

# MT VOID 06/17/22 -- Vol. 40, No. 51, Whole Number 2228



Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society  
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**LINCOLN** (a film retrospective by Mark R. Leeper and Evelyn C. Leeper):

Juneteenth (officially Juneteenth National Independence Day) is our newest Federal holiday. It commemorates the emancipation of enslaved African-Americans.

President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, but that freed only slaves in states still in rebellion. On June 19, 1865, Union General Gordon Granger arrived in Galveston to enforce that Proclamation, and this is seen as the end of slavery. However, until the 13th Amendment to the Constitution was ratified by the required twenty-seven states on December 6, 1865 (Georgia being the last of these), slavery was still legal in Delaware and Kentucky.

(The last states to ratify the amendment were Delaware (1901), Kentucky (1976), and Mississippi (ratified 1995, but not until 2013 was the US Archivist officially notified).)

In celebration of Juneteenth, here are some observations about the film LINCOLN, which focuses on the passing of the 13th Amendment by Congress.

**CAPSULE:** In LINCOLN, with very interesting release timing and with considerable historical accuracy, Stephen Spielberg tells the history of the two great conflicting goals Abraham Lincoln had toward the end of the Civil War. He wanted both to free the slaves and to end the fighting. Spielberg does not simplify the issues. Much of the film is talk. He respects his audience's intelligence enough to tell the complex story and maintain a great deal of historical accuracy. The film even looks very authentic to the period. The viewer may have to work hard to catch all that is happening, but the task is worth the effort. This is a film for an intelligent audience.

It is impressive to see so many art house actors playing even in small roles in this film.

At the beginning, there is an implication is that soldiers--black and white--had memorized the Gettysburg Address. This is probably not likely.

Lincoln easily slips into the middle of a joke, making it his joke, and then returning to the topic. These jokes and Lincoln's humorous analogies are a distraction and a slyly used tool. However, not all of Lincoln's humor strikes the modern viewer as hilarious. But there is no lack of modern humor as the abolitionist's President's agents search out Congressmen who would vote against Lincoln and try to change their minds.

Mary Todd Lincoln's self-promotions of her own interests make her seem more of a liability to her husband than an asset. She might be interesting enough if she had her own film, but in this film she seems merely to interrupt the main story. (On the other hand, maybe the idea is that Lincoln has more than just the 13th Amendment to deal with.)

This is Daniel Day-Lewis's second-to-final film and a role for which he will probably be remembered well. His voice, however, is not as high-pitched as Lincoln's was reported to be.

The military use of the telegraph and its use in general is the highlight of the civil war rarely discussed in film.

Even though Spielberg and his audience know the political result of these issues, Spielberg manages to create real suspense as to the outcome. Spielberg's talent covers many types of films, and many styles. Here he colors his photography with a darkness of film noir.

The scenes of the aftermath of the war are drawn out. They may be historically correct, but they do little to advance the story of the film. (There is, however, a slight trick placed on the viewer in them.) Perhaps it would have been better for the film to have ended either with Lincoln walking away from the camera and out the door of the White House, or with the announcement of the Emancipation Proclamation in Galveston (although Lincoln makes it quite clear early in the film why the Emancipation Proclamation is of questionable legality, and uncertain to stay in effect after the end of the war, and hence \*why\* the 13th Amendment is needed).

Rating: high +3 (-4 to +4) or 9/10

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0443272/reference>

What others are saying: [https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/lincoln\\_2011](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/lincoln_2011)

[-mrl/ec]

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## 12 YEARS A SLAVE (film review by Mark R. Leeper):

[In honor of Juneteenth, our newest Federal holiday, we are re-running Mark's review of 12 YEARS A SLAVE, which originally appeared 12/06/13. Note that an earlier version of Northup's story, SOLOMON NORTHUP'S ODYSSEY (1984), will be running on TCM on July 14, 2022 at 7:00AM. This starred Avery Brooks [Captain Sisko in "Star Trek: Deep Space Nine"] in his first television role.]

CAPSULE: This is the truly horrifying true story of Solomon Northup, a free-born black man who in 1841 was kidnapped and sold into slavery. 12 YEARS A SLAVE is based on his eyewitness account of his years of slavery, what he saw, and what he experienced. As one character puts it, "the story is amazing and in no good way." It is a powerful and important film, an unflinching look at some of (what we would hope is) the worst cruelty of human slavery in the Antebellum South. Rating: +3 (-4 to +4) or 9/10

[Spoiler warning: I discuss one shocking sequence in the film that really needs to be commented on. I do not think that it diminishes the viewing experience.]

