



Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society  
 Club Notice - 01/13/95 -- Vol. 13, No. 29

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

Unless otherwise stated, all meetings are in Middletown 5T-415  
 Wednesdays at noon.

DATE

TOPIC

- 01/14/95 Movie: IT CAME FROM BENEATH THE SEA (Saturday night, 8PM, RSVP)
- 01/21/95 Movie: THE CREEPING UNKNOWN (Saturday night, 8PM, RSVP)
- 01/26/95 Book: Donald E. McQuinn's WARRIOR (\*\*THURSDAY\*\*)
- 02/15/95 Book: Franz Kafka's METAMORPHOSIS
- 03/08/95 Book: a Stanislaw Lem book to be determined

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. This is intended to be a humorous comment about Manhattan, so of  
 course I will start talking about New Mexico. The point of this is  
 to make you so disoriented that you fall down laughing and anything  
 I say will seem extremely funny. At least that is how it works in  
 "Theory of Humor 101." It is called "theory" since most of what is  
 in the course never works in practice, much like economic theory.

Every model of humor indicates that by starting out in New Mexico, everything I say about New York City will have sufficient humor strength to have you rolling on the floor laughing give or take 1.7 International Chortle Units or ICUs.

THE MT VOID

Page 2

I suppose from a start in New Mexico I will have to get back to Manhattan soon, but I am not looking forward to it. Then again I was not really looking forward to New Mexico. Why would anyone look forward to a place as dry and ugly as New Mexico? That was what I thought until my plane landed in Albuquerque. Then I started thinking about what a nice place New Mexico would be to retire. I told my mother about how nice it was and she objected that there just would be nothing to do in New Mexico. She prefers to live near someplace metropolitan. Well, I currently live near a place that is metropolitan. It is a little island I like to call Tahiti. Part of the problem is that, unfortunately, it is the island that everyone else calls Manhattan.

How does anyone live in Manhattan? The metaphor I usually use about going to New York is of the dog who somehow swallowed his master's diamond necklace and the master had to wait a day or so and then has to sift out the diamonds. I mean there certainly are some gems in Manhattan, but you have to root through a lot of less than pleasant material to get to it.

But I tend to forget how uncomfortable the city is from one visit to the next. Some promising movie opens at a theater in New York and the eternal optimist in me says, sure, let's go to New York. The state of anticipation lasts in me until I get near to the Lincoln or Holland tunnel. I never liked those names to begin with. Why name a tunnel into New York after somebody who was minding his own business and got shot in the head? And is Holland any better a name for a tunnel? The first thing I think about when I think of Holland is that little Dutch boy who sticks his finger in a hole to stop a leak. Did anybody stop to think this is not the happiest image to associate with a tunnel under a river? Anyway, we get to the tunnel and I set out the spackle kit and all of a sudden the traffic starts crawling. Part of it is the tightness of the tunnel, but I am convinced that part of what is

going on is that people are going through a treatment to prepare themselves for the super-populated, hyper-congested environment of Manhattan.

I will discuss that next week. [-mrl]

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2. THE DIAMOND AGE by Neal Stephenson (Bantam Spectra, ISBN 0-553-09609-5, 1995, 416pp, US\$22.95) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

Reading THE DIAMOND AGE is like eating an entire cheesecake. No matter how good it is, one reaches the point where enough is too much.

THE MT VOID

Page 3

Stephenson's earlier SNOW CRASH (\*not\* his first, though most people think so) was also written very densely, but not quite as much as this book. The result, at least for me, is that SNOW CRASH was a success, but THE DIAMOND AGE misses the mark. (Stephenson's co-authored INTERFACE was written in a far more straightforward style, but that may have been due to the influence of his co-author.) To carry the dessert metaphor a bit further, you can eat a lot of a moderate dessert, or a little of a very rich dessert, but not a lot of a very rich dessert. Stephenson is making his desserts richer; he needs to cut down on the portion size.

The basic plot is certainly enthralling enough: In the future, nations have been replaced by clones. The Neo-Victorians are one of the major clones, and a leading Neo-Victorian has commissioned a primer--an interactive teaching book--for his daughter. However, the designer makes a second, bootleg copy, which then falls into the hands of a young, lower-class girl. What happens when she receives the same training that an upper-class Neo-Victorian girl would get is part, but just part, of the story.

