

humor. That is as may be, but the story was not an example of my humor. It was actually true. I'm not T h e N a t i o n a l I n q u i r e r. I don't make the news; I just report it.

THE MT VOID

Page 2

Now I have another one for you from the amazing worlds of science and politics. This one comes from the W a s h i n g t o n P o s t of June 30, 1991, page A23. It seems that the country of Columbia has decided that the time has come to modernize. The country has a reputation for being a peanut-whistle, slap-dash, two-for-a-nickel sort of place. But not any more, by God! Everything is going to be 21st Century plus. They wanted to draw up a new constitution with new judicial, political, and economic structures. Boy, were they going to show the world. And to top it all off, they were going to store it i n a c o m p u t e r! Wow.

But this material was highly sensitive. Who can you trust not to tamper with the material and not to leak the contents. Family! It just so happened that one of the framing committee had a nephew who was a big computer technician. He could be trusted. He was family. And he had had a whole year of computer correspondence school so he h a d to be qualified. Right? So you know what happened next? No? Well, neither do I. Nor does the nephew. All that is known is that one instant Columbia was a major South American country with a new constitution. The next instant it wasn't. It just had a useless diskette. I think you could call this the "oops" heard around the world.

"Well, anybody could have erased his country's constitution. Nobody's perfect!" That's what he probably said. What's that you say? Backup? Well, yes, they did have some backup of sorts. At least they had pieces of paper in wastebaskets. A high but not very happy source said, "We literally have people going through trash cans looking for scraps of paper." Even if they could reconstruct the constitution, it might not do them any good. The portion lost was the result of three days of crucial debate and compromise. If you can't prove that this is the correct version of the constitution, nobody is going to ratify it. They are probably just going to have to start those three days over. Maybe they

should write it with a quill pen on parchment. In two hundred years, who is going to want to frame an authentic-looking reproduction of a diskette.

2. Re the reviews last week of action heroines: Frank Leisti points out that Eddie Murphy, not Richard Pryor, is the star of 4_8_H_o_u_r_s. [-ecl]

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

Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity.

-- Horace Mann

STRANGE MONSTERS OF THE RECENT PAST by Howard Waldrop
Ace, 1991, ISBN 0-441-16069-7, \$3.95.
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper
Copyright 1991 Evelyn C. Leeper

Six months ago I reviewed S_t_r_a_n_g_e_T_h_i_n_g_s_i_n_C_l_o_s_e_U_p, a British edition which combined H_o_w_a_r_d_W_h_o? (Doubleday, 1986) and A_l_l_A_b_o_u_t_S_t_r_a_n_g_e_M_o_n_s_t_e_r_s_o_f_t_h_e_R_e_c_e_n_t_P_a_s_t (Ursus Imprints, 1987). This (American) volume contains the seven stories (and the foreword by Lewis Shiner) that made up A_l_l_A_b_o_u_t_S_t_r_a_n_g_e_M_o_n_s_t_e_r_s_o_f_t_h_e_R_e_c_e_n_t

P_a_s_t, as

well as "A Dozen Tough Jobs," a novella originally published in novel form (Zeising, 1989). As best I can tell, publishers do this to drive readers and collectors crazy.

(I will review "A Dozen Tough Jobs" first, then the stories from A_l_l_A_b_o_u_t_S_t_r_a_n_g_e_M_o_n_s_t_e_r_s_o_f_t_h_e_R_e_c_e_n_t_P_a_s_t. If my comments on the seven stories from that other earlier collection seem familiar, it's because they are basically what I said about the stories six months ago.

If you've read that review, you can skip them.)

