

Scottish village where his company wants to build a refinery. And the village is only too happy to sell out ... well, sort of. L_o_c_a_l_H_e_r_o is a whimsical and well-observed comedy.

THE MT VOID

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C_o_m_f_o_r_t_a_n_d_J_o_y is about a popular Glasgow disk jockey going through mid-life crisis when his girlfriend leaves him. ("She left the washing machine. D'ya think that's a good sign?") Then suddenly his mind is taken off his problems as he is plunged into the middle of a G_o_d_f_a_t_h_e_r-style gang war over ice cream. Peculiar and often very funny.

2. The Old Bridge public library is sponsoring a discussion group on Walter Miller's C_a_n_t_i_c_l_e_f_o_r_L_e_i_b_o_w_i_t_z at 8PM Wednesday February 21. Contact me or them (679-5622) if you need further information.

Mark Leeper
MT 3D-441 957-5619
...mtgzx!leeper

Two men look out through the same bars;
one sees mud, and one the stars.

-- Oscar Wilde

MY 10 FAVORITE FILMS OF 1989
A film article by Mark R. Leeper
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1. THE ABYSS -- A science fiction and adventure film that just misses a +4 rating. Alistair-MacLean-type action combines with 2001-type vision to make a whale of a film that blows B_a_t_m_a_n right out of the water. Rating: high +3. If only it had more interesting science fiction ideas. Rumor has it that there is a lot more to the film that will be coming out on cassette, but which was deleted from the theatrical release so as not to have a film too long. Under-appreciated, this film by itself advanced the science of undersea exploration. The face masks designed to allow the camera to see who was behind them actually were much preferred by divers over standard designs for the increased vision.
2. FIELD OF DREAMS -- A complex and witty fantasy film that features great performances by James Earl Jones and Kevin Costner. Even if you do not like our national pastime, this film about ghosts of the White Sox and a quest is a solidly entertaining fantasy.

Rating: low +3.

3. BORN ON THE FOURTH OF JULY -- The true story of Ron Kovic who started a gung-ho super-patriot and remained so even after the Vietnam war left him a paraplegic. But eventually he turns into an anti-war activist. The film is done very realistically but it seemed Kovic didn't have very good reasons for taking either point of view. The sequence of his trip to Mexico could have been trimmed down, but whatever your feelings about Kovic this is a good film. Rating: low +3.
4. PARENTHOOD -- Several stories about styles of parenting are a single story. Because each story is on different approaches to raising children, the whole is better than the sum of its parts. Diane Wiest gives a stand-out performance. Rating: low +3.
5. THE BEAR -- A simple and pure and wonderful little film about a short period in the life of a young bear. It is too short at 90 minutes, particularly because it feels much shorter. Those "hammy" animal sounds are the real thing, by the way. A few of the scenes are among some of the most moving moments of film this year. Rating: low +3.
6. ROGER & ME -- A biting documentary about the destruction GM does by closing plants in Flint, Michigan. It is razor-sharp and bitter. Moore's film is a compilation of footage he took and pieces from stock footage, documentaries, television, etc. Moore rarely has to use narration to tell the audience the point of a sequence; the point is clear from the footage he chooses. The

film has a very effective documentary style. Rating: high +2.

7. BLAZE -- Not as well-hyped as other films this holiday season, B_l_a_z_e is still a front-runner for plaudits with a solid performance by Lolita Davidovitch managing to steal the show from Paul Newman. Rating: high +2.
8. INDIANA JONES AND THE LAST CRUSADE -- Forget that Indian thing. This is the *real*_R_a_i_d_e_r_s_o_f_t_h_e_L_o_s_t_A_r_k_I_I. Slightly more realistic than R_a_i_d_e_r_s, a little more concentration on character,

and less on chases, this is a solid action adventure film putting the series back on track. George Lucas needs a hit and for the first time since R_e_t_u_r_n_o_f_t_h_e_J_e_d_i he deserves one. Rating: high +2.

