

we are used to seeing men playing women on the screen. The problem, as I was telling a friend, is that it is never convincing. There are males who can play females on the screen in a convincing fashion, but somehow it takes a particular quality to do it correctly and most men just don't have that quality. If I saw Dustin Hoffman on the street in drag, I would immediately assume

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that what I was seeing was man in drag. I certainly would be suspicious. I saw a local production of the play L_a_C_a_g_e_a_u_x
F_o_l_l_e_s and about half of the men in drag were convincing and half were not. So, my friend challenged, who do I think is better? Is there any famous actor who does a really good job at cross-gender actor? Well I was convinced by Linda Hunt in T_h_e_Y_e_a_r_o_f

L_i_v_i_n_g

D_a_n_g_e_r_o_u_s_l_y but as far as I am concerned the best cross-gender actor is currently in a film. In fact he is from an acting family that specializes in cross-gender roles and is so good, most people do not realize that any of the actors in the family are male. And yet they all are. Of course I am talking about that great acting family, the Lassies. These guys have been pulling this deception off for a long time. It is particularly impressive since when they perform they are doing it almost totally nude. Yet nobody ever notices that this is a female impersonator that is running to get help to dig little Timmy out of the collapsed mine shaft.

Now I have always had a certain fondness in my heart for Lassie, be it a male or a female. And when I was a kid, I always assumed Lassie was a male, not being all that facile with languages at age five. I only discovered as I was growing up that Lassie had a name almost exclusively used by females. Sometimes ignorance can lead you to the right conclusions. I don't know if you have noticed that Lassie is one of only two continuing characters in film who consistently get title credit for being intelligent. The other is, of course, Sherlock Holmes. And when Lassie comes to the rescue she comes alone. Sherlock Holmes usually has to bring along Watson. Whether you call Lassie or Holmes and Watson you seem to get four legs and about 250 IQ points.

But this bit of substituting a male for a female sounds like it is grounds for an affirmative action complaint. Next thing you know

they will be having Jonathan Pryce playing Lassie. But if it seems unfair to female dogs that a male gets to play in a female, realize that they have already had their revenge. First of all there is a famous canine role in which what everybody assumed was a male dog was really a female. Any guesses who? Well, you should have been reading this notice since I released the sordid fact here years ago. Longtime readers of this column will know that only females have ever appeared as Spuds Mackenzie. The reason has not so much to do with actors' equity or quotas as that males usually play long-haired dogs and females play short-haired dogs. I am not so sure why the former is true, but the latter is for prudish, Victorian reasons that I will leave to your imagination.

2. PARABLE OF THE SOWER by Octavia E. Butler (Four Walls Eight Windows, ISBN 0-941423-99-9, October 1993, 299pp, \$19.95) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

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Post-holocaust stories have been with us for quite a while. Even eliminating such classics as Noah and the Flood or Lot and his daughters, the category dates back at least to Mary Shelley's L_a_s_s_t M_a_n (1826), Richard Jeffries's A_f_t_e_r_L_o_n_d_o_n (1885), Jack London's S_c_a_r_l_e_t_P_l_a_g_u_e (1915), and S. Fowler Wright's D_e_l_u_g_e (1928), to name some of the better-known works. In the 1950s the theme met up with the atom bomb and, spurred perhaps by the recent success of Edwin Balmer and Philip Wylie's W_h_e_n_W_o_r_l_d_s_C_o_l_l_i_d_e (1933) and George Stewart's E_a_r_t_h_A_b_i_d_e_s (1949), really took off. The most enduring of this period's work is undoubtedly Walter M. Miller's C_a_n_t_i_c_l_e_f_o_r_L_e_i_b_o_w_i_t_z.

But in general post-holocaust, or post-apocalyptic, stories needed an apocalypse--almost always one of the classic four: fire (in the form of atomic radiation), flood, plague, or war. After all, with the war behind us, the only way to go was up. Things were getting better--everyone was moving up in the world. So the only thing that could produce a primitive set of conditions would be some sort of

natural disaster or, of course, the Bomb. But now it's the 90s. Things don't look as rosy. Our cities are becoming more run-down, less safe. And so it's not surprising that we are starting to see more stories in which there are post-holocaust conditions without an actual holocaust.

