

worthwhile to check their facts or if they just sit in their armchairs and make them up. Do they realize there is a world out there to check their facts against? That got me wondering if there was. Of course that is one of the important philosophical questions of the 20th Century. Can anything real out there exist

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or is the whole world just a figment of my imagination?

That got me thinking about Solipsism. Do they have Famous Solipsist School? I can imagine ads on matchbooks and in magazines that ask simple questions about the material world. If you fill out the coupon and send it in, you have already flunked out. Now can I find someone to just go into the business with me?

2. GREEN MARS by Kim Stanley Robinson (Bantam Spectra, ISBN 0-553-37335-8, 1994, 535pp, US\$12.95) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

This is the second book of Robinson's "Mars" trilogy. The first was last year's Hugo-nominated R_e_d_M_a_r_s, and the series will be finished with the upcoming B_l_u_e_M_a_r_s. (I should mention again that while Robinson's novella "Green Mars" appears to take place in the same future history as this series, it is not a part of this novel.)

G_r_e_e_n_M_a_r_s, it must be said, suffers from the same flaws and difficulties as most middle-of-a-trilogy novels. It does not start at the beginning, nor does it go through to the end. While R_e_d_M_a_r_s can be read as a stand-alone novel, G_r_e_e_n_M_a_r_s cannot. You must know what happened in R_e_d_M_a_r_s for G_r_e_e_n_M_a_r_s to make any sense or have any meaning. (I would really have appreciated a brief glossary of major characters and political groups--my memory of the details of R_e_d_M_a_r_s has faded over the intervening year.)

There is also (to my tastes) far too much technical discussion of terraforming and areology, particularly in the first half of the book. For example, on page 148 Robinson writes: "The surface of

the glacier appeared to be extremely broken, as the literature had suggested--mixed with regolith during the flooding, and shot through with trapped carbonation bubbles. Rocks and boulders caught on the surface had melted the ice underneath them and then it had refrozen around them, in a daily cycle that had left them all about two-thirds submerged. All the seracs, standing above the surface of the glacier like titanic dolmens, were on close inspection found to be deeply pitted." (By the way, a regolith is a layer of loose rock material resting on bedrock, a serac is a large mass of ice broken off the main body of a glacier and remaining behind in a crevasse after glacial movement or melting, and a dolmen is a prehistoric megalithic [large stone] structure consisting of two or more upright stones with a capstone, typically forming a chamber (which doesn't actually sound like what the seracs would look like, but what the heck). All definitions courtesy of the American Heritage Dictionary.) I could be wrong, but I also think that the discussions on pages 175 through 187 and

elsewhere of the poisonousness effects of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere are confusing it with carbon monoxide. While inhaling large amounts of carbon dioxide can cause death by suffocation, it is not poisonous in the usual sense of the word, and it is not clear to me that in an atmosphere with a certain percentage of oxygen it matters whether the remainder is nitrogen or carbon dioxide, at least as far as human respiration goes. (Though the atmospheric pressure would be important--consider the possible side-effects of nitrogen to deep-sea divers.)

This may all seem terrible technical and nit-picky, but the book lends itself to that so well that it should be somewhat expected.

It is only in the second half of Green Mars that Robinson returns in force to the political and historical aspects of the series. While one may argue that the key event that triggers the "phase change" of Green Mars' final chapter is totally arbitrary, there's no denying that historical triggers often are. Still, I have to reserve final judgement on Green Mars until Blue Mars concludes the series, and then see if Green Mars serves its purpose in the overall picture. That is the only way to view this book and much as I want to see Kim Stanley Robinson finally get a Hugo, it makes

no sense to look at this as a possibility. (I mention this because this had a British edition in 1993, and hence would be eligible for the Hugo awards for last year, to be given at Conadian this September. I note this just to clarify its eligibility for anyone who does want to nominate it.)

3. SIRENS (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule review: This is a delicious Australian comedy based on around real incident from the 1930s. An English vicar visits the estate of an Australian famous for painting female nudes to convince the artist not to exhibit a painting deemed blasphemous. Instead the vicar's wife is seduced by the sensuous atmosphere surrounding the artist. Rating: +2 (-4 to +4)

It was the 1930s and the Australian art world was shocked by the so-called immoral paintings of Norman Lindsey. There were some people who were irritated as he has painted picture after picture with sensuous female nudes. But for some, particularly for the local religious authorities, this time he had gone too far. A local exhibition included a crucified female nude. Around this minor controversial episode of art history John Duigan has written and directed the most enchanting comedy film since last year's M_u_c_h A_d_o_a_b_o_u_t_N_o_t_h_i_n_g.

