

1. YOU READ IT HERE FIRST. After seeing a short coming attraction for the film ED WOOD at CONADIAN, last September, I said "... On the other hand, they do a really terrific job on Martin Landau to make him look like the dying Bela Lugosi. There might even be an Oscar nomination for Landau in the role from what I have seen."

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Well, I was right as far as I went. [-mrl]

2. I don't know if you have been following the Simpson trial. (And I don't want to know. I don't want to learn anything about you that might indicate you are a total idiot.) Actually I don't follow it, but it seems to be following me. When I am trying to find out about what is really happening in the world--I mean places like the Middle East and Eastern Europe--all the news seems to want to cover is the O. J. Simpson trial. Too many news programs seem to think what I want to hear about that one stupid trial instead.

And perhaps it is because of my monumental disinterest I may have missed an important point, but every once in a while some strange fact comes out. For example, there was supposedly almost a mistrial because an alternate juror showed up on camera for about one second. I take it nobody is supposed to know who the jurors are. How can they keep it a secret? Imagine you are a supervisor somewhere in Los Angeles and one of your charges comes to you and says he wants to take a leave of absence. But let's just put on the timecard that it is for jury duty. For how long? Well, gee, he isn't really sure. It could be as long as, say, the O. J. Simpson trial or somewhere thereabouts, just to name a round sort of figure. Actually it's another months-long trial that happens to be starting at the same time as the Simpson trial and will probably end about the same time. That's it.

Actually, while I am on the subject, I will say that I think many people are missing the whole point of the trial. I have had several people tell me quietly and in strictest confidence that they think Simpson is guilty, as if that was the point of the trial. (People who had no compunctions of saying that a white

hotel baroness was a consummate schmuck seem to feel that a black athlete deserves more forbearance. I remember one radio call-in show had people calling in with what special punishments they would give the hotel woman if she was found guilty, forcing her to clean toilets and that sort of thing. Can you imagine what would happen if a radio station did the same sort of thing with Simpson? And if not, what does that say about double standards in America?)

But the question of who is the killer was isn't really the point. Maybe Perry Mason always got someone else to confess and thereby proved his client innocent, but that was TV. The point of the trial is to see how much latitude the law allows. The goals of the Simpson legal team is to win a decision not too unfavorable to Simpson. That may be a hung jury, a mistrial, or even a verdict of "not guilty." Getting evidence ruled as inadmissible does nothing to make Simpson look innocent to a jury or to the public, but it sure makes it harder for the prosecutors to obtain a conviction

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that will stick. If the trial ends with everybody convinced that Simpson is guilty but with Simpson getting let go free, that might be a perfectly acceptable resolution to the lawyers and to Simpson. That's why right now the lawyers could have most of the country convinced Simpson is guilty, perhaps even the jury, and still they could be winning the game.

Since the real question is a very arbitrary and technical one of how much latitude there is in the law, I find the trial much less dramatic than many people seem to find it. All the lawyers have to do is demonstrate a reasonable doubt. Simpson has enough high-powered lawyers to convince a the Pope to convert to Buddhism. Putting doubt in a jury's mind should be a snap. Well, at least the trial is better than sports, but not much. [-mrl]

3. Yet more URLs, this time from Robert Schmunk:
Speculative Fiction Clearing House:
<http://thule.mt.cs.cmu.edu:8001/sf-clearing-house/>
Usenet rec.arts.sf.* FAQs:

<http://www.cis.ohio-state.edu/hypertext/faq/usenet/sf/top.html>
The Science Fiction Shop:
<http://www.tagsys.com/Ads/SciFiShop/>

4. WORLDWAR: TILTING THE BALANCE by Harry Turtledove (Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-38997-2, 1995, 478pp, US\$22) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

This is the second of Turtledove's "Worldwar" tetralogy. The first, WORLDWAR: IN THE BALANCE, came out a year ago, and the next two will be out in 1996 and 1997. (This fact is mentioned peripherally in the blurbs and the jacket copy, but is not evident from the cover. I mention it because the reader should know to read the first book first. I am not going to give a thorough summary here.)

