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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society  
Club Notice - 02/19/93 -- Vol. 11, No. 34

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

Unless otherwise stated, all meetings are in Holmdel 4N-509  
Wednesdays at noon.

  D  A  T  E              T  O  P  I  C

- 03/10 WEST OF EDEN by Harry Harrison (Primitive Humans Vs.  
          Alternatively-Evolved Bio-Tech-Advanced Reptiles)
- 03/31 STEEL BEACH by John Varley (Near-Future Utopias--  
          Or Are They?)
- 03/31 Deadline for Hugo Nominations
- 04/21 ARISTOI by Walter Jon Williams  
          (If This--AI, Virtual Reality, Nanotech--Goes On)
- 05/12 THOMAS THE RHYMER by Ellen Kushner (Fantasy in a Modern Vein)
- 06/02 WORLD AT THE END OF TIME by Frederik Pohl  
          (Modern Stapledonian Fiction)
- 06/23 CONSIDER PHLEBAS by Iain Banks  
          (Space Opera with a Knife Twist)
- 07/14 SIGHT OF PROTEUS by Charles Sheffield (Human Metamorphosis)

Outside events:

The Science Fiction Association of Bergen County meets on the second  
Saturday of every month in Upper Saddle River; call 201-933-2724 for  
details. The New Jersey Science Fiction Society meets on the third  
Saturday of every month in Belleville; call 201-432-5965 for details.

- HO Chair: John Jetzt     HO 1E-525 908-834-1563 hocpb!jetzt
  - LZ Chair: Rob Mitchell   HO 1D-505A 908-834-1267 hocpb!jrrt
  - MT Chair: Mark Leeper    MT 3D-441 908-957-5619 mtgzfs3!leeper
  - HO Librarian: Nick Sauer   HO 4F-427 908-949-7076 homxc!11366ns
  - LZ Librarian: Lance Larsen   LZ 3L-312 908-576-3346 quartet!lfl
  - MT Librarian: Mark Leeper   MT 3D-441 908-957-5619 mtgzfs3!leeper
  - Factotum: Evelyn Leeper   MT 1F-329 908-957-2070 mtgzy!ecl
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1. With this issue we inaugurate a new sort of review. We have reviewed films, TV, books, and other miscellaneous manifestations of science fiction in the public media in the past but until now we have missed one of the biggees. We have not talked a lot about science fiction in postage stamps.

THE MT VOID

Page 2

Now until recently science fiction did not show up a whole lot in postage stamps. In my opinion there was a lot of fantasy and more than a little horror, but not much science fiction. Then the Post Office Department started selling envelopes with built-in stamps that were a hologram of a spaceship and a space station. Now that the Elvis stamp was a big success they have decided to go more to the popular media for stamp subject. Yes, soon we may have a postage stamp celebrating the nuptials of Pebbles and Bamm-Bamm. But for now they have a five stamp panorama--a sort of pentatycho--showing a scene out of a Buck Rogers style future. They call it "Space Fantasy." It cost \$5.80 for a book of four strips of 5 \$.29 stamps each. Correspondent Bill Higgins wrote Evelyn and me about the stamps:

Perhaps you and Mark can explain the story this little mural is telling. There is a fleet of green pointy ships and a fleet of red zucchini-shaped ships, but they don't seem to be shooting at each other or anything. [I think we are at a sort of a cross-roads. It is sort of like you get cars going in different directions on the L.A. Freeway and they only sometimes shoot at each other.--mrl] And where are those domed cities, or shopping malls, going? [It looks like they are going generally upward.--mrl]

The astronomical details are puzzling, too. Why is the sky the color of tomato juice? [For artistic effect! If we knew if this was night or morning we would know if the sky is a good sign or a bad sign. --mrl] I count fifteen or maybe sixteen spherical worlds in the pictures. All are crescent-lit by the white star in the center stamp.

There two people (?) in spacesuits, silhouetted against the big white star, yet we can clearly see colors and details of their costumes-- therefore they must be lit by a source much brighter than the star, coming more or less from the direction of our point of view. But the source can't be

\*too\* bright or we wouldn't see crescent planets, we would see full planets. The same light source would seem to be shining on most of the spaceships. I suppose this could be a moderately bright source close to us and the ships but distant from most of the planets. On the three biggest planets, we can see detail in their shadowed parts (i.e., not in the crescent), which supports this theory.

Technology: All the vehicles appear to have rocket plumes coming out the back. But what kind of rockets are they using? The exhaust colors are distinct for each kind of ship in view: blue, chartreuse, orange, pink, turquoise, and yellow.

