

You may or may not have heard that the Hubble has been trying to focus on the star Capella. I say trying because of that little grinding error that makes the universe look to it like it looks to you when you wake up on New Year's Day. But never mind that. It

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has been looking at Capella to see what is going on between here and there. What it is doing is using a spectrograph to measure absorption lines between here and there. This helps to give them the hydrogen to deuterium ratio in the universe. Hey, you there. I see you starting to fidget. No wonder the Japanese are whipping our butts in the world market. If you can't see how something is useful to you right away, your minds start to wander.

Well, the ratio is about 15 parts per million. That means that there is less matter in the universe than we thought. That means we probably going to escape the Big One. The huge collision ain't gonna happen. Lots of us like Stephen Hawking have been expecting the expanding universe to stop expanding at some point and then all come together in a huge collision that would set off another Big Bang. I hear you. You still don't see why this is good news for the housing industry. That's why you're still driving a Honda and some jackass on Wall Street is driving a Porsche.

You see, I've thought this collision was coming for a long time. I maybe have just come to accept it a bit too much. So my house needs painting. So what. It is all going to be mashed into a single point singularity anyway. Who's going to know or care? Well, it ain't in the cards. We now can be pretty sure we are here for the long haul. Now I guess I've got no excuse for not fixing the place up. I can't hope to insure my house and collect big when it all comes crashing together. Well, Allstate would probably have said it was an act of God anyway.

On the other hand, this is it. This is what we made of the universe. There was a common theory that there are a sequence of Big Bangs, after each of which things fly apart and then come crashing back together. When everything crushes back together, there is another Big Bang and it all starts over with a fresh start on the universe. Well, it may be we can't count on that as much as

we all do. When I was playing with clay as a kid and didn't like what I got, I just sort of mashed it all together and started over. I guess I had hoped nature was holding open that same option with the universe. Now I'm not so sure.

2. The 1992 Nebula Award winners are:

Novel: S t a t i o n s o f t h e T i d e by Michael Swanwick

Novella: "Beggars in Spain" by Nancy Kress

Novelette: "Guide Dog" by Mike Conner

Short Story: "Ma Qui" by Alan Brennert

3. Last week we gave a schedule for the May 2 WBAI science fiction programming. So naturally the next day they changed it. The c u r r e n t schedule (subject to more change, of course) is as follows:

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5:00 AM Terrence McKenna
7:00 AM As I Please: Jorge Luis Borges
8:00 AM "13 Clocks," Radio dramatization
10:00 AM History of SF on WBAI
noon Philip K. Dick interview
1:00 PM "Star Pit," dramatization/reading by Samuel Delaney
4:00 PM That Time of Month: Women in Science Fiction
5:00 PM Soundtrack: science fiction in the movies
7:00 PM Golden Age of Radio: classic science fiction radio drama
9:00 PM Reading at Dixon Place: James Morrow, Rachel Pollack,
and other authors reading their own works
11:00 PM Hour of the Wolf: Terry Bisson (guest)

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Do not be afraid of enemies; the worst they can do is

to kill you. Do not be afraid of friends; the worst they can do is betray you. Be afraid of the indifferent; they do not kill or betray. But only because of their silent agreement, betrayal and murder exist on earth.

-- Bruno Yasienski

PASSED AWAY

A film review by Mark R. Leeper

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Capsule review: When the patriarch of a large Irish family dies, the whole brood comes to the funeral to be wacky together, to work out their personal problems, and to learn to endure. P_a_s_s_e_d

A_w_a_y is a warm pleasant comedy with no great insight, but with an amiable eye for human behavior. Not bad.
Rating: +1 (-4 to +4).

One of the film industry's more common tactics is the warmedy-bait-and-switch. Well, that's what I call it anyway. The idea is that you take a comedy "with heart" (as they say in T_h_e_P_l_a_y_e_r) and promote it as if it were a wild screwball comedy. Warm human values just do not hack it at the box office. And with at least two cast members in common with last year's hilarious O_s_c_a_r, the advertising could well have been intended to give the impression that P_a_s_s_e_d_A_w_a_y was cut from the same cloth. It wasn't, but it is quite a pleasant film on its own. In spirit, P_a_s_s_e_d_A_w_a_y is much more like O_n_c_e_A_r_o_u_n_d.

