



Mark: ... through a nasty freezer accident Snipes escapes and is terrorizing utopia.

John: Maybe I'm all wet here, but I think the technology exists now

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to prevent this kind of accident from happening. I'm am speaking of course of the zip-lock bag with the red-and-blue-make-green seal.

Mark: Nope, the technology is still only able to make y\_e\_l\_l\_o\_w and blue make green. Some of the best minds have works on it but they can only get red and blue to make purple at room temperature. There was a big furor when someone claimed that they could get red and blue to make green at room temperatures, but their work has not been reproducible. There are persistent rumors that behind the Iron Curtain there experiments to make red and blue make borscht, but it is mostly just grocery tabloids who are spreading that one.

John: If it can hold in spaghetti sauce, it can surely secure Wesley Snipes.

Mark: Some Wesley Snipes, yes, others, no. There is always the odd Wesley Snipe that makes it out through the crack.

John: And if they'd used the extra large ones with the printed-on blanks labels, they could have written right on that bag the contents and the date it was frozen, maybe even room for a note "never ever defrost."

Mark: Yeah, but when are you going to do when kids break in with microwave ovens?

John: Like, I've seen this on advertisements on television, so it must work. Of course, there is a danger here. Stuff can go bad in the freezer, so if the criminal was ever defrosted, he could have been even worse than when he originally went in.

Mark: "Did it make ya' mean, son?" (line from T\_h\_e\_G\_r\_a\_p\_e\_s\_o\_f\_W\_r\_a\_t\_h)  
Actually usually is makes them better. They lose their hardness  
and come out all mushy.

John: And meat is especially prone to freezer burn, although what  
effect this may have had on Stallone we can only guess.

Mark: I don't know, does it affect white meat differently than dark  
meat?

John: Just an idea.

Mark: And perhaps not even that.

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3. THE PLAYER OF GAMES by Ian M. Banks (a book review by Dale L.  
Skran):

Ian Banks has written two "Culture" novels in addition to P\_l\_a\_y\_e\_r\_o\_f  
G\_a\_m\_e\_s (T\_h\_e\_U\_s\_e\_o\_f\_W\_e\_a\_p\_o\_n\_s and C\_o\_n\_s\_i\_d\_e\_r\_P\_h\_l\_e\_b\_a\_s), but  
P\_l\_a\_y\_e\_r\_o\_f  
G\_a\_m\_e\_s may be the most direct and accessible. Banks combines  
large-scale space opera with mythic writing and touch of splatter-  
punk. Some find his novels unpleasant to read, and P\_l\_a\_y\_e\_r  
certainly presents a vastly unpleasant society, the Empire of Azad.  
It also presents a classic SF scenario, as the C\_u\_l\_t\_u\_r\_e  
representative, game-player Gurgeh, is aimed science fiction a  
weapon at the heart of the empire.

In some distant time and place, there exists a vast and powerful  
empire which calls itself simply the "Culture." But it is not an  
empire in any classic sense; it is based on voluntary cooperation  
of equals, and has no laws, or at least not very many. The Culture  
has outgrown planets, and lives on "orbitals," "plates," and "GSVs"  
(General Service Vehicles--vast starships that house billions).  
Men and women, humans and aliens, the genetically modified and the  
normal, humanoids and sentient machines, all happily co-exist as

equals in a society that has long ago moved beyond material want.

The semi-military organ of the Culture called the Contact Service encounters the Empire of Azad, based on an ideology of domination and ruthlessness, and held together by the playing of a complex and elaborate game called "Azad." Although capable of war on a galactic scale (see C\_o\_n\_s\_i\_d\_e\_r\_P\_h\_l\_e\_b\_a\_s for a history of the Culture/Indirian war), mass assault is not the way of the Culture. A lighter touch is found in the form of Gurgeh, possibly the best games player in the Culture. A decadent who lives to play games, Gurgeh finds himself blackmailed into joining the Contact Service and entering the game of Azad, the victor of which becomes the new emperor of Azad.

