

to work and I had to hit my brakes to avoid hitting him. At this particular instant I saw no car in my rear view mirror, no car ahead of me. The squirrel picked just the wrong moment to run across the street, just ahead of the only car around. The traditional explanation for this sort of behavior is the squirrel

has a little tiny brain and was just being careless. That is an explanation from somebody who doesn't know much about squirrels. Anyone who has tried to prevent squirrels from stealing seed meant for birds can tell you that it is a really tough task precisely because squirrels are amazingly intelligent problem solvers. They have an amazing ability to outthink the makers of so-called "squirrel-proof feeders." And if one squirrel cannot steal the seeds by himself, they are perfectly capable of organizing themselves into teams. One squirrel will kick seeds out of a feeder so that another squirrel on the ground can eat them. Then they will change places. If the task calls for it, they will use an agility that will put human acrobats to shame.

So I cannot believe that the squirrel ran in front of my car out of stupidity. That squirrel knew exactly what he was doing. The only question is can I figure out why he took such a dangerous chance. I think I can guess. A few years ago we traveled in Kenya and had almost the same experience with gazelles. Our Land Rover would be going down a road across a plain at something like thirty miles per hour and a gazelle would see us and would run in an arc just to cross the road six feet in front of our speeding car. I mean there might be two or three cars on this road a day and this gazelle just had to cross the road at the instant a car was passing. The near-miss is clearly intentional. Is it possible that gazelles are doing this specifically because it is so dangerous? What possible survival value could it have for a squirrel or a gazelle to intentionally put itself into danger?

Well, let's look at a third animal behavior and it could be the key to the other two. A large predator bird is chasing a small bird that is its intended prey. Superficially it would seem that the bird being chased should just do what it could to outrun the bird chasing it, but often that is not what it does. Rather than putting as much space as it can between it and its stalker it does

nearly the opposite. It starts going through a complex flying maneuver right where it is. The predator loses interest just as when he could be catching up. If this little bird has so much energy to waste, he is going to be hard to catch. The little bird flirts with death to prove to this and other predators that he is going to be a hard catch. Maybe even to prove it to possible mates. Maybe even to prove it to himself. The same goes for the gazelle and the squirrel. Now what does this say about human behavior? We have our own fascination with behavior that is dangerous for the sake of the danger and as a show of prowess. Midnight graffiti raids, kids walking on railroad trestles, any number of sports, couldn't these all be instinctive signals to predators that no longer really exist that we are bad choices as prey? By flirting with danger we let the world know we are prepared for it. [-mrl]

3. Hugo Factoid of the Week: Poul Anderson has the most Hugo wins in the fiction categories, with 7 Hugos. Runners-up are Harlan Ellison, Fritz Leiber, and Roger Zelazny, with 6 each. Ellison also has one in the "Dramatic Presentation" category, for "The City on the Edge of Forever." (Asimov and Heinlein have 4 each, and Clarke has 3.) [-ecl]

4. ARCHANGEL by Mike Conner (Tor, ISBN 0-312-85743-8, 1995, 350pp, US\$21.95) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

[Contrary to what the dust jacket says, the author's name is Mike Conner. The title page gets it right.]

In an alternate Minneapolis of the 1920s, Danny Constantine is a reporter who discovers a series of murders which seem to be the work of a vampire, but which turn out to be connected with the plague known as Hun. Hun, a hemorrhagic fever and a variation on

Ebola, first appeared during the Great War, and has killed half the world's population. But the deaths are not evenly distributed--only non-blacks are dying. Blacks, it appears, are immune. (The promotional flyer says "African-Americans are immune." This is a true statement, but misleading. It is blacks around the world, not just African-Americans who are immune. Thus do some people get carried away by political correctness.) So the United States's population has gone from 125,000,000 to only 30,000,000, while most of Africa is untouched, and Asia almost completely depopulated. Constantine, along with policeman Dooley Willson (shades of CASABLANCA!), try to find the cause behind these murders which somehow seem connected with noted medical researcher Simon Gray. And though this all, someone called the Archangel is broadcasting the truth that the government is trying to conceal.

