers of SF Signal know, created the TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and followed it up with a few other excellent series. As a writer, he understands what makes characters tick and that stories have layers and are always metaphors. But he also understands that you never want to lose the audience in the metaphor. You want to give the audience a good story they will enjoy, with characters that they care about and who carry throughout the movie a sense of fun.

Whedon clearly showed his ability to do this with *Marvel's the Avengers*. He managed the magic of creating a movie that appealed to both old and new fans of the characters, and demonstrated that he understood exactly what needed to be done for a movie of this magnitude. I can't think of any other creator today — well, maybe Christopher Nolan — who could bring an appropriate high-level fresh vision to a property that will be almost three decades old by the time the new movie rolls around.

As for why I want a trilogy about the rebuilding of the Republic: I've been waiting for that final trilogy for far too long now, and I'd be disappointed if the new *Star Wars* movies were about anything else. This means recasting the main characters of Luke, Leia, and Han Solo, as the current actors are too old to play them at the time of the new trilogy. But J.J. Abrams showed with *Star Trek* that the right actors can make those roles their own, and I would hope that Mark Hamill, Carrie Fisher, and Harrison Ford would be willing to appear in the films to frame them, perhaps by telling the stories of the new trilogy to Han and Leia's grandchildren as they bounce them on their knees...

John Joseph Adams

John Joseph Adams is the bestselling editor of many anthologies, such as **Other Worlds Than These**, **Armored**, **Under the Moons of Mars: New Adventures on Barsoom**, **Brave New Worlds**, **Wastelands**, **The Living Dead**, **Federations**, **The Improbable Adventures of Sherlock Holmes**, and **The Way of the Wizard**. He is a four-time finalist for the Hugo Award and a four-time finalist for the World Fantasy Award. He is also the editor and publisher of the magazines *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare*, and is the co-host of Wired.com's The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy podcast. His latest book is **Epic: Legends of Fantasy**.



As I write this, rumors are circulating that Matthew Vaughn is going to direct Episode VII. He wouldn't have been my first thought, though *Kick-Ass* and *X-Men: First Class* were perfectly serviceable films that seemed ably directed. I can't say that either made me think he should direct *Star Wars* films, but that said, hiring a superhero film director seems like a logical choice, given the huge blockbuster nature of those films, as obviously any new *Star Wars* film is going to be a huge spectacle. Thinking along those lines leads me to one of my favorite directors: Christopher Nolan. (Honestly, I'd like him to direct All the Movies.) As much as I enjoyed his *Batman* films, it's really *Memento*, *The Prestige*, and *Inception* that make me really want to see this happen; obviously none of those films are very much like *Star Wars*, but they're not like *Batman* movies either, and his *Dark Knight* films turned out quite well.

Other rumors are circulating that the original primary cast—even Harrison Ford, who has publicly been very sour about *Star Wars* in the past—are all going to be reprising their roles, and will be playing older versions of themselves, with the movies taking place many years after the end of *Return of the Jedi*. And it sounds pretty clearly—unsurprisingly—that the movies will be steering clear of the existing Expanded Universe stuff that's already out there. (Though I'd have loved to see Timothy Zahn's **Thrawn** trilogy adapted.) But the thing is, most of what I would have said I'd want to see from the new movies has already been covered at some point or another in the EU. I mean, rebuilding the Jedi and founding a Jedi Academy, and rebuilding the Republic seems like reasonable things to expect, and those have been well-covered. I do wonder what kind of antagonist they're going to have, since it seems like all the Sith are basically gone and destroyed by the end of RotJ. But I just don't know. I just know that I really don't want it to suck. And other than that, I'm content to just wait and see what they come up with. To be honest, I'm much more worried about who they get to write the thing than who they get to direct; I'd

love to see them key on the fact that the best of the movies—*Empire Strikes Back*—had a screenplay written by a science fiction writer (Leigh Brackett), and maybe try that again.

Otherwise, I'd love to see a strong female character at the forefront of the new saga (assuming that the returning characters will be more in the background, in sort of advisory roles, like Obi-Wan in the original trilogy). That would do a lot to repair some of the damage they did to Leia by making her Jabba's slave girl, not only in the movie but on the damn movie posters. (A point Sandra McDonald spends some time on in her new Lightspeed story "[Searching for Slave Leia](#).") Also, if they could backtrack on the whole midichlorians thing, that would be awesome.
