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The Illuminati Strongly Endorse Reading the WSFA Journal

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FROM THE EDITOR...

Hello, all!

Well, it's that time of year again.

What time is that, you ask?

The week before Thanksgiving, naturally. The time when many of us calculate how much vacation time we have left and who'll be stuck in the office between Christmas and New Years. The time when holiday parties run rampant and the first tentative shopping lists are compiled (though some of us, like statistical outliers, go shopping in summer and some go Christmas Eve—it's all a bell curve, people). The Halloween candy is down to the last lousy few pieces nobody wants but the "Chrimukwanzaa" candy hasn't been set out yet.

Easy to get wrapped up in the stuff that surrounds these holidays, but it all misses the point. Thanksgiving—giving thanks. Think about reasons to give thanks, as we approach turkey day. We probably all have things for which we're grateful.

See you all soon!

Drew



ESSAYS, LETTERS AND OTHER MUSINGS

Holiday-Based SF?

Drew Bittner

You know, *It's a Wonderful Life* is sneaky. It's holiday-based sf; alternate history is part of our meta-genre, after all, and what is this story—George Banks gets a heavy dose of dystopian “if not for me” reality slapping him in the face and shocking him out of his self-pity—if not alternate history?

Same with *A Christmas Carol*. Sure, you could call it a ghost story (which might make it into holiday-based horror... or at least dark fantasy), but I'll call it for sf anyway. Scrooge is given a message of redemption and hope, which (as I said in last month's Journal) is the general point of what we read.

How many other stories about the holidays—not just Christmas, but Halloween, Thanksgiving, Easter, Arbor Day...—are stealth sf stories? I'd bet there are a few. If anything, it can give writers something new to think about when they're working up the plot for their next novel.

MEDIA REVIEWS

What I've Been Reading Lately

Drew Bittner

Okay, nobody sent me any reviews for this month, so I'll bore you with a short list (and mini-reviews) of what I've read lately.

DC Universe: *Helltown* by Dennis “Denny” O’Neil

I'd been looking forward to this one for a long time. Denny O'Neil is a hero to lots of comic book readers, having (with artist Neal Adams) reinvented Batman in the early 1970s, told groundbreaking socially-relevant stories with Green Arrow and Green Lantern (including a first-ever story of drug addiction featuring Green Arrow's sidekick Speedy), and reinvented Steve Ditko's objectivist hero The Question as a philosophical seeker of wisdom in the 1980s. Along the way, he edited the Batman titles for DC

Comics until just recently, leaving an imprint on the character scarcely less than creator Bob Kane's.

Helltown is all about Vic Sage, aka Charles Victor Szasz, who finds his way back to the hellhole that is Hub City. He stumbles into a job as a radio reporter, but quickly gets into trouble with the mayor. Beaten nearly to death by assassin Lady Shiva, Vic is given the chance to remake himself into someone new: The Question.

O'Neil steals from his previous work on The Question comic series; he reintroduces supporting characters such as Myra Connelly Fermin and her loathsome husband Benny (the über-corrupt mayor, named Wesley in the comic), and images such as the Question buried up to his neck as an endurance test. Vic is never referred to as "the Question," which makes one wonder why he bothered inventing that alter ego in the first place, and his philosophical musings are relegated to grace notes here and there. Bruce Wayne (and Batman) is also heavily featured, having a prominent role in Sage's self-recreation as a mystery man, while Shiva and Dragon take on the roles of coach, mentor and role model (albeit in different ways). It's meant to be a character jam, of sorts, though the focus is supposed to be The Question... and I don't feel like that really happened here.

It's nice to see Denny back on The Question, but this book didn't live up to my expectations.

The Ultimates: The Tomorrow Men by Michael Jan Friedman

One complaint I have about novels based on superhero stories is that, in some cases, the threat (usually the supervillain) is based on absolutely nothing from the source material.

We get that here in spades. Michael Jan Friedman, who's written more than one novel set in Marvel's universe, sets up the Ultimates (who are the 'new universe' version of the Avengers, set in the same world as Ultimate Spider-Man, Ultimate X-Men, et al.) as the world's last hope when a quintet of time travelers invade their HQ. Turns out the future is not all that rosy and only the Ultimates can prevent a chain of events leading to... well, bad bad stuff. After a rocky introduction, the group (including Iron Man, Captain America, the Wasp, Thor, Hawkeye and a bunch more) give them a listen.

These "tomorrow men" tell the Ultimates that a cabal organized by a Middle Ages tyrant-wannabe will launch a worldwide strike very soon, but there's still time to defeat them. The story sounds a little fishy but sure enough, there *is* an underground military force building up... but even if these guys are a serious threat, why does the story told by the Tomorrow Men not add up? And what will Tony Stark (aka Iron Man) discover when he takes an unexpected trip into the future?

It's a good novel but I really wish that Friedman had been given the space by Marvel to use established enemy groups like Hydra or AIM, or establish that the time travelers were using something like Dr. Doom's time portal—anything that would tie in with Marvel's own ample continuity. (I have to figure he was restricted in what he could use, so that the

comics could do whatever they chose with the toys inherited from mainstream Marvel.) As it stands, this story could have been ported into the DC universe with minor tweaks.

Friedman's a good writer but this wasn't the story it could have been.

Grave Sight by Charlaine Harris

Time for an upbeat review.

