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Mini Reviews, Part 20 (film reviews by Mark R. Leeper and Evelyn C. Leeper):

This is twentieth batch of mini-reviews.

BANK OF DAVE (2023): BANK OF DAVE is based on a true story, about how Dave Fishwick tried to start a community bank in Burnley. As is usually the case with films based on true stories, there are some liberties taken. For starters, there is no "Bank of Dave" in real life; Fishwick had to settle for Burnley Savings and Loans, a lending company. (It is true, however, that the institution has lent over 30 million pounds to people in need, and has donated all its profits to charity. There was also no villain (Charles Dance in the movie) and no Def Leppard convert. The result is a film which is predictable in its twists and turns and heart-warming moments, a harmless enough way to pass an evening, but nothing special. [-ecl]

Released theatrically 25 August 2023. Rating: +1 (-4 to +4), or 6/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt14308636/reference>

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

ALEXANDER--THE MAKING OF A GOD (2024): ALEXANDER--THE MAKING OF A GOD has an IMDb rating of 5.2, which makes it sound mediocre, but when looks at the raw data, one discovers that about two-thirds of the ratings are 1s. The unweighted mean is 2.8; the 5.2 gives more weight to votes from people who have voted on other films. What has happened here is that the Radical Right has run a campaign to get people to downrate it because gasp! it shows Alexander as bisexual. The fact that he *was* bisexual (at least engaged in behavior we would now label as bisexual) apparently doesn't hold any weight with the Radical Right--alternative facts, you know.

(For what it's worth, Oliver Stone's ALEXANDER gets a 5.6, but it comes by it honestly, at least based on the bell-shaped curve of votes.)

The film is actually a mix of documentary about excavations in Alexandria and other research about Alexander, and dramatizations of events in Alexander's life up to his conquest of Babylon. This sort of thing has been done on a smaller scale on the History Channel (at least back when they did history shows on the History Channel. My major complaint with the dramatizations is that the scriptwriter has decided to use Western-style nicknames: "Alex" for Alexander, "Ptol" for Ptolomy, and so on. I just don't believe that anyone called Ptolomy "Ptol".

The major complaint real film reviewers have is one I can agree with: the transitions back and forth between documentary and dramatization leave the viewer a bit jerked around, and reminded me of the feeling one got when watching television in the old days (or Tubi or YouTube now) and having a show or a movie suddenly interrupted by a commercial.

I would love to see a sequel to this, covering Alexander's conquests after Babylon, but I have a feeling that won't happen. [-ecl]

Released on Netflix 31 January 2024. Rating: +2 (-4 to +4), or 7/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt27494999/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/tv/alexander_the_making_of_a_god

ORION AND THE DARK (2024): ORION AND THE DARK is an animated film written by Charlie Kaufman based on the book by Emma Yarlett. I had hoped for something more Charlie-Kaufman-esque, but given that it's a TV-Y7 film, that was hoping for too much. It's probably okay for kids, but even with a few throwaway references for adults it's probably not worth the time for them. [-ecl]

Released on Netflix 02 February 2024. Rating: high +1 (-4 to +4), or 6/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt28066777/reference>

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

SOME DESPERATE GLORY by **Emily Tesh** (copyright 2023, Macmillan Audio, 15 hours and 56 minutes, ASIN: B09YHXVMGB, narrated by Sena Bryer) (audio book review by Joe Karpierz):

About a week ago as I write this, a long time friend of mine whom I jokingly call my editor because I run all my reviews by him and let him catch my grammatical, spelling, and potentially logical mistakes and I sat down for one of our periodic Google Meet calls (he lives in California, and I'm in Illinois). One of the many and varied topics in our nearly four hour call was 2023 books from the Locus Recommended Reading list that I had read (I was shocked to discover that I had read eight of them, and am currently in the process of reading, er, listening to a ninth). I've just gone over that list again, and while there are some pretty good books on it, and there are five that I'm planning on nominating for the Best Novel Hugo (and no, I'm not going to talk about that mess here or anywhere else), there is one that stands head shoulders above the rest of them: the debut novel from Emily Tesh, **SOME DESPERATE GLORY**.

