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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
 Club Notice - 6/26/92 -- Vol. 10, No. 52

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

Unless otherwise stated, all meetings are on Wednesdays at noon.

DATE TOPIC

- 07/15 MT: THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO SCIENCE FICTION by David Pringle (SF reference books) (MT 1P-364)
- 08/05 HO: THE SILMARILLION by J.R.R. Tolkien (Alternate Mythologies) (HO 1N-410)
- 08/26 HO: BONE DANCE by Emma Bull (Hugo nominee) (HO 1N-410)

DATE EXTERNALMEETINGS/CONVENTIONS/ETC.

- 07/11 SFABC: Science Fiction Association of Bergen County: Nicholas Jainschigg (artist) (phone 201-933-2724 for details) (Saturday)
- 07/18 NJSFS: New Jersey Science Fiction Society: TBA (phone 201-432-5965 for details) (Saturday)

HO Chair: John Jetzt HO 1E-525 908-834-1563 hocpb!jetzt
 LZ Chair: Rob Mitchell HO 1D-505A 908-834-1267 mtuxo!jrrt
 MT Chair: Mark Leeper MT 3D-441 908-957-5619 mtgzy!leeper
 HO Librarian: Nick Sauer HO 4F-427 908-949-7076 homxc!11366ns
 LZ Librarian: Lance Larsen LZ 3L-312 908-576-3346 mtfme!lfl
 MT Librarian: Mark Leeper MT 3D-441 908-957-5619 mtgzy!leeper
 Factotum: Evelyn Leeper MT 1F-329 908-957-2070 mtgzy!ecl
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1. I want to enlist your help in a good cause. If any of you see Evelyn, I want you to say to her, "Eighty miles a week." That's it. "Eighty miles a week." Thanks, I appreciate it.

Well, let me tell you about why you are telling her this. Evelyn has certain house responsibilities. For example, Evelyn's responsibility is arranging for the driveway to be shoveled and ending world tyranny. (But that's another story.) Another of her

responsibilities is setting up the VCRs. If there is going to be a program on, she sets up the machine, pops in one of the buffer tapes, and makes a note as to which tape the program is going on in a sort of tape-tracking program. At least 95% of the time this goes just fine. Occasionally a recording is just not where she has

THE MT VOID

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said that it was. Often she updates the program from memory long after the fact, and she misremembers where she put the program. So I came up with a great solution. An index card with digits "0" to "9" and a paperclip. "Just move the paperclip when you put in a tape and you have a record of what tape you put in," I explained proudly.

"WHAT?!"

"It's just one more quick step."

"YOU WANT TO TAKE OVER THE RECORDING?"

"Uh, no, Buttercup, I just thought this was a better way to do things."

"IF YOU DON'T LIKE THE WAY I DO THE JOB, YOU ARE WELCOME TO IT!"

"But it takes two seconds to move that clip."

"GREAT. YOU DO IT."

"Sorry I said anything."

Now for you to understand the next part, you have to know about THE CARPET FROM HELL. We recently got new carpeting in the den. Now we don't know a lot about carpets. I assume many of you out there already know about THE CARPET FROM HELL, but you didn't tell us. You see, it looked like a dark carpet, but when the light hits it right it is almost white. This makes it an "easy-care" carpet. With some carpets it is hard to tell when they need cleaning. THE CARPET FROM HELL leaves no doubt. One poppyseed and from thirty paces the carpet visually calls to you and says, "Hey, Jerk. Come over here and get this thing off me."

Then there is speedy recovery. If I do pushups on THE CARPET in the morning, I can still read my fingerprints off THE CARPET FROM HELL that evening.

Now, the exercycle poses a problem since I turn it toward the television when I use it. For days afterward you can see just how I had it turned. So Evelyn has a solution. She puts a towel under the exercycle and a rug on top to hide the towel. I try to explain to her that a rug on a carpet goes like a cheeseburger on a bagel. But as the last straw, when I turn the exercycle she wants me to rearrange the rug and towel so they stay under the exercycle. So next time she tells me I have to rearrange the carpet, I am going to tell her she has to do the exercycling. And it's eighty miles a week I do, so I'll expect her to. So if you see her, just remind her it's eighty miles a week. But she doesn't listen to me. So I want her to hear it from you.