Anthony Campion (played by Hugh Grant) is an English vicar visiting Australia. His travel plans will take him near Lindsay's studio/home. He is given the mission of visiting Lindsay (played by Sam Neill) and convincing him to pull the offending painting from exhibition. Campion is deemed an ideal choice since he cannot possibly appear to represent outdated ideas to Lindsay. After all Campion was actually was a bit of a progressive himself at Oxford. And Campion even goes so far as to smoke Turkish cigarettes and call his pretty wife "Piglet." Lindsay can't help but be impressed by a free thinker like that, can he? Instead there will be a clash

of worldviews and Estella (a.k.a. Piglet) will discover there is an entire sensuous world she never knew.

This is a story about conflicting worldviews. In spite of considering himself very liberal, Anthony lives in a world of strict, church-dictated limits. Lindsay, his wife, and his three models live in a world of frequent nudity, open discussion of sex, promiscuity, and omni-present paintings and statues of female nudes that unnerves even the neighbors. But it is clear that the Campions are not prepared to survive in this hostile Australian world. There is a running gag about hostile animal attacks going on all around and the Campion's fear, though they themselves never meet anything more savage than the odd wallaroo. They seem to be followed by a snake, but his presence seems more metaphorical than real. Nature really seems toward them to be its most benevolent and beautiful, as if on its best behavior for guests.

Hugh Grant, does a terrific job of trying to seem free-thinking and yet being horribly inhibited. In the presence of nude models his worldly exterior gives way to flustered stuttering. Tara Fitzgerald of H_e_a_r_M_y_S_o_n_g initially matches her husband's disapproval of the sensuous lifestyle but slowly defrosts with time. There is a marvelous duality in her performance as she tries to appear straight-laced to her husband while exploring a side of herself that she has hidden from herself and others. Unfortunately Sam Neill has little to do in his performance but appeal worldly and in a way almost fatherly to the models he paints nude. He is almost the opposite of his character in T_h_e_P_i_a_n_o.

S_i_r_e_n_s is often very funny and at the same time serves as a sort of down-under Monroe Doctrine saying "The is Australia--no Pat Robertsons are welcome." I give it a +2 on the -4 to +4 scale.

4. Academy Award Shorts (1993) (film reviews by Mark R. Leeper):

For years there have been annual films that are compilations of the best animated films of the year, but to the best of my knowledge this is the first time there has been a compilation of Oscar-

nominated shorts shown as a unit prior to the actual award ceremonies. The films shown were taken from two categories, three films were from Documentary Short Subject (all that were nominated), two films from Live-action Short Subject, and last year's winner for Live-action Short Subject.

Even at New York City prices, this compilation was in fact well worth seeing. An effective short film can be as satisfying as a full length film. While the animation festivals are reaching a point of diminishing returns, these films, being Oscar-nominated, are all fairly accomplished and well-made productions so this is a fairly worthwhile ticket purchase. I have no idea if the compilation will tour the country or show only in New York City. It may even be intended primarily for academy voters. However, it is recommended that you watch your local PBS station who will likely show some of these shorts as filler.

"Blood Ties: The Life and Work of Sally Mann"
(Steven Cantor and Peter Spierer, 30 min.)

Sally Mann is a photographic artist, and a pretty good one by the examples shown here. Much of what she photographs is her own family around her secluded home out in some woody area. Apparently her family feels very comfortable with nudity. So of course there is a lot of child nudity in her art and this has put her on a collision course with Pat Robertson and people of the religious right afraid for the possible corruption of public decency and for the welfare of the Mann children. Her work is not crudely done and her children have the ethereal look of air spirits in Mann's photography. This film is a defense Mann and her work. There are some very superficial concessions to even-handedness perhaps just to demonstrate there is a controversy. I would have liked to see Robertson get a better chance to represent his point-of-view. (No, don't send me indignant mail. I just want to see a fair fight; I am not siding with Robertson. If Robertson found out what I actually think of him it would probably ruin his whole week. However, this could have been a more convincing argument if it showed more of the opposing point of view.)

