

huge run in the black stocking of the nighttime sky. Right, that's what the pictures made it look like. This was going to re-energize a generation and get it thinking about going up there themselves. Maybe they could go barreling around the solar system if this chunk of ice could. So what happened? Nearly nothing. This thing was a

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bigger letdown than the Kevin Costner WYATT EARP. A whole generation was left standing there saying "that was it???"

So the man behind the curtain said this was just not good enough. He was going to arrange a new comet. Comet Kohoutek. The name sounds like an Inuit word. And that was appropriate since it was just a ball of ice. Comets are ice that shines like fire. Like the ice and fire of Ragnarok. And that is appropriate since comets themselves have been considered messengers of despair, destruction, and doom. But each generation gets only one warning and we were already scheduled to get a Millennium. So Kohoutek turned out to be something less than a flash in the pan.

Now we have what is supposed to be the greatest comet in twenty years. Not like the comet of the century, Kohoutek, but better. Kohoutek was the comet of the century but was a disappointment. Then again, for many of us the century was a disappointment also. This is even better and as this is being published it is in the night sky. The official name is Comet C/1996 B2 but its friends call it Comet Hyakutake. Never heard of it? Well nobody had until January 31 Japanese date, but it was still January 30 here. On January 30 Universal Time (Greenwich Mean Time), a Japanese amateur astronomer named Yuji Hyakutake from Hayato-machi, Aira-gun, Kagoshima-ken, Japan, was looking at the stars with jumbo binoculars and saw the thing. It may have been seen before that, but if so it was about 7000 B.C.E. when jumbo binoculars were much scarcer than today. But if anyone saw it then, they didn't make notes. I bet it was impressive then. It won't be this time. This time you might just see it if you know where to look. But probably not. [-mrl]

2. RUNAWAY TIME by Deborah Gordon (Avon, ISBN 0-380-77759-2, 1995, 404pp, US\$5.50) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

Sara Maravich goes back from our future to 1865 to try to save Lincoln. She arrives late, however, and instead falls in love with Tyson Stone (a.k.a. Thomas Jefferson Reid). This is basically a historical romance; the alternate history aspect is dealt with mainly by people from the future returning to the past and talking about it. (Apparently, anyone who sees a time traveler go back remembers both the "original" future and the changed one.)

There was one glaring anachronism: Reid talks about Maravich sleeping like a vampire in the daytime. While there was some notion of vampires at that time, the concept did not achieve widespread popularity until after Bram Stoker wrote DRACULA at the end of the century.

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The two alternate history romances I reviewed earlier at least had the virtue of showing the reader a changed world. (One was Maura Seger's PERCHANCE TO DREAM, in which the Confederacy wins the Civil War; the other was Seger's FORTUNE'S TIDE, in which the American Revolution fails.) This one is just a time-travel romance set in the post-Civil War period with a few references to possible changes somewhere down the line, and is not recommended for alternate history fans. [-ecl]

3. IT CAME FROM THE DRIVE-IN edited by Norman Partridge (DAW, ISBN 0-88677-680-5, 1996, 320pp, US\$5.50) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

I am a big fan of 1950s science fiction films, and married to an even bigger one. (In fact, he is embarked on a project of re-watching every 1950s science fiction film, one every Saturday night.) So when I saw this I thought it would be great.

Unfortunately, I had forgotten all those other 1950s films: the

juvenile delinquent films, the Westerns, and so on. And I had forgotten that the drive-ins lasted into the 1960s and 1970s with films considerably worse. (Indeed, there are still drive-ins today, and who knows what they are running?) Too many of the authors seem to have taken these as inspiration, rather than the films I remember so fondly.

There are a few of good stories here. Gregory Nicoll's "Underground Atlanta," while having no connection to drive-ins other than the most tenuous similarity to 1970s horror films, is an interesting concept. And the Nina Kiriki Hoffman and the Steve Rasnic Tem stories have their moments. But the rest seem as unmemorable as the drive-in fare they commemorate. Maybe if I had been a more frequent patron of drive-ins I would appreciate them more, but as it stands I cannot recommend this anthology. [-ecl]

4. FARGO (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule: This is a real winner of a crime film from the Coen Brothers. It has some violence, a little comedy, and a fair amount of realism in this story of the ever-widening chaos that results from a mock kidnapping. The story is structured a lot like an episode of "Columbo" with Frances McDormand as a pregnant police chief whose kindergarten teacher mannerisms and

attitudes conceal a razor-sharp mind. Rating:
high +2 (-4 to +4)

Joel and Ethan Coen have gone slightly eccentric in their last two films. With the exception of some work with Sam Raimi, they initially came to the public's attention with BLOOD SIMPLE in 1984. Since then they made RAISING ARIZONA, MILLER'S CROSSING, BARTON FINK, and THE HUDSUCKER PROXY. One after another was both a popular and critical success. But THE HUDSUCKER PROXY was just a little too weird, like a surreal, cartoonish imitation of Frank

Capra films, and it was their first critical failure. To prove that they still have what it takes they have returned with a film similar in style to BLOOD SIMPLE with the same realistic approach but with more style. FARGO is likely to be a real winner for the Coen Brothers.

