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# SPARTACUS NO. 54

MARCH 2022 \* GUY LILLIAN III  
1390 HOLLY AVE MERRITT ISLAND FL 32952  
GHLIII@YAHOO.COM \* GHLIII PRESS NO. 1318

Rosy chose the Friday night movie on February 25, a fair World War II prelude called *The Edge of War*. It dealt with the efforts to avoid war between England and the Third Reich over the Czechoslovakian region called the Sudetenland, as a delusional thug tried to take territory and restore his own country's tattered repute. Someday, a sequel could be made about Vladimir Putin, and his attempted *Anschluss* of Ukraine.

The man has dead eyes. I suppose that's a Slavic trait, but Putin's eyes have a peculiar flatness of affect. President Biden once told him that when he looked at him, he saw a man without a soul. Vladimir Putin replied, "Then we understand each other." So granted, we're dealing with a fanatic moved by impulses that make no sense outside of his own vision. What the Hell does he think he's doing? Rebuilding a mythic superpower? Proving his personal virility?

What he *has* proved is the essential weakness of his country. The Russian invasion has been marked with lousy planning, non-existent justification and pathetic logistics. Russians always have relied on brute strength to carry them through and Putin obviously believed that throwing more and more soldiers and explosives at his victims would cause them to cave. Instead, he's shown himself to be on the borderline of psychopathic and his military to be second-rate. Even if he conquers Ukraine, he'll suffer from the brand of incompetence and pointless bloodletting for the rest of history.

If there is a bright side to this despicable invasion, it's in the reaction of the civilized world. Rather than cower in helplessness before a delusional bully, mankind has met Russia with revulsion. The countries of NATO stand "shoulder to shoulder" in support of Ukraine and against Putin. The nation's President, **Volodymyr Zelenskyy**, has had his courage and fortitude almost universally hailed, There's talk of a Nobel Peace Prize – which should be renamed to reflect the honoree's passion for Justice. Impossible name and all, Zelenskyy is Spartacus. *Every* Ukrainian is Spartacus.

The Russian goombah, frustrated on a thousand levels – Ukrainians standing firm before his sloppy, ill-prepared, and *vulnerable* army – has fallen back on nuke-rattling. Let him bluster. First, I doubt the professional Russian military would sit still for a pointless and suicidal nuclear attack, on any target. They know, even if Putin does not, that an exchange would end with a Russia lit by a glow visible from Mars. And even if the military there is totally under Putin's thumb, I don't think we should be afraid. There are principles involved here, and some principles are more important than fear.

More important, also, than cynicism. Knowing that where America goes, Europe and NATO follows, Putin is waiting for the USA to cave. He thinks he knows us. He notes our noisy national disunity and isolationism. He figures that, though our economic war against his dictatorship is dealing body blows to the Russian economy, it is also causing problems here – mostly at the essential teat of our society, the gas pump. He figures partisan power-greed and the average American's weariness with sacrifice will bog our government in the mud of the aforementioned isolationist disunity – and strip us of any authority or power to counter his recklessness and delusion. Will it work? Does Putin have our number? Are Americans that feeble, that weak?

I am extremely proud of the way in which President Joe Biden has met this crisis. In addition to rallying world outrage at the invasion, he's taken steps to minimize the cost to America itself. More needs be done, especially in regards to our depthless thirst for oil. We can meet most of our shortages by opening our Strategic Reserves. If we resolve to meet the environmental worries with the savvy and courage we've shown to date, we can be reopen the Keystone Pipeline – and tell Putin to suck on his oil.

We've seen the steel within the Ukrainian spirit. What do *we* have deep in our bones?



So what does this have to do with science fiction and/or its fandom? Check out “**A Note from a Fan in Moscow**” in Mike Glycer’s *File:770*. It’s a brave and candid look at life in Russia for a decent – and anonymous – citizen. (Mike obtained permission for the piece to be reprinted here, for which many thanks, but I decided to forbear. The author didn’t want his piece appearing with “grandstanding” politics.)

