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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
Club Notice - 09/09/94 -- Vol. 13, No. 11

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

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

_D_A_T_E _T_O_P_I_C

- 09/10 Movie: WAR OF THE WORLDS (Saturday night, 8PM, RSVP)
- 09/14 Book: A CONNECTICUT YANKEE IN KING ARTHUR'S COURT by Mark Twain
(Classics)
- 09/17 Movie: INVADERS FROM MARS (Saturday night, 8PM, RSVP)
- 09/24 Movie: PHANTOM FROM SPACE (Saturday night, 8PM, RSVP)
- 10/05 Book: MINING THE OORT by Frederik Pohl (tentative)
- 10/26 Book: FRANKENSTEIN (Classics *and* movies tie-ins)
- 11/16 Book: INTERVIEW IWTH A VAMPIRE by Anne Rice (movie tie-ins)

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.

- MT Chair: Mark Leeper MT 3D-441 908-957-5619 m.r.leeper@att.com
- HO Chair: John Jetzt MT 2G-432 908-957-5087 j.j.jetzt@att.com
- HO Co-Librarian: Nick Sauer HO 4F-427 908-949-7076 n.j.sauer@att.com
- HO Co-Librarian: Lance Larsen HO 2C-318 908-949-4156 l.f.larsen@att.com
- MT Librarian: Mark Leeper MT 3D-441 908-957-5619 m.r.leeper@att.com

Distinguished Heinlein Apologist:

Rob Mitchell MT 2D-536 908-957-6330 r.l.mitchell@att.com

Factotum: Evelyn Leeper MT 1F-329 908-957-2070 e.c.leeper@att.com

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1. Of the book to be discussed this coming Wednesday in Middletown,
Mark Leeper says:

Combining humor, social comment, and science fictional issues, A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court is today recognized as second only to Huckleberry Finn as the most popular of Mark Twain's works. The adventure just misses being science fiction by not having one or two sentences to explain why a wallop on the head

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knocks the Connecticut Yankee back to the days of King Arthur. Hank, a skilled mechanic, wakes up in the Sixth Century where first he must work his way from the executioner's stake to the point where he is running the society as the self-styled "Boss."

Going back to the 500s has its up side and its down side for a 19th century engineer. The up side is that it is the Sixth Century and the ever-ready technician has a knowledge of some of the history of that century and a great deal of the technology developed in the interim. The downside is that the Sixth Century was a fairly barbaric era by Hank's 19th Century standards. Twain pokes jibes at religion of that time and of his own throughout the novel. The myth of an age of chivalrous knights and fair maidens takes a serious drubbing at Twain's hands. And the Age of Chivalry provides plenty of ignorance and social inequity that Twain can either poke fun at or take seriously as the mood and the writing style take him. Twain also looks at several issues that generally are treated only in science fiction, such as the effects of the introduction of technology to a society not yet ready for it. But above all this is a book of wit and irony and a classic that is genuinely worth rereading.

2. I wonder if other couples have the sort of conversations that Evelyn and I have. Somehow I look at other people I know and just cannot imagine them having discussions of just exactly the same character we have. This is as close as I can remember a verbatim transcript of a conversation we had.

The news was talking about the meteor impacts on Jupiter with an impact of five million times the strength of the Hiroshima bomb. (By the way, it was a bit low as an estimate. It turned out to be

6,000,000 megatons compared to 15 kilotons. That is more like 400 million Hiroshima bombs. How much is that really? Well imagine you placed a Hiroshima bomb every four inches around the equator all the way around the Earth and in one instant set them all off. The resulting explosive power would less than one of the big meteor impacts on Jupiter. Well, hitting Earth might not be quite that bad since Jupiter's gravity had something to do with the force, but it would not be a whole lot less.) On CNN a scientist says "I think we can just feel lucky that we were not hit."

Evelyn: "Cockroaches wouldn't mind."

Mark: "Cockroaches would mind."

Evelyn: "No. Why would they mind?"

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Mark: "They'd die."

Evelyn: "No they wouldn't. Cockroaches can survive anything."

Mark: "Yes. They could survive a nuclear war. But we are talking about a disaster much worse than a nuclear war here."

