

New Review from Amalie Flynn: Jan Harris' "Isolation in a Time of Crisis"



The poems in Jan Harris' *Isolating One's Priorities in a Time of Crisis* are about the apocalypse.

Or after.

What happens after.

&

After the apocalypse happens. After the world cracks like an egg.

Splits apart. The crushed eggshell membrane and how.
Covered in fluid yolk we emerge blinking –

*we pass clement evenings foraging among the wreckage
of shop local boutiques and chain drugstores
(Season's Greetings)*

we observe

*long vacant cities teeming with rats and pigeons dark seas
replete*

*with giant jellyfish we do not live in an elegant age
(Mass Extinction)*

&

The apocalypse has already happened in Harris' poems.

Some humans survived –

*in the day-glow light
our old skin cells flake
off and drape across, the zoysia grass
(Marauders All)*

Born again into this.
This fallout world.
And the scale of destruction is ecological –

*ours is an age of salination
desiccation an interminable heat
(Mass Extinction)*

&
I am reading Harris' poems now. In this dystopic America.

A hellscape of.

Toxic religiosity. Evangelical Trumpism. Bigotry and brutal
police.

Global war and fiery planet.

Pandemic plague. The lack of air. How when the virus inhabits
lungs.

We flip the bodies over.

On their bellies like fish. How one woman survived but lost
half her upper lip.

From the tube and pressure. Of being facedown for months.

That missing chunk of flesh now.

This fever dream wasteland nightmare America or how we find
ourselves.

You and me. How we find ourselves.

Still alive.

&
I write to Harris, saying –

These poems are about COVID, right?

About Trump?

&

Because *how*, I think.

How can they not be?

&

But Harris did not write these poems about COVID or Trump.

She wrote them after the 2018 Kavanaugh hearings.

They are about surviving sexual assault.

&

Harris tells me –

I guess I've always been thinking about the end of the world. You know I had this Southern Evangelical childhood – very rapture focused. Then, when the Kavanaugh hearings were happening, I was appalled, obviously, and as a survivor myself, I kept thinking about who gets to speak.

&

Harris' poems are about the apocalyptic devastation of sexual assault.

And the disappointment of unrequited rapture.

About waking up in a destroyed world. How we piece it back together.

Or declare it broken. And live in it somehow.

&

She says –

I kept plugging on and thinking how do we survive, like in the sense of what do we do with our days, our shames, our broken hearts. How do we open to what's next?"

&

And yet poems are alive.
Each sentence with words like organs.
How syllables are cells.
How once written.

Poems are alive.

&

And for me. Harris' poems are about.

The Kavanaugh hearings and the assault by a nation that did not care.

Would not believe women. Women who said *this happened*.

And these poems are about.

About what has happened since.

A presidency that assaulted truth and science and equality and the environment.

War. And a virus that has assaulted the globe. Leaving over four million dead.

So far.

&

Because what is apocalyptic can be plural.
How apocalypses are multiple and countless.
Intensely personal and collectively shared.

&

Harris' poems are full of hydroponic lettuce, half grown,
empty cul-de-sacs.

Broken call boxes and a rapture that never comes.
Because after disaster there is always aftermath.

Where what is left is left.

&

I met Harris in graduate school in Tuscaloosa.
Where I came and left as bones.
How I almost disappeared and yet.
I remained.

Graduated and moved to New York City where.
After that summer I would stand on a corner and watch a plane
hit the Twin Towers.
Or how they fell.
And how people jumped and fell and died.
And how somehow. Somehow I survived.

&

How existing is this.
The same as not disappearing.

&

Harris' poems acknowledge those lost –

*we saw that some us had been separated
from themselves and their reintegration
into the whole was not a possible outcome*

*we could not replace their inner vacancies
we could not estimate the size of their lonesomeness
or fill them with vanities of optimism and hope
(Post-Apocalyptic DSMV)*

&

But Harris is focused on survivors.
The sheer magnitude of what it takes to survive –

*when we look at the frontier we know we can survive
deep in us the memory of arid plains and savannahs
solacing us through our hard scrabble expansion
(Episodic Memory)*

&

How survival is plagued by loss –

*our sorrows are beyond counting and lie scattered around us in
the radon dust covering
our planet's irradiated surface
(The Average Mean)*

Loss of a world –

*when the worst was over the
marauding tribes settled down we started migrating
back to where we had come from we walked through
shells of suburbs and condo communities
(Radio Silence)*

Loss of how it was –

*and who could have imagined this cold
there is no more joy and no time for
simple pleasures like strawberry jam and*

the other ways we spend our time
(After the Sun Goes Out)

Loss of readiness.
How hard it is to move forward.
Or go on –

we are prepared for what we will encounter
so long as it resembles all we left behind
(Time and Duration)

&

But how meaning can persist.
Found in permeated rock, like radioactive isotopes –

our predicament has freed
us from the oppression of quarterly
target goals bike commutes having
three children whose monograms
match on all their school accessories
(A Handbook for Resilience)

&

In 2004 I reconnected with Harris. I called her and told her a
baby.
How I was pregnant. Or how she said *I didn't know you wanted*
to do that.

&

Motherhood is seismic. It is a series of explosions real and
imagined.
The world hot lava active. How my entirety is only this.
Calculating risk and trying.

&

Now there is a pandemic.

In the morning my one son bikes to school wearing an N-95 mask.

My other son is homebound. He cannot leave the house because the world.

Is not safe.

How he is disabled by his disability but more.

The disregard of others to wear a mask or get vaccinated or.

Do whatever it takes to end this.

&

And I know Harris does not have children.

But I found motherhood in her poems.

&

There is the fear of it –

*we cannot know what evolutionary biologists will call this
age we cannot know which of our offspring will survive
at night we count them and wonder which one will it be
we search their sleeping faces for resilience we are looking
for a future we will build with what we have left
(Mass Extinction)*

How motherhood is a fear.

Fear of wondering if they will.

Will survive. The desperation.

Of wanting them to survive.

And how ravaged this world is.

