



attraction of pizza. Anyway, the physical universe has it in for me so periodically I am forced to put myself on one of these diets. That is painful enough. But further I am telling you folks about it, adding self-insult to self-injury. I am being candid for two reasons. One is that way I am sort of committed. If in a few

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months somebody who reads this notice sees me back in one of my spacious phases I will be mortified. I will realize that you know I am dieting. And I know you know I am dieting. And you know I know you know. But what is worst of all is that I know you know I know you know I know you know. And you probably know that. At least you suspect. Or maybe I just think you do. But dieting is a real pain for me. I am someone who really enjoys his food. It is not like I am addicted to eating. I could easily quit cold turkey any time. Yes, the cold turkey I could quit. Pizza might be more of a problem. That's when I really need my sense of humor to keep me from going buggy. And by going public I am forced to joke about the tragedy. That is the second reason I am going public, to force me to laugh at my situation.

What makes it difficult is that Evelyn is naturally thin. I mean, she is so thin that when she goes to comb her hair she sometimes misses entirely. She is not a veteran of the Battle of the Bulge like I am. Evelyn has no sympathy since she has no idea what I go through to diet. But I bet she's gonna find out. I am sure after a few weeks of eating reduced-calorie celery I will be really anxious to share my experience. Actually I say that, but if you look in the diet books they show you all kinds of luscious foods you can have on their diet. After looking at all the pictures you feel like going out and having a big binge. When you actually eat the stuff it is a different story, of course. The dishes look pretty but have no flavor. All the calories are in the flavor. You have the feeling looking at the books that you will eat like a Caesar. And actually, you do. Wasn't it Augustus who ate only what he himself picked off the tree because he was afraid of what somebody might put in his food? That's what a diet is like. Actually, if the foods are not so much the problem, the portions are. Everything is measured so you don't get too much. If you floss your teeth after one of those meals you end up with a net loss of weight. (And how exactly do you measure a cup of lettuce

leaves?) Anyway, if you see me wearing my hair shorter, shaving off the moustache, shaving off the beard, well, that is just ballast, I guess. You will know that I am getting desperate to lose another few ounces. [-mrl]

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2. PICTURES AT 11 by Norman Spinrad (Bantam, ISBN 0-553-37384-6, 1994, 455pp, \$12.95) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

I picked this up at 10:30 one night, intending to read just a few pages before bed. At 2 AM I forced myself to put the book down, even though I was only halfway through it. After all, this was a work night.

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Well, needless to say, I did finish it. And it is a real page-turner. A group of eco-terrorists, the Green Army Commandos, has taken over a Los Angeles television and threatens to blow it up unless Californians defeat a referendum for a new nuclear power plant. At least that's how it starts. But soon everything escalates beyond control: Brazilian coffee boycotts, stolen plutonium, "Meet the Commandos" television shows, and much, much more. Spinrad has captured the cynicism of television newscasting, as well as the interactions of the various factions within the Green Army Commandos.

And the story of how the media collaborates with terrorists to boost ratings is quite enthralling--almost as enthralling as it was when Paddy Chayefsky did it eighteen years ago in N\_e\_t\_w\_o\_r\_k. Even as I was reading about how the station was rationalizing their jockeying for higher ratings from the take-over, I was hearing Diana Christiansen talking about a "magnificent messianic figure inveighing against the hypocrisies of our times," and Frank Hackett saying "we're talking about putting a manifestly irresponsible man on national television." And when Spinrad got to the negotiations between the terrorists and their agent(!) when Heather Blake (the station meteorologist) suggests "Meet the Green Army Commandos, an

interview of about ten minutes each with the eight anonymous terrorists the public hasn't gotten to meet," all I could picture was Laureen Hobbs, the Black Communist radical complete with agent and lawyer, who is asked to do a "weekly dramatic series based on the Ecumenical Liberation Army" which each week will open with an "authentic act of political terrorism, taken on the spot and in the actual moment." (And not surprisingly, after long diatribe on distribution costs, percentages, and deficit, Hobbs ends up responding to someone's ideological claims about the seminal prisoner-class infrastructure by screaming, "You can blow the seminal prisoner-class infrastructure out your ass! I'm not knocking down my distribution charges!" (And the fact that Kelly Jordan, the Minister of Information for the Green Army Commandos, is Black, makes the parallel even stronger.)

