



"Sidewalk Ethic." America has lost its "Sidewalk Values." What are "Sidewalk Values"? They are valuing sidewalks.

What characterizes suburbia more than good safe sidewalks? Every morning when I drive to work I have to dodge contingents of

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housewives walking for their health, but who refuse to do their walking on the sidewalk. Nor do they seem to care about the traffic problems. They just seem to watch with the half-closed eye-lids of their chubby complacency as cars struggle to avoid them. Nobody uses the sidewalks any more. The street seems to be where everyone walks. Kids no longer seem to know what sidewalks are for. In my neighborhood, the kids just use the sidewalk to break beer bottles. Maybe the idea is that sidewalks are for people who don't have the courage to face real traffic. Real kids skateboard in the roads. Realer kids rollerskate in busy traffic. Super-real kids rollerblade on major arteries. The only way you can be realer than that is to hot-wire a car. And we get those too in our neighborhood.

So this is my newest campaign. I am going to write to the heads of all the major parties and tell them there is grass roots support for sidewalks. Sidewalks made America great. Be they sidewalks on the poorest dirt road in Mississippi or the sidewalks of New York, those great white ways are what made America great. Improve our sidewalks to make a concrete contribution to our society.

Mark Leeper  
MT 3D-441 908-957-5619  
...mtgzfs3!leeper

The idea of a good society is something you do not need a religion and eternal punishment to buttress; you need a religion if you are terrified of death.

-- Gore Vidal

DEEP SPACE NINE: "The Emissary"  
A television review by Mark R. Leeper  
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Newton and Leibnitz each developed calculus independently at the same time. When a culture is ready for calculus, somebody will develop it. Often many minds can come up with the same idea at the same time. This year the idea that a lot of television executives came up with was that the time was right to launch a major science fiction series. There are at least five new series starting this year set in the future. But none is more eagerly anticipated by the fans than D\_e\_e\_p\_S\_p\_a\_c\_e\_N\_i\_n\_e, the third generation of S\_t\_a\_r\_T\_r\_e\_k.

The concept was rumored to be much opposed by Gene Roddenberry while he lived. Roddenberry did not want his characters at a fixed location since he thought it would limit plot ideas. Better it was to be out exploring where no man/one has gone before. The new series occurs at a captured enemy space station near a stable wormhole. (This is supposedly a very up-to-date physics concept, but it seems to me we had the same physical mechanism in the board

game "Clue.") On this station we have a large mix of aliens, mostly species familiar from 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, the only major addition being a very versatile shape-changer played by the venerable Rene Auberjonois. The feel you get is that of a space-going Tijuana.

The new series centers on Ben Sisko (played by Avery Brooks), who is the new commander of the station. Apparently the station was captured from the Cardassians (tall thin men with bony ridges in their faces and weak powers of observation). In sixty years they never noticed anything peculiar about the station's locale, like there was a nearby wormhole. They did happen to notice the presence of something called orbs. These have very peculiar properties. They may be the only orbs in the universe that are not even vaguely spherical. Actually, they look like hour-glasses from the comics' Bizarro world film as if they were holy grails. The orbs are connected with something the new series has in abundance, gratuitous mysticism. The orbs may be an artifact of some new super-species who live outside of time. And, of course, the humans end up having to explain and defend their existence to the new species just as they had to do with Q in the super two-hour opener 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. Of course, you know and I know, that living linearly in time is the best of all possible lifestyles. But it does have to be explained to any god-like aliens that humans run into. And on the subject of self-congratulation we, of course, have another case of a human, this time Chief O'Brien, proving he is smarter than a computer. Rest assured that in battles or when confronted with aliens, the writers of the new series will always have a healthy conviction that human is what it is best to be. Even

if being human you run the risk of being Geraldo Rivera.

Actually, if the plot seems a little trite and familiar, recognize that it has requirements many other stories do not have. Usually it suffices for a story to have a beginning, a middle, and an end. This story needed to have about eight beginnings that it could leave for other episodes to resolve. There is the shape-shifter's origin; there is the existence of some sort of celestial temple; there is unfinished business with a blackmailed Ferengi; and on and on. I will point out that the blackmailed Ferengi is not

quite the same as those in the previous series. Quark is what the others would be like if they had decent writers.

And decent writing is probably what will attract viewers to this program. Certainly it is better writing than S\_p\_a\_c\_e\_R\_a\_n\_g\_e\_r\_s. And, of course, there is a much better race- and gender-balanced crew in keeping with a 1990's 26th Century rather than a 1960's 25th Century. None of this is deathless prose, you understand, except among the true Star Trek worshippers, but it is on a less insulting level than something like T\_h\_e\_D\_u\_k\_e\_s\_o\_f\_H\_a\_z\_a\_r\_d.

