

# Hub

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As well as socialising with like-minded people, there is also the option to be part of a private tour of the brewery (a small charge will apply for this).

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York's a great place to visit. We hope to see you there!



## New Skin for the Old Ceremony

by David Tallerman

Sherriff Dickinson finished his shift at ten, pulled up outside of Laney's diner. The first thing he did was to take off his department-issue Blauer jacket and slip on his own, old leather coat, which was warmer and in his opinion frankly looked a hell of a lot better. Then he got out and stood smoking a Marlboro, leant against the body of the cruiser. It was a pitch-dark night, and the wind coming down from the north stung sharply and smelt of snow. Still, he needed the cigarette and the brief moments of peace it brought to draw a line under the day's work. By the time he ground the butt under his heel he was just Mark Dickinson, a normal guy tired after a long, hard shift.

He stamped across the forecourt and pushed through the double doors of the diner, felt the warmth slide over his skin. Judy was working the counter, or rather she was propped on a stool behind it, reading a magazine. She looked up, smiled and said, "Hi, hon."

"Hey Judy." He glanced around the room, seeing nothing but empty tables. "Kind of quiet in here."

"Yeah. Couple of guys from the farm were here just a while ago. But then Joe Lansdale came in, going on about some crazy thing or other, and they decided they'd go off and take a look."

"They must be short of entertainment if that's worth going out for. The only way anyone's going to see anything Joe Lansdale sees is with a bottle of whisky in them."

"You said it, hon." She poured him coffee from the percolator against the back wall. "You eating tonight?"

Sometimes he did and sometimes he didn't, depending on what the day had been like. Tonight he was starving, and he told her so.

Once Judy had passed his order through and had settled back onto her perch, he took a seat nearby and said, "So what did they think was so special, that it was worth rushing out for on a night like this?"

"Hell, I don't know. What he said was – when he was driving here from Jackson – he saw something, like a string of lights, about half a mile up. They were in sort of a curve over the trees, going straight up real slow. Course, the way he told it was longer than that, and he made it sound a whole lot more dramatic."

"And this was on the Jackson Road?"

"Well, over the woods there. You live out that way, don't you, Sheriff?"

Mark winced. No point trying to leave his job behind him at the end of the day if people kept reminding him all the time. "Yeah. Maybe I'll keep an eye out for them, make sure they're not getting themselves into any trouble."

"Might be an idea." she replied.

After that, the conversation tailed off. Five minutes later, Judy brought his meal out and set it down on the lacquered table. Then she refilled his coffee and returned with the steaming cup and a clotted bottle of ketchup.

The food was okay. The fries were too brown and the burger was underdone, slightly raw and bloody - his pa would have said, "You watch when you bite that, son, case it tries to bite you back." but it was hot, the portion was generous, and Laney's had the best coffee for about a hundred miles around - by the time he finished he felt full and warm.

He sat for another five minutes, then took the plate and cup and ketchup and put them down on the counter in front of Judy, said goodnight, and went back outside. He had another Marlboro to finish off the meal and then got back into the cruiser, pulled a sharp U-turn on the forecourt and slid the car out into the road.

The sky was black, the road and the fields to either side were black, and even the cruiser's powerful headlights didn't do much but cut a frosted triangle into the darkness in front of him. There wasn't a star in the sky.

After ten minutes, Mark swung left onto the Jackson road. He could just make out the silhouette of woodland to his left, a jagged line cutting across the sky. He was thinking about what Judy had said - knowing Joe Lansdale they'd be sitting out here with a couple of bottles by now. That was fine by him, except that it was cold and by midnight it would be well below freezing, and he'd heard of people who'd got drunk enough that they didn't have the sense to get indoors and they'd frozen to death. Also, Joe would be in his pickup and he wasn't much of a driver at the best of times. Probably he'd just made up all that about strange lights, looking for some company to share a bottle with - Joe was always telling stories, to the point where you had to wonder if even he knew what was real and what wasn't. Certainly, there weren't any lights to see now.

But even as he thought that, two red pinpricks flickered in the distance. It took him a few moments to realise that they were taillights. As the gap closed he could make out the outline of Lansdale's battered Buick, pulled in to the dirt siding of the road. He brought the car to rest in front of the other vehicle and stepped out, and then after a moment's thought reached back in and took his Maglite out of the glove compartment, flicked it on and swung the beam over the windscreen of the truck.

