



HOLIDAY VIDEO GIFT GUIDE: PART II



YOUNG MARVELS

While *The Avengers* was the big superhero movie this year, *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (2019) also made fans happy with Tom Holland continuing his role as a younger Peter Parker coping with his powers and responsibilities, most notably in a post-Thanos and (sadly) post-Tony Stark world. With its humor and relatability, this version of Spider-Man is the best one yet. On the flip side, *X-Men: Dark Phoenix* (2019) generated a lot of controversy. While the cast performances were praised (these younger X-Men have been good in the past too), the execution of the famed comics storyline (the second time it has been tried) was sharply criticized by many fans and critics. Definitely one for X-fanatics and completists, although it may inspire heated debate.



DEMOLITION MEN

Let's face it: The *Fast & Furious* franchise may be fun, but the movies get dumber and dumber as they go along. (Hey, I've seen all of them.) Not that you care if you're a fan of Dwayne Johnson and/or Jason Statham, particularly when they are teamed up together, like in the spin-off flick *Fast & Furious Presents: Hobbs & Shaw* (2019) which finds them taking on cybernetically-enhanced terrorist Idris Elba who wants to unleash a deadly virus on the world. I've got to give Johnson and Statham points: they're among the new school of action heroes that have turned 50 into the new 40. It's nice that some of us can maintain an action hero physique going into middle-age, plus keep a sense of humor intact. Now let's have some *F&F* ladies get their own spin-off.



CLASSIC CHILLER

Long considered to be an Italian master of horror and suspense, Mario Bava brought us such dark delights as *Black Sabbath* and *Blood and Black Lace*. My favorite film from this director is the oddly titled *Kill, Baby... Kill!* (1966) which is about a small Italian village which is being terrorized by the vengeful spirit of a little girl. People stay inside at night for fear she will stalk them. Into this oppressed town arrives a medical examiner (Giacomo Rossi Stuart) tasked with performing an autopsy on a woman who died mysteriously. He then becomes swept up in the supernatural mystery of the village and tries to unravel it. Some older horror films do not always age well, but this Bava classic is mesmerizing and still creepy today. Valerio Valeri was well cast as the spooky girl at the heart of it all. Her wide-eyed stare will unsettle you. The bonus documentary and Tim Lucas' commentary on the Kino Lorber issue take fans deeper into the film's creation.

MACHINE MAN

While the 2014 version of *RoboCop* has slicker visual effects and looks more modern than its source material, it lacks the heart, soul, and black humor of the 1987 film directed by Paul Verhoeven and co-starring Peter Weller and Nancy Allen. The original movie inspired two sequels, a nineties television series, and the reboot, which itself is going to produce another sequel. *RoboCop* was really perfect for the corporately minded eighties. Weller plays a terminally wounded cop who's given new life in cybernetic form, combining his own consciousness with that of a machine to create the allegedly ultimate law enforcement officer, one without human feeling or desire to negotiate with criminals. His partner (Allen) helps him as his repressed human memories begin to bubble up, and he questions the nefarious purpose he has been programmed and tasked with. (This is not Verhoeven's only meditation on fascist



politics.) Arrow Video have lovingly repackaged this sci-fi classic in a limited edition box set that includes both the theatrical and director's cuts of the film (same length, tweaked differently) taken from 4K masters, along with six postcards, a fun "This property

protected by RoboCop" sticker, an 80-page book with photos and numerous essays, a double-sided fold out poster, and seemingly a gazillion bonus features on the two discs. The list price is \$50, but Amazon recently had it for \$28.