Now, the fact that someone else wrote a very similar story earlier doesn't invalidate Spinrad's novel. But it does make P\_i\_c\_t\_u\_r\_e\_s\_a\_t\_1\_1 more of a formula novel than many of Spinrad's other works. And its tendency to bog down in preaching environmentalism will undoubtedly annoy some readers. P\_i\_c\_t\_u\_r\_e\_s\_a\_t\_1\_1 is a good book, but not as good as its trade paperback status might imply. [-ecl]

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3. TOMORROW SUCKS edited by Greg Cox and T. K. F. Weisskopf (Baen, ISBN 0-671-87626-0, 1994, 271pp, \$4.99) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

In these days when it seems as though publishers think every anthology must have at least two dozen stories, all new, it's almost a relief to see a good, old-fashioned reprint anthology, even if it is titled "Tomorrow Sucks" and has a terribly trendy cover. Think of it: there are only eleven stories here, and they've all been printed before. Of course, the fact that they are by such authors as Ray Bradbury, Brian Stableford, Keith Roberts, Roger Zelazny, and C. L. Moore may help sell this radical concept.

The stories are bracketed by essays by the editors talking about

the history of the vampire story and its connection with science fiction, since what supposedly sets these vampire stories apart is that they a\_r\_e science fiction. (The cover caption is "SF in a Jugular Vein.") But the editors seem willing to stretch a point--if there's something science-fictional about "Kaeti's Nights" by Keith Roberts, I must have missed it.

As with most anthologies, there are some good stories and some not-so-good (in my opinion, of course--your mileage may vary). The Roberts and the Stableford stories are very good (and perhaps the least science-fictional of the bunch). On the other hand, I tired of Spider Robinson's "Callahan" stories long ago, and his foray into the world of vampires hasn't changed my mind. One wonders how they missed Damon Knight's classic "Eripmav" (with NESFA scoring a merchandising coup when they reprinted it--on a T-shirt!).

In general, although I like science fiction, I seem to prefer my vampire stories as more supernatural and less scientific, at least based on my likes and dislikes here. Even so, there's a wide enough range of lesser known vampire stories here that there will be something to please most fans of the genre. [-ecl]

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4. MATTER'S END by Gregory Benford (Bantam, ISBN 0-553-56898-1, 1995, 294p, \$5.99) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

As a fan of short fiction, I am always happy to see a publisher bring out a collection of an author's short fiction. There was a period during which most publishers seemed to shy away from single-author collections, but lately we've been seeing them from almost all the major science fiction publishers. Bantam's latest is this collection of twenty-one stories by Gregory Benford. This is his second collection; the first was titled I\_n\_A\_l\_i\_e\_n\_F\_l\_e\_s\_h.

Although only seven stories list earlier copyright dates on the copyright page, I believe that all the stories have appeared elsewhere before. They span the entire three decades of Benford's writing career, and cover a wide range of styles and subject matters. Benford, in fact, talks about this in his afterword, a

far better description of the stories in terms of category, style, and intent than I could hope to give.

The diversity of styles will probably mean that there will be some stories not to your liking, but it also means that there will probably be some stories you do like (as opposed to an all-or-nothing situation). Benford, though a professional physicist, does not write in the way many people expect scientists to write (although he is almost alone among science fiction writers in refusing to use faster-than-light travel in space travel stories, as being scientifically impossible), so you never really know what to expect from him.

I can't say I liked all the stories, and some I would argue with for one reason or another, but with such excellent pieces as "Freeze-frame," "Centigrade 233," "Nobody Lives on Burton Street," "We Could Do Worse" (okay, I'm a sucker for alternate history stories), and "Immortal Night," this is certainly a volume I can recommend. (Is it just my imagination, or is there a possible future history cycle in "Immortal Night," "The Bigger One," "Nobody Lives on Burton Street," and "Centigrade 233"?) [-ecl]

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#### 5. MRS. PARKER AND THE VICIOUS CIRCLE (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule: Dorothy Parker wrote witty, cynical poems and stories and spoke extemporaneously some of the funniest epigrams this side of Oscar Wilde. She was one of the central figures of the famous Algonquin Round Table literary circle. Finally a film has been made which explodes the myth that it might be interesting to know a little more about Dorothy Parker. Rating: 0 (-4 to +4)

