

MT VOID 01/19/24 -- Vol. 42, No. 29, Whole Number 2311



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Mini Reviews, Part 17 (film reviews by Mark R. Leeper and Evelyn C. Leeper):

This is the seventeenth batch of mini-reviews, more films of the fantastic.

LEAVE THE WORLD BEHIND (2023): In LEAVE THE WORLD BEHIND Ethan Hawke and Julia Roberts rent a house on Long Island. While on the beach an oil tanker runs aground right in front of them. When they get home the WiFi is out and there's no cell service. Then Mahershala Ali and Myha'la show up, claiming to be the owners, stranded by a blackout in New York City. Things continue to get weirder and it's clear that Ali knows more than he is saying.

LEAVE THE WORLD BEHIND is similar to a "Twilight Zone" episode, but it is original in its approach.

Director Sam Esmail is in love with Dutch angles--and not just Dutch angles but rotating the camera through 360 degrees, often not staying in a single plane. He also uses unsettling sound effects and music by Mac Quayle to create or add tension. The problem is that this is all very obvious to the viewer, who will probably feel they are being manipulated. It's also not clear the explanation (such as it is) makes much sense. [-ecl]

Released theatrically 22 November 2023. Rating: +2 (-4 to +4), or 7/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt12747748/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/leave_the_world_behind_2023

IT LIVES INSIDE (2023): In IT LIVES INSIDE, our main character seems to be hiding some sort of bloody secret. We get very few clues what the film is about, and the viewer sees many apparent unexplained supernatural implications. Several familiar situations tied together by elements of Hindu mysticism. But does it really matter to you if you are being chased by a Hindu demon or a werewolf? I suppose the setting of the Indian-American community would be more interesting to people who are not familiar with it, but in our part of New Jersey, it's not exactly new. [-ecl]

Released theatrically 22 September 2023. Rating: low +1 (-4 to +4), or 5/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt15683734/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/it_lives_inside_2023

THE LAST VOYAGE OF THE DEMETER (2023): THE LAST VOYAGE OF THE DEMETER covers a section of the novel usually glossed over, Dracula's journey (primarily by ship) from Transylvania to Whitby. The make-up models Dracula on Nosferatu rather than on later versions of the Count. (Homage, or just relying on an image in the public domain?) A lot of the movie is filmed in semi-darkness, so it is sometimes difficult to know what is going on. This film has some gratuitous anachronisms (primarily in the addition of a new character) and also breaks some horror film "rules" (again, focusing on a specific new character). Of some interest to Dracula aficionados, but not much to offer a general audience. [-ecl]

Released theatrically 11 August 2023. Rating: 0 (-4 to +4), or 4/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1001520/reference>

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

A BIT OF LUCK: ALTERNATE HISTORIES IN HONOR OF ERIC FLINT edited by **Lisa Mangum** (Publication Date: February 9, 2024, WordFire Press LLC, Print length: 317 pages, ASIN: B0CP6GBSDP) (book review by Joe Karpierz):

Those of you who have been reading my reviews for any length of time know that reviewing anthologies or collections is a challenge for me. I want to review, in detail, every piece of fiction in a book, and that just can't happen. There are reviewers out there who are really good at it, and I do try to emulate them when I can.

Imagine, if you will (with apologies to Rod Serling, I guess), me trying to review an anthology dedicated to the memory and works of an author I've never read in a subgenre that I've not paid much attention to.

Like I said, it's a challenge.

From a personal standpoint, I met Eric Flint several times at conventions. He was always pleasant to talk to, and I discovered along the way that he lived in the same town in which I was born. That particular tidbit led to several minutes of conversation outside of a party one night at one convention or another. And, as I said, I've never read any of his work.

Probably the closest I've come (that I can remember) to reading alternate history is Michael Chabon's Hugo Award winning THE YIDDISH POLICEMEN'S UNION.

So why read this book? The premise--alternate histories where a bit of luck is involved--was interesting to me. Additionally, in order to be included in this volume the authors had to have attended one of the Superstars of Writing Seminars. That implied, to me, that there was going to be a decent level of quality to the stories, and, for the most part, that was true.

As I've said before, not every story in an anthology is going to affect everyone the same way. And not all the stories will be of the same level of quality--however the reader defines quality. This volume is no exception.

Quite possibly my favorite story in the anthology is "G-Gals", by Kendrai Meeks, in large part because of the surprise (to me, anyway) ending. The titular G-Gals of the story are three women who take on jobs for...well, that would be telling...that are a bit unusual and daring. Membership in the G-Gals changes through time, and in the case of this story with this version of the team, they're having to

deal with a former member who got a bit too interested and involved with one of the folks from a prior job that the G-Gals were assigned. It's an excellent, well-written story, and I honestly had absolutely no idea where it was going.

I'm something of a vampire fan (no, not the sparkly ones), but in particular I am enamored of the original DRACULA by Bram Stoker. "A Brother's Oath", by L. Briar, gives us the story of a young Vlad Dracula and his brother. The story is indeed one of brotherly and family love, and something that seems like betrayal but might not be. But what we do get is a narrative of how Vlad (whom we typically call The Impaler) becomes the monster of Stoker's novel. In the end, who was the lucky one? The reader can draw their own conclusions.

