

Lincroft-Holmdel Science Fiction Club  
Club Notice - 4/3/87 -- Vol. 5, No. 38

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

Unless otherwise stated, all meetings are on Wednesdays at noon.

LZ meetings are in LZ 3A-206; MT meetings are in MT 4A-235.

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- 04/08 MT: Would Shakespeare think PORTNOY'S COMPLAINT was science fiction? or, contemporary fiction as historical SF  
04/22 LZ: MURMURS OF EARTH by Carl Sagan SF-related Non-Fiction  
05/06 MT: THE HANDMAID'S TALE by Margaret Atwood Mainstream SF  
05/13 LZ: TO YOUR SCATTERED BODIES GO by Phillip Jose Farmer Reincarnation

HO Chair: John Jetzt HO 1E-525 834-1563  
LZ Chair: Rob Mitchell LZ 1B-306 576-6106  
MT Chair: Mark Leeper MT 3E-433 957-5619  
HO Librarian: Tim Schroeder HO 3M-420 949-5866  
LZ Librarian: Lance Larsen LZ 3L-312 576-2068  
MT Librarian: Bruce Szablak MT 4C-418 957-5868  
Jill-of-all-trades: Evelyn Leeper MT 1F-329 957-2070  
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1. This week's discussion stems out of a comment that was made at the last discussion. we were talking about how much explanation of new technologies and cultural patterns needed to be explained in a science fiction novel, and how much the author could assume the reader would pick up from context. Someone said that that to Shakespeare the Elizabethans a contemporary novel like PORTNOY'S COMPLAINT would seem like science fiction--it would be set in an alien world, but people could pick everything up from context and wouldn't need the explanations that science fiction novels so often have.

So on April 8, bring your favorite ideas about why or why not your favorite contemporary novel would be comprehensible to Elizabethans as science fiction.

2. Last week I reported on the growing conspiracy of a square dancing underground. I have been asked by friends who are square dancers and who claimed to be ignorant of what was going on that I

should point out that perhaps (PERHAPS) not all square dancers are in on the conspiracy.

Actually I am informed by (not necessarily unimpeachable) sources that 90% of all square dancers are innocent and probably 60% don't

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even know that the conspiracy exists. That is perhaps the most tragic part about the square dancing conspiracy. A Squarie is the innocent victim of the conspiracy perhaps even more than a non-Squarie. I am sure most square dance with only the best of intentions, but will they be able to prove that to a congressional committee if the question ever comes up?

And you Squaries, have you thought about how the callers are conditioning you to follow orders? Ask yourself, why are you not even allowed to question the authority of the caller. That should tell you something. And you should ask yourself who your caller is taking his/her orders from. How will you feel when your caller start giving you:

Waltz that gal across the floor.  
Hide some drugs in your desk drawer.  
Meet in the center with a right hand star.  
Toss a granade at someone's car.  
Promenade that pretty little thing.  
Drill some holes in an airplane wing.

One Squarie told me of her square's personal rebellion against the caller. Just for fun they did everything the mirror image of what the caller wanted. This the Squarie thought of as a disobedience of a sort. It didn't even occur to her that the mirror image of a man throwing a Molotov Cocktail is still a man throwing a Molotov Cocktail. Scary, huh?

Oh, incidentally, I will say that I have been invited to a square dancing class to see "how innocent" it all is. This is a warning to all readers, if the same offer is made to you DON'T GO! Yes, you will be convinced square dancing is innocent with just one class. Ask an ex-Squarie -- one who has been deprogrammed -- about that first class, how it never ends, how you are fed on a diet like

Coke and cookies and no protein at all and kept dancing until you are too weak to argue back. Why do you think there are so many Squaries around these days?

3. The LZ librarian and, hence the LZ library, have moved from 1C-117 to 3L-312. [-lfl]

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

VARNEY THE VAMPIRE by James Malcolm Rymer or Thomas Peckett Prest  
Dover, 1972 (originally published 1847), \$10 (for two volumes)  
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper  
Copyright 1987 Evelyn C. Leeper

As the heading indicates, this is not your normal horror novel. It's old (almost 150 years), it's long (868 pages, or close to 900,000 words--by comparison, D\_u\_n\_e checks in at about 200,000), and no one is sure who wrote it. The greatest of the penny dreadfuls, it is described by E. F. Bleiler as "the most famous book that almost no one has read." Well, I'm never one to turn down a challenge, so I determined to sit down and read it.

