

## book reviews

By Rebecca Blaber

### Saint Rachel

By Michael Bracewell  
(Jonathan Cape, £9.99  
paperback)

Much has been made, recently, of the questionable effectiveness of the new 'wonder-drug', Prozac. We've had Prozac in the broadsheets, on The Late Show, in the Sunday Supplements, and now we have the Prozac novel.

Michael Bracewell's Saint Rachel has been lauded as the topic of such debate. Our protagonist is a young, white thirtysomething, newly separated and clinging to the edges of his former glory. Bracewell has created a character essentially devoid of personality. Where his life source should be, he has sedatives, tranquillisers and, most importantly, Prozac. If this already sounds painfully self-conscious, then that's because it is.

The back cover of the novel informs us that this is "...a novel about drugs, gender and the fragility of things.." and in a sense this is true. The drugs are medicinal rather than recreational, and the issues of gender are raised by the one point of interest in the plot, which is saved for the last

half of the novel.

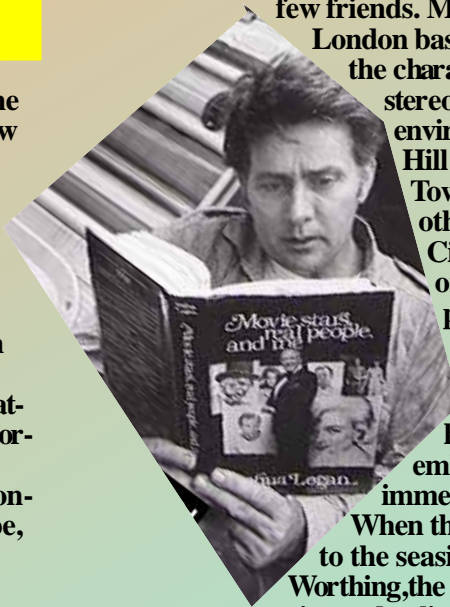
Bracewell's language is contemporary, expressive and exact, save for a tendency to romanticize.

As the novel meanders forward, we witness the thoroughly depressing spectacle of John becoming enveloped in a life of ritual, enlivened only by his fleeting contact with a cousin and a few friends. Much of the novel is

London based, and we follow the characters from the stereotypically hippy environment of Notting Hill to the Barbican Towers and out the other side to the City. The descriptions of location seem particularly important for the novel, as characters become, somehow, a living embodiment of their immediate surroundings.

When the plot takes us out to the seaside town of Worthing, the narration becomes pacier and enlivened. Such symbolism is not wasted.

If Bracewell intended to make us wary of urban decay and desensitization, then he has been successful. Where the novel fails is at the essential level of characterization. The characters lack credibility because they are little more than extensions of an age-old philosophical argument. Had the



protagonist had quirks, idiosyncrasies or something, then we would sympathize with his miserable condition.

Certainly, the symbolic novel is not to be sniffed at, yet there is a clear argument for leaving such ponderings on urban disaffection to the experts.

Or the Late Show.



### Dixie Chicken

By Frank Ronan  
(Sceptre, £5.99)

Dixie Chicken is a sublime comi-tragic masterpiece. Set in and around Dublin, events are relayed to us by an unquestionably all-seeing narrator, God, who wastes little time before disabusing us of the notion that he is, in



fact, Eric Clapton.

The story centres on Rory Dixon, a charmed and charming man, descended from splendidly disastrous hippy parents. As the novel opens, he is found hanging suspended from his car and dangling over the sea. Even in death he is desirable, as the young lad who swims the body in to harbour discovers, with hilarious consequences. From this opening point we are treated to a series of flashbacks and snatches of character history, opening up a tale stacked with angels and rogues and flawed personalities in between.

Ultimately, it is the writing itself which emerges, along with Rory Dixon, as the hero of the piece.

Ronan weaves adolescent pain, corruption, obsession, priests with secrets and a myriad of other little mysteries into something sharp, gritty and indecently entertaining.

