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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
Club Notice - 11/27/87 -- Vol. 6, No. 22

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

Unless otherwise stated, all meetings are on Wednesdays at noon.
LZ meetings are in LZ 3A-206; MT meetings are in the cafeteria.

 D A T E T O P I C

- 12/09 LZ: POSTMAN by David Brin (Post-Disaster Recovery)
- 12/16 MT: Superheroes (Martin, Van Vogt, and Wylie)
- 12/30 LZ: FUTUROLOGICAL CONGRESS by Stanislaw Lem
(Foreign-Language Authors)
- 01/20 LZ: 20,000 LEAGUES UNDER THE SEA by Jules Verne (Classics)
- 02/10 LZ: DRAGON WAITING by John Ford (Recent Fantasy)

HO Chair: John Jetzt HO 1E-525 834-1563 mtuxo!jetzt
LZ Chair: Rob Mitchell LZ 1B-306 576-6106 mtuxo!jrrt
MT Chair: Mark Leeper MT 3E-433 957-5619 mtgzz!leeper
HO Librarian: Tim Schroeder HO 3M-420 949-5866 homxb!tps
LZ Librarian: Lance Larsen LZ 3L-312 576-6142 lzfme!lfl
MT Librarian: Will Harmon MT 3C-406 957-5128 mtgzz!wch
Factotum: Evelyn Leeper MT 1F-329 957-2070 mtgzy!ecl
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1. Most of this notice will be written by Evelyn. She has just recently taken the Kelly Educational Services course "Writing Humor in Club Notices." What can I tell you? Some things can be taught, some can't.

2. Some of you may have noticed that we had the discussion of military science fiction a week ahead of schedule. Most of you probably did not, either because 1) you're not in Middletown anyway, or 2) you thought it was always scheduled to be the day before Thanksgiving. In any case, since most of us seemed to think it was supposed to be on November 25, we had it that day anyway. This is probably for the best as this means we can have our next meeting December 16 instead of right before Christmas when everyone is too busy partying to have serious science fiction discussions.

For those who missed it because of this confusion: don't worry, there will probably be a "Military Science Fiction 3" one of these Wednesdays soon. [-ecl]

THE MT VOID

Page 2

3. Not much to say this week, but there are a lot of reviews attached, so that will make up for the skimpiness of this. [-ecl]

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

ISAAC ASIMOV'S ROBOT CITY
BOOK I: ODYSSEY by Michael P. Kube-McDowell
Ace, 1987, ISBN 0-441-73122-8, \$2.95
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper
Copyright 1987 Evelyn C. Leeper

Michael Kube-McDowell's O_d_y_s_s_e_y starts out with two strikes against it: it's set in someone else's universe, and it's the first book of a series. So why did I buy it? Good question--I wish I had a good answer.

I understand why authors like to write stories set in pre-formed universes. After all, one advantage that mainstream writers have over science fiction writers is that they don't have to think up or society or other background to go with their plot. And for those who like Sherlock Holmes, or S_t_a_r_T_r_e_k, or Asimov's positronic robots, the lure of a new addition to the o_u_v_r_e can be a powerful inducement to part with their \$2.95 (or in this case, my \$1.79, since I bought O_d_y_s_s_e_y used).

And the trend is becoming popular. Recently the science fiction

and fantasy field has seen a lot of "shared-world" anthologies (Robert Asprin's "Thieves' World" and Janet Morris's "Heroes in Hell" are among the most popular). Now in addition, we are seeing more and more books with the blurb "X writing in the Science Fiction Worlds of Y." (Usually this can be expressed more accurately as "Joe Unknown writing in the Science Fiction Worlds of John Multiple-Hugo-Winner.") In the last few months, in addition to the "positronic robot" series we have seen Charles Platt's P_l_a_s_m (a sequel to Piers Anthony's C_h_t_h_o_n and P_h_t_h_o_r), two interactive fiction books by Mark Acres set in Robert Heinlein's "Starship Troopers" world, and undoubtedly others that I have missed. There's even a new "Venus Prime" series (the first one, B_r_e_a_k_i_n_g_t_h_e S_t_r_a_i_n, by Paul Preuss) which claims to have been inspired by Arthur C. Clarke, whatever that means. What's odd about this is that these books are appearing while the original authors are still alive--it used to be the case that such novels were written after the original author died and people had to give up all hope of ever getting any more from him or her.

