

1. The next book discussion will be in Middletown; the following description was provided by Evelyn Leeper:

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When I first selected R_e_d_M_a_g_i_c_i_a_n by Lisa Goldstein, I didn't realize it would be such a difficult book to find. Because of this, the discussion will probably be more about the topic than the individual book. "Jewish Science Fiction" is probably too broad a topic, however, even for Jewish Heritage Month, so I would like to narrow it down to one that was used at Chicon V this past year: The Nazi Holocaust and Fantastic Literature. Goldstein's book is a fantasy set during the Holocaust; another well-known fantasy with this basis is Jane Yolen's D_e_v_i'l's_A_r_i_t_h_m_e_t_i_c, which has won several prestigious (and non-science-fiction) awards. Is the Holocaust a valid background for fantastic literature? Should a writer worry about offending people by "trivializing" it? What pitfalls, if any, should be avoided?

(By the way, T_h_e_D_e_v_i'l's_A_r_i_t_h_m_e_t_i_c is a very short book--it is marketed as a young adult novel--so you should be able to read it in an evening if your library has it, and because it has won so many awards, your library may well have it.) [-ecl]

2. Well, he's back in the news again. Who do you think is the worst current monster in film? I will give you a clue. It's not Freddy, it's Teddy--Ted Turner, that is. Evidently the French government is looking to make illegal the showing on television of colorized versions of black and white films. And you-know-who is Mr. Colorization world-wide. To film fans all over the world Ted Turner is a man who chews up classic films and then spits them up on television screens everywhere. Well, as usual I have a stand on this issue that nobody, not even Ted Turner, would like, I suspect. I think both sides are wrong. If I could make colorization go away, I would. Turner is doing a bad thing when he colorizes John Huston's great M_a_l_t_e_s_e_F_a_l_c_o_n. (Oh, please stop doing that, Mr. Turner.)

One standard argument that colorization isn't so bad is that you

can always turn the color off. The standard response to that argument is that colorization spoils the carefully crafted black, gray, and white tones that Huston orchestrated for the film. Right. This is a film that has been stored on unstable film stock for half a century, then is broken down into lines and broadcast to cathode ray tubes. Now, no two of these cathode ray tubes have exactly the same setting of brightness or contrast and yet every one until now has gotten the precise black and white tones this film had when projected in 1941. But turning off the color on a colorized print is just going to distort the tones horribly. Come on. Face it, you are not going to get Huston's original tones if you watch T_h_e_M_a_l_t_e_s_e_F_a_l_c_o_n on television. You cannot even get them in a theater any more. the response of film fans was going to be to get a bill through Congress that a large number of films were special treasures and Turner could not colorize them without a big warning at the front saying this film has been colorized. So there, Mr. Turner. Turner's response to this was, "Sure. Good

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idea." Not just special treasure films but everything Turner colorizes bears the announcement at the front. I guess I'd call that a class response.

In my experience this violence done to the mood of a film by colorizing it is small compared to the violence done by commercials. The New York ABC affiliate broke the opening credits of H_i_g_h_P_l_a_i_n_s_D_r_i_f_t_e_r for a commercial. Then generally show a generous ten or twelve minutes of the film at a time before cutting to an interruption. Turner's two stations show films in a manner that indicates he respects cinema. He does not have excessive interruptions--more than I would like but nothing like some other stations. And his stations show features about the making of films. And he shows shorts. Then there is T_h_e_U_n_h_o_l_y_T_h_r_e_e. That's Lon Chaney, Sr.'s only sound film. Not a great film, but because it was Chaney's only talkie, I was curious for years to see it and there may have been about a dozen people in America who knew the film's background and wanted to see it. Nobody in their right mind would think this obscure artifact could be a big audience draw. Imagine my disappointment when I found out from a friend that Turner had broadcast it and I missed it in the listings. I was luckier a few months later when he broadcast it a second time.

Turner also broadcast the silent version of B_e_n_H_u_r, _W_i_n_d, what is left of G_r_e_e_d, and the nearly silent M_y_s_t_e_r_i_o_u_s_I_s_l_a_n_d with Lionel Barrymore. For years I had wanted to see the Japanese film U_g_e_t_s_u. I had never seen even PBS broadcast it. Turner showed it in Japanese with subtitles.

I love K_i_n_g_K_o_n_g. I didn't want Turner to colorize it. Turner got the best existing print he could get and cleaned it so more detail was visible and colorized that. He also released, I am told, the cleaned-up black and white version. I saw the colorized version and thought Turner had done little to add to or detract from the film. I would like to see the cleaned-up black and white version.

Most of the films Turner colorizes are readily available in black and white. And most that are not are also not mood pieces where the shades of gray are super-critical. They are films like D_i_r_i_g_i_b_l_e, an adventure film about the Navy using dirigibles. The only real atmosphere was that in which the dirigible flew.

