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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society  
Club Notice - 10/07/94 -- Vol. 13, No. 15

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

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

  D  A  T  E                T  O  P  I  C

10/26 Book: FRANKENSTEIN (Classics \*and\* movies tie-ins)  
11/16 Book: INTERVIEW WITH THE 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.

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1. For those of you tracking how odd and unfortunate fates seem to follow the Leepers in their world travels, I mentioned last week that a ferry that left from the same port we did and took much the same route sank with 800 killed. That story was soon pushed out of the headlines by plague breaking out in New Delhi. It has been less than a year since we visited there. If there is no notice next week, it is because AT&T has asked us to visit MCI.

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2. One of the interesting times around my house is every couple of years or so when religious missionaries come around to try to get me to join their ranks. It is always a Sunday morning. They seem

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to have a particular affinity for my door and it doesn't seem to be that I am willing to talk to them. I don't think that it is that because they always come around twice, then leave me alone for a couple of years, then a new set comes around.

The first time they send around people whose faith is strong, but who have not really given a whole lot of thought to the issues involved. These people are fun to talk to. They usually have been given the same six or so weak arguments and a whole lot of faith that the arguments must be correct because, of course, God is on their side, or so they think. They will give me their argument number one. I will counter it. This always seems to unnerve them a little. In their religion they are not used to any argument but appeals to authority. They expected that the fact that they had faith a n d an argument would be enough to convince me.

After a weak defense of argument number one, they try argument number two. I suppose this should be gratifying, but it is also a bit frustrating. It is like playing chess with someone and five moves into the game they say, let's start a new game. So we start on argument number two and the same thing happens again. And again. Okay, so some of their arguments can be countered, but God is on their side so one of the arguments they have been given must be "the killer," the one that will floor the opposition.

None of their six arguments turns out to be "the killer." So what happens? The missionaries go back to argument number one. I counter it again and so they try three again. It becomes like a whack-a-mole game at a carnival where you don't know which one will pop up next, but you know you can handle the situation, no matter which one it is. But they have their six arguments and they will try each in turn.

Now what is really frustrating about this is that they have only

the openings of these arguments. They don't seem willing to play the whole game with any of them. Now in chess what you would do is say, "Okay, if you don't like the state of the game, let's turn the board around. I will play your side and you play mine." That wouldn't work real well with the missionaries. I could suggest to them, "Let's go back to argument number one, I will argue for the religion; you argue against." They have it fixed in their minds that in this game they play with the white pieces; I have to play with the black pieces. I think their real fear might be that if I argue for the religion, and they argue against it, they might accidentally win and go to Hell for it.

But I cannot blame them very much for being unwilling to switch sides in an argument. Our society considers it at best an annoyance and at times even a taboo to argue for a point of view that isn't your own. Evelyn has learned to tolerate it and only holds me up to public ridicule for doing it. My friends give out a

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sigh of exasperation if I say "Well, let me play Devil's Advocate...."

Just as an aside, I think playing Devil's Advocate and arguing for the opposing side is very important. I don't think you really should firmly believe anything until you have argued as strongly as you can, at least in your own mind, for the other side. It might surprise the missionaries on my doorstep to know that I have already argued for their side in my own mind and in fact, I think I have argued better than they have. One of the things wrong with our society is that people are replacing "I believe X because I have explored all the alternatives and the arguments for X seem the strongest" with "I believe X because I have explored all the alternatives and X seems most in my personal best interests."

Anyway I could suggest to these missionaries, "Let me play Devil's Advocate," and argue for their side, but I suspect that might not go down too well. Anyway, once they brand me as someone who wants to look at their arguments, they decide they have to return with reinforcements and so next week they return. And next week I will return to discuss the follow-up visit.

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### 3. ED WOOD (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule review: Tim Burton's disappointing biopic of bad filmmaker Wood looks great, but it is a wafer-thin patchwork of familiar rumors and stories which is, like the rabid fans of Wood's films just a trifle mean-spirited in its fun. Martin Landau is good as the dying Bela Lugosi and gives the film what core it has, but Depp goes back and forth among the three emotions that Burton allows him and fails to create a person. Rating: low +1 (-4 to +4)

Tim Burton has made just about the only biography that could have been made of the film-making career of Ed Wood Jr. since there are so many legends of filmmaker. He has probably correctly assumed people who come to see the film are less interested in delving into the character of the man and more in having an extension of the experience they have laughing at the ineptitude of the films Wood made. Burton has created a stylish film to poke fun at Wood.

