

(Shown out of chronological order for reasons that will become obvious.)

THE MT VOID

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THE AFRICAN QUEEN is one of the most respected films in cinema history. Actually filmed under incredibly adverse conditions in Africa, it is John Huston's story of a river trader (Humphrey Bogart as Charlie Allnut) who falls under the influence of missionary Rose Sayer (played by Katherine Hepburn). Rosie wants Charlie to become a one-man army against the invading Germans. The interplay of the two main characters is legendary and won an Oscar for Bogart as well as nominations for screenwriter James Agee, director Huston, and Katherine Hepburn. The adventure comedy also stars Robert Morley, Peter Bull, and Theodore Bikel. Peter Viertel told the story of Huston coming to Africa and making the film in a novel, WHITE HUNTER, BLACK HEART, which was filmed almost forty years after the events. By an odd coincidence that film, starring and directed by Clint Eastwood, will also be shown. Huston is seen as a man who helps the weak and bullies the strong, who comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. For once I will say of a film I am showing that it was over-rated by the critics and I frankly think that it is good but nowhere nearly that good. But you can decide. Since it makes a nice segue, we will show WHITE HUNTER, BLACK HEART first.

2. Last week Mark talked about how everyone loves spring. Well, Laura Cunningham of the N_e_w_Y_o_r_k_T_i_m_e_s felt obliged to write a rebuttal, which appeared in the April 5 issue (page C1). It said, in part:

"Spring scares me," confides a friend. "Everything pulsating. All the longer daylight means to me is that I have to lower the window shades earlier to watch TV." Many urban souls thrive on winter depression, enjoying the flu as an excuse to cuddle under covers, popping cough drops and videocassettes. One recent afternoon, several city friends refused to accompany me to the New York

Botanical Garden in the Bronx, saying they didn't care to "see everything in bloom, looking, you know, so hyper-real and computer-enhanced."

I understand. Spring can be pushy. I myself prefer a moody day, wind-whipped and gray, to visit the garden, before the true, manic spring begins, with the overloud bird chirping and all the rest. So I rushed up before most of the buds could open and too much pollination was under way. There were spores in the air, to be sure, but germination was discreet and I had the muted experience I craved, and more.

So I guess you can't please everyone. [-ecl]

3. If Cunningham is complaining because she prefers a "moody day, wind-swept and gray," to a spring day, I think she's comparing

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apples and winesaps. It was not true in California, but at least in this area I think spring might be the season with the most rainy days. Also, I celebrate spring as the return of my favorite weather, the crackling electrical storm. Bucolic weather comes in only second.

4. Roberts Adams's A_l_t_e_r_n_a_t_e_W_o_r_l_d_s and Keith Laumer's K_n_i_g_h_t_o_f_D_e_l_u_s_i_o_n_s are on loan to the Lincroft SF Library, thanks to Rob Mitchell. C. S. Lewis's S_c_r_e_w_t_a_p_e_L_e_t_t_e_r_s should be available at any public library (if yours doesn't have it, complain!). [-ecl]

5. Item number three serves a double purpose. It also extends the section to a new page. The first draft of this notice would have made the comment section just the right length to be kept to an even number of pages. Of course, to do that we would have had to cut the quote. Then I might have gotten more angry mail from readers like the redoubtable shori kempo expert Rajesh Shah (among others) who are disappointed if the notice contains writing only by people named Leeper. Okay, just for you folks we will move the film review up front and start it on an even-numbered page. That way trees won't die so that quote addicts can get their quotes.

Mark Leeper
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...mtgzy!leeper

Of the ten Amendments in the Bill of Rights, the First is more powerful and has done more to shape the United States than the other nine put together. Had we been given only that one Amendment, we could have given ourselves the other nine.

--Mark Leeper

DEFENDING YOUR LIFE
A film review by Mark R. Leeper
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Capsule review: Find out where Southern Californians go when they die. Albert Brooks's life-after-death comedy is charming and fun, but sidesteps substance. Rating: low +1.

Albert Brooks writes, directs, and stars in subtle little comedies about human foibles. He has a good feel for small characters and a good ear for dialogue. His M_o_d_e_r_n_R_o_m_a_n_c_e has him wooing a beautiful woman with whom he is unable to get along. His L_o_s_t_i_n_A_m_e_r_i_c_a has him quitting a good job in a fit of pique and then going out in an RV to discover a real America that is not what he thought it was. Each gives a hint what he thinks life is about, but it is open to some interpretation. In D_e_f_e_n_d_i_n_g_Y_o_u_r_L_i_f_e he turns to fantasy so instead of hinting he can come right out and state his values.