Turner has, to my mind, been a boon and not a bane to film fans. I like his news coverage too.

3. This year's World Fantasy Award winners are:

Best Novel (tie): T_h_o_m_a_s_t_h_e_R_h_y_m_e_r by Ellen Kushner and O_n_l_y_B_e_g_o_t_t_e_n_D_a_u_g_h_t_e_r by James Morrow

Best Novella: "Bones" by Pat Murphy

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Best Short Story: "A Midsummer Night's Dream" by Neil Gaiman and Charles Vess

Best Anthology: B_e_s_t_N_e_w_H_o_r_r_o_r edited by Stephen Jones and Ramsey Campbell

Best Collection: T_h_e_S_t_a_r_t_o_f_t_h_e_E_n_d_o_f_i_t_A_l_l_a_n_d_O_t_h_e_r_S_t_o_r_i_e_s by Carol Emshwiller

Best Artist: David McKean

Special Award -- Professional: Arnie Fenner

Special Award -- Non-Professional: "Cemetery Dance" -- Richard
Chizmar

Life Achievement Award: Ray Russell

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All our knowledge begins with the senses, proceeds then to
the understanding, and ends with reason. There is nothing
higher than reason.

-- Immanuel Kant

THE PEOPLE UNDER THE STAIRS
A film review by Mark R. Leeper
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This is not a review--it is a symposium of ideas about T_h_e_P_e_o_p_l_e_U_n_d_e_r_t_h_e_S_t_a_i_r_s based on an after-film discussion. It will contain spoilers in the same sense that a road sign that says "Bridge Out" is a spoiler.

- Kate Pott, acknowledged film viewer, cautions us that it really would be unfair on the basis of one psychotic cannibal film to condemn all the psychotic cannibal films being made and that many are considerably better than T_h_e_P_e_o_p_l_e_U_n_d_e_r_t_h_e_S_t_a_i_r_s.
- I think it somewhat politically simplistic for this film to suggest that there is sufficient money in the black ghetto for everyone to have a high standard of living, but that the money is all going to killer psychotic slumlords who, through inbreeding, have become crazy as bedbugs. Even if you accepted that premise, I am not sure that their dementia would take the form of kidnapping children for their own and then, when the children become unhappy, imprisoning them in the walls of a house.
- Evelyn Leeper points out that this house that appears small on the outside would not have walls three to four feet thick. Much of this film takes place within the walls of the house and we can see the inside of the walls are excessively spacious.
- Evelyn pointed out that door-to-door salesmen are a much rarer phenomenon than they used to be. The few salesmen who came to the door could not be rendered into sufficient meat to feed the twelve growing children living in the walls of the house.
- I would add that if so many door-to-door salesmen have disappeared it would be fairly easy for the police to pinpoint the trouble spot in the neighborhood.
- I was less than pleased with a plot structure in which all but about ten minutes of screen time is taken up by two over-extended chases through the walls, basement, and roof of a single house.
- Evelyn was not totally pleased with plot elements like having the African-American boy who is the main character mostly trying to earn enough money for a cancer operation to save his mother's life (and wanting to become a doctor someday) and getting advice from his kindly uncle Booker and his somewhat shady friend Leroy.

- I found that in spite of the fact that our main character has found rooms full of money wrested from ghetto tenants, it seems unlikely that the explosions at the end of the film would shower only money on the neighbors waiting outside.
- It was the overall impression of the three of us that this film sucked pond water. Kate rated it a -2 and Evelyn and I each gave it a -3 on the -4 to +4 scale.

BILLY BATHGATE

A film review by Mark R. Leeper

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Capsule review: A film with a nice period feel about a young man rising in Dutch Schultz's organization while Schultz himself is falling. Above average accuracy for a gangster film, but still some mistakes. The film needed a really good performance by Hoffman, who for once just could not muster the power the role needed. Rating: low +2 (-4 to +4).

"Organized" crime was not so organized in the 1920s and early 1930s. Individual gangs built on bootlegging, prostitution, gambling, or other rackets fought each other for turf. Meyer Lansky forged a single government over the major gangs to organize them and to minimize inter-gang warfare. The birth of this syndicate was the death of the last wild gangster. And it was not the FBI or the police who killed him; it is generally assumed to have been fellow gangsters terrified because this loose cannon had just effectively declared war on the United States government. In his fiery temper, Dutch Schultz had announced that he was going to kill government prosecutor Thomas E. Dewey. The new syndicate was trying to bring order. The last thing it wanted was a war with the United States government packaged and delivered by the likes of Dutch Schultz. So Schultz died and true organized crime was born. E. L. Doctorow's

novel Billy Bathgate tells the story of a young Irish-American rising in Schultz's organization at the same time Schultz's star started descending. Tom Stoppard wrote the screenplay for a film adaptation directed by Robert Benton.

