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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
Club Notice - 07/08/94 -- Vol. 13, No. 2

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

Unless otherwise stated, all meetings are in Middletown 1R-400C
Wednesdays at noon.

_D_A_T_E _T_O_P_I_C

- 07/09 Movie: DESTINATION MOON (Saturday night, 8PM, RSVP)
- 07/13 Book: GLORY SEASON by David Brin (Hugo Nominee)
- 07/16 Movie: THE MAN FROM PLANET X (Saturday night, 8PM, RSVP)
- 07/23 Movie: THE THING (Saturday night, 8PM, RSVP)
- 07/30 Movie: WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE (Saturday night, 8PM, RSVP)
- 08/03 Book: MOVING MARS by Greg Bear (Hugo Nominee)
- 08/09 Movie: THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL (Saturday night, 8PM, RSVP)
- 08/24 Book: VIRTUAL LIGHT by William Gibson (Hugo Nominee)

Outside events:
The Science Fiction Association of Bergen County meets on the second Saturday of every month in Upper Saddle River; call 201-933-2724 for details. The New Jersey Science Fiction Society meets on the third Saturday of every month in Belleville; call 201-432-5965 for details.

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1. The discussion book for the next meeting is David Brin's Hugo-nominated _G_l_o_r_y_ _S_e_a_s_o_n, in which Brin takes one of the ideas that he first used in "Piecework," namely, that cloning humans won't

work because the sperm is needed to spur placental growth. G_l_o_r_y
S_e_a_s_o_n takes place on a planet where there are two seasons. In
one, women are interested in reproducing--but by parthenogenesis--
and men are disinterested, but necessary somewhat in the role of
catalyst. In the other, men are sexually driven, but women are

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disinterested--in part because children conceived during this time
are n_o_t exact copies of their mothers. This world was settled long
ago by people from Earth and has been out of contact until now,
when a Visitor arrives. There's also a coming-of-age story in all
this. Though it drags a bit toward the end, it is still much
tighter than Brin's previous epic, E_a_r_t_h, and considerably less
strident than many authors would have made this topic. [-ecl]

2. While I was in Estonia, I got to see L_a_T_r_a_v_i_a_t_a for some like
\$1.50. I don't know how many of you have seen the opera. In it,
Violetta is a sort of Paris good-time girl with a bad reputation
and worse lungs--mostly due to the ravages of consumption
(tuberculosis). (Now it is tough to do consumption well in opera
because singers tend to be heavily-built and have strong voices.
But let that pass.) Alfredo deeply loves her and has given up
fettucini for her. (And you know those two were inseparable!) The
two are living in a villa outside of Paris when Alfredo's father
visits Violetta and says that she has to call the affair off
because Alfredo's sister's fiance's family objects to the name
Violetta is giving the family. Violetta agrees to leave her lover
and return to her life of partying. She writes him a note and
leaves.

Now the second scene of the second act is really dramatic. How can
I convey it to you? I know! Think of Alfredo and Violetta as
being played by Bogart and Bergman a la C_a_s_a_b_l_a_n_c_a.

Alfredo attends a gambling party when who should walk in with a
count on her arm but Violetta?

Alfredo: Of all the gambling tables in all the parties in of

Paris, she walks into this one!

He is more and more insulting as the night wears on, beating the Count at cards and finally provoking the Count to challenge him to a duel, knowing as an older man the Count hasn't a chance. Violetta asks him not to kill him...

Alfredo: Tell me who was it you left me for? Was it the Count, or were there others in between? Or aren't you the kind that tells? [pause] Why are you here? To tell me why you ran out on me at the villa?

Violetta: Yes.

Alfredo: Well, you can tell me now, I'm reasonably sober.

Violetta: I don't think I will, Alfredo.

Alfredo: Why not? After all, I got stuck with the wine bill. I think I'm entitled to know.