Evelyn: "But cockroaches can survive an awful lot."

Mark: "If we are going to get anywhere, we should start with some points of common agreement. Can you and I both agree that in order to survive cockroaches need the Earth?"

Well, I thought it was witty.

Okay, let's try one a little more subtle. We were watching the original S_h_a_d_o_w_l_a_n_d_s on TV. This is the one with Joss Ackland and Claire Bloom rather than Antony Hopkins and Deborah Winger. Based on Lewis's S_u_r_p_r_i_s_e_d_b_y_J_o_y, this is the story of how Lewis found, married, and lost Joy Gresham. I commented to Evelyn that all joy must have its reversals and that these days many people are spelling "joy" backwards.

Think about it.

3. This year's Hugo winners are:

- Novel: G_r_e_e_n_M_a_r_s by Kim Stanley Robinson
- Novella: "Down in the Bottomlands" by Harry Turtledove (A_n_a_l_o_g, January 1993)
- Novelette: "Georgia on My Mind" by Charles Sheffield (A_n_a_l_o_g, January 1993)
- Short Story: "Death on the Nile" by Connie Willis (A_s_i_m_o_v'_s, March 1993)
- Non-Fiction Book: T_h_e_E_n_c_y_c_l_o_p_e_d_i_a_o_f_S_c_i_e_n_c_e_F_i_c_t_i_o_n, edited by John Clute and Peter Nicolls
- Dramatic Presentation: J_u_r_a_s_s_i_c_P_a_r_k
- Professional Editor: Kristine Kathryn Rusch
- Professional Artist: Bob Eggleton
- Original Artwork: S_p_a_c_e_F_a_n_t_a_s_y_C_o_m_m_e_m_o_r_a_t_i_v_e_S_t_a_m_p_B_o_o_k_l_e_t

by

Steve Hickman

- Semi-Prozine: S_c_i_e_n_c_e_F_i_c_t_i_o_n_C_h_r_o_n_i_c_l_e edited by Andrew Porter
- Fanzine: M_i_m_o_s_a edited by Dock and Nicki Lynch
- Fan Writer: Dave Langford
- Fan Artist: Brad W. Foster
- John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer of 1991-1992 (Sponsored by Dell Magazines): Amy Thomson (V_i_r_t_u_a_l_G_i_r_l)

- Big Heart Award: Jack Williamson
- First Fandom: Everett F. Bleiler and Andre Norton

A full report on the convention will run, probably starting next week, for the next five or so issues.

4. THE ENEMY WITHIN (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule review: An HBO remake of S_e_v_e_n_D_a_y_s_i_n_M_a_y done quick, dirty, and with very few surprises. The best that can be said for this version is that it will do little to impair the enjoyment of the original. Rating: low 0 (-4 to +4)

At first it seemed promising. The ad for T_h_e_E_n_e_m_y_W_i_t_h_i_n ran right after another made-for-HBO movie, T_h_e_D_o_o_m_s_d_a_y_G_u_n which was actually a very enjoyable film. The ad implied the story was about a coup in the United States. Now the classic political suspense film is S_e_v_e_n_D_a_y_s_i_n_M_a_y, a superb film with a great script and a powerhouse cast including Kirk Douglas, Burt Lancaster, Frederic March, Martin Balsam, Edmond O'Brien, not to mention enough other good actors to stock two more films. (Let me amend that: there are only two really great American political thrillers--both directed by John Frankenheimer: S_e_v_e_n_D_a_y_s_i_n_M_a_y and T_h_e_M_a_n_c_h_u_r_i_a_n_C_a_n_d_i_d_a_t_e. No other political thrillers come close.) But another suspense film in the vein of S_e_v_e_n_D_a_y_s_i_n_M_a_y could be exciting ... as long as it was sufficiently original. T_h_e_E_n_e_m_y_W_i_t_h_i_n turns out to be too much like its illustrious predecessor and yet not nearly enough; it is based on the Rod Serling script for S_e_v_e_n_D_a_y_s_i_n_M_a_y, adapted from the Fletcher Knebel and Charles W. Bailey II novel. That means they took some assets of that film, but at a very high price. They invite constant comparison and they could not deliver a film that came anywhere close to stacking up.