The basic plot is simple enough. Jack Warden plays Jack Scanlon, the patriarch of a large Irish family. His four children are grown and leading entangled lives of their own. As the film opens, Jack has just recovered from a heart attack and is helping his oldest son Johnny (played by Bob Hoskins) through a mid-life crisis. Then Jack dies suddenly and Johnny finds himself the new head of a rather eccentric household and at the same time is responsible for arranging for his father's wake and funeral. Johnny has a house full of family ranging from very human to just this side of totally wacky. And one more mourner shows up: Cassie Slocombe (played by Nancy Travis, who looks a lot like Julia Roberts). Jack always had a wandering eye and often other parts wandered as well. Johnny himself is attracted to Cassie and suddenly Johnny knows what he wants to do with his mid-life crisis.

Charlie Peters, previously a screenwriter with such dubious credits as P_a_t_e_r_n_i_t_y and T_h_r_e_e_M_e_n_a_n_d_a_L_i_t_t_l_e_L_a_d_y, this time directs his own screenplay and gets a killer cast, including Hoskins, Warden, Blair Brown, William Petersen, Tim Curry, Peter Riegert, and Maureen Stapleton. All he really needed for this film about the dignity of being a regular person in America was a score by Georges Delerue. Richard Gibbs's music just does not quite hit the right spot. I give P_a_s_s_e_d_A_w_a_y a +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

THE MAKING OF THE MESSIAH by Robert Sheaffer
Prometheus Books, 1991, ISBN 0-87975-691-8, \$19.95.
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper
Copyright 1992 Evelyn C. Leeper

This book came at, if not a good time, at least a very coincidental one. (Well, it came a while ago, but it just came to the top of my stack.) I read this right before a Jehovah's Witness came to the door to engage Mark in further debate. (I think because he doesn't throw them out, they figure there's hope.) While I hadn't given Mark a summary in time to help him this time around, I was able to give him more information for next time.

The premise of the book is that the start of Christianity served a definite political agenda, that political agenda was in large part the c_a_u_s_e of the rise, and that the documents on which Christianity is based reflect that agenda. Sheaffer's arguments fall into three categories: arguments based on the contents of the New testament, arguments based on the contents of other documents, and sociological arguments.

To me, the most important of the categories is the first (for reasons I will explain later). Sheaffer covers all the contradictions found in the New testament. For example, in the gospel of Matthew there are twenty-seven generations between David and Joseph; in the gospel of Luke there are forty-one (and the names are very different, even for Joseph's father). And there are many other contradictions to be found. To me, as I said, these are the strongest arguments against Christianity, since Christianity is based (in large part) on the infallibility of the New Testament. Take away the story of Abraham and Isaac, the story of Moses, the story of Jericho, and you still have Judaism because it is based on the ethical and social admonitions of the Old Testament rather than on the individual people. But take away the virgin birth, the miracles, and the resurrection, and you no longer have Christianity.

Sheaffer's second type of argument is based on documents outside of the New Testament. Here he uses these documents to support his assertions rather than to dispute Christianity's. While this is appropriate and even useful in a discussion with impartial scholars, it is less powerful in a debate with Christians, since they can dismiss as forgeries any non-canonical documents, but cannot be as blithe about the canonical ones. Still, to the general scholar these documents are of interest even if the average reader is unable to make an informed judgement on their likely veracity.

The third type of argument actually runs parallel to these two in that it attempts to explain why the religion was pushed in a certain direction. I am perhaps most skeptical of this part--not

that the arguments are not convincing, but because I suspect that one can construct convincing, and contradictory, e_x_p_o_s_t_f_a_c_t_o arguments for almost anything. Yes, it's possible all that Sheaffer suggests is true, but it could as easily have been a different set of reasons for what happened, or pure chance. So far as I can tell, we can't even agree on the true causes of the American Civil War, only 130 years ago; it is highly unlikely we will ever understand all the causes for the rise of Christianity.

