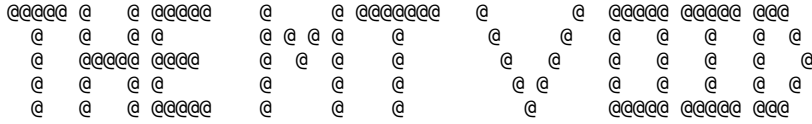


# MT VOID 12/10/21 -- Vol. 40, No. 24, Whole Number 2201



Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society  
12/10/21 -- Vol. 40, No. 24, Whole Number 2201

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Co-Editor: Mark Leeper, [mleeper@optonline.net](mailto:mleeper@optonline.net)  
Co-Editor: Evelyn Leeper, [eleeper@optonline.net](mailto:eleeper@optonline.net)  
Sending Address: [evelynchimelisleeper@gmail.com](mailto:evelynchimelisleeper@gmail.com)  
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### Mini Reviews, Part 3 (film reviews by Mark R. Leeper and Evelyn C. Leeper):

Here is the third batch of mini-reviews, biographical documentaries and biopics.

**FAUCI:** This film covers Dr. Anthony Fauci's work not only with the COVID-19 pandemic, but also with the AIDS/HIV epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s. (Interestingly, both were politicized, though in very different ways, and we can see how politics often drives people's positions more than science does.) In both epidemics, Fauci had a major role. Though most of the film is about his efforts against disease, there is some biographical material, as he talks about trying to balance his family life and his professional career (hard to do when he is the point man during an epidemic). (Warning: on-line ratings such as in the IMDB tend to be skewed by political factors and should not be trusted.)

Released theatrically 09/10/21; available on Disney+ and NatGeoTV. Rating: +2 (-4 to +4), or 7/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt13984924/reference>

What others are saying: <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/fauci>

**MY SALINGER YEAR:** A semi-autobiographical film based on the non-fiction book by Joanna Smith Rakoff, covering her time in 1996 and 1997 with a New York literary agency who had J. D. Salinger as a client. (Careful angles avoid showing the face of the actor playing Salinger, so the filmmakers emphasize Salinger's famous reclusiveness, while also avoiding the need for extensive make-up.) Our main character learns to see much of life through the lens of Holden Caulfield, in spite of not having read *THE CATCHER IN THE RYE* when she started the job. One envies Joanna the chance to walk down the street and be greeted by world-famous writers. For those who are into the New York literary lifestyle I can recommend also *CROSSING DELANCEY*.

Released theatrically 03/05/21; available on DVD. Rating: +2 (-4 to +4), or 7/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2222052/reference>

What others are saying: [https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/my\\_salinger\\_year](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/my_salinger_year)

SWAN SONG: [There are two 2021 films titled SWAN SONG. One is a science fiction film with Mahershala Ali. This is not that film. This is a drama film with Udo Kier.]

Udo Kier got his real start as the star of FLESH FOR FRANKENSTEIN and for BLOOD FOR DRACULA, and has been known mostly as a character actor in his over-200 films. In SWAN SONG, he is a retired hair dresser asked to do the hair and make-up for a former client with whom he had a falling-out. His character, Patrick Pitsenbarger, was a real hairdresser to the Sandusky socialites "back in the day" and a well-known drag performer. Patrick (a.k.a. "Mister Pat") keeps his history alive with a set of very old photographs and memories of himself and his family. This is a familiar story of old person revisiting places from their youth, as well as a story of someone discovering that they never understood what the real situation was. What starts as pity in the viewer transforms into an appreciation of "Mister Pat's" charm and joie de vivre, with some moments of sadness for the disappearance of a gay culture he was such a part of. (Upon hearing that the drag bar where he used to perform is closing, Pat plaintively asks, "But where will we dance now?")

Released on various streaming services 08/13/21. Rating: high +1 (-4 to +4), or 6/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt10832274/reference>

What others are saying: [https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/swan\\_song\\_2021](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/swan_song_2021)

[-mrl/ecl]

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**LIGHT CHASER** by Peter F. Hamilton and Gareth L. Powell (copyright 2021, Tordotcom, \$13.99, trade paperback, 173pp, ISBN 978-1-250-76982-4) (book review by Joe Karpierz):

Science fiction is a funny, weird genre (go figure). Some of the best SF stories are told with emphasis on their characters and on character development. It's not unusual to talk to fans who will say that they "want more stories about character X" because they fell in love with that character. It's also not unusual to talk to fans who love stories that are built around interesting ideas; and really, that's how the genre started in the first place. Science fiction was the genre of fantastic ideas, of the sense of wonder that people get from stories that contain wild, outside the box ideas. Many people like one type of story over another, and that's okay. Others like stories that have both great character development and wild ideas that generate a sense of wonder. That's okay too.

