

Beyond that all I can say is this is the most fun you will have in a film for quite a while. I could tell you why this fractured fairy tale is fun, but most of what is fun catches you off-guard. I couldn't convey the fun and I'd probably ruin the gags. Rate the movie a +2 on the -4 to +4 scale.

[-mrl]

NEOM by Lavie Tidhar (copyright 2022, Tachyon Publications, 224 pages, paperback, ISBN-10: 1616963824, ISBN-13:978-1616963828) (book review by Joe Karpierz):

Lavie Tidhar's new novel (to be published in November 2022), NEOM, is hard to describe, let alone review. It takes place in Tidhar's Central Station universe, but Central Station itself does not play much of a role in the book; in fact, it is only mentioned a few times. What NEOM is, among other things, is yet another love letter to science fiction of the past. It is no secret that Tidhar grew up on and loves old science fiction, and he pays homage to it here again, just as he did in CENTRAL STATION. NEOM takes place not far from Central Station, and it is a destination for one of the characters, Saleh, who wishes to get there to leave the planet and head to the stars. (As a side note, there is a futuristic city of dreams being built in Saudi Arabia, itself called Neom. The dreams it will purportedly hold, when complete, will be similar to what the denizens of the novel of the same name encounter when they get there. I was completely unaware of this when I read the novel, and only found out about it after I finished reading it.)

NEOM is a novel of many things: love, family, discovery, robots, people just hoping to survive, police officers justifying their existence, orphans, flowers, and much more. All of these things entwine and entangle with each other. Mariam and Nasir are childhood friends; Nasir is a police officer questioning his job, as all he does is write tickets for loitering. Mariam works several odd and varied jobs trying to make ends meet. One of those jobs is in a flower shop, where a robot comes in looking for a rose. Unbeknownst to Mariam at the time, the nameless robot is looking to resurrect the "golden man", something that is important to him for more than one reason, and one of those reasons is very surprising to him. The nameless robot reunites Mariam and Nasir; Nasir has feelings for Mariam, and we see that the theme of love, which runs throughout the novel, is a part of the story of these two characters.

Each of the characters within NEOM have their own story, their own reason why they contribute to the whole. While this is most likely obvious to everyone, there are times that we don't think about that until we are hit over the head with a metaphorical hammer. Saleh, for example, has an artifact that he wants to sell in order to generate the funds he needs to get to Central Station and leave the planet. The artifact is believed to be something left over from a long ago war waged by mechs, robots among them. A terrorist (the concept of the terrorist brings one of the best lines of the novel: "Terror, Rohini said, was art: if a bomb went off in a crowded market and there was no one to broadcast and amplify the experience, did it really go off?"), Nasu, comes to Neom for reasons related to the golden man. And who is the golden man? We find out that he is a weapon from the wars of the past, but why does the nameless robot want to awaken him? And what will be the power source that is the final piece of the puzzle that brings the golden man to life? And what will the golden man do once he comes to life (we get something of a clue as to what the golden man is to the rest of the mechs with the line "The golden man raised its hands, and the Red Sea, which was filled to the brim with the waste and remains of smart matter, began to part at its command.", invoking visions of Moses in the Old Testament.

As I said earlier, Tidhar uses NEOM to pay homage to past science fiction novels: "A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm..." and "Those who follow the Way of Robot designate themselves with an R. prefix." reminds us of Isaac Asimov. "What do robots dream about? Nasir said", and "Do robots dream?" Nasir said, before he could stop himself" bring up memories of Philip K. Dick. Tidhar also makes a reference to Arthur C. Clarke, which the reader just might miss if they were not paying attention, referring to "the forbidden moon of Europa".

But Tidhar does provide commentary on the field today, with "They do not like old things here, much. Always with the new. They forget the new becomes the old, and that they will be just as old and obsolete in their turn." In speaking about the world of today, he says "in a world that was always connected there was enormous value in being unplugged."

The more of Tidhar's work that I read, the more he becomes one of my favorite writers. No, I haven't read everything of his, but at some point I feel as if I will catch up and read all of it. He is one of the outstanding writers of modern times in the field of science fiction and fantasy. NEOM is a wonderful addition to the field, and it should be read by all. [-jak]

THE WAR THAT MADE THE ROMAN EMPIRE: ANTONY, CLEOPATRA, AND OCTAVIAN AT ACTIUM by Barry Strauss (book review by Gregory Frederick):

Throughout history there are many important pivotal events which can change the course of history in major fundamental ways. This history book describes one of them. The results of a naval battle at Actium in Greece lead to the creation of the Roman Empire after Julius Caesar's death. There were more than 600 ships and about 200,000 men plus one important royal woman involved in the battle. Octavian was actually not a great general but he had a great general and that was Marcus Agrippa who created a new navy for Rome which defeated Antony. If Antony would have been the victor the center of the Roman Empire might have been in Alexandria, Egypt. But because Octavian won, the center of the Roman Empire remained in Rome. Plus Octavian who later adopted the name Augustus remade the former Roman Republic into his version of a Roman Empire. He left the Senate as a functioning body but instead of Senators being elected by the people, Octavian began selecting them and he used the Senate as a breeding ground for officials who would eventually be loyal to him. Octavian would allow all the Senators to have some power and influence but over time he also selected Roman knights to serve as commanders and administrators. The author really delves into the backgrounds of the various characters in this historical account. I would recommend this history book to understand how important the outcome of the battle was for our Western civilization. [-gf]

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

THE LIBRARY BOOK by Susan Orlean (Simon & Schuster, ISBN 978-1-476-74019-5) was not what I expected. At a quick glance, it seemed to be a book about libraries. However, while it does cover some general information about libraries, it is really about the Los Angeles Central Library, and specifically about the fire on April 29, 1986, that destroyed 400,000 books and damaged 700,000 more. This was (and still is) the largest library fire in the United States. So why isn't it better known? It turns out that on April 29, 1986, there was another fire that captured everyone's attention--in the reactor core at Chernobyl.

That aside, Orlean covers the history of the Los Angeles Central Library both before and after the fire, and while it is of more interest to people who live near and use the Los Angeles Central Library, there is enough to make it worthwhile for anyone interested in libraries. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

It is not what we do, but also what we do not do,
for which we are accountable.

--Moliere

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