



Table of Contents

[OCTOBER SKY](#) (film review by Mark R. Leeper)
[SYSTEM COLLAPSE by Martha Wells](#) (audio book review by Joe Karpierz)
[A BRIEF HISTORY OF EARTH by Andrew H. Knoll](#) (book review by Gregory Frederick)
[Roald Dahl](#) (letter of comment by Keith F. Lynch)
[This Week's Reading](#) (THE LAST OF THE LEGIONS AND OTHER STORIES) (book comments by Evelyn C. Leeper)
[Quote of the Week](#)

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OCTOBER SKY (film review by Mark R. Leeper):

[The 25th anniversary of OCTOBER SKY was February 19. We missed that because of the Turner Classic Movie listings, but here is Mark's review from 1999.]

Capsule: In Coalwood, West Virginia, 1957 a boy uses model rocketry to escape the fate of a career digging coal. With the inspiration of one high school teacher and the drive to follow his curiosity and vision, he resists all the pressures of the town, and especially his own father, to work for a dying mining company. While parts of the story seem contrived, this is a true story. It is based on a book by the main character is riveting. Rating: 8 (0 to 10), low +3 (-4 to +4)

It is October 1957 in Coalwood, West Virginia and there are virtually two different worlds--worlds that never touch each other. One world is the town's coal mine. The Olga Mining Company runs that and it is the town. Most boys know from an early age that when they get old enough they will go down in the mine to work. The other world is what they read about in the papers. It is where amazingly the Soviets just put a satellite called Sputnik in orbit around the whole planet. And for nearly the first time the two worlds touch. There right over Coalwood is a light shooting across the sky. Homer Hickam, Jr. (played by Jake Gyllenhaal) sees the satellite go overhead, and nothing will ever be the same for him. There overhead is a piece of the outer world, put there by a rocket. Homer gets some of his buddies together with the school nerd and they decide that they are going to build their own rockets.

This is the story of the four boys who dedicate themselves to building and launching their own rockets. Naming the rockets Auks after flightless birds they soon find that launching rockets not only can be the ticket to get them out of town, it really has to get them out of town. The town is owned by Olga and they are not allowed to fly rockets from Olga's property. Instead they find a slate hilltop eight miles from town and set it up as their launching base. They begin to get the materials and money they need by any means, fair or foul. This includes stealing spikes from abandoned railroad tracks and selling them. But there is tremendous resistance in the town to doing anything as strange as building rockets and they come into conflict with the school, with the police, but most of all Homer Jr. comes in conflict with his father, Homer Sr., superintendent of the Olga mine. [Note: to avoid confusion, Homer Sr.'s name is changed to John in the screenplay.]

"John" is played by Chris Cooper in an ironic piece of casting. Cooper is most familiar for his role as the coal mine union organizer in MATEWAN. In this film he is cursing that same union. But the conflict between Homer and his father forms the dramatic core of the film. It is in the love-hate relationship between Homer and his father that the film gets its strongest resonance. Homer's relationship with an inspiring teacher, Miss Riley (Laura Dern), while also strong, falls into more familiar territory.

OCTOBER SKY is directed by Joe Johnston who directed THE ROCKETEER and JUMANJI. The screenplay is by Louis Colick, based on the book ROCKET BOYS by Homer Hickam, Jr. Hickam claims to be pleased with the adaptation of his book and even points out that the two titles are anagrams. For acting credit, the honors go mostly to Chris Cooper as Homer's father. Laura Dern and Jake Gyllenhaal are just a little too good-looking for their roles as films of the original people demonstrate at the end the film. However, Coalwood, filmed in a Tennessee coal town really does capture the look of West Virginia in the 1950s. [I say this as someone lived in West Virginia for a while in the 1950s. Okay, I was very young, but I still remember the look of coal country.]

OCTOBER SKY is a powerful look at a young man's drives to become a scientist. It is also a moving portrait of a father-son relationship. I rate the film a low +3 on the -4 to +4 scale and an 8 on the 0 to 10 scale.