Violetta: Now I see what has happened to you. The Alfredo I

knew at the villa, I could have asked him not to kill the Count. He'd understand. But the one who looked at me with such hatred... well, I'll be leaving the party soon and we'll never see each other again. We knew very little about each other when we were in love at the villa. If we leave it that way, maybe we'll remember those days and not Paris, not tonight.

[She breaks down.]

Violetta: Alfredo, Alfredo, we loved each other once. If those days meant anything at all to you..

Alfredo: I wouldn't bring up the villa if I were you. It's poor salesmanship.

Violetta: Please. Please listen to me. If you knew what really happened, if you only knew the truth....

Alfredo: I wouldn't believe you no matter what you told me. You'd say anything to get what you want.

[Flash back to happy days at the villa. Drinking wine together. Falling in love. Then Alfredo getting the farewell note, his heart breaking. Crumpling it up and throwing it down.]

Well, to make a long story short, or silly at any rate, Alfredo's

father tells him that Violetta was acting out of nobility all along. In the next act Alfredo rushes to the dying Violetta to tell her:

Alfredo: We'll always have the villa. We didn't have it, we'd lost it, until we met again. We got it back last night.

Violetta rushes to Alfredo only to die in his arms.

Now if this touching ending seems to have familiar chords, it is because it is reminiscent of the following night's opera in the same opera house, Puccini's L_a_B_o_h_e_m_e.

Yes, here on the same stage the TWO TUBERCULAR TITANS OF ITALIAN OPERA, on consecutive nights competing for the coveted Palm d'Eath Award! And in the event of a tie they will be together on Sunday on one colossal stage: Violetta a_n_d Mimi, duking it out in sudden death competition.

Boy, I love opera!

3. Thanks to Phil DeParto, here's the July and early August schedule of the Film Forum's annual Summer Festival of Fantasy, Horror and Science Fiction. The official start is August 5, but they are running a Lon Chaney Sr. series in July which is listed here as well.

Mon 7/18: T_h_e_U_n_k_n_o_w_n,_F_r_e_a_k_s
Mon 7/25: T_h_e_P_e_n_a_l_t_y,_M_o_c_k_e_r_y
Mon 8/01: T_h_e_B_l_a_c_k_b_i_r_d,_O_u_t_s_i_d_e_t_h_e_L_a_w
Fri-Sun 8/05-8/07: T_h_e_S_e_v_e_n_t_h_V_o_y_a_g_e_o_f_S_i_n_b_a_d,
T_h_e_T_h_r_e_e_W_o_r_l_d_s_o_f_G_u_l_l_i_v_e_r
Mon 8/08: T_h_e_P_h_a_n_t_o_m_o_f_t_h_e_O_p_e_r_a(1925),
T_h_e_H_u_n_c_h_b_a_c_k_o_f_N_o_t_r_e_D_a_m_e(1923)
Tue 8/09: T_h_e_B_e_a_s_t_f_r_o_m_2_0,0_0_0_F_a_t_h_o_m_s,
C_l_a_s_h_o_f_t_h_e_T_i_t_a_n_s
Wed-Thu 8/10-8/11: 2_0_M_i_l_l_i_o_n_M_i_l_e_s_t_o_E_a_r_t_h,

I_t_C_a_m_e_f_r_o_m_B_e_n_e_a_t_h_t_h_e_S_e_a
Fri-Sun 8/12-8/14: M_y_s_t_e_r_i_o_u_s_I_s_l_a_n_d (1963),

J_a_s_o_n_&_t_h_e_A_r_g_o_n_a_u_t_s
Mon 8/15: T_h_e_U_n_h_o_l_y_T_h_r_e_e (1925), D_e_v_i_l_D_o_l_l (1936)

For further information, contact the Film Forum at 212-727-8110.
The Film Forum is located at 209 West Houston Street between Varick
Street (7th Avenue) and Avenue of the Americas (6th Avenue) in New
York

4. THE HACKER AND THE ANTS by Rudy Rucker (AvoNova, ISBN 0-688-
13116-5, May 1994, 320pp, US\$20) (a book review by Evelyn C.
Leeper):

A few years ago (well, quite a few, actually), Theodore Roszak
wrote a novel called B_u_g_s, about how "bugs" in computers became
real bugs. Roszak has gone on to better things (F_l_i_c_k_e_r, for
example), but the idea refuses to die and now Rudy Rucker has
written a novel about ants created within cyberspace which achieve
an existence in the real world.

