

Leyele.

Years later Khonnon, now a Talmudic scholar, meets Leyele and they fall in love. Neither knows about the vow they would be married and Sender does not know whose son Khonnon is. The intense Khonnon is already considering giving up his study of the Talmud to study Kabbalah, the great book of mystical knowledge and magic. Sender three times tries to arrange a marriage with a rich but rather sheepish young man. Twice the plans fail and Khonnon believes his magic has averted the arrangement. The third time, however, an agreement is reached. Khonnon calls upon dark forces to help him but is consumed by his own spell and found dead. The day of Leyele's marriage--in fact, during the marriage ceremony itself-- Khonnon's spirit returns from the grave as a dybbuk, a possessing demon, and takes over the body of the woman he was denied. Leyele is taken to a great and pious Rabbi, now nearing the end of his life and torn with self-doubts, who alone may have the knowledge to remove the demon.

If some of this smacks of William Peter Blatty, it should be remembered that this is a 1938 film based on a pre-World-War-I play. *THE DYBBUK* by S. Anski (a pen name for Shloyme Zanvl Rappoport), along with *THE GOLEM* by H. Leivick (a pen name for Leivick Halper), are perhaps the two best remembered (and most commonly translated) plays of the great Yiddish Theater. While Yiddish folklore has many dybbuk and golem stories, and the play *THE GOLEM* was based on an actual legend ("The Golem of Prague"), *THE DYBBUK* was an original story involving a legendary type of demon. The film retells the story of the play, but remains very different. Other than plot there is not much of the play carried over into the film.

All too commonly constraints of budget and even what appears now to be inappropriate style rob some scenes of their effect. Much of the acting is exaggerated in ways that might have been more appropriate to silent film or to the stage. In fact, in some ways this feels like an entire film done in a style much like the early, good scenes of the 1931 *DRACULA*. Director Michal Waszynski could well be excused on the grounds that he was making the film for a very different audience. However, just occasionally, a scene will be really supremely well done. The best sequence of the film is when Leyele, just before her marriage, is called upon to dance with the poor of the town, as is traditional. Leyele is reluctant and the dance turns into a grotesquery culminating with Leyele dancing with a figure of death. The film is a showcase for Yiddish songs, cantorial singing, and dancing, both traditional and modern. Much seems out of place, but this one dance creates one of the most eerie and effective horror scenes of its decade.

THE DYBBUK stands as more than a good horror film. It is also an artifact of pre-Holocaust Yiddish film and of Eastern European Jewish village life. Curiously, for a Yiddish film some of the stereotypes that appear could be interpreted as being anti-Semitic. We see a miser with exaggerated Jewish features counting and recounting his coins. We see what is intended to be a great Rabbi looking pompous, fat, sloppy, and apparently lazy. Why a Yiddish film would have such images is open to question. Still, it is a pity that this film is not better known. It deserves to be thought of as a major film of its decade. I rate it +3 on the -4 to +4 scale. Congratulations to the National Center for Jewish Film for restoring this film. [-mrl]

THE RELENTLESS MOON by **Mary Robinette Kowal** (copyright 2020, TOR, \$17.99, trade paperback, 542pp, ISBN 978-1-250-23696-8, copyright 2020, Audible Inc., \$25.99 audiobook, 17 hours and 35 minutes, ASIN B08B7DXVXC, narrated by Mary Robinette Kowal) (audiobook review by Joe Karpierz):

THE RELENTLESS MOON is the third book in Mary Robinette Kowal's Lady Astronaut of Mars series, but it doesn't immediately follow on to *THE FATED SKY*, the story of Lady Astronaut Elma York and her colleagues heading out to Mars (which I reviewed in June of 2021). Rather, it is a parallel story to that novel, telling the story of astronaut Nicole Wargin going to the moon while York is headed to Mars.

Nicole Wargin is married to the governor of Kansas, a man who has designs on the presidency of the United States. The situation on Earth, both politically and physically, is dire. The climate is getting worse, as a result of the meteor strike that set things in motion back in *THE CALCULATING STARS*. The political climate is not much better, if not worse, as there are attempts to sabotage the space program and derail it from its goal of getting as many people off the Earth as possible in order to save them before the planet becomes uninhabitable.

