



Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
Club Notice - 12/1/95 -- Vol. 14, No. 22

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

Unless otherwise stated, all meetings are in Middletown 5T-415
Wednesdays at noon.

DATE	TOPIC
12/06/95	Book: MIDSHIPMAN'S HOPE by David Feintuch
01/03/96	Book: BRICK MOON by Edward Everett Hale ("Steampunk")
01/24/96	Book: THE MAN WHO FOLDED HIMSELF by David Gerrold

Outside events:
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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1. Of our next discussion book, David Feintuch's MIDSHIPMAN'S
HOPE, Rob Mitchell writes:

An author can be inspired sufficiently by someone else's character
or milieu, to transplant it into the author's own world. When done
well, this transplanting is called an homage to the original
author. When not done well, this transplanting is called a rip-off
of the original. I've not decided yet whether David Feintuch's
MIDSHIPMAN'S HOPE, and the follow-on two books, are homages or

rip-offs of C. S. Forester's HORNBLOWER series.

Horatio Hornblower is the hero of 10.5 (including one uncompleted) books about a British naval officer at the beginning of the century--the 19th century. The books detail his adventures and the

THE MT VOID

Page 2

development of his career, from lowly midshipman to Lord High Admiral, and are renowned for their attention to detail and access into Hornblower's mind. Hornblower comes across as a honorable and resourceful individual, even when he believes himself to be unworthy or desperate. Forester develops Hornblower's character plausibly, so that even a present-day reader with extensive knowledge of present-day navies can feel a kinship with Hornblower and his sailing ships.

The verdict is not so clear with Feintuch's books about his Captain, Nicholas Seafort. MIDSHPMAN'S HOPE is the first of four books (three of which have been published already) about Seafort, whose resemblance to Hornblower is painfully obvious. All of Hornblower's self-doubt, inventiveness, and focus on duty are magnified in Seafort, like a funhouse mirror, so that for long sections of the books the reader expects to find Seafort flagellating himself physically as well as mentally. Hornblower at his worst was never so dreary, and for so long, as Seafort is on almost every page.

MIDSHPMAN'S HOPE starts out with Seafort as the senior Midshipman on a fusion ship destined for a colony settled in a distant star system. A trip to another star takes on the order of 2-3 years, during which time the ship is isolated from the rest of the universe. The Captain of the ship is the ultimate arbiter of life and death, with power and responsibility unparalleled since the Age of Sail. A Captain is served by 2-3 Lieutenants, a few officer specialists (doctor, pilot, engineer), about 4 midshipmen, and a few dozen crew. The ships themselves are not purely naval vessels, but are combination cargo and passenger ships, delivering supplies and new bodies to the distant colonies, and bringing back food and natural resources to the Solar System.

Due to some fairly imaginative disasters, all senior officers end

up dying and Seafort becomes Captain. Only nineteen years old, admittedly an inadequate navigator, lacking any respect or confidence from the passengers or his subordinates, Seafort muddles through, dealing with mutinies, alien attacks, computer difficulties, and crew shortages with cleverness and a morbid refusal to see his own effectiveness. The second and third books follow the pattern of the first--creative challenges that Seafort overcomes with plausible but surprising ingenuity, liberally laced with Seafort whipping himself for screwing things up.

Feintuch postulates an Earth-wide culture run by the United Nations and based on an official state religion. Evidence suggesting possible guilt is sufficient grounds for the accused to be subjected to drug-based interrogation. A great underworld (literally) exists in the bowels of what once were the major cities of the world. Such is the culture from which Seafort sprang, and that in part is how Feintuch justifies Seafort's self-scourging for

failing to live up to his impossibly high standards. I didn't buy it--Seafort is much less approachable than Hornblower, and Feintuch's Navy, which is a reflection of the culture, is an ugly, unappealing, and unstable Navy that I could not relate to. On the other hand, the action sequences were exciting and clever, which is why I read more than the first book. I'll also read the fourth, when it comes out, but Seafort will not share the special place in my literary pantheon that Hornblower holds. [-rlm/a.k.a. jrjt]

