

# MT VOID 12/01/23 -- Vol. 42, No. 22, Whole Number 2304



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### Ooops! (A DOG OF FLANDERS):

Last week we ran a recommendation and long review of A DOG OF FLANDERS (1959). Well, it turns out that the version Turner Classic Movies is running in December is the 1935 version. Ooops!

The 1959 version is available on several streaming services (Peacock, Tubi, Plex, etc.), but with ads. [-ecl]

### THREE-BODY Running on PBS (comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

PBS in the New York area (Thirteen) is running the 30-part series THREE-BODY, starting December 8, with two 45-minute episodes every Saturday night from 7:30PM to 9:00PM. Check your local listings. [-ecl]

**Mini Reviews, Part 11** (film reviews by Mark R. Leeper and Evelyn C. Leeper):

This is the eleventh batch of mini-reviews, all of special visual interest.

**ASTEROID CITY (2023):** In **ASTEROID CITY**, Anderson creates a feel of the 1950s that is more convincing than accurate. For many, this was a fun period in our history and is still remembered affectionately; for others, was a time of forced conformity, suspicion, and repression. Anderson captures both these aspects.

The story takes place in Utah, 1955, at a site of what appears to be some government research lab. The eponymous town (with a population of 87 it can scarcely be called a city, but the name may have been suggested by Atomic City, Idaho) tries to make itself a "destination" by playing up its "asteroid crater" (actually a meteor crater), and having the local military join them in presenting annual awards for student science projects.

But this is all surrounded by a framing story of a theater group writing and staging this as a play. And it is populated by the usual motley Anderson cast of characters. (Anderson also manages to collect an all-star ensemble cast that often overshadows the point of the film. Although there may not be a point to the film.) The dialogue is in Anderson's formalized style, and his signature symmetry shows up in the use of split screen as well as traditionally.

This isn't up to his best films (**THE GRAND BUDAPEST HOTEL**, **MOONRISE KINGDOM**, and **THE FANTASTIC MR. FOX**), but Anderson fans won't want to miss it. [-mrl/ecl]

Released theatrically 13 June 2023. Rating: +1 (-4 to +4), or 6/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt14230388/reference>

What others are saying: [https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/asteroid\\_city](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/asteroid_city)

"The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar", "The Swan", "The Rat Catcher", and "Poison": Four short films based on Roald Dahl stories and made by Wes Anderson for Netflix in 2023. There is not much to be said: they have the inimitable Wes Anderson style in both dialogue and set design, and if you are a Wes Anderson fan, you will definitely want to see them. If you are unfamiliar with Anderson's work (his best are probably **THE GRAND BUDAPEST HOTEL**, **MOONRISE KINGDOM**, and **THE FANTASTIC MR. FOX**) these provide a glimpse of what people love about his work. [-ecl]

Released streaming 27-30 September 2023. Rating: high +2 (-4 to +4), or 8/10.

Film Credits:

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt16968450/reference>

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt28912758/reference>

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt28912858/reference>

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt28912885/reference>

What others are saying:

[https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the\\_wonderful\\_story\\_of\\_henry\\_sugar](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_wonderful_story_of_henry_sugar)

[https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the\\_swan](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_swan)

[https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the\\_rat\\_catcher\\_2023](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_rat_catcher_2023)

[https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/poison\\_2023](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/poison_2023)

**BARBIE (2023):** The narrator of **BARBIE** tells us at the beginning that before Barbie all dolls were baby dolls. This is followed by a spoof of the beginning of 2001's opening sequence (the first of many film references). (Of course, one may argue that Barbie doesn't seem very grown-up at the beginning of the film either.)

[Disclaimer: I was disinterested in Barbie before it was cool to be disinterested in Barbie.]

It is a pleasure to see some of these excellent actresses (such as Rhea Perlman) from Barbie's earlier days. It's like seeing old friends whom we have not seen for a while.

Everyone has talked about how the movie makes some salient points about sexism, patriarchy, and consumerism in the real world in the movie, but it seems to overlook the same issues with the sexism, matriarchy, and consumerism in Barbieland (which is yet another

parallel world, though unlike most films, in *BARBIE* we have characters traveling from the world of the imagination to the real world, rather than vice versa). While in the real world, we have scenes of toxic (and non-toxic) masculinity, one can argue that in Barbieland, we have scenes of toxic (and non-toxic) femininity. There are two notable monologues: one is Gloria talking about the problems women face in the real world; the other is Sasha telling Barbie why she is basically evil.

And the key line of the film may well be: "Get in the box." But while the film has several points to be made but eventually the viewer may go into overload. And one problem is that the ending seems to indicate that men are incapable of running things. Is that actually better?

Interestingly, parts of the set design have an "Asteroid City" look, since both use color in very striking ways.

While I am told that this film has many references to familiar films, I have seen only one or two and the rest may be after my time.

