

Boskone 26
A convention report by Evelyn C. Leeper
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Again Boskone ran from late Friday afternoon through late Sunday afternoon (with Punday Sunday evening, making it very sparsely attended). Since I was scheduled to appear on a Friday 7 PM panel, we left work about 2 PM and headed up to Springfield. Other than a fifteen-minute blizzard west of Hartford and perfectly wretched traffic in Hartford (we hit it just about 5 PM), we had little trouble, but those were enough to make it hectic. We arrived at Springfield about 6:20, parked the car, and then discovered I had left my sheet telling where the Green Room was in New Jersey. Mark suggested going direct to the panel, since I had that written in my appointment book, but I decided to go to regular registration first to find the Green Room and then to the Green Room. Registration was in the Sheraton Tara; the Green Room was in the Marriott. Because of the construction being done on the Marriott's lobby, there was a circuitous route required to get from one hotel to the other which took ten minutes each time. This led to a lot of difficulties in getting between programming items later. Although this was billing as being a completely indoor path, it included a stretch through an unheated, open-sided parking garage--not my idea of the Great Indoors.

Upon arriving at the Green Room, I discovered they had moved the panel, so it's a good thing I didn't go directly to the room I had listed. I spent about fifteen minutes unwinding and talking to Saul Jaffe and Laurie Mann, then proceeded to my panel (which will be described in the panel section).

Hotels

The hotel was spread between two hotels, the Marriott and the Sheraton Tara. The two are across the street from each other, but because of the renovations, this path was unusable. The only route (mentioned earlier) took ten minutes and made access for the handicapped a real problem. Each hotel again had a snack bar set up near the programming areas, with quite reasonable prices, and lots of

seating space for discussions and just plain resting.

We, of course, stayed with our friend in nearby South Hadley and thereby did not exacerbate the already overflowing hotel problem. While NESFA could handle a Boskone of up to 1800, the hotel situation is such that realistically not more than about 1400 could be accommodated.

Dealers' Rooms

Just as last year, there was dealers' rooms in each hotel. So, yes, there was always a dealers' room nearby, but it was difficult (even more than last year) to get to the "other" room. The Marriott was the primary programming hotel, so I wonder if the dealers in the Tara felt short-changed. On the other hand, the Art Show was in the Tara, so most people got there at least once. The problem is there just isn't a room large enough to hold all the dealers that isn't already allocated.

The dealers' rooms dealt mostly in books, and a very good assortment it was. Again, sales were not up to what dealers had hoped for--it's not clear why.

Art Show

I got to the Art Show only briefly, and was not greatly thrilled by it. Maybe I'm losing my interest in them or something, but they seem to have turned into a combination of bad art for sale and good art marked NFS ("Not For Sale"). For an art exhibit, the conditions are less than ideal for viewing the pieces. They did have a very large track of artists' programming, which I had suggested last year, so maybe they actually read these reports!

Film Program

The film program consisted of several George Pal films, but through some mixup they got the television film *The Time Machine* rather than the Pal version. Blecchh! I didn't see any of them. Some people complained about the scant film program--given what they choose, I would be just as happy if they didn't have any. I had suggested last year they get something like Lem's *Solaris* and in this year's "Gripe Session" they specifically mentioned that as one they've been trying to find, but cannot.

Programming

There was an art track, but no science track (apparently no working scientists wanted to come out to Springfield on the weekend--I wonder why?).

The Panel Panel

Friday, 7 PM

Josepha Sherman, Michael Jan Friedman, Mark Keller, Evelyn Leeper, Eric Van

(This was the first panel that I was ever on, so I'm not sure how good a summary of the panel I can give, being as my effort was spent in paneling rather than note-taking.)

A good panel should be entertaining, informative, or both. Informative is better during the day; entertaining is better right after meal break and in the evenings when everyone is starting to run down. To have a good panel, you need good panelists, not ones who monopolize the panel or drift

off the subject. You also need a good subject. Some of my examples of overdone panels were "Word to Screen," "Screen to Word," "Book Collecting," "Feminism/Fat/Fandom" (or any two of those), "World Building" (which is almost always "World Building 101"--don't they ever offer an advanced course?), and "Arthurian Fantasy." People in the audience offered the opinion that "put-down" panels were also a bad thing. On the positive side, someone suggested a panel on "Political Heroic Fantasy"; many thought this was an oxymoron. Panels on lesser-known authors was another suggestion. And people seem to like the "Tips for Writers" type panels.