Apocalypse world we are giving them –

the limits of our perception much like our

*children's refusal to believe us when we tell them that
limes grew on trees and
how succulent limes were tree limes and all the luscious
things belong
elsewhere they are ancient remnants of a forgotten
anointing
(Chrismation)*

Or how mothering in the aftermath is hard –

*we are finding our way back to fellowship but it is perilous
practice
to release our fear and allow our offspring to wonder in the
garden
to watch their precious DNA drip away when they are pricked by
thorns
(Cognitive Flexibility)*

&

Harris' poems speak to a collective mothering. Parents or not.
That we do. Do in this world. Especially one ravaged and torn.
How we are all connected. Connected by care or our lack of it.
Connected by our fear and yet love.
That overlap –

*we too are motivated by the vectors of love and fear
we live in the Venn diagram between them
each of us entwined in their corresponding sway
(Cognitive Flexibility)*

&

In Harris' poems there is the loss of a promised rapture –

*yet despite all our
fixations on the last days we never imagined*

*the whistling sounds of radio-magnetic grass
on abandoned golf courses
(Eschatological Ruminations)*

How –

*we cannot indulge
these reckless hopes of deliverance the earth
is indeed a globe whose elliptical orbit barrels
us toward infinity and even though it rends our
hearts to confess it no rapture is coming to save us
(Eschatological Ruminations)*

&

And the loss of rapture in Harris' poems feels symbolic.
Of what it means to survive.
How it can mean being left behind.
Left behind by a religion or rapture or savior.
The belief that someone or something will save you –

*the
whole time we dreamt of a superhero
who was coming to save us every night
we would warm our bread by the fire and
lather it with strawberry jam as if to say
we are not afraid of the hypothetical dark
(After the Sun Goes Out)*

And –

*at one time we all believe like this that
our lives would tumble on and then when
no one was paying attention in a fanfare
god would intervene
(Eschatological Ruminations)*

Or, how –

*some flirt with believing in providence but we cannot tarry in
those illogical
assumptions
(The Average Mean)*

Because.

What holds this universe together is something else.
Or nothing. Nothing else –

*we muster our resources unsure
of our end our final ablation an offering for the black
holes who
hold our universe together
(Mass Extinction)*

&

Ultimately Harris' poems are about us.
How disaster connects us –

*Our lives ran parallel until we met in the knot of disaster
(Many Worlds Theory)*

They are poems about who we are and what we do.
When we wake up in the aftermath of disaster –

*Our intertwining presented two alternatives
1. to collapse everything and begin again
2. to recognize the limit of universes
(Many Worlds Theory)*

&

How we survive. What we build. How we move forward.
Beats as the heart of Harris' poems.
Whereas rapture is unrequited and reckless, the answer seems
to be love –

*in the latter days we have embraced an enigmatic
vocation we stand in abandoned cul de sacs and
radiate love
(Exclusion Zone)*

How –

*although it is hard labor
we stand in cul de sacs point our chests towards
discarded mc-mansions and their derelict hedges we
begin to oscillate with the intractable surge that vibrates
between our ribs love pulsates with a ferocious
diffraction like the nuclear fallout that is still releasing
(Exclusion Zone)*

Harris admits –

*we cannot know if our work changes
anything
(Exclusion Zone)*

And yet –

*rumors persist that deer and
foxes have returned to Chernobyl's exclusion zone that
wildflowers crowd its meadows and in the shadows
green things begin to grow
(Exclusion Zone)*

&
Isolating One's Priorities in a Time of Crisis ends with hope
–

*we know that something is there because we
feel it breathing against us reaching past twilight's
consciousness
(Modern Homesteading)*

How it –

*whispers that we too must
die and death will be sooner than we know
(Modern Homesteading)*

How after the apocalypse.

We can find hope.

How there is light in the aftermath.

Light within us and each other.

How it radiates out in this new broken world –

yet we

*will be braver than we think because the light inside
is the light outside and it's already shining around
us as we begin to inhabit a world we had known but
waited for this moment to discover waited to
catch our breath before plunging into that white
burning we call existence
(Modern Homesteading)*

&

Harris' powerful collection is a testament.

To destruction and what remains.

How to rebuild the city of oneself.

How to make meaning out of the meanness of existence.

Her poems offer hope.

That maybe. Together.

We can survive.

Poetry Review: Graham Barnhart's THE WAR MAKES EVERYONE LONELY



1.

The book arrives. By mail and on the cover. There are clouds.

Gray clumped in altostratus heaps. A military helicopter headed.

Into thick sky that stretches off. The bottom right hand corner of cardstock.

Or how the title. *The War Makes Everyone Lonely* makes me think of 2007.

How my husband deployed to Afghanistan. And how lonely we both were.

When he came home.

2.

Graham Barnhart's poems are about war.

What war is.

What war is not.

Like clouds his poems

gather.

3.

There is a musicality to them. Barnhart's poems.

The transformer outside his sister's house –

still humming somehow

(Everything In Sunlight I Can't Stop Seeing)

How the hum makes memory.

Reminds Barnhart of war –

electricity quieting in the wire when the sun

scrapes its knee bloody up the mosque steps

(Everything In Sunlight I Can't Stop Seeing)

Or how. When he was at war. For Barnhart –

every insect droning is a cicada

(Unpracticed)

4.

Or bullets. How –

Bitterness sounds like this: steel-tongued

cascades pouring out by the handful.

(Range Detail)

5.

At home there is. A child playing an oboe.

Through a window and after.

After Barnhart comes home from war dull.

Growing dull or the music of it.

Human breath pushing down an oboe's neck.

Blast of sound. How the boy –

he sounds like a robot learning to speak,

but now and then an almost "Ode to Joy"

or "Lean on Me" outlines itself, and I forget

I am going to die.

(Belated Letter To My Grandmother)

6.

Barnhart's poems are electric.

Like voltage in a box. Or moving down a wire.

How it is this constant current.

The persistent hum of still being alive.

And then the jolts. When you remember.

7.

Remember *yes*.

Writing to his grandmother a letter about the letters
he never wrote.

While he was away. How Barnhart writes –

to say yes

yes, the guns were loud –

loud like gods applauding

(Belated Letter To My Grandmother)

8.

But most of all there is tension.

