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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
Club Notice - 08/27/93 -- Vol. 12, No. 9

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

Unless otherwise stated, all meetings are in Holmdel 4N-509
Wednesdays at noon.

_D_A_T_E _T_O_P_I_C

- 09/15 WORLD AT THE END OF TIME by Frederik Pohl
(Modern Stapledonian Fiction)
- 10/06 SARAH CANARY by Karen Joy Fowler (Nebula Nominee)
- 10/27 THE MOON IS A HARSH MISTRESS by Robert A. Heinlein (Classic SF)
- 11/17 BRIAR ROSE by Jane Yolen (Nebula Nominee)
- 12/08 STAND ON ZANZIBAR by John Brunner (Classic SF)
- 01/05 A MILLION OPEN DOORS by John Barnes (Nebula Nominee)
- 01/26 Bookswap

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.

- HO Chair: John Jetzt HO 1E-525 908-834-1563 holly!jetzt
LZ Chair: Rob Mitchell HO 1C-523 908-834-1267 holly!jrrt
MT Chair: Mark Leeper MT 3D-441 908-957-5619 mtgzfs3!leeper
HO Librarian: Nick Sauer HO 4F-427 908-949-7076 homxc!11366ns
LZ Librarian: Lance Larsen LZ 3L-312 908-576-3346 quartet!lfl
MT Librarian: Mark Leeper MT 3D-441 908-957-5619 mtgzfs3!leeper
Factotum: Evelyn Leeper MT 1F-329 908-957-2070 mtgpfs1!ecl
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1. Evelyn is something I have to call "politically iridescent." It is one of the things that makes living with her a constant shower of the unexpected. Sometimes she will rail against political correctness; sometimes she will pull up a piece of foolish dogma as if it is as foundational as Euclid's Elements. We both read _S_i_g_h_t

_o_f_P_r_o_t_e_u_s by Charles Sheffield, a club discussion book, and Evelyn recommended to me the Hugo-nominated story "Even the Queen" by Connie Willis. That was the background for the interchange.

THE MT VOID

Page 2

We were discussing S_i_g_h_t_o_f_P_r_o_t_e_u_s and she asked me if I noticed something wrong with it. Well, I noticed several things wrong, but she picked out one I hadn't noticed. "There are no major female characters."

"Yes?" I said, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"No, that's it. Sheffield didn't put any women in." Now I know that a Shakespearean sonnet is a poem in iambic pentameter that has a rhyme scheme a-b-a-b, c-d-c-d, e-f-e-f, g-g. One of the guys in 11-grade English class asked my teacher what you call a sonnet with the right number of lines and the right meter, but a different rhyme scheme, and he said, "A lousy poem." But this is the first time I have heard that a novel with only male characters is a lousy novel. It is as if there is a quota system for novels that major characters should be half-male, half-female (the mix, not individually, though in S_i_g_h_t_o_f_P_r_o_t_e_u_s, even the other interpretation is possible).

Actually here Evelyn was not quite correct. Oh, at least not factually correct. She was politically correct, which I am sure is the more important, but she was factually incorrect. I later pointed out that in S_i_g_h_t_o_f_P_r_o_t_e_u_s the characters were only in male phase but could also be in female phase. "well, they read like men. They have the shallowness of men." I guess in science fiction the rule has to be extended to say that half the characters behave in shallow stupid ways and have names that are male. Then you have the characters who are heroic and noble and they have names that are female. Why am I reminded that in Imperial China if you were making a piece of art that was going to the emperor, the dragons could have five toes. If they were going to lesser mortals, they could not. Now if I were there I would see what would happen if I had the dragons on my porcelain have six toes! Of course, I probably would not have lasted long in Imperial China.

Emperors, like other staunch advocates of political correctness, have very poor senses of humor.

So anyway, then I started "Even the Queen" and guess what? There is one very minor character named Bysshe and all the rest of the characters are female. So I went to Evelyn in shock and alarm over the fact that she is actually recommending stories that do not have an equal-opportunity mix of genders. And I got hit with the amendment to the first rule: "Even the Queen" is only a short story. S_i_g_h_o_f_P_r_o_t_e_u_s is a whole novel." So like quota systems don't apply to very small businesses, I guess they don't apply to very short works of fiction.

"There are no women in J_o_u_r_n_e_y_t_o_t_h_e_C_e_n_t_e_r_o_f_t_h_e_E_a_r_t_h. Does that make the film version an improvement because they put women in?"

THE MT VOID

Page 3

After a moment she came back with, "Well, Verne is a better writer than Sheffield." Amendment B to rule 1 of gender quotas is fiction must say that good writers are exempt. I asked Evelyn if I had that right. "That's it. Political correctness is the last refuge of the incompetent." Right.