FRESH CHILLS

The third entry in the *Annabelle* series and seventh film set in the Conjuring Universe, *Annabelle Comes Home* (2019) takes the familiar scare tactics employed in the James Wan world of horror but often subverts our expectations. This sequel was written and directed by Gary Dauberman, who penned *The Nun*, the previous two *Annabelle* movies, and the two new *It* films. While he is not strong on character development (outside of adapting King), Dauberman pulls back on the jump scares here, building tension through our expectations but not always shocking us. Unlike the other movies, this *Annabelle* tale takes place over one night. After Ed and Lorraine Warren (Patrick Wilson and Vera Farmiga) leave their young daughter Judy (Mckenna Grace) in the care of a teen babysitter (Madison Iseman) for an overnight trip, the babysitter's nosy friend (Katie Sarife) gets into the off-limits Artifact Room and unleashes holy hell on the house, with the soulless *Annabelle* doll as the conduit for evil spirits (like a spectral werewolf and the Bloody Bride) and bad vibes. *Annabelle Comes Home* is like a slasher film done with spectral stalkers that attempt to divide and conquer the kids in the house. With ghost stories back en vogue in recent years, it's hard to be very original lately, but Dauberman still manages to get your blood going. He gives each of the main characters (the three girls and a male teen crush) imbues them with more three-dimensional traits than one



might expect, and the actors run with that. He also cleverly bookends the film with the Warrens to appeal to longtime franchise fans. It's not new, but the energy is fresh.

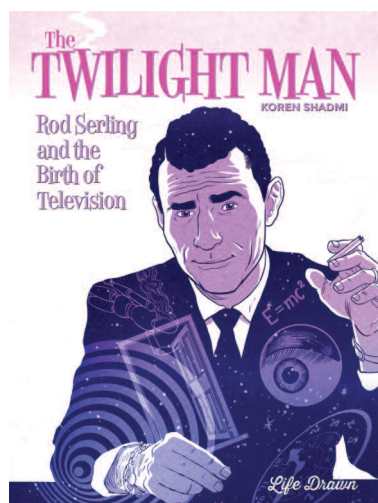
Directed by André Øvredal, and adapted by screenwriters Dan Hageman and Kevin Hageman from the books by Alvin Schwartz, *Scary Stories To Tell In The Dark* (2019) unites many of those creepy children's tales, but not in an expected anthology format. Here, a group of teens who have visited a haunted house become victims of a century-old curse. In this case, one of the kids (Zoe Colletti) snatches a book of scary stories written by a deceased young woman who has imprisoned by her family. But soon, horrible stories start to write themselves in the book as each teen falls victim to a separate terror tale and disappears. But is there a way to stop the curse from continuing? Guillermo del Toro co-produced the film and had a hand in the story construction. This teen-oriented PG-13 movie favors psychological trauma with just the right amount of bloodless violence to make it just gruesome enough without going over the top, and its fun retro vibe siphons an old school, campfire tales quality to it. The Jangly Man is the coolest creature; he can break apart into pieces and reform at will. This is not deeply scary material but a good gateway for younger fans just getting into horror. Like *Annabelle Comes Home*, *Scary Stories... features a solid cast and familiar material given fun tweaks. The film looks great in 4K too, particularly with all the subtle visual gradations in dark scenes that could not have been achieved in much older genre films.*



GOING DEEPER INTO THE ZONE

I'm going to break protocol here and introduce one graphic novel into the mix this year, and I feel it is apropos given that it is about Rod Serling, one of the greatest television writers of all time. Written and illustrated by Koren Shadmi (*Rise of the Dungeon Master*), *The Twilight Man* finds the famed writer, creator, and host of *The Twilight Zone* recounting his life story to a young lady he meets on a flight. Serling chronicles his experiences as a paratrooper and boxer during WWII, how the horrors of war and his intolerance for racism shaped his perspective and fueled his writing, how he tangled with network executives over censorship, and how his smoking habit got out of control. Nicely illustrated and thoughtfully researched, this 178-page graphic novel has received a lot of praise from fans, critics, and

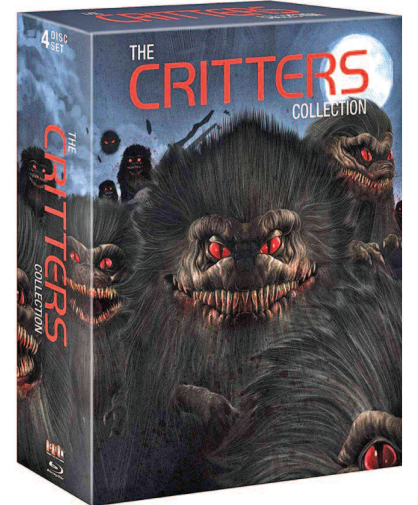
fellow authors for portraying the evolution of a man who saw the great potential in the small screen.



