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Arno Penzias Obituary:

"Physicist Arno Penzias, who co-discovered the cosmic microwave background, helping to confirm the Big Bang theory of the universe's beginning, died on Monday at age 90.

In the 1960s, Penzias and colleague Robert Woodrow Wilson were working at Bell Labs in Holmdel, N.J., on a new type of microwave antenna shaped like a giant horn. They planned to use the ultrasensitive system to study radio emissions from the Milky Way. What they eventually found instead was a signal that originated from outside our galaxy that turned out to be the smoking gun proof for the Big Bang theory."

Full article at <https://www.npr.org/2024/01/24/1226572843/arno-penzias-obituary-big-bang-theory>.

Mark Leeper's Top Ten Films of 2023 (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

I rated OPPENHEIMER a +3 and the others either a high +2 or just +2 (-4 to +4), so they are listed alphabetically.

OPPENHEIMER: There is a lot of substance to the film, but there is a lot of style as well (it is after all a Christopher Nolan film), and the style sometimes gets in the way of the substance.

BARBIE: 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.

CLOSE TO VERMEER: This documentary covers the planning of a major Vermeer exhibition in the Netherlands, including disputed paintings, the layout of the exhibit, and even merchandising. This is a documentary art lovers won't want to miss--and it doesn't require a lot of background knowledge to appreciate it.

DESPERATE SOULS, DARK CITY AND THE LEGEND OF MIDNIGHT COWBOY: *DESPERATE SOULS, DARK CITY AND THE LEGEND OF MIDNIGHT COWBOY* is more a chronicle of the period of the 1950s and 1960s and is a history of that period by clips from films, discussion of film makers, and Warhol-esque art than an analysis of the film *MIDNIGHT COWBOY*. There is some discussion of the effect *MIDNIGHT COWBOY* had going forward, but writer/director/producer Nancy Biurski primarily looks at how the film came to be at all.

A HAUNTING IN VENICE: *A HAUNTING IN VENICE* is based primarily on Agatha Christie's *HALLOWE'EN PARTY*, but it also has elements from *A CARIBBEAN MYSTERY* and *NEMESIS*. Somehow Kenneth Branagh does not come up to David Suchet as Poirot.

THE HOLDOVERS: *THE HOLDOVERS* is worth watching for the performances (Paul Giamatti, Dominic Sessa, and Da'Vine Joy Randolph), but otherwise a fairly standard story.

THE INVENTOR: *THE INVENTOR* is a combination of stop-motion animation and hand-drawn animation. It is a biopic of Leonardo da Vinci, but it concentrates more on his scientific pursuits than on his artistic ones.

LEAVE THE WORLD BEHIND: *LEAVE THE WORLD BEHIND* is similar to a "Twilight Zone" episode; in fact, the story has not one but three episodes it has connections to (and a Ray Bradbury story to boot). But it is original in its approach.

MAFIA MAMMA: We watched *MAFIA MAMMA* primarily because Toni Colette is the lead actress, and we think she is great as a comedy actress.

And this film doesn't disappoint in that regard; Colette plays a woman in a boring job who suddenly inherits a Mafia empire (and a vineyard) from a grandfather she never met. Some elements of the film may remind one of *TUCKER & DALE VS. EVIL*, but with a twist.

THE MONKEY KING: *THE MONKEY KING* is an animated film that is a prequel to the classic "Monkey King" legend, "Journey to the West", or perhaps more accurately, a secret history. Because the film is a prequel, it requires no prior knowledge of the Monkey King in viewers, though the final scene assumes some recognition.

[-mrl]

Online Film Critics Society (OFCS) Awards Announced:

Best Picture: *Oppenheimer*
 Best Animated Feature: *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse*
 Best Director: Christopher Nolan - *Oppenheimer*
 Best Actor: Paul Giamatti - *The Holdovers*
 Best Actress: Lily Gladstone - *Killers of the Flower Moon*
 Best Supporting Actor: Robert Downey Jr. - *Oppenheimer*
 Best Supporting Actress: Da'Vine Joy Randolph - *The Holdovers*
 Best Original Screenplay: *The Holdovers*
 Best Adapted Screenplay: *Oppenheimer*