Tension in Barnhart's poems.

9.

Tension between war and home. Between
remembering war and leaving it behind or
how –

Flashbacks

don't announce themselves.

It takes so little.

(Everything In Sunlight I Can't Stop Seeing)

In one poem, Barnhart is flooded with it.

Memory of barracks and army green wool.

White sheets. Film reel dark rooms.

Passing moon.

The fire watch and screams. Of a drill sergeant.

How Barnhart writes –

*I told her all of this when she found me
standing in the bedroom doorway.*

(Somnambulant)

10.

The tension is a distance. Between

what happened and how he cannot

describe it. Or regret. When he does –

*Behind headlights growing darker
night against the snow, I regret saying*

*kind of like Afghanistan aloud
with my mother and grandmother*

in the otherwise silent heat of the car

(Sewing)

11.

In Barnhart's poems, there is a sense that coming home from war is displacement or this placement outside of time. How –

tree branches, black

in the dawn sky, resume their grays and browns

by lunch. The black wrought fences continue

leaning into their rust, rigid and failing

(Everything In Sunlight I Can't Stop Seeing)

Everything remains. Goes on.

And Barnhart writes –

there

is no war in this but me.

(Everything in Sunlight I Can't Stop Seeing)

12.

Or the tension between what is real

and what is not. How there is training
for war. Watching grainy videos of men
over there. Placing bombs. Or defecating
under almond trees. Set to pop music.
Only to emerge in America –

sunbright Texas

tobacco juice hissing on the tarmac.

(Capabilities Brief)

13.

How soldiers play *Call of Duty*. To pass time.

This game of war. Where –

*Rifles were weightless. Bombs fell with nothing
close to oversight. Injuries meant
heavy breathing –*

a red-tinged screen.

(Medics Don't Earn Killstreaks)

But in a video game, war is fiction. And unreal.

How –

there's no difference between urgent and expectant.

*No need to estimate under fire
the percentage of a body burned.
How much fluid to administer. How much per hour
they should piss out. No need to pull the bodies to cover.
They disappear without you
checking their pulse.*

(Medics Don't Earn Killstreaks)

14.

And the unreality of war is not limited to what is virtual.
Barnhart describes an army recruiting advertisement.
A child hugging a soldier. Her brother or her father.
How the word *army* is used five times. *Strong* six.
But there is little war. How there are no –

piles of feet

on airport roads

and no one assigned to shovel them.

(Notice and Focus Exercise)

And –

No blistered trigger fingers.

No depressions in quiet skulls

(Notice and Focus Exercise)

15.

In Barnhart's poems, war is –

Another year refusing water to children.

*When they made the universal gesture for thirst
along roadsides you wouldn't stop.*

(Days of Spring, 2016)

It is bombs –

*A bombing at the gate before you arrived
was just a story you knew about rubble.*

(Days of Spring, 2016)

It is guards at a gate –

hired to die so you wouldn't when another bomb came.

(Days of Spring, 2016)

16.

Barnhart's poetry acknowledges militarism.

Acknowledges aggression.

The physicality of deployment.

Occupying space in a country

that is not your own.

Barnhart remembers arriving in a village

raided by American soldiers. Arriving and –

Dressed

like the men who killed

their

husbands, we passed out sewing machines

to

widows so they could make clothes

for their children and embroider cemetery flags.

(Sewing)

17.

Or in Iraq. Dinner with a man who called himself. King of Kawliya.

Who fed them meat peeled from goat bones.

How they fed each other from their hands.

Barnhart writes –

I remember my fingernail

against a man's lip .

(Shura)

Or how later –

the women who had prepared our food

and waited with their children for us to finish

were given to eat what we had left.

(Shura)

18.

There is leaving in Barnhart's poems.

War and

what it leaves behind.

Remembering transitioning a village, Barnhart writes –

all the small corners in that small base

were pulled open. Picked blessedly clean.

Before our dust-wake settled, no stone,

if we had stacked it, was left standing on another

(How to Transition a Province)

This is the tension.

Between going to war but not staying.

Between leaving a mark and wanting

to leave nothing at all.

And the complicity when it is not possible.

19.

Barnhart remembers H.E. rounds. Their smoke and

dust. How –

illuminate

shells – packed light and smoke

and

shot too low – drop phosphorous

through

civilian fields we aren't

supposed

to burn, so we wait down

the cease-fire in the bus that brought us.

(Indiana-Stan)

There is privilege in leaving. Because –

Over there, if the wheat

or poppy crops catch, we can leave

those fires as soon as they start.

(Indiana-Stan)

20.

This is the complexity of going to war.

21.

When imagining himself on a dating site.

And choosing a profile picture.

Barnhart writes –

*Hope it all says: confident
and responsible.*

*As an aggressor
aware of his complicity.*

(Tinder Pic)

He acknowledges –

*there will be left swipes
for that arrogance.*

*For trying to play imperialist
and dissenter without seeming too*

patriotic or worse –

apathetic. Naïve or too reckless.

Unwary and soon to explode

(Tinder Pic)

22.

This is the complicity of it.

23.

Or how
because. Because Barnhart is a medic. D18.

U.S.

Army Special Forces Medic. There is a tension.

Between going to war and going to war as a medic.

24.

How the word medic in Latin.

Mederi

Means to heal.

25.

During
deployment, Barnhart works with a physical therapist –

*learning
to scrape sore tissue*

*with
a slice of machined steel*

*curves
to match the shape of the musculature.*

*Like
a cradle or scythe, you said to no one

(Days of Spring, 2016)*

In
Barnhart's poems. This is the tension.

How
he is both. A cradle. And a scythe.

He writes
—

*And that was how morning found you,

sometimes
a cradle, sometimes a scythe

(Days of Spring, 2016)*

26.

But out
of it. Out of this complexity of war.

The
complicity of it. Comes Barnhart's poems.

Like
the purple loosestrife he describes. That
grows
at the prison near Mazar-i-Sharif –

gathered

*trembling
against the walls*

(Tourists)

27.

Barnhart
imagines himself –

a glowing green eye in a gargoye mass.

(0300)

28.

He
describes going to see an informant.

