



2. The next discussion book is Michael Bishop's BRITTLE INNINGS, of which Evelyn Leeper says:

This has my vote for the Hugo.

Now, I am not a baseball fan (or indeed, a fan of any sport), so when I first heard that Michael Bishop was writing a novel about minor league baseball in the South during World War II, my ears didn't immediately perk up. But I kept hearing recommendations and praise for it, so when it arrived, I decided to give it a try.

BRITTLE INNINGS is good--very good. Though baseball is the background, BRITTLE INNINGS is not about baseball; it is about what makes us human, what makes us the same--and what makes us different. To do this, Bishop uses not only the metaphor of baseball, but all the parallels of his theme in the racial segregation of the era. The various characters each have his or her place in society, and this place is often independent of any rational basis. That may sound trite, but in Bishop's hands, it is not, and he skillfully uses the hidden true nature of background of his characters to show how we often make decisions based on incomplete or incorrect assessments of people.

The story takes place in 1943, when Danny Boles, fresh out of high school in Oklahoma, is signed for the Highbridge (Georgia) Hellbenders, a class C farm club. When he arrives, however, he has been struck mute by an incident on his journey and is forced to begin his stay as more of an observer and less of a participant than might normally be the case. His interaction with his teammates, especially Jumbo Hank Clerval, form a window into the world of human relationships. There is more I could say about BRITTLE INNINGS, but I don't want to reveal too much of the plot.

Bishop also conveys a wonderful sense of time and place--you feel

as if you are in the hot and dusty 1940s South as you read BRITTLE INNINGS. And in addition to the main part of the novel (written as Danny's first-person narrative), there are also sections written from another voice, in a totally different style, which describe a totally different time and place. These, too, are excellent, and the combination of the two provides yet another level of meaning. I can only hope that this book finally wins Bishop a Hugo--after all, he has had ten nominations and still hasn't managed to get a rocket to take home. Though, of course, rockets per se have nothing to do with this book. [-ecl]

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3. Evelyn and I were discussing the story "Leiningen Versus the Ants" by Carl Stephenson. (Do other married couples have this sort of discussion???) Evelyn commented that she never really

understood the story. If you haven't read the story, you should. It concerns a man who built a South American plantation with his own hands and the battle he has when the plantation is attacked by a huge horde of soldier ants. ("Twenty square miles of agonizing death," was the description in George Pal's film version starring Charlton Heston.) Leiningen wins a sort of Pyrrhic victory. He survives, but the plantation is nearly a total loss. Evelyn's comment was that it made no sense to her that he stayed and fought the ants. What was the point of that? He still lost everything. He could have easily gotten away with his life just by getting out of the way of the ants. Why fight them to no good purpose?

Sometimes knowing the answer to a question is a lot easier than telling someone else it so that it sounds credible. I knew why Leiningen pitted himself against the incredible odds of the sea of soldier ants, but if Evelyn didn't know I couldn't explain it to her. After thinking a moment I told her "It's a man thing." She thought that was funny. I guess it sounds funny, but it is also the correct answer.

Maybe Leiningen's defense is part of male psychology, though the existence of a separate male psychology has come under criticism of

late. In the peculiar political logic of the last part of this century, it is out of vogue to say there is a separate male psychology. There *is* a separate female psychology and that seems to be acceptable. But as one psychologist has put it, "male psychology is what is left when you are finished talking about female psychology." How it is possible to have a separate female psychology without having a separate male psychology is an article of political faith. Maybe if you dig deeply enough you will finally find a magnetic monopole. But it is somehow much more comprehensible to me than to Evelyn that Leiningen would risk his life on the proposition that if his plantation were to be destroyed, at least he would make the ants pay for it. Be it a good or bad trait, I understand the idea that if the ants were going to shove, Leiningen was going to shove back. I am very ambivalent about that decision, of course. Both sides are hurt and neither gains anything by Leiningen's resistance. But that is in the male psychology, this idealism that the ants are not going to get my land without a struggle.

But this discussion came back to me when I saw a in a local shopping center a kind of store I had never given much thought to. It was a nail salon. Women come in and spend extravagant sums of money to have their fingernails painted. This has got to be an action that is totally beyond my ken. First of all where some people smoke from nervous energy, I bite my nails for the same reason. It is a bad habit, but it is a darn tough one to break. Smokers can put their cigarettes in another room. When my fingernails are in another room, generally I am also. Also, whoever manufactures fingernails puts something in them to make

them addictive. I am sure they do. But even if I didn't have the habit, I think the it would be pretty tough for me to understand this nail-painting thing. These days whoever does it is getting into multiple colors and designs, even rally stripes. It has got to be connected to this urge to find on your body loose flaps of flesh, punch out a hole, and use it to suspend shiny pieces of metal or stone. Of course, Evelyn has a problem explaining the nail thing. Her fingernails have never known polish. Flash! I have lied to you. Luckily Evelyn was in the room so I could check my facts. Yes, she did paint her nails while she was in high

school. Why? She says that everybody was doing it. Honest, that was her explanation. I doubt that all the men were. Maybe I can give that superficial an explanation of Leiningen. On his plantation everybody was standing their ground against the ants. I guess that made more sense to Leiningen than painting his nails. You know, I think it makes more sense to me too. [-mrl]

