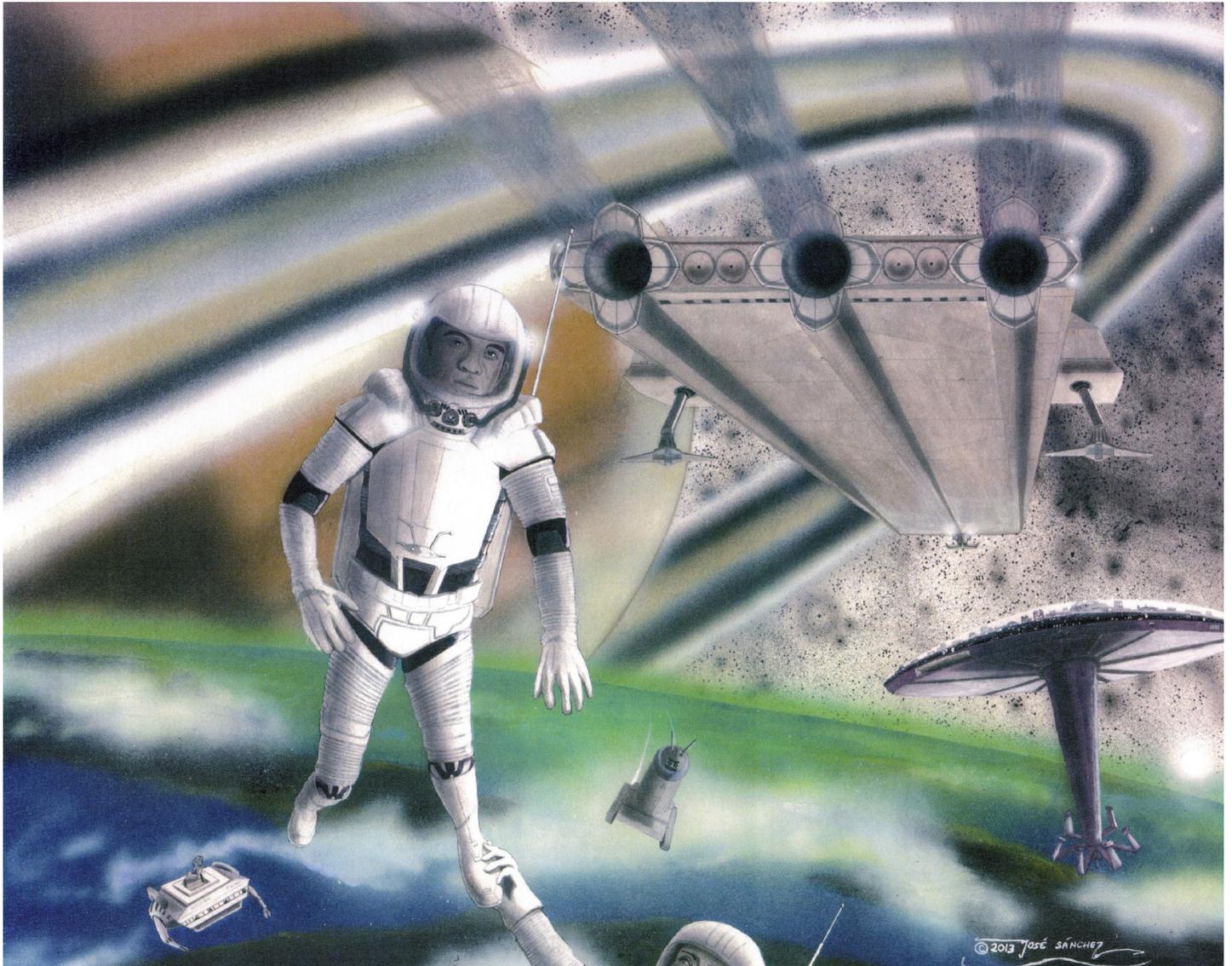


Tightbeam 293

February 2019



Jose Sanchez — Saturn in Our Sights

Tightbeam 293

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Letters

Dear George and Jon:

Many thanks for Tightbeam 292. I hope I'm not too late for a fast loc for the next issue's letter column. This month has been very strange, but at least there is the chance to once again get caught up.

The local... Bob Jennings is right about Dragon*Con outnumbering the Worldcon by quite a lot. I have never been to a Dragon*Con, too big and expensive for me, but the Dragon Awards... There are no fan awards, and I am not even sure that the attendees of Dragon*Con can nominate for these awards. Can anyone set me right here?

I have a niece who is into anime, but is really liking the French/Korean production Miraculous. It is CGIed, with lots of anime influences. I would be interested to read Jessi Silver's take on this rather popular production. (I Googled it up...thousands of assorted social media pages, artwork and fanfic galore, and that must mean millions of dedicated fans.)

Is anyone in the N3F subscribing to the newest incarnation of Amazing Stories? The editor-in-chief for this actual magazine is Ira Nayman, who lived here in Toronto. I offered my services to Ira as a proofreader/copy editor starting with issue 2, and issue 3 may be at the publisher. I am told issue 4 is imminent, and with some luck, I will be taking on the proofreading/copy editing responsibilities again. (Just for the record, I have been one of four proofreaders/copy editors for each of those issues.)

The bacover reminds me that this year will see the 50th anniversary of the first moon landing. That was science fiction at one point; it is appearing more and more like science fiction today. I hope this world will smarten up soon, clean up this world and look more and more towards science, rather than the worst in politics. Please don't make that last sentence science fiction...

Anyway, a loc as promised; I wish it had been longer. Many thanks, take care, see you all soon!

Yours, Lloyd Penney.

Anime

Anime Review – Mary and the Witch's Flower
...Review by Jessi Silver March 19, 2018

It is Tib the black cat who leads Mary to the strange flower in the woods. When she discovers a little broomstick shortly afterwards, she is astonished to feel it jump in to action. Before she can gather her wits, it is whisking her over the treetops, above the clouds, and in to the grounds of Endor College, where: 'All Examinations Coached for by A Competent Staff of Fully-Qualified Witches.' – ANN

Copyright 2017 – Studio Ponoc/GKIDS



Source: Novel

Episodes: 1 (film)

Summary: Young Mary Smith moves to the countryside to live with her great aunt Charlotte while her parents are away. Mary wants more than anything to be useful, but she's a clumsy person and often causes more problems than she solves. While lamenting her situation one day, she encounters two cats – Tib and Gib – who lead her to a forest glade where a cluster of spectacular blue flowers are growing. Mary takes the blossoms back to her room to admire them, but soon discovers that they're more than just attractive blooms – the flowers, called “fly-by-night” by magic users, bloom but once in seven years and have the power to grant magical abilities to even the most mundane of users.

Mary stumbles into these mystic powers and finds herself a magic broom, which takes her to Endor College, a witch school above the clouds. She's mistaken for a magical prodigy and the headmistress goes so far as to approach her about joining the honors classes, but it isn't long until her secret is discovered and the faculty of the school chases Mary down in search of the fly-by-night blossoms. Mary must then protect herself, rescue her friend Peter and his cats, and make sure that the flowers don't fall into the hands of those who would try to use them for horrifying experiments.

Review: This review contains mild plot spoilers for the film.



Studio Ponoc/GKIDS

It's cliché at this point for one to speculate on what Japanese animation studio will turn out to be the “next Ghibli.” It's difficult to define exactly what that's supposed to mean – Ghibli's output has encompassed films aimed squarely at very young children (Ponyo or My Neighbor Totoro, for example), to more intense adventures that families can enjoy (Nausicaa, Princess Mononoke, Spirited Away), to films that I'd argue take more maturity to appreciate (Porco Rosso, Only Yesterday, Grave of the Fireflies). Does Ghibli mean “animation quality?” “Story craft?” “Character and background design?” I've seen all of these traits thrown around as potential components of the Ghibli magic that's captivated animation fans all over the world, and even somehow managed to gain credence with the incredibly insular, inscrutable, and in my opinion, sometimes downright infuriating Academy Award voters (seriously, Boss Baby over Your Name? You've got to be kidding me). Whether or not there's a definitive way to identify the Ghibli style is a question that I'll leave to others who are more invested in it. As for myself, I'm just enjoying the fact that, as animators and directors graduate from Ghibli, we're able to enjoy the new perspectives they bring to this classic film making form.

Much like Hosoda Mamoru, Hiromasa Yonebayashi worked for Studio Ghibli as an animator and director before venturing off on his own to join the newly-established Studio Ponoc. Mary and the Witch's Flower, the studio's first feature-length animation, captures a lot of the classic family-friendly charm that typifies the bulk of Ghibli's output, while providing a enough freshness to distinguish itself and its creative staff from their predecessors.