However, as Orson Scott Card has so eloquently observed, when an author writes a novel in another author's universe, s/he d_o_e_s_n't write an original novel. Not just, mind you, that the novel that is written is un-original, but also that there is an original novel that i_s_n't written. As Card observes, Heinlein's "Lensman" novel might have been great, but luckily he decided to write S_t_a_r_s_h_i_p_T_r_o_o_p_e_r_s and G_l_o_r_y_R_o_a_d instead. And I'm sure Haldeman's sequel to S_t_a_r_s_h_i_p_T_r_o_o_p_e_r_s would have been excellent, but the field has been enriched by the fact that he wrote T_h_e_F_o_r_e_v_e_r_W_a_r instead. What novel did Kube-McDowell n_o_t write when he wrote O_d_y_s_s_e_y? Is there a limbo for unborn novels, as many believed there was for the souls of yet-unborn children, and if so, what

Robot City: Odyssey November 24, 1987

Page 2

lives there?

O_d_y_s_s_e_y's other flaw is more prosaic--and also more and more common. Once again we have, not the first book of a series, but the first third(?) of a novel. There is no resolution at the end of this volume. The second part (Mike McQuay's S_u_s_p_i_c_i_o_n) is now out, but any future parts remain unavailable. At least in the movies when you paid for Chapter 1 of T_h_e_P_h_a_n_t_o_m_E_m_p_i_r_e you got a full-length complete feature film with it (or even two). The flaw is exacerbated by the omission of any mention on the cover that this is n_o_t a self-contained

story. Even a cake mix tells you on the o_u_t_s_i_d_e of the box what ingredients are missing.

So with two strikes against it already, what would I say about the book itself? Well, it's not even a good addition to Asimov's positronic robots. The robots are a very small part of what is going on, they don't ring true, and there are non-human alien races, a very non-Asimovian touch. All in all, I would have to rate this book a strike-out. It could be that the second and third novels will make it all worthwhile, but I'm not inspired to spend my money to find out.

NAPOLEON DISENTIMED by Hayford Peirce
Tor, 1987, ISBN 0-812-54898-1, \$3.50.
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper
Copyright 1987 Evelyn C. Leeper

This novel by Hayford Peirce (yes, that really is how it's spelled) is the second in the "Ben Bova Discoveries" series (the first is Rebecca Ore's B_e_c_o_m_i_n_g_A_l_i_e_n). From the introductory blurb, I get the impression that Bova is attempting to imitate the "Ace Science Fiction Specials" series that Terry Carr edited so successfully before his death. But judging from this novel--admittedly a very small sample, statistically speaking--Bova has a ways to go. While it's true that some of Carr's selections were somewhat traditional science fiction (Kim Stanley Robinson's T_h_e_W_i_l_d_S_h_o_r_e, for example), others like Shepard's G_r_e_e_n_E_y_e_s and Carter Scholz's P_a_l_i_m_p_s_e_s_t_s were more unusual stylistic experiments. N_a_p_o_l_e_o_n_D_i_s_e_n_t_i_m_e_d is straightforward time travel/alternate worlds science fiction (only in science fiction could such a comment be more with a straight face!).

