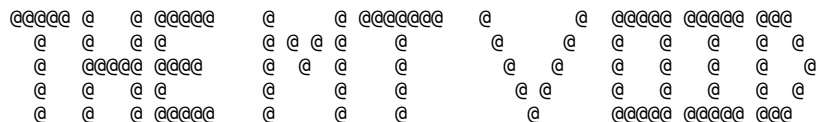


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Mini Reviews, Part 13 (film reviews by Mark R. Leeper and Evelyn C. Leeper):

This is the thirteenth batch of mini-reviews, all based on real people:

AMSTERDAM: AMSTERDAM starts in the 1930s, but then jumps back to World War I and its aftermath before returning to the 1930s. The production design by Judy Becker and art direction by Danielle Osborne and Alexander Wei, the cinematography by Emmanuel Lubezki, and the script by David O. Russell all capture both periods. The former period includes surrealist art, the latter Dadaist poetry. (Margot Robie became so interested in the art that she actually created some of the pieces used in the film.) And the ensemble cast (which includes Christian Bale, Margot Robie, John David Washington, Chris Rock, Michael Shannon, Zoe Saldana, Mike Myers, Rami Malek, and Robert De Niro) allows for a wide range of characterizations. Though most of the characters are fictional, the historical basis for the story is real.

Released theatrically 7 October 2022. Rating: low +3 (-4 to +4) or 8/10

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt10304142/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/amsterdam_2022

THE FABELMANS: THE FABELMANS is Steven Spielberg's semi-autobiographical film, but it really adds little new to what is already known about Spielberg. We see Spielberg as a boy creating scenarios, inventing special effects, and learning how to edit. In one short sequence we learn how Spielberg became Spielberg.

The film is actually the adventures of one family (much as Barry Levinson's AVALON is). It is allegedly a very accurate representation of the Spielberg family. The young Sammy (Steven under a nom de screen) is a character both obnoxious and likable, and the film

itself is an interesting experiment, a different way of telling a story through home movies.

But how often do you see Hanukkah shown on the big screen? In the similarly-themed AVALON, Levinson sticks to secular holidays: Independence Day, Thanksgiving, Washington's Birthday, and so on.

In fact, AVALON is an interesting parallel. Both films are about Jewish families, and memory. But THE FABELMANS emphasizes the Jewishness, while AVALON avoids almost any mention of it. (We see one Star of David in the cemetery towards the end, and Some Yiddish is spoken, but even talk of concentration camps doesn't mention Jewishness.)

And in AVALON, the emphasis is on how faulty memory can be, not just people disagreeing as to when something happened, or if something was a train or a streetcar, but things the audience can see. We see Sam bringing home the piano in the pouring rain, but he describes it later as being a beautiful sunny day. Whereas in THE FABELMANS Sammy (the Steven Spielberg character) doesn't rely on memory; he relies on movies, which both lie (as in all the fictional scenarios he sets up) and tell the truth (as in the candid films of his mother).

And sometimes you feel the camera reveals too much, not just in the storyline, but in real life. (Or as they say, the camera doesn't lie-- which of course it can.)

As noted, this is not a terrifically original or interesting plot, and Spielberg might be pulling from the plot more than there was in the first place. Once before, Spielberg made a comedy and it turned into 1941. In THE FABELMANS, Spielberg is once again Spielberg making a comedy of teenagers. Neither film works and both films were amazingly below expectations. Maybe his heart just isn't in it.

But Spielberg is a consummate director, as the nice understated touch in the final scene shows.

Released theatrically 23 November 2022. Rating: +2 (-4 to +4) or 7/10

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt14208870/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_fabelmans

TED K: TED K is the story of Ted Kaczynski, a.k.a. the Unabomber. The film starts with scenes reminiscent of a movie posse on snowmobiles, showing how the modern world has encroached about nature. Kaczynski watches, believing that modern civilization has ruined the world, and then goes back to his cabin far from civilization and people he knows (but which also has a radio and a modern rifle). Kaczynski uses a trail bike to get around in this mountainous territory, and vandalizes power lines (and fancy cabins). He has thoughts both of violent images and of romantic scenes.