I hope you can clear up some of these mysteries. [Sure I can. It is all a fantasy. And after all, isn't it the thought that counts?--mrl]

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

KINGDOMS OF THE WALL by Robert Silverberg  
Bantam Spectra, ISBN 0-553-09309-6, 1993, \$22.95.  
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper  
Copyright 1993 Evelyn C. Leeper

If it seems as if this is a reworking of Silverberg's own T\_h\_e  
F\_a\_c\_e\_o\_f\_t\_h\_e\_W\_a\_t\_e\_r\_s--a journey across an alien world to seek God--  
that's because to a large extent it is. In T\_h\_e\_F\_a\_c\_e\_o\_f\_t\_h\_e\_W\_a\_t\_e\_r\_s,  
it's humans traveling across an ocean world; in K\_i\_n\_g\_d\_o\_m\_s\_o\_f\_t\_h\_e\_W\_a\_l\_l  
it's aliens climbing the Wall, an enormous mountain set atop a  
series of cliffs. It's true that in T\_h\_e\_F\_a\_c\_e\_o\_f\_t\_h\_e\_W\_a\_t\_e\_r\_s the  
pilgrims are pilgrims by necessity, while in K\_i\_n\_g\_d\_o\_m\_s\_o\_f\_t\_h\_e\_W\_a\_l\_l  
they are pilgrims by choice. And this distinction does change the  
main focus of the story from survival to the quest for ... what? Is  
it a quest for knowledge or a quest for something greater than  
oneself? The pilgrims of K\_i\_n\_g\_d\_o\_m\_s\_o\_f\_t\_h\_e\_W\_a\_l\_l are climbing to meet  
the gods, who live at the top of the Wall. But some go merely as  
worshippers, while others see themselves in more Promethean terms.  
The question being examined is not just the purpose of the climb,  
but of life itself.

Silverberg has chosen to make his pilgrims aliens--not a primitive people who are supposedly alien, but who are, nonetheless, human in their biology and motivation--but a race who are n\_o\_t human, whose biology is very different than our own. I was happy to see this change from the usual approach, but disappointed in what Silverberg used it for. Or, more precisely, I was disappointed that it wasn't this way purely for its own sake. I was also disappointed that Silverberg felt it necessary to spell out the "lesson of the Wall" rather than allow the reader to derive it him- or herself from the story.

If you've already read T\_h\_e\_F\_a\_c\_e\_o\_f\_t\_h\_e\_W\_a\_t\_e\_r\_s, this will probably seem just a reworking of that in a different setting with a few changes (somewhat like S\_o\_m\_m\_e\_r\_s\_b\_y is to T\_h\_e\_R\_e\_t\_u\_r\_n\_o\_f\_M\_a\_r\_t\_i\_n\_G\_u\_e\_r\_r\_e). Of the two, I would say K\_i\_n\_g\_d\_o\_m\_s\_o\_f\_t\_h\_e\_W\_a\_l\_l is marginally better.

THE SEVENTH BULLET by Daniel D. Victor  
St. Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-08291-6, 1992, \$17.95.  
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper  
Copyright 1993 Evelyn C. Leeper

Three points stick out in this account of Sherlock Holmes's investigation of the murder of journalist David Graham Phillips. One, Victor has been heavily by the JFK conspiracy theories. Two,

Victor telegraphs his ending. Three, Victor desperately needs a 1912 calendar.

To take the last first, Victor has Watson say he first met Mrs. Carolyn Frevert on Friday, March 13, 1912. Other days and dates are in sync with this. But in 1912, March 13 was a Wednesday. That the year is 1912 is obvious from many other statements in the book, as is the fact that it is March. And Victor/Watson makes a point of saying it was a Friday the 13th. Very sloppy. The same carelessness, or perhaps artlessness, is evident when the resolution of it all becomes obvious about three-quarters of the way through the book.

And without giving too much away, I have to say that the facts of the case seem to bear no small resemblance to some of the claims regarding the Kennedy assassination. Mysterious bullets, incomplete autopsy results, and more make me think that Victor patterned the Phillips assassination at least in part after one fifty years later. And Holmes doesn't so much solve the crime as have large pieces of the solution handed to him. (Phillips, by the way, was a real journalist who really wrote the works attributed to him in this book and really was assassinated in 1912. It is p\_o\_s\_s\_i\_b\_l\_e that all the similarities to the Kennedy assassination are real, but I doubt it.)

On the plus side, Victor manages the characterization of Holmes and Watson fairly well and writes a narrative in the correct Watsonian style. Except for one slip into a Britishism by an American character, he handles the differences between the two nationalities and makes them distinct. The use of Theodore Roosevelt as a character is perhaps gratuitous--I am of the school that believes Sherlock Holmes can be interesting even if he doesn't meet Freud or Dracula or Theodore Roosevelt--but it's not enough to detract seriously from the novel.

On the whole, this is a fairly lightweight entry, but still a pleasant way to pass an evening.

GROUNDHOG DAY  
A film review by Mark R. Leeper  
Copyright 1993 Mark R. Leeper

Capsule review: If you could live one day over and over, as if you were replaying a video game, could you ever get the day perfect? What would be your best strategy? Bill Murray plays a weatherman reliving over and over February 2 in Punxsutawney, PA. What is the best he can make of the day? The premise is engaging and the execution entertaining. Rating: high +1 (-4 to +4).