The structure of Billy Bathgate's plot parallels that of Goodfellas. The story begins with one horrendous crime, flashes back to how things got to this state, and then continues from there into the future. Billy (played by Loren Dean) is on hand to see Schultz (played by Dustin Hoffman) murdering Bo Weinberg (played by Bruce Willis). It is a long ritual involving a tugboat, a tub of cement, and Drew Preston (play by Nicole Kidman), who is Bo's unreliable girlfriend. From there we return to how a teenage Billy, awestruck at Schultz's power and wealth, first accidentally impresses Schultz, then intentionally does it, then connives his way into Schultz's organization. Bathgate begins as mascot and errand boy to the Schultz organization and uses his new-found wealth to impress his girlfriend and his mother, the latter drained from a sweatshop job that pays in a week what Billy spends on one lunch.

There are problems with the script that might also be virtues. This is not a rock 'em, sock 'em, Untouch able's sort of film. There are scenes with action, but there are not many. There is little to

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race your pulse. There is not even much dramatic tension. The film is more concerned with questions such as whether Schultz really is exceptional or whether he is just an ordinary man. There is a little bit of inter-gang rivalry, a bit of Billy's risking his life from or for his boss. But Billy's scams are small and short. Like Ragtime, this is not an adventure film; it is an opportunity to put the viewer in a well-realized historical setting so that the viewer can appreciate the situation. In some cases advancing Billy's story frustratingly takes us away from Schultz's story. There is also a little sex in Billy's story, giving us some visual candy to appease us that we are not seeing Schultz's story.

One problem with the dramatic tension is that Hoffman does not do angry and psychotic very well. Sometimes putting someone mild in a vicious role works extremely well. A case in point might be Alan Arkin in Wait Until Dark. However, the decision to have the driving

power of a film to be the force of Dustin Hoffman's anger is questionable.

"Sorry, Mr. Hoffman, we're looking for someone meaner."

"I can be meaner!"

"We're looking for someone angrier."

"I can be angrier!"

"We want someone scary."

"I can be scary!"

"We want someone else."

Hoffman kicks the casting director in the bedoopees.

Henry Fonda also was convincing in nice-guy roles but had problems with heavies. Hoffman is not terrible in the role, but he is only okay and much more could have been hope for.

Next we come to the question of historical accuracy. Here, too, the film is flawed, but not terribly. There were some points that were indeed quite accurate. Arthur Flegenheimer did indeed borrow the name Dutch Schultz from another hood. And he was indeed very even-tempered until it came to the question of money. If Schultz thought you were cheating him out of even small money, your life was not worth much. "Legs" Diamond and Vincent "Mad Dog" Coll each died from Schultz's rages over money and they were by no means alone. But the film did not go far enough. It showed Dutch Schultz as a fancy dresser. Schultz was too much of a skinflint ever to dress nicely. Lucky Luciano said, "Dutch was the cheapest guy I ever knew. The guy had a couple of million bucks and he dressed

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like a pig." The film shows Bo Weinberg being an independent hood murdered before the upstate New York trial. In actual fact, Weinberg worked for Schultz. He had little faith that Schultz would win the upstate New York trial and let Luciano move in on Schultz's

rackets while Schultz was pretending to be a good citizen for the trial. Another inaccuracy is in the spoiler section following this review.

As a minor aside, incidentally, we see a little of Stephen Hill playing Otto Berman--known as Abbadabba Berman. He was a mathematician who worked out a method to increase the numbers racket take by 10%. He would find out what numbers had been least played. From there he figured how much he had to bet in racetrack pari-mutuel machines to make the low-played numbers come up winners. That part was perfectly legal. The pari-mutuel machine bets would lose, but the right numbers would come up and Schultz would pay out less. The "Abbadabba" nickname was a magic word (corrupted from "Abracadabra"?) indicating that Berman was the magician of the numbers racket.

Overall this is not a perfect portrait of Dutch Schultz and the people around him, and it could use a bit more action, but it is watchable and enjoyable. My rating is a low +2 on the -4 to +4 scale.

*****SPOILER*****SPOILER*****SPOILER*****SPOILER*****

The attack on the Palace Chop House could have been better researched. Charlie "The Bug" Workman (I'm not making this up!) did the hit. To make sure he was not surprised by someone coming out of the restroom, he went there first and shot the heavy-set man washing his hands. He then burst out of the john with a .38 in each hand and gunned down the three men at Schultz's table. Bug then realized the man in the john was Schultz and went back in to rifle Schultz's pockets. This is quite different from the scene in the film. Also, Schultz appears dead in the film. Actually, Schultz raved for about two days before dying. I occasionally get mail from people whose response to having inaccuracies pointed out is "What does it matter?" That is never an easy question to answer. In truth, historical accuracy is its own reward. It only matters if it matters. To me it matters.

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