There is also the question of the reactionary Fists of Righteous Harmony, the Drummers, and the Seed. One of the difficulties in

reading THE DIAMOND AGE is that Stephenson has a higher proportion of neologisms than just about any other author writing today. Readers have to remember what a clave is, who the Drummers are, where New Atlantis is, and what chevaline, nanosites, and mediatron mean.

The odd thing is that in spite of the flaws in THE DIAMOND AGE, it will probably be one of the best novels of 1995. Its strengths do make up for a lot. I'm just worried that Stephenson's next book will be even denser and longer. Of course, that would make Stephenson the Umberto Eco of science fiction--not an entirely negative appellation. [-ecl]

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3. REMAKE by Connie Willis (Bantam Spectra, ISBN 0-553-37437, 1995, 176pp, US\$11.95) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

In the future, Hollywood will be able to do even more amazing things with computer graphics than they can now. The patching up of scenes in THE CROW after Brandon Lee's death will be nothing compared to remaking BEN-HUR with Sylvester Stallone--even though Stallone is dead. Or if you prefer, you can go to the Happy Endings Theater and see a version of CASABLANCA where Victor is killed by the Nazis and Rick and Ilsa can go off together. (Well, Hollywood would probably think this was a happy ending.) But the flip side of this is that no one is making \*new\* movies anymore. The best an aspiring actor can hope for is to have his or her face

digitally superimposed over someone else's in an already existing movie.

Our first-person narrator makes a living editing old movies. His current job is to edit out all references to "AS"s (addictive substances), making this story at least a cousin to Willis's "Ado." But he has also met an aspiring dancer, one who wants to \*really\* dance in the movies, not just have her face digitally combined with someone else's body. Where this quest leads her and the narrator is the story of this book. (By the way, this is a novel, according

to my word count estimate, rather than the novella it was described as at ConAdian--and the price is correspondingly higher than they said also.)

Willis shows a real love for old movies similar to what she displayed in her short story "Miracle." Does it seem as though there a lot of themes recycled here? Or is this also a self-referential joke on the idea of remakes? Or maybe it's just that Willis uses the constructs she is most comfortable with to tell her story. The problem, I suspect, is that readers who are not as familiar with old movies, and in particular old musicals, may not enjoy it as much as those who are.

Then again, Willis's understanding of movies may not be that of others either. She seems to say that the musical died in 1965. That is, the first-person narrator claims that Michael Caine said that "the musical had kicked off in 1965" (although later it is said by someone who merely looks like Michael Caine). This implies that Willis, or Caine, or the Caine look-alike think that FIDDLER ON THE ROOF, THE ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW, GREASE, ALL THAT JAZZ, FAME, VICTOR/VICTORIA, A CHORUS LINE, LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS, or any number of recent Disney animated films aren't musicals. (And that's only talking American films. In India, \*everything\* is a musical. In Jaipur, I saw a musical remake of THE HAND THAT ROCKS THE CRADLE. After that, almost nothing that Willis imagines would surprise me in if came to pass.) I would be more inclined to say that the musical has developed; more recent musicals use the music in a very different way than older ones. Just compare CABARET with movies from the 1930s which used nightclub numbers, or FAME with 42ND STREET.

There is also some sloppy editing here. A character called "Heada" (as an intentional misspelling of "Hedda") is accidentally called "Hedda" once or twice, someone should tell the proof-reader about the use of the semi-colon as the separator in lists where the items containing commas within them, and there is at least one line completely missing from the top of page 131.

In spite of all these complaints, I found the book a moderately enjoyable read. I suppose I've started to expect every Willis story to be deep, insightful, and riveting, and I've forgotten that

she does a good job at just telling a story as well. REMAKE serves to remind me of that, and to bring back some of the magic the movies used to have. Maybe I'll go watch CASABLANCA--in black and white, with the original ending. [-ecl]

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4. THE MOUNTAINS OF MAJIPOOR by Robert Silverberg (Bantam Spectra, ISBN 0-553-09614-1, 1995, 240pp, US\$19.95) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

Way back when, when Hector was a pup (September 1950, to be precise), GALAXY ran an ad on their back cover which consisted of two columns of text. The right was a typical Western scenario, with hoofs drumming and the hero ambushed by the bad guys with six-shooters. The left was a science fiction scenario, identical, but with jets blasting and the hero ambushed by the bad guys with proton gun-blasters. This, GALAXY said, was not the sort of science fiction they intended to print.