I have one complaint right off the bat: Conner (in the form of the character Simon Gray) describes Ebola being known in 1918, *by that name*. Since Ebola was named in 1976 for the valley where it was first noted then, this naming seems unlikely. I also thought the "expository lump" of the speech was clumsy, and the whole concept that anyone with even the slightest Negro ancestry was completely immune bogus from a scientific standpoint. As Will Shetterly, a noted fantasy author who is coincidentally also from Minneapolis, said recently on the Net: "There are no scientific tests for race ... blood is blood, and bone is bone." While it is true that some genetic tendencies may be more pronounced in certain ethnic groups--for example, Tay-Sachs in Ashkenazic Jews, or sickle-cell anemia in blacks--this is not the 100% immunity that Conner postulates.

I also thought it obvious that Conner was going for an AIDS parallel, perhaps strongest when the Archangel is saying (about kidnappings of Negroes for their blood), "But we didn't care that 'they' were disappearing. It wasn't happening to 'us.' And as we well know, whenever something horrible and incomprehensible happens to someone, there's a part inside our minds that says, "Well, he must have deserved it. Otherwise it never would have happened." And after all, wasn't it right that 'they' should suffer, too? So we were quite willing to let these kidnappings go on." But the fact that in ARCHANGEL, it was those *unaffected* by the disease

who were maligned and outcast somewhat undercut this. There was some sense that the blacks were not entirely unhappy about the whites getting the short end of the stick, but less than one might expect.

The alternate world is evoked fairly well, given the weakness of the premise, and for some that may be enough. However, I found the underpinnings sufficiently shaky to disrupt my "willing suspension of disbelief," and cannot really recommend this book. [-ecl]

5. JOURNALS OF THE PLAGUE YEARS by Norman Spinrad (Bantam Spectra, 1995, ISBN 0-553-37399-4, 160pp, US\$9.95.) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

This novella first appeared in Lou Aronica and Shawna McCarthy's 1988 anthology FULL SPECTRUM. What appears here is a revision of my review at that time.

Norman Spinrad's JOURNALS OF THE PLAGUE YEARS has been analyzed by far better reviewers than myself already, so I can merely concur with most of their criticisms. Bigelow, the main character, having found a cure/inoculation for the AIDS virus(es) which are sweeping the country (which he does in about a month working on his own, while whole teams of researchers working for years have found nothing), inoculates himself against the disease. This cure is designed to be transmitted in the same way as the disease. He then decides to protect his wife and son. But he concludes the only way to pass the protection to his wife is by raping her, and the reader is supposed to sympathize with how bad he feels about having to do this. To protect his son, he goes to even more baroque lengths--he hires a prostitute to have sex with him and then a couple of days later, with his son. Now first of all, the cure is transmitted in the same way as the disease. But the primary method of transmission of AIDS even when Spinrad wrote JOURNALS was through infected blood (mostly between intravenous drug users), and certainly is now. Even assuming some sudden needle shortage that Spinrad fails to mention, Bigelow should be able to pass it through infected blood somehow. (It certainly seems to be transmissible

enough that one session guarantees its passage.) Secondly, Spinrad seems determined to show us that a plague requires drastic means to contain it--Bigelow is willing to rape his wife (he doesn't tell her that he has the cure for reasons too flimsy to stand up) and this is "necessary." But Bigelow's (adult) son *knows* his father has the cure, so one would imagine Spinrad would have Bigelow use the same method, minus the force. But no, that would be incest and homosexuality and even to save his son's life those are evil--rape is okay, but homosexuality between consenting adults is not, according to Spinrad. I find this moral structure odd, and Spinrad doesn't convince me of its necessity. (Admittedly, Bigelow's rape of his wife is not pre-meditated, which does ameliorate the inconsistency somewhat, but not enough, in my opinion.) And without the necessity for the actions Spinrad describes, the force of the novella is lost. By making his "unpleasant choices" too easy to refute, he destroys the message he seems to intend--that sometimes unpleasant choices *are* necessary.

On the plus side, I thought the description of the quarantined San Francisco and the social structure created to be quite well done and logical. In fact, this aspect of the novella is strong enough to overcome my objections to the logic and make me give this a qualified recommendation. We are starting to see a lot of AIDS-inspired stories now, and while this is not the best, it does have an emotional impact that many more logically plotted stories lack. [-ecl]

6. THE FREEDOM FACTOR by Gerald N. Lund (Deseret Book, ISBN 0-87579-961-2, 1987, 295p, US\$6.95) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

It has been said that there are a lot of science fiction novels never noticed by the science fiction fan. For example, there are many "futuristic" romance novels that get little notice in such magazines as LOCUS and less representation in the science fiction section of your local bookstore, or even in your local SF bookstore. Another area not often reckoned with is that of the "Christian SF novel" (a term usually applied to works aimed at evangelical Protestants rather than, say, the works of C. S. Lewis or James Blish). I have even seen alternate history romances (and reviewed two here recently), and I have now discovered an alternate history LDS (Mormon) novel. (Mark also found some LDS science fiction novels, one of which may yet be reviewed here.)