It seems to me, by the way, that Sheaffer goes a bit out of his way to offend. Maybe it's a given that Christians will take offense at this--though even that is debatable for the majority of them--but starting out in the introduction by saying, "Many Christians will find this book as offensive as Moslem fanatics did Salman Rushdie's blasphemous S_a_t_a_n_i_c_V_e_r_s_e_s," and reiterating this several times, does have the appearance of waving the red flag. And one reference to the "cruci-fiction" can be allowed on literary grounds; repeated use of the neologism smacks of intentional and gratuitous insult.

In spite of the overly strident tone, however, T_h_e_M_a_k_i_n_g_o_f_t_h_e_M_e_s_s_i_a_h does collect in one concise volume a summary of the arguments against a belief in a literal Christianity based on the infallibility of the New Testament. What is left remains for the reader to decide.

THE PLAYER

A film review by Mark R. Leeper

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Capsule review: A new film about how back-stabbing and unforgiving Hollywood is, from the

director of B_u_f_f_a_l_o_B_i_l_l_a_n_d_t_h_e

I_n_d_i_a_n_s,_Q_u_i_n_t_e_t,

and P_o_p_e_y_e. There are some nice self-referential touches but over all the film is just a little too much into muck-raking. Rating: +1 (-4 to +4).

Hollywood's worst-kept secret is that there is a lot wrong with the film industry. It seems that everybody who has ever had everything to do with film-making cannot wait to tell anyone who will listen how everybody else in Hollywood--especially a close friend or co-worker--is a back-stabber. The key quote from last year's documentary N_a_k_e_d_H_o_l_l_y_w_o_o_d was that Hollywood is a town

in

which people wish you well only if you are dying. People just love to write about Hollywood Babylon. I suspect that the Hollywood restaurants have to close at noon for lack of business considering how many people "can never do lunch in this town again." And nobody loves stories of how bad things are in Hollywood as much as people actually in the industry. They hear the stories, they tell the stories, they build the stories into tall tales and folklore. I

seriously doubt that there is much wrong with the film industry that is not wrong with the auto industry, or the chemical industry, or the clothing industry. It is just that of these industries only the film industry's primary business is telling stories. Hollywood has always turned out a lot of bad films and a few very good films. It certainly appears that there are fewer good films coming out than there are were at one time. But how many theatrical films these days are as bad as a "Blondie" or "Mexican Spitfire" film? For that matter, how many pre-1950s films have the impact of T_h_e_K_i_l_l_i_n_g_F_i_e_l_d_s? I guess that is why I have never had a strong interest in Hollywood's dirty linen. And even in the days I think Hollywood was its greatest, it was making films about how far Hollywood had deteriorated. S_u_n_s_e_t_B_o_u_l_e_v_a_r_d was a pretty good dirty linen film. T_h_e_B_a_d_a_n_d_t_h_e_B_e_a_u_t_i_f_u_l_A_l_l_a_b_o_u_t_E_v_e,H_o_l_l_y_w_o_o_d_B_o_u_l_e_v_a_r_d,T_h_e_B_i_g_P_i_c_t_u_r_e,B_a_r_t_o_n_F_i_n_k,and_T_h_e_P_l_a_y_e_r are all decent Hollywood dirty linen films. But T_h_e_P_l_a_y_e_r is what I should be writing about.

T_h_e_P_l_a_y_e_r is a deep-focus film. You are expected to keep an eye both on the foreground and the background. In the foreground we have a story of murder in the film industry; in the background we see Hollywood with all of its faults and blemishes. We hear writer Mitchell Tolkin's criticism of the film industry coming a bit at a time out of dozens of mouths. They describe a typical bad film. And sure enough the foreground story has everything the characters

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in the background complain about. The film moves in a tight circle describing all the faults of modern Hollywood films and then exemplifying them.

Tim Robbins plays Griffin Mill, a somewhat slimey film executive being eased out to make way for Larry Levy (played by Peter Gallagher), another slimey executive. This might be enough to put Griffin's nerves on edge, but Griffin is also getting sinister postcards with death threats because of the shabby way he has treated writers. It is when Griffin decides to try to play detective and find the angry writer that he really becomes

embroiled.

