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Not Mark Leeper's Top Ten Films of 2024 (comments by Mark R. Leeper and Evelyn C. Leeper):

Normally, this column would be Mark's "Top Ten Films of 2024". Mark has been producing such a list for the last thirty-eight years (1986-2023), but it has finally been done in by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Well, not just them, but they are the proximate cause.

A few years ago, AMPAS (and others) became concerned about the quantity of "For Your Consideration" DVDs that some studios were sending out. It was a combination of environmental concerns, concerns over piracy, and concern about an uneven playing field. So they decreed that no movie that sent out DVDs to the Academy members would be eligible for an Oscar,

Now that studios and filmmakers were not sending out DVDs to Academy members, they decided to stop sending out DVDs to anyone. Once they had set up a streaming capability for Academy members, it was easier and cheaper to use it for all the awards organizations. There was also the question of what happens if a DVD is sent to everyone in "Joe's Bar Award Team" and one of those people is also an Academy member, does that disqualify the film from an Oscar? Easier just to not send DVDs to anyone.

But the streaming experience leaves a lot to be desired. Films stop in the middle with some arcane error code. Films pixilate, glitch, or stutter. Every studio has a different interface, so you need several apps, and how one mirrors the film on one's television varies, as does how one gets subtitles. Working on a tiny screen means when you try to pause or change the settings, you may accidentally reposition the time bar.

So the bottom line is that we haven't seen nearly enough films, or major films, for Mark to come up with a meaningful list. Hopefully, the various mini-reviews over the year have given you some idea of what's out there. [-mrl/ec1]

FALL OF CIVILIZATIONS: STORIES OF GREATNESS AND DECLINE by Paul Cooper (book review by Gregory Frederick):

FALL OF CIVILIZATIONS: STORIES OF GREATNESS AND DECLINE offers a sweeping exploration of the rise and fall of some of history's most influential civilizations. With a clear and engaging narrative, Cooper brings to life the stories of various civilizations, such as Sumer, Assyria, Carthage, Roman Britain, Byzantium, the Aztecs, and the Inca Empire, plus others, drawing attention to both their monumental achievements and eventual collapse.

Cooper weaves history into captivating narratives, making complex historical events accessible to a broad audience. He balances historical details with human drama, engaging readers not just with dates and facts, but with the stories of individuals and societies. The author doesn't just recount the downfall of civilizations but delves into the causes, exploring internal factors (e.g., corruption, over expansion, or societal instability) as well as external forces (such as invasions or environmental collapse). This analytical approach provides readers with a deeper understanding of why these societies fell, rather than just a simple recounting of their decline. One of the very many interesting items in the book is that only a few places in the world developed a written language and isolated Easter Island is one of those places. Also, the civilization of ancient Sumer for example wrote their texts on hardened clay tablets which will last far longer than our world's current digital data which will be gone if the power to maintain them is gone.

The book spans various civilizations from different parts of the world and different time periods, providing a global perspective on the theme of rise and fall. This diversity enriches the reader's understanding of historical patterns and connections between seemingly distant empires.

FALL OF CIVILIZATIONS is a well-crafted and thought-provoking exploration of history's great empires and their eventual collapse. While not ground-breaking in terms of originality, the book provides a solid and engaging overview of the factors that lead to the fall of civilizations. It is an excellent choice for readers seeking to understand the cyclical nature of history and the complex interplay of factors that contribute to the rise and fall of great societies. [-gf]

AI and Movie Questions (comments by Thomas Russell):

Suppose Dorothy had asked the tin man "How can I get to Kansas?" And the tin man replied "I don't know."

Further suppose that you ask say, Alexa, this question: "What did the tin man say when Dorothy asked him how to get back to Kansas?"

Then Alexa would summon up all her artificial intelligence powers and say, "I don't know."

P.S. The "real" Alexa is reading this email right now and has already gotten wise to the trick.

[-ttr]

This Week's Reading (book comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

Some weeks it's hard to fill this column. For the last couple of weeks a lot of my reading has been re-reading. Another large chunk has been Winston Churchill's history of World War II, but at something like 3500 pages, that will take a while. I will probably comment at the end of each of the six books, just as I commented on the initial sections of THE EVERYMAN CHESTERTON rather than waiting until the end. But even so, some weeks, there's nothing really new to comment on.

I can say that adding old books to my reading queue--and putting them at the front of the queue--is not making it easier to write the column. But there is enjoyment in re-reading books. Recently a reviewer and editor was talking about books that they had liked a lot and would recommend. I asked them which of their favorite books they re-read the most, and they said that what with their reviewing duties and editing duties they really had no time to re-read books. That to me would be a real problem.

