



Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
Club Notice - 05/22/92 -- Vol. 10, No. 47

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

Unless otherwise stated, all meetings are on Wednesdays at noon.

LZ meetings are in LZ 2R-158.

 D A T E T O P I C

06/03 HO: THRICE UPON A TIME by James Hogan (Time Travel) (HO 1N-310)

06/24 HO: RAFT by Stephen Baxter (Gravity) (HO 1N-410)

07/15 MT: THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO SCIENCE FICTION by David Pringle (SF
reference books) (MT 1P-364)

08/05 HO: THE SILMARILLION by J.R.R. Tolkien (Alternate Mythologies)
(HO 1N-410)

08/26 HO: BONE DANCE by Emma Bull (Hugo nominee) (HO 1N-410)

 D A T E E X T E R N A L M E E T I N G S / C O N V E N T I O N S / E T C

05/16 NJSFS: New Jersey Science Fiction Society: TBA
(phone 201-432-5965 for details) (Saturday)

06/13 SFABC: Science Fiction Association of Bergen County: Trip
to Library of NASA in Manhattan (phone
201-933-2724 for details) (Saturday)

HO Chair: John Jetzt HO 1E-525 908-834-1563 hocpb!jetzt
LZ Chair: Rob Mitchell HO 1D-505A 908-834-1267 mtuxo!jrrt
MT Chair: Mark Leeper MT 3D-441 908-957-5619 mtgzy!leeper
HO Librarian: Nick Sauer HO 4F-427 908-949-7076 homxc!11366ns
LZ Librarian: Lance Larsen LZ 3L-312 908-576-3346 mtfme!lfl
MT Librarian: Mark Leeper MT 3D-441 908-957-5619 mtgzy!leeper
Factotum: Evelyn Leeper MT 1F-329 908-957-2070 mtgzy!ecl
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1. Well, it's spring. Trees and bushes are in bloom. The warm
clothes go up to the attic; the electric fans come down. The bees
are buzzing. And on television your choice of eight different
baseball games. Each one more boring than the others. Blechh! I
hate baseball. What do you expect from a sport whose greatest

virtue is that it does not suck pond water as badly as football does. Not quite. However, in spite of my regard for baseball I have to admit there are actually three good baseball films. No, not T_h_e_P_r_i_d_e_o_f_t_h_e_Y_a_n_k_e_e_s. Yug. Not B_u_l_l_D_u_r_h_a_m either. That was just okay. No, all three good baseball films are fantasy films

THE MT VOID

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first and baseball films second. One of the good ones is I_t_H_a_p_p_e_n_s_E_v_e_r_y_S_p_r_i_n_g with Ray Milland. I don't think I have a good copy of that anyway. On Thursday, May 28, at 7 PM we will show:

The Other Two

THE NATURAL (1984) dir. by Barry Levinson

FIELD OF DREAMS (1989) dir. by Phil Alden Robinson

THE NATURAL is an epic fantasy of good against evil told as a baseball story. It starts to tell the Bernard Malamud story of a natural baseball player but goes off in its own direction so that it becomes that rarest of all films, the horribly inaccurate adaptation of a novel that tells a much better story than the novel. Randy Newman's score is terrific and the all-star cast is used without wasting a star: Robert Redford, Robert Duvall, Glenn Close, Kim Basinger, Wilford Brimley, Richard Farnsworth, Barbara Hershey, Robert Prosky, Darren McGavin, and Joe Don Baker.

FIELD OF DREAMS is a gentle baseball-related fantasy about an Iowa farmer who one day starts hearing voices telling him to build a baseball diamond in the middle of his cornfield. Before he knows it, the voices are making even nuttier demands. The film made a name for fantasy writer W. P. Kinsella, on whose book S_h_o_e_l_e_s_s_J_o_e it was based. (Curiously, the character in the book T_h_e_N_a_t_u_r_a_l is based on Shoeless Joe Jackson, so there is a certain completeness in showing these films together.) Now it is a common misconception that FIELD OF DREAMS was actually better than THE NATURAL. That's nonsense, since THE NATURAL was the best baseball film ever made. It is just that between 1984 and 1989 people's standards dropped. It will be obvious showing these films back to back that FIELD OF DREAMS, good as it is, is out-classed by THE NATURAL. Correct me if you think I'm wrong. A review of FIELD OF DREAMS appears elsewhere in this issue. The film stars Kevin Costner, Amy Madigan, James Earl Jones, Ray Liotta, and Burt Lancaster.