My friend **Curt Phillips** addresses a related question in

***An open statement to the world science fiction community:***

**It begins to appear that the Chengdu WorldCon is in support of Putin's invasion, and opposes the worldwide condemnation of what Russian troops are doing to Ukraine at this very moment. This could only be because the Chengdu Worldcon is either being directly managed by the Chinese government - which is allied with Putin's regime - or is committed to doing nothing that would oppose the Chinese government's positions. Either way, it's becoming clear that allowing the Chengdu Worldcon to obtain the 2023 Worldcon by block voting was a tremendous mistake, and in my opinion, the World SF community should immediately consider ways to strip them of the right to host the 2023 Worldcon.**

**I invite the committee of the Chengdu Worldcon to respond to my accusations and to respond to the international call to remove Sergey Lukianenko as a Guest of Honor for their convention.**

I believe we must also ask that good fellow and superb writer **Robert Sawyer** – also a Chengdu Guest of Honor – for his opinion on this matter. Mostly, though, I think that the Chengdu concom should come forward with their Worldcon’s position on the invasion. In fact, belay that ... I think that *every* SFer would express a stand here.

A corollary to Curt’s concern would involve the fan funds. None of the established FFs would seem to involve China; perhaps a “one-off” *a la* the fund to send John Hertz to Japan some years ago will be created. If so, I don’t think thoughtful members of our community, aware of the world, should donate a dime until it’s clear that Chengku has nothing repeat nothing to do with the totalitarian politics of its government or its allies.

*File 770* published a remarkable anonymous letter to the science fiction community from a Russian fan. I urge all to look it up. It clarifies that our fundamental conflict is not with Russian citizens but with dictatorship, arbitrary destruction, and plain, simple, pointless cruelty. It’s a

sad piece – you can't help but feel for the afflicted Russians – but it's also hopeful, proving yet again that we're all in the same boat.



Before Putin violated Ukraine, I was going to lead with Russia's violation of the Winter Olympics – another if much lesser example of the excesses of a tyranny. Specifically I want to mention their brilliant and abused figure skater, Kamila Valieva, a 15-year-old kid of unparalleled talent and snake-belly luck.

You know, of course, about the drug found in her system a month before the competition, and the suspicion that fell on her like a wall of ice. You also know of the effects of the ugly anger that focused on her, how she collapsed in her final program and finished out of medal contention, and how her coach berated her as, gutted, she staggered from the ice. I must fall back on excerpts from **Chris Schleicher's** article from Five-Ring Circus. Schleicher knows the sport – and the true scope of the Olympic disaster.

**At the 2022 Beijing Olympics, there was no ... moment of joy. The scene that I witnessed instead made me feel hollow and heartbroken, like I was somehow complicit in the mental anguish of these young women by even watching. ... [We] watched 15-year-old Kamila Valieva, the girl at the center of the Olympic doping scandal, the skater seen as near-certain to capture the gold medal, crumble into a ball of tears upon learning she had ended up in fourth place after a disastrous free skate. Valieva received only perfunctory support from her coach, Eteri Tutberidze, who had berated her as soon she stepped off the ice: "Why did you let it go? Why did you stop fighting? Explain it to me, why? You let it go after that axel. Why?"**

**Where do we go from here? How can our sport go on witnessing children be broken by a brutal coach who may even be encouraging them to take banned substances?**

I am scared that Valieva's fourth place finish will be an excuse for figure skating to brush this incident under the rug. *Nothing to see here! The doper didn't even medal!* But the skating community must demand investigation and consequences for what has happened. Figure skating has given me some of the most beautiful and ecstatic moments of my life. But at what cost? I am reminded of the Ursula K. LeGuin short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas." In the story, there is a utopian city of impossible perfection, but for that perfection to exist, one small child must be kept in darkness, squalor, and misery. When they reach a certain age, citizens of Omelas learn about the child. Most of them stay, deciding the greater happiness outweighs the pain of this child. Others walk away, alone, into an uncertain future. I hope I never see an event again like the one I witnessed Thursday. For me, the beauty on display from some skaters was not worth seeing a child emotionally broken on live television. If figure skating cannot find a way to protect the innocent youth in its ranks, I am prepared to walk away.



To move away from the war for a while, what I find especially rewarding in Joe Biden's nomination of Ketanji Brown Jackson to the Supreme Court is not her gender (female) nor her ancestry (black) nor her education (Harvard, like everyone else – why not appoint a Berkeley grad sometime?) – but the fact that, once upon a time in her past, she was a *public defender*.

