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Table of Contents

[JOHN CARPENTER'S THE THING](#) (film retrospective by Mark R. Leeper)
[Reviewing and Advance Reading Copies](#) (letter of comment by Joe Karpierz)
[Scientific Accuracy in Films](#) (letter of comment by Peter Trei)
[This Week's Reading](#) (PROPHETS AND MOGULS, RANGERS AND ROGUES,
BISON AND BEARS; THE WORDHORD) (book comments by Evelyn C. Leeper)
[Quote of the Week](#)

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JOHN CARPENTER'S THE THING (film retrospective by Mark R. Leeper):

June 25 is the fortieth anniversary of the release of JOHN CARPENTER'S THE THING (not to be confused with THE THING FROM ANOTHER WORLD (1951) or THE THING (2011)). Given that it is forty years old, and based on a story that is about seventy-five years old, THERE WILL BE SPOILERS! Briefly, this is a logic puzzle mixed with an alien invasion story.

I started by saying, "My reaction to the opening of this film was different from other people's. This film is based on "Who Goes There?" by John W. Campbell, Jr., opens with a helicopter chasing a dog across a large snowy field. Now I generally like dogs and with this one my usual reaction would have been rooting for the dog but being very familiar with the story, my reaction was "Get that sucker!"

For that matter, the Norwegian spoken by the pilot at the beginning of the film gives away the plot, shouting that the dog isn't really a dog, it's some sort of thing imitating a dog.

While this was not exactly John Carpenter's breakthrough film--it came after after DARK STAR, ASSAULT ON PRECINCT 13, HALLOWEEN, and ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK--but it may well be his best film. However, it was a commercial and critical flop at the time, and only over the years has its gained the stature that it has. (It scores 8.2 out of 10 on the IMDB, and 83% on Rotten Tomatoes.)

The original story, and the first movie, were set in the Arctic, but this movie is moved to Antarctica. When the story was written, and the first movie made, permanent bases were fairly common in the Arctic, but not in Antarctica. Moving it to Antarctica gives it some hints of H. P. Lovecraft and the Elder Gods.

It might help one's understanding of the film if one can remember what characters had what names, but personally I have never found anyone who could keep the characters straight. Is that perhaps to emphasize how they are all part of a Protean entity with no permanent individuality?

Jed the dog deserves an acting award. I'm serious about that. This dog is better than Boris Karloff at appearing menacing and also mysterious. And he never looked at the camera, the dolly, or the crew (which is a common acting animal problem).

Here you have a base made up mostly of scientists, and the only one really thinking is the helicopter pilot? (In the original movie it's the airplane pilot and the secretary. There seems to be some implication that she has some scientific position, but we see her typing, making coffee, and doing other non-scientific stuff.)

Childs (Keith David)'s voice may be familiar, since he has narrated many PBS documentaries. Other than Ken Russell and Wilford Brimley, though, there are not a lot of familiar faces (which may be why it's hard to keep the characters straight).

Rating: +3 (-4 to +4), or 9/10.

[-mrl]

Reviewing and Advance Reading Copies (letter of comment by Joe Karpierz):

In response to [Heath Row's comments](#) in the 05/27/22 issue of the MT VOID on Joe Karpierz's reviews in various issues of the MT VOID, Joe writes:

My thanks to Heath Row for his kind words about my reviews of THE KAIJU PRESERVATION SOCIETY, COMFORT ME WITH APPLES, and THE EXTRACTIONIST.

With regard to me having an advance reader copy of THE EXTRACTIONIST, yes, I did have one. My fortune in being able to get ARCs from various publishers stems from two people. First is Evelyn, who encouraged me to review for the the MT VOID back in the 1990s when I discovered that she, Mark, and I all worked for the same company (AT&T at the time, although it may have been Lucent Technologies by the time we made that discovery) by way of a comment in one of Roger Ebert's movie reviews in which he mentioned Mark. So yes, I've been reviewing here since sometime in the 1990s. Second is Robert J. Sawyer, who, while he, I, Rick Wilber (I think), and Jacob Weisman, owner of Tachyon Publications, among other authors (man, that's a lot of commas--I probably used them wrong) were sitting at a bar at Chicon in 2012 when Sawyer turned to Weisman, pointed at me and said "Jacob, you should have him review books for you".