How
he is remembering the man and his cell phone video –

Hacksaw tugging neck skin.

*The careful
way you spoke in English*

*my
uncle, my brother, my uncle's son. Your
finger*

*touching
each shemagh-wrapped face.*

*The
one you couldn't name I knew was you*

(Informant)

Or how
Barnhart's poetry is like this.

How in
his telling it. He straddles worlds.

Reveals
secrets. Identifies himself. And

invites
the reader. To find themselves.

29.

The
war. The war stretches on like sky.

Across
countries and deployments.

How this
war does not ever end.

30.

Because how many years ago. When I stood on that corner
watching.

As a plane
hit the first tower. And a plane hit the second tower. Fire.

Or
people clinging to the metal. Slipping and jumping and falling
and

how
the two towers crashed down.

31.

There is a poem about post 9/11 tear gas training.

Words *PRO PATRIA MORI* in red.

Above a cement hut door. *To die for your country.*

Or how. After. Barnhart writes –

*Somehow
outside, somehow after*

*on my
knees with everyone else, purging*

*years
of sediment phlegm from scraped alveoli,*

*I saw
the line waiting to go in, heard*

*the
men behind me learning to drown.*

*Learning
to breathe that evil pure as air.*

*Motes
of gas, like dust in sunlight,
wafted
from the exit labeled DULCE ET
(Post 9/11 Gas Training (II))*

32.

How
many. Soldiers have gone to war. Gone to
war
post 9/11 and how many have come home.

And how
many.

How
many dreamed of its *sweetness*.

33.

There
is a futility.

Poems
about training and more
training
or the feeling that it may
not

matter.

34.

Barnhart writes –

Today

I can deadlift four-oh-five.

When

I can move four-ten it will

not

stop a bullet or

*the
overpressure of a bomb*

(Cultivating Mass)

There is a sense of inevitability.

Because

–

A

tourniquet will work

*unless
it doesn't*

(How To Stop the Bleeding)

35.

Language
is questioned.

Its
privilege. How Barnhart inscribes diplomas in Pashtu.

Only
to be told. By the Major. To write them in English –

*The
Pashtu,*

*he said,
is lovely*

but unofficial.

(Certificates of Training)

36.

Or the
task of announcing he will deploy again.

How Barnhart
imagines his words as bats. How –

*I'll
probably just open my mouth,*

wait for something to fly out

(Telling You I Will Deploy Again)

Or when the words don't come.

Barnhart describes hitting them

with a racket.

Scoops and sloughs them outside.

And –

Regretting,

*only
a little, the need, the abrupt*

*cessation
of a fragile thing,*

*that terrible
satisfaction, even*

*with
these apologies hanging limp,
crumpled in the rhododendrons.*

(Telling You I Will Deploy Again)

37.

In
trying to describe to his father –

*the
dull machine chunk*

*of a
rifle's sear reset between rounds*

(What Being In The Army Did)

Graham
offers –

*maybe
there is no word*

(What Being In The Army Did)

Just
space.

Air
between bars. Distance between keys.

To
which his father replies –

*No,
he said,*

*there
is definitely a word*

(What Being In The Army Did)

38.

And
Graham questions poetry.

Remembering
a photograph of two dead bodies.

Men wrapped and left on a dirt field. Barnhart writes –

bodies

*sloughed
in a field then photographed.*

*In
their repose*

*deserving
more than this poem*

*and
its portions*

*of
sky framed by power lines.*

*(Deserving
(II))*

39.

Of
course. Loneliness is this.

This
futility. The question.

Of
whether anything makes a difference.

Or if
words are enough.

40.

But

in Barnhart's poems. His words
are
the answer. The raveled call to
prayer.
Or his surprise to see a boy –

kneeling beside his bucket to kiss the dirt.

*(Call
to Prayer)*

The shared
humanity of experience.

Even
in war. Even in our loneliness.

41.

In
his poems, Barnhart sews together.

The pieces
of war. Memory. Leaving

and coming
home. What it means to

fight
a war and care for its wounded.

42.

He
describes history as a skeleton –

each city suturing

new skin to the skeleton.

(Pissing in Irbil)

Or
how his poems are flesh.

Attaching
themselves to the

skeleton
of what happened.

Wrapping
bone in meaning.

43.

At a poetry
reading, Barnhart sees a bee

dragged
by a spider. As the poet who is

reading
says –

*Those
with the time*

for

poetry don't deserve it

*(Deserving
(I))*

Barnhart wonders –

*The
poetry or the time*

*(Deserving
(I))*

44.

I am
not certain we deserve either.

But,
as I read Barnhart's *The War Makes Everyone Lonely*,

I am
grateful.

Grateful
for both.

Film Review: JOKER, by Adrian Bonenberger and Andria Williams

Andria Williams: Hey there, Adrian.

Adrian Bonenberger: Hi, Andria.

Williams: So, I heard you recently saw “Joker” in the theater, as did I. It’s gotten a lot of buzz. I’ve seen various reviews call it everything from “disappointing” to “an ace turn from Joaquin Phoenix” to “not interesting enough to argue about,” but I get the sense that you and I both liked it, and I would much rather talk about things I do like than things I don’t. So I’m glad you wanted to talk about it a little here with me.

Should we start with the styling? I’ve always enjoyed the various iterations of Gotham. In the Christopher Nolan trilogy (2005-12), for example, the sleek, crime-ridden city contains visual elements of Hong Kong, Tokyo, Chicago, and New York City. Todd Phillip’s vision seems much more an early-eighties, pre-gentrification city in the midst of a garbage strike, apparently circa 1981 (if we’re to believe the film marquee advertising *Zorro: The Gay Blade*, which played in theaters that year—an over-the-top comedy about a hero who consistently evades capture), without much of the warmth or can-do grit NYC often elicits.