2. Recently Evelyn pointed out to me a piece in U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT about the release of Michael Crichton's LOST WORLD. They quoted a statistic that dinosaurs have been featured in about twenty films. That was the number they came up with. Twenty. They probably had some editorial guy think all evening of dinosaur films and then multiplied the number he thought of by two. It was not a giant career opportunity. I mean, it was not like covering Bosnia or the Middle East. Suppose you are some hotshot journalism student getting a job at U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT, the Royal Crown Cola of the news magazine world. And here comes your big break.

"New Guy," they say, "I got a big important assignment for you." Your pulse races. Your passport is burning a hole in your pocket and what do they say? "I want you to figure out how many dinosaur movies there have been." Oh, well. Good-bye, Mr. Pulitzer. What kind of a job would you expect from the kid? He came up with an estimate of twenty films featuring dinosaurs and they ran with that number.

Evelyn figured that had to be a low estimate. Right she is. So here is our list of fifty-five. It is not exhaustive. In specific, I have left out a lot of Asian monster movies from GODZILLA on down. But I got a whole bunch Mr. New Guy missed.

GERTIE THE DINOSAUR (1909)
DINOSAUR AND THE MISSING LINK (1917)
THE GHOST OF SLUMBER MOUNTAIN (1919)
THE THREE AGES (1923)
THE LOST WORLD (1925)
KING KONG (1933)
SON OF KONG (1933)
ONE MILLION B.C. (1940)
FANTASIA (1940)
UNKNOWN ISLAND (1948)
TWO LOST WORLDS (1950)
THE LOST CONTINENT (1951)
THE BEAST FROM 20,000 FATHOMS (1953)
THE ANIMAL WORLD (1955)
KING DINOSAUR (1955)
THE BEAST OF HOLLOW MOUNTAIN (1956)
THE LAND UNKNOWN (1957)

THE GIANT BEHEMOTH (1959)
JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF THE EARTH (1959)
THE LOST WORLD (1960)
DINOSAURUS! (1960)
VALLEY OF THE DRAGONS (1961)
GORGO (1961)
THE MAN CALLED FLINTSTONE (1966)
ONE MILLION YEARS B.C. (1966)
DINOSAUR ISLAND (1966)
LA ISLA DE LOS DINOSAURIOS (1967)

JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF TIME (1967)
JOURNEY TO THE BEGINNING OF TIME (1967)
WHEN DINOSAURS RULED THE EARTH (1969)
VALLEY OF GWANGI (1969)
OFF ON A COMET (1970)
THE LAND THAT TIME FORGOT (1975)
THE PEOPLE THAT TIME FORGOT (1977)
THE LAST DINOSAUR (1977)
THE CRATER LAKE MONSTER (1977)
WHERE TIME BEGAN (1978)
DINOSAUR (1980)
CAVEMAN (1981)
LEGEND OF THE DINOSAURS (1983)
BABY... SECRET OF THE LOST LEGEND (1985)
THE LAND BEFORE TIME (1988)
LIVING WITH DINOSAURS (1989)
PLANET OF THE DINOSAURS (1990)
A NYMPHOID BARBARIAN IN DINOSAUR HELL (1991)
ADVENTURES IN DINOSAUR CITY (1992)
THE LOST WORLD (1992)
JURASSIC PARK (1992)
CARNOSAUR (1993)
WE'RE BACK! A DINOSAUR'S STORY (1993)
THE LAND BEFORE TIME II (1994)
THE FLINTSTONES (1994)
RETURN TO THE LOST WORLD (1994)
CARNOSAUR II (1994)
DINOSAUR ISLAND (1994)

[-mrl]

3. TOY STORY (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule: TOY STORY is the epitome of Pixar's computer graphics work to this point: a feature-length film in which toys come to life and have adventures. And the humor is genuinely funny, making this really a family

film. And the computer graphics are superb. Pixar makes inanimate objects come to life well, but they ought to find other ideas for their stories. Rating: high +1 (-4 to +4)