9. DO THE RIGHT THING -- With one film Spike Lee goes from being a one-film director to being a major Hollywood talent. This is a realistic film of insight, intelligence, and even some wit, but no easy answers. [Minor spoiler follows.] A likable "street film" turns into A_n_a_t_o_m_y_o_f_a_R_a_c_e_R_i_o_t. Rating: high +2.

10. GLORY -- Excellent Civil War film of the first black regiment and the prejudice they faced. At times it seems a little over-idealized, but no more so than most films about World War II. Realistically photographed by Freddie Francis and well acted, particularly by Morgan Freeman. Rating: +2. This film is tied with H_e_n_r_y_V as the film people are most likely to still be watching in the year 2000.

HENRY V

A film review by Mark R. Leeper

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Capsule review: Kenneth Branagh shows that there is more than one way to play Henry, though his way does not always seem convincing. Visually the film is splendid.
Rating: +2.

The advantage of the longbow over its shorter predecessors is, of course, range. It is entirely feasible to create a shower of falling arrows that your enemy must enter before he can even come near you, provided you have brought enough arrows along. This is p_r_o_b_a_b_l_y the reason that the English at the Battle of Agincourt were able to kill what is quoted as ten thousand French while losing only 29 of their own numbers. Bill Shakespeare's script for the current H_e_n_r_y_V tends really to downplay the technological advantage the English had at the battle, implying the imbalance in casualty figures can be attributed instead to the fact that Old Hank really knew how to give one heck of a good pep-talk. Well, song-writers tend to glorify song-writers, and film-makers like to make films about film-makers, so it isn't surprising that Shakespeare's stuff tends to glorify wordsmiths. Even though the actual casualty numbers were probably closer to 200 and five thousand, Shakespeare still seems to over-rate Henry's speech-making.

That technical issue aside, how is H_e_n_r_y_V anyway? I do not claim to be a judge of Shakespearean acting and presumably the main virtue of this film is Branagh's much-vaunted interpretation of Henry. I can tell you that in the early scenes he delivers his lines with very little expression at all. I am sure this is intentional, but after a supremely dramatic entrance he strikes the viewer as being a sort of a cold fish. As time goes by he puts more emphasis in his words, and by the love scenes at the end he seems not just human but positively likable. One gets the impression that Henry was a wild teenager who rises to his office as king while we watch. Still Branagh seems only a good actor who has the audacity to cast himself in a great role. He may become a Rupert Pupkin of Shakespearean actors.

This is a Shakespeare for the late Twentieth Century, with far more dramatic visual images than in previous versions. Notable particularly are Henry's entrance and a scene of Henry on a rearing steed at "the breach," back-lighted by fire. The battle scenes are beautifully filmed, somewhat in the style of E_x_c_a_l_l_i_b_u_r. Ironically, the narrator tells the audience to work hard to picture the scene while the audience have only to sit back and let it flow over them.

While they did not remove the line to tell the audience to work to visualize the scene, some liberties were taken. Flashback scenes were added to show Henry's past with Falstaff. Presumably Branagh undertook

to write these himself in a Shakespearean style. There was a deletion to references to the English killing French prisoners which probably would not play as well on modern audiences as it did in Shakespeare's time.

This is a memorable film and probably one that will be playing on PBS in 2010 when most of the rest of this year's films are forgotten. My rating is a +2 on the -4 to +4 scale.

LES MISE'RABLES by Victor Hugo
Signet, 1987 (1862c), ISBN 0-451-52082-3, \$5.95.
A book review by Mark R. Leeper
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As a boy I used to watch a program called "The G. E. College Bowl," which was basically a quiz show with teams from American colleges. It may well have had the most interesting questions of any quiz show I have ever watched. One that stuck out in my mind at the time was "What novel is over 1400 pages and includes extended essays on ...?" He must have listed about four subjects of which I remembered only "the Battle of Waterloo" and "the sewers of Paris." The answer was L_e_s_M_i_s_e'_r_a_b_l_e_s by Victor Hugo. I think I had seen the film with Frederic March and Charles Laughton. We had read a short story in school called "The Bishop's Candlesticks" which we were told was actually an excerpt from L_e_s_M_i_s_e'_r_a_b_l_e_s. Being used to 200-page novels I could not imagine how someone could sit down and write a novel so long it required essays on subjects such as the sewers of Paris.

