



**THE BETA TEST:** In **THE BETA TEST**, the main character is the sort of over-charged Hollywood agent we have seen before, except even more so. The main character treats everyone he knows the same infuriating way, and that saves him the effort of trying to understand any of the people he is dealing with. Then he receives a strange letter inviting him to an anonymous sexual encounter, and his frantic personality becomes even more so, as he attempts to deal with the web ensnaring him. In many ways this is reminiscent of **EYES WIDE SHUT**, and indeed the filmmakers have just done a live reading of the Stanley Kubrick classic.

Released theatrically 11/05/21; available on various streaming services. Rating: high +1 (-4 to +4), or 6/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11738830/reference>

What others are saying: [https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the\\_beta\\_test](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_beta_test)

**THE CARD COUNTER:** The beginning of **THE CARD COUNTER** recalls many other gambling films (**CROUPIER**, **HARD EIGHT**, **21**, **THE CINCINNATI KID**), and you will see some of the poker played the way it is in **CASINO ROYALE**. The main character (William Tell, played by Oscar Isaac) tells how he gambles and what his strategy (and philosophy) is. It is always interesting to see a professional do his thing, as well as to see the tacky neon decoration of the casino town. But then things take a darker turn as he is visited by someone (Cirk, played by Tye Sheridan) who wants to use Tell's past skills to achieve his own goals. There are peculiar chuckling sounds on the soundtrack that never get explained. Caveat: There is strong violence and full frontal male nudity.

Released 09/10/21; available on various streaming services. Rating: +2 (-4 to +4), or 7/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11196036/reference>

What others are saying: [https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the\\_card\\_counter](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_card_counter)

**THE FRENCH DISPATCH OF THE LIBERTY, KANSAS, EVENING SUN:** This is a typical Wes Anderson film, with lots of visual jokes, and many actors in common with **THE GRAND BUDAPEST HOTEL**. Indeed, the cast is rather spectacular, with seven Oscar winners, 9 Oscar nominees, and three long-time Anderson collaborators. The script is notable, consisting of three separate stories supposedly printed in the title magazine: "The Cycling Reporter" (who reports on the town of Ennui-sur-Blase), "The Concrete Masterpiece" (about mentally disturbed artist), "Revisions to a Manifesto" (dealing with the "Chessboard Revolution"), and "The Private Dining Room of the Police Commissioner", all of which interconnect. The set design has the same sense of symmetry as **THE GRAND BUDAPEST HOTEL**, and is filmed in part in color and in part in black and white.

Released theatrically 10/21/21; available on various streaming services and on DVD from Netflix. Rating: high +1 (-4 to +4) or 6/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8847712/reference>

What others are saying: [https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the\\_french\\_dispatch](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_french_dispatch)

**TICK, TICK ... BOOM: TICK, TICK ... BOOM** (try putting that title into print) is about real life Jonathan Larson, who composed the Broadway hit **RENT**. **TICK, TICK ... BOOM** is based on an earlier "autobiographical rock monologue". Andrew Garfield, who plays Larson, is carving out a nice career for himself, not only as Peter Parker (Spider-Man), but also in such roles as Robin Cavendish in **BREATHE**. This is a very high-energy film, which for the actors must be a bit like acting in a marathon, even given it is not shot all at once. It may be heretical, but I liked this better than **RENT**.

Released theatrically 11/19/21; available on Netflix streaming. Rating: low +2 (-4 to +4), or 7/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8721424/reference>

What others are saying: [https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/tick\\_tick\\_boom](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/tick_tick_boom)

[-mrl/ecl]

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**STARS AND BONES** by **Gareth L. Powell** (copyright 2022, W. F. Howes, Ltd., 8 hours and 28 minutes, ASIN: B09RLLWWZ5, narrated by Rebecca Norfolk) (audio book review by Joe Karpierz):

The history of space opera is littered with stories of alien races saving humanity from itself. Our alien watchers keep an eye on the citizens of the planet, carefully watching the development of the human race, trying to make a decision regarding the worthiness of humanity to survive or die. Then there's stories of humanity encountering a mysterious deadly enemy that can't be stopped. There are tales of living ships, who are the companions and protectors of the people of Earth. There are tales of omnipotent overlords who ensure that humanity doesn't do anything stupid. Most of us have read stories that contain one or two or all of these tropes, some of which are successful and some of which are less so.

