

world conquest, that had the power to drop nuclear weapons on our heads, that suppressed freedom in dozens of countries. Then when he was released, PAFF! Eastern Europe is democratic, the Soviet Union is a bunch of independent countries ready to try capitalism, the Berlin Wall has been broken up and you can buy pieces as souvenirs

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in K-Mart. It was amazing learning of this over three years. Can you imagine being told about it in three minutes?

I get some of the same sort of shock by going back and looking at some 1960s newspapers. I guess I had sort of forgotten how repressive those times were with regard to sex. It is really hard to believe, but as vital as sex is to everyone in today's world, it really went almost unmentioned in the early Sixties. You could go through an entire newspaper and not find a single reference to AIDS or any venereal disease. There was no discussion at all about day care centers and the sexual molestation of children. You almost never read stories of parents raping their children. When schools showed up in the newspapers, the question was how well they were teaching people abstract subjects like science and English. They apparently never worried about sex education. They never distributed condoms.

Major cities never cordoned off streets and had parades of people celebrating their sexual preference. Popular music never explicitly described and extolled the virtues of anal sex. You never heard Congress going into a weekend session to discuss jokes about pubic hair or anyone called "Long Dong Silver." At that time, to become a national hero and to be asked to be on special councils you pretty much had to be a Mercury astronaut. If all you'd done was play basketball well and had promiscuous sex, you never got that special treatment.

Yes, the world is a lot less uptight these days. It's quite a difference.

3. Announcing the First SF Club Imagination Contest! (Talk about pompous!) We are looking for entries which answer the following questions:

1. Assume you have a time machine which let's you go back and view (and record) any time period in the past up to 24 hours long. The machine sits "outside of time," so you can't affect anything. Oh, yes, and it works only once. Where would you go back to, and why?
 2. Same machine, but now it will work ten times. What ten times would you pick and, of course, why?
4. New Jersey public television is running a six-part British science fiction series, C_h_i_l_d_r_e_n_o_f_t_h_e_D_o_g_S_t_a_r, Saturdays at 11:30 PM starting January 11. We will be unable to tape it, so if someone else tapes it and it's any good, could we borrow the tape? [-ecl]

Mark Leeper
MT 3D-441 908-957-5619
...mtgzy!leeper

EXPECTING SOMEONE TALLER by Tom Holt
Ace, 1990 (1987c), ISBN 0-441-22332-X, \$3.95.
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper
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I don't normally enjoy "humorous" fantasy. For one thing, it's usually not very humorous. But Tom Holt's E_x_p_e_c_t_i_n_g_S_o_m_e_o_n_e_T_a_l_l_e_r_i_s funny--funny enough that I frequently laughed out loud reading it (much to the distress of my spousal unit, who was trying to read something serious).

Holt takes as his background Richard Wagner's "Ring" cycle of operas. Malcolm Fisher, schlemiel supreme, runs over a badger one night. The badger is not really a badger, however--it is Ingolf, a Frost Giant who had seized the Ring and the Tarnhelm from Siegfried's funeral pyre. If you're not following this, that's okay. Malcolm didn't either, so the badger ... excuse me, Ingolf provides some explanation and Malcolm later does his own research as well. (At the end of Malcolm's research, Holt describes his state as follows: "Malcolm had never been greatly inclined to metaphysical or religious

speculations, but he had hoped that if there was a supreme being or divine agency, it would at least show the elements of logic and common sense in its conduct. Seemingly, not so. On the other hand, the revelation that the destiny of the world had been shaped by a bunch of verbose idiots went some way towards explaining the problems of human existence.")

Now that Malcolm has the Ring and can rule the world, of course, everyone else wants it back--gods, valkyries, Rhinemaidens. He also need some practice to get the knack of the Tarnhelm. And throughout all this Holt demonstrates a wry wit that other humor writers often fall short of. My only objection is the somewhat abrupt resolution, but then any long drawn-out serious stretch would spoil the comic timing. If you are a fan of Wagner's operas, you m_u_s_t read this book, but even if you've never heard a note, E_x_p_e_c_t_i_n_g_S_o_m_e_o_n_e_T_a_l_l_e_r is highly recommended.

(Extra note to opera fans: Anna Russell would have loved it.)

SHERLOCK HOLMES AND THE MYSTERIOUS FRIEND OF OSCAR WILDE by Russell A. Brown
St. Martins, 1988, ISBN 0-312-03932-8, \$7.95.
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper
Copyright 1991 Evelyn C. Leeper

I have seen Sherlock Holmes novels this bad before, but never from a major publishing house. Usually they are from small presses with lower standards.