When the film opens Wood (played by Johnny Depp) is a handyman at Universal Studios who produces silly, pretentious plays with the Ed Wood touch of ineptitude. But Wood idolizes Orson Welles, who was writing, directing, and acting in his own film at 26. Wood is already 30 and feels the need to be an auteur filmmaker, right now. The problem is that with the exception of producing some really

terrible plays he has no experience relevant to making films. However, he has the confidence that he knows everything that he needs to know. A chance meeting with Bela Lugosi give him the edge he needs to get his first film made as well as beginning a friendship that would last the rest of Lugosi's years.

Wood's one flaw time and time again is in assuming he has talent and is creating great art. Of course the films he really does create are notorious for their ineptitude. On a small scale he is not unlike Roger Corman--he will give anyone an opportunity to be

in his films without discrimination on the basis of talent. This gets earns him a sort of the following of a coterie of talentless actors who find easy employment with Wood. The list centers on the fading Bela Lugosi but includes Swedish wrestler Tor Johnson, fake psychic Criswell, and horror show host Vampira. Unfortunately, with the exception of one marquee reference, the film never mentions Lyle Talbot. Talbot had been in major productions before and after the Wood films he was in as well as being a regular on the TV show "Ozzie and Harriet." It would have been interesting to know more about why he was willing to accept minuscule wages to appear in Wood's productions.

The style of the film is to weave together many of the anecdotes that have appeared elsewhere for years. Many are probably true, others apocryphal. Wood was certainly a transvestite, as shown in E\_d\_W\_o\_o\_d\_F\_r\_W\_o\_o\_d, and much of what was coherent about G\_l\_e\_n\_o\_r\_G\_l\_e\_n\_d\_a? was an autobiographical study of a transvestite. Whether or not he would let being a transvestite affect his directing in later films as shown could well be just legend. Wood's friendship and attention did help Lugosi through the aging actor's final years, but whether his relationship was really as close as shown probably depends on to who is telling the story. And certainly the ending of the film is a fantasy in Ed's mind and one wonders how much else is a fantasy in this film. There are obvious anachronisms in the film. The producer of G\_l\_e\_n\_o\_r\_G\_l\_e\_n\_d\_a? has a stack of film cans behind his desk including one labeled "One-Eyed Samurai." I find this very unlikely for an American film producer in 1952.

Johnny Depp puts a little too much energy into Wood. At least on screen Wood's body language seems to indicate a man a bit more placid and laid back than Depp plays him. Landau's ailing Bela Lugosi really looks very good, a combination of Rick Baker's excellent makeup and Landau's own study of Lugosi's facial expression. Burton is banking on not too many people being able to recall Wood's looks and demeanor, but Lugosi's is too familiar a face too familiar for Burton to take similar liberties.

Story accuracy beyond that point is open to some interpretation. Though the film is based on Rudolph Grey's N\_i\_g\_h\_t\_m\_a\_r\_e\_o\_f\_E\_c\_s\_t\_a\_s\_y: T\_h\_e\_L\_i\_f\_e\_a\_n\_d\_A\_r\_t\_o\_f\_E\_d\_w\_a\_r\_d\_D.\_W\_o\_o\_d,\_J\_r.," I doubt if it or any other existing piece of research is a serious study of Ed Wood, and

perhaps Wood does not deserve a serious study. If the film adaptation is any indication, the book is not always well researched. Lugosi is shown to be lonely and alone, a drug addict for twenty years and not having made a film in the last four. It is true this was a particularly rocky period in Lugosi's life. After D\_r\_a\_c\_u\_l\_a Lugosi was always the victim of his own poor discretion in the roles he chose and of the narrowness of his acting repertoire. He really as an actor better suited to silent film than sound. There are only so many roles that require his forte, which was looking mysterious. He ended up playing too many red herring butlers in too many cheap horror mysteries. After he played Dracula for the last time on screen in A\_b\_b\_o\_t\_t\_a\_n\_d\_C\_o\_s\_t\_e\_l\_l\_o\_M\_e\_e\_t\_F\_r\_a\_n\_k\_e\_n\_s\_t\_e\_i\_n he was also the victim of Universal Studio's ingratitude for his previous contributions.