The plot advances very slowly because while the individual scenes are long (and scored with popular music of the time), they do not do much to advance the plot. As Ted Kaczynski, Sharlto Copley (probably best known for DISTRICT 9) really carries this film.

Warning: there is some backal nudity, but any frontal scenes are cleverly staged to obscure critical areas.

Released theatrically 18 February 2022. Rating: +1 (-4 to +4) or 6/10

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8128276/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/ted_k

[-mrl/ecl]

ORPHANS OF THE SKY by **Robert A. Heinlein** (copyright 1941 Astounding Science Fiction, 2017 Blackstone Audio, 4 hours 29 minutes, ASIN B07562BBKH, narrated by Graham Halstead) (audio book review by Joe Karpierz):

I've probably said this before, but I'll say it again. I didn't read any Robert A. Heinlein in my formative science fiction years. Like a lot of people, I read a parent's--in my case, my mother's--collection of science fiction books, and she did not have any books by Heinlein. So, I'm pretty much late to the party, as it were.

I picked up ORPHANS OF THE SKY as a cheap, maybe even free (I don't remember, but then again it's not that important, I suppose) audio book from Audible a while back. Looking for something quick and short to get through a couple of weeks ago, I finally decided to start listening to it. I was underwhelmed.

ORPHANS OF THE SKY is a generation starship story, if not the first then one of the first of that subgenre of science fiction. The ship is the Vanguard, heading toward Far Centaurus from the now mythical planet Earth on a journey financed and sponsored by the Jordan Foundation. Some time during the trip there was a mutiny amongst the crew, and since that time the survivors descended into a much simpler life, forgetting most of the technological advances that they came aboard with. In fact, they don't even remember that they are actually aboard a ship travelling to a distant location. It is a hierarchical society, with officers and "scientists" taking care of the ship, and the rest of the inhabitants being simple farmers. I was reminded of Peter F. Hamilton's "Arkship" trilogy, which took place on a generational starship headed for a new planet on which humanity could live, but which also had a "mutiny" (albeit not really a mutiny, but that's a different review) which resulted in the inhabitants reverting back to a farming life. As I listened to ORPHANS OF THE SKY, I wondered whether Hamilton was influenced by Heinlein's book, and I'm sure that if I poked around the interwebs hard enough I'd find the answer to that question. The inhabitants of the Vanguard don't believe there is an actual voyage to a place called Far Centaurus. Rather, they believe the voyage is metaphorical, a journey of religious significance. The idea that the ship could move is

considered preposterous. The ship is the ship. It is all there is. How would it move and where would it move to?

The inhabitants of the Vanguard live in constant fear of the muties (or mutants), humans who were affected by radiation in the upper parts of the ship. Hugh Hoyland is selected to be a scientist, one of the people who tend to the needs of the ship, feeding to the generators which keep life support. He goes on a mutie hunting expedition, and is captured by the two-headed by Bobo, a microcephalic dwarf who takes him to his boss, the two headed Joe-Jim. Joe-Jim initially enslaves Hugh, but as the story progresses shows Hugh that the voyage and the ship are real. The remainder of the story deals with Hugh trying to convert and convince his friends and others to believe in the mission and aid in its completion.

ORPHANS OF THE SKY consists of two novellas: "Universe", published in ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION in May of 1941, and its sequel "Common Sense", published in ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION in October of 1941. It is considered a classic in the field, and as noted earlier, it's one of the first generational starship stories. I'm sure it was groundbreaking back in its day, and while it seems to hold up fairly well given the time in which it was written, I didn't find it all that extraordinary. And it's definitely a product of its time. While I can live with the anachronisms inherent in books that are more than 80 years old (I actually had to look at that number as I was typing it and decide if I was doing the math right), the misogyny depicted near the end of the novel is very hard to take. Either Heinlein is trying to show that the human race has fallen so far during its years on the ship that it treats females as inferior beings, or he believed that they were indeed inferior--at least at the time he wrote the story. I would like to give him more credit than it looks like he deserves, but his later novels, while written differently with regard to the treatment of his female characters, still seem to have Neanderthal attitudes towards women.

