

@@@@@ @ @@@@@ @ @@@@@@@@@ @ @@@@@ @@@@@ @@@@
@ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @
@ @@@@@ @@@@@ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @
@
@ @

Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
Club Notice - 02/26/93 -- Vol. 11, No. 35

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 1C-523 908-834-1267 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

All material copyright by author unless otherwise noted.

1. Occasionally you realize you are a little closer to the future than you thought. No, I don't mean there is more gray in my beard than I realized. That goes without saying. No, there is an article in the January 23 ScienceNews that hit me as something of a surprise. Some of you probably already know about the Turing

THE MT VOID

Page 2

Test. It is a measure of artificial intelligence. Having a machine that can talk like a human is really the goal here. It is set up in a complex way, but a group of judges sit at terminals talking to a series of conversationalists at the other end. Some of the conversationalists are human; some are computer programs. The question is whether the judges can tell which are which. A computer program passes the test if a significant number of the judges think the program is really a human.

I have known about the Turing Test for years and thought we were still a long way from actually achieving the Turing Test goal. Joseph Weintraub of Thinking Software in Woodside, New York, is a lot closer than I had realized. He has a wise-cracking program that chats about the differences between men and women. Of eight expert judges, two thought the program was a human; six knew--or suspected--it was a piece of software. Two out of eight is not such a great average until you start to think that for 25% of these experts the Turing test is being fulfilled!

2. Through some software bug, last week's issue was mistakenly labeled Volume 11, Number 31, instead of Volume 11, Number 32. [-ecl]

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

Truth, in matters of religion, is simply the opinion that has survived.

-- Oscar Wilde

THE GUNS OF THE SOUTH by Harry Turtledove
Ballantine, ISBN 0-345-37675-7, 1992, \$19.
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper
Copyright 1993 Evelyn C. Leeper

If the point of studying history is to learn from it, then surely one should learn something from alternate histories as well. And certainly I found a lot in T_h_e_G_u_n_s_o_f_t_h_e_S_o_u_t_h that is relevant to current concerns--in fact, far more so than one usually finds in alternate histories.

But first, the story. Judith Tarr was supposed to be on this panel, but couldn't make it. Harry Turtledove has credited Judith Tarr with the inspiration for this book (previously known as T_h_e_L_o_n_g_D_r_u_m_R_o_l_l). It seems that he was talking to Judith about one of her books and she bemoaned the fact that the cover on it was "as anachronistic as Robert E. Lee holding an Uzi." Well, Turtledove thought about this and decided that Uzis were not the right weapon, but what about if Lee had an AK-47? What if Lee had a l_o_t of AK-47s? And who would give Lee a lot of AK-47s? Time traveling

Afrikaaners, of course. So Turtledove postulates a group of Afrikaaners from 2014 who have traveled back in time 150 years with thousands of AK-47s to help the Confederacy win the Civil War and set up a white supremacist government. In addition to the AK-47s, they have two additional "weapons": information about the Union's battle plans, and the spectre of the horrible outcome if the Union wins. The former, however, diminishes in value with time as this timeline moves further and further away from the timeline the Afrikaaners know. And the latter has its own pitfalls, as some soon discover.

The most interesting part, though, is after the Confederacy wins the war. (Okay, this is a slight spoiler, but with thousands of AK-47s, it's hard to believe they might lose.) Though the war was fought in large part to maintain slavery, which in term was based on the belief in the inferiority of the black race, Lee finds himself faced with two very uncomfortable facts. First, though the common wisdom in the Confederacy (and in the Union, for that matter) was that blacks wouldn't--couldn't--fight well as soldiers, the evidence of his own experience against black troops has taught Lee otherwise. And having begun thinking that maybe all the other "facts" about blacks that he's been taught are equally false, he is then brought face to face with the realization that history--his great-grandchildren and the great-grandchildren of those around him--would condemn slavery, and the men who upheld it, as evil. How he and others resolve this conflict is the focus of the last part of

T_ h_ e_ G_ u_ n_ s_ o_ f_ t_ h_ e_ S_ o_ u_ t_ h and to a great extent of the book as a whole.

And here is where I see the relevance. What do you do when evidence disproves a widely held belief about a group of people--in particular, about the fighting skills of a group of people? What do you do when you suspect (for can we ever k_ n_ o_ w?) that history will condemn your age as bigoted for its treatment of a group of people?

In case you haven't figured it out by now, I'm talking about the whole argument about allowing gay and lesbian soldiers in the military. Unless Turtledove is psychic (or had visitors from the future), he couldn't have foreseen just how relevant T_ h_ e_ G_ u_ n_ s_ o_ f_ t_ h_ e

_ _ S _ o _ u _ t _ h would be. Yet that is what most impresses me about it. The historical aspects are, I am sure, impeccably researched, but it is the moral questions that gives this book meaning and body. It is more than just a laying-out of alternate Civil War battles. It has characters who have feelings and convictions, and who face dilemmas, and who change and are changed by the events around them. Don't think of this as just another "What if the South won the Civil War?" novel; it's much, much more.