While the first book set up the premise--an alien race invades the Earth in the middle of World War II--the second continues the many threads started therein. So we're still following stories in the Soviet, Poland, Germany, Britain, China, Japan, Illinois, Colorado, and probably a few more that I've forgotten. (Oh, yes, and Croatia, though not quite the same Croatia that he wrote about in "Ready for the Fatherland." There's something about the Balkans, apparently, that makes them an ideal setting for novels about conflict.) Even Turtledove realizes that he's juggling too many balls and can't keep introducing new characters forever, so he

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starts eliminating some of them. (Luckily the book includes a five-page cast of characters to help the reader keep the people and the aliens straight.) Personally, I think there may be a few threads too many, and there were one or two that I found myself skimming (Russian tactical maneuvers just don't do it for me, I guess).

Intermixed with the stories directly related to the invasion stories are the personal stories, which are not as effective and often seem to have been added either to make some philosophical

point or to provide some not-so-subtle motivation for the characters to do what Turtledove wants or needs them to do. The result is that a character at one point completely rejects a certain path of action, while later expressing great admiration for a group that had traditionally followed that path. (It's hard to avoid spoilers, but I'm trying.) This seems just a bit inconsistent to me. In fact, what this character wants is basically that what happened somehow "un-happen," so we have an interesting internal alternate history parallel.

One thing I like about Turtledove's writing in general is that he has Jewish characters--real Jewish characters, not just a lab assistant named Saul Rubinstein who shows up in a couple of scenes, but rounded, central Jewish characters who think and act Jewish. And *WORLDWAR* is no exception. This makes it doubly strange that so many of his other characters seem stereotypical: the Illinois nurse, the Japanese officers, the Croatians, and so on. Maybe this is part of the price of having so many characters: it's impossible to build them all from scratch. Whether this ever veers into something negative enough to complain about is not clear, but some groups do seem to be portrayed fairly negatively (and not just the Nazis, many of whom are the good guys!).

The first volume covered about a year, as does this. But Turtledove sets up some long-term events that seem to indicate that either the last two books will cover a longer timespan or there will be room for a sequel. (It is possible he can wrap up the threads in another two years, but it seems unlikely.)

Well, okay, I've talked about bits and pieces of *WORLDWAR: TILTING THE BALANCE*, but what about the novel as a whole? I found it not as enjoyable as the first, but in part this is due to its placement in the series. The first book of a tetralogy is fresh and new, introducing the scenario and characters. The second develops them further, the third (one presumes) will do the necessary setup for the last volume, and the last (one hopes) will wrap it all up. This means that of necessity books two and three won't have the "punch" of the first and last books, and that is the case here. Turtledove does his best, but the sheer multiplicity of story threads, and the knowledge that there are still two years and two more volumes to go, is a bit intimidating. [-ecl]

5. PERCHANCE TO DREAM by Maura Seger (Avon, ISBN 0-380-75338-3, 1989, 311pp, US\$4.50)
FORTUNE'S TIDE by Maura Seger (Avon, ISBN 0-380-75339-1, 1990, 310pp, US\$4.95) (two book reviews by Evelyn C. Leeper):

When I told someone that I was going to review two alternate history romance novels, the response was, "The concept ... these still boggles me. Would the typical romance reader even realize that the history is wrong?" I said I thought this was a bit unfair to romance readers. Since many romance novels are set in the past, one might even suspect these readers have a *better* understanding of history than, say, the average SF fan--at least at the level of knowing who won the Civil War, anyway. This does not mean that the author still doesn't make historical mistakes, however

Seger's first foray into the world of alternate history romance novel was PERCHANCE TO DREAM. There is an "Author's Note" at the front which says (in part), "This is a different kind of historical romance, one that deals not with events as they actually happened but with the far more tantalizing question of what might have been. The story takes place in 1876, fourteen years after the South *won* the Civil War. This is not as outlandish as it might seem. The South actually did come very close to winning the war at the battle of Antietam in 1862. What if it had? What would the consequences have been. ... But who is to say that somewhere out beyond the twists and turns of turn, on a branch of history quite apart from our own, [these characters] aren't as real as you or I?" (Of course, the latter idea makes *all* fiction alternate history of a sort.)