Over the years we have seen films about crimes against humanity committed in history. There are many very good films about the European Holocaust. There simply have not been very many films to depict the nightmarish cruelty of slavery in the United States. No doubt part of the reason is financial. Selling the idea that the country allowed the horrendous crimes that occurred under slavery would not sell well to the American public. The narrative film that came the closest was probably the television mini-series ROOTS, made under the eyes of the network censors. That film handled the subject considerably more gently than the subject really deserved in order not to offend the television-watching public. This may be the first narrative film to show slavery this realistically. Not all slaves were treated so cruelly under American slavery as we see in the film, and some no doubt had it considerably worse, though how that could be strains the imagination. What we see in this film is credible and damning enough.

Solomon Northup (played by Chiwetel Ejiofor) was a well-educated, free-born black man living in Saratoga, New York in 1841 when he was offered a supposed job with a circus. He accompanied two men to Washington, DC, where instead they drugged him and sold him as a slave. He was forced to hide his education and take a name he was given, Platt. Periodic beatings were part of his treatment from the beginning. He was treated hellishly and so were the other slaves around him.

In truth, not everybody in the South's slave system is portrayed as being sadistic and cruel. Northup's first "master," William Ford (Benedict Cumberbatch) seems to be a decent man of conscience who appreciates Northup's intelligence and talents. However, the racial system is stacked against blacks and abhors even the mutually beneficial relationship Northup and Ford enjoy. Ford's carpenter (Paul Dano), white and jealous of Northup's position, is able to destroy the relationship. Northup has to work for a new and less scrupled master, Edwin Epps (Michael Fassbender). For the slaves working for Epps is a constant parade of beatings, rape, and torture, physical and mental. All of this is sanctioned by Scripture, as Epps tells his slaves.

In the film we see a spectrum of decency or lack thereof among the slave owners. Though as with Ford even a decent master is no protection from the system. And perhaps the most shocking sequence has Northup nearly lynched and left hanging from a tree limb standing tiptoe to breathe. As he stands there slaves around him go about their daily business doing their best not to look at him and none daring to help him or even visibly react to his peril apparently for fear of being made to share his fate. This goes beyond injustice and cruelty to the point of dehumanizing the innocent. It is a scene reminiscent of some of the worst of the European Holocaust.

The screenplay by John Ridley is based on Northup's own book and had to be carefully written to avoid melodrama. Recounting this story of slaves in the hands of decadent slaveholders, it would have been tempting to go overboard. The horrors of slavery are many, but it would be too easy to go to extremes and end with the cheap and unreal effect of Richard Fleischer's melodramatic MANDINGO. Even Quentin Tarantino's DJANGO UNCHAINED felt a little false on the subject of slavery. At no point does one feel this film is exaggerating.

The film has an impressive cast with familiar actors in even some relatively small parts. One suspects that as with Stanley Kramer's JUDGEMENT AT NUREMBERG actors were willing to accept minor roles just to be associated with an important film. Also, the right director had to be chosen, not just for his dramatic talent, but perhaps to fit the right profile. When Steven Spielberg made THE COLOR PURPLE, in some quarters it was held against him that he was a white man and a Jew making the film about the black experience. Director Steve McQueen is black but British so he is also an outsider to the American black experience.

Like Steven Spielberg's LINCOLN from last year, and for which this is a good companion piece, this film is required viewing to understand the United States as it was in the 19th, 20th, and 21st century. I rate it a +3 on the -4 to +4 scale or 9/10.

Film Credits: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2024544/combined>

What others are saying: [http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/12\\_years\\_a\\_slave/](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/12_years_a_slave/)

[-mrl]

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**THE GALAXY, AND THE GROUND WITHIN** by **Becky Chambers** (copyright 2021, Harper Audio, 9 hours and 55 minutes, ASIN B08BPLNBQZ, narrated by Rachel Dulude) (audio book review by Joe Karpierz):

THE GALAXY, AND THE GROUND WITHIN, is Becky Chambers' latest (and possibly last, although I don't really know that for sure) entry in her "Wayfarers" series, which won the Hugo Award for Best Series in 2019. Chambers does not disappoint those who love her fully fleshed out characters, her beautiful writing style, and the situations that make her novels so endearing.