The plot is of an admirer of and aide to a great general in the mode of MacArthur who is troubled by that general becoming a demagogue. Suddenly the aide discovers his hero may be leading a well-orchestrated conspiracy to take over the government. He has one week to prevent the coup, if he decides that is where his loyalties lie.

Forrest Whitaker is by now a familiar face to filmgoers from films like G_o_o_d_M_o_r_n_i_n_g,V_i_e_t_n_a_m;B_i_r_d;T_h_e_C_r_y_i_n_g_G_a_m_e; and the under-recognized D_i_a_r_y_o_f_a_H_i_t_m_a_n, but he is wrong for this role of "Jiggs" (now "Mac") Casey. Too few roles go to portly actors, but the highly visible colonel, the aide to one of the most powerful men in the country, would be unlikely to be a man of such heavy stature. It is an exercise in futility to expect that Whitaker and

Jason Robards Jr. could carry a film like Kirk Douglas and Burt Lancaster in their prime. Even some of the best lines from the Serling script fall flat when say in this film because the original script took the time to build up to them properly.

Sam Waterston is only mediocre as the President; somehow he just fails to capture the dignity of his office. He does not seem sufficiently Presidential. In the previous version there is a whole Presidential staff going in different directions trying to untie the Gordian knot of the coup plot. Their parts are reduced to a single Presidential secretary who, of course, has a film-star beauty that does not seem likely for an Oval Office position.

The technique used to adapt the story was to scope it down so that it was less difficult and expensive to film, then to pad the plot to fill the gaps. Instead of having important and tense sequences in Spain and Texas, the film is set entirely in Washington. With the extra time we get an irrelevant subplot of "Mac" Casey's problems raising his son. There is more than enough material in the original script to fill a film twice the length of T_h_e_E_n_e_m_y_W_i_t_h_i_n and this piece is a most unwelcome diversion. Also we get gunplay and murder where the original got by with one off-screen apparent murder and no other violence. The action in the original was cerebral, not visceral. We get several chases where the original had only one very short chase. And, of course, the film has the requisite computer break-ins. About the only addition to the plot of any real political interest value is a part played by George Dzundza as a third party with a definite interest in the proceedings.

Perhaps this might have appeared a better film if I had never seen the original. That is impossible to judge. But this movie definitely demonstrates that it is foolish to remake a film just because the original was good. You have to have something new and of value you can do to improve on the original. And in that regard T_h_e_E_n_e_m_y_W_i_t_h_i_n was doomed from the beginning. Unless you have an allergy to black and white films--and more fool you--go back and watch the John Frankenheimer original. I give this film a low 0 on the -4 to +4 scale.

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

Capsule review: Whit Stillman who wrote and directed M_e_t_r_o_p_o_l_i_t_a_n has brought back to of that cast in a story of entangled love affairs and US-European relations in the early part of the 80s. The dialog, while still fun, is a bit less clever than it was in the previous film. The story is not

as much fun, but still enjoyable. Rating +1 (-4 to +4)

In the early 1980s Ted is a marketing executive posted to Barcelona. He is very serious, very dedicated, very straight-laced, and takes trendy "marketing philosophy" just a bit too seriously. In his off hours he dates some of the beautiful women who act as hostesses at the local trade show, but avoids getting closely attached to the women and their anything-goes lifestyle. One night on his doorstep shows up his cousin Ted, a smooth talking but inconsiderate navy officer who is a bit of a jerk. Fred is in Barcelona playing diplomat and paving the way for a visit of the U.S. Sixth Fleet. This gives Fred an opportunity to visit Ted, who is himself less than enthused about the visit. Fred enjoys inventing stories for Ted's girl friends including claiming that Ted wears masochistic leather underwear and is into sexual perversion. The only thing that Fred seems serious about is his love of the United States, but that can be a problem with anti-US feeling running very high in Europe and even occasional terrorist attacks against Americans.

At first Fred seems to the viewer to have a sort of Auntie Mame charm, playing his wild practical jokes. But soon we begin to see why Ted is less than pleased to have Fred around. Fred's mishaving becomes something less than endearing and eventually rather irritating. Fred's jokes take on a more serious tone, and his lack of diplomacy and jingoist attitudes cause problems for others and himself.