Someone asked if there was a "one-fan-per-panel" rule. No one was sure, but I think people agreed that five people was about the maximum desirable panel size. I said (and I think many agreed) that panelists should not attempt to panel with under the influence of any controlled substance (including alcohol).

(Sorry if this isn't too coherent. I was distracted by the need to said witty and profound things, or at least fake it.)

Meet the VIPs Party Friday, 8:30 PM

I was a guest at this (because I was on two panels). However, I discovered the difference between VIPs and just IPs--VIPs (professionals) got a place to sit with a namecard; IPs (non-professionals) got to wander around. I didn't stay very long, because we had arranged to meet some friends for dinner at 9 PM to discuss the plans for the 25th anniversary party for UMassSFS (a.k.a. UMSFS) to be held at Noreascon III. I did get to see Laurie Mann in her third change of clothers for the day (anyone who has time to change clothes that often at a convention isn't working hard enough!).

Dinner: The Student Prince

However, several of our friends had gone early to dinner and we met them returning as we were going there. This was annoying, since I had basically skipped out of the VIPs party because this was the only time to meet these friends, and now I missed that also. Still, there were some of us left and it might had been difficult getting a table for all of us--the place was, as usual, packed.

Conventionolics Anonymous Friday, 11 PM

This panel showed no signs of starting at 11 PM since the VIPs Party was still going in the same room, so we went to the Hobokon party instead. Someone said this eventually did take place. The Hobokon party was serving alcohol, which was supposedly a non-no for an "open" party, but no one seemed to be enforcing those rules this year. They were serving Jersey beer and Blatz beer, which some may claim aren't real drinks anyway.

Why Not Charlemagne? Saturday, 11 AM Elise Krueger, Ellen Asher, Michael Jan Friedman, Shariann Lewitt

This was instead of the "obligatory" Arthur panel, so what did they spend most of the time talking about? You guessed it: Arthur. They kept explaining why people wrote about Arthur (more readers know about Arthur than Charlemagne). Of course, more readers know about Arthur than Charlemagne because more authors write about him. Arthur is easier to write about; he is basically

fictional and Charlemagne is real. Arthur is a hero; Charlemagne is an administrator, and an epic requires an heroic flaw. Over and over they kept returning to Arthur--the next panel on this topic should be forbidden to mention him (though then they'll start talking about "the 'A' person").

Of course, one reason that Arthur is better known and more written about is that we (don't ask me who the "we" they kept talking about are) come from an English heritage, not a French one. Someone suggested a story of Charlemagne returning as a liberator of Quebec, which led to the question (unanswered) of whether Charlemagne was more popular in French Canadian literature than in United Statesian ("American" just doesn't seem the right word here).

It was claimed that there were some interesting aspects to the Charlemagne story. For example, because the French threw out the Moors, "we" (there's that "we" again!) can drink wine and eat pork. Alternate history was certainly one of the ways discussed to bring the Charlemagne story to the speculative fiction field. Again, Arthur was fantasy, Charlemagne was real. It was eventually concluded that what Charlemagne needed now was not so much a Malory or T. H. White, but a John Boorman.

A few Charlemagne-based works were mentioned: *The Song of Roland*, Ludovico Arisota's *Orlando Furioso*, L. Sprague De Camp's *Castle of Iron*, Poul Anderson's *Three Hearts and Three Lions* Penguin Books' *Lives of Charlemagne* by Einhard & Notker. There was also something that sounded like "William Curtnose epics," but many of the people there seemed more intent on showing off their French accents than on communicating to the majority of the audience, so I'm not really sure what it was. A reference work on the Merovingians versus the Carolingians, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (Michael Baigent et al), was also cited.

(I had planned to go to the "Mac and Me: Electronic Publishing for Fans" panel, but 1) I forgot, and 2) it was in the Tara and that made it a nuisance to get to. But before this panel I was in the Green Room where Laurie was in outfit #4 and decided to go back to her room for outfit #5. Of course, that was because she discovered her daughter had thrown up on outfit #4....)