Mark Leeper
MT 3D-441 908-957-5619
...mtgzy!leeper

BATMAN RETURNS
A film review by Mark R. Leeper
Copyright 1992 Mark R. Leeper

Capsule review: Three angry costumed neurotics battle in a big, silly, lovable comic book on the screen. Two lesser villains from the comic turn out to be much more intriguing than the Joker on the wide screen. This is a terrific, surrealist film.
Rating: high +2 (-4 to +4). Warning: minor plot spoilers in this review, almost all taken from the film's publicity.

A book may be very amusing with numerous errors, or it may be very dull without a single absurdity.

Oliver Goldsmith, preface to T_h_e_V_i_c_a_r_o_f
W_a_k_e_f_i_e_l_d

In 1983, for the 50th anniversary of K_i_n_g_K_o_n_g, engineers tried

to inflate a fifty-foot gorilla balloon on the Empire State Building. It was a real fiasco. It never got more than half inflated, looked absurd, and became a real embarrassment. When asked what he thought of it, a Japanese tourist said, "I love it! It's so American! It's big, it's silly, and it doesn't work."

B_a_t_m_a_n_R_e_t_u_r_n_s is a film that could be made only in America. It's big; it's silly; it doesn't work. And above all it is lovable. It is a mammoth King Kong balloon of a film that is nearly as endearing for what doesn't work as for what does. It is one of those rare films that could end up appealing to art film fans and to Friday-night fun-seekers. It is genuinely one of the most bizarre films ever made. Its explosions of surrealism and its warped characters make its predecessor B_a_t_m_a_n seem pale and lukewarm. Rather than one villain, this film offers three and manages to make two of them much more interesting than Jack Nicholson was as The Joker. In B_a_t_m_a_n film the viewer knew how the Joker became the Joker. In this film the viewer goes the additional step of saying, "Yeah, if that happened to me, I think I'd become like the Penguin or Catwoman."

The film opens with a monster child being born to a rich household. Rather than keep this horrible little creature, his parents set him adrift in a basket in a sewer. There he is adopted by the penguins living in the sewer. ("What penguins in the sewer?" you ask. Shhh! Let Mr. Burton tell his story! Just accept it that there are a lot of intelligent penguins living in the sewer ... with the clowns.)

Meanwhile, a big industrialist who pollutes the same sewer and is planning to steal a giant electrical charge from the city. (No,

don't ask about that one either.) Max Shreck (played by Christopher Walken) is the industrialist and he is r_e_a_l_l_y nasty to his mousey, frumpy secretary Selina Kyle (played by Michelle Pfeiffer). Between him and her lackluster lifestyle, she is getting ready to explode. Selina comes home each night to her lonely apartment, calls, "Honey, I'm home," reminds herself that she is not married, feeds her cat, and listens to her mother's brow-beating phone messages. Eventually when circumstances make Shreck see Selina as a threat he throws her out a very high window. Miraculously she is not killed and in some mysterious way is rescued by alley cats. (Hey, look, if the sewer

penguins can save a monster baby....) Selina completely makes herself over as the super-feminist, militant Catwoman, complete with skintight vinyl cat suit. ("Life's a bitch; now so am I!" she says.) Suddenly she is wreaking havoc with a bullwhip and doing amazing athletic flips. ("How come she can do that now?" you asked. Shhh! Now I've warned you.) V_a_r_i_e_t_y aptly calls her "a kitten with a whip." About this time the adult version of our monster baby emerges from the sewer with his army of clowns to make himself loved and to find his parents. He is nicknamed the Penguin (and played by Danny DeVito). Shreck decides to use the Penguin in a plan to discredit Batman and to have the Mayor ousted and replace him with the Penguin. He is going to create a crime wave and make the Mayor look so bad that the people will replace him with the Penguin. ("If that scheme works, how come Dinkins is still Mayor of New York?" you ask. Shhh! Now I'm not going to warn you again.) Catwoman and the Penguin team up, knowing that with the Mayor thrown out they will be sitting in the catbird seat. After that the plot gets strange and a little hard to believe.

To say there are gaps in the plotting of B_a_t_m_a_n_R_e_t_u_r_n_s is a gross understatement. This is a film that somehow survives major lapses in logic. You never know what is going to turn up in the sewer next without rhyme or reason. There seem to be whole rooms of furniture, troops of clowns, and colonies of penguins. Also in this world anyone who dons a weird suit suddenly becomes an athlete ready for the Beijing Circus. We see Batman, the self-appointed vigilante, use lethal force on criminals in the street. Then later he lectures Catwoman on the importance of letting the law punish the bad. In another inconsistency Batman berates Alfred for revealing his identity to Vicki Vale, but carelessly allows Catwoman to learn who he is, and later intentionally reveals his identity to Max Shreck. (It is interesting that the film does go back and explain a plot hole from the previous film.) Other places the plot assumes impossible capabilities for the Batmobile (it can be wider on the inside than it is on the outside). Then it assumes that every family in Gotham would make the same mistake of leaving the same valuable unguarded.