Frank Ronan is probably best known for *The Men Who Loved Evelyn Cotton*, which won him the Irish Times/Aer Lingus prize in 1989. This delicious fourth novel should at the very least secure him a place in the New Titles section of any good bookstore for years to come.

**The Palace Thief**  
By **Ethan Canin**  
(Abacus, £6.99)

Ethan Canin, much like Michael Chabon, stands as one of

America's brightest literary hopes. Following the success of his previous short story collection, Canin has produced *The Palace Thief*.

Each of the four novellas in this new collection is centred on a protagonist who is capable of sucking us entirely in to their world. The narrator of

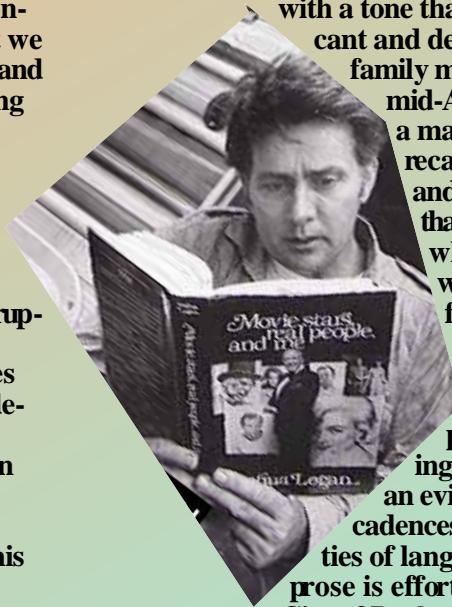
*Accountant*, Abba Roth, engages us with a tone that is at once supplicant and decisive. Roth is a

family man, that staple of mid-America, and he is a man with a secret. He recalls for us patterns and events in his life that have led him to where he is today, without showing a flicker of self-

aggrandisement or excessive introspection. His is a profoundly intriguing story, written with

an evident love for the cadences and the physicalities of language; Canin's prose is effortless and haunting.

*City of Broken Hearts* cleverly begins with such minutiae as baseball nostalgia and misunderstandings between father and son, and draws us on in to the fragile heart of American cultural identity. We witness the terrifying aftermath of broken relationships, and the patternings of tentative human contact under the weight of pain and frustration. All this is told in



a gently intensified prose style that gains much of its impact through the absolute immediacy and clarity of the imagery.

The title story, *The Palace Thief*, is perhaps the finest in the collection. Canin's deceptively candid narrator takes us, as the others have, through his life to the present, and offers what he claims to be "...a story without surprises". What he does



offer is an engaging account of a man's life and career that seems, somehow, terribly important as a symbol of something. This works on an instinctive basis, as it is difficult to put in to words quite what is being symbolized.

This collection is, at turns, haunting, intriguing and provocative. It leaves you with a sense of heightened humanity, which is no mean feat in twentieth century American writing.







Universal films put it this way "It's a story that might have come out of today's headlines and yet Bison, Guile, and war-tom Shadaloo belong to another world a fantastic, gripping and visually dynamic realm, where heroes and villains alike are masters of the ancient arts of warfare. This is the universe of Street Fighter." You've played the game now see the film, or rather should you see the film will it ever live up to the game ?

Well it's got stars Jean-Claude Van Damme (who plays Colonel Guile) and the late Raul Julia (Presumed Innocent, The Addams Family,) and of all people Kylie Minogue (soap, film failure, popstar, Patsy Kensit here we come, and Guile's lieutenant, Cammy). And for some reason the irrepressible lovey Simon Callow appears as the Allied Nations Under Secretary. So what's the plot ? Well Van Damme wages a no-holds-barred battle of strength and skill for the fate of humanity, so what's new about that. He's the tough Colonel Guile, an Allied Nations commando who leads a cover mission to rescue relief workers from a psychopathic, self-styled warlord General M. Bison (played by Julia). The World's in chaos, we're on the brink of destruction and the only way to save it is for VD to find the hostages, in Bison's Bond like secret subterranean base and set them free. What it has got going for it is the action-adventure writer Steven E. de Souza (Die Hard, Die Hard 2, 48



little spin on the characters, and their interpretation of the plot, and of course with an

HRS., The Flintstones), now turning his hand to Directorship for the first time, and some award winning designers and photographers. So if you like your action well lit and designed and don't give a damn about the dialogue then you might like this.

