

1. Our next discussion book is Harry Harrison's W_e_s_t_o_f_E_d_e_n, of which longtime member John Jetzt says:

Harry Harrison's W_e_s_t_o_f_E_d_e_n might be called an alternate pre-history. The premise is that the dinosaurs were not made extinct

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by some event 65 million years ago. Rather, they went on to evolve into intelligent reptiles that inhabited most of the earth's tropical regions. Meanwhile in the temperate zones humankind also managed to evolve up to the Stone Age. Then an ice age forces the humans to wander south. The ensuing encounter and conflict provide the basis for a very readable story.

The fundamental idea of this novel is handled very well. The reptiles are developed as believable beings. They are not anthropomorphic dinosaurs with white gloves, but rather real reptiles with a consistent biological and social dimension. Harrison even gives the reptiles a plausible language--complete with a reptilian glossary--that seems well researched and linguistically believable.

Harrison's attention to details is excellent. As we gradually learn more about the reptiles, we are presented with a fairly complete picture of an "alien" culture on planet earth. The most startling feature of their civilization is their achievements in, and dependence on, biotechnology. None of their artifacts are manufactured in the physical sense, but rather "grown" from bio-engineered lifeforms. A pictorial "zoology" at the back of the book provides a useful catalog for the reader.

So the reptiles have an advanced technology, and they think and act reptilian, for want of a better term. The humans have spears, and they think and act human, of course. The two species have inborn disgust and loathing for each other. The conflict between them is exciting and fun to read. If one has not had enough by the end of the book, then be comforted to learn that this was just the first of a trilogy.

[By the way, the Club library in MT has two copies of W_e_s_t_o_f_E_d_e_n available for loan. Contact Mark Leeper, 957-5619. -ec]

2. I recently had occasion to call a funeral home to find out how to get there. (No, I mean how to get there by car. Don't be morbid!) I called the number given in the phone book and discovered that the woman at the other end could not give me directions to the place. It seems that what I had really called was an answering service for several mortuaries. Now I had heard of this sort of system being set up for florists. There is a number, 1-800-FLOWERS, you call and they will take your order and pass it to an appropriate florist. If you want to send peonies to Peoria you call this number and some unsuspecting Peorian florist will get an order to send the reproductive parts of some plants to your chosen destination. I knew you could arrange to send flowers to a funeral anywhere in the country. I didn't suspect that there already was the beginnings of a network that will allow you to set up a funeral anywhere in the country. Just dial 1-800-DED-FOLX. Of course, right now all you need to worry about is that your

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chosen florist is going to send the wrong kind of flowers to the wrong house. Call 1-800-DED-FOLX and you may not even be sure it is Uncle Charlie they buried here. But then, maybe a little mystery in your life is a good thing.

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We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not
enough to make us love one another.
-- Jonathan Swift

Skran's Picks for the Hugo
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Since you all still have until March 31st to postmark your Hugo nominees, I thought I would put forward my own list of suggestions, several of which I have reviewed in the MT VOID. Two of them, A_n_v_i_l_o_f_S_t_a_r_s and A_F_i_r_e_U_p_o_n_t_h_e_D_e_e_p are now available in paperback at Waldenbooks (and presumably elsewhere). All are available from the Science Fiction Book Club.

And my nominees are (ta-da!):

1. A_r_i_s_t_o_i by Walter Jon Williams
2. S_t_e_e_l_B_e_a_c_h by John Varley
3. A_F_i_r_e_U_p_o_n_t_h_e_D_e_e_p by Vernor Vinge
4. A_n_v_i_l_o_f_S_t_a_r_s by Greg Bear
5. reserved for R_e_d_M_a_r_s by Kim Stanley Robinson

The "reserved" slot is based on my expectation that when I finish Robinson's book, I'll probably nominate it over something else I've read. If I don't like it, nominee runners-up include:

1. C_h_i_n_a_M_o_u_n_t_a_i_n_Z_h_a_n_g by Maureen F. McHugh
2. T_h_e_R_e_m_a_r_k_a_b_l_e_s by Robert Reed

Overall, this has been a good year for the "regular old SF novel" of the sort I like. I would classify all of my nominees as "hard" SF that is well-written with interesting characters. There is some variation of quality, and objectively, S_t_e_e_l_B_e_a_c_h is probably the best written and structured. A_r_i_s_t_o_i may have the best ideas and texture, while A_n_v_i_l_o_f_S_t_a_r_s has the most gripping plot and A_F_i_r_e_o_n_t_h_e_D_e_e_p the widest scope of vision. However, I wouldn't mind seeing any of them win the Hugo.

BABYLON 5
A film review by Mark R. Leeper
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So far this year we have seen the premieres of S_p_a_c_e_R_a_n_g_e_r_s, S_t_a_r_T_r_e_k: D_e_e_p_S_p_a_c_e_9, and T_i_m_e_T_r_a_x. For each I have written a somewhat tongue-in-cheek review of some of the sillier aspects of it. Unfortunately, there is a distinct shortage of silliness in B_a_b_y_l_o_n_5. In spite of the fact that the pacing is a little lethargic, this is the most intelligent of the new series. I am afraid that without the S_t_a_r_T_r_e_k organization behind B_a_b_y_l_o_n_5, it probably will not succeed. Yet this is certainly the more engaging series. Where D_e_e_p_S_p_a_c_e_9's idea of an intriguing mystery is where the shape-changer Odo came from, B_a_b_y_l_o_n_5 is built around a far more interesting mystery. It seems that humans in B_a_b_y_l_o_n_5 are just coming back on the rebound. Ten years earlier an unstoppable alien race, the Nivari, had totally massacred the humans. All that remained was the final c_o_u_p_d_e_g_r_a_c_e and the universe would have been less one species of ape descendents. Then suddenly the Nivari unaccountably declared they had lost the war and surrendered to the humans. A decade later still nobody understands the sudden reversal.

So here is B_a_b_y_l_o_n_5, the meeting place of hundreds of species. Like James White's hospital ship, it has provisions for a wide variety of alien species requiring different atmospheres at different pressures. The ship functions as a sort of United Nations and interplanetary hotel in space. There are five major powers as well as many minor cultures interacting.

The look of the future is perhaps the best thing about the series. There are no silly or gimmicky wipes between scenes. The space effects, created with computer ("Video Toaster") graphics, are genuinely exciting. They take their inspiration from the characteristic art on British science fiction paperback covers. The effects in the "Star Trek" series seem three-dimensional and have a sort of realism not present here. The space effects here are closer to artists' conceptions and are much more intriguing. Ships open and spread wondrous wings like huge moths would or grip other ships like beetles do. The effects have a real sense of wonder, all this reportedly at one-quarter the cost of "Star Trek"'s effects.

The first story told in B_a_b_y_l_o_n_5 is a rather prosaic whodunit which is even a little less suspenseful since we are told the villain at the very beginning. The characters are not really interesting yet, but clearly will become more three-dimensional with future episodes.

B_a_b_y_l_o_n_5 deserves a chance to prove itself. This is adult science fiction with a hard edge. I will continue to watch S_t_a_r_T_r_e_k: D_e_e_p_S_p_a_c_e_9, but I will actually look forward to the next

episode of B_a_b_y_l_o_n_5. For that matter, I will trade you two episodes of S_t_a_r_T_r_e_k: D_e_e_p_S_p_a_c_e_9 for every episode of B_a_b_y_l_o_n_5 I can get.

JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF THE EARTH

A film review by Mark R. Leeper

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Science fiction year on television continues unabated and now takes a nose-dive straight down. J_o_u_r_n_e_y_t_o_t_h_e_C_e_n_t_e_r_o_f_t_h_e_E_a_r_t_h has absolutely no connection to the story by Jules Verne, as I am sure the spirit of Verne would want to impress on each and every one of us.