The story seems fairly standard at first glance. The Earth and its population have been devastated--no, eradicated--by an alien race. Most of what's left of humanity has scattered to the stars. The remaining humans have vowed to fight the aliens to exact their revenge. They live on Gaea Station, where residents are rigidly segmented and trained for various roles to take the fight to the aliens or help preserve the human race. They are grouped into cohorts, and when they have finished their training, they each get their assignments. Our protagonist, Kyr, is a highly trained and talented warrior who is the leader of her cohort. As the assignments are passed out and revealed, Kyr learns that she has been assigned to the nursery. And that's exactly what it sounds like. Kyr will spend the rest of her life pumping out babies to help preserve the future of the human race. As each of her cohort leaves her to go to their assignments, we learn

a very important fact: no one likes Kyr.

I have a very mixed relationship with character in stories. Characters aren't necessarily important to me, but I also know that they are important to a story. My general reaction is that a character is doing a thing because the story calls for it, and I usually don't have a strong reaction to any one character. In this case, I found Kyr extremely unlikeable. There's no empathy, no sympathy, no relating to other characters. She is driven to preserve the human race and she just can't see why nobody else feels the same way. I was truly turned off by her character (At one point I asked my wife, who had read the book before I did, if there's some sort of redemption arc for Kyr, because at that moment in time I really didn't care if Kyr was killed off or not. She asked where I was in the book, and all she said was that I had a long way to go and just keep reading. That, of course, did not answer my question, which it shouldn't have.).

It is supposed to be impossible to escape Gaea station, but Kyr's brother (who was in another cohort) does just that. Kyr is already angry with her sister, who did the same thing and who Kyr thinks of as a traitor. The difference is that her brother is supposedly assigned to what amounts to a death squad, and with the help of a friend of her brother's discovers where he's been sent and what his assignment is. With the help of the friend, she finds a way to get off the station and get to the planet where he's at, to try to talk him out of it. What and who she finds on that planet begins to change her view of everything, including what is really going on at Gaea Station.

I haven't really talked about the aliens at all, and while Kyr eventually befriends one of the aliens, what is interesting is the reality altering "Wisdom", a tool that was developed long ago and that the aliens trust because "it always does the right thing". Where it came from, how they know it always does the right thing, and how they came to control it is not the point of the exercise here. It is a tool that is central to the story because it causes one of the biggest, blindside twists I've seen in a novel in a very long time. I truly did not see it coming, and when I mentioned it to my wife she only said "Ah, yeah. It just gets weirder."

There is a lot going on in this book, which is a story of family, self discovery, and the lengths to which people will go to preserve what they think is important. And let's not forget the bad guys--well, bad guy here. He is despicable, as is the system that has been set up on Gaea Station. As much as Kyr wants to change things and help humanity survive, our antagonist wants to keep power for himself. I mean, isn't it always that way?

SOME DESPERATE GLORY is an awesome read. It was one of those books where I couldn't see what was coming, or even if I did, how it was going to get there. It's one of the few books that has gripped me from beginning to end. As far as I'm concerned, SOME DESPERATE GLORY should win the Hugo for Best Novel in Glasgow. Just a note, however, the book does come with some trigger warnings, so sensitive readers will want to pay attention to those.

Sena Breyer is a magnificent narrator for this book. Her pacing, tone, and vocal qualities fit the novel perfectly. She also provided an excellent voice for both the aliens and the Wisdom. I loved this book, and I loved the narration. I cannot speak highly enough about it. If I were to recommend one book from 2023, it would be SOME DESPERATE GLORY. [-jak]

Hugo Awards and Chengdu Worldcon, Oscar-Nominated Films, OPPENHEIMER, BARBIE, and POOR THINGS (letter of comment by Taras Wolansky):

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

Thanks for many interesting issues of MT VOID since my last letter.

Really shocking story about how the Hugo awards were handled at the Chengdu Worldcon. At the time, I compared the con to the 1936 Nazi Olympics--though, of course, the Nazis famously did *not* bar black or Jewish athletes.

The disgraceful results at Chengdu vindicate those of us who pointed out the absurdity of holding a literary convention in a country that does not recognize freedom of speech or press. One of the administrators said she did what she did so that the Hugos wouldn't "crash and burn"; but it would have been better for them to crash and burn, and then perhaps rerun in a free country.

