

2. It is generally acknowledged that my taste in films is bad and certainly not to be trusted. It seems to be generally acknowledged among the fans that the worst of the "Star Trek" movies is S t a r T r e k V, and most commonly what is thought to be the best of the films is S t a r T r e k I I. In my typical bass-ackward fashion I would

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say just the reverse. I would say that in spite of about six embarrassingly stupid scenes the most interesting of the "Star Trek" films, the one with the most engaging ideas, is S t a r T r e k V. At some point I should explain what I like so much about S t a r T r e k V and what I consider so important that it says.

But what I was reminded of recently was why I d o n' t like S t a r T r e k I I. Evelyn mentioned that on Usenet they have foolish discussions like "What would happen if the Enterprise met the Deathstar?" To me the answer is obvious. It is the legacy of S t a r T r e k I I that what would happen is whatever the scriptwriter would like to have happen. While S t a r T r e k V is a good story with superficial (very) bad touches, S t a r T r e k I I has excellent examples of bad writing that cheat the audience, and the Star Trek audience that values emotional impact over logic falls for the little con game without even noticing.

What happens in S t a r T r e k I I is that the script sets up interesting problems, then sidesteps the problems rather than solving them. And by doing that it suckers the audience. A particularly nasty example is the question of what the Enterprise would do if it was half-crippled and fighting a totally uncrippled starship. We watch with rapt anticipation. And what is the answer? The Enterprise would use previously unknown powers to shut down the shields of the other starship! Is that feeble writing or what? It sounds like something a seven-year-old would come up with: "Using the special magic code that only the Enterprise knows, it shuts down the shields of the other starship." Now let me ask you, even if the Federation would be stupid enough to give the Enterprise powers over other starships, wouldn't they make it the ability to shut down another ship's o f f e n s i v e systems, not d e f e n s i v e ones? It would be really hard on the Federation's strained budget to leave

their ships so they could blow each other up but not so they could defend themselves. Of course, it is a great excuse for a special effects sequence.

Similarly, the scriptwriter put himself in a position where he had to have Kirk come up with a clever solution to the "Kobayashi Maru" dilemma. He just didn't have a clever or even a credible approach to the problem. He came up with a solution, but not one which showed much thinking at all.

I am not even discussing the technical foolishness of the concept of the Genesis Effect, which seems to do things such as produce a star at the right distance from the object planet, then produces chemical compounds which form trees in hours. Good science fiction requires solving problems that it raises and thinking about the concepts. As such, S t a r T r e k I I, in spite of good action sequences, has the most slap-dash plot of any of the series' films.

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3. Anyone who wants a copy of Mark's travelogue of Eastern Europe (45,000 words long!) should contact him.

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Books are the carriers of civilization. Without books, history is silent, literature dumb, science crippled, thought and speculation at a standstill. Without books, the development of civilization would have been impossible. They are engines of change, windows on the world, "lighthouses" (as a poet said) "erected in the sea of time." They are companions, teachers, magicians, bankers of the treasures of the mind. Books are humanity in print.

-- Barbara W. Tuchman

THE MOUND AND OTHER SF STORIES FROM THE LOW LANDS

edited by Roelof Goudriaan

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A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper

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This anthology of King Kong Award Winners was specially translated and produced for the 48th World Science Fiction Convention (Confiction) held in the Hague, the Netherlands, August 23-27, 1990. An introduction gives a brief summary of the state of science fiction in the Netherlands. (Interestingly, though it mentions "strong American influences," some of the translations follow British English rather than American English.)

The first story is "The Winter Garden" ("De wintertuin") by Paul Harland (translated by the author). I cannot in fair conscience review it, however, because my copy of the book is missing pages 17 through 20! (Odd--one normally would lose an entire signature, yet that is not the case here.) I presume that this is not true of a large number of copies, but if you are buying this, you might check. (At least the missing pages are all in one story, rather than spanning stories.)

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"The Mound" ("De terp") by Jan Bee Landman (translated by the author) is a somewhat typical dystopian future story, not very different from many other similar ones. Reading it, however, I was struck by how like a synopsis of a half-hour television show it was. In the United States, this might even have been its origin; in the Netherlands it seems less likely.

Thomas Winter's "The Desirable Lot of the Slender Ones" ("Het begerswaardig lot van de ranken") (translated by Jan Bee Landman) bears

a marked similarity in premise to such works as Frederik Pohl's "Midas Plague" and even David Brin's P _ r _ a _ c _ t _ i _ c _ e _ E _ f _ f _ e _ c _ t. But unfortunately, it is written in such a way as to make reading it tough going. This could be the translation, but Landman's other translations don't display the problem.

"Knowfather" ("Westvader") by Gerben Hellinga, Jr. (translated by the author) is science fiction adventure in the old tradition--a Golden-Age-type tale of humans against the elements and a story of contact between alien races. Hellinga's characters are well drawn and the message, while old, is well delivered. (Is it just a quirk of translation or does this contain an homage to a famous science fiction story best known for its last line?)

As with two other stories in this anthology, "Their Descriptive God; Softly Weeping" ("Hun descriptieve god, zacht jankend") By Jan J. B. Kuipers (translated by Jan Bee Landman) hearkens back to a classic science fiction story: in this case, Sam Moskowitz's "Microcosmic God." However, Kuipers demonstrates a totally different style--perhaps Silverberg tinged with Borges.

Earlier I mentioned that some stories use British English and some American English. This is most noticeable in the spelling (e.g., "color" versus "colour"), and checking the translators explains this: Landman prefers the American spellings, while Harland and Hellinga use the British. This leads to a somewhat inconsistent volume, and when combined with typographical errors ("and" is misspelled twice and in two different ways on page 62 alone!) and the missing pages, the result is a less than totally satisfying volume. And if this represents the best of Dutch science fiction, I have to say there seems to be much room for improvement.

[Disclaimer: The original Dutch may be of a higher literary quality than the translation. But I am reviewing the translation, not the original.]