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## Table of Contents

[Mini Reviews, Part 5 \(SMOKE, BLUE IN THE FACE, DATING THE ENEMY](#) (film reviews by Mark R. Leeper and Evelyn C. Leeper)  
[JOE VS. THE VOLCANO](#) (comments by Evelyn C. Leeper)  
[THE ADVENTURES OF AMINA AL-SIRAFI](#) by [Shannon Chakraborty](#) (audio book review by Joe Karpierz)  
[Edgar Rice Burroughs](#) (letters of comment by Tim Merrigan and Peter Trei)  
[This Week's Reading](#) (recent purchases) (book comments by Evelyn C. Leeper)  
[Quote of the Week](#)

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**Mini Reviews, Part 5** (film reviews by Mark R. Leeper and Evelyn C. Leeper):

This is the fifth batch of mini-reviews:

**SMOKE** (1995) and **BLUE IN THE FACE** (1995): **SMOKE** is a slice-of-life film about the characters who work in and come to a cigar shop in Brooklyn. **BLUE IN THE FACE** is the sequel, and both star Harvey Keitel as the manager of the shop (though not the owner). Both are variously written and directed by Wayne Wang and Paul Auster. There is a certain "My Dinner with Andre" feel about them, as much time is spent with characters just talking to each other about life, philosophy, smoking, and everything else, and this is utterly engrossing. **SMOKE** and **BLUE IN THE FACE** both have amazing casts. **SMOKE** has Giancarlo Esposito, William Hurt, Forest Whitaker, Stockard Channing, and Ashley Judd. **BLUE IN THE FACE** has an unrecognizable Michael J. Fox, an equally unrecognizable Lily Tomlin, Lou Reed, Jim Jarmusch, Mira Sorvino, and Madonna. There is also a scene with Jackie Robinson's ghost, shown only from the back (sort of like Jesus was in many early films). (Is "42" in "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" a reference to Robinson?) [-ecl]

**SMOKE**:

Released theatrically 9 June 1995. Rating: high +2 (-4 to +4), or 8/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114478/reference>

What others are saying: <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1062983-smoke>

**BLUE IN THE FACE**:

Released theatrically 13 October 1995. Rating: high +2 (-4 to +4), or 8/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0112541/reference>

What others are saying: [https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/blue\\_in\\_the\\_face](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/blue_in_the_face)

**DATING THE ENEMY** (1996): We just saw **DATING THE ENEMY**. It is similar to **PRELUDE TO A KISS** (1992) (which we watched right after it), but with the difference that the body-switch is between a couple. One thing I've noticed is that in this sort of movie that came out before same-sex relationships became okay in movies, it seems to be okay to have romantic contact with a body of the opposite sex, even if it is inhabited by a person of the same sex. (**GHOST** (1990) is another one, though not precisely a switch.) In **PRELUDE TO A KISS**, Peter has sex with Rita's body, even though it's inhabited by the old man, and the audience doesn't seem fazed by this. In **GHOST**, Molly won't even kiss Oda Mae, even though Oda Mae's body is inhabited by Sam. Heck, in **SPLASH** (1983) Tom Hanks goes off with a member of another \*species\* and the viewing public didn't seem to bat an eye. **DATING THE ENEMY** dodges this problem by having both members of the couple switch, but other films say something about how we perceive other people (or how Hollywood thinks we do), more as their bodies than their minds. It definitely connects to the gender issues of today--what \*really\* defines us? Is it our bodies, or our minds? Then again, maybe I'm reading more into this than is there, and Hollywood (at least when these movies were made) didn't want to show apparent romantic contact between two people of the same sex. (This is not unlike **BIRTH OF A NATION**, where the filmmakers were very clear in saying that the blacks in the film were played by whites in blackface, because otherwise the audiences would have been outraged by the scenes with the black men and white women. The actual actors were the important people here, not the characters.)

Then again, one of the best quotes in **SPLASH** is about ignoring these differences:

**Freddie**: People fall in love every day, huh? Is that what you said?

**Allen**: Yeah.

**Freddie**: Yeah? Well, that's a crock. It doesn't work that way. Look, do you realize how happy you were with her? That is, of course, when you weren't driving yourself crazy. Every day? Come on. Some people will never \*be\* that happy. \*I'll\* never be that happy. What am I talking to you for? You don't know anything.

[-ecl]

Released theatrically 19 September 1996 (Australia). Rating: +1 (-4 to +4), or 6/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0116036/reference>

What others are saying: <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/dating-the-enemy>

**JOE VS. THE VOLCANO** (comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

Was **JOE VS. THE VOLCANO** inspired by the "Twilight Zone" episode "Mr. Bevis"? [-ecl]

**THE ADVENTURES OF AMINA AL-SIRAFI** by [Shannon Chakraborty](#) (copyright 2023, HarperAudio, 16 hours and 59 minutes, ASIN: B0B4BQ9G2P, narrated by Lameece Issaq and Amin El Gamal) (audio book review by Joe Karpierz):

Most of us dream of the day we retire, getting to walk away from our job, career, and work colleagues for the last time. If we're lucky, we've spent a very long time doing what we (hopefully) love doing for a living. A very small (and dwindling number) of people work for one company their entire career. Others stay in the same field, but change employers any number of times before they call it a day. But we do, eventually, get off the train, and hopefully spend the rest of our days in peace.

Unless, of course, something calls us back.

Amina al-Sirafi was a pirate, a famous and notorious one at that. She had fallen away from her religion for a life of crime. She had multiple husbands, one of which was a demon. Her life was both dangerous and exciting, but she finally decided that enough was enough. She turned away from that life, instead living with her family, which included her mother and daughter, and returned to a life of faith, piety, religion, and peace.

