

Kill Bill Volumes 1 and 2
 directed by **Quentin Tarantino**
 Miramax Film Corporation, 2004

The Emperor's new clothes: volumes 1 & 2

blame Robert Redford. It's all his fault really. When he bailed out a small, Utah-based independent film festival, the Sundance Film Festival was born. Under his guardianship, Sundance has become one of the most influential film festivals in the world, championing the best modern American and international independent film makers, among them the Coen Brothers and Steven Soderbergh. And Quentin Tarantino.

A model of low-budget independent cinema, 1992's *Reservoir Dogs* was fresh, vibrant, funny and violent; a showcase for Tarantino's pop culture sensibilities, his perverse sense of humour and his cheerfully vulgar dialogue, which amused and offended audiences in equal measure. And then there was the ear scene. Elvis impersonator Michael Madsen tortures a bound and gagged cop by dancing to a Gerry Rafferty song. And slicing off his ear with a straight razor. Unfortunately, the cop still has one ear left and is forced to listen to the rest of the song. The scene was horrific. It was nauseating. Worse still, it has inspired drunken men to dance to *Stuck in the Middle With You*. The controversy surrounding that scene made the film and gave Tarantino a reputation as a dangerous young director surfing the pop culture zeitgeist. So what if we found out later that the film was an unacknowledged remake (or rip-off) of Hong Kong director Ringo Lam's excellent *City on Fire*?

Tarantino was suddenly everywhere. Passionate, arrogant and as excitable as a puppy in a room full of unhumped legs, you either loved him or you loathed him. He was 30 and he had the world at his feet. No-one knew what he was going to do next. What he did next was *Pulp Fiction*. It jump-started John Travolta's failing career and made a star of Samuel L Jackson. It won him the Palme d'Or at Cannes. It won him an Oscar for Best Original Screenplay. So what if he had to share it with former friend Roger Avary, whose story (about a boxer and his daddy's gold watch) he'd filched and made the backbone of his movie?

Then he lost his way a little. Despite a stellar cast, 1997's *Jackie Brown* just wasn't very good and for a while it seemed that Tarrantino was more interested in his acting career than on delivering a good film. Obviously he put himself in his own movies. If you had an ego bigger than your gargantuan chin, you would too. But other people started using him too, and he made a pretty good motor-mouthed scumbag who gets shot in the face in films as diverse as *Reservoir Dogs*, *Desperado* and *From Dusk Til Dawn*. And here lies one of the guilty pleasures of any Tarantino performance. Audiences really enjoy seeing Tarrantino take a bullet between the eyes. Particularly if George Clooney follows it up

by driving a table leg through his heart.

After the two-for-one failure of *Jackie Brown* and his acting career, Tarrantino disappeared and spent a couple of years sulking, licking his wounds and battling writer's block. But now he's back, louder than ever, with his magnum opus, *Kill Bill Volumes 1 & 2*, based, apparently, on several drunken conversations between Tarrantino and Uma Thurman while they were filming *Pulp Fiction*. *Kill Bill* is a sprawling martial arts epic charting the globetrotting vengeance wrought by The Bride (Uma Thurman), a pregnant assassin, who is shot and left for dead on her wedding day on the orders of her former lover and employer, Bill. Waking up from a coma 5 years later, The Bride is understandably a little bit peeved and sets out to get even with her former colleagues (Lucy Liu, Vivica A Fox, Michael Madsen and Daryl Hannah) and Bill (David Carradine). Shot in the US, Mexico and China, and originally conceived as one film, Tarrantino and Miramax supremo Harvey Weinstein decided that the film they had was too good to edit down to a manageable length. So they chopped it in two and decided to release *Volume 1* and *Volume 2* 6 months apart. It's a gamble that almost pays off.