After reading Gareth L. Powell's collaboration with Peter F. Hamilton, **LIGHT CHASER**, I was sufficiently intrigued to read some solo work by Powell. So I picked up the audio book for **STARS AND BONES**, a Continuum novel. What I got was basically all of the above, with one minor twist: the alien race wasn't necessarily saving humanity, it was saving the Earth \*from\* humanity. Told in a series of flashback chapters, we learn that the inhabitants of Earth were doing what they do best--destroying the planet much as we are doing today--but were set to destroy themselves in a nuclear holocaust. Those watchful aliens, sitting out deep in the solar system, decided that the human race was worth saving due to a technological advance that is essentially Powell's way of getting around the FTL problem. The Angels, as they were called, prevented the warheads from going off, and evacuated the planet of every last living human they could. The price for that salvation was the humanity could never again live on a planet where they could destroy an

ecosystem like they did Earth's. Hence, the Continuance was born, a fleet of huge living ships--most of which were arkships that carried human beings through space--which spread throughout the galaxy looking for a place to settle which wouldn't run afoul of the Angel's edict.

The story begins gaining steam when a distress signal is detected coming from planet Candidate 623. Eryn, on the Vanguard ship Furious Ocelot, goes to Candidate 623 and discovers that her sister Shay had been there on her ship the Couch Surfer (if nothing else, the ship names are awesome), and was now dead. Eryn is determined to discover who the alien enemy is and gain revenge for the death of her sister.

And then the fun begins.

As with many stories like STARS AND BONES, the alien entity is extremely powerful, killing and assimilating--no, it's not a Borg--everything in its wake in an effort to put an end to humanity for, as we might expect, reasons it only knows. But there's more to the story than the big bad running around the galaxy killing things. Eryn's quest to gain revenge for the death of her sister is only part of the story. Shay's se daughter, and the daughter's father, play a role in shaping who Eryn is. Her feelings about her niece and her father are complex to say the least. My suspicions are that if (or maybe when) we see more novels of the Continuance, we'll see more of Eryn's family.

Earlier I mentioned flashback chapters. Two of the characters in those flashbacks--Haruki, the richest man on Earth, and Frank, a physicist, played a large role not only in the set up for the main body of the story, but also in the end when the major discovery of what the marauding alien is and maybe, just maybe, how it can be dealt with. Eryn goes looking for Frank, and what she encounters when she finds him--which isn't easy, as he's trying to keep his location secret--sets the novel careening headlong to its conclusion.

STARS AND BONES is a well written novel, with straightforward prose and a pace that keeps things interesting. It doesn't, however, really break any new ground. It tells a story that we are generally familiar with. It's a good old fashioned space opera that uses space opera tropes effectively. There's nothing really surprising here. STARS AND BONES is comfort food for those that want something familiar. If I had one complaint with the story, it was how the threat was dealt with. It felt almost rushed, almost like a cheat when all was said and done. But in reality, maybe that wasn't the point of the story. Maybe the point was the characters and \*their\* stories.

If I had one more complaint about the novel, it wasn't about the novel itself but with the narrator. Rebecca Norfolk seemed to be rushing through the book, and she didn't change tone or voice when she was reading different characters. She didn't throw me out of the story, as I was invested in what was happening, but her lack of personal style--at least in my opinion--detracted from my enjoyment of the book just a bit.

Overall, a nice novel to while away the time with when you're looking for a change of pace. And sometimes that's all you need. [-jak]

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

THE DEVIL AND MISS PRYM by Paul Coelho (translated by Amanda Hopkinson) (Harper One, ISBN 978-0-060-52800-3) is basically a reworking of Fredrich Duerrenmatt's play THE VISIT, which is actually mentioned by one of the characters. In THE DEVIL AND MISS PRYM, the village will get ten bars of gold if they murder one of the villagers within three days.

It is not clear exactly when the story takes place. But it is obviously after 1956, when THE VISIT was written, so it is not too unlikely that it was also after 1962, when the "Twilight Zone" episode "The Hunt" aired. "The Hunt" was an original story by Earl Hamner, Jr., about a man and his dog and their encounters with Heaven and Hell, and the plot of it is re-told as a story in THE DEVIL AND MISS PRYM.

But it isn't the originality of the premise or internal stories (or lack thereof) that matters, but the way it which Coelho tells his story, and that is what makes this well worth reading. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

People asking questions, lost in confusion, well I tell  
them there's no problem, only solution.

-- John Lennon

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