



EXCLUSIVE

24

PICTURE PALACE

SET MY HEART TO FIVE | Guest contributor Simon Stephenson on his love for cinemas...

My novel, *Set My Heart To Five*, tells the story of Jared, an android who teaches himself to feel by watching old movies. The book is set in 2054, when only a handful of old cinemas remain, lovingly showing the movies that survived the Great Crash because they were stored on film. Thus, the future cineaste's canon is almost entirely composed of big-hearted hits like *Forrest Gump*, *Thelma & Louise*, and *Sleepless In Seattle*.

As now, the unsung heroes of the piece are the cinemas themselves. Many of the cinemas Jared frequents are real places that I conceived as little changed from today, albeit with their neon marquees a little more burned out, their red velvet seats a little more threadbare, their alabaster statues a little more headless. At the time of writing, it seemed a safe bet these cinemas would still be around in another few decades. After all, many of them had survived two world wars. Some of them had even survived *Gigli*.

But I wrote my book before many of us had even heard the word 'coronavirus' or had opinions on the merits of N95 versus FFP3 masks. I

wrote it before any of us knew how good we had always had it.

At this moment in history, our future feels uncertain in a way it never has before. So where do us cinephiles go to find our solace? For many of us, going to the movies has always been what we do when things get tough. Cinemas have carried me through break-ups, sicknesses, and even bereavements. I know I have not been alone in spending my pandemic evenings wishing I could simply go and watch a movie in the dark amongst my fellow humans.

I have even found myself fantasising about revisiting beloved cinemas I have known: the Dominion, the Cameo, the Grosvenor, the Coronet, the Rio, the

IN THE DARK
Falling in love in front of the silver screen... ah, those were the days.

Prince Charles, the Vista. I can trace the geography of my life through them and their poetic names.

In *Set My Heart To Five*, I conceived of a world absent many of the things we take for granted: airplanes, New Zealand, even – because Elon Musk had incinerated it in a 'hilarious' prank gone wrong – the moon. But the notion that we might someday live in a world without our beloved cinemas never even crossed my mind.

Of course, the good news is that we don't have to live in such a world. The owners and staff of our beloved cinemas are used to making the best of challenging circumstances and – like the hero in a multiplex movie – they will prevail. But they need our help to do so, so when the doors do at last open once again, let us line up around the block to fill their auditoriums for every matinee and double-bill they show. Let us take all our friends and buy way more popcorn than we can ever eat. And then let us eat that popcorn, together, in the dark. **SS**



ETA | OUT NOW / SET MY HEART TO FIVE BY SIMON STEPHENSON IS PUBLISHED BY 4TH ESTATE ON 28 MAY 2020. EDGAR WRIGHT IS ATTACHED TO DIRECT A FEATURE ADAPTATION FOR WORKING TITLE.

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