But the space program goes on. Nicole goes to the moon on a mission, but before she gets there, problems erupt with the lander. And then there are more problems, and more problems, and ... well, you get the idea. It's determined that there is indeed a saboteur in their midst who is trying to act to convince world powers that they should stop the program and spend the money on earth in order to help the people who are starving and worse as a result of the meteor strike.

In reality, Nicole is there to try to root out Icarus, the code name for the group that is trying to shut down the space program. We learn a lot about Nicole's background as this plays out. We learn that she herself was a spy back during the war, and that past is helping her in her investigation into all the problems that have been hitting the colony on the moon.

Icarus itself has setbacks, as a polio outbreak in the colony has caused much of the personnel to get sick, some unable to recover from the disease. There was supposed to be polio vaccine on the expedition, but that supply was hit by the saboteurs as well. The novel reads like *The Perils of Pauline*, with one thing happening after another in a, well, relentless fashion.

Nicole is not the most likeable person in the book. Much is made of her history of anorexia nervosa, and the condition plays heavily into the story. On Earth she lives a high class, wealthy situation as a result of being the wife of a powerful political individual who has high aspirations. She really is pampered, with all the trappings of wealth that one would expect from that background. I bring this up because I find it a bit unsettling that while there is much talk in the novel of poverty-stricken people who don't have enough to eat and who live in squalor, the main character has a totally different lifestyle. I'm not sure what kind of message Kowal is trying to send with that dichotomy, but it does seem a bit off to me. There is a lot to unpack in this and other messages within the book. And while the messages are worthwhile, I did feel at times that I was being beaten over the head with those messages.

That's not to say that this is not a good book; far from it. It was engaging and well written, and while we as readers can assume that

things are going to turn out okay, it was well worth my time to find out how Kowal was going to get there.

Kowal herself narrated the novel as she did with the previous two, and as usual she did a fine job, which just added to my enjoyment of the story. There's really not much else I can say about that. I don't often know what to say about narrators whom I have heard multiple times. I guess that if the narration was lacking there would be more to say. Clearly, not in this case.

It will be interesting to see where Kowal takes the story from here. [-jak]

MONKEY BUSINESS (letter of comment by Kevin R):

In response to [Mark's review of MONKEY BUSINESS \(1952\)](#) in the 11/26/21 issue of the MT VOID, Kevin R writes:

A script using magic might have been mined from Thorne Smith's THE GLORIOUS POOL, though the studio might not have had access to the rights. Cary Grant had played a Smith character before, the late George Kerby, in TOPPER, a favorite of mine. [-kr]

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

THE LAST PAGAN: JULIAN THE APOSTATE AND THE DEATH OF THE ANCIENT WORLD by Adrian Murdoch (Inner Traditions, ISBN 978-1-594-77226-9) is proof that it is not just science fiction and fantasy books that get totally inaccurate cover illustrations. In this book, Julian is described as "dark-haired" and with a "pendulous lower lip that was hidden behind the bristly beard he wore trimmed to a point." The cover shows a man with reddish-gold hair, a rather normal- looking lower lip, and no beard.

But one should not judge a book by its cover, and the contents seem more true to what knowledge we have of his life and reign. More so than with many other emperors, our knowledge of Julian suffers from the problem of the winner writing the history. As the full title indicates, Julian was a pagan who attempted to restore paganism and suppress Christianity as part of that process. So when he died and was replaced by a Christian emperor, it is not surprising that almost all the historians (mostly Church fathers) wrote negatively of Julian. Ammianus and Libanius, who both personally knew Julian, were both pagans, which does help to counterbalance the writings of the Church fathers. Murdoch assembles information from as many sources as possible and offers explanations of policies to which contemporary historians often attributed wrong reasons, or no reasons.

This is a book intended for the general reader, and at about 250 pages of text, does not require a major investment of time. Julian was one of the more unusual emperors, and perhaps of particular interest with the rise of neo-paganism over the last several decades. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

[Sir Stafford Cripps] has all the virtues I dislike
and none of the vices I admire.
--Winston Churchill

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