STEEL BEACH by John Varley  
1992, (hardback + SFBC)  
Reviewed by Dale L. Skran, Jr.  
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After people read science fiction for a while, it is fairly common to observe the "older, funnier" phenomenon that Woody Allen had to live with. Readers begin harking back to the "good old days." For some, this was the 50s when writers like Asimov and Heinlein were pumping out their best stuff. For others, it was the 60s and burning stars like J. G. Ballard and Thomas Disch. For people like myself (born in 1958), the 70s with Ben Bova at the helm of A\_n\_a\_l\_o\_g and writers like George R. R. Martin and Larry Niven looms as the Golden Age. However, my personal guess is that this "effect" derives in part from the tendency of readers to keep following "old favorites" and not looking at new talent. Objectively, I believe SF today is as strong or stronger than in any of these previous epochs, even in areas such as "hard SF." Some are willing to allow that writing today is better, and certainly much is published, but the complaint is that the "sense of wonder" is gone, and fantasy has overtaken hard SF. By sheer weight, this is surely true, but if you look there is some tremendous hard SF out there. Recently, I have reviewed A\_r\_i\_s\_t\_o\_i by Walter Jon Williams, and A\_F\_i\_r\_e\_o\_n\_t\_h\_e\_D\_e\_e\_p by Vernor Vinge. I hope they both get the Hugo nominations they deserve. However, they are not alone in 1992. Two other equally strong novels appeared, and we'll take up one of them now.

John Varley was one of the blazing stars of my Golden Age in the 70s. He swept in to the SF world with a series of intensely written short stories dealing with complex issues of gender and human transformation, well before the cyberpunk revolution. Unfortunately, it became clear that his command of the novel was limited, and his steadfast refusal to have believable (or appealing) male characters became annoying. He also became involved in a long-term book contract deal for the Titan - Wizard - Demon series that seemed to keep him in a creative rut. He emerged periodically, sometimes winning the Hugo, but always as a less than dominant figure. Now he returns with a major achievement - S\_t\_e\_e\_l\_B\_e\_a\_c\_h.

Although not strictly part of the "Worlds" universe he used for most of his short stories, for all practical purposes it is the same universe. Unknown aliens have wiped humanity off the Earth, apparently without any recognition that we are even intelligent. Their attentions are instead focused on whales, the Earth's only important species. For about 100 years humans survive on the moon and in a few space colonies on a military footing, but this has started to relax by the time of S\_t\_e\_e\_l\_B\_e\_a\_c\_h.

S\_t\_e\_e\_l\_B\_e\_a\_c\_h follows Hildy Johnson, a reporter at a tabloid newspaper on the moon through sex changes, a dinosaur farm, the deification of a gigastar, life in an imitation of the old West, and a revolution a la T\_h\_e\_M\_o\_o\_n\_i\_s\_a\_H\_a\_r\_s\_h\_M\_i\_s\_t\_r\_e\_s\_s. The technology is plausible, the backgrounds interesting, and the lurking menace all too believable. For once, Varley has succeeded in making sex changes a natural and believable part of the story, and avoided having all male characters being moronic ciphers.

In many ways, the book is a homage to the best of Heinlein and the L5 Society, which ends up (oddly enough) playing a significant (and plausible, mind you) role in things. For insiders only - try to figure out which character is really Jerry Pournelle! This paragraph makes S\_t\_e\_e\_l\_B\_e\_a\_c\_h sound like bad fan fiction, which it isn't. It's a thoughtful, interesting story about the stress that powerful technology might place on the idea of being human. A "steel beach" is Varley's apt analogy for what we live on now. Just as the fish came out onto a sandy beach to be reptiles and mammals, we are crawling out onto a steel beach to become something else. This is a time of huge choices and awesome responsibilities, ranging from nuclear power to genetic engineering to protecting the ecosystem. It has never been more exciting, or more dangerous, to be human. Heinlein had an abiding faith that we would survive, just barely, and so does Varley. We need all the help, and all the tools we can lay our hands on. S\_t\_e\_e\_l\_B\_e\_a\_c\_h may be one of those tools.

Highly recommended to fans of Varley, Heinlein, hard SF, gender-bender SF, and human transformation. Sexual situations and ideas may disturb some. Likely Hugo nominee from 1992.

ARISTOI by Walter Jon Williams  
TOR Books, 1992, \$22.95 (hardback)  
Reviewed by Dale L. Skran, Jr.  
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I've been watching Walter Jon Williams ever since I read his first novel, H\_a\_r\_d\_w\_i\_r\_e\_d. Dismissed by many as mere imitation cyberpunk, H\_a\_r\_d\_w\_i\_r\_e\_d seemed to me a readable and interesting near-future piece of SF, albeit a bit derivative of Gibson. Later novels, including V\_o\_i\_c\_e\_o\_f\_t\_h\_e\_W\_h\_i\_r\_l\_w\_i\_n\_d and A\_n\_g\_e\_l\_S\_t\_a\_t\_i\_o\_n showed William's development as a writer and a storyteller, but did not win him any great accolades.

