

"Death on the Nile" by Connie Willis (A_s_i_m_o_v'_s, March 1993)

As in the past we will also be voting for the "Alexanders" (named after Mr. Bell, of course!). If you cannot attend and want to vote, please send your rank-ordering of the stories (we don't

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include "no award") to Evelyn Leeper (evelyn.leeper@att.com) before the meeting (June 23, 12:00 noon EDT, 16:00 GMT).

2. Honest to gosh I saw this. There is a book being sold with the "Star Trek" emblem and the title was 2_0_t_h_C_e_n_t_u_r_y_C_o_m_p_u_t_e_r_s_a_n_d_H_o_w_T_h_e_y_W_o_r_k_e_d. The blurb says "The official Starfleet history of computers." It is about 160 pages in color with pictures of computer insides and of the Starship Enterprise. The main text is simply a light introduction to computers with comments on computers by noted authorities like Deanna Tori and Wesley Crusher. The cost for this little gem is \$18. Now I am not saying that I would mind chucking over my \$18 for the book if it, say, told you about 24th Century computers, or even compared the principles of 24th Century computers with those of the 20th Century. But there is little informative in the book to indicate that Troi or Crusher are even familiar with the most basic principles of the computers of their own day. Certainly they don't tell us how and why computers have changed since the 20th Century.

I do think that this sets a marvelous precedent. Have you written a book that lacks pizzazz? Say you just finished a book on how to build your own fallout shelter, then say the Soviet Union double crosses you by suddenly becoming neither Soviet nor a Union. So what do you do? Well, you buy a franchise and put out the

S_t_a_r_f_l_e_e_t_G_u_i_d_e_t_o_T_o_r_p_e_d_o_P_r_o_o_f_S_h_e_l_t_e_r_s. Or the S_t_a_r_f_l_e_e_t_G_u_i_d_e_t_o_2_0_t_h_C_e_n_t_u_r_y_F_a_l_l_o_u_t_S_h_e_l_t_e_r_s. Have suggestions by Jean-Luc Picard on what canned vegetables to stock up on. Get instructions from Lt. Worf on how to conserve water and dispose of wastes. Actually I found it surprising that all the computer experts happened to come from a single starship. One wonders if Starfleet

is made up only of two kinds of people, Enterprise crewmen and total boobs with the IQ of clothes-dryer lint.

3. UNCHARTED TERRITORY by Connie Willis (Bantam Spectra, ISBN 0-553-56294-0, July 1994, 149pp, , US\$3.99) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

Quandoque bonus dormitat Homerus.

Or, for the classically impaired, "Sometimes even good old Homer nods." [Horace]

Anyone who's read my reviews knows I am a fan of Connie Willis's writing. So of course I looked forward to this, especially after hearing the first part read at Boskone last year. Alas, U_n_c_h_a_r_t_e_d

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T_e_r_r_i_t_o_r_y did not live up to my expectations.

U_n_c_h_a_r_t_e_d_T_e_r_r_i_t_o_r_y is another of Willis's jibes at "PC" (political correctness, not personal computers). She can do this very well (as in "Ado"), but here the jokes fall flat, at least for me. It may be that the make the novella length there had to be a bit too much padding. Willis can write well at any length, but I suspect here she had to write at novella length and the story wouldn't support it. Here her target is those who want to preserve planetary ecosystems and protect indigenous cultures from technological contamination--only here the indigenous peoples know a good thing when they see one.

But around this Willis has added a romantic triangle--well, more like a pentagon, with three veteran surveyors, a new surveyor, and an alien. This part seemed unnecessary to the rest of the story.

Of course, I can't be totally negative on this. It has its moments, and some of the interplay is quite funny.

And after all, one of the main characters i_s named Evelyn.

