

Lincroft-Holmdel Science Fiction Club  
Club Notice - 9/24/86 -- Vol. 5, No. 11

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

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

LZ meetings are in LZ 3A-206; MT meetings are in MT 4A-235.

\_D\_A\_T\_E

\_T\_O\_P\_I\_C

- 10/08 LZ: BLOOD MUSIC by Greg Bear (Genetics)  
10/15 MT: (Re)organizational Meeting for MT discussion (Rm 4A-235)  
10/29 LZ: MALLWORLD by Somtow Sucharitkul (Commerce)  
11/19 LZ: THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS by Ursula K. LeGuin (Sexual Identity)  
12/10 LZ: NEUROMANCER by William Gibson (Consciousness)

HO Chair is John Jetzt, HO 4F-528A (834-1563). LZ Chair is Rob Mitchell, LZ 1B-306 (576-6106). MT Chair is Mark Leeper, MT 3E-433 (957-5619). HO Librarian is Tim Schroeder, HO 2G-427A (949-5866). LZ Librarian is Lance Larsen, LZ 3C-219 (576-2668). MT Librarian is Bruce Szablak, MT 4C-418 (957-5868). Jill-of-all-trades is Evelyn Leeper, MT 1F-329 (957-2070). All material copyright by author unless otherwise noted.

1. Recently the news had a story of some protesters outside the White House. They were chanting "Ronald Reagan has to go. Hey hey. Ho ho." Isn't that terrible? Hey, when I was in school the protesters would sing things like "Just like the tree that's planted by the water, we shall not be moved" or "The answer is blowing in the wind." Now those had soul. That had art. The people who wrote those chants spent a little more time than just realizing that that "ho" rhymes with "go." When somebody who can't find a better rhyme for "go" gives me an opinion, I can't help but take it from whence it comes. I think that the Golden Age of protest, the late 60's and early 70's, have passed. Today some of the most creative protests come from films like the ones we will show at our next Leeperhouse film festival (October 2, 7:00 PM).

Social Satire

FLASH GORDON CONQUERS THE UNIVERSE, chap. 9

REPO MAN (1984) dir. by Alex Cox

THE STUFF (1985) dir. by Larry Cohen

The strange comedy REPO MAN became an immediate cult classic. A

punk gets a job repossessing cars where he gets a good look at the strange underbelly of L. A. Society. His most important repossession is to get a car that has three dead visitors from outer space. This film takes a scattergun approach to its comments on society and wherever it hits it makes its point. Harry Dean

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Stanton as the dedicated repo man is priceless. Very funny and even more strange.

Only slightly less strange is THE STUFF. Up through the Arctic permafrost comes... THE STUFF. It bubbles, it oozes, and it's the best tasting dessert food you have ever tasted. Soon it becomes a billion dollar industry, but perhaps there is more to it than meets the eye. A lot more. Any film that has for characters thinly disguised versions of Lyndon LaRouche and Famous Amos teaming up to save the world from a threat that comes from dessert food is OK by me.

2. Larry Beshear sends the following letter of comment after reading Randy Fritz's comments in the last notice:

I feel that Evelyn's ConFederation report was unjustly belittled. Personally, I enjoyed reading it but that could be due to the fact that I found it very amusing (as a whole and very funny in parts). I was also impressed with the fact that you either remember a lot of what happens to you during the course of a day, or you must annoy a lot of people while taking notes as they speak to you. You should also be applauded for at least documenting the portions that you did remember (were the meals really that memorable though?).

Mark Leeper  
MT 3E-433 957-5619  
...mtgzz!leeper

TOM O'BEDLAM by Robert Silverberg  
Warner, 1986 (1985c), \$3.95.  
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper

[Warning: spoilers ahead.]

I like Silverberg's novels; I really do. But this one is so exasperating, so annoying, that (to steal a quote) I do not want to set it down but cast it aside with great force.

So what do I find so exasperating? Not Silverberg's writing style--that is as good as ever. And his characters are memorable, three-dimensional--everything characters should be. It's the message that drives me up the wall.

T\_o\_m\_O'\_B\_e\_d\_l\_a\_m takes place after the atomic war has decimated North America (and apparently the rest of the world, though no one can be sure anymore). Tom is a mutant who wanders through the western United States having visions of distant worlds and of the "Crossing" to them that mankind will soon experience. His visions, and those of the newly born

tumbonde' sect, and those of the patients in an exclusive mental institution near Mendocino all point toward an apocalyptic transition for the human race. This vision is best expressed by one of the converts to tumbonde': "The gate will open; the great ones will come among us and make things better for us. That's what's going to happen, and it's going to happen very soon, and then everything will be okay, maybe for the first time ever." If this sounds like the current cults that say the ancient astronauts will return and solve all of mankind's problems, you're right.

