

meeting. Mirkheim is not a place out of Norse mythology, which has many heims, but no Mirk. :^):^) Besides, the only other books I found with titles out of Norse mythology, except, of course, Norse mythology, weren't worth reading, let alone discussing.

THE MT VOID

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Okay, this is the sixth book in Poul Anderson's future history series about the Polesotechnic League, and, of course, Nicholas Van Rijn. Amidst all of the galaxy-spanning empires (benign and otherwise) that other authors have postulated, Anderson has created a galactic civilization based on commerce and engineered by traders in search of profits. Other organizations (e.g., unions and governments) are also considered, but it is the central role of commerce that sets this series apart. The alliances, and the conflicts, between species are dictated by habitats and histories of their respective planets and cultures. When two similar races are both intent on the same property or commodity, there is liable to be conflict or cooperation - depending on the two cultures' values and histories. If two races are entirely dissimilar, there is unlikely to be either.

In Mirkheim, a source of extremely rare superheavy metals is found, hidden, secretly exploited, rediscovered, claim-jumped, argued over, and ultimately fought over. Because Anderson has focused on commerce as a driving force in this series, the plot works and is sensible in a way that many others are not. All of the actors have motives, and both the characters and the motives are believable. Past actions and conflicts (from the earlier books in the series) affect the behavior of the actors in this story, but nothing is left unclear if you haven't read all the other volumes. [-lfl]

2. Mah friends, many and devious are the ways of SAY-TEN. Like GAHD, SAY-TEN moves in mysterious ways. We do not know where EE-VIL will strike next. I am here to talk to you today about SAY-TEN's most devious plot in years.

Now many did not believe me about the comm-YU-nist menace. They said I was seeing comm-YU-nists everywhere. They laughed at me like they laughed at JEE-ZUS. And now what do they have? Rap music. People with funny lines in their haircuts. Mah friends,

that comm-YU-nist plot is still working.

But today I want to talk to you about a threat that they all will KNOW is all around. That threat is OX-EE-GEN. Yes, OX-EE-GEN. OX-EE-GEN is SAY-TEN's most dangerous substance because it is always there. SAY-TEN will not let you get away from OX-EE-GEN. Now, many of you grew up being taught by GAHD-LESS teachers that OX-EE-GEN was a good thing. And they say there are no comm-YU-nists in our school systems!

But I am here to tell you that if we all work together we can defeat the menace of SAY-TEN's OX-EE-GEN. We did it in Michigan. There, a school system was giving its innocent students deep-breathing exercises. Luckily some good CHRIST-GENS who were ever-vigilant--as we all must be--found out about SAY-TEN's plot. They told the school system that deep breathing of OX-EE-GEN leads to out-of-body experiences, promotes mysticism, and undermines

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CHRIST-GEE-ANITY. In some parts of Michigan I bet it also promotes emphysema and lung cancer. That was all it took, good GAHD-fearing CHRIST-GENS to stop SAY-TEN in his tracks.

Now I know what many of you are thinking. We all have to breathe. Yes, that's true. It is part of the human condition. Like ORIGINAL SIN. But we owe it to JEE-ZUS to take shallow breaths as JEE-ZUS took shallow breaths. And let us all say, AAY-MEN.

3. I'd just like to add that if you have ever deep-breathed in Michigan, you would want to have an out-of-body experience too--preferably to another state. [-ecl]

4. Correction: In spite of what the heading said, two weeks ago, I reviewed W_h_a_t_M_i_g_h_t_H_a_v_e_B_e_e_n_3: A_l_t_e_r_n_a_t_e_W_a_r_s, not W_h_a_t_M_i_g_h_t_H_a_v_e_B_e_e_n_2: A_l_t_e_r_n_a_t_e_H_e_r_o_e_s. [-ecl]

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Character is that which can do without success.
-- Ralph Waldo Emerson

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST
A film review by Mark R. Leeper
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Capsule review: Disney's animated feature films are, in my opinion, over-rated. They lack plot and complexity. Their emotional impact is limited. The

usual excuse is that they are only supposed to be simple children's films. B_e_a_u_t_y_a_n_d_t_h_e_B_e_a_s_t demonstrates that a lot more can be done in this medium. It beats B_a_m_b_i,C_i_n_d_e_r_e_l_l_a,S_n_o_w_W_h_i_t_e,S_l_e_e_p_i_n_g_B_e_a_u_t_y, and all of the other classics, including F_a_n_t_a_s_i_a. Parents should go with their kids. If you don't have kids, go anyway. This one may not be on cassette this century. Rating: +2 (-4 to +4).