The Algonquin Round Table was a unique literary circle. Through the 1920s a group of the brightest, wittiest, and elitist of the Manhattan's artistic types met every day in the Rose Room of the Algonquin Hotel on 44th Street. There they ate lunch, traded barbs, and gossiped. Woe betide the unprepared newcomer who tried to join the prestigious group. He became an immediate target for the rapier-sarcasm of some of the cleverest literary minds this country ever produced. The Round Table circled around its two brightest stars, Alexander Woollcott and Dorothy Parker. Both were merciless critics as well as authors. Other notable members were Robert Benchley, Marc Connelly, Edna Ferber, George S. Kaufman, Robert Sherwood, and many others. M\_r\_s.\_P\_a\_r\_k\_e\_r\_a\_n\_d\_t\_h\_e\_V\_i\_c\_i\_o\_u\_s\_C\_i\_r\_c\_l\_e is the story of Parker's life, particularly during the years



comedy shorts.

The script by director Alan Rudolph and Randy Sue Coburn jumps around in time with a latterday Parker offering bleak little humorous poems as commentary on the action--or lack thereof--of the film. The film works as a detailed portrait of someone whom you would not want to meet in real life. This is sort of a literary S\_i\_d\_a\_n\_d\_N\_a\_n\_c\_y which tells you more than you want to know about a person about whom there is less than meets the eye. The other members of the Round Table are of more interest, of course. I would rate it a 0 on the -4 to +4 scale. [-mrl]

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6. Montreal Film Festival (film reviews and commentary by Mark R. Leeper) (part 3 of 5):

Our fourth day is starting a bit rainy. The nice thing about a film festival is that if we get tired of all this cinema we can, without guilt, just say "the heck with it" and go to the movies. In line for MESMER I am holding an umbrella over my head and Evelyn's. There is room for a third so I edge over to include the woman ahead of us in line. We start a conversation and she is a Peruvian. Her husband who went off to get a pass to the film works for the National Film Board of Canada and we get to talk with him about the board. We are particularly fond of Canadian animation like "Hot Stuff" and "The Big Snit." One of the things I ask to know a little more about is a character who seems to run through a lot of Canadian animation. It is a cat who has shown up in many different National Film Board animations and of late I have seen even on bags of potato chips. That strikes me as odd since the different filmmakers rarely use the same invented character. Apparently the cat was introduced in "The Cat Came Back," which I assume is based on the song about the unwanted cat who keeps returning to his owner after the owner tries more and more desperate measures to be rid of the thing. The cat was used in other animations and now seems to be a trademark of films in a given style from the Film Board. The Board is a non-profit government agency and which ran into some controversy when private

companies wanted to start using the cat figure, like the potato chip company. I imagine the controversy was not what to do with the profits, though that entered into it, but would this appear to be a government endorsement.

Present for the premiere of MESMER were director Roger Spottiswoode and Alan Rickman. Rickman was very popular with the audience. He is a major film actor after playing in a particularly good villain in DIE HARD, as well as appearing in CELLO (a.k.a. TRULY, MADLY, DEEPLY), and the somewhat over-the-top sheriff in ROBIN HOOD, PRINCE OF THIEVES. (Though in that film Rickman had Costner to act as a lightning rod. Most audiences found it jarring to have Costner talk with an American accent. He certainly should have known what the English accent sounds like. It is what Nazis or ancient Greeks and Romans sound like in so many films. In any case it is probably Rickman's worst performance, though the fault is more in that wretched script.)

Of course, having the director or even an actor on hand to discuss the film could be very interesting, but that is what the press conferences are for. I guess that the audience likes to just see the people involved with a film. Ironically, actors are more popular than directors. Audiences get a real thrill seeing actors in their three-dimensional form, particularly someone like Rickman

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who has been good in some popular roles. The directors come and say a few words and usually disappear. I suppose some can be looking at audience reaction and some may go off for coffee. Only a couple that I have seen so far have been answering questions about the film afterward and I think that the theaters discourage that behavior, since they have to follow a schedule. Generally the introductions are short. Rickman welcomed the audience in French and then translated into English saying "I THINK I just said..."