As the reader might know, I was a P.D. for almost 25 years in Louisiana. I seldom did more than scrape by financially and the job's reputation in the profession was pitiable. Nevertheless, working for poor people was satisfying in a certain way – for me, it underscored the lessons learned in clouds of CS gas at Berkeley. It was fun work – the stories you heard and the Action in court were incredible – but it barely kept me alive. (I'm forever working on my collection of case accounts from *Challenger* – with care++ not to violate client confidentiality.)

Public defenders always run into the perplexity of non-lawyers who ask how we can defend miscreants we know – or are reasonably sure – are guilty. We cite the Bill of Rights and *Gideon v. Wainwright* – guaranteeing that every person charged with a jailable crime has the absolute right to counsel, and the citizens look unsure. But I'm not. I am certain of one thing: being a public defender is noble work. So to find that someone who's spent time in the rank ranks is being elevated to the highest court in the land is to feel vindication. I wish Ms. Jackson an easy confirmation and decades of service.



Even in 1974, when I was a go-fer at DC Comics for the princely sum of \$100 a week, Mike Uslan was trying to get together a *Batman* movie, though he was, at the time, just another member of the DC Junior Woodchucks. (If you were wondering about the nickname for the junior staff at DC, you are not alone. The younger guys at Disney claimed in reply that they would call *themselves* “the Justice League of America.”) In the decades since – 48 years, do you believe it? – he seems to have succeeded. Take a look at his page on IMDB. Check out next season's *Broadway play* devoted to his past with *Batman*, *Darknights* and *Daydreams*. Go see *The Batman*.

Superb. An almost complete triumph.. I don't think it's possible to convey my excitement at *The Batman*, which I took in today. Talk about *satisfying* – the only disappointments I can think of connected with the three-hour Bat-gasm were the short shrift given the Batmobile – we never get good look at it – and Bruce Wayne's omnipresent misery. There's no trace of the familiar suave and debonair public mask; Pattinson plays a man on the edge of a breakdown. (I understand that was the director's idea. It threw me a little, but it's different, anyway.) He's excellent as Batman, in fact the whole cast is excellent, and the realization of the usual characters is original and superb. Whoever thought of the Riddler as so disgustingly evil? Of the Penguin as a low-grade Tony Soprano? (That was Colin Farrell, in prosthetic makeup. Unbelievable!) It's a masterpiece.

Some excellent TV has streamed into the Greenhouse as we while away the last frigid (70°) weeks of winter. *Reacher* is a hoot, humongous Alan Ritchson – the original Aquaman from *Smallville* – recapturing the character from diminutive Tom Cruise, one of the worst miscastings in recent popular film history. An essential for any good thriller series is a goof supporting cast – viz Angel and Rocky and Beth, the purty lawyer lady, from *The Rockford Files*, Meyer from Travis McGee, even Watson and Lestrade. This show has it, with terrific turns by a spunky female cop and a smart, conflicted black officer. Good show, on its way to a second season, with a third being negotiated.

*Chance*, too, has qualities to seek in any good thriller. The hero needs a vulnerability. Usually – as with Burke’s Robicheaux or *Goliath*’s Billy McBride – it’s booze. Here – well-shown by Hugh Laurie as the title character, a neurologist—it’s a deep anger. A fascinating supporting character, too, in the quasi-ex-SEAL he employs as a guide and henchman as he seeks to protect a patient from an abusive husband. Again, good show.

To return to movies, the approach of the **Oscars** – receding as this is read in SFPA; still comin’ for those scanning this on eFanzines – causes a binge of viewing every year. This year we have streaming to bring us the nominees, so here are my **Predictions** and my **PREFERENCES**..

Best Picture: **THE POWER OF THE DOG**, although the splendid coming-of-age-while-in-a-deaf-family *Coda* won the Screen Actors Guild award for an ensemble and is making a late charge. I loved the movie, despite its moment-to-moment predictability, but Jane Campion’s savage western is by far my choice. The director, Campion, has her Award bagged.

Best Actress: I danced when my beloved **JESSICA CHASTAIN** won the aforementioned S.A.G. for *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*, and I bet I’ll be dancing still when the curtain closes on Oscar night. Best Actress is a weird category this year; Honors have been spread among several. But the S.A.G. is the biggest, and the latest, so ...