I rather surprised myself with B_e_a_u_t_y_a_n_d_t_h_e_B_e_a_s_t. When I was young, I liked the Disney feature cartoons as little entertainments, but after age ten or so I found the stories a little uninteresting. Eventually I could respect the detail in the technique, but even then I was rarely impressed with their imagination. Yes, they had attention to detail and if I knew what to look for, I liked that. But, with the exception of the dragon sequence from S_l_e_e_p_i_n_g_B_e_a_u_t_y and the "Night on Bald Mountain" sequence from F_a_n_t_a_s_i_a, there was not much beyond lukewarm imagination. And the stories were really uninteresting. And being a realist about my own looks, I have long been a little irritated at the subtext that equates physical beauty and ugliness to evil. With all that to set up my attitude, it is hardly surprising that I would come away from B_e_a_u_t_y_a_n_d_t_h_e_B_e_a_s_t genuinely believing it is the best animated feature film ever to come from Disney Studios. And that includes that beloved intellectual fraud F_a_n_t_a_s_i_a.

The plot of the film maintains Disney's usual standard for fidelity to the original story. This means, of course, that if you read Madame de Villeneuve's story and then saw the film, you would be likely to see similarities and probably would believe that the story did somehow inspire the film. (Those anxious to read the story faithfully told can find it in Andrew Lang's B_l_u_e_F_a_i_r_y_B_o_o_k.) Some bits were more likely inspired by Jean Cocteau's film L_a_B_e_l_l_e_e_t_l_a_B_e_t_e. Belle, if not a real intellectual, is at least a reader. In fact, she seems to love books more than boys, so is thought to be weird. (Bravo for her!) But Belle has a semi-secret admirer. Gaston is handsome, big, and strong. He is also obnoxious, insufferably conceited, sexist, and selfish. Gaston is supremely macho and the film subtly makes the statement that to be macho is to be beastlike. All of Gaston's virtues that he tells us about are really just descriptions of a beast. He is big, he kills

animals, he is covered with hair. There are a bevy of young women from the town who swoon over the beastly qualities of Gaston. Belle, however, is unimpressed and wants nothing to do with Gaston. Then events conspire (or contrive) to make her the prisoner in an enchanted castle ruled over by a real beast--or at least an apparently real beast. He has all of Gaston's qualities in a more extreme form. The Beast is super-macho, but knows that it is a curse both literally and figuratively. Belle wants no part of the Beast until he starts to win her over. How does he start to win her over? In a manner--time-honored in Disney films--for beasts to win over people. I won't say how, but anyone who has seen O_l_d_Y_e_l_l_e_r will find the situation familiar. The story is well-told, though almost entirely revisionist.

Some mention should be made of the castle's enchantment, since many of the film characters exist as a direct result of that enchantment. Once touch that Cocteau put in his film version that was not in the original story was that the walls of the castle had ornamental torch-holders that looked like human arms holding the torches. These ornamental holders have a life of their own. The Disney film extends this to most of the furnishings of the castle, giving them also voices and personalities. At moments this almost has a Philip K. Dick sort of horror, when someone drinking from a tea cup finds the cup is talking to him. The personalities are genial, however, and the potential horror is quickly muted.

Visually this film is at least up to and probably better than what we think of as the classic Disney feature cartoons. Snow White and Sleeping Beauty were drawn as sweet and cheerful as a bluebird but perhaps not quite as smart. They were characters for years when innocence was prized over intelligence. Belle has apricot-sized eyes and high cheekbones, but also a range of facial expression far greater than the classic animation heroines. There is clearly more going on in her head than in those of her previous counterparts. Whether it was done before without acknowledgement, or is a new approach, a different team animates each of the major characters. James Baxter headed the team which animated Belle and Paige O'Hara voiced the characters.

The Beast is a strange concoction combining elements of a mandrill, a bison, a lion, and the American werewolf in London. Glen Kean was is chief animator for the Beast. The voice casting director (I am sorry I do not have his name) listened on tape to several dozen voices for special characteristics. He said in an interview that he himself was surprised to hear the qualities he wanted in the voice of Robbie Benson. I share his surprise and his conviction that Benson's voice does work for the Beast.

In general, the art and animation are impressively done. These days effort goes into every background painting. One place I noted poor technique and it took me some time to get the joke. While

Disney artists usually take pains to make each character different, the three village maids who fawn on Gaston are really one character drawn three times. They were then animated in a perfunctory two-dimensional style. Perhaps the filmmakers were subtly saying that women impressed by macho are just not worth much effort.

The songs are by Howard Ashman and Alan Menken, who also wrote the songs for T_h_e_L_i_t_t_l_e_S_h_o_p_o_f_H_o_r_r_o_r_s (one piece is reminiscent of a piece from L_i_t_t_l_e_S_h_o_p) and T_h_e_L_i_t_t_l_e_M_e_r_m_a_i_d. Overall, the music is better than that of T_h_e_L_i_t_t_l_e_M_e_r_m_a_i_d. The remainder of the film's music was by Menken. Ashman served as executive producer. A note at the end dedicates the film to Howard Ashman, who died of AIDS eight months before the release of the film.

