

Reality Deviants Book Club:

The Crow

Adam Simpson

Hello Mage fans and welcome to Mage the Podcast. Today we're bringing you another episode of Reality Deviants Book Club. This is the show that belongs to people who believe reality is a rule of thumb - and we gave it the finger.

If we can stick to the subject, we'll look at recommended media in Mage Books to see if they're worth your time. I'm your host Adam, and I'm joined again by Pooka. Pooka, are you keeping it together?

Pooka

Barely. I mean, decently though, I guess. Well enough. Just put out a giant Changeling book on the Storyteller's Vault that I'm pretty proud of, but it ate my life for several weeks. So I do also have...

Adam Simpson

Hey, give us the title.

Pooka

So it's a book of grammar. It is a book of Changeling magic that is a spiritual, not successor, but replacement to the cancelled Book of Glamour that fans had been promised for months and then years and then Time of Judgment happened and

Changeling disappeared for a while so it's kind of been this legendary tome that never materialized and my co-authors and I were like, yeah, you know, let's take a crack at doing something like this and so 130,000 words later it is now finally out.

Adam Simpson

Awesome.

Pooka

I do also have two other small announcements. So first, I think this episode should probably be hitting the airwaves before TryitCon 2, TerryCon edition. So one more time, I'll say check out tryitcon.com if you're interested in a three-day convention for learning new games and meeting new members of the community. It'll be November 7th, 8th, and 9th, all online, all in memory of our co-host Terry Robinson. And the website has all of the relevant information, but there's also a Discord you can join for updates. I think it's going to be run through the Start Playing Games platform, but like, managed through Discord. That's where we're going to have all the scheduling and conversations.

And then I am also planning on attending PAX Unplugged from November 21st through the 23rd in Philadelphia. So if anyone is planning to be there, let me know on the Discord. I will hopefully be running two one-shots along with some other members of the D10-Tion Center.

It's weird to say that. Written out, it makes a lot more sense as a pun, the D10-Tion Center, but we're a group of Mage the Podcast and Mage the Podcast adjacent folks.

I will also be running around trying to do interviews on the expo floor and whatnot. So usually it's a happy enough chaos to be worth the exhaustion at the end of it.

We'll see how things go.

Adam Simpson

I've heard Jquestionmark will be there from Mage the Podcast Discord fame. So sounds like a fun time.

Pooka

That's one. The rest of you should go too.

Adam Simpson

If you're looking for thoughtful, intelligent commentary on books recommended by Mage authors, why did you pick this show? If you're ready to hear us stumble our way through a film, take a seat and find a drink. If you aren't bothered by rants and hot takes, you're ready for us.

Mage the Podcast's legal team states, "Opinions expressed on Reality Deviants Book Club really do not express the views of Mage the Podcast. In fact, you probably shouldn't listen to these guys at all." Why are we the only show with that warning? The other hosts are going to get jealous.

Mage fans on our Discord server expressed interest in *The Crow*, a movie from the 90s. You may be thinking, this is a book club. It's in the title. Can't these guys get it right? Let me remind you, we're Reality Deviants. We don't sweat the details. Just be happy we're wearing pants. Wait, am I...? Yeah, I'm good.

Before we get to today's film, I want to discuss Clans of the Alphan Moon. This science fiction novel by Philip K. Dick was published in 1964. I don't see an episode in this book, but it is worth mentioning. It's the story of a man whose wife divorces him, has job trouble, and gets personal advice from a mind-reading blob from outer space. When his former wife becomes a diplomat to a distant moon where only insane people dwell, he spies on her through a remote-control android. This is one of those rare cases where you can make this stuff up.

It is recommended in the First Edition rule book where Stuart Wieck says, "I've read only a few of his wonderful books, but of them, this one qualifies as a mage book. It's about drawing the line between sanity and madness, an issue at the heart of this game."

End quote. I actually disagree with this. The story isn't about drawing the line between sanity and madness. All of the characters use standard psychological tests and never question them. The book is really about realizing the line between sanity and madness is not firm. People drift back and forth across that line, so we shouldn't declare the insane hopeless or think of them as a different category of people.