<https://www.ibc.org/create-and-produce/behind-the-scenes-joker/5012.article>

Bonenberger: Yes, that’s true; and the Gotham of the 90s

Batman—Tim Burton’s version—was much more stylized (no surprise there), simultaneously futuristic and antiquated, set in the America of the 1930s. Monumental, bleak, massive. I thought *Joker* did an excellent job of capturing the look and feel of the 1980s New York I remembered as a child; dirty, *on edge*, menacing at night. The parts that were beautiful, to which I was fortunate enough to have had some access, were cordoned off from the rest of the city, but even there things were dingy. If the setting for Todd Phillips’ Gotham in *The Joker* is NYC circa the early or mid 1980s, he nailed it.

Williams: I never knew that version of New York, and I can’t even claim to know the current one, so I think that’s fascinating.

I did recently learn that a city of “Gotham” first entered the popular American lexicon through Washington Irving, who described it in his early-19th-century collection *Salmagundi*. In its British iteration, it’s a town King John hopes to pass through on a tour of England, but the residents, not wanting him there, decide to feign insanity so that he will take another route (and he does!). I thought that was kind of fun. Do you see any hints of this early Gotham in *Joker*?

Bonenberger: That’s amazing, I had no idea... how delightful! It’s an excellent and appropriate comparison... in *Joker*’s Gotham, that allegory or metaphor is inverted, though; the residents who *are* mad, or driven to mad action by impoverishment and disillusionment, do want a king. When the man who wants to be king, Thomas Wayne, is murdered, the “king” who’s selected instead for adulation is The Joker, a madman himself.



Photo,

TIFF.

<https://nypost.com/2019/09/10/toronto-film-festival-2019-gritty-joker-is-no-superhero-movie/>

Williams: With all I'd heard about its bleakness, I suspected I was not going to "enjoy" the afternoon I spent watching the film, and I was right—I didn't, not exactly. Watching someone be humiliated is physically awful, almost intolerable. The worst parts for me, for some reason, were when Arthur Fleck would be terrified and running, in his Joker suit and makeup. It was horribly sad. He has this awful potential to kill but in those moments he's fearing for his own life the way anyone would, almost the way a child would. There was something really pitiable about it and I found that harder to watch than the violence.

Arthur Fleck is a man writhing in torment for almost the entirety of the film. On more than once occasion he says, very clearly and deliberately, "I only have negative thoughts." He lost considerable weight for his Joker role, and on several occasions pulls out a loaded gun, places it under his chin, and seems to prepare or at least pretend to shoot himself. I thought of Kierkegaard's "the torment of despair is the inability to die," his claim that despair is "always the present tense," is "self-consuming." "He cannot consume himself, cannot get rid of himself, cannot reduce himself to nothing." (It should be noted that I am bringing Kierkegaard into this discussion almost solely to make our editor Matthew Hefti roll his eyes and stare into the middle-distance, and to make another editor, Mike Carson, laugh.)

What, if anything, does an audience gain from sitting with Arthur Fleck through two hours of his torment, his self-consuming, his inability to die? Is it morbid curiosity, a failure of the "darker-is-deeper" direction of DC comics, an exercise in empathy, a joke?



photo,

Warner

Bros.

<https://www.insider.com/the-joker-movie-new-trailer-video-2019>

Bonenberger: If we're talking about viewing *Joker* in terms of Phoenix's acting, I think his performance is suitably magnificent and compelling to argue that the movie is worth watching simply because of his presence. He does transform himself, and his body is so weird, his charisma so powerful, that simply to watch the film because of a virtuoso performance is not to lose one's money (I paid \$18 for a matinee show with me and my son).

Williams: His body is very unusual, and played up to be even more so in *Joker*. He's got that congenital shoulder deformity—you can't help but notice it because in the film he's shirtless half the time with his shoulder bones jutting out—and you have to kind of admire Joaquin Phoenix for not having it fixed, in a world where a person with enough money can pay to have anything fixed.

I read an interesting and kind of wild [Vanity Fair](#) interview where Joaquin Phoenix, who comes across as rather sweetly self-deprecating, relates almost proudly that the director described him as looking like “one of those birds from the Gulf of Mexico that they're rinsing the tar off.” And I mean, he really does. You should read that interview, it's bananas: he has two dogs that he raises vegan, and he cooks sweet potatoes for them, and one of them can't go into direct sunlight so he had a special suit made for her. It's fascinating. I mean, sometimes I brush my dog's teeth and I feel like I deserve a medal.

But I digress. So your eighteen dollars were well-spent—it was worth it to spend two hours watching Joaquin Phoenix as Arthur Fleck?

Bonenberger: Is Arthur Fleck's struggle worth watching in and of itself—is his torment and suffering worth two hours of one's time? As someone who doesn't spend much time thinking about the disabled or discarded of society, even as caricatures (this is not a documentary, it is fiction), I

thought Phoenix's quintessentially *human* performance was, in fact, worth watching; in me it inspired a deep empathy for my fellow humans, and for the difficulty of their interior lives. Again, that is not true of everyone, and a movie ought not to be taken literally, but if this is a tragedy, of sorts, then yes, I think it's worth it.

Like yourself, I've always been skeptical that darkness equaled depth; one can easily imagine superficial movies that are dark; many "jump-scare" horror movies fall into this genre, as do gorier horror or war films that end up disgusting audiences rather than bringing them into a deep emotional moment. I would say that any dramatic movie that is deep will be dark, by definition—and any comedy that is deep will flirt with darkness only to emerge into the light. *Joker* is dark, and I also believe that it is deep.

Williams: I was struck by the primacy of Arthur Fleck's imagination in the film. He frequently envisions himself doing things which are impossible, but interestingly—other than pretending multiple times to shoot himself—none of them are violent. Instead, he visualizes various yearnings: for the approval of his idol, talk-show host Murray Franklin (Arthur imagines himself being called from the audience, his weird laugh suddenly not a freakish tic but the mode that directs Franklin's attention to him, and even brings forth a fatherly sort of love); or when he invents an entire relationship with a neighbor; or when, reading his mother's diagnostic reports from Arkham Asylum, he imagines himself in the room with her as she's questioned decades before.

It's not Arthur's imagination that leads him to commit violent crimes, it's his knee-jerk reactions to the rejection or betrayal of these fantasies.

How do you see the role of imagination in the film? Is the fantastic dangerous; can the imagination volatilize?