Alas, Robert Silverberg's MOUNTAINS OF MAJIPOOR is just this sort of science fiction. Prince Harpirias accidentally shot the prize game of a powerful noble, so was exiled to a remote diplomatic post, and then given an opportunity to redeem himself by going into an unexplored land populated by savages and rescuing some scientists. The prince could be English, the remote post India, the unexplored land Tibet, and the bilatoons, tuamiroks, vandars, and onathils, foxes, boars, rabbits, and elk.

Now, since I haven't read the original Majipoor trilogy, it's possible that there is enough background there to make this something more than just a cross between H. Rider Haggard and Rudyard Kipling. And even if there isn't, there's nothing inherently wrong with those sorts of stories. Maybe now that the Earth is pretty much all explored and mapped, anyone wanting to write about mysterious barbarian tribes cut off from the rest of the world has to set his story on a distant planet. And Silverberg does a reasonable job of telling this adventure story, even if it is rather traditional and predictable. But it's not science fiction.

On a purely mechanical note, the layout of the chapter openings (the first nine lines split in the middle by a rectangle of black sky with stars), is very difficult to read. The eye (well, my eye, anyway) wants to read first the left column and then the right, but instead you have to read straight across, jumping over the rectangle nine times. The purpose of typography should be to make the book more readable, not to sacrifice readability for a flashier look. [-ecl]

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## 5. IMMORTAL BELOVED (a film review by Mark R. Leeper);

Capsule: Columbia's first Famous-Composer Bio-Mystery since *AMADEUS* is a speculation about the real-life mystery of to whom Ludwig van Beethoven addressed three unsent letters. He referred to the addressee only as his "Immortal Beloved." Gary Oldman is a good choice to play the genius who expresses his emotional torment through his music. Still somehow the story is less than compelling. Rating: high +1 (-4 to +4).

Well, to start with, there probably were three major amors in Beethoven's life. And one really was Giulietta Guicciardi; so far the filmmakers got that one right. The other two women were Giulietta's cousin Josephine von Brunsvik, to whom he proposed, and Therese Malfatti, the daughter of one of Beethoven's doctors. The film did show Josephine as a minor diversion and ignored Malfatti altogether. This is a rough biography of Ludwig Van Beethoven that takes some liberties to add some suspense.

There genuinely is a historical mystery, of course. After Beethoven's death three letters were found addressed to someone he called "Immortal Beloved." It is possible they were just a writing exercise, though the fact they range from poetic prose to complaints about his health and his discomfort makes that unlikely. If they were to a real person, nobody ever found out to whom the letters were addressed. The film suggests that Beethoven (here played by Gary Oldman), kept this love a secret, then illogically left a bequest to his "Immortal Beloved" without ever naming the intended recipient. Anton Schindler, a friend (played by Jeroen Krabbe) sets out, to solve the mystery. (The real Anton Schindler apparently was a junior acquaintance of the composer. Beethoven was born in 1770 and Schindler was the author of *BIOGRAPHIE VON LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN*--English title: *BEETHOVEN AS I KNEW HIM*--in 1860, some thirty-three years after Beethoven died. But Schindler might well have looked for the mysterious love, so to set up this

mystery/biography is really not too much of a conceit. Though it is a bit absurd to assume that the composer would on one hand be so secretive about this love and on the other hand virtually to force this investigation by leaving her his fortune. And, of course, as with AMADEUS, any conclusions the film draws are purely speculation and should be considered as such.

The film opens with Oldman living up to his name and near death. (He looked much the same early in BRAM STOKER'S DRACULA, but there he was near death just on the other side.) Schindler finds the will and sets out with a list of leads to try to discover who this

THE MT VOID

Page 7

Immortal Beloved is. The structure is like that of CITIZEN KANE and as with CITIZEN KANE the story of the life is revealed as a mosaic of flashbacks and here even flashbacks-within-flashbacks, mostly covering the period from the onset of his deafness to his death. First Schindler visits the now-aging Countess Giulietta Guicciardi (Valeria Golino), whom Beethoven forcefully makes his pupil. She falls in love with him and wants to marry him, but she and her father discover a secret about Beethoven that he cannot bear them to know. The trail then leads to Anna Marie Erdody (Isabella Rossellini), a Hungarian noble who continues the story, and so forth. Much of the film concentrates on either on his women, his deafness, or his cruel battle for custody and control of his nephew.