Our story takes place in Minnesota and North Dakota. Jerry Lundegaard (played by William H. Macy) is an unsavory wheeler-dealer who cheats on every human transaction he can manage, sometimes a little, sometimes a lot. As the film opens he is arranging to have his wife Jean (Kristin Rudrud) kidnapped so his wealthy father-in-law will pay the ransom. Lundegaard expects to split the ransom with the kidnappers and have the money for a land deal. Hired for the job are two thugs, the irascible Carl Showalter (Steve Buscemi) and the quiet but violent Gaear Grimsrud (Peter Stormare). Once the kidnapping has taken place things get out of hand. Police chief Marge Gunderson (Francis McDormand) gets involved investigating.

In a film of interesting characterizations, McDormand's Gunderson stands out. It is strange to see a pregnant woman as a police chief. It is even stranger to find a police chief with cloying over-enthusiastic mannerisms as if she is teaching Ding-Dong School. She is the sort of woman who answers a simple how-are-you? with "I'm doing REALLY SUPER!" But put her at the scene of a crime and that is just what she does, super. In moments she has a sophisticated forensic analysis. Her straight-arrow approach is in stark contrast to the habitually scamming character played by William H. Macy, everybody's worst nightmare of a car salesman. Somewhat more familiar is Buscemi's irascible and nasty smalltime hood getting a shot at bigger things. But the Coen Brothers have a talent for creating memorable characters even from people in small walk-on parts. A cashier with an odd smile and a rubber-faced prostitute each make unexpectedly interesting camera studies.

And not just the characters are interesting. Even a lunch pulled from a buffet adds texture to the film. Joel Coen gambles he can make interesting some unconventional subjects of shots and more often than not he is right. The Coen Brothers seem to have wanted to make a real document of life in a deep, cold Minnesota winter. It is as if the two Texas-born filmmakers wanted to get it all on

film once so they would never have to return. It is hard to blame them. The cold of the snowy environment pervades the whole film. People are walking through snow, constantly tripping, trying to get to their cars and scrape windshields. People talk to each other from inside cave-like fur hoods.

Carter Burwell's score works, but seems strangely unconventional. The main theme sounds more appropriate for some sort of historical epic, though perhaps it could also fit the epic struggle of against the elements in the cold Northern winter. This is a film with some heavy violence and some good humor. (One of the best laughs is in the closing credits. Be warned, early risers.) Also notice that there seems to be a little study of how different people use and react to profanity. This is an audience-pleaser that rates a high +2 on the -4 to +4 scale. [-mrl]

5. Boskone 33 (a convention report by Evelyn C. Leeper with a section by Mark R. Leeper) (part 3 of 6):

Books We Love That Aren't SF
Sunday, 10:00AM
Bruce Coville, Peter J. Heck, Mark Keller,
Katya Reimann, Faye Ringel (m)

[Note to the hotel liaison--the chandeliers in this room rattle with the slightest vibration.]

Heck began by saying that since he was working on three-book mystery series with Mark Twain as the major character (DEATH ON THE MISSISSIPPI, A CONNECTICUT YANKEE IN CRIMINAL COURT, and THE PRINCE AND THE PROSECUTOR), anything by Twain was on his reading list.

Reimann said she enjoyed Boris Pasternak's DR. ZHIVAGO and Bernard Cornwell's "Sharpe" series. She didn't like the Patrick O'Brien series, however, because while they are superficially authentic, they are obnoxious in more subtle ways. Since her dissertation was on seafaring and pirate narratives of the period, she has some knowledge in this area.

The panelists noted that many science fiction fans read historical fiction. Keller thinks this is because it has the same things that grab us about science fiction and fantasy: a different environment, and characters think about things differently. Keller himself likes George MacDonald Fraser's "Flashman" series (based on "Tom Brown's Schooldays") and James Clavell's Asian series. He also likes Cornwell, and (in spite of Reimann's comments) O'Brien. (Perhaps it is true that a little learning is a dangerous thing,

but drinking deep from the Pierian spring doesn't always solve everything either.)

Coville said that he finds himself shifting to reading non-fiction, because he finds it the best source of story ideas; he particularly likes biographies. Heck also likes biographies and has recently read two of Darwin, one of Einstein, one of Hubbell, and LONGITUDE by Dava Sobel (about the longitude problem in general and John Harrison in particular). Someone said that there is another book about John Harrison that just came out as well.