Bonenberger: You've hit on what I think is the key to the film's effectiveness as a human drama—the energy that makes *Joker* viable as a super-villain, the ante that makes the movie so moving. Phoenix portrays the story of a man with beautiful dreams, and we tend to think that such people are incapable of evil. That *The Joker* is a criminal, instead—this is a truth well-known to all—is the source of criticism that frets about *The Joker* inspiring copycat criminals or mass shooters or incels or any of the other dangerous real-world villains people are worried about right now.

Arthur Fleck fantasizes about a world where he's loved. He fantasizes about community, and kindness, and respect, and dignity. Alas, the world he lives in and has lived in his entire life has been one of solitude, lies, and exploitation, adjudicated by violence. If this were a superhero movie, Fleck would discover in himself some hidden reserve of power, a la Captain America (a similar story in many respects), and learn to overcome the circumstances of his life and universe. Instead, he is ugly, and poor, and weird, and damaged, and the system does its best to target him for elimination. Rather than escape and hide, Arthur fights back.

It seems clear that in the world of the movie—a world where many poor and disaffected people view the police, the government, and the wealthy with overt hostility—Arthur's conditions are not unique, or even particularly unusual. Hence the widespread rioting and looting that takes place at the movie's end. He is simply the catalyst for change.

Because this is a super-villain origin story, not a superhero movie, the role of imagination and dreaming is a kind of joke (appropriately given the movie's title); it is a cheat, something to deceive one into inaction. In *The Joker*'s world, violence against one's powerful oppressor is the only realistic choice, the only truth. This is what a nihilist ends up believing, this is the truth that makes fascism work (a country surrounded by enemies like Nazi Germany, beset by the

potential for destruction). Secret optimism is what makes Arthur Fleck a character one cares about, and explains why anyone would follow him in the first place. Actual pessimism–nihilism, really is what makes The Joker a criminal.

Williams: I think you're really right that Arthur's disaffection is not unique in the film. He's only the most fantastic iteration of it.

That brings me back to the big, scary "copycat question." In his *Critique of Violence*, Walter Benjamin notes that "the figure of the 'great' criminal, however repellent his ends may have been, [can arouse] the secret admiration of the public." And in *Joker*, it's definitely not secret: Arthur Fleck's actions spark not just the imaginations of hundreds or thousands of Gotham city residents, but their imitation, as they don his clown mask and gang up on a pair of cops in a subway. How do you read their enthusiasm for the killer of three young, male Wayne Industries employees (the leader of whom, my husband [who, for the record, found *Joker* slightly boring] noted, looks like Eric Trump, although it's hard to imagine Eric Trump being a leader of anything)? If Slavoj Žižek sees Bane as a modern-day Che Guevara fighting "structural injustice," how do you think Arthur Fleck compares to or continues that role?

Bonenberger: I had always wondered why people followed The Joker. In the original Batman series, where The Joker is a costumed criminal who tries to steal jewels and defeat Batman (who is attempting to prevent the taking of jewels), the motive is clear: greed. In more recent films and comics, though, The Joker ends up being a figure of anarchy and mischief, violence directed against the powerful. With the recent Jokers in mind, and in this movie in particular, one discovers that people follow The Joker because he is a deeply sympathetic character in which many exploited and downtrodden individuals perceive deliverance from their own injustices. Then, it turns out, as in the end of *The Dark Knight Rises*

when Heath Ledger's character sets a pile of money ablaze, that The Joker is crazy, and not really interested in "justice" at all; he's interested in destruction and violence for its own sake. This movie explains The Joker's fascination with The Batman, and the Wayne family, and also demonstrates that his schemes and plans attract people because he lives in a world that produces many people capable of being attracted by someone like The Joker.

To get back to the last question briefly, the world of Fleck's fantasies, in which people think he's funny, and he's loved, and treated respectfully—kids actually seem to respond very positively to him in reality, he is child-like—there are no Joker riots, there are no savage beat-downs in alleys. The movie requires that viewers decide, then, if the utopia of Arthur Fleck's drug-induced reveries is more ridiculous and implausible than the reality, where The Joker somehow inspires unfathomable violence, murder, and unrest. As with most great art, what one believes is true depends on the viewer. Some will think that The Joker is the problem, and if he is removed, Gotham's problems will go away. Others will think that the system is the problem, and that destroying the wealthy and powerful will lead to a better world. Others still will see in Fleck's dream a call to build a world based on love and respect, in which violence is unnecessary save as a last resort.

Williams: In your Facebook post about the film, which first gave me the idea for this chat, you mentioned the "pathos and bathos" that *Joker* provides. I, personally, loved its increasing outrageousness in its final minutes, the grisly humor of Arthur Fleck leaving bloody footprints down the hallway and then, in the final frames, being chased back and forth, back and forth by hospital orderlies. It seemed like the film was announcing its transition from origin story to comic-book piece. It felt, to me, like it was saying, "Relax a little. This is a comic now."

How did you read the ending?

Bonenberger: Same, exactly. We've gone entirely into The Joker's world, now, and it's a world of whimsical jokes, murder, and chaos. Perfect ending to the movie. We're all in the madhouse now.

Williams: So, you can only choose one or the other: DC or Marvel?

Bonenberger: If we're talking about movies: DC. If we're talking about comic books, Marvel.

Williams: Who's your favorite DC villain?

Bonenberger: At this point, The Joker.

Williams: Mine's not really a villain: It's Anne Hathway's Selina Kyle in *The Dark Knight Rises*.

Bonenberger: Yeah, you're cheating there.

Williams: I know! But what's not to love? She's like six feet tall (jealous!), she's smart, she's got a relatively articulate working-class consciousness. She's feminine (the pearls!). She plays on female stereotypes to get what she wants. Although I'll admit that the way she rides that Big Wheel thing is utterly ridiculous and actually a little embarrassing.

She's also got some good one-liners. My favorite is when one of her dweeby male-bureaucrat-victims sees her four-inch pleather heels and asks, "Don't those make it hard to walk?" And she gives him a sharp kick and says, breezily, "I don't know...do they?"

Bonenberger: That is an amazing one-liner; I suppose it's hard for me to see anyone but Michelle Pfeiffer as Catwoman after she dispatched Christopher Walken's villainous character by kissing him to death. Powerful.

