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Synchronicity (comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

I have talked about synchronicity before (e.g., issue 02/23/2018), but what weird coincidence led me to read about Ivar the Boneless in a book I am reading and then also hear about him in a totally unrelated podcast within a 24-hour period? [-ecl]

Mini Reviews, Part 16 (film reviews by Mark R. Leeper and Evelyn C. Leeper):

This is the sixteenth batch of mini-reviews, all character studies. As an extra St. Patrick's Day bonus, one is set in Ireland:

THE BANSHEES OF INISHERIN: THE BANSHEES OF INISHERIN seems to be fundamentally a story of how life on an isolated island can either dull your brain or drive you insane. (It is so dull that even the Irish Revolution going on at the time is perceived only at muted explosions heard across a wide expanse of water.) In the film, one of two close friends (played by Brendan Gleeson and Colin Farrell, who were also both in IN BRUGES, which was also written and directed by Martin McDonagh) suddenly decides that the other is too dull and no longer desirable as a friend. But the cast-off friend will not accept this. In some sense, each decides the other is on a different intellectual level. And a third character, a young boy (played by Barry Keoghan), seems to represent both aspects--not quite sane, and somewhat intellectually challenged. Their actions and reactions drive the plot, such as it is, but the film on the whole seems just a look at a very bleak lifestyle.

Released theatrically 4 November 2022. Rating: +1 (-4 to +4) or 6/10

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11813216/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_banshees_of_inisherin

RAYMOND & RAY: In RAYMOND & RAY, the title characters (played by Ewan McGregor and Ethan Hawke) are two very different half-brothers on a road trip to their father's funeral. For reasons never entirely explained the father has left instructions that not only should they attend the funeral, but that they must dig the grave and bury him themselves. (He has also left other odd instructions, also never explained other than by people saying he was strange.) The brother use the time to vent their anger at each other and at their father, and of course family secrets are also discussed and revealed, as is predictable in this sort of film.

Released on streaming 21 October 2022. Rating: high +1 (-4 to +4) or 6/10

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt15334032/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/raymond_and_ray

VENGEANCE: VENGEANCE starts off with witty dialogue, and writer B. J. Novak maintains this level throughout. Novak is also the director (and star) and he and editors Andy Canny, Hilda Rasula, and Plummy Tucker use short choppy takes to disorient the viewer. The plot is familiar: a cosmopolitan goes to the country and finds the unexpected and not the stereotypes--well, okay, some of the stereotypes. In this case, an intellectual New York Jew goes to rural West Texas and meets Texan weirdos. (Just to give one other example, in LOCAL HERO, a Houston urbanite goes to rural Scotland and finds the unexpected and not the stereotypes--well, okay, some of the stereotypes.)

Anyway, there's a great joke based on "Chekhov's gun", and our main character thinks himself superior, but doesn't know basic stuff; he doesn't know who won the Alamo, doesn't recognize the tune to "Deep in the Heart of Texas", and is constantly asking patronizing questions which get surprising deep answers. The whole movie is a murder mystery within this cultural experience.

Released theatrically 29 July 2022. Rating: low +2 (-4 to +4) or 7/10

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11976532/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/vengeance_2022

[-mrl/ecl]

THE SPARE MAN by **Mary Robinette Kowal** (copyright 2022, Audible Studios, 11 hours and 24 minutes, ASIN: B0B8K159G7, narrated by Mary Robinette Kowal) (audio book review by Joe Karpierz):

THE SPARE MAN is Mary Robinette Kowal's brilliant, witty, and fun followup to her recent Lady Astronaut books. Not that those books weren't terrific themselves; they certainly were. But THE SPARE MAN, inspired by the 1934 movie THE THIN MAN, goes off in a different direction entirely than those novels. I love it when an author shows their ability to branch off and do different things. And yes, I know she's written novels and short fiction, fantasy, romance, and science fiction. She's won the Hugo, Nebula, and Locus Awards. She won the Astounding Award for Best New Writer. *and* she's a professional puppeteer. Other than all that, she hasn't done much.

THE SPARE MAN can be described as a locked room murder mystery science fiction romance with one of the most awesome dogs in science fiction history as well as a lawyer that I would love to have as MY lawyer if I had enough money to retain her services. The setting is the cruise space ship I.S.S. Lindgren, traveling between the moon and Mars. Artesia Zuraw and Mishal Husband (yes, it's an inside joke; you'll just have to read the book to understand it), along with their service dog, a Westie named Gimlet, are taking a honeymoon cruise to Mars. They are your stereotypical rich couple, used to living in luxury, with a penchant for drinking a variety of cocktails. We'll get to that.

Everything goes sideways when a murder occurs outside their cabin, and Mishal goes chasing after who he thinks is the perpetrator of the crime after trying to help the victim. Thing is, the victim wasn't dead when Mishal checked on her, and he has her blood on his hands. This results in, you guessed it, Mishal getting accused of the murder. This leaves it up to Artesia to begin tracking down what actually happened and who the actual murderer is.