"A Dozen Tough Jobs" is basically a retelling of the Labors of Hercules. This would be a bit of a spoiler, except that everything you have ever read about this novella tells you that. Now this way you can go and read up on the source material before you read the novella. I can understand why Waldrop is not selling as much as some other authors--most authors make their references to McDonald's and Madonna, while Waldrop makes his to Anatolia and Agamemnon. He does, however, mix his metaphors by throwing in Egyptian references as well as Greek (yes, I know the Greeks ruled Egypt for a while, but not during the periods he is referencing). If you like Greek mythology (and are up on your references), you will love this story. If you don't know Mercury from Medusa, you will probably go away from this story asking what the fuss is about. What this means, of course, is that this piece may be more of a curiosity piece a la David Gerrold's F_l_y_i_n_g_S_o_r_c_e_r_e_s than a piece of great literature. But what the heck, everyone's entitled to little fun. (And what I want to know is when the "Annotated Dozen Tough Jobs" is going to come out!)

"All About Strange Monsters of the Recent Past" is an unabashed copy of the monster films of the 1950s--all of them. To tell more would be to spoil many of the surprises.

"Helpless, Helpless" is an updating of the plague to our modern, mechanized, computerized society. I think Waldrop overlooks (or glosses) a lot of what would happen in a mechanical plague, and find his ending somewhat overly rosy. Perhaps because of this, this story seems a trifle on the Luddite side--and Waldrop admits to not owning a word processor, or even an electric typewriter.

Even Waldrop acknowledges "Fair Game" may represent some ultimate minimalist approach to literary criticism, or at least that's how I read his introductory comments. Certainly no one can go further in this direction than he does with Hemingway in this story.

It has been said that art imitates life. It has also been said that life imitates art. One of these--perhaps both--would seem to be the case in "What makes Hieronymous Run?" If you haven't studied or at

least been exposed to the works of Hieronymous Bosch or Peter Brueghel the Elder, this story probably won't make much sense. If you have, this will open a whole new way of looking at them. (I had originally suggested an anthology of stories based on works of art, along with the art that inspired them, mentioning W. H. Auden's "Muse'e de Beaux Arts" and Hal Clement's O_c_e_a_n_o_n_T_o_p. It turns out Ian Watson has collected an anthology P_i_c_t_u_r_e_s_a_t_a_n_E_x_h_i_b_i_t_i_o_n which does just that. Unfortunately, the only copy I've seen so far was priced at more than I wanted to pay, so I can't report on its contents.) There is an undercurrent in this story that ties into one that other Waldrop stories display: the idea that maybe our view of history is totally out of whack with "reality" (whatever that is).

"The Lions Are Asleep This Night" is a more conventional alternate history, this one set in Africa. It predates Robert Silverberg's "Lion Time in Timbuktu" but I doubt there is any connection. Maybe it's just time for more science fiction with African themes and settings--Mike Resnick is making quite a name for himself with his Kirinyaga series set in a future recreation of pre-colonial Kenya and his novel I_v_o_r_y. As usual, though, Waldrop's entry in this African renaissance is different, more subtle--so subtle, in fact, that Ellen Datlow insisted that he had to rewrite it to explain more to an audience who didn't know history. Even so, I think it still assumes a lot on the part of the reader.

"Flying Saucer Rock and Roll" is a story that I failed to appreciate due to my ignorance of rock and roll music and history. But since I am probably exceptional in the extent of my ignorance, you may enjoy it more. Certainly Waldrop's need to substitute phonemes for real rock lyrics (which would have cost a fortune in royalties) didn't help matters.

The final story of this set, "He-We-Await" is another story set in Africa (it is, you know). This one shows some influence from the horror films of the 1930s--the Mummy series in particular. Or maybe it's just the similarity of theme, and I'm applying Waldrop's penchant for pop culture to my reading of it. At any rate, this story ends the set on a suitably apocalyptic note.

As you might have suspected from the fact that I bought a whole book just for one Waldrop novella, I like Waldrop's writing and I recommend this book. But he's difficult to review because you can't group Waldrop's stories into categories and discuss them in bunches. Each one is an individual and insists on being treated as one. Now that these are available in a relatively easy-to-find edition, I suggest you go out and find it.

THE ICICLE THIEF
A film review by Mark R. Leeper
Copyright 1991 Mark R. Leeper

Capsule review: A satire on how films are treated on television becomes a weird fantasy, not totally original but surprisingly creative. Rating: high +1 (-4 to +4). (Note: heavy spoilers follow the first paragraph.)