Continuing with the theme of the macabre, another favorite story of mine is "Out Of Habit", by Juliet Jones. It's the story of a nun who questions her vows to the sisterhood, not because she doesn't necessarily agree with them, but because she's hunting Jack the Ripper. Yep, you got it, a nun questioning her life choices while attempting to slay one of the most notorious mass murderers of the time. I really enjoyed this one.

An awesome, but particularly short story is "Collateral Loss", by Fulvio Gatti. It's another in a long line of stories dealing with President Kennedy's assassination. While I'm sure there are many stories out there that posit what would happen had Kennedy survived, I don't think there is one quite like this that supposes what the world *loses* if Kennedy lives.

Stace Johnson gives us "Rufus and the Wizard of Wireless" which inventor Rufus T. Owen of Central City Colorado, ends up collaborating with none other than Nikola Tesla on building a powered submersible for the U.S. military. Owens will build the submersible itself, while Tesla will provide the power for it. The odd thing is that the experiment takes place in Colorado, where no one would expect anyone to be building such a device, so far away from any ocean. As there are two parties in the venture, one experiences bad luck, and the other experiences good luck. It's a nicely done story.

I could try to summarize each of the twenty stories, but I'd be here all night writing this review. Instead, I'll highlight a few more. How about a story involving the American Civil War and Baba Yaga. You can read "Kutuzov At Gettysburg", by B. Daniel Blatt. Do you want a wild west story about Billy the Kid? There's "The Notorious Lawman Billy the Kid". How about a super-secret agency that fights magical creatures in the modern day but the whole thing is tied up in the King Arthur legend? Try "The Unnamed", by Gama Ray Martinez. A story about a woman named Sam who finds a way to go back in time to try to save her best friend in high school, and upon succeeding she realizes that she's affected way more than she wanted to (as one does in time travel stories)? Read "This Was Yur Life (Play It Again Sam)", by Mary Pletsch.

Kevin J. Anderson, of Word Fire Press (and famous for a bunch of other books, including the extended Dune Saga with Brian Herbert), the company which published this volume, caps the book off with the terrific "Entropy Ranch", about a secretive group of Christians who have decided to use their ability to see into the past and perform time travel to try to prevent people from experiencing tragic events that they don't deserve, using the reasoning that Christians would use this power for good, to help people.

"A Bit of Luck" is a good collection of stories that doesn't require the reader to know anything about Eric Flint or alternate history. What it does require is a reader who is interested in new and different takes on both fictional and non-fictional events, or even just a reader who wants to read good stories. I've listened to Eric Flint enough to know that he was interested in telling good stories. The stories in this book definitely honor his name in that regard. [-jak]

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

I have twice reviewed *Longbourn* by Jo Baker (in the 03/21/2014 and 03/10/23 issues of the MT VOID), about one of the servants in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. This week it's *The Other Bennet Sister* by Janice Hadlow (Henry Holt, ISBN 978-1-250-12941-3), about Mary, the sister given shortest shrift in Austen's novel. Mary is the plain one, the bookish one, the one who wears spectacles (to the horror of her two younger sisters and Mrs. Bennet). She works at perfecting her piano playing until she realizes that Kitty's playing, while technically inferior, has a greater effect on her than her own very precise efforts. She starts reading to improve herself, only to be told by Mr. Bennet that the authors she has found the closest to her own feelings are trite, shallow, and basically worthless. And so on. Nothing she does pleases her family.

The first part of *The Other Bennet Sister* takes place at the same time as the events of *Pride and Prejudice*. Then there is a section where all four of her sisters are married, and Mary is left alone with her parents at Longbourn. Then Mr. Bennet dies, the entail (remember that?) kicks in, and Mary is shuffled (or shuffles herself) from her sister Elizabeth's home at Pemberley to Jane's home at Netherfield Park to her friend Charlotte's home at Longbourn to her aunt and uncle's home in London. Only at the last does she find a congenial environment.

Hadlow is clearly writing this novel to look at all the variations on why people marry, not just in Austen's time (early 19th century), but even now. Some marry for such a strong love that everyone else is pretty much ignored. Some marry for security and this may or may not work out. And some marriages are happy in themselves and extend their happiness to everyone around them. Everyone has advice for Mary, either about who to marry (and why), or that she should become a governess, or not wear spectacles, or some other unwanted suggestion. Needless to say, they all disagree with each other.

There is, of course, a romance for Mary, obstacles to this romance, men who may not be what they seem, and so on. The ending is a bit rushed, and I'm not sure I believe the resolution of the Caroline Bingley subplot. But this definitely delves deeper into the meaning of marriage than Austen did, and shows how what might have seemed good advice in PRIDE AND PREJUDICE may have turned out less than ideal, while keeping the style of Austen's writing. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

Where a calculator on the Eniac is equipped with
18,000 vacuum tubes and weighs 30 tons, computers
in the future may have only 1,000 vacuum tubes and
perhaps weigh 1-1/2 tons.
-- Popular Mechanics [March, 1949]

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