Joe and another man that he vaguely recognised, one of the farm hands, were sat in the cab staring back at him. He could just make out a third man leant against the far side. He wasn't surprised to see that all three of them had bottles in their hands. He walked over, cut the flashlight beam, leant in through the driver's window and said, "Hey Joe. Nice night for it."

Joe's grinning face looked weird in the darkness. "Never a bad night for a drink, sheriff."

"Thought you were out here looking for little green men. You figure they're more likely to pay a visit if you've got some whisky in you?"

"Dunno what Judy's been tellin' you, but I saw what I saw. You come to tell us it was just a weather balloon, Sheriff?"

"Hell, no, that's FBI business," Mark replied, returning the grin. "All I've come to say is I don't want you finishing that bottle and then trying to drive this old heap back into town. If you want a lift, you can come along with me now. Otherwise, you're sleeping in the cab."

"I reckon Bessie'd resent being called an old heap."

“That’s as may be. All I’m saying is, I don’t want no harm to come to you and these boys. You want to sit here and tell your stories, that’s fine by me, only you don’t do anything that’ll cause either of us any fuss - like wrapping Bessie around a tree.”

Suddenly, and quite unexpectedly, Lansdale craned his head out of the window, and said in a tone so serious that it seemed strange coming out his mouth, “I did see it, y’know. Hadn’t a drop in me on the way here, an’ I swear to you an’ god an’ whoever else that I saw something.”

“I’m not saying you didn’t.”

“An’ what’s more, when these lads and me got here, there was somethin’ moving around in those woods. We went to look, but we lost it. That’s why we was waitin’ here. If you want to police something, maybe you should go an’ see what that was - ‘cause it sure as hell wasn’t no man.”

Mark sighed. He didn’t like where this was going. ‘Off duty’ was a phrase that seemed to have no meaning to anyone other than himself. He wanted to go home, get a shower, maybe watch a bit of TV before he turned in. What he didn’t want was to be wandering around the woods in the dark and the cold, hunting for phantasms conjured by a deluded alcoholic.

Lansdale interrupted his thoughts by turning to the young man next to him and saying, “He ain’t gonna take my word for it. You saw it too. You tell him that.”

“I saw something,” replied the farmhand grudgingly, evidently not wanting to get drawn in. Nevertheless, he sounded as if he meant it.

Mark flicked his torch back on and swung the beam towards the tree line. He wasn’t surprised when he couldn’t see anything there. The edge of the forest was like a wall; just a tangle of dark lines and smudges. He said, “I’ll take a quick look. I want you to stay right here. And if I find you’ve been jerking me around, you’ll be sleeping it off in the cells, you hear me?”

Lansdale just grunted, as if the possibility that he would do such a thing was too remote to be worth even mentioning.

Mark walked around the Buick and stepped off the asphalt. There was a short embankment of mud and ice caked together, and he slid and stumbled down into ankle-deep grass. As he paced towards the verge of the forest, sweeping the torch ahead of him, the dense mass of foliage seemed no less impenetrable. Only when he was a half-dozen feet away did the trees and bushes begin to separate themselves into distinct shapes. Closer still and he could make out something like a path winding into the undergrowth. He sighed again and ducked through a gap in the tangled branches, keeping the Maglite beam low to the ground.

It would be far too easy to get lost. He realised immediately that the trail wasn’t a trail at all, was in fact nothing more than an animal track that ended abruptly, having led nowhere. A few steps in and when he looked back he could barely make out the tree line. More than anything he felt irritated, and with himself more than Joe Lansdale - what was wrong with him that he could be so easily suckered into this wild goose chase? By rights, when he took the uniform off that should be it. In fact, by rights, even in uniform he wasn’t obliged to wander around on freezing nights like an idiot, for no reason other than that some drunk told him to.

He was a good cop - he knew it, and was proud of it. He tried to be fair, to do the right thing. He was particularly proud that he’d never harmed anyone in the course of his work - oh, a few scrapes and bruises, sometimes you had to put someone on the ground and make sure they stayed there, but he’d never once fired his gun, never succumbed to the urge for a little pre-emptive justice of his own. He was a good cop - and times like tonight, being a good cop turned around and bit him right on the ass.

He should go through with his threat to lock up Joe for the night - that might drum some sense into him. He sure as hell shouldn’t be doing this. He swung the torch around one last time, seeing nothing but shadows and the twisted silhouettes of branches, black on black on...