In actual fact neither side makes its case very well. Mann contradicts herself, saying her pictures are not erotic but later admitting there are many aspects to her photographs and they can be seen as erotic. Mann claims that the children do not mind posing nude, but later her son does express some objections during a posing session and no longer poses nude. On the other hand, the allegation that the children have been damaged by the experience seems to be wrong. If anything the children seem more poised and confident for the experience.

"Chicks in White Satin"
(Elaine Holliman and Jason Schneider, 20 min.)

My wife found this more moving than I did. This film documents the preparations for the marriage of two lesbians, Heidi and Debra, and the eventual wedding ceremony. Much of it is sort of the "Candid Camera" reactions of people when they do things like trying to enter a bridal registry at a local department store. The parents give their reactions to wedding plans. Debra's mother is very easy-going and just accepts the plan. Debra's father says that he looked up the word "wedding" in the dictionary and since it did not say the principals had to be of different sexes, he accepted that this could be a wedding. Heidi's mother obviously is against the marriage, but eventually comes to accept it when it is clear there is nothing she can do to change the plan. Her husband never even responded when the wedding was announced. The rabbi performing the marriage simply seems to take it all in her stride. There are some interesting and even a few touching moments, but not sufficient to make this a standout film for me.

"Defending Our Lives"

(Margaret Lazarus and Renner Wunderlich, 30 min.)

I am no more an activist on issue of domestic violence than on many other very worthy issues, and this film did not grab me at the very beginning. But eventually this proved to be the most powerful film of the collection and I found myself getting angry in exactly the way the filmmaker intended. The style is not as polished as any of the other films, with the possible exception of "Chicks in White Satin." Instead, it seems just an editing together of several women telling their stories of domestic abuse intercut with lectures from a conference on domestic abuse. Part of what pulled me into this film was that early on I had the feeling that in the position of the battered women, I would know what to do. My formula often would included getting the police involved. One thing this film did for me was to show that this formula, or probably any formula, could often be futile and worse. Much, much worse. Too often police are unwilling to intervene in what they see as a family dispute. I suppose that is not all that surprising to me, but the film got me empathize to a far greater degree than I would have without seeing the film. In other words the documentary was totally successful. So while the film is superficially crude in style, it is very effective in technique.

"Down on the Waterfront"
(Stacy Title and Jonathan Penner, 27 min.)

This piece had several familiar professional actors and was professionally produced. But the short comic film is only occasionally really funny as a satire of how films really get made. In the post-war decade two filmmakers, whose only experience was making survival films for the military, would like to go into film production. They meet in a park with a longshoremen's union boss (played by Edward Asner) who wants to make film to counter _ O _ n _ t _ h _ e

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_ W _ a _ t _ e _ r _ f _ r _ o _ n _ t and to get revenge on Budd Schulberg for writing that film. The pace is a little slow, but the big problem is that there is insufficient payoff at the end beside a small swipe at Hollywood.

"Black Rider (Schwarzfahrer)"
(Pepe Danquart, 12 min.)

This is a short but very funny little film with two different kinds of "Black Rider." Unfortunately the pun of the title may be lost on many of the Americans who see the film and don't know what a "black rider" is. In Europe you buy a pass to ride busses and trains. There are only occasional spot-checks to see if people are carrying passes or are illegal "black riders"--people without passes. The spot-checks are only occasional but the penalties are stiff. So in this German comedy we have a man who is riding the bus illegally because his motorcycle has broken down, and we also have a bus rider who happens to a black man who has made the mistake of sitting next to a racist bigot. The story takes a while to develop, but it pays off with a very funny piece of irony.

"Omnibus"
(San Karmann, 9 min.)

"Omnibus" is last year's winner for live-action short. This is a witty, ironic piece of man on a train that doesn't stop at the station he wants. After months of taking the same train, suddenly the schedule have been changed to shoot right by his stop. He

suddenly realizes the schedule change was on the worse possible day and his whole way of life will crumble if he cannot get the train to stop one last time.

In the Documentary Short Subject category I would choose "Defending Our Lives." I only saw two of the five films nominated for Live-action Short Subject, but "Black Rider" is the better of the two.