But Lugosi's state was looking up as a look at Lugosi's filmography indicates. And there was a revival in his career--of sorts--from 1952 to his death in 1956. G\_l\_e\_n\_o\_r\_G\_l\_e\_n\_d\_a? was actually the second of three films he made in 1952 after O\_l\_d\_M\_o\_t\_h\_e\_r\_R\_i\_l\_e\_y\_M\_e\_e\_t\_s\_a\_V\_a\_m\_p\_i\_r\_e and before B\_e\_l\_a\_L\_u\_g\_o\_s\_i\_M\_e\_e\_t\_s\_a\_B\_r\_o\_o\_k\_l\_y\_n\_G\_o\_r\_i\_l\_l\_a. After

his

drug rehabilitation Lugosi also married his fifth wife, a fan as a wife who remained loving and loyal to him until his death. In 1956 he made T\_h\_e\_B\_l\_a\_c\_k\_S\_l\_e\_e\_p and took some part in the publicity campaigns. It was not even a speaking role but presumably between that and TV appearances he could at least squeak by.

This film opens trying to give the feel of an Ed Wood film but the haunted house we see in the beginning has more the feel of Burton's films with miniatures much like we have seen in Burton fantasy films since "Frankenweenie." On the other hand Burton does a fairly good job of recreating scenes that look much like they did in the original Wood films. Actors do not always look quite like their original counterparts, especially Bill Murray as Bunny Breckenridge, but some scenes do bear an uncanny resemblance to their original film versions. One need look no further than Universal's M\_a\_n\_o\_f\_a\_T\_h\_o\_u\_s\_a\_n\_d\_F\_a\_c\_e\_s to realize how much worse the recreations could have been.

If one is really interested in the real behind-the-camera dirt of popular 1950s entertainment, the current Q\_u\_i\_z\_S\_h\_o\_w is far better done and more credible. But for a diverting couple of hours, E\_d\_W\_o\_o\_d is enjoyable entertainment. I rate it a low +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

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#### 4. HOOP DREAMS (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule review: Surprisingly engaging documentary that follows two promising inner-city basketball

players from high school recruiting to freshman year at college. The story is surprising both in its completeness and the dramatic power it has, considering it is not a script that could be planned in advance. Rating: +2 (-4 to +4).

How does a documentary film like this get made? If a director has a script in front of him, he can be fairly certain that there will be some measure of drama coming out of the film he is shooting. A documentary about the Third Reich has got to give its director the relative security of being able to scan all the materials and assure himself that there is a story worth telling. But how did producers Fred Marx, Steve James, and Peter Gilbert know that if they started filming two promising junior-high-school level basketball players for four or five years that at the end of the time they would have a film with the dramatic impact of H\_o\_o\_p D\_r\_e\_a\_m\_s? This is a documentary that sustains interest for its entire 174-minute length.

The film follows the high school careers of William Gates and Arthur Agee, two black Chicago boys, promising hoopsters, drafted by St. Joseph's, a suburban Catholic high school that has a strong emphasis on basketball. They are in the same program that developed star player Isiah Thomas. Both boys have learned to spell success "NBA." William comes to St. Joseph's on full scholarship, paid by a patron who holds a high position at the Encyclopedia Britannica. Arthur is not so lucky; he is on half scholarship with his family paying the balance. This difference will prove to have far-reaching effects on Arthur's high school basketball. Arthur's father becomes a crack addict, turns to crime, and is sent to prison. The Agees are unable to pay the school's tuition and Arthur is thrown out and must go instead to Marshall, a local all-black school. Despondent over family problems, Arthur has a very poor sophomore year while William prospers only to be brought low by a knee injury. The camera follows the story of the two players and the pressures to win that they face. Without a word of commentary the film stingingly indicts high schools and colleges that treat athletes like commodities. High schools programs treat athletes as if winning

were everything; colleges treat them as if money is everything and winning is the way to get it.

250 hours of film were shot to provide the filmmakers with enough material to tell a complete and detailed story. Even so, one is often surprised that the camera was present and filming at what are often very personal moments. We get a good deal more of both the Agee and Gates families than one would ever expect they would agree to. There are surprisingly unflattering portraits of people like Gene Pingatore, the St. Joseph's basketball coach, and recruiters from schools like Marquette.

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You do not have to be a basketball fan to find this a remarkable documentary about much more in American life than basketball. I myself have no interest in the game and I give the film a +2 on the -4 to +4 scale.