The premise of THE FREEDOM FACTOR is that Nathaniel Gorham, one of the signers of the Constitution, transports Bryce Sherwood, a Senate aide working to get ratification for an amendment that would eliminate the checks and balances of the Constitution, to a world

in which the Constitution was never ratified. As with most such books written with a political agenda in mind, considerations of art or even logic are left by the wayside.

For example, Sherwood's family moved from California to Boston in our world when Bryce was ten years old. Since according to Gorham's train track analogy, this is "the same train with the same people ... just on a different track," all of Sherwood's family exists here as well, but because New England is a totalitarian state, his family never moved. Well, and just how did they get to California in the first place? Where did they live before that? Why would events be different and yet all the people be the same, two hundred years after the change? (Just to confuse the issue, the people are **not** the same: the heroine has no siblings in the alternate world while she did in ours.)

Attention to other details and extrapolation is also sloppy. At first I thought that, based on internal evidence (page 16 and 173) the earliest this could take place is 2016. (Well, theoretically, it could have been 1988, but then none of the people mentioned as Senators were Senators, so this would have been a third alternate world.) But actually the data on pages 173, 195, and 288 are conflicting: you can't have any two of September 22, August 30, and August 28 be Thursdays, let alone all three, unless there's been some massive calendar reform, so who knows when this takes place. And without a Civil War where did the West Virginia mentioned on page 215 come from?

Naturally Sherwood realizes what a valuable thing the Constitution is, gets involved with the resistance movement, and so on. (I hope you don't think this is a spoiler.) The LDS content seems limited to having the principals express a belief a God and a strong respect for the American Constitution, and possibly to the mechanism by which Gorham is able to visit Sherwood and effect changes (though I can't be positive on this aspect).

I cannot recommend this book except to hard-core alternate history fans. The extrapolation is weak, and the characterization thin. I think I would have preferred a heavier LDS connection--at least that would have made the book interesting.

[Though this is a trade paperback, it is the size--more or less--of a mass-market book. A trade paperback is a softcover book that is must be returned intact by the bookseller if s/he wants credit for unsold copies. A mass-market paperback need have only the cover returned. I mention this, because if you are looking for this book in spite of this review, you should be looking at the smaller-sized books. On the other hand, unless you live in Utah, you will almost definitely have to special-order it from Desert Book, P.O.Box 30178, Salt Lake City UT 84130, or call their bookstore at 801-328-3884. If your local SF bookstore carries this, it must be the

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world's most complete such store!] [-ecl]

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

Capsule: With some major accuracy problems and some anachronistic language Mel Gibson entertainingly tells the story of legendary 13th Century Scottish freedom fighter William Wallace. Not all of the film works, but only because the story was so ambitious for a second directorial effort. Rating: +1 (-4 to +4). For general information and comparison, following the review I will describe my understanding of the history of Wallace, some of which might be considered film spoiler.

With the directorial experience of just one film, THE MAN WITHOUT A FACE, Mel Gibson has tried to make his own film comparable to SPARTACUS, built around the late 13th Century Scottish hero and freedom fighter Sir William Wallace. He has given the film a 177-minute length of which could have been better used to tell the story of this larger-than-life hero. Unfortunately, Gibson's pacing is a bit off and the film gives way to some dull stretches. This is a film that I am happy I did my homework for before seeing to avoid being too impressed by the film and then having to be

disillusioned later when I discovered the film's inaccuracies.

The story, with many obvious parallels to that of the film SPARTACUS, tells of the young Wallace growing up in a Scotland occupied by the troops of Edward Longshanks (a.k.a. Edward I, played by Patrick McGoohan). William's father narrowly misses being murdered with some other important Scots, then is killed fighting Edward. William is brought up by his uncle and taught to fight with his wits rather than by brute strength. He returns home to live as a simple farmer, and the story slows down to tell the story of his romance and marriage. But soon Edward's injustice reaches out to him. Wallace strikes back, is outlawed, and becomes a powerful leader of the rebels fighting against English rule.

