Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
Club Notice - 04/19/96 -- Vol. 14, No. 42

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

Unless otherwise stated, all meetings are in the Middletown
cafeteria Wednesdays at noon.

DATE TOPIC

04/19 Linda Zimmerman talk; Forging a Nation. Fri, 8PM
Borders Books, Wayne, NJ
04/21 Writer's Critique Group, Sun 3PM
DeParto home, Lyndhurst, NJ
04/21 Cynthia Soroka seminar, Sun, 2PM
Barnes & Noble, Ledgewood, NJ
04/26 Special Activity: Dinner & Ice Cream, Fri, 7PM
Terri's/Scoop deVille, Ramsey, NJ
05/11 Author William McCay @ S.F.A.B.C. meeting. Sat, 8PM
Saddle River Cultural Center,
Upper Saddle River, NJ
06/25 JEOPARDY (starring our own Rob Mitchell) (check local TV listings)

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.

MT Chair: Mark Leeper MT 3F-434 908-957-5619 mleeper@lucent.com
HO Chair: John Jetzt MT 2E-530 908-957-5087 jetzt@lucent.com
HO Librarian: Nick Sauer HO 4F-427 908-949-7076 njs@lucent.com
MT Librarian: Mark Leeper MT 3F-434 908-957-5619 mleeper@lucent.com
Distinguished Heinlein Apologist:
Rob Mitchell MT 2D-536 908-957-6330 rlmitchell1@lucent.com
Factotum: Evelyn Leeper MT 1F-337 908-957-2070 eleeper@lucent.com
Backissues available at http://www.mt.att.com/~ecl/MTVOID/backissues.html
or http://sf.www.lysator.liu.se/sf_archive/sf-texts/MT_Void/.

1. URL of the week: Terry Bisson Story Showcase at http://www.greyware.com/authors/tbisson/. Contains information about and stories by the author. [-ecl]



==========

2. Honest to gosh, I saw this ad. There was a sign out on Route 9 for a realtor showing a woman--she looked like a bleached blond--and next to her was the caption "Houses don't sell themselves. That's what I do." At least I think she was a realtor. [-mrl]

==========

3. Last time I was talking about how rating movies basically forced them to put in more sex and violence. Well, Heisenberg said you cannot measure a particle without affecting it. And that certainly is true of rating entertainment.

What is the answer? I don't know. But rating TV programs is a hair-of-the-dog sort of solution and it won't work any better than it did with movies. It will just force TV producters to put in more sex and violence to get a lucrative rating. Labeling a fruit as forbidden does not make it one iota less tempting. Sure, it may warn a few parents to lock it up, but what good does that do? It only makes the fruit more forbidden and more tempting. It is a can't win for losing sort of problem. I think part of the problem is this country's new-found love of martial arts is convincing more people that violence is the entertainment of choice. Science fiction films have martial arts. Horror films have martial arts. The country is going nuts for films about people beating up people. There is a certain romantic feel to this whole folklore of disciplines and secret fighting techniques.

Maybe part of the answer is to try to explode the myth that because martial arts require discipline that they are in some way noble. The Cosa Nostra also fosters discipline in their ranks. So did Hitler's Brown Shirts. What makes a discipline noble is its cause,

not its effectiveness. Martial arts may not have as bad a cause as the Brown Shirts or the Cosa Nostra, since their cause was to give power to the wrong people. But martial arts are not so hot either. They are actually discipline without any cause at all. If they are not immoral, they are certainly amoral. If they have a cause, it is making its practitioners the meanest SOBs on the block. And what a triumph that would be, huh? I am not a big fan of the NRA--by ANYBODY's definition--but it looks to me like hypocrisy to condemn the NRA and at the same time to take the kids to martial arts class or for adults to go themselves. What is the difference between learning how to shoot and learning how to kick? That isn't taking a moral stand; it is only making a choice of weapons.