White. Had he imagined it? Just for an instant ... he swung the beam back, more slowly; but now there was nothing. Back again, lower this time - and there it was, on the ground, a smudge of dull grey in the shadows, tangled with jagged lines of darkness.

He took a short step closer and then another and another, edging slowly nearer. He tried to keep the torch focused on that spot but it bucked with each step, illuminating random images - the gnarled bole of a tree behind, its roots where they dug into the dirt beneath the pale shape, filaments of grass shattered by its fall. As he moved closer and the fleeting glimpses began to coalesce he became surer and surer that it was a body lying there, that someone had tripped and had perhaps knocked themselves out in the fall. It was only when this thought was firmly set in his mind that the second idea came along, and when it did he stopped abruptly and nearly dropped the torch - suddenly, inexplicably, he was certain beyond a shadow of a doubt that the body wasn't human.

He stood there for maybe five minutes, maybe ten, just staring, with something in the back of his mind telling him to run, just run and not look back. His hands were shaking, and the torch beam shuddered and gyrated. He could only see parts of the body--but the arms were too long and distended, the fingers far too slender, the chest was impossibly narrow. He'd never really stopped to consider the full meaning of the word *alien* before but now he understood it completely - there was something about that pale form that was different beyond his ability to express.

Still, he didn't run. And after an interminable time he felt sure that whatever it was, it wasn't moving, and he could see from the way that one thin leg was twisted that it was hurt, and another instinct took over then. He began to walk towards it. It still didn't move. Even when he was stood right over it, it didn't stir at all - and at that moment, unaccountably, the fear went away.

With his hand and the torch back under control he began to investigate properly. The pallid body had fallen half into a bush of twisting foliage that wrapped about it like razor wire. The head was very large, too large for the frail neck and shoulders, and draped at an unnatural angle. He could see a dark patch on the forehead that might have been blood, or something like blood. The eyes were perfectly black and very large, and he wasn't sure whether they were even open or not, whether the thing was looking at him. He suspected that it was unconscious but he couldn't be sure. The more he looked, the more he was convinced that the brownish smudge on the forehead was a wound. It was hurt, probably it was unconscious. He knew what he had to do, but all of his instincts screamed against the idea.

He bent down and began gently to pull away the jagged tendrils of undergrowth, and when the bodies' extremities were free he began to kick at the bush, breaking it down out of the way. Once that was done he flicked off his torch and slipped it into a pocket, and then shifted to a kneeling position. He reached down with his right hand. When he touched the skin, there was a moment of awful nausea - but he'd worked with dead bodies before now, and was this any worse than that? A small voice somewhere in his mind said, yes, this was infinitely worse, but he pushed the thought aside and concentrated on the task at hand. With his right forearm he drew up the creature's shoulder, so that he could slip his other arm under its back.

The thing was far, far too light, like a child, and its skin was dry and leathery. There were cuts where thorns had broken the surface, or more like tears, since there was no trace of blood. That was strange, because when he hoisted it up, with his other arm under its spindly legs, he could see clearly that there was indeed a wound on its forehead - it looked black and viscous and he felt sure that it was blood. Perhaps they were just thick-skinned, he thought absently. And yet he was supporting its full mass and it still weighed next to nothing.

Without the torch, and with the after-glare still stinging his eyes, it was impossibly dark. No light penetrated the canopy overhead. But turning slowly, Mark thought that he could see a region of dark, dark grey that must be the tree line.

He began to walk in that direction, taking tentative steps and glancing between the ground and the place where he hoped the edge of the woods to be. He was terrified of dropping the frail,

childlike creature in his arms. Each time he blinked, his eyes adjusted a little more, and soon he could see the stunted outlines of trees that marked the forest's periphery.

Walking this slowly, it was terribly cold - he noticed then that the body seemed to give off no heat whatsoever, and he wondered vaguely if it was alive at all. He was starting to feel afraid again; afraid of the dark, afraid of the thing he was carrying, although whether because it might be dead or because it might not be he couldn't say. Again, he wanted to run. But he controlled himself, continued his measured steps towards the lighter darkness. And eventually he stepped out from between the trees.

Only then, when he saw the lights of Lansdale's Buick, did it occur to him the position he was in. He didn't know what to do with the thing, he hadn't thought that far ahead, and he didn't want anyone else involved until he'd had the chance to calm down and think it over - certainly not Lansdale, certainly not the farm-hands.

