Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
Club Notice - 05/17/96 -- Vol. 14, No. 46

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

Unless otherwise stated, all meetings are in the Middletown cafeteria Wednesdays at noon.

DATE	TOPIC
05/22	THE WORLD OF NULL-A by A. E. Van Vogt (Retro-Hugo Nominee)
06/12	ANIMAL FARM by George Orwell (Retro-Hugo Nominee)
06/25	JEOPARDY (starring our own Rob Mitchell) (check local TV listings)

Outside events:

05/18 Cynthia Soroka, talk on Self-Publishing at meeting of Garden State Horror Writers, Public Library, Manalapan NJ, 12N (Sat)
05/18 Lissanne Lake, illustrator, guest speaker at NJSFS meeting, 7:30PM
05/21 Topic discussion group: Science Fiction Infantry - STARSHIP TROOPERS by Robert Heinlein, Borders Books, Paramus NJ, ?PM, (Tue)
05/21 Cynthia Soroka appearance, Barnes & Noble, Hartsdale NJ, 7PM (Tue)
05/28 Author Group discusses H.G. Wells, Borders Books, Wayne NJ, 8PM (Tue)

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.

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Backissues available at http://www.mt.att.com/~ecl/MTVOID/backissues.html or http://sf.www.lysator.liu.se/sf_archive/sf-texts/MT_Void/.

1. URL of the week: http://www.omnimag.com/. "OMNI on the Internet" includes features and fiction from OMNI magazine. (In fact, it now *is* OMNI magazine, since there is no longer a paper edition.) Currently available are a newly discovered story by

Fritz Leiber, and stories by Robert Silverberg, Howard Waldrop, and others.

Last week's URL was accidentally truncated (cut-and-paste strikes again!). It should have been: http://www.cs.cmu.edu/Web/books.html (with the "l" on the end)..

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2. Hugo Factoid of the Week: Michael Bishop has been nominated 10 times without winning. Runners-up include Bruce Sterling (8) and Gene Wolfe (7). Next week: who has had at least two nominations and has the best batting average for wins? [-ecl]

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3. I recently had an opportunity to re-watch one of the early Japanese monster movies, RODAN. This film is perhaps second only to the original GOJIRA (here somewhat butchered into GODZILLA, KING OF THE MONSTERS) for actual interest value as opposed to pure entertainment. But this time it is the American version that has interesting idea, not the Japanese version. When they brought the film over, David Duncan wrote a prologue. Duncan was a science fiction novelist who also wrote for films. Most of his writing is forgotten today and his one claim to fame today might be that he wrote the screenplay for George Pal's TIME MACHINE. (David Duncan is not the same author as the currently writing Dave Duncan, by the way.)

The main purpose of the prologue was to show some American faces so American audiences will have some reason to think of a monster in Japan as an international problem. There will, of course, be some

people in the audience who just twelve years earlier were fighting for their lives against people like the characters in the film. What they show in the prologue are two nuclear tests (one called improbably "Mission Gigantic"). After showing the tests, the narrator asks, "What have these tests done to Mother Earth. Can the human race continue to deliver these staggering blows without Mother Earth striking back?" It suggests the following story is about a possible aftermath. Well, it is not the most cogent argument. It is hard to take seriously the idea that the way Mother Earth will strike back is with an arsenal of prehistoric monsters underground that it has that it will release as a result of nuclear tests. But the idea that Mother Earth might retaliate is still with us and taken fairly seriously by some. And, in fact, has more than a grain of truth.

The name given to this semi-mystical and semi-scientific idea is "Gaia." It suggests that the eco-system actually has defense

mechanisms to protect itself. But unlike a lot of mystical ideas, this one has a grain of truth. Nature breeds for stable equilibria, in a way. The sort of thing that happens is that an increase in prey leads to an increase in predators. An increase in predators leads to a decrease in prey. A decrease in prey leads to a decrease in predators. A decrease in predators leads to an increase in prey, and the cycle begins again. If the effects become greater and greater then eventually the prey goes down to the point where it cannot continue the population, and it dies out and the predators die or go away. That would be an unstable equilibrium but if that were likely it would have happened long ago we would not be observing the predator/prey balance.