Now I have two close friends who are black belts. (Maybe it would be more accurate to say I had two close friends when I started this article. For all i know I may be trading two friends for two or more kicks in the head.) And I am pleased for my friends getting



black belts if they have accomplished something that they really want. I congratulate them to the same degree and with the same sincerity as I would if they had been working for years and built a beautiful and detailed scale model of Westminster Abbey out of match sticks and glue. It is quite an accomplishment. But is the world a better place for all the effort that has been put into the achievement? Who has benefited from all the all the work and effort and all that discipline? What new ideas have been given to the world? Perhaps the person is a little healthier for the exercise but whether or not that makes the world a better place is a moot point. Maybe I just don't appreciate the pride that goes with the ability to kick somebody in the head in the best and most beautiful way. But every time I go to my local strip mall and see kids in those pajama-like uniforms playfully kicking at each other I wonder what use this time has been put to. I am not keen on para-military groups like the Boy Scouts, but at least they try to stress community service. What do these storefront dojos stress except the power to be efficiently destructive? What kind of values are those? But it does serve to excite kids about the possibility to see how a Steven Seagal, a really mean head kicker, does his thing. He has all the charisma of a brick and most of the acting talent, but he kicks heads with the best of them. [-mrl]

==========

4. JAMES AND THE GIANT PEACH (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

> Capsule: This is a film that is creative and bizarre, but curiously off-center and unengaging. Disney Studios and Tim Burton bring Roald Dahl's off-beat children's fantasy about a fantastic trans-Atlantic peach flight to the screen. The film seems to be trying to recapture some of the originality that THE NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS had. However, Caroline Thompson's hand is sadly missed in the writing, and the Randy Newman score lacks the energy that Danny Elfman would have given it. There is nothing memorable at all about the songs. JAMES AND THE GIANT PEACH is more a curiosity than an entertainment. Rating: 0 (-4 to +4)

Tim Burton makes two types of films. One type has plots that are concatenations of really odd scenes, strong on visual composition, but without much story to glue the scenes together. His other type of films are the ones written by Caroline Thompson. Thompson has a way of sewing together weird images into a story that has emotional impact. JAMES AND THE GIANT PEACH is an attempt to follow up the excellent THE NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS with another weird



animation piece. Perhaps this time Thompson was off directing her terrific adaptation of BLACK BEAUTY. Or perhaps producer Burton may have felt he did not need Thompson's story since he was adapting a book by Roald Dahl and only needed to turn it into a script. In any case her hand is sorely missed in this film of an animated boy and friends who seem to be magical giant versions of garden "pests."

Watching the film, the viewer is never quite sure where the plot is going in this story with its plot turns that border on a

psychedelic dream with a slight fairy tale quality. As the story opens, James is a very contented and well-adjusted little live-action boy. He is living happily with his loving parents who promise to take him from England to see New York City. Then they are suddenly eaten by a mysterious mystical rhinoceros. James is forced to go live with his two aunts, overly-painted grotesques who seem to hate children and garden pests about equally. James, on the other hand, rather likes spiders and other creepy- crawlies. His aunts feed him on fish heads and place him in virtual slavery while they sit around each day admiring themselves and finding ways to make James more miserable. Luckily, however, a mysterious man gives James some magical green glowing crocodile tongues which when accidentally dropped cause a tree to sprout a peach the size of a house. (I'm really not making this up, you know!) When the peach opens a hole, James goes in and turns into an animated boy who meets friends who are a spider, a centipede, a grasshopper, a ladybug, and a worm. When the peach gets loose and rolls into the sea, James is off to try to find New York City with the enthusiastic animals he has met. Along the way the crew has to fight dangers like mechanical sharks.

Paul Terry has the title role (well, at least the first half of the title) and is the main character, but being a child gets eighth billing. He gets his revenge by having absolutely no voice when called on to sing, though he does just fine in the acting scenes. Top billing goes to major actors who voiced the animated creatures in the peach, not that they are really there for anything but marquee value. The voices are Simon Callow as the erudite Grasshopper; Richard Dreyfuss as the cigar-chomping, low-brow centipede; Jane Leeves as the Ladybug; Susan Sarandon as the resourceful spider; and David Thewlis (of NAKED and RESTORATION) as the Earthworm. The writing gives none of these creatures much personality beyond funny voices and only the most threadbare of characterizations. A little better characterization goes to Joanna Lumley and Miriam Margolyes as the two aunts, though that is perhaps because we get to see them in live-action. Also a cameo role goes to Jack Skellington, the main character of THE NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS.