But as he scrambled up the embankment he saw that he was in luck. Joe was sprawled over the back seats with a ragged blanket over him, and Mark could hear his raucous snoring even at this distance. The others were nowhere to be seen - probably they'd got bored and set off back towards the farm.

He walked over to his cruiser. It would take a lot to wake Joe, but still, he tried to be quiet. He would have liked to put the body on the back seat but it would be difficult to get it in there without making a lot of noise, and he didn't like the idea of anyone going past and seeing what looked like a corpse sprawled on his seats. Instead, after a minute's difficult fumbling in his trouser pocket, he managed to get out his keys, unlock the trunk and flip it open. He slipped the body in and eased its legs up. Curled and pale white in the dark of the trunk, it looked foetal and pathetic. He felt bad locking it in but there wasn't any choice. He went round to the driver door, got in and started the engine.

He really hadn't thought any further than this. Could he take it to a hospital? Would they be able to do anything if he did? Maybe he should ring somebody, but who, and how? Were the kind of people that would want to know about this even going to be listed in the phone book? More than anything he felt responsible for it, a terrible tightening in his chest - it might be dying back there in the trunk. Every moment he sat here thinking, doing nothing, it might be dying. So even though he hadn't the faintest idea where he was going, he pulled out into the road and started driving, heading east.

Slowly everything began to seem more normal, more real - the familiar sensation of the seat-leather against his back, the motion of the cruiser, the simple routine of driving was real. As for the thing in the trunk, it was hard to imagine that it was actually there. He felt a vague desire to stop and check, as if perhaps none of it had ever happened, he'd never pulled over, maybe he'd fallen asleep at the wheel for an instant. He would like for that to be true. Could it really be possible that there was something from another planet curled up in the back of his car? Maybe it was a hoax, a joke. Then he remembered the look in its blank black eyes, the texture of its skin. It wasn't a hoax. He'd never considered this kind of thing before, never given it credence; if he had it was only to laugh at the National Enquirer headlines and the spurious late-night documentaries. Now, he would have liked some answers, theories even - why the hell had a creature from another planet, maybe another galaxy, been wandering about in the woods? What could it possibly have wanted? If it ever woke up would it try to harm him, would it try and communicate? It had seemed so pathetic - he couldn't imagine that fragile thing as the forerunner of some extraterrestrial invasion.

Either way, there was no point in guessing. He would have to get it to a hospital - it was the only answer he could think of. And maybe it was the wrong answer, maybe he'd even get into trouble for it, but he was responsible and what else could he really do?

Except that the hospital was forty miles away. The small surgery in town would be shut, and he didn't know where the doctor lived. The knot in his gut told him that it would be dead by the time he got to the hospital, if it wasn't already.

Then he realised where he was - just a couple of miles from town, coming up to the bridge - a couple of miles from his house. He had a first aid kit there, better than the one in the cruiser, and he had blankets and pillows. Maybe he could patch it up a little, staunch the head wound, he could make it more comfortable and tie the trunk open.

After the bridge Mark pulled off onto Main Street, driving slowly and carefully, feeling oddly furtive. Rather than stay on Main he turned right at the first opportunity. He felt bad that the diversion through the back roads would take longer but he'd been too nervous on the brightly-lit thoroughfare, with so many people still out on the street. The back roads were quiet as the grave, and he made it home without passing a single other vehicle. He slid the cruiser into the driveway and cut the lights.

He wanted to stop and gather his thoughts, now that he was somewhere familiar and safe, but experience told him to keep moving, to do any thinking that had to be done on his feet. He slipped out, unlocked the back door and rummaged for the first aid kit in the cupboard under the sink. Then he flicked the switch for the outside light and went back out, the kit tucked under his arm, paused just for an instant as his stomach knotted again and then pulled up the trunk.

Had it moved? He couldn't say for sure. He was pretty sure its hand had been resting on its leg before, but maybe it had jolted off when they'd hit a bump. It didn't matter. The head wound was the priority - get it cleaned, get it bandaged, as quickly as possible.

Only, he hadn't seen it in the light before, and it looked so strange. Not like before, not so luminous now under the orange glow of the back light, less... inhuman. It could almost have been... the skin was pale, too pale, but it did look like... and the face, the features were wrong, the mouth was like a slit and the eyes were so wide.

He stopped. He couldn't quite grasp the thought. His stomach was heaving, like a wave was passing up and down through his gut. Now that he'd looked at the head he couldn't break his gaze away. Because that dark patch, he could see now that it wasn't blood.

