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Mini Reviews, Part 25 (film reviews by Mark R. Leeper and Evelyn C. Leeper):

This is the twenty-fifth batch of mini-reviews, all films of the fantastic:

THE ANGRY BLACK GIRL AND HER MONSTER (2023): THE ANGRY BLACK GIRL AND HER MONSTER starts out narrated by the "angry black girl" of the title. She tells a few of her growing-up experiences, which are familiar as tragic stories we have heard many times before.

Back in 1972 Samuel Z. Arkoff produced a pastiche of Dracula called BLACULA. Similarly, several filmmakers have made films trying to give classic stories a more contemporary setting (e.g., Jack the Ripper, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, and the Phantom of the Opera). Now Bomani J. Story has done this with Mary Shelley's FRANKENSTEIN, setting the new version in an African-American neighborhood. (Although the neighborhood that this takes place in is supposedly controlled by a murderous drug gang, it is surprisingly green and pleasant-looking.)

The story follows the plot of FRANKENSTEIN, with director Story staying closer to the plot of the Shelley novel than either James Whale or Terence Fisher did. Much of the enjoyment of this film derives from seeing where its plot points connect to the same plot in the original. Where the original Frankenstein was fascinated by electricity, Vicaria (the "Angry Black Girl" of the title) is fascinated by

lightning, but both Frankenstein and Vicaria antagonize their teachers. (Vicaria's first name is an homage to the "Victor" of the novel; her last name is never specified, but it is referred to as sounding German .)

Vicaria speculates that if death such as the death she is seeing all around her is a disease, then perhaps it can be cured. She also has a fascination on famous (Black) scientists and their discoveries and inventions.

Once we get to the middle of the film, however, it no longer seems to be using the plot of the Shelley novel. Ultimately, the viewer then must decide what presentation best fits the Shelley. [-mrl/ecl]

Released theatrically 9 June 2023. Rating: +1 (-4 to +4), or 6/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt19896150/reference>

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

DAVE MADE A MAZE (2017): DAVE MADE A MAZE is sort of a modern FORBIDDEN ZONE with the weird music. Dave builds a maze in his living room out of cardboard boxes, but somehow it becomes bigger on the inside than on the outside (is it a TARDIS or just "A Subway Called Moebius"?). It also acquires booby traps, weird perspectives, and strange powers. The film seems oddly similar to SYNECDOCHE in some ways that I can't explain.

Oh, and there's a minotaur. And at the end someone does note the difference between a maze and a labyrinth. [-ecl]

Released theatrically 18 August 2017. Rating: high +2 (-4 to +4), or 7/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4457344/reference>

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

DISENCHANTED (2022): DISENCHANTED is the sequel to 2007 ENCHANTED, with Amy Adams and Patrick Dempsey returning as the leads, but while some of the humor of the dissonance between the two worlds worked in the original, it does not work here. In part, this is because all the good jokes were already taken. The plot is also weak: just take older fairy tale plotting and replace good with bad and vice versa and the script practically writes itself.

(Is it my imagination or does the annoying magic scroll look like the infamous dancing paper clip?) [-mrl/ecl]

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

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1596342/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/disenchanted_2022

NANNY (2022): NANNY is a a film combining heavy drama and horror. It is uniformly well cast and surprisingly strongly affecting. This is a film that could not have been made ten years ago. [-mrl]

Released streaming 28 December 2022. Rating: +2 (-4 to +4) or 7/10

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt10931784/reference>

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

THE MOUNTAIN IN THE SEA by Ray Nayler (copyright 2022, Macmillan Audio, 11 hours and 5 minutes, ASIN: B09Q7GVD92, narrated by Eunice Wong) (audio book review by Joe Karpierz):

Oddly, the thing that I heard about THE MOUNTAIN IN THE SEA by Ray Nayler that drew me to reading (well, listening to) the book was "AND it's got intelligent octopuses in it!" Now, the first thing I thought was "it's octopi, not octopuses", but then I looked it up and saw that both are correct, with octopuses being listed first, then octopi. The next thing I thought was "How odd that a novel with intelligent octopuses in it is so highly regarded by the science fiction community." But the fact that it *was* highly regarded was the tipping point for me picking up the book.

Of course, those intelligent octopuses are only a small part of the story, and not really even the whole story, when you come right down to it. But that's not a surprise, is it?

Those octopuses are the triggering point for the novel, however. It turns out that a species of octopus has been discovered in the Con Dao Archipelago, and Dr. Ha Nguyen, who had been spent her life studying cephalopod intelligence and even wrote a book about it entitled "How Oceans Think" has been offered the chance to go to the Archipelago and study those octopuses. The Archipelago has been cleared out of its inhabitants by the DIANIMA corporation, and all entry and exit to the facility is highly restricted (as we learn later on in the novel, anyone who tries to leave will be killed), so the invitation is highly exclusive, and Ha jumps at the chance.