Linking this to Mage, early editions accepted Quiet. The mage just had to work some issues out and would then return to normal. Later editions saw Quiet as warning signs that the mage would become a Marauder.

This book doesn't link well to Mage when you consider Marauders. They are damaged people and will not return to normal. I get the impression Stuart Wieck was considering how Sphere magic forever changes mage's perceptions, requiring them to build a new frame of reference that could make them appear insane to Sleepers.

Clans of the Alphan Moon is a fun science fiction adventure. I'd recommend it to people who like science fiction and don't take their stories too seriously. As a Mage book, it's optional

Back to our feature. *The Crow* was recommended five times that I was aware of in Mage Books.

Other World of Darkness books recommend it, too. It is listed in *Destiny's Price*, *Mage Revised Rulebook*, *The Orphan's Survival Guide*, *Tradition Book Hollow Ones*, and *The Book of Secrets*.

The Orphan's Survival Guide says, "It's as classic as Pulp Goth cinema gets. True, Eric Draven is a ghost, or more properly, a Risen, but the world he and his companions inhabit is the epitome of an Orphan's lot." End quote.

On that note, the 1996 *Wraith* supplement, *The Risen*, recommended the original graphic novel as well as the movie. The graphic novel by James O'Barr was published in 1989. It is the story of Eric Draven, who returns from the grave to get revenge against a group of criminals who killed him and his fiancée after torturing them.

The main character applies face paint inspired by puppets in traditional European theater. The white color and unusual markings about the eyes and mouth give Eric Draven an alien, spectral appearance that made the character stand out in the world of comics.

The movie came out in 1994. It gave us a more approachable, relatable version of the story. In the movie, Eric Draven is still a relentless assassin, but is less emotionally distant, and it focuses on justice rather than trauma.

I read the graphic novel to prep for this episode, and it's intense. The pain and anger of a man who lost everything is shown with no dilution. Although the original packs a punch that is undeniable, I think the changes for the movie were a good decision.

The supernatural elements were magnified for the movie. We see Eric Draven claw his way out of his grave. We see him heal wounds rapidly. He can read memories when he touches people.

In the graphic novel, he calls himself *The Crow*. A crow exists in his thoughts and talks to him. In the movie, a crow from the spirit world accompanies him and is a necessary link to his powers.

The movie adds a new character named Myca. She is the half-sister of the villain Top Dollar who has occult knowledge. She is the one who realizes *The Crow* is Eric Draven's weakness.

I learned the film crew had too much trouble with actual crows, so they used five ravens during filming. We're not supposed to notice. In the graphic novel, T-Bird is the boss of the criminal group. The movie makes Top Dollar the boss of a larger criminal group, and he is involved in occult practices.

Michael Wincott played Top Dollar and gave an understated, complex performance that is not to be missed. The film's plot is so simple, you could call it elemental. This makes it work remarkably well and makes it a perfect vehicle for the dark, bleak visuals and mood.

It has been called quintessential Goth Cinema, and I certainly agree. The soundtrack included The Cure, Nine Inch Nails, Violent Femmes, Machines of Loving Grace, Stone Temple Pilots, and others.

I heard the lead singer from The Cure when Eric Draven was first putting his face paint on, and I thought, this is perfection. Despite the grim atmosphere, the message of hope hits home at the end.

The movie's famous line is, "it can't rain all the time." Even in the world of darkness, this rings true. Pooka, anything to add before we dive into the questions?

Pooka

Well, so *The Crow* is one of those things where the mythology around it, around the production of the film itself, I would say, seems to have just as much weight as the content. So it's hard to approach the movie without considering that the accidental death of Brandon Lee, the star, mere days before filming was concluded.

And then if you're familiar with the comic, the backstory of how that text was written, the author has stated it was kind of driven by this need to express the rage and grief that came from his fiancée being killed by a drunk driver.

There was also a bit about, I think a Detroit newspaper reported that there was a couple murdered for a \$20 engagement ring, which is rather close to what happens to Eric and Shelley in the comics.