It's true that Rucker comes up with a better explanation as to how
this all happens. But I had two problems with T_h_e_H_a_c_k_e_r_a_n_d_t_h_e
A_n_t_s, which were in some sense the same problem: Rucker explains
too much. I work with computers in my job (no, reviewing books is
n_o_t my paying job) and reading things like "they've established an
Ethernet pseudonode with your address" and "his idea was to compile
a virtual ant server, tar the binary with a bunch of self-
reproducing ant programs, and compress the whole viral mess into a
self-extracting program that fits inside a user's boot script" is
too much like work. (Not to mention that pinning it down to
present-day concepts such as "Ethernet" and "tar" make it all sound
anachronistic for the future, like having a character fifty years
in the future driving a Honda Civic).

The other problem connected with explaining too much is that the
reader (this reader, anyway) is not immersed in the world of the
novel. One of the strengths of cyberpunk would appear to be in its

acceptance of technology as simply "being," without the need for what is called "technobabble" when S_t_a_r_T_r_e_k does it. The constant explanations here kept jerking me out of the world of the novel into the world of the writer of the novel.

I admit that Rucker is an author who may be an acquired taste. I have liked some of his work, but T_h_e_H_a_c_k_e_r_a_n_d_t_h_e_A_n_t_s just didn't do anything for me.

5. THE SHADOW (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule review: The sumptuous and fun new film version of T_h_e_S_h_a_d_o_w is faithful to the letter of the canon of the old radio hero but adds a lot that is new. What they have changed makes for good storytelling. This is a very enjoyable fantasy film and could well be this summer's J_u_r_a_s_s_i_c_P_a_r_k. This one is a lot of fun. Rating: high +2 (-4 to +4).

Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? Now let's not always see the same hands.

Back in the 30's and 40s, before there was television, one of the great super-heroes of the radio-ways, pulps, and comics was Lamont Cranston. He was a variant on H. G. Wells' I_n_v_i_s_i_b_l_e_M_a_n. Cranston could not actually make himself invisible, but using techniques he learned in the orient he could "cloud men's minds so they cannot see him." With adventures that began in 1931, he was one of the earliest popular American superheroes, and was perhaps the most popular superhero on the radio. The Shadow had already been a household name more than seven years when Superman first appeared and more than eight years when Batman was first introduced. To the radio's sinister strains of Saint-Saens's "Omphale's Spinning Wheel" the invisible Shadow would stalk the night looking for evil-doers to scare the bejeezus out of. Over the years there were many cast changes and many voices to The Shadow and his sidekick, "the lovely and talented Margo Lane," including at one time respectively, Orson Welles and Agnes Moorehead.

Even though The Shadow lasted on radio twenty years, until 1956, there was never (until now) a memorable version of The Shadow on TV or in the movies. Somehow the combination of atmosphere and special effects necessary would have never been possible. Also unlike other superheroes, The Shadow had to be played by someone ugly. The pulps, which started publishing the character in 1931, always portrayed him as a tall man with a long crooked nose, a fedora, and the lower part of his face covered. He was more

frightening when you could see what he looked like. Victor Jory was nearly ugly enough and starred in a 1940 serial, but could not match the phantom with the disembodied voice of vengeance on the radio. Today special effects are much more articulate on the screen, even if actors often are not. The menace of The Shadow is now very possible to show on the screen. In fact, while on the radio The Shadow could only cloud men's minds and in later years read what he clouded, the screen's new Shadow has an arsenal of psychic weapons, and so do his enemies. This provides opportunity for more visual excitement. But what current actor is ugly enough to play Lamont Cranston, The Shadow? Would you believe Alec Baldwin? I would not have, but this film manages to have a handsome Shadow without compromising on the menace or the image.