The blackmail plot that Holmes has to foil is merely an excuse to show Holmes make the transition from homophobe to enlightened, politically correct person. Since I find the concept of the super-logical Sherlock Holmes being homophobic as unbelievable to start with, this subplot was annoying rather than convincing. And what of the other characters? Well, the reviewers quoted on the back of the book cite the multitude of Wilde's epigrams present in the book. But these epigrams were all used in particular circumstances, none of which were conversations with Sherlock Holmes. It's particularly galling to have Wilde's final words presented as occurring here, because their context is so well-known. It's as if a novel in which Shakespeare met an Elizabethan equivalent of Sherlock Holmes had Shakespeare saying things like "To be or not to be--that is the question" or "Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by this son of York" in ordinary conversation. This excessive use of epigrams reduces Wilde to a caricature rather than a character. And just about everyone that Holmes and Watson know seems to turn out to be gay--well, perhaps that's an exaggeration, but certainly well above the oft-quoted 10% figure for the population as a whole.

It would certainly be possible to write a good novel involving Sherlock Holmes and Oscar Wilde, but this is not it.

(This is marketed on the cover as a Stonewall Inn Mystery, complete with lavender triangle. It's terribly politically correct, but also incredibly unsubtle.)

THE COUNTRY OF THE BLIND by Michael Flynn

Baen, 1990, ISBN 0-671-69886-9, \$3.95.

A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper

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This book falls into that interesting category of "secret history"--interesting to me, at any rate, because it frequently straddles the line between fiction and non-fiction. For example, Michael Baigent's H_o_l_y_B_l_o_o_d, H_o_l_y_G_r_a_i_l supposes that Europe is really ruled by a secret society led by a descendent of Jesus, and the book is marketed as non-fiction. Well, I_n_t_h_e_C_o_u_n_t_r_y_o_f_t_h_e_B_l_i_n_d is marketed as fiction, but there's nothing i_m_p_o_s_s_i_b_l_e in it.

The premise is that Charles Babbage completed his analytical engine, but news of its success was suppressed by a group of social scientists who decided to use it to predict historical trends. If this sounds like Isaac Asimov's "psychohistory," it is, and Flynn's characters even discuss the similarity. In present-day (or very near future) San Francisco Sarah Beaumont stumbles across the existence of a secret society which has been using the engine, and now computers, not only to predict trends, but to try to change them. While she is trying to accept this idea, she is told there is at least one other group with a similar plan--and it is more ruthless in what it will do to effect change. This second group wants to kill Sarah to protect itself, and Sarah finds herself in an uneasy alliance with the first group to try to block the second.

Through the book there is a lot of discussion and philosophizing on the morality of all this. While in some books this sort of thing might seem preachy, it works here, because the plot requires someone to try to convince Sarah to help the society. (Even so, there are a few occasions when even this is strained, including some classroom sessions reminiscent of ones from Robert A. Heinlein's S_t_a_r_s_h_i_p_T_r_o_o_p_e_r_s.) And Flynn also managed to win the Libertarian "Prometheus Award" without having more than a smattering of violent sex, an element that I had come to think was almost a requirement for that award (two past winners were J. Neil Schulman, who wrote T_h_e_R_a_i_n_b_o_w_C_a_d_e_n_z_a, and L. Neil Smith, who wrote T_h_e_C_r_y_s_t_a_l_E_m_p_i_r_e and acknowledged his debt to Schulman in the acknowledgements of that book). Maybe some Libertarian out there can explain why there seems to be a correlation.

However, as I said, Flynn avoids this, and sticks to the subject at hand. The characters are well-drawn and more varied (racially, ethnically, and otherwise) than most authors bother to do. This may seem like a minor point, but it helps give the novel a more realistic feel than many novels have. The book does drag a bit at the end and devolves from philosophy into a chase sequence, but on the whole it is a satisfying book with some ideas to think about

when you're done.

(Is Charles Babbage making a comeback? William Gibson and Bruce Sterling recently wrote T_h_e_D_i_f_f_e_r_e_n_c_e_E_n_g_i_n_e in which the adoption of Babbage's d_i_f_f_e_r_e_n_c_e engine--not analytic engine--by the British government leads to a very different world than our own. And did you know that Babbage also invented the cow-catcher?)