There was a ragged ovular tear in the skin, and beneath was obsidian blackness, glistening moistly like a beetle's shell. As soon as he realised that, the whole illusion was shattered. He wasn't looking at a fragile, pale-skinned creature anymore - he was looking at a dark, insectile thing, and it was wearing the skin of something else.

Something? Who the hell was he trying to kid?

He could see the pale line over the forehead where the hair had been shorn off, the faint indent where an ear had been, and he thought that he could make out a seam now, threading its entire spine. It had been stretched, distorted, mutilated, cut open and sealed up, changed almost beyond recognition - but not quite.

Because he was sure now that it was human skin.

He slammed the trunk, walked round, climbed into the driver's seat, turned the key in the ignition. His mind wasn't really working anymore - only, there was a small voice, perfectly calm and rational, saying, "of course, so that's why they come here. They're like - like hunters in the old West, like fur hunters. It must be fashionable, out there somewhere, to make it worth the effort, coming all this way, it must be the cutting edge of fashion to wear... to wear..." but his brain couldn't get beyond that point, and as he pulled back out into the road he wasn't really thinking anything at all.

Even as he reversed his route through the back streets his mind stayed blank, with only some inaudible part navigating, planning. Off the back streets, briefly onto the main street and then skidding around the turn-off onto dirt, the headlights illuminating jutting pines that lurched up on either side of the old, barely-used road out of town--and if anyone had asked him where he was going he wouldn't have been able to give them an answer. It was only when he brought the cruiser to a halt that he began to think again, to feel - and then it was only anger, and so detached that it was like someone else was screaming in his thoughts.

He got out and stood between the headlights, looking down. The old open-caste mine was just a chasm now and he could only see the bottom where the moonlight refracted off the water pooled there. It was a long way down, and the edge was steep and pocked with boulders and tangled foliage that clung in stubborn defiance of gravity. It should have been fenced off really, he thought absently. But then no one ever came out here anymore.

He walked around to the trunk, opened it and hauled the thin, childish body out without letting himself stop to feel the disgust that was welling in his stomach. He wished he'd thought to put his gloves on - he could feel the skin, like old paper, sliding over the creature's own chitinous form. It still felt ridiculously light as he carried it to the edge of the pit.

How strong was it, he wondered - could it survive the fall? Perhaps it would be able to breathe in the tepid water that glistened darkly far below. But there was no way it would be able to climb back up the near-vertical scree; and sooner or later it would die down there.

Still, he couldn't help but hesitate. And as he did, he felt it shift in his arms, and looked down to see its jet-black almond eyes staring up into his own. He couldn't begin to read its expression. Was it fear? Hatred? Nauseated, he took a step forward, so that he was right on the edge, barely keeping his own balance, and then almost without meaning to he thrust the thing away. It wasn't a throw so much as a desperate attempt to escape from it, to break that incomprehensible stare. He had his eyes closed but he heard its downward passage, a series of dull impacts, the rattle of stones and finally its contact with the dark water.

Mark stood there for a while, eyes pressed hard shut. Then, not knowing how long it had been, he took a step backward, and then another... and then he opened his eyes and looked around. He felt light-headed, but the craving to be sick had passed. It was cold, he realised, freezing cold - how had he not noticed that? There was something reassuring about the light emanating from the car, and he walked slowly over to it and slipped inside. Then he sat, pulling his battered leather jacket around him, trying to calm his breathing, trying to stop shivering.

In its eyes... it had been fear, he knew that now.

But he knew without thinking, because there was only one thought reverberating in his mind, a single word. And even when the shivering had passed, even when he'd turned the car around and begun the long drive back into town, that one word was all he could think.

"Monster."

Over and over and over.

# REVIEWS

*The Thirst* reviewed by Paul Kane

*Transformers* reviewed by Alasdair Stuart

## **The Thirst**

Directed by Jeremy Kasten

Starring Matt Keeslar, Clare Kramer, Adam Baldwin

Starz Home Entertainment, £16.99

On face value, *The Thirst* is a concept movie that seems to have been tailor made for low budget horror. Vampire films can be done exceptionally well on a small scale, all you need is a couple of fangs, some red corn syrup, and a few necks - but the ideas need to be fresh; after all, vampires have been around in fiction and in the cinema for a long, long time. At the start of *The Thirst*, you'd be forgiven for thinking this is exactly the case. Unbeknownst to alcoholic Maxx (Keeslar - best known as Feyd-Rautha Harkonnen from the Sci-Fi Channel's version of *Dune*), his



girlfriend Lisa (Kramer) has terminal cancer. He tells his AA group that he thinks she's back on recreational drugs, but when she reveals the truth his initial reaction is anger, then terror. Not to worry, though, because hospitalised Lisa is being visited by the 'night doctor' Mariel (Hostage's Serena Scott Thomas) who has a rather special cure lined up for her.