I commented on social media that one thing that charmed me about the film was that it seemed to speak to me as a little girl who always wanted to grow up to become a witch. Similar to the Harry Potter series, Mary and the Witch's Flower suggests that there might be an entire

secret world out there, where magic is real and those with a talent for it might be able to distinguish themselves and make impossible things happen. It helps that film eschews the tendency to make its heroine a strong but unattainable fantasy version of feminine purity, seen in such characters as Nausicaa or Kiki. It's not that those characters are inherently terrible for women (and to be honest they're much better role-models than a lot of "strong female characters (TM)"), but they also feel like an outsider's perspective on what girlhood should be, when in reality it can be messier, more painful, and more awkward than it is often portrayed. I'm definitely not saying that Yonebayashi and friends have insider knowledge in pre-adolescent girlhood, but Mary feels closer to the type of person someone could meet in real life. She's fundamentally kind and not overly-rebellious (which tends to be another direction writers take these kinds of characters), but she's not particularly talented, gets bored easily, and goes against orders sometimes. She also lies by omission in order to feel better about herself, which ultimately gets her into trouble but is so understandable from the perspective of someone who often feels unworthy of praise. The idea that there could be a world out there somewhere in which the differences that one dislikes about oneself are seen as beneficial can become intoxicating.

The film also makes some attempt at real-world commentary, its most discernible issue-of-choice being animal (and human!) experimentation, as an offshoot of the typical environmentalism that crops up in similar films. Whether this is entirely successful is up in the air; my attitude was something akin to "I see what you did there" but more from the perspective of being repulsed by the mild body-horror aspect than buying into what I thought the creators were trying to say.

Visually the film doesn't disappoint, and manages to combine traditional character animation, lush, vivid background art, and even some CG effects into a very appealing package. It straddles the line between traditional and modern very well, making an argument for utilizing new animation techniques even while trying to maintain a mostly hand-drawn look. After watching *Shirobako* multiple times, it's interesting the kind of things I tend to notice when watching animation. In this case it was the animal movement- one of the film's climactic moments involves a herd of animals escaping from captivity, and the horde of different creatures moving across the landscape feels very natural, chaotic, and whimsical as well. The depiction of the English countryside that serves as the setting for the more mundane parts of the story recalls some of the background art from *The Secret World of Arietty*; the lushness of the plant life and the misty hillsides are almost a character all their own.

One aspect of the film that I really liked was the revelation that Mary's aunt Charlotte played an important part in the story when she was a youngster, and that Mary as a descendant of that family line is in prime position to draw things to a close. Even when young women have central roles in a narrative, it's often the case that they're the only female in a sea of men. In this case there are important connections between Mary and Charlotte, as well as the Endor headmistress. Additionally, Mary comes to the rescue of Peter, her male companion, multiple times throughout the film, which was a refreshing surprise.

The one thing that detracts from this story, and I suspect that others may agree with me, is that the whole package feels a bit rote. Stripping away the visual trappings and the spunky main character reveals a story that's competently formulaic but not otherwise special in any way. It's a fairly typical "heroine's journey" in which a young girl is forced to look inside herself and make personal improvements, all in the guise of going on a grand adventure that, once completed, brings her back again to her mundane normal life. That said, it's the type of movie that I

wouldn't feel uncomfortable watching with a child and which demonstrates an example of how to be heroic and fight for something ethical. It's certainly more tolerable than your typical CG talking animal movie, and it doesn't talk down to its intended audience.

The more creators there are making great movies, the better, and having graduated from Studio Ghibli I think Yonebayashi has a bright future ahead of him bringing to screen the type of anime films that have wide appeal. *Mary and the Witch's Flower* is an above-average interpretation of a Western-style fairy tale that centralizes a somewhat-atypical female heroine and brings to life a magical world that might make some viewers long for the opportunity to attend a witch school. Check it out at a local film festival, or grab the disc when it's released in May.

Pros: Mary is a spunky heroine with some realistic pre-teen flaws. The female relationships provide a good through-line to the film. The artistry is excellent.

Cons: The story is pretty average and can feel like a re-hash of old concepts.

Grade: B

Winter 2017 – Follow-up Reviews by Jessi Silver

Despite the title of this website, I rarely stop after watching intro episodes of anime (unless the show is so terrible or offensive that it doesn't deserve a second look; there have been many of those over the years). Here are some collected thoughts on some of the second and third episodes I've watched of selected series. This post will be updated as I conduct more follow-up viewings, so stay tuned.

Saga of Tanya the Evil – Episodes 2 and 3



I was fairly unimpressed with the first episode of the series, since it seemed to glorify violence and to specifically fetishize the fact that some of the most violent acts of war were being committed by a character in the body of a pre-pubescent girl. “Young girls in horrific situations” could be a sub-genre unto itself in anime, considering all of the series whose main point of interest involves thrusting youngsters into roles way above their emotional pay grade in order to look edgy or wring some sort of unearned emotional response out of the audience. In this case, I'm totally baffled why the first episode begins where it does, because Tanya's origin story is much more compelling, and puts a totally different slant on what's actually happening.