I have to confess that I skipped over all the descriptions of clothing and the love scenes. After all, I was reading this for its alternate history aspects. (Reviewing a romance novel from my perspective as a semi-expert on alternate history, I feel a bit like William Jennings Bryan called on to give his opinion on sex from his perspective as an expert on the Bible.) The premise is that the South won at Antietam and went on to drive into Washington, capturing Lincoln and holding him until a peace treaty was signed, then returning him to face impeachment and disgrace. Now it's 1876 and President Lee (of the CSA) is trying to convince the South to reunite with the North, but parties opposed to this are going to attempt to assassinate him. Our heroine is a Southerner secretly working for Lincoln, etc., etc. While Seger knows some history (all the books in the bookstore seem to have been published about the right time), she goofs on one major item: she has Lee at the beginning of his fourth term as President in 1876. First of all, the President of the CSA was elected to a six-year term and could not serve more than one term (or at any rate could not succeed himself). Second, even assuming those rules

were changed, Lee could have been starting his fourth term in 1876. (Davis was elected in November 1861, and inaugurated at the beginning of 1862. This is a difference of fourteen years, a number not divisible by any reasonable term length.) I *suspect* Seger was thinking that Davis's term started in 1860, and Lee's in 1864, 1868, 1872, and 1876, but this is clearly wrong. (However, this is no worse than errors I've seen in alternate histories published in the science fiction category, so I can't complain too much.) A statement that claims that women in England could vote in municipal elections as early as 1869 may not sound right, but it is in fact historically accurate.

As for the story, there was too much romance to suit me (yes, I *know* it's a romance novel). Susannah Fitzgerald is a bit too much Scarlett O'Hara (at least in her public persona), and Rand Cabot a bit too much Rhett Butler--the book even has a scene in a brothel reminiscent of a similar scene in *GONE WITH THE WIND*. Also, anyone who couldn't figure out that the young boy Tad in chapter 2 was really our heroine from chapter 1 in disguise isn't paying attention--and I found it annoying that the third-person narrator kept writing as though Tad were male, which seems like lying to the readers. However, there was a fair amount of alternate history-type stuff, like that slavery was basically dying out in the South even though they had won, and that the North was invading Canada, etc. Still, I can't really recommend it, except to alternate history completists. (Of course, most of the ones I know are men, and probably would rather die than be seen reading a romance novel, but I suppose that's why they sell those vinyl paperback book covers. You can always tell the clerk you're buying it for your sick sister.)

In *FORTUNE'S TIDE*, Seger again warns the reader, "Like my earlier book ... this is a story of what might have been. There are moments in history that are, in effect, forks in the river of history. One such instance occurred at the Battle of Saratoga in 1777, when the Americans turned the tide of the Revolutionary War and set the stage for eventual victory. It has been my self-appointed task to imagine what would have happened if that decisive confrontation had ended, instead, in defeat; and because I am first and foremost a romantic, to imagine especially the consequences to

a particular man and woman."

Unfortunately, the consequences to that particular man and woman take up most of the novel, with hardly any alternate historical detail, certainly less than in her first. Seger makes a couple of errors: she has Alexander Hamilton as a very important figure in 1777, when in reality he didn't achieve success until after his marriage into society in 1778, and she has the United States having 10,000 pounds in its treasury when it was actually broke. Also, the copy editor was asleep at the switch--the heroine introduces herself to someone by her real name on page 249, yet later in that

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same conversation, that person calls her by the name she has been passing under for most of the book, a name that he would have had no way of knowing. I recommend this even less than the other, at least from the alternate history viewpoint. As a romance novel, these may both be great, but all they've served to do is convince me that I am not a fan of romance novels. [-ecl]

6. A BOOKMAN'S FANTASY by Fred Lerner (NESFA Press, ISBN 0-915368-65-X, 1995, 97pp, US\$11.95?) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

Every year NESFA prints a book of the writing of its Boskone Fan Guest of Honor. This year Fred Lerner was the guest, and the book is A BOOKMAN'S FANTASY, a collection of twenty-four of his essays.