For years one of the more interesting aspects of the annual tournees of animation was to see the developments in computer animation. An early example--early meaning 1986--from Pixar was "Luxo, Jr." in which metal lamps behaved in human ways. Pixar started life in 1979 as a division of Lucasfilm but became an independent company in 1986. The Luxo lamps were ideal for early attempts at computer animation since they were articulated collections of rigid pieces. Certainly in computer animation rigid body movement is easier to describe to a program than is the movement of something soft and pliable. In fact, Pixar has done a lot of showing toys and other inanimate objects coming to life since if they come off too rigid it can look like part of the characterization. With that in mind it is not difficult to understand why their first feature film is a story in which toys are the main characters and humans play a relatively small role and are not the center of attention. Different animation techniques have different advantages, but TOY STORY is certainly a milestone in computer animation. Pixar still has to prove that their animation techniques are more versatile than Will Vinton's clay animation or the Puppertoons of the 1940s and 1950s. In fact, their style is very like the results of Puppetoon animation. There is nothing wrong with what they do here, but they need to be thinking about how to get more variety in their themes, particularly if they want to be more than hi-tech Puppertoons.

That said, the film is certainly as watchable for the adults in the audience as for the children. We are not talking Merchant-Ivory level here but the adults should appreciate most of what is aimed at the kids and there is some intelligence in the humor (including a very nice bit about the origin of religions--hot stuff for a Disney family film). The story deals with a collection of toys owned by young Andy. What Andy does not know is that when he is not watching, the toys come to life and live lives of their own (a very familiar fantasy theme). Andy's current favorite is Sheriff Woody (voiced by Tom Hanks), but he has just gotten a new toy, Buzz Lightyear, Space Hero (Tim Allen). Woody is not happy about being displaced as Andy's favorite for reasons never made clear--perhaps it's job security. And it does not help that Buzz is not quite bright enough to realize that he is not the real thing. The rivalry is watched by the community of toys including tyrannosaurus Rex (ironically voiced by Wallace Shawn), Mr. Potato Head (Don Rickles), Slinky Dog (Jim Varney), and Bo Peep (Annie Potts). Just how Bo Peep got into this collection of Andy's toys is anybody's guess, but she adds a love interest for Woody. Eventually the rivalry will get out of hand and will have the two racing to return home first from the outside world and then from the house of the

neighbor boy Sid, a budding sociopath with an impressive imagination when it comes to mutilating toys. One rather nice touch here is that Disney animations nearly always equate beauty with goodness and ugliness with evil, but it is not necessarily true here.

The animation technique used here is extremely good. The attention to details like reflective surfaces and the play of light and shadow get better and better with succeeding Pixar productions. Surface texture still seems to be a problem. Pixar does a sort of semi-gloss surface very nicely, which may be one reason they do so much with plastic toys. But the detail and texture they would need to do realistically a man's arm with hair, for example, is not really there any place.

Pixar has made a charming movie carrying their current plot concepts and animation techniques to what appears to be about the limit. TOY STORY is a lot of fun. Now the important question for Pixar is what do they do next. This one gets a high +1 on the -4 to +4 scale. [-mrl]

4. FANTASTIC ALICE edited by Margaret Weis (Ace, ISBN 0-441-00253-6, 1995, 291pp, US\$12) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

This is an anthology of seventeen stories based in some way on Lewis Carroll's ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND.

Well, I suppose it sounded promising.

I was not encouraged by the fact that the introduction refers to the original work both as ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND and ALICE IN WONDERLAND. It also describes Lewis Carroll as "the epitome of the proper Victorian gentleman," a description which I do not believe squares with his penchant for photographing nude girls. But the real test, of course, is the stories themselves.