Even the narrator, Graham Halstead, sounds like something of a throwback to some of the earlier narrators that I listened to. While his reading cadence and tone are pleasant enough, there is no effort to use different voices to distinguish between characters. While I would be okay with listening to other novels narrated by Halstead, compared to narrators such as Mary Robinette Kowal, Wil Wheaton, or Jefferson Mays, he falls far short--in my opinion. The listener's mileage may vary.

Maybe we can make allowances for this being early Heinlein, as we know that many of his later novels, especially those of the 1960s like STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND, THE MOON IS A HARSH MISTRESS, and STARSHIP TROOPERS, are classics. ORPHANS OF THE SKY, well, not so much. [-jak]

THE WOMAN KING (letter of comment by Gary McGath):

In response to [Mark and Evelyn's review of THE WOMAN KING](#) in the 02/10/23 issue of the MT VOID, Gary McGath writes:

[Mark and Evelyn wrote,] "The specifics of THE WOMAN KING are fictional, but most of the generalities are accurate, except for the personality of King Ghezo and the position of Ghezo and the head of the Agojie regarding slavery. In the film, they oppose it; in real life Ghezo was one of the worst slavers in West Africa." [-mrl/ecl]

Portraying the slavers as the good guys is a pretty big "except." [-gmg]

HAY BEFORE THE BOOKSHOPS (letter of comment by John Kerr-Mudd):

In response to [Evelyn's comments on HAY BEFORE THE BOOKSHOPS](#) in the 02/10/23 issue of the MT VOID, John Kerr-Mudd writes:

[Evelyn wrote,] "HAY BEFORE THE BOOKSHOPS by Bridget Ashton"

She's a Gubbins now (<https://www.bridgetgubbins.co.uk/>)

[Hay] was an interesting border market town. The hardware store was a wonder to a little kid; you grown-ups could buy nails by the bucketload. Literally. The Three Tuns would have been just settling into its fifty-year delapidation about then. (Caveat--I never went inside). The trains went with Beeching in '63. [-jkm]

FLESH GORDON, BROS, MOUNTAIN IN THE SEA, and Worldcon (letter of comment by Heath Row):

Happy Valentine's Day! This morning, I wished my wife the same upon waking, and prepared Pillsbury Orange Rolls with orange icing for a special weekday breakfast, a rare treat. Our local grocery store doesn't always stock orange rolls, but I associate them with holidays such as today. Valentine's Day isn't a big deal for us usually, especially on a work day, but I gave Caitlin a Valentine's card and traditional heart-shaped box of assorted chocolates, and we'll most likely seek takeout from a neighborhood restaurant for dinner tonight. My standing movie night with a friend was postponed this week because of the day. Last week, we watched FLESH GORDON. I thought I knew what kind of movie FLESH GORDON was, for decades. Decades! And I was wrong. Yes, it's a nudie flick. Yes, there are portions that are downright pornographic. But that is far from what the movie is, on the whole. My inspiration for finally watching it, on the Henstooth Video Blu-ray, was that Bjo Trimble served as makeup designer in the makeup department for the film. As mentioned in her memoir "On the Good Ship Enterprise" (Telegraphs & Tar Pits #45) and confirmed by IMDb, she also played a role in SUPERMAN: THE OTHER MOVIE, served as costume designer for THE FURTHER ADVENTURES OF MAJOR MARS, and was uncredited as wardrobe mistress for THE INCREDIBLE 2-HEADED TRANSPLANT.

In any event, Trimble's makeup work is on fine display throughout FLESH GORDON, particularly in terms of William Hunt's portrayal of Emperor Wang the Perverted. I'm not entirely sure that it's the case, but it seems that Hunt's Wang wears more and more makeup, increasingly garish, as the movie proceeds. The makeup is notable.