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4. The New York Times reported on June 13, 1995, that Octavia Butler is one of twenty-four winners of this year's MacArthur grants (sometimes called the "genius awards"). Butler will get \$295,000 over a five-year period, as well as free health insurance. There is no restriction on how the money is used; it is generally intended to encourage and facilitate the recipient's work. Butler is the first science fiction author to win this. [-ecl]

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5. A LITTLE PRINCESS (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule: A World War I vintage children's book by the author of THE SECRET GARDEN is given a very nice production. Unfortunately, there is good reason why they don't write children's stories like this any more. How the virtuous young heroine's kindness and bad luck gets her into trouble is a lot more believable than how she gets out. Still, this is a well-crafted film and one that adults can appreciate as much as children. Rating: low +1 (-4 to +4)

In 1993 Warner Brothers scored a coup with the critics for their adaptation of THE SECRET GARDEN by Frances Hodgson Burnett. That was a cloyingly sweet if unconvincing moral tale for children. Perhaps sensing the mood of the country is moving back to the same sort of sympathies it had at that time, Warner Brothers is again adapting one of Burnett's stories, this one--A LITTLE PRINCESS--has been done twice before, once with Mary Pickford in 1917 and again

with Shirley Temple in 1939. I will say at the outset that this is not the kind of story that does much for me, It is not that I do not like children's films, but Caroline Thompson's excellent BLACK BEAUTY is much closer to what would appeal to me. In spite of the fact that that film is a story told by a horse, I found it far more touching and believable than this exaggerated and contrived tale. A far better treatment of similar themes was in another example of a better children's film THE JOURNEY OF NATTY GANN.

As with THE SECRET GARDEN, this film opens with a young girl brought up in India but having to return to her native country. In this case it is imaginative Sara Crewe (Liesel Matthews) who loves the tales she has been told from the Ramayana. But it is 1914 and called to war is Sara's widower father (Liam Cunningham, who also plays the blue-skinned Prince Rama in the too few dramatized sequences from the Ramayana). Sara is placed in Minchin School for Girls in New York. The school is ruled over by the very repressed and autocratic Miss Minchin (Eleanor Bron, veteran of films going back to the great BEDAZZLED). Minchin is clearly jealous of the advantages that wealth has brought Sara. But the audience knows that Sara's popularity is the result of her story-telling ability which she uses to enliven the lives of the other students. Sara believes that a happy fantasy is better than a grim reality. When Sara's fortunes are reversed, however, Miss Minchin is quick to turn Sara from a pampered student into a cruelly used slave. Sara is forced to give up her studies and work in the school instead. Still Sara has the ability to make and keep friends including the other girls at the school and (from across the way) the enigmatic Indian servant Ram Dass (Errol Sitahol) and his monkey called--what else?--Hanuman, after the king of monkeys from the Ramayana.

Top billing goes to Eleanor Bron with a Frankensteinian shock of gray hair. Second billing goes to Liam Cunningham as the slightly too good to be true father. Liesel Matthews, who carries the film, must be content with third billing because she is a child and a newcomer. Almost all to the other cast members are unfamiliar, but the acting is uniformly good.

A LITTLE PRINCESS, like THE SECRET GARDEN, wants to be a moral tale but falls more into the realm of kiddie film noir. It is not her virtue that saves Sara. Coincidence is what saves her. And her virtues are a big part of what gets her into the trouble in the first place. The film does, to its credit, show some of the value of imagination. The villainous Miss Minchin is trying to eradicate any imagination from her girls. Yet it is the escape that comes from the imagination that the girls really need. This would be a very interesting film to see paired with Peter Jackson's HEAVENLY CREATURES.

Mexican director Alfonso Cuaron gives the film a nice feel for a New York girls' school of the time (though actually the novel was

set in an English girls' school). His film most comes alive when he is portraying scenes from the Ramayana and he seriously might consider lengthier dramatizations of that epic work. He gets some details wrong. My wife noticed that his map of World War I Europe included a Yugoslavia that would not come into existence until after the war. His depiction of gas warfare might be strong stuff for children if they really understood what they were seeing.

But the biggest fault is this. A LITTLE PRINCESS is a superbly contrived story in which a young girl seems destined to be badly punished for being intelligent and imaginative. Then the extremely unsubtle hand of the author reaches out and saves the poor girl at the last possible moment by a series of unconvincing and nearly impossible coincidences. There is little doubt that in the real world Sara would not have been so fortunate. Boy, am I glad I didn't read this one when I was young and impressionable.