Italian actor, screenwriter, and director Maurizio Nichetti is probably more recognizable by sight than by name to most American audiences. Nichetti plays a little artists with a big (false) moustache in the international hit A l l e g r o N o n T r o p p o. That film was directed by Bruno Bozetto, but now Nichetti is very much an a u t e u r, writing and directing T h e I c i c l e T h i e f in which he himself plays the two main roles. The subject of the film, at least for a while, is what commercial television does to a film. The title is a reference to Vittorio De Sica's B i c y c l e T h i e f with part missing, just as films are shown on television with part missing. The title, of course, works only once it has been translated into English, indicating the film is aimed for an international market, which indeed it has gotten. As the film opens, Nichetti, playing himself, arrives at a television station to host his own film, T h e I c i c l e T h i e f. We see the chaos at the station, we see a typical family watching the film, and in black and white we see the film itself. What the television station does to the film is the springboard (but only a springboard) for the pandemonium that is to follow. This is an innovative and at times very funny film. I rate it a high +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

HEAVY SPOILERS TO FOLLOW

While it is not entirely a new idea, Nichetti very cleverly mixes the three levels of the film with a fourth level, the commercials. At one time it was very common to have cross-over elements between the text of a radio or television play and the commercials. The FCC decided this was a deceptive practice and made it illegal, though radio disk jockeys commonly violate the rule. There have been many times when usually disjoint planes such as audience and actors interact in live plays and in fantasy films such as T h e P u r p l e R o s e o f C a i r o. In this case of the film characters, the director, the people in the commercials, and the audience, five of the six pairings of planes do take place. Characters from the film at some point find themselves in commercials, talking to the director, and even once looking out from the television to see what the audience is doing. The missing pairing is that at no point does there seem to be any sort of unexpected meeting between the audience and the characters in the commercials.

The use of color is singularly impressive, perhaps more so than the script itself. This is true not just in the amazing scene in which a scantily-clad commercial actress breaks into the film world and has her color wiped off by Antonio as he dries her off. There is also use of subtle color shifts throughout the black-and-white sequences to simulate the variable film stock available in post-war Italy when _ T_ h_ e_ B_ i_ c_ y_ c_ l_ e_
_ T_ h_ i_ e_ f was made.

Where Nichetti falls down most is in his acting of Antonio, the poor laborer in the internal film. Had Nichetti captured some of the tragic desperation of Lamberto Maggiorani's performance in _ T_ h_ e_ B_ i_ c_ y_ c_ l_ e_
_ T_ h_ i_ e_ f, it would have strengthened the humor by contrast. It would also have demonstrated some depth in Nichetti's acting ability. He may have felt such a somber note had no place in a light comedy, but if so, it was a serious lack of vision. His failure to put any meat in his performance of Antonio is the weakest point of an otherwise creative film.

TRULY, MADLY, DEEPLY
A film review by Mark R. Leeper
Copyright 1991 Mark R. Leeper

Capsule review: Nina is slowly disintegrating after the death of her lover. Then he returns as a ghost, and she must decide what her new relationship will be with him. Slow and overly drawn-out at times but watchable.
Rating: 0 (-4 to +4).

(Contains minor spoilers important to explaining the premise.)

A perennial fantasy film subject is that of ghosts coming back to affect the lives of the living. I don't mean the horrific approach of

T_h_e_U_n_i_n_v_i_t_e_d_T_h_e_H_a_u_n_t_i_n_g_,
T_h_e_L_e_g_e_n_d_o_f_H_e_l_l_H_o_u_s_e. The films I
am talking about have spirits walking among us relatively benignly.

T_o_p_p_e_risagoodexample;sois B_e_e_t_l_e_j_u_i_c_e and
D_o_n_a_F_l_o_r's T_w_o
H_u_s_b_a_n_d_s. The success of G_h_o_s_t will probably spawn several more
examples in the next year or two. However, because of timing it seems
likely we can ascribe to coincidence the similarities between G_h_o_s_t
the BBC film T_r_u_l_y, M_a_d_l_y, D_e_e_p_l_y, though in some ways the
two are quite

similar.