HUNGRY CRITTERS

One cult monster series that does tend to draw as much scrutiny as the slasher flicks of the eighties involves relentlessly hungry furballs from outer space. Scream Factory's *The Critters Collection* (1986-1992) brings together all four of the original entries in the quirky, low budget franchise. (A new movie and a web series emerged earlier this year.) Some people view this as a knockoff of *Gremlins*, but the original script was allegedly written prior to that other hit eighties movie being released. At any rate, I recall the first one being rather fun, and all of them showcase some talented actors before their big breaks, which can be a hoot: Billy Zane in part 1; Barry Corbin and Scott Grimes in part 2; Lin Shaye in parts 1 and 2; Leonardo DiCaprio in part 3; and Angela Bassett in part 4. Each

movie in the collection comes with new making of documentaries, fresh commentary tracks, and new transfers from 2K scans for the first two movies.



STREAMING 101

Thinking of getting a streaming subscription for your loved ones? Here's a basic content breakdown of key players so you can understand what they will be getting. You can also go on their sites to at least preview the content as well.

NETFLIX

NETFLIX (starts at \$12.99/month)

This streaming giant has a large selection of original movies and television series, including *Stranger Things*, *Mindhunter*, *The Crown*, *Roma*, and *The Irishman*. There is also a fairly deep selection of documentaries, television series, and new and vintage films. You should keep track of what is coming and going each month so as not be caught off guard, and while it is far from complete, the Netflix movie catalog is good.

hulu

HULU (starts at \$5.99/month)

While Hulu originally focused on being a repository for recent and classic TV series, they now have their own original shows including *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Castle Rock*, as well as documentaries like *Fyre Fraud* and *Becoming Bond*. There are also some feature films, but the selection is middling. To be fair, this is a television-oriented service and that's where they excel.

amazon prime video

AMAZON PRIME VIDEO (included with Prime membership)

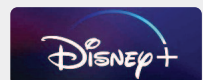
An extension of the experience for prime customers, Amazon has a fair amount of free movies and television series to offer. They can be a bit haphazard at times, but the selection is impressively deeper than one would expect, particularly on catalog titles ranging from the 007 movies to *Elvira*, *Mistress of the Dark*. Further, you can rent many movies for a reasonable price. Plus there are Amazon series

originals like *Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan* and *The Man In The High Castle*. And some other streaming and pay services can be synced through Prime.

ACORN tv

ACORN TV (\$5.99/month, \$59.99/year)

Are you a fan of British television? You've come to the right place. AMC-owned Acorn TV has a great selection in that area along with some other international titles. But the British catalog alone is impressive: *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries*, *Midsomer Murders*, *Doc Martin*, *Slings & Arrows*, *Agatha Christie's Marple*, originals like *Blood* and *Pitching In*, the list goes on...



DISNEY+ (\$7/month)

Shooting their way into the streaming market,

Disney is offering a vault of movies and television series from Disney, Pixar, Marvel, and National Geographic. One of the highlights is the new *Star Wars* series *The Mandalorian* which includes an appearance from Baby Yoda. Considering how much content is available, Disney are shrewd to start their new service, which has had a few hiccups, at a low monthly price. (Disney+ is offering a bundle with ad-free Hulu and ESPN+ for \$12.99/month, which is an overall \$5 monthly savings.)

SHUDDER

SHUDDER (\$5.99/month, \$56.99/year)

If you're a fan of horror, this once indie service, now taken over by AMC, features an eclectic selection of fear fare, like the Hammer movie *Twins Of Evil*, the eighties slasher *Hell Night*, and the recent Nic Cage flick *Mandy*. They also serve up original movies (like *The Wrath*) and television series (the new *Creepshow* anthology). The AMC connection means you can watch *NOS4A2*, too. Shudder is not yet available through Blu-Ray players, but you can watch on a Roku, Apple TV, laptop, desktop, tablet, phone, or Xbox.