At last, in A\_r\_i\_s\_t\_o\_i Williams has made what may come to be recognized as a major contribution to SF. Here, he goes beyond imitation or extension, and creates his own, wonderfully visualized future world where progress in AI, virtual reality, and nanotech have been carried to all-too-reasonable conclusions. Structurally similar in Varley's S\_t\_e\_e\_l\_B\_e\_a\_c\_h in that both are based in a future where the Earth has been destroyed, Williams creates a texture for his world that is unique. Unlike many SF writers who seem uncomfortable or unfamiliar with non-scientific fields, he seems equally at home with art, science, history, or psychology. In A\_r\_i\_s\_t\_o\_i Williams writes believably of the artistic side of several characters, creating grand and wonderful speculations of just what we might do with ourselves "if this goes on." The layered and subtle descriptions of artistic works and activities are all too rare in science fiction. Among other things, the main character,



Gabriel, spends a fair part of the story composing an opera - while working on a half dozen other projects.

Initially the reader may have to struggle a bit to find their bearings in the strange new world of the Aristoi (what, after all, is an "oneirochronon" or a "skiagenos"?), but soon the neatly developed ideas become clear, and you are immersed in a world where people deliberately split their personalities to perform multiple tasks, where the virtual world is always overlaid on the natural world, and where control of the physical almost equals control of the virtual.

Combine this with interesting characters (the self-confident Gabriel, the shy Clancy, and the mysterious, alluring Zhenling), add in sexual relationships that almost necessitate diagramming, and a rousing mystery in space in the grand tradition (a planet full of people that shouldn't exist) combined with a mysterious death, and you have an enormously engaging tale of a truly multi-dimensional character (this means more than you may realize!) engaged in a dangerous struggle.

I'm not going to say this should be nominated for the Hugo, since if I do, that'll be the kiss of death. Just read it.

P.S.: The jacket art by Jim Burns is excellent, both as art and as an evocation of the story!

SCENT OF A WOMAN  
A film review by Mark R. Leeper  
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Capsule review: \_ S \_ c \_ e \_ n \_ t \_ o \_ f \_ a \_ W \_ o \_ m \_ a \_ n is slick and well-made, making 157 minutes seem like a lot less. It makes the audience feel all the right emotions at the right turns. But ultimately there is less here than meets the eye. While the last fifteen minutes will please some, the same segment will strike others as pat and contrived. Rating: high +1 (-4 to +4).

Curiously, \_ S \_ c \_ e \_ n \_ t \_ o \_ f \_ a \_ W \_ o \_ m \_ a \_ n is a film of a man's journey from childhood to adulthood. Charlie Simms (played by Chris O'Donnell)

goes to a very upper-class private prep school where the nicest kids are super-snobs and most others are worse. Charlie has two problems over Thanksgiving weekend. In the days just before Thanksgiving he saw some students setting up a prank that went very wrong. Now the administration is using both a big carrot and a big stick to pry out what Charlie knows. His other problem is Lt. Colonel Frank Slade (played by Al Pacino). Charlie has been hired to care for Slade over the weekend. Slade is very much like the Jack Nicholson character in A F e w G o o d M e n, but now a blind alcoholic who hates the world. What makes the story curious is that it is Slade who must make the journey to adulthood. Charlie learns a different lesson, that of seizing opportunity.

Charlie's job is just simple baby-sitting, but Slade has other ideas. He drags Charlie to New York City on a mission of Slade's own planning. As you could predict, the two men who start by hating each other have adventures together and learn to respect and admire each other. Their togetherness is just what each turns out to need, to nobody's surprise.

Much has been said about how good Pacino's acting is in S c e n t o f a W o m a n, but in fact he seems to overpower every sentence he speaks. Like his character, he forces himself to be the center of attention in every scene where he appears. If Chris O'Donnell is remembered for the film, it is for the scenes where Pacino did not appear. Incidentally, this film also exploits the myth that blind people seem to develop their other senses to super-human levels. Pacino's Slade can judge the quality of a salute without actually seeing it. He also can identify the perfume and even the soap a woman uses, hence the title of the film. Bo Goldman's screenplay has good dialogue but ultimately falls into the not uncommon cinematic irony of pulling all the familiar strings and pushing all the familiar buttons to tell the audience not to let themselves be manipulated nor should they manipulate others. I give this S c e n t o f a W o m a n high +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.