The story takes place on the planet Gora, which, if I remember correctly, means "useless". The only thing that Gora has going for it is that it is near a confluence of the wormholes that connect the various worlds of the Galactic Commons. As a result of this fortuitous location, although it is essentially a barren rock, it has become a way station of sorts for travelers to stop and rest before moving on to their next destinations. There are multiple places to stay and visit on Gora, but the novel takes place at the Five-Hop One-Stop, a kind of all-in-one location for travelers and, well, Wayfarers. The host/proprietor is Ouloo. With the aid of her child Tupo, she runs the Five-Hop, trying her best to make all her guests feel welcome, happy, and comfortable.

The story takes place just after an accident takes out satellite communications and prevents travel to and from the planet until the satellite network is repaired. As luck would have it, the Five-Hop has three guests staying there at the time of the accident: Pei, an Aelun; Roveg, a Quelin; and Speaker, an Akarak. The only thing of note is that none of the five characters in the novel are human, although Pei may miss a rendezvous with her secret human lover, Ashby (thus connecting this book to the first book in the series, THE LONG WAY TO A SMALL ANGRY PLANET). The fact that none of the characters are human is really not the point, and thus descriptions of the various races are also not the point. The point is that each of the four races is different, with their own problems, their own thoughts, their own dreams, and their own concerns. These differences are what drive the story, as Chambers plays to her strength by describing the interactions of these characters, and the growth all of them--even the child Tupo--experience as a result of the days they spend together waiting for the satellite network to be repaired.

Back in 1983 I listened to Isaac Asimov talk about beginning the process of writing FOUNDATION'S EDGE after Doubleday, I believe it was, threw a semi-truck full of money at him for it. He said he started by going back and reading the original "Foundation Trilogy", and he realized that absolutely nothing happened in those three books. It was just a lot of people doing a lot of talking. While no one in their right mind can compare the "Wayfarers" series to the "Foundation Trilogy"--Chambers is a significantly better writer all the way around than Asimov was, and writes better characters while asleep than Asimov ever did--the one comparison that can be made between the two is that nothing happens in either series.

To be fair, anyone who has stuck around for the entire "Wayfarers" series \*knows\* that there is no plot in these books, and they go into it with that knowledge and are perfectly okay with it because of all the things I wrote earlier in this review regarding character, situations, and style. Thus, this book is not for everyone. Heck, her Hugo nominated novella of a few years ago, "To Be Fortunate, If Taught", was an outstanding piece of storytelling that I thought deserved the Hugo that year--and it had an actual plot. I'm really not a fan of the three-day study of character interactions, a "day in the life", if you will. I want my novels to have a plot. Now there are those of you out there saying "wait a minute, you like Kim Stanley Robinson's MINISTRY FOR THE FUTURE, and it didn't have a plot". Fair. I think it not only had something\* of a plot, but it was intensely interesting. Your mileage may vary, of course.

I'm not saying that THE GALAXY, AND THE GROUND WITHIN is a bad book. Far from it, it has a lot going for it. Chambers' writing is as impeccable as ever, and the characters and their interactions are fascinating. It's a good book. It's just not my cup of tea. Not all books are for everyone. This one isn't for me, but I can see why people like it.

Another outstanding aspect of the audio book is the narrator, Rachel Dulude. She changes voices with the characters. Tupo sounds like

a typical kid, and Ouloo sounds like a typical mom. All the characters are distinguishable from each other by the voices that Dulude uses. She makes all the characters and the novel fun to listen to, even if it's not something I'd go out of my way to read. [-jak]

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**BLADE RUNNER** (letters of comment by John Purcell and Keith F. Lynch):

In response to [Mark's comments on BLADE RUNNER](#) in the 06/10/22 issue of the MT VOID, John Purcell writes:

First up, it is hard to believe that BLADE RUNNER is twenty-five years old this year. Unreal. I enjoyed this movie and its dark film noir atmosphere. Very effective. Of all the versions of this movie that have been released, I have only seen the original version, so that is all I have to go by. Still, it was very well produced and effective. Your comment that you wondered if the Earth had stopped rotating kind of made me think of the physics that would result, and it would be cataclysmic, to say the least. The whole planet would be messed up, not just Los Angeles, and likely everybody would be dead. Now \*those\* visual effects would have been fun to create, but that's not exactly what PKD had in mind. Still, a good movie. [-jlp]