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

Capsule review: This amiable, light-weight romantic comedy has Marisa Tomei chasing over Italy in a quest for the man predicted to be her perfect match. The viewer won't need a crystal ball to divine the plot twists coming. Rating: +1 (-4 to +4)

Faith Corvatch (played by Marisa Tomei) has known since she was a girl who the right man for her was. Both a Ouija board and a fortune teller has told her that the man fated to be her great love was someone named Damon Bradley. She has looked for Bradley all her life. She has become infatuated with the idea that fate has chosen a mate for her, if only she can find the elusive Mr. Bradley.

Eventually she has to give in to the inevitable and find someone else. Her fiance, a podiatrist, is not the most romantic choice for a husband, but Damon Bradleys do not show up every day. But a



few days before her marriage her husband gets a phone call from a friend on his way to an international flight to Venice. The friend's name is Damon Bradley. Faith rushes to the airport, but not in time to intercept the man whom fate has intended for her. Her only chance to meet the man promised to her by fate is to go with her best friend Kate, and fly to Venice to chase down Damon. After a journey from Pittsburgh to Venice the fates finally arrange for her to run into Damon on the streets of Rome. Damon (played very winningly by Robert Downey Jr.) fall into each other's arms, love at first sight. Then Damon makes an admission about himself that will change their relationship entirely that will change Faith's mind about him. Damon will have to prove he really is the man that the fates have intended for Faith. For more--far too much more--information about the plot twists, see the trailer running in theaters.

Norman Jewison directs as well as co-produces hoping, possibly, that the colorful Italian characters and soundtrack music will capture some of success of his M\_o\_o\_n\_s\_t\_r\_u\_c\_k. That film was about older and, frankly, better drawn and more interesting characters. Here the attempt is not to so much to define characters but to but to create a very light piece of froth somewhere between S\_l\_e\_e\_p\_l\_e\_s\_s i\_n\_S\_e\_a\_t\_t\_l\_e and R\_o\_m\_a\_n\_H\_o\_l\_i\_d\_a\_y--elements borrowed from both are present--and take advantage of warmly romantic Italian settings and

seductive music, particularly "Some Enchanted Evening" from S\_o\_u\_t\_h P\_a\_c\_i\_f\_i\_c. Sven Nykvist's camera captures romantic scenes so that they feel romantic without being overly Hallmark-ish.

Marisa Tomei plays her role brash but with more of a fragile quality than her Oscar-winning role in M\_y\_C\_o\_u\_s\_i\_n\_V\_i\_n\_n\_y. Robert Downey Jr. as her possible perfect romantic mate is a trifle bland but winning enough to have the audience rooting for him to win her a second time. More personality is vested in Bonnie Hunt's witty Kate. Hunt's Kate seems more than a little like the sort of character Stockard Channing plays. Rounding out are the cast Fisher Stevens and Joaquim De Almeida as Kate's husband and would-be lover.

This is one Norman Jewison film that will not make much of a splash, but it is competent and pleasant. Give it a +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

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6. I LIKE IT LIKE THAT (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule review: This comedy-drama set in a Spanish section of the Bronx tries to hard to reach too broad a range of tones and is stretched too thin. A family falling apart and coming together is the subject of newcomer writer-director Darnell Martin. Fewer characters better observed would have made for stronger drama and less cliched comedy. Rating: low +1 (-4 to +4)

I L i k e I t L i k e T h a t is the first major studio film written and directed by a black woman. When actually watching the film it generally flows fairly smoothly, though in retrospect the styles represented in the film are very much a mixed bag. To have in a single film sex scenes verging on slapstick and grim scenes of street violence makes one wonder if the writer/director, Darnell Martin, was managing the tone of the film as a whole or in pieces. It almost seems as if she was optimizing individual scenes without thinking of the film as a whole. The unevenness of tone extends even to the title. This is a film with a lot of people at various levels of dissatisfaction which would much more aptly be titled I H a t e I t L i k e T h i s

In a Puerto Rican neighborhood in the Bronx, the street constantly boils with activity, but nowhere more than the bedroom of Lisette and Chino (played by Lauren Velez and Jon Seda). Chino is into marathon love-making, much to the amusement of the neighborhood and the boredom of Lisette. Chino feeds a family of five on a McJob but wants to provide some luxuries for his family. A blackout

brings what Chino sees as an opportunity. Now Lisette has to feed a family of four and visit a husband in jail on no job at all. But

a rather contrived set of circumstances gets Lisette a high-paying job in the recording industry working closely with a slightly sleazy executive (Griffin Dunne) who is sexually attracted to her. Rumors of her having been seen with the executive reach Chino in prison and when he is released he wants to set matters straight. What ensues is a comedy-drama of Lisette's on-again off-again relationship with her husband and the struggle of the family to pull together.

