

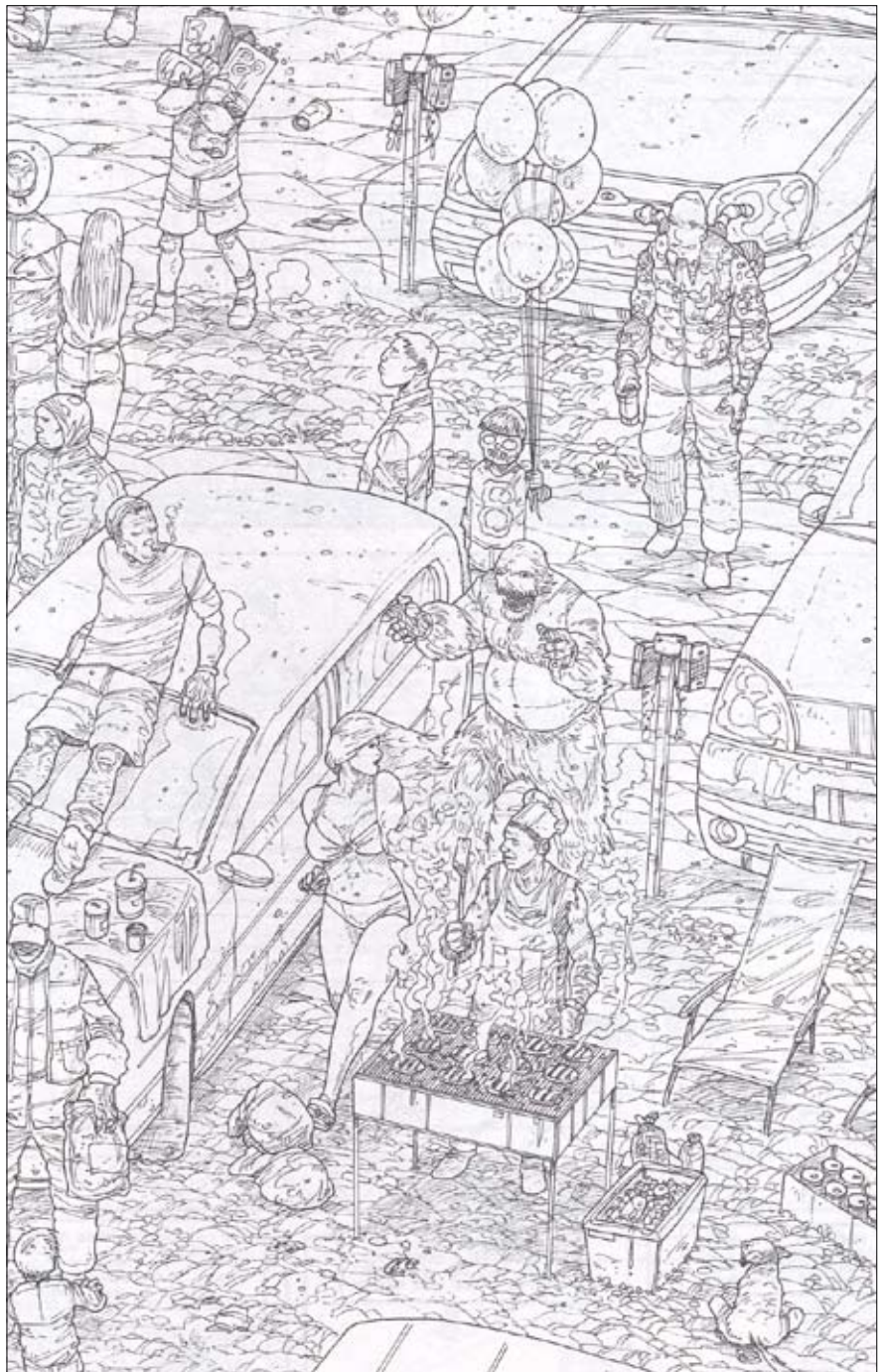
# Respect Your Shelf: The AU Buyer's Guide

THIS MONTH:

## JOE LANSDALE NOVELS

WORDS BY ROSS THOMPSON

With eye-watering violence and dialogue saltier than a pirate's posing pouch, Champion Joe's books are likely to offend more cowpokes than they please. But if you can get past the rapid fire innuendoes, triple entendres and squelchy deaths, you will find a writer of rare, incomparable talent. Lansdale has a natural gift for front porch storytelling, and can spin a whopping yarn with the best of them. His atomic tales wander and loop in and out of every genre under the sun – whether he's dreaming up cowboys squaring off against a town full of zombies, giant steam-powered robots marauding in the desert, or Godzilla trying a 12 step program to give up killing humans, they're like a whole evening's worth of double features merged into one. This writer of the purple rage has countless books to his name and his mantel groans with the weight of an armoury of awards, yet he remains largely undiscovered over here. It's high time we did something about that. Saddle up, pardners...