Williams: I guess there are worse ways to go out.

Bonenberger: My favorite villain is actually from Marvel, from the comic books; it's Dr. Doom. He will do anything for supreme power—he is in his own way an excellent archetype of greed. I love his boasts. I love how he embodies his persona so naturally, and is so comprehensively incapable of overcoming his weaknesses and flaws...he is a tragic character. Doom is nearly heroic—he has his moments—but his great flaw overwhelms his capacity for good. Isn't that what separates the bad from the good?

Williams: That sounds like a very Wrath-Bearing Tree kind of question to end on.

Mr. Tolkien's War: A Review of Peter Jackson's 'They Shall Not Grow Old,' by Rob Bokkon

Anyone who knows me at all well can tell you that I don't really have a personality, per se: what I have instead is a gigantic amalgamation of obsessions. Fandoms. Things like the life and work of Prince Rogers Nelson. Hungarian cuisine. The history of Jim Jones and Peoples Temple. The films of Peter Jackson. The Great War.

So, obviously, when word came through that those last two things were colliding, in the form of a documentary commissioned by the Imperial War Museums, I was nearly beside myself. If anyone could capture the horror and the bravery of

the Great War, it's the guy who gave us the Pellenor Fields and the Battle of Five Armies on the big screen. I counted the days until the release date. I jabbered about it to all three people I know who love WWI as much as I do. I was, to put it mildly, stoked.

Which remained my default state right up until I sat down in the theater to absorb what I truly hoped would be a modern masterpiece. The truth, as always, was rather more complicated.

The version we saw was bookended by both an introduction, and making-of featurette, from Mr Jackson himself. It is my current understanding that the greater theatrical release of the film will not include these, which is a pity, as the film loses much of its impact when one is unaware of the sheer labor of love involved in the restoration of the old footage. And, of course, consider yourselves warned that SPOILERS ABOUND, both for the film and for the works of J.R.R. Tolkien.

The theater was almost three-quarters full, which surprised us; the crowd was fairly diverse, but included a high proportion of fit middle-aged guys in outdoor-pursuits gear, who by their conversation seemed mostly to be veterans. We live in a university town, so the history dorks (us) were also well-represented. The former dean of the college of arts and letters was there. Enthusiasm was high.

And then we fucking sat there for thirty solid minutes. Not thirty minutes of previews, mind you, but some "edutainment" compiled by Fathom Features that consisted of an "interactive" quiz, six multiple-choice questions about the Great War—"Did the Great War take place in A: 1914-1918, B: 1861-1865, C: Never, D: Last Week" and "Was Baron Von Richtoven, aka the 'Red Baron', a A: toilet cleaner in Bournemouth, B: your mom, C: a famous WWI flying ace with 80 confirmed kills or D: the inventor of owls?"—designed for people who have never heard of the Great War.

But when the film finally began, and the rowdy high-schoolers three rows back finally shut up, absolutely everyone in the room was transfixed.

Because this movie is *stunning*.

It begins and ends with images of the war with which we are familiar, in shades of silver and black and white, complete with the sound effect of an antique projector. The voice-overs are the voices of old men, disconnected from their source, joined to past time and image only by association. Jackson's decision to jettison traditional narration in favor of archival recordings from Great War veterans is meant to grant immediacy to the film by immersing the viewer in direct experience rather than received history.

The question that must be asked is, "Does this work?" And the answer is, yes and no. While my socialist soul champions the decision to represent the War exclusively from the perspective of the people who actually fought the damn thing, the narrative feels tailored nonetheless. Blame it perhaps on the source material, as the archival audio was taken from something like 600 hours of interviews done in the '50s and '60s by the Imperial War Museums, who clearly have their own version of the War they wish to promote. A version of the war where the sun still has not set on the British Empire, George V regards us all favorably from the wall of every post office, the tea is hot and everyone knows their place.



Still from Peter Jackson's 'They Shall Not Grow Old.'

There are moments—a few—in the voice-overs where a note of fatalism or horror or even protest will arise. Mild moments, expressed with little fervor, which seem to be included only to evoke veracity. At the end, we get a series of voices reminding us that war is useless, pointless, a waste. A series of voices that feels tacked-on, as though we as an audience of

modern sensibilities expect to hear this condemnation. Overall, throughout the film we hear the stories of Tommies who were happy to be there, who'd "go over again," who missed it when they left, who saw it as "a job of work that had to be done." Is this the overarching experience of the average British soldier in the war?

My reading has told me otherwise. Robert Graves' *Good-Bye to All That* certainly seems to indicate otherwise. Siegfried Sassoon would undoubtedly curl his lovely aristocratic lip at the very notion. Is it worthwhile to hear these voices, these stories? Absolutely. Is it honest? This I cannot answer, but I have doubts.

But never mind that. You'll forget all your criticism, all your doubt, if just for a moment, when that color footage hits the screen.

Jackson has always directed with a cinematographer's eye, and this film is no exception. The first few shots of Tommies arriving in France, clad in khaki (a very authentic shade of khaki, as it turns out; Jackson spent weeks getting the color exactly right from uniforms *in his private collection*, since Peter Jackson is the world's biggest World War I geek), baring their very British smiles for the camera: these are enough to make you forget that this footage ever existed in another form. The color used is not the bright and hyper-real shading of a modern film. The tones are very much those of a color photograph from 1914, which just serves to make the images seem more immediate and real.

The soundtrack at this point becomes a thing of pure artifice, but what artifice—Jackson's otaku devotion to detail has never been showcased to greater effect. As revealed in the making-of featurette at the end, lip-readers were employed to pore over the footage and to reconstruct all possible dialogue. Then, by identifying uniforms or cap-badges, Jackson was able to place the regiments, and based on their origins (Royal Welch,

Lancashire, &c.) actually found actors from the appropriate locales and hired them to do the voice-overs. Further, every boot hitting the mud, every rustle of a rucksack, every clank of a helmet being thrown to the ground is there.