Now, if humans come along and kill off some of the prey themselves, they artificially kick off a cycle. They kill off prey, so the predator population decreases and the count of prey increases again. Nature has defended herself. That is the Gaia concept, that Nature defends herself. Another example is that there are definitely bad effects from burning out the Amazonian forests, but the effects are more muted than expected. Why? Fewer forests mean more carbon dioxide in the air. Forests live on carbon dioxide. They love it and it helps them grow. Forests grow thicker all by

themselves and turn carbon dioxide into oxygen. Killing off forests fosters growth in other forests and Nature has once again defended itself.

So the Gaia people are partially correct. There is no conscious spirit in nature, but nature really does defend itself. But Duncan may be assuming a bit much when he suggests that nature is going to have a ready response to nuclear weapons and that the natural restoring force to the effects of nuclear weapons is for nature to cough up some flying pteranodons to counteract the effects. This just does not sound like a cycle that Nature would have seen very frequently in the past. Not that it isn't an amusing image. [-mrl]

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4. WAR OF THE WORLDS: GLOBAL DISPATCHES edited by Kevin J. Anderson (Bantam Spectra, ISBN 0-553-10353-9, 1996, 288pp, US$22.95) (a book review by Mark R. Leeper)

When I was growing up I very much used to enjoy certain themed anthologies, particularly those edited by Groff Conklin. Ones that come particularly to mind are his SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES IN DIMENSION and INVADERS OF EARTH, and Clifton Fadiman's FANTASIA MATHEMATICA and THE MATHEMATICAL MAGPIE. These days I don't care so much for theme anthologies. Occasionally when I used to read anthologies I would find one or two stores would be ones I had read before, but often they were worth rereading or could be skipped.

Then I started finding anthologies in which all the stories were original and that allowed me to avoid the minor problem of repeating of familiar stories. These days, however, things have swept in the other direction and I will rarely spend time and money on a themed anthology of original stories. I want stories that are reprinted from elsewhere, and for very good reason.

Theme anthologies aren't what they used to be. What I think is happening is that somebody gets an idea like that people would buy an anthology of alternate history Elvis Presley stories, goes out,

and commissions a bunch of such stories. Once the editor has requested such a story he or she needs darn good cause to reject it. After all, if it does not make it to the anthology that author really cannot sell it any place else. First, there just was a whole anthology of stories written about alternate history Presley stories so the public who would be interested in the subject is probably glutted with them, and also it is relatively obvious that this story was commissioned for the anthology and rejected or why else was the author writing on the subject. So it would not pay authors to write for theme anthologies unless it is pretty darn sure the stories will be accepted regardless of quality.

In addition, it is a lot easier to write a story on an idea of your own choosing. An author may be full of interesting ideas but may have only the most mediocre and dull ideas on a concept as uninspiring as alternate histories of Elvis Presley. Nevertheless, that is where the money is and the story is unlikely to be rejected because it is just not very entertaining. So an Elvis Presley alternate history is what is written. The result is that we get a lot of what I find to be dull anthologies. I find when I read these anthologies, more often than not I have checked at some point what is the final page number of the story and increasingly I am aware how many pages off that is. When I get there what I feel is more relief that I got there than excitement about what was in the story. It is, in fact, very difficult for me to imagine what could be exciting about an Elvis Presley alternate history and reading such an anthology generally does not answer that question.

My wife can seemingly read no end of stories as long as they are on a certain set of topics that she finds exciting, such as alternate history, Sherlock Holmes, etc. I probably have a list of topics like that, but I find that I have a very narrow band of stories that I will unconditionally read based on subject matter. And certainly most of the theme anthologies that are coming out now are nowhere near my narrow band. Now if someone would do an anthology of interesting mathematical ideas, maybe something like the old FANTASIA MATHEMATICA, that would interest me. But I can't see that happening. The field of mathematical stories has been left to Rudy Rucker and an increasingly limited set of authors. I really like WAR OF THE WORLDS, so when I got an advanced reading copy of a set of stories set during the invasion from WAR OF THE WORLDS, I

decided to give that a try.