### THE DRIVE-IN (1988)

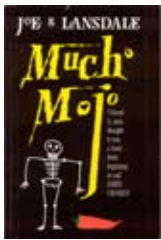
With over 20 novels and a couple of hundred (count 'em if you don't believe it) short stories, Lansdale is the very acme of prolific. Some of these are straight thrillers that go for the jugular like a junkyard mongrel, while others are gonzo knockabouts birthed from a feverish, cheese before bedtime imagination.

*The Drive-In*, subtitled *A B-Movie With Blood And Popcorn, Made In Texas*, hails from the latter camp, and is about as wild and unhinged as fiction gets. When a bunch of friends head to their local outdoor cinema, hoping for a night of back-to-back horror movies and bottomless crates of beer, little do they know that the real entertainment will unfold on their side of the screen. After a mysterious comet strikes the drive-in and traps everybody inside with a flesh-zapping forcefield, it does not take long for folks to lose their civilised ways and turn into backwoods, gun-toting rednecks. This second-hand synopsis does not do the riotous story justice, or convey the crazy trip on offer here. If Stephen King donned a cowboy hat, trimmed

his sentences and dropped some acid into his Jack and Coke, he might be able to bust out this warped tale of aliens, cannibalism, eyeball popcorn and other bad stuffs. But I doubt it. *The Drive-In*, recently adapted into a comic, is nothing like anything else you will ever have read or seen. You won't forget it in a hurry.

**La Triviata:** If you like *The Drive-In*, check out its sequels, entitled (ahem) *Not Just One Of Them Sequels* and *The Bus Tour*. They are, if you can believe it, madder still.

**Sample Excerpt:** "And finally there was that voice, that lovely voice that was kind of Randy's and kind of not; and that was kind of Willard's and kind of not, the one that hummed softly, shucked and jived. Those voices, those honey-poison, hot and cold voices of the Popcorn King."



## MUCHO MOJO (1994)

Six of Lansdale's umpty-ump novels feature Hap Collins and Leonard Pine, each of whom are in their mid-40s and barreling headlong towards a mid-life crisis. Hap and Leonard are firm friends in spite of the odds: the former is a smartass sad-sack who's a sucker for a woman in trouble; his more level-headed colleague is a

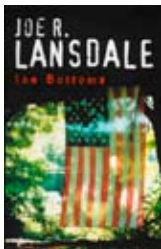
black, gay Vietnam Vet. Their ideal day is spent mooching around their Texas shack, sipping beers, eating cookies, watching old movies, shooting the breeze. But their days of buds and vittles are constantly interrupted by a succession of outlandish adventures featuring vengeful hookers, biker gangs, the Klan and at least one overly affectionate armadillo. These captains outrageous are problem magnets,



## DEAD IN THE WEST (1983)

Jebediah Mercer isn't your average lapsed preacher. Favouring a six-gun and a horse over the good book and the pulpit, the Reverend shoulders a shady past and a grudge against the Lord. Tired of fighting the good fight, Jeb hits the bottle and the road, and winds up in Mud Creek, a one mule, two cart town that does a fine line in dust sodas.

Unbeknownst to its inhabitants, this godforsaken gulch has been cursed by an Indian medicine man they lynched some time before. After he spits his hoodoo over the graveyards and burial grounds surrounding the town, the dead rise and lumber hungrily towards their previous home in search of human munchies. Before Jeb can say "Sweet Tom Savini", he's holster deep in legions of the freshly exhumed undead



## THE BOTTOMS (2000)

Not all Lansdale books creep out from beneath the dark side of the pillow. In recent years, he has transformed from a restless literary gunslinger into a mature crime writer of some distinction. See, for example, *A Fine Dark Line*, which retells Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* from a new perspective, or *Lost Echoes*, an eerie

horror thriller that has shades of King's *The Dead Zone* but a knockdown drag-out ending that will loosen your teeth and dislocate your knees. *The Bottoms*, however, is Lansdale's signature work. It's the Great Depression, and while everybody else in deep Texas scratches around for enough for corn and some change, young Harry Crane plays in the woods, shooting squirrels and making dens. All is well until he makes a pretty unpleasant discovery near the Sabine river bottoms: the mutilated body of a young black woman. As



