

MT VOID 11/10/23 -- Vol. 42, No. 19, Whole Number 2301



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Mini Reviews, Part 9 (film reviews by Mark R. Leeper and Evelyn C. Leeper):

This is the ninth batch of mini-reviews:

BLACKBERRY (2023): BLACKBERRY is a semi-fictional telling of the history of the Blackberry phone, much as THE SOCIAL NETWORK was for Facebook. It has an introduction by Sir Arthur C, Clarke which talks about uses for cell phones that fits right in with what we saw during the pandemic. The main characters are "Mike Lazaridis"--inept, quiet, and easily pushed around, but also the owner of the company (RIM)--and "Douglas Fregin"--too self-assured, too loud, and thinking that he runs RIM. At the start of the film, the staff of RIM uses its only(!) phone line for personal dial-up Internet. "Jim Balsillie" takes over, in an incandescent rage at how everything is being run.

A lot of the plot is somewhat accurate, but although the characters have the same names as the people in real life, they apparently bear little resemblance to those real-life counterparts (hence the quotation marks). It's a fascinating movie, though not quite up the level of THE SOCIAL NETWORK, THE CROOKED E--THE UNSHREDDED TRUTH ABOUT ENRON, or for that matter WALL STREET, but take it all with several grains of salt.

Released theatrically 12 May 2023. Rating: +1 (-4 to +4), or 6/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt21867434/reference>

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

IT'S A WONDERFUL KNIFE (2023): It seems an odd tradition for the film industry to make films with violent murders for the Christmas season, but that's show business. IT'S A WONDERFUL KNIFE has a serial killer wandering the streets killing people on Christmas Eve.

You can tell Angel Falls is a great place, because it's full of gay and interracial relationships, including gay, interracial relationships. (And the first person to die is not African-American.) But there is a nasty real estate developer who wants to ruin it all, with a commercial development called Water's Cove.

All the descriptions of this film seem to latch onto the idea that the "alternate town" is an actual alternate reality (assuming that is not an oxymoron) rather than a dream or vision. I'm not sure that's a major change, especially with the explanation the film eventually gives. Another change is that the main character is much younger than George Bailey (gotta grab the young demographic) and female.

The biggest problem is why, after killing the psycho killer in our world, our main character thinks things would be better if she had never been born. With George Bailey, at least there is some reason for that belief, Yes, I suppose it could be just saying, "I wish I had never been born," but that is drifting back into dream/vision again.

There are nods to IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE: Angel Falls rather than Bedford Falls, a reference to being a Clarence, etc. There are also nods to current political situations. Other than that, it's pretty much your basic slasher film. [-mrl/ecl]

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

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt27619382/reference>

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

THE DOWNLOADED by **Robert J. Sawyer** (copyright 2023, Audible Originals, 5 hours and 39 minutes, ASIN: B0CKTV55X9, performed by Brendan Fraser, Luke Kirby, Vanessa Sears, Colm Feore, Andrew Phung, full cast) (audio book review by Joe Karpierz):

I've been reading Robert J. Sawyer's works since 1995's THE TERMINAL EXPERIMENT, a finalist for the Best Novel Hugo in 1996. That novel didn't win the award that year, but to be fair, it was up against some pretty heavy competition (which is not to say that it wasn't heavy competition to the other finalists). Folks who have read my reviews over the years know that I've enjoyed his work. He's won more awards than I can count, including the Hugo (HOMINIDS), Nebula (THE TERMINAL EXPERIMENT), and John W. Campbell Memorial Award (MINDSCAN), just to name a few (I mean, we could be here all day listing out the awards he's won, including the Aurora, Seiun, and others). While he's never stopped writing, he's been off the radar when it comes to fiction awards (although he's received all sorts of lifetime achievement awards) since 2012. This is a mystery to me, as I feel his writing has gotten better in the last decade. Maybe it's the time he's spending between novels that is giving that result. Whatever the reason, it's a welcome trend.

Which brings me to THE DOWNLOADED, an Audible Original. It's a departure from 2020's THE OPPENHEIMER ALTERNATIVE, but a return to the type of story that Sawyer is known to write. It's a mix of science and technology with religion, with more than a few moral and ethical questions thrown in along the way. It's also compelling, fast paced, and compact. There's no wasted filler here. And the novel is performed (rather than read) by a stellar cast, led by Oscar winner Brendan Fraser.

The year is 2059, and technology exists such that people can be put into cryonic suspension while their minds are still awake within a massive quantum computer. There obviously can be many uses for this technology, and Sawyer explores a couple of different ones, and that exploration makes for some fascinating storytelling. There are two groups of people that undergo this cryonic suspension. One is a group of astronauts that is getting ready to make a one-way interstellar voyage to colonize a far distant planet. The other is a group of convicts who agreed to serve their sentences in this unique prison. In both cases, with the aid of the aforementioned quantum computer, the time they experience within virtual reality is different from what passes in reality. The convict we do follow, Roscoe Koudouljian, is a convicted murderer who will serve his twenty-year sentence in the virtual reality while only a few months pass by in the real world. The astronauts, including Dr. Jurgen Haas, will spend 500 "real" years in cryosleep traveling to the new planet. And yes, quantum entanglement allows the downloading of the astronauts' minds across the vast interstellar distances. After all, the quantum computer resides on the earth--they won't just take it with them.

Of course, as one would expect, something goes terribly, terribly wrong. I mean, that's the way of these things, right?

The story unfolds via a series of interviews conducted by a mysterious entity, whose identity is revealed later in the novel. This is certainly not the first time this technique has been used in literature, and Sawyer uses it effectively and masterfully to extract the backgrounds, motivations, and histories of the characters. Through the series of interviews, we learn how the two very different groups react to the situation they're in. Oh, did I mention that both groups woke up and were downloaded back into their bodies under circumstances they weren't expecting? As in, the astronauts woke up on time but still on earth, and the convicts over-served their sentences by hundreds of years? The two groups have to learn to live and work together in the world in which they find themselves. And oh yeah, there's another catastrophe on the way. Because of course there is. And don't forget that mysterious entity. So yes, there's a lot on their plates.

And yes, as previously stated, Sawyer does deal with many moral, ethical and political questions and situations. One of them is quite new, facilitated by the onset of the cryonic suspension technology, and one is as old as the hills. But asking and addressing these questions is absolutely nothing new in science fiction. Science fiction is nothing if not political, and has always addressed moral and ethical issues. These are the backbone of this story, and what makes it a great story.

I cannot possibly say enough about the production of the novel. This isn't just a narration by a bunch of high powered actors; this is a full scale production with all sorts of audio effects used to immerse the listener into the story. In fact, the novel is recorded using Dolby Atmos, so if your listening device is capable of producing that sound the novel should be listened to that way. Audible has assembled an award-winning cast, and their professionalism shows through in the performance. I've listened to full cast productions in the past, but this is the first time I've listened to one with full audio effects. And while it is short, clocking in at under 6 hours (I see that the print edition, when it is released in May is going to be 180 pages long), it's as long as it needs to be.

Sawyer's work continues to get better as time passes. Both the *OPPENHEIMER ALTERNATIVE* and *THE DOWNLOADED* are his best works in years, and I'm not trying to downplay his other novels. These two are just that good. I highly recommend both, but they each appeal to different audiences. *THE DOWNLOADED* is a terrific science fiction novel, one of the best I've read in 2023. It's the kind of novel I've been wanting to read in a long time, and I sure hope to see more like this one in the future. [-jak]

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

Three years ago, James Davis Nicoll had a column about *THE BEST SCIENCE FICTION STORIES 1949* edited by Everett F. Bleiler and T. E. Dikty--the very first "Year's Best" of science fiction stories (it ran from 1949 to 1954, along with a "Year's Best SF Novels", 1952-1954). Through the years many other editors have taken up the baton: Judith Merril (1956-1968), Lester del Rey (1972-1976), Donald A. Wollheim (1965-1990), Terry Carr (1972-1987), Gardner Dozois (1984-2018), David Hartwell & Kathryn Cramer (1996-2013), Jonathan Strahan (2007-2019), Rich Horton (2006-2021), ... You could even include Isaac Asimov if you want to count his retrospective "Great SF" series (though the choosing was reportedly done by Martin H. Greenberg, and Asimov just wrote the introductions to each story).

My favorite series these days is the one from HarperCollins, as part of their "Best American [xyz]", where "xyz" could be "Science Fiction and Fantasy", "Essays", "Mystery Stories", "Science and Nature Writing", and so on. (There was also a short-lived "European Fiction" series.) The primary editor is John Joseph Adams, but each year has a different co-editor, and what I like is how (at least in the "Science Fiction and Fantasy" series) works are chosen from sources I would never have known about. The stories chosen may not be the "best" (and by whose choice and what metric?), but they are a way for readers to find really good stories that they might not otherwise have seen. (The major drawback, of course, is that all the stories must be American.)

That's what I liked about the Datlow & Windling series of "Best Horror & Fantasy" (though I pretty much read only the Windling fantasy choices)--it wasn't full of familiar stories from familiar sources.

(And there are two types of "hidden gems": stories from science fiction and fantasy sources that do not have a big circulation, and stories from *non*-science fiction and fantasy sources that people who read only/primarily in the field almost definitely missed. (Someone might have noticed a science fiction story in *PLAYBOY*, but what about something from a college literary magazine, or an English-language magazine published in another country?) Clearly even the best editor cannot read everything, but they can certainly do a better job than I can. [-ecl])

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Quote of the Week:

O Lord, help me to be pure, but not yet.
--Saint Augustine

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