I am afraid that I am just not destined to like any film based on Frances Hodgson Burnett books. This was only a little better than THE SECRET GARDEN and I give it a low +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.  
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#### 6. CHANDRAMUKHI (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule: An odd mixture of BIG, SHE, and E.T. in a story of a boy suddenly aged to a man by magic, a celestial goddess, evil spirits, gangsters, and a lost African civilization. The total effect is more than the sum of its parts.

Well, to start with, much of what I say here is purely conjecture. I am writing about a Hindi film made for the Indian market that was not subtitled. (In what follows I am not talking about Hindi films intended for an international market like those of Satyajit Ray. I am speaking of the sort of film that makes up the huge volume of entertainment films made for neighborhood theaters in India.) For

someone who does not speak Hindi, this means that enjoying the film requires some guesswork ... but not nearly as much as you might think. It requires a lot less guesswork than would watching a non-subtitled Chinese film, for example. A Hindi film will almost always have a surprising amount of English in the dialogue. Certainly it is enough to give clues every now and then of what is going on. A character will use a phrase like "half-breed" or "Chinese torture." Also, the plots are not difficult to figure out. Indian domestic films are aimed rather low with fairly simple plots, often carried by action. Every film is a musical--approximately every half hour there is a big production number.

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Most are in large part comedies--even if the rest of the film is suspense or horror. When seen in theaters almost all run about ten minutes shy of three hours but have a ten-minute intermission. When traveling in India, I recommend taking in a film or two as an alternative to sightseeing in the hot sun while being chased by aggressive touts. You may learn more than you might expect about Indian culture. CHANDRAMUKHI was a film I went to see in India, but it had finished its run and we ended up seeing DAALAL instead. I probably would have enjoyed CHANDRAMUKHI more since it is more fun than any of the films I did see. This is not to say it is actually good. For quality of filmmaking it is roughly on a par with our SANTA CLAUS CONQUERS THE MARTIANS. And that is not intended as a dig. Standards and audiences are very different in India.

In any case, do not take what I say about this film as being absolutely true since holes are filled in with conjecture and inference. But here is what the plot seems to be....

The film opens with gangsters making a plot of some sort. From context, it is probably plans for a kidnapping. Also, we appear not to be in India but in East Africa someplace; it looks like Kenya. The scene flashes to some boys living in the Indian community who are friends and ride their bicycles together looking at the wildlife. One of the boys is Raja.

The scene flashes to an alien world or heaven--I am not sure which--where we see some celestial beings. It is not clear if they are



supposed to be aliens or something supernatural, but they are sufficiently advanced that from our perspective they are magical in one way or another. I will assume they are magical and supernatural. One female, Chandramukhi, goes flying. She has the flowing silk dress you might associate with a Chinese goddess, at least in a Hong Kong film. But I mean she really goes flying ... without benefit of any equipment ... like Superman ... and runs afoul of some sort of flying demon--we will see more of him later--who shoves her to make her fall. Fall she does, all the way to our planet.

Upon landing she is chased by the criminals for some reason you need to understand Hindi to follow, but she is discovered by Raja. So the story comes down to one of the title character using magic (in the tradition of "Bewitched") and helping the kids against the gangsters. And she is a good ally to have. She shoots magical rays from her eyes; among the things she does is make angry people meek and friendly, not unlike Obi-Wan Kenobi, By just gesturing she cleans up Raja's bedroom. Then when she is hungry she eats telekinetically.

Does all this seem a little simplistic? Is this not enough plot for you? Okay, she magically ages Raja to an adult. Now he has to

come to terms with an adult body as well as gangsters. At the same time. The makers of this film apparently knew that they had almost three hours to fill and were more concerned about the danger of letting the story slow down than about making its being difficult to believe. Indian neighborhood audiences want a good time, not a whole lot of credibility in a film story. There are some nice whimsical touches that come across the language barrier. One of the gangsters is half Indian and half English so calls himself "a half-breed." And being a half breed he dresses like Horst Bucholtz in THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN. But that is still not all, since I have not even mentioned the lost civilization that captures everybody. This script is not one that anyone would call restrained.

What can you say about the style of a Hindi film? This is a film that has had everything lavished on it but money. The special

effects are poor even by American TV standards. Generally a scratch on the film is used for a ray blast. Martial arts skills are created, brazenly cheating, by running the film backwards. The only things polished are the musical numbers. That is pretty close to par for a Hindi film. Indian audiences demand big musical sequences in every film, some to sing along and some to go out for snacks. This film has a whole production number before the opening credits.

CHANDRAMUKHI is a film you have to meet halfway, like most Indian domestic films, If you catch it in when you are in the right mood, it can be fun. And it may tell you more about Indian culture than you expect. [-mrl]

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Every government is run by liars and nothing they say should be believed.

-- I. F. Stone