Gary Oldman is one of the best and most versatile actors in film today. He gives us a very watchable impression of a great genius in constant struggle with himself and with his own personal demons. Krabbe's role is less demanding, calling for him to be little more than a good listener in period clothing. Galino and Rossellini are winning but are upstaged by the intensity of Oldman's performance. In fact the only other strong performance is by Johanna Ter Steege as the sister-in-law who fights Beethoven for custody of her own son. Direction is by Bernard Rose, director of the off-beat fantasy PAPERHOUSE and of the horror film CANDYMAN.

"It is the power of music to carry one into the mental state of the composer," according to Beethoven. And Rose seemingly uses this as the inspiration to score the film with whatever music Beethoven is



composing at each point in time. Whether he was entirely accurate is unclear, but he does seem to proceed through the symphonies in chronological order. This means, of course, that the filmmakers get a glorious, evocative orchestral score simply by making selections. And certainly one cannot deny the power of scenes like Napoleon's shelling Vienna to the strains of the first movement of the Fifth Symphony in pure digital sound.

The fragmentation of the narration, using the patchwork narrative form, and bogging down of the story into a custody battle tend to rob IMMORTAL BELOVED of some of its power, but the music on a really good sound system and the crafty proposed solution to the central mystery make this one of the better musical biographies. Rating high +1 on the -4 to +4 scale. [-ecl]

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6. THE SECRET CHRONICLES OF SHERLOCK HOLMES by June Thomson (Otto Penzler, ISBN 1-883402-37-9, 1994, 203pp, \$20) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

This is the second of June Thomson's stories based on various off-hand references in the Canon. There are seven stories here: "The Case of the Paradol Chamber" (mentioned in "The Five Orange Pips": "The year '87 furnished us with a long series of cases of greater or less interest, of which I retain the records. Among my headings under this one twelve months I find an account of the adventure of the Paradol Chamber, ..."), "The Case of the Hammersmith Wonder" (mentioned in "The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire": "'Voyage of the Gloria Scott,'" he read. "'That was a bad business. I have some recollection that you made a record of it, Watson, though I was unable to congratulate you upon the result. Victor Lynch, the forger. Venomous lizard or gila. Remarkable case, that! Vittoria, the circus belle. Vanderbilt and the Yeggman. Vipers. Vigor, the Hammersmith wonder.'"), "The Case of the Maplestead Magpie" (apparently completely invented), "The Case of the Harley Street Specialist" (also apparently completely invented), "The Case of the

Old Russian Woman" (mentioned in "The Adventure of the Musgrave Ritual": "'Here's the record of the Tarleton murders, and the case of Vamberry, the wine merchant, and the adventure of the old Russian woman, ...'"), "The Case of the Camberwell Poisoning" (mentioned in "The Five Orange Pips": "The year '87 furnished us with a long series of cases of greater or less interest, of which I retain the records. Among my headings under this one twelve months I find an account ... finally of the Camberwell poisoning case. In the latter, as may be remembered, Sherlock Holmes was able, by winding up the dead man's watch, to prove that it had been wound up two hours before, and that therefore the deceased had gone to bed within that time--a deduction which was of the greatest importance in clearing up the case."). and the "The Case of the Sumatran Rat" (mentioned in "The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire": "'Matilda Briggs was not the name of a young woman, Watson," said Holmes in a reminiscent voice. "It was a ship which is associated with the giant rat of Sumatra, a story for which the world is not yet prepared.'").

As I said, this is the second volume like this that Thomson has written. The first, THE SECRET FILES OF SHERLOCK HOLMES, consisted of fairly dry and straight-forward stories, full of "authentic" Holmesian touches, almost as if Thomson was working from a list of catch-phrases and idiosyncrasies. However, the characterizations were better in that volume than in this, where the "check-list" methodology seems even more evident, and the solutions even more contrived. I am of the opinion that it may be time for a law forbidding any mysteries involving disappearing persons to take place in a Tudor period house. If you don't know why, this collection may be for you. Otherwise it has little to recommend it. [-ecl]

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We learn from history that we do not learn from history.  
--Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel