



SPARTACUS 41

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So this is our guy: Joe Biden, a hyper-experienced public servant, 36 years a U.S. Senator, eight years Vice-President of the United States. As a kid, he overcame a stutter; in middle age, he lost his first wife and a daughter to a car wreck and a son to glioblastoma. He's an old man now, 78, whose graces are those of another era; he's run into controversy over new ideas and new perspectives; he's made mistakes, missteps. But on him rests the hope that this country can haul itself out of the worst moral and political hole of the last half of its lifetime. On him, but mostly on us, and our always fragile faith in our countrymen. As usual, it all depends on us.

Biden reminds me of Eisenhower, an able grandfatherly figure whose relaxed cheer provides comfort and serenity. After the nightmare of the last 4 years, especially the beginning of 2020, we could use that. Also, his willingness to consider and adopt progressive ideas is a hopeful signal that America wouldn't be a stagnant adventure under his administration. The country would calm down, heal, regain its footing, and still progress.

And the danger we now live under, the constant threat of further irreparable harm at the hands of a crackpot, would be erased.

Granted, Biden isn't a charismatic messiah. Fine with me: you want thrills, ride a roller coaster. But here, now, he's *our guy*, and we need him. VOTE, damn it, give him his chance and America its chance.



My Facebook post of July 6, 2020:

Okay, that's decided. Trip to Europe continued to 2021. We now hope to piggyback the jaunt to the D.C. Worldcon, fly to Edinburgh from Washington, train to London, excursions to Bletchley Park and Stonehenge, over to Paris and Normandy, back to Dover, home from Heathrow. All beginning at the end of August, 2021. A 20th anniversary celebration. *whew* We're both relieved.

We are indeed. No one knows if the human race will still be around in 12 months, if the embargo on Americans in civilized countries will still be in effect, if metabolism will still be part of my daily routine: it all depends on COVID-19 and whether America has the wit to fight it effectively. But this change – forced by the virus – has several immediate beneficial effects. For now, the stress is off. Rosy and I have both worried about flying on planes packed with hacking, coughing, infectious Trumpys. Neither of us wanted to go on a three-week journey masked. And there was, of course, the pressure of time. The pressure is off – and now we get to couple our trip to one we want almost as desperately – a Worldcon.

Nothing is sure yet about DisCon III, of course, but a year's wait is a year's hope. Hopefully August, 2021 will see an end to the coronavirus panic, a vaccine or a significant slacking, advanced prevention techniques, and a decent American government in place. And we'll have time to deal with finances and other matters here.

It will happen. I'm not leaving this planet until I face *Mona Lisa*, stroll through Stonehenge and see Rosy ooh and ahh at Versailles.



Sparked no doubt by the beginning of the Space Age in the late fifties, my generation was comet-happy. We Boomers grew up in the fifties, dreaming of a glory to come: *Halley's Comet*. My grandfather, Guy Lillian Sr., told me about its visit in 1910, when it dominated the skies and people feared its tail would poison our atmosphere. There was talk that the King of England died due to the ancient curse, that the coming of a comet presaged a monarch's fall, and Mark Twain, famously, came into the world on its previous visit, and left us when Halley flew by in 1910.

We all looked forward eagerly to 1986, when the metronomic comet would, sure as clockwork, return. In late 1974 I joined a huge crowd atop the Empire State Building searching for *Comet Kohoutek*, making its first trip around the sun and promoted to be the Comet of the Century.

While crammed into the observation floor like a jelly bean in a jar, I talked with the fine *New Yorker* writer Harold S.F. Cooper, Jr., who jotted down a couple of GHLIII *bon mots* for an article on the event – which, like Kahoutek, never appeared.

Well, there was still Halley. It did return. In 1986, though, it didn't come close to Earth. If you knew where to look, you could see the thing – I did – but it was but a smudge in the sky, barely visible through backyard telescopes. Ten years later, we hoped *Comet Hyakutake* would compensate us for our disappointments, which were beginning to mount up. Wikipedia says that the comet put on a good show, but a brief one. *I* didn't see it.

But then came salvation. Then came *Hale-Bopp*.

1997's Hale-Bopp truly was the Comet of the Century, or at least the Century since 1910. A behemoth by comet standards – ~60 kilometers in diameter (that's 37.282271534 miles to us stupid Americans) – it shone in our skies for 18 months, a record ... and some of that in daylight. Light pollution from cities had less effect than usual; I could see it easily from the streets of New Orleans. The one time I observed it through a telescope, it resembled a brilliant dot radiating glowing tendrils. Though Marshall Applegate's extremely loony Heaven's Gate cult chose its passage to commit mass suicide, Hale-Bopp was properly looked upon as a glorious event. The comet won't return to our skies until 4385, give or take a couple of years, and we all look forward to it.