In his original novel Wells himself only told about the invasion in England. There is no mention of whether the same events were happening in other countries or not. His original intent was to show Britons what it must be like when the British Navy pulls into some distant island and declares themselves its sovereign by virtue of British armaments. Wells wanted to explore how British society would react if the same thing happened to them. The story could not be told believably having the invader be any military power at the time so Wells introduced Martian Imperialism. As a result he left open the possibility that it was only England that was attacked and that other nations did not come to England's aid. But certainly the easiest explanation is that the invasion was an international event and many countries were invaded.

The stories themselves in this new anthology are in large part writing exercises that borrow a lot from the Wells. They try to throw in a little historical detail about each's chosen character and what that character was doing at the time of the invasion. The descriptions of the battles usually vary little from those in Wells. It is an obvious formula to use but the stories that stand out are the ones that provide some variation. The other common approach is to do a pastiche, describing the invasion but in another author's style.

Kevin Anderson begins the anthology with a preface claiming that this is certain famous people's versions of the invasion and if they contradict, well, different people see things differently. Apparently two of the stories contradicted so much that he has to give it special mention. In fact, there are more contradictions than that, but the claim does help to make the stories fit together better. The initial stories are minor with Michael Resnick suggesting that Teddy Roosevelt would react to the Martian invasion much as he reacted to anything else he encountered. Anderson's own story is more a profile of Percival Lowell and his excitement at meeting Martians. Both of these stories are not so much stories as scenes from days of the invasion.

Walter Jon Williams offers the first substantial story of the volume. His "Foreign Devils" is set in Imperial China and uses an alternate history approach. Having the story set in the Second Opium War allows there to be three warring parties, each fighting the other two. In such a situation there are unexpected and not to say ironic results of the Martian invasion. Daniel Marcus's "Blue Period" follows a much more expected course of not really telling a story that stands on its own but instead just describing Pablo Picasso, describing scenes of the Martian attack on Paris, and describing the artist's reaction. There is description but not a lot of plot beyond "Picasso sees the Martian attack on Paris." Henry James's account is much more complete and perhaps should have

been first since it is by Silverberg, perhaps the best writer in the book, and also because it gives a fairly complete retelling of the Wells plot in somewhat shorter form.

Robert Silverberg's "The Martian Invasion Journals of Henry James" by itself has not much new. It starts with James visiting Wells and expressing his admiration for Wells. What he says of Wells much echoes the feelings that Silverberg himself feels about Wells as he expressed on a panel at the 1995 World Science Fiction Convention. I am not sure that James had an admiration as strong as expressed here. The rest of the story chronicles the experiences of James and Wells during the invasion and is actually a shortened version of the events of the novel. Anyone who has not read the novel (shame on you) can learn the essentials by reading the Silverberg story. Just to keep in practice, Silverberg throws in an alternate history twist at the end. But it is only a half-hearted one, I am afraid.

Janet Berliner ties Winston Churchill and H. Rider Haggard's fictional Umslopogaas into one of the more ambitious entries combining a bit of Boer War African adventure with the Martian Invasion. Curiously there is little connection drawn between Wells's metaphor of European Imperialism and actual European imperialism in Africa at the time. There is something of what amounts to a pun on what Haggard called an alien invader and the Martians. The premise already starts to wear thin by the time we get to Howard Waldrop's "Night of the Cooters." That is ironic because this may well be the story that inspired the volume and is the only reprint of a story written before the creation of this book. This story matches Texas rangers against Martians. The approach what a lot of the writers in this book have adopted: taking scenes right out of Wells, but translating them to another setting and perhaps modifying the style to the appropriate person. The story follows Texas rangers going after some wayward schoolboys; then when the Martians land the game becomes more describing scenes in the Wells, but with a Texas accent. His rangers do fairly well fighting Martians and the Martians seem more vulnerable here than in other stories, but perhaps Waldrop has a certain pride in his state's heroes.

Doug Beeson gives us an account of Albert Einstein during the invasion and it is one of the better stories. It gives us new incidents not in the Wells, rather than just repeating scenes of the novel in other locations. The story also has the courage to try to invent a little about the Martian technology that Well did not. His image of Einstein of constantly perceiving the world around him in terms of physics is not entirely convincing. We are not so successful in getting into Kipling's head. Barbara Shamble's story of Rudyard Kipling is well textured, but the plot is a bit of a disappointment. It has more dialect and less adventure than most stories in the volume, a bit of a

disappointment considering that Kipling was the master of the adventure tale.