There is something ironic about Margot Robbie going from playing the very un-Barbie Tonya Harding in *I, TONYA* to playing Barbie in this. (And her measurements are all wrong. For one thing, she is three inches too short.) [-mrl/ecl]

Released theatrically 9 July 2023. Rating: high +2 (-4 to +4), or 8/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1517268/reference>

What others are saying: <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/barbie>

**STARTER VILLAIN** by **John Scalzi** (copyright 2023, Audible Studios, 8 hours and 5 minutes, ASIN: B0C6FR3JN1, narrated by Wil Wheaton) (audio book review by Joe Karpierz):

John Scalzi's novels run the gamut from silly to serious, but there always seems to be a new idea floating around that he plucks out of the air and uses to make an entertaining novel. Scalzi's novels are always accessible; he's made it very clear that he writes commercial novels that the masses will enjoy. A friend of mine and I had a very recent conversation in which we discussed whether "light reading" novels are award-worthy, with the particular example of last year's *KAIJU PRESERVATION SOCIETY* being a finalist for the Hugo Award for Best Novel. *KAIJU* was indeed light reading, but Scalzi always manages to insert thought provoking ideas into his books, no matter how light or silly a book may be (I'm not saying that *KAIJU* was silly, but it was light reading, other than the ideas Scalzi sneaks into it). To my recollection, and this particular discussion with my friend occurred only last night as I write this, but I don't think we came to any conclusion about award-worthiness of silly books. It is, however, possible that we'll have the same discussion about Scalzi's *STARTER VILLAIN* sometime next year, whether it makes any awards lists or not. Charlie Fitzer's life is an utter mess. He's a divorced former business reporter, trying to get by as a substitute teacher (I personally know you can't do this. I tried to be one during my year of unemployment two decades ago) while living in his family home which he owns with his siblings that want him to sell and get out of. He wants to try something different with his life. He wants to buy a local tavern, but he is denied a bank loan. He lives with two cats, Hera and Persephone, who I think he can provide for with a substitute teacher's salary.

And then, something happens that we all wish would happen in our lives: his rich uncle dies and makes Charlie the heir to his parking lot business empire. Yes, his rich uncle died and left him set for life (now I know we all really don't want a rich uncle to die just to leave us money--we want that uncle to live, because we are all nice people, but when said uncle dies we want to be left large sums of money). The catch is that he must represent his uncle--did I mention Charlie and his Uncle Jake are estranged? Charlie hasn't seen Jake since he was a young boy--at the funeral, and he will receive more than enough money to buy out his siblings on the house, get the loan for the tavern, and live his new life.

As we all know by now, nothing is that easy. Thugs in business suits attend the funeral, all of them wanting to make sure that Jake is really dead. The family house--the one he was going to buy from his siblings--gets blown up, and of course Charlie gets framed for the explosion. Charlie has no where to live, no where to go, and is probably going to end up in jail for a bombing he had nothing to do with. His deceased Uncle Jake's assistant, Mathilda Morrison, sets him straight. And, well, so do his cats. It turns out his cats are genetically modified and are super-intelligent. The cats and Mathilda help run the real business for which the parking lot empire is just a front. It turns out that Jake was a supervillain, and Charlie has just inherited all of that supervillain stuff, including his super secret lair under a volcano which is being protected by a group of--you guessed it--genetically modified dolphins who can not only talk but are threatening to go on strike for better working conditions.

Are you with me so far? Cats who can talk (via a special keyboard hooked up to a computer), check. Dolphins who can talk but are snarky, obnoxious, and rude, check. Oh wait. Did I mention genetically enhanced whales (there's a lot of genetic enhancement going

on here) that are being used to attack the underground lair, space lasers, and spy satellites? I didn't? Sorry, I should have (Yes, I realize that I'm now starting to sound like Scalzi, or at least Wil Wheaton reading Scalzi. Whatever.). Oh, did I mention that the \*other\* thing (things?) Charlie inherits are all of his deceased uncle's enemies?

Those enemies have invited Charlie to the annual retreat of the Lombardy Convocation, during which Charlie is presented with a not very pleasant ultimatum. And THIS is where things start getting interesting, and the novel really starts moving.