So that anger and grief, it fuels the story in the comic in a way that's more unstructured than the film. Because like you said, the film creates this criminal underworld and this motivation for the crime that catalyzes the whole story.

There's less of the senselessness underlying it all that you get in the source material. So it still works, but I would recommend reading the comic and watching the film and

comparing them if you feel okay with that sort of double dose of relentless angst and violence.

I also noticed a couple shots in the film that felt like they connected to homages in some small way, like in other films. So there's a scene where Eric is running across rooftops, and just in terms of how it's shot, his movements, the pacing, and was like, huh, it looks exactly like when Trinity runs across the rooftops in The Matrix.

Or there's another scene where he kind of ignites this crow-shaped emblem and flames. And I thought, huh, it's just like that moment in Dark Knight Rises when Batman does the same thing. There's probably others I missed. But even if those weren't direct homages by the later filmmakers, the visual language of the movie still informs a lot of what came after.

The director, Alex Proyas, went on to direct Dark City, which people have also pointed to as thoroughly World of Darkness movie.

Adam Simpson

Oh, yeah.

Pooka

So... maybe. Maybe his style will be recognizable to people in how it's percolated through other similar media.

Adam Simpson

Well, first question, what did you like about it?

Pooka

Well, as you may or may not know, I am a dyed-in-the-wool Goth clubber from my younger days. This is, as you say, one of the sort of ur-texts for 90s Goth, so it holds a place in my heart. The soundtrack is one of the all-time great movie soundtracks, and given how much music both undergirds the story and has a presence in it, in the original graphic novel there's lots of quotes and excerpts from like Joy Division songs and titles of the chapters are named after them.

There's also in the film a concert scene at one point. So it definitely created this nostalgia in me. And you have to admire how thoroughly the elements of that, the music, but also just the art direction and the set design, all kind of cohere into this atmosphere that I would say is like the only place where this ghost story really could take place.

The fact that it's on Devil's Night and Halloween as well just kind of adds to the mix. Tying into another comic-imagined film, was thinking of Sin City as being one which presents the only location its story could take place.

And *The Crow* is the only one that can hold this tale of a mysterious bird animating a rock musician to dig himself out of his grave so that he can avenge his and his girlfriend's murders.

And it's a movie that knows what it is, which I appreciate. Acting-wise, Brandon Lee has a great presence for most of the film. There's a few lines delivered in a way that I couldn't help but giggle at how over the top they are, but he really does embody this combination of fury and weariness and struggling to retain what humanity he can.

Ernie Hudson as the cop is solid in his performance. And Rochelle Davis as Sarah, the skater teen, was good. I was curious about why she seemed to have disappeared after doing this film.

And indeed, it was because she grew close with Brandon Lee during filming. And after his death, she wanted nothing more to do with Hollywood for a long time. Apparently, she has started to return to film. She's also from Philly, so, represent.

And something that stands out to me is the overall extreme stylization of the film, to the point that it begins to affect the story structure. There are shots that are more like tableaux than anything else, up to and including this kind of random moment of Eric shredding on his electric guitar on a rooftop before smashing the instrument while backlit by the orange sky.

And you have David Patrick Kelly as this John Milton quoting arson-obsessed lunatic. You have these dramatic gun battles with cuts all over the place. I sometimes felt that the story unfolded through images that were similar or thematic connections more than any sort of like plot arc.

It gave things a choppy feeling, kind of like a comic. But unlike the comic, it didn't have sort of inner monologue or showing the psychology of Eric Draven. Do you really need that?

Maybe not so much for a story that's as driven by emotion as it is both inside and outside of the text. It functions more like this open piece of art, more than, for example, something like Marvel, where it might be based on a comic, but it is heavily invested in advancing the story of its overall universe.

So I don't want to say it's a meditative film as a result, but it's less about, let's see how the story gets from point A to point B to point C to point D. You just kind of have to go along for the ride.

Adam Simpson

This movie was a straightforward revenge story with lots of action and impressive visuals. I certainly liked it. It holds value for gamers more than 30 years later because more than any movie I can think of, it is the world of darkness rendered on the screen.

