



I do have a pretty good idea of how long a meter is, and I have guzzled my way to a pretty good grasp of two liters. But I have no image whatever of a kilometer, much less 10 or 50 kilometers. And vivid quantitative imagery is essential for the reader of

THE MT VOID

Page 2

R\_e\_n\_d\_e\_z\_v\_o\_u\_s\_w\_i\_t\_h\_R\_a\_m\_a. Without it you miss out on much of the sense of wonder that Clarke expected to engender with his exacting descriptions of Rama--the huge, lifeless alien spacecraft that drifts mysteriously into our solar system. I did realize that it's huge, because on page 17 Clarke says that its mass is at least ten trillion tons. That's a lot of mass. (Or is it metric tons rather than regular American tons? Are tons of mass as big as tons of weight? Why didn't I pay more attention in Physics 1?)

After page 17, though, I was hopelessly out of it. On page 36 the commander of the exploratory crew mentions that the entry tunnel is "half a kilometer long...about the thickness of the shell." Pretty thick shell, eh? On page 43 we learn that the interior cavity is 50 kilometers long and 16 wide. Sounds like plenty of room to stand up in and look around breathlessly.

"Radiating from the central hub, 120 degrees apart, are three ladders that are almost a kilometer long." Good thing there's no gravity to impede their traversal of the ladder--at least not until they've gone some fraction of a kilometer away from the hub toward the outer hull of the vessel (spinning at "over eight hundred kilometers an hour"). Now (page 44) we get to a really awe-inspiring sight: "the ten-kilometer-wide dark band running completely around it at the halfway mark" which they christen "the Cylindrical Sea" because it appears to be made of ice and because "right out in the middle there's a large oval island, about ten kilometers long and three wide," which they christen New York.

The commander realizes they are facing a daunting task: "We've four thousand square kilometers to explore, and only a few weeks to do it in." I figure that they better cover, at a minimum, 143 square kilometers a day--however much that is. In the distance, they can see several towns--"If they are towns." "And the nearest is only eight kilometers away," says a crewmember hopefully. Yes,

thinks the commander, "but it's also eight kilometers back." Even with my poor grasp of metrics, I believe that checks out.

On page 80, only a kilometer to the right of their exploratory path, he sights a "rather mysterious...long groove or trench, forty meters deep and a hundred wide...almost ten kilometers long." By page 120 he has found out what the groove is for (it's not a canal), but now he's "clinging to the face of a curving, sixteen-kilometer-high cliff." And he still has 183 pages to go.

Perhaps by now you're wishing I'd say something about the plot of R\_e\_n\_d\_e\_z\_v\_o\_u\_s\_w\_i\_t\_h\_R\_a\_m\_a instead of just quoting more measurements. The problem is, there isn't much of a plot. The little ad hoc crises and the cutaways to the petty politicking back in the United Planets committee meetings seem to have been inserted as perfunctory padding between the fascinating statistics. None of the characters is particularly captivating, and the puzzles Clarke

THE MT VOID

Page 3

sets for them and us are not very engaging. Just about the only interesting action is some spectacular "weather" inside the huge spacecraft (e.g. violent winds with "velocities of between two and three hundred kilometers an hour"). The book's conclusion, and its "surprise" ending, fall flat.

So how come R\_e\_n\_d\_e\_z\_v\_o\_u\_s\_w\_i\_t\_h\_R\_a\_m\_a won not only the Hugo and Nebula, but also the John W. Campbell Memorial Award and the Jupiter Award for 1973? Peter Nichols, in his S\_c\_i\_e\_n\_c\_e\_F\_i\_c\_t\_i\_o\_n\_E\_n\_c\_y\_c\_l\_o\_p\_e\_d\_i\_a, says: "To what extent the book deserved it, and to what extent the awards merely celebrated the return to the field after many years' comparative silence of a much loved figure, is unclear." [-ch]

2. I guess I tend to assume that many of the animals we think of in nature are also reasonably intelligent. Once you have fought your way to the top of your food chain, your brains which are to the top of your body have room to expand up and then to scheme. Take for example the Great White Shark in J\_a\_w\_s, who was so big and mean that nobody dared pick on him or make fun of his looks. He clearly was at the top of h\_i\_s food chain. And at the same time he was not only able to plan an effective attack campaign on that little boat but in scenes cut from the film in the final editing, also played a

very mean game of canasta. The things in A\_l\_i\_e\_n were pretty mean also and nobody ever had them in hollandaise sauce on toast points.

Humans are almost an example also. We are just one step from the top of the food chain ruled over by the New Jersey mosquito, and we tend as a species to be promising and bright but still listen to Bruce Springsteen music. My understanding is that Bruce Springsteen counts few, if any, New Jersey mosquitoes among his fans.

But anyway, my point is that you tend to think of spiders as being toward the top of their particular food chain; at least indoor spiders are. In my whole life I have eaten at most two and thank heavens my Boy Scout days are over forever. So I tend to think of spiders as being reasonably intelligent animals. Not so, however. I mean you'd think they've got a pretty good thing going in my house. I do not kill spiders and have never intentionally eaten a campfire omelette flavored with one. In return I would expect that the spiders in my house would be smart enough at least to stay out of my way. But no, you give these little ladies an inch and they take eight feet. (Yes, I don't mean to be sexist, but I think of the spiders in my house as females. The males are considerate enough not to make webs. They are not mean like the females. And they end up being a quick lunch for the females. Not that i\_s sexist, if you ask me.)