Note to the local board of censorship: To save your checking, this article is about one male and one female. It concerns two authors, one of whom is male and one is female (as far as I know). I accuse myself of writing about only Western Caucasians. I accuse myself of writing only about heterosexuals, but give the excuse that I am writing about a married couple and I wanted to maintain gender balance. I have left open the possibility that the character Evelyn is a man, as the name could apply to either gender. I accuse myself of writing about a male-written novel and only a short story written by a female. I hereby make amends. W_u_t_h_e_r_i_n_g_H_e_i_g_h_t_s.

2. Scott McQuin shares the following with us:

"Sky and Telescope" magazine of August is sponsoring a contest to rename the Big Bang. Timothy Ferris at Berkeley writes a two page essay on why it should be renamed using both scientific, historical and literary arguments. However, the most persuasive argument was the Calvin and Hobbes cartoon in which Calvin Proclaims that scientists are unimaginative and should rename the Big Bang to "The Horrendous Space Kablooiie." Such testimonial evidence clinched the matter for me.

So, if you can't do any better than Calvin, no need to submit. I imagine that the entire scientific community will give consideration to anything over Calvin's offering, however. If you want to have your suggestion considered send your name and suggestion on a postcard (with a brief explanation) to: Sky and Telescope Magazine, P.O. Box 9111, Belmont Ma 02178.

The panel of judges includes Carl Sagan, Hugh Downs and Timothy Ferris.

Let's see, my this should be easy, how about: The Kosmic Krakatoa? The Primaeval Pimple Pop? Gushing Gravitons from the Galactic Goose? Gelatinous Genesis goes Gonzo? Hmmmmm. Maybe this isn't so easy after all. [-ssm]

3. HEART AND SOULS (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule review: In some ways similar to A_l_l_o_f_M_e or A_G_u_y_N_a_m_e_d_J_o_e, H_e_a_r_t_a_n_d_S_o_u_l_s turns out to be a likable and endearing metaphysical fantasy and a real showcase for the physical acting talents of Robert Downey, Jr. If this one catches you in the right mood, it works well. Rating: +2 (-4 to +4).

The light "life after death" fantasy is still with us. You know

the sort of film: T_o_p_p_e_r, A_G_u_y_N_a_m_e_d_J_o_e, S_t_a_i_r_w_a_y_t_o_H_e_a_v_e_n, H_e_r_e C_o_m_e_s_M_r._J_o_r_d_a_n, D_e_f_e_n_d_i_n_g_Y_o_u_r_L_i_f_e, even G_h_o_s_t (though it had darker tones mixed in). They all have a nice, cushy, "death is just a change of state" feel. They were particularly popular during World War II when a comforting view of death was needed.

The latest entry, H_e_a_r_t_a_n_d_S_o_u_l_s, has a surprising degree of charm. We are introduced to four people, each working out his or her life but having unfinished business. Destiny puts them all on the same ill-fated bus which falls off the side of a bridge to avoid crashing into a car. The car just happens to contain a woman giving birth. All four are killed along with the driver, but the souls of the four passengers survive and are somehow metaphysically attached to Thomas Reilly, the baby. They are compelled never to leave Reilly's side. For a while they are visible to the young boy, but when this appears to do more harm than good, they follow him invisibly.

When Reilly becomes a man (played by Robert Downey, Jr.) the souls suddenly find they each have a mission and must appear to, and sometimes physically possess, Reilly.

Our four spirits are Charles Grodin as a singer with stage fright, Alfre Woodard as a woman torn from the children she loved, Tom Sizemore as a small-time hood with an attack of conscience, and Kyra Sedgwick as an overly diffident lover. But Downey outdoes Steve Martin's performance in A_l_l_o_f_M_e, being in turn possessed by the four spirits. Downey prior to C_h_a_p_l_i_n never seemed to have much screen presence. Now he is showing an amazing flair for physical comedy and a tremendous versatility.

There are some problems with the script. All too often American businesses are shown as having one conscienceless cut-throat and a bunch of executives living off his kills. This film falls into that same trap. What is more, the company that Downey's character seems to be liquidating is apparently never save. But in spite of that loose end, this is a likable fantasy with some of its kooky special effects and its phantom bus. It might be a little sugary for some tastes, but it also has its share of touching moments. I rate this a +2 on the -4 to +4 scale.