The style seems inspired more by Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's "Saint-Germain" series than anything else--long, flowery descriptions of clothing, furniture, and so on. The idea is that there is this device, GODHEAD (Gathering, Organizing, and Dispersing Holistically Extratemporal Autonomous Device), which belonged to a scientific swami but somehow came into the possession of the MacNair. This device is a alternate worlds device (time travel is also involved) and pretty soon people are skipping around from world to world, meeting other versions of themselves, and getting involved with a group trying to use time travel to overthrow Napoleon before he takes (took?) over all of Europe. None of it struck me as original, and the style seemed to bog down the action. Actually the whole thing reminded me of nothing so much as a Jacobean drama of the sort the film T_h_e_D_r_a_u_g_h_t_s_m_a_n'_s_C_o_n_t_r_a_c_t was imitating.

It is not fair to judge the series on the basis of a single book. It is certainly true that the "Ace Science Fiction Specials" had their share of duds. One must regret, for example, that the last book in that series, at least under Carr, was Loren MacGregor's T_h_e_N_e_t, a thoroughly average book. So I will reserve judgement on this series until I sample one or two other novels. But, for me at least, it has gotten off to an inauspicious start.

HOPE AND GLORY
A film review by Mark R. Leeper
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Capsule review: John Boorman's reminiscences of childhood during the London Blitz form the basis of this unconventional but believable comedy. This film is filled with memorable characters and a child's sense of wonder at the War. Rating: +2.

There are lots of films made about World War II. Some are idealized--and just about any English-language film made d_u_r_i_n_g the War was--and some are more realistic. There are at least some films made about the British home front but very, very rare is the film that does not idealize. You get this vision of a dedicated British people suffering bombs and bullets with an idealized British stiff upper lip. Many seem inspired by M_r_s. M_i_n_i_v_e_r. John Boorman, whose films usually are abstract and in the fantasy genre, has turned out a realistic reminiscence of the WWII British home front which probably has more than a little autobiography. H_o_p_e_a_n_d_G_l_o_r_y is a child's-eye view of the home front, though we see what is happening with the understanding of an adult.

Very simply, H_o_p_e_a_n_d_G_l_o_r_y is the comedy/drama of the Rohan family of five when Daddy enlists in the army and goes off to war. The first scene of the film sums up the best of the film. We see a weekend movie matinee audience at a theatre. On the screen, a somber newsreel talks about a worsening international situation that we know will soon lead to hostilities. In the audience, however, war seems to have broken out already as screaming kids run around, throw things at each other, and generally have the high old time that kids always have if given half a chance. Well, the war does come but it still leaves the children that necessary half a chance. This is was with a sense of wonder. After each bombing the children joyfully run around to pick up souvenirs like shrapnel and shells. Even the adults stare with childlike wonder as an errant barrage balloon, almost as big as a house, floats solemnly through the neighborhood, capriciously damaging a chimney here or a roof there. And in this world of the inanimate balloon seeming like a

mischievous floating monster, we see some of what could have inspired Boorman's love of fantasy.

Unfortunately, partway through the film seems to lose some of its vision. The story of the children gives way to to soap-operish story of Young Bill's teenage sister. The subplot of the sister drags the film down a bit but the mother's character is every bit as well-drawn as young Bill's. And in one sequence a prayer voiced under the mother's breath focuses the film and elevates her part from a portrayal of a hysterical mother to a tragic hero. The film is at its best when it is about the mother or son in London. When the film shifts away from London, as it eventually does, it loses its uniqueness. But until that point it is nearly perfect. Rate H_o_p_e_a_n_d_G_l_o_r_y a high +2.

THE LAST EMPEROR
A film review by Mark R. Leeper
Copyright 1987 Mark R. Leeper

Capsule review: Impressive biographical historical epic gives an emotionally uninvolved account of the life of Pu Yi, the last emperor of China. Bertolucci tells us about historical events he should show us and shows us sex scenes he should probably only tell us about. But the sweep of history is certainly present and a great deal of change in China is obvious. Rating: +2.

We in the United States feel we have grown used to change. Change seems to come quickly and to virtually all aspects of life. But in fact change does not come very fast to the United States and we do not take to change well. The country that has seen the most change this century is, in all probability, China. For millennia it had retained a feudal structure under the emperors. China held firmly to its past as the rest of the world moved forward. When it finally did let go of that past, it snapped violently forward into the 20th Century. In the span of a single lifetime it has gone from dynasties to the electronic age. Even a shorter lifetime could have seen five very different forms of government. And such a lifetime was the one lived by Pu Yi, the last emperor of China.