Was I satisfied that I had at last seen our great comet? Not a chance. My thirst for cosmic glory was only whetted. I wanted *more*. So when, in future years, I heard of more ice balls raining in from the Oort Cloud, I'd scan the skies in anticipation. I well remember doing so from the side of the road in Shreveport, Louisiana. Did I see anything? *Lots of clouds and a few birds.*

So here comes *NEOWISE*. Facebook is rife with photos of another glorious celestial event. The net holds detailed guides of where it may be found in our July skies. I went to the beach one early morning to get the best view. A single cloud formed a message in its place: UP YOURS. B-b-but what about those beauteous pictures? 19-second exposures, I'm told: it won't look like that in the sky.



I decided I'd just do what we do when a launch is imminent, and look from our backyard. Thrice I rose before sunrise, and once, bedeviled by insomnia, simply stayed up all night. I saw stars and planets and a meteor flare and dissolve, and once heard a huge creature – either a manatee or a bull buffalo; I couldn't tell; -- splash and snorfler joyously and loudly in our canal. No comet. If the guides on the web were correct, I was looking right at it ... and with binoculars! Yet there was nothing!

I resolved to change my tactics and look for the comet at sunset. At least I'd get some sleep. The comet was supposed to appear just below the Big Dipper, which leaps out of the zenith at night. I anticipated an easy find. We have a snowbird neighbor who built a McMansion on the wide river they call Sykes Creek. I walked up to his driveway and watched the familiar constellation assert itself from the twilight blue. I waited and waited, stoically ignoring the gnats and skeeters that strafed my ears, and ran my lenses again and again over the area "below" Ursa Major. Stars emerged I couldn't make out with the naked eye. And several suspicious *smudges* ...

I finally surrendered to the night. *You won't beat me, NEOWISE*, I swore to the cosmos, and vowed to return.

That was days ago. I still haven't seen it. I may have to wait 6,766 years – till it returns.



My Hugo ballot is in, and it's pitiful, which is my own fault; CoNZealand provided a link to a nominees' reading list and samples of most everyone's work I didn't take advantage. My votes are therefore puny, and I may have missed some gems. I did not miss the opportunity to vote Jennifer Ng's Campbell Acceptance Speech below No Award in its category: a graceless and ugly slur. Easier to vote in the Retro-Hugo Awards: "Killdozer!", "The Children's Hour", *Le Zombie*, *Curse of the Cat People*, Burroughs, C.L. Moore, Leigh Brackett – who can resist casting such classics high?

The fan nominations for the contemporary awards were dominated by unfamiliar names, but as John Hertz pointed out in conversation, that is *our* fault. *Fans of my generation don't nominate anymore*. I always try to nominate, but if I haven't been asked to consider a candidate by other fans in years – decades! Enough. Let's try to "roll some logs," as Schuyler Miller once put it. Let me see some recommendations for '21! Here's one from me: *Glorious* by Greg Benford and Larry Niven. It's a good contribution to a good series and as you know, Benford has never won a Hugo. Disgraceful lapse.



Reading and viewing are how we survive during quarantine, and here are a few items of print and pixel diverting my brain of late.

I am, of course, starved for movies – I can't wait to see *Shirley* and *Da 5 Bloods* and *The Quiet Place II* – but I have taken in *Greyhound*, a Tom Hanks movie on cable TV. We're distracted at the front by a pointless romantic appearance by the incandescent Elisabeth Shue, otherwise it's a sea drama as taut as a tow cable. Adapted from a C.S. Forester novel, *The Good Shepherd*, it deals with a naval convoy's crossing of the deadliest part of the Atlantic, U-Boats on the prowl. Hanks captains a destroyer escort, code-named *Greyhound*, charged with fighting off Doenitz' wolfpack, and the pressure and the action and the fury *never stop*. Good FX, superb acting (Hanks for once isn't playing Tom Hanks; his character has edges), and a profound sense that we Boomers *really missed something* when we missed World War II. Plus another profound feeling: *Thank God*. Terrific.

Before the Fall (Noah Hawley) and *Blue Heaven* (C.J. Box) are Edgar winners from recent years, and *excellent* reads. These are literate, well-paced, character-driven stories, not just genre novels but *novels*. I applaud their awards. "Literate, well-paced, character-driven" ... so seldom does SF, where *ideas* are prime, attain these virtues. That's a cue, by the way: discuss. I'd thought of Box as a supermarket-shelf hack; consider this a grovel in apology and a pledge to seek more of his work.