More recently my father much enjoyed the Royal Shakespeare production based on the book and sent me a tape of the music. I did like the music, but was curious what the characters were talking about. I wanted to know the story. So it was that I started the 1463-page unabridged edition.

My initial impression that here is a writer who must have been paid

by the word may have been correct (or by the newspaper installment) , but also this is a story well worth the telling and the length is welcome if for no other reason than to extend the reading time. This is a novel I enjoyed reading, not just having read. The more pages, the more reading.

I would hope it would not be necessary to tell the reader the basic story, but to outline the first third in a little more detail than would be common knowledge: Jean Valjean as a young man steals a loaf of bread and is sentenced to prison. On his release he is a desperate man whom nobody will help. When a good bishop gives him lodging for the night, he steals from the bishop. He is caught by the police, but the bishop lies to the police to protect Valjean. The bishop then tells Valjean to return to virtue. Valjean steals once more, but finds he now cannot steal without deep remorse for betraying the bishop, so through necessity devotes his life to virtue. Meanwhile the police want him for this last crime and for not showing the yellow passport that tells people he was a convict.

He builds a new identity for himself devoted to helping others. He becomes mayor of a town and there meets Fantine, who has given all she has to support her illegitimate daughter Cosette, who is being raised in virtual slavery by the blood-sucking The'nardier family with whom Fantine

foolishly entrusted Cosette. To pay the The 'nardiers, the once beautiful Fantine has had to sell her jewelry, her hair, and her eye teeth, and finally turn to prostitution. Valjean agrees to rescue Cosette. Unfortunately, at this point the police arrest a man wrongly identified as Valjean and the real Valjean must turn himself over to the police to save the innocent man. In doing so he fails to restore Cosette to the now dying Fantine. The real Valjean is sent back to prison, but escapes to a life of trying to raise Cosette as a father and evade the wily police inspector Javert. This is all told in just the early part of this novel, against the background of France in the turmoil of the Restoration monarchy of Louis Philippe.

Now, are the essays really there? Yes, they certainly are. There is a 58-page essay in the chapter on "Waterloo"; only the last page actually advances the plot. The rest is just there for texture. Hugo spends twenty-one pages on the history and philosophy of the sewers of

Paris and whether their contents can be turned to profit for the state. You will also find a history of convents and a discussion of the argot of the criminal classes. I do not begrudge Hugo the self-indulgence of these digressions; though these essays are of spotty interest, they help to put the novel into an historical context.

The subject of LesMise'rable is human injustice. Perhaps part of the reason for the length of this novel is simply to space out the injustices so that it is not so much a tear-jerker or at least a soap opera. I will say it is an emotional novel, but almost purely by plot. We are rarely actually told anyone is unhappy or told the emotional state at all. Usually, the characters are told very matter-of-factly. Through most of the book Hugo does not describe what his characters are feeling. At one place in the play Jean Valjean protests that he stole only a loaf of bread and tells Javert that he is the stronger of the two men. The Valjean of the book would never boast or ask for sympathy or threaten. His style is to get along with people. When he cannot evade Javert he allows himself meekly to be arrested and then escapes during an opportunity presented to him when saving another man's life. Part of the idea is that to a man who is virtuous enough, God will provide opportunities.

Hugo describes a world in which one is not really punished for bad deeds oneself, others are. Good deeds are almost always rewarded but bad deeds result only in great misery for others. Those who feel no remorse and are only callous toward the misery of others seem to go unpunished. To some extent that makes it a tear-jerker and I have to say it is the only book I have ever read that genuinely did bring a tear to my eye. (I will spare you a description of which scene it was.) But I consider that no small feat in a book that so avoids letting you know what the characters are feeling and which concentrates only on what they are doing.

