



FILM

First-time director Denise Di Novi loves the 'messiness' of female experience.

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# STARLIVING

FILM REVIEW

Quips and bullets fly in excessive 'Free Fire.'

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Houston Chronicle Life & Entertainment

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BOOKS



Courtesy photo

Dianne K. Salerni is the author of the "Eighth Day" series.

## Former teacher writes intriguing fantasies for tweens

By Alyson Ward

In Dianne K. Salerni's popular "Eighth Day" books, there's an extra day wedged between Wednesday and Thursday — and most people don't know anything about it.

The series begins with 13-year-old Jax Aubrey, who discovers he has access to the eighth day. He then learns there are people trapped in that universe, existing only one day a week.

Salerni's books for middle-graders are full of action and mystery, with likable characters and some intriguing connections to the Arthurian legend. She'll be in Houston Sunday to talk to young readers as part of Inprint's Cool Brains! reading series, which gives kids the chance to meet their favorite authors.

Getting inside the heads of her young characters is second nature to Salerni, because she taught fourth- and fifth-graders for 25 years. Those years in the classroom, she said, "gave me a lot of perspective on how kids behave."

Salerni got the idea for the Eighth Day series from a family joke. When her daughters would ask their dad if they could go somewhere or do something, he'd put them off by saying, "We'll do it on Grunsday." Grunsday was just a made-up name for a day that didn't exist, but Salerni started thinking: What if Grunsday were real?

She launched her career **Young continues on D3**

### Author appearance

Dianne K. Salerni will discuss the Eighth Day series and her other books.

**When:** 3 p.m. Sunday  
**Where:** Meyerland Performing and Visual Arts Middle School, 10410 Manhattan  
**Information:** Free; 713-521-2026, inprinthouston.org

TELEVISION



HBO

Julia Louis-Dreyfus is Selina Meyer in "Veep." Now in its sixth season, "Veep" has earned Louis-Dreyfus five Emmys.

## Making TV great again

What would the commander in chief think of these fictional presidents?

By Ellen Gray  
PHILADELPHIA DAILY NEWS

**B**EFORE we elected "Celebrity Apprentice" star Donald J. Trump to the Oval Office, TV presidents had only Jed Bartlet (Martin Sheen) of "The West Wing" to measure themselves against. It wasn't much of a contest — only David Palmer (Dennis Haysbert) of "24" came close — which may be why most TV presidents are no longer even trying to win the popular vote. It's enough just to get our attention.

As HBO's "Veep" has returned for a sixth, side-splittingly cynical view of life inside the Beltway, we hail Julia Louis-Dreyfus' (now former) President Selina Meyer and other current TV commanders-in-chief.

President Trump, who knows a thing or two about grabbing focus, probably doesn't have time to watch his fictional counterparts. But what if he did? Here's what might interest him.



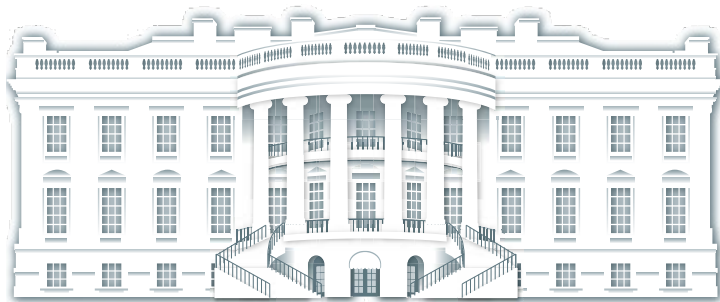
CBS

Keith Carradine in "Madam Secretary"



Showtime

Elizabeth Marvel in "Homeland"



Charles A. Apple and Ken Ellis illustration / Chronicle



ABC

Kiefer Sutherland in "Designated Survivor"



Netflix

Kevin Spacey in "House of Cards"

### Selina Meyer

**Actor:** Julia Louis-Dreyfus  
**Show:** "Veep"  
**Where to find her:** 9:30 p.m. Sundays on HBO  
**Known for:** Inflated ego, foul mouth, chronic ineptitude, and, now, after having been rejected by both the

American people and Congress, for lasting only a short time in an office to which she was never elected.