And with all these gaffes there is a lot to like in the new Batman film. The late Anton Furst's set designs from the first film have been made more dreamlike and often given an E_d_w_a_r_d_S_c_i_s_s_o_r_h_a_n_d_s

feel by the new production designer Bo Welch. There are numerous allusions and touches in the film. The Batman character was initially inspired, at least in part, by the idea of a crime-fighter as stealthy, dark, and mysterious as Dracula, the original bat-man. The first screen adaptation of the novel D_r_a_c_u_l_a was the 1922 German classic N_o_s_f_e_r_a_t_u, in which the actor who played the animal-like vampire was Max Schreck (whose name was slightly modified for the allusion, but is still noticeable).

A rather nifty but probably nearly unnoticed allusion is a woman clown dressed in 18th Century French attire who delivers her lines in a sleepy monotone. Could this be an allusion to Glenda Jackson playing a manic-depressive playing Charlotte Corday in M_a_r_a_t/S_a_d_e? There are multiple allusions to Burton's best previous film, E_d_w_a_r_d_S_c_i_s_s_o_r_h_a_n_d_s. Much of the photography has very similar visual images. Statues in the snow, such as are shown at the old zoo, look a lot like Edward's topiary. The opening logo is over snow, not unlike the snow of the opening of E_d_w_a_r_d_S_c_i_s_s_o_r_h_a_n_d_s. Danny Elfman, who scored all three films, in B_a_t_m_a_n_R_e_t_u_r_n_s has borrowed themes from B_a_t_m_a_n, but also style from his E_d_w_a_r_d_S_c_i_s_s_o_r_h_a_n_d_s score. Choral voices under the snow scenes show up a lot in this film as they did in E_d_w_a_r_d_S_c_i_s_s_o_r_h_a_n_d_s. One almost wonders, incidentally, with all the Christmas imagery if this film was really intended for a summer release. One nice visual touch is that what looks like a line of virile Batmen standing in line in one scene is a closet of costumes. The only thing missing from the Batmen are chins. If Batman is a dramatic-looking figure in costume, it is the costume that looks so impressive, not him. You could put Rick Moranis in that costume and he would look dangerous.

Indeed, after all the discussion prior to the first film as to whether Michael Keaton could really play Batman, the role has once again turned out to be surprisingly undemanding. The suit gives Batman his stature, the script gives him a little complexity, and Keaton steps through the role fulfilling its demands without contributing anything extra. While that made him the best thing in the first installment, this time it just did not hack it. This is Pfeiffer's and DeVito's film. Living secretly in the sewers, hatching his plans, the Penguin clearly borrows heavily from T_h_e_P_h_a_n_t_o_m_o_f_t_h_e_O_p_e_r_a. Yet at the same time he can turn hot and angry in seconds, like Joe Pesci's character in G_o_o_d_f_e_l_l_a_s. He has not in my memory had a role that allows him such rage or such range.

Until now I have always considered Michelle Pfeiffer to be a marvelously sexy woman who wears a lot of make-up and who does not have a whole lot of talent. Sex appeal and make-up pulled her through D_a_n_g_e_r_o_u_s_L_i_a_i_s_o_n_s and T_h_e_F_a_b_u_l_o_u_s_B_a_k_e_r_B_o_y_s, but not for one moment of her acting have I ever considered her impressive. However, I can no longer imagine anyone else being better as the Catwoman. Her uncompromising fury makes her a male chauvinists' worst nightmare. One moment she is pretending to be shocked that

Batman would dare hit a woman, the next striking out at him for so much as daring to hesitate. Forget chivalry--this woman wants blood and will do whatever it takes!

As a side note: it is good to see Tim Burton taking a risk for a friend: Paul Reubens is back working again in spite of what is now rumored to be a rather unfair rap.