My jaw stayed on the floor for a long while. It is beautiful, there's no denying that. It is a labor of love. And in true Peter Jackson style, the camaraderie of camp life, the minor inconveniences and sanitary arrangements, or rather the lack thereof, the cheerful bitching about the cheap beer and wretched cigarettes lasts only a little while, to be replaced by the screaming terror of battle and its stomach-turning consequences. Jackson has never pulled his punches when it comes to revolting images (if you've ever seen [Dead Alive](#) or [Meet the Feebles](#) you'll know what I'm talking about) and this film is no exception. Popcorn went untouched when the images of trench foot, bloated corpses, maggots and rats swarm across the screen.

And yet, it is here that the film reaches its greatest artistic heights. Again and again I was reminded of the works of Otto Dix. For those who don't know him, Dix was an enthusiastic volunteer for the German army in 1914, whose drawings from the front remain a poignant and disturbing testament to the aesthetic impact of conflict. His true fame came during Weimar Berlin, which earned him the enmity of the Nazis, who denounced him as a "degenerate artist."

In *They Shall Not Grow Old*, a shot of a disemboweled cavalry horse strongly recalled Dix's *Horse Cadaver*, the animal's ruined body a testament to the service of all the animals who aided in the war effort.



Otto Dix, "Horse Cadaver from the War."

Many times Jackson shows bodies dangling, untended and ignored, from barbed wire, akin to those from the *War Triptych*

or the obviously named but no less striking *Corpse on Barbed Wire*.



Otto Dix, "Near Langemarck (February 1918)."



Otto Dix, "Corpse on Barbed Wire."

A group of Tommies, exhausted, huddled together in their trench, are positioned almost exactly like Dix's *Resting Company*, the only difference their uniforms. The parallels were too obvious to ignore; Jackson, in his years of searching through the footage provided by the War Museums, had clearly searched for and found footage that matched the works of Dix. Otto Dix, perhaps more than any other artist, truly captured the soul-killing dread and visceral, bleak reality of this war. Jackson, in his deep and thorough understanding of his subject, chose images echoic of Dix's in order to evoke in the viewer that same sense of despair, of resignation, of trauma. This conscious homage is my favorite takeaway from Jackson's film.

Whether conscious or not, however, Jackson's most prominent homage, and ultimately the film's downfall, lies in its obvious parallels to his most famous subject matter: the works of Tolkien.

J.R.R. Tolkien served in the Lancashire Fusilliers, as a signal-officer. He saw action at the Somme and lost two of his closest school friends to the War.

The narrative structure of *They Shall Not Grow Old* is, almost exactly, that of *Lord of the Rings*. A group of brave, innocent Englishmen/hobbits, inadvertently forced away from the comforts of hearth and home, reluctantly but bravely sally forth to do their duty in the face of certain destruction. Along the way, their innocence is lost. They confront

unimaginable evil and emerge scarred, only to return home to a land unwelcoming, hostile, entirely changed from the one they left.

Of course, Jackson cannot be blamed for telling the truths of the War; this narrative, though romanticized and muddled, parallels the experience of many Englishmen during the War. It was certainly Tolkien's narrative. It is the very Englishness of the narrative that presents us with the film's biggest problem, one Andria Williams (of the Military Spouse Book Review, and a Wrath-Bearing Tree editor) also covered extensively in [her review](#), which is that of representation.

To the casual viewer, seeing *They Shall Not Grow Old* leaves one with the clear impression that the entire Great War was fought by the British infantry and artillery, more or less single-handed. The French of course are mentioned, and even seen in a few shots, but overall the collection of images on the screen is of British, Welsh, Scots and Irish troops, every face a white face. The British West Indies Reserves are never seen. The film is innocent of a single Sepoy, there are no Gurkhas, no Malays.

In the featurette at the end of the film, Jackson addresses these concerns with a literal wave of the hand and a dismissive remark about the focus of the picture and the material available to him, while the screen actually shows unused footage of black troops, giving the lie to his explanation even as he offers it. What really pissed off your humble reviewer was the sentence Jackson used to cap this segment of the featurette: "This is a film by a non-scholar, for non-scholars."

Wow. OK. Certainly it's not an academic film, but to suggest that giving representation only to white British troops on-screen is in some way justifiable because the film is "by a non-scholar" rubbed me the wrong way. Mr Jackson, you're going to tell us that you, the man who owns a closetful of original

WWI uniforms—the man who literally minutes before was showing off his collection of *actual Great War artillery pieces*—the man who admitted to owning every issue of *The War Illustrated* magazine—you, of all people, would offer this lame excuse?

I think the issue here is not an actual dishonesty on Jackson's part, however. I believe that his inability to see his own biases stems from a long association with the works of Tolkien, in which the War of the Ring is fought and won by the Men of the West, the people of Gondor and Rohan. (Although as noted by other viewers of this film, even Tolkien's coalition was more diverse than the one shown in *They Shall Not Grow Old*—at least the Fellowship included elves and dwarves).

The issue of Tolkien's source material, and whether or not it is actively or casually racist, is one that encompasses far too great a scope for this review. Certainly Tolkien did not think himself a racist, and was a vocal opponent of Nazi racialist theories, even going so far as to send a series of nasty letters to a German publisher who wanted to reprint *The Hobbit* in the late '30s but only after confirming if Tolkien was "arisch"—that is, Aryan. He also hated apartheid, having been born in South Africa, and was similarly vocal in his condemnation of the practice.



J.R.R. Tolkien in
WWI uniform.

Yet there are Tolkien's own works, which reflect the unthinking cultural biases of a man born in the Victorian era who came of age in the Edwardian. The nations of the East (Rhun, Harad, &c.) are all populated by dark-skinned Men who are under the thrall of Sauron. Tolkien's own remarks about the appearance of Orcs (found in his letters) include a distressing description of them as like "the unlovliest of the Mongol-types," and he explicitly stated that the gold-loving

Dwarves were based on the Jewish people, for whom he nurtured a public admiration his whole life, but the association is an uncomfortable one to modern thought.

In conclusion: should you see this film? Absolutely. Should you see it with caveats and reservations? Clearly. Beautiful but flawed, *They Shall Not Grow Old* is a necessary film, but an incomplete one.