My objection to all this (in case you haven't figured it out) is that Silverberg seems to be saying that we needn't do anything to improve things here on earth--powerful alien beings will show up to solve all our problems. He may even feel we c\_a\_n' do anything to improve things, a nihilistic belief that I simply cannot subscribe to. (Silverberg may not have these beliefs personally, but the book seems to be promoting them, so I'll use the shorthand of "Silverberg says.") One can argue that a belief in the Biblical apocalypse would result in similar conclusions, but at least that has the virtue (if one may call it such) that it relies on divine intervention, rather than on other mortals who are somehow more advanced than we. If these advanced mortals could pull themselves up to that level, why can't we? If one postulates that they were assisted by yet another advanced race, then we could easily get into the paradox of infinite regress here.

As if this weren't enough, Silverberg has Tom--a gentle, pacifistic character--engage in some highly questionable activities. Tom, because of his mutation, is a critical nexus in the Crossing. And while some people are eager to "cross" and become the wards of these super-beings,

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others are not. And how does Tom feel about sending these, in effect killing them on Earth to send their souls elsewhere? "It wasn't a killing anymore than the other killings were. ... if I hadn't, he would have killed me sure as anything with that spike, and then there would be no more crossings for anyone. You understand that...? I didn't kill you...I did you the biggest favor of your life." So also said the Inquisition as it lit the auto da fe': "We torture your body so that we can save your soul."

Maybe Silverberg believes all this. Maybe he doesn't. But the

book (which is the topic here) does seem to present these ideas as reasonable, so I must weigh the philosophical aspects of the book as well as its technical and literary aspects. While it gets high marks on the latter, I find the former leaves an exceedingly bad taste in my mouth.

TWISTING THE ROPE by R. A. MacAvoy  
Bantam/Spectra, 1986, \$3.50.  
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper

Although this is a sequel to MacAvoy's enormously popular T\_e\_a\_w\_i\_t\_h  
t\_h\_e\_B\_l\_a\_c\_k\_D\_r\_a\_g\_o\_n, it seems to have more in common with her latest, T\_h\_e  
B\_o\_o\_k\_o\_f\_K\_e\_l\_l\_s. Unfortunately, what this means is that she has drifted  
away from what I liked and into what I am not as interested in (though I  
can't say I actually d\_i\_s\_l\_i\_k\_e it either).

T\_e\_a\_w\_i\_t\_h\_t\_h\_e\_B\_l\_a\_c\_k\_D\_r\_a\_g\_o\_n had as one of its two central characters  
Mayland Long. He was an enigmatic Chinese gentleman (in the literal  
sense of the word) and made T\_e\_a\_w\_i\_t\_h\_t\_h\_e\_B\_l\_a\_c\_k\_D\_r\_a\_g\_o\_n a truly memorable  
book. What appealed to me was MacAvoy's use of one of the lesser used  
(at that time anyway) mythologies--the Chinese mythology, with its  
dragons and spirits. The same was true of her "Damiano" series--set in  
medieval Italy, it drew upon Christian and Arab mythologies for its  
characters and story.

T\_h\_e\_B\_o\_o\_k\_o\_f\_K\_e\_l\_l\_s was a step back toward the over-used--in this  
case, the Celtic. While I agree that Celtic mythology may have a  
certain appeal for someone named MacAvoy, I personally am getting  
somewhat tired of the current epidemic of Celtic and pseudo-Celtic  
fantasy covering the shelves in the science fiction/fantasy sections  
these days. Don't get me wrong. MacAvoy does it well, but I question  
the necessity of doing it at all these days.

That brings us back to T\_w\_i\_s\_t\_i\_n\_g\_t\_h\_e\_R\_o\_p\_e. Martha Macnamara and  
Mayland Long are back, all right, but they're now the managers of a  
touring Celtic folk group. Seriously. There is a lot of time spent  
discussing the technical aspects of Celtic folk music and the emotions  
that it evokes, in fact more time than is spent on the fantastic aspects  
of the story, which seem pasted on for the purpose of making this a  
fantasy. It is, rather, a murder mystery that needn't have been fantasy  
at all. It's a well-written murder mystery, true, and I'm sure  
fascinating for those who are interested in Celtic music. But for me,  
for all these reasons I mentioned, it was a disappointment. My  
unreserved recommendation for T\_e\_a\_w\_i\_t\_h\_t\_h\_e\_B\_l\_a\_c\_k\_D\_r\_a\_g\_o\_n and the  
"Damiano" books still stands, however. I just hope that MacAvoy will  
return to the not-so-well-trodden ground she began to explore before.