It's not half-bad. Okay, so that's not a glowing recommendation. But considering the length, I think the fact that I managed to read it all and have a reasonably enjoyable time of it says something. The first half moves along at a good pace, as the Bannerworths find themselves tormented by the actions of Sir Francis Varney, who is trying to drive them from their home. There is the romantic subplot, with Charles Holland and Flora Bannerworth, which follows the standard

Victorian pattern. There is comic relief, with Admiral Bell and his first mate Jack; this comic relief becomes a bit overdone at times, with the plot stalled while the admiral and Jack have yet another squabble. Eventually we find out just what Varney wants the house for and we begin to sympathize with him and his predicament as he is chased by the mob and forced to seek shelter with the Bannerworths, the very family he has been tormenting. There is a brief section in which Varney is describing his history that is reminiscent more of F\_r\_a\_n\_k\_e\_n\_s\_t\_e\_i\_n than of D\_r\_a\_c\_u\_l\_a, and in fact throughout the whole first volume, the vampiric elements are quite understated.

In the second half, Rymer (or Prest or whoever) seems to run out of steam. Instead of a single story, we get a series of episodes of the sort:

- mysterious nobleman comes to town
- greedy mother arranges to have her daughter marry him, even though the daughter doesn't love him and/or loves someone else
- on the wedding day, someone shows up, points to the groom, and shouts "That's Varney the Vampire."
- Varney flees and (optionally) the girl marries the man of her dreams instead

After several iterations of this plot, interspersed with musings by Varney himself on how much horror and misery he is bringing to the people that he meets, Rymer finally changes direction and wraps up the

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novel by having Varney tell his life story, or at any rate major parts of it, to a sympathetic minister. Having done this, Varney apparently decides that he has served his literary purpose and departs, somewhat dramatically, from the scene. Without ruining the ending (what makes me think anyone will read this, anyway?), let's just say a sequel is unlikely.

If this seems like a flimsy plot to hang almost a million words on, remember how many films Universal Studios, Hammer Studios, and who knows who else have made based on Bram Stoker's D\_r\_a\_c\_u\_l\_a. Yes, it's padded

unmercifully--at one point a character is waiting in someone's library and picks up a book to read and the next chapter of V\_a\_r\_n\_e\_y consists of the story she reads! Yes, many of the characters are two-dimensional or less. But there is also genuine horror, genuine humor ("people will talk even when they have not anything particular to say, so that we cannot wonder at their doing so when they have"), and a genuine story. I'm not sure that I'd recommend that you plow through the whole of V\_a\_r\_n\_e\_y\_t\_h\_e\_V\_a\_m\_p\_i\_r\_e, but you might give the first half--which can stand on its own without the second half--a try.

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THE VAMPYRE by John Polidori  
(in THREE GOTHIC NOVELS edited by E. F. Bleiler)  
Dover, 1966 (originally published 1819), \$3  
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper  
Copyright 1987 Evelyn C. Leeper

If you thought V\_a\_r\_n\_e\_y\_t\_h\_e\_V\_a\_m\_p\_y\_r\_e was old, well, here's an even older novel, or rather, novelette, since the word count on this is about 8500 words. This is one of three works produced as part of a "challenge match" one night in Geneva in 1816. The other two were a fragment of a novel by Lord Byron and another, slightly better known work, F\_r\_a\_n\_k\_e\_n\_s\_t\_e\_i\_n by Mary Shelley. It's clear that Shelley was the winner. T\_h\_e\_V\_a\_m\_p\_y\_r\_e is too straight-forward a telling of a vampire story to generate horror or tension the way Shelley's does. As Bleiler points out, however, a large body of work was produced in the remainder of the Nineteenth Century that was inspired by T\_h\_e\_V\_a\_m\_p\_y\_r\_e including, of course, V\_a\_r\_n\_e\_y\_t\_h\_e\_V\_a\_m\_p\_y\_r\_e, which Bleiler describes as the repetition of the incidents of T\_h\_e\_V\_a\_m\_p\_y\_r\_e until the author (and Varney) ran out of steam.

Not up to V\_a\_r\_n\_e\_y\_t\_h\_e\_V\_a\_m\_p\_y\_r\_e in characterization, plot, humor, or even writing style, Polidori's V\_a\_m\_p\_y\_r\_e does have the virtues of brevity and historical interest. Polidori's Lord Ruthven has been the model of innumerable vampires through the years since T\_h\_e\_V\_a\_m\_p\_y\_r\_e was written and makes this work a "must-read" for students of the genre.

RAISING ARIZONA  
A film review by Mark R. Leeper  
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Capsule review: A frantic and funny comedy about an ex-con who steals a baby to have instead of the one his wife cannot have. The B\_l\_o\_o\_d\_S\_i\_m\_p\_l\_e Coen brothers have made a second great film. It's a screwball comedy filled with screwball characters.