At times the film achieves some of the strengths of *Martina* as self-seeking family and friends try to interfere in the relationship of Lisette and Chino, but with the exception of a surprisingly well-drawn and acted Li'l Chino, played by ten-year-old Tomas Melly, most of the peripheral characters are a bit cartoonish. Griffin Dunne's record executive is a one-dimensional cliché. Rita Moreno as Chino's overly strident mother is magnetic but more in her delivery than in her lines. Jesse Borego is a bit too swishy and over-the-top as Alex/Alexis, Lisette's brother, soon to be sister. Velez's performance as Lisette is the heart of the story and she does carry the film, though not always with sufficient help from the script. One scene of her handling her tension by suddenly flashing into a dance just does not seem realistic and Velez handles it as well as any actress could. Seda only at times develops a screen presence.

Martin could well turn out to be a very good director, but her technique needs refining. I would give this film a low +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

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7. ConAdian 1994 (con report by Evelyn C. Leeper) (part 2 of 6 parts):

Panel: A A A Al l l lt t t te e e er r r rn n n na a a at t t te e e e  
H H H Hi i i is s s st t t to o o or r r ri i i ie e e es s s s  
Thursday, 9 PM

Evelyn Leeper (mod), Ginjer Buchanan, Glenn Grant,  
Philip Kaveny, Allen Steele, Harry C. Stubbs

Description: If you could change one event in the past, how would today's history change? What are the rules of alternate histories?

[Thanks to Mark, who took copious notes at this on his palmtop, and then downloaded them to mine. Isn't technology wonderful?]

Well, we started a bit late because we were waiting for Buchanan, who was supposed to be the moderator. Eventually, I volunteered to

moderate and we got started.

I began by asking why the room was so full, because this wasn't a party with free liquor. And full it was, with all the seats in the hundred-seat room taken, and a couple dozen people standing, and more who couldn't even get in the door. Someone replied that there was nothing else going on at this time, but it turned out that even when full programming was running, these small rooms tended to overflow. Eventually I concluded that everyone was at an alternate history panel because they wished they were somewhere else.

Everyone introduced themselves. Steele is a writer who has written some alternate history stories (notably "Goddard's Children").

Grant is a reviewer, writer, and editor; he never wrote any alternate history stories, but he did review

T h e D i f f e r e n c e  
E n g i n e.

Stubbs (Hal Clement) had an even more tenuous connection to alternate histories--he just reads the stuff. Kaveny is an author, and is interested in alternate histories as an analytic tool. You all know who I am, or if you don't, this con report will probably tell you.

We had a whole list of questions sent to us before the convention--questions which we had in turn suggested. The one I chose to start with was, "What is the appeal of alternate histories and why are they so popular?" Steele thought that there was a basic appeal in seeing what might have happened if things had been different, in part because we see dividing points in our own lives: almost being hit by a car, choosing one school over another, and so. His favorite Civil War story, for example, was about when Lee wrapped his cigars with his battle map and then left it behind at the campground, where Union spies found it.

Grant felt there were three aspects to the appeal, which he described as "funny, weird, and scary." It's funny because you can play with irony: what if Keats were a computer hacker? It's weird because seeing history differently is inherently weird. It's scary because you can see how easily things could be different: a bolt missing on the Enola Gay could result in a different plane with a different bombardier, etc. (a reference to Kim Stanley Robinson's "Lucky Strike" and also Robinson's "Sensitive Dependence on Initial Conditions"). Steele used his own story "Goddard's People" as an example: what if the German rocket program had gone in a different

direction?

Stubbs thought part of the appeal as that alternate histories was that it gets great arguments going. It also gives people the ultimate excuse: "with so much in play, it wasn't my fault." Of course, the reverse is also true: every little thing you do and decision you make can have vast consequences. (Kind of makes one paranoid, doesn't it?)