The fact that I review for the MT VOID got me accepted at NetGalley, which Jacob suggested would be a good place for me to be so they wouldn't have to ship me physical ARCs as that is so expensive. Since then, things have changed a bit in that Tachyon does offer to send me widgets directly, but I go to NetGalley to get them so I can build up my review portfolio (for lack of a better term) so that I can get ARCs from other publishers. Tachyon knows that I only request books from them that I'm pretty sure I will like, which means they will get good reviews. Side note is that I'm auto-approved on NetGalley for ARCs by Tachyon. Another side note is that Tachyon has asked me to read and review NEOM, the new book from Lavie Tidhar, to be published in November. I have that ARC now, but the earliest I will get to it will be after I've finished my Hugo reading.

I do get ARCs from other publishers. They are always small publishers, like Subterranean, Rebellion, and Gallery. My presumption is that my audience is too small for a large publisher to consider me for reviewing their books. I've never been able to get an ARC from Tor, for example. In fact, one of my next reviews will be of "The Dark Ride, The Best Short Fiction of John Kessel", out in July from Subterranean. So yes, another ARC. [-jak]

Scientific Accuracy in Films (letter of comment by Peter Trei):

In response to [Jim Susky's comments on implausibilities in THE MARTIAN and the accuracy of 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY](#) in the 05/27/22 issue of the MT VOID, Peter Trei writes:

[Jim Susky writes.] "In 1968, Kubrick, Clarke, his NASA guru, his thousands of hours of reading, and others conspired to make his art film/sci-fi-epic technically unimpeachable."

Not quite.

It always bugged me that they didn't attempt to simulate lunar gravity. This is most obvious in the motions of the photographer moving around the conference room, and somewhat less so in the movements of the astronauts at the dig site. They missed a great chance too; when they pour coffee in the shuttle to the dig, the shot cuts just before the liquid appears. A slow motion shot of it pouring would have been great.

Finally, that shuttle is shown flying over the lunar landscape about a hundred meters up. While low orbits are possible, that's ridiculously low, given mountains, etc. [-pt]

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

PROPHETS AND MOGULS, RANGERS AND ROGUES, BISON AND BEARS by Heather Hansen, with the tag line "100 Years of the National Park Service" (Mountaineer Books, ISBN 978-1-59485-888-8) goes from a straightforward history of the National Parks and the Park Service, to stories of those impacted by the actions taken regarding the National Parks, to sidebars and anecdotes, and so on. If you can stand the literary whiplash, it is a fascinating story, though the earlier period is more interesting than recent times. (The book is from 2015, so doesn't cover the enormous rise in attendance over the past few years in the most popular parks.)

It is also flawed by poor copy-editing, resulting in such sentences as, "Little Bighorn--where the Battle of the Greasy Grass, as it's known to American Indians--took place, is now also working to get it right." (Hint: the dash belongs after "took place", not before.) And the index, while well-populated with people and places, is woefully lacking in topical entries. Then again, I suspect this is intended as an entertaining book for park-goers, not an academic history.

Last week I wrote of BEOWULF: "It is rife with the compound nouns (and adjectives) of the original poem: whale-road, house-dweller, wolf-slopes, guest-building, sea-booty, life-injury, water-sport, ... We still have many such nouns, but nowhere near as many, and certainly not in common usage."

Then I ran across a review of THE WORDHORD: DAILY LIFE IN OLD ENGLISH by Hana Videen (Princeton University Press, ISBN 978-0-691-23274-4). Reviewer Henry Hitchings writes, "Since the fall of 2013, she has taken to Twitter every day, as @OEWordhord, to post a single example of an Old English word." And he explains "kennings", which are those compound words I loved so much:

"A kenning is a figurative phrase or compound noun that stands in for a familiar word: The mind is a 'hord-loca', and instead of referring to a ship one might speak of a 'flud-wudu' (flood-wood). ... Even when rendered in 21st-century English, many kennings remain wonderfully vivid. The body is a bone-locker, flesh-hoard or life-house; the sun is a heaven-candle; the sea can be the wave-path, sail-road or whale-way. A spider is a weaver-walker. A battle is a storm of swords. A visit to a grave is a dust-viewing."

So apparently they are not the standard words for these items, but a poetic rendering of them, much as in Homer one finds standard poetic phrases, e.g., Athena was not called "gray-eyed" in everyday speech, but the phrase filled in the meter that Homer was using. Kennings are still really cool, though. [-ec]

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Quote of the Week:

Men occasionally stumble over the truth,
but most of them pick themselves up
and hurry off as if nothing
had happened.

-- Winston Churchill

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