While it would be expecting too much for the stories to equal

Carroll's, I had hoped they would at least capture some of the spirit (as did Gilbert Adair's ALLICE THROUGHT THE NEEDLE'S EYE a few years ago). Unfortunately, for the most part they don't. A couple have as their only connection the fact that they have a talking Cheshire cat. (In this they are similar to Thomas Disch and John Sladek's BLACK ALICE, which had a Tenniel illustration on the cover, but no connection with the Carroll stories.) Others postulate that Wonderland is some sort of fantasy world bearing little resemblance to how Carroll described it, or even the afterlife. And the stories are so downbeat, filled with child abuse, death, drugs, and so on. I know that's real life, but

THE MT VOID

Page 7

Wonderland was supposed to be an escape from real life. Even the stories that do seem to be set in the "real" Wonderland are mostly unsatisfying, their jokes and paradoxes taken straight from Carroll himself. The one exception to this is Connie Hirsch's "Wonderland Express," in which Hirsch seems to have come up with *new* wordplay of the type Carroll used.

One other story that did work was "A Common Night" by Bruce Holland Rogers, mostly because Rogers did a good job imitating Carroll's poetry.

But on the whole, FANTASTIC ALICE is a disappointment, and I cannot recommend it even (or perhaps especially) for fans of the Carroll works.

I also have a complaint separate from the contents of the book. For the reader, a trade paperback should offer some advantage over a mass-market paperback, and should certainly not be worse. Yet when I left this book in the car for only four hours, the cover looked like someone had taken a curling iron to it. Other companies manage to make trade paperbacks that avoid this; I would hope Ace would too. [-ecl]

5. A MONTH BY THE LAKE (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule: There is less going on in A MONTH BY THE LAKE than meets the eye. This is a very slight story set in 1937, the last summer of peace, in the resort area of Lake Como, Italy. It tells of the romantic conflict of an English woman and an American who want the same fatuous man. Not every British period piece film is a HOWARDS END. Rating: 0 (-4 to +4)

Miss Bentley (played by Vanessa Redgrave) has been coming to Lake Como for vacation since she was a little girl. When she was young, many English vacationed in Lake Como, but of late there are few other English vacationing here. This year she is the only person from home until a new mystery man arrives. Major Paul Winslow (Edward Fox) is more boy than man, but Miss Bentley is interested in the dashing-looking Englishman. But then so is Miss Beaumont (Uma Thurman), the newly arrived American nanny for an Italian family. The two compete for Winslow's attentions, Beaumont with her youth and a seemingly effortless flirtation, Bentley with what might almost be called a campaign. Against the background of the pleasant Italian scenery the two play out their game.

This all sounds like it could be done very broadly and could be quite funny. Or it could just bask in the sunshine and lovely natural setting and somehow end up being magical like ENCHANTED APRIL was. Neither is really the case. Trevor Bentham's screenplay, based on the novelette by H. E. Bates leans more toward understatement. Winslow is such a silly man that one wonders why the women are trying so hard. Beaumont is young and attractive, but empty and shallow. The only strong emotion in the film is Bentley's desperation for the man who may be her last chance ever to marry. Perhaps buried in this film is an allegory about the effortless brashness of America and a more serious and more conflict-bound Europe, but if so, there is not much to the metaphor. More likely this is just an effort to tell a leisurely story in a leisurely setting. If the latter is true, it is a little too much leisure, and the viewer starts looking for the political conflict that must be present in 1937 Italy. In fact,

for 1937 Italy, the Lake Como area must be among the least interesting places to be in the country. When Bentley sees a Fascist parade and nearly gets into serious trouble for photographing it, the film seems to perk up a bit in the hope that something of some import will happen. But the moment is quickly fleeting and the story returns from a battle of ideas to a battle of flirtations. It is not surprising that more is not made of the pre-war politics since the original Bates story was set around 1960, or so I have been told.