**What might interest (or annoy) Trump:** In "Veep"-world, Meyer, not Trump, was the 45th president. (She **Television continues on D2**)



Melissa Phillip / Houston Chronicle

Evelyn's Park, which opens to the public Saturday, is located on the site of the former Teas Nursery in Bellaire.

NATURE

## Evelyn's Park in Bellaire designed for sustainability

By Molly Glentzer

Houston has another new urban park to celebrate this Earth Day.

Evelyn's Park, on the five-acre site that once held Teas Nursery, opens to the public Saturday with a sampling of the kinds of activities that will activate the new jewel of Bellaire. On tap are a mini-farmer's market, family fun and food and beverage offerings including picnic boxes from Zelko Concepts' new The Ivy & James cafe, wine and beer tastings

### Picnic in the Park

**When:** 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday  
**Where:** Evelyn's Park, 4400 Bellaire  
**Info:** Free; 281-946-9372, evelynspark.org

and food truck fare.

The buildings by Lake-Flato architects are complete, the mostly young plants and trees in SWA Group's landscape design look ready to flourish and the log-climbing hill and slide are ready for rambunctious

children.

During a walk-through Wednesday, executive director Denton Ragland noted important aspects of the park that don't necessarily meet the eye right on: This green space is a national model for sustainability, he said.

Solar panels atop the office/event space building aim to bring the park a net carbon zero energy footprint. A massive storm water runoff system lies underneath the landscape, and water **Evelyn's continues on D3**

**KEN HOFFMAN:** His column does not appear today.

**DEAR ABBY:** New study aims at stopping Alzheimer's before it starts. **PAGE D5**

STAR

FILM REVIEW

# Quips and bullets fly in excessive 'Free Fire'

By Walter Addiego

Fans of the danker depths of genre movies will feast on "Free Fire," a feral exercise in high-energy moviemaking that boils down to an extended shootout in a decrepit warehouse.

And I do mean extended: After a modest set up, wild gunplay fills maybe two-thirds of the film's 90-minute run time.

A comedy and a labor of love, the movie is a takeoff on 1970s action films that's been stripped of filler to concentrate on pure visceral thrills. The director is Britain's Ben Wheatley, a cult figure who often works with writer Amy Jump (his wife) — their highly idiosyncratic output includes the 2012 bloody black comedy "Sightseers" and last year's "High-Rise," based on a dystopian novel by J.G. Ballard.

Certainly the filmmakers have soaked up the work of Sam Peckinpah, Quentin Tarantino, John Woo and Martin Scorsese (executive producer of "Free Fire"), past masters at depicting over-the-top battles with firearms. Wheatley aims to outdo them all, employing a



Afficionados of wacky '70s hair and clothing styles will have much to savor with "Free Fire," starring Brie Larson and Sharlto Copley. The film is one long shootout.

A24

**'Free Fire'**  
**Rated R:** for strong violence, pervasive language, sexual references and drug use  
**Running time:** 90 minutes  
**★★★★**

a lot of bleeding people crawling on their bellies and firing at anything that moves. A couple of assassins later join the fray (and who is employing them?) and the film toys with the constant possibility of combatants switching sides. Yes, it's gunplay, but it's funny and ghastly at the same time.

To forestall audience burnout, the filmmakers have inserted a few lulls in the action. That helps, as do the comic verbal sallies that accompany the gunfire. Still, after a while we may feel that, OK, we've gotten what Wheatley and company are up to, but they are pushing on regardless.

Quibbling aside, "Free Fire" mainly works, as an indulgence in cinematic overkill for moviegoers who realize that sometimes too much is just enough.

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minimum of plots and a cast of walking, talking action-movie clichés who trade quips and insults between volleys of bullets.

It's the late 1970s in Boston and an IRA operative, Chris (Cillian Murphy), with a briefcase full of cash wants to purchase several dozen high-powered assault weapons. Accompanying Chris are

a handful of characters — and it's a terrific cast — played by Brie Larson, Michael Smiley and Sam Riley. Aficionados of wacky '70s hair and clothing styles will have much to savor.

The sellers are led by Sharlto Copley's hilariously loutish Vern, wearing what must be the ugliest suit ever made

on Saville Row. His team includes Armie Hammer (with beard and turtleneck), a ferocious Jack Reynor and a former Black Panther played by Babou Ceesay.

There's bad blood between the Reynor and Riley characters. The weaponry Vern brings is not what was requested. And everyone on both

sides is armed to the teeth. Guess what follows.