Best Film Editing: Oppenheimer
 Best Cinematography: Oppenheimer
 Best Original Score: Oppenheimer
 Best Production Design: Barbie
 Best Costume Design: Barbie
 Best Visual Effects: Oppenheimer
 Best Debut Feature: Celine Song - Past Lives
 Best Film Not in the English Language: Anatomy of a Fall
 Best Documentary Feature: 20 Days in Mariupol

Technical Achievements

Culinary Direction - The Taste of Things
 Original Song ("I'm Just Ken") - Barbie
 Original Song ("What Was I Made For?") - Barbie
 Stunt Coordination - John Wick: Chapter 4
 Stunt Coordination - Mission: Impossible - Dead Reckoning Part 1

Lifetime Achievement Awards

Jodie Foster (actor)
 Gene Hackman (actor)
 Gale Anne Hurd (producer)
 Hayao Miyazaki (animator/writer/director)
 Thelma Schoonmaker (editor)

Special Achievement Awards

Ben Model, for his work in restoring and releasing silent film classics.

Fran Drescher, president of the Screen Actors Guild, for her diligent negotiation on behalf of working actors in the 2023 SAG-AFTRA strike.

Members of and President Meredith Stiehm of the Writers Guild of America for persisting in their strike to ensure that the rapidly-changing American film industry will remain a viable source of livelihood for artists

Best Non-US Releases

Bad Living (João Canijo, Portugal)
 Blackbird Blackbird Blackberry (Elene Naveriani, Georgia)
 Close Your Eyes (Victor Erice, Spain)
 Dear Jassi (Tarsem Singh Dhandwar, India)
 Explanation for Everything (Gábor Reisz, Hungary)
 The Girls Are Alright (Itsaso Arana, Spain)
 I Love You, Beksman (Perci M. Intalan, Philippines)
 The New Boy (Warwick Thornton, Australia)
 Samsara (Lois Patino, Spain)

Founded in 1997, the Online Film Critics Society (OFCS) is a professional association for online film journalists, historians, and scholars with a mission to further the growth of an informed film audience, to promote awareness of the Internet as a source of news and commentary, to provide a forum for the OFCS members to communicate and discuss ideas about journalism and cinema, and to encourage a high standard of journalism across the online media. The OFCS consists of nearly 300 members around the world; nearly one third of the organization's membership are based outside of the United States. The Online Film Critics Society explores the nature of film from historical, sociological, political, emotional, technical, and other perspectives and appreciates film as a medium for art and a mode of entertainment. Learn more at www.ofcs.org.

QUANTUM SUPREMACY by Michio Kaku (book review by Gregory Frederick):

In *QUANTUM SUPREMACY*, Michio Kaku, a leading figure in theoretical physics and science communication, delves into the groundbreaking advancements and potential of quantum computing. With his characteristic clarity and enthusiasm, Kaku takes readers on a journey through the complex realm of quantum mechanics, explaining the fundamental principles behind quantum computing and its revolutionary implications for the future.

Kaku masterfully navigates through the intricate concepts of quantum mechanics, making them accessible to readers of all backgrounds. He begins by unraveling the mysteries of quantum physics, laying the foundation for understanding the profound shift quantum computing promises to bring to our technological landscape. Digital computers use digital bits that can carry only one piece of information at a time (either 0 or 1) but quantum computers use qbits which can carry much more information. Qbits are atoms that can be either 0 or 1 or any value in between these 2 states. Also at the atomic level objects can exist in multiple states at the same time which is called superposition. So you can now have exponentially faster computations leading to the potential for solving currently intractable problems in fields such as cryptography, drug discovery, nuclear fusion, understanding the Universe, better batteries to store solar power, folding of proteins, understanding aging, and artificial intelligence, Kaku paints a vivid picture of the transformative power of quantum supremacy. If, for example, we understand why proteins need to fold in certain unique ways then we would understand much more about how to prevent disease.

Throughout the book, Kaku balances scientific rigor with captivating storytelling, seamlessly weaving together historical anecdotes, cutting-edge research, and visionary speculations. He explores the race among tech giants, research institutions, and governments to achieve quantum supremacy and the geopolitical implications of this technological arms race.