We learn that Tanya was originally a (male) Japanese middle manager who was known for being ruthlessly devoted to the health of his company. This meant taking a very uncaring attitude towards other employees, especially when firing them. A disgruntled former employee of the company pushes our protagonist(?) in front of a train early in the second episode. Time stops, and he has a lengthy conversation with God(?) regarding the existence of any deities (I have to hand it to the main character – his ability to maintain skepticism in the existence of God while speaking directly to him requires guts). Refusing to soften up, God (or “Being X” as the main character dubs him) causes him to be reborn in another world, but with all his memories

intact. He scrapes by, does what he can to survive, and then joins the military, eventually reaching the point at which we joined the tale in the first episode.

What stood out to me was the fact that the story was less focused on the actual war than it appeared at first. Instead, my main take away from these follow-up episodes is more related to the main character's conflicts with Being X regarding the need for faith, and Being X's incredibly manipulative ways of forcing the main character to acknowledge the miraculousness of "God" and the situation God has forced him into. Tanya is compelled by Being X to pray each time the calculation jewel (which hones her magic powers) is used, otherwise it remains unstable and could kill her through its malfunction. This is supposed to eventually instill in her (and in the mentality of the man who still exists within her mind) a sense of humility and faith. On one hand I can see that the character truly needs to learn this lesson, because he's a total jerk who caused a lot of upset in the lives he supervised. On the other hand, this manipulative deity who pulls strings to get humans to "believe" is pretty abhorrent. I gained a lot more sympathy for Tanya over the course of these episodes, simply for trying to hold onto a worldview while essentially being forced to let it go (or die in the process). This is certainly a lot more complexity than I would have expected originally.

With the way I watch anime, there's always the danger of being so put off by something right away that I miss out on an anime's better side by not wanting to bother with it anymore. Personally I think that there are some things that are beyond forgiveness, but there are also cases like this where I feel like maybe whoever was handling the series composition just didn't do a good job of putting the story's best foot forward. It's not as if there aren't still problems (I'm curious whether reviewers, including myself, can really speak to the genuine nature of the female-female professional relationship between Tanya and her subordinate when Tanya still houses the mostly-unaltered mentality of the Japanese salaryman she once was), but I think I might be up to following this through now.

ACCA: 13-Territory Inspection Department – Episode 2

Watching the second episode of ACCA helped to reinforce some of the general feelings I had about the particular construction this show seems to have. While, again, not a whole lot actually "happens" as far as action-y plot-related stuff, there are a lot of subtleties that seem to be leading in a particular direction.

Jean is still ostensibly the focal character, but there are many scenes throughout the episode where he is present but the POV appears to be held by someone else. This time we're introduced to "photojournalist" friend of his named Nino, actually an undercover agent hired by Jean's superiors to follow him around. There are several scenes here and there of Nino reporting on Jean's whereabouts when normally we the audience would be privy to a firsthand what Jean was doing instead. There were a lot of scenes where I thought to myself that it would have been nice to know about Jean's activities after going inside his home or turning the lights off in his hotel room; being on the outside and not knowing exactly what's going on is disorienting, but I also suspect that we're meant to develop a healthy suspicion of Jean in preparation for some bombshell later on. I've been trying to stay away from any plot spoilers to ready myself for this eventual surprise, so I hope that my interpretation is correct. There are several references to his possible involvement in a coup d'état; whether that's actually what's going on or not is the question here.



This episode has similar pacing to the first, so viewers who found themselves frustrated with the slow-moving story in episode 1 will probably not be especially compelled to keep up with the series any further. I feel as though I've made my case as to why I find this type of anime series compelling already; the fact is, I haven't found it boring at all, and I can feel the makings of a good thriller bubbling under the surface of what I've seen so far.

Gabriel DropOut – Episode 2



I had the feeling that the unique humor element of this show might wear down pretty quickly, and that was confirmed for me after watching the second episode. The show is reliant on one central gag, that being the opposing (and typically unexpected) personalities of the angels and demons in the main cast. This in itself admittedly remains pretty chuckle-worthy when I think about it, but the second episode falls into a rut that so many anime comedies do, in that it relies too much on its central gag and dances around it without doing much to expand or escalate any of the humor.