5. Boskone 31 (con report by Evelyn C. Leeper) (part 1 of 3):

Last year the drive was one hour longer due to the move from Springfield to Framingham, and three hours longer coming back, because there was a snowstorm added on as well. This year it was another hour longer going up because of wretched traffic, but only a half-hour longer coming back. (Going up we averaged 45 miles per hour, but never actually went 45 miles per hour--it was either 10 miles per hour or 70 miles per hour, and when it was 10, the heater was going full blast because the engine was over-heating.) Having everything in one hotel is nice, but is it worth it?

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Three years ago, panelists registered in the regular registration area and were given their panelist information there. Two years ago, we had to go to the Green Room to get our panelist information, and this was in the other hotel, so this was a trifle inconvenient. Last year they returned to handing out the panelist information at the regular registration desk. This year--you guessed it: panelists had to go to the Green Room. I wish they would settle on one method.

Hotel

The Sheraton Tara was quite nice, and sufficient for the size that Boskone seems to have settled in to (700-900). Again, the parties seemed fairly empty.

Dealers Room

The Dealers Room is holding steady, with pretty much the same dealers (in the same places) as last year. There is a Border's Bookstore nearby which took advantage of having all these authors in Framingham to have autograph parties.

Art Show

I took a quick look through the art show, but little there interested me. I did get a copy of Wells's First Menint he Moon illustrated by Bob Eggleton at the Print Shop, and bid on a "book pin" (a small brooch that opened up to reveal a tiny story inside). But last-minute bidding on the pins (there were about a dozen different ones) was so spirited that I decided it was not worth it.

Programming

Again, it appears that the era of the "hard-science" Boskone is over. There are some science panels, but not as many as before. I attended fewer panels and other programming items than last year (twelve this year versus fourteen last year). Of course, I did not have all the Connie Willis panels I had last year, but in addition, the last two I attended this year were totally unplanned (see the notes for "Does It Have to Be a SpaceMAN?: Gender and Characterization" and "Deconstructing Tokyo: Godzilla as Metaphor, etc." for an explanation)

The First Night

I miss the Shirim Klezmer Orchestra! But we did have more opportunity to talk and mingle, which was somewhat hindered by the loud music the last couple of years. As I was having my second drink, Michael Flynn asked me to make sure there was an overhead projector for the "Turbulence and Psychohistory" panel. Never ask

me to remember something at a party, especially if I'm having a drink! Naturally I forgot, but luckily the room was small enough that the attendees could see his viewgraphs when he held them up.

I have no idea what the con suite was like--I never got there.

Comic Books and Alternate History

Friday, 10 PM

Pam Fremon (mod), Michael Flynn, Will Shetterly

(One reason I was doing 70 miles an hour up was that I really wanted to make it in time for this panel (and was not quite sure how far Framingham was--it turns out it's just about 255 miles from work). Well, I made it.)

This was clearly a panel designed around one of the Guests of Honor. Shetterly is perhaps best known for his alternate history comic, C_a_p_t_a_i_n_C_o_n_f_e_d_e_r_a_c_y. (Well, that's what he's best known for to me anyway.) C_a_p_t_a_i_n_C_o_n_f_e_d_e_r_a_c_y is set in a world where the

South won the Civil War, and where a band of super-heroes exists. It ran sixteen issues altogether, twelve from SteelDragon Press and four from Marvel/Epic. (The twelve from SteelDragon can be gotten for \$10; the address is SteelDragon Press, P. O. Box 7253, Powderhorn Station, Minneapolis MN 55407.) Shetterly also said that there might be a continuation of C_a_p_t_a_i_n_C_o_n_f_e_d_e_r_a_c_y some day.