Books into Movies

Saturday, Noon

Barry B. Longyear, Scott Ciencin, Gary K. Wolf

I only caught the end of this. When asked what books the panelists wanted to see made into movies, Wolf answered, "*Dune*." Longyear mentioned two or three of his books (he seems to be one of the leaders in the new trend of plugging one's own books on every panel, and it's getting downright embarrassing). This attitude was particularly strange since he claimed he had gotten a better deal from Moscow on *Enemy Mine* than from Hollywood.

Magic and History

Saturday, 1 PM

Susan Schwartz, Bill Forstchen, Esther Friesner, Tim Powers, Melissa Scott, Judith Tarr

This started with the panelists pushing their latest books--one of them (I forget which) claimed to be a member of the "Book of the Month Club" for having a new book almost every month this year. In fact, that was a large part of the panel--when asked about anything, panelists tended to respond with, "Well, in my book *Revenge of the Sorcerers* I tried just that approach...." The first question was whether panelists use existing magical systems or make them up. Powers claims that they're all made up anyway, so changing the rules of voodoo slightly to make the story better is acceptable, for example. Tarr prefers the "magic as science" approach, which is also what Scott used in *Armor of Light*. Unfortunately, most of the rest of the panel was promotional rather than informational.

**Short Fiction: The Cutting Edge
Saturday, 2 PM**

James Patrick Kelly, John Betancourt, Anne Jordan, Charles Ryan, Sheila Williams

Little was said about short fiction; the topic was really what was the cutting edge of speculative fiction. Science fiction is seen as the battleground of the war between the English majors and the science majors. Cross-over authors have a hard time of it. Several people (included Kelly) claimed Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* was not realistically extrapolated and hence not really science fiction, but everyone seemed willing to accept Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue*, even though it was much less believable. But *Native Tongue* was published by DAW Books and was by a "science fiction" author. Another type of cross-over mentioned was the techno-thriller. And then there was cyberpunk, splatterpunk, steampunk, Blaupunkt.... Steampunk (discussed later) was described as "bringing a modern sensibility to historic events." With steampunk and other trends, it was claimed that science fiction seems to be turning backward to the past rather than forward to the future. Everyone is doing alternate history, for example. (I can't really keep up any more.) But though readers talk about cyberpunk, what editors are getting is contemporary fantasy.

This panel (and others in this room) were marred by noise from the next room--the audio system was much stronger than the partitions.

**Alternate Sexuality in Science Fiction
Saturday, 3 PM**

Joan D. Vinge, John Dumas, Delia Sherman, Gina Villa

Vinge started by asking what "alternate sexuality" is. The panelists agreed it included redefining gender roles and redefining the family and encompassed gay and lesbian sex, inter-(sapient)-species sex, and transsexualism (transsexuality?). As an example of redefining the family, one panelist mentioned Anne Rice's vampires, who form a family though not related in the traditional sense. (However, as someone said, they are related by blood!)

Sherman offered the opinion that sadists were reprehensible (I forget in what context this remark was generated), which triggered a discussion of voluntary versus involuntary "victims," and led one panelist to suggest the idea of "American Gothic" in black leather and garters. Further additions to the list of alternatives were solo sex and appliance sex ("The Brave Little Toaster gets pregnant"). Though there was some of the same tendency to equate "alternative sexual lifestyles" with "homosexuality" as at the Readercon panel, I think this panel managed to avoid sliding into that trap; whenever someone drifted that way, someone else would bring up other variations (e.g., appliance sex).

The discussion drifted into a debate on whether future societies should always be portrayed as accepting toward alternative sexualities, or at least if not accepting, then wrong in this refusal. All this smacks of putting a requirement of political correctness on authors' writings which I would think science fiction fans would be among the first to object to. Somewhere in all this discussion the question of religious attitudes toward alternative sexualities was raised and someone started talking about how if there were an Islamic future how intolerant society would be, because after all, in the past Islam was strong on forced conversions and such. I pointed out that when it came to intolerance and forced conversions, Christianity didn't have a pristine record either. Frankly I'm getting a little tired of how many people feel entitled to attack an entire religion because of the actions of some of its followers. But if you identify *their* religion with some of the more outrageous promoters of it, they get all upset. It is unfortunate that the normally tolerant science fiction community feels that Islam-bashing is quite all right. It isn't.