While *QUANTUM SUPREMACY* is intellectually stimulating, it remains highly accessible, thanks to Kaku's talent for elucidating complex ideas without sacrificing depth. Whether you're a seasoned physicist, a tech enthusiast, or simply curious about the future of computing, this book offers a captivating exploration of one of the most revolutionary developments of the 21st century.

Overall, *QUANTUM SUPREMACY* is a thought-provoking and enlightening read that showcases Michio Kaku's unparalleled ability to make cutting-edge science both comprehensible and captivating. It's a must-read for anyone interested in the intersection of technology, physics, and the future of humanity. [-gf]

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

In these times it is worth remembering that Texas has produced some people worthy of praise, and one of these would be Howard Waldrop, described by the *Austin Chronicle* as "a mainstay of Austin's literary scene, a leviathan of sci-fi short stories, ... and a beloved mentor to many in the city and the wider literary sci-fi scene." And from the existence of that quote, you have probably realized that Waldrop has just died.

He wasn't a Texan by birth, but having been born in Houston, Mississippi, gave him at least the opportunity to claim (quite truthfully) that he was born in Houston, and leave it at that.

One often sees recommendations of the form "if you liked author X, you will probably like author Y," implying a similarity. With Waldrop, a more accurate analogy would be "if you meet one person with autism, you've met one person with autism." (Not that Waldrop had autism; it's an analogy.) He was, as they say, *sui generis*. The only other science fiction author of whom I've heard that description is R. A. Rafferty, who came from the neighboring state of Oklahoma. Is it something in the air there? If I were forced to pick a similar author, it might be Terry Bisson, who also died recently. At Readercon 15, Catherine Asaro said that Waldrop had a lot in common with such writers as R. A. Lafferty, Carol Emshwiller, Jonathan Lethem, and Michael Chabon, not that his writing was similar to any of them, but that they were all unique voices. Something about a set of elements who are similar in that they are all different sounds very odd.

(Ellen Datlow once said that as an editor she never wanted to see another "Sherlock Holmes meets famous person" story--unless it was by Howard Waldrop.)

Rather than try to review some of Waldrop's work, I will observe that he is one of the few science fiction authors who made his living at it solely from short fiction. (He did write one novel, *THEM BONES*, and co-authored another, *THE TEXAS-ISRAELI WAR: 1999*, with Jake Saunders.) Again, at Readercon 15, a panel on ambition which included Waldrop and Barry Malzberg was asked by moderator David Alexander Smith what their earlier ambitions were and whether they felt they had succeeded. Malzberg said, "To make a living as a science fiction writer, and no, I didn't." Howard Waldrop then said, "Barry stole my thunder, but I'll go him one better. I tried to make a living in science fiction writing short stories."

And I will recommend all of Waldrop's short stories. The best collection is probably STRANGE THINGS IN CLOSE UP: THE NEARLY COMPLETE HOWARD WALDROP (1989, Legend, ISBN 978-0-099-64440-8), which is itself an omnibus of HOWARD WHO? (1986) and ALL ABOUT STRANGE MONSTERS OF THE RECENT PAST (1987). Old Earth books did a couple of collections in 2007 and 2008 (one of shorter works 1980-2005, one of longer 1989-2003) for those looking for something more recent.

Admittedly the stories in STRANGE THINGS IN CLOSE UP are thirty-five years old, but these include most of the classics for which Waldrop is best known: "Ike at the Mike", "Mary Margaret Road-Grader", "God's Hooks!", "The Lions Are Asleep Tonight", "Flying Saucer Rock and Roll", "Heirs of the Perisphere", and, of course, "The Ugly Chickens". (Just as the prolific Robert Bloch will forever be "the author of PSYCHO", Waldrop will be "the author of "The Ugly Chickens", or more likely "that chicken story"). A bigger problem is its rarity/cost, and this applies to the Old Earth short fiction volume, and the Subterranean one as well. The sad fact is that the Old Earth long fiction volume seems to be the only (paper) collection of Waldrop's fiction that is readily available for less than \$40. The good news is that many of his collections are available free electronically from least some libraries through Hoopla. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

Housework can't kill you, but why take a chance?
--Phyllis Diller

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