So who do you choose to write a screenplay for an all-out action-movie based on a worldwide best selling game where no one talks, but there's a lot of action ?, yes it's Steven again. Die hard, all action, Die Hard 2, all action, the Flintstones, er all dinosaurs, 48Hrs perhaps he was ill here, or perhaps he just wrote the action bits. So it's going to be action and dinosaurs. Based on encyclopaedic knowledge of street fighter, culled from his sons addiction to the slot machines, and some father son bonding and a few spare days of free time a story developed.

Filmed in a total of 35 locations from Bangkok, to Australia, using thousands of extras the films a veritable tour de force of action, shame about the dialogue, and why couldn't we have had a few Kylie songs ?

So was it like the game ? stupid question really was Dune like the book, and was Bonfire of the vanities like the book, the answer is definitely no. Each director screenwriter put's their own

adapption of a video game it's not easy to do. No dialogue,, but if you've never heard of street fighter then there's enough to keep you happy and if you have played it then then there's enough action to keep anyone happy. Think gung-ho, think Guns of Navarone, think Street Fighter. However it's a family film it's got an Rrating in the US, so don't expect tortures of abuse and violence this is strictly James Bond sanitised violence

Laugh ! we thought we'd split our sides. A few choice words about the cast.

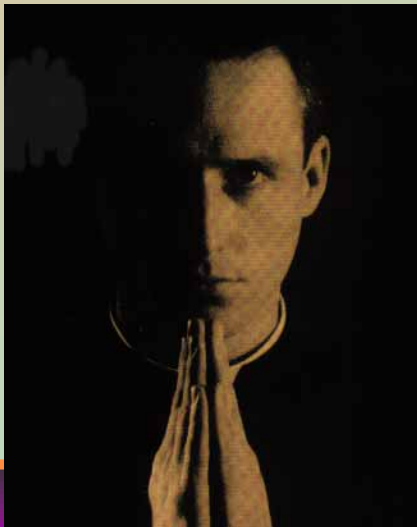
Van Damme as a child turned down an offer from a professional ballet company to go to Hollywood. Where he worked as a taxi driver, nightclub bounce and waiter until he displayed his martial arts prowess in a chic Los Angeles restaurant for startled producer Menachem Golan. Which is the best euphamism we've ever heard of. Kylie Minogue portrays a British intelligence officer, so it's English accent time !! Cammy is a powerful woman, both physically and mentally. She is an accomplished martial artist and a master at surveillance. The role proved to be a considerable challenge to Minogue. (no kidding)





“Cammy’s possibly everything I’m not,” says Minogue. “She’s such a powerful woman and occupies such a position of power, and I’m very small and petite.” Minogue is undoubtedly the most successful singer/actress to emerge from Australia in the past decade. (change that to ever and you still won’t be wrong) Simon Callow portrays the pompous Allied Nations Under Secretary who attempts to detail Col. Guile’s rescue plan at the eleventh hour, So no type-casting there then.

Tim Zinnemann (Executive Producer) was born in Los Angeles and learned about the film industry at an early age from his father who was a director. No prizes for guessing who that was !



## Priest

**Priest** is a highly controversial and very moving film that confronts what is often kicked under the carpet, tackling subjects head on such as catholic guilt and gay sex to child abuse. Rooted in working class Liverpuddlian values and scripted by Jimmy McGovern of Cracker fame, the film cuts human emotion right open. The film opens with an old priest using a crucifix as a battering ram and doesn’t let up for one minute from there. The story centres around Father Greg, played by Linus Roache, who still has his halo in place and is appalled by the behaviour of colleague, Father Matthew, played by Tom Wilkinson, who has a very un-priestly panchant singing karaoke down his local and banging his housekeeper, played by Cathy Tyson. Initially the whole scene is quite amusing, that’s until Greg finds himself a gay lover and hears the confession of a girl who is being sexually abused by her father. From then on its edge of your seats stuff, you can almost smell the burning going on down in hell.