As you might expect, things and people are not what they seem. Artesia and Mishal are actually Tesla Crane and Shal Steward. Tesla is a brilliant scientist and inventor, and Shal is a famous detective. They were traveling incognito in an effort to enjoy their honeymoon without being hounded by their fans--especially Tesla's--who are everywhere (none of this is a spoiler, as these facts are revealed early in the novel). And yes, Gimlet truly *is* a service dog, but that's because Tesla is suffering from PTSD due to a work accident that happened several years ago. Tesla suffered a debilitating injury in that accident, so not only has to deal with the PTSD but the physical effects of that industrial accident. Tesla's physical problems as well as the PTSD play a huge part in the story, and Kowal does an awesome job of not only weaving them into the story but showing what a person who is affected by these things has to go through just to make it through everyday life.

I did say they were rich. In fact, they are very rich (Throughout the novel, Kowal shows us that Tesla is very aware of her wealth and privilege, and that she really has to rein in that privilege every time she wants to wield it like a sledgehammer. That's not to say that Tesla doesn't strategically wield it; she just doesn't wield it as often as she could.). They are so rich that they can have one of the Solar System's top lawyers, Fantine, on call for them. Tesla can not only afford to have Fantine as her lawyer, but can also afford to have several long interplanetary phone calls with her (complete with increasing time lags as the ship gets further and further from Earth) on the trip. Fantine is a joy to listen to. Her insults are such that I would like to be imaginative to come up with them on my own.

I mentioned their habit of drinking a variety of cocktails. One of the perks of their wealth is that they could bring expensive liquor on board the ship with them in order to make a variety of exotic cocktails. This not only contributes to the plot of the story, but allows

Kowal to provide recipes for cocktails at the beginning of every chapter. Some of them are real, and some are those she made up. Did I mention I love it when an author can do different things?

So, yes, it's a locked room murder mystery science fiction romance in a big over-the-top cruise space ship (if you've ever been on a cruise ship, you know how over the top they can get; they're like little cities themselves) with cute dogs, musicians, yoga instructors, robotics experts, incompetent security staff, security staff that seems to be incompetent but isn't, and all the rest of the trappings of that kind of story. And to top it all off, it's fun. Agatha Christie just might be proud of this one. And it certainly wouldn't hurt my feelings if Kowal decided to write more Spare Man novels.

As I may have mentioned earlier, Kowal is multitalented, and proves that by not only being a terrific writer but an awesome narrator. Now I suppose it helps that she's reading her own material here, so she knows in her head what's going on without having to dig in and research it. Still, her delivery is outstanding, and her ability to come up with a myriad of voices for all her characters that help the listener understand who and what that character is supposed to be contributes to the story in ways other narrators are unable to do. [-jak]

Nebula Award Finalists:

- Nebula Award for Novel:
 - LEGENDS & LATTES, Travis Baldree (Cryptid; Tor)
 - SPEAR, Nicola Griffith (Tordotcom)
 - NETTLE AND BONE, T. Kingfisher (Tor; Titan UK)
 - BABEL, R.F. Kuang (Harper Voyager US; Harper Voyager UK)
 - NONA THE NINTH, Tamsyn Muir (Tordotcom)
 - THE MOUNTAIN IN THE SEA, Ray Nayler (MCD; Weidenfeld & Nicolson)
- Nebula Award for Novella:
 - A PRAYER FOR THE CROWN-SHY, Becky Chambers (Tordotcom)
 - "Bishop's Opening", R. S. A. Garcia (Clarquesworld 1/22)
 - I NEVER LIKED YOU ANYWAY, Jordan Kurella (Vernacular)
 - EVEN THOUGH I KNEW THE END, C. L. Polk (Tordotcom)
 - HIGH TIMES IN THE LOW PARLIAMENT, Kelly Robson (Tordotcom)
- Nebula Award for Novelette:
 - "If You Find Yourself Speaking to God, Address God with the Informal You", John Chu (Uncanny 7-8/22)
 - "Two Hands, Wrapped in Gold", S. B. Divya (Uncanny 5-6/22)
 - "Murder by Pixel: Crime and Responsibility in the Digital Darkness", S. L. Huang (Clarquesworld 12/22)
 - "A Dream of Electric Mothers", Wole Talabi (Africa Risen)
 - "The Prince of Salt and the Ocean's Bargain", Natalia Theodoridou (Uncanny 9/22)
 - "We Built This City", Marie Vibbert (Clarquesworld 6/22)
- Nebula Award for Short Story:
 - "Destiny Delayed", Oghenechovwe Donald Ekpeki (Asimov's 5-6/22)
 - "Give Me English", Ai Jiang (F&SF 5-6/22)
 - "Rabbit Test", Samantha Mills (Uncanny 11-12/22)
 - "Douen", Suzan Palumbo (The Dark 3/22)
 - "Dick Pig", Ian Muneshwar (Nightmare 1/22)
 - "D.I.Y.", John Wiswell (Tor.com 8/24/22)
- Andre Norton Nebula Award for Middle Grade and Young Adult Fiction:
 - RUBY FINLEY VS. THE INTERSTELLAR INVASION, K. Tempest Bradford
 - THE SCRATCH DAUGHTERS, H. A. Clarke
 - THE MIRRORWOOD, Deva Fagan
 - THE MANY HALF-LIVED LIVES OF SAM SYLVESTER, Maya MacGregor
 - EVERY BIRD A PRINCE, Jenn Reese
- Ray Bradbury Nebula Award for Outstanding Dramatic Presentation:
 - ANDOR: "One Way Out", Beau Willimon, Tony Gilroy
 - EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE, Dan Kwan, Daniel Scheinert
 - NOPE, Jordan Peele
 - OUR FLAG MEANS DEATH, David Jenkins, Eliza Jimenez Cossio, Zadry Ferrer-Geddes, William Meny, Maddie Dai, Alyssa Lane, John Mahone, Simone Nathan, Natalie Torres, Zackery Alexander Stephens, Alex J. Sherman, Jes Tom, Adam Stein, Yvonne Zima
 - THE SANDMAN: Season 1, Neil Gaiman, Lauren Bello, Vanessa Benton, Mike Dringenberg, Sam Kieth, Catherine Smyth-McMullen, Heather Bellson, Jim Campolongo, Jay Franklin, Austin Guzman, Alexander Newman-Wise, Ameni Rozsa, David Goyer, Allan Heinberg
 - SEVERANCE, Dan Erickson, Chris Black, Andrew Colville, Amanda Overton, Anna Ouyang Moench, Helen Leigh, Kari Drake, and Mark Friedman