In this episode, Satania continues to be haunted by the bread-stealing dog, and thinks she knows more than she actually does about eating lunch in the school lunch room. Raphael picks on Satania some more. Vigne and Gabriel bicker about Gabriel's lack of motivation. The girls have an adventure trying to prepare a meal in their cooking class (using some... unusual ingredients). It's all fairly standard sitcom stuff, with the flavor being the characters' particular personalities. The issue I'm having at this point is that their personalities could really exist in any similar ensemble comedy, regardless of the characters being heavenly or hellish beings. Remove the horns, wings, halos, and upside-down crosses from the mix, and this is just another typical anime comedy without much worth recommending it above other similar anime series.

I probably won't watch more of the show at this point, but I'll try to keep an ear to the ground to see if anything actually ramps-up over the next few weeks.

Miss Kobayashi's Dragon Maid – Episode 2

The second episode of Dragon Maid continues in the same vein of being mostly cute, humorous, and primarily harmless. We meet a second dragon, a juvenile named Kanna, who's been nursing a crush on Tohru and who wants to punish Kobayashi for monopolizing her time. Jealousy can be a dangerous motivator, but Kanna's feelings are pretty simplistic and she gives up the pursuit once Kobayashi-san makes her feel welcome (and feeds her some chocolate). The dragons take Miss Kobayashi out to play (dragons playing together can be a little dangerous, as we find out). Tohru also uses her dragon strength to capture a thief while out shopping (it's also very evident that she's well-liked by all the merchants, though she doesn't really understand why).



I was really glad that there wasn't a repeat of the uncomfortable, non consensual nudity from the first episode. It was a stain on what was otherwise a pretty enjoyable first outing for the show. The second episode continues to be fairly cute, manages to feature some really great

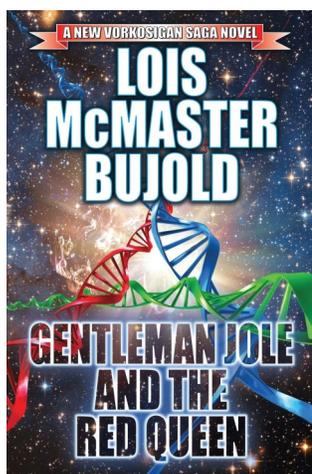
animation during Tohru's and Kanna's play date, as well as during Tohru's confrontation with the thief in the shopping arcade, and demonstrates a certain charm that makes it fun to watch despite the fact that it doesn't really get me laughing all that much.

The one aspect that I don't really like actually forms the basis for the show, which is a little problematic, I suppose. I'm not a big fan of characters who immediately proclaim their love for another character, especially against all logic and their target character's wishes. Tohru is very forthcoming with her desires and there's clearly some reason why she's become fixated on Kobayashi (little bits and pieces of Tohru's backstory have been peeking through already, so I'm guessing there's something going on), but her fervent love and overwhelming jealousy is tough to handle without having some of that background to grasp onto. I'm hoping that a little more nuance develops as the show moves on. I'm not familiar with the manga, so I don't know how realistic I'm being.

I will likely continue along with this show since I'm a fan of the KyoAni aesthetic and animation.

Books

Gentleman Jole and the Red Queen by Lois McMaster Bujold— ...Review by Tom Feller



The latest and seventeenth novel, not counting the short stories and novellas, in the Vorkosigan saga features two characters who have not had much attention in recent installments. Cordelia Naismith Vorkosigan, the mother of Miles, was a central figure in two of the early books, *Shards of Honor* and *Barrayar*, but ever since has been relegated to a supporting role once the emphasis shifted to Miles. Oliver Jole, the former aid and lover of both Cordelia and Aral Vorkosigan, Cordelia's husband and Miles's father, has always been a supporting character. This is the first time he has taken center stage. Miles himself is relegated to a supporting role.

The novel is set mostly on the planet Sergyar, which is part of the Barrayaran Empire. Cordelia is the Vicereine, succeeding her husband who died three years previously. Oliver is the admiral in charge of Barrayaran naval forces in that system. To their mutual surprise, they fall in love after meeting again in their middle age, and the story is about their romance. As someone who fell in love during his middle age, I approve of this.

There is very little action in this novel, and I do not recommend it to anyone not already familiar with the series because it is atypical. For fans of the series, however, I can recommend it as a change of pace and as an exploration of some characters who have not been as visible as others. I would compare it to *A Civil Campaign*, an earlier entry in the series that is a really romantic comedy in a science fiction setting rather than an action-packed space opera like most of the other books, but the new book is not as funny.