2. Note that all meetings have been moved to Holmdel or Middletown. This is because none of the attendees at recent Lincroft meetings have actually been from Lincroft. Since the majority are from Holmdel, we will try meeting there for a while. Since the 7/15 book will be written up by a Middletown person, we will have that meeting there. (So now you know that the way to have meetings convenient to you is to offer to lead them. :-)

Room numbers (and location changes) will be announced as they become known. [-ecl]

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...mtgzy!leeper

Self-knowledge is always bad news.
-- John Barth

A MIDNIGHT CLEAR
A film review by Mark R. Leeper
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Capsule review: Black comedy and tragedy about a German and an American squad who want to make a separate peace during the Battle of the Bulge. The film tries to emulate Heller's C_a_t_c_h-2_2 and black comedies such as C_a_s_t_l_e_K_e_e_p. Rating: low +2 (-4 to +4).

A_M_i_d_n_i_g_h_t_C_l_e_a_r is a World War II story on the insanity and stupidity of war in general told with bitter humor and irony. It begs comparison with C_a_s_t_l_e_K_e_e_p and especially C_a_t_c_h-2_2. It pretty well had to be an angry film, being directed by Keith Gordon (who had previously made T_h_e_C_h_o_c_o_l_a_t_e_W_a_r), and being based on a novel by William Wharton (the author of the book B_i_r_d_y). And there is a lot of rage let out in A_M_i_d_n_i_g_h_t_C_l_e_a_r, sometimes eloquently, sometimes muddled.

The story is set in mid-December, 1944, in the Ardennes Forest. Somewhere, in another part of the forest, the Battle of the Bulge--the last great German offensive of the war--is raging. (Curiously, they never mention that this is the Battle of the Bulge, even in the narration. It might have helped some viewers place the action in perspective.) The story concerns a squad of six very war-weary Americans sent to act as sentinels where the Germans are expected to break through. Basically they are to report, then save themselves if they can. It does not help their odds that one of their number is already nearly insane. No reasonable commander would give such an order, but their Major Griffin (played by John McGinley) is every soldier's worst nightmare--stupid, officious, and without a touch of sympathy for the men he commands.

Then things start getting stranger for the squad. They find the corpses of a German and an American soldier frozen in a tableau of dancing together. They have several encounters with Germans that should have gotten them killed and the Germans refuse to throw anything at them worse than snowballs. In fact, they have run into a squad of Germans who apparently wants to play one of the most dangerous games of wartime--they seem to want to make a separate peace.

This is a slow, deliberate, and very introspective film--an odd choice to start the summer fluff season. It reaches its climax a good half-hour before the end of the film and then just sort of smolders out. There are many bizarre touches in the photography, not the least of which is the bizarre statuary in the area the squad is trying to secure. One statue holds its decapitated head in

front of it like a ghost. Mark Isham's score depicts the weirdness of the situation, but certainly not the period. The film is sad, angry, and anti-war straight through. Even the flashback sex scene turns out to be sad, angry, and anti-war. The film is much more anxious to attain a literary style than to be an accurate portrayal of how war is fought, but it makes its point. I give it a low +2 on the -4 to +4 scale.

FAR AND AWAY
A film review by Mark R. Leeper
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Capsule review: A really big film with impressive historical sweep. The sort of epic storytelling that films do so well and just have not done very often in recent years. Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman star in a story of Irish immigrants coming to the Irish slums of Boston and then to the Oklahoma land rush just about one century ago. This is the most enjoyable film I have seen in 1992.
Rating: +3 (-4 to +4).