The Coen brothers have made another movie. Two years ago the then 29-year-old director Joel and the then 26-year-old producer Ethan made a superb story of murder and misunderstanding. B\_l\_o\_o\_d\_S\_i\_m\_p\_l\_e was a great first film and all the more amazing for having come from two unknowns. Joel had been editor on some low-budget horror films, the best known of which was T\_h\_e\_E\_v\_i\_l\_D\_e\_a\_d; Ethan had no film experience. B\_l\_o\_o\_d\_S\_i\_m\_p\_l\_e was a great film and an outstanding critical success. More recently the Coens had to prove that they had more than just one film in them. Well, R\_a\_i\_s\_i\_n\_g\_A\_r\_i\_z\_o\_n\_a proves that and while it seems less ambitious to make one more comedy in a market full of comedies, R\_a\_i\_s\_i\_n\_g\_A\_r\_i\_z\_o\_n\_a is as unique in its own way as B\_l\_o\_o\_d\_S\_i\_m\_p\_l\_e was.

Nicholas Cage plays H.I., an ex-con who went through jail terms as often as you go through tubes of toothpaste. Then he married Edwina, an ex-cop who wants to settle down with him and raise a family. One problem. No kids. And as a cigar-chomping doctor gaily explains, there aren't gonna be none, neither. Things look pretty bad until Edwina hears about a furniture chain (Trey Wilson who played in F\_X and as the base commander in A\_S\_o\_l\_d\_i\_e\_r's\_S\_t\_o\_r\_y). owner whose wife just had quintuplets. Now, if some folks don't got enough kids and others got too many, the answer is obvious. If H.I.'s so used to stealing.... Well, you get the idea. And what the Coens give us a bringing-up-baby sort of comedy done in a manic Joe-Bob-Briggs style.

I think while he was making this film, the cameraman must have lived on black coffee and motion-sickness pills. In fact, the same might be true of most of the major actors. The Coens have a way of telling a story that is fast and staccato. The camera moves in fast, jerky motions, making the viewer feel as manic as the characters.

The film grinds up biker movies, the prison system, other people's kids, the parents of other people's kids, and just about anything else that gets in its path. The film is fast and it's funny. And it's not like most of the other comedies out there. Rate this one a +2 on the -4 to +4 scale.

THE TOXIC AVENGER  
A film review by Mark R. Leeper  
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Capsule review: This is a feeble parody on super-hero comics that seems to have a following purely because it knocks New Jersey. It has crude production values, weak humor, and an inexplicable following.

Generally I am not all that fond of parodies. A film gets no points just for being a parody, no matter what it is satirizing. A parody should be funny on its own, even if the viewer has never seen the material being parodied. One parody that does work is John Landis's first film, a satire on T\_r\_o\_g called S\_c\_h\_l\_o\_c\_k. The gags in S\_c\_h\_l\_o\_c\_k are funny even if you have never seen T\_r\_o\_g. One parody that does not make it for this very reason is T\_h\_e\_T\_o\_x\_i\_c\_A\_v\_e\_n\_g\_e\_r.

Melvin Furd (a name borrowed from M\_a\_d magazine satires of the 1950s) is a 98-pound weakling working as a mop-boy at a health club in Tromaville, New Jersey, the self-styled "Toxic Capital of the World." At the club everyone is good-looking and is a creep in one way or another, and the favorite sport is tormenting Melvin. One such prank goes awry and lands Melvin in a vat of toxic waste which puts Melvin through some changes. He becomes incredibly strong like Arnold Schwarzenegger but at the same time he is made deformed and ugly like, well, Arnold Schwarzenegger. He then proceeds to set the world, or at least Tromaville, right.

The problem is that most of the jokes in T\_h\_e\_T\_o\_x\_i\_c\_A\_v\_e\_n\_g\_e\_r are feeble and predictable. The jokes are on the level of the health instructor telling his exercise class to do just what he does, and then someone drops a snake down his back. You've seen this gag about thirty times before. The film is crudely made with the words often not synchronized with the lips.

T\_h\_e\_T\_o\_x\_i\_c\_A\_v\_e\_n\_g\_e\_r is a funny film for anyone who can laugh for an hour and a half at the same joke premise with little assistance from the

rest of an amateurish script. Yes, we all like to knock New Joisey, and none more than we New Joisey residents, but   T  h  e  T  o  x  i  c  A  v  e  n  g  e  r doesn't do it particularly creatively. Rate it a -1 on the -4 to +4 scale.