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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
09/11/20 -- Vol. 39, No. 11, Whole Number 2136

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Co-Editor: Mark Leeper, mleeper@optonline.net
Co-Editor: Evelyn Leeper, eleeper@optonline.net
Sending Address: evelynchimelisleeper@gmail.com
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Apology and Reminder (comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

Apologies for sending out last week's MT VOID (text version) with no date in the Subject line.

Also a reminder that you can receive either a text or a PDF version of the MT VOID (or both, I suppose). [-ec1]

Thirty-Minute Commercials (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

Comment from Mark Leeper's Journal July 6, 1990:

[At the time I wrote this originally this format of commercial showed up on too many cable stations. Some of these abuses were creeping into mainstream broadcasting Channels. The game has shifted a bit but it is all still out there.]

I would like to comment on these delightful half-hour television commercials that are showing up on cable. One piece of advice: Don't believe them. While the commercials say at the beginning that they will teach you in this half-hour something useful, they give away almost nothing but paid testimonials. There are at least three different courses on better memory and they each give away free one memory technique, and each gives pretty much the same technique. And you could find that same technique free by going to the library and getting out a book on memory devices. Many of them, including each of the memory courses, come on cassette. Now the library book will have about 160 pages of about 300 words each- -that's about 48,000 words. The cassettes will usually be eight cassettes, each with a 50-minute lecture filled with music and pauses for exercises. You will get roughly 6000 words per cassette or a total of about 48,000 words. You are paying between \$50 and \$100 to save yourself the effort of going to the library and reading one book. But how much money is there is saying you can change your life by going to the library and reading a book? Instead, some guy claiming to be from "The Memory Institute"--

you won't find that one in any list of America's learning institutions--claims he learned these techniques from a man who went from being an auto mechanic to a millionaire in two years. (Hey, at the rates my mechanic charges, he is well on his way without any secrets!)

The one thing these commercials are good for is to get an idea of what is important to us as Americans. How often have you heard someone get on television and say for \$49.95 he will send you a set of cassettes that will teach you about national fiscal policy or particle physics. No, the topics are cellulite, weight loss, memory, car polishes, paint pads, improving you sex life, being a supportive wife (hey, Evelyn, you want to take the "Light His Fire" course? No, I thought not.), over-priced woks, and racks to stuff into turkeys' rear ends to stand them up in the oven.

And now that this set of articles is over I don't feel I have to watch another damn one of these stupid programs. [-mrl]

THE AFRICAN QUEEN (comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

I noticed for the first time that Huston was showing a musical contrast at the start. We first see the Africans singing an English hymn which they appear to be doing because it is required rather than from enjoyment, and Rose is not pleased with their singing either. Then we see Charlie Allnut on the African Queen listening to a boy playing a finger organ, and evidently enjoying it quite a bit.

It's clear from Samuel's ravings that he was sent to Africa as a missionary because he was not a good enough student to hold any position in England. So his (Methodist) church sends the worst of their ministers as foreign missionaries, implying that the souls of the English deserve the best and the Africans get the scraps. Contrast this with the Mormons, who send their best (at least in terms of languages) as missionaries to other countries and the rest are missionaries in the United States (or presumably other English-speaking countries).

The Africans in the village are portrayed fairly well *by the standards of the time* (thought the whole bit with Allnut throwing his cigar stub away and several men fighting over it is an example of a recurring racist trope). But the total ineptitude of the African soldiers at the fort in handling their rifles (which is strangely at odds with the fact that they do seem to hit the boat fairly often) makes one wonder why the Germans even use them as riflemen.

Charlie would have known better than to anchor near a tree-lined shore at dusk; that's just where the insects would be.

After the shot of the African Queen stuck on the mud, and then the rains upstream, I was sure I remembered a shot of the waterline of the boat showing the rising water lifting it to float free. Of course, there is no such shot.

Charlie is a Canadian, but he tells the German captain he is British. That is because before 1946, Canadians were considered British citizens/subjects. [-ecl]

NASFiC 2020 (con report by Keith F. Lynch):

The 2020 NASFiC is the third virtual con that I've interacted with. (The first two were this year's Balticon and Newhere.) All three were free. I won't say I've attended them. By "interacted" I'm excluding any cons for which I've merely passively viewed events, such as livestreamed Hugo award ceremonies. I have also attended 108 cons in person (including one NASFiC), starting with the 1980 Disclave and ending with last year's Philcon.

Like Balticon and unlike Newhere, much of the NASFiC's activity was on Discord. I've been unable to sign up for a Discord account without it demanding my birthday, which I'm unwilling to give. I'm also unwilling to lie about it. Since Discord claims that question's purpose is only to prove I'm over 13, for which my birth year suffices since it was before 2007, and since nothing prevents a child from lying about their birthday, they're either lying or incompetent. It's my hope that all future virtual cons avoid using Discord until they fix this. And that those cons not encourage fans to lie to Discord about their birthdays. Or do cons really want to select for dishonest members?