But I was telling you about this one spider in my bathroom. Very tiny. She's wearing a T-shirt that says "Go climb a sesame seed." At least three times she has built a web in my bathroom right where

THE MT VOID

Page 4

I might step just before getting into the shower. I guess when you are her size the side of the tub looks "majestic." It looks like prime real estate and a great place to set up a little home and catch the occasional gnat who comes by just filled with luscious, wholesome gnat juice. Every morning I try to give her the message that she might get hurt homesteading in the Great Bathroom Valley. I make my ugliest monster faces and rip up her web, droning:

Fee, fie, foo, fider.

I smell the blood of a gnat-sucking spider.

Since she's too small for me to ride 'er,

I'll drink her down with apple cider.  
She looks at me with those eight dewey eyes and giggles, then runs  
to hide in a little nook while her house is demolished. Next  
morning, there is that web again. I don't get any more respect  
from her than I get from Evelyn. Maybe I can get a Boy Scout with  
spider on his breath to scare her.

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...mtgzx!leeper

To be surprised, to wonder, is to begin to understand. This  
is the sport, the luxury, special to the intellectual man.

-- Jose Ortega y Gasset

## FLATLINERS

A film review by Mark R. Leeper

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Capsule review: An original and hypnotic horror film. The music, the acting, the photography, and the script all get very high marks. It is a horror film with intelligent characters who do things rather than have things done to them. Strong on atmosphere and intriguing in ideas. Rating: high +2.

Horror films tend to be very derivative. They take many of the same themes and rework them over and over. How different is F\_r\_i\_g\_h\_t N\_i\_g\_h\_t from D\_r\_a\_c\_u\_l a really? It is very rare for me to come out of a horror film feeling I had seen something really new for the horror film.

And, be warned, usually when I feel have seen something new, most audiences do not like the films. In the last ten years there have been

five horror films I have liked in this way. They are S\_o\_m\_e\_t\_h\_i\_n\_g W\_i\_c\_k\_e\_d

T\_h\_i\_s W\_a\_y C\_o\_m\_e\_s, L\_i\_f\_e f\_o\_r c\_e, P\_r\_i\_n\_c\_e o\_f D\_a\_r\_k n\_e\_s\_s, L\_a\_d\_y i\_n W\_h\_i\_t\_e, and now

F\_l\_a\_t\_l\_i\_n\_e\_r\_s. F\_l\_a\_t\_l\_i\_n\_e\_r\_s is a mesmerizing horror thriller about life and death and redemption. From about two minutes into the film I was constantly anxious to find out what happens next. And when it did happen, I was never disappointed but still never appeased.

A group of medical students are fascinated by the brink-of-death experience that some of their patients have had. But their curiosity certainly goes beyond just collecting other peoples' accounts second-hand. As long as they have the ability to induce death and to bring people back, why wait for it to happen by chance and to other people. Why not go off exploring the undiscovered country for themselves. As one student says of the quest to know what is beyond death, "Philosophy failed. Religion failed. Now it's time for medical science to try." So one tries it and is brought back. But now things seem different to him and reality is not quite the same.

At least in theme F\_l\_a\_t\_l\_i\_n\_e\_r\_s is reminiscent of some of the classic old Karloff films like Michael Curtiz's T\_h\_e W\_a\_l\_k\_i\_n\_g D\_e\_a\_d, and where that film was a little pat in its description of life after death (Karloff just had time to describe it as "peace" before dying a second time, and more permanently), this film is only a little less pat in other ways in its "meaning of death." However, it is not concentrating so much on what the other side looks like as on what it is like to have been there and be back.

This is a movie to see in a theater; it will lose a lot of its visual impact on the small screen. Almost the entire film is shot in either twilight half-tones or at night. The medical school has got to be the most baroque in the world. It would have done credit to any 1930s expressionistic horror film. Its architecture is almost gothic

with immense vaulting rooms; dark, dismal corridors; labs with immense statue heads as if gods were looking on. Director Joel Schumacher's previous T\_h\_e\_L\_o\_s\_t\_B\_o\_y\_s had little to recommend it but atmosphere. This time he has better atmosphere and a far more compelling story to tell.

Kiefer Sutherland (of L\_o\_s\_t\_B\_o\_y\_s) plays Nelson, who is exploring death partially for curiosity and partially for glory. Julia Roberts is Rachel, who has her own private demons to face. Roberts has the best developed character. Keith Bacon is Davis, who is just a little too good to be true. Alec Baldwin's younger brother William plays Joe, whose story is somewhat less interesting than the others and could by itself have been an episode of "The Hitchhiker."

F\_l\_a\_t\_l\_i\_n\_e\_r\_s is intelligently filmed and written. It has irony but happily not apparently tongue-in-cheek. In short, it deserves to be a classic horror film and may well make it. I rate it a high +2 on the -4 to +4 scale.