As far as I know, the radio plays never gave you much of a history of how The Shadow got his peculiar talents. I have been a fan of the radio plays and they never went into any detail on the origins of The Shadow except that in the Orient this hero learned the ability to "cloud men's minds." The film goes into much more detail.

Our story begins in Tibet with Lamont Cranston anything but heroic. As his first alter-ego Ying Ko, he is a mysterious drug lord of American origin. It is hard to believe that this villain will one day be the great crimer-fighter I know from the radio series. Seduced by the light side of the force he goes to New York to make amends for the evils he did in the East. He gets one opportunity after a priceless sarcophagus is sent, un-requested, to the New York Museum of Natural History. The coffin leads to murder and The Shadow finds himself fighting Shiwan Khan, the last descendent of Genghis. Khan is portrayed by John Lone who played T_h_e_L_a_s_t_E_m_p_e_r_o_r and Khan is now determined to become the next one.

T_h_e_S_h_a_d_o_w probably does not use Baldwin to the fullest it could since the demands of playing a superhero fall well short of those of being one. It at least gives him a chance to play someone a little sinister and helps to shake off his clean-cut family man image. Perhaps out of place are his humorous one-liners after action scenes. They were funny when James Bond delivered them in the 60s, but they have become much too common in action films and

it is all wrong for the somber Shadow to be making "Bondisms." Penelope Ann Miller is attractive in dresses featuring low cuts in front and lower cuts in back. She has a little more to do than the original Margo Lane--the original was little more than a sounding board so the audience knew what The Shadow was thinking--but still this is not a role that stretches someone's acting abilities. One way to tell this film had serious financial backing is the name actors in parts that could have gone to unknowns. Jonathan Winters, in his most reserved role in memory, plays the police commissioner actually fairly well. Peter Boyle has little to do and seems along only for the ride. Andre Gregory is completely

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wasted as a minor functionary in The Shadow's network. Tim Curry makes a weird villain, but doesn't that go without saying?

But the real star of the film is New York City of the 1930s. Not New York as it was then or ever, but a beautiful, idealized, Art Deco 1930s New York City. Director Russell Mulcahy, who gave us the great-looking H_i_g_h_l_a_n_d_e_r, gives us a stunningly idealized Manhattan of the mind's eye. In addition he give us small gratuitous surprises for the camera including one subjective shot that is almost a roller-coaster ride in itself. And a Jerry Goldsmith score is always a plus.

This may not be exactly the classic radio version of The Shadow, but it may be more fun. For the most part it does not contradict the canon, but it places it in a larger context and fills in many of the blanks. There are some changes but there is a lot of filling in of gaps in some very unexpected ways. Lamont Cranston is given an evil past that certainly casts The Shadow in a whole new light. In fact it adds complexity to his character over the one-dimensional do-gooder. While Batman is essentially out for vengeance against criminals in general, Lamont Cranston had committed terrible evils and was driven by the need to make amends. I am not sure that this is what Walter Gibson had in mind for his character, but it certainly works.

The Shadow on radio was a little different from The Shadow in the pulp magazines and The Shadow in the film is different from either. I do not remember any radio references to The Shadow having a

network of agents--I think there was more about them in the pulps. Even on the radio he did have his faithful cab driver Shrevie. The Asian mysticism that plays a big part in the film version was not usually apparent in the radio series, though some of the pulps drew heavily on the Asian origin of the The Shadow's powers. Perhaps the most interesting revision to the Canon is to give Margo psychic abilities also. While never explained it really adds interest to her relationship with Lamont.

