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Page 1 of 2

Perfect time for escapism

Urban fantasy fans can lose themselves in speculative fiction, writes **Amanda Ellis**

There's a phenomenon in Hollywood that the more troubled the times, the more escapist the films. It began in Depression-era America, when movies brought hope to a population plagued by unemployment.

Statesman and longtime president Franklin D. Roosevelt thought it was a fine thing. "During the Depression, when the spirit of the people is lower than at any other time, it is a splendid thing that for just 15 cents an American can go to a movie . . . and forget his troubles," he said.

Historian Dixon Wecter argued motion pictures reflected the tastes of jaded adults who sought a never-never land that was sentimental or melodramatic.

The escapist storytelling phenomenon is one people also observed during the Global Financial Crisis, with CNN writer Douglas Hyde noting the renewed popularity of superheroes and comic books (as during the Depression era) and tipped they would continue to inspire audiences.

Fast forward to 2016 — the uncertainties of #Brexit and our uncertain politics at Federal level — and escapist storytelling and heroic

characters are as compelling as ever.

Science fiction and fantasy offer readers a way to escape but also re-process their reality. And good speculative fiction can help readers re-frame the world and understand the people around them.

A case in point is Santa Cruz-born author and astrologer Kim Falconer's Ava Sykes series, an urban fantasy outing for Falconer's new Australian publisher, Harlequin.

Having previously written seven Quantum series books for HarperCollins, the Californian's first urban-fantasy novel stars a kick-arse MMA fighter, Ava Sykes, who discovers the blood disorder that occasionally fells her is actually a sign of her other-worldliness.

Falconer's first book in the new series, *The Blood in the Beginning*, has found a good home in the Mira imprint which has produced some pretty fine urban fantasy over the years starring stereotype-busting female lead characters.

Reminiscent of C. E. Murphy's early Walker Paper novels, which featured a grumpy police mechanic turned urban shaman, *Blood's* main character Sykes is a grown up ex-foster kid who discovers she's not as human as she thinks.

Although on new turf, Falconer has hooked into readers' desire to explore how an antisocial but intelligent person would deal with a dramatic change to the way they see themselves.

The action also threatens the character's life and livelihood and her ability to stay independent and insular from the world.

The 62-year-old author has set the series in a contemporary place she calls New LA County. Modern LA as we know it has experienced the Big One, a series of quakes where parts of the coast split off and fell into the ocean, making for some beautiful scenery underwater.

"Fifteen years under the sea had turned this part of LA into a coral-encrusted page out of Californian history, salt preserved . . . Baitfish swam



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Page 2 of 2

in large schools over the streets, like silver bees swarming.

“In the rubble below, a street sign poked out of the cracked road. It read unset Blvd.”

Twenty-something Sykes has a connection to the sea she’s unaware of but comes to understand with the help of two charismatic other-world men, doctor Miguel Rossi and nightclub boss Daniel Bane. The relationships aren’t central to the story — meaning this tale doesn’t get the paranormal romance label.

By day Falconer’s heroine is a diligent science undergrad with ambitions to enter the medical profession. But when she comes into contact with a copycat killer, their violent encounters help the fighter realise her strength comes down to more than training.

While Sykes experiences a physical metamorphosis during the story, her true journey is one of self-discovery. She realises it’s more important to protect herself and others than hide who she is out of fear of discovery.

In the wake of September 11, Sony Pictures Classics executive Michael Barker argued audiences were still open to darker dramas during times of economic turmoil, telling the Wall Street Journal the key was people needed to not feel “ripped off”.

Falconer exceeds here because she meets the expectations of urban fantasy readers. One worth escaping to amid all the uncertainties of the world.



Santa Cruz-born author Kim Falconer.

The Blood in the Beginning is published by Harlequin Mira (\$30, ebook \$4).

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