4. THE SECRET GARDEN (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule review: T_h_e_S_e_c_r_e_t_G_a_r_d_e_n is an artistically perfect rendering of a horribly cloying Edwardian children's story. The Transcendentalist view of the perfection of nature sops right through and saturates this story. It tells how one little girl is able to redeem three people's lives through the magic of a wonderful garden full of bunnies and lambs and foxes all playing together. The film is supremely crafted but for someone else's taste. Rating: low +1 (-4 to +4). An artistic +2; an entertainment -1.

When it comes to film, I have no guilty pleasures. A common game among film fans is to say what films are bad, but that they enjoy anyway. I just do not accept the concept that a film is bad but I like it in spite of its obvious faults. If I like a film, it really is a good film, to my mind. I may be one of the few people who enjoys a film such as L_i_f_e_f_o_r_c_e or E_x_o_r_c_i_s_t_I_I, but to me that is just because others simply do not appreciate that these really are films with positive qualities. On the other hand, I do accept that there are good films I just cannot appreciate. I recognize quality but I still cannot bring myself to like this wonderful piece of art. Ingmar Bergman is probably a really good filmmaker and I admit it, but T_h_e_S_e_v_e_n_t_h_S_e_a_l is his only film that I find enjoyable, and then only if I am in the right mood. C_h_a_r_i_o_t_s_o_f_F_i_r_e is very well made, but it does nothing at all for me. T_h_e_S_e_c_r_e_t_G_a_r_d_e_n is a beautiful and near-flawless adaptation of a gawd-awful Edwardian children's story that would have done better to remain in a dusty box in the attic.

Kate Maberly plays Mary Lennox, a ten-year-old born in India around the turn of the century. She hates India and she hates her parents. When an earthquake kills her parents she is sent back to England to find more things to hate. She goes to live in her uncle's mansion which seems larger than Yankee Stadium and somehow feels dead wherever you go. Of her uncle there is little sign. He mourns for the death of his wife, a twin to Mary's mother. The mansion is ruled over by Mrs. Medlock (played by Maggie Smith), who has no use for little Mary. Mary is more or less expected to sit around all day and ignore the sobbing coming from someone about whom nobody will tell her. But our adolescent Jane Eyre discovers on the grounds of the mansion a garden that was kept by her aunt and has since been locked up. In this garden there are bright colors, nature seems to be alive, and it's the only truly alive place on the whole grounds. Mary discovers the garden and discovers her sick, apparently dying cousin. Through her love of nature and the garden and with the help of two wonderful servants,

little Mary saves her cousin's life, makes her own life worth living, and pulls her uncle out of his miasma of self-pity. But none of that is remotely surprising when you see the magic of nature in the hidden garden. Here robins understand and love children. Sweet little bunnies play with chubby little foxes and get along perfectly well. Little new-born lambs test their wobbly legs for the first time. It is a place where there can be no doubts that God is an Englishman and this is his own personal petting zoo.

T_h_e_S_e_c_r_e_t_G_a_r_d_e_n is a project of American Zoetrope, who in 1979 produced T_h_e_B_l_a_c_k_S_t_a_l_l_i_o_n, the first half of which is a truly wonderful piece of filmmaking. And some of T_h_e_S_e_c_r_e_t_G_a_r_d_e_n captures some of the same feel. It was directed by Agnieszka Holland, who previously directed E_u_r_o_p_a, E_u_r_o_p_a and O_l_i_v_i_e_r, O_l_i_v_i_e_r. (I wonder if she wanted to rename this one G_a_r_d_e_n, G_a_r_d_e_n.) The photography (by Roger Deakins) is wonderful, even if what is in front of the camera is exaggerated and unctuous. When the house should look dismal, it looks really dismal. The grounds are gray and depressing. Inside the garden all of a sudden every detail jumps out at the viewer--every corny bunny and lamb. Holland just perfectly captures a mood so dismally ugly or so cloyingly sweet that I, for one, felt like gagging. I admit what she did, she did well. Artistically this is a +2 film; for my experience it is a -1. Let me split the difference and give this film a low +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

5. THE MAN WITHOUT A FACE (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule review: Mel Gibson's directorial debut is a film that will be hard for him to beat in the future. It is a sensitive story of a boy and a teacher. It is a story about curiosity and about

bigotry. It is about big minds and little minds, about a platonic relationship between a man and a boy. I never had a lot of respect for Gibson even after he played Hamlet, but in one film he shows he is a better director than an actor. Rating: high +2 (-4 to +4).

"Is this all you see?" asks Mel Gibson, playing Justin McLeod. He is referring to the horribly disfigured right side of his face. "Because if this is all you see, then you don't see me." Gibson is also referring to all the action roles he has played in exploitation films. He usually plays an action figure or--in the case of h a m l e t--an inaction figure. Now he is getting old for all the action roles and he wants to break that image. He wants to be thought of as a serious actor and a talented director (reportedly

THE MT VOID

Page 7

more the latter than the former). So he directed himself in T h e M a n W i t h o u t a F a c e and proved his point by giving us what will likely be one of the best films this year.