The look, the atmosphere of a dark, Gothic Punk, urban world was produced with great attention to detail. My son called it an artistic movie because the feel of that bleak city was as much a character as any of the actors.

I was active on World of Darkness message boards in the 90s, and more than one employee talked about how they would gather after work to go see *The Crow* in the theater again. The people writing for World of Darkness agreed that was their movie.

The Gothic cathedral for the finale, the alchemy symbols spray-painted on the walls. We learned the city is partially destroyed by arson fires at Halloween each year. No city can go on that way, and it might stretch believability. But don't miss the point. The point is showing us a corrupt city that has lost hope. If you look at the World of Darkness books in the early 90s, you'll get that in spades.

Next question, where did the movie fall short?

Pooka

So to your last point there, it is very much a product of its time to a degree. And I don't just mean in terms of the top notch visual effects. There's a scene with a very obvious

fake hand. I don't know if you caught that. I just was like, oh. Anyway, it's very self-consciously gritty in that 90s way.

And the devil's night fires were a real problem in Detroit. But it reminded me of this trope of the city without redemption that was common in American discourse of the time, not just in media that's meant to be gothic, but throughout the discourse.

And the characters sometimes turn into archetypes that kind of prop up that narrative, sometimes in ways that tie into things like race or class that can be a little uncomfortable. But it's certainly not unique for doing that.

And the comic arguably does it even more. And really, that's the case for a lot of older media. You just kind of have to remember the context of when it was released, not only the world as it actually was at the time, but how it presented at the time, how the world saw itself at the time.

On top of that, I don't think this was ever going to win an Oscar for Best Picture or anything, but it's a movie that knows exactly how raw it is, so the stylization I talked about before wasn't a turnoff.

However, stylized or not, there were a lot of sudden shifts in tone that felt weird to me, because this movie is iconic for being dark and grim and brooding, so it caught me off guard when suddenly you have this car chase with cops shouting, "What in the crap?" and, like, driving around. Or the little sort of buddy comedy scenes between Eric and the cop where they're hanging out wisecracking.

It's the kind of thing which you can maybe get away with in a longer, I don't know, miniseries or full series. And actually, this would make a fantastic miniseries now that I think about it, but it's not as effective in an hour and 40 minute long movie.

So those moments kind of took me out of it a little bit. They weren't all bad, but often they weren't improved by these little moments of sometimes hokey or stilted dialogue. Those are just quibbles, though.

Adam Simpson

It would have helped me to have a scene where Eric Draven realizes his vengeance includes the crime boss Top Dollar. When he started his revenge, he was hunting the thugs who attacked him in his apartment. In the process of hunting them after he comes back from the dead, he learned Top Dollar sent the thugs because Top Dollar was upset about Eric's fiancée organizing apartment residents to resist Top Dollar as a landlord. When the credits rolled, I paused and put the pieces together, but the movie is such a rush, it would have been better to give us a scene where Eric resolves to take out the ringleader.

Also, Eric's cat Gabriel got shafted. Eric discovers the cat living in the wrecked abandoned apartment for a year, then just moves on. The cat isn't given a proper home. If this is a movie about justice, where's justice for the cat? Moving on, does *The Crow* give us ideas for Mage?

Pooka

There's no way that cat just hung out for a full year. Like honestly, anyway.

Adam Simpson

Well, yeah, okay. Hahaha.

Pooka

So yeah, first off with Life three and Mind three, maybe throw in a bit of Matter or Spirit, I think you could pretty much duplicate all of the effects we see in the film. So healing yourself, purging drugs from the systems of others, looking through the eyes of a bird, superhuman physique, reading impressions left on objects, manipulate pain, transfer memories.

You can make all of that work. Like you said, in World of Darkness terms, Eric is a risen, a wraith back in his body to fulfill some purpose. But you could equally make this into a Euthanatos story. And in fact, in the Mage Storyteller's Handbook Revised, there's a section in the back that lists a whole bunch of movie inspirations for the Traditions and Conventions.