George Alec Effinger offers a delightful pastiche of Edgar Rice Burroughs with a John Carter story that gives a broader context to the whole Martian invasions. What Wells let us assume was the only intelligent race on Mars is just one more strange species that fits fairly nicely into the range of strange creatures Burroughs envisioned on Barsoom. This may well be the best story in the anthology, not for the writing style but because it tries to do something other than the obvious. More adhering to the formula, Allan Steele has a reporter seeing the devastation of the attack and recounting it to Joseph Pulitzer. Steele has some nice detail, but the story does little that others have not done. Much the same can be said of Mark W. Tiedemann's account of Tolstoy and its familiar device of the accompanying letter saying what a great find the account is. Tiedemann seems to be trying to work in geographic locations that have been in the news the last couple of years.

Gregory Benford and David Brin tell us of the ever-optimistic Jules Verne who is certain that the Martians can be defeated. For background material they have a bit about Verne's disagreement with H. G. Wells that really comes down to disagreement between the approaches of hard science fiction and of lighter science fantasy. The one thing that really is shocking from two major science fiction writers is that they believe that everything in the Martians comes in threes, three legs, three arms, three eyes. The one hitch is that this three-ness was the invention of the 1953

movie, not the novel. The book had the war machines be striding tripods, but nothing else was in threes about the Martians.

Don Webb's account of an eleven-year-old H. P. Lovecraft borrows some ideas from Nigel Kneale and the Quatermass stories. It does not have much of a story but there definitely are intriguing ideas. Curiously it turns out to be a better story than Daniel Keys Moran and Jodi Moran's story of an adult Mark Twain. Missing from their story is most of the wit we expect from Twain. What could have been one of the better stories fails to capture the essence of Twain. M. Shayne Bell does on of the few really serious pieces in this non-serious anthology, an account of Joseph Conrad in Africa at the time of the Invasion. Again it compares the Martian invaders with European invaders in a troubled Africa.

A more original and interesting approach is used by Dave Wolverton in his account of Jack London off in the frozen North meeting a French Canadian who uses a captured Martian is a most inhumane manner. This is one of the better adventure tales in the book. The final story is Connie Willis's piece about Emily Dickinson, a satire on college theses written in a form akin to literary slapstick. Some of the allusions are particularly clever though none struck me as actually being funny in the traditional sense of

making me laugh, chuckle, or even smile. An afterword by Benford and Brin again in the voice of Verne tries to tie things up and suggest some differences in our world resulting from the Great Invasion.

There is a plot that has become popular in the last ten or fifteen years of asking what would happen if two famous people in history and/or literature met. What if H. G. Wells had met Jack the Ripper, what if Sherlock Holmes had met Sigmund Freud, etc. This anthology fits neatly into that mold but for the fact that the one constant character is not a single person but the Martian Invasion. As such the book is of some interest value, though the sameness of the stories is a bit wearing. Perhaps the stories would be best read at a rate of one a week.

Fans of the Wells novels may find this worth reading, but I am not

sure that it was worth an entire anthology. But then a lot of anthologies are being published that do not seem to be very good subjects for whole anthologies and this is better than most. Waldrop's "The Night of the Cooters," which predated the anthology may have covered the idea as much as it needed to be covered. [-mrl]

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5. TWISTER (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

> Capsule: Some exciting action scenes punctuate a plot that is a virtual museum of cliches. Without too much acting and a bunch of all-too-familiar story elements, the plot could have used a few good twists. The story is contrived and lacks credibility. Not all the tornado scenes are believable or look real, but some are quite impressive. Rating: 0 (-4 to +4) [Minor spoilers in plot description. A discussion of tornadoes follows main review.]

"We sure been havin' a lot of weather lately." It is a line from an old comedy, somebody trying to make conversation. But the last few years that line seems to have taken on new meaning with record storms, hurricanes, high temperatures, heavy snowfalls, and cold winters. So Amblin Entertainment (by way of Warner Brothers and Universal Pictures) thought that the time was right to make a film about the most violent weather they could. And that, of course, is what they did.