Ha is one of three, um, entities at the facility. The other two are Evrim, a highly intelligent android that is so much like a human being that international laws have been passed not only outlawing her existence but prohibiting any more androids from being built as well; and Altantssetseg, a female war veteran who is the facilities one and only security officer who manages to keep all intruders at bay and at first appearance doesn't seem quite human because of the armor she wears and the weird translation device she uses.

But as I said earlier, the book is not about intelligent octopuses at all; what it is about is communication, changing societies, the impact of another intelligent species right here on Earth that uses symbols to communicate, and the nature of consciousness. A curious but interesting side story involves an AI-like entity called a ".5". The owner of a .5 can have an emotional relationship with the .5, with the idea being that we don't want to have to worry about the needs of others, just our own needs. So, the .5 is interested in the owner's needs but does not need the owner to take care of it. Ha has a .5, and eventually comes to the realization that it is not really doing her any good, and eventually discards it. The point, as I see it, is that as a society we need to take care of each other, and that kind of relationship by definition is not a one-way street.

There are a couple of other interesting subplots at play here. One involves a hacker named Rustem who specializes in AI minds. He's been hired by a mysterious woman in a mask to break into a complex neural network by a back door and take over Evrim's mind. The other involves a young man named Eiko, who applies for a position at one of the regional headquarters of DIANIMA but ends up being kidnapped and forced to work on a fishing boat controlled by AI. Eventually these two subplots do merge into the main story near the end, and they are a fascinating look into the society and politics that exist outside the Con Dao Archipelago.

I mentioned earlier that the story is about changing societies, but I think it's also about how individuals can change when new experiences are introduced into their lives. I've already talked about Ha's discarding of her .5, and there in change in Evrim (of course--it's a necessary plot point in books like this), but the surprising change is that of Dr. Arnkatla Minervudottir-Chan - one of my all-time favorite character names--the brain behind DIANIMA, whose goal is to create a mind "wiped clean of its limitations".

Ray Nayler is a writer who is new to me, although I have since discovered that he is a writer of short fiction (and I have recently read one of his short pieces). *THE MOUNTAIN IN THE SEA* is his debut novel. Based on the novel and the one short story I've read, it seems that I've found yet another writer that I need to seek out and read more of.

Eunice Wong is also new to me. Her narration of *THE MOUNTAIN IN THE SEA* is outstanding. While this is something of an exaggeration, I would pay money to hear her say "Dr. Arnkatla Minervudottir-Chan". Or maybe it's not an exaggeration--I mean, I did pay money to acquire the audio book. But the story here is that she is a terrific narrator, who adds much to the story. There's that communication theme again. [-jak]

Evelyn notes:

"Octopi" is wrong because it assumes the root is Latin, but it is not--it is Greek. The "correct" plural would be "octopodes". "Octopi" is only "correct" because of common usage. (One can argue that the same is true of many words ending in "is", such as "basis", "axis", and "penis". One usually sees the correct plural--change the "is" to "es"--for the first two, but rarely for the last.) [-ecl]

MOBY-DICK (letter of comment by Fred Lerner):

In response to [Evelyn's review of THE ACT OF READING](#) in the 06/09/23 issue of the MT VOID, Fred Lerner writes:

When my daughter was in high school one of the favorite teachers made her promise not to read *MOBY-DICK* until she was at least twenty-five years old. She's well beyond that now, but has still not read it.

Nor have I. I've never read anything by Melville, and have never been motivated to seek out any of his books. Even a visit to New Bedford and its whaling museum didn't inspire me to look at *MOBY-DICK*. There's no accounting for taste--or for literary blind spots.

But I did see plenty of South-Seas-style tattoos last month, while I was in the Marquesas Islands. [-fl]

Evelyn responds:

Well, chacun à son goût and all that. I have read a lot of Melville, but I'm surprised you haven't read BILLY BUDD or "Bartleby, the Scrivener", which seem to be ubiquitous. I read "The Encantadas" (along with Kurt Vonnegut's GALAPAGOS) when we went to the Galapagos. I highly recommend his novella "Benito Cereno". [-ecl]

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

I just finished an e-book version of THE BEST OF L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP (Phoenix Pick, ISBN 978-1-612-42249-7). Two stories stuck out. One was "The Gnarly Man" which seems like it might be a bit of an inspiration for Jerome Bixby's screenplay for THE MAN FROM EARTH. The other is "Nothing in the Rules", which is all about who can compete in women's sports events. The rest are also worth reading, of course. This edition was an eBook, but both stories are widely available in other collections and anthologies. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

An author is a fool who, not content with boring those
he lives with, insists on boring future generations.
--Charles de Montesquieu

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