And I also relisten to audio books, but I've already said enough about THE DAUGHTER OF TIME and THE MARTIAN and more than enough about MOBY DICK. Then again, can one ever say too much about MOBY-DICK? So I will fall back on a bit of a cheat and give you my comments on Chapter 2 of MOBY DICK, since I have never included those in the MT VOID. (The comments on Chapter 1 can be found in the 08/09/24 issue.)

CHAPTER 2: The Carpet-Bag

To say that Nantucket is "Tyre of this Carthage" to New Bedford is to mean that Nantucketers were the founders of New Bedford (or at least the progenitors in some sense). Carthage (in present-day Tunisia) was founded three thousand years ago by Phoenician colonists from Tyre (in present-day Lebanon).

"The first thing I did was to stumble over an ash-box in the porch. Ha! thought I, ha, as the flying particles almost choked me, are these ashes from that destroyed city, Gomorrah?" The ash-box was there to provide ashes to spread on icy steps, paths, etc., during the winter. The dark color helped absorb sunlight (and heat) and melted the ice faster, plus the ash provided a grittier surface. In Melville's time, ash (from fireplaces, cooking fires, etc.) was plentiful and free, while salt cost money, and also did not provide a non-slip surface.

Gomorrah was destroyed along with Sodom for its wickedness: "Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven; ... And [Abraham] looked toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the plain, and beheld, and, lo, the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace. [Genesis 19:24,28] It is interesting to note that in the Bible, Sodom is occasionally mentioned on its own, but Gomorrah is only mentioned in conjunction with Sodom. So Melville's choice of Gomorrah rather than Sodom here is intriguing.

Then Ishmael enters what he thinks may be an inn, and reports, "It seemed the great Black Parliament sitting in Tophet. A hundred black faces turned round in their rows to peer; and beyond, a black Angel of Doom was beating a book in a pulpit. It was a negro church; and the preacher's text was about the blackness of darkness, and the weeping and wailing and teeth-gnashing there. Ha, Ishmael, muttered I, backing out, Wretched entertainment at the sign of 'The Trap!' Tophet was a shrine to Moloch in ancient times: "And they have built the high places of Tophet, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire; which I commanded them not, neither came it into my heart." [Jeremiah 7:31]. It is also another name for Hell. There was no "Black Parliament" in either, but there were several English and Scottish Parliaments given that name. Ishmael's use of the words "blackness of darkness" emphasizes how ironic it is for a black preacher to preach using those terms for the representation of evil. And Melville did not invent them; the preacher's text was Jude 1:13: "Raging waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame; wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever." With its "raging waves of the sea," how appropriate a text for a sea-faring town such as New Bedford! And is it a prefiguration in miniature of Father Mapple's sermon?

"Pea coffee" is just what it sounds like--a coffee substitute made from roasted English (green) peas.

"It stood on a sharp bleak corner, where that tempestuous wind Euroclydon kept up a worse howling than ever it did about poor Paul's tossed craft." This is a reference to the northeast wind mentioned in Acts 27:14-18: "But not long after there arose against it a tempestuous wind, called Euroclydon. And when the ship was caught, and could not bear up into the wind, we let her drive. And running under a certain island which is called Claudia, we had much work to come by the boat: Which when they had taken up, they used helps, undergirding the ship; and, fearing lest they should fall into the quicksands, strake sail, and so were driven. And we being exceedingly tossed with a tempest, the next day they lightened the ship; ..." And of course, to New Englanders, the nor'easter is the most feared storm.

There follows a long analogy to the parable of Lazarus and the rich man from Luke 16:20-25. (This is a different Lazarus than the one who rose from the dead.) When Ishmael refers to "old Dives, in his red silken wrapper," that is the rich man, "Dives" being a Latin appellation for wealth.

"... this is more wonderful than that an iceberg should be moored to one of the Moluccas." According to McWhorter, "wonderful" here (and in many if not all the other instances) has the old meaning of "curious", "peculiar", or "bizarre".

The Moluccas (now the Maluku Islands) are an archipelago in the eastern part of what is now Indonesia.

Is the painting in the Spouter Inn a well-known painting, or just a generic whaling painting?

[-ec1]

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Quote of the Week:

As democracy is perfected, the [presidency] represents, more and more closely, the inner soul of the people. We move toward a lofty ideal. On some great and glorious day the plain folks of the land will reach their heart's desire at last, and the White House will be adorned by a downright moron.
--H.L. Mencken [1920]

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