Best Actor: **Will Smith**. BENEDICT CUMBERBATCH. Smith’s turn in the delightful *King Richard* – about the family of Venus and Serena Williams and their early tennis training – is fine fun for ¾ of the film, as he shows that a driven parent can be a loving and supportive one. But in the last part of the movie, when Venus’ career is finally starting to pop (the film doesn’t deal much with Serena), Richard stops being a magical force in his daughters’ lives and all of the energy seems to evaporate from Smith’s performance. Cumberbatch, on the other hand, brings additional depth and texture to his tormented character with each passing second. He’s simply astonishing, revealing the reasons behind his early foulness with a tragic restraint.

Look for the remarkable deaf actor **Troy Kotsur** from *Coda* to win as Best Supporting Actor – he was effective, funny and touching, but I’d prefer KODI SMIT-MCPHEE from *Power of the Dog* – and **Ariana DeBose** to make history with a Supporting Actress win for Spielberg’s *West Side Story* remake, the history being that Rita Moreno won the 1961 Oscar for the same role in the original movie. No opinion; haven’t seen it.



Current reading has included a John Douglas true-crime tale of a racist serial killer, *The Killer’s Shadow*, and a massive, intriguing and original concept-based SF novel, *Shadows of Eternity* by Greg Benford.

Set a couple of hundred years in da foocha, *Shadows* involves a Library where researchers tap into, study and try to interact with messages broadcast throughout galactic history by races now, undoubtedly, long dead. Comprehending their alien perceptions is daunting, consuming centuries of effort; Benford’s heroine is the young researcher who makes significant inroads at some serious cost to herself and is tasked with a duty no one could have imagined. Dealing with the nature of consciousness, the underlying math of music, the limitations of humanity and well, everything, it’s a joy. In recent years Greg has been producing his best writing since *Timescape*, and this tome is near his apex. A wise fandom would widely tout this book for the field’s annual awards; but alas, it didn’t make the Nebula ballot and I doubt the Hugo listing will be any sharper. Shame on us.

My Hugo nomination ballot *did* name *Shadows of Eternity* among the Best Novel contenders. I also listed *A Quiet Place II*, *Don't Look Up*, *The Squid Game* and *Dune* in the long-form dramatic presentation category, the other "Big" Hugo. I was about to say that *Dune's* inevitable victory would mark the first time a single story would bring home two Hugos, but remembered that *A Case of Conscience* won both Best Novel and a retro-Hugo in its original novella form ... "The Mule" copped a retro-Hugo after the entire *Foundation* series won a one-off Best All-Time Series category ... and let's not forget the Murderbot stories, which won a Hugo as a series and through *Network Effect*. So I'm full of beans.

Fan favorites on my ballot included Alan White, Taral Wayne and Marc Schirmeister (fan artist) ... Joe Major, Nic Farey and Andy Hooper (fan writer) ... *Alexiad*, *Beam* and *SF Commentary* (fanzine). (Those weren't *all* my nominations – notice that I left open the possibility that *you* might have been one of my other picks. Captain Political, that's me.)

## EPIC COMMENTARY

Much of the response we drew from **Spartacus** no. 51 centered on the ghastly Gabby Petito murder.

**Bill Plott** (wjplott@aol.com) hits a familiar note. "While I lament the horrible tragedy of Gabby Petito, I cannot help but notice it is yet another blue-eyed blonde who went missing to massive attention. If she had been black or Hispanic, there would have been no such outcry. If white girls were disappearing and dying at the rate of Native American females, the problem would be addressed with alacrity."

**David Schlosser** advances a similar issue. "While not denying the interest that circumstances like Gabby Petito or the like can generate, it's also true that I don't recall hearing of any such cases amongst minority women with anything like that sort circumstances and publicity. I suspect that the dearth of publicity is more on the state and national level than on the local level, although that would depend somewhat on how big that local area is." **Kay McCutcheon** (kemeleon@gmail.com) agrees. "While I agree that Gabby Petito's case is something of a unique situation, why should that be so? I know there is an ongoing catastrophe on the Reservation of young indigenous women disappearing without any (or very little) interest by the authorities. I actually see very little being done anywhere in this regard."