4. SPEED (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule review: What sounds like a silly idea for an action film actually has some resonance on the screen. What seems like a bad choice for a lead actor works out better than expected. This is basically a D_i_e_H_a_r_d film with a bus and that isn't too bad. Rating: low +2 (-4 to +4)

Every once in a while what seems like a foolish idea for a film turns around and surprises you with what a clever idea it really is. You hear an idea like "H. G. Wells chases Jack the Ripper in a time machine" and think "No, thank you." Then you see the film and come out thinking what a great idea it was for a film. I had that experience with S_p_e_e_d. A Los Angeles bus is rigged to explode as it drops below 50 miles per hour. First of all, as much as vehicles can be, busses are natural buffoons. They seem clumsy and ungainly. National Lampoon once thought it funny to do an article on "WWII's Battling Busses." S_p_e_e_d almost sounded like it could be a comedy sequel to the very funny T_h_e_B_i_g_B_u_s. Then on top of it, the star was Keanu Reeves. What busses are to vehicles, Reeves is to actors. The combination of the two seemed more like something someone thought up in T_h_e_P_l_a_y_e_r than an actual plan for a film.

In fact, what sounded like an unpromising plot turns out to tap into an experience most of us have had. Who hasn't at some time

been driving and late for an appointment and found there was traffic in the way or perhaps a piece of unpaved highway. In S_p_e_e_d every road hazard that could slow down the bus becomes a deadly threat.

Dennis Hopper plays Howard Payne, a high-spirited psychotic who is determined to extort \$3.7 million from the city of Los Angeles, one way or another. His first scheme is foiled by Jack Traven, a deadpan SWAT officer with unorthodox (and irresponsible) ideas

about how to resolve hostage situations. Payne's second extortion attempt is the plan to rig a city bus and to at the same time give Jack (Keanu Reeves) a taste of defeat and perhaps eternity. Reeves makes his way onto the speeding bus, but not before the driver can hit 50 on the speedometer and inadvertently arm the bomb. An expected turn of events leaves the driver incapacitated and he is replaced by Annie (Sandra Bullock), a volunteer. Annie has the seemingly impossible task of keeping the speed of the bus up while Jack has to do the delicate task of disarming a bomb under a speeding bus and of negotiating with Payne through a cellular phone. Films have used a similar plot with bombs on planes or boats (e.g. J_u_g_g_e_r_n_a_u_t), but then when the bomb is not being defused the plane or boat can just cruise. Here the situation calls for constant attention and it makes for a very exciting two hours.

Keanu Reeves, who has now been directed by people like Kenneth Branagh, Francis Ford Coppola, Gus Van Sant, and Bernardo Bertolucci, may be getting to where he actually can act, but he just has no charisma. Perhaps this is even a virtue--not every body in life has to be a Gregory Peck. Perhaps not every screen hero has to be either. Dennis Hopper, however, can act weird in his sleep and totally steals the film from Reeves.

There may be one or two problems still in the script. On consideration it is clear that Traven mishandled the situation disastrously. Pop quiz: how should he have handled the situation? He should have arranged to pay off Payne and worry about catching him afterward. Payne does many times his \$3.7 million in damage in the course of the film and Traven's bravado also has its cost in human life. Also there were clear errors in the filming of the bus jumping a gap in the highway. The bus jumps a gap between two level stretches of highway. It seems that a little model work showing a banked highway and a proper camera angle could have made the sequence a little more believable. But overall this is an action film that delivers the goods. I would rate it a low +2 on the -4 to +4 scale.

5. MAVERICK and THE CROW (two film reviews by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule review: As two adaptations from other media, these show that there may be a lot of potential for adapting comic books to the screen, but 1950s television is starting to be mined out. Certainly in this case we have a good adaptation of a comic book and a much less successful cinematic TV show. Ratings: M_a_v_e_r_i_c_k gets a 0, T_h_e_C_r_o_w a +1 (-4 to +4). However, M_a_v_e_r_i_c_k may be more appropriate for a wider audience.

It is now no longer much of a novelty to see either a 1950s television show like "Maverick" or a comic like "The Crow" adapted into a film version. One would expect that of the two, it would be easier to be faithful to the style of the dramatic medium on the screen. However, even speaking as someone who has not read "The Crow," I can say that at least in this instance the comic book form seems to have been better represented on the screen than the TV show.

