

conclusion to a great movie -- also THE ABYSS. Without spoiling anything if you haven't seen the film (which I recommend highly), the final minutes have a deus-ex-machina conclusion totally unjustified by, and counter to the feel of, the previous 90% of the movie. I left the theatre disgruntled, that such a wonderfully intense and "realistic" movie would end with such an unexpected

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thud.

This isn't a movie review, however. It's a book review -- a review of a well-crafted novel that gave me an appreciation for what was going on "behind the scenes" of the film, as well as an even greater respect for the author. THE ABYSS, by Orson Scott Card, is set in the present day (plus a little). An American submarine, carrying ballistic missiles, is mysteriously lost less than 100 miles from Cuba. Traditional Navy rescue efforts are stymied by a hurricane that will be in the area before any rescue craft can arrive. Fortunately, a civilian alternative is available. DEEPCORE 1 is basically an off-shore oil rig designed to sit on the continental shelf. Tied to a surface ship via a "umbilical cord" providing oxygen and communications, DEEPCORE 1 is an experiment. Proving it will work is the driving ambition of its designer, Lindsey Brigman, who happens to be in the process of getting a divorce from Bud Brigman, the well-liked foreman of the DEEPCORE crew. The Navy gives DEEPCORE the task of conducting an investigation of the sub sinking, and sends four SEALS, headed by a Lieutenant Coffey, to be in charge.

The movie, or at least 90% of it, was an exciting blend of suspense (what *was* the problem with the sub; what's going on with LT Coffey?), characterization (the Lindsey-Bud-crew triangle), and atmosphere (you really felt that you had a mile of water above you). The major weaknesses were the two-dimensionality of Lt. Coffey, and the way the ending came from left field, without any justification earlier in the film. Card's novel, though, eliminates that weakness without losing the film's strengths -- indeed, amplifying the characterization. Card creates plausible people. I've spent time with roustabouts and SEALS; Card paints a credible picture of how these disparate folks talk, act, and think. Particularly effective for me was the way he handled Lindsey and

Bud; their stormy relationship, the faces they put on for each other, their playing against each other's vulnerabilities (and feeling guilty even as they're doing so) -- these are real people. Even apart from the SF elements of the novel, Card made me care about the main characters.

The most creative part of the book, though, is the treatment of the Builders. Again, without spoiling either the book or the movie, the Builders are the beings responsible for the disaster with the sub, and for the escalating world tensions that ensue. The reader is treated to one of the rarest gifts in science fiction, aliens that truly feel alien. Not just humans in weird shapes, but intelligent creatures with different, albeit accessible, modes of thought and culture. Every gripe I had with the movie was addressed in the book. Even the "miraculous" ending was foreshadowed adequately and was justified by what had been revealed about the Builders' ethics.

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Card's THE ABYSS is not a mere novelization of a script. As he points out in his Afterward, most novelizations are based on the script as it appears before filming starts and just flesh out scene descriptions and such. The final movie often looks and feels different from that script, though, as script or editing changes are made, or as the actors evolve their roles during the filming. THE ABYSS is different. It was written as filming was taking place, with Card often on the site. He spent time talking with the director and actors, getting a deeper feeling for the characters, and in some cases providing the actors with some insights. This dynamic process ensured as much as possible that the book and movie would be closely tied, but that each could provide whatever amplification is appropriate for the given medium. Every scene in the movie is also in the book, often with the exact dialog, but Card's adds, in terms of character, mood, and background detail make the book valuable in its own right. Offhand, I can't think of a better book I've read this year. [-jrrt]

2. I talked here a while back about the self-help book I was writing. It was designed to help people through those moments in life when we really need help and yet cannot go to anyone else for

comfort. I mean, if you are going through a divorce, if you have a bad disease, if you lose a loved one, there is always someone out there to help you bear up. My book covers those devastating situations where it is very unlikely that you can find someone to commiserate with--it is just too embarrassing. So while

W_h_e_n_G_o_o_d
T_h_i_n_g_s_H_a_p_p_e_n_t_o_P_e_o_p_l_e_Y_o_u
C_a_n_n_o_t_S_t_a_n_d goes looking for an appropriate publisher, one with foresight, clear thinking, and a lot of money (well, I am now willing to accept two out of three) I am getting started on my new book. Tentatively I will call it
M_a_s_t_e_r_S_t_r_a_t_e_g_i_e_s_f_o_r_t_h_e_9_0_s.