Keith F. Lynch writes:

You should have mentioned that the future it's set in--November, 2019--is two and a half years in our past. Instead of a dystopia, 2019 feels like a golden age, before anyone had heard of COVID-19. (Actually, that's probably the month that that virus came into existence.) [-kfl]

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**2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY** (letter of comment by John Purcell):

In response to [comments on the accuracy of 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY](#) in the 06/10/22 issue of the MT VOID, John Purcell writes:

As for 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY, I have always thought that the accuracy of the science in that movie was pretty good. However, here we are twenty-one years after the movie's setting, and things did not exactly turn out as projected in this 1968 movie. Well, that's why this kind of movie is called science fiction: it's not trying to be an accurate projection of the future, just a possibility of how things could be. For that matter, don't get me started on the sequel movie and book 2010, starring Roy Scheider. Man, did \*that\* one miss the bus by a wide margin! [-jlp]

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**BY FORCE ALONE** (letters of comment by John Purcell, Keith F. Lynch, and Gary McGath):

In response to [Evelyn's review of BY FORCE ALONE](#) in the 06/10/22 issue of the MT VOID, John Purcell writes:

Evelyn's review of BY FORCE ALONE has piqued my interest. Since I need to renew my public library card, one of these days I will go down there and take care of that and see if this book is on the shelves. It sounds like a fun premise to base the rewrite of the Arthurian legend. [-jlp]

Keith F. Lynch writes:

[Evelyn writes,] "Merlin mutters pi. Pi is an irrational number--only such numbers hold power in an irrational place--and it is transcendental, which seems appropriate. And it is infinite, just like the Weald." (Well, no it's not infinite--its decimal expression is infinitely long.)"

True. But there was no concept of decimal expression in those days. Nor did anyone know that pi was irrational until the 18th century, or transcendental until the 19th.

[Evelyn writes,] "He also goes on about the square root of two being irrational, which doesn't strike me as something the Merlin of this story would be that informed about."

But at least the Greeks of the time already knew that the square root of two was irrational. [-kfl]

Gary McGath writes:

[Evelyn writes,] "BY FORCE ALONE is the story of how Arthur started as a minor juvenile delinquent and rose Al-Capone-like (or Tony-Soprano-like, for today's readers) to rule all of Britain as the "capo del capi", while Guinevere began as the leader of a group of female bandits."

Makes sense. In post-Roman, pre-Saxon Britain, the distinction between a king (or queen) and a bandit leader was blurry. [-gmg]

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

MAKING HISTORY: THE STORYTELLERS WHO SHAPED THE PAST by Richard Cohen (Simon & Schuster, ISBN 978-1-982-19578-6) is not about history per se, but about historians, from Herodotus and Thucydides to the present. One review talked about how Cohen compares and contrasts those two early historians, with the reviewer referring to "Team Herodotus" and "Team Thucydides". The former was apparently not one to let facts get in the way of a good story, so tended to include everything anyone told him, not matter how unlikely, while the latter was more rigorous in his recountings.

I will admit to skipping some chapters--a chapter about a particular historian is more interesting (and easier to follow) if you have some familiarity with their work. Still, there was plenty to read.

Alas, however, Cohen is one of the vast multitude who do not understand life expectancy. He writes, "Life expectancy [in Elizabeth I's reign] ranged between twenty-five and thirty-five, so [London] was overwhelmingly a youthful place." This ignores the very high infant and child mortality rates. The fact that he later writes that Edward Gibbon's mother "gave birth to seven children, all but Edward dying in infancy," and of Sir Walter Scott that "six of his eleven siblings were to die in childhood" does not seem to have made him question his earlier statement. Gibbon died at age 57; if his six siblings each died at age 2, the life expectancy of his generation was about 10. Scott died at age 61; if five siblings lived to that age, but six died at at 5, the life expectancy of his generation was 33--just about the Elizabethan figure, without a particularly youthful component.

[MAKING HISTORY by Richard Cohen should not be confused with MAKING HISTORY by Stephen Fry, a 1996 alternate history which won the Sidewise Award for Alternate History (Long Form) for that year.]

[-ec]

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Quote of the Week:

We must learn to live together as brothers or perish  
together as fools.

--Martin Luther King, Jr.

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