MINOR SPOILER: There are some odd touches that should have been cleared up in the script with some explanation. Why did the boys never look at the object the police were holding until *after* they proved it was not theirs? For that matter why did the police never notice that the object they were holding was professionally built and not made by amateurs. Also were both younger and older brother high school seniors in the same year, as they seemed to be? This seems possible, but unlikely. [-mrl]

SYSTEM COLLAPSE by Martha Wells (copyright 2023, Recorded Books, 6 hours and 36 minutes, ASIN: B0C5N8LL2P, narrated by Kevin R. Free) (audio book review by Joe Karpierz):

I have seriously mixed feelings about the "Murderbot Diaries" series by Martha Wells, which has now reached its seventh installment with SYSTEM COLLAPSE. Murderbot is extremely popular, and I can see why. From the very beginning, readers loved SecUnit's quirky, snarky personality. Many others identified with SecUnit because of its neurodivergent behaviors. Others loved the stories themselves, which are well written with snappy dialogue and fast moving stories which are well plotted. From one book to the next, the cast of characters is familiar, and reading a Murderbot book is like cozying up with your cat on a cold winter's night--warm and comforting. All of those things are true of SYSTEM COLLAPSE. If you sense a "but" coming on, you're right. But I'll get there.

The events of SYSTEM COLLAPSE take place immediately after those of NETWORK EFFECT, which was actually not the last Murderbot book that was published (that book would be 2021's FUGITIVE TELEMETRY, for those of you keeping score at home). The nefarious Barish-Estranza corporation has sent ships to rescue the population of a colony planet that had been contaminated by an alien virus.

Herein lies my major complaint with SYSTEM COLLAPSE. Wells makes no attempt to summarize what has gone before, no attempt to help the reader with a "Previously, in The Murderbot Diaries". For those readers who haven't obsessively read all the Murderbot books multiple times, or at least NETWORK EFFECT in preparation for SYSTEM COLLAPSE--because of time limitations or all the other good books out there waiting to be read--it's been in the neighborhood of three years since NETWORK EFFECT was published and many folks can't remember that far back. I was pretty much lost for a good chunk of the beginning of the book until I went back and read a summary of NETWORK EFFECT (which was weird, because you'd think I'd have gone back and read my review of that book. Which I still haven't done.).

In any event, Murderbot and the rest of the cast of characters are heading back to the planet to attempt to rescue the colonists from becoming slaves for the greedy Barish-Estranza corporation. While all that is going on, Murderbot is having some mental health issues, not the least of which take the form of redacted memories that are getting in the way of SecUnit doing its job efficiently. Since the story is told in the first person, we can follow along with SecUnit as its frustration mounts every time a memory is redacted.

So, we have a fairly standard story of a group of folks trying to rescue another group of folks from the clutches of an evil corporation, complete with snappy dialogue, snarky humor, and a main character who has trouble doing routine things. Oh yes, that character still loves watching media at inappropriate times (yes, Sanctuary Moon is still the favorite, but when the rescue team discovers where the colonists are holed up they ALSO discover ancient media that SecUnit has never seen before). Basically, this story contains everything that everyone has loved about Murderbot since the series began with ALL SYSTEMS RED. Is SecUnit growing and changing, learning things about itself as the novel progresses, as a result of discovering why all that stuff was redacted? Absolutely. But it's still a very traditional Murderbot story.

And there's the problem I have with the Murderbot Diaries. It's getting stale. It's mostly more of the same. I understand that many readers like characters and situations they can come back to time and again. That's perfectly okay--for those readers. I'm on the other side of this, which means I have an unpopular opinion. Every time I hear that another Murderbot book is coming out, I groan. Sure, I don't have to read them--unless I want to be unprepared for the current year's Hugo list of nominees--and I am a completist of sorts. The Diaries were supposed to end after six books, and now we know we're going to have nine. I'm not saying these are bad, poorly written stories. They're not. They are well written and are entertaining. But I'd like to see Wells branch out into other science fiction stories. I think it's time for her to try something else, time to move on. [-jak]

A BRIEF HISTORY OF EARTH by Andrew H. Knoll (book review by Gregory Frederick):

Andrew Knoll's A BRIEF HISTORY OF EARTH is a masterful exploration of our planet's incredible journey through 8 billion years of geological and biological evolution. From the formation of Earth to the emergence of complex life forms, Knoll takes readers on a captivating journey, blending scientific rigor with accessible prose to unravel the mysteries of our planet's past.

One of the most striking aspects of Knoll's work is his ability to distill complex scientific concepts into easily understandable narratives. He seamlessly weaves together geology, paleontology, chemistry, and biology to provide a comprehensive overview of Earth's history. Whether discussing the formation of the first continents, the rise of photosynthetic organisms, or the mass extinctions that have shaped life on our planet, Knoll's writing is both informative and engaging.