Amidst responses to my comments on La Brea and The Last Man, **Rich Dengrove** (RichD22426@aol.com) also opined on the tragedy. "Of course, the disappearance and death of Gabby Petito is going to be publicized over the death of [a] nobody. That category includes us. Is the media prejudiced? Yup. .... Also greedy. You must remember Gabby was not the top of the line. Not even her story rated more than a flash in the pan. As far as I can tell, the publicity ended before her boy 'friend' Brian's suicide was discovered. Because it did, we never found out that, despite all the sneaky thing he did, he had some remorse. In fact, it sounds like killing her constituted the anger of the moment, which he soon repented."

These thoughts seem cynical to me. Can anyone cite a missing non-white girl who was neglected by the cops or media? I think it was the availability of video of Gabby and her maggot of a fiancé that made the tragedy so irresistible to the media, in addition to the obvious attractiveness of the victim and the mystery involved in first her disappearance, then Laundrie's. Speaking of whom ...

**Gary Brown** (garyfbrown@bellsouth.net) had comments which no one could dispute: "I guess at this point, all we really know about Brian Landrie is that he is a murderer and a coward. A picked over body in the Florida wilderness is certainly what he deserved."

On another matter in *Spartacus no. 51*, **Nicki Lynch** (sfbookfan@yahoo.com) protests "You think people are tired of looking for justice for January 6<sup>th</sup>? Maybe people in Florida are, but we are not. A great many people in the D.C. area were traumatized by January 6<sup>th</sup> and that cannot be forgotten."

Nic's husband **Rich Lynch** (rw\_lynchyahoo.com) chimes in on Officer T. J. Hooker's flight into near-space: "Like you, I was entertained by William Shatner's garbled speech of gratitude after his suborbital spaceflight. You mention that his metaphor of Earth=Life and Space=Death seems to indicate he has had some serious uneasiness about mortality ... that may well come with the territory when one reaches 90 years of age. He's had a good life and I hope he'll be at peace with himself when he reaches his end." Rich goes on to note the passings of Southern fans Joe Moudry and Charlotte (Charlie) Williams. "I find it astonishing and appalling



that in just a single year, three different (and unrelated) Tennessee fans named Charlie Williams have died. I miss them all." As do I. I had no photo of Charlotte/Charlie to print last time, but here's one now. *Vale*, lovely lady.

*Spartacus no. 51* opened with a paean to my favorite athlete, Jimmy Connors, and the epic mantra I have composed in his name: *The right to say "Shit!" is the right to play tennis.* **Gilbert Head** (eghead@uga.edu) touches on this and on the imbecilic removal of a Thomas Jefferson statue from a public place because he owned slaves. "Re the right to shovel epithets in public places (like tennis courts): Well, at a certain level, people may well have that right, but as I have repeatedly worn myself out trying to explain, the end result of shoveling such matter deep and wide is that, sooner rather than later, you rob that language of a major part of its original function: to emotionally underscore a point by shocking the sensibilities of the listener. I have been too long a supporter of the well-crafted speech and those whose skills bring it to life to be enthusiastic of any denaturing of the power of language. The one thing that employing such verbal strategies will certainly accomplish with me is that I will pretty quickly tune that individual out. That said, folks gonna do what folks gonna do.

"Re: Jefferson and the liberal baby and the bath water: Self-righteousness is an ugly human trait, whether I agree with the philosophy or not. And, as you point out, it is ultimately self-destructive to the self-proclaimed core interest of those trying to sell you something. It is yet another way that the seeds to our destruction as a bold social experiment and, as a nation, are seeds which we ourselves seem determined to sow."

So we nervously await the future. Personally, I await the Dat-scan which will tell me if I have Parkinson's Disease or am just a nervous wreck. Rosy and I prep for the trip to Paris, London and Edinburgh which will fill April. I am more worried about the flights than anything else; I keep repeating "*Mona Lisa ... Normandy ... White Cliffs ... Stonehenge ...*" in hopes of getting myself through it halfway sane. And everybody waits upon the war in Ukraine. Waits ... hopes ... works ... and fights. I wish I had some medium more than a silly fanzine to thank the Ukrainians for reminding me so strongly of what it means to be an American.