But here's another oddball one. Peter F. Hamilton, one of the great space opera writers of our time, who has so many wonderful ideas running through his novels that it's impossible to write them in anything less than the length of WAR AND PEACE, is a collaborator on a novella, of all lengths, which contains some pretty spectacular ideas. The thing is, the novella is actually the right length for the story. How does \*that\* happen? To be fair, I've never read anything by Gareth L. Powell before, but I'll bet he at least had something to do with the cat being in the story.

While there really is only one main character, Amahle, there isn't much time for the full character development that many people like to see. And yet, I think we see enough to get a feel for her motivations as we move through the story. Amahle is a Light Chaser, an explorer who travels from planet to planet in the universe--and it's not clear whether all her stops are within the same galaxy or not--alone except for an onboard AI traveling companion, trading baubles and trinkets for life stories. She makes her stops throughout The Domain. At the end of her round trip cycle, she turns in the memories (stored on a kind of necklace) in exchange for more baubles, and goes back out on the trip again. She is revered wherever she goes; she is remembered by each of the civilizations she visits. All are interested in making sure she gets the memories she asked for so they can get the trinkets she gives in return.

Yet, something is amiss.

She gets bored on her journeys, so she views the memories that have been handed in to her. There is a voice, a person, who is telling her that something is wrong. It seems to be the same person, but from different times and different places. This person knows her, and knows that she can do something about what is wrong. She is warned not to trust her AI. And as she puts all the stories together, she realizes that something is indeed wrong, and that she can and should do something about it, for the future of humanity is at stake.

Which brings us to the beginning of the book.

Okay, that's not fair, but really the rest of the book sets up the beginning, which is the result of everything that has transpired in the rest of the story. We don't know what hits us at first, but as the story continues we do come to realize that the beginning is the culmination of the rest of it. Granted, this is not a new storytelling method, but in this case it is very compelling.

Hamilton and Powell pack a lot into this novella. There is no extra fluff here. Everything counts, and everything matters. And it's all good, even great. This will be on my Hugo nomination ballot for Chicago next year. That's about as high a recommendation as I can make. [-jak]

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**BEING THE RICARDOS** (film review by Mark R. Leeper and Evelyn C. Leeper):

BEING THE RICARDOS is a fictional telling of three crises that affected Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz during the early 1950s: Ball was declared a Communist by Walter Winchell, there was a front-page tabloid scandal about Arnaz and another woman, and Ball was pregnant. (The latter may not seem like much of a crisis, but in the early 1950s, television had never shown a pregnant woman, and had certainly never used the word "pregnant".) The film has a lot of flashbacks, but there seems to be a change of film stock that helps us know what is 1950s and what is earlier. In a tribute to the show, the first line (after the "documentary" opening--see below) is, "Lucy, I'm home!"

In addition to all this, there is reasonable coverage of the technical aspects of rehearsing and filming an episode at that time.

There are a few criticisms one can make of the film. One that has been made by many is that they cast a Spaniard (Javier Bardem) as Arnaz, rather than someone from Cuba, or at least from Latin America. (Similar casting, such as Antonio Banderas as a Cuban in THE MAMBO KINGS PLAY SONGS OF LOVE in 1992, attracted less attention. Indeed, the fact that they chose someone Hispanic for MAMBO KINGS was considered a big step forward by some.) On the other hand, Javier Bardem does get a chance to show off his singing voice with Latin (American) songs.

There seems to have been less of a commitment to have the characters in the film look like their real-life counterparts than there often is in films of this sort. Perhaps that's a good thing; the actors are actors, not impersonators, and covering actors in lots of make-up to achieve an artificial resemblance is often counter-productive. (They did do accurate hairstyles, though.) On the other hand, it took me quite a while to realize that J. K. Simmons was playing William Frawley (as Fred Mertz)--he was just too recognizable as Simmons.

The film also does some major time compression, showing all these crises as happening in one week, while in fact Ball was pregnant in 1951 and brought before HUAC--and event happening \*before\* Winchell's accusation--in 1953. And unlike in REDS, the "witnesses" (the people labeled as people who worked with Ball and Arnaz in what is filmed in a documentary style) are not the real people, but actors. (Quite possibly they are delivering things that the real people actually said.) As in many biopics, the viewer has a choice what there is to believe.