Better than Us is a Russian SF series on Netflix, so very like U.K.'s *Humans* in background that we've wondered if they could inhabit the same universe. It isn't bad! The story moves slowly – it's Russian, after all – but is engrossing, and no, there is no political cant. (It might be a consequence of the translation, but American references abound: one character reads 1984 in English, and they even call space travelers *astro-* instead of *cosmonauts*.) The lead actress, playing an advanced robot, is both beautiful and effective. (Her biggest challenge in the role, she says: not blinking.) It's a 16-part mini-series, so be patient, but it's a good SF meller.

Like many of you, I suspect, I have a towering TBR stack, rich with Tim Powers and Barry Longyear, Edgar winners, Hugo nominees, an intriguing gamer novel, *88 Names* ... and

anti-Trump volumes, John Bolton's *The Room where It All Happened* and Mary Trump's *Too Much is Not Enough*. Plus a couple of walls full of John Sandford novels, courtesy of my father-in-law Joe Green, a *hewge* fan.



I value John Hertz's advice as much as anyone's in fandom, and while discussing WOOF the other night, he mentioned a theory he'd read in oppo to Surgeon's 90% law. This axiom was far more positive. *80% of the bad stuff in life comes from 20% of the people.* (It's far more complex than that, at least if I have it right: the **Pareto Principle**, which states that 80 percent of the effects tend to come from 20 percent of the causes, no matter what the topic.) That philosophy, John said, seemed to be what I followed in *The Zine Dump*, where I always seek for something affirmative to say, and after three-and-a-large-fraction years of assailing Trump, *Spartacus* might benefit from the same.

I can see his point. It isn't enough to curse the darkness in such an environment. You should spread positive vibes, as well. I'll try to do that in the few issues we have left before the election, and afterwards. However ... Check this out, from Oregon's public radio, as quoted by the brilliant, angry Charles Pierce in his online *Esquire* column, 7-17-2020:

Federal law enforcement officers have been using unmarked vehicles to drive around downtown Portland and detain protesters since at least July 14. Personal accounts and multiple videos posted online show the officers driving up to people, detaining individuals with no explanation of why they are being arrested, and driving off. The tactic appears to be another escalation in federal force deployed on Portland city streets, as federal officials and President Donald Trump have said they plan to "quell" nightly protests outside the federal courthouse and Multnomah County Justice Center that have lasted for more than six weeks.

Federal officers have charged at least 13 people with crimes related to the protests so far, while others have been arrested and released, including Pettibone. They also left one demonstrator hospitalized with skull fractures after *shooting him in the face* with so-called "less lethal" munitions July 11. Officers from the U.S. Marshals Special Operations Group and Customs and Border Protection's BORTAC, have been sent to Portland to protect federal property during the recent protests against racism and police brutality. But interviews conducted by OPB show officers are also detaining people on Portland streets who aren't near federal property, nor is it clear that all of the people being arrested have engaged in criminal activity. Demonstrators like O'Shea and Pettibone said they think they were targeted by federal officers for simply wearing black clothing in the area of the demonstration.

Mayor Ted Wheeler and other local officials have said they didn't ask for help from federal law enforcement and have asked them to leave. "A number of people have asked if I know DHS leadership is in town, and if I'm going to meet with them. We're aware that they're here. We wish they weren't. We haven't been invited to meet with them, and if we were, we would decline," Wheeler tweeted Thursday. Democratic Gov. Kate Brown called [Homeland Security Acting Director] Wolf's visit "political theater from President Trump" and said he "is looking for a confrontation in Oregon in the hopes of winning political points in Ohio or Iowa."

Pierce himself goes on to say:

Portland may be a dumbshow for dummies, but it also looks like a dress rehearsal. This is not an "authoritarian impulse." This is authoritarian government—straight, no chaser. And this administration has a powerful thirst for it. It will do anything if it thinks it can get away with it in order to benefit a president* who wants to bring the Republic down on his head.

Unmarked vehicles, disappearing people off the streets?

We need a Truth and Reconciliation Commission now, before the dress rehearsal becomes a road show.

Americans shouldn't be silent about such things. We have to take note. We have to take offense. *We have to put a stop to this. We must vote blue.*

And if we need inspiration, there was the loss of John Lewis in late July. The BLM protesters in Portland are learning his lesson, just as we had to, when protesting the Vietnam War in 1970: you have to put yourself on the line. You have to cross that bridge to get to the other side.