There is a surprising richness of themes in this film. Batman's own story is distorted and reflected in the two colorful villains. All three have their origins in pain. All three have donned their costumes to work out their own personal neuroses. All three characters seem to live by the motto that in rage and solitude there is strength. Even animals are compassionate compared to the brutal humans. The two tortured villains are each save in their moments of weakness by animals. The Penguin, like Edward Scissorhands, longs to be normal instead of a freak. Does Batman wear the animal costume to set himself apart from humanity and to make himself a freak?

To extent the sentiment of the Japanese tourist, B_a_t_m_a_n_R_e_t_u_r_n_s could have been made only in the United States. Only in the United States could \$80M be spent bringing a comic book story to the screen, unembarrassed. One need only look at B_a_r_b_a_r_e_l_l_a or the Perry Rhodan film M_i_s_s_i_o_n_S_t_a_r_d_u_s_t to see how it could have gone wrong. I think America still leads the world in big, brash, silly films. That may not be much, but it still something in which to take some pride.

While I thought the first Batman film rated only a 0, I'd give this one a high +2 on the -4 to +4 scale. You ain't seen nothing like this film.

CITY OF TRUTH by James Morrow
St. Martin's, 1992 (1990c), ISBN 0-312-07672-X, \$14.95.
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper
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In the 1950s C. M. Kornbluth wrote two classic stories which centered around lying as a way of life: "The Marching Morons" and _ T _ h _ e _ S _ p _ a _ c _ e _ M _ e _ r _ c _ h _ a _ n _ t _ s (the latter co-authored with Frederik Pohl).

Whether Morrow's novella is a response (of sorts) to these, or just the result of being quoted John 8:32* once too often, I cannot say. But Morrow has given us a society in which everyone tells the truth, everyone knows the truth, and it does not set them free.

Veritas (the "City of Truth" of the title) would seem to be following perfectly Kant's categorical imperative ("Act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a general law of nature"), which might lead the reader to question whether Kant's "Metaphysical Foundations of Morals" might not need a few revisions. It is the rare science fiction book today that takes on both the New testament _ a _ n _ d Immanuel Kant, which is probably reason enough to read the book. But Morrow manages to write a very funny book even while examining these weighty issues. When one character asks her husband whether he copulates with a lot of women to strengthen their marriage, he says no, he just likes to ejaculate inside other women.

I also liked the aptly named Camp Ditch-the-Kids. In fact, it's probably Morrow's injection of honesty into the advertising and mercantile aspects of society that reminds me of Kornbluth. There is much, much more, but to tell it would ruin a lot of the enjoyment of the book.

But it's not all humor and jokes. Morrow constructs a situation in which the main character needs something besides the truth--he needs the hope and innocence that lies (of commission or of omission) can bring. And he finds that he is not alone in this need. In the end, it is not the truth that sets him free, but the lies.

Morrow is writing some of the most thought-provoking short fiction today, and I highly recommend his work in general and C_i_t_y o_f T_r_u_t_h in particular. I would nominate this for a Hugo next year, but a British edition appeared in 1990. (In fact, this edition was apparently done from those plates and follows British spelling conventions.) Maybe I'll just lie on the nomination form and hope no one notices.

* "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

UNIVERSE 2 edited by Robert Silverberg and Karen Haber
Bantam, 1992, ISBN 0-553-08038-5, \$21.50.
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper
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As Silverberg says in his introduction, "This is the second of a new series of anthologies of previously unpublished science fiction stories, carrying on the name and spirit of the distinguished U_n_i_v_e_r_s_e series that the late Terry Carr produced between 1971 and 1987." (Of course, he then goes on to explain how that's not entirely accurate, but you get the idea.)

_ U _ n _ i _ v _ e _ r _ s _ e _ 2 contains twenty-two stories, ranging from the memorable to the unremarkable to the incoherent. The best is "The Passing of the Eclipse" by Donna Farley, about a future society in which people all wear masks and, by extension, about the (figurative) masks we all wear in our society. It's a moving story, and a thought-provoking one, worthy of consideration come Hugo time next year.

Almost as good is Kathe Koja's "By the Mirror of My Youth," about the consequences to one family when cloning humans becomes a real possibility. It did remind me a lot of Faye Weldon's "The Cloning of Joanna May" (I hope I have the title right there), though I suspect coincidence rather than influence. (For reasons surpassing _ m _ y understanding, Silverberg and Haber follow this story with a protagonist named Rachel with another story with a protagonist named Rachel. This is as bad as _ F _ u _ l _ l _ S _ p _ e _ c _ t _ r _ u _ m _ 2's placement of David Brin's "The Giving Plague" immediately following Karen Haber's "A Plague of Strangers"--and there's an irony that one of the "victims" of the latter is one of the "perpetrators" here. Part of editing is sequencing, and alas, this sometimes seems random.)