It's a shootout for the ages, something that might have been choreographed by Chuck Jones (Bugs Bunny, etc.) at his most anarchic — if he had really been into guns. Everyone wants to grab the cash; almost everyone has been wounded (mostly in the limbs), so we see

## Evelyn's Park in Bellaire promises to be place to celebrate nature

Evelyn's from page D1

features in the master plan could one day recycle storm water for irrigation.

Insects and birds already have discovered the food-and-habitat-providing native plants. Saucer magnolia, Eastern redbud and Mexican plum trees bring color and form to the intimate Evelyn's Memorial Garden, at the park's southeast corner, wood ferns and sweet viburnum fill the understory.

Mexican sycamores, maiden grass, cassian grass and trailing lantana line the big central Event Lawn. Salvia leucantha and butterfly iris grow along the Oak Allee, created with 14 live oaks donated by Joe Teas.

The Forestation Area, which will eventually shield views of the homes that back up to the park's north side, has been seeded with plains bristlegrass, prairie wild rye and inland sea oats under Montezuma cypress, sweetgum and Southern magnolia trees.

Lighting throughout the park is dark-skies compliant.

"You won't see this stadium from 20 blocks away," Ragland said. "We want to be neighborhood friendly in every way we can."

A special bike parking lot near the entrance includes a free air station, with tools, to encourage two wheeled transportation and help keep car traffic to a minimum.

The park's programs



Melissa Phillip photos / Houston Chronicle

The Ivy & James will open at Evelyn's Park in May. Chef Jamie Zelko eventually will offer cooking classes at the cafe.

will include earth-friendly education. When the cafe officially opens in May, for example, chef Jamie Zelko will offer occasional classes in cooking with herbs in addition to breakfast, lunch and dinner fare.

Unlike the recently opened

Levy Park in the Upper Kirby District, Evelyn's Park will be less about finding things to do than simply finding a place to "be" and celebrate nature, Ragland said.

"If you spend ten minutes outdoors, chemical reactions happen in your brain,



A historical marker shares the story of Teas Nursery, which was founded by horticulturalist Edward Teas in 1910.

influencing your mood for the rest of the day. Those little ripples in the pond end up affecting the whole neighborhood."

Ragland wants to see how the community uses the park before he plans too many activities. Benches in three styles are scattered across each section of the park, and the big lawn can accommodate anything from picnics to impromptu soccer games.

Still to come — perhaps by fall — is Bridgette Mongeon's "Move One Place On" bronze sculpture, which will be represented during Saturday's opening by live, costumed

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Flowers are flourishing at Evelyn's Park, which will open to the public on Saturday.

## Young readers become invested in Salerni's characters

Young from page D1

as an author in a backward sort of way, self-publishing her first novel in 2007. Two years later, an independent Hollywood producer contacted her about the movie rights, and about the same time, an editor at Sourcebooks offered to re-release the book. So Salerni sold the film rights, found a publisher, "and then I went looking for an agent."

Her first two books, "We Hear the Dead" and "The Caged Graves," were aimed squarely at teens, but Salerni has found that middle-grade novels are her sweet spot.

In YA stories, she said, "the characters all seem to be filled with such angst. They think everything is the most important decision they've ever made."

Middle-grade characters, meanwhile, "are just kids. They make mistakes all the time, and they know they make mistakes all the time. It's like, 'I messed that up. I guess I need to do it again.'"

Salerni left teaching a

few years ago to be a full-time writer, but she still likes to spend time with young people: She does Skype chats with school classes, and replies to every kid who sends her an email.

She often receives astute, complicated questions from young readers deeply involved in the series.

"They really get invested in the characters, and they don't want it to be over because it's like they're losing their

friends," she said.

"The Morrigan's Curse," published in 2016, is the third — and, at least for now, final — book in the Eighth Day series.

But Salerni is still writing; she just finished a ghost story and is now at work on what she calls "a supernatural mystery."

She'll read some of her work Sunday and answer questions, and she'll talk about the research she does for each book.

"That's not as boring

as it seems," she said. "Part of my research was to go to Mexico and climb the Pyramid of the Sun."

It's like slideshows of my vacation."

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 (R)  
 (2:00) 4:40, 7:00  
 9:55 UPSTAIRS  
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