## SUNSET AND SAWDUST (2004)

Lansdale's knack for creating living, breathing characters came to the fore on this hot-blooded hoedown. Sunset Jones is married to the no-good sheriff of Camp Rupture – until, that is, she shoots him clean through the temple for attempting to violate her on the floor in the middle of a Texas twister. After she bags the tin star for

herself, Sunset uncovers yet more corruption and intrigue, this time involving a leaky oilfield and yet more dead bodies – who, contrary to that old sailor's chestnut, have plenty of tales to tell. *Sunset And Sawdust* might find its roots in Westerns and dime novels, but Lansdale puts a fresh spin on proceedings, always taking the story down alleys you will not expect. And it's heartening to see that

and they inadvertently suck each other into one rumble tumble after another. In *Mucho Mojo*, Leonard inherits a load of cash and a house from his recently deceased uncle. Everything seems tickety boo until he discovers he's living next door to a crack den and, oh yeah, there's a child's skeleton in the basement. With more quotable one-liners and gunfights than a Tarantino movie, *Mucho Mojo* stings like a nettle sandwich, but at heart it's a love story of sorts – Lansdale deftly captures the silly little things that keep men together while their worlds fall apart.

**La Triviata:** Lansdale has also penned stories for *Batman*, *Conan*, *The Fantastic Four*, *Jonah Hex* and *Superman*.

**Sample Excerpt:** "Holding cells are very small and short on comfort. And this one smelled like a dog kennel. Me and Leonard were sitting on the floor with about 10 other guys, and the floor was cold and hard and not a single throw pillow was in sight. A drunk kept trying to put his head in my lap and wanted to call me Cheryl."

and has to once again place his fate in the hands of his maker. At sunset a zombie showdown of the goriest, grisliest kind ensues and our hero paints the town red – though not in the good sense. Though *Dead In The West* might sound like the stuff of yellow-paged pulp fiction, it has a lot to say about racism, love, duty, honour and faith – themes which run through the entirety of Lansdale's canon. Plus nobody else writes rollicking prose quite like Lansdale. The action scenes are so vibrant that they almost rip the pages in two. It is, as they say, un-put-down-able.

**La Triviata:** Lansdale holds belts in Daito Ryu Aikijujitsu, Hapkido, American Combat Kempo and Aikido, and teaches at his own martial arts school.

**Sample Excerpt:** "The door did not open. The zombies were at the church steps. The Reverend handed his revolver to David, cocked the shotgun over his shoulder, ready to crush skulls."

news spreads through the town, deep buried prejudices bubble to the surface. The Klan dusts off their ghost outfits, light their burning crosses and go hunting, but Harry suspects a different perpetrator: The Goat Man, who may or not be "The Debil", a child-eating creature said to live out in the woods. Part murder mystery, part rites of passage novel, *The Bottoms* is as intoxicating as moonshine. It will crack open your subconsciousness, crawl inside and refuse to leave.

**La Triviata:** Joe's daughter Kasey is a famous country and western singer.

**Sample Excerpt:** "Then too, there was the Goat Man. Half goat, half man, he liked to hang around what was called the Swinging Bridge. Up until the time I'm telling you about I had never seen him, but sometimes at night, out possum hunting, I thought maybe I heard him, howling and whimpering down there near the cable bridge that hung bold over the river, swinging with the wind in the moonlight, the beams playing on the metal cables like fairies on ropes."

he can right sexy, ballsy, independent women as well as he can hangdog losers. As with *The Bottoms*, the finale is as satisfying, poignant and haunting as storytelling can be. You don't want it to end, but at the same time you love how it does. Lansdale has never been better than he is in *Sunset And Sawdust*. He has a pencil full of lead bullets - shake the book and you can hear the words rattle.

**La Triviata:** The despicable badass McBride previously appeared in Lansdale's novella *The Big Blow*.

**Sample Excerpt:** "On the afternoon it rained frogs, sun perch, and minnows, Sunset discovered she could take a beating good as Three-Fingered Jack. Unlike Jack, who had taken his in the sunshine, she took hers in her own home at the tail end of a cyclone, the windows rattling, the roof lifting, the hardwood floor cold as stone."



## GUIDED BY CHOICES:

### THE AU DEFENCE

Given the breadth and scope of Lansdale's back catalogue, it's pretty difficult to pick out five notable novels. It's on a par with choosing five of your favourite fingers and toes – you'd be pretty upset to have to lose any of them. With that in mind, once you've finished devouring this selection box of Lansdale goodies, you might as well gobble up all the other chocolate baubles as well. For starters, *Cold In July* is a devious whodunit which lassoes you in on the first page, then drags you through cactus needles, steer skulls and broken glass. *Freezer Burn*, arguably the nastiest thing Lansdale has ever done, is a creepy travelling sideshow which tars and feathers your conscience and has an ending which turns the whole plot inside out. And then there's *The Nightrunners...* or *Act Of Love...* or *Leather Maiden...* or...