Thus begins a journey into a loci of darkness as the well-meaning Gurgeh becomes more and more deeply involved in a society so cruel it allows body parts to be wagered on Azad, and which provides 24-hour video of live torture to entertain its elite. Banks serves up both a bucket of plot twists and a fascinating character study combined in an essay on the playing of games. As you may suspect, nothing in this cosmic hall of mirrors is quite what it seems, and even the Player of Games may not survive.

Bank's works are especially interesting as a picture of a direction we (human culture) could be evolving toward. Although Banks is sometimes dunned for his vivid depictions of cruelty, we live in a world where Pol Pot and Hitler murdered millions by torture. Bank's vision is actually a hopeful one, portraying how a free society may evolve that is both capable of defending itself against totalitarian competitors while allowing its citizens the maximum

opportunity to live life to the fullest. The Culture is not perfect, and Azad and the Indirians are not all evil, but I have little doubt where I would want to live.

I enjoyed P\_l\_a\_y\_e\_r\_o\_f\_G\_a\_m\_e\_s the most of the three books in the Culture series, and it serves as a good introduction to the Culture. I'm a little unsure who to recommend this to, since it really is space opera, albeit good space opera, but it strives to be far more the a mere description of battles won and lost, or plot

twists unraveled. Readers of hard SF will be comfortable here, as will those with an interest in SF that focuses on different societies and political systems. Fans of gaming may find this book especially interesting, although they are warned that Azad is only sketched out, and the focus is on character and plot, not the minutiae of game-play.

#### 4. FORTRESS (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule review: This extremely formulaic prison film set in the 21st century will be more at home on cable than a Flying Wallenda. Stuart Gordon's future prison looks like it is from the 21st Century, but the story feels like it is out of the 1950s--the low end of the 1950s. Gordon is good at mixing dark humor and horror, but you couldn't prove it by this tired exercise in Sci-Fi (as opposed to science fiction). Rating: high -1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

I went with friends to see this one. They had coupons. It was a dollar to get into the movie and twenty-five cents for popcorn. My friend Dale got the popcorn. When the film was over I told Dale I hoped he had gotten a dollar's worth of popcorn because he hadn't gotten twenty-five cents' worth of film.

Okay, that is a bit of an overstatement. But certainly this was a film that is better to have seen than it was to be seeing it. There was a breed of science fiction writing called "space opera" because it was really just a bad Western or "horse opera" translated to a science fiction story just by making substitutions. F\_o\_r\_t\_r\_e\_s\_s is not really a science fiction film at all but a bad prison film thinly disguised as science fiction because it takes place in the future. The plot is one long string of prison film cliches. We have the good guy who is sentenced to prison unfairly for breaking an unjust law. He is threatened and abused by the sadistic prison warden while the tough prisoners want make hamburger out of him. The toughs try beating up on him and can't. Meanwhile he wins the hearts and minds of all the prisoners but the toughest con and he proves he has guts by taking a punishment intended for a weaker friend. But he still has to prove he is the top of the pecking order by fighting the biggest and meanest of the

prisoners. By the skin of his teeth he beats up the tough and has him in his power, but... surprise... he shows mercy. And on and on ad nauseum. This is a plot built of one cliché after another. Except it doesn't take place in some jerkwater prison in the present, it takes place in Tomorrow. In this future the ZPG folks a\_n\_d the pro-life folks have both gotten their way. The law in "one woman, one pregnancy." Our hero tried to have a second baby after their first baby died. So into the clinker husband and wife go. The prison is privately owned by sadists who somehow can run this ultra-modern electronic prison on the \$26/day/inmate they get from the state. This prison may be uncomfortable, but it sure is fancy, and how they run it on \$26/day/inmate is beyond explaining.