(As an aside, is it possible that many religions go through a "holy war" phase about 1100 to 1300 years after their inception?)

(Samuel R. Delany was scheduled to be on this panel but could not attend.)

How to Be a Better Reader

Saturday, 4 PM

Patrick Nielsen Hayden, Jim Frenkel, Evelyn Leeper, James Mann, James Morrow

By the time this panel rolled around, I was a little more calm about it, plus I had a little more time to prepare. Nielsen Hayden introduced Jim Frenkel and James Morrow, giving a couple of sentences about each of them, then turned to me and said, "I really don't know too much about you; why don't you introduce yourself?" Not cool. I probably should have mentioned that I write book reviews for *Lan's Lantern*, but being new to this I hadn't prepared a stock self-introduction. (Take this as a hint to new panelists.) When we were asked for some beginning comments on how to be a better reader, I responded that at first I was going to say one should get a strong enough lightbulb, a comfortable chair, ... but then realized that wasn't what was meant. I said what seemed the best way to be a better reader was to read better books--if you read Steven Brust's *To Reign in Hell* without having read Milton's *Paradise Lost*, it won't be nearly as meaningful. If you've never read Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, you won't see the similarities between that and H. Beam Piper's *Other Human Race*. Another panelist mentioned the alarming number of fantasy "fans" who love the "Shannara" series but have never read Tolkien. Of course, there were some who felt this was too much like insisting on "culture bites" a la "Cultural Literacy," which they seemed to scorn. While I don't think the items chosen for "Cultural Literacy" are the best possible set, I do think there is some validity to the concept. I just finished reading an article by Timothy Leary in *Mississippi Review* in which he feels obliged to add a footnote explaining who the Axis was in World War II and who the Allies were. Such a footnote would make me worry about the author, the audience, or both. But back to the issue at hand.

I got some debate when I said that if people don't start becoming better readers when they are young, they'll have great difficulty doing it later, by which I meant that if when you're in college you're still moving your lips when you read and reading very slowly, you will have a lot of trouble reading enough to read widely. Other people were promoting reading other forms of literature to learn to read better: drama, essays, poetry. Especially poetry. I'm not sure why the promotion of poetry has suddenly become a big thing at science fiction conventions. Someone mentioned Chaucer and Nielsen Hayden said that Chaucer was definitely fannish--I wonder what he means? One thing noted was that you can read for different things, e.g., you can read for ideas, you can read for writing style, you can read for story, ... and all of them require a different style of reading.

Two books were recommended: John Ciardi's *How Does a Poem Mean?* and Ezra Pound's *ABCs of Reading*. (These were also recommended at Readercon, but then many of the same people were on both panels, so that isn't surprising.)

True Covers: Truth in Packaging for Books and Magazines

Saturday, 6 PM

Ginjer Buchanan, Beth Fleisher, James Gurney, James Warhola

Buchanan started by explaining that books are scheduled two years in advance of publication. Cover conferences occur about thirteen months before publication and involve the editor who chose the book, the art editor, and marketing people. The author is not involved. The art director then talks to the artist, who draws some preliminary sketches, perhaps based on his or her own ideas, perhaps based on the art director's suggestions. S/he may or may not get a complete copy of the book. It is possible that the art director will reject all the ideas, but usually the choice of artist and job

specification avoids this. Then there is the blurb and the back-cover commentary (no one seemed to want to take responsibility for these). The panel ended up with a spirited exchange between them (the editors mostly) and the audience regarding the current practice of having books by minor-author written in the universe of MAJOR-AUTHOR. Many audience members felt that the comparative type sizes used on such covers tricked many buyers into purchasing books that they thought were by MAJOR-AUTHOR rather than minor-author. Buchanan denied this and pointed to continuing strong sales for the "Robot City" series, claiming that such deception would be noted after the first book or two and if buyers/readers objected, sales would have dropped off.

Dinner: Peking Duck House

We had quite a long wait for dinner and had to rush somewhat so that some people could get back in time for the Guest of Honor speech--which ran all of about eight minutes! This restaurant is very popular with the Boskone crowd, but someone should warn the management ahead of time--they could have used some more servers (and kitchen staff, I'm sure).