Time hasn't curbed Tarantino's magpie tendencies. Taken together, the two films are something of a curate's egg, veering wildly between surrealistic bloodletting, gritty violence, martial arts fantasy and black comedy. With his earlier films it may have been fun for film buffs to indulge in geeky fanboy reference spotting, but with *Kill Bill* it's almost impossible not to spot the deliberate and wholesale plundering of cinema. Watching *Kill Bill* reminded me of the Gray's Study Notes, which have helped so many poor students through their exams in the past. *Kill Bill* is the cinematic equivalent. Never seen a spaghetti western or a Shaw Bros martial arts movie? Don't worry. Tarrantino's seen them all and he's cribbed the best bits for you. Elsewhere he 'pays homage to' (steals from) among others, Kurosawa, Nagisa Oshima and John Ford, as well as less mainstream sources like the kitsch Japanese gangster movies of Seijun Suzuki and cult TV shows like *The Green Hornet*. So if you're watching *Kill Bill* and suddenly you experience déjà vu, do not be alarmed. You have seen it before.

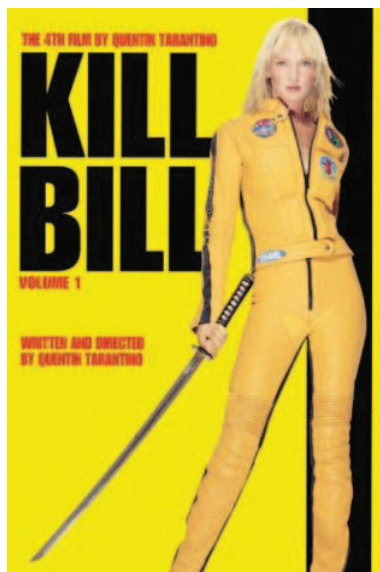
Of the two halves, I preferred *Volume 1*. The film opens with a quite literal bang; the battered, bleeding Bride begs (in crisp monochrome) for her life and the life of her unborn child before the unseen Bill shoots her in the head. Fast forward a couple of years in technicolour and we're thrown headlong into the pitched battle between knife-wielding assassins The Bride and Vernita Green (Vivica A Fox), one of her former colleagues, as they demolish Green's

A survival guide to later life
Marion Shoard
Constable Robinson, 2004
PB, 644 pp, £9.99, 1 84 119372 0

suburban home. But watch the background closely and, in a moment that's quintessential Tarantino, you'll see the ominous shape of the school bus stop outside the house as Green's daughter arrives home ...

In the past, I've always found Tarantino's films to be too static. Apart from his patented stylistic flourish of playing around with the narrative structure, his films take few chances. They're stagey, dialogue-driven pieces of fluff, long on quotable lines beloved by students, but shockingly light on character. The framing and editing are pedestrian. They're flabby. They don't move. Well, whether it's down to Tarantino or his action choreographer, the legendary Yuen Wo-Ping, *Kill Bill Volume 1* moves. Tarantino's direction is tight and confident. Limbs fly, swords flash, geysers of blood spray and the camera dances around it all with almost as much energy as Thurman's vengeful harpy. While his narrative is as disjointed as ever, the film is lean, pared to the bone. Gone is the playful dialogue and laid-back delivery of earlier films; elegaic samurai sword battles replace his tense gun-toting Mexican stand-offs. The film switches from black and white to colour to frenetic Japanese anime and back again, climaxing with a stylised (and gratuitously violent) battle in a Japanese restaurant that's right out of a Seijun Suzuki film.

At its centre, holding everything together in the best performance of her career, is Uma Thurman. Raw and sexy, tough as nails, Thurman is a revelation. A raging, primal force, literally climbing over the corpses of her enemies to get at the titular Bill, her quest for vengeance is the engine that drives the film. Her scream of rage and grief upon waking up from her coma and reaching down to find her previously pregnant belly empty, is agonising and humanises her otherwise comic book superhero character. Tarantino's genius for handling actors isn't just confined to Uma Thurman. With the exception of professional mannequin Daryl Hannah (laughable as a one-eyed killer), the performances in *Kill Bill 1 & 2* are perfect. Michael Madsen's cool, laconic Budd is a trailer-trash cowboy cousin to his Mr Blonde of *Reservoir Dogs*. Lucy Liu is an impossibly dainty kimono-clad Yakuza. But it's Vivica A Fox's murderous suburban mommy who's perhaps the best foil The Bride encounters in either film and it's a shame that she doesn't feature more.