On May 5, 1961, T\_w\_i\_l\_i\_g\_h\_t\_Z\_o\_n\_e ran an episode called "Shadow Play," written by Charles Beaumont and directed by John Brahm. Dennis Weaver played Adam Grant, a man sentenced to death. It is the day Grant is to be executed for murder. He claims to have a sort of deja vu and can even tell people verifiable facts he seems to have no way of knowing. He claims that he is living the same day over and over. Eventually he is executed only to wake up in his cell with the same day starting over. This idea gets re-used and explored in detail in G\_r\_o\_u\_n\_d\_h\_o\_g\_D\_a\_y.

Phil (played by Bill Murray) is a television weatherman with a funny on-screen persona. Of the television he is bitter and cynical and does just about whatever he can to make himself difficult to deal with. February 2, Groundhog Day, finds Phil in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, filming the famous Groundhog Day festivities. Phil is less than thrilled and is making life miserable for his producer Rita (played by Andie McDowell) and cameraman Larry (played by Chris Elliot). Next morning he wakes up and it is still Groundhog Day. Phil is living the same day over and over and making the same mistakes. The day becomes like a video game that he plays over and over, practicing to get past all the hazards of the day. He uses one strategy after another trying to find how to get the most out of the day and how best to benefit from having gone through the day use his experiences of having already been through the day.

The script (by Danny Rubin and director Harold Ramis) starts taking on a higher meaning of just what the purpose of life. Phil can play his day for thrills, he can play it to gain self-enrichment, he can play it to get sex, he can be an altruist, or he can romance Rita. The latter is questionable since, first, Rita is a bit sappy herself, but also it is a bit of a challenge since after Phil has been so nasty way back on February 1, it seems unlikely that one day would be enough for re-educating Rita. The film's conclusion about what the best of all possible Groundhog Days is is a bit of a cheat, since it depends very heavily on previous knowledge--life is not really like a video game--and it is somewhat reminiscent of I\_t'\_s\_a\_W\_o\_n\_d\_e\_r\_f\_u\_l\_L\_i\_f\_e.

Ramis has an intriguing premise taken just about as far as it

could be taken. It is pleasant but not particularly deep. I rate it a high +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

## HOMeward BOUND: THE INCREDIBLE JOURNEY

A film review by Mark R. Leeper

Copyright 1993 Mark R. Leeper

Capsule review: This is a remake of the 1963 film T\_h\_e\_I\_n\_c\_r\_e\_d\_i\_b\_l\_e\_J\_o\_u\_r\_n\_e\_y. In this version, however, the animals talk to each other, often in off-color wisecracks. It is not a good sign that the producers thought this device was needed for modern audiences, but it does add its own entertainment value to the film. Rating: +1 (-4 to +4).

I was twelve years old when I read Sheila Burnford's I\_n\_c\_r\_e\_d\_i\_b\_l\_e\_J\_o\_u\_r\_n\_e\_y. It must have been a year or so later that I saw the Walt Disney adaptation. I do not actually remember if that film was narrated or not. I suspect it must have been narrated to keep the story understandable. (I think T\_h\_e\_B\_e\_a\_r was about the first case I saw of a feature film that shows animal characters completely non-verbally.) In any case, now the film has been remade almost thirty years later and the approach to conveying animal action has taken a step backwards from realism. In Duwayne Dunham's remake the animals talk and even wise-crack to each other. That certainly makes the animals easier to understand, and it opens the way for a lot of humor--a la L\_o\_o\_k\_W\_h\_o'\_s\_T\_a\_l\_k\_i\_n\_g--but it regrettably pushes the story into fantasy.

Shadow (played by Ben with Don Ameche's voice), Chance (Rattler/Michael J. Fox), and (Tiki/Sally Field) love their human family, but are left temporarily with a family friend. Through a mix-up, they decide they have been abandoned and determine to strike out on their own to make their way home. Between them and home are some unspecified hundreds of miles (250 miles in the original) of beautiful but treacherous wilderness.

The screenplay is by Linda Wooverton (who worked on B\_e\_a\_u\_t\_y\_a\_n\_d\_t\_h\_e\_B\_e\_a\_s\_t) and Caroline Thompson (who wrote E\_d\_w\_a\_r\_d\_S\_c\_i\_s\_s\_o\_r\_h\_a\_n\_d\_s).

Often the wise-cracking animals get off a good one, but it is

somewhat hit or miss. Lines like the referring to a porcupine as having a "bad hair day" just don't work. In spite of that misplaced humor, HomewardBound does hit a responsive chord and will have many members of the audience openly crying at the loyalty of these pets for their humans. Not a perfect film, but generally one that should please adults and children. I give the film a +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.