Devastated by Lisa's apparent death, Maxx hits the nightclubs with his mates, where he thinks he spots his ex hanging around with a very unsavoury crowd. Could it be that he's just experiencing the effects of being off the wagon? Apparently not, because when he returns to the club alone, he finds Lisa's new buddies tucking into a bunch of human prey. Following her back to their out of the way lair, he's captured and introduced to her new 'family', including Lenny (Adam Baldwin, who still appears to be wearing his cowboy outfit from *Serenity*), Duke (Neil Jackson, who has had plenty of practise biting necks in the TV incarnation of *Blade*) and leader Darius (no, not the singing one - but an unkempt Jeremy Sisto from *Six Feet Under*). They're vampires who believe in having a good time, which seems to revolve around Darius having threesomes with Mariel and Lisa, and slowly drinking their captives dry after pinning their hands to chair-arms with a nailgun. They offer Maxx a simple choice: he can join them or become meat...

The Thirst's plot - such as it is - could really have fitted into an hour-long episode of an anthology series like *Masters of Horror*. In fact, it could even have been reduced to a half-hour of *Tales from the Crypt*. With all that extra time, you'd think the makers would have had more to say about the meaning of life, death, disease and everything... Instead, all this is pretty much glossed over in favour of one gore-ridden scene of bloodletting after the next. If *The Thirst* is different in any way to the vampire movies that have gone before it, then it's down to the loving way director Kasten lingers on the biting and feeding that is integral to this species' lives. You'll see these guys ripping away vocal chords, chomping on crotches, and spilling gallons and gallons of blood, while the storyline struggles to keep its head above the rising tide of crimson.

The actors do their best with the material they've been given, but people like Baldwin, Jackson and Sisto are especially wasted, coming across as rejects from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* or *The Hills Have Eyes*... only with sharper teeth. I liked the notion of not being able to drink blood from their own kind, but again this isn't really explored in any great depth - and leads to a bewildering, hallucinogenic scene where Maxx and Lisa try to come off the good stuff. There also seemed little point to the scene right at the start where Jackson dispatches a prostitute he's ordered by ramming a lamp into her throat; it did nothing apart from set the overall gross-out tone of the entire flick.

The tagline would have you believe that this is 'Requiem - for a Dream meets *Near Dark*', but while those movies dealt with the themes of addiction and loyalty to family in an adult way, *The Thirst* seems content to crank up the shock value and hope you won't notice that there's not really much substance to back it all up. The extras are quite minimal, as well, just a director's commentary where Kasten explains himself, a photo gallery, deleted (and longer) scenes, plus a DVD-Rom of the screenplay. Sadly, this movie probably won't leave you thirsting for more of the same.

**Transformers**- in cinemas now.

Directed by Michael Bay

Starring: Shia Lebouef, Megan Fox, Josh Duhamel, Tyrese Gibson, Rachael Taylor, Anthony Anderson, Peter Cullen, Hugo Weaving

*Transformers* has had a rollercoaster ride to the screen from the initial jubilation at the announcement, to the howls of derision from some factions of the fan community at everything from the fact that Optimus Prime was covered in flames to the shape of Megatron's head. It's something unique to genre fandom, the same instinct that asks for adaptations to be faithful to the



subject matter extended until it becomes full on protest movements. From HEAT, the organisation dedicated to bringing back Hal Jordan as Green Lantern to the protests against Spiderman's web shooters, there's an element of fandom for whom change is something to be feared and fought against.

With Transformers, their central criticism was that the original, iconic designs had been ditched in favour of newer, more modern concepts. The producers contended that they'd tried the original, boxy designs and they hadn't worked. Certain fans placed their mint condition, boxed toys carefully out of the pram. Certain others picked fights with one of the movie's producers at his website, fights he was only too happy to participate in. Names of characters were changed, actors were lobbied for to voice the transformers, the amount of human characters on screen was endlessly, *endlessly* debated. Megatron's head was redesigned at the last minute but for many it still wasn't enough and the endless rolling e-brawl continued. For eighteen months.