Whit Stillman, who wrote and directed 1990's M_e_t_r_o_p_o_l_i_t_a_n, has returned with another film about smooth-talking young intellectuals. Taylor Nichols and Chris Eigenman--both from M_e_t_r_o_p_o_l_i_t_a_n--are Ted and Fred. Stillman, who won an Oscar nomination for the previous film, has taken much the same sort of dialog, but has woven into the story politics sex and politics. Stillman's screenplay, of course, concentrates on good dialog. In fact it is unrealistically good dialog--it is doubtful that anybody really speaks this well off the cuff and to some extent that makes the films less believable. It is difficult at times to believe

that these are real people as eloquent as Stillman's characters are. The plot also has a number of nice ironies, but the story line is a little thin. Like Woody Allen's M_a_n_h_a_t_t_a_n this is a film that make great visual use of the city in which it is set but wears out any curiosity we might have about who is going to end up living with whom. This film needs a little more than that to keep us caring. It needs a strong plot and there it falls down. Much of the film is about Ted's attitude toward Fred, and Fred just does not seem worth us caring about him. Nor is one sure how accurate is B_a_r_c_e_l_o_n's depiction of US-Spanish relations.

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In general the film is entertaining but not as rewarding as it might be. Parts almost fall into the level of fluff, and cliched fluff at that. My rating would be +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

6. THE ADVOCATE (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule review: Covering some of the same territory as T_h_e_N_a_m_e_o_f_t_h_e_R_o_s_e, this is a mystery story set in Medieval Western Europe. The attitudes are a cross between those of the time and of our own, but there is more than a little enjoyable "culture shock" in this film. Nicol Williamson very nearly steals the film, but the whole cast is enjoyable.
Rating low +2 (-4 to +4)

The year is 1452 and Paris lawyer Richard Courtois is tired of the legal entanglements and corruption of city law. He wants to use his talents to help common people, so he and his clerk Mathieu travel to the small town of Abbeville. There he indeed finds that law is different, though no better and in some ways a lot weirder. Rural law cases involve accusations of witchcraft, devil pacts, and sodomy with animals. And the law extends to human and animal alike. If a farmer is shown to have had sex with his donkey, both might be hung on the same gibbet. Animals may also be called to

court to be sworn as witnesses. One of Courtois's first cases is a very bizarre "murder trial," at least by modern standards. Today such an incident would not fall under the category of murder, but we are looking at a very different culture. Incidentally, the case really did get tried as it is portrayed in the film according to historical records. It seems at first like a ludicrous and trivial court action until Courtois starts sensing that the state's case is invented and may be a part of a larger conspiracy.

_ T_ h_ e_ A_ d_ v_ o_ c_ a_ t_ e is a film with a lot going for it. First and foremost is the setting. Years go by between good films set in so remote a historical period. Even without a good plot the historical detail by itself would keep this film intriguing. The historic detail that gives the film its texture and gives a feel of being very well researched. The viewer is consistently astonished by the differing attitudes and life-style of the 1400s. Unfortunately too often the attitudes we see are a mix of that century's and our own.

Similarly to _ T_ h_ e_ N_ a_ m_ e_ o_ f_ t_ h_ e_ R_ o_ s_ e, the photography often appears

inspired by the master artists of the time like Breugel and Bosch. The peasants look grizzled and a bit grotesque.

But beyond the historical detail the plot is also enjoyable by itself. The mystery is not one of the best or most unpredictable, but it is likely to keep the audience guessing. _ T_ h_ e_ A_ d_ v_ o_ c_ a_ t_ e is at

once an intriguing mystery film and a well-written drama with comedic overtones. One historical detail that the film makes clear is that in the Middle Ages people were a good deal less sensitive about being seen without clothing. That, however, tends to make me suspect it would get some editing before American public television would show it. But clearly it seems intended for some wide audience because of a major budget and a cast of familiar actors including Colin Firth in the title role, Ian Holm as a likable but corrupt local priest, Donald Pleasance as Abbeville's other attorney, Michael Gough as town judge, and Nicol Williamson thoroughly enjoying his role as a local lord.