There is some irony in the fact that Don Bluth left Disney animation studios because they were not doing animation films in their own grand tradition and now they may be doing them better. In B_e_a_u_t_y_a_n_d_t_h_e_B_e_a_s_t Disney Studios has given me something it has not given me in a long time: an animated feature film I want to see again. I rate it a +2 on the -4 to +4 scale. Amazing.

PROSPERO'S BOOKS

A film review by Mark R. Leeper

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Capsule review: Peter Greenaway's Christmas package for really jaded fans of fantasy or Shakespeare. This film breaks a lot of rules, but it is still a marvelous and fascinating retelling of T_h_e T_e_m_p_e_s_t in visionary terms. It may be one of the great fantasy films for just the right audience.
Rating: low +3 (-4 to +4).

This has been a year for some unusually visual films. We have seen a man made from liquid metal in T_e_r_m_i_n_a_t_o_r_2. We have seen a beautiful animated fairy tale with B_e_a_u_t_y_a_n_d_t_h_e_B_e_a_s_t. But you haven't seen anything like P_r_o_s_p_e_r_o's_B_o_o_k_s. Not this year. Probably not any year. Peter Greenaway retells the story of Shakespeare's T_e_m_p_e_s_t. Well, in a manner of speaking, that is what Greenaway does. It also, as the title suggests is a tour of Prospero's books. When the scholar and wizard Prospero was ousted as the Duke of Milan and set adrift in a small boat, a friend gave him his twenty-four magical books so that Prospero should not die. Shakespeare does not tell us what the twenty-four books are;

Greenaway walks us through the books and shows us the texture of the medieval magic.

Now Prospero knows that the air, the ground, and the sea are thick with spirits. Knowing his books, he is able to see the spirits. Once we start the books, we also see the spirits all around. Spirits generally do not wear clothing and because of the overwhelming number of spirits we see, this film has the most nudity from the greatest number of angles of any film that comes to mind. At almost any given time humans are a tiny minority in the midst of a host of spirits that surround us--at least to the mind of Prospero. And that is what Greenaway has filmed, thumbing his nose at conventions of no or limited nudity. There is a nearly constant ballet of naked spirits of both sexes cavorting around and visually overpowering all humans but Prospero.

Nothing overpowers Prospero. We do not know if the story is happening entirely in Prospero's head or if Prospero has made himself an all-powerful deity playing with mortals as a child might with dolls. Like the child playing, Prospero gives the voices to all his characters, occasionally with the actor providing a shadow voice speaking in near-unison. So while Caliban speaks in gruff Gielgud, Miranda speaks in a dual voice of John Gielgud and Isabel Pasco.

Greenaway's script is almost as daring as his staging. Yes, it does tell the story of T h e T e m p e s t eventually, using Shakespeare's own lines. But it also describes the great books of Prospero in Shakespearean prose, a writing task the Bard never attempted. Starting with the Book of Water, whose pages were once colorful and are now faded from dampness, each new book is a pleasure if not a total delight. The Book of Mirrors is lined with mirrors. The Book of Architecture has pop-up buildings, some of which become sets. Prospero's whole world can be found in his books. No wonder he prized them over his dukedom!

Greenaway's visual style overpowers his story after slowing it to a halt as dancing and singing spirits get in the way of the plot.

The sets are like fanciful intricate paintings with beautiful images. Not content even there, Greenaway overlays and composes images in mattes and multiple exposures. The film is made in high-definition video and takes full advantage of the electronic effects that medium provides.

For more than two hours the viewer is bombarded (with the accent on "bard") with visual image after visual image after visual image (although when he tires of the intellectual content he can take a few minutes of vacation from it watching the naked bodies). The film is challenging and taxing at times. It probably requires a good knowledge of the original play. Recognizing this limitation for United States audiences, Miramax has provided an 8-1/2- by 11-inch cheat sheet card to tell us Yanks what the plot of T_h_e_T_e_m_p_e_s_t was. I suppose it is a nice gesture, but I am impressed by anyone who can so fast read and remember even this short summary. One rather wonders what Shakespeare would have made of the film.

Greenaway has made yet one more film that will appeal to only a very narrow range of tastes. But as with his C_o_o_k,_t_h_e_T_h_i_e_f,_H_i_s_W_i_f_e,_a_n_d_H_e_r_L_o_v_e_r (and unlike T_h_e_D_r_a_u_g_h_t_s_m_a_n's_C_o_n_t_r_a_c_t), I find myself in that splinter. This is a fantasy film that does a great deal that is new but one I cannot recommend without strong reservations. For those with my odd tastes I rate it a low +3 on the -4 to +4 scale.