One suspects this will have more appeal for those who remember the original "I Love Lucy" show, but its continuing popularity will extend the audience for this.

Released theatrically 12/10/21. Rating: high +2 (-4 to +4), or 8/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4995540/reference>

What others are saying: [https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/being\\_the\\_ricardos](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/being_the_ricardos)

[-mrl/ecl]

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**THE DYBBUK (1938)** (letter of comment by Kip Williams):

In response to [Mark's review of THE DYBBUK](#) in the 12/03/21 issue of the MT VOID, Kip Williams writes:

Thanks for spoilers [warning]. Some of us read old works of literature for actual enjoyment, and not seeing the author's work unraveled by punchline shouters helps. [-kw]

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**THE LAST PAGAN** (letters of comment by Peter Trei, Kevin R, Gary McGath, and Paul Dormer):

In response to [Evelyn's comments on THE LAST PAGAN](#) in the 12/03/21 issue of the MT VOID, Peter Trei writes:

Nit: When you write about a non-famous historical event, it helps to include the date: Julian ruled 361 to 363 AD. He was the second Emperor after Constantine.

There's a good portrait of him from a coin on his Wikipedia page. It's a profile, so can't speak to the beard's point, but his lip looks pretty normal:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julian\\_\(emperor\)>](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julian_(emperor)>)

[-pt]

Evelyn responds:

I should have included his dates. But while we're picking nits:

It's "A.D. 361", not "361 A.D." (Whether or not it includes periods seems to be a style thing, and may differ in the UK.)

I would say "361 C.E.", \*especially\* for Julian! (He'd probably prefer 1114 AUC.) [-ecl]

But Kevin R writes:

I'm all for adding relevant dates, but Julian is far from obscure.\* ObMundane Fiction: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julian\\_\(novel\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julian_(novel))

\* That'd be Jude: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jude\\_the\\_Obscure](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jude_the_Obscure)

Julian would have been considered infamous, if not famous, in Christendom.

My opinion may be skewed by 12 years of Catholic El-Hi education, including two years of Latin, and a history B.A. from a Jesuit university. I had maybe more than average exposure to things classical than was usual for a late 20th century schoolboy? [-kr]

Peter replies:

Just a tad. Or maybe, I'm just a Philistine. My school was, to the extent it was anything, Church of England, and that as little as possible. I didn't study history past 8th grade (the UK made you specialize early, which I regard as one of its weak points.).

If I were of a more serious-lit bent, I might have read the Vidal, but I wasn't. [-pt]

Gary McGath adds:

Ibsen wrote an extra-long play, "Emperor and Galilean", about Julian. [-gmg]

And Evelyn notes:

The BBC did a radio version of it, which is one of the extras in their Ibsen DVD set. [-ecl]

And Paul Dormer adds:

Saw it at the National Theatre in London back in 2011, apparently its UK stage premiere. Andrew Scott was the lead. [-pd]

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### **This Week's Reading** (book comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

THE PAST IS RED by Catherynne M. Valente (Tordotcom, ISBN 978-1-250-30113-0) was actually pretty good for most of it, if a bit unlikely. Tetley Abednego lives on the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, a.k.a. Garbagetown, which is divided into regions such as Electric City, Pill Hill, Cardboard Flats, and Clotheschester. People get their names from things on the patch. I was willing to accept all this, and even that there supposedly was no dry land left, even though in actual fact if all the ice melted, the sea level would rise only 215 feet. (See <https://www.goodshomedesign.com/maps-of-what-the-earth-would-look-like-if-all-ice-melted/> for what Earth would look like.) But when Tetley finds a radio and has a real-time conversation with a girl on Mars (i.e., with no time lag), I gave up on accurate science. (Valente's novelette "The Future Is Blue" forms the first part of this novella.)

Interesting note: James David Nicoll reports on Twitter that Connie Willis's novel LINCOLN'S DREAMS, about Robert E. Lee and the Civil War, doesn't mention the word "slave" once. Or the word "black" (except in referring to objects), "African (except in referring to violets) or even "Negro".

[-ecl]

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Mark Leeper  
mleeper@optonline.net

Quote of the Week:

The Micawber Principle:  
Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure  
nineteen nineteen six, result happiness.  
Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure  
twenty pounds ought and six, result misery.  
--Wilkins Micawber  
(Charles Dickens,  
DAVID COPPERFIELD)

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