A Brooksian character, Daniel, dies on his birthday and finds himself in a very Californian view of an afterlife. In Judgment City he is given a hearing to defend his life and the way that he has led it. At stake is whether he will attain a higher plane in the next life or not. Rather than just hint at his values, the way Brooks as screenwriter did in previous films, he now can posit a heavenly host who can say, "This is the standard by which you will be judged." And his standard comes down to "Be brave." If you do not insist on the salary you think you deserve, if you do not take a chance on your investments, if you do not have sex with someone when you want it, it will be held against you in Brooks's afterlife. Ethics count for nothing. Helping others if not done in a spectacular feat of courage counts for nothing. Courage is what counts. What could have been a view into Brooks's personal philosophy suffers greatly from the apparent shallowness of that philosophy.

At heart then, the film misses a chance to be about something profound and instead is just another film like L._A._S_t_o_r_y and S_c_e_n_e_s_f_r_o_m_a_M_a_l_l about California values. This particular vision of Limbo-adjusted-for-Californians is a vision of what Brooks thinks his contemporaries would like in an afterlife. It is garish hotels and gourmet food. You can eat as much as you like without worrying about calories, cholesterol, or capacity. During the day you have hearings on your integrity as a person, then at night you can go hear a comic or see what you were in previous lives in a sort of upscale convention center.

Brooks's character meets and falls in love with the perfect woman, Julia (played by Meryl Streep). She is easy-going and affable and was a hero in her previous life. Julia is not so much a woman as a walking good example. She is sailing through judgment while Daniel is having serious problems with a strident prosecutor (played by Lee Grant) and an enigmatic and strange attorney played by Rip Torn.

D_e_f_e_n_d_i_n_g_Y_o_u_r_L_i_f_e is diverting, but the ending is weak and the philosophy is shallow. I rate it a low +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

FULL SPECTRUM 3 edited by Lou Aronica, Amy Stout, and Betsy Mitchell
Foundation Books, 1991, ISBN 0-385-41801-9, \$15.95.
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper
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I had originally thought the first F_u_l_l_S_p_e_c_t_r_u_m anthology was okay. Then I thought the second not as good as the first. By the time the third has come around, the first seems wonderful in retrospect. Yes, I found this book a real disappointment. The edge that the stories in the earlier volumes had (primarily in the first volume) is gone, leaving us with a series of not very original, not very subtle parables.

But before I talk about the negative aspects, I suppose it's only reasonable to tell you what I liked in the anthology. The best in the book is Peg Kerr's "Lethe," a well-crafted story about a doctor's encounter and coming to terms with a "death dealer," a person who helps the dying to pass on. This was a story of genuine emotion, though marred somewhat by having some of the characters as (apparently) natives of Callisto--an unnecessary and off-putting touch. Still, the story overcame this problem rather quickly and (as I said) is probably the best in the book.

Marcos Donnelly's "Tracking the Random Variable" is based on chaos theory, and of one man trying to get order from chaos. If a butterfly sneezes a China, this can create a hurricane in the Caribbean. So why shouldn't a man's marriage be affected by the number of spark plugs sold by certain garage? There is some unnecessary business, such as having the main character put his coupons in order of value, which serves mostly to confuse the plot, but on the whole this is an intriguing application of chaos theory.

"Loitering at Death's Door" by Wolfgang Jeschke (translated by Sally Schiller and Anne Caveley) is classic science fiction with historic and mythical overtones. Though it doesn't break new ground, it is well worth reading, because Jeschke knows how to write and how to communicate ideas without hitting the reader over the head with a sledgehammer.

A few stories are okay, but nothing to rave about. "Dogstar Man" by Nancy Willard is one of those "quiet fantasies" that is mostly setting, some character development (in this case minimal), and a slight fantasy varnish. For some reason I was convinced the first-person narrator was female until it was clearly stated otherwise; but this probably indicates a blurring of gender stereotyping these days rather than the inability of the author to delineate between the two. Another quiet fantasy is Tony Daniel's "Prism Tree," though I would perhaps more specifically label this a self-conscious Southern fantasy--self-conscious in the sense that the author seems to be working very hard at writing a down-home, put-your-feet-up sort of story. I have nothing

against such stories, but they should appear effortless rather than strained, and the parallel of the map and the territory which Daniel uses is also a bit over-worked in fantasy these days.

"Desert Rain" by Mark L. Van Name and Pat Murphy is about art and artificial intelligence. Unfortunately the two aspects don't mesh very well and one is left with the same feeling that ones gets from many "Star Trek" episodes these days: there were two plotlines that together added up to the right length. Of the two halves, I think the authors would have done better to have concentrated on the art aspect, since the AI part has been done before (in Lester Del Rey's "Helen O'Loy," on the old "Twilight Zone," and, yes, even in "Star Trek").