The film does better with its visualization than it does with its story, but those who were hoping for the detailed careful work of

THE NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS will be disappointed. The animation in that film was a genuine tour-de-force, with something interesting happening in just about every corner of the screen in nearly every frame. There were a lot of throw-away humor and clever ideas in the animation that is just missing from the animation scenes here. The live-action scenes have some very nice stylized sets. Even in the animation scenes there is a great variety of visual styles from scene to scene. Be warned there is a lot in this film that younger children may find frightening. There is a lot that the adults in the audience will find unusual, but much of it just does not quite work. (Be aware there is one more bizarre little final scene for those who sit though the credits.)

The story of JAMES AND THE GIANT PEACH is unusual and creative, often a stylistic plus, but here there just is not very much to chew on in the story and nobody to really care about. It is hard to imagine that the loss that James suffers at the beginning of the film is in any degree offset by what James gains in the course of the film. The story, which I am told varies a great deal from the book, just is not a very good one. I rate this film, on the basis of some of the more interesting visuals, a 0 on the -4 to +4 scale. [-mrl]

==========

5. BIBLE STORIES FOR ADULTS by James Morrow (Harcourt Brace, ISBN 0-15-600244-2, 1996, 243pp, US$12) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

Everyone needs their traditions. For me, these include reading Kim Stanley Robinson's "'History of the Twentieth Century, with Illustrations'" on New Year's Eve and James Morrow's "Bible Stories for Adults, No. 31: The Covenant" on Passover.

Now the problem is that I'll end up reading all the other stories in this volume at the same time.

This is a *great* collection.

There are twelve stories in this book. Four are Morrow's traditional "Bible Stories for Adults": Numbers 17 (The Deluge), 20 (The Tower), 31 (The Covenant), and 46 (The Soap Opera). The other eight have varying degrees of connection to the Bible. In his preface, Morrow categorizes these and gives what he sees as the connections between them and the Bible or religion. While there is obviously some validity in what he says, there are other connections to be drawn as well. For example, while "The Confessions of Ebenezer Scrooge" may ask, as Morrow says, "whether charity alone can exorcise the demons that drive monopoly capitalism," it also serves as a companion piece to "Bible Stories

for Adults, Number 46: The Soap Opera," examining justification. Or perhaps it connects to "Bible Stories for Adults, Number 20: The Covenant," looking at what motivates human behavior.

Is "Daughter Earth" a miniature version of "Diary of a Mad Diety"--or is it the other way around? Morrow says that "The Assemblage of Kristin" looks at the mystery of consciousness, but it's also about death and resurrection. If Morrow's traditional "Bible Stories' are telling us that we have gotten it all wrong, what is he trying to say with "Spelling God with the Wrong Blocks"?

And to be honest, one might ask what "Known But to God and Wilbur Hines," "Abe Lincoln in McDonald's," or "Arms and the Woman" have to do with Bible stories. On the other hand, they're great stories, so who cares? (In fact, I was surprised to discover that the only award nomination for these stories was a Nebula nomination [and win] for "Bible Stories for Adults, No. 17: The Deluge." There are at least a couple of other stories which are at least as good as anything nominated in their years.)

Morrow manages to put into words feelings that many readers will recognize that they had but never formalized. The most obvious example (to me) is "Bible Stories for Adults, No. 46: The Soap Opera," where he looks at the real meaning of the story of Job and comes to a conclusion that will have many readers shouting, "Right on!" And maybe this is what connects all these stories: their ability to make us look at what we have always been taught and ask what it really means and if it's really true. In this context, even the stories that seem at first unconnected fall into place as examinations of beliefs and belief systems. What motivates the people in all these stories is a belief system, perhaps not Biblical, but certainly ones that could be labeled religious. And Morrow shows us that these belief systems have implications that many proponents would prefer to gloss over. (If I were to suggest a companion piece for these stories, it might well be Mark Twain's "War Prayer.")

I've avoided saying too much about the stories themselves, because I feel they will have the most impact if you don't know a lot about them beforehand. But I will say that I highly recommend this book.