Other than a brief test to see if I could see and hear panels, the first thing I viewed was the Prometheus Award ceremony, on Saturday. It used Vimeo, which is sort of like Zoom's webinar mode except without any text chat. C. J. Cherryh and Jane S. Fancher won for ALLIANCE RISING. Poul Anderson won the Hall of Fame award for "Sam Hall." I don't know why the ceremony was at the NASFiC rather than at the Worldcon.

Immediately after that ceremony, in the same "room," was "Visions of SF, Liberty, Human Rights: The Prometheus Awards over Four Decades, from F. Paul Wilson and Robert Heinlein to Today." As the panel approached the end of its hour, it was abruptly cut off without notice as one of the panelists was talking.

My next event, on Sunday, was "Future of Policing: A Journey Planet Fanzine Workshop." I arrived a little too early, so I got

a screen that said "Our program will begin shortly... Please Stand By!" It continued to say that until well after the event was due to begin. Finally, I tried reloading the Vimeo web page, and the program began in the middle. Not a well-thought-out user interface.

They were apparently taking questions from the audience via Discord. I think they want audience members to contribute articles on the subject of policing to their fanzine. If so, I certainly plan to submit one, as I have strong opinions, based on personal experience and lots of reading on the topic.

Vimeo, unlike Zoom, cuts off the beginnings of the names of panelists who are on the left edge of the screen. Also, it has automatically generated captioning which is distracting and inaccurate, hides the names of the panelists who are on the bottom of the screen, and apparently can't be turned off.

Two hours ahead of time, I signed up via the website for the kaffeeklatsch with Eric Flint. I got no immediate indication or feedback as to whether there was an opening or whether the event was already full. A few minutes before the event was to begin I got two emails, from two different people, providing the Zoom URL for the event. This was my first truly interactive event at the con. It went well. The author had a video background which I recognized as GRRM's Hugo presentation from last month.

I logged into the dead dog party, another Zoom event, as soon as it was scheduled to start at 4 pm. Except for a four-hour gap when I went to my brother's house for dinner and video watching, I remained until the event ended more than twelve hours later, at 4:20 am. It had multiple breakout rooms, and fans were free to move among them at will. It was nice being able to catch up with people I hadn't seen in years. I told Brad Templeton that he's prominently mentioned in a history of Google that I recently read, and Kevin Standlee that his election work was mentioned in The Washington Post. (I'm a fairly extreme extrovert. If interesting people are around, I can stay up all weekend. If I'm alone, I'm likely to fall asleep at any hour.)

In retrospect, I see that the NASFiC had other Zoom parties I could have also attended.

To get online I use an Apple laptop which I place on my bare chest as I recline on my chaise. The screen is at the best distance for my eyes, the keyboard is at an acceptable distance for my hands, and I act as a human heat sink, since Zoom gets the computer hot, and it was already quite warm in my room. The only disadvantage is that the bottom half of my face isn't visible in the video, since the built-in camera is at the top of the screen, and if I angle the screen down to compensate I can't see the screen clearly. Also, if I'm back-lit that annoys other viewers, and if I'm front-lit the resulting glare annoys me. Maybe I should instead set up in the basement, where I'd have my thousands of books as a backdrop.

Later I read in the Washington Post that Zoom had a several-hour total failure on the east coast later on Monday morning. So perhaps it would be best if virtual cons had backup plans in case of Zoom, Vimeo, or Google Hangouts failures.

I've heard that the NASFiC plans to put videos of its events online. [-kfl]

NASFiC 2020 and Virtual Conventions (letters of comment by Dorothy J. Heydt, Tim Merrigan, Keith F. Lynch, and Dan Kimmel):

In response to [Evelyn's comments on NASFiC 2020 and virtual conventions](#) in the 09/04/20 issue of the MT VOID, Dorothy J. Heydt writes:

[Evelyn wrote,] "After I posted the first part of this, Dorothy J. Heydt asked whether the problem of time conflicts was true of all conventions." [-ecl]

Actually, I don't remember *asking*, but rather stating a firm conviction that this is a characteristic of all conventions, since I can't remember a con I ever attended that didn't have at least one. [-djh]

Regarding Dorothy's suggestion that recording the panels for later viewing avoids some of the problems, Keith had said, "I can view the panels, but can't ask questions of them...."

Dorothy responds:

Well, that's a him problem. I seldom have the audacity to ask questions in the middle of a panel, or even after. [-djh]

Tim Merrigan writes regarding programming conflicts:

Mind you, I thought Con Jose back in 2002 were taking the piss when they scheduled two panels about Buffy in consecutive timeslots--at opposite ends of a very large convention centre. [-tm]

Keith F. Lynch responds:

At least they weren't simultaneous.