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Kaveny's view was that alternate history is the "bastard stepchild of history." He doesn't feel that the cigars had any real effect on the battle (a minority opinion, I believe). But mainstream history gets you thinking things occurred this way out of necessity, and alternate history shows this is not true: we need causality. And it reminds us that perhaps our analysis is not as good as we thought. Kaveny also mentioned that much of the military discussion on the Internet is about alternate history.

(At this point Buchanan arrived and announced that it was not possible to hail a cab in Winnipeg, to which my response was, "Well, not in   t  h  i  s Winnipeg anyway!")

Returning to the appeal of alternate histories, I said that there seem to be two categories of people who like alternate histories: the optimists, who want to read about how things could be worse, and the pessimists, who want to read about how things could be better. The example I gave was Mark Olson's observation that French alternate histories tend to be those in which things are better--for one thing, everyone speaks French.

Buchanan said that the whole game of science fiction is "what if?" If I make this change, what will happen? She added that if you have read Susan Schwartz's "Suppose They Gave a Peace," you realize that things may turn out the same anyway.

I then asked the panelists the question that always seems to get asked: what are the classics and what do you like, and why?

Buchanan said that she had thought no one could improve on Ward

Moore's   B  r  i  n  g  t  h  e  J  u  b  i  l  e  , but Harry Turtledove's   G  u  n  s

o f t h e S o u t h topped it. I said that I knew Philip K. Dick's M a n i n t h e H i g h C a s t l e was well thought of, but it did little for me. (Dick wrote it using the "I Ching" to plot it, which explains a lot. Dick later talked about how the "I Ching" would lead you along and then betray you.) Stubbs liked L. Sprague deCamp's L e s t D a r k n e s s F a l l, because of the way the protagonist used technology to try to prevent the Dark Ages; he loved the details (the rivets, to hearken back to another panel). Grant couldn't think of one, because (he said) alternate history wasn't his favorite genre, but he did say that I n t e r z o n e has them frequently. (True, but so do the other magazines as well.) Buchanan also mentioned Benford's H i t l e r V i c t o r i o u s, which reminded Grant that there was a recent issue of A s i m o v' s which ran not one, but t w o, stories about alternate worlds in which Fidel Castro became a baseball player.

William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's D i f f e r e n c e E n g i n e was mentioned

by Grant as having one of those ideas so great (that Babbage could have actually built his machine), that when he heard it he said, "Oh, God, this would be wonderful." Steele said he also liked this book, and that the people at S c i e n t i f i c A m e r i c a n had built

Babbage's machine and it worked. Steele particularly liked the

scenes describing the huge machines. (Me, I like the pun in the title.)

Steele said, however, that the book that really "got" him was Michael Moorcock's B e h o l d t h e M a n, and it was all the rest of the panelists could do to keep him from giving away the story. He thought it took a lot of courage for Moorcock to write about Jesus and the Crucifixion, though today's readers may not realize it. I noted that other writers have done it (Joe Lansdale, Brad Linaweaver, Kirk Mitchell, and Frederik Pohl, among others) but they don't dive into it the way Moorcock does. (Actually, one may ask whether B e h o l d t h e M a n is an alternate history, or just a secret history, but it is almost always listed as alternate history.)

I filled in the gaps by listing various classics the others hadn't:

Randall Garrett's "Lord D'Arcy" stories, H. Beam Piper's Lord

KalvanofOtherwhen, Keith Roberts's

Pavane, and Norman Spinrad's

IronDream (which Steele said he had always enjoyed, because it

"pulls off a hat trick"; with a premise of being a science fiction

novel written by Hitler, "it is definitely a sick pleasure, with a

lot of sick shit."). I noted that a made-for-cable movie of Robert

Harris's Fatherland will be on HBO this fall ("Now a semi-major

motion picture!"). Len Deighton's SS-GB was another "what if

Germany won the war?" book. (Many of these are out of print, but

do show up in used bookstores.)

Someone mentioned the Leo Frankowski books, which Kaveny said he

hated but read passionately. I said that I thought the first one

interesting, but got pissed off with treatment of women.

Someone asked how you defined alternate history, since all fiction

contains things that didn't happen. I immediately claimed this

person must have been talking to Mark (Leeper) since that was what

Mark was always saying (when he wasn't saying that chaos theory

invalidates most alternate history stories). Steele responded that

alternate history is a deliberate attempt to rework history. I

gave the example (inspired by my many conversations with Mark) that

we know Rhett Butler was fictional, but nothing about his existence

or non-existence affected society's history. There must be changes

on a macro-level for it to be alternate history.