T_h_e_L_a_s_t_E_m_p_e_r_o_r chronicles Pu Yi's life from the days the emperor

ruled to the Republic, to the days when the Japanese invaded and ruled Manchuria, to the Communist revolutionary government, and finally to the Cultural Revolution. And each government uses Pu Yi without ever giving him any power. He is always a puppet and each succeeding government merely seizes the strings from the previous one. Each regime is portrayed in a bad light and each resurrects aspects of the days when the emperor ruled.

_ T_ h_ e_ L_ a_ s_ t_ E_ m_ p_ e_ r_ o_ r is a big film, an epic, with a great deal of historical scope. As such it is quite a good film, but it is in some ways very flawed. Bernardo Bertolucci somehow fails to breathe any life at all into his characters. They are strangely uninvolved; one is always displaced from them. The characters are more ciphers than humans. Just when we might be ready to empathize with Pu Yi, he does something immature and nasty and suddenly we find ourselves not caring for him again. _ T_ h_ e_ L_ a_ s_ t_ E_ m_ p_ e_ r_ o_ r also panders a little, taking more opportunities than necessary to shock us with scenes of breast-feeding, feces-sniffing, multi-partner sex, opium use, and lesbianism. Bertolucci underestimates his audience (or at least me) if he thinks that this sort of thing is what would interest them, even if he finds historical documentation for it, which I doubt.

All told, I would rate _ T_ h_ e_ L_ a_ s_ t_ E_ m_ p_ e_ r_ o_ r a +2 on the -4 to +4 scale.

MY LIFE AS A DOG
A film review by Mark R. Leeper
Copyright 1987 Mark R. Leeper

Capsule review: When a misfit child goes to live with his uncle's strange family, he finds himself as a human being. There is a lot more to this film than is initially apparent. Rating: +2.

This is one of those statements that get me into trouble, but I think that Bergman has given a sort of image to Swedish film that Swedish film might be better off without. When people think of Swedish film what comes to mind is dry intellectual exercises, with a lot of symbolism, that if you could understand would only give you a multitude

of reasons why the characters are depressed. This may not be fair in general--even of just Bergman films--but it is the impression much of the public has gotten. Friends of mine have to be coerced to go see even a subtitled film. Well, M_y_L_i_f_e_a_s_a_D_o_g is subtitled, but it is worth the effort to see, and then some.

The main character, a young boy, is not having a very good childhood. He is fatherless, his mother is dying of tuberculosis, and he gets into a lot of trouble, mostly due to the coercion of other children. But everybody knows he is a bad boy. He doesn't fit in with other children or his family. Finally he gets packed off to live with an uncle. Suddenly everything clicks into place. His uncle's family loves life and accepts people for what they are. They are eccentric, but likably so. The eccentricity is done believably, not exaggerated as the family was in Capra's Y_o_u_C_a_n't_T_a_k_e_I_t_w_i_t_h_Y_o_u.

M_y_L_i_f_e_a_s_a_D_o_g is not just a fine portrait of childhood and how children react to life's problems; it is a comparison of philosophies of life. The main character's mother wants to change him to make him a more convenient child to deal with. The closer he is to the ideal of being seen and not heard, the better. The uncle's family accepts him as a human instead of a machine-tooled component. They revel in human diversity. Under their influence he blooms as a human being rather than dwelling on morbid thoughts. As a portrait of the world from a child's eyes, a sort of child's testament, M_y_L_i_f_e_a_s_a_D_o_g is a better film than Bergman's F_a_n_n_y_a_n_d_A_l_e_x_a_n_d_e_r, but is a cut below Boorman's H_o_p_e_a_n_d_G_l_o_r_y. Rate it a low +2 on the -4 to +4 scale.