Unfortunately, that's about the extent of the stories I enjoyed. The unsubtlety I complained about starts with the very first story in the volume. James Morrow's "Daughter Earth" is superficially Kafkaesque, but superficial is perhaps the perfect word, since it trades the subtlety of T_h_e_M_e_t_a_m_o_r_p_h_o_s_i_s for the heavy-handedness of a tract. While it does at times achieve a certain level of whimsy, the obvious preaching detracts from the reader's enjoyment. (Since this is clearly a parable, I won't even analyze all the scientific errors--once you accept that a woman can give birth to a talking biosphere, complaining that its gravity seems inconsistent seems pointless.)

There are several other stories which seem more written for the moral or the message. "Precious Moments" by Kristine Kathryn Rusch is a weary tale about using one's abilities wisely. (I also had a hard time shaking the feeling that the first person narrator was female, even though it became obvious he wasn't.) "Division by Zero" by Ted Chiang tries to give us a new twist on mathematics and fails: the mathematics is suspect (at least to me, and I do have a B.S. in Mathematics) and the parallel to real-life a bit heavy-handed. Ursula K. LeGuin continues her nature-based writing (or is this trend of hers just my imagination?) with "Newton's Sleep," in which astronauts living in a space habitat find that they can't really leave the Earth behind, no matter how hard they try. I am not a big fan of this sort of story, even when well done, so perhaps my negative reaction is to the message rather than to the medium. "The Helping Hand" by Norman Spinrad is so obvious from the word "Go" (well, perhaps not that early, but certainly from about the third page) that I kept hoping against hope that it

wouldn't be what it seemed to be. It was. Rod Serling would have loved it. (Actually, the "Outer Limits" did love it, or a story very similar.)

For some stories, the moral wasn't heavy-handed, but the plot (particularly the ending) was predictable. This is true of Spinrad's story, but others fall into this trap as well. For example, "The Dark at the Corner of the Eye" by Patricia Anthony, a story about a psychic policeman who may also be clairvoyant, had a good build-up, but then ruined it with a cliched cop-out ending. (Ooooh, a pun! Sorry, I couldn't resist.) And David Zindell's "When the Rose Is Dead" closes

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the anthology with a story with a predictable ending (which is bad placement, leaving as it does a rather sour taste in the reader's mouth). Even the narrator's compulsion to tell his story is recycled-- Orson Scott Card uses a similar device in R_e_d_P_r_o_p_h_e_t.

Admittedly sometimes predictability can be overcome by a good author. Michael Bishop's "Apartheid, Superstrings, and Mordecai Thubana" is a bit too predictable and heavy-handed in the fantasy aspect to be great fantasy, but it is certainly successful as straight fiction. If this sounds as if I am applying a different standard to fantasy than to non-fantasy, so be it. (By the way, Bishop seems on his way to joining Mike Resnick in the small set of authors known as "The Africa Mikes." Okay, so I just coined the name, but what the heck. Bishop previously wrote N_o_E_n_e_m_y_b_u_t_T_i_m_e, set in prehistoric and modern Africa.)

Almost as annoying as stories with predictable endings are stories with great build-ups, but no endings. "Lake Agassiz" by Jack McDevitt is about an old sailboat buried in an ancient lake bed and capable of restoring itself--and the past. It read somewhat like an A_n_a_l_o_g story, except that A_n_a_l_o_g would have had some sort of clever twist ending to it, and McDevitt doesn't. (This is set in his "Fort Moxie" universe.) Kevin J. Anderson's "Fondest of Memories" is another story that is all build-up and no pay-off. Maybe that isn't fair, because the build-up is to some extent the point of the story: our anticipation doesn't always match the event.

Some stories just don't make it. They're not too predictable, or

too heavy-handed, or too anything else negative, but they're not anything positive either. Poul Anderson's "Rokuro" is based on some old artificial intelligence ideas, but couched as a play instead of a story. While it would be interesting to see this produced, when read it seems flat--strange for such a good author. "Police Actions" by Barry N. Malzberg spends most of its time communicating to the reader the hopelessness of it all, but otherwise is a not very coherent complaint about urban decay and the modern world. Karen Joy Fowler's "Black Glass" is the story of Carry Nation raised from the dead by voodoo ("voodoo") to help fight the drug war. If this sounds relatively unpromising, well, I can't say I was thrilled with the execution any more than the idea. "Snow on Sugar Mountain" by Elizabeth Hand is a story of a shape-changer and an astronaut and their respective needs to return to their origins. It's well-written, but opens no new doors for the reader.