This may well be a piece of summer fluff, but I found it far more engaging than the usual superhero film. For once the power of the mind, both psychic and reasoning, are as important to a hero as are his physical powers. And the image of the tall, crooked-nosed in Fedora and cape whipping out guns will thrill rather than disappoint fans of The Shadow. This is the most I think I have ever enjoyed a "superhero" film. I give it a high +2 on the -4 to +4 scale. (Oh, by the way, my contact with The Shadow has been almost entirely in radio revivals of the old series. I am too young to have heard original broadcasts.)

6. THE GAME IS AFOOT edited by Marvin Kaye (St. Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-10468-5, April 1994, 512pp, US\$24.95) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

There have been several anthologies of Sherlock Holmes pastiches and parodies, as well as of non-fiction pieces, but this is certainly the most varied assortment yet. The fifty-three pieces here include four early non-fiction pieces, eight early parodies, six early pastiches, five later non-fiction pieces, twelve recent parodies, six recent pastiches, and twelve pieces which defy classification. The latter include Doyle's own "The Field Bazaar," an interview with ZaSu Pitts as Mrs. Hudson, a Sherlock Holmes in Oz story, and other miscellanea.

The result, of course, is liable to please everyone and no one. Some may find the non-fiction dull, others may think the recent

pastiches are not up to the level of the classic examples of this artform, and I personally have an aversion to parodies, which almost always totally fail to amuse me. But Kaye has collected a lot of pieces which have been unavailable for a long time and for this alone it is worth the price. There may be readers who like everything and anything about Sherlock Holmes and clearly they will love this book, but even assuming you like only two-thirds of it--a reasonable estimate for a Sherlock Holmes fan--it's still a must-buy.

7. FORREST GUMP (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule review: What would you get if John Irving tried to write a Horatio Alger story based on the life of Gomer Pyle? Robert Zemeckis attempts to make a cult film, but the result is vague and ambiguous. Most viewers should find their own philosophy somewhere in this cinematic inkblot so will be deeply moved. But it did not do a whole lot for me. Rating: 0 (-4 to +4). Some opinions will vary greatly.

There is more to _ F_ o_ r_ r_ e_ s_ t_ G_ u_ m_ p--both the character and the film-- than what is happening on the surface, but I am not clear just what it is. This is Robert Zemeckis's symbolic exercise that belongs

beside films like _ B_ i_ r_ d_ y, _ C_ a_ t_ c_ h_ 2_ 2, _ H_ a_ r_ o_ l_ d_ a_ n_ d_ M_ a_ u_ d_ e, _ T_ h_ e_ W_ o_ r_ l_ d

_ A_ c_ c_ o_ r_ d_ i_ n_ g_ t_ o_ G_ a_ r_ p, and especially _ B_ e_ i_ n_ g_ T_ h_ e_ r_ e. I think if I could

figure out what _ B_ e_ i_ n_ g_ T_ h_ e_ r_ e was _ r_ e_ a_ l_ l_ y all about, I would have

a big clue on _ F_ o_ r_ r_ e_ s_ t_ G_ u_ m_ p is about beneath the surface, and vice versa. My problem is that I can see many possible meanings, and

none is particularly profound. You could see _ F_ o_ r_ r_ e_ s_ t_ G_ u_ m_ p as being an allegory implying God or angels look out for the simple and the

congratulatory philosophy of the fortunate, and it has a sinister touch of victim-blaming for many good people who suffer through what I think is no fault of their own.) At least on some level this is the story of a man with an IQ of 75, the victim of a lot of cruelty from his peers, who overcomes his problems with a natural talent for running at super-human speeds, for playing ping-pong at super-human speeds, for assembling guns at the same speeds, and for just being a nice person. He overcomes his disability to the degree that he becomes a winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor, one of the most successful businessmen in the country, and the center of a sort of runners' cult, all by just being a really, really nice man with just a few minor super-powers and having friends who guess well about what stocks are going to take off. He also is unknowingly the catalyst for many events of American history from the 50s to the 80s.