 T h e P l a y e r is not just about the film industry, it is about film itself. Wherever Griffin goes, he is surrounded by film posters and lobby cards that match his mood or the plot. There are references to the long tracking shots of T o u c h o f E v i l and

 A b s o l u t e

 B e g i n n e r s during a long tracking shot in T h e P l a y e r. And there are

the now famous cameo appearances. V a r i e t y lists 65 famous people who play themselves in this film. Identifying people in the background becomes a major distraction.

Robert Altman has through most of his career been a maverick filmmaker, but I cannot help feeling that this film is a little ungracious albeit with good nature. Altman has done some good films and a few real stinkers. He certainly cannot blame the failure of

 Q u i n t e t on the studio trying too hard to make it commercial. And even after having made losers, he seems always to find work. This

alone shows that the film industry has not always been so unkind to

him. And on top of that, T h e P l a y e r was made only a short time after a similar and in some ways better film, Christopher Guest's

 T h e B i g P i c t u r e. That film is recommended for fans of T h e P l a y e r.

I rate Altman's film just a +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

YEAR OF THE COMET
A film review by Mark R. Leeper
Copyright 1992 Mark R. Leeper

Capsule review: Peter Yates directs and William Goldman writes this far-fetched romantic thriller. The story is of a chase for a bottle of wine that may only be worth a million dollars or may be worth much more. The story is mediocre, but the scenery is nice. Rating: high 0 (-4 to +4).

Penelope Ann Miller plays Margaret Harwood, a savvy wine expert who has had to be given any responsibility in her family's fine wine business. The first serious task she is given is to travel to a castle on the Isle of Skye and to inventory the castle's wine cellar her father has purchased. The good news is that the cellar turns out to have the most valuable wine bottle in the world--not to mention one of the biggest. It is a three-foot tall bottle of Chateau Lafitte from 1811, the "Year of the Comet." Unfortunately, the castle also houses a comic-book-style villain Philippe (played by Louis Jourdan) who is doing something scientific and evil elsewhere in the castle. Soon also on hand at the castle is Oliver Plexico, the agent of the purchaser of the wine bottle. Based on one previous experience, Margaret finds Oliver to be just about the most obnoxious man in the world. Guess who she has to have as an ally in her escape from the clutches of Philippe.

I have to admit being anxious to see this film from the moment I heard the story and screenplay were by William Goldman. Goldman is probably best known for T_h_e_P_r_i_n_c_e_s_B_r_i_d_e, but he also has been responsible for the novels and screenplays of N_o_W_a_y_t_o_T_r_e_a_t_a_L_a_d_y, M_a_r_a_t_h_o_n_M_a_n, and M_a_g_i_c. He also wrote the screenplays for B_u_t_c_h_C_a_s_s_i_d_y_a_n_d_t_h_e_S_u_n_d_a_n_c_e_K_i_d, T_h_e_G_r_e_a_t_W_a_l_d_o_P_e_p_p_e_r, A_l_l_t_h_e_P_r_e_s_i_d_e_n't's_M_e_n, and A_B_r_i_d_g_e_T_o_o_F_a_r. His name almost guarantees good writing. Almost. This is way below par Goldman with flat uninteresting heroes and far-fetched villains. The film was directed by Peter Yates (B_u_l_l_i_t_t, B_r_e_a_k_i_n_g_A_w_a_y, T_h_e_D_e_e_p, T_h_e_F_r_i_e_n_d_s_o_f_E_d_d_i_e_C_o_y_l_e), who claims to have had in mind a Cary Grant/Grace Kelly sort of adventure with younger stars. Unfortunately, Ms. Miller is no Grace Kelly and Tim Daly as Plexico is even further from Cary Grant. The action is more predictable

than exciting. The scenery does add a little needed gloss.

Scotland is certainly beautiful and Southern France at least looks

pleasant. But as romantic thrillers go, _ Y _ e _ a _ r _ o _ f _ t _ h _ e _ C _ o _ m _ e _ t is warm
beer. I rate it a 0 on the -4 to +4 scale.

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