

Factotum: Evelyn Leeper MT 1F-329 957-2070 mtgzy!ecl
All material copyright by author unless otherwise noted.

1. I have to say I think I am losing the battle. I think soon I am going to find myself evicted from my own house by beasties with

THE MT VOID

Page 2

lots more legs than I have. Let me start at the beginning. As the early Earth cooled--you thought I was kidding about "starting at the beginning"--water condensed and formed oceans which teemed with life of various sorts. One of the first biggies was the trilobite. He was a sort of crustacean and crustaceans are the sea-going equivalent of spiders. Bet you didn't know that. Didn't you ever notice that crabs and lobsters have eight legs? That lobster you dipped in melted butter last week was a big meaty spider, or rather a first cousin to a spider. Richard Attenborough's L_i_f_e_o_n_E_a_r_t_h series even shows you a spider that still has a lobster-like tail. Anyway, where the crustaceans first came ashore and learned to spin webs was right where I am living right now and all the spiders in the world make a pilgrimage to my house to find their roots.

What makes matters worse is that I refuse to kill spiders. Spiders want two things: to make little spiders and to kill pests. The latter I agree with whole-heartedly. I can do without little spiders, but what the heck. Anyway I think most people hate spiders because by human terms they are ugly. But heck, how many of us are Robert Redford? (How many of us would want to be?)

What gets me is their industriousness. Give them a couple of months in the house and they'd be selling franchises. Pick any fixed points a foot or so apart in the house and it's been colonized by a web at some point. I occasionally wake up in the morning to find a web across the bathroom sink. Now that's nerve.

Well, this is it. They've gotten most of my garage, much of my dining room. If they get my dining room I am sure they will cut off my supply lines and that whole end of the house will fall to them. If they get the living room the hall will fall to them, then there will be no way to save the green bedroom or the bathroom. The future looks bleak. This is Mark Leeper, on the front lines of the blue bedroom.

Mark Leeper
MT 3E-433 957-5619
...mtgzz!leeper

A Little Batch of Skran Mini-Reviews
by Dale L. Skran Jr.
Copyright 1988 Dale L. Skran, Jr.
Purpose: To Warn the Unwary, Reward the Good

T_a_l_t_o_s by Steven Brust

This rather short novel recounts the Vlad Taltos the Assassin's earlier years, and is at least as entertaining as J_h_e_r_e_g, Y_e_n_d_i, or T_e_c_k_l_a, the other books in the series. Although the books follow the life of one character, they are more or less self-contained, and do not tell a single sequential story. Brust creates a new and entertaining fantasy world, but the focus is really on Vlad. This novel is interesting in part due the three-layer format Brust uses, with three different stories alternating section by section. One story describes how Vlad casts a particular spell, the second concerns how he entered and escaped from the land of the dead, and the third tells about his early life and how he became an assassin.

W_i_l_d_C_a_r_d_s_I_V: A_c_e_s_A_b_r_o_a_d edited by George R. R. Martin

This is perhaps the best of the Wild Cards series, and returns to the short stories by individual authors format. Martin contributes a series of journal extracts that tie the stories together. The premise is that a planeload of Aces and Jokers are traveling around the world to investigate how other countries have handled the "Wild Card" virus. The result is an entertaining travelogue without the "cosmic comic book" style menaces of the earlier books in the series. The somewhat disheartening message of the series is that super-powers would make much less difference than you might imagine, while creating a new underclass reviled for their physical deformities. Consider how useless being bullet-proof might be when applied to fighting famine in Africa as an example.

The major defect in this alternate history lies in its excessive closeness to our universe, a motif copied from Marvel and DC comics. For example, no matter how many times Dr. Doom has flown to the moon or conquered the Earth, Ronald Reagan is still President in 1988, and we are still flying (or trying to fly) a space shuttle! WWWaaaattttcccchhhmmmmeeeennnn is recommended as a more realistic assessment of the impact of super-powers on our world.

Seventh Son by Orson Scot Card

Card has done it again, I fear, with this wonderfully written fantasy about an alternative America where folk magic works. The power of this novel lies in Card's ability to make the reader see the world through the eyes of children. Viewed from their perspective, the magic of reality blends seamlessly into the magic of Card's fantasy world. Unfortunately, this book is reputed to be the first of SEVEN(!), and things are not all wrapped up at the end. A Hugo nominee well worth reading.