## Little Women

Despite the popularity of Louisa May Alcott’s 1869 classic of American girlhood it is difficult to see why it war-

rants a third screen adaptation. It is as quaint as a picture of a thatched cottage on a chocolate box, just as sweet and sickly and about just as interesting.

The tale is based around four March girls, who maybe poor, but have the advange of a strong willed and saintly mother Susan Sarandon, who manages to come across as extremely caring,



without being a martyr. Winona Ryder hurls herself into the role of hot-headed Jo with her usual wide eyed gusto its difficult to tell whether she is good because of her acting ability or positive energy. She undoubtedly had a hard act to follow - Hepburn played the part magnificently 60 years ago. Ryder manages to pull a few heart







strings, but her tantrums are difficult to believe. Her crush on shy, sensitive Professor Bhaer, played with his usual smouldering eyed good looks, is also difficult to believe. I don't know if its the characters she has been cast as in the past, but passion doesn't seem to fit into Ryder's repetoire of feelings. Trini Alvarado as gentle Meg will have the toughest of you reaching for your Kleenex. The vain Amy is played at 12 by Kirsten Dunst and, somewhat less precosiously at 16-plus by Samantha Mathis.

Directed with true conviction by Gillian Armstrong, there is no disputing it is a warm-hearted, wholesome family story. If home-baked cookies and the Waltons are your bag take a look, if they're not your money would be better spent having a flutter on the lottery. You'd probably have a lot more excitement.



## I love a man in uniform

It might sound like the title of a kinky video, but infact it is a disturbing tale of human obsession, violence on TV and the loneliness and isolation that big city's can bring, from writer/director David Wellington.

The plot hinges on aspiring actor Henry Adler played by Tom McCamus who lands himself the part of tough cop sergeant Flannigan in a low budget TV cop show and ditches his job as a boring bank clerk. Taking method acting to the extreme he decides to take to the streets of Toronto in his cop's uniform and pass himself off as the real

McCoy. Unfortunately, however, what seems like a game turns into a nightmare.

Adler becomes addicted to his tough cop image and can't work out whether he is an actor or a vigilante which needless to say puts him in some tight corners. McCamus's performance is totally mesmerising and he is well supported by Brigette Bako, who doesn't take kindly to his advances, and Kevin Tighe who plays a very convincing bent cop.

It is a very impressive debut for Wellington and one that will knock you dead in your seat, even if it does appear to take its inspiration from Taxi Driver. Highly recommended.



**Odilon**

**Redon**

**Royal Academy**

If you're in one of those 'what is life all about' moods, take a stroll down to the Royal Academy and take a look at the work of Odilon Redon, who displays more than a few black fantasies. You'll either come out feeling like the world ain't that bad after all, or you'll be looking to join a convent. Redon's work, which has a mystical, religious quality carved out of the dark side of the mind, is very different to the soft, watery moods of the Impressionists who were painting at the same time.

Redon was very much a loner and loved to wallow in tales of how he was an unwanted child. It is difficult to know if this was true, but a true blackness and isolation comes jutting through in his work that is difficult to conjure up simply for art's sake.

The first 20 or so years of Redon's work is almost exclusively in black and white, a monochrome canvas on which to portray his loneliness and pathos. But colour took a major turn in his work with 'Yeux Clos' which was painted in 1890. The painting portrays what appears to be the head of Christ, his eyes closed

and head hanging. In his beauty it is difficult to say whether he is in life or



de Kooning Woman 1, 1950-52

death.

Redon's obsession for religious imagery comes from what he claims was a miracle. As a child he suffered

from fits. His parents took him to Verdelaix, a shrine dedicated to the Virgin Mary, and, so the story goes, he was cured.

If you are looking to trawl through a maze of dark visions, Redon's exhibition is highly recommended. Razor blades not supplied.