Sean McMullen's "Souls in the Great Machine" is a must-read for people interested in the history of technology, alternate technologies, and what it really means to become "cogs in the machine." (If this story seems unlikely, I suggest you read Kevin Anderson and Doug Beason's _ T _ r _ i _ n _ i _ t _ y _ P _ a _ r _ a _ d _ o _ x for a demonstration of how the idea here was actually applied in our world.) Other stories worth reading include "Bruning Bush" by Carolyn Gilman and "Lost in Transmission" by Tony Daniel.

I found this anthology spotty, but with five very-good-to-excellent stories (including one of Hugo caliber), I feel I can recommend it.

Capsule review: Weird and morbid comedy about life in some strange post-Holocaust future.

Cannibals and vegetarians battle in a world where the only meat available is from other people. Meanwhile, life goes on in a strange apartment house over a delicatessen. Offbeat is putting it mildly. Rating: high +1 (-4 to +4).

The time is the future, perhaps ten years after it all went bad. The sky is thick yellow fog. Humans have two legs and frogs have four, but the only other animals left alive have six or eight. Legal tender is bags of lentils or corn. And something else has disappeared with the world we knew. What is missing is something like sanity. With so few animals around, society has been broken into two classes, vegetarians and those who have taken to heart the adage that one man's meat is another man's person, so to speak. The setting is an apartment house standing over one of the few remaining delicatessens. And only rarely does the delicatessen have meat. In the apartment there are the long-term residents and the transients. The transients do not so much move out as disappear. And as their luck would have it, they always disappear just in time to miss one of the meat days at the delicatessen.

In the apartment building live a typical bunch of people. There is the supremely myopic cello player who has nearly given up on finding a husband. There are two men who make those toy cylinders that when turned upside down moo like a cow used to. Then there is the nice woman who hears voices telling her to commit suicide. She tries to oblige in complex and creative ways. Fortunately or not, her Rube-Goldberg-like suicide mechanisms just don't work. Into this old neighborhood moves an ex-circus clown ear-marked to be literally dead meat. Somehow he evades the butcher's knife and falls for the nearly blind cello player.

With many a supremely gruesome twist and turn, this film is a logical descendent of the British film T h e B e d - S i t t i n g R o o m and the French L e D e r n i e r C o m b a t--two very strange slice-of-post-holocaust-life black comedies. And it perhaps is the most entertaining of the three. Some of its visual style is also reminiscent of B r a z i l. the style is mostly short gag scenes that eventually add up to a plot which in the final third is somewhere between madcap and frenetic. This is a film for particularly morbid tastes in comedy. I give it a high +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

GOOD MORNING, IRENE by Carole Nelson Douglas

Tor, ISBN 0-812-50949-8, 1992 (1991c), \$4.99

A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper

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First there was G o o d N i g h t, M r. H o l m e s, in which we get "A

Scandal in Bohemia" told from Irene Adler's point of view. Now we have a sequel, in which Irene (now Norton rather than Adler) investigates another mystery in which j u s t c o i n c i d e n t a l l y, Sherlock Holmes is also involved.

The mystery involves tattooed corpses, Sarah Bernhardt, and the royal family of Monaco. This seems like enough already without adding Sherlock Holmes, and indeed the sections with Holmes are the weakest in the book and seem pasted on. (Not to mention that having two different first-person narrators, Penelope Huxleigh and Sherlock Holmes, is extremely confusing to the reader.) The solution also seems to depend on a lot of unlikely coincidences, including the idea that one can copy a drawing and get exactly right those features that are important, even when they seem superfluous to the drawing as a whole.

There are those who really like Douglas's Irene character. To me, she seems as much a stereotype of the "Victorian woman with modern ideas" as Elizabeth Peters's Amelia Peabody or any number of other examples. And while I could accept the occasional foray into male disguise, Irene is c o n s t a n t l y changing into male garb--to investigate, to explore, to fight a duel.... There's such a thing as overkill.

The flaws are not so glaring as to keep me from reading the next book in the series (I r e n e a t L a r g e), but I can't get very enthusiastic over G o o d M o r n i n g, I r e n e either.