And this is listed for the Euthanatos, kind of adapted into a Mage plot hook. Referring back to the comic, the text has *The Crow* itself as much more of a spirit patron to work with.

In that montage scene where Eric first does his makeup to get that iconic mime from hell look, the soundtrack song by The Cure, which is called Burn, is playing. And the lyrics include the line, don't look, don't look, the shadows breathe. *The Crow* guide in the comics repeatedly says, don't look, when Eric has his flashbacks to the trauma of watching his fiancée being murdered.

So that's the connection there. The most outright mage character was probably Myca, the somewhat cringy, orientalist half-sister of the main antagonist who has this knowledge of the occult for reasons.

She seems to understand what *The Crow* is and apparently thinks she can take its power. She also apparently likes to eat eyes with her half-brother, slash lover and be weird and dreamy.

So she fits perfectly with the aesthetic of the movie, for better or worse. But I see her as a good example of, if you want to do this, maybe hedge wizard who's flown too close to the darkness or something.

And I also got some inspiration for how to approach character development for stories that start in media res. So admittedly, my point of reference for a lot of those thoughts was more Vampire than Mage, just because I think the former game suits the feel of the film a little bit better.

But I was thinking of how the film gets into its action pretty immediately. Eric is dead, and then a few minutes later, he's up and revenging his way across the city. We get the full story in pieces through flashbacks and dialogue along the way.

And I agree with you that having an actual sort of scene where it all comes together for him would have been a good addition. But I could see that being an alternative structure to explore to what's commonly presented in a World of Darkness books, which is to do the prelude first, if you're going to do one at all.

I do think many players don't get that deep into the character biography as they're putting dots on the sheet. So if you're Storytelling and you want to fill in that backstory after the fact, the movie shows one way that story could unfold.

You can use traits like amnesia and dark secret that have structure built into them to help you do that. It's not something every table will want to sit through, so the group

kind of has to agree on that approach to developing their individual stories, but I think it could work.

Adam Simpson

Yeah, well, this movie does give us inspiration for Coincidental magic that would seem believable to people. Other than that, I didn't get any ideas for running Mage, but this wasn't really a Mage movie. Very much a World of Darkness movie, but I don't see it as a quintessential Mage movie.

Pooka

Mm-hmm.

Adam Simpson

The themes and concepts of Mage the Ascension weren't really there, in my opinion.

Pooka, does this grant us any insights into the world of Mage?

Pooka

I think it gives insight into the World of Darkness. I mean, every single choice in the movie felt like a World of Darkness choice, from the constant rain to the constant arson to everything always being worse than it appears on the surface.

There's drugs, there's guns, there's electric guitars, which nobody seems to find strange when a vigilante is carrying one around. There is a literal trench coat and katana moment.

And one battle ends with somebody getting impaled on a church gargoyle, so that blood pours from its mouth.

So it is the apotheosis of World of Darkness vibes. And even though Mage has grown, I would say, beyond the Gothic Punk that was so espoused by Vampire in particular, if it ever really was contained within that concept, it is an aesthetic that shows through here and there in the books, in particular the ones you mentioned that have *The Crow* as a recommendation.

So it's useful to remember that as a, at least potential backdrop for conflicts between Technocracy and Traditions, or when Marauders or Nephandi show up.

But hope is also a theme that's visible amidst all of that grimdark, and that's something which I'd say connects to Mage in particular. There's a lot of romantic tragedy, a lot of rage and bitterness, a lot of nihilism, but there are also these little random moments where Eric pauses in his quest for revenge to make the lives of others better.

It points to retaining humanity, and mages are fundamentally still human in a way that the protagonists of the other games often aren't. So it's a good example of a story that shows that contrast.

Adam Simpson

The first two editions of Mage are firmly planted in the World of Darkness. Later editions are there, of course, but they seem to treat World of Darkness more like the real world with the names changed. Seeing what the classic World of Darkness looks like, having a visual guide to what the Mage writers had in mind for their Gothic Punk cities is great. Storytellers can then decide how much of that they want in their games.