Grant claimed that all science fiction becomes alternate history

eventually, because the science in it will prove implausible or

there will be other historical diverges. Alternate histories, on

the other hand, will remain as valid as when they were written. I

said this seemed to be saying that alternate history stories will

last forever, and Steele talked about an upcoming story of his,

"The Tranquil Alternative," set in an alternate 1995, and how he

didn't have to be as concerned about it being out-dated right away.

I then asked for quick questions. The problem with this is you get

a lot of non-questions. "What about history that has never happened, where Russia [sic] never lost astronauts?" Okay, what about it? Someone in the audience mentioned Robert Sobel's F\_o\_r W\_a\_n\_t\_o\_f\_a\_N\_a\_i\_l, a detailed history of North America which assumes Burgoyne won the Battle of Saratoga. It even has ten pages of bogus bibliography. (Grant claimed he used to do bogus bibliographies on papers in high school, but that is like comparing a child's drawing to a Van Gogh.) I've seen it only in hardcover and have no idea why someone hasn't reprinted it. (Buchanan, however, thought it was dull.)

Asked what they liked to see (or wanted to write) in an alternate history the panelists responded with a variety of answers. Kaveny was interested in the High Middle Ages. I said I particularly liked stories centering around a change in religious history (such as John M. Ford's D\_r\_a\_g\_o\_n\_W\_a\_i\_t\_i\_n\_g or Poul Anderson's "In the House of Sorrows"). Buchanan said that the problem with alternate histories in which you kill Hitler is that there will be someone else to take his place.

Steele said that two years ago at MagiCon, he heard about Resnick's plan to do A\_l\_t\_e\_r\_n\_a\_t\_e\_O\_u\_t\_l\_a\_w\_s and asked (or was asked) to do

a

story. He then forgot, and nine months later Resnick called him up and said, "Where's the story?" Steele asked how long he had--he had two weeks. So he did research on Jesse James, and said the crash course approach was terrific, like being in college. "You find your mind going in directions it hadn't gone before." I added that I like to run off and read about periods after I read alternate histories based on changes in them. Buchanan agreed that a good alternate history or time travel will teach you something. (Of course, you have to be careful to know what changes the author has made in history or you might end up "learning" that Lee won at Gettysburg.)

Stubbs said that one of the questions suggested was, "What if the anti-fire people had won?" He said it has been written: they died of cold and the pro-fire people came along after them. In other words, history converged.

Someone in the audience asked what would be most disturbing changes we could choose? Kaveny said he has seen the Tank Trap Memorial, and keeps thinking about what might have happened if the Germans had got to Moscow. Buchanan agreed that it would be some scenario in which the Axis had won, and Steele said most people seem to choose one that has something to do with World War II. Buchanan responded that she could handle the South winning the Civil War, but not Germany winning World War II. Stubbs also said he would have taken a change in World War II personally, because he would have been killed had the Germans won. (I noted as an aside that there seemed to be a sub-genre of alternate histories in which



Germany wins World War II which use that as an excuse for explicit violence and sadism, beyond what the story seems to call for.)

Grant cited an amazing tourist photograph taken in Utah, with a big chunk of meteor in sky, which would have hit Alberta had it not burned up. He had also heard of a meteor that hit outside of Montreal, which, if it had been a bit larger, might have wiped out the city. Steele said one of his ancestors was the New Jersey delegate who signed the Declaration of Independence; as he put it, "I wouldn't be here if we had lost the Revolution." (I think chaos theory says that most of us wouldn't be here with that big a change that far back, but that's another panel.)

Grant mentioned that for those interested, there would be a panel on Saturday on alternate Canadas.

Parties

Well, we started toward the Boston in 2001 party in the Place Louis Riel, but as we were leaving the elevator we ran into Mike and Carol Resnick, and Carol mentioned, "Oh, by the way if you're going over to the Place Louis Riel, the elevators are all broken there." Since the party was on the 14th floor we decided to skip it and instead talked for a bit with the Resnicks about our trip to India last year. Carol said that Mike thought we were very brave to go on our own, but I suspect "brave" didn't quite express what he was thinking. Certainly other people tended more towards words like "foolish," "stupid," and "brain-damaged." Carol said they wanted to see India, but not on their own. (One of the things they mentioned was that because the train/plane/whatever connections are not reliable, you might lose your hotel reservations. I explained that we didn't actually have any reservations after the first night, which they seemed to think pretty daring. Well, so far the only place this has gotten us into trouble was Stockholm.)