Lerner was one of the founders of the Science Fiction Research Association, and his academic background shows through in several of the articles, such as "How Science Fiction Became Respectable," "Towards a Definition of Science Fiction: A Reply to James Gunn," and "Lester and Me" (about how Lester Del Rey was one of the examining committee for Lerner's doctoral dissertation, "Modern Science Fiction and the American Literary Community"). But Lerner allows comes through as a fan in his opinions about Kipling, Heinlein, horror, and his favorite books. And a surprising number are about Vermont, and why he lives there, and what he likes about it (and what he doesn't). The most harrowing is his "Farewell to

Alexandria," in which he describes culling his library. It's enough to send shivers down the spine of any dedicated book collector.

Many of the articles are reprinted from Lerner's fanzine LOFGEORNOST or Ed Meskys's NIEKAS, with a few from other sources. But the original sources are hard to come by, so it's nice to have this excellent selection reprinted in convenient form. If nothing else, it should remind a few people that they want to nominate LOFGEORNOST for best fanzine Hugo.

[This is not going to be in your local super-store. If you don't have a science fiction speciality shop nearby, order by mail from someplace like the Science Fiction Shop or Uncle Hugo's, or direct from NESFA Press, P. O. Box 809, Framingham MA 01701-0203.] [-ecl]

7. DOLORES CLAIBORNE (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule: An unusual mother-daughter relationship is explored in a film that begins

as an extremely downbeat character study but which eventually packs an emotional wallop. This is good acting, particularly by Kathy Bates and Christopher Plummer, telling what eventually turns into a good story. Rating: low +2 (-4 to +4)

A film as hard-going as DOLORES CLAIBORNE is in its first 85 minutes had better work particularly hard to redeem itself in its final act. We have a story that is relentlessly downbeat with uniformly unpleasant characters. One wonders how this tale could possibly come out to make this dreary story worth the telling, or the sitting through. In fact, this turns out to be a surprisingly moving story with some fairly powerful emotional overtones and perhaps it even has a hero.

The film opens with two women struggling at the top of a staircase. Vera Donovan (played by Judy Parfitt) is thrown down a flight of stairs and her housekeeper, Dolores Claiborne (Kathy Bates) chases after her to see the results. Finding Vera not yet dead Dolores ransacks the kitchen to find the proper tool to finish the job. She is found there standing over the body, marble rolling pin in hand, ready to strike a death blow, not realizing that the woman at her feet is already dead from the fall. And, as it turns out, this may not be the first fall that Dolores arranged. Her husband died in an apparent accidental fall years earlier under very suspicious circumstances. Police Detective John Mackey (played by Christopher Plummer) would like to prove the woman with the rolling pin was indeed a multiple killer.

The drama will have one more major character. Selena St. George (Jennifer Jason Leigh), daughter of Dolores Claiborne St. George-- is a successful magazine writer who comes to Bangor to help her mother and to understand the situation. In her first visit to her mother in many years, Selena starts to delve into her mother's life of hard work and harder knocks. Dolores herself seems fixated on her own history and slips all too easily into recollection of the past that intrude on the present.

Kathy Bates does a terrific job in the title role, an unglamorous drudge with long-simmering angers and occasionally a sarcastic wit. She effectively plays a woman whose personality has been mostly rubbed away by disappointments and by the total lack of anyone to care for or about her. Jennifer Jason Leigh who played journalists with affected nasal twangs in MRS. PARKER AND THE VICIOUS CIRCLE and THE HUDSUCKER PROXY, plays yet another journalist and curiously occasionally lapses into the same nasal twang, though here it is hard to account for where she might have picked it up. I have always liked Christopher Plummer as an actor with some range who is better than his roles. But most unusual is David Strathairn as Dolores's abusive husband. His mild personality has till now made

him seem like another Henry Fonda.