So next up, does it change how you want to run Mage?

Pooka

Not really. I don't really run Mage in a way that connects well to this movie. I don't go in for excessive personal trauma and tragedy in my games, though individual players are welcome to investigate that if they want.

I like including some grimdark elements, but not as many as I would for Vampire or Wraith, and I tend to steer clear of melodrama and excessive violence, so I'm not really tempted to push my Storytelling style towards any of those aspects, which *The Crow* has ample examples of.

I think what I would point to are the connections with other people, the connections with Sleepers, I guess. Through Sarah, you have that opportunity for hope. Give one of the mages the Ward Flaw and make them really have to spend time on improving the life of this interesting character who's still a Sleeper.

Through Albrecht, the cop, you see the ordinary guy who wants to help. So maybe one of your players has the contacts background from the police department or something, and you can use that as inspiration.

And Myca, the witchy eyeball-eating sorcerer, is another possible point of connection for other characters. So I'd be more likely to try building some of those connections into the game more than just, how can I make the mages more like Eric Draven?

I tend to want Mage to be weird more than grim and melancholy, If I did go in that direction more, I wouldn't take that many cues from this movie because I think there are other inspirations which maybe do that better. Possible sources for future Media Club episodes.

Adam Simpson

I wouldn't say it changes how I want to run my games, but it reminds me how important scenes with NPCs can be. When Eric Draven interacts with a young girl, we see the humanity still closeted away within him. His conversations with the criminals he's hunting before they fight not only let his personality show, but gives the audience a chance to see what his ordeals have done to him.

Don't rob your players of chances to talk with NPCs on a personal level before or after key scenes. It can help players understand they're not only solving problems, but also influencing others.

Especially with new gamers, let them know it's not all about survival or showing their competence. They should also be expressing a character's perspective, bringing humanity to a bleak world. Okay, I'm getting dizzy on top of this soapbox. Pooka, can you recommend *The Crow* for Mage? And if so, what additions?

Pooka

I won't not recommend it. I don't think it would be for everyone or for everyone's play style. Doesn't sharply define mine apart from poaching the soundtrack for useful music in a dramatic scene.

I'm inclined to say that it would work well with either the vibes of First Edition, which I also think of as being more intentionally aligned with the gothic punk ideal of the World of Darkness as a whole, or maybe a very lightly defined version of Revised, given how commonly that edition is framed as street level with guns and dirty streets and plucky apartment tenants.

And it's groundedness on Earth too, but with little in the way of truly flashy magic. But if someone asked me flat out, is this a Mage movie? I think I would say it's more a movie that can be framed in Mage terms.

And useful material does fall out when you do that. I mean, Sneakers was kind of the same way. Nobody's doing Vulgar magic here, but story-wise, sensibility-wise, it has options you can work into Mage.

Adam Simpson

I give it an emphatic yes. Every edition of Mage has something to gain from this movie, but especially the first two. A vivid depiction of the World of Darkness has value for every Storyteller. The scenes in this movie are almost entirely at night. You won't see a glimpse of daylight until an hour into the movie.

World of Darkness isn't meant to be taken literally, but hey, can't hurt. A YouTuber offered information on the film's production. It was first pitched by studio executives to James O'Barr as a musical starring Michael Jackson.

In the meeting, James O'Barr laughed and then said, "You serious? No. Just no. And I'm leaving." Pooka, just think of the episode we could make on that version of *The Crow*.

Pooka

I mean, I can't stop thinking about it. It's like a bell that can't be unrung.

Adam Simpson

We're going to be talking about that for a while to come. Oh, when will the madness end? Oh, it ends here. If you enjoyed this episode, you may be ready to move into Eric Draven's neighborhood. Make sure to carry some self-defense and don't forget to wear black.

If this episode has upset you, use that anger to change the world. Better than coming after us. For our next episode, we will dip into weird fiction again. I could use some weirdness. Until then, tell people about Reality Deviants Book Club. Madness loves company. This episode is a part of Mage the Podcast. That is, until listeners tell them we're still slipping episodes into their feed.

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