(I suppose I should provide a caveat here. If you are distressed by a frank look at your religious beliefs, you may not find this to your tastes. But then, you probably knew that.) Also being reprinted by Harcourt Brace at the same time is Morrow's novel ONLY BEGOTTEN DAUGHTER, the perfect companion piece for this collection. [-ecl]

==========



6. THE LAST MAN by Mary Shelley (Bantam Classic, ISBN 0-553-21436-5, 1826 [1994], 499pp, US$5.50) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

While everyone else was re-issuing Mary Shelley's FRANKENSTEIN to coincide with the release of Kenneth Branagh's MARY SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN (and indeed there was even Leonore Fleischer's MARY SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN, the novelization--think about it), Bantam published Shelley's other science fiction novel, THE LAST MAN. My suspicion is that not a lot of people ran right out and picked it up. First of all, it was in Bantam's "classics" series, so if bookstores ordered it at all it was put in the "Fiction" section, or the "Literature" section if they subdivide it further. (How do they determine what is literature and what is "merely" fiction?) And then its cover had a small reproduction of a painting of a pastoral English countryside, rather than a hideous monster with stitches and bolts glaring out at you. And finally a quick flip through would show that the specific science fiction element--a world-wide plague--doesn't even appear until most of the way through the book. (On the up side, if Mary Shelley is checking her sales from the astral plane, her books are quite popular in women's studies courses, so there is a market.)

The book starts in 2073. We know this because Shelley (in the voice of the narrator) tells us this. Otherwise we would have no idea, because the world that Shelley describes is that of 1823 when she was writing it. Oh, there are a few changes. People travel in airships (the Montgolfiers had already flown their balloons by

1823). And someone goes as ambassador to the "Northern States of America" (page 254). (Mark claims this last is pretty impressive in predicting the Civil War, but I suspect people could see it coming even then.) But the social structure of England is as it was in 1823, with power held by the monarch rather than by Parliament and elected officials. And people still get around on horses. And while having a war in the Balkans may sound very 21st Century these days, the war Shelley describes is the same war that Byron fought in, with the noble Greeks trying to gain their independence from the evil Turks. (And the war is fought in the same way, with the families of the officers following the troops to Greece and then staying at nearby villages while the troops marched off to formal battles.)

Much of the first two-thirds of the novel is a study of the social structure and attitudes of Shelley's own time, and works only if one reads it as a historical novel set in Shelley's time rather than a novel set in our future. But when the plague arrives, the novel becomes as convincing as a futuristic tale as such other "disaster" novels as EARTH ABIDES and ON THE BEACH. The style is still that of the early nineteenth century, of course, but the images of death and the decline of civilization are as vivid and enthralling as in any modern novel.



Is THE LAST MAN as good as FRANKENSTEIN? In the sense that the latter has been continuously in print in inexpensive editions for as long as I can remember (and quite possibly for over a hundred years before that) and has had an inestimable effect on science fiction (and horror), while the former has been almost inaccessible for much of that time and has had no identifiable effect, the answer has to be no. But if read without considering the context of subsequent authors, and considering the books as mainstream fiction rather than science fiction per se, THE LAST MAN is certainly a more polished, more considered, and more mature work than FRANKENSTEIN, and well worth the reading. I have to wonder what Shelley's other novels (VALPERGA, LODORE, and FALKNER) are like, but since they are not science fiction, they are probably totally unavailable. [-ecl]

==========

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

Why Do SF Fans Love Jane Austen?
Sunday, 1:00PM
Rosemary Edghill (Eluki bes Shahar), Esther M. Friesner,
Debra Doyle, Teresa Nielsen Hayden (m)

The panel had its share of academics: both Doyle and Friesner have their doctorates. (On the other hand, Nielsen Hayden revealed that a certain editor at Tor is actually a high school drop-out, proving that formal education is not an infallible guide to success or intelligence.) Friesner's degree is in medieval Spanish (that explains her stories set in that milieu, such as "Such a Deal"). Friesner has also written an alternate Austen story ("Jane's Fighting Ships") and a BEM story in Austen's voice ("Pride and Prescience"). She claims that Lope de Vega should be a science fiction author's role model: "It's very difficult to whisper sweet nothings in Anglo-Saxon."

Friesner claimed that many Jane Austen novels can be generated by a simple computer program: boy meets girl, boy loses girl, girl sees boy's real estate, boy gets girl. Still, she says, "The language is such a wonderful escape from Beavis and Butthead." She gave the examples: "We fainted alternately upon the sofa" and "You have delighted us long enough." Also, she added, "They dress cool." Someone commented that no one in Jane Austen does laundry; even the folks who are broke have servants. Nielsen Hayden said that the big effort is to avoid dropping class. The stakes are high in a Jane Austen, but even so, people are not going to die, be turned out of their homes, or even go hungry.