Panel: D D D De e e eb b b bu u u un n n nk k k ki i i in n n ng g g g  
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c ce e e e

Friday, 10 AM

Jack Nimersheim (mod), George Flentke, Keith G. Kato,  
Hayford Peirce, Howard Scrimgeour, Susan M. Smith

Description: Most SF writers knowingly use pseudoscience. Where do we draw the line?

It's probably worth listing the panelists' credentials for this panel. Nimersheim writes for computer magazines. Flentke has a Ph.D. in biochemistry and is doing research in the Department of Pharmacology at the University of Wisconsin. Kato has a Ph.D. in experimental plasma physics and is on the research staff of Hughes Aerospace. Peirce is a science fiction writer. Scrimgeour is a veterinarian. Smith has a Ph.D. in biochemistry and is an

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assistant professor in the Department of Nutritional Sciences at the University of Wisconsin.

The panelists seemed to agree from the outset that to be acceptable in science fiction, pseudo-science must at least be consistent. For example, Asimov's psycho-history is pseudo-science, but it has an internal consistency. (I am reminded of the panelist at Boskone who was using a psychologist's definition of psycho-history--using psychology to analyze the motivations of historical figures--and couldn't figure out what the rest of us were talking about until we realized the confusion and sorted it out.) The panelists also cited creation science as pseudo-science, but were less forgiving of it.

Someone described pseudo-science as having "the trappings of science without the verisimilitude." Someone else claimed, however, that every science has passed through a pseudo-science phase. This got people talking about how science is done. For example, it used to be that when someone discovered something, he or she would search the literature and often find that someone else had already discovered this, but no one had read the earlier work. There was some question as to whether there would be less of this phenomenon with the more rapid information exchange of today, but I suspect that the limiting factor is what people can assimilate, not what can be published.

Kato pointed out that sometimes bad science is just bad experiments; my understanding is that this about sums up the

problems with cold fusion.

This led to a discussion of Velikovsky. Some people said that when Velikovsky's book WorldsinCollision came out, scientists either didn't respond to it at all or just called Velikovsky a crank. But others said that there were in fact responses that addressed Velikovsky's claims and showed how ridiculous they were, but no one was interested in those. It was only later, when Carl Sagan attacked Velikovsky, that people started hearing this sort of response, and then only because Sagan was celebrity.

This led to the question: who should get the blame for pseudo-science? The three candidates seem to be the public, the media, or pseudo-scientists themselves. Certainly when the media covers the pseudo-scientists but not the rebuttals from real scientists, they are partly to blame. But the public seems to have developed the attitude that "if science can't prove it's wrong, it must be right." And while some pseudo-scientists genuinely believe they have arrived at their conclusions through scientific analysis, others are more interested in promoting their political, social, or religious agenda. (I've just finished reading James Morrow's TowingJehovah, and he captures this attitude quite well, both for the religious and for the anti-religious. Morrow rarely shows

favoritism, preferring to skewer everyone in his works.)

According to the panelists, one key to recognizing a pseudo-scientist (as opposed to a real scientist who is working on the fringes of science) is that the pseudo-scientist won't back off in light of contradictory evidence.

This got people off into a discussion of peer-reviewed articles, fueled by someone in the audience who had several of his articles rejected by peer-reviewed journals only to achieve success elsewhere. I can't say with certainty that peer review is better or worse than editorial review, but for an example of the latter, I will point out that Richard Adams's WatershipDown was rejected by twenty-six editors before someone at Penguin finally decided to take a chance on it. It would appear, therefore, that there is

anecdotal evidence on both sides, although I grant there are (or at least should be) different guidelines applied to non-fiction than to fiction. Maybe the reason pseudo-science is so popular is that people are trying to apply guidelines more suitable for fiction than for non-fiction to it: they want to believe what is sexy, interesting, or fun, not what is true.

And of course the old "water engine" idea was mentioned: did someone invent an engine that runs on water that was suppressed by the oil companies? Or as Peirce expressed it, "Is anti-gravity floating around?"

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Happiness, n. An agreeable sensation arising from contemplating the misery of another.  
--Ambrose Bierce