The plot involves an eccentric scientist (played by F. Murray Abraham) who believes there is a world inside the Earth. He builds a mole machine that looks like the nose of an airplane, a tank tread, and a rocket engine. He sinks into the unknown. Ten years later, his nephew is planning his own mole machine only to discover that a mysterious industrialist has already built the thing. It looks like a tube of toothpaste with rockets set backwards on some tank treads. A crew of young hunks is chosen and the whole bunch heads off into the inner earth. Sound silly? No, the silliness is just beginning. I didn't even mention that the mole machine has a holographic personality, a woman's head floating in a blue bubble. Then there is the piece of the "Book of Knowledge" that looks like an executive's desk decoration but which was actually spit up by Mt. Vesuvius. One thing it does not look like is anything you could call a book.

Now once inside the Earth--where they get by diving into an erupting volcano--they find a rather diffident Abominable Snowman whom they teach English in seconds using an electronic device they happen to have in the mole machine. The scholar on the trip wants to name the snowman Daedalus, which the scholar thinks is the name of a Greek God (Daedalus was a mortal, not a god). Everyone else calls the Snowman the supremely inappropriate name Dallas. Also in the interior of the Earth are some things that look to us like manta rays with vampire fangs. There are also prehistoric troglodytes and a 3000-year-old mastermind living in something that looks like a lobster shell being fed by tubes of green fluid. This is clearly a series with more imagination than intelligence.

The look of the series varies a great deal. Initially there is some beautiful footage of volcanic eruptions. The sets of the interior of the Earth look very plastic. Perhaps most irritating is the wipe between scenes and when the program goes to a commercial: the entire picture seems to get sucked into a hole at the center of the picture, through the miracle of morph special effects.

To make a long story short, in the battle for capturing science fiction fans to new series, J_o_u_r_n_e_y_t_o_t_h_e_C_e_n_t_e_r_o_f_t_h_e_E_a_r_t_h is a non-combatant. If you missed the pilot, you missed all there is going to be.

ARMY OF DARKNESS
A film review by Mark R. Leeper
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Capsule review: In the third "Evil Dead" film, a man from the 20th Century unleashes war between medieval armies of the living and an army of the Dead. In the right hands this could be a very exciting concept. Unfortunately, Raimi plays it off for easy laughs and fails to make a film that comes even close to being worthy of the concept. Rating: low +1 (-4 to +4).

Sam Raimi's E_v_i_l_D_e_a_d was a low-budget horror film that was above average for its kind. It combined fluid camerawork (often with undercranked cameras) and a fresh look at the then over-used concept of the walking dead. It made a name for Raimi as a director willing to do the unusual. While ostensibility the same sort of film, E_v_i_l_D_e_a_d_I I picked up the pacing and increased the creativity by a large factor. It was a wild, funhouse sort of horror film where just about anything weird could happen. The accent was on being strange and funny with gooseflesh becoming a low priority. The film ended by dropping its main character through some sort of evil vortex into medieval Europe.

Determined to play the ball where it lies, the third of the

"Evil Dead" films begins with Ash arriving in medieval Europe and eventually gets him involved in an epic battle between the living and the dead. A_r_m_y_o_f_D_a_r_k_n_e_s_s is another giant leap in creativity, but this time Raimi has gone too far. This film shows just how far Sam Raimi has allowed his reach to exceed his grasp. A_r_m_y_o_f_D_a_r_k_n_e_s_s is a truly magnificent failure. The concept of an apocalyptic battle of the powers of Darkness against the powers of Light has been toyed with by writers from Milton to J. R. R. Tolkien and James Blish. When Clive Barker adapted his C_a_b_a_l into N_i_g_h_t_b_r_e_e_d, he also said what he wanted to do someday--and what that film gave only an inkling of was such a mammoth battle of the Dead against the Living. The Raimis (Sam co-scripted A_r_m_y_o_f_D_a_r_k_n_e_s_s with his brother Ivan) try to tell the story of such a battle, but squander too much of the effect on cheap one-line jokes, insufficient humor, and images that often don't work. The scripting is weak and the camerawork often captures exactly the wrong mood. The Raimis could not get their tongues out of their cheeks long enough to realize they were squandering what could have been a great horror fantasy classic.