Director John Irvin is best know recently for his WIDOWS' PEAK, a film that I found even more predictable than A MONTH BY THE LAKE, but at least it had a story to predict. Vanessa Redgrave does what she can with the silly woman she plays, but it cannot have been one of her favorite roles. I know there are people in the world someplace who think that Uma Thurman is talented and very attractive just like I know there are people who think liver and onions is delicious. It is hard for me to be keen on either. Going back to A ROOM WITH A VIEW, we have seen quite a few prestige British period pieces playing the art house circuit. H. E. Bates is unfortunately no E. M. Forster and A MONTH BY THE LAKE is no ROOM WITH A VIEW. Rate it a 0 on the -4 to +4 scale. [-mrl]

6. CASINO (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule: Martin Scorsese's story of the rise and fall of a casino manager is a detailed but informative and even enthralling three hours. CASINO chronicles how organized crime lost Las Vegas, as seen through the eyes of two close friends appointed by the mob to run the operation. In spite of strong graphic violence

this could get the Best Picture Oscar. Rating:
low +3 (-4 to +4)

Following the structure of a classical tragedy, CASINO chronicles

in fascinating detail the rise and fall of Sam "Ace" Rothstein, the mob-assigned manager of a prestigious Las Vegas casino. Martin Scorsese co-wrote the screenplay with Nicholas Pileggi, basing it on Pileggi's novel. The two previously co-wrote GOODFELLAS, based on another Pileggi novel. (Pileggi also co-wrote the screenplay for the upcoming CITY HALL.)

CASINO has an epic length, just short of three hours, and while the central plot advances slowly the film is filled with the engrossing details of what is involved with the running of a major casino as well as telling a complex yet never confusing story.

Ace (played by Robert De Niro) is a consummate gambler who does his homework for bets in painstaking detail. His skill has earned enough for the Kansas City Mob that they reward him, a non-Italian Jew, by letting him manage the Tangiers Casino. This is a position in which he can get very powerful while becoming very rich. In the job he really comes into his own as a perfectionist who oversees all the details, some unsavory, of running the high-profit show. Ace reluctantly allows his friend since childhood Nick Santoro (Joe Pesci) to come to Las Vegas and to get involved with the Tangiers. Ace also falls for a beautiful hustler, Ginger McKenna (Sharon Stone). Neither turns out to be a good decision. Nick is a loose cannon thug with a volatile temper. He will do whatever it takes to get money and power. Even as Ace's power and prestige increase, the seeds of his downfall are being sown by idealistic but questionable decisions. Ace's marriage and over-generosity to Ginger, his trust of the uncontrollable Nick, and his unwillingness to rehire the incompetent brother-in-law of a local official all lead to major trouble. As he and Nick narrate, each self-righteously defends his own actions.

Robert De Niro is fine as Ace, though the character is well within the range of characters he has played before. Pesci's violent thug is very much the same character he played in GOODFELLAS though perhaps with a shorter fuse here and with more of a penchant for cruelty. The actor who really shows us something new is Sharon Stone, whose descent into alcohol, cocaine, and rage is her most effective screen role to date. As an apparent joke, the deeper addicted Stone gets, the more she is made up to look like Michelle Pfeiffer. James Woods is around playing his usual slimeball character. Don Rickles is surprisingly effective in one of his rare serious roles.

Scorsese's style with this film is fresh and new, though not all of his touches really work perfectly. The film starts near the story's end with Ace in a car bombing and blown through a strange

credit sequence with impressions of the lights of Las Vegas. The sequence is strange and the floating through of De Niro in what looks like a car ejection seat is very odd, indeed, almost reminding one of Fellini. The sequence was created by Elaine and Saul Bass. Saul Bass was one of the classic credit sequence designers of the 1960s. Scorsese does use violence more often than in previous films. And what is there is very strong stuff and is not for the sensitive. Borrowing a touch from FORREST GUMP, the film is seasoned with popular music of the 1970s, often as a commentary on the story.