_ T_ h_ e_ A_ d_ v_ o_ c_ a_ t_ e was written and directed by Leslie Megahy, a director nearly unknown in the United States but who has made several TV

movies for the BBC. This is his first feature film and deserves attention. My rating would be a low +2 on the -4 to +4 scale.

7. WHAT HAPPENED WAS... (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule review: This is a strong two-person play filmed for the screen. Two nervous people have a date and the dialog reveals a the inner turmoil in each of their lives. This film has won awards, but it covers territory that has been done before.

Rating: high +1 (-4 to +4)

This is a film that already has rally stripes. Tom Noonan wrote, directed and starred in this film which he made for only \$300,000 and took only eleven days to shoot it. They finished editing the film just hours short of the deadline for entering it in the Sundance Film Festival. But the effort to get the film done in time was repaid. At Sundance it won the Waldo Salt screenwriting award and Grand Jury prize. Samuel Goldwyn snapped it up for an immediate profit. Noonan's face may be familiar to filmgoers for other films in which he has acted. He has played psychopathic killers in films like M_a_n_h_u_n_t_e_r (the earlier of the two "Hannibal Lector films") and T_h_e_L_a_s_t_A_c_t_i_o_n_H_e_r_o. It is good to see him in a more normal role.

W_h_a_t_H_a_p_p_e_n_e_d_W_a_s... is basically a one-act play for two people produced as a film. But for a few scenes at the beginning, the film is all one scene taking place as it happens in front of the camera. This, however, is not to imply the film was made in a single take but it does give the film a certain immediacy. A woman has invited a co-worker to her Manhattan apartment for dinner. Both work in a legal office, Jackie as a secretary, Michael as a paralegal. She has been impressed by his sense of humor and is intrigued by his apparent working on some secret project of his

own. She has invited him to a candlelight dinner at her apartment.

The evening begins very awkwardly. Each has a talent for choosing just the wrong thing to say to the other. The date appears not to be working out at all. But on and off the wine seems to be loosening each other up. They begin trading confidences and dropping defenses. Eventually each will know more about the other than either of them really want.

Tom Noonan's Michael is controlled and systematic. Karen Sillas's Jackie lives with emotional tides that Michael has been able to suppress in himself. He is mechanical and she is disturbed. Noonan's script gives hints as to how each has gotten that way, but in the end much is left to conjecture. Both performances have impressive authenticity. My one complaint would be that film is not really the proper medium for this script. More appropriate would be the live stage. Noonan's direction intentionally makes little use of the advantages that cinema has over the live stage while it certainly could benefit from the additional intensity and immediacy that live performances would have given it. Making the film more cinematic would probably have further sacrificed the immediacy. Noonan at least does not repeat Hitchcock's error in R_ o_ p_ e of trying to create immediacy by simulating a single take. In R_ o_ p_ e Hitchcock apparently realized the technique became a distraction and he did not repeat his error in D_ i_ a_ l_ M_ f_ o_ r_ M_ u_ r_ d_ e_ r. Occasionally Noonan misjudges the pacing of his material, but his direction was usually on-target.

In spite of the critical acclaim this film is getting, it is not nearly as original as the rumor mill would have it. It was reminiscent of other dramatic works and very similar to a play produced on PBS in the 60s called, if memory serves, "Birdbath." While falling short of my expectations for the film, I would still give it a respectable high +1 on the -4 to +4 scale. You won't see much else like it in the theaters soon.

8. In response to Mark's comment that "we are desperately asking all members and other interested parties to join in the crusade to save the VOID and send their dollars to the VOID care of Mark Leeper," one of our British members replied, "Sorry, we don't have any dollars!"

Mark responds, "Hey, for a cause as good as this I'd take pounds, Deutsche marks, lira, Roman cistersis, gold eagles, negotiable bonds, pesos, intis, EEC yet-to-be-nameds, sols, S&H Green Stamps, or Raleigh coupons. We, in fact, take anything but no for an answer. We ain't picky and we aim to please."

Note that our Australian members have no such excuse. [-ecl]

Mark Leeper
MT 3D-441 908-957-5619
m.r.leeper@att.com

How is the world ruled and how do wars start? Diplomats
tell lies to journalists and then believe what they read.
-- Karl Kraus