Director Taylor Hackford uses weather and sky conditions in unusual ways in this film. Flashbacks are signified by sunny skies.

Scenes filmed in the present are always shot under dismal gray skies. Not only does this not make sense literally, it doesn't even make sense symbolically since the events under the sunny skies seem just as dismal as those under gray. Just occasionally Gabriel Beristain's camera gives us a startlingly colorful sky effect--always in flashbacks, of course. One sequence under a total solar eclipse brings a surprising special effect into a story that at least on the surface does not seem to need them.

It is ironic, perhaps, that most of the best films based on stories by horror writer Stephen King, tend not to be the ones based on his horror stories. Of the four best films based on his writing--I would say subjectively that they were CARRIE, STAND BY ME, THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION, and DOLORES CLAIBORNE--only the first is based on a horror story. And I would rate DOLORES CLAIBORNE a low +2 on the -4 to +4 scale. [-mrl]

8. EXOTICA (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule: This scattered mosaic of a film forces the viewer to piece together its plot from fragments presented along the way. While the story, once assembled, is ultimately dissatisfying, the challenge of assembling the pieces to understand the whole story keeps the viewer engrossed. Explicit scenes set in a strip club and the film's view of that business will have an appeal all their own. Rating: +1 (-4 to +4)

There is a party game called "A Stick Falls, a Man Dies." The person running the game gives players a very high-level description of an invented incident and players try to figure out what really happened, asking only yes-or-no questions. By doing this players get a fragment of the story here, one there, soon there are whole parts of the story they understand. Finally the right piece falls into place and they understand the whole story. Films, of necessity, make the viewer play a similar game. In the first scene of a film the audience see characters they don't yet know in a situation they don't yet understand. Most filmmakers try to bring viewers up to speed as quickly as possible, giving all the necessary clues as quickly as possible. Generally it is the mark of a bad filmmaker to leave the viewer confused. But it is very possible to tell a story much like as in the game where the pieces

are revealed in no particular order. A bit at a time, the way the pieces fit together is uncovered to the viewer until the viewer has a whole story. PULP FICTION did that to some extent, telling its interlocking stories out of chronological order on purpose to make the audience work to piece together the overall story. MARATHON MAN intentionally shows the audience a very diverse set of scenes with odd characters before it starts knitting them together into a single story. Canadian filmmaker Atom Egoyan goes much further in that direction in his cinematic jigsaw puzzle EXOTICA. The characters and situations are intentionally confusing to challenge the viewer initially to put them together to make a story. And with Egoyan's mischievous wit, the story is not just told as a jigsaw puzzle, it is told to mislead on purpose. The gaps that the viewer attempts to fill in for himself, he is probably wrong about. And the story that gets shown to the viewer a bit at a time is perfectly suited to this style of telling. It is about the secrets in people's lives that they do not reveal to others, and perhaps not even to themselves.

The one problem in all this is that when you hear the solution in the party game, the story may make a nifty puzzle solution, but it is just not that good a story all by itself. EXOTICA has the same problem. When the last secrets are disclosed in the final scene, what you have is a story that needs the convoluted telling because it just is not compelling on its own. The plot that connects the three major characters--the smuggler, the tax auditor, and the strip club host--seems overly contrived and frankly, just not all that interesting. One comes away saying, "Oh. Is that all?" The story is curiously unmoving.

Egoyan both wrote and directed this piece which is bound to appeal to some audiences for the intellectual appeal of what is slowly revealed in its central puzzle. And it may appeal to quite a different audience for what is more quickly and easily revealed in its explicit sex club scenes.

This is a film with more than its share of surprises that expertly catches the viewer off-balance more often than not. Unfortunately, Egoyan is more interested in his game of secrets about his characters than in actually giving us insights. I give EXOTICA a +1 on the -4 to +4 scale. [-mrl]

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Gratitude is merely the secret hope of future favors.
-- Francois de la Rochefoucauld