Twelve-year-old Chuck Norstadt (played by Nick Stahl) is confused and unhappy. He is the only male in his family. His mother, who keeps marrying and divorcing husbands, has had two daughters and Chuck my three different men. Chuck's mother and older sister are twin harpies who hardly speak except to criticize him. Chuck's one dream is to escape home and go to a military academy. But at the beginning of this summer of 1968, Chuck failed the entrance exam. He will have a second chance at the end of the summer if he can learn enough over the summer, but he needs help. The good news is that there is somebody who can help him. The bad news is that it is the local recluse, a man with a face that was horribly scarred. Justin McLeod is a human conversation piece. There are all sorts of rumors about what he does for a living and how he got that face. So Chuck begins a relationship with the mysterious recluse, and he opens Chuck's mind to the wonders of the intellect. The film is many things, but one is a tribute to intellectual thought.

Malcolm MacRury's script is a study in contrasts. It is a story about excellence and it is a story about prejudice. It is about big minds full of questions and little minds that are sure they

know all the answers. McLeod is one of an increasingly rare breed of teachers who are desperate to open minds and to share a sense of wonder. This is a film that will probably be compared to D_e_a_d P_o_e_t_s S_o_c_i_e_t_y by Gibson mentor Peter Weir. That film, however, tries to be a dramatic audience-pleaser and T_h_e M_a_n W_i_t_h o_u_t a F_a_c_e is more under-stated. I do not know if Gibson is someone who can cut it as a great director film after film, or if he just had one really good film in him. But he did have at least that one film.

I give T_h_e M_a_n W_i_t_h o_u_t a F_a_c_e a high +2 on the -4 to +4 scale.

6. ROAD SCHOLAR (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule review: Poet and humorist Andrei Codrescu drives a big new used Cadillac across the United States and shows us slices of American life as it is rarely seen. While the film is not original, Codrescu's outsider's view is never dull. Rating: +1 (-4 to +4).

Andrei Codrescu is a Romanian-born Jew, a fact that explains many aspects of his personality. His acerbic sense of humor is a survival trait when one lives in a background radiation of anti-Semitism from both the neighbors and the government. It also trains one to expect the worst and hope for the best from

institutions and the bureaucracy running the country. At the same time, having come to the United States and finding conditions better, he clearly likes this country and has an affection, if somewhat bewildered, for Americans. And he sees America as an outsider. Because of these different perspectives, he has become a commentator on National Public Radio's "All Things Considered." In

R_o_a_d S_c_h_o_l_a_r Codrescu brings these perspectives to bear on various aspects of American life seen during a trip across the country.

R_o_a_d S_c_h_o_l_a_r is not so much a film as a news magazine in cinematic

form. It is supposedly inspired by the book O_n_t_h_e_R_o_a_d by Jack Kerouac, but it is closer in form to a stringing together of segments of "Charles Kurault on the Road" or "Jean Shepherd's America." It is also comparable to Michael Palin's short television series "Around the World in Eighty Days" and "Pole to Pole." Codrescu drives from Manhattan to San Francisco commenting on the passing parade. He visits Ellis Island and comments on the immigrant experience. He also visits a Romanian restaurant, where his compatriots make up for years of extreme poverty in the old country by eating pornographically large cuts of meat. He is served a steak so long he has to fold over the end so that it does not drag on the table. Detroit and its hard times remind him of Romania. In Chicago (if I remember correctly) he visits a sausage factory and discovers a new sensuality in the packing of sausages. Also in Chicago he visits a McDonald's restaurant exactly as they were when they were first open. It is an educational exhibit for McDonald's Hamburger U. Codrescu mixes in a private war between the city council and a junk artist who is half burying a car in her yard.

Westward he continues to report on New Age crystal religion and a healing shrine in New Mexico, and a drive-up window in a kitsch matrimonial chapel in Las Vegas. We visit Biosphere II, a sealed and totally self-contained community to which inhabitants have exiled themselves for two years. This is supposed to prove people can live in similar confines in space, though presumably in space there will not be a constant stream of tourists to chat with at the windows. Codrescu dubs Biosphere II a "Disneyland for the Millennially Disabled." According to Codrescu, America seems to be discovered over and over again and never definitively. Definitive discovery seems to have eluded Codrescu also, but at least his commentaries and slices of life are never dull. I rate this a +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

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