This is a sort of a monster movie in which the monster is not a giant lizard but something a lot less tangible, but a lot more deadly--a sort of spirit of tornadoes. Back in 1969 the monster

came and took Jo Harding's father, and Jo is going to have her vengeance on the beast. And, like with many monster movies, the film lives when the monster is on the screen and the rest of the film is just waiting for those scenes. There are some good action

sequences when that tornado (or actually one of several tornadoes) is on the screen. The rest of the story is actively bad as a collection of warmed-over cliches from other films. In addition to the cliche of the vendetta that Jo has against tornadoes, there a love triangle with Jo competing with psychologist Melissa for the affections of Jo's soon-to-be-ex-husband Bill. Bill is himself a former tornado hunter, but now he has decided to give all that excitement up and become a docile TV weatherman. Jo leads a whole group of idealistic young tornado hunters who will win their victory against tornadoes if they can launch a homemade probe into a raging cyclone. Now you would think that a set of angry tornadoes would be opponent enough. But there is also a human enemy, a team of evil tornado hunters who stole the idea of the probe from Bill and have made their own with (gasp!) corporate funding. And while the good guys are a free-thinking ragtag lot who dress casually and chase their tornadoes in mismatched cars and vans, the bad guys have their own armada of vans--all black--they all dress in matching designer outfits, and they steal their ideas and their plans from the idealists every chance they get. And to top it all they bask in television publicity while the good guys are unsung in their heroics. Each team is set on wresting from tornadoes the secret that will let people predict where a tornado will strike fifteen minutes in advance of the hit rather than the current three minutes. The good guys have to get the secret data before the bad guys get it and give it to some corporation.

Because a single tornado lasts for only a few minutes the film contrives to have a series of tornadoes forming over Oklahoma, each larger than the last, to put our two teams in ever increasing danger as they try to jockey themselves into the paths of the storms in the hopes of getting their probes picked up and picked up and spun by one of the deadly funnels. Just how the data can be used to make the tornado more predictable is never explained. This is an odd failing considering the script was co-written by Michael Crichton (and by Anne-Marie Martin, a.k.a. Mrs. Michael Crichton). Crichton likes to explain (and often slam) scientific investigation and it would have been worthwhile to get his explanation for how the data would be used. There is a little scientific exposition, but it is more descriptive than explanatory. We learn, for example, that tornadoes are measured on the Fujita Tornado Intensity Scale (see discussion after review) of the light gale F1 to the incredibly deadly F5 that of all the tornado hunters only Bill has actually seen. An F5 is called "the finger of God." (Now what do you think they would use for the finale of this film?)

This is the second film ex-cinematographer Jan de Bont has directed, the first being SPEED. And he directs like a cameraman.

The most memorable characters of TWISTER are all the very visual tornadoes. There is, however, what seems like it might have been an unexpected problem. Action scenes require moderate close-ups. Like an expressionist painting, a tornado looks great from a distance and not so good in a close- up. It is a huge finger sticking out of the sky which is an awe-inspiring sight. Get close enough to it to see it giving our characters' trouble and the tornado no longer looks so impressive. In close-up it looks more like just a big, unimpressive dust cloud. It helps to have it pick up heavy objects and whirl them around, but it is not easy to make a cloud of dust look dramatic. Still, the acting honors go to dust. Spencer Tracy said all that is necessary for acting is to remember your lines and do not bump into the props. Playing tornado hunters Jo and Bill Harding, Helen Hunt and Bill Paxton remember their lines and wait for the props to bump into them. Neither pulls in a whole lot of interest on the screen. As the hapless fiancee of Bill, Jami Gertz fairs a little better, but she is given some really sappy comedy relief lines like explaining to someone who has called her on her cordless phone, "This is not a good time for me," as she rides into the path of a raging tornado. Cary Elwes has little to do as the evil tornado hunter, and the most memorable human in the film is Lois Smith as Aunt Meg who makes wind-driven lawn ornaments and who proves she is a good person by cooking up huge quantities of good-looking food, almost all protein and cholesterol.