It was pointed out that Austen was down-rated because she wrote about domestic issues; Nielsen Hayden says this attitude is gender-centric. She somehow got sidetracked onto a Mark Twain book on Collie Kibber (whom Nielsen Hayden describes as "the worst Poet

Laureate England ever had") in which Twain talks about Suzanna Kibber, who went out to cross-dress and have adventures.

According to the panelists, Rudyard Kipling regarded Austen as the greatest novelist in the English language, and his story, "The Janeites," has World War I soldiers doing a Society for Creative Anachronism sort of group in the trenches based on Austen's period.

Returning to Austen herself, Friesner said, "You've got to love her for the embedded literary criticism," particularly in NORTHANGER ABBEY.

Someone said that Jane Austen's world was a civil world, but that it was also difficult and dangerous. However, this person cited dueling, but the panelists pointed out that there were no legal duels after about 1800. One reference to this was in VARNEY THE VAMPIRE, which has a duel circa 1815, but the winner has to arrange to leave the country. Someone noted that SENSE AND SENSIBILITY has a duel, but it's very unusual and is kept secret, and honor was satisfied between Brandon and Willoughby without anyone being killed.

Someone else noted that the era was dangerous from a health standpoint, but claimed people were safer without a doctor. One of the panelists said that people who wanted to know what the era was like should read John Carey's EYEWITNESS TO HISTORY, which had a description of a mastectomy without anaesthesia. (Carey's book is a collection of first-person accounts of events, big and small, throughout the ages.)

Someone talked about the long descriptions of wheeled conveyances. One of the panelists said that high- perched phaetons were the equivalent of Ferraris, fast but dangerous.

There was discussion of the impact of new technology, including the drug problem, the drugs being distilled liquors and sugar. For a feel of the era, Fred Lerner recommended THE MEMOIRS OF JACQUES CASANOVA which predates Austen by a few decades. Referring back to health issues, he notes that smallpox is "small" because it is less serious than the pox itself (syphillis). When reading books of the period, "bad blood" is a code phrase for syphillis and "cleansing the blood" refers to cleaning oneself of syphillis. There seems to be a real parallel to AIDS here, according to some.

In talking about what Austen *didn't* write about, someone mentioned the Enclosure Acts, which sent the peasants into the countryside. In terms of what Austen did and didn't write about,

someone suggested a similarity to Tom Wolfe's BONFIRE OF THE VANITIES. Also, most novels written between 1966 and 1970 didn't mention Vietnam, which parallels Austen's (and other period novelists') avoidance of the Napoleonic Wars.

Someone quoted Charlotte Bronte regarding Austen's work: "Where is the picturesque? Where is the Romantic?" (Clearly, Bronte didn't like Austen's work.) Someone else said there was a line of descent from Austen to Anne Bronte, which got Nielsen Hayden fired up about the literary canon and which books have progeny and which don't. One critic apparently described the works of the Brontes with the description "Like the mule, they have neither pride of ancestry nor hope of progeny." Nielsen Hayden said that this sort of argument frequently turned the (MLA) Modern Language Association into something resembling a Wild West gunfighter competition.

This led to a big discussion of canon, core curriculum, etc., which I will not relate here. Friesner (I believe) did note that "richness of invention" is academese for "lots of cool stuff in it," and talked about such works as "Come Back to the Raft, Huck Honey" (discussing the homosexual relationships in THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN). Luckily, she said, this work was counteracted by Frederick Crews's POOH PERPLEX.

Edghill summed up the answer to this panel's question by saying that Austen "describes an alien world compulsively with enormous attention to detail."

Well, that's it. This report is shorter than last year's, but that's partially because I went to fewer panels (in part because of our late arrival). Then again, I may be running out of the energy to do reports the way I could in my youth. :-)

However, with John M. Ford as the Guest of Honor next year, I expect I will be back to my previous level.

T H E E N D

Mark Leeper
MT 3F-434 908-957-5619
mleeper@lucent.com

Scandal is gossip made tedious by morality.
--Oscar Wilde