MESMER

[A note on the following. This review is being written at the Montreal Film Festival. I do not have materials to research Franz Anton Mesmer so what dubious historical knowledge I have of Mesmer, I have to take from the film.] Roger Spottiswoode has directed

films as good as UNDER FIRE and last year's AND THE BAND PLAYED ON. His lesser films include TURNER AND HOOGH and STOP OR MY MOM WILL SHOOT. His latest is an odd film about one of history's more enigmatic personalities, Franz Anton Mesmer, whose name has passed into common usage for "mesmerism," a word used synonymously with "hypnotism." It is not clear, however, that the force Mesmer called "animal magnetism" is hypnotism. In Dennis Potter's screenplay what Mesmer uses does not appear to be hypnotism or really any other technique as applied today. Just how he cures pain is something mystical that would probably today be ascribed to "power of suggestion." But this had to have been a real revelation in a time when the recommended treatment for hysteria-related ailment was slicing the patient's arm and bleeding the patient until he was no longer strong enough to be hysterical.

The film opens with a tribunal of Paris doctors examining the heretical techniques of Mesmer. Unfortunately, the unfriendly medical tribunal of hide-bound doctors is an all-too-familiar film stereotype going back to the Frederic March DR. JEKYLL AND MR. HYDE. It starts the film on a false note. Mesmer is apparently reviewing in his memory his own career and most of the story is told in flashback--also a bit cliched.

We find ourselves in Vienna sometime in the 1770s. Mesmer is already a controversial character: he cures the poor, or at least tries to, in mystical ceremonies that often seem to work. His approach is so radically different from those of his contemporaries that he is considered to be a charlatan. Yet surprisingly often his methods are effective. Since Mesmer offers his services to the poor free and rarely has a paying patient he must operate on funds provided by his wealthy wife. His wife and his dim-witted son or stepson are losing their respect for the unsuccessful Mesmer.

At a recital, famous blind pianist Marie Therese Paradis has a hysterical fit. The physicians want to bleed her right there in front of the recital audience, but Mesmer finds he can calm her

with his mystical "animal magnetism" techniques. Paradis becomes Mesmer's patient and develops an emotional need for his attention and treatments. Parallels could be drawn to religious cults and

indeed the script sees Mesmer not so much as a hypnotist as perhaps a faith healer. The plot centers on Mesmer's treatment of Paradis and later his career in a decadent Paris where he specializes in helping the rich with complex mystical ceremonies. Finally the French medical establishment, no more receptive than the Austrians, calls upon Mesmer to prove he is not a charlatan. Through much of the film I found myself wondering where Mesmer's theories had originated.

There are several problems with the script, but absolutely nothing wrong with Rickman's performance. Mesmer should be charismatic and hypnotic--in a word, "mesmerizing"--and pulls off his performance with aplomb. With the proper handling of the film, this could be Rickman's best remembered performance. Amanda Ooms as Maria Therese Paradis brings to her role a sort of otherworldly quality. Michael Nyman's score is not memorable but it does create a proper mood.

Spottiswoode occasionally seems to exaggerate on the side of the melodramatic, though when dealing with a figure like Mesmer, can one be sure? Scenes of his cure techniques have a wild madhouse feel. There are sensationalist and bloody scenes of opening veins and bleeding patients of a style one might find from Hammer Films of Britain.

This is a spotty film with moments of real intelligence as well as moment of pure sensationalism. Initially I gave it a lower rating, but on consideration I would rate it a high +1 on the -4 to +4 scale. Dennis Potter, considered an influential force in British drama, unfortunately did not live to see the film based on his script completed. He died last May.

A word or two about the ideas of this film that might constitute a spoiler. For me the techniques used by Mesmer are so bizarre a major attraction of the film would have been to find out the origin of Mesmer's ideas. Dennis Potter's script apparently was written intending to tantalize the viewer with just that specific question. He structures the film to save that revelation for the final lines of the film and then answers the question with a fascinating paradox. It is almost as if power of suggestion invented itself. Mesmer is so convinced that pain could not exist without a means to alleviate it that he has used power of suggestion on himself to convince himself there must be something like power of suggestion. The other interesting question the script plays with is, if you do not cure a patient, but only make the patient imagine that he is cured, have you not in fact cured the patient? As a personal example I suffer badly from the common cold unless I take Vitamin C. If I do take the vitamin the cold is usually very light by

comparison. I am told that VitaminC does not help a cold, to which I respond it may be true, but I really value the illusion that it is helping.