Keller said that while some fans are big on New Age stuff, others are fascinated by detail and read about the history of science instead. He observed that essayists still exist in popular science where they have disappeared from other disciplines, and gave as examples David Cuomen (from OUTSIDE magazine), Diane Ackerman, Stephen Jay Gould, and Isaac Asimov.

Coville said that there are fans who have read everything and remember it all, but if one wanted to be more specific, fans like books that aren't science fiction, but feel like science fiction. Coville's favorite books in last few years include Robert McCammon's BOY'S LIFE, Toni Morrison's BELOVED, A. S. Byatt's POSSESSION (Byatt also did ANGELS AND INSECTS), Lawrence Norfolk's LEMPRIERE'S DICTIONARY, William Browning Spencer's ZOD WALLOP, and Greg Maguire's WICKED: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE WICKED WITCH OF THE WEST.

Keller, noting the recurrence of BELOVED on people's lists, said that mainstream reviewers won't admit Vladimir Nabakov's ADA or Toni Morrison's BELOVED *are* science fiction. Heck added that Joe Haldeman's 1968 falls between the cracks as well, and I would include Mark Helprin and some of E. L. Doctorow.

Ringel said (apropos of not much that had come before) that her pet peeve is that most people don't read anything written before their time. Heck said because of his writing he has been reading Mark Twain, George Washington Cable, and Rudyard Kipling; he particularly recommended KIM. (Someone mentioned that Timeri Murari had written two sequels to KIM. I could find a listing for

one, THE IMPERIAL AGENT.) People said they particularly liked Twain's non-fiction, especially CHRISTIAN SCIENCE.

Coville said he was "relatively anal-retentive," and so keeps a record of what he has read and a plan of what to read. (Doesn't everyone?) Apparently he had shown this to his fellow panelists, and Ringel said she hasn't see such a random selection since Brandeis's library's "uncategorized" shelves. (Maybe next year there should be a reading list swap, where everyone brings copy of their previous year's reading list, they all get thrown into a box, and then everyone pulls one out at random for ideas of what to read

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the next year.)

As far as non-science fiction books with science fiction sensibilities, Coville said he was disappointed in E. L. Doctorow's WATERWORKS, Peter Ackroyd's TRIAL OF ELIZABETH CREE, and William Hjortsberg's NEVERMORE (with Arthur Conan Doyle and Harry Houdini as a team of detectives).

One audience member said she disliked medieval novels which the author assumes medieval Catholic theology is the same as today's Catholic theology. One of the panelists noted that Cecelia Holland was the first to have an illiterate heroine. Before her it was felt that all the heroines had to be literate, no matter how unlikely that was for their historical period. Ringel said than Evan Rhodes's CHILDREN'S CRUSADE is full of howlers, such as characters eating an omelette with tomatoes and potatoes, references to "Gothic" and "Romanesque" architecture, a troupe of Yiddish players, etc. Keller said that Louis L'Amour couldn't do background at all, and had characters say things like, "In about two hundred years, these people are going to become the Mongols, aren't they?" On the other hand, Larry McMurty does background well, in both his "Lonesome Dove" series and in TRUE GRIT. Coville reminded us that what people "know" that isn't true is often a problem in historical fiction. He also talked about Austen Lee (a descendent of Jane Austen), who wrote a version of EMMA in which she carefully used the vocabulary of the early 19th century, but the sentence structure, etc., was still all late 20th century. As he said, computers make it possible to get the vocabulary right

easily, but the rest of it is tougher.

Someone recommended Zoe Oldenbourg's GOODNESS STAR (for which I could find no listing in BOOKS IN PRINT).

Keller said his "Guilty Pleasures" included New Age books and Christian prediction books: "It's fun to read through these because you can feel so superior to their other readers." People also talked about UFO books ("you see that aliens now are the elves etc. who used to abduct people") and recommended the urban legend books by Jan Brunvand.

Coville recommended William Goldman's STREET (for which I could find no listing in BOOKS IN PRINT) and COLOR OF LIGHT, Annie Dillard's AMERICAN CHILDHOOD, John Berendt's MIDNIGHT IN THE GARDEN OF GOOD AND EVIL, Douglas Coupland's MICROSERFS, Jerome K. Jerome's THREE MEN AND A BOAT, David Guterson's SNOW FALLING ON CEDARS, and P. J. O'Rourke. Heck suggested the topic "books with which I've embarrassed myself on public transportation" (by laughing so loud) and named Carl Hiassen's books, and David Lodge's SMALL WORLD: AN ACADEMIC ROMANCE and others. Ringel suggested Jane Smiley's MOO and Malcolm Bradbury's MENSANGE (for which I could find no listing in BOOKS IN PRINT).

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[to be continued] [-ecl]

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Sanity is a cozy lie.

--Susan Sontag