TRIUMPH by Ben Bova
Tor, ISBN 0-312-85359-9, 1993, \$18.95.
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper
Copyright 1993 Evelyn C. Leeper

In an alternate history story, something happens that didn't happen in our world (or, conversely, something d_o_e_s_n't happen that d_i_d happen in our world). But while this is a necessary condition, it is not a sufficient one. An alternate history in which Fred Wilson (or even John Kennedy) takes his coffee with two sugars instead of one on May 17, 1962, is not going to be very interesting unless something noticeably different happens because of this. A corollary of this is that you have to s_e_e some result--an alternate history in which the usher knocks John Wilkes Booth's hand aside at the last moment needs to have something after that besides Lincoln saying, "Thank you, son. Now we can get on with rebuilding the country," or even, "How dare he! I'll show those Rebels--I'll order every town in Virginia burned to the ground!"

This is all by way of background to my main objection to T_r_i_u_m_p_h by Ben Bova. It sets up an interesting situation--what if Stalin had died on April 12, 1945, instead of Roosevelt, and in the subsequent confusion the Americans pushed on to take Berlin instead of leaving it to the Soviets? The problem is, that's it. That's the whole book. It starts on April 1, 1945, with the activation of "Operation Broadsword," and ends on April 30, 1945. One assumes the politics of post-war Europe will be different but it is left as an exercise for the reader as to how. (One is further misled by the jacket blurbs comparing it to Len Deighton's S_S_-_G_B and Robert Harris's F_a_t_h_e_r_l_a_n_d. First of all, in both of those Germany w_i_n_s, and second, they take place after the change-point, the former by one year and the latter by twenty.) We do get to hear Churchill talk about how Europe would have been had the Soviets taken Berlin. Of course, he gets it wrong, which may be Bova's way of saying that no one can predict the future even though we have to make decisions as if we could.

Another flaw arises from Bova's apparent need to tie all this into space exploration. Bova makes Yuri Gagarin's older brother Grigori Stalin's private secretary. But Evgey Riabchikov's R_u_s_s_i_a_n_s_i_n_S_p_a_c_e gives a detailed description of Gagarin's family and he had no older brother Grigori, nor did his parents die in the collectivization as Bova describes. Yes, in an alternate history there are fictionalizations, but to make such a major character a fictional relative of a real person when that isn't the main thrust of the novel seems a violation of Occam's Razor if nothing else. (You can postulate a fictional relative if that is your "what if?" but not just as a side note.)

In short, it's an interesting premise but Bova doesn't take it anywhere. For inveterate alternate history fans only.

Nebula Nominations (1993)

Novels

- Barnes, John: A M i l l i o n O p e n D o o r s (Tor, October 1992)
- Fowler, Karen Joy: S a r a h C a n a r y (Henry Holt, October 1992)
- McHugh, Maureen F.: C h i n a M o u n t a i n Z h a n g (Tor, March 1992)
- Vinge, Vernor: A F i r e U p o n t h e D e e p (Tor, April 1992)
- Willis, Connie: D o o m s d a y B o o k (Bantam, June, 1992)
- Yolen, Jane: B r i a r R o s e (Tor, September 1992)

Novellas

- Bull, Emma: "Silver or Gold" (A f t e r t h e K i n g, Tor, January 1992)
- Denton, Bradley: "The Territory" (F a n t a s y & S c i e n c e F i c t i o n, July 1992)
- McHugh, Maureen: "Protection" (A s i m o v ' s S F, April 1992)
- Morrow, James: "City of Truth" (St. Martin's Press, May 1992)
- Oltion, Jerry & Goodloe, Lee: "Contact" (A n a l o g, November 1991)
- Shepard, Lucius: "Barnacle Bill the Spacer" (A s i m o v ' s, July 1992)
- Swanwick, Michael: "Griffin's Egg" (St. Martin's Press, January 1992/A s i m o v ' s, May 1992).

Novelette

- Benford, Gregory: "Matter's End" (F u l l S p e c t r u m 3, Bantam, April 1991)
- Dyer, S.N.: "The July Ward" (A s i m o v ' s S F, July 1991)
- Gilman, Carolyn: "The Honeycrafters" (F a n t a s y & S c i e n c e F i c t i o n, October/November, 1991)
- Sargent, Pamela: "Danny Goes to Mars" (A s i m o v ' s S F, October 1992)
- Shwartz, Susan: "Suppose They Gave a Peace" (A l t e r n a t e P r e s i d e n t s, Tor, February 1992)
- Williams, Walter Jon: "Prayers on the Wind" (W h e n t h e M u s i c ' s O v e r, Bantam, May 1991).

Short Stories

Bishop, Michael: "Life Regarded as a Jigsaw Puzzle of Highly Lustrous Cats" (_ O _ m _ n _ i, September 1991)

DiFilippo, Paul: "Lennon Spex" (_ A _ m _ a _ z _ i _ n _ g, July 92)

Kress, Nancy: "The Mountain to Mohammed" (_ A _ s _ i _ m _ o _ v' _ s, April 1992)

Robinson, Kim Stanley: "Vinland the Dream" (_ A _ s _ i _ m _ o _ v' _ s,

November 1991/ _ R _ e _ m _ a _ k _ i _ n _ g _ H _ i _ s _ t _ o _ r _ y, Tor, December 1991)

Soukup, Martha: "The Arbitrary Placement of Walls"

(_ A _ s _ i _ m _ o _ v' _ s _ S _ F, April 1992)

Willis, Connie: "Even the Queen" (_ A _ s _ i _ m _ o _ v' _ s _ S _ F, April 1992).