(Spoiler warning: This film could not be adequately described without telling more of the plot than I usually like to tell. It is clear early on where this film is going. However, if you prefer not to read details of the plot, be warned.)

The summer is off to a roaring start with the return of a type of film we have not seen in a while, a big sprawling spectacular historical novel in cinematic form. This is a film in the grand tradition of epics like T_h_e_U_n_t_a_m_e_d, which took Tyrone Power and Susan Howard from Ireland to a trek across South Africa with the Boers. It is rare enough these days to see an historical film set in another century. F_a_r_a_n_d_A_w_a_y sweeps the audience from the tenant unrest in Ireland in 1892 to the Irish slums of Boston to a brief sequence in the Ozarks and finally to the Oklahoma land rush. The land rush race of 1893 is eye-poppingly brought to the screen on a scale rarely seen on films any more. Along the way the viewer gets a pleasurable history lesson about conditions in Ireland, Boston, and Oklahoma of a century ago. F_a_r_a_n_d_A_w_a_y is a_l_l_o_t of film. It is 140 minutes of story.

The story opens in western Ireland. There tenant farmers live and die in abject poverty, owing everything they have to absentee landlords. Many of these landlords never even saw the properties that made them rich. Joseph Donnelly (played surprisingly well by Tom Cruise) has dreams of escaping his poverty and owning his own lands. His dreams change when the rent collector indirectly kills Donnelly's father and then intentionally burns Donnelly's home. Donnelly leaves home, intending to find and murder his landlord Daniel Christie (played by Robert Prosky). Christie turns out to be a likable fellow and Donnelly a completely incompetent assassin. Soon Donnelly is a patient being cared for by Christie's family in Christie's own house. Donnelly particularly is interested in Shannon Christie (played by Nicole Kidman--Cruise's real-life wife). Shannon fancies herself a very modern woman and has dreams of running away to America, where they are giving away free land in

Oklahoma and where she can be the equal of any man. It is no surprise to the audience that she is eventually off to America with part of the family treasure and with Donnelly in tow as a sort of servant--at least that is what she thinks he is.

The longest chapter of the story is set in the Irish immigrant slums of Boston, where the couple go from riches to rags to riches and back to rags. The historical re-creation here is beautifully done. We see the immigrant population and the brothels. Donnelly and Shannon are forced to pose as brother and sister and share a room in a brothel. Shannon plucks chickens and barely makes enough money to cover the rent, while Donnelly is adopted by a local bully (played by Colm Meany of S_t_a_r_T_r_e_k: _T_h_e_N_e_x_t_G_e_n_e_r_a_t_i_o_n) and groomed as a bare-knuckle boxer. Donnelly has a meteoric career as a boxer--reminiscent of too many other of Cruise's films. Eventually the couple is dragged apart by poverty. Donnelly tries a minor stint laying railroad track in the Ozarks before he decides to head west and find his land in Oklahoma. They once again meet up for the largest and most famous of the Oklahoma land rushes, the Cherokee Strip race. (Ever wonder what Cherokee Strip Day commemorated?) The Cherokee Strip was a six-million-acre strip of land between Kansas and Oklahoma bought from the Cherokee Nation for \$8,500,000. It was partitioned into plots of land, and at noon on Saturday, September 16, 1893, the race for land began. The first person to get to one of the plots and replace the marker flag in it with his own flag owned it. One to a customer. This was the best known of the Oklahoma land rushes, attracting 100,000 settlers ("boomers"). A settler could be shot for being a "sooner," cheating and going to a plot of land sooner than noon. Sooners are, however, commemorated in the state nickname: The Sooner State. The Cherokee Strip land rush has been depicted in films several times before--most notably in the 1931 film C_i_m_a_r_r_o_n, based on the novel by Edna Ferber and which won the Oscar for best picture. However, for once budget constraints seem to have been a small issue. Aerial shots of the rushing boomers indicate the land rush was recreated for F_a_r_a_n_d_A_w_a_y on a massive scale.