Why You Don't Want to Be an SF Writer

Sunday, Noon

James Morrow, James Patrick Kelly, Shariann Lewitt, Tim Powers, Cat Pryde

Most of the panelists began by explaining that either they weren't full-time writers or they were incredibly poor or they had someone else supporting them. Lewitt does "work for hire" (e.g., writing books in series under a house name--you didn't really think there was someone named Kenneth Robeson who wrote all those "Doc Savage" novels, did you?) Morrow depends somewhat on his wife's job. Powers took ten years to get to the stage where his writing would support him. Pryde made only \$6927.13 on writing last year.

Powers thinks books are evidence of his existence, but he likes to have written, not to write. Someone quoted Hemingway that writing is not a full-time job. They all bemoaned the fact that being a writer means they have to promote their books on all their panels (I wonder if they saw my notes?!). Kelly and others said they did enjoy the feedback on their writing they get from people at conventions. But several felt that Boskone was all politics and back-stabbing; this was clarified later to mean that the authors and editors were doing the back-stabbing, not the convention organizers. The need to work at conventions (by meeting with editors and such) took away a lot of the pleasure authors might have attending them. Powers in particular avoids working at conventions and self-promotion in general. He explained that if by holding a book-signing in a local store he managed to sell fifty more hard-cover books than he would otherwise, he was still only getting \$50 for having to dress up and spend an afternoon sitting around in a store. If he sells fifty more paperbacks, he doesn't even make back bus fare.

As for the adulation of their fans, those who are pursued by fans hate it and those who are not pursued by fans hate that. James Patrick Kelly made a point of saying that he has never had sex at a convention (I think several audience members wondered if that was a challenge). There was a lot of discussion about the wearing of a ribbon--people look at the ribbon, then peer at the badge. If you're lucky they then say something to you (preferably not "Are you anybody?"); if you're not, they give you this look like, "I've never heard of you," and walk away.

Steam Punk and Post Steam Punk

Sunday, 1 PM

Ginjer Buchanan, Esther Friesner, Tim Powers, Brian Thomsen

"Steampunk" was apparently a term coined to cover K. W. Jeter's *Infernal Devices*, Tim Powers' *Anubis Gates*, and James Blaylock's *Homunculus*. Three novels do not, however, a genre make. Even with the expected addition of William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's *Difference Engine*, this seems like a skimpy category.

The characteristics given (none seems precise enough to be called a definition) include "a throwback to science fiction's origins," pseudo-science with no explanation (as in Shelley or Verne), Victorian settings with people "with modern sensibilities," and so forth. Jeter's *Morlock Night* was also mentioned, as was *The Wild Wild West*. I would suggest such works as *Dr. Who & the Talons of Weng-Chiang* and some of the Sherlock Holmes pastiches which had him defeating mad scientists with "earthquake machines" and the like. Kipling's "The Eye of Allah" was cited as perhaps the earliest example of this sort of work, though certainly not "steampunk."

Is steampunk science fiction or fantasy? I suggested it was science fantasy, which seemed to satisfy most of the panel.

Powers talked about the need to research this sort of work thoroughly. If he has Byron saying something, he doesn't need to prove that Byron said it, but he'd better be sure no one could prove Byron *didn't* say it. He also feels that people become harder to understand the further back in history you go and claimed that people before 1500 are totally alien to us. Hence when authors write about them they tend to adapt them to modern audiences much as Mexican food is adapted to United Statesian tastes in "Mexican" restaurants in this country. As an example of how alien these people were, he told of an instrument he found described in an account of the time, said instrument being used to push the hands of people who were being boiled in oil away from the edge of the pot. I pointed out that this was not so alien, since if one went back only 45 years, one could find similar items in the death camps of Europe. (For that matter, one can probably find them in the offices of the secret police in many countries today.) If you think all this sort of thing went out hundreds of years ago, it's too easy to say, "Look at how inhuman they were and how much better we are," instead of looking at how inhuman we *still* are.

This being at the end of the panel, there wasn't any time to follow up on it. I suspect that cyberpunk, splatterpunk, steampunk, and all the other punks will eventually merge into their parent genres: science fiction, horror, science fantasy. These days movements are in, and anyone who finds similarities in two novels declares a movement. I'm surprised there isn't "space-elevator-punk" based on Arthur C. Clarke's *Fountains of Paradise* and Charles W. Sheffield's *Web Between the Worlds*.