BIG

A film review by Mark R. Leeper
Copyright 1988 Mark R. Leeper

Capsule review: B_i_g places in the body-switch derby just a nose behind V_i_c_e_V_e_r_s_a. Penny Marshall gives the story some genuine feeling but the script has problems. With a good supporting case, B_i_g rates a +1.

Every once in a while the Law of Averages works especially well or poorly for filmmakers. Columbia made M_a_r_o_o_n_e_d just before Apollo 13 and T_h_e_C_h_i_n_a_S_y_n_d_r_o_m_e just before Three-Mile Island. On the other hand, three different filmmakers independently decided to make the films P_l_a_c_e_s_i_n_t_h_e_H_e_a_r_t, C_o_u_n_t_r_y, and T_h_e_R_i_v_e_r a few seasons back, all "save-the-farm" films. Of late it has been "child-and-adult-changing-places" films. In little more than a year, we have seen L_i_k_e_F_a_t_h_e_r, L_i_k_e_S_o_n; V_i_c_e_V_e_r_s_a; and 1_8_A_g_a_i_n. Now Tom Hanks joins the ranks of Dudley Moore, Judge Reinhold, and George Burns, playing a younger person in an older person's body.

Well, the first major difference is that this is not two people changing places. The story is not really two stories of people adapting to sudden age change. Instead we have a 13-year-old suddenly finding himself about twice that age. Josh Baldwin finds a mysterious wish-granting machine at a carnival. After this point the story gets more realistic and at the same time less so. Josh's own mother thinks the older version of him (played by Tom Hanks) is a kidnapper and he has to flee, with the help of a friend, to Manhattan. He is a child who for the first time is seeing the gritty real world without the protection of his parents. Then the realism dissolves as he enters the business world and finds his winning, boyish ways open doors for him. Previous versions of the idea have children in older bodies trying to seem normal and failing miserably or at least humorously. Hanks wears silly-looking clothing and acts like a kid and in some sort of f_i_l_m_b_l_a_n_c manner it all works out for him as if he was Chauncey Gardner from B_e_i_n_g_T_h_e_r_e. His secret boyhood catapults him to success in business and love in the toy business. None of this is very believable. And on top of that, the ball of string that I collected as a boy may have had more loose ends than B_i_g, but I doubt it.

Supporting Hanks is Elizabeth Perkins, who played a second banana role in ... A_b_o_u_t_L_a_s_t_N_i_g_h_t. As the woman intrigued by the boyish Hanks, she reminds one at times of Debra Winger and at other times of Jill Clayburgh. Also on hand are the venerable Robert Loggia (whose second career in film seems more successful than his first) and John Heard, who tarnishes some of his earlier nice-guy roles playing an ambitious executive. And who can forget the grungy hotel clerk played by Rockets Redglare? And the whole production is directed by Penny Marshall--formerly of L_a_v_e_r_n_e_a_n_d_S_h_i_r_l_e_y. I would say B_i_g is a step up from her first film, J_u_m_p_i_n'_J_a_c_k_F_l_a_s_h, but it still gets just a +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF TIME by Stephen W. Hawking
Bantam, 1988, 0-553-05340-X, \$18.95.
A book review by Mark R. Leeper
Copyright 1988 Mark R. Leeper

Stephen Hawking is known to the world for both what he can do and what he can't do. What he can't do is most of the things you can. He suffers from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, a nerve disease that has left him with little more motor function than a rag doll. He can move his hands a little and talk only with the aid of a voice synthesizer. His mind is apparently unimpaired--to put it mildly. Despite his handicaps he is considered one of the world's leading theoretical physicists. The man who can't use his body to scratch an itch uses his mind to explore time and space, to explore quantum mechanical particles and the shape of the universe, to see back to the Big Bang and forward to the death of the universe. Now Hawking expounds on it all in what might be the most popular science book since G_o_d_e_l, E_s_c_h_e_r, B_a_c_h.

A_B_r_i_e_f_H_i_s_t_o_r_y_o_f_T_i_m_e is a little book. The main body is 175 pages, large print. The book gives Hawking's view of space and time, all done with only one mathematical equation. Someone told Hawking that each equation he put in would halve sales, so he explains in his introduction that he uses only the equation $E=mc^2$. The publisher undoubtedly feels, not unjustifiably, that the general public's mental disabilities rival Hawking's physical ones. So Hawking keeps things simple for a while. When he calls something an ellipse, he explains that it is "an elongated circle." If you think such explanations make the book elementary, have a little patience. The easy ride last only for about fifty pages. Then the information starts coming faster and harder to follow or even remember. What's more, at least once I felt the urge to stop and argue. (I know. "Of all the nerve!" Well, Hawking argues against determinism, or at least that determinism is of no interest if there is no observer making predictions based on the state of the universe. He glosses over the distinction between "determined" and "observer-determinable." But the complete decimal expansion of pi is very probably one and not the other, for example.) Other parts I wanted more explanation on. I actually tried the "interference pattern" experiment on page 57. You can do it with an index card and a penlite in a dark room, at least it would seem so from his description. You just don't get his result doing it that way. I shined a light through a card with two slits and did not get the pictured interference pattern.