The Wilbur/Fahnestock/MacAfee translation is actually fairly readable, an absolute necessity in a book of this length. Occasionally

they carry across Hugo's long sentences, which tend to obscure the material. Page 834 has a sentence 144 words long talking about "The blind clairvoyance of the revolution"--whatever that is. That sort of thing tends to slow the reading temporarily, but the pace soon picks up

again. One device Hugo used both here and in T_h_e_H_u_n_c_h_b_a_c_k_o_f
N_o_t_r_e
D_a_m is that he will introduce a character, talk about the character for
great length--in L_e_s_M_i_s_e'_r_a_b_l_e_s perhaps better than a hundred pages--
and
then tell you that this is in fact one of the major characters from
earlier in the novel, but under a different name. Usually you can tell
whom the character was, but occasionally it leads to confusion.

But in short, if you want (as the song says) to "find a good book-
-to live in," L_e_s_M_i_s_e'_r_a_b_l_e_s is one of the best books for escape I have
read over the past decade. I would probably say I consider it one of
the "great books."

MY LEFT FOOT

A film review by Mark R. Leeper

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Capsule review: Upbeat but not saccharine tale of Christy Brown. Paralyzed with cerebral palsy so that he has control only over one foot, he becomes an artist and an author. The film perhaps over-emphasizes his romantic life over other aspects that could be more interesting, but it is a superb performance. Rating: +2.

Christy Brown was born with cerebral palsy to a poor Dublin family. Paralyzed so that he has control only over one foot, he used that foot to write and paint, distinguishing himself in both until his death in 1981. This is his story from birth to his late thirties, told as a series of flashbacks as he thinks about his life one afternoon. This is not just his biography, but also a portrait of living conditions for the poor in Dublin in the 1930s and 1940s. We see not just his life but also his times. His father was a heavy drinker and a bully. Some of the early scenes of Brown as a child trapped in this household and in a body he cannot operate have a nightmarish quality most fictional horror films cannot approach. We cower with a terrified Christy when his father goes on drunken rampages. People call him an idiot to his face and he has no way to respond or prove them wrong. We struggle with Christy the first time he tries to communicate, scratching on the floor with a piece of chalk between his toes, answering an arithmetic problem that his father had missed a few minutes before. Like many people with communications disabilities, he is assumed to be profoundly retarded when in fact he has a very quick mind.

This sort of film could easily have become sentimental inspirational muck. In fact, it has more of the feel of Daniel Keyes's

_ F _ l _ o _ w _ e _ r _ s _ f _ o _ r _ A _ l _ g _ e _ r _ n _ o _ n. As Christy raises himself, his world perspective

changes. At times he is not very likable and often he is manipulative.

Where the story falls short of _ F _ l _ o _ w _ e _ r _ s _ f _ o _ r _ A _ l _ g _ e _ r _ n _ o _ n is that it lacks the

drama of the fall or that book's awe at intellectual achievement. And

like the aborted stage version of _ F _ l _ o _ w _ e _ r _ s _ f _ o _ r _ A _ l _ g _ e _ r _ n _ o _ n, the peak of

Christy Brown's achievement is that he "gets the girl," nothing more profound. In spite of the film's apparent emphasis on the importance of

Christy's love life, it is one of the better portraits of the life of the handicapped on film.

Daniel Day Lewis is good as the adult Christy, as has been noted by other reviewers. I have seen little credit given, however, to what I consider even better performances by Ray McAnally as Christy's swaggering, ruffian father and especially by Hugh O'Connor as the young Christy. At age 13, O'Connor turns in the best performance in a well-acted film. The screenplay was written by Shane Cunningham and the director, Jim Sheridan. My rating is a +2 on the -4 to +4 scale.