Which brings us to P a r a b l e o f t h e S o w e r . There hasn't been a

plague, a flood, or a war, but by 2025 people are living in fenced and guarded enclaves. A new street drug has turned people into pyromaniacs, and those driven from their burned-out homes have little choice but to go into slavery in the new border factories. At the beginning of the story, Lauren Olamina is fifteen years old and living in a small neighborhood, relatively safe (though everyone is getting weapons training, and no one goes "outside" unless they must). Her father is a minister, but Olamina finds herself drawn away from his religion to a new religion/philosophy called Earthseed which she is formulating based on her view of the world. Earthseed seems to have two aspects: life is change and humanity's destiny is the stars. Or to quote from the various verses preceding each chapter, "All that you touch/You Change./All that you Change/Changes you./The only lasting truth is Change./God/Is Change," and, "We are all Godseed, but no more or less so than any other aspect of the universe. Godseed is all there is--all that Changes. Earthseed is all that spreads Earthlife to other earths. The universe is Godseed. Only we are Earthseed. And the Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars. One character describes Earthseed as a "combination of Buddhism, existentialism, Sufism, and I don't know what else."

But--not surprisingly--Olamina's neighborhood is destroyed and she decides to head north in the hopes of starting a new community--an Earthseed community. So we have a post-holocaust, coming-of-age, new-religion, mutated-human novel. (Oh, yes, Olamina also has

"hyper-empathy," or the ability to feel other's pain. This is apparently the result of a drug her mother took when she was pregnant with Olamina.) This is a lot of stuff to put in a three-hundred-page novel, but Butler manages to do it by avoiding the padding that so many authors put in their novels these days. She

writes in a very direct style which lets her cover more ground and cover it well.

This is better than at least two of the Hugo nominees for its year (in my opinion), but didn't make the ballot or receive much notice. I suspect it's because it was published by a small press, and wonder if Butler purposely chose this route. I can't imagine any of the major publishers rejecting it, but I suppose in publishing anything is possible. (On the other hand, the level of typos is much higher here than would be usual for a major publisher, especially in the use of opening or closing quotation marks. The result is that you may think you're reading narration and suddenly hit a close quotation mark that had no opener, or conversely.)

I h i g h l y recommend P a r a b l e o f t h e S o w e r and I'm going to go on a quest for Butler's other nine novels. (I've read some of them and thought they were good also.) If your bookstore doesn't have P a r a b l e o f t h e S o w e r, you can order it from Four Walls Eight Windows, 39 West 14th St. 3503, New York NY 10011.

4. MY DEAR HOLMES by Gavin Brend (Otto Penzler, ISBN 1-883402-69-7, 1994 (1951c), 183pp, \$8) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

There is clearly a Sherlock Holmes revival going on--this is the tenth Holmes-related book I've reviewed this year. Some are pastiches or other fictional works, and some are non-fiction studies. This one falls in the latter category and is a reprint of a classic 1951 study in the chronology of the Holmes stories.

It's so classic, in fact, that when I started reading Baring-Gould's annotations in parallel, I discovered that much of the analysis I had been attributing to Baring-Gould was in fact a compilation of the works of others such as Brend. (This is not to belittle Baring-Gould--collecting and organizing all the various sources is no mean task.) Brend also goes into the question of Watson's marriages (two, according to Brend) and Watson's absences from Baker Street. If you've enjoyed Baring-Gould's A n n o t a t e d S h e r l o c k H o l m e s, especially the chronological parts, you will certainly enjoy this. One good touch is that Brend tries to explain the various inconsistencies in Watson's chronology without always resorting to saying Watson's hand-writing was unreadable. No one could have hand-writing as bad as Baring-Gould leads one to believe Watson's was--or if he did, nothing he wrote would be at all readable, and we wouldn't have a n y Sherlock Holmes stories at all.

Mark Leeper
MT 3D-441 908-957-5619
m.r.leeper@att.com