The whole package is a riveting account and a well-told story. Though the script does not always play absolutely fair with the audience, the small cheats help lead to unexpected plot twists. No film I have seen this year has a better shot at a Best Picture Academy Award. I give CASINO a low +3 on the -4 to +4 scale. [-mrl]

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

Capsule: Even a good director can have an off film, but MIGHTY APHRODITE is an amazing misfire for Woody Allen in many different ways. Most serious of all, the vast majority of the gags fall embarrassingly flat as if Allen is starting to have problems judging what is funny. Rating: -1 (-4 to +4)

MIGHTY APHRODITE is a strange title. I guess the implication is that love or at least sex is a powerful force in people's lives. Or perhaps that love conquers all. But the title just does not seem to be all that clever and in the final analysis it just does not work very well. That makes it perfect for one of Woody Allen's rare films that is a nearly complete total misfire. Admittedly, it is hard to be totally objective about whether a film is funny or not, but from my point of view the jokes fail one after another. Perhaps part of the problem is Allen's choosing the motif of the Greek drama complete with chorus to comment on the action. Somehow lampooning Greek choruses is an exercise in futility. It worked with Russian literature in LOVE AND DEATH because he hit many different aspects of Russian literature and make clear what he was kidding in each case. Here it is one or two jokes repeated over and over. One joke is to have the chorus use modern language and

especially Yiddishisms. The other is to have the chorus sing modern music and it is a very similar gag. Generally Greek choruses just are not funny and it takes a great deal of skill to make these jokes funny the first time they are used. When Allen milks the jokes by using them repeatedly, they fail him in a major

way.

The story told is of couple Lenny (Woody Allen) and Amanda (Helena Bonham Carter) who are considering adopting a child. Lenny is a newspaper sportswriter and plays the role only a little less believably than he played Jimmy Bond in CASINO ROYALE. Posing him standing on a basketball court cannot make the New York intellectual look or sound like a sportswriter. Suddenly the couple who have applied for a child are given an opportunity to adopt if they decide to quick, quick, quick. (Is this really how the adoption process works?) They go with it and get what turns out to be a great child. But Lenny is obsessed with finding the child's real mother. The agency has a rule against giving out this information and, in fact, to do so would be breaking the law. But in an incredibly contrived scene Lenny gets the illegal information. Lenny tracks the woman down to find her to be hooker and porno actress, Linda (Mira Sorvino). Linda has a winning personality, a losing intellect, and an irritating voice. Getting interested in the woman's life, Lenny tries to arrange a marriage for her with a boxer, Kevin (Michael Rapaport), and to bury the feelings he is starting to have for her.

The jokes in this film are not just unfunny, some verge on mean-spirited. Among the subject for jest are about how stupid Linda and Kevin are. Kevin has to ask to find out which is his right fist and which is the left. It is not very likely and even less funny. One of the hallmarks of a Woody Allen script is the clever dialogue. Here the dialogue comes off as neither believable nor witty. And it is given too important a place. Scenes that would have major dramatic impact take place off-screen. Prostitute Linda is freed of her entire unwanted commitment to her pimp, but we never see her reaction when she is told. A later major scene between Kevin and Linda we are told about but do not see. Instead these scenes appear to have been eliminated to allow room for

"witty" dialogue scenes that do not advance the plot and eventually drag.

The strain of writing, directing, and starring in a film, as he does here, is starting to show on Allen. Each task is executed with unexpected mediocrity here. Allen does absolutely nothing to distinguish his current character from the one he played in previous films like MANHATTAN MURDER MYSTERY. Helena Bonham Carter's role is fairly colorless and is a departure for her only in that she is not playing an indignant, pouty aristocrat. Mira Sorvino wins the film on points alone. Her likable prostitute, with the Liza Doolittle propensity for saying the unintentionally shocking, steals the show. Ordinarily, stealing a Woody Allen film is a major distinction. With MIGHTY APHRODITE it seems hardly worth the effort. Hopefully Allen will be back on form next film. This one gets an amazing -1 on the -4 to +4 scale. [-mrl]

THE MT VOID

Page 12

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Men are the only animals who devote themselves,
day in and day out, to making one another unhappy.
It is an art like any other. Its virtuosi are called
altruists.

--H. L. Mencken