And some were just so orthogonal to my experience that I can't really judge them. Maybe it was the translation (by Kim Stanley Robinson) of Joelle Wintrebert's "Transfusion," or maybe it's a difference in style between English-language science fiction and French-language science fiction, or maybe I'm just dense (and I'm not taking a vote, so you needn't send me _ y_ o_ u_ r opinion on which one it is!), but I didn't get this one at all. "Chango Chingamadre, Dutchman, & Me"

by R. V. Branham is another one of those stories that centers around rock music--or at any rate some sort of music I don't follow. So, as with Howard Waldrop's "musical" stories that I reviewed recently, it left me cold, but I have to abstain from casting a vote.

So there you have it (as they say). There were two or three good stories, but on the whole I can't recommend this anthology.

TRAVELLER by Richard Adams
Knopf, 1988, ISBN 0-394-57055-3, \$18.95.
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper
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At first glance, this sounds like a pretty silly idea: to tell the story of the Civil War from the point of view of General Robert E. Lee's horse. But then, Adams's first book, *Walter's Hippodrome*, was rejected by dozens of publishers because it was a "bunny story." When Penguin finally published it, it went on to become their best-seller ever, and was recognized as an adult story told with non-human characters, rather than "just" a children's story. Adams followed this up with *Sharadik*, the story of a bear revered by a primitive tribe, and *Plague Dogs*, a dark tale of animals used in medical research. So Adams has a history of taking unlikely approaches to fiction and making them work.

And it does work. Clayton Cramer said, "I can see it now. 'Hmmm. Today we went to a place with very tasty grass. Spent much of the day walking slowly past thousands of boots, standing on lovely green grass. Had my shoes replaced today. Nice blacksmith -- very gentle on my hooves.'" This is not far off the mark, at least as far as style goes, but it misses the point of the book. Traveller (Lee's horse in real life, by the way; many of the events recounted in *Traveller* are based on documented events in history) does see things from a horse's viewpoint, but he sees more than just eating grass and getting new shoes.

One of the things that struck me when reading *Traveller* is that what we have here is a different point of view (in the technical sense) than one usually has. We have seen third person omniscient, and third person non-omniscient, and first person, but what we have here is first person *retrospective omniscient*. That is, because the story is based on history the reader knows what is coming, and what is really going on, in a fashion not normally encountered. Well, perhaps other historical novels would have this, but the ones I can remember are either third person omniscient or first person, but with the narrator finding out everything of importance in the course of the book. This is not true here. As is mentioned on the dust jacket (so I fell it's not a major spoiler), Traveller never realizes Lee *lost* the war--he thinks Lee *won*! But Adams does this in such a way that the reader finds herself asking whether that is really so unreasonable a conclusion. Certainly many people have asked of World War II whether we really won, or whether the Germans and Japanese won in the end, for many of the same reasons. So do we really understand what is going on in the world better than Traveller? (Adams does help out the reader a bit by interspersing historical summaries every few chapters, so that we can keep track of what is going on in terms *we* can understand.)

Adams does a good job of giving his characters individual personalities. His animals (in other books as well as this one) are not

the usual caricatures, but real individuals. His horses act like horses, not like "humans in horse suits," and his rabbits act like rabbits, and so on. He manages the dialects well in T_r_a_v_e_l_l_e_r, balancing readability with accuracy of sound. The only quibble might be that his animals can communicate inter-species (he talks to cats and other non-horses), but not with humans.

Some of the techniques in T_r_a_v_e_l_l_e_r parallel techniques Adams used in previous novels. For example, there is a prescient horse (Sorrel) in

T_r_a_v_e_l_l_e_r who seems patterned after a prescient rabbit in W_a_t_e_r_s_h_i_p

D_o_w_n: both see vague hints of what is to come, but not specific events.

The use of an animal as a narrator also allows Adams to make some strong statements about slavery. Traveller's constant comparison's of his life to that of the slaves ("always saying goodbye") brings home the reality of slavery more than writing it from a human point of view might. And again, Traveller's incomplete understanding of reality leads him to believe that Lee's black valet Perry is the most important man around other than Lee himself, because Perry is so close to Lee.

Traveller sees things from a horse's perspective. This leads him to conclude, for example, that there are fewer guns at some point because there are fewer horses around to pull them, rather than that there are fewer horses around because the guns have been damaged and so the horses aren't needed. When Lee talks to himself, Traveller naturally assumes that Lee is talking to him, and when Lee says, "Lord God, why is this happening?" Traveller naturally assumes that Lord God was a previous horse that Lee had, and Lee is just confused about who he is talking to. And all this talk about "the War" makes Traveller think "the War" is a place with glorious soldiers and fine grass and a big white house. When all is over, his one regret is that they never got to this place called "the War." We laugh at this naivete, but is this so difference from our preoccupation with the glory of war and our tendency to brush over the ugly reality?

Yes, maybe Traveller is just a horse. And maybe he is a little dense. But he's no more dense than we are at times, and maybe seeing things through his eyes can help remove the blinders from our own.