Odilon Redon's exhibition is on at the Royal Academy until May 21

**Willem de Kooning**

**Tate Gallery, London**

Bill and Hillary Clinton have one and I'm sure Madonna wants one, if she hasn't already got one. Yes, if you are rich, hip or trying to be happening you have got to have a de Kooning on your wall.

Willem de Kooning, the Dutch, American born artist, who fell out of favour with the critics in the seventies is back with a vengeance, even though he's rocking well into his nineties. If you haven't heard of de Kooning get down to his retrospective at the Tate and take a look, you'll find his creamily textured canvases mesmerising. He gives a whole new meaning to the colour baby doll pink.

His heavily brush stroked work trails







off into fragile lines of predominantly red and blue, a taste of the artist's slide into senility. Endless drama-queen style accounts have been conjured up about his latter work, dubbed 'late de-Koonings' by the art world.

Everything has been vaunted from an artist out of control to the possibility of them actually being painted by his daughter. Thankfully none of this dirt has stuck.

There is little in de Koonings work to pin him down to a period, or as a mould for the rest of his work, which is obvious with Picasso for example. What is ever present in his work, however, is an incredible sexual passion, which seeps through his work. No one better can sum this up than the artist himself who once said, 'Flesh was the reason why oil painting was invented'. Nothing has come out of de Kooning's studio since 1990, although the artist is still alive, and many believe nothing



now will. His work as they say is complete.

Willem de Kooning's work is being shown at the Tate Gallery, Millbank, London SW1 from February 16 to May 17. Don't miss it.

## June Leaf

Thorp Gallery, NY

If you are lucky enough to get over to the big apple in the next few months it is definitely worth checking out the Edward Thorp gallery in downtown Soho.

From March 18 through to April 22 the Edward Thorp will be showing paintings and sculpture by June Leaf, which represent a double life experience between Nova Scotia and New York City.

Leaf dramatically portrays the wild and windswept barrenness of Nova Scotia with the hard, grimey reality of New York City. In both environments her work highlights how tough it is to survive in either.

Many of her images are boats and figures in relation to the sea and how chaos reigns in order to unite, yet there are moments of quiet, calm respite, such as a solitary bed in a bare room. The works vary greatly in scale and material and are totally mesmerising.

If you don't catch June Leaf, you could always catch up with Christopher Brown who is displaying his work at the Edward Thorp from April 29 through to June 10.

In the exhibition Brown continues to develop themes relating to his personal vision of historical events in the 19th and 20th century, inspired by both photography and film.

This time dealing primarily with imagery from Zapruder's film of the Kennedy assassination he raises a number of controversial questions, including the relationship between history and memory. To illustrate this he uses a number of techniques such as erasing and blurring to replicate the processes of the mind.

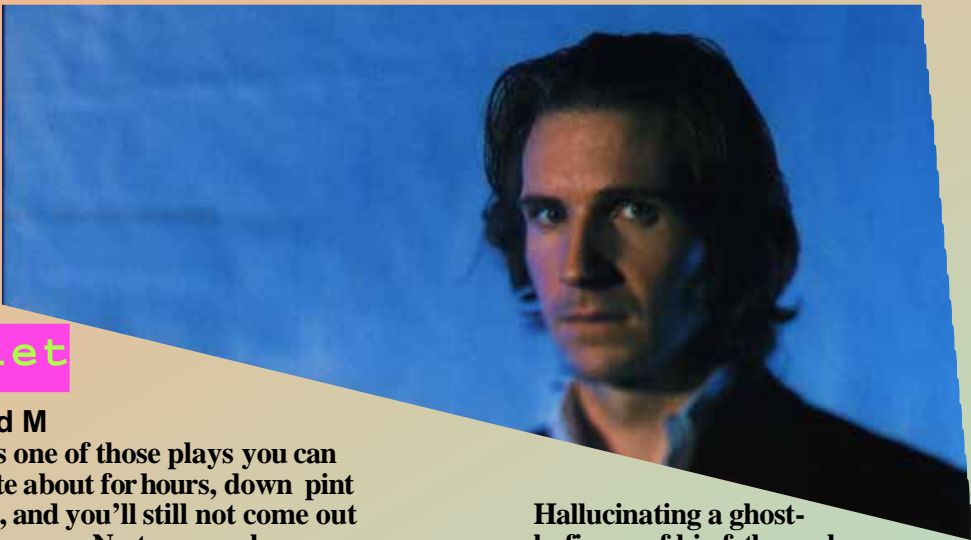
A survey show is running concurrently at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas through to April 16 if you happen to be hanging out playing cowboys.