The film is told with the same peculiar structure as M_a_v_e_r_i_c_k. That is the first three-quarters of the film is told in flashback and from there it proceeds without flashback, but it is not clear why the starting point is what it is. Most of the story is told by Gump (Tom Hanks) on a bus stop bench to anyone who will listen. His captive audiences, at first indifferent, become more and more engrossed and inspired by his story.

Gump is born with a bad spine in addition to his below-average IQ. The local school children in Greenbow, Alabama, ostracize and torment young Forrest and this somehow causes his back problems to go away in one mysterious moment and for him to become a super-runner able to out-pace bicycles and pickup trucks. His high-speed running and his nice guy attitude make him first a football hero, then a war hero, and continues throughout his spectacular life. He prospers tremendously, then goes on to look for meaning in his life. In fact he gets everything material anybody could want but the one thing Gump really does want. He never seems to be able to hold on to his childhood sweetheart, Jenny. With a talent for making wrong decisions, Jenny walks a self-destructive path through the same world as Forrest, but without the benefit of his simple good ways or his super-powers. Along the way we see a lot of American history and here a lot of popular music whose lyrics often echo the plot twists in the film. (And along the way there is also some sloppy writing. One personal bugaboo: an event we are told takes place on a Saturday morning is later given the date March 22, 1982. That was a Monday.)

Tom Hanks is decent in his role as far as I can tell, but can one really say he was believable in so unbelievable a role? In a way he is the wise fool. But one cannot say people like him behave the way he does, since there just is nobody like he is in this film. About the best one can say is that he maintained his accent fairly uniformly. Robin Wright as Jenny gets a little chance to

act, but only sufficiently to prove herself competent. This role was more demanding than her title role in T_h_e_P_r_i_n_c_e_s_s_B_r_i_d_e, but

still did not provide her the emotional range to prove whether she can actually act, or just read lines. My big complaint concerning the acting is with Gary Sinese. He has spent too much time on the stage when it was clear that films are desperately in need of his talents. I hope we will be seeing more of him in future films because he is one talented actor. This is a soft, soft film in need of more of the intensity only he provides it. Sally Field at one time could not turn in a bad performance either, but as Forrest's mother she is recreating the same characterization she has played all too often in the past. In her sleep she can do sweet, homey, folksy, women with a small stubborn streak. This is just one more.

Somehow this is not what you would think of as a special effects film, yet in fact some of the visual effects are quite impressive. What most people would pick up on are the scenes of Hanks shaking the hands of Presidents. They are not actually executed as well as might be expected in spite of the praise they have gotten. The scenes that impressed me concern an actor who loses limbs in the course of the film. There are standard ways to create this effect that involve body doubles or binding back the limb so the camera cannot see it. At least one scene in the film cannot be explained using either technique. All I can think of is that digital technology might have been employed but it genuinely looks like this actor had legs amputated for the role. Scenes in which Forrest moves at high speed also are very impressively done. Generally undercranking a camera leaves tell-tale signs in other parts of the scene, perhaps branches wave much too fast in the wind. Here again the techniques are not obvious but they are convincing. Of course Robert Zemeckis's films are often very heavy on special effects, so he is no stranger to special effects wizards.

F_o_r_r_e_s_t_G_u_m_p is certainly supposed to be an enigmatic film, hopefully no less than I found it to be. If it was supposed to be inspiring in some way, it missed my wavelength. It was competently made but overlong and occasionally infuriating. I would give it a 0 on the -4 to +4 scale. But, being fair, I will point out that your mileage will possibly vary. The film received an ovation at the end in the theater where I saw it, so it is pleasing some

audiences.

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"Not to eat quiche--that is the Law; are we not men?"
--Mark R. Leeper