Jamie (played by Alan Rickman) has been dead for a while now, but Nina (played by Juliet Stevenson) refuses to close that chapter in her life and get on with the business of living. She imagines Jamie is still around giving her advice. Nina sleepwalks through a life that is shattered and crumbles more day by day. Then a spectral Jamie does return and takes up residence as Nina's secret live-in (if "live" is the right word) lover. He explains his presence by quoting Dylan Thomas saying, "And death shall have no dominion."

If the plot of T_r_u_l_y, M_a_d_l_y, D_e_e_p_l_y resembles that of G_h_o_s_t, in style the two are very different. There is a lot that G_h_o_s_t tries to do that T_r_u_l_y, M_a_d_l_y, D_e_e_p_l_y does not. The British film is far more sad, slow, and introspective. G_h_o_s_t throws in a major sub-plot of a crime story; it has a comedy sub-plot with Whoopi Goldberg; it stops and closely examines just what powers a ghost would and would not have. It also has its sad and introspective moments, but they do not last too long. To pack so much into a film may be of dubious value, but it is all there. T_r_u_l_y, M_a_d_l_y, D_e_e_p_l_y clearly has different priorities and very different pacing. It takes its time to build Nina's character, but it glosses over the metaphysics and there seem to be notable inconsistencies in the nature of ghosts (e.g., at times the ghosts seem to take care that they cannot be overheard; at other times it does not seem to bother them). There is some whimsy, some warm comedy, and one character who is well-observed, but overall this is a rather slight film and a disappointment. I would give it a 0 on the -4 to +4 scale.

UNAUTHORIZED AMERICA by Vince Staten
Harper & Row, 1991, ISBN 0-06-096514-2, \$9.95.
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper
Copyright 1991 Evelyn C. Leeper

This book is subtitled "A Travel Guide to Places the Chamber of

Commerce Won't Tell You About," and in general, that's true. I'm reasonably sure that the Chamber of Commerce doesn't advertise the spot where Jayne Mansfield was killed in a car crash--for one thing, it's probably not in any town, let alone one large enough to have a Chamber of Commerce. On the other hand, the spot where Martin Luther King was assassinated probably is advertised by the Memphis Chamber of Commerce--after all, the Lorraine Motel has been turned into a King Museum.

You can find out where famous movie stars got into fist fights, where politicians (and evangelists) met their downfall, where Elvis has been spotted (seems to me that would take a whole book of its own!), and even where there was a gun battle with aliens from outer space. Some of the sites, as you can tell, are less than thoroughly authenticated, but then Mark and I frequently go see sites of even less authenticity ("This is where they were digging the Underground in Y_e_a_r_s_t_o E_a_r_t_h when they dug up the spaceship") and 221B Baker Street is still doing a land-office business, even though it's a banking company rather than the residence of Sherlock Holmes.

This book also has something that many books of this sort lack--an index. In fact, it has three: by person, by subject, and by location. For those who want to see the sites they happen to be near, rather than those who plan their whole vacation around, say, the Stripper Museum in Helendale, California, having an index by location is a real bonus. So when I'm in Chicago next, I know just where to find Al Capone's grave and the site of John Dillinger's ambush, not to mention the site of the St. Valentine's Day Massacre. (Of course, there is a company that runs gangster tours of Chicago--much to the dismay of the Chamber of Commerce, I might add, which only serves to validate the subtitle of this book.)

Oh, and of course I checked for the attractions closest to home. New Jersey has the "Lean on Me" high school, the birthplace of duct tape (no tours, though there is a factory in North Carolina that offers tours), the "Blind Faith" murder site, the Jersey Devil, Mike Tyson's mansion, Jimmy Hoffa's grave (okay, so this is still in dispute), where Jackie Wilson had a heart attack, where condoms are made (sorry, no tours), and toxic waste beaches. Maybe I'll pass.