Shetterly began by saying that all fiction is alternate history (a claim my husband Mark has been making for years--after all, he says, Rhett Butler and Scarlett O'Hara did not really exist in our universe, right?). He added, however, that authors must be true to their own view of the world, and C_a_p_t_a_i_n_C_o_n_f_e_d_e_r_a_c_y was no doubt influenced by the fact that Shetterly grew up in the South. But the author being true to his or her view does not limit the field; as Shetterly said, there can be many alternate histories (in spite of the fact that people often assume that an alternate history is the definitive one rather than just another one). For example, Shetterly said that just because his CSA is grim does not mean that another CSA h_a_s to be grim. Flynn pointed out that authors also tend to write alternate histories in which "it comes out right," i.e., the way the author would have liked it. (Flynn noted that Harry Turtledove's G_u_n_s_o_f_t_h_e_S_o_u_t_h got an award from descendants of Confederate veterans, which goes to show that people also like to read alternate histories in which "it comes out right." By the way, Turtledove has just finished co-authoring an alternate history with actor Richard Dreyfuss. Entitled T_h_e_T_w_o_G_e_o_r_g_e_s, it is reportedly a police procedural in which the Thirteen Colonies made piece with Britain in 1779. [Thanks to Robert Schmunk for jogging my memory on this one.]

If Shetterly was influenced by his Southern background, Flynn was influenced by having early on read J. C. Squire's I_f_I_t_H_a_d

_ H_a_p_p_e_n_e_d_O_t_h_e_r_w_i_s_e: _ L_a_p_s_e_s
 _ i_n_t_o_I_m_a_g_i_n_a_r_y_H_i_s_t_o_r_y, with its stories
 by Belloc, Chesterton, Churchill, and others; and "Sideways in
 Time" by Murray Leinster. In response to a question from me later,
 Shetterly said that he knew of many "what if the South won the
 Civil War" stories; he listed Ward Moore's _ B_r_i_n_g_t_h_e_J_u_b_i_l_e_e, Terry
 Bisson's _ F_i_r_e_o_n_t_h_e_M_o_u_n_t_a_i_n, Mackinlay Kantor's _ I_f
 _ t_h_e_S_o_u_t_h_H_a_d
 _ W_o_n_t_h_e_C_i_v_i_l_W_a_r, David C. Poyer's _ S_h_i_l_o_h
 _ P_r_o_j_e_c_t, Leonard
 Skimin's _ G_r_a_y_V_i_c_t_o_r_y, Robert Stapp's _ A_M_o_r_e
 _ P_e_r_f_e_c_t_U_n_i_o_n, William
 Sanders's _ W_i_l_d_B_l_u_e_a_n_d_t_h_e_G_r_a_y, E. Ruffin's
 _ A_n_t_i_c_i_p_a_t_i_o_n_s_o_f_t_h_e
 _ F_u_t_u_r_e (written in 1860, which I guess means it was not _ r_e_a_l_l_y an
 alternate history, but a straight extrapolation about the future),
 and something by Wilson. At the time I thought he meant Woodrow
 Wilson, but I cannot find anything by him; Shetterly may have been
 thinking of "If Lee Had not Won the Battle of Gettysburg" by Sir
 Winston Churchill.

Shetterly also talked about how one decides what would be
 different. Racism, he claims, is an effect of Southern pride, so
 one presumes if Southern pride had not been so damaged by the loss
 of the Civil War, then racism might not have arisen. He also
 thinks that had Lincoln lived, Southern pride after the war would
 not have been so undermined, thereby causing less racism in that
 scenario as well.

The panelists noted that writing an alternate history assumes
 readers know what the real history was. This of course brought to
 mind the story Connie Willis told last year about how at a
 discussion of her novel _ L_i_n_c_o_l_n'_s_D_r_e_a_m_s one of the attendees asked
 how much of the Civil War material Willis had made up (none of it,
 it turns out). When pressed, the attendee said, "Well, for
 example, who's this Grant character?" (I note that in his latest
 alternate history sortie, Turtledove lists all the characters of
 _ W_o_r_l_d_w_a_r: _ I_n_t_h_e_B_a_l_a_n_c_e on the endpapers of the
 novel, and notes
 which were real and which are imaginary.)

Flynn noted in some context that "industrial-strength Nazis" as villains are gone, and someone pointed out that "Saturday Night Live" had done a skit in which Superman had landed in Germany instead of the United States and become Uberman.

Various alternate histories and turning points were of course mentioned. Someone asked what if the disease that killed off most of the indigenous American people when the Europeans invaded had worked in the other direction and diseases from the Americans had killed off most of the Europeans instead? The panelists observed that this was exactly what happened in Africa, where Europeans died in comparable proportions to the deaths of the population of the Americas, and the result was ultimately not much better for the Africans.