MESMER played with "Intact," a short film by Turkish director Seyhan Cecilya Derin. It is about a Turkish woman whose family has arranged a marriage for her falsely convincing her intended that she is still a virgin. Now they are arranging a medical operation to give him the illusion that she was. The main character is not happy being treated as a commodity but meets another Turkish woman at the clinic who has a different outlook on the operation. The film touches on themes of personal freedom and self-worth.

I probably would have like to go for the press conference at 2PM but we had tickets for MEN LIE opposite it.

## MEN LIE

The title pretty much tells it all in this hypocritical anti-male diatribe packaged as a light comedy. John Andrew Gallagher has turned from making the kinds of films cable services run at midnight to a feature-length diatribe which brings less and not more understanding to his issue.

There are basically three kinds of scenes in MEN LIE. There are interview scenes with women claiming that men are shitheels. There are scenes of men weakly defending their behaving like shitheels. And there is the wafer-thin story of Scott (played by Doug DeLuca) who acts like a shitheel after getting advice from other shitheels on how it is done. The joke that keeps repeating itself is to have a woman say Scott will act like a jerk and then, sure enough, the script has him do just that. If the same film were made with women as the target or blacks or just about any ethnic group it would be obvious that this film is hate propaganda, but by targeting men it can be considered a blow for women's liberation and will find a ready and even anxious, if not very discerning, audience.

(What little story there is the following paragraph may spoil.) Scott has a perfect girlfriend, Jill (played by Ellia Thompson), but like a jerk he cheats on her every chance he gets. His uncle, who is an unsavory lawyer, gives him a lot of advice on how to be a more competent jerk. Jill's friends warn her that Scott is a jerk and a louse, but Jill foolishly loves Scott. She catches him once, but he apologizes then continues to cheat. When she catches him a second time, she ends their relationship. Scott says he has

learned a lesson but is a jerk with his next girlfriend as well. That's not a very exciting plot, but it really is all there is to this film. Repeatedly the laughs come from Scott doing exactly what one of his detractors predicted. Supposed laughs also come from men using supposedly standard male tactics like Scott blaming Jill's anger on PMS.

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Being fair, there are two male characters in the film who seem to be presented in a positive light. There are no women who are portrayed as being anything worse than gullible or angry. Also in fairness, the stereotypical male jerk as presented does have some basis in reality, but men do not have a monopoly on being jerks, and the stereotypes here have no more validity than other ethnic hate-stereotypes.

Generally the acting is sufficient, but there are at least two scenes in which it was jarringly bad. This is a bad film that is riding a political wave that is just about the only thing that would make it acceptable to anyone. By far this is the worst film I have seen at this festival. Some of the few on-target jokes in the film concern a character who insists on seeing female nudity in the films he rents from videostores. Gallagher may not be happy about this form of exploitation, but, hey, business is business so he includes exploitive sex scenes in this film. I wonder if he also felt bad about exploitation of women when he made BEACH HOUSE and POSED FOR MURDER.

MEN LIE has crude production values, a very flat plot, and perhaps a chuckle or two. For the sake of a couple of decent chuckles I rate this one a low -1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

That answers my question about whether or not being shown at the festival guarantees that a film will be good. Somebody must have liked it--it got a good review from Joe Leydon of "The Houston Post." I don't know who that is.

The evening film was THE ADVOCATE and it was introduced by Leslie Megahey, the writer director and by Lysette Anthony. She had a smallish comic role in the film. I know the name, but don't remember where I have seen her before. Oh, to have Internet access

here!

## THE ADVOCATE

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

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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.

THE ADVOCATE 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 THE NAME OF THE ROSE, 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. THE ADVOCATE 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.

THE ADVOCATE 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.

That was probably the best film so far. Certainly it was the most enjoyable, though MESMER left me with more to think about. It is a pity that there are not more Medieval mystery films like THE NAME OF THE ROSE and THE ADVOCATE. I guess it is surprising there aren't more considering how often you hear about Medieval mystery plays; it is surprising more have not been made into films. [On the Internet that last line is e-mail bait. I expect a megabyte or two of e-mail from well-meaning but humorless people explaining to me what a Medieval mystery play is and about eight items explaining to me what an idiot I am for not knowing!] [-mrl]

[To be continued]

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