What sets A BRIEF HISTORY OF EARTH apart is Knoll's talent for storytelling. He brings to life the key events and transformations that have occurred over billions of years, painting a vivid picture of our planet's dynamic history. For example, proving how far back life started, sedimentary rocks that are 3.3-3.5 billion years old in Africa can contain the biological signatures of life. Knoll addresses questions surrounding the origin of life, and the evolution of multicellular organisms. Some scientists with the RNA origin-of-life view think that an early RNA (or RNA-like) molecule got tucked into a spontaneously formed lipid sphere thereby forming a primitive cell.

Moreover, Knoll does not shy away from tackling complex and sometimes controversial topics, including the impact of human activity on the planet with nuance and clarity. The increase of global temperatures is an example of human impact on our planet. Before 1940 global temperatures were below the twentieth century average but since 1978 they are consistently above that average and are also increasing. By presenting the latest scientific evidence and theories, Knoll encourages readers to think critically about our place in the natural world.

Throughout the book, Knoll's passion for his subject shines through. His enthusiasm is infectious, making even the most esoteric scientific concepts accessible and engaging. Whether you're a seasoned scientist or simply curious about the world around you, A BRIEF HISTORY OF EARTH offers something for everyone.

In conclusion, Andrew Knoll's A BRIEF HISTORY OF EARTH is a captivating journey through time that will leave readers with a deeper appreciation for the incredible story of our planet. Combining impeccable scholarship with compelling storytelling, Knoll has crafted a book that is both informative and inspiring. It is a must-read for anyone interested in the history of Earth and the wonders of the natural world. [-gf]

Roald Dahl (letter of comment by Keith F. Lynch):

In response to [Gary McGath's comments on Roald Dahl](#) in the 02/16/24 issue of the MT VOID, Keith F. Lynch writes:

[Gary McGath wrote.] "On another occasion [Roald Dahl] said, 'There is a trait in the Jewish character that does provoke animosity. ... I'm not saying people shouldn't read his books; it's no longer possible for him to benefit from their sales. But I find it bizarre that people give him a pass so easily while spewing hatred on someone who deviates from the orthodoxy on trans people.'" [-gmg]

Careful, or you'll win a (mandatory) free vacation at a DEI re-education camp. The central orthodoxy of DEI is that every person consists entirely of the intersection of every group they are a member of, and that groups can be cleanly divided into oppressor and oppressed. Since Palestinians are oppressed, that necessarily means Jews are oppressors, hence that anti-semitism is virtuous. [-kfl]

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

THE LAST OF THE LEGIONS AND OTHER STORIES by Arthur Conan Doyle (Project Gutenberg, no ISBN) is the sort of thing Doyle expected to be remembered for.

It wasn't.

I actually like this book, and recommend it, but one has to observe that it has not achieved the fame of Doyle's "Sherlock Holmes" stories, or of his "Professor Challenger" novels. His historical novels such as MICAH CLARKE or THE WHITE COMPANY are read somewhat, but almost entirely by readers familiar with Holmes and Challenger, and curious to see what else Doyle wrote. (Does anyone read Mary Shelley's THE LAST MAN who has not read already read FRANKENSTEIN?)

Which is a pity, because as stories of the ancient world, they are quite atmospheric. "The Last of the Legions" is about the departure of the last Romans from Britain in 410. "The Last Galley" tells of the return of the last Carthaginian galley to Carthage after its defeat in the Third Punic War in 146 B.C.E. In "The Coming of the Huns" a hermit on the eastern outskirts of the Roman Empire first sees the Huns come over the horizon. A shepherd unknowingly competes with the Emperor Nero in a singing contest in "The Contest" in 66 C.E. "Giant Maximin" is the story of one of the least likely emperors of Rome, not surprisingly during the Crisis of the Third Century. "The Red Star" is a "first encounter" story; more would be a spoiler. "The Home-Coming" is based on an account (considered unreliable) in Procopius's SECRET HISTORY. "A Point of Contact" is what *is* called a secret history, about an imagined meeting between two well-known ancient figures. The other stories are mostly not set in ancient times, or are more atmosphere than event.

For those interested in ancient Rome (and according to a recent meme, that includes pretty much all men and probably a lot of women), these provide a more poetic look at how various events may have seemed to the participants and observers.

(I am reminded of the observation--I'm pretty sure by Stephen Baxter--that when the Romans left Britain to support troops in Gaul and Italy, the Britons did not realize they were leaving permanently, nor did they think, "This is the start of England.") [-ecj]

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Quote of the Week:

We have overcome the notion that mathematical truths have an existence independent and apart from our own minds. It is even strange to us that such a notion could ever have existed.

--James Newman

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