In a large film with a big cast Patrick McGoohan walks away with all honors as the villainous pre-Machiavellian Machiavellian King Edward I. Rarely has the screen produced so ruthless a tyrant. While more ruthless than the character he played in DANGER MAN (a.k.a. SECRET AGENT), he brings the same cold, calculating efficiency to this role. Gibson seems to have had his hands full directing the film and brought little to his role more than expected. Besides the apparent love of freedom, he could have been playing his character Mad Max.

Curiously, this film seems less anachronistic than its trailers made it feel. Occasional lines seem, if not out of place, at least overly fine-tuned for the late 20th Century. Having characters exclaiming "Excellent!" seems better attuned to the time of Bill and Ted than of William and Edward. Gibson's visual style seems not yet matured so that he overuses slow motion scenes, sometimes telegraphing the action. Some of his scenes seem contrived and unbelievable. One such scene involves a dead body that drips blood just at perfect instant. Another involves what has to be the world's least skittish deer. (You have to have seen the film to know what I mean.)

Gibson tries to create a realistic feel by making Scottish communities seem properly grimy, though he applies this standard far less to women than to men. He has a great deal of violence, graphic and implied, in the course of the film. Toward the end of

the film there are certainly some painful scenes to watch. Gibson also has some fun with the battle scenes that I suspect was not inspired by any historical record. Unfortunately, while the battle scenes are exciting and colorful, what we see bears little relation to what actually happened in the battles portrayed. In fact, while the film seems to say that Wallace was trained to use his wits in battle rather than brute force, that is not how he is portrayed on the screen. The historical Wallace used his wits far more in battle than Gibson's representation, who seems to rely on a good speech and little more than headlong berserker assaults. (The battle shown are very little like the real battles. See the historical note after the review.)

BRAVEHEART is well-intentioned and ambitious, but is disappointingly flawed. It probably required a more experienced director--and one who would have demanded a little more from Gibson. I give it a +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

HISTORICAL NOTE (possible light spoilers):

In the years just preceding William Wallace's revolt Edward I knew his real enemy was France to the south with a military force much superior to his own. England had been at peace with Scotland for more than a century and Edward expected little trouble from the north. But John de Balliol, King of Scotland, allied himself with Philip IV of France rather than supply Edward with men and arms to fight the French. It was not a strong alliance since France had little faith in John's power to defend his title as king.

Edward was already taxing England for the war with France and did not relish the idea of fighting a war against Scotland and France at the same time. He certainly did not want to tax his people for both. In 1290 he had expelled the Jews from England and without them to borrow from any more he was finding that the decision to expel had been a costly one.

Edward decided to confer with Scotland's King John and to assure John's loyalty. He called upon John to meet him at Berwick. John refused. Edward took this as a declaration of war and invaded Scotland with intent to conquer, sacking Berwick. King John then

renounced any homage to England. But Edward's commander, Warenne, the Earl of Surrey, defeated King John at the Battle of Dunbar. He captured John and imprisoned him. Edward declared himself to be King of Scotland before returning to fight France.

Edward set up a puppet government in Scotland, not expecting much resistance. William Wallace, the son of a poor knight, was outlawed at this time when he got into a personal argument with a young Englishman. The Englishman Selby insulted Wallace and Wallace killed him. Wallace joined one of the several bands of outlaws. With a band of 30 men he burned Lanark and killed the sheriff in May 1297.

Wallace organized an army from the small landowners and organized guerilla attacks on the English between Forth and Tay. Through this time Edward was fighting in France and Wallace was fighting the Earl of Surrey. Surrey brought a large army to fight Wallace in September. The two armies met September 11, 1297, at the Battle at Cambuskenneth (a.k.a. Stirling) Bridge near Forth. (This is very different from how the battle was portrayed in the film.) A narrow bridge separated the two armies. The Earl's own advisors told him that he could not get his full army across the bridge in under eleven hours and if he tried crossing he could bring only a small part of his army to bear on defense. He ignored the advice and ordered his men across the bridge. Wallace awaited the proper time, when about half the army was across the bridge, and attacked. Half the army watched helpless on the far bank as the other was driven back into the river to drown. Wallace earned a stunning victory and in the process captured Stirling Castle.