I finally figured out what it is about Friesner on a panel that annoys me. She has this way of talking in which at the end of a sentence she drops her voice and starts ... talking ... very ... slowly ... as ... if ... revealing ... a ... very ... big ... secret. Arrgghh! (Another trait that she and many other panelists have these days if that they seem to go into these "wouldn't it be neat if..." modes which would be great were it not for the fact that the answer is often, "No.")

SF Mysteries
Sunday, 2 PM
Rich Bowker, Scott Ciencin, Beth Meacham, Andi Shechter

The panelists began by stating what has been observed before: that it is difficult to write a traditional "puzzle" mystery in the science fiction genre. In a traditional mystery, the reader must have all the clues necessary to solve the mystery, yet in a science fiction milieu there is often unexpected technology, different mores, etc. I mean, if it turns out that the butler did it by teleporting in from Venus and the detective solves this because the butler left because epsilon traces in the teleportation chamber and these epsilon traces could only have originated on Venus.... Well, you get the idea. The easiest way to combine the two genres is with a minimal science fiction background and a mystery

plot (hardly anyone does a minimal mystery background with a science fiction plot--Sam Spade meets alien invaders).

And then followed the usual complaints about publishing/marketing. Where should such cross-over novels be shelved? Apparently you can't convince chains to shelve them in *both* "Mysteries" and "Science Fiction/Fantasy." Of the books listed below, most were filed in the "Science Fiction/Fantasy"; but the John Dickson Carr, Dickinson's *King & Joker*, the Hjortsberg, the Leonard, and the MacLeod were in "Mysteries"; and the Deighton was in "Fiction." Go figure.

There was then the obligatory listing of books and authors: Isaac Asimov's robot mysteries; Alfred Bester's *The Demolished Man*; George Chesbro's *The Beasts of Valhalla* and Mongo mysteries; Bowker's *Dover Beach* (post-holocaust) and *Marlboro Street*; various works by John Dickson Carr; Glen Cook's *Sweet Silver Blues*, *Bitter Gold Hearts*, and *Cold Copper Tears*; Len Deighton's *SS-GB* (alternate history); Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (hard-boiled detective); Peter Dickinson's *Green Gene* and *King & Joker* (the latter alternate history); George Alec Effinger's *When Gravity Fails* (cyberpunk); Randall Garrett's Lord D'Arcy stories (science fantasy/alternate history); Joe Haldeman's *Tool of the Trade*; various works by Barbara Hambly; William Hjortsberg's *Falling Angel*; Lee Killough's *Deadly Silents* and other police procedurals; Elmore Leonard's *The Touch*; Richard Lupoff's *Comic Book Killer*; Charlotte MacLeod's *Curse of the Giant Hogweed*; Larry Niven's "The Long Arm of Gil Hamilton," various works by Mike Resnick; Wilson Tucker's *The Lincoln Hunters*; Andrew Vachss' *Flood*, *Strega*, and *Blue Belle* (mainstream but listed as being of interest to science fiction fans); Jack Vance's "Demon Princes" series; Kate Wilhelm's *The Dark Door* and *Safe House* (or possible *Super House*--the panelist wasn't too sure of the title and it isn't listed in *Books in Print*); and Gary L. Wolf's *Who Censored Roger Rabbit?*.

Gripe Session Sunday, 4 PM

The gripe session was very low-key, with most of the gripes being of the administrative level (opening registration before the dealers needed to set up, providing microphones, etc.). There was little opposition to the "scale-down" policy that caused such an uproar last year. One fan who objected to it said he wasn't coming back next year, which just about everyone applauded.

Miscellaneous

The various upcoming worldcons had tables, so I could sign up for Confiction without having to send my check registered mail. (Yes, apparently you can send checks to the American agent--this was never made clear. Also apparently you can send United States checks to Holland.)

Summary

As I have said, it wasn't perfect. But it was good enough that we'll be back next year for Boskone 27 (February 16-18, 1990; Guest of Honor Glen Cook). Given that it's back on President's Day weekend opposite the new Boston convention Arisia, and the Boskone after a Boston worldcon, I expect it will be smaller still, perhaps under 1000. It will be interesting to see how that works out.

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