(A note on the proofreading, or lack thereof: This is the worst proofread book I have ever seen, with the possible exception of some cheap porno novels. "Assesor" should be "Assessor" (page 54), "Hickock" should be "Hickok" (pages 63 a_n_d 67), the typeface should have returned to Times Roman in the middle of page 101 (not stayed italic), and there is at least one line missing in paragraph six on page 107. After that, I stopped keeping track.)

MOBY DICK (1930)
Film comment by Mark R. Leeper
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This is a true and accurate synopsis of the 1930 film M_o_b_y
D_i_c_k, starring John Barrymore (as Ahab) and Joan Bennett. Noble
Johnson plays Queequeg. It is based on Herman Melville's classic of
men and the sea.

The film opens with the camera moving in for a look at the book
M_o_b_y_D_i_c_k, o_r_T_h_e_W_h_i_t_e_W_h_a_l_e. The
novel begins, "There never was,
nor ever will be, a braver life than the life of the whaler.
Compared to the game they hunted the mightiest land beast was but a
poodle dog." [Boy, that Melville! He sure can write!]

Fade to the harbor of the New Bedford seaport. The Mary Anne
is pulling into harbor, all eyes are on the callow young seaman
doing acrobatics on top of the mast. Why, it's handsome young Ahab
showing off again! Ahab comes ashore and flirts with some of the
girls and insults others. ("If they cut into you they'd certainly
get plenty of blubber.") Ahab sees his brother Derek escorting a
new girl in town--Faith, the parson's daughter--to church. Ahab is
struck with Faith's beauty but decides to go to the grog shop
instead of church. There Ahab meets Queequeg, a primitive man who
carries an idol he talks to. Queequeg becomes Ahab's sidekick.

Eventually Ahab does go to church and flirts with Faith.

Before long Faith is losing interest in Derek's courting because, like all the girls, she is intrigued by the handsome Ahab. As Ahab is setting sail again Faith tells him that it is he, not Derek, that she loves. They agree to marry when Ahab returns.

Ahab and the Mary Anne are at sea when Ahab sights Moby Dick, the black whale with a white hump and forehead. [This allows the use of stock footage.] As Ahab and his cronies chase the whale in the long boat, Ahab takes one risk too many. The whale turns on Ahab and bites him. Ahab loses a leg and it is replaced by a peg.

When Faith sees Ahab is returning she is overjoyed. But when she sees the peg leg she is momentarily shocked and runs away. Weeks later, we see Ahab unable to get work as a whaler. Faith asks Derek to tell Ahab that she still loves Ahab. Derek twists the message so Ahab thinks Faith does not really love him. Derek then tells Faith that Ahab has cursed her.

Ahab goes to sea for seven years, but not as a whaler. Faith realizes too late that she should not have trusted Derek. Eagerly she awaits Ahab's return. Eventually Ahab manages to buy his own whaling ship, the Shanghai Lady. He sails it back to New Bedford to

get a crew to go after Moby Dick.

[It should be noted that we are now fifty minutes into a seventy-five-minute movie and are ready to start telling Melville's story. Melville tells only the last third of the story, which, of course, is why M o b y D i c k is such a thin book.]

Ahab is unable to get a crew so must shanghai one from the brothels and grog shops. The meaner and nastier the crew, the better, he decided since he really wants revenge on Moby Dick. Once at sea, however, the shanghai crew is surly and unmanageable. They are cutthroats one and all. There is one exception. It is Derek who was shanghai onto the Shanghai Lady with the rest. Derek finds out his brother Ahab is the captain, but the mates don't believe it and will not let him see Ahab.

During a storm Derek decides to break out of the hold to confront Ahab. The rest of the crew take this opportunity to mutiny. With storm and mutiny raging, Derek finds Ahab at the wheel and accuses him of intentionally shanghaiing him. The two fight and Ahab is winning when Derek throws a knife into Ahab's back. Queequeg--Ahab's old friend--picks up Derek and breaks his back. There is no explanation about what happened to the mutiny, but it seems to have ended by the next scene.

Fair weather returns, but Ahab is depressed. He decides Moby Dick has beaten him. "He's licked me, Mr. Stubbs," he says. Just then Moby Dick is sighted. The longboats hit the water. Moby Dick turns on Ahab's longboat but Ahab swims to the whale and, demoniacally laughing, repeatedly stabs the whale with a harpoon. Moby Dick dies. We last see pieces of Moby Dick being cut up on the deck of the Shanghai Lady.

Ahab and the Shanghai Lady return to New Bedford. There Ahab discovers that Faith has waited for him. The two fall into each other's arms.

Boy, that Herman Melville! He sure can write!

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