Bruce Campbell recreates his role as Ash, who now finds himself caught up in a "Connecticut Yankee" sort of plot as he prepares for the battle. However, the Raimis do not have the writing skill of a

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Mark Twain, so Ash's programmed response to problems is to use his shotgun or his chainsaw. When Ash fouls up a mission to retrieve the N_e_c_r_o_n_o_m_i_c_o_n--the classic book of evil--he inadvertently looses on the world a battalion of skeletons. The Raimis fail to build much excitement about the ensuing battle, playing it more for giggles than thrills. And the final sequence of the film, which seems horribly out of keeping with the rest of the story, is apparently an afterthought. The conclusion of the film as shown at the Sitges Film Festival and reported in the October 19, 1992, V_a_r_i_e_t_y, was much bleaker but also probably much more effective than what was shown in local theaters.

I rate A_r_m_y_o_f_D_a_r_k_n_e_s_s a low +1 on the -4 to +4 scale, mostly on the basis of some good ideas albeit mishandled. Maybe somebody else will pick up the idea again.

FALLING DOWN
A film review by Mark R. Leeper
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Capsule review: Michael Douglas plays the kind of angry, hard-hitting role his father would have played. After being pushed and chafed by society, one day he just decides to fight back at all the small annoyances that degrade the quality of life. That may make him a villain but, as with Bernard Goetz, it is hard to condemn him. Rating: high +1 (-4 to +4).

Life is a sort of social contract. You put in your work at school and then in your career. You pay your dues and you expect to be paid back with a reasonable level of happiness. You expect to reap the rewards of your work. You expect to live in a society where the rules seem to make sense and where justice prevails. And, of course, all those expectations are in varying degrees wrong. If you walk places where you have a right to walk, you are very liable to be beaten and robbed. If you go into a convenience store, you very often find prices are just too darn high. The hamburger may look good and juicy in the picture, but when you actually get it, it is flat, dried out, and unsavory.

Michael Douglas plays "D-Fens," a 30-something nerd with a crewcut who by his accounting is just not getting his fair share out of life. His marriage has gone sour, his career has gone sour, and life just seems to have picked him to dump on. On a hot day in Los Angeles with traffic at a total standstill, he abandons his car and sets off on foot to get to his daughter's birthday party and at the same time just let everybody know that he is fed up. Today he is going to make sure he gets satisfaction. Overcharge him, and be prepared to have him take your store apart. Push him and he is going to push back. Cheat him only in peril of your life. Then there is Prendergast (played by Robert Duvall). On Prendergast's last day of police work, he becomes fascinated by a string of incidents that he can plot in a line on a map. Somebody is fighting back against all the indignities of life, the same ones that frustrate Prendergast, and Prendergast has to stop him before he gets in serious trouble.

F a l l i n g D o w n is an angry howl against the deterioration in the quality of life we all face. Joel Schumacher directing from Ebbe Roe Smith's script has created a villain cut from the same cloth as Bernard Goetz. It is hard not to sympathize with Douglas's angry man. It would be easy to identify Douglas's character with one political wing or the other, but as he goes from venting his anger on a Korean grocer, to Latino gang members, to a neo-Nazi, and

finally to rich, selfish, over-paid whites, we see Douglas as surprisingly center-of-the-road. He is a Moderate who has run fresh out of moderation. This is a protest film that could have been made in the 1960s. (My wife, I, and Vincent Canby independently thought to compare it to T_h_e_S_w_i_m_m_e_r.) Only toward the end does F_a_l_l_i_n_g_D_o_w_n lose its power and become somewhat prosaic. But the film is angry and takes chances few Hollywood films are anxious to take anymore. I rate it a high +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