A friend has suggested that the script might better have been titled HOWLER. Without much loss, TWISTER could be edited down to twenty minutes of great action scenes, and then it might have gotten better rating than a 0 on the -4 to +4 scale.

We are really just tiny and frail creatures living in a huge sea of atmosphere. The forces that we can create, with the possible exception of nuclear forces, are small compared to some of those routinely--but luckily rarely in our time scale--unleashed by nature. This ocean of atmosphere that we live in can at times have currents that become deadly, and one of the deadliest and most focused forces it can unleash is a tornado. Perhaps lightning has more impact per square inch and a hurricane may last longer and dissipate more force overall, but nothing combines the focus and the sheer power of a tornado: a finger of spinning wind with speed that can uproot trees and swing trailer trucks like they were toys.

Because air is invisible, we can rarely see how much chaotic motion there really is in the atmosphere around us. But unequal heating can cause powerful updrafts of air, as much as 100 miles per hour.

With all that air going up in the air, a low pressure area is formed and surrounding air has to rush in to replace it. That air can go straight into the partial vacuum, but sometimes, like an object in decaying orbit around the earth, it instead spirals in. As it spirals in faster and faster, it pulls more and more air

with. The air rushes around the low pressure area faster and faster until it is traveling at speeds of up to 300 miles per hour, rushing in to the center to get pulled up the chimney. Along with the air being pulled up comes anything and virtually everything that gets in its way. When this happens over water, a huge spout of water is formed. But when it happens over land what it picks up can be solid objects which get carried along at the same high speeds. The reason we can see the funnel shape of a tornado is that it is picking up dust and dirt from the ground and pulling it into the updraft. Often the color of the tornado is just the color of the soil under it. In the funnel we are also seeing water vapor condensing from the cooling effect of in-rushing air. Colliding with air at the speeds that the air is swirling is deadly, colliding with water is worse, colliding with something solid is incredibly destructive. And a wind this powerful can pick up and whirl around a train locomotive. As the low pressure area moves the deadly finger can move along the ground at speeds from 20 to 70 miles per hour, carrying destruction with it.

As they said in the film, the intensity of tornadoes is measured by the Fujita scale (see below). There can be as many as 1000 tornadoes a year over land, almost always over flat countryside as there is in Kansas, Missouri, and Texas, and especially Oklahoma. Many of these have funnels less than 100 feet wide and last only a few minutes, but tornadoes a mile wide or lasting as long as an hour are not uncommon. Sometimes you can have funnels forming around not around the entire low pressure area but at its edge. And when that happens one can get several tornadoes forming around the same low pressure area. March 18, 1925, there were seven funnels from one low pressure area in the Midwest (especially Illinois) with a resulting death toll of 689.

THE FUJITA TORNADO INTENSITY SCALE (provided by the National Weather Service)

- (F0) Gale tornado (40-72 mph)

    - Light damage. Some damage to chimneys; break branches off trees; push over shallow-rooted trees; damage sign boards.
- (F1) Moderate tornado (73-112 mph)

    - Moderate damage. The lower limit is the beginning of hurricane wind speed; peel surface off roofs; mobile homes pushed off foundations or overturned; moving autos pushed off the roads.
- (F2) Significant tornado (113-157 mph)

    - Considerable damage. Roofs torn off frame houses; mobile homes demolished; boxcars pushed over; large trees snapped or uprooted; light-object missiles generated.

- (F3) Severe tornado (158-206 mph)

    - Severe damage. Roofs and some walls torn off well-constructed houses; trains overturned; most trees in forest uprooted; heavy cars lifted off the ground and thrown.
- (F4) Devastating tornado (207-260)

    - Devastating damage. Well-constructed houses leveled; structures with weak foundations blown off some distance; cars thrown and large missiles generated.
- (F5) Incredible tornado (261-318 mph)

    - Incredible damage. Strong frame houses lifted off foundations and carried considerable distance to disintegrate; automobile sized missiles fly through the air in excess of 100 meters (109 yards); trees debarked; incredible phenomena will occur.

[-mrl]

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It is almost impossible systematically to constitute a natural moral law. Nature has no principles. She furnishes us with no reason to believe that human life is to be respected. Nature, in her indifference, makes no distinction between good and evil.

--Anatole France