While the film has the feel of a novel, it was in fact based on an original screenplay. The screenplay was done by co-producer Bob Dolman. It was based on a story by Dolman and by director Ron

Howard. This is purely a Hollywood product, story and screenplay, which makes it all the more surprising that the result is so pleasing. There are a few false moves, the worst coming in the final seconds of the film, but general the writing is quite good.

Tom Cruise does well with a script that involves many of his talents. Both his boxing and his horse-riding are surprisingly good and done in large part apparently without doubles. The Irish accent at first seems strange coming from Cruise, but only because his own inflection is familiar. Had I not seen him before, I would probably accept the Irish accent as his own. Kidman's talents also seem more

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than sufficient for her role. Robert Prosky never turns in a bad performance, of course.

Because there is so much to see in this film, it was shot on extra-wide 65mm film stock. That would not be uncommon for a special-effects-oriented film but is most unusual for a film with few or no visual effects. Just one more reason _ F _ a _ r _ a _ n _ d _ A _ w _ a _ y is a good buy in a movie ticket.

Kudos to Ron Howard for the best and most entertaining film I have seen so far this year. I give it a +3 on the -4 to +4 scale. It's nice to be enthusiastic about a Hollywood studio film once in a while.

FIELD OF DREAMS
A film review by Mark R. Leeper
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Capsule review: A complex and witty fantasy film that features great performances by James Earl Jones and Kevin Costner. Even if you do not like our (stupid) national pastime, this film about ghosts of the White Sox and a quest is a solidly entertaining fantasy. Rating: low +3.

I do not like baseball. And because I do not like baseball, baseball films do not work on me as well as they do on other people. Most baseball movies assume that there is something somehow noble about

playing baseball. I don't buy that. A good baseball for me is one that would still be good if you substituted professional wrestling as the game. P_r_i_d_e_o_f_t_h_e_Y_a_n_k_e_e_s just does not stack up very well under this

criterion. You have to consider baseball important to respect Gehrig.

B_u_l_l_D_u_r_h_a_m is an okay but not great character comedy. B_a_n_g_t_h_e_D_r_u_m

S_l_o_w_l_y would still be a good study of the relationship of two men. I

find that even with no respect for baseball, T_h_e_N_a_t_u_r_a_l remains a fine fantasy allegory of talent and treachery, of darkness and light. Now

another baseball fantasy has come along with enough human values, enough

fine acting, and a good enough script that it is well worth seeing even

if (like me) you hate baseball. F_i_e_l_d_o_f_D_r_e_a_m_s is a real surprise: a (usually) genuine piece of quality writing for the screen.

Kevin Costner plays Ray Kinsella: a would-be ball player's son, a college activist in the late 1960s, and now an Iowa farmer. One day while working in the field he hears a disembodied voice tell him, "If you build it, he will come." After days of puzzling over hearing the message repeated, he has a vision that the "he" is Shoeless Joe Jackson of the White Sox (and, incidentally, of E_i_g_h_t_M_e_n_O_u_t), a personal hero of Ray's dead father. "It" seems to refer to a baseball diamond to be placed in Ray's cornfield. In time, the eight convicted White Sox have been wished out of the cornfield and are playing baseball in the field. Then another message comes and Ray finds himself on a mysterious mission to Boston to find controversial 1960s writer Terence Mann, supremely played by James Earl Jones. Jones's performance is quirky and brilliant. Mann's first meeting with Ray is worth the ticket price all by itself. Ray continues his ridiculous set of tasks and quests until at the end it all comes together and makes sense.

Faults? Well, over the rest of the story there is superimposed a rather prosaic "save the farm" plot that gets into the way of some of the better story-telling. Then toward the end of the film there is a rather gratuitous piece of cheap suspense. It is needed for the larger plot--almost every shot in this film is--but the actual cause of the suspense seems forced. Universal has taken a chance on an intelligent fantasy film with a complex script and has made one of the best films of the year. I would give it a low +3 on the -4 to +4 scale. Pity it was about baseball.