The Edward Thorp Gallery is at 103 Prince Street, 2nd Floor, New York, New York.

It is open from 10 am to 6 pm from Tuesday through Saturday.

Incidentally it's just around the corner from Anna Sui's funky clothes shop - which is a must see for the wicked decor even if you can't afford the t-shirts!





## Hamlet

### Hasi and M

Hamlet is one of those plays you can pontificate about for hours, down pint after pint, and you'll still not come out with an answer. No two people seem to see the same thing in it, which makes it arguably the worst, or best play in the world.

The Almeida's production of Hamlet was unfortunately a case of been there, got the t-shirt. Sure it was packed out, but many I suspect were there to see the gorgeous Ralph Fiennes in the flesh and to see whether the leather-clad bully in Schindler's List could actually pull off this almighty role. Ralph (pronounced Raffé, for you non-luvvies out there) rose to the occasion. He was both passionate and crazed, throwing off armour for a mad man with a dog on a string look, which was undoubtedly a familiar one to many members of the audience at the Hackney Empire.

Hallucinating a ghostly figure of his father, who looked more like an extra for Star Trek than a scary apparition, Fiennes went bonkers in true Shakespearian style. At times, however, he raced through his lines and one felt that he was more interested in getting curtain down before the pubs closed.

Tara Fitzgerald's Ophelia, however, was less believable. Her portrayal of madness was so shakey, one felt she was a woman on the edge herself. Shakespeare's parts for females aren't exactly great anyway, but she managed to drown any tenderness that Ophelia has in am-dram.

She is better sticking to playing Merchant Ivory style beauties in the likes of The Vacillations of Poppy Carew.

Not even the talents of Francesca Annis could save the day as Gertrude. I'm not sure whether it was Jonathan Kent's directing, but her mannerisms belonged more in Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest than Hamlet. I am honestly suprised she didn't ask for her handbag.

The turkey award, however, has to go to Terence Rigby who played the ghost/player king and the grave digger. Maybe he was just having a bad night, but the only believable thing he seemed to be able to do on stage was shovel earth.

Three hours and an aching bum later, it was very much a case of great cast, great setting, where did it all go wrong. Next stop for this production is Broadway, and judging by the reception of 'Four Weddings and a Funeral', I'm sure it'll go down a storm. Hopefully in a storm somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic.





## Poetry

Jem Rolls

Performance Poetry in London has finally come alive and the scene is really kicking with talent. All credit is due to the Nuyorican tour last year and the success of such clubs as Pull My Daisy in triggering off what was, until recently, an entertainment that was wilting on its feet.

New clubs such as Farrago in Homerton and the Big Word in Islington are fast establishing a reputation for offering diverse bills that are bringing in crowds who previously would never have dreamed of spending a night at a poetry reading.

Poetry bills no longer exist of the self-obsessed ranting with a razor blade in hand. Now you could get on a bill say a ranter such as Mr Social Control before a hyper rapper such as Pink Sly, followed by a comic poet, say Dickie Doran, followed by the gracious and literary Jessica D'Este. I'm sure you'd agree this is wild diversity that is a long way from pouring over Betjamen. The nicest thing people ever say to me as a poet is 'I didn't know poetry could be like this, I didn't know it could be this good' ..... And they do say it regularly.

There is great public resistance to the notion of poetry that harps back to their days in school. The word poetry spells boredom to

them and this is the big hurdle that poets and promoters have to get over. But don't get me wrong, the future is looking brighter. Standup comics are starting to check out the scene, more poets are getting involved in music gigs plus happenings such as the Digital Disapora's NuYork-London slam night down the ICA, things are little short of buzzing.

