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**The Great Courses: "A Historian Goes to the Movies: Ancient Rome" (Part 1: The Beginnings)** (comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

I recently discovered "A Historian Goes to the Movies: Ancient Rome" from The Great Courses, and in spite of the fact that Hoopla makes me use one of my limited number of monthly check-outs for each half-hour lecture, there was no question of whether we would watch it. (Actually, we also have Mark's check-outs as well.)

Professor Aldrete did not cover older films such as the 1926 BEN-HUR or the 1934 CLEOPATRA, but chose to begin with the 1951 QUO VADIS, the start of the modern age of "sword-and-sandal" movies.

QUO VADIS (1951):

Professor Aldrete's description of Nero's egotism, narcissism, and insistence on always being declared the winner (even when he fell out of his chariot and never finished the race!) sounds so much like a recent President that it is scary.

Apparently this film was so popular that one Hollywood notable applied the term "blockbuster", naming it after a particular large weapon used in World War II. This was the first use of the term as applied to films, and there's a certain irony to having an extremely successful film named for a weapon, as "blockbuster" and "bomb" are complete opposites in Hollywood.

This film also began the trend of marketing "stuff" to go along with the movie. There were probably no dolls or lunchboxes, but there were "Quo Vadis boxer shorts".

Since this was the first lecture, Aldrete covers more general topics as well, such as the use of accents to serve the same purpose as the black and white hats supposedly did in Westerns. British accents indicate aristocratic pagan Romans (usually villains), while American accents indicate "salt-of-the-earth", freedom-loving Christians.

#### BEN-HUR (1959):

Other than re-iterating the use of accents to code people, Aldrete spent most of his time focusing on the naval battle and the chariot race. Of the naval battle, Aldrete says that General Lew Wallace, author of the book BEN-HUR, was the first person to people galleys with slaves. In actual fact, the oarsmen of Roman galleys, and indeed all ancient galleys, were freemen. It wasn't until the Renaissance that governments used slaves in galleys.

The chariot race was also wrong in many aspects. Roman chariot races had twelve competitors, not nine, and they were divided into four teams (not representing geographical areas), each of which worked in coordination. They also did only seven laps, not nine, and no one put blades on their wheels. (They were, however, used on battle chariots.) The chariots in the movie were heavier than racing chariots, and there were other minor differences as well. (Frankly, I think the chariot race in the 1926 BEN-HUR is much more exciting.)

#### SPARTACUS (1960):

Aldrete points out this is an atypical Roman epic: there is only one gladiatorial bout (which the hero loses), and only one big battle (which the hero also loses). (The real Spartacus actually won many battles, but none are shown here.)

Aldrete covered the background of the film, which had four writers and was all tangled up in the issues of the blacklist, as well as as in issues of politics, gender, and race.

The film was based on actual events, but not surprisingly, had inaccuracies. The real Spartacus was not born a slave, but was born free and fought as a paid auxiliary, but then deserted and was sentenced to slavery. His wife was a Thracian, not a Briton and was also a prophethess.

SPARTACUS continues the tradition of having English actors as the upper class characters, and Americans as the lower-class or slaves.

Another inaccuracy is that Spartacus did not "dream of the end of slavery" (as the prologue claims) and was not a freedom fighter/abolitionist but concentrated basically on freedom for himself and his small circle of friends. And far from beginning the process of the abolition of slavery in Rome (or the fall of Rome, for that matter), the conflict with Spartacus was the last of the Servile Wars, and there was never another major challenge to slavery.

The depiction of the gladiatorial school is mostly plausible, according to Aldrete, though gladiators were not branded, not was there a significant hair curl. What is accurate is the pairing of gladiators with different weapons and fighting styles, rather than the melees usually shown in films about Rome.

As is common in Hollywood epics, the elite Roman soldiers are shown wearing leather cuirasses rather than the metal armor they did wear, and the shields are oddly held horizontally rather than vertically. The troop formations are not accurate (they come from a much earlier period), and the Romans abandon their formations when they engage the enemy (which is not how Romans fought--the whole point was to maintain discipline). And no one used flaming logs.

In real life, Spartacus did not ride into battle; he killed his horse to show solidarity with his army (which had no horses), and died in battle. (So there was no fight between him and the totally fictitious Tony Curtis character, nor was he crucified.)

One stylistic touch is that the slave army is seen in close-up, while the Romans are shown from a distance, causing the audience to identify with the slaves.

As for gender, Varinia's sexuality in displaying herself while swimming was shocking at the time, not to mention that she was clearly more experienced than Spartacus, yet she is portrayed as a good, even virtuous, woman. And there is also the infamous "oysters and snails" sequence revealing Crassus's bisexuality.

And Draba is portrayed much more favorably and respectfully than Blacks were in films of the time, especially ancient Africans.

[-ecl]

**"In the Shadow of the Ship" by Alette de Bodard** (copyright 2024, Subterranean Press, \$40 hardcover, 96pp, ISBN: 9781645241478) (book review by Joe Karpierz):

"In the Shadow of the Ship" is the latest story in Alette de Bodard's Xuya universe. As with all the stories in the Xuya universe, one of the central characters is a mindship, in this case the The Nightjar, Thirsting For Water. Our human protagonist, Khuyen, ran away from Nightjar when she was sixteen to join the civil service as a magistrate, trying to right the wrongs of the vast war that has been taking place. Khuyen left Nightjar because of unspeakable things that she couldn't explain. She left behind her friends, family, and the ship. Now she is coming back to Nightjar for her grandmother's funeral, and she must face all those she has abandoned as well as what Nightjar has been doing all these years.