Let's return to our lives, the lives of non-fiction. We've spent 40+ years in the workforce and finally settled down to a life with no deadlines, no stress (hopefully), no responsibilities. Then maybe an old friend calls, offering a chance to work on one last important project, a project that is worthwhile and above all, lucrative. That extra money could make the rest of our retirement more comfortable than we ever expected it would be. So we take the job.

One day, Amina is visited by a woman named Salima, whose daughter Dunya has been kidnapped by a mercenary named Falco. It turns out that Dunya is the daughter of one of Amina's former crewmen who died while in her employ. Salima is offering Amina an absolutely huge sum of money to find and rescue Dunya. How many of us would be able to resist a huge sum of money that would keep us set for the rest of our lives. Amina sure couldn't. With a heavy heart, Amina leaves her daughter who didn't want her to leave, and her mother who told her it was a very bad idea and told her not to leave. She recruits her old crewmates: Dalila, an expert with potions and poisons; Tinbu, her first mate; and Majed, her navigator. Together, along with a makeshift crew, they sail on Amina's old ship, the Marawati. And thus begin the adventures alluded to in the title of the novel.

It turns out that Falco and Dunya are attempting to locate the Moon of Saba, a pearl which supposedly has magical powers. Along the way, they encounter Amina's demon husband Raksh, who is a) still bound to Amina by the wedding contract, and who Amina locked away in a trunk and was hoping never to see again, and b) is the father of Amina's daughter, a secret which Amina keeps from him in order to prevent him from using that fact against her. Yeah, it's complicated.

This book is the first of a planned trilogy, which makes me want to say it should be entitled "One of the Adventures of..." It's a well-written novel, but unlike **WITCH KING**, tells its story in a very linear, straightforward fashion, something I was looking forward to after the twisty-turny **WITCH KING**. The story is actually being told by the scribe Jamal, who is in the employ of Amina and who knows the story very well.

Why are there going to be multiple adventures? It seems that Amina fell afoul (and you have no idea how much of a pun that is) of some magical creatures who, in exchange for sparing her life, coerced her into entering into a contract which will have Amina continuing to search for magical relics.

What I can't comment on, because I really know nothing of it, is that the novel is set in a Muslim culture and country. The setting is integral to the story, of course, but I don't think the reader needs to know anything about Muslim culture to appreciate the novel.

While I think this is a good novel, a fun adventure, and an excellent story--which I highly recommend to readers of fantasy and those interested in Muslim culture--I have a hard time seeing this as a Hugo finalist. We've seen many books with this kind of story over the years, so it is really nothing new. Still, it's a worthwhile read. [-jak]

**Edgar Rice Burroughs** (letters of comment by Tim Merrigan and Peter Trei):

In response to [Joyce Beeson's comments on Edgar Rice Burroughs](#) in the 09/06/24 issue of the MT VOID, Tim Merrigan writes:

[Joy Beeson wrote,] "And his time, it was a-changing. I don't know how many stories told of nobly marrying a girl of common birth, only to discover that she was a mislaid princess." [-jb]

Wasn't that about the time destitute British nobles marrying the children (daughters mostly) of wealthy Americans started? [-tm]

Peter Trei answers:

There were a lot of "Dollar Princesses" during the Gilded Age.

One prominent example of the progeny of such a marriage is Winston Churchill. [-pt]

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

This week is more a "what's coming up" article than what I've just read. Every once in a while Better World Books has a really good sale (25% or even 30% off their already low prices on a lot of books), and I buy a half dozen or so books from my want list that all end up costing less than \$5 each.

This time it was four Sherlock Holmes pastiches from Titan Books; I liked the first three I got from them.

There was also **THE TIME TRAVELER'S ALMANAC** by Ann and Jeff VanderMeer, I've already read and reviewed it in 2016. At the time, I was unhappy that I had checked it out of the library and had to read it faster than I would have preferred. Now I can read it a story at a time.

Another one I had already read was **BROKEN STARS: CONTEMPORARY SCIENCE FICTION IN TRANSLATION** edited by Ken Liu, the "sequel" to **INVISIBLE PLANETS: AN ANTHOLOGY OF CONTEMPORARY SCIENCE FICTION IN TRANSLATION**. I've already reviewed both of them, but I may just read both of them again.

Then there is **THE DIARY OF SAMUEL PEPYS: COMPANION**, volume ten of the University of California edition of Pepys's diary. The first eight volumes are the diary itself. I have this on my Kindle (thank you Project Gutenberg!) Volume nine is the index (not really needed when one has a searchable copy). The "Companion" is basically an encyclopedia of everyone and everything in the diary, or if you prefer, a set of annotations. Some entries are very short (e.g., one line identifying someone as a local grocer), while others are more extensive (e.g., four pages explaining the Admiralty).

And the one truly new book: **CHINA DREAMS: GROWING UP JEWISH IN TIENTSIN** by Isabelle Maynard. Born in Tientsin in 1929 of Russian Jewish parents who fled the Communists, she lived through the Japanese occupation and eventually emigrated to the United States.

So that's what coming up, along with the two volumes of W. Somerset Maugham's "lost" stories I mentioned a couple of weeks ago. Not everything will get reviewed, of course. On the other hand, my near-future plans include our annual trip to Second Time Books, and I'm pretty sure I won't leave there empty-handed. :-) [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

I cannot walk through the suburbs in the solitude of the night without thinking that the night pleases us because it suppresses idle details, just as our memory does.  
--Jorge Luis Borges

quote

-- author

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