This is not books, its raw word', say Big Word's posters and it should be stressed that performance poetry is not literature as such. It is all about performance and entertainment. It's alive with rhythm, humour and sometimes music, as well as lyricism. It is definitely not dead language, obscure literary reference and iambic penameter. Neither is it monotoned mumbling to fluffy navels.

This poetry - and you have to see it to believe it is young, funny, wild and very much in your face. So buy a ticket and check it out at a venue near you soon - I can guarantee you won't be disappointed.





# natural born



# Killers

Behind The Hype  
By Michael Bracken

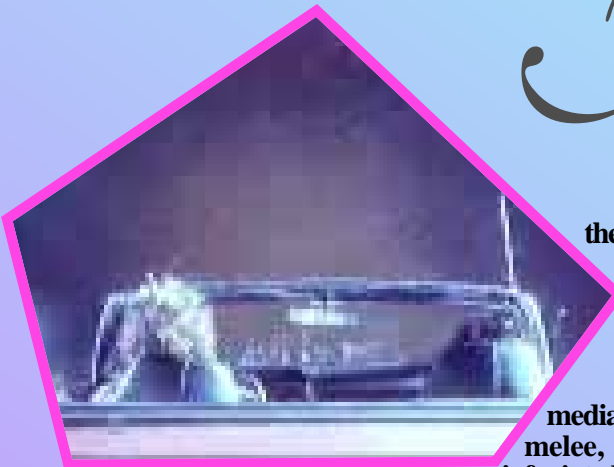
Violence, sex, murder and a media angle. With this combination, there is only one other advantage a film needs to stoke publicity to cosmic levels, and 'Natural Born Killers' has got it. Censorship.

Just when it looked as if Stone's latest flick would be cruelly exposed after the initial press flatulence assigned to big-budget, ultra-violent trash, in stepped the British Board of Film Censors. The delayed release and video ban meant a pirating frenzy and instant cult status in the wake of the PPFS - post 'pulp-fiction' syndrome.

A highly stylised exploration of technical virtuosity, the outer limits of parody and the meaning of love and insanity, Stone's attempt to give the big picture cleverly uses the small screen.

Mickey (Woody Harrelson) and Mallory (Juliette Lewis), two fucked-up dumb white kids on a three week odyssey of murder, sex and nihilistic rage, mean big business for T.V.

reporter/slime-ball Wayne Gale (Robert Downey jr.)  
To add to



the

media  
melee,  
infuriated

cop Jack Scagnetti (Tom Sizemore) eventually puts the pair behind bars.....but for how long.

For all the hype, '..Killers' is a prolonged knowing wink from omnipresent Oliver. Setting Mallory's childhood in a sitcom parody attempts to highlight the prevalence of child-abuse in the USA, albeit with a complacent, comedic shrug.

Aural and visual film references abound: from 'Cape Fear' with Mickey as the big bad wolf; through 'Tetsuo:the Iron Man'; to Mickey as a comic-Kurtz, dabbing water on his hairless head. But this is Tarantino's swamp, and, technical ability aside, Stone is drowning without the side splitting dialogue that permeates the formers portfolio.

We're told this is 'a Tarantino story', but how can a director who uses the

good-vs-evil analogy as blatantly as Stone did in 'Platoon' (with Elias and Barnes) be expected to delicately enunciate the (Brechtian) interplay inherent in a Tarantino story.

ahem... enough  
horseshit

It's worth seeing for the visual composition and thrash-metal, surf-retro soundtrack alone, although the music was also whipped from the big-Q's bag of tricks. Juliette Lewis entertains as she apes and pokes fun at her first big part (as in 'Cape Fear') with maturity and humour, but overall, '..Killers' bedlam laden scenes leave the punter confused and uneasy.

Olivers army will love it, but the biggest fans of this flick will surely be outraged headline writers at the Daily Mail.