Nightjar has been badly damaged, and has been doing what it deems necessary to keep itself alive and functioning. It has been demanding children as Tribute, and those children disappear. The Tributes have been continuing all the years that Khuyen has been gone. Now Khuyen's cousin Ahn has been sent as Tribute, and Khuyen is on a mission to rescue her. She is aided by a mysterious woman who seems to have some connection to Nightjar and to whom Khuyen feels a strange attraction to. Together they make a perilous journey deep into Nightjar as they attempt a rescue while discovering things about each other and Nightjar itself.

"In the Shadow of the Ship" is a novella that packs a lot of story into its shorter length. While the reason for Khuyen's trip to Nightjar is to attend to her grandmother's funeral, that event is just the way de Bodard is once again telling a story of family and betrayal, and the expectations that the elder generation has for its children. Any parent can relate to the disappointment they experience when their child(ren) don't follow a path that the parent thinks is logical and best for the child(ren) and the family. de Bodard raises those familiar expectations a notch here, as Khuyen's mother is continually laying on the guilt, letting Khuyen know that she has not only betrayed and let down her family, but let down Nightjar as well. Indeed, Khuyen's attempt to locate Ahn can be seen as a way of trying to make amends for her abandoning her family. The theme of family runs even deeper, as we discover the secret of the mysterious woman - named Sunflower - and her relationship to Nightjar. Eventually Khuyen must come to grips with who she was and who she is and what she wants to do going forward.

I've always enjoyed de Bodard's Xuya universe stories, and this one is no exception. It is complex and thought provoking, with characters that are well drawn out and interesting and a story that is both emotional and horrific. I'd recommend it to fans of de Bodard and the Xuya universe, as well as folks just looking for a great read. It may not be the best jumping in point for the Xuya stories, but I think it stands well enough on its own that the reader won't be lost. [-jak]

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

THE MAGICIAN by W. Somerset Maugham (Penguin, ISBN 978-0-143-10489-6; also Project Gutenberg) is an early Maugham novel, and probably his only fantasy novel. It's a novel of the occult, which was so popular at the time. Arthur Burdon loves Margaret Dauncey, but at some point Burdon does something to anger Oliver Haddo, a self-proclaimed magician (probably modeled after Aleister Crowley), and in revenge, Haddo uses either hypnotism or occult methods to steal Margaret, and then use her to exact a terrible revenge on Burdon. (I suppose this is a bit of a spoiler, but seriously, is this not obvious early on?)

This book certainly has its interesting points, but all things considered, I have to say that I am glad Maugham switched to writing that was more focused on people and their reactions in realistic situations.

Maugham's satiric works may drift away from realism--or maybe they hit the nail on the head. Consider the opening paragraph of "Cupid and the Vicar of Swale":

"Swale is a place of many advantages. It is strikingly picturesque and eminently respectable; the people who live in it excite the admiration of the world in general, not only by their affluence, but by their gentility also, and in these degenerate days the one does not always accompany the other. They inhabit mansions overgrown with creepers, and they all keep a carriage. Here and there a few poor people live in artistic cottages for the special conveniences of the young ladies, who paint in water-colours. But the poor people, even, are of the nicest class, the class that looks so pleasant in Academy pictures. Alas! it is a type that is fast disappearing in England. Now the labourer is an independent creature with no feelings of gratitude; he does not touch his hat to the parson, and his wife drops no curtsy to the squire; he is full of new-fangled Radical notions, and neither looks nice in pictures nor in reality. He has become distinctly vulgar. But Swale is still different, and long may it keep free from the corruption of external influence! As I said, the cottages are delightful, with little leaded windows admitting neither light nor air--but that is a detail; they are most pleasing to the fair sketcher; honeysuckle and roses climb about the doorway, many of the roofs are thatched, and the whole appearance is exquisitely dilapidated."

Wonderful! This, along with sixteen other stories, are in SEVENTEEN LOST STORIES. This has the six stories from ORIENTATIONS (which I reviewed a few weeks ago) as well as eleven others written between 1900 and 1908. The eleven are:

- Lady Habart (1900)
- Cupid and the Vicar of Swale (1900)
- Pro Patria (1903)
- A Point of Law (1903)
- An Irish Gentleman (1904)
- A Marriage of Convenience (1906)
- Flirtation (1906)
- The Fortunate Painter (1906)
- Good Manners (1907)
- Cousin Amy (1908)
- The Happy Couple (1908)

("A Marriage of Convenience" was re-written as part of THE GENTLEMAN IN THE PARLOR. "Cousin Amy" was re-written as "The Luncheon". "The Happy Couple" was re-written and re-published under the same name.)

All are worth reading (although "Cousin Amy" can be skipped if you have read "The Luncheon"). [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

A lawyer's dream of heaven: every man reclaimed his property at the resurrection, and each tried to recover it from all his forefathers.

--Samuel Butler

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