Charlaine Harris kicks butt. This novel, the first in a new series, follows the narrator (Harper Connelly) and her brother, Tolliver Lang, as they cross the country finding dead bodies for money. Harper survived being struck by lightning years before; the only "benefit" is that she can sense the presence of dead bodies. When she's close enough, she gets glimpses of who they were in life and how they died.

In the town of Sarne, the duo step into a quagmire of family trouble when Harper is hired to find a dead girl named Teenie. There's some doubt as to whether her dead boyfriend Dell killed her and then himself—doubt that Harper sets to rest immediately by finding Teenie in a nearby wood.

Her discovery kicks off a savage round of murders, as the mystery surrounding Dell, Teenie and their families threatens Harper, Tolliver and everyone around them. What secret is someone killing to protect, and why? Dell's brittle mother, Teenie's ex-party girl mother (who lost her older daughter earlier), the clueless town mayor, the handsome lawyer, the suspicious police chief and the deputy who has an eye for Harper... what part do they play in this story, and who can Harper trust? Making the wrong call may put Harper on the wrong side of the grave.

Harris shows her customary flair for character and setting, creating a really special pair in Harper and Tolliver. Their sister/brother dynamic rings true, the love and need and even the friction that such closeness generates. Likewise, the story is strong; though astute mystery readers may be able to guess at much of the outcome, Harris knows her way around plotting a mystery and gives only enough away to keep the reader turning pages as quickly as possible.

If you're in the mood for a great mystery with minimal supernatural trappings, this one's for you.

The Dark Tower VII: The Dark Tower by Stephen King

I'd taken awhile to get to this, mostly because I hadn't read the fifth and sixth books in the series, but finally I figured to hell with it and plunged in.

It's a terrific book.

King brings together the strands of virtually everything (every novel, anyway) that he's written since *Carrie*, as Roland the Gunslinger finally gets to the home stretch. His small circle of family is reunited, just after his mutant were-spider son Mordred (a hybrid of his

genes and those of the mad Crimson King) is born. Roland, Eddie Dean, his wife Susannah, Jake and billy-bumbler (a sort of crossbred raccoon/dog) Oy must reach the Dark Tower—axis of all Creation—before the Crimson King can break the supporting Beams and throw down the Tower forever.

After several thousand pages of journey, it all comes down to this.

It would be nearly impossible to condense everything that happens in nearly 900 pages, but it's fair to say that Stephen King wrote himself (and especially his near-death experience in a hit-and-run accident) into the story, his survival being a key part of Roland's quest. Along the way, they encounter anew characters from other books (including Ted from *Hearts in Atlantis*), who help them toward their goal.

There is pain, heartbreak and death along the way, as Roland's circle is pared down to only two... and then one, as Roland fights his murderous offspring then faces the Crimson King in a final contest for the Dark Tower itself. King offers readers a chance to stop there, before Roland sets foot in the Tower, but then plunges forward and shows... well, that'd be telling, but the ending is implicit in everything that's come before. Frustrating, yes, but true to the story.

Anyone up for reading an epic summation of King's oeuvre... this is the book you've been waiting to read for a long, long time. Enjoy it—it's not likely he'll do anything on this scale again.

Batman: Dead White by John Shirley

Batman faces off against a steroid-swollen albino hoping to ignite a race war, while a former detective struggles to save his junkie son, in a tense, fast-paced tale by a co-screenwriter of **The Crow** movie.

Still new to the world of vigilante justice, Bruce Wayne is fighting a war on two fronts. On the one hand, he's haunted by a shadowy presence—what seems to be his first Batman costume—and he grapples with what it might possibly mean. Now that a former flame named Teia is back in his life, is there a way to be both Batman and Bruce?

Meanwhile, a monstrous, race-baiting fascist named White Eyes is building a militia with the aim of taking down the United States. Equipped with advanced weaponry and buoyed by his followers' zealotry, White Eyes stokes their fanaticism with rhetoric on the Antichrist and his Zionist conspiracy puppets. His pawns—including street trash like Red Trask—run afoul of the Batman, who begins to piece together the scope of this menace.

At the same time, detective Cormac Sullivan runs afoul of corrupt cops Breen and Burkhart, earning himself expulsion from the Gotham City PD despite Captain Jim Gordon's best efforts. He heads to California to find his juvenile delinquent son, rounding him up after busting a meth ring, and takes him to a camp in Pennsylvania they enjoyed years before—never realizing the camp is where White Eyes has his army.

Shirley weaves together these diverse stories, building them into a gripping gestalt as Batman races to help Sullivan and then foil White Eyes' plan to attack the federal government in DC. It's high-stakes storytelling and the sort of thing that would make a heck of a movie. With minimal invocation of the greater DC universe (there's only one reference to Metropolis and no "guest appearances" by other costumed heroes), Shirley unleashes a story of Batman pitted against himself and a very worthy adversary. I hope he'll be tackling more Batman soon, as he proves page by page that he really gets it.

WSFA MEETING MINUTES



EVENTS

Please email upcoming events to editor@wsfa.org with the word "submission" in the subject line for consideration.

On Saturday, November 18, after about 11:45pm EST, stargazers in North America and Europe will see what's billed as an impressive Leonids meteor shower this year.

IN MEMORIAM

Jack Williamson