Edward made a truce with France by marrying the king's sister and betrothing the king's daughter to his son. He was off in Flanders when he found out that Wallace had defeated his army and, flushed with victory, had invaded England and was sacking Cumberland and Northumberland. Wallace was knighted and given the guardianship of Scotland ruled in Balliol's name. He decorated his shield with the skin of an English tax-collector.

Edward I, having his truce with France, re-invaded Scotland, marched to Stirling, and met Wallace's army at Falkirk on July 22, 1298. Wallace formed his forces into four schiltrons. That is a circle of men with spears pointed outward (similar to what the film showed at Battle of Stirling Bridge, but that was a straight line). Edward's knights could do little against these phalanxes and so were called off. Instead the English used a shower of arrows from long bows. This made quick work of the Scottish army. Wallace, however, survived by hiding in a dense nearby wood.

Wallace resigned his guardianship, but still fought a guerrilla war against the English in Scotland. In 1305 he was arrested at Robroyston near Glasgow. He was found guilty of being a traitor to Edward, though he had never sworn allegiance to the king. He was executed that same year, much in the manner shown in the film.

Contrary to the film, however, Edward I did not die until 1307, Edward II did not marry until 1308, and Edward II's and Isabella's first child was Edward III who was not born until 1310. Henry the Minstrel, also known as "Blind Harry" made Wallace a popular hero by immortalizing him in an epic romance poem in the 15th Century.
[-mrl]

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

Capsule: Hal Hartley gives us three humorously dysfunctional characters on the run from equally strange thugs. The pacing is slow, but more interesting than the plot are the strange characterizations. Still, even they are not sufficient to float this often leaden film.

Rating: low +1 (-4 to +4) text

Hal Hartley is something of a rogue filmmaker, producing, writing, and scoring the films he directs. Of late he is making them for PBS's American Playhouse. I have seen only his THE UNBELIEVABLE TRUTH, though I found that an original and well-made film, perhaps better than AMATEUR.

In the current film Hartley brings together a mixed bag of characters who are unfortunately less than totally believable. One problem with his style is that he will completely change our understanding of a character for the sake of a funny or bizarre line. The main character is Isabelle (played by Isabelle Huppert). For fifteen years Isabelle was a nun. Then she gave it up to write pornography and give vent to her nymphomaniacal tendencies. Unfortunately, her pornography does not sell because she cannot resist the temptation to turn it into literature. She is still holding off on her nymphomaniacal binge because she is very choosy about her choice of partners. So with absolutely no experience with sex, she wants to be a pornographer. Into Isabelle's life comes a possible sex partner, an injured man (played by Martin Donovan) with no memory of who he is or how he came to be injured.

Also into Isabelle's life comes Sofia (Elina Lowensohn of SCHINDLER'S LIST), a woman who is a porno film star who has run afoul of a powerful criminal international arms dealer. The dealer has sent two strangely erudite thugs to murder her. Sofia knows who the amnesiac really is, but does not want to tell him.

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Complicating matters is a former associate of the amnesiac and Sofia, Edward (played by Damian Young).

Hartley's dialogue is as bizarre as Quentin Tarantino's in PULP FICTION, but with characters not quite as bright. Hartley leaves long pauses between spoken lines and this tends to slow the film down. While some have classified the film as a thriller, the slow pacing tends to sap any thrills that AMATEUR might have delivered. In truth, because of their bizarre behavior and motives it is difficult to identify with or even believe any of the characters. One character who has gotten an electrical shock seems to mimic the childish, brutish mannerisms of the Frankenstein monster, particularly when he comically lays siege to a pizza shop.

Hartley wrote, directed, and even scored this film, much as he did with his previous film SIMPLE MEN. That film also featured performances by Martin Donovan, Elina Lowensohn, and Damian Young. This is Isabelle Huppert's first performance with Hartley, though she is a familiar actress in France, particularly from Jean-Luc Goddard's films. Seeing similarities in Goddard's and Hartley's styles, she wrote to Hartley suggesting that she act in his films. Hartley admits contritely her letter went unread for several months due to his own disorganization. When he realized what the letter was, he paid its owner more respect.

This is a film that turns out to be more entertaining than it might at first appear, but its style does not allow it believable characters, nor is the humor strong enough to qualify it as a comedy, nor does the film function as a thriller, nor is the style really interesting. The combination of what it contributes in these aspects is sufficient to make the film watchable, but it is little more than that. I give it a low +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

[-mrl]

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The public is a fool.

-- George Bernard Shaw

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