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This somewhat hinted at what the panelists then explicitly observed: what alternate history readers enjoy has nothing to do with the plot. The background and other trappings far outweigh the actual events that may take place. For those who like reading alternate histories, the panelists therefore recommended a couple of non-alternate history books of interest: Josephine Tey's

_ D_ a_ u_ g_ h_ t_ e_ r_ o_ f_ T_ i_ m_ e (a mystery novel in which a modern detective tries to figure out what really happened to the "two little princes in the Tower" during the time of Richard III) and Fletcher Pratt's

_ B_ a_ t_ t_ l_ e_ s_ T_ h_ a_ t_ C_ h_ a_ n_ g_ e_ d_ H_ i_ s_ t_ o_ r_ y.

(Pratt's _ B_ l_ u_ e_ S_ t_ a_ r and _ T_ h_ i_ r_ d_ K_ i_ n_ g were cited as actual alternate histories, though.)

A variety of alternate history stories were recommended, sharing the characteristic that they are hard to find: John M. Ford's

_ D_ r_ a_ g_ o_ n_ W_ a_ i_ t_ i_ n_ g (Shetterly said that Ford had a "Byzantine mind"), Saki's "When William Came," Robert Sobel's _ F_ o_ r_ W_ a_ n_ t_ o_ f_ a_ N_ a_ i_ l:

_ I_ f_ B_ u_ r_ g_ o_ y_ n_ e_ H_ a_ d_ W_ o_ n_ a_ t_ S_ a_ r_ a_ t_ o_ g_ a (written as an alternate history of

the United States, complete with scholarly bibliography), and the

1974 _ N_ a_ t_ i_ o_ n_ a_ l_ L_ a_ m_ p_ o_ o_ n complete with alternate history newspaper

edition. (The Usenet alternate history bibliography lists February 1977 and February 1980 alternate history issues of N a t i o n a l L a m p o o n, but nothing from 1974.)

But back to the specific topic (comic books and alternate history):

when Shetterly began writing C a p t a i n C o n f e d e r a c y, alternate history

in comics was usually at the level of "What if Superman's father had put a banana in the ship instead of Superman?" (I do not know what the level of writing in alternate history comics is these days, but on Usenet in

a a a al l l lt t t t . . .h h h hi i i is s s st t t to o o or r r ry y y y. . . .w w w wh h h ha a a at t t t- - - -i i i if f f f one still sees this sort

of posting--though, mercifully, not very often.) And DC's "Legion of Superheroes" resurrected 1930s superheroes in an alternate world. But as Shetterly noted, there is a big difference between "what if?" and "gosh, what if?" and the comic books have tended towards the latter. However, superheroes are by definition in an alternate universe--one in which there are superheroes!--so you have to count them even if they're not as intellectually challenging. (I've seen alternate history novels in which Germany wins World War II where the premise seems to be the author's excuse to write violent semi-pornography, so I would not claim that books necessarily hold the moral or intellectual high ground here either.)

Comic books also often overtly serve the purposes of their publishers in terms of what in the movies would be "product placement"--using the publisher's other characters. So we get "What If?" and "Elseworlds" from DC, in which Batman becomes Green Lantern instead. (This does not even qualify as "gosh, what if?" to me, but more like "so what?") On the other hand, W a t c h m e n is a genuine, honest-to-goodness alternate history.

Movies, on the other hand, tend to ignore alternate histories. Shetterly thinks this is because Hollywood creates the world anew in each movie, so alternate histories would be gilding the lily. (Actually, of course, that's a misquote on my part--it should be

either "painting the lily" or "gilding refined gold." I like to throw these little education bits in my reports, even if no one else cares about them.) I should note that Hollywood, or rather the movie industry, has done a few alternate histories, of which the best known are I t' s a W o n d e r f u l L i f e and "The City on the Edge of Forever" episode of the original "Star Trek." But I know of only about two dozen altogether, including foreign productions.

Shetterly closed by reminding people that he is running for governor of Minnesota. He listed as his main qualification, "I tell lies for a living and am up front about it."

(to be continued)

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Extreme affection may not benefit the beloved just as
extreme wrath may bring nothing harmful on to the hated.
-- Guan Tzu

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