As the book continues, its comprehensibility--at least to me--is spotty. His philosophical points become questionable. Mostly he is building up to an explanation of why he feels the universe may have no boundary in space and time. Just as the parallels that are used for navigation expand and then contract as you go south from the North Pole. He says the universe expands and contracts. And just as there are no

real boundaries on the surface of the earth, so there are no boundaries to the universe. An interesting point, but there are boundaries in just the sense he is trying to avoid. There really and truly is a northernmost point on the earth and you cannot go any further north than that. Further, he claims that he once believed that in a contracting universe we'd have memories of the future rather than the past; though he later rejects those theories, it seems absurd that he ever would have believed them. The mere fact that the universe had reached the peak of its expansion does not seem like it would cause the immediate reversal of anything like memory. It may well be that with the mathematics his heuristic arguments would be more convincing, but without it much of his reasoning is most unconvincing.

Finally, he finishes the book with anecdotal sketches of Einstein, Galileo, and Newton. These are not biographical sketches, mind you, but anecdotes about how hard Newton was to get along with and how the Nazis hated Einstein.

Overall, there is a lot of interest in A B r i e f H i s t o r y o f T i m e, but the book seems to lack a sort of discipline. It seems more a collection of related articles than a book with chapters that naturally follow each other. It is a noble effort for Hawking to try to bring his material to the masses but to do so this informally makes the arguments less convincing and it seems a much less fertile mind could have written the book and freed up Hawking for work only he is capable of. With his genius and his possible shortness of time, the task of bringing modern theory to the masses could have been delegated.

It should be noted that the book has a useful glossary, though not complete and with some definitions that could prove confusing.

So with my two little Master's degrees I feel a little presumptuous in saying this about a book by the great Hawking, but A B r i e f H i s t o r y o f T i m e is a usually readable but flawed book. My respect for Hawking's accomplishments continues in spite of--but is not enhanced by--my reading of his book. It is decent but not great.

P.S. It bothers me that I never see any references to Hawking that

do not make sure you know this is _ t_ h_ e great scientist with the horrible wasting disease. Nobody ever talks just about Hawking without mentioning his disability. he has become "the wasting-away scientist," like "the singing nun." I have a number of popular physics books but only this one shows the author on the cover and I suspect it is so the prospective buyer will see the wheelchair. There are three quotes about Hawking on the back cover and two of them mention the disability. Hawking himself discusses it inside the book. I guess people can only relate to what they understand.

ARIA

A film review by Mark R. Leeper

Copyright 1988 Mark R. Leeper

Book publishing has the concept of the "original anthology." Several well-known authors are given a theme to write on and each does a short story bringing an original approach to that theme. Occasionally a similar approach is tried in anthology films, having a different director for each segment, but usually what is done seems to be to give the director a script and let him direct it. Films like _ Q_ u_ a_ r_ t_ e_ t_ , _ T_ r_ i_ o_ , _ E_ n_ c_ o_ r_ e (all based on collections of W. Somerset Maugham stories), _ O_ . _ H_ e_ n_ r_ y'_ s_ F_ u_ l_ l_ H_ o_ u_ s_ e, and _ D_ e_ a_ d_ o_ f _ N_ i_ g_ h_ t were probably done this way. _ A_ r_ i_ a appears to be a film that gave its directors even more autonomy. In this anthology film, the only thing that the segments have in common is that each is an interpretation of an operatic aria. As long as the aria is played through the film, it seems to fulfill the requirements.

It would be misleading to try to rate such a mixed bag of short films as a single piece. Instead I will consider each segment. Even there I want to give each piece two ratings, one on how it stands on its own as a film and a second rating on how well it used the music it was interpreting. (Ratings are on the -4 to +4 scale.)