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While there is much to enjoy in *Kill Bill Volume 2*, it is overlong and reliant on the kind of tired Tarantino dialogue that was a notable, and very welcome, absence from *Volume 1*, and swaps the graphic but surreal bloodletting of the first film for the gritty, nihilistic viciousness of his earlier films. The disjointed chapters of narrative drag, they lack the sheer kinetic energy of *Volume 1*'s animated origins of O-Ren Ishii (Lucy Liu) or the playful humour of Sonny Chiba's swordmaster and his sushi house, while Daryl Hannah's one-eyed Aryan she-bitch is never the serious threat to The Bride that *Volume 1*'s psychotic fetishised Japanese schoolgirl Gogo (Chiaki Kuriyama) proved. Nothing in the second film comes close to the lyricism and beauty of the final snow garden duel between The Bride and O-Ren Ishii which echoes the films of Kenji Fukasaku and Nagisa Oshima.

The most surprising thing about *Volume 2* is just how good David Carradine is as Thurman's nemesis Bill. While The Bride dominates the first film, the second film belongs to Bill. An unseen menace with mixed feelings in *Volume 1*, he is revealed as both father figure and jealous lover to The Bride, whose only chance of redemption lies in his restoration of her stolen daughter. Lean and weathered by age and experience, Carradine's craggily handsome visage complements Thurman's fallen angel beauty perfectly. His performance is measured, hypnotic, still exuding the cat-like grace of his Kung Fu days, his tequila-roughened voice lending the worst, most banal lines Tarantino can put in his mouth a worth they don't deserve. That Bill is such a palpable force in *Kill Bill* is purely down to Carradine. He invests Bill with a dignity and tragedy that just isn't reflected by the script. I wanted to scream with fury and throw popcorn at the screen, when at the climax of the two

films, after around 3.5 hours of carnage, Bill sits down and lectures The Bride on the merits of comic books and the relationship between superheroes and their archenemies. The scene is light-weight. It's kitsch. It's geeky. The scene is pure Tarantino. It's an insult to both the audience and to Carradine. That Carradine almost pulls it off is a tribute to his long overlooked talent. That Tarantino ends his epic masterwork with dialogue this bad is proof that his talent is overcooked.

David Watson

*The past is a foreign country, but so is old age, and as you enter it you feel you are treading unknown territory, leaving your own land behind. You've never been here before.*¹

THIS quotation sets the theme for this helpful and practical book. The author of *A Survival Guide to Later Life* deals sensitively with issues such as moving house, retirement housing and the selection of a care home. She includes, in the latter, a guide to the quality of tea bags and coffee used. Apparently, if both are cheap, then the presumption is that the management of the home may also scrimp on lighting, heating and 'second helpings'.

The chapter 'Adapting surroundings' details changes that can be made to major rooms and gardens. There is also an excellent list of gadgets and aids, including stair lifts, alarms and walking aids, and clever ways of funding them. Bugbears such as incontinence are described, including suggestions of useful clothing and equipment like 'kylie sheets.'

There is a detailed section on professional helpers, which states that:

'The GP will decide, prescribe and control your access to the rest of the health service. Life or death, blindness or vision, inability of freedom of movement, and much more are theirs to determine!'

It also emphasises practical issues such as 'flu jabs', annual health checks and regular reviews of medication. Important issues such as age-related macular degeneration, dementia, depression, and employment of staff are also examined.

Other helpful chapters discuss money, state, housing and council tax benefits, and a further chapter considers legal and financial representation, which also covers vital issues including bank authorisation, power of attorney, receivership, and appointeeship. An appendix deals with complaints and lists useful contacts.

Each chapter is well referenced. Hoard concludes that many elderly people are happy in spite of some of the restrictions of old age. Moreover, she emphasises that it is only at this time of life that many break through the barriers that have prevented them from really knowing their younger relatives and descendants.

I recommend it.

Lotte Newman

Reference

1. Morris J. *Trieste and the meaning of nowhere*. London: Faber and Faber, 2001.