PEE-WEE'S BIG ADVENTURE  
A film review by Mark R. Leeper

Capsule review: Uneven but surprisingly comic satire of children's movies. Some of the jokes run too long, but for the most part this is a lively little comedy with a sharp edge of wit.

When P\_e\_e- W\_e\_e' s B\_i\_g A\_d\_v\_e\_n\_t\_u\_r\_e was first released most of the reviewers on Usenet panned it. More than one person walked out on it early in the film. Some people seemed to like it, however, and some of the people who did were the people who knew film best. Let's face it, P\_e\_e- W\_e\_e' s B\_i\_g A\_d\_v\_e\_n\_t\_u\_r\_e is no Bergman film; it is a light piece of satire, the sort of thing you would not expect to appeal to art audiences. Now I think I can understand that a little better.

Paul Reubens's alter-ego, Pee-Wee Herman, is a living satire on childhood. Reubens himself has a sort of baby-face and when he puts on lipstick, wears a tight suit with a red bowtie, and raises his voice a couple of octaves, he does a remarkable imitation of somebody's idea of a child. The problem is that he is a one-joke comedian. His cable comedy special was nearly unwatchable for that reason. What Reubens desperately needed is a good script and the one he co-authored for this film is just what he desperately needed. It is a satire on children's films that was carefully crafted to remain fresh. The way it does that is to lampoon one film comedian after another in the overall framework. There is a re-doing of the world's most cliched ghost story; there is a not-so-fiery Latin dance; there is a chase scene that would have done Mack Sennett proud; there is a Buster-Keaton-style machine for making a whole breakfast; there is a love story with Pee-Wee offering sage advice; there is a pet store fire with Pee-Wee the only one who can save all the pretty animals. The film offers enough that jokes rarely wear thin. By the time the film reaches its end it has good-naturedly attacked just about every film convention in range.

P\_e\_e- W\_e\_e' s B\_i\_g A\_d\_v\_e\_n\_t\_u\_r\_e is just coming to cable. It is worth giving it a try, even if you decide to call it quits after five minutes. Give it a high +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

TO ENGINEER IS HUMAN by Henry Petroski  
St. Martin's Press, 1985, \$16.95.  
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper

The subtitle of this book is "The Role of Failure in Successful Design" and that is what Petroski covers: what we can learn from failure. He discusses some of the more well-known engineering failures--the Tacoma Narrows Bridge failure in 1940, the DC-10 crash in Chicago in 1979, the collapse of the Kansas City Hyatt Regency walkways in 1981, and many others--and analyzes why these failures happened. It is in the nature of engineering, he proposes, that there will always be failures, because engineering consists of change and change implies that there will always be unknown factors. It is easy to build the millionth one-story house, but it is at least as difficult to build the first two-story house as it was to build the first one-story one. Engineering is based on models and sometimes the models are incomplete.

Petroski also looks at engineering successes such as the Crystal Palace and the Empire State Building. Much of their success appears to be due to the engineers realizing their limitations and insisting on double-checking everything as promptly as possible. This is contrasted with the construction of the New York Convention Center, beset by delays because (among other reasons) materials were not tested before being delivered to the site.

This pre-Challenger-explosion book puts into perspective the "disasters" of modern engineering. As such, it should be required reading for the technophobes and Luddites who see only the failures of technology, and not the lessons that we may learn from them. As Petroski says, "Falling down is part of growing up."

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BEYOND ENGINEERING by Henry Petroski  
St. Martin's Press, 1986, \$17.95.  
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper

This is Petroski's second book (his first was T\_o\_E\_n\_g\_i\_n\_e\_e\_r\_I\_s  
H\_u\_m\_a\_n)

and in it he attempts to merge the technical and the literary. Although his first chapter (which could have been titled "How to Engineer a Novel") seems like a very simplistic--and I believe, inaccurate--view of literature, he progresses to firmer and more interesting ground. He discusses generalization versus specialization and contrasts the stigma of illiteracy with the badge of "innumeracy." He decries the absence of television series about engineers; after all, if lawyers, doctors, and the police can have their shows, why not engineers? He looks at digital watches (shades of Douglas Adams?) and wrestles with the thorny question of dust jackets--are they part of the book or just advertising?

The essays in this book are not earth-shaking. The reader may feel that she could have written such a book herself. That may be, but it may also be that new insights will be gained from hearing them expressed by someone else.

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