Opera: UnBalloinMaschera (A
MaskedBall) by Giuseppe Verdi
Director: Nicholas Roeg

The opening piece (but for a framing piece that will be described later) involves an assassination attempt on King Zog of Albania. The attractive and versatile Teresa Russell (BlackWidow) has finally been given a role that she is totally unconvincing in. Sporting a handlebar mustache and wearing a tight military tunic, she plays King Zog. Only afterwards did I find out that it was she in the role, but it was obviously an actress rather than an actor. Nor did the punchline of the story work. Story: 0. Appropriateness: +1.

Opera: LaForzadelDestino (The
ForceofDestiny) by Giuseppe Verdi
Director: Charles Sturridge

I did not care for this segment on first brush, but on discussing it later I see more quality in it. Sturridge shows us troubled children leading a pointless existence of TV-watching and getting into trouble. The original aria is a plea to the Virgin Mary which may well be appropriate. Story: +1. Appropriateness: +1.

Aria June 11, 1988 Page 2

Opera: Armide by Jean-Baptiste Lully
Director: Jean-Luc Godard

Two attractive female attendants in a gym for body-builders first desire the powerful masculine bodies around them, then try to seduce them, only to be frustrated and ignored by the dehumanized athletes around them. The section is amusing and perhaps even erotic. Story: +1. Appropriateness: -1.

Opera: Rigoletto by Giuseppe Verdi

Director: Julian Temple

Seemingly out of place we have one Blake-Edwards-style sex farce. A husband and wife cheating on each other both go with their lovers to the same garish motel. The common tension builds as husband and wife nearly run into each other time and again. Will they run into each other? Do we really care? Mindless but amusing. Story: +1. Appropriateness: 0.

Opera: D i e T o t e S t a d t (T h e D e a d C i t y) by Erick Korngold
Director: Bruce Beresford

Because I read the program I know what the director of B r e a k e r M o r a n t and C r i m e s o f t h e H e a r t was trying to say with this film, but it does not come from the film. According to the program, it has a man falling "in love with what he believes to be the spirit of his dead wife." It appears to be just two lovers and scenes of an atmospheric (and apparently empty) old European city. Story: 0. Appropriateness: +1.

Opera: L e s B o r e a d e s by Jean-Phillippe Rameau
Director: Robert Altman

One would expect a good segment from a director as distinguished as Robert Altman. Surprise! This is the biggest loser in the lot. It is dull, but worse than that, it is borrowed from a much better film, M a r a t / S a d e. Both films deal with the historical fact that in post-Revolutionary France it was though chic to involve the inmates of insane asylums in theatrical productions. In M a r a t / S a d e the insane put on a play and rich patrons come to see it; in Altman's the insane come to see an opera. In both the mad are uncontrollable, which is one reason the rich want to watch them. But in M a r a t / S a d e the monkeyshines are only a tiny piece of all that is going on on the screen. They are all that happens in Altman's section of A r i a. Story: -1. Appropriateness: -1.

Opera: _ T_ r_ i_ s_ t_ a_ n_ u_ n_ d_ I_ s_ o_ l_ d_ e by Richard Wagner
Director: Franc Roddam

I was not fond of Roddam's films _ T_ h_ e_ B_ r_ i_ d_ e and
_ Q_ u_ a_ d_ r_ o_ p_ h_ e_ n_ i_ a, but I
have to give him the prize for _ A_ r_ i_ a. This had to be what the people who
thought of the film had in mind. This is a very sensual adaptation of
Wagner's "Liebestod" that in some ways fits the music as well or better
than Wagner did originally. Story: +1. Appropriateness: +3.

Opera: _ T_ u_ r_ a_ n_ d_ o_ t by Giacomo Puccini
Director: Ken Russell

I lucked out on this one--I did not read the program. There is a
nice surprise in this segment, but the program ruins it by telling too
much. The story is of a princess of some sort being decorated by having
diamonds and rubies inlaid directly into her flesh. But even as we
watch it, more is going on than we realize. Don't read the program.
Story: +1. Appropriateness: +1.

Opera: _ L_ o_ u_ i_ s_ e by Gustave Charpentier
Director: Derek Jarman

An old woman dressed incongruously in the clothes of a much younger
person remembers days gone by. This one squeaks by, passable but no
great shakes. Story: 0. Appropriateness: 0.

Opera: _ P_ a_ g_ l_ i_ a_ c_ c_ i by Ruggero Leoncavallo
Director: Bill Bryden

If Bryden was trying to say something with his framing sequence of
John Hurt preparing for and singing _ P_ a_ g_ l_ i_ a_ c_ c_ i, it went right past me.
Not very unusual. This was not up to most of the segments it framed.
Story: -1. Appropriateness: +1.

THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT ALMOST BLANK