T_h_e_C_r_o_w seems set in a world where it is constantly a rainy night in Hell. Everything seems a little rain-drenched in the world of T_h_e_C_r_o_w, but somehow the villainous Top Dollar (played by Michael Wincott) manages to get buildings to burn every year on October 30--Devil's Night--for clients who are willing to pay Top Dollar for the service. His thugs torch a building, raping a woman and murdering her and her husband-to-be, Eric (Brandon Lee). As myth would have it a crow transports their souls to the after-world, but returns Eric's soul one year later for him to exact terrible revenge on the evil gang. (One has to ask oneself if the indignant dead do sometimes return, why were there not armies of indignant dead chasing after Stalin and Hitler. Even murder and arson are crimes less deserving of the Crow-treatment.)

Visually this film is a powerful adaptation of the comic book form to the screen. Alex Proyas directs with many short cuts highly evocative of comic book panels. Every once in a while he will dwell on one majestic image, like the figure of Eric standing in a huge circular, broken window. He pauses on this image just about as long as a reader of the comic would pause on that panel. The screenplay takes little time to humanize any of its characters beyond perhaps making a little girl seem likable. This is one more story full of sound and fury and striking visual images, but it has little core and no characters of any emotional interest. Still it is bound to be remembered as a signpost showing the way to translate effectively the characteristics of a comic book to the screen. It deserves a +1 on the -4 to +4 scale. Extreme violence makes this a film for a narrow audience but it is a far more interesting transition to the screen than is M_a_v_e_r_i_c_k.

Though more acceptable for a wider audience, M_a_v_e_r_i_c_k is a film that also lacked core--but here it was needed far more. The TV show covered the adventures of two brothers, Bret and Bart

Maverick, two likable gamblers. Bret was played by James Garner. When Warner Brothers needed someone to play Pappy Maverick, father of Bret and Bart, he too was played by James Garner. (There was a third brother, Brent, introduced after Garner walked off the series.) "Maverick" was played straight for a couple of seasons,

then a humorous description in one of the scripts gave Garner the idea to play that scene tongue-in-cheek, a style that remained with him the rest of his career. But even with his good-humored acting, the stories usually were fairly well-written and well-thought-out.

They were a lot better than the string of gag scenes that William Goldman wrote into the screenplay of the new adaptation. Mel Gibson as the new Bret Maverick goes from one minor adventure to another trying to get together the money to be in a giant high

stakes poker game. There was no real plot complication in this film until the last 40 minutes. Writer William Goldman has some good fun, and some that works not quite so well, doing to Western cliches what he did to adventure cliches with T_h_e_P_r_i_n_c_e_s_s

B_r_i_d_e,

though they work only occasionally here. (Perhaps the best scene of the film is done in an Indian language and subtitled, lampooning Indian acting in so many bad films.) Far too many gags fall flat and plot devices fall flatter. Most of the film is told in flashback by a Bret with a noose around his neck. When this threat is resolved Bret has cheated the hangman not nearly so badly as Goldman has cheated the audience. James Garner is also on-hand and playing a major character, perhaps to keep an eye on what his Bret is up to. Playing lawman Zane Cooper, Garner is pretty much the laconic character he has always played. Jodie Foster plays Annabelle Bransford, as capable of the double-cross as any of the men. There is certainly some fun here and some nice nature photography not really characteristic of the series. But with so little story this one gets no better than a 0 on the -4 to +4

6. [from alt.fandom.cons]:

Shorecon '94
September 9-11, 1994
Sheraton Eatontown Conference Center
Eatontown, New Jersey
The Jersey Shore's First Multi-Genre convention

Activities include a Friday night rave, a Saturday night techo-dance, an auction of collectible games and comic books, and a dealers room of comic, gaming, science fiction and other merchandise.

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Guests include many well-known comics and gaming personalities. There will also be live-action role-playing, anime, movies, and videos.

The First of Foote (The Royal Scots), a Revolutionary War reenactment group, will present a marching drill. and the 12th Virginia Cavalry, a Civil War reenactment group, will be present. TimJim/Prism Games and Backstage Press will demonstrate their latest games. Starfleet Region 7 will be represented, as well as Integrity and other Star Trek clubs.

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