What's even more notable, however, is how strong an homage the movie pays to the serials of yore, including the 13-chapter 1936 "Flash Gordon" starring Buster Crabbe. That is what it should be known for--as a loving tribute to serials--not as a nudie picture. (The producers even edited the movie to avoid an X rating, in the end earning a rating of R.) Given the removal of hardcore pornography, FLESH GORDON should be a midnight movie staple, right up there with THE ROCKYHORROR PICTURE SHOW and EL TOPO. In fact, the movie even utilizes traditional serial wipes, some of them quite elaborate, and the movie predates George Lucas's STAR WARS by three years. In addition to Trimble, the crew included other people noteworthy to sf media fan. Special effects artists included Dave Allen, Rick Baker, Jim Danforth (as Mij Htrofnad), Greg Jein, and Mike Minor. The set design is excellent, as are the models. George Barr designed and illustrated the poster. Cornelius Cole III's animated opening title credits are amazing, reminiscent of the work of Terry Gilliam and Jiri Trnka Studio's FANTASTIC PLANET. And fan and author Tom Reamy worked on properties for the art department. The movie also features stop-motion animation, including a creature called the Great God Porno, which special effects crew members named Nesuahyrrahas tribute to Ray Harryhausen. The other examples of stop-motion animation are also impressive.

In 1975, the movie was nominated for a Hugo Award in the Best Dramatic Presentation category. FLESH GORDON lost out to YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN and ranked among other nominees including PHANTOM OF THE PARADISE, THE QUESTOR TAPES, and ZARDOZ.

The movie is impressively produced, almost overshadowing its script and the acting undertaken by Jason Williams as Flesh himself, Suzanne Fields as Dale Ardor, Joseph Hudgins as Dr. Flexi Jerkoff (best character name!), and Mycle Brandy as Prince Precious. Hudgins and Brandy stand out as the actors to watch most intently, delivering solid performances despite the limitations of the script. Craig T. Nelson's voice for the Great God Porno was added as an afterthought and is delightfully lackadaisical for such an awe-inspiring creature. The movie was safe enough to watch with a friend, but I'm not sure I'd watch it with my wife or recommend it to another couple. Yet here I am. It is Valentine's Day, after all, so I thought I'd share my thoughts.

I read and enjoyed MT VOID #2258-2260. My wife also recently watched BROS, on a return flight from Portugal, and enjoyed it. She said it made her cry, inspiring her to turn to lighter fare: episodes of "Resident Alien" (T&T #49-50). An octopus plays a noteworthy role in that program, which resonates with Evelyn's remarks on Ray Nayler's THE MOUNTAIN IN THE SEA.

Like you, I will not be going to the Worldcon in Chengdu. But I'm looking forward to this weekend's Gallifrey One "Doctor Who" con, and the roleplaying game event OrcCon, at which I'll run a session using FASA's 1985 "Doctor Who" rules. It's not difficult for me not to go to Worldcon--yet. The only one I've attended so far was the 2020 CoNZealand online. I'm still a local confan, but I'm sure that'll change with time.

Putting it on a tight beam. [-hr]

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

My sister-in-law asked me if I ever re-read any of our books. I was going to send her an email, but then I figured why waste it when I could get a column out of it?

Some books I re-read because one of our book groups is discussing it. Others get re-read because I've just seen a movie based on it. But some get re-read just because I want to. And because I'm a compulsive list-maker, I actually have a list of all the books I've read since 1992.

To start with, the list says I've read about 5500 books in the last thirty years, with about 300 of those being re-reads. (It's hard to tell precisely, since I was not always consistent in how I entered author's names, or even titles.) The list is of books, so it doesn't always include short stories. I've certainly re-read many Sherlock Holmes stories, and many of Jorge Luis Borges's, Somerset Maugham's, and Ted Chiang's stories. In books, the ones I've read more than twice include William Shakespeare's CORIOLANUS, Arthur Miller's DEATH OF A SALESMAN, J. R. R. Tolkien's THE HOBBIT, Rudyard Kipling's KIM, and several Raymond Chandler's "Philip Marlowe" books, Jane Austen books, Agatha Christie books. The "leaders of the pack" though, would be China Mieville's THE CITY & THE CITY and Herman Melville's MOBY DICK, both of which I have read at least five times in the last thirty years. (My readings of MOBY DICK include the very close reading I did when writing my "Annotations and Thoughts on Moby Dick", my book-length commentary on it [<http://leepers.us/evelyn/mobydick.htm>].)

I haven't tracked audiobooks, but I have listened to Andy Weir's THE MARTIAN many times (and read the book thrice). Josephine Tey's DAUGHTER OF TIME is another one that I have listened to more times than I can count--Derek Jacobi's voice is irresistible. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

Dogs have families. Cats have staff.
--Anonymous

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