

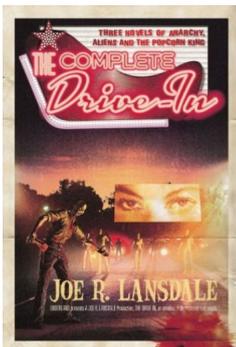
Joe R. Lansdale's "THE COMPLETE DRIVE-IN" (Book Review)

Written by Trevor Parker
Thursday, 06 May 2010 14:01



If you're looking for some entertainment down East Texas way, something a little spicier than fishing derbies or church revivals, The Orbit Drive-in theater is the place you want to be. Every Friday, the Orbit presents an all-night horror show starting at dusk, and it won't be boring you with any refried Hollywood remakes or bloodless teenybopper fare up on its 60-foot screen, rest assured. If there's one place you can always count on to get nasty, it's the Orbit.

THE COMPLETE DRIVE-IN (collecting three previously-published DRIVE-IN novels and available from [Underland Press](#) for \$16.95) tells the story of Jack, an average Texas kid whiling away the summer before he enters college. He and his friends decide to pack up lawn chairs and beer coolers and head to the Orbit to take in a quintuple bill of horror classics. Good times roll accordingly, until halfway through THE TOOLBOX MURDERS when a rogue comet plummets from the sky and envelops the Orbit in acidic black goo. The drive-in patrons are now trapped indefinitely, with tempers short and food supplies dwindling amid a backdrop of endless horror movie loops. Eventually, the folks inside sort out their differences through respectful discussion and form an alliance based on trust and cooperation... just kidding. This review being on the Fango site and not Oprah.com, trust that the Orbit gets ugly in a hurry. Expect shootouts, roving biker gangs, lethal karate action, gratuitous nudity, cannibalism, mutated holy prophets, carnivorous filmstrips, giant catfish and all the scabcorn you can eat.



For years, author Joe R. Lansdale has been treating readers to crass laughs and shocking violence in his stories all the while ignoring genre boundaries and good taste in the process. His books are raucous, witty and they never once touch the brake pedal. The immensely entertaining DRIVE-IN novels are some of his best-loved work and with good reason: Here readers are witness to Lansdale at his most unrestrained and original. For horror fans that have endured so much lately in the way of endless reduxes and tired formula monsters, these novels are refreshingly bizarre and share the same careening unpredictability as the best of unhinged

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European exploitation cinema. The slight downside is that they also share those movies' occasionally loose attempts at plotting. Regardless, anyone who has affection for the "splatstick" of early Peter Jackson and Sam Raimi will adore the gore-soaked, taboo-trampling cartoon that these novels are. And as fun as they may be, the books shouldn't be dismissed as insubstantial pulp yarns. Underneath the comedy and mayhem, Lansdale works a darker theme throughout, that of society and civility collapsing among an isolated group. Think vintage George Romero or Stephen King's *UNDER THE DOME*, only with mutants and dinosaurs.

The first *DRIVE-IN* is actually one of the oldest titles in Lansdale's catalogue, first published in 1988. The second part hit bookstores the following year, with the third finally appearing after a 16-year gap (and its release was confined to a cruelly limited print run, so it will be brand new to the majority of Lansdale's fan base). So what's new with this reprinting from Underland Press, other than having all three books inside a single spine? There's an interesting introduction from director Don Coscarelli (*PHANTASM*, *BUBBA HO-TEP*), in which he discusses his aborted *DRIVE-IN* film adaptation with some concept sketches from his attempt included as a color centerpiece. Also, there are comprehensive author's notes from Lansdale about the origin of the story and the experience of writing it. One particular treat for long-time buffs of the series is to finally see Lansdale granted some decent cover art. The flaming highway cover illustration to the 1997 Carroll & Graf paperback edition of *DRIVE-INS 1 & 2* was an embarrassment, almost awful enough to distract from the fact that they misspelled Robert (PSYCHO) Bloch's name on the pull quote. So even if you own some or all of the previous editions, there are enough bonuses included with *THE COMPLETE DRIVE-IN* to recommend re-buying. For those who have yet to visit the Orbit, get your hands on this handsome collection immediately and don't forget to visit the snack bar at the intermission.

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