Christopher Lambert did a decent job as Tarzan in G\_r\_e\_y\_s\_t\_o\_k\_e. That is mostly because there seems to be something strange about him that is hard to put a finger on and there would be with Tarzan also. But generally he just is not a very good actor. In this film his acting seems particularly wooden as he plays John Brennick, the lone wolf standing up against a society gone wrong. Loryn Locklin plays Brennick's beautiful blond wife, loved by Brennick and lusted after by the nasty warden. She is bland but she can speak her lines and does not bump into the furniture. Kurtwood Smith who seems to be making a career of playing stern villains (like the unsympathetic father in D\_e\_a\_d\_P\_o\_e\_t\_s\_S\_o\_c\_i\_e\_t\_y) here plays the prison warden. As it turns out there is a little more to him than meets the eye at first, but nothing that is very interesting. Still admittedly he is a better actor than either Lambert or Locklin. Lincoln Kilpatrick--trying hard to be Morgan Freeman and nearly succeeding--plays a wise old inmate.

Stuart Gordon who is better known for horror directs, but the drab prison motif robs this film of the black humor that his R\_e\_a\_n\_i\_m\_a\_t\_o\_r films and his P\_i\_t\_a\_n\_d\_t\_h\_e\_P\_e\_n\_d\_u\_l\_u\_m had. About the only aspect of this film that is above rather than beneath expectation is the art direction and set design. The prison really has a decent look. I just wish a better story was written to take advantage of the look. My rating for this is a high -1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

5. IRENE AT LARGE BY Carol Nelson Douglas (Tor, 1993 (1992c), ISBN 0-812-51702-4, \$4.99) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

Penelope Huxleigh is back for a third time to relate the adventures of Irene Adler Norton and Godfrey Norton, and of herself, as a man from her past returns amid mystery and death.

In G\_o\_o\_d\_N\_i\_g\_h\_t,\_M\_r.\_H\_o\_l\_m\_e\_s, we first met Penelope Huxleigh, who serves as Watson to Adler's Holmes for a retelling of "A Scandal in Bohemia" told from Irene Adler's point of view. Adler is not the "adventuress" Doyle describes, but a liberated woman. She also solves a murder mystery, finds lost jewels, etc., etc. In G\_o\_o\_d\_M\_o\_r\_n\_i\_n\_g,\_I\_r\_e\_n\_e, Irene (now Norton rather than Adler) investigates

another mystery in which j\_u\_s\_t\_c\_o\_i\_n\_c\_i\_d\_e\_n\_t\_a\_l\_l\_y, Sherlock Holmes is also involved. Now in I\_r\_e\_n\_e\_a\_t\_L\_a\_r\_g\_e, Douglas again uses both Huxleigh's and Watson's points of view at different times and this (to my mind) detracts from the story. Part of what makes a mystery work is having the reader get into it and try to reason along. A single point of view (which could be a third person point of view) is necessary to maintain this illusion, and this is not what the reader gets.

There are those who really like Douglas's Irene character. To me, she seems as much a stereotype of the "Victorian woman with modern ideas" as Elizabeth Peters's Amelia Peabody or any number of other examples. And while I could accept the occasional foray into male disguise, Irene is \_c\_o\_n\_s\_t\_a\_n\_t\_l\_y changing into male garb--to investigate, to explore, to fight a duel.... There's such a thing as overkill.

The rest of the book is also similar to the first two in the series. Readers who enjoyed them will like I\_r\_e\_n\_e\_a\_t\_L\_a\_r\_g\_e. To new readers, I would suggest you read them in order rather than starting with this one. (Douglas has recently delivered the fourth book in the series, I\_r\_e\_n\_e'\_s\_L\_a\_s\_t\_W\_a\_l\_t\_z, to Tor. It is rumored to have occult or supernatural elements.)

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Nothing else in the world ... not all the armies ...  
 is so powerful as an idea whose time has come.  
 -- Victor Hugo