I've seen all the Oscar nominated movies, except MAESTRO, though not with a great deal of satisfaction. If OPPENHEIMER wins everything, I'll be relatively content.

Actually, I saw only the first half of BARBIE: I was bored and left when my popcorn ran out. Which I now regret somewhat as, based on reviews, it seems the second half is more interesting than the first. But I just couldn't work up the enthusiasm to go back and watch it again.

[SPOILERS for POOR THINGS follow]

My initial reaction to POOR THINGS was mostly favorable--I didn't start checking my wristwatch until the 90-minute mark--but it struck me as something like false advertising to rate the film R instead of NC-17. I could easily imagine a mom taking a young daughter to what she thinks is no more than a racy feminist fable.

At one point our heroine grabs a corpse's erect member (a flesh-colored dildo, presumably). And then there's a great deal of nudity during her lengthy sojourn in a Parisian brothel. (Emma Stone is decorative, but some of her sexual partners will leave scars on your retina.)

At the end, I expected her to save the life of her beloved, dying creator by switching his brain with the youthful villain; instead, she switches the villain's brain with a goat, and lets her creator die.

After some reflection, I realized that her creator has to die so she can come out on top: a sort of feminist wrapper on a deeply sexist story, in which she is enlightened and empowered by servicing every man who pays, even the ones that disgust her. Without the ending it becomes obvious that this is somebody's fantasy all right, but nothing to do with feminism.

Furthermore, when she seeks enlightenment in the bordello, the character's mental age is about five or six. Of course, she is played by an actress in her thirties, so most viewers don't think it through.

The film adopts the Roman Polanski defense: "Your Honor, she may have been a child on the inside, but an adult woman on the outside." [-tw]

Classical Podcasts (letter of comment by David Goldfarb):

In response to [Evelyn's comments on podcasts](#) in the 03/01/24 issue of the MT VOID, David Goldfarb writes:

Writing about podcasts, you mention "Classical Stuff You Should Know". Are you aware of "Natalie Haynes Stands Up for the Classics"? If not, I highly recommend it. She posted on Bluesky recently that she's started recording a new set of them. (They are weekly when they're coming out, but only come out in a series of 5-6 at a time.) [-dg]

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

KILLER IN THE RAIN by Raymond Chandler (Pan, ISBN 978-0-330-26461-7) is a collection of eight early stories by Chandler that he held back from reprinting while he was alive (and may have wanted them permanently so, but once he was dead ...). Why? Because they were all early versions of major parts of his novels.

For example, "Killer in the Rain" and "The Curtain" were both incorporated (with name changes and some plot adjustments) in THE BIG SLEEP. FAREWELL, MY LOVELY used three stories: "The Man Who Liked Dogs", "Try the Girl", and "Mandarin Jade". And THE LADY IN THE LAKE incorporated "Bay City Blues", "The Lady in the Lake", and "No Crime in the Mountains".

In his introduction, Philip Durham analyzes how Chandler changed and merged various stories into a novel, along with noting what changes Chandler made, both in plot, and in the actual words (for example, the descriptions of the hothouse in "The Curtain" and THE BIG SLEEP).

To those familiar with the novels, the stories may appear rough and incomplete, but they do provide insight as to how a writer can develop a story. Among other things, none of the detectives in these stories is named "Philip Marlowe". "John Dalmas" is the name he used multiple times, but even as he was writing about John Dalmas, he had created Philip Marlowe in THE BIG SLEEP. Taken in conjunction with RAYMOND CHANDLER SPEAKING (see my review at), this is a valuable resource for readers wishing a deeper look into Chandler's process.

(There is also a 2001 American edition from Penguin, as well as an older edition from Ballantine. I have to say that reading stories in a British edition about ur-Philip-Marlowes in Los Angeles and running into British spellings is a bit of a stumbling block. I believe that the Durham introduction is standard across all the editions, but I'm not sure.) [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

We have overcome the notion that mathematical truths have an existence independent and apart from our own minds. It is even strange to us that such a notion could ever have existed.

--James Newman

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