Maybe it was their way to encourage people to have broader interests, rather than some fans spending the whole con in the Buffy track, others spending the whole con in the art show, yet others entirely in gaming, etc. [-kfl]

Dan Kimmel writes:

I was a panelist at the online NASFIC. It was my third online convention. No, it's not like the real thing, and I very much missed the social interaction, but I did enjoy doing the panels and my readings were well-received. When we get to the other side of the pandemic--where there's a vaccine Dr. Fauci approves of and not simply Trump--I can foresee future conventions being a mix. People unable to travel for whatever reason could also "attend," including panelists. It might even get people to "try out" a con online and then decide to attend in reality the next year. [-dmk]

This Week's Reading (book comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

I have slacked off my reading of THE DECAMERON because the stories had a certain sameness to them, especially since each day had a theme (virtue rewarded or some such), so all that day's stories were similar. (Does this sound like science fiction theme anthologies?)

However, I recently watched Piers Paolo Pasolini's 1971 film THE DECAMERON. It is 111 minutes long and has nine of the stories, so none gets much time, especially given that the opening credits and first film together take up 23 minutes.

The stories (in Boccaccio's order) are I-1 (deathbed confession), II-5 (fake sister), III-1 (deaf-mute gardener), artist, IV-5 (brothers' revenge), V-4 (sleeping on the balcony), VI-5 (artist's inspiration), VII-2 (oil jar), VII-10 (ghost says fornication not a sin), and IX-10 (attempted seduction of friend's wife).

The artist looking at ordinary people and everyday goings-on to use in his fresco gives Pasolini an excuse to have the camera linger on people's faces. Pasolini's faces are like Jean-Jacques Annaud's in THE NAME OF THE ROSE, distinctive and evocative of the time and place of the film. (Or maybe the credit should go to Annaud's casting crew: Gianni Arduini, Dominique Besnehard, Celestia Fox, David Rubin, and Sabine Schroth. Usually there is a single casting director--Pasolini's was Alberto De Stefanis--but Annaud had a whole team.)

The story of the artist is split up as interstitial bits between the stories of the second half of the film; I have no idea why, since it is not as if it ties in to them in any way. At the end, the artist asks why paint the scenes when the dreaming of them is what is beautiful. This sounded a bit like Alfred Hitchcock's claim that the actual filming was a bit of an anticlimax because after he finished his (extensive) storyboarding, he already had seen the whole film in his head.

There is plenty of sex and nudity (both sexes and all angles); Pasolini did not have to worry about the MPA ratings for his audience, which not surprisingly gave this film an X. Even today this would probably end up NC-17, or (more likely) not submitted for a rating at all.

So then I decided to watch Pasolini's THE CANTERBURY TALES as well. (Given that I bought the two as a set on eBay, because it was only marginally more expensive than buying THE DECAMERON alone, that's not too surprising.) This is eight tales and is also 111 minutes long.

The stories (in film order) are "The Merchant's Tale", "The Friar's Tale", "The Cook's Tale", "The Miller's Tale", "The Wife of Bath's Prologue", "The Reeve's Tale", "The Pardoner's Tale", and "The Summoner's Tale".

This claimed to be "the original English-language version" though the credits were in Italian. Also, it starts with a straight credits sequence rather than showing credits over activity the way THE DECAMERON does.

Pasolini had fewer stories to choose from for this film, but a wider variety of plots and themes. He filmed a few brief framing sequences with himself as Geoffrey Chaucer writing the tale, and in one he is shown reading THE DECAMERON (a small in-joke).

In "The Merchant's Tale", the old man (played by the irrepressible Hugh Griffith) is named Sir January and the young bride May as a reference to the phrase "January and May marriage" (which seems to be the same thing as a "May-December marriage"). In either case, one person is in the spring of their life, while the other is in their winter. Recall also that in Chaucer's time, the year started in March, so both December and January came after May. When the calendar changed, May-January gave way to May-December.

"The Cook's Tale" is quite strange: the main character is dressed like the Little Tramp and is a Chaplin-esque fool, there are a couple of Keystone Cops, and the whole story is very slapstick.

"The Miller's Tale" is "The Miller's Tale", and other stories have fart jokes as well. Just so you know. (And there's lots of sex and nudity in this film, just as in THE DECAMERON.) [-ecl]

Mark Leeper
mleeper@optonline.net

Quote of the Week:

Problematic elitist caste bullshit is implicit in any superhero narrative that ascribes genetic origins to the protags paranormal abilities--barely removed from racism. (I vastly prefer activation-event narratives that can randomly happen to anyone.)
--Charles Stross

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