Yes, this is a thriller, with Scalzi having a grand old time messing with supervillain tropes, including double crossing, back stabbing, lying, and well, everything else that supervillains do. At the same time, through Charlie he investigates moral and ethical issues, and studies the idea of the costs of what you want falling into your lap and whether it's a really good idea to take advantage of what appears to be your good fortune. Once again, Scalzi has written a fun, fast paced, humorous, yet thought provoking novel that will be popular with his fans. As usual, Wil Wheaton does a bang up job of narrating this book. Really, should any one else ever narrate a John Scalzi novel? Nah. [-jak]

**FANTASTIC VOYAGE** (letter of comment by Peter Trei):

In response to [Evelyn's comments on FANTASTIC VOYAGE](#) in the 11/17/23 issue of the MT VOID, Peter Trei writes:

[Evelyn writes:] "If they inject miniaturized water, even a little bit, with the sub, isn't that going to expand at the end of the hour? The ratio seems to be 1:3000, so even 1/4 teaspoon would expand to 750 teaspoons, or 250 tablespoons, or more than 15 cups of water that would suddenly appear in Banes's system." [-ecl]

Forget the water: In the movie the saboteur and entire sub were left in the subject. Asimov, who wrote the novelization (the movie script came first, but the book was published before the movie release) modified the story slightly to deal with it. [-pt]

Evelyn responds:

True. But IIRC, he still doesn't address the water. [-ecl]

**Ancient Plays, Robert J. Sawyer, THE DAUGHTER OF DR. MOREAU, J. Robert Oppenheimer** (letter of comment by Taras Wolansky):

In response to various comments in various issues issue of the MT VOID, Taras Wolansky writes:

On the survival of ancient plays: I've heard it said that those seven plays each of Aeschylus and Sophocles were required reading in school, and so were copied many, many times. On the other hand, we have nineteen plays of Euripides, because his plays were actually popular.

Joe Karpierz writes about Robert J. Sawyer, "While he's never stopped writing, he's been off the radar when it comes to fiction awards ... since 2012." I haven't been paying much attention to the Hugo Awards lately, but when I went to look them up, I found that no white male has won Best Novel since 2013, and no non-white male since 2015. So it's not like Sawyer is being singled out. (I didn't check the other awards.)

According to Joe Karpierz's review, Silvia Moreno-Garcia's THE DAUGHTER OF DR. MOREAU has a major character named Montgomery Laughton. In THE ISLAND OF LOST SOULS (1932), Charles Laughton plays Dr. Moreau, and Arthur Hohl plays a character named Montgomery.

Oppenheimer Update: About a month ago, I was scanning the newsstand in the big Barnes & Noble at Palisades Center, and there espied the red cover of the September COMMENTARY, featuring Cillian Murphy in his trademark suit from the movie. The bold headline: OPPENHEIMER WAS A COMMUNIST.

The actual story is less sensational than the headline. Like millions of people, Oppenheimer drifted into the Communist Party in the Thirties, and then drifted out again in the Forties. He was never a spy--but he was slow to report a friend's attempt to recruit him. And as he absolutely refused to discuss the matter, it's unclear which particular Stalinist outrage may have finally opened his eyes. I suspect he was ashamed of the whole thing. Sure, millions of people had fallen for the fake utopia--but those were ordinary people, and Oppenheimer had a higher opinion of himself.

It was a strange time. In his autobiography [THE WAY THE FUTURE WAS], Frederik Pohl remembered with wonderment how he and his friends in the Brooklyn Young Communist League simultaneously praised the Soviet Constitution for banning capital punishment, and applauded the death sentences handed out to "traitors" in the Moscow Show Trials. [-tw]

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

This week will be just a few quick catch-up comments.

ARMS OF NEMESIS by Steven Saylor (Minotaur, ISBN 978-0-312-38323-7) is one of his "Roma Sub Rosa" series of mysteries set in ancient Rome, and featuring Giordanius the Finder as the detective. This reminded me of many of Kim Stanley Robinson's works, full of what are effectively infodumps. One of the rules of writing is not to include all your research in the book; Robinson can (sometimes) get away with it, but with Saylor it is just awkward.

I've been bingeing Michael Grant books about ancient Rome. I reviewed his THE FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE (Collier, ISBN 978-0-002-028560-4) two years ago, and just recently read GREEK & ROMAN HISTORIANS (Routledge, ISBN 978-0-415-11770-8), FROM ROME TO BYZANTIUM (Routledge, ISBN 978-0-415-14753-8), and JEWS IN THE ROMAN WORLD (Dorset, ISBN 978-0-880-29026-5). The first ties in nicely with John Burrow's A HISTORY OF HISTORIES, which I reviewed in the 11/17/23 issue. The second was a bit elementary, aimed more at an audience with very little background in the subject. And the third was mostly "Jews in the Eastern Roman World". There were Jews throughout the empire, and I had hoped for more coverage of that.

TERRACE STORY by Hilary Leichter (Ecco, ISBN 978-0-063-26582-0) is a fantasy novel marketed as mainstream. A couple and their young child live in a cramped apartment with no view, until their friend Stephanie opens a door and reveals a beautiful terrace. Annie Berke in the Washington Post compared it to "the rigorous, fantastical imagination of Ted Chiang"; I cannot say I see that. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

Originality is the fine art of remembering what you hear  
but forgetting where you heard it.

--Laurence J. Peter

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