The idea is this: Today's yuppie suffers from conflicting goals.

Macho is out. Today a yuppie wants to be sensitive (or at least to

a_p_p_e_a_r to be sensitive). At the same time as part of the "me"

generation the yuppie wants to be selfish. So how to bring these

two goals into line, that is the question. The answer is M_a_s_t_e_r

S_t_r_a_t_e_g_i_e_s. I don't want to give the whole thing away, but let me

give you some examples. Say a friend comes to you asking you to

sponsor him for the Jerry Lewis Disease Walkathon. That is the

disease where you really do walk around the way Jerry Lewis makes

fun of. Your friend asks you how much you are willing to

contribute per mile your friend walks. The Master Strategy is to

tell your friend that you really are touched by the plight of these

poor children who walk like Jerry Lewis and you recognize what

pressure your friend is under and how bad your friend will feel if

something happens and he is unable to walk. Then say you will

contribute \$10 if for any reason your friend cannot walk a full

mile. Don't make it too much money or your friend will sit home

with a beer and you'll be stuck. This way you take pressure off

your friend, you look sensitive, and, most importantly, odds are

you won't have to pay one red cent.

Now say you get a notice you are supposed to register for jury duty. Now there are any number of ways to get out of jury duty, but they all make you look like a real jerk who just doesn't want to play. Your Master Strategy for the 90s is to fill out the registration card (honestly) and sign it. Then write on it in red, "I support my local police and I promise to vote 'guilty.'" You

have affirmed your love of the criminal justice system and at the same time you have made yourself ineligible. No defense attorney in the world would ever choose you and everybody knows it. I don't think you've broken any laws either.

I hit on the idea for Master Strategies when someone I work with repeatedly tried to get me to play on the department's softball team. I simply told him that I have too much respect for the team to ever play for it. He's still trying to figure that one out.

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All genius is a conquering of chaos and mystery.
-- Otto Weininger (1880-1903)

THE BEER DRINKER'S GUIDE TO FITNESS AND FILMMAKING

A film review by Mark R. Leeper

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Capsule review: More home movies than a professional production, but through them we see the story of the writer/director trying to make a go of selling cute films of his family. He won't do it.
Rating: low 0.

I am on the selection committee for the cinema club at Bell Labs in Holmdel, due to the tremendous acumen I have shown in my cinematic writing and because they will allow anyone to help choose the films.

One of the other members has been pushing for some time to show T_h_e_B_e_e_r_D_r_i_n_k_e_r's_G_u_i_d_e_t_o_F_i_t_n_e_s_s_a_n_d_F_i_l_m_m_a_k_i_n_g. I don't believe that he has actually seen the film, but I think he likes the title. The club has been, on occasion, willing to humor this member but we have been unable to find a distributor for the film. By an odd coincidence the director, Fred G. Sullivan, has also been unable to find a distributor. Finally Sullivan has been able to get the film distributed in a manner that makes maximum use of the clever title and with minimum distribution risk. It has been released on videocassette.

T_h_e_B_e_e_r_D_r_i_n_k_e_r's_G_u_i_d_e_t_o_F_i_t_n_e_s_s_a_n_d_F_i_l_m_m_a_k_i_n_g is more a collection of amateur sound home movies that form more a sort of family journal than a real story, though in the course of its telling we do learn a lot, perhaps more than we want, about filmmaker Fred and the Family Sullivan. Fred made amateur films most of his life and as an adult is raising a large family in the Adirondacks on what he can make from his films. His first feature film was C_o_l_d_R_i_v_e_r, an adaptation of a novel set in the Adirondacks. It apparently didn't do much for Fred, who leads a hand-to-mouth existence, often just after changing diapers. His children cooperate in misbehaving for the camera, acting up and badly. Children do not really make good actors in spite of the maxim that claims they and dogs are the best. Fred's ingenuousness starts to wear a little thin by the middle of the film and the 84 minutes seem like more. Among the skits he throws in is one of a college professor who deeply admires his work. It is a piece of silliness that could work at the hands of a better filmmaker, but the silliness is not contagious. It becomes clear also that Fred finds his own life and his family cuter than most of the audience will.

Eventually one really feels like grabbing Fred by the collar and telling him, "Look, your family is hungry and you are trying to feed them by selling cute home movies of them. You really are going to have to find another line of work." My rating is a low 0 on the -4 to +4

scale.

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