- Nebula Award for Game Writing:
 - Elden Ring, Hidetaka Miyazaki, George R.R. Martin
 - Horizon Forbidden West, Ben McCaw, John Gonzalez, Annie Kitain, Ariadna Martinez, Nick van Someren Brand, Andrew Walsh, Adam Dolin, Anne Toole, Arjan Terpstra, Ben Schroder, Dee Warrick, Giles Armstrong
 - Journeys through the Radiant Citadel, Ajit A. George, F. Wesley Schneider, Justice Ramin Arman, Dominique Dickey, Basheer Ghouse, Alastor Guzman, D. Fox Harrell, T.K. Johnson, Felice Tzehuei Kuan, Surena Marie, Mimi Mondal, Mario Ortegon, Miyuki Jane Pinckard, Pam Punzalan, Erin Roberts, Stephanie Yoon, Terry H. Romero
 - Pentiment, Kate Dollarhyde, Zoe Franznick, Mårten Rattasepp, Josh Sawyer
 - Stray, Steven Lerner, Vivien Mermet-Guyenet, Colas Koola
 - Vampire: The Masquerade--Sins of the Sires, Natalia Theodoridou

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

I recently read a trilogy of sorts on what constitutes "good art": WHAT IS ART? by Leo Tolstoy, AN EXPERIMENT IN CRITICISM by C. S. Lewis, and ON MORAL FICTION by John Gardner [the British one].

In Chapters XI and XII of WHAT IS ART? by Tolstoy (translated by Aylmer Maude), I was stuck by how applicable they are to the current surge in AI-generated fiction. The summary of Chapter XI is "Counterfeits of art produced by: Borrowing; Imitation; being Striking; Interesting. Qualifications needful for the production of real works of art, and those sufficient for the production of counterfeits." The summary of Chapter XII is "Causes of production of counterfeits. Professionalism. Criticism. Schools of art. Perfection of form necessary to produce the infection which characterizes a true work of art."

Basically, Tolstoy says that "counterfeit art" (what we would probably call just bad art) is created by observing what is popular and copying it, or by following what appear to be the rules of the art (e.g., poetry must rhyme).

And isn't this what an AI is doing--is programmed to do--when it is creating "art"?

Tolstoy says that good art must convey emotion, and would ask how an AI could feel any emotion to convey. Tolstoy insists that good art comes from a religious basis--by which he means the basis of his form of Christianity--and I doubt any AI is a pacifist anarchist Christian.

There is however, a lot of truth in what he says about *how* people decide what is art first (the "I know it when I see it", or "what I point to when I say it" school) and then fashion the definition to be sure to include those and only those examples.

Of course, he does the same, deciding that Dante, Shakespeare, and Wagner (among others) are not good art. What he cites as good art are plays, songs, etc., that we would probably classify as maudlin, and expect to see on Lifetime or the Hallmark Channel. Even more problematic is his claim that these are good because everyone, even the laboring peasants, can appreciate them. This makes the definition of good art as dependent on the reader/viewer/listener as on the creator of the art. I suspect there is no art that all the working peasants in Russia would have appreciated, let alone all the peasants and everyone else as well.

Lewis seems to take the opposite position from Tolstoy. Where Tolstoy insists that good art has to appeal to, and be understood by, everyone, Lewis is unabashedly "elitist" in saying there are people who do not read for any elevated reason, and who barely remember what they read. He definitely assumes class (in the British sense) has something to do with this, making disparaging remarks about butchers, for example. For Lewis, art is for the upper class, possibly with some incursion down the ladder, but certainly not "art should be understandable by the peasant in the field." [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

I am the kind of writer that people think other people are reading.

--V. S. Naipaul

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