Now at long last, the movie's here and we can breath a sigh of relief for two reasons. Firstly, it's one of the only Summer blockbusters to actually show up for work this year and secondly because it's been so uniformly well received that the criticism of it has dropped to a dull hum, the sound of mint condition, boxed toys being carefully put back *into* the pram.

The basic plot is exactly what you'd expect. The Decepticons come to Earth looking for the Allspark, a cube shaped device with godlike abilities that can bring technology to life. The Autobots come to Earth to get it before the Decepticons can acquire it and turn every piece of technology on the planet into a weapon. Stuck in the middle are Spike Witwicky, his sort of girlfriend Mikaela, Army Rangers Lennox and Epps and hacker Megan.

After the slightly wobbly *The Island*, this is Michael Bay back at full force and, simply put, no one does this sort of movie better than he does. There are countless, jaw dropping moments in Transformers, from the opening assault on a Qatar firebase to a rolling gun battle through a ruined village and the relentless, city-wide battle that takes up the last forty minutes. Bay's steadycam style may give some people travel sickness but here he puts the humans centre stage and the film is deliberately scaled around them. There's one shot in particular, in the closing fight, that demonstrates this perfectly. Spike is sprinting down the middle of a street, Ratchet and Ironhide flanking him as shells go off, Decepticons attack and all hell breaks loose. The whole time, the camera's focussed on Spike, in the centre of complete mayhem, risking his life. This is a film about the humans who interact with the Transformers at least as much as the Transformers themselves and the end result is one of the best alien invasion movie of the last ten years.

The effects are, simply put, astounding. The Transformers look utterly real for almost all the film, with Bumblebee in particular a totally convincing character despite being mute. In fact, the script underplays one of its best running gags, with Bumblebee communicating through Sam's radio for the vast majority of the movie. It's an incredibly tough thing to pull off, making audiences care about giant alien lumps of metal that have been added in post production but Bay manages it time and again. There are moments of real emotional investment here and one scene, which harks back to *ET* of all things that's surprisingly difficult to watch.

The performances, in a film like this, can get lost in the churn but at least two star turns are on display here. LeBouef, who has threatened to break out for years, does here and does so effortlessly. It's no surprise he's been cast as Indy's son in the fourth Indiana Jones movie as there's the same sort of slightly dishevelled, just this side of frantic feel to his work that Harrison Ford has at his best. He has great comic timing, a convincing moral weight and a convincingly anti-establishment attitude that gives Spike a much punkier, slightly geekier edge than he ever had in the comics or cartoons. LeBouef spends almost all his screen time with the Transformers and more than holds his own against them and based on this, he's got a long career ahead of him.

The other breakout here is Josh Duhamel. A relative unknown in England, Duhamel is one of the only cast members to underplay and it pays dividends. He plays Lennox as an effortlessly calm, focussed, good-humoured CO and is gifted with some of the best lines in the

movie as well as one of the best action sequences. Like LeBouef he holds his own against the 'bots and like LeBouef, there's surely great things in store for him.

The rest of the cast fare a little less well, with Gibson *impressing* but Fox falling a little short. Intended to be a tomboy, she's a little too perfect until the final hour, where she's given one of the film's standout moments in the closing fight. The others are either comic relief (Welcome in the shape of the always reliable Anderson, surprisingly bad in the case of Turturro), walking exposition (Taylor, who deserves better than what she gets here) or instant gravitas (Voight and O'Neill, a man who has played spooks, Men in Black or Special Ops soldiers in very nearly every TV series made in the last ten years).

If you want to be snobby about it, you can, after all, Transformers is a two and a bit hour film based on a toylines. Likewise, if you want to hate it because it's not exactly like what you saw when you were a child, you're more than welcome to. Whether an adaptation is good or bad is entirely subjective and this reviewer is all too aware of the effect a bad adaptation can have on well loved source material (*Judge Dredd-The Movie* in my case).

But if you do pass this over, for whatever reason, you'll miss one of the very few genuinely entertaining, genuinely epic Summer blockbusters of the last couple of years. After last year's barren featureless wasteland and this year's string of disappointing third instalments, this is one of the few films that genuinely impresses. It's huge, it's loud, it's violent, it involves